

The Smiths

By

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**Overview & Author Commentary**

This excerpt is part of a longer project which explores the lives of the Smith children, born into a family which while big is isolatory and violent. There are heavy themes of trauma and recovery, broken people reaching out in their own broken ways and trying desperately to connect with anything that'll reach back out towards them. Act one takes place in each of the four main characters' childhoods. Act two sees them as teenagers.

In Act one all the childrens' cores are established; Beckett craves authority and will defer to authority figures unquestioningly. Constance is meek but has a brewing anger stemming from the repression she's forced into at home, having to care for her siblings without complaint. Louis feels he has to be the model child in order to "make up" for his blackness and Nate, the "ideal son" is in actuality a girl.

Their mother, a woman who wants to be enviable to the community more than anything, signs them up to do a play at the local church.

While working on this project I was interested in exploring the ideas of being isolated within a supposedly tight-knit group. I don't consider myself close to anyone in my own family except for my mother despite the fact that I have aunts, uncles, cousins, a father and a brother.

My relationship with my brother was something that I'm sure also influenced my work here. I've never seen stories of people who struggled with sibling relationships, in most fiction stories it's natural for siblings to get along token struggle - a paltry annoyance with one another.

I wanted to explore what it would be like to be in a family of tense strangers you've known all your life. I was also interested in the idea of 'otherness'. All the Smith siblings feel they are 'othered' in some way and that this both defines and dams them.

### **The Characters**

**Beckett:** The oldest and most fanatical, In the first story he burns his father's porn in the woods (at his mother's behest) with May as an act of cleansing immorality. They are established to be extremely close though they're constantly on each other's nerves. Beckett does not like Allison, feeling that she's intruding on his and May's dynamic. At the end of his story Beckett is sent by his mother to his teacher Mrs. Bellerose's home in order to do a small task for her and Beckett, being weak to his mother and keen on being liked by authority figures, agrees.

**Constance:** Established as an incredibly lonely girl, a great majority of her life consists of taking care of her siblings and doing what her mother wants. She has a sharp, secret interest in violence

and meets a girl named Tama whom she bonds with immediately. Tama's father was recently sent to jail for what is rumored to be murder.

**Louis:** Half black, has a different mother than his siblings (Miriam) whom he isn't close with due to his internalized racism and want to fit in. In the first story he tries to feel at home with his mother's friend's family but just when he's beginning to they pull him into a racist caricature show and he's devastated.

**Nate:** The youngest, trans girl who isn't out of the closet. She also has a different mother than her siblings, an unknown woman. In the first story she's established as the favorite of the household as the one who most conforms to the 'ideal boy', rough-and-tumble. At night she wears a dress stolen from a thrift store which belonged to a missing girl her age Laura Jean. Her friend Bill sees her in this dress and she vows never to let herself 'be a girl' again.

The end of act one saw the Smiths participate in a church play which went disastrously. Beckett, playing Mary, began crying inconsolably during a monologue about purity. Nate got into a tremendous fight with Bill, who began calling her "Laura" on stage and both Louis and Constance fled.

## **Section Two : The Rot Seeps In**

When the Smiths grew they grew bent and ugly like the trees in the woods surrounding them, gnarled from the start. They came out the ground that way. You looked at their parents, the soil they sprouted from, and you knew there was no chance of them being straight and narrow.

When the mother had another baby all her own there was a fight as usual. This time the husband, red-faced, following her down the hill. She walked with her arms crossed in front of her, head stooped low. When she walked like that you could see the jutting shoulder bones pressing against the thin stretch of her skin.

Gregor was yelling about the money. How they'd be able to afford another one, another one! Goddamn it Tabi, god fucking-! And Tabitha was quiet, letting him get it out. Though she was walking away from him, though he seemed to be chasing her, when you tilted your head it looked more like she was tugging him reluctantly along or even that she was comforting him somehow; as if the movement soothed him.

When they walked back up the hill they walked muttering, both their heads stooped and leaning towards one another, an inosculated pair.

They had the baby in the middle of winter, all piling into one car and tearing out to the nearest hospital. Mrs.Reed said it was a near-horrific sight, that dingy little car roaring down the road with limbs poking out of it. She said the red haired one's head was sticking out the window, screaming along with the mother.

They named the baby Grace and when they brought her back to the house it was a silent, solemn affair, weeks after her birth. There was no joy in any of them, just a hard closing of the car door and a sharp hiss not to wake her, you know she takes forever to fall asleep.

The neighborhood's eye closed in sympathy that day. Another guest for the white house. Another pre-bent little sapling thrown into the unconscientiously fertile soil.

### **Beckett - Three Person'd God**

Beckett, May and Allison gathered in May's room to study as they usually did after school. The room was surprisingly girly; a small canopied bed, pale peach walls and stuffed animals lined up on most available surfaces. In front of her bed was a low table which reminded Beckett of the kinds they had for little kids to draw on at daycare houses.

None of them belonged to any clubs, none of the clubs wanted them. The teachers didn't even suggest it anymore, except for Ms. Henson and Ms. Henson was a real hippie, the kind who'd live in a van on purpose. Beckett dreaded her classes. She called everyone 'honey' and wore her hair in pigtails like a preschooler. If she was their age she'd be eaten alive. She was always bursting into song and telling everyone to hold hands like it was preschool instead of their senior year.

Even Allison laughed at her and she was one of the kindest people Beckett had ever met. She was the kind of sweet that made you hate her a little, like when toddlers tried to comfort you

by shoving some ratty old doll in your face and patting your head too hard. Beckett guessed that kind of dumb-sweetness was why his dad would yell at him and his brothers when he caught them sitting around.

“I don’t wanna watch you boys lying around this house I paid for like you own it. Like you’ve got nothing to do today- Go. Jesus, get out,” he’d shout and then they’d have to go somewhere. Beckett used to go to May’s house whenever he couldn’t go home but he hadn’t since school started again. Instead he’d just walk until his feet hurt or find some rock in the woods to sit on.

“We didn’t have enough people last time, that was the thing.” May said. She was talking to the room in general about the club she wanted to found. Beckett was unclear about the club’s details, only that the school kept rejecting it because of its all-blackness. The first time they’d told her it would be exclusionary and the second time they’d told her there weren’t enough black students who’d be interested.

“This time I’m gonna have everyone come with me to the main office when I turn in the form. That way they’ll be able to *see* how many people support it. Just names on a paper isn’t enough. People can sign their name to anything, they don’t have to care about it. They need to know we care about it,” May continued. Her hands were on both of her knees as if she were steering herself somewhere.

“Speaking of everyone, I wish we all had math together this year.” Allison sighed, flipping through her dented notebook too quickly to be reading anything in it. Not that there was

much more than doodles. Beckett had seen it, there was a disturbing amount of drawings of her and Dirk Moynihan held within. Allison began tearing pages out and making paper stars.

“Why? We’re awful at math.” Beckett pointed out.

May snickered. “Speak for yourself Mr. Twenty percent.”

Beckett scowled. “Fifty percent isn’t a good grade either, idiot.”

May leaned forward on her bed, wrapping her arms around one of its wooden posts to keep from falling as she grinned down at Beckett. “Better than yours. Least I can count.”

*Count your blessings. Count yourself lucky you’re a girl so I can’t hit you,* Beckett thought. But the words’ spark vanished as soon as he thought of them and he no longer had the energy to respond.

May waited, hanging eagerly from the bedpost but Beckett turned from her, muttering something vaguely before pretending to become immersed in his homework.

Bickering with May used to be easy to the point of muscle memory. The two of them could go at it about nothing from sunrise to sunset, neither of them giving in an inch without taking two. But recently they’d been growing apart. May was becoming busier, always in motion while Beckett had slowed to a near stop. May was a girl with big feelings and Beckett could barely conjure up any other than existential guilt and sorrow. His feelings were big in the way a



cave was - not May's fireworks. Lately she'd been trying less around him and why shouldn't she? He hardly tried at all around her. He hardly tried at all full stop, except with Allison.

“Why don't you just let other people join too? Then they can't say it's discriminatory.” Allison suggested, arranging the paper stars she'd made on the table between her and Beckett. When May didn't respond Allison flicked one at her forehead.

“Huh?” May said, turning from Beckett.

“Your club?” Allison smiled.

May frowned, flicking the star back at Allison. “Because then it wouldn't be-”

May's mother knocked softly before pushing the door open and peeking in. “Sorry, Beckett? Your brother's here.”

“Louis?” Beckett asked, grateful for the chance to put his homework off. Mrs. Reed glanced out into the hall and nodded. “Tell him I'll be right there.”

“Oh!” May cried, leaping from the bed and rushing past her mother who let out a surprised yelp. “Hey, Louis, I want to ask you something-!”

“How many times do I have to tell you, no running in the house!” Her mother stressed, following her.

Beckett realized he was alone with Allison. He'd been realizing that a lot lately, the fact feeling significant in a way it hadn't before. He couldn't remember when the feeling had started. It just seemed to hit him all at once one day that Allison was a girl. That had never happened with May, he was confident he could sleep in the same bed as her and get a solid eight hours. They'd done it before, before they'd gotten too old for naps and before Beckett's father had caught them together once and walked around like a rooster the rest of the week.

He never felt the urge to kiss May when she laughed and when May walked she did so with a straight-laced purpose, hands balled into fists at her side. Nothing like Allison whose hands swung languidly back and forth, so languidly that Beckett imagined he could hold his own out and catch one with ease.

"May's really into this club thing, huh?" Allison said, shocking Beckett. She smiled, raising her eyebrows. "Sorry, didn't mean to scare you."

"You didn't scare me." Beckett insisted and Allison stuck her tongue out at him, curling it into a cupped shape as she crossed her eyes.

Beckett turned his head away. "That's not scary, it's just gross."

"Loo' ah 'e..." Allison demanded in a ghostly vibrato. "Beheceh..."

She grabbed his shoulder and he wrenched himself away, falling to the ground as she burst into laughter. He felt droplets of saliva land on his face and she covered her mouth at his pointed scowl, banging her head against the table as she hid her face from him.

“God!” she laughed, her voice bunching up into a snort. Beckett forgot his annoyance and listened to her laugh, sitting up on his elbows.

“I’m a monster,” Allison coughed, smiling at Beckett as he pulled himself all the way up and slid his notebooks into his bag. “Hey, can I ask you something?”

“Depends.” Beckett said, pulling a wad of stray paper from the bottom of his bag and frowning as he tried to remember if he needed them or not.

Allison pushed his shoulder so hard he nearly fell a second time. “Seriously! Okay, so I was talking Hailey Whitfield today-”

“Ugh, why?” Beckett asked. Hailey Whitfield was desperation personified. She wore her hair in big baton girl curls which always got stuck in her lip gloss and her brother had died in the army years ago. She claimed he’d gotten shot by jumping in front of a foreign woman and her children but Beckett’s dad said that he’d stepped on a mine while trying to desert.

He and May had wrecked her house one night when they were all in middle school, probably right around when her brother died. There’d been a rumor that Hailey blew some

soldiers during the wake and May had convinced him that it was real and punishable. When he'd hesitated she'd asked if he wanted to be a preacher or a whore that was sympathetic to Hailey's sexually deviant cause.

Remembering it gave Beckett a full-body shiver. They'd destroyed everything in Hailey's kitschy yard; gnomes, flowers, stone angels. They'd even taken the framed photograph of her brother in fatigues and tossed into the thicket, venomous with glee.

"She's nice!" Allison insisted, tone forced. "Well she's not mean-mean, I think she's trying to be nice."

"Hailey Whitfield started a rumor that I was inbred." Beckett said, clearing his throat. For a good month he'd had to walk with his siblings trailing behind him for fear someone would point and pucker their lips in a series of faux kisses.

Allison waved the triviality away. "Yeah, May told me but that was in middle school. I don't know, you have to give people chances. Anyway that's not important because what I wanted to tell you is that Hailey told *me* that she was thinking of asking *you* to the dance!"

Beckett hoped May hadn't heard about that. The last time Hailey had invited him to something was her birthday party and that had ended with him and May crying in the creek. That was when he first remembered meeting Allison though both she and May told him they'd met before, when he'd been praying on the playground.

“I can still remember what you first said to me, first words ever; ‘I know you’re here to make fun of me. Do as you like, the meek shall inherit the earth.’ You told me that with your hands clasped together, kneeling at the edge of the foursquare.” Allison would say when she told the story, deepening her voice to mimic Beckett’s and receiving a cackle of delight from May.

That day at the creek Allison had appeared like an angel. He and May had been fighting, attempting to drown each other maybe and then out stepped Allison from the treeline with her mangled hair and chunky square glasses. She’d asked to see the bird Beckett had brought to school the day of the first meeting that he couldn’t remember. They’d had to dig it up, he and May had already buried it - a two headed chick that’d been born dead.

Beckett was sure that kids who’d performed strange rituals in the woods until they were fifteen weren’t welcome at the thanksgiving dance or whatever they’d decided to theme it that year. Last year it was ‘Spooktober’ and the year before that it was ‘Pumptastic’ which the student body had had a field day with.

“I don’t think I’m going to the dance.” Beckett said, zipping up his bag.

Allison sighed. “May said the same thing.”

“We never have before,” Beckett shrugged.

Before Allison had joined their group he and May hadn’t even considered going to any dances. They’d joke about the concept, talk about how they’d be set alight the moment they

crossed the gym's threshold. They pictured themselves as horror movie monsters, creatures that'd bring the festivities to a grinding halt. However, Allison was an optimist. She always tried to frankenstein them into something good.

Allison rested her cheek on her fist which pushed the fat there up, squinting one of her eyes. "I think it'd be fun though. Especially since now's our last chance."

"It isn't even prom. And everyone there would hate us." Beckett pointed out then paused. "Well, not you. They'd hate me and May," he amended.

"What, I'm not cool enough to hate?" Allison asked, pretending to be offended as she leaned forward.

Beckett stood as he heard Louis' voice telling May he'd think about something and May's voice asking him to just sit down and think about it now, please? Just think about it for a second. "You're too nice to hate," he said.

"*You're nice!*" Allison exclaimed as if being nice were a grave insult she was returning. Beckett looked towards the door, then at her.

"Can I ask you something?"

Allison perked up. "Sure."

Beckett's attention was caught by one of the teddies lying on May's bed. He used to make fun of her for them when he was small, grabbing her stuffed animals and holding them over his head as she tried to grab at them. He'd do it until she knocked him down and scratched and screamed. Then her grandmother would shuffle in, favoring one of her legs so heavily she appeared to be lopsided. Her voice was always calm when she told them "I think Beckett better go home now." as if it were a decision all three of them made and she was just the one to finally verbalize it.

Even though May's grandmother had died a year ago Beckett sometimes thought he heard her shuffling towards him, slow but solid, heavy. Her off-beat footsteps pressed against the side of his head.

"I think Beckett better go home now," gave him the same feeling as when he'd been lying in bed, looking up at the ceiling with his chest bare and an ache in his hip. A feeling that he'd done something irreversibly wrong - serious beyond becoming angry. The kind of wrong that only flame or confession would rid him of but he couldn't confess. If he confessed it'd be true - the door would open after all those footsteps and she'd be there.

Beckett snapped to the present, bringing his hands together in front of him so he didn't touch anything of May's. He looked at Allison through the window so he only saw the barest halo of the sun hitting the very top of her hair. Even that seemed like too much. If he looked into her eyes when he felt like this he felt like she'd know and she'd never be sweet again, he was sure. Likewise, if he touched May's pillow whatever wrongness was in him would leech into her

head as she slept. As with his crush on Allison he didn't know when this feeling had started either, only that they felt compelling and unchangeable. He felt like a prophet, one of doomsday.

“I was wondering if you'd wanna help me out with babysitting this weekend?” Beckett asked instead of his original stupid question which he quickly crushed to the bottom of his chest. Allison wouldn't want to dance with him. “My parents are going away for a bit to have some time away from the baby.”

His mother hadn't been well since Grace was born. She'd been excited when she was pregnant but after the baby came she could barely look at her, a sick little thing. Beckett's dad scoffed once that she liked attention more than babies.

Beckett was glad his mother was leaving for a while and taking his dad with her. He hoped the time away would make her come home wanting them again. Well, wanting Grace. His mother could be a very loving woman, he remembered her holding him in her thin arms as a boy and feeling that somehow she knew things he didn't and would use that to protect him, to warn him away from danger. He wanted Grace to at least remember something like that, even if she didn't have it forever.

“Sure, I love your house! It's so old and spooky,” Allison said, smiling at him. “And I'm great with babies. I haven't seen her...Grace, right?”



Beckett nodded. “Yeah, she’s a little sick. Or she was sick,” he clarified, seeing Allison’s expression drop. “She’s okay. I’m sure she’d be happy to meet you.”

Allison nodded quickly. She was writing the appointment down in a corner she tore from her notebook. “I can’t wait, should I come over Saturday? What time?” She asked.

Beckett hesitated then leaned over, arms crossed close to his chest. He turned back to the room. “Uh, whenever? Whenever works best for you.”

Allison nodded, distracted as she drew something underneath the date. Her and Beckett’s heads, the two of them smiling. The word ‘whenever’ emerged from Beckett’s mouth, encased in a speech bubble. Question marks surrounded Allison’s head, her glasses bending to mimic eyebrows furrowed in confusion.

“Do you like it?” Allison asked, turning her notebook so he could see it better.

Beckett’s heart felt light inside his chest. “You didn’t draw my horrific acne.”

Allison laughed. “I didn’t draw my double chin either, we can keep that a secret. Just between you and me,” she winked.

Beckett turned away, remembering he shouldn’t look at her. He uncrossed his arms, they hurt from how tightly he was holding them. “Three,” he said quickly. “Come over at three?”

Allison's paused and he imagined her staring at his back. Then she said "Roger that," and he nodded, rushing out into the hall lined with family photos and half-worn away stickers.

"See you then," He waved, not looking back. He walked down to the living room and peered inside to where May and Louis were sitting, Louis on floor and May on the couch. As soon as his head popped in they both looked up. May looked annoyed by the interruption while Louis stood eagerly.

"Ready to go?" Beckett asked, pulling his backpack on.

"You're the one who kept me waiting," Louis said, dusting himself off and heading towards the archway back into the hall. "I'll *think* about it, May."

"Sure," May said, gaze sliding from the two boys and towards the unlit fireplace. After her grandmother's death it'd become decorative rather than functional, another place for storage. Currently there was a pile of books and a calf-height figurine of a naked black woman occupying the space.

"I'm leaving," Beckett told her. There was an awkward beat.

"Okay, do you want to do something Saturday?" May asked blandly.

Beckett shifted from one foot to the other. "I'm busy. I have to watch Grace."

May was quiet for a while. She sat with her chin propped up, fingers curling around her lips. She looked at ease and far away. She didn't used to look like that. May used to look

frustrated even when she wasn't doing anything, sometimes even while she slept. Her eyebrows would furrow and she would grunt out little half-commands and Beckett would watch her, eyes wide to take her in. He didn't let himself look at people like that anymore.

"Got something else to say?" May asked, still turned from him.

"No."

"Then get out," May said, waving him off. Beckett noticed that her nails shimmered a bit when moving in the light. He wondered when she'd started painting them and thought to ask her.

"I'll see you Monday," he said instead, not waving as he left.

May didn't say anything back.

He and Louis walked back up the hill in silence. The leaves that canopied them were beginning to turn brilliant browns, yellows and reds that reminded Beckett of flames. When he was younger he remembered that Nate would point up at the trees and shout "*Incoming!*" whenever a leaf drifted towards them.

Beckett looked towards Louis who was walking with his hands clenched into fists, breath coming out in restrained bursts as he tried not to seem tired. Beckett slowed slightly, glancing at Louis again. His brother held himself rigidly, they both did and Beckett felt the sudden urge to reach out and ask him something, touch his shoulder, to try and connect. Then the thought seemed painfully embarrassing and he sped up again, listening to his brother's footsteps trailing behind him and the crunch of dry leaves beneath their shoes.

The house was afternoon-dark when they stepped inside, all the curtains drawn as usual. Duke looked up from his spot at the bottom of the stairs and wagged his tail as he slowly made his way over to the boys.

Louis bent down to pet him while Beckett went to the kitchen, pouring himself a glass of cold tap water and downing it. “Mom? I’m home.” Beckett called, placing his empty cup beside the sink.

“Upstairs!” She responded. Beckett felt hopeful it was a good day for her and seemed to be proven right when he heard humming as he climbed the stairs.

The door to his mother’s room was open but he knocked anyway, stepping in when she told him it was alright. She was sitting on the bed trying to close a suitcase with two more stacked by the door.

“Thanks for coming so quickly honey, I just need your help with some finishing touches.” She said with a smile. Her hair was down, covering her shoulders and brushed glossy. It was rare to see it in anything other than a ponytail and Beckett nodded to himself. His mother only did something with her hair when she had the energy and she only had the energy when she was feeling well.

“I was done with homework anyway.” Beckett lied, walking over and pushing his weight onto the suitcase. “Try now?”

“What would I do without you, hon?” His mother sighed as the suitcase finally zipped closed.

“What I do without you, hon?” Nate teased, walking by the door.

“Ignatius!” Their mother scolded but the door to the bedroom across the hall was already being slammed shut. She rubbed her eyes for a moment then looked up, expression pleased again.

She reached over and took Beckett’s hands in hers. “I’m really glad you’ve agreed to watch the house. I know I haven’t been very good to you lately but I’m gonna be better, alright angel? It’s just been hard. You understand, right?”

“Of course,” Beckett nodded eagerly. “I hope you get better- I mean feel better.”

“You don’t blame me, do you?” She asked, squeezing his hands and bringing them closer to the expanse of flat bone above her chest.

He shook his head. “No, ma. It’s hard. I’m sorry.”

She smiled and nodded slowly, bringing one of her hands up to his cheek. “Thank you, I try my best, you know? I really do try. I love you, all of you kids but you...you’re something special.”

Beckett felt as if he were glowing even as anxiety began pressing urgently against his chest. He didn’t know why. His mother was feeling better and he was helping. He opened his mouth to thank her when she continued.

“You’re so mature,” she said, patting his cheek. Nausea suddenly came rushing back to him, clouding his head like a summer fever. His mother’s hand pressed the feeling deeper into him like a cattle brand, the hiss of it keeping him from hearing whatever she said afterward. His gaze fell unsteadily to the floor which doubled then blurred.

“Are you alright?” His mother asked. Beckett didn’t raise his eyes, could barely speak. Something held down his tongue which began spreading slowly over his entire body, weighing it. He felt sick and slow. He wanted to go to sleep. He wanted his mother to let go of him for both their sakes. He wanted her to hold him close, to tell him she knew exactly how to help him.

Sometimes he wanted her to kill him. He had half-dreams some nights where she’d walk into his room, illuminated by a perfectly circular beam of moonlight. She’d have a sorrowful expression on her face but it was out of love and he knew that as she wrapped her hands around his neck. He knew she was sorry and that there was no other way and she would sob as he died beneath her, the only sound in the room.

Then he'd wake up coughing, fighting himself to the floor.

"I'm just going to miss you." Beckett said carefully and his mother exhaled with a small pleased sound.

"I'll be back before you know it," she told him. Then she let him go.

\*

On Saturday Louis left in the early morning. Beckett heard him in the downstairs hall, shuffling around as Beckett himself laid on the couch with a blanket wrapped tightly around him, eyes burning every time they shut. When the front door clicked closed Beckett sat up and stared at nothing. Then he laid down again and started counting backwards from one hundred for the fourth time, hoping it would work. He hadn't had a good night's sleep in years. He couldn't sleep in his bed, he panicked in the middle of the night.

Upstairs Grace began to cry and he sat up before he knew what the sound was, heart hammering in his chest. He tossed the blanket over the back of the couch and rushed up the stairs, knocking on Constance's door.

"Constance?" There was no response and Beckett hesitated before trying the knob, relieved that it wasn't locked.

Grace was sitting up in her crib, grabbing the bars and wailing at the open door. Constance's bed was unmade and empty and Beckett had to kick aside a pile of clothing in order to reach the baby and lift her out of the crib.

"It's alright," he murmured, adjusting his grip. He didn't quite know how to hold a baby. He'd only held Grace a few times and when Nate was a baby Beckett had been a very small child.

He took his baby sister out the room and into the kitchen to feed her, walking very carefully down the stairs. Grace continued to scream as Beckett warmed a bottle of milk his mother left in the fridge. On the counter he noticed a note that'd been torn from a larger paper; 'Going to Tama's. Lunch in fridge.' was written on it in lettering so small that even the half-paper seemed like a waste. Beckett couldn't understand why all his siblings were so eager to get out of the house. Maybe because he had nowhere to run off to that seemed better.

Beckett took the warmed bottle and hesitated as Grace began to grab at it. He set her on the floor and tested the temperature, first by squeezing some into his hand and then his tongue. Sure that it wouldn't burn her, he lifted Grace up again with a soft "Sorry," and let her drink.

Her face remained red and her eyes squinted with displeasure as she hiccuped and gugged around the rubber. Very little calmed Grace. She was born sick and sad and was only taken care of out of a sense of obligation, not real love. No one held Grace with a smile, not even him.



When the phone rang Beckett didn't answer it, not wanting to balance Grace with one hand or try to watch her on the floor while talking. After a few rings the answering machine in the hall beeped with an incoming message and Beckett leaned out of the kitchen to listen to it. "Hey, it's May. For Beckett...I know you said you were busy today but you could come over tomorrow? After church or something? I...yeah, whatever. Bye."

Beckett went over to the machine and deleted the message out of instinct borne of being a nosy person himself. Then he headed back to the kitchen and wrote 'May - Sunday' down on the paper Constance had used, slipping it into his pocket. By that point Grace was fussing around the bottle and Beckett adjusted its position before realizing it was empty.

"Good girl," he said, not knowing how to talk to a child. He briefly wondered if he'd ever have children but pushed the thought away before it could be completed, filling his head with prayer instead. His sister squirmed in his arms and whimpered like she might cry so he held her just a bit tighter and didn't allow himself to think of anything else. He had to be as clean as he could be for her. She was the only pure one of them now and he desperately wanted her to stay that way.

*Hail Mary, full of grace...*

*Hail Mary, full of Grace...*

\*

“It’s good to see you! I haven’t really been to your house before, have I?” Allison asked rhetorically, looking around and gasping at Duke’s appearance as the dog slowly rounded the corner. The girl had on a half unzipped yellow backpack and carried a plastic bag in her free hand. She had multiple barrettes in her hair and a teal shirt which bragged about seeing a king fish at some obscure lake. Allison always wore so many pops of color that she fizzed.

“It’s more bearable with everyone gone.” Beckett said, closing the door behind her. He’d opened all the curtains so the light came in. He’d forgotten how bright the house could be. “That’s Duke.”

“Duke! Oh, he’s so cute. May said he was a hunting dog so I thought he’d be mean but *look* at him!” Allison cooed, scratching behind his ears. Duke’s tail thumped against the ground.

“My dad says he is but I’ve never seen him kill anything bigger than a rat. Mom says we might as well have gotten a cat if that’s all he can do,” Beckett said. He picked up the plastic bag and peered into it. “What’s all this?”

“Baby toys! They used to be my brother’s but he’s too big for them now. Mom thought it might be nice to bring them over.” Allison said.

“We’re not too poor to afford baby toys,” Beckett said then wondered why he said it.

Allison frowned. “I know, I just thought-”

“No, it was nice. Thank you. Sorry, it’s just- I get defensive.” Beckett said, twirling the bag’s handles around his wrist.

Allison shrugged. “It’s okay. Can I use this to guilt you into letting me choose what we watch?”

“Watch?” Beckett asked.

“On T.V?” Allison explained with faux exasperation, already searching for the living room. “That’s like, the only reason people babysit.”

They sat in the living room and watched a serial about two cops that Allison liked because one of them was a woman. Beckett sat on the couch and Allison stayed on the floor with Grace who’d woken from her nap pacified, drinking in the attention.

“Who do you think did it?” Allison asked. They’d been at it awhile and after a few episodes it became easy to guess who the killer was. They all seemed to follow the same outline.

“The boyfriend,” Beckett said.

“I think it was the mom,” Allison countered.

Beckett frowned. “A mom wouldn’t kill her own baby. And she was screaming about it.”

Allison shook her head. “No, trust me. I think she killed him as revenge against the boyfriend. Like, ‘oh you think you can control me with *this?* Fuck you!’ And now that there’s no more baby there’s no reason to stay together.”

Beckett thought about his own mother. Her cold, dry hands. He looked at his own then squinted at the television. “Why’s her hair that shade of red?”

“Bad dye job?”

“Her hair looks like she slipped in the bathtub then decided she liked the color.” Beckett quipped and smirked when Allison laughed. Saving up his ‘trying’ for Allison was worth it.

He and Allison weren’t alone together often and it was only recently that he’d let the topic change from May when they were. He used to be afraid that if he was alone with Allison and they weren’t talking about May she’d realize he was boring and ugly and more than a bit miserable where May was firecracker-bright in everything. Then one day Allison had called him *funny* with a smile and it felt like the first crack in an egg.

“Hey, Beckett?” Allison asked, dangling a set of primary colored plastic keys in front of Grace who grabbed at them and whined when Allison kept them away. Beckett’s gaze fell sharply downward but Allison just stuck out her tongue and blew a raspberry, delighting Grace again.

“Mm?” Beckett responded, returning to the television. The red haired landlady was showing the detectives a trash chute where a plastic bag was wrapped around something very small.

“I decided to ask Dirk to the dance on Monday.” Allison said, lowering the keys so Grace could grab and stuff them into her mouth.

“Dirk Moynihan?” Beckett asked as if he didn’t know. His heart sank but it wasn’t the worst feeling in the world. It was the best outcome, really. Dirk Moynihan was part of the school newspaper. He wore dumb hats with a toothy smile and always carried around a little black recorder that he shoved in people’s faces. He and Allison had the same kind of unworried happiness and it felt right that they should be together. Dirk wasn’t *wrong* like he was.

Beckett nodded, closing his eyes as Allison told him about the newspaper club, that Dirk was funny and sweet and said she could draw for the paper, the real paper, if she wanted to. He kind of wanted Dirk to drop dead. He wished he was as brave and clean as Dirk. He wished Allison smiled at him like that. It wasn’t the worst feeling in the world but there were better.

At Allison’s excited gasp he turned his attention back to the television just as the mother was cornered, sitting at the kitchen table with a gun. The detectives had their hands outstretched, telling her calmly to put it down.

“He raped me, did you know that?” Beckett watched, turning cold as the word tore through him. It was such a *hard* word. It was a word he’d mouthed to himself, barely more than a whisper. It was a word that hollowed him temporarily, when he heard it, when he whispered it with as little breath as possible.

The hand with the gun is steady and she points it upward, towards the ceiling. Backup is on its way, they need to stall her. She won't let them speak. It's her turn to speak. She's smiling, they didn't know that.

“And after I got pregnant he acted like it was good news. He expected me to be a mother but how could I mother that *thing*? I hated him. I hated how he cried for me. How he fed from me. And I loved him sometimes too, both of them. Harry, he had my hair, you know? Blonde from the day he was born. Then one day I look down into his crib and it's darker. And every day it gets darker until...you know what I thought, before I killed him?”

“You don't have to do th-”

“Do you know what I thought, detective?” Silence. “I thought he looked *just* like his father.”

Beckett was on his feet at the gunshot, skidding out into the hall as Allison turned to him with a victorious grin; “I knew it was her! Beckett?”

“Bathroom!” He managed to shout, louder than he'd meant to. He grabbed the phone and punched in May's number by heart, dragging the cord as far as it would go. The boyfriend was screaming the woman's name. She had to die, she'd done something horrible so she had to die. Beckett understood. Someone was on the phone.

“Why’d you call me? Hello?” May asked, annoyed by his lack of a response. He looked at the floor and realized he couldn’t go any further, the line had run out. He didn’t like being in the hall. It was too open a space. “Beckett, what the hell?”

He hung up without a word, walking upstairs and into the bathroom like he’d said he would. That was good. He was telling the truth. He leaned his back against the door but didn’t like not being able to see it so he sat on the toilet and then in the tub with the curtains pulled back, just enough to see the knob glint in the late afternoon sun.

In the unfamiliar bedroom there’d been an artificial clean smell and the hum of a fan that had stayed on the entire time. He’d felt sick and like he wanted to go home. The weight in his chest was unmoving and it remained after the weight on his hips had gone. He hadn’t wanted to move his head. He’d been staring out the window and a voice was asking him to look at her - to not be so childish as to give her the silent treatment.

*“I want to talk about what just happened. Did it scare you? I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you. Come here. Look at me.”*

Beckett closed his eyes and pulled every part of his body as close to himself as he could, staying completely still. He could hear the television downstairs playing a commercial and Grace shrieking about something that didn’t turn into a wail. He wished he were dead. He wished he were brave enough to do something about it. He wished he could be punished before hell, it was too long a wait. Was that the punishment?

When he'd walked home that first horrible afternoon he'd been dizzy and fell onto the side of the road. He'd imagined an angel coming down from the sky and telling him it would be alright, that he'd be forgiven. He knew he wouldn't be. He couldn't be. All he could do was repent and repent and repent until he was punished. There would be no forgiveness. No angel. No mother who loved him despite it all.

That day-

He didn't remember how he got home but it took a long time.

He didn't remember a lot after that.

He started slowing down.

"Beckett, are you okay?" Allison asked.

Beckett didn't reply. He curled into a ball with his back slotted just under the faucet.

"Beckett?" Silence. "...I have to head home soon. I put Grace in her crib."

He knew he was being weird. He couldn't speak. He couldn't move.

Allison waited, longer than he thought she would. "Okay, I'll see you Monday."

There were a few more seconds of hesitation before Beckett heard the creak of the stairs' wood beneath Allison's feet as she left. A moment after the house stilled Grace began to cry, a thick wail that nearly brought her brother to his feet before he remembered what he was. He couldn't look at Grace - couldn't touch her. He began to rock, eyelids shut so tight that colors began to dance in the space he'd nestled into behind them.



“Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou amongst women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. Hail, Mary, full of grace-” He began to whisper the lines with a fervent repetition, drowning out the sound of his sister’s crying and the imagined turning of the knob as he prayed for someone, anyone, to strike him down.

\*

“What’s wrong with you?” His father asked. It was Tuesday evening and Beckett was sitting on the porch banister watching as the woods surrounding them became more sinister. The night closed in. Insects that hadn’t yet succumbed to the approaching fall cold hesitated near his face until he swatted them away, only for them to return seconds later. He was surprised that his father noticed his mood, or cared. He’d assumed the man was incapable of one or the other unless it was affecting him in some way. Beckett thought maybe wherever his parents went off to had worked, even if it wasn’t forever.

“Don’t pretend you don’t hear me,” the same gruff voice above him said, reaching down and swatting at the back of his head. Beckett hissed and glared up at his father who returned the gaze with an amused smile. “There. Hate seeing you walking around mopin’ ‘bout nothin’ all damn day.”

Beckett knew it wasn’t because he hated to see him sad. It was the same dumb-sweetness that meant he couldn’t sit around the house. Out of all of them only Nate knew how to be sad the

right way- by getting angry instead. Beckett used to get angry. He used to be angry a great deal of the time because he'd been righteous and pure and no one else cared except May. He wasn't as angry anymore, or, it wasn't the same. There wasn't any bone behind it - just flat anger or toothless spite, all soaked in fear.

“Heard you got in a fight with that black girl.”

“Her name's May, dad.” Beckett said instead of asking how he knew. This obviously annoyed his father whose amusement died immediately.

“You know how that looks? My boy going around making some girl cry?”

“She cried?” Beckett asked.

His father waved an arm in the air, eyes widening in exasperation. “Of course she fuckin' cried, that's what they all do. You raise your voice and they can't take it.”

Beckett thought privately that May could take it. She could take anything and throw it right back at whoever lobbed it at her ten times harder, knock their teeth in. But then again she hadn't been able to take him not calling her back or going to school on Monday.

They'd had a fight. A real fight which hadn't happened in years or maybe ever - no, not since the day they met Allison in the creek. They'd tried to drown each other then so there was something physical to distract from the hurt but they couldn't touch each other now, for many

reasons. Beckett couldn't touch anyone. They were a girl and a boy. They were teenagers. There was no other hurt to distract from the words' hurt.

“I think the bottom line is that you just don't give a fuck about me.” May told him halfway through their walk to her house. Allison had been trailing lackadaisically behind them, listening to music which played through a clunky pink radio shoved into the pocket of her backpack. At May's statement she paused, feeling something different about the accusation. May's annoyance was usually light and frenetic but this had a heaviness to it that made it impossible to catch and throw back and forth.

“What?” Beckett said, looking up at the trees. More leaves colored and fell each day. “Because I was sick Monday? Sorry for being sick, I won't do it again.”

“You're being like, jokey right now and I'm telling you that you don't give a fuck about me. Like, you don't care. At all.” May said, not taking the bait. She was standing tall and staring forward with her hands on her hips, as if she'd just reached the top of some mountain but her lip was being worried between her teeth. When she spoke her words sped and slowed the way they did when she was trying not to lose control of something.

“May-”

“It's not about you skipping or not calling me back or whatever. It's all of it. I don't even know if we're friends anymore.”

Beckett stared at May, feeling as if the world was tilting very slowly around him. “Of course we’re friends. You’re my best friend,” he said.

“Ok.”

“May-”

“What’s my club even about?” She asked without turning.

Beckett took a deep breath. It didn’t fill him. “The club? It’s...it’s a movie club. For black people.”

May smiled thinly. “Great.”

“That’s what it is.”

“Sure. Ok.”

“May-”

“Stop saying my fucking name!” May snapped suddenly, arms bursting out to either side of her as she whirled around. “What’s wrong with you? I know something’s wrong, it’s like you’re always forcing yourself to hang out with me. I see you, you know. I see you walk right past my house. I see you wandering around in the woods and sometimes I’m like - I want to go see what’s up but I know you’ll just leave. You always want to leave and fine. *Fine*, Beckett. If you want to leave so fucking bad then *go*.”

Beckett stood staring at her. She'd gotten closer as she spoke and was standing practically chest to chest with him by the end of it, teeth clenched and eyes wide, shining. Behind them Allison stood silently, some pop song faintly floating over the entire scene.

"You're fucking crazy," he'd told May. Then he'd left.

Beckett didn't respond to his father, hoping he'd get tired of the silence and leave but it seemed to be taken for an invitation instead. The old man leaned against the pillar opposite the banister Beckett was sitting on and crossed his arms.

"Listen, I know it's confusing right now but I'm here to tell you I've been through this before. Been through it with your mother. You just gotta stop listening," he sighed, looking out into the darkening woods as well. "No point trying to understand 'em, getting close...they're fucking crazy. You can't reason with that."

Beckett thought about his father. He'd seen pictures of him when he was young, Beckett's age, standing by his grandmother's hip. She'd died when he'd been in high school and after that he'd stayed in the house alone except for the women he brought there. Sometimes when Beckett's dad yelled at them he followed it up by saying that his grandmother hit him - that words were nothing - that he was kind in comparison.

Beckett's mother said she knew the first time she stepped through the door that she'd never leave, sometimes with a smile and other times with a grim determination. His mother was

loyal to their father like soldiers to the flag. Beckett would see people blown to bits, limbs missing and minds dissolved in liquor still declaring themselves proud soldiers, proud Americans. When his dad called his mother fucking crazy Beckett knew he was a little bit right.

“Don’t talk about her like that,” he said.

His father turned to him, gaze heavy as his anger grew from nothing. “Feeling brave, kid?”

“Braver than you.” Beckett said, jumping off the banister in time to avoid being pushed. As he stumbled to the ground he heard the porch steps creak and took off running. When his father screamed it wasn’t even words anymore, just the screeching of a drinker and a smoker and someone who’d stayed the same place his whole life - who’d die there and be happy to, no matter how many times he made a point to run away.

Beckett ran all the way down the hill to May’s house, nearly smashing his face in whenever the momentum became too much and he tripped forward. He couldn’t stop until he made it there, until he hopped the little fence with its missing lantern and knocked on her window, the light clearly visible through the thin curtains.

She didn’t answer but he hadn’t expected her to without a fight so he kept knocking and calling her name, even after she turned off the light. He knocked harder so she couldn’t ignore him, sure he’d be dragged off but he’d be ready to try again the next day and the next until she finally let him apologize.

“Stop saying my fucking name,” May said, leaning out her hastily opened window. Her jaw was set and her hair was in a bonnet for the night. Her body was halfway out the window, forcing Beckett back against the fence that narrowly bordered the house.

“What?” She asked and Beckett nodded jerkily. He would apologize, it was his last chance.

“I slept with Mrs.Bellerose,” he said instead.

May furrowed her brow. “What?” She asked again, more confused than angry this time.

“When we were fourteen. It wasn’t at first, at first it was-” A hand on his back, a kiss on the cheek. A compliment and a smile, a job well done. Then more, until it started to make him sick. He’d get queasy walking by the house and every friday his mother would send him there, there was always something to do and he always went. He hated that he went. He wished he were smarter. He wished he wasn’t such a fucking idiot.

He was being pulled through the window, his body and May working in tandem despite how hard it was to see and move in the dark and how disconnected he felt from everything. He felt as if he were bumping around the casing of his body, floating clumsily upward, spinning in circles towards the ceiling.

The day it stopped was a hot day, too hot to go home she told him. Stay for lemonade, stay until evening when it cools down a bit. So he'd stayed and drank and she'd reached across the table and put a hand over his, smiling.

*"I love talking to you Beckett, you're so mature. More mature than most people ever get to be."*

He wished he'd have died right then. Died pure and dumb and immature.

"Don't fucking say that," May hissed. They were on her bed, crushing her stuffed animals, and she was grabbing his biceps- trying to keep him upright as his body leaned towards the floor. He hadn't realized he'd said that out loud.

"But I do, I want to die. I wish I was dead, May. I wish I was fucking dead. I deserve it, I really do." He said, speaking fast as if trying to convince her. Did her dad have a gun? His dad did. He should have brought it, let her kill him. Not him, not his mother, May. May would do it. May was tough.

"You're scaring the hell out of me," May told him, her voice shaking.

"I told my dad. A few days after it happened I said someone from my grade had sex with her, Mrs. Bellerose, and he said whoever did was one lucky son of a bitch. I don't feel lucky, it never felt lucky. I feel like it's over." Beckett said and it did. It felt like he'd gone off the rails,



become some other thing. He sometimes thought of the person he could have been if that day didn't happen; straight-backed and proud, eyes that looked right at the things he loved, hands that grabbed and squeezed. He would feel that he deserved things other than punishment and he would. He wouldn't be scared about everything all the time.

“Your dad’s a goddamn lunatic, Beckett. Beckett? Beck, hey, listen to me. Listen to me, okay? I-” May’s hand moved to steady herself and Beckett slapped it away, sending them both tumbling to the ground in a heap. He moved away from her and looked at his hand. It was wet and when May raised her head there was blood running over her lip.

“I’m sorry May, I’m sorry-!” Beckett whispered, voice high with panic.

“Listen to me,” May interrupted, grabbing his bloody hand. Her grip slipped and she grasped his wrist instead, the bone there poking at the plush of her palm. “I’m gonna burn her fucking house down. I’m gonna go over there and I’m gonna burn her fucking house down and you’re gonna get your dad’s gun and if she tries to get out we’re gonna hunt her down and shoot her.” May told him, voice even and slow. Her grip was tight around his wrist and it reminded Beckett of when they were little; Of Hailey Whitfield and their little two-person vigilante mob, of the world when it was just the two of them that mattered.

“No we’re not.” Beckett told her, pulling his wrist away and wiping the blood on her chin with his shirt sleeve. “That’d be insane.”

“Yeah, well I’m fucking crazy apparently,” she said and Beckett laughed softly. “I hate her, don’t you hate her?” she asked.

“It’s my fault,” he said. It was simple when he said that so he said that more often than he whispered the other word. It being his fault made the world less frightening.

“No it’s not,” May said.

“It is,” he insisted and it felt like muscle memory again. Beckett laughed, little more than an exhale. He couldn’t imagine a world without May. She was the only person he’d ever wanted to tell.

“It’s not. Hey, listen. Beckett? It’s not your fault.”

“I was so fucking stupid.”

“You were fourteen,” May said. It was simple when she said it.

Beckett blinked and smiled wryly. “Yeah,” he said, then his head fell into his bloodied hands.

May held him. Despite how small she was compared to him she held him. “Cry,” she demanded. He shook his head and began to protest, he wasn’t going to cry in front of her. Then she yanked at a chunk of his hair. “Cry or I’ll make you.”

So he cried. The two of them knelt on May's carpet, between the table and the bed, wrapped around one another. He cried until he thought he might throw up, until he was empty enough to slowly ease back into himself. He was tired. He was sure May's parents would come in at any moment but the night was uninterrupted and the house was still.

"I'm sorry I've been a bad friend," he told her when he was done. May had snuck out to the kitchen and gotten them candy which they ate in the corner of her bed. May laid on her side, facing him and Beckett sat up, back to the wall

"I knew you were acting weird before, I remember it. I guess...I wish I'd asked you about it. But we didn't talk about stuff like that when we were kids. Emotions and all." She paused and Beckett chimed in.

"I wouldn't have told you," he said.

"You don't know that," May protested. She paused. "Should we like, call the police?"

"You want to call the police three years later and say a woman had sex with someone?" Beckett snorted. He didn't want to be called a lucky bastard again.

"You were fourteen," she pointed out before giving up. She grabbed a teddy bear and stuffed it under her head. "They won't do shit anyway. They never do shit."

Beckett stared at the wall as he finished his candy, then he shifted so he was lying down beside May. They stared at one another.

“I’m sorry,” Beckett apologized.

May rolled her eyes. “You already said that.”

“Tell me about your club,” he said.

May frowned and looked away as if embarrassed. “No, you like...you don’t care about it and that’s fine. I don’t wanna-”

“May if you don’t tell me about your club in explicit detail I’m going to burn your house down,” Beckett interrupted.

A smile slowly spread across May’s face as her gaze snapped back to meet Beckett’s. “Fine!” She said, as if the threat were a real one that he might carry out. “If you insist.”

\*

It was cold the night of the dance and for the hundredth time Beckett considered not going. He stood in front of the mirror in his mother’s room and looked at himself. He was wearing his church clothes and had slicked his hair back for the occasion before becoming self conscious about his acne and letting it fall into his face again.

Nate leaned into the room. “Your date’s here.”

“May isn’t my date,” Beckett began but Nate was already off.

“I don’t care!”

May was standing on the porch as Louis sat with Duke who, excited by the visitor, languidly wagged his tail and paced between the two of them. Beckett patted the dog's head, going unacknowledged.

“I don’t have any interest in joining,” Louis said slowly. His words were worn and automatic, expanding on them having proved useless.

“Why, afraid of being associated with the likes of me?” May asked. She was wearing a dress that tapered in at the hip, tied tightly with a bright white bow. It reminded Beckett of how she’d dressed when they were children, like she was always on her way to meet someone important.

“Stop harassing my brother,” Beckett told her, walking down the stairs. “Allison’s waiting.”

“I’m not harassing him, I’m giving him an opportunity to...enrich our community!” May said, jumping down and falling in step with Beckett. Behind them Louis made a noise halfway between a bark of laughter and a sigh of disbelief, shutting the front door as May spun around to face him. “He’s so stuck up!”

“It’s a family trait. We’re like walking tents.”

“If you think about it that’s kinda true, with our skeletons and all.” May said with a genuinely thoughtful air that struck Beckett as hilarious though he contained himself.

“I’m a genius,” he asserted instead.

May smiled. “You’re a dumbass.”

“I’m unappreciated in my time,” Beckett said. He was glad things hadn’t changed too much between them. He was amazed that he could joke with her again.

The two of them made their way to Allison’s house, talking idly about what they’d do when they got to the dance. They joked about the fact that everyone would think they were together, how disgusting of a concept it was, how it would surely be the only reason no one asked them to dance - out of a respect for their fledgling relationship. The world was rooting for them.

“You don’t wanna clip a baby bird’s wings,” May said, spreading her arms wide and teetering as if struggling for balance.

Allison’s home was on a shaded stretch of road by town, one you could cut your way to by walking along the stone wall that separated town from the fields beyond it. As Beckett and May balanced themselves on the wall, screaming every so often when their feet slipped, Allison’s home slowly came into view and with it - Allison herself.

She was sitting on the steps in front of her house, head leaning against the banister and the fabric of her bright orange dress dripping down the stairs.

“Is she okay?” Beckett asked and May stopped to look, frowning.

“Allison!” She shouted, waving her hands and nearly falling backwards. She had to overcorrect and launch herself into the grass by the other girl’s feet to avoid it. “You okay?”

Allison startled, laughing at the sight of the other girl as Beckett climbed down and approached them. “May, what the hell? You look like you fell right outta the sky!” She exclaimed, her laughter bubbling up then popping, leaving her looking flatly upwards towards the treetops. “Dirk said he couldn’t come.”

Beckett frowned. “Why, did he get sick?”

Allison smiled softly then frowned again, hugging herself. She wasn’t wearing a jacket and her arms were bare. “No...he said he didn’t feel up to it but I know he just didn’t want to go with me. You were right, May.”

“About what?” May asked. She was pacing, taking in the information like a televised P.I, hands clasped behind her back.

“I shouldn’t have told Hailey.”

“You told-? Ugh, Allison...”

“I know. I just...she asked me and it would have been weird not to tell her and I really thought she wanted to be friends,” Allison said.

Beckett looked to May and she straightened, gesturing towards the sky as if asking for someone on high to back the story up. “Hailey started getting all buddy-buddy with Allison for no reason and I knew something was up but Allie’s a nice person or whatever and now look where we are.” She paused and in a quieter voice continued, sitting down next to the other girl. “It’s not your fault, you just wanted to believe in humanity.”

“If Dirk got scared off by Hailey then he doesn’t deserve to dance with you,” Beckett said. May agreed and Allison nodded, thanking them both listlessly. The three of them went silent.

Beckett thought back to the night he and May had smashed up Hailey Whitfield’s place. It was the two of them against the world then. They were the heralds and couriers of justice. Judge, jury and executioner in two little knock-kneed bodies. If those two heard of Hailey’s misdeeds they would have raised hell and set it loose at the dance. They would have razed the place to the ground and run shrieking with joy from the wreckage, satisfied in a job well done, satisfied in one another, their little two headed world.

Now they stood and sat, silent and staring at not quite anything. A gust of wind cut through them and May perked up. “Allie, you’re shivering. You cold? Wanna head inside?”



“I guess, sorry. You guys can go if you want, you don’t-”

“Shut up. As if we’d leave you,” May shushed, rolling her eyes.

Allison smiled and Beckett thought about dumb-sweetness. About Ms.Henson and Allison and himself. Him sitting on the couch and his father coming in and shouting to get up, go somewhere.

He remembered a time when he was a little kid, crying about something or other and Nate had watched him from the hall before shyly creeping in and shoving a baseball into his hand.

When Beckett asked what it was Nate told him it was from a game their father had taken Nate to, one of the players had hit a ball into the stands and Nate had grabbed it before anyone else. Beckett had thrown the ball out into the hall and been hit with a soft baby-fist, calling him mean. And he had been, mean. At the time he was angry. Angry at his father for taking Nate somewhere instead of him and angry at Nate for throwing it in his face, for thinking that the ratty trinket would fix anything.

“Wait, Allison. Do you still want to dance?” He asked.

Allison looked sheepish. “Um...I mean, I just think it’d be awkward with him there and Hailey and-”

Beckett shook his head. “No, I mean do you want to dance? You look- you both look- it’d be a waste, in my opinion. Do you want to just...?”

Why was being sweet dumb? Why was trying something to be looked down on? Why was it a bad thing to not understand, to be kind? Why was it a waste of a day to enjoy an afternoon?

Beckett began to dance. There was no music and it showed. His body moved to some irregular beat that even he couldn't quite get right, unsure in his pose and direction. May and Allison watched from the stairs; May's mouth open in gleeful disbelief and Allison's eyes wide with something else.

Why did life have to be miserable all the time? Why did he specifically have to have such a miserable life? Why shouldn't a baseball fix it? If it wouldn't heal on its own and God would only watch or punish him then why shouldn't he try a baseball or a nap? Why shouldn't he grab whatever sweet thing he was offered and enjoy it fully, thank the hand that offered it instead of slapping it away? If life was constant rain why should he be an idiot to relish in the brief spots of sun?

As he danced something in him said that he looked stupid, that he didn't deserve to live, that nothing he was doing mattered, that Allison would tell him so in moments.

But instead he heard footsteps and opened his eyes to see Allison in the frame of her open front door, radio held over her head. "Let's get some music!" She cried, placing the device on the banister and pressing a button with a loud click because Allison was sweetness incarnate.

Music filled the air all at once and May hooted towards the sky. “I hate this song, let’s dance!” She said, grabbing Allison by her wrist and joining Beckett in the grass.

And again the something in him said that they were all stupid, lured in by Beckett’s own stupidity. That Allison would not be so sweet to him if she knew what he was and again that he should die, should be ashamed.

And he was ashamed but he didn’t allow it to stop from dancing. He danced harder. He grabbed May and swung her in circles, drinking in the way she shrieked and used her weight to swing him back until they launched themselves into the grass, laughing and crying for Allison to help them up and then he was touching Allison. And he forced himself not to let go when she looked down, rewarded by her smile and the plush of her hand in his.

Her hand was smaller but his looked skeletal against hers, skin deathly pale in contrast to the healthy pink of her own. He remembered the pain in his hips and jerked backwards but Allison came with him, thinking it was part of the dance and soon it became true, the two of them moving hand in hand across her front yard, dancing more in response to each other’s movements than what the music demanded.

“What even is that?” May laughed as Allison dipped Beckett and threw her hand up into the air as a flourish.

“It’s called romance!” Allison responded and Beckett’s heart turned into apple-mush in his chest, a strange private joy. “May I have this dance?” Allison continued, letting him stand and curtsying towards him, hand outstretched.

Beckett’s own hand trembled as he took it, tightening his grip so it wasn’t as noticeable. He smiled, a big showy one to make everything as silly as Allison perceived it to be. “Of course. Don’t tell my wife.”

Allison opened her mouth in faux shock, looking towards May as she and Beckett arranged themselves into what they thought was the correct posture for a ballroom. “May, I’m gonna steal your man!”

“As long as you promise not to give him back,” May responded, raising the music’s volume so it reached them even at the edge of the yard.

The music was not at all fit to waltz to but it was what they did, first clumsily attempting to dip and spin one another, gliding across the grass - switching who danced with whom: May and Allison, Beckett and May, until finally it returned to him and Allison. They were tired by that time, swaying in each other’s arms.

“I’m sorry about Dirk,” Beckett told her. Allison’s cheek was against his shoulder and he’d given her his jacket to wear which she did even though it didn’t fit her well. He wished he didn’t like her like a girl. It would make things easier.

“It’s not your fault, thanks for cheering me up. Now I can at least remember this,” she said. He could feel her smile growing wider. “This is my first dance.”

“It’s all of our first dance.” Beckett said to make the moment less romantic for his own sake, then paused. “Is that right? It’s all of our first dances...?”

“Let’s all make out in the back of my dad’s car,” Allison said and both he and May shrieked at the comment.

Their three person dance continued as the evening darkened. The lot of them ran in and out the house to grab snacks and eventually stayed in to watch television when it turned to night in earnest and it got too cold to stay out.

They watched a show that May liked, a cowboy detective who wandered from town to town solving murders. The girls squabbled over who had done it while Beckett fought against the urge to close his eyes and fall asleep, knowing that the next time he opened them it’d be time to leave and he would have missed the moment. He wanted every second of it, greedy and unrepentant.

Eventually however he could keep himself awake no longer and began to drift off, only to be jolted back to clarity by Allison’s hand on his bicep, shaking him as she leaned forward.

“See?” She said triumphantly, pointing towards May who had thrown herself to the floor in exaggerative despair. “I *told* you it was the doctor!”

### **Constance - Endling**

The walk to the ShopMart Tama worked at was long, and Constance’s mind often turned to the new baby when idle. It seemed to her that she’d become a new mother too, having to juggle Grace along with her brothers. It wasn’t as bad now that they were older, but they still relied on her for so much. Sometimes it felt like they relied on her for everything but that wasn’t true, no one would rely on her for everything. According to her mother, she could barely be trusted with the little she was.

The sun was low in the sky, late afternoon approaching evening, and Constance was sweating through her layers of clothing; jacket over cardigan over dress. A bird flew past her, chirping frantically as it was chased by another. The pair vanished into the trees and Constance paused to look in the direction they’d gone off in. The first bird must have had food to be chased like that. She pictured a bird’s thoughts to be as frantic as its movements, one million things at a time. A bird, it seemed, was smarter than her - who thought slow and heavy, like the thudding of an old washing machine.

The ShopMart was at the edge of town, down below the swell of a hill. Beyond it were overgrown train tracks and flat land as far as the eye could see. Constance stood atop the hill and held out her arms to the side, watching her shadow become a cross. She smiled but it quickly vanished when she heard a peal of rough laughter from below.

Slinking around the empty parking lot were three boys, all her age and all wearing pants two sizes too big for them - some with belts and some without, letting Constance see their jutting hip bones and the puffy plaid elastic from their boxers. The laughing boy was wearing a paint stained tank top and holding a cigarette between his blackened fingers.

Matt Hosinger. Constance knew the smell of him. Sweat and dizzy-fumes. He said that was how an artist smelled and Tama always said he was full of shit whenever she was asked. But she wore the jacket he'd forgotten to take back for weeks after the breakup, claiming he gave it to her. Constance never corrected her, would never question her, but everytime she was alone with the thing she'd get up and pick at the stitching. She wanted to at least destroy the 'MATT' that'd been shoddily embroidered onto the pocket.

As she descended the hill she kept her face blank, asserting as natural a distance between her and the whooping boys as she could. The ShopMart's sign was beginning to glow; at night it'd be like a beacon in the dark.

Constance inhaled when she stepped inside, breathing in the artificial cold air and mildew. The store was small, a singular room, and most of its aisles were full of junk. The only food they sold came pre-packaged and by the door there was a large cardboard box labeled 'For The Needy' in Tama's blocky lettering. Beside it was a sticker of Santa Claus, despite it being the middle of fall. Inside the box were a few dented cans and a scarf.

“That’s not supposed to be a donation, someone just dropped it but you know, fuck ‘em.” Tama said from the counter, leaning over to see Constance at the door.

“I’m sure they’d be glad it wasn’t just thrown out.” Constance said, walking over to her.

Tama scoffed. “You’d think,” she said, flipping through a magazine. Her nails were painted a glitter-black that was already cracking, despite being new. Constance hadn’t seen it on her yesterday. The magazine was a tabloid about celebrities getting out of limos. The woman on the cover had a star printed between her legs with the headline; SIX MORE WEEKS OF WINTER? A FURRY FRIEND SAYS HELLO!

“Those guys are out there, did you see them?” Tama asked.

Constance nodded, foot bumping into another cardboard box, this one full of dusty soup cans. She glanced at Tama before bending down and grabbing as many as she thought she could carry, placing them in her bag one at a time so the other girl could stop her if she wanted.

“I, um...yeah, they seem...they’re pretty loud aren’t they?” Constance asked.

Tama stared at the magazine but her eyes didn’t move. Constance zipped her bag up without looking, testing to see how heavy it was. Bearable. Louis would be happy. She’d been sure to get his favorite, the kind with noodles inside.



“Fuck this,” Tama said, tossing the magazine onto the counter. “Let’s go.”

Constance flinched. “Um, outside? To talk to them?”

Tama furrowed her brow, punching something into the register and smiling briefly as it popped open. “What? No. We’re going out the back. That’s where they parked their cars.”

Tama led the two of them through the dingy backroom and out the door onto the empty lot of constantly depressed grass that seemingly grew horizontally, giving up on becoming upright again. The air was warm and the smell from the locked dumpster soured it so that the entire area seemed rotten. Constance wondered if a smell could stain a place, if removing the dumpster would clear the air or if the scent of its rot would linger like whatever had flattened the grass.

A car was parked beside a chained shut dumpster papered with stickers and graffiti tags.

“That’s it.” Tama said, handing Constance one of the two cartons of eggs she’d taken from the fridge. “Matt’s ride.” Her voice was rough, mocking her ex. Constance’s lip twitched in an awkward smile. It was tough to know when she could laugh about Matt. Sometimes Tama got mad when she laughed and sometimes she got sad when she didn’t.

The first egg splattered against the car door’s window with a wet crack, some shell sticking to the yolk. Constance fumbled to open her own carton as Tama laughed under her breath, tossing eggs as fast as she could. By the time Constance threw her first the other girl was already halfway done, whispering for her to hurry.

Constance liked the rush of energy that ran up the back of her neck when they did things like this. The first time was shoplifting at a mall in Wellner where Tama's mom got her beauty treatments and let them wander around for the day. Constance had been staring at a shirt with pink, white, and red candy stripes, checking and rechecking the price tag.

When Tama had asked if she wanted it and Constance bemoaned its expense the other girl shrugged. Then she'd taken a bracelet from the sunglasses rack and tore off the tag, shoving it under a stack of shirts similar to the one Constance was holding, slipping the bracelet onto her wrist. "Just take it. You do that all the time."

Constance hadn't thought it'd be so easy to do, to get away with. She'd never taken something just for herself before - it was always for the family and usually necessary: food, toilet paper rolls, utensils tossed into a bag. Beckett had once divided a cookie into fourths while the rest of them watched anxiously. At home there was always someone over a shoulder, watching with an outstretched hand so she'd been surprised when it really was as easy as Tama said.

Tama knew how to free her. She knew everything. They'd only gotten caught once, when they'd trespassed into their school at night to fill a girl's locker with shaving cream. Even then the guard looked more frightened than they were and when he'd asked for their names Tama had cried and held her and he'd let them go with a warning - he hadn't even gotten their names.

“Let’s go!” Tama shrieked when Constance’s carton was finally empty. The two of them giggled and rushed breathlessly back inside.

Constance ran to the windows, lowering all the shutters while Tama checked the security footage. The boys were still in the parking lot, oblivious.

Constance grabbed the keys from behind the counter, locking the door just as she heard a small commotion start outside. The boys talking all at once, moving as a group. There was a laugh, a knock on the window, then more laughter. She moved away from the windows, heart racing as she crept to the backroom and whispered for Tama to lock the door they’d run in from.

“It locks automatically,” Tama explained. “Why’re you whispering?”

“The boys are outside, I think they know something’s up.” Constance said.

“And?” Tama scoffed, standing and heading back to the main store with Constance.

“Fuck ‘em. Let’s just hang out until they leave.”

“What if they just wait for us to come out?” Constance asked, following Tama to the freezer ‘aisle’ which was just an uneven row at the back of the room. Most of them were filled with alcohol, the rest with frozen pizza and tv dinners.

“We have food, water and a bathroom. They’ve got a shitty car and a curfew.” Tama pointed out, grabbing a soda and a can of whiskey. “Besides, they try anything and I’ll kill ‘em. I’ve got that sort of instinct you know? It’s in my blood.”

Tama went over to the counter and opened both cans, chugging half the soda and filling the empty space with whiskey. Constance forgone the soda, reaching right for the half-can of whiskey the other girl had set down. She glanced at Tama to see if she’d object but she was too busy fidgeting with the register, counting and pocketing bills.

“Aren’t you gonna get fired if you keep doing this sort of thing?” Constance asked. “Not that it matters.” she added hurriedly, sipping the whiskey. It wasn’t good but she winced through it.

“Probably. The manager likes ‘curvy’ girls so it’s whatever,” Tama spat.

“How do you know that?” Constance asked.

“He told me. It was so freaky! He was all like ‘Other guys aren’t into them but I *love* curvy girls.’ I think it’s why he hired me and I was like, okay, so I’m fat or whatever? I’m gonna bleed you dry, loser.”

Constance nodded. She pictured the manager’s home slowly filling with gas as he slept. She pictured Tama’s smile when she heard the news. “Weird...”

“Perverted. Like Matt. God, why does every guy-” Tama didn’t finish her thought. There was a frantic unrhythmic hammering against the back door, more foot than fist, and both girls paused to listen to it. After it vanished they stayed silent, listening to the muffled shouting that followed.

“...How’s your dad?” Constance asked.

“He’s fine. He keeps saying he’s gonna get out soon but I’m like, no you’re not. He says it’s because he has good behavior but it sucks. He does that everytime my birthday’s coming up and I’m there saying ‘give it a rest’, you know?” Tama said.

Constance leaned against the counter as Tama hopped on top of it, the two of them huddling as casually as they could. Constance’s eyes kept gravitating to the shuttered windows. It was dark and the only noise beside the boys’ distant rage was the hum of the freezers and an occasional loud clang from the air conditioner.

It felt familiar, hiding with someone from something loud and terrible. Only she didn’t have to take care of Tama, she was the only person Constance knew who could take care of herself. She scooted closer so her forearm was pressed against Tama’s thigh and when it wasn’t pushed away she nearly saw stars.

They left two hours later, after they heard the boys leave, whooping and jeering at the closed building. They snuck out the back and ran for it, Tama grabbing Constance’s hand and

pulling her forward when she nearly stumbled to the ground. It was hard to run in the dresses she wore, down to her ankles and stiff against the cold.

They stopped running when they'd made it to the main road and no one had chased them. Constance leaned against a stop sign and Tama glared out at the other side of the road. There was a lamp post there and its dull illumination brought out the rough texture of her skin: The red acne, the little hairs. Constance flinched when Tama turned.

“What?” Tama asked.

“Huh?” Constance asked, eyes widening.

“You flinched,” Tama said.

Constance shook her head. “I don't know, it's dark.”

Tama smiled, amused by her cowardice. “Wanna come over to my place?”

Constance played with the fabric of her jacket's over-long sleeve which she'd rolled up three times to keep from falling over her hand. “Um...what time is it?”

“I don't know. Just come over.” Constance didn't respond. Tama walked two steps to the right then back again. “Come over, you can tell the time there.”

“Okay,” Constance nodded. She knew that she'd give in to Tama eventually, she always did. Her mother said she led her around by the nose but that wasn't true - it was everyone else who did that. She was always at everyone's beck and call.

“My brother might come get me,” she remembered, warning Tama as they began to walk.

Beckett had a habit of collecting them, herding them all into the house after dark, even though their parents insisted that the boys would be fine. Constance thought he liked the authority it granted him, busting down doors and dragging the spoils back.

“The cute one or the rich one?” Tama joked and they both snickered.

The Young house was always either too hot or too cold and everything in it seemed to creak. Tama and her mother moved from town a year after her father went to prison. Their new house was run down, one of the abandoned farmhouses littered around St. Dixon, smaller than Constance’s. Only a select few parts of the house were liveable, several doors were blocked off with bright yellow tape and furniture that didn’t fit into the smaller space was crammed into strange rooms. The girls had to crawl over chairs and a couch to get through the front door.

“Do you want anything?” Tama asked, balancing on a coffee table at the kitchen’s entrance before hopping inside.

Constance looked at the blinking blue letters on the microwave. It was thirty past ten. If she wasn’t home by eleven Beckett would come after her and it’d take more than that to walk back. “I’ll just wait here,” Constance said, sitting down at the kitchen table. “Maybe if no one comes I can sleep over.”

“Sure, my mom loves you.” Tama said, making herself a sandwich and wolfing it down while standing at the cluttered counter.

“Ew,” Constance said, playing along. Whenever either one of their mothers was brought up that was the response. It wasn’t something they’d planned, it’d simply evolved over the years and was now a fact of life. Hatred was as physical as any other animal. Sometimes Constance thought she could touch it, a hardened ball between her breasts.

“She says you’re a good influence. Whatever. That bitch doesn’t know half the shit we get into, I bet she’d have a heart attack if she did.” Tama said, twisting the plastic tail of the bag of bread she’d used and tucking it under itself. “Do you want to take anything home?”

Constance shook her head. “We’re uh...fine. I just went shopping so it’ll be a bit...”

“Fine,” Tama said, sitting in the chair opposite Constance’s. “Ugh, Matt. Fuck him right?”

Constance nodded. “Right.”

“Like, how childish do you have to be? Did he really think we were scared of him? I could take him down easy. He’s scrawny, pathetically scrawny. All he eats are barbeque chips and carrot sticks absolutely *covered* in ranch. Seriously...” Tama laid her arms down on the table, cushioning her chin as she slouched. All at once she looked tired and closed her eyes.



“Sometimes I feel like we’re the only two people who like, matter, you know? Who *understand* shit.”

Constance didn’t say anything, staring at the spiky hairs that stuck out from Tama’s head. She’d cut her hair after the breakup with Matt, just got up from her bed and hacked away at it with scissors and wouldn’t let anyone fix it so it was growing back in patchy. Constance bit her lip, she didn’t know what kind of face she was making.

She loved it when Tama talked like this. It brought her back to the days when they first really *met* one another and Constance was in perpetual awe of the other girl, like she was a planet with her own pull. It made her think of Bonnie and Clyde or Romeo and Juliet. Everyone in class thought it was stupid of them to kill themselves over such a small thing - love. They thought the devastation was silly, dramatic. She’d been too scared to raise her hand in class but she thought it wasn’t stupid at all, it was very brave. To be willing to do something like that - to be that deeply connected to someone else that their death made your own paltry, necessary, was something she admired. When she’d asked Tama she’d agreed. She said she’d kill for a romance like that.

It was very difficult to kill anything. Constance didn’t know if she’d care about anything enough to kill it, least of all herself. When she imagined her death it was always a type of starvation. In the books Louis read there were a lot of women with wasting diseases, women who laid in bed and got worse until they weren’t anything anymore. Constance thought her own death would be like that. No color, no bang, just silence and lack.

“I wish he was dead,” Tama muttered and Constance’s breath caught in her throat. She exhaled slowly so that it wouldn’t sound like a gasp and reached over, poking at the other girl’s head.

“What did you say? Tama, what?”

“I wish that fucker was dead,” Tama said, loud, meaning it.

Constance blinked and smiled shakily. She could feel the corners of her mouth faltering, she didn’t have a pretty smile - pretty anything. She knew that so she tried not to. “Oh...yeah. Well, I mean, it’s not like it’d be that hard would it? With the two of us.”

Tama didn’t answer so she tried to laugh, bringing her hand back to her own side of the table to ball into a fist on her lap. “He’d be shocked, wouldn’t he? After thinking he’s so tough and above it all. Wouldn’t he be shocked and...uh, scared? He’d be scared I think. He seems like- like he scares easily.”

“He’d piss his pants. He’d seriously beg for his life or whatever and it’d be like - nope, sorry asshole. Bang.” Tama said, miming a bashing over her own head as a stand-in. Constance brought her hands to her heart, pressing them against the skin. Tama looked out the kitchen window, at the dead and darkened grass.

“And I know how to do that shit too, it’s in my blood.” Tama said with a dull severity. “Murder’s coursing through my veins,” she said. Constance nodded, not looking at Tama. She

was looking at her hands, imagining that the whole world could hear the beating of her hideous heart.

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That weekend, like most others, Constance listened to Grace cry from the living room. She laid on the couch stiff as a board with a book sitting heavy on her chest and imagined she could float through the ceiling.

She'd float past the bedroom that wasn't her own anymore and over the rooftop of her family's farmhouse until she could see the entirety of St.Dixon. From way up there her body would look like nothing more than a speck of dust and all her thoughts would be even less than that, invisible and meaningless and maybe then she'd understand her mother and God.

Grace never did anything but cry and the house was always full with it. She was born sickly, early and with a problem in her lungs. Their mother had had to stay in the hospital a few extra weeks and whenever they visited she'd be staring at the window as the sound of Grace's respirator steadily rose and fell in the background.

After they'd brought Grace home she wouldn't stop crying unless someone was holding her and then all the crying had hurt her throat and then she'd gotten colic. Constance didn't think she'd ever seen her baby sister at rest except when she was in the hospital all hooked up to those wires with a mask covering half her face.

“Connie, Grace is crying.” Louis leaned over the couch, frowning. “What are you doing?”

“Nothing, I have a headache.” Constance said, taking the book and returning it to the dusty shelf that sat in the corner of the room. “Does she ever *stop* crying?” She said, trying to soften it into a joke which suited neither of them. Constance was too ghostly for humor, it fell right through her, and Louis treated every word spoken to him like a gem to be evaluated. Humor between them either didn’t land or it landed with a thud.

“She’s a baby. Plus she’s sick.” Louis said, running a hand over his curls.

Constance looked down at her feet. In church she’d been told that sin was like rot, eating you from the inside out, that you could see it on someone. When she’d told Tama this, Tama told her he was talking about drugs and STDS.

Sometimes Constance couldn’t believe how plain she looked, how smooth her skin was, not marked by even acne or a singular faded scar. Tama and Beckett’s faces were riddled with acne and Nate had freckles. Even Louis had an old scar where he’d split his chin open after getting pushed off the bus and connecting with the sidewalk’s edge.

It made her distrust the preacher, or maybe not. Maybe it was just that the things she thought weren’t sinful. She hadn’t heard of other girls besides Tama thinking the way she did, violence in hot flashes or the night’s slow broil. She would lie awake sometimes with her heart

racing, staring through the bars of Grace's crib and feeling as if she'd never sleep again. She would imagine opening the small window between them and throwing herself out of it. She'd even picture the scrape of the roof's tiles against her bare skin, the split second feel of grass and taste of dirt before it was all black nothing. Or trumpets.

But maybe that wasn't a sin, just to think about it. Or not one big enough to mark her.

She and Louis left the living room and made it to the bottom of the stairs just as the back door opened and their dad stepped in, ignoring Louis to wrap an arm around Constance.

"There she is, how's my angel?" he asked. Louis rolled his eyes and slipped away. Constance wished he'd stayed but they were growing apart lately and with their father it was always every man for himself.

"Did you need me for something?" Constance asked, looking down.

Her dad frowned. "Do I need a reason to talk to you?" He asked, souring quickly. He was an unpredictable man and sometimes Constance forgot that just because he was the kindest to her it didn't mean he was kind.

"No," Constance answered quickly, tilting her body away from him. "I just- I'm going to check on Grace."

They both paused as Grace's cry ratcheted up into a shriek before bubbling out into sobbing again. Her father hesitated before patting Constance's shoulder, letting her go. "Better get to it," he grumbled, heading to the kitchen.

Constance stood and listened to her father open the fridge and bemoan something, slamming the door shut. Then there was the pressured pop and hiss of a bottle being opened. This was her reward, she thought. This was what passed for kindness, the lack of violence. She was sure one of her siblings would pay for that later - their father only knew one way to calm down. With that in mind she walked up the stairs, one step at a time.

Her mother was in her room as usual. When Constance peeked in she found her lying on top of the bedsheets, a towel wrapped around her head that was darkening the pillow beneath her. Constance walked quickly past the room and the creak of the floorboards made her mother hiss.

Grace quieted slightly when she saw Constance, perhaps relieved not to be alone anymore. Constance didn't understand people who wanted others around them. Nate was like that, her mother too.

Grace weighed more each month and it was starting to become difficult to lift her. Constance bounced her slightly, swaying around the room that used to just belong to her. Now it felt more like she was a guest, Grace's serf. The baby slowly stopped crying as Constance hummed and swayed. She wondered if it was nice to be held by someone. She wondered if Grace thought the whole world loved her.

After a while Constance noticed a shadow on the wall and turned to see her mother leaning against the doorway, dressed in a nightie with a robe pulled over it. Her expression was pinched for some reason and didn't change under Constance's gaze.

"You think I can't do that myself?" She asked.

Constance looked at the wall beside her mother then at the ground, heat creeping up the back of her neck. "No, I just...she was crying so I wanted to help. I know it's hard," she said. She didn't bring up the fact that she'd been asked to help, that she *always* helped, knowing that it'd just be taken as further insult.

"You don't know anything,"

"Okay," Constance told the floor.

"Stop with the sass." Her mother said, walking over and taking Grace from her. "And stop running around the house, it's like living with an elephant. I have a headache."

"Okay," Constance said, not daring to move. Everything she did was wrong. If she stayed still sometimes she could disappear.

Her mother stared, unblinking, holding Grace completely still in the air. "...I love all of you, you know? I love you, Constance. You just make it hard. It's not easy being a mother and I know you hate me."

"I don't hate you," Constance said, chancing a glance up. Her mother had moved in front of the window, holding Grace above her head. The baby was delighted by her new height, kicking and giggling with her mouth open. Drool crept downwards until it attached itself to her mother's forehead.

"All daughters hate their mothers, I hated mine, she was miserable. She never paid any attention to me, it was like she didn't even want to be a mother." Grace shrieked with delight as she was lowered and raised again. The arms that held her shook with the effort. "I want you to understand that I'm trying, I know I'm not the best mother in the world but I love you."

Constance felt a dull rage begin to dig its nails into the fleshy parts between her ribs. It hurt. She looked down again. "I know- I love you too, uh...mom," Constance said.

"Forget my name?" Her mother asked, suddenly trying on cheer. Constance didn't smile, she didn't want to be asked what was funny or hear a comment about her teeth. Cheer was a trap. "You're a natural, you know? You've really been such a help. I'm sorry for being cranky, It's just these headaches."

"It's okay."



“When you have children of your own they’ll worship you like Mother Teresa.” Her mother said and Constance felt her hands begin to go numb. What was the right thing to say? If she said no then she might be accused of being ungrateful, of thinking herself too good for her mother’s compliment but if she said yes then she might be acting too full of herself.

“I don’t know if I’ll have kids,” Constance said, bringing her finger up to her mouth before jerking it away and scratching her ear. Her mother didn’t like seeing her bite her nails. She’d painted them hundreds of times to get her to stop but it never worked - she just grew used to the chemical taste.

Her mother drew Grace close to her, the baby’s eyes blinking slowly and the mother’s completely closed, swaying gently from side to side. Constance thought of Mary, always the one she’d created through her youthful defacement years ago- the one with a bloodied Jesus in her arms. That was the only Mary to her.

“You will,” her mother assured her, kissing the top of Grace’s head. “It’s the most beautiful thing in the world, a mother’s love.”

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Constance usually skipped school. Sometimes with Tama but mostly on her own.

She wasn't impatient about it like Nate, who'd run off at the bus stop or climb out the bedroom window, making a break for the woods as Beckett shouted after, waving a toothbrush like a nightstick in one hand. Constance went without a fuss and then left. One day she was sick, the next she was going to the bathroom, one time she'd seen a class going on a trip and just followed them out the door, breaking off from there. It was easy for her since she looked like she couldn't crush a fly if she wanted to, not for kindness but for the weight of her hand.

When Constance thought about skipping school it was as if she were already out the door, being warmed by the sun. She had that kind of imagination. Louis said it would make her a great artist. He wanted to be some manner of city artist, though he never told her what exactly it was he'd do. His idea of being an artist seemed largely to be smoking scented cigarettes and wearing black in the summer, not that Constance thought badly of him for it. She herself had no concept of what she wanted to be or do when she got older. It was the one thing she couldn't picture. When she tried, a flickering white film appeared with her in the center of it and she just stood there and stood there until she vanished, looking exactly the same as she always did.

Constance was about to skip school that day, or was considering it, and so she'd wandered into the bathroom to wait for the classes to start. The teachers would all be occupied then. She stood underneath a thin window made out of stained glass, or something similar. Each bathroom had a different color of glass, this one was yellow. Constance thought it looked cheerful but everyone else avoided the room for its piss-soaked quality.

After a few minutes she heard footsteps approaching and froze, scurrying into a stall just as the door opened. Sometimes teachers came in to do checks, telling everyone to get out while aiming their eyes towards the ceiling as if they'd all be washing their hands naked.

“Ew, I literally just saw someone...” A girl’s voice said, Constance couldn’t tell who. It was one of the townie girls though, all the townie girls had a slightly crisper accent. The further you got from civilization the more prone you were to letting your words drag.

There was a bang against the stall door and Constance glanced towards the toilet, seeing if it was safe to climb onto. The seat was cracked, half gone. She could try to balance but one time her foot had fallen in and the girls outside would be there to hear it. She was already teased for how she stank, not even a specific smell just ‘like shit’ but that was everything in high school. She smelled poor, she guessed.

Another bang. “You trying to spy on us, dykie?” The shoes in front of the door were a dull white, lightly dusted by dirt and heeled just slightly. Constance’s boots were splattered with mud and stained by grass. They’d been her father’s when he was a teenager (Nate had found them in the attic) and she’d tied them to her ankles with rope so they wouldn’t fall off. She didn’t say a word.

A head popped up for a brief moment, as if tossed disembodied into the air. There was a shriek as it fell then another laughing grunt of effort. The head reappeared, attached to a slender neck. “It’s Constance!” The girl screamed, pulling her friend away from the door. “Fish fingers!”

“Ew, brother fucker!” The girl who’d banged on the door laughed. Constance knew they were holding one another as if Constance were something disgusting but harmless, a diseased bird stumbling towards them. “Is she not gonna talk? We know it’s you!”

“She’s like *dumb* dumb. Like *brother fucker* dumb, you know?” The other girl said before making her voice low and plodding. “I-I-I dunno uhh I d-d-dunno.”

A delighted shriek. “Shut up, that’s so mean!”

“That’s what she sounds like. If I sounded like that you couldn’t pay me to talk either.”

Constance hoped they left soon. She wished she were braver. She’d ask how she could be a brother-fucker and a dyke. She’d grab their hair and slam their heads against the edge of the sink. She wondered if heads cracked open like eggs. She wondered what one’s face would twist into when the other was smashed - would she try to help her friend? Or was it every woman for herself?

“At least you’d be pretty, like, even if you didn’t talk, Matt’d still be into you.” There was a whispered beat before one of them laughed again.

“Let’s go. Oh, did I tell you? Last night…”

The voices faded and the door slammed shut. Constance stood in the stall until the bell rang, imagining she was gone already. She imagined it so hard that it was almost a shock when she actually did make it outside, as if she were fulfilling a dream of hers.

It was easy to find Tama when she skipped because she didn't wander, she was always at one place or another. Constance found her at the second spot she looked, a large flat rock in the field beside the church. Constance used to sit there when she was little and try not to nod off after service had ended. She'd be shoulder to shoulder with Louis as they waited for their mother to finish her chatting, Nate and Beckett bickering behind them.

Tama laid on it all stretched out, sunbathing. There was plenty of space when you didn't have to negotiate with three little tyrants. "I think Matt's dating someone," Constance said by way of greeting, and Tama furrowed her brow but didn't open her eyes.

"Who? Fanny?" She asked.

Constance bit her nail. It tasted like soap. "I don't- I didn't see them and it's hard with just, uh, voices, you know? I was in the bathroom," she explained. "I just heard."

Tama opened her eyes, squinting as if challenging the sun. "I bet it's Fanny. Slut."

Constance didn't know what to say to that. "Louis told me that in Europe that's like...the same as the c-word. Fanny, I mean."

“I’ll bet,” Tama said. Constance climbed up on the rock next to her and Tama easily made room for her. The rock’s warmth melted something inside Constance and she closed her eyes.

“She said I was a brother fucker. Some girl in Beckett’s grade made that up a few years back. It was really crazy...like, some guys came up to me and were asking about like black...penis. And all that? And I was just like...I don’t know. Um...”

When she opened her eyes Tama was looking at her funny. Constance tried to smile.

“Jesus, Con.” Tama said, sitting up. “What the fuck?”

“I don’t know,” Constance said again, worried Tama might be angry with her. “It was crazy,” she tried to laugh but it got stuck in her throat.

“What’s her name?” Tama demanded.

“Um,” Constance racked her brain, frantically trying to find the source. Beckett and May still talked about her sometimes, May especially. She had a sharp voice you paid attention to.

“Whitfield?”

“Whitfield?” Tama asked quickly, saying the name as if snatching it. “Hailey Whitfield? Fuck her. I bet she came up with it because that’s what she’s into, psycho. I bet that’s why she’s always talking about what a great guy her brother was for dying in some mud puddle. People piss themselves when they die, you know? Because they can’t control anything in them anymore. So

her brother dies in some mud puddle with piss soaking through his fatigues and he's a hero for it? Bullshit. Fuck Hailey Whitfield."

Constance didn't say anything because it was difficult to say anything to Tama when she was in a rage. She just listened and nodded and slowly sank into the rock, feeling the warmth on her back and imagining it making her skin glow like how she pictured an angel's. Her dad didn't call her an angel because she was good. He did it because she had blonde hair. She wanted to be good, she wanted to help someone.

"Constance," Tama said.

Constance felt the sun vanish suddenly from overhead and opened her eyes. Tama peered down at her and Constance moved her hand, pushing the other girl's glasses up her nose. She thought it was a button nose but Tama called a pig snout whenever Constance brought it up. She didn't know why. It was like she was afraid to let anything about her be pretty or nice.

"What?" Constance asked, remembering she'd been called.

"You need to get angry about stuff. Get angry with me," Tama demanded.

"...Okay, um...about what?"

Tama moved her arm as attempting to toss her hand over her shoulder. "Anything, what's been pissing you off lately? Come on. You've got so much to be pissed about."

Constance tried to think of things that made her angry but her mind went blank. Even the moment in the bathroom only brought with it a sort of choking nervousness, like static in her hands. She bit at her nails. “Nothing.”

“Nothing? C’mon. What about your mom? Doesn’t she piss you off?”

“Not really, she’s just...a little...I don’t know.”

“Your mom’s a bitch and so is mine,” Tama asserted, moving on to her own difficulties, to Constance’s relief. “All she does is keep things and go to work and come back and sit on the porch. It’s like she’s not even a person anymore, she doesn’t care about anything. She doesn’t even go to visit my dad, did you know that? She makes me do it because she’s too chickenshit.”

Tama stood on the rock, arms outstretched as if asking the world to try and knock her down. “Never let me get like that, Con. If something happens to me and I just sit there and get all quiet about it, snap me out. Make me be a person again, make me get mad.”

“Okay.”

“I saw a shrink on t.v who said that even anger had a place. People are afraid of being angry, especially girls, but the shrink - she was a woman, she said that everything people feel they feel for a reason. It’s all equal, there’s nothing bad. I think that too. That’s why you’ve gotta get mad about something with me.”

Constance thought about telling Tama the daydreams she had sometimes, of throwing a pot of boiling water at her mother or pushing Nate down the stairs. She thought of those types of



things in the moment, in flashes, and sometimes they clung on; but the moment they detached themselves she didn't feel anything about them anymore. Even as she thought about them now they were like...reading something on paper. In the moment it was like seeing something on television, but in her memory the awful things were typed out neatly and no longer visceral. She wanted to ask Tama what she thought the woman on television would say about that or about Tama's father or about Tama and the way she threatened to bash people's brains in when she got mad.

“Okay, I'll think of something.” Constance said. She thought that maybe violence had been born into her like Grace's sickness and Louis' curly hair and Tama's criminal blood and maybe it'd never change. No matter how she tried to straighten and hide and be good. Maybe she could use it for something good, if it wasn't going to go away.

She'd seen an interview on television with an expert who'd done an interview with a serial killer. The man was reading what the killer had said off a piece of paper and one of the answers had stuck out to her. The question was about when he'd know he was going to kill the first girl and his answer was “*Since I started to think like me.*”

The interviewer made a noise and the expert said it was gibberish, possible evidence of a disorganized mind or an attempt to make himself seem more mysterious than he was but Constance knew what he meant. She knew it because sometimes she would let herself think, truly think, and then the white reel would turn to vivid color and the static image of her would flicker and expand, wild and shrieking, crying out for something that she'd never let herself

name - it was that last stopped thought - the ultimate violent act - and in that moment on the rock she wrenched it free and held it like wet hair in her fist.

To hurt. She wanted, more than anything, more than to disappear, to hurt.

And so, she decided, she would.

\*

It took her weeks to get everything planned out but she couldn't go to Tama with it before then, she didn't want to look sloppy. Tama was an expert on schemes and would point out the flaws in criminals' plans whenever she saw one apprehended, real or fictional. "I can't believe they didn't wear masks!" or "Don't they know you need to pick the bullets up? Those can be traced back to the gun, dumbass."

No, that couldn't happen. She couldn't have Tama thinking she was some amateur (even though she was) or that she wasn't serious about it. She had to convince her that she'd really go through with it and that it would work.

On Sunday it was finally decided. Everyone had gone to church except for Constance because she had to stay and watch Grace who, in contrast to her usual malaise, was occupying herself peacefully on the carpet. Constance considered bringing her sister with her but it would be too dangerous. Beckett was always talking about how evil could seep into you and if Grace hadn't been born with violence in her blood then Constance didn't want to expose her to it—it

might poison her, like being cut with a rusty nail. So Constance placed Grace inside her little yellow playpen and turned on cartoons for her to watch.

It shouldn't be more than an hour or so that she'd be gone, and Grace wouldn't need to eat for at least two or three. Constance checked off such items in her head, depositing the least lethal-when-unsupervised toys she could find into the playpen, much to Grace's curious delight.

"I'll be back really soon, okay?" Constance told her sister. Grace didn't look up, happily bashing a doll against a toy keyboard, shrieking at the jagged sound.

Constance was out of breath by the time she made it to Tama's house. She'd run as much of the way as she could. Everything was right in her head for the moment and she might lose it if she waited too long. That was why she couldn't wait for her family to come home, she had to go right then. She'd been sitting on the couch going over the plan in her head and it'd just suddenly all felt real instead of some abstract pretend-idea like the ones she always had.

Tama's mother was sitting on a sofa chair that'd been dragged out onto the porch, curled up like a girl and continuously rotating a vase around in her hands. She was a thin woman, unlike her daughter, and seemed forever on the tail end of a cold. She coughed when Constance appeared, blinking at her like her eyes hurt.

"Hello Mrs. Young," Constance said, too anxious to be shy. "Is Tama home?"

“Shouldn’t be, should be at work.” Mrs. Young said in the clipped, mysterious way she relayed all information. As if anything she said might later be dredged up and used against her.

“But is she home? Do you know where she is?” Constance asked. “It’s important.”

Mrs. Young placed the vase she was holding on the wooden porch rail, staring at it. Or maybe beyond it, at the deserted road Constance had just ran down. “She’s in her room, I think,” she said, shrugging. “That girl does what she wants.”

Tama’s room was at the back of the house, near the backdoor, which was sealed with yellow tape because the porch beyond was missing—meaning there was just a sheer drop to the ground. It was a small room, and most of the items that should have been in it were instead out in the hall: A vanity, a tub of old toys that Constance couldn’t imagine Tama being interested in, rolled up posters for bands now declared lame.

When Constance opened the door Tama was lying on her unmade bed, head buried in her pillow. She threw something at the door without looking when she heard it creak.

“Leave me the fuck alone!” She screamed, voice raw from crying.

Constance shut the door a bit, so that whatever had been thrown thumped heavily against the wood. It was a book that’d had its jacket removed and so became any number of books. Constance opened the door again. “It’s me.”

Tama looked up then, sniffing inelegantly. “Oh, sorry. I thought it was my mom.”

“It’s okay, um, why’re you crying? I have something important to tell you. But why?” Constance asked, moving deeper into the room. It was messy even without the surplus of furniture. Dresser drawers hung open and near empty, their contents on the floor in front of them. On the bedside table were two lamps, only one was on: A mouse holding a flower like an umbrella, both figures aglow. The shades had been drawn, ostensibly to let whatever sorrow Tama was feeling remain uncut by the bright afternoon.

“It’s true, Matt’s with her. With Fanny. Shit,” Tama began to cry again, mascara running down her face. “I saw them together in town acting all stupid, like they invented being in love.”

This information made Constance’s heart race. She tried not to sound too excited when she spoke. “Tama, I have something-”

“It’s like, fuck him right? It’s such bullshit. He was always like, ‘you and me forever babe, fuck this town and all this fake shit.’ Saying that we were the only real ones...but I guess he’s fine with ‘fake shit’ as long as it’s a C or above.” Tama tossed another book at the door to punctuate her point and Constance saw that she had a small pile beside her on the bed. She hadn’t known Tama read so much. Or else they were all there for the sole purpose of tossing at the already dented door.

“I’m telling you, I know a way to get back at him,” Constance tried.

Tama held her pillow to her chest. “He’s such a dick, I don’t even care.”

Constance shook her head fervently. “Tama, no. I know you care. Because you’re a really sweet person. Even if you don’t admit it I know you are. But you can’t be sweet with him because h-he knows that too and uh, you know. He knew it and he took advantage of that,” she said, trying to keep herself from faltering. What if Tama thought her idea was stupid? A half baked scheme? But no, she’d thought about it, really thought about it and Tama had never called her stupid or anything.

“So I was thinking about what you said earlier, about anger and all that, and how some people are just...They’re just wastes of everything, just lying around doing nothing and even...Even bad things can be good sometimes? Like how I should...I was thinking we should get him back. *Really* get him back. Matt, I mean.”

Tama nodded, face buried in the pillow again. “Yeah, bash his brains in...”

Constance tapped her knuckles against the bone of her jaw. “I mean it though, not like for pretend.”

“Mhm,” Tama said and Constance realized she needed to show her more, that she was really serious. Obviously. She was so stupid. Of course Tama would think it was a joke. You couldn’t just go up to someone and suggest something like that without proof you’d do it.

“I thought about it a lot and I think it could work. I mean, I’m sure it’s stupid but if you helped me it’d be...Okay, so I was thinking that you ask Matt to meet you somewhere. He’ll come, he’s a pervert, right? So he’ll come if you ask. We can use the shed behind my house, my dad doesn’t even really go in there anymore. You can ask him to meet you in the woods alone and he’ll think you want to make out, right? But I’ll be there. My mom has drugs. Doctor drugs. She has to go to the city to get them and everything, that’s how strong they are. If you give him that he’ll definitely fall asleep,” Constance said, excitedly laying out the plan. She was surprised by how little she stumbled, finding it easier to talk the more she went on. Tama hadn’t lifted her head yet but that was fine, she could tell she was listening.

“So you give him the drugs, maybe in a drink? And you’re drinking and flirting like he’s going to get lucky but then he falls out and we bring him to the shed. He’s pretty skinny for a guy, right? And I’ve been carrying Grace a lot so I’ve gotten a little bit stronger so I could help. We could carry him into the shed and I- well first I thought we’d use my dad’s gun, but guns are too much. They’re loud and they leave that powder, right? On your hands and all over the place and the bullet and it might kill him for real so I thought maybe we could take a knife from somewhere like a diner. We could take a bus to Wellner and grab a knife from one of the diners there.”

Constance imagined the two of them eating together, they’d have to wear something totally different than what they usually did, cover their hair maybe. If the knife got traced back to the diner a waitress might remember them. Tama hadn’t lifted her head but she wasn’t crying anymore. The room was very quiet except for Constance’s voice and that was novel, it spurred

her on. The more she talked the more she could feel it happening, the hand-warmed surface of the knife in her hand, the wet-wood smell of her father's shed. Electricity was running through her. She was seeing stars.

“So we stab him. Just once or twice because if it's over and over they always know it was personal. Twice is good, one for you and one for me - not anywhere he'd die from or anything. Maybe the...arm? Or...”

Tama was staring at her, making a face Constance had never seen before. Constance blinked, slowing before barreling on. The method was wrong, maybe. Maybe she thought messing with chemicals would be too identifiable. She was probably right, what if the police came snooping around? Chemicals would be much easier to track. Or maybe she thought it was too risky.

“Are you worried he might remember coming to see you and think you had something to do with it? That won't happen. Or, if-if it does then you know, you can just cry and act scared and say someone else came in...you know nobody blames girls for stuff like that,” she assured her. When she still didn't get any response a desperation bled into her voice. “Tama, what do you think?” She begged.

Tama had moved further away from her and Constance had watched, feeling herself losing steam. She clenched her hands together, suddenly cold. She reached out for her friend. “Tama? Tama what do you-”



Tama smacked her hand away hard enough that it banged against the wall and Constance cried out in pain, cradling it towards her chest. “What the fuck? What? What the fuck is wrong with you, are you serious?” Tama asked.

Constance blinked down at the bedsheets they were sitting on; faded yellow moons and stars that looked like abstract shapes after so many years of use. Her hand throbbed. “That hurt, Ta-”

“What the fuck? Are you serious? What the fuck?” Tama repeated, and Constance realized that she had seen the face she’d been making before. She’d seen it the one time her mother had stepped in between her father and Beckett.

Beckett had said something in the middle of an argument that’d turned it from hot to ice cold and their father’s face had gotten tight, eyes draining of anger and filling with something else as he turned wordlessly and made his way to the hallway drawer. Their mother followed him the whole way there, screaming and grabbing onto his arm as if it’d stop him, her voice moving from anger to something else - a warbling terror.

It was a gun. Constance knew. It was where her father kept his gun and so she’d grabbed her brother’s arm and told him to run with her and they’d hid themselves in her room, putting a chair under the door knob and crawling out onto the roof in case he broke it down. Beckett’s face as he reached for her hand was just like Tama’s, only the other girl wouldn’t touch her because Constance was the one with the gun, the one with drained eyes.

“Are you stupid? Are you a fucking idiot? What?” Tama asked, clutching the pillow close to her. Her voice was soft and shaking, despite the aggression of her words.

“I wanted to help...” Constance explained but she was feeling tired now, the adrenaline of the plan seeping from her. Tama’s words cut through her but her body was anesthetized with disappointment. “It would work. I’m sorry, but if you helped me it’d work. If you’d listen to me-”

“What? Con, what? You’re scaring me. You’re scaring the shit out of me.” And she was, Constance could tell. Tama was tearing up again. Constance wanted to lie down. She was so tired of everything. Of Matt and Tama and school and her parents and Grace and all the other little things she had to keep track of. They were all gnats and flies buzzing around her, feeding on her corpse. She was born dead, maybe. That had to be it. She was born still and she’d never moved once in her life, not even to swat the bugs away.

“You’re always complaining about him and saying you want him dead.”

“I-”

“And aren’t you always talking about- about your dad? And how you know all that stuff from him? How you have that in your blood?” Constance asked, trying one last time to get Tama to see her- what she was trying to do. They understood each other. They had to.

“I’m the same way. I mean, I don’t think my dad’s killed anyone but he nearly does a lot and I nearly do a lot- I mean, I think about it...I think about stuff. I think wrong. I think the worst stuff and I wouldn’t do most of it because they don’t deserve it but you deserve it- to have Matt gone I mean. But we can just do this, just make him pay for how he treated you.”

“I lied,” Tama told her.

Constance shook her head very slowly. “About...?”

Tama had shoved herself into a corner. “About my dad. I was lying, okay? He didn’t try to kill my mom. He just roughed her up or whatever, typical shit, because he wanted to go somewhere and she didn’t - she wouldn’t get in the car and he was shouting at her to but she wouldn’t ‘cause he was drunk so he went by himself. And it was dark and he was driving with one hand on the wheel because he was still drinking and there was a car - there was a car and...and they crashed. And the other people died.”

Constance was quiet as Tama spoke. She felt as if they were moving further and further from one another. The room was growing like a drop of dye in water.

“They weren’t from here, just driving through. It happened on the backroads and dad thought no one had seen so he tried to drive away but someone was walking by and they called the police and they found him in town. He had to walk because the car was wrecked. He said the bodies were...he said it looked like the car had been built with limbs- that’s how bad. He wasn’t

thinking straight. Every time I go there he cries about how he could have killed my mom if she'd gone with him. He makes me forgive him. It's all he ever asks for."

Tama looked up, her eyes wild with fear, and Constance realized that she was never going to act. For as much as she complained and talked and puffed herself up she'd never *do* anything about it. She didn't understand Constance. She was a liar. She was just like everyone else - the little insect people who buzzed and droned. Then a feeling ripped through her, the feeling that'd kept her running to the house that Sunday and that'd kept her up at night for years, electric and passionless as instinct. It shouted through her blood: *It's time!* So for the first time ever she moved. She grabbed one of the books by Tama and brought it down over the girl's head.

"What-? Stop. Stop!" Tama shouted, raising her pillow and trying to push Constance off. Constance wondered how much force a human's head could withstand. She'd seen bugs splattered under hardcovers using half the force she was. Everything in her told her to keep going, to not stop until Tama did. Tama was a liar. Tama was a coward. She didn't understand. No one would understand. She was alone, alone, alone.

Tama managed to kick her hard enough that her blows faltered and Constance had to catch her breath, throwing herself off the bed to avoid another kick.. "You're psychotic! What the fuck?" Tama screamed as Constance crawled across the floor. She grabbed the lamp and yanked it from the wall, making the light spark before the room went dark.

“You’re a liar. You’re just a nobody, a fucking nobody! You think you’re so great but you’re just the same as Fanny. You’re the same as everyone else!” Constance shrieked. She’d never heard her voice so loud. She sounded like her mother. “I’m the only one! The only one in the whole world!” The lamp shattered to pieces on the floor and Constance screamed as Tama made a break for the door, throwing it open and running into the hall, crying for her mother to save her.

Constance threw open the closet and grabbed the jacket that Matt had given Tama before running to the back door, tearing off the tape and leaping down into the grass, taking off before she had a chance to think of where she was going. She ran with her heart jack-rabbing in her hollow chest, the world fading away as her body grew lighter and lighter- until she was flying over it. Over the woods and the houses and the world. She was amongst the white nothing above even space, where God and all his angels lived, only they weren’t there. The only things there were her, the beating heart, and the wail of a frightened girl crying *“Mommy, mommy please, mommy please save me!”*

When Constance came home she locked the door behind her and stood in the foyer, watching her shadow creep along the floorboards. That was her, an outline of a girl. She wondered if Tama would tell her mother about Constance’s plan or just the attack. She wondered if the police would come. Maybe, they wouldn’t do anything though. The police didn’t care what girls did.

Grace was crying, the one where it was half a scream and Constance walked a few steps forward before collapsing. The floor was cool. She was sweating and shaking, weak from running so far without stopping. She realized she needed to breathe and gulped air down like water, desperate to fill herself.

When she felt strong enough she stood again, supporting herself against the wall as she made her way to the living room. Grace was standing with her hands clinging onto the side of the pen, screaming and rattling it, trying to break out. She was facing away from her sister, and when Constance picked her up she was so shocked by her presence that she paused before continuing to wail.

Constance silently brought her to the kitchen, trying to feed her a bottle, but the girl refused, pushing it away. Constance set her on the counter and checked her diaper but she was clean. She was tired then, maybe the television had kept her awake.

Constance walked listlessly up the stairs, pausing at the top and holding onto the railing with only one hand, allowing herself to tip, suspended, into the air. Five fingers between her and the ground. Four. Three.

She righted herself. Grace didn't deserve to die and she didn't know if falling down the stairs would even kill either of them. What if they just got hurt? She didn't want to lie on the floor, waiting helplessly for someone to come home.

She brought Grace into their bedroom and stood there for a moment with her sister in her arms, trying to remember what to do. When she remembered she began to slowly rock Grace from side to side, singing softly. “Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound...” It was her mother’s favorite hymn, she was always telling Constance that it was one of redemption. Everyone could be saved.

In church they were told that everyone was born a sinner but Constance’s mother told them differently. She said that everyone was born pure because little babies didn’t know what sin was or how to do it. Even babies born of horrible things were pure and Beckett always marveled about Grace that way, staring down at her and muttering about how they’d all been like her once - everyone in the entire world.

Constance thought about the day her father had banged against the door. When she’d mentioned it again, months later, he’d said; “*What are you, stupid? I didn’t actually get the gun. What kind of man do you think I am? I wouldn’t do that.*” She wondered if that was true and if so, why that was the line.

He’d been banging against the door, demanding they let him in, cursing the way a dog behind a fence barked at shadows. Beckett had been terrified even though he’d tried not to show it, shaking out a prayer, but Constance hadn’t been scared at all.

Her eyes had moved from Beckett's face to the darkness falling from the edge of the roof. She remembered thinking that it'd be soft, like falling into warm water. She was calm between the shivering and the banging, a stone amongst the waves.

Constance realized that Grace was sleeping in her arms and that her throat hurt. She was on the fourth repetition of the hymn after running without water. Constance set her sister down in her crib, moving slowly so that she wouldn't realize she was being left alone again.

When she made it back into the hall she pressed her head against the wall. She hadn't been born pure. She was the one person who hadn't been. Even the horrible people she knew were horrible for a reason, she'd just been born with a spontaneous violence in her blood. Isolatory, a miracle.

Constance stayed in the hall and time moved slowly around her, waves lapping at the shore. Then she shuffled into her mother's room and looked around, unsure what she was searching for but unable to find it. She blinked and thought about something Nate had told her.

They'd been sitting on the back porch one night, passing Grace between them. It was the end of summer and the leaves were only just starting to harden and turn. They'd been talking about what it meant to be a woman, or Constance was complaining about it and Nate was listening out of boredom.



“I feel like there’s nothing to me, really. I’m more than boring because even boring people are people, they have hobbies. Even crossword puzzles or going on walks is something, I don’t have anything,” She’d said, passing the baby to Nate. “I used to get mad but then I started swallowing it down because girls aren’t supposed to be mad and now I feel like- well sometimes I mean, sometimes I feel like it’s all stuck in my throat. Like it doesn’t even go to my head anymore.” She’d meant something more than anger but she didn’t want to tell anyone about the violence thrumming in her. It was the only thing that lit her up.

“Sometimes it’s not about what you do but what you want. I don’t do shit but I want shit,” Nate said. She bounced Grace on her lap, holding the baby as if she could stand. “Don’t say shit, Gracie.”

“I don’t think I want anything.”

“You probably do, you’re just pretending you don’t. It’s like that thing...” Nate snapped her fingers but didn’t come up with anything.

“Repression?” Constance guessed.

“It’s not enough to repress shit.” Nate said, without acknowledging that she’d been given the word. “Repression means it’s still there, a muzzled dog still wants to bite you. If it’s rabid you’ve got to put it down,” Nate told her. “I used to think that it was a sickness, like you could cure it? But you can’t. It’s in the brain. It rots it.”

Nate had glared out into the darkness and Constance felt she didn't think it was warm. Nate saw an enemy out there, a growling beast that would kill her if she let it. Constance looked out and tried to see it too but again she was stone to waves. No fear, nothing.

Constance came back to the room. The house hummed. The heat was on. It was a soft sound that went unnoticed until you caught hold of it, then it was impossible to ignore.

She blinked and moved onto the bed, feeling more tired as the seconds wore on. She was a stone, sinking into water. A smooth rock in the ocean, immune to erosion, unchanging. She'd just sink to the bottom and stay there until, like hard candy in a warm mouth until she eventually faded to sugar, then aftertaste, then memory.

But even as she thought that, lying still in her mother's bed, she thought of the word annihilation. She thought of muzzled dogs, mind-sick and dangerous no matter how quiet they were. She'd been born sick like Grace, rabid, diseased, alone. And no matter how still she stayed she would remain so, untreatable.

She used to imagine a kinder world, one where she was loved. She tried to conjure it, let herself float into it. But her mind was too waterlogged to float away from her. She remained in her body, heavy. Constance listened to the static, eyes wide open. A headache was coming on. Something was closing in.

### **Louis -Rabbit Hearted Boy**

Louis sat looking out the bus window as St.Dixon's sleepy scenery crept past in shadow. He was tired after a long day in Wellner but it was too close to his stop to sleep so he looked out the window instead.

The night sky was a deep, encompassing black which stretched itself out unhurriedly. There was nothing but stars to disturb the color which only added to it, flecks in the dilated eye. To Louis the sky always seemed bigger, more godlike at night. Maybe because the sun wasn't there to force his gaze away.

His mother once told him that God watched him everywhere and the thought had comforted Louis. God watched everyone, even him, and at night when he looked into the sky he felt as if he might be looking back.

When Louis got off the bus and began walking back home, passing through the field of wheat, he paused at the sight of a humanoid lump in the road. He knew that there were bums in the city and a few drunkards in town but they rarely wandered far from the relative hustle and bustle. He wondered for a moment if the figure was dead before it shot up to its elbows.

"I have a gun," The figure said. "So don't mess with me."

Louis relaxed, walking closer. "Nate, it's me."

Nate paused, shifting forward. "...Louis? What the hell're you doing out so late?"

"Why are you out here on your own?" Louis deflected. "Beckett must be-"

"Yeah, he must be killing himself over it." Nate snickered, jumping to her feet.

Louis sighed and continued walking home with Nate trailing close behind, zigzagging and pausing every so often like a wild dog. She had a shambling sort of heavy-lean walk that looked like a mimicry of how tough guys in movies moved. It was so practiced that the effort was obvious, like when Louis used the word mother instead of mom.

"Where were you anyway?" Nate asked.

Louis had been spending his Saturdays out for months without anyone noticing. He usually returned at dinnertime and found that going to church the next day without fuss was enough to allow him to go undetected. Their mother was particularly proud of this, bragging to the other church ladies whose teenagers were out doing 'Lord knows what.' Not her babies though, except Nate, and what could you do about that? Boys were like that at that age, secretive and willful, especially towards their mothers.

"Do you *care*? Are you *concerned* about me?" Louis asked, sneering. It worked. Nate balked from the implied femininity so fast that the question was dropped again.

"No! Fuck, just thought I'd ask." They both fell silent for a few minutes before Nate spoke again. "Constance didn't come out of her room like, at all today."

“Mom says that’s what teenagers do,” Louis said. “And Beckett says girls are like that.”

“What does Beckett know about girls?” Nate laughed.

“He’s friends with two of them.” Louis pointed out.

“I heard he’s dating that fat chick.” Nate said.

“Allison? She’s nice. Don’t call her fat.” Louis chided.

“Why shouldn’t I? She’s fat ain’t she? I got freckles and you’re black.”

Louis paused before laughing quietly to himself and Nate leaned towards him, bumping his shoulder with her own too hard to be playful. “What’s so funny?”

Louis smiled and patted Nate’s cheek, sending her recoiling in disgust. “Marks of Cain. Whoremongering.”

When they were all very young they had learned about the mark of Cain during a church service. Afterwards, Nate and May got into a fight while the rest of them watched, Constance gripping Louis’ shoulder. Nate claimed May had the mark of Cain - her being black, while May claimed that Nate had the mark - the freckles that dotted her skin. This had led first to Nate chasing May around the dead grass beside the church building and when the girl proved too fast Nate had picked up a rock and thrown it, hitting her square in the middle of her forehead.

Afterwards Constance had nearly been sick with guilt over the affair, telling Louis that she'd been the one to tell May about the freckles which their father said Nate's mother had had as well.

Nate groaned. "That was so long ago!"

"May still has the scar you know."

Nate shrugged. "I was a little shit, I wouldn't throw a rock at a girl now."

"You still are. Me an- Constance and I used to talk about that all the time. She was so scared, like you were going to turn out to be a killer."

"Yeah, I know. I could hear you two fucking giggling and whispering above me." There was a pause. Without conscious decision the two of them had decided to wander a bit, effectively circling the house so they could enter through the back door. In front of them was a small branch of the larger creek that cut their house off from the rest of the land. Louis walked around it and Nate jumped over. "You know, I've always been kinda jealous. You guys were so close, like you had two heads."

"Well we *are* twins," Louis said. It was a joke he and his sister had made when they were kids. Louis was the only black one and Constance the only girl. Everything about their appearances were opposing but they were the onlies of their family, shoulders heavy with expectation to stand upright.

Nate moved past the comment, eager to get to her own point. “Well yeah, I mean...I don’t know. You had Constance, Beckett had May and you and Beckett were always fighting over mom...I don’t know.”

“You’re the favorite though,” Louis said.

“That’s nothing. Being the favorite just means they don’t give me shit about shit.” Nate said, not denying her position. It was obvious to everyone. She paused for a moment, hands shoved into her pockets. “I don’t know, I guess I’ve just...always kinda felt like a hangnail you wanna tear off.”

Louis wondered if that feeling had something to do with their birth mothers’ absences. He wondered if Nate were the oldest or if he himself weren’t black - would they still feel so *extra*? He pictured the family without them. Just their mother, father, brother and sister. The four of them a nuclear unit, every feature evenly dispersed amongst them. No shock of red hair or brown skin.

He remembered how Nate used to tease him. Kicking, pushing, jeering. How he’d find his books tossed from the window, how Nate would whisper loudly behind him whenever he said the word mother: “*Well, not your mother. Not your real mother.*”

“You had a gang of your own until you went psychotic,” Louis said, moving past Nate and emerging from the woods into the edges of their yard. “Honestly, if Constance was worried before I thought she’d go into hysterics after that.”

He'd made it halfway home the night of the disastrous play, plodding forward in the dark when a car stopped next to him, doors popping open. His father's voice had barked at him to get in. It was a silent drive back and Louis kept looking over at his sister, sure she would be in pieces after both the violence and disappointment of the night, their mother's rage roiling over the six of them. But Constance had sat in her seat like a ragdoll, head bobbing, a gentle smile on her face, unbothered. He'd felt alone.

"Yeah, sure. Whatever." Nate said, remaining in the woods as Louis walked away. "Asshole, fucking know-it-all." She continued, voice rising as she spat out the words but remaining very very small, suspended in the air, waiting for an open palm.

The next week Louis woke up to his darkened bedroom before the sun rose, listening for a moment to the snore and shuffle of sleep as he gathered the will to force himself out of bed. Beckett was curled up in a ball under his blankets for once and Nate was snoring loudly, body half-slumped onto the floor. Louis sighed and hopped over a freckled hand, palm-out at the bottom of the bunk bed's ladder. Three people was too many to a room, he thought, not for the first time. Three teenagers to a room had to be torture in some states.

He dressed himself quickly, stumbling into the bathroom and, bleary-eyed, picked out his curls as he brushed his teeth.



It was nice to have the house to himself in the mornings. He'd beat the rush for the bathrooms, which usually involved Constance having to pull Nate and Beckett off of one another. Louis didn't know why everything always came to blows between them. He guessed it was a clash of wills - Beckett caring so much about everything and Nate caring so little. In truth he was a bit worried. Not just about Nate but about Constance too. She'd been spending every day in her room with the door locked, sleeping for hours at a time. Though his mother and Beckett weren't concerned Louis couldn't help but feel like something was fading behind that door, like he was losing his sister. As he walked downstairs he remembered Nate's words to him last week and the uncharacteristic hesitance with which they were said. Maybe he wasn't the only one watching their sister's door.

Leaving the dawn-darkened halls of the house, with its drawn curtains and stale air, always gave Louis a bit of a rush. Duke seemed to share his love of it, always shuffling out the front door as Louis held it open for him and sighing with contented effort when he was able to settle down on the porch.

As Louis waited for the bus he re-counted the bills he'd stuffed in his pocket, pay from his brief stint as a ShopMart cashier supplemented by money he'd saved up doing odd jobs. He frowned and shoved them back in his pocket. His reserves would run out soon but as long as he had enough to pay for a ride there and back he knew he'd keep going. He liked the feeling of going somewhere far, of being on the move.

When he saw the bus in the distance he counted the fare over and over again, not wanting to come up short and be one of those people who held everything up and made a scene by begging to be let on. As the bus moved towards him, so did a commotion up the road. Louis paused to look without turning his head too far. He didn't want to look interested. A gaggle of boys around his age were whooping and running at full speed towards him. Or the stop, he supposed.

When the bus pulled up they were still a ways away so Louis put them out of his mind and stepped on, depositing the exact right amount in the coin slot and walking to the middle of the bus. To his dismay the next person on was an old woman who took so long to pay (her shaking hands continuously letting go of the coins before they could reach the slot) that it allowed the boys that'd been running to catch up and fall in line behind her. They all tossed their coins in noisily and went directly for the back of the bus; Laughing, shouting and pushing one another as they went.

"Hey, Lou! That you?" One of them shouted. Louis ignored him, turning only after he was called a second time.

The boy was solidly built and several shades darker than him, his face wide in a way that made him look dog-friendly. Like he was always happy to see you. Stupid. Louis recognized him vaguely, which in St.Dixon meant he was a stranger, they'd probably never spoken. He might have seen him onstage, he thought. A member of the theater group perhaps.

“My name’s Louis,” he responded.

“Yeah, I know-” The boy continued before being cut off by an elbow to the ribs.

“Lou Lou!” Someone from the back hollered like a war cry.

“White boy extraordinaire!” The one hanging off the other boy, the one Louis had deemed ‘dog-friendly’, grinned, tipping an imaginary hat. “Your first time seeing a genuine nigger?”

Louis rolled his eyes and turned away, eliciting another round of delighted faux-pleas and jeers which sank back into their own circle when Louis refused to engage any further and the driver shouted at everyone to sit down.

Louis’ face felt hot. He bet they were the back-of-the-class boys. The ones he never really even saw, just heard like a Greek chorus stuffed into the corners of every other class. The only thing they came to school for were the free breakfast and to drool onto their blank test papers. Louis nodded to himself, avoiding the eye of the old woman who was glaring in his direction. Past him, he hoped. He adjusted the collar of his shirt and tried his best to look utterly detached from whatever was carrying on behind him. The woman got up and moved to the very front of the bus at the next stop.

The scenery through St.Dixon rolled slowly by but as they left town and traveled past an endless expanse of flat land, it zipped into color. A large swath of pale gray sky and the brown-green barren fields below it. In the summer they were full to bursting with wheat and

corn. The supermarket would have a special shelf devoted to bread and freshly shucked canned corn, labeled proudly 'Made in St.Dixon!'

When Louis dreamed he did so deeply, uninterrupted. When he woke he was glad to see that he was only a stop or so away from Wellner and that the boys were gone, replaced by a little girl who was reciting colors aloud; "Yenlow, red, boo, pupluh, pink..."

Wellner was completely different from St.Dixon; even the trees were nice. The sidewalks were not littered with decaying leaves because in Wellner they were swept to the side or into large piles on manicured front lawns. Louis tried not to look too closely at the houses. As a child he'd stopped in front of one and a woman had parted the curtains, a phone held tightly in her hand. Her eyes had frightened him towards his mother, who said she probably thought he was one of those *other* boys, the ones who only looked at anything to see if it'd fit in their pocket. Louis remembered those eyes. Those eyes would have killed him if they could and he didn't have his mother to act as a walking pass for him now.

As Louis drew closer to the town itself the trees didn't fade away. They decorated the white sidewalks and park benches that adorned the streets. Storefronts seemed to shine, lined up in tidy rows and all built in the 50's, their designs complementing one another. Wellner was not a town created bit by bit as people drifted in but one that'd been planned and approved by wealthy men to venerate themselves. Street names were oft repeated in Wellner and every other bench had a gilded plaque.

Louis could feel that care in every aspect and admired it all. He couldn't bring himself to hate the town, no matter how afraid he was of who lived in it— who might come around the corner with a wide smile, just a touch duller than the two on either side of it?

Louis walked through downtown Wellner at his typical brisk pace until the scenery became a bit more familiar, a homey sense of hopelessness. The fallen leaves were pressed and torn by boot heels and most businesses were shuttered. Most of them he'd never seen open.

Louis checked his watch as he headed to a door between two buildings, a hair salon and a shuttered storefront. The little trio was across from an abandoned gas station which had had its pumps removed though the building itself remained, which struck Louis as a very poetic sight, though he had no idea how to articulate what about it moved him.

He knocked on the door, looking down at the tacky 'Welcome' rug with a heart in place of the 'o'. The girl who opened the door was dressed entirely in a shade of orange so bright Louis squinted against it.

"Louis, hi!" Mimi Ann smiled. She was younger than Louis by a few years. A freshman, probably.

Louis nodded politely, returning her smile though he didn't feel like talking to her. She was an intense girl and he knew if he stayed with her she'd keep him there for an hour at least to talk about her latest obsession. Previously it had been horses, now makeup.

The door led into a small, dark bar which was sleepy when closed and catatonic when open. Louis knew the building intimately. He didn't hesitate to grab the keys laying on the counter and unlock the door behind the bar. Thankfully Mimi didn't follow him, poking her head into the doorway as he walked up the wooden stairs. There was no way to climb them that didn't make noise. Mimi had once told him her dad, one of the queens, claimed it was so no one could sneak up on you.

The hall was bright but quiet, windows covered up by not only curtains but sheets of multicolored paper which on sunny afternoons transformed the narrow space into the inside of a kaleidoscope. A zebra print rug ran the length of the hall, the whites stamped brown with age and dirt. There were several small rooms that opened into the hall but Louis went straight for the end and knocked.

“Who is it?”

“Louis Smith.”

The door opened and Farrah, half done-up, smiled at him. “You don't have to give your full name, baby. I'll know it's you.”

Farrah's room was messy. Clothing hung from and was draped over every available surface, leaving the dresser pushed against the covered window free for makeup. Two mannequin heads sat on the desk, one wearing a wig, the other a lavender church hat. They'd both been doodled on so that they were making eyes at whomever looked at them.

Farrah settled down at the vanity and began doing her makeup; a bold golden look that seemed to make her dark skin glow. Louis wrapped his arms around her shoulders, pressing his cheek into the side of her head.

“You’re making me mess up my mascara,” she fussed.

When he’d first heard it her deep voice reminded him of something he’d watched on television when he was younger, a buff man stuffed into a grotesquely tight dress. Louis couldn’t remember the circumstances, just the man waving from the other side of the street, an audience’s laughter mounting as he cried out; “*Hey there sailor!*”

Farrah was nothing like that. Farrah was beautiful, someone Louis wanted to look at even when half done-up like she was. She teased him about it sometimes, telling him that he should find her at a dig site and see how long the magic lasted. Louis thought that even at a dig site he’d like watching her. She had a careful way of moving, effortlessly performing no matter how she was dressed. She didn’t need flashy makeup or extravagant clothing to seem womanly, she just decided to be - then decided not to be. It was fascinating, something he’d never been able to do. He could only be...less. Not more. Not *different*.

They’d first met because of an ad in the papers about work, moving boxes at a bar. Louis wasn’t especially strong but it was work and he wanted the money to get out of the house so he came. For some reason he was offered the job right after the interview. The actual owner of the bar, Burke, had glared and asked him questions so clipped they were barely a sentence and Louis

had stepped outside afterward, ready to head home and curl up in bed to forget the magnificent failure but then there'd been a hand on his shoulder —Farrah's.

She'd been out of drag then and in a buzzcut and overalls but she had the same smile she always did. Louis found himself nodding as soon as she said "Hey, do you want-?" scarcely hearing the end. He'd been hired to move boxes and he'd done so. Now he came every weekend or so to do odd jobs for Farrah, ostensibly. In actuality Louis passed most Saturdays languidly in her room, left there to read or do homework as people rushed in and out.

"Mimi was bothering me," Louis complained.

Farrah patted his hands and he let go, letting her lean forward to see her reflection better. "Don't start that now, neither of you ever bothered anyone. Angels, the both of you."

Satisfied by the response, Louis moved away from the mirror and walked over to the couch, collapsing onto it theatrically. "Have you heard anything from Emiliano?" he asked after a beat.

"Nope, nada." she said with a chipper tone he knew well, one of someone who didn't want to be asked anything more. She turned her head slightly to see what he was doing. "Are you busy?"

"Extremely," Louis replied, eyes hidden by the crook of his elbow.



“Funny. Get your butt over here. Here...” Farrah opened a drawer and rummaged through it as Louis stood and walked over to her. “Go to the liquor store and pick this up.”

“I’m not twenty one,” Louis pointed out, accepting the crumpled list Farrah gave him anyway.

“Neither am I, it’s tragic isn’t it?” She laughed. “You’ll be fine, the owner’s a friend. Just show him the list, he’ll know my handwriting - it’s the kind you can’t read.”

Farrah had been right. When Louis walked into the liquor store the owner, a heavily tattooed woman in a tank top despite the weather, glared at him. Upon seeing the list she relaxed, telling him to wait at the counter while she gathered everything.

After he left he had to trek back out to Farrah’s place. Halfway there he heard a familiar voice behind him.

“Hey is that Lou Lou?” Louis didn’t react, hoping they’d believe they were mistaken. The voice called again and when it was joined by others he began moving faster.

Suddenly a boy stepped out in front of him, the one who’d started the Lou Lou thing. He had a lean body and warm-brown skin, the kind of boy a white girl might date for a week or so to make her parents mad. He had that kind of smile, like a dare.

“You’re pretty hard of hearing, aren’tcha?” He asked.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t realize you were talking to me. Since my name’s Louis.”

“Sure, and Taxi over there don’t give the girls free rides.” This made his group snicker and lean against one another. Louis wondered which one of them was called Taxi. The one who’d talked to him first, dog-friendly, was smiling apologetically. Louis looked away, he didn’t have time for this. He didn’t want to get in a fight with anyone.

“Wonderful. If you’re done-” he started, about to excuse himself when a hand came down on his shoulder.

“Gonna run?” The boy in front of him asked, moving his right hand to join his left on Louis’ other shoulder. They stood like that for a few seconds as Louis grew more agitated and uncomfortable. When he stepped to the side in an attempt to break free the boy matched him, unshakeable.

“What’s wrong?” the boy asked, laughing quietly. “My hands’re just as clean as yours.”

“C’mon, man...” One of the gaggle on the sidelines said, the one called Taxi, Dog-Friendly. He looked at Louis with an apologetic grimace.

Thankfully the boy in front of him relented easily, raising his hands up with faux surprise before turning them towards the other boys and pretending to shoot. This immediately eased the

tension gathering within the group and they leaned against each other once again, wordlessly moving on from Louis.

Dog Friendly paused and moved as if to speak to Louis but as soon as Louis saw him he ran. He ran until his legs gave out, looking back to find no one behind him. Remembering, he checked the bag of alcohol which had become stretched thin due to his running and was relieved to find that every bottle was still intact. He walked the rest of the way back, feeling silly for the ache in his chest.

When he returned to the bar Louis meekly handed the worn bag off to Burke before bounding up the stairs to find Farrah standing in the hall. She was gazing at the wall opposite her where a window used to be, flipping a coin into the air and catching it expressionlessly.

When Louis shifted she lit up suddenly, pocketing the coin. “Oh, there you are! I was getting worried. She didn’t give you any trouble did she?”

Louis shook his head. “No trouble at all. It was a very pleasant experience all around.”

Farrah laughed. “You...” she said but didn’t finish her thought, reaching out and knocking softly on his head; once, twice.

Louis eyed her pocket. “Is something wrong?”

“Nope,” Farrah assured him brightly, walking back to her room. Louis followed her, becoming frantic for some reason. He got like that at times, when people turned away from him. It was a desperate don’t-leave-me feeling that he hated himself for.

“Some boys in town tried to harass me,” he said conversationally.

“Harass?” Farrah asked, sitting on the couch and plucking a piece of paper off the coffee table in front of her. She gazed seriously at Louis who smiled and waved her concern away.

“Not...they’re just some boys from my school trying to be tough,” he clarified.

“I should have gone...” Farrah kept watching Louis for another second or so. “You have a lot of trouble with other kids, don’t you?”

Louis took this as a compliment, nodding. “I’m very mature for my age,” he said. He walked over to the couch and looked at the papers covering the coffee table; flyers, letters, official looking documents.

“That’s fine but don’t you have any friends, hon?”

“I don’t need them,” Louis answered without hesitation, proud of the fact.

Farrah made a noise which he knew to be equivalent to a sigh, a sharp click of the tongue. “What about that blondie I used to see you with? One of those Goodman boys.”

Louis felt as if vaudeville music had begun to stick to him. The tar, the swollen bee-sting lips. He bit his own to convince himself they wouldn't pop under the pressure. "We don't...we weren't really friends. Our mothers were friends and they don't talk anymore."

He hadn't been to the Goodman house since the incident three years ago. His mother had, and always expressed disappointment in his sudden refusal or purported inability to join her; he was sick, he had a stomach ache, he had to go to the library. Anything and everything he could use to get out of it he did use until she finally stopped asking. Once the baby came his absence didn't matter, she had something new to tote around. Then she stopped going at all.

"Everyone needs friends, hon. Remember that," Farrah sighed. "You're a sweet kid and it's fine if you want to be alone but it's easy to slip and find yourself lonely."

Louis looked at Farrah. He wanted to wrap his arms around her. "Will you do my makeup?" He asked her that every so often. He wanted to see what he'd look like. He wanted to have a different mask to put on, one he'd finally feel comfortable in.

"Next time, baby." Farrah promised, lifting her head and smiling. "Right now I need you to help me move a few things. We've gotta put you to work."

"You always say that," Louis protested though he was already moving towards the door in anticipation of her.

“Don’t rush me,” Farrah told him, herding him into the hall with a smile. “I make masterpieces, hon. Be patient.”

\*

That night Louis came home just in time for dinner and stayed up under the blankets with a flashlight, reading until the house went sleep-quiet. There would be no church on Sunday. Their parents were still gone on what Beckett called a relationship retreat but which Constance said their dad told her was a last chance for the both of them.

“Dad said that?” Beckett had asked incredulously while Constance fidgeted with the skin around her nail.

“Um, in so many words...” she muttered.

“Do you think they’ll get divorced?” Louis had asked. They’d eaten dinner altogether sans Nate, who came home only to rush back out again without a word. Beckett had left to bring her back but returned empty handed, locking himself in the bathroom. When he emerged a bruise was forming at the corner of his mouth.

Beckett rolled his eyes which were constantly ping-ponging towards the clock. The later it got the more agitated he seemed. “Mom wouldn’t give up like that.”

Constance frowned at her plate but didn't say anything, so Louis asked the question for her, "Is a divorce giving up?"

Beckett swallowed a bite of his food, wincing. Their parents hadn't left them with much and no one was sure when they were coming back. There was a small tower of canned food by the sink and Beckett had swiped a bag of rice from May's house which Constance had cooked improperly so some bits remained hard and gritty.

"I'm saying from mom's perspective," Beckett said. "Besides, if dad left, what would we do? Mom doesn't own the house." He smiled, a tight uptick of his thin lips. "We'd have to pile into your ma's *house*," He said, pointing to Louis and exhaling in a facsimile of a laugh.

"Don't be mean..." Constance pleaded, preempting an argument. Louis went quiet, scooping up a spoonful of rice. It was cold. Someone had left a window open all day. He thought back to the boy on the bus, the one who asked if it was his first time seeing a genuine nigger. He'd said it with a drawl, Gen-u-eye-n, and Louis repeated it under his breath as he stared down at the meal his sister made.

"I'm not being mean. Louis doesn't care," Beckett said, glancing at him. Louis didn't look up and the moment passed. "I wouldn't let that happen to you," Beckett asserted, perhaps thinking his comment had frightened them. "Mom wouldn't either. Personally I wouldn't care if dad left, it's just that the house is his."

“I don’t think dad would kick us out...” Constance protested.

Beckett snorted. “Not you, maybe. Me and Louis would be kicked to the curb.”

Louis looked down from his bunk at Beckett’s bed which was empty as usual. Louis was a light sleeper so he was often woken up by his brother’s nightmares. He knew he left the room for hours - sometimes only returning in the early morning, just before their mother woke up.

When Louis was small Beckett would sometimes let him into his bed. Louis was afraid of sleeping on the top bunk and after too many nights of being woken up by Louis crawling into bed with him and mother their father snapped that if he didn’t sleep in his bed he could sleep on the floor.

Beckett had been a bit less tired then. There’d been a wilder glint in his eye that also scared Louis at times but it was rarely aimed at him like Nate’s was. He had always been scared of Nate, explosive as their father was.

“I’m not letting my brother sleep on the floor,” Beckett had told Louis nobly and Louis had climbed into bed beside him with his back against the wall so that Beckett’s body concealed his from the doorway’s line of sight. Louis’ heart had been between his ears for what felt like hours until he woke up and found that they’d gotten through the night undiscovered.

Louis climbed down from his bunk and was relieved to see Nate lying half-pooled on the ground as if her body were made of something softer than the rest of theirs. He stepped outside.



In the hall he could hear that the radio was on, a man's voice was speaking in an over-enunciated tone but Louis was too far to make out the words. Beckett must be in the living room, he thought, knocking on Constance's door.

"Um?" Constance said, opening it a few seconds later. Her eyes were pinkish and Louis' own widened.

"Were you crying?"

"Um...I read something..." Constance ducked into her room for a minute or so before gesturing for Louis to follow her. "Grace's in there, she's sleeping."

The two of them made their way downstairs and slipped onto the front porch. The night's chill made Louis realize how tired he'd been. Constance looked thoughtfully at the railing before settling on the ground and holding a bottle up to Louis. Wine. Louis' brows shot up at the sight of it.

"Where'd you get that?" He asked, looking back through the window at the darkened foyer. He half expected Beckett to appear and snatch the bottle away.

"Tama gave it to me, she took it from some store I think."

Louis grimaced, "The girl who's dad's in jail?"

Everyone knew who Tama was, trailer trash thrown into half a house.

Everytime their mother drove past it she shook her head and muttered “Thank the Lord for our good fortune,” if she was feeling grateful and “I’d sooner put a bullet between my eyes then let you kids grow up like that,” if she wasn’t.

Louis thought of his birth mother, Miriam’s home; Her trailer. Had he been born there? No, he always told himself that. No. He’d been born in a hospital, then taken *home* by his father after only a few months. The few months were nothing in comparison to the sixteen years spent apart. Still, he tried to avoid Tama. He didn’t want her to feel some sort of kinship with him like May sometimes did. It made him want to scream. He wasn’t anything like them.

Constance chuckled and Louis nearly gasped aloud. Laughter was so out of place coming from Constance. He hadn’t heard her laugh in a good while, he realized. She used to laugh a lot when they were kids, really small, before she could reach the sink.

“Don’t worry, she doesn’t want to hang around me anymore.”

“What?” Louis crouched down. “Did you two have an argument?”

Constance smiled, shaking her head. Her body leaned with her and Louis eyed the bottle, seeing its neck and shoulders were empty.

“We had a brawl...oh,” she paused and closed her eyes, wincing as something came over her. “Oh fuck, Louis...it’s all messed up,” she whispered. “I’m messed up.”

“Aren’t we all?” Louis mused.

“No, not normal messed up. I’m...I need to be put down.”

Louis’ chest tightened a bit at her words. “That’s not true.”

Constance’s head was in her hands now, her upper body slowly rocking back and forth.

“It’s true, I need...Louis, I don’t think anyone could love me. Do you ever think that?”

“No,” Louis lied. “Everyone’s loved by someone...even dad loves mom and God loves everyone and I love you even if Tama doesn’t.”

“You’re...you don’t know. What do you know? Always acting so above it...I really hate that about you.” Constance said softly then whined low in her throat, a single sob she held onto, then silence. A deep breath. “I’m sorry, don’t be mad at me, okay? Please? I didn’t mean it.”

“Okay,” Louis said. His eyes burned a bit but he blinked the feeling back and shoved it in his chest. He felt himself moving further from the forefront of his mind, becoming a plastic version of himself. “I’m not mad.”

“I thought Tama and I were the same but there’s no one like me in the world,” Constance despaired, taking a swig from the bottle. “Sometimes I feel like I’m not even a real person. I’m just a thing that goes places and that’s the best thing about me, like I shouldn’t be real - if I were real it’d be like, um...like a doll come to life. You want the doll to go back, you know?”

Louis nodded but she wasn't looking at him. He tried to remember the last time he saw her laugh but could only remember the eyes on the dog-friendly boy, how he'd looked at him with a shy pity, a hopeful camaraderie and how that boiled Louis up inside. He'd wanted to kill him and all those other no good genu-ine niggers who smiled at him.

When he was a small boy he'd pray to the ceiling with tears streaming down his face to die and be reborn white, it seemed a simple thing to him. Black marks got whited out. Even now he spent hours some days standing in front of a mirror, examining his face, tugging on his lips, practicing his inflection, the way he stood. Everything.

When he looked at Constance he wanted to shout until his voice went hoarse. What did she have to cry about? But he didn't yell, ever, so he listened to her drunken rambling until she leaned herself against one of the wooden posts and closed her eyes.

"I want Tama..." she muttered as if about to name something more but then trailed off, leaving the statement as it was.

Louis smiled. His sister wanted Tama's love over his. His wasn't good enough. Anger wracked him but he nodded, balling his hands into fists as he reassured her "She'll get over it," all pleasant. He'd practiced. He wasn't good enough for anyone, no one cared what he thought of them.

Then Constance reached out, grasping at the air and humming and Louis looked at her fingers, skin cracked and pink around jagged nails. He pretended she was reaching for him and not the bottle.

Constance's hand was limp in his. "What do you do when you hate people, Louis?"

"I don't hate anyone," Louis said.

"What if I hate someone, what should I do?"

"Nothing," Louis said. He squeezed her hand a bit, hoping she'd squeeze back.

"I wish I'd never been born. Or if I'd been born a boy...I wouldn't have to..." She sighed, weary, and turned her back to him. Louis let her hand go without a fight. "I wish..."

Louis waited but when nothing else came he looked away from her back and out into the night behind the porch. The frantic don't-leave-me feeling replaced his anger. Farrah once told him that he reminded her of a rabbit and all Louis knew of rabbits was the hunt, bodies strung up on hooks, feet sold off as good luck charms.

"What do you know about rabbits?" Louis asked, not expecting an answer.

Constance was still for a long while before turning and grabbing the bottle, drinking again. "They die of fright," she slurred.

Louis spoke quickly, hoping she wouldn't turn again. "Do you believe in rebirth? Maybe you'll be reborn as someone...happier?"

Constance looked at him for a moment then closed her eyes again, curling up on the porch's floor and sighing once before seeming to fall asleep. Louis watched her for a minute before standing and walking to the living room where Beckett was sitting up, still awake. Together the two of them carried Constance to her room and shut the door.

They stood out in the hall for a beat of silence. Louis opened his mouth, about to ask if Beckett thought she'd be alright, when Beckett made a noise of disgust.

"Just like dad," he said, turning to Louis as if surprised to see him still standing there. "Go to bed," he ordered, then went back downstairs.

Louis stared after him for a moment before crouching down in the hall with his hands pressed together and screaming soundlessly, a high pitched release of air from the back of his throat. He screamed like that until it felt silly to continue then he went to his room and crawled back up into bed.

As he laid awake, staring up at the ceiling, he felt everything begin to slip away from him until he could convince himself that he didn't care. It didn't matter, nothing here mattered. As soon as he turned eighteen he'd go to the city and never hear from his family again. He wouldn't need them. He'd go to museums bigger than the house and pass by buildings that scraped against the sky like the fingers of some buried giant.

The city was a place of art and culture and sophistication, real sophistication, not the fake suburban south's version of it. There'd be men that gathered in the center of the room at parties and talked about literature while their girlfriends buzzed around on art, pointing to the decor and deeming it 'gauche' or 'derivative' through scented cigarette smoke.

Louis wouldn't need anyone. Everyone was a stranger in the city. Everyone there was just as lonely as each other.

\*

Louis was stepping off the schoolbus when it happened. There'd been a grumbling throughout the ride that Louis ignored. Someone was going to fight and it wasn't any of his business as long as he took the window seat and pressed himself against the wall.

The entire ride had passed like that, everyone glancing around, everyone holding their breath. The second Louis stepped off the bus it exploded behind him. No escalation, just match-quick fire.

It was one of the younger boys that spilled out first, Luke Tyler, with his long hair and omni-present smile even as he was practically being thrown down the stairs. He hit the ground with a cushioned thud, shrugging off his backpack in his haste to stand as Nate followed him, tripping over his body.

The two of them fell on one another, fists flying and faces red with exertion. Everyone on the bus crowded by the windows or the steps if they were braver, hollering for blood, hollering for one of the participants' deaths.

"Kill him, Luke!" Ralph Tucker screamed. The typically sullen boy had a brightness to his now wild eye that sent shivers up Louis' spine.

Louis moved away quickly, looking around for anyone to step in but there was no one. The driver was still in his seat, speaking into a walkie talkie, one eye on the fight as he occasionally shouted at them to cut it out. There was no one and Luke was winning, he was on top of Nate and grinning to reveal a singular missing tooth. The boy was holding a stone in the air, hefted from the ground they were wrestling on and Nate was staring up at him and it with an earnest, wrathful glee that Louis would never understand.

"Fucking do it, pussy! Do it, I dare you! Do it, do it, do it!" Nate screamed, not looking for help even though she'd surely seen Louis on the bus. He was the only one of their siblings to go home right after school; Beckett followed May or Allison around and Constance rarely attended a full day anymore. It was only Louis and Nate didn't even glance at him, just stared up into the eyes of her former friend, pink spittle spraying from her bloody lips. "I fucking dare you!"

Louis wasn't a person who invited attention. He did not get angry, he did not yell, he did not get into fights. He wasn't a person who mattered, really, to the vast majority of people. Some



days he felt that to the bone. He would never matter, he would never be good, no one would ever look to him for anything but a pleasant smile and a few peaceable words.

Some days he felt that to the bone and became hollow. That day, when that same feeling rose, it only filled him. It filled him with a desperate want - an anger bordering on need.

*Look at me, he thought. I'm here.*

Louis grabbed a fistfull of Luke's hair and yanked it as hard as he could, heaving the boy off of Nate. He couldn't hear anything. The world went mute the moment his hand shot out. Nate blinked up at him and Louis grabbed her hand, already in motion.

"Run!" He screamed, "We've got to run!" and Nate was on her feet before he'd even finished the words, the two of them tearing through the forest with Ralph and Luke right behind them.

They'd managed to make it out onto the other side, the bottom of the hill where their house was, when Louis went down. A dull pain to the back of the head set him off kilter, made him suddenly stumble under the weight of his backpack and fall to the ground as he tried to move.

Nate was halfway up the hill already and Louis couldn't remember how to speak. When he opened his mouth he just groaned.

When the boys descended on him he didn't even have enough air to groan, their shoes sinking into the flesh of his stomach emptied him. In a frenzied haze he realized Nate was there too, shouting something, in the fray. Then Louis couldn't concentrate on anything. He didn't know how people did this. The pain was matched with the fear in how much it overwhelmed him.

"Hey, hey get away from them!" A voice called out and there was a brief pause before Ralph and Luke hissed fearfully at one another and decided not to push their luck, they'd accomplished what they'd set out to do.

The next thing Louis knew there was a boy standing over him. He recognized him vaguely but couldn't remember from where. School, probably.

"Thanks." Nate said, wheezing and being helped up. "Louis, can you walk?"

"Fuck," Louis said. The word fit weird in his mouth. He was trying not to cry. He could not cry in front of Nate or someone from school. "I don't-"

"It's cool, I got you." The boy said, crouching down. "Climb on."

Louis closed his eyes as he was carried on the boy's back. He could hear Nate's high, thin voice being answered by the boy's rumble. He could *feel* him talking, his lungs expanding, the vibrations of his words. It was comforting, like being a kid again.

For some reason he remembered Miriam holding him. Nothing else about the moment stuck except for the feeling of her smooth, sun-warm skin and her laugh. He wanted to go back there. He wanted to be a child in her arms.

When they stopped it was at an unfamiliar house, ostensibly the boy's but Nate wandered in easeful as a stray. She asked where the bathroom was with her gaze roving around the room. Louis' left eye had become impossible to see out of and was hot to the touch, bumpy with swelling. He ran his fingers lightly over it as he was guided into the bathroom after Nate, the two of them being seated on the tiled floor.

“Don't touch it, dumbass.” Nate told him, locking the door after the boy left. “Here. Christ, whatcha do that for?”

“I don't know, isn't it natural to want to touch it? Excuse me I don't know black eye etiquette-”

Nate interrupted him. “I mean why'd you hop into the fight. What're you stupid?”

Anger gripped Louis' chest and he was too tired to flatten it, in too much pain. “Are *you* stupid? What were you thinking going up against them both?”

Nate's eyes rolled sharply. “It's not your problem. Don't get involved if you're gonna bitch about it. If it's going to be such a big goddamn deal-”

“Shut up. Seriously, just shut up. What am I supposed to do? What, would it have made you happy if I just *stood* there and watched my little brother get his head bashed in with a rock? Is that what you wanted? Do you think I could do that?”

Nate didn't answer.

“I fucking hate you. You're my brother.” Louis spat.

It felt like something had clicked. Both things were true. He hated his brother. His brother who hated him back from the moment they'd been introduced. His brother who never had a kind word to say about him, who tossed his books out of windows, who took every chance he could to remind Louis that even though he was a piece of the puzzle that didn't fit, Louis was from a different game altogether. He hated his brother and he didn't want him to get hurt. He didn't want him to die.

“No, I'm not.” Nate said and Louis laughed softly.

“Yeah,” Louis nodded, head throbbing. “Alright. Sorry.”

“...No, I mean.” A pause. Louis stood unsteadily and opened the medicine cabinet, pulling out bandaids, cotton swabs and a black bottle of alcohol. He dampened a swab and pressed it to one of Nate's cuts. He repeated the process without sound from either side other than the occasional hiss of pain.

“I...do you ever feel like? Um...” Louis didn’t stop what he was doing. He felt like if he did Nate would stop in tandem and whatever this was was important somehow, he knew it. He was good with people, even if he didn’t like them.

“Sometimes I feel like maybe I wasn’t meant to be a boy,” Nate said.

Louis waited for more but none came. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know.”

Louis paused then sighed. “Just because you lost *one* fight-”

Nate pushed Louis and he moved without resistance, falling back against the edge of the toilet. “It’s not about the fight, forget the fight! I’m trying to tell you something, listen!”

“Then talk to me,” Louis said, fighting to keep his tone flat. Nate started fights the way cartoons cried, ‘Look over there!’ before vanishing down some hole. Louis forced himself not to look.

Nate’s arms were crossed, body ping-ponging around in a manner too jagged to call rocking. “...Don’t tell a fucking soul. If you tell anyone I swear to God I’ll kill you. I’m not joking Louis, I’ll kill you. I’ll shoot you in your sleep and then blow my brains out.”

“Okay.”

“I’m serious,” Nate snapped.

Louis spread his hands out. “I *understand*. Honestly, who am I going to tell?”

Nate paused for a long time and the ache in Louis’ eye began to overwhelm. He could remember parts of the fight more clearly now, which parts of him would be bruised by tomorrow.

“...When I was really little I would sometimes wear girl’s clothes. Like, dresses and shit. And I’d pretend that maybe I wasn’t a boy or something. And it wasn’t uh, it wasn’t...I don’t know.”

Louis didn’t say anything. He didn’t have anything to say. He felt like he’d been dropped into another reality. Maybe the real Nate had run off without him and was sitting at home right now and this was a stranger across from him, one that wore dresses as a child and was willing to categorically lose a fight to try and save him.

Nate was looking at the wall below the window. There were hand painted blinds that kept people from seeing in; Crabs pinching pennies and sea shells marching along the slats. “I know there’s shit in porno mags about people who get off to that kinda shit but I was like...it wasn’t like that, okay? It wasn’t.”

“Okay,” Louis said.

“It wasn’t.” Nate insisted. “I...I don’t know. I don’t know why I’m fucking telling you this but it’s like, I don’t know. You were the least...you didn’t give a shit about being like dad, ever. Beckett tries and I try *so* hard. I’ve always tried so goddamn hard and I’d see you just

sitting in your little corner reading your books and rolling your eyes at it all and it'd piss me off so bad. I don't know. I just..."

Louis thought of the time he'd found his favorite book in the mud below their bedroom window. It had rained all night and the pages were nothing more than mush. He'd stared down and willed himself not to cry, not to react at all because he knew that two eyes were boring down at him from above, eager to drink each tear and spit them back at him.

"Sometimes I think I fucked it all up already. My whole life, it's all fucked up for nothing. And there's no way out and I don't have *anything* and I don't...why should I? When I'm this freak- this fucking pervy ass *thing* that's too chickenshit to stop hurting people."

At that Nate laid herself down in a weird way, draping herself over her own lap, hands wrapped around her elbows and head buried in her arms. She looked halfway between pleading and hopeless. When she spoke again her voice was clear. "I'm sorry, Louis. I'm so fucking sorry."

Louis wondered what he was being apologized to for. The fight? Their entire lives up until now? For what he'd just been told? He didn't know what to do. He very badly wanted to say the wrong thing. He wanted to take the vulnerable thing he'd been given and snap its neck, pound it into mush. Because knowing did not stop him from hating his brother.

His earlier thought returned him with more insistence behind it. That this was some new Nate and the old one, his brother, had left him to flee to safety. That Nate was lounging on the couch without a scratch on him. This Nate, the one who'd come back for him, the one stretched out like roadkill before him, needed. Needed him.

Maybe this Nate didn't hate him back. Maybe one day Louis could even come to love this one. This vulnerable being with his brother's face.

Louis reached out and placed his hand on the back of his sister's head. It was strange to touch Nate. "It's okay," he said. He'd never been good at comforting anyone other than Constance. He tried to think of what he'd say if she were crying, not quite able to shake the feeling that any second Nate would spring up cackling and declare it all a joke, his brother yet again.

"Hey, it's okay." Louis waited a moment then sighed at the lack of a response, peeling his sister off the floor. "Come here, get up."

He hugged her then, for maybe the first time in their lives. He hugged her and she was so small in his arms, still skin and bones. Louis wondered where she kept all of herself.

"Ugh, gross." Nate sniffed, wrapping her arms around her brother.

"I agree," Louis said, staring at the bloodstained tiles. He wondered if his body was warm, if Nate had ever had a warm body hold her.



He went back to the memory of his favorite book in the mud, his eyes on the ground. What would he have seen if he'd looked up? If he'd looked his brother in the eye - would there have been a crack, a sliver through which he could have climbed through and seen this Nate? This Nate who was so frightened of being caught she'd rather maul potential seekers to death? And would Nate have seen something too? What sort of cracks did he have, what vulnerable thing did he have curled up inside him?

“Nate? I have something to tell you.”

\*

After patching each other up Louis went downstairs and found the boy who'd helped them in the unfamiliar house's living room, watching opera on television. It was a tape, its box sitting on top of the stand. The room was warmly crowded, a variety of hobbies left half-finished on various surfaces. The couch he was leaning against was lumpy with age but looked comfortable, a deep green.

“Oh! How's it going? You guys alright?” The boy asked, standing up. Without the pain hazing his memory Louis recognized him instantly. Dog-friendly. It must have shown on his face because the boy smiled, sticking out a hand. “The name's Cab.”

“Cab?” Louis asked, shaking it mindlessly. He realized that must be why his friend had called him Taxi.

“Yeah, man. Like Calloway!” Cab said, snapping his fingers. “Remember that name,” he told him.

Louis blinked, not knowing what to say to such a boisterous display. “...Well, thank you. I really appreciate your help.”

“It’s nothing. I couldn’t just stand back and let it happen, you know? I hate that,” Cab said, falling onto the couch. “Do you like opera? I don’t get the music but I like the story. I’m in the theater club, I want to be an actor.”

Louis thought the theater club in St. Dixon was as likely to make someone an actor as water was to set a house ablaze but he nodded. “The last play was very good.”

“Thanks,” Cab said, shooting him a smile that melted away quickly. “Look, I wanted to say I’m sorry about how Oscar and the guys were getting on your case.”

“I don’t care about them,” Louis said, guessing that Oscar was the genu-ine boy.

“Yeah, we get that,” Cab said. “You always...well, you know.”

The two of them were quiet for a minute, wondering who’d make the next move. Then the woman on screen took center stage and belted out a note so long Louis’ brows began to creep upward.

“I know, right?” Cab exclaimed, sitting up on his knees.

“That’s amazing,” Louis said.

“Right?” Cab practically shouted, pointing. “She’s singing about how she’ll love him until her dying breath and it’s like, damn, her dying breath is twice as long as anyone else’s! You know that’s real. You know it.”

Louis perched himself on the arm of the couch and watched the television, mesmerized as Cab continued to explain the plot in a rambling mess of excitement.

“You can sit down, you know,” he finally said between breaths.

“Oh, I have to...” Louis looked over his shoulder and pointed. “Nate’s waiting, I just wanted...”

Cab smiled, waving the offer away. “No problem.”

Louis suddenly felt like running. His face heated up and he wrung his hands together. “Uh,” this boy had been so kind, nothing but kind. Louis wanted to curl up into a ball. What the hell was he so mean for? Why had the first thing he’d noticed been how dark the boy’s skin was and why had it felt like a victory? Why did he sometimes miss the Goodman days when it was him and Noble? If Louis were a few shades lighter he was afraid he’d run right back to him, throw open the door to Noble’s tidy blue bedroom and grin *“Did you miss me?”*

If Louis were a few shades lighter he knew he’d be horrible and if it were possible he’d do it. In an instant. A heartbeat. Louis thought of sun-warmed dark skin, a hum’s vibration

reaching to touch his heart through another's chest and his eyes began to sting. The worst part was Cab knew. He knew what an ugly person Louis was. He knew he looked down on him and his friends and still helped him. He helped him even though he knew Louis probably wouldn't have if it were the other way around.

"I'm sorry," Louis said in a small voice, looking at the rug below them. He didn't know what to say other than that. He didn't have anything else. He coughed. "Uh..."

There was a sharp thump behind him and Louis turned, startled to see a rabbit in the doorway. It was a sweet-coffee beige and had cool black eyes which seemed to stare directly at him. Cab got off the couch and scooped it into his arms, pressing a kiss to its head.

"This is Eartha Kitt," Cab looked up. "Get it?"

Louis blinked. "Um..."

"It's a pun, 'cause baby rabbits are called kitts." Cab explained.

"I thought that was foxes."

Cab nodded wisely. "Babies is babies, man."

Louis looked at the rabbit. It fit perfectly in Cab's arms and was still in its contentment, the twitching of its nose and occasional blink the only things signaling it was alive.

"Do you like rabbits?" Cab asked.

Louis couldn't tell him they had a hunting dog. "I heard they were too fragile to keep in houses with kids," Louis said conversationally.

Cab pulled a face. "Nah, you just gotta be gentle with 'em. Here, sit down and I'll put her on the couch - don't reach for her, okay? Just let her chill."

He waited for Louis to slide onto the couch then sat himself down as well, placing Eartha between the two of them. Unlike before he watched the television without moving and shouting though he still grinned and occasionally gasped sharply, shaking his fist in ecstasy.

Louis laughed behind his hand at the display, turning his head away from the other boy when he caught him and grinned.

"Something funny, Lou Lou?"

"Not my name," Louis whispered, voice trembling as he fought back more laughter. He didn't know where it'd come from.

Cab laughed, throwing a hand in the air. "Why're you whispering?"

Louis shrugged, laughing harder but silently. "The rabbit..."

"You think we go around whispering all day?" Cab asked and the two of them continued like that for a while, Cab poking at Louis until finally he held a hand up and gasped that he couldn't breathe.

“You checking up on him?” Cab asked. Louis was confused until he looked down and saw Eartha was sniffing at the side of his leg. Louis froze, not wanting to frighten the rabbit and after a few moments she hopped up onto the leg itself, sliding down into his lap. She paused there and turned her body so she could see Cab but didn’t go towards him. Louis looked to the other boy and Cab made a motion which Louis mimicked, giving her a hand to sniff. She did and afterwards Louis left his hand palm-up on his knee, there if she wanted it.

\*

“Farrah?” Louis called, stepping into the room as Nate hung back in the hall, arms crossed and gaze shifting from the door and back. It was deep into the night, way past Louis’ usual arrival time. They’d come then because the place was busier at night and Louis wanted Nate to see the place in full swing, with everyone rushing around half-painted, pulling on wings and pantyhose. That, and there was no way Nate would be able to wake up as early as Louis did.

Nate had been uncharacteristically shy as Louis introduced her to everyone and they all ate it up, she was a hit. Louis had saved the best for last though.

“I brought someone,” he explained.

Farrah turned. She looked a bit more tired than usual, dressed to the nines but with a deflated air - as if her clothes were wearing her. Her eyes widened at the sight of them and Louis was confused before he remembered what he looked like, a mess of bruising. When the rest of

his family had seen they hadn't batted an eye, fights were common amongst them. Despite her shock Farrah didn't say anything about it.

"A friend?" She asked instead.

"I told you I don't-" Louis glanced back towards Nate. She caught his eye and widened her own, a silent inquiry as to just who he thought he was looking at. "No. My...sister?"

Nate shrugged violently, exasperated. She moved a lot, Louis noticed. Even with her arms crossed she was moving, tapping the back of her head repeatedly against the wall.

"Well, where is she? Bring her in here!" Farrah said and Louis motioned for Nate who stepped hurriedly into the room, taking everything in. Her mouth hung open a bit as she eyed the place and the woman at its center, every single bulb in Farrah's vanity-mirror shining brightly to halo her. When Nate finally let her gaze rest on Farrah herself it latched on and Louis felt a mixture of pride and camaraderie. Finally, another person who understood.

Farrah smiled. "You look shocked," she struck a lethargic pose. "Do I dazzle?"

"Are you a woman?" Nate asked.

"Are you?"

Nate considered this. "I don't know. I'm fourteen."

Farrah laughed, spreading her arms out so that the beads of her shawl clacked warmly against one another. “That’s fine! You can be anything you want here, just not fourteen. Anyone asks, you lie, okay?”

“I’m great at lying,” Nate said with a puffed chest. “And beating ass. If you need someone to lie and beat ass I’m your guy. Or whatever.”

“Can you give her a makeover?” Louis interrupted quickly.

Farrah smiled, a soft one that spread slowly across her face like water, carefully poured. Louis looked away, suddenly embarrassed by the gesture and attention. He wondered if he’d ever smiled like that. He’d never considered it before. Smiling was not a very cool city slicker thing to do.

“Sure I can, you’d like that hon?” Farrah asked Nate.

Louis walked to the couch that’d been shoved into the corner of the room, half-covered by a see-through drape hung from the ceiling. He sat and watched the two of them. Farrah was leaning on her hand and Nate was trying to look away from her but her eyes kept drifting back.

Eventually she stepped forward, letting herself be guided towards the mirror. “Sure, just...I don’t wanna look like a clown or nothing, alright?”



“You saying I do?” Farrah asked and when Nate teetered her hand fifty-fifty she pretended to be aghast. “You should know better than to insult someone who has your face in their hands. Worth more than life to some! Come, sit down here...”

Farrah was a whiz with makeup. Louis had seen her do it hundreds of times, completely transform herself. She said it was easy when you knew what to do and that appearance was only half of it. She’d told him in the early days of his coming to see her that he seemed like a person who knew about the other half and he did. He knew more about the other half than he did anything else.

He reached up and grabbed a singular curl of his hair, stretching it out until it was long and straight before letting it bounce back. Nate was warming fast to Farrah, wriggling and grinning wickedly while being admonished for it. Louis wondered what it was about Nate that made adults like her so immediately. Adults liked Louis like they liked fine china, not a person. They liked his other half, the masterpiece of himself he and the world had sculpted for the sole purpose of safe admiration.

There was creaking from the hall. Heavy footfalls that slowed the closer they came to the door. “Um, Farrah?” Mimi asked, peering into the room. “Burke wants to know when- oh!”

Nate froze, the two of them looking at each other through the mirror’s glass before Mimi tilted her head. “Nate?”

Nate didn't reply for several seconds too long to be casual and when she did it was with a practiced flat ease, as if tossing the word over her shoulder. "Yeah?"

Mimi grinned. "I thought it was you! When did you start coming here? I thought Louis was keeping it hush hush."

Louis had no idea where she'd gotten that admittedly correct idea. Before he could say anything she'd moved on, digging for something in her bag. She pulled out a rolled up magazine, unfurling it as she walked to Nate's side.

"I wanna show you- There! Look, see?" She flipped through a few pages before folding it to a particular photo which she'd circled in neon green highlighter, already smudging on whatever glossy material the magazine was made from. "Doesn't that look like you?"

Louis didn't move to see the photo, watching Nate's face as it went from sheer terror to a tightly leashed hope. She nodded. "I guess. In the dark."

Mimi groaned and spun theatrically around. "No. no, absolutely not - this will not stand..."

The two of them continued to chatter and Farrah, whose back had been ramrod straight, relaxed. After a few minutes she said something softly to Nate and smiled when the girl looked up. Louis closed his eyes and laid against the arm of the couch.

“Room on there for me?” Farrah asked and Louis sat up, clasping his hands together in his lap. “You tell me your folks did that and I’ll let you stay here forever,” Farrah said.

Louis gestured questioningly to his face then shook his head. “I wish.”

“No you don’t,” Farrah admonished him.

Louis brought his knees up to his chest. “I meant...” he gazed at the papers on the coffee table, they were all organized now, in neat little piles. “Have you heard anything from Emiliano yet?”

Farah stretched and rubbed an eye, smudging her makeup. She looked at the colors on her hand. “She’s taking him. I tried but I don’t think any court in their right mind would give me visitation.”

Louis frowned, feeling cold and small. “Just because you like to dress up?”

Farah shrugged though the answer was concrete and heavy on both their chests.

“That’s not fair,” Louis said, hearing the childishness of his words as soon as they were out of his mouth. “I hate her.”

Farah hummed. “Some days I hate her and some days I hate myself. She gave me a choice. She said either the makeup goes or I do!” She laughed under her breath, leaning forward. “He won’t remember me, he’s too young. Maybe it’s...” She smiled ruefully, taking Louis’ hand and squeezing it once. “I was going to say maybe it’s better that way and be an adult but no. I want him to remember, to miss me.”

She gestured to Nate and Mimi who were pouring over the magazine, squeezing so they both fit on the vanity's cushioned stool. "They're sweet, aren't they?"

Louis nodded. He'd only seen Emiliano once before in a photo; A toddler grasping onto the railing of a playpen to stand, gaping in open mouthed awe at the camera.

Farah had met Louis a month or so after being discovered by her wife and moving into the bar's upstairs room. Ever since she told him about Emiliano Louis had hoped she would get to see him again but from the way she was talking that wasn't going to happen. Emiliano was gone forever.

Farah turned to look at Louis and exhaled, seeing something rising in him. She wrapped an arm around his shoulder and rubbed his arm as if trying to keep him warm. "It's nice not to hide. To be understood," Farrah said, still looking at Louis. Her attention finally broke him. He buried his face in her chest and cried. Loud, heaving sobs that veered towards screaming at times.

He wanted. He wanted things so badly. He wanted his mother to love him. He wanted his siblings to be alright, for Constance to smile again. He wanted to be loud, to get angry, to run past mirrors without stopping to look, to have friends, to matter. He wished he wasn't so ugly. In every sense he was ugly. He looked ugly and thought ugly and spoke ugly - he wanted to be happy. Beautiful, like Farrah.

Farrah held him close and made deep shushing sounds, running a hand through his curls and reassuring the two girls that everything would be alright, just leave him be, he just needs to let it out.

When Louis stopped crying he was tired and the room was empty sans Farrah who was sitting with her head on top of his, still holding him. He almost wanted to keep crying so she'd keep holding him but instead he coughed and sniffed, taking a tissue when she handed it to him.

“Better?” she asked.

Louis nodded.

“Good, we needed that.”

Louis didn't know what that meant but he nodded again, struggling to stand. He felt bone-tired. He checked the clock and clenched his teeth. It was nearly dawn.

“When does the bus come?” Louis asked, stretching to try and erase his fatigue. He needed to get his sister home. If Beckett found their beds empty he'd call the national guard.

“In an hour but another one comes in two,” Farrah told him, standing and pulling on a coat hanging from a nail above her bed. “I'll walk you two, see that you get home safe.”

Louis followed her out, closing the door behind them. He could hear Nate and Mimi talking with Burke downstairs, their high voices wriggling through the slits in the wood while Burke's baritone thumped against it. Louis smiled, "Yes, mother."

Farrah snickered, dropping her voice to its lowest possible register. "Boy, if you don't..."

\*

Louis had to practically carry Nate home. She was small for her age, barely making it to his shoulder and when he got tired of trying to drag her he stopped and hoisted her onto his back. He knew he wasn't that strong so the ease with which he could carry her worried him. He wondered if she was eating enough.

The house was quiet and when Louis checked the living room he saw that Beckett was asleep on the couch. They'd gotten lucky. He set Nate down. "Wake up, we're here."

Nate barely opened her eyes as she nodded, mumbling something as she pulled herself up the stairs and vanished into their room. Louis would wake her before he went to bed, remind her to wipe her face off.

He sighed, looking out the window. Dawn was creeping up the hill, gray light coming through the curtains. He grabbed the banister, about to pull himself upstairs as well before hesitating and letting go, walking to the hall phone instead. He brought it into the kitchen and

plugged it in there so he wouldn't wake his brother, sitting down at the table and dialing a number from memory.

The phone rang.

After the second ring Louis' impulse was to slam the receiver down but he forced himself to wait and was rewarded by a soft click on the third ring.

"Hello," he said hurriedly. There was silence on the other end, then a crackling that might have been some sort of interference but when she spoke he knew it was laughter.

"Hi, baby." Miriam said. He could hear the smile in her voice. "What's wrong? You kids coming over soon?"

Louis was quiet, slowly lowering his head to the table and closing his eyes. "I don't know...I just..." he knew it was weird. He'd never called Miriam before, though he'd thought about it. He tried to think of the reason why he was doing it now but only came up with two twin images; Farrah holding him and him holding Nate. He wondered if the few months Miriam had had him were good ones, if she remembered them. "I miss you," he said.

Laughter, again. She had a slow, thoughtful laugh. Like poured honey. It made Louis feel warm. "Hm, I miss you too, Lou." she told him. "Miss you something fierce."

### **Nate - Hell Hath no Fury**

Everything in Mimi's room was 'kitschy' (a word she had learned from Mimi herself) and sharply feminine. Where Nate's mother's room was floral and still Mimi's was bright - animal print and makeup, like a big game hunter. Even the carpet was not content with being beige and was instead a deep pink with hard patches made from spills and years of foot traffic.

Ever since the two of them became friends Nate had been going over to Mimi's house. It was one of the cheerful ones in town, built newer and smaller than the ex-farms scattered about St. Dixon's sprawling fields.

"What about Felicity? Or Anastasia?" Mimi asked, rummaging through a dresser drawer. The two of them were dressed in matching outfits, like sisters. Mimi said she always wanted one while Nate bemoaned having two. In reality she liked the little fantasy Mimi made for her. It was like a dream. A world where she was a pink girl with a bright room and a sister she matched with.

"Who the hell do you think I am?" Nate asked, squinting as Mimi pulled the brush through her hair. "Anastasia..." she scoffed. Nate always seemed to come in with her hair tangled and Mimi's solution was always to yank it smooth. Nate liked that about her. She was a full-steam-ahead type of girl.

"I think you look like a supermodel," Mimi said excitedly. She stood, resting the brush on Nate's shoulder and sorting through the pile of clothes they'd left on her bed.



Nate shrugged off the brush and picked up the overturned magazine she'd been looking at before she'd been told she needed to sit straight. "You just think that 'cause I'm skinny."

She flipped immediately to a photograph she knew by heart, the one Mimi had shown her the first time they *really* met at Farrah's bar; A girl with spiky red hair so crusted with product that it shined in the light. Her cheeks were the same artificial shock-red, all the way to the tip of her nose and she smiled at the camera as if the photographer had told her a joke just before the flash went off.

Nate studied the picture religiously. Mimi had pointed to it seconds after meeting her, pulling it from her bag and declaring that the woman in it looked *just* like her. It was the first time in a long while that Nate had felt that weird happy feeling, like she was a kid again. But when she was a kid it'd had to be a secret from everyone. Now she had Mimi.

She used to think about a certain commercial all the time. A girl and her just-like-me doll brushing each other's hair - or, no...that couldn't be it. But in her mind it was true. The girl and the doll sitting cheek to cheek, brushing one another's hair with orange slice smiles. She hadn't had a hope of looking like them, of being not just pretty but *ideal*. Quintessential, as Louis might say - real slow so you'd remember he said it.

But she had a chance at being like *this* woman. The kind of woman her parents would say was ugly, mannish, but the rest of the world had loved enough to photograph.

“Here it is!” Mimi exclaimed, taking a tube of lipstick from her bedside drawer. She held it up to Nate and smiled mischievously. Her eyes were puffed at the very bottom where bags would be, making a smile look natural on her face. Nate snatched the tube from her and laughed when she screamed in protest.

“Ow! What? What is it?” She teased, dodging Mimi’s frantic hands, keeping the tube away. She liked that too, that toothless play-fighting they did.

“Don’t just snatch it! You’re so rude,” Mimi shouted.

“Girls should be rude in this day and age,” Nate said, quoting Mimi’s father.

Nate thought Mimi’s father was fantastic. She thought all the queens from Farrah’s bar were but especially Mr. Kinoshita. He wasn’t as upbeat as the others and looked tired, even when performing. Louis said he used to worry that he’d fall asleep on stage. Mimi said even though he looked perpetually tired he did a lot all day and that seemed to be true.

Whenever Nate came over, Mr. Kinoshita was doing something. Today when she’d come over he’d been learning how to make sauce for pasta, saying that the ones at the store had plastic in them - he’d read that somewhere.

“If it comes out good I’ll give you some to take home,” he’d told her and Nate had nodded before rushing up to Mimi’s room. She thought Mr. Kinoshita was fantastic but couldn’t stand being alone with him. It made her feel like her heart was gonna fall out.

Mimi managed to snatch the lipstick back from Nate, fixing her with a glare before perking up again. “I got this from my mom last weekend when I went to visit and guess what’s the best part.”

Nate tried to think of things Mimi would get excited about but before she could come up with anything Mimi was shoving the tube in her face again.

“Cut it out-”

“There’s two!” Mimi exclaimed, holding her own in the air as Nate took the one she was shoving at her. “So we can match. It’s a fabulous shade of red.”

Nate examined the tube. It was golden with a matte shine that made it seem like it’d be cool to the touch. She looked at herself in the mirror, watching Mimi confidently apply her own to her lips. “A fabulous shade...” Nate repeated under her breath, gazing at her own bare lips.

“Fabulous...”

\*

As Nate walked home she tried to think of a name that’d suit her. She’d been trying to think of a new secret name for herself. She thought it might be silly, but Louis pointed out that

she'd already sort of changed it from 'Ignatius' to 'Nate' so another wouldn't hurt. Mimi had been the one to think of it being secret. A lot of the queens she knew had secret names, names that only friends and certain buildings heard.

None of the names she heard suited her though. They were all so pretty. Most of the girls names she heard were from the bible or magazines, and the others belonged to someone else - people from school. She didn't want someone else's name, she wanted her own like Nate was her own.

She was glad Mimi had become her friend. Before Mimi and Louis and Farrah's house she'd been living like a stray dog, thinking of nothing but fuel and fight. She'd forgotten how nice it was to have places to go and people to talk to. It was different than it was with Bill and them. When she remembered the days she played with them she got a strange, sick nostalgia. Like the ache of too much sweetness. She hated how angry she'd been and how quick she was to use it against others - but that wasn't all her fault, was it? Hadn't they all wound up and set each other loose? And hadn't her father been proud of her, always proud of her, when she came limping home?

He'd even been proud the night of that horrific play. Bill's mother had been screaming, hysterical, and she'd been doing so for awhile. She'd been screaming the whole time Nate was whaling on him, calling him her baby and begging someone to help - oh, help him!

After, when Nate had been in the backseat with bruised knuckles and sweat coming off her like steam and he'd turned with the biggest grin she'd ever seen on him.

“Nobody calls *my* boy a sissy,” he’d shouted, slapping at the top of her head. She’d felt like she was going to die. She’d shook the rest of the night as her body slowly drained itself from rage, making room for the horror to settle in. She’d almost killed Bill. Worse, she’d *wanted* to.

As she walked she tried to put that thought out of her mind. She was older, she had Mimi and Louis and Farrah - people who she didn’t have to pretend around. She didn’t need to be biting all the time, constantly trying to keep from being last in the pecking order. There was no pecking order anymore. She wouldn’t do something like that again, why would she? The first time still haunted her years later.

This soothed her and she began to let her mind wander to other, more benign things when she heard a noise up ahead and paused briefly before continuing on. It wasn’t uncommon to hear noises when you walked through the woods as Nate often did, abhorring the road. There was nothing to see on the road but your own shadow and she wasn’t afraid to see something scary. If something scared her she’d punch a hole through it.

The noise, rhythmic and hard and insistent, grew louder until she stumbled on it. It was only her father, sitting as close to the treeline as possible without going into the yard. He was hammering something and mother was watching from the porch steps, radio at her feet. It was too far away to make out the words but it sounded like a man shouting, a preacher.

“What’re you sneakin’ around for, boy?” Her father asked, his teeth holding a nail which he spit into his hand seconds later. Nate thought about Mr. Kinoshita, who always greeted her

with a dry joke like “*Did you slip under the door Naa-Na?*” or “*Oh! I think I saw two little mice go by.*”

“I’m always sneakin’ around,” Nate said. She knew how to talk to her father. Beckett and Louis didn’t have a clue and Constance didn’t have to know. Beckett, if asked the same question, would get defensive - say he wasn’t sneaking and Louis would explain himself. Nate placed a foot against her father’s back. “What’re you doing, old man? Making yourself a cane?”

Her dad grabbed her ankle, jerking it so she’d stumble. He laughed, turning back around as Nate caught herself by slamming into a tree. He laughed like he’d accidentally coughed out a scarce bit of joy. He never laughed heartily unless he was drunk and he seemed to begrudge people who did. He was a man of such limited joy that to show it seemed wasteful, dangerous.

“Making your ma something. She wants a shelf for her...” he waved his hand, gesturing towards the amorphous things a woman might keep. “She wanted to buy one, I said what for? I got two good hands right here.”

Nate looked over at her mother. She’d stopped looking at the two of them and was instead talking to Beckett who was leaning over the railing like a goon. They looked so stark against each other, his black hair and her dull blonde but they had the same pale, limp quality. Even Louis had that. His skin was cool and even, not vibrant like the other black boys Nate saw around. Nate had the same skin as their dad, it reddened easily.

“Nate, you’ll get ticks!” Beckett shouted from the porch. Nate made a show of rolling her entire body in exasperation before throwing him the bird.

“And I’ll leave ‘em on your pillow!” She shouted back. The porch was too far away to make out the expression of anyone sitting on it but Beckett recoiled visibly, saying something to their mother before slamming back inside.

Her dad wheezed, shaking his head and spitting in the grass. “Too much of his mother in that kid,” he said. He’d been starting to show his age recently. He was slower and his hair was more gray than black. He stood and glared down at Nate for a beat. “You too. That hair,” he said, ruffling Nate’s hair so roughly her body stumbled along with the movement of his hand.

“Cut it,” he demanded. Then, “And carry that shit inside.”

“Nate looked at the mess of wood and nails, gathering up as much as she could and following her father. His back was still broad even though it wasn’t as straight as it used to be.

Nate remembered being a little kid suddenly, too young to have thoughts. She remembered seeing her father sitting on the floor, the wide white expanse of his bare back and her placing her foot on it. It’d looked so small but the color matched and he’d turned, asked her what the fuck she thought she was doing but he’d said it with a smile.

“The men are here, despite appearances,” her dad said when they reached the porch.

Her mother frowned. “Don’t start that again. Plenty of boys keep their hair long these days.”

“Sure,” her dad said, moving inside. “Don’t mean I have to like it.”

Nate and her mother watched the door slam shut and stood together for a moment, a step or so apart. “Don’t let him get to you,” she said.

Nate snorted, shrugging the boxes of material higher on her chest. “I’m not Beckett, ma. Don’t worry. I’m not gonna cry because dad doesn’t like my hair.”

Her mother looked at her for a moment, and blinked. “He wasn’t raised...this house wasn’t as loving to him as it is to you.” She had lit a cigarette the moment the front door shut and was holding it to her lips without smoking it. She moved it slowly between her fingers, left then right.

Nate wanted to laugh or maybe scream. Loving. The house on the hill had been loving to no one. Their father told the story often, sometimes with pride. He said his grandmother, who’d raised him after both his parents left, never pulled a punch in her life. He said it was why he’d been the only family at her funeral.



*“And that’s how she would’a liked it too. I was the only person in that damn family who got her. That family’s gone now, fuck that family, it’s just us now. That’s why we’ve gotta have each other’s backs,”* he’d say when he was cheerful.

*“I’m the only family you’ve fucking got, hate me or love me, it’s just us now. So listen to me the first time I tell you something, huh?”* he’d shout when he wasn’t.

Nate could always hear something in the second option. She thought maybe it was her grandmother’s voice. In those moments she could almost see her father as a child, abandoned to the care of someone who no one but him loved enough to mourn.

“Christ, I get it. I’m fine.” Nate said, walking up the stairs. “It’s not like it’s new or anything.”

“Where were you today?” Her mother asked but Nate was already inside and let the door slam shut without answering. She waited, just inside, for something more but she could hear nothing on the other side so she just stood against the wall until the weight of the box became too much and she let it drop.

“Nice,” Beckett commented from the kitchen. Louis looked up from the counter.

“Fuck off,” Nate replied, walking quickly past.

“Nice,” Beckett said again, injecting more venom into it.

“Are you okay?” Louis asked at the same time.

Nate didn't answer and the space where her voice should have been was replaced by their father's, shouting from the living room; "Fucking christ, the two of you! Leave him alone. God's sake, you'd think-"

Nate bounded up the stairs to the second floor, half-listening to the argument that was blossoming below her as she brought down the attic's ladder and began to climb.

"-Get out of the fucking kitchen, what're you doing in the kitchen? What're you hungry for? Get out of the f-"

The attic was too high up to make out the words, especially after she closed the door. She could hear her father's voice escalating into shouting. Beckett's joined in at times, a sharp little jab or two, but was mostly drowned out. She bet Louis didn't respond at all. She couldn't hear him. If he was smart he'd probably crept away.

The little hiding place she'd made as a child was still there beneath the loose floorboards. Everything was as she left it. She'd added a few things over the years but nothing close to what she remembered as the Laura Jeanne dress, too small for her now but she couldn't get rid of it. She still treated it with reverence, carefully moving it aside to tuck the lipstick underneath.

She admired her little collection; plastic jewelry, glittery stickers, scrunchies and primary colored barrettes, a broken mood ring, earrings that her mother had 'lost' and a plethora of

flavored chapsticks. It was all pretty but nowhere near the beauty of the lipstick tube. She admired it in the light, turning it over in her hands.

“Fabulous...” she breathed, uncapping it. It was beautiful. A deep red that made her want to bite into it. She raised it to her lips, about to paint them when a muffled bang from below made her flinch. Something had been thrown or hit - a wall or a chair maybe and with it came her mother’s voice, shrill enough to overpower her father’s.

Nate capped the lipstick again, quickly covering it with the dress and replacing the boards. She didn’t believe in signs like Beckett, Constance, and their mother, so she told herself that it wasn’t one. It wasn’t like God was trying to keep the lipstick’s beauty from her and it wasn’t like she was scared of what’d happen if she went against that. It was just that she knew if the argument spread further she wouldn’t be able to get down for a while. When her mother went to bed she wasn’t likely to leave the rest of the evening and Nate had spent more than one day sweating it out in the crawlspace until dinnertime so she hurried to the attic door and peered out, scurrying out when she was sure everyone was still downstairs.

“-He’s your son, your son!”

“I don’t give a fuck who he is, he’s goddamn disrespectful! You’re gonna let him-?”

“Don’t take the lord’s name-”

“Oh since when do you give a fuck about the lord’s name Tabi-?”

“They’re at it again,” came a soft voice from behind her. Nate turned to see Constance - what little of her was visible through the crack in her door. She looked ill. Nate didn’t remember the last time they’d spoken. Her heart was pounding the way it always did when she was fresh from an indulgence in feminine beauty. Her first instinct was to snap at her sister, go on the offensive but she stopped herself.

“Dad’s mad ‘cause they were in the kitchen or something,” she explained instead.

“Should I go?” Constance asked.

Nate screwed her face up, confused. “What?”

The door creaked open a bit wider. “Sh-”

“Down there? And do what? God,” Nate turned to her own bedroom door. “Do whatever you want Constance, don’t ask me.”

Constance didn’t say anything to that and Nate didn’t wait to see her choice, going over to Beckett’s bed and climbing onto the window sill. Louis and Constance both did that, always needing some sort of go-ahead to do anything. Nate didn’t know how they were able to live like that but as much as she hated it, she sometimes wished she was like that. It’d be easier, wouldn’t it? Being meek and nervous and slow to act. To have her father toss her aside like the rest of them.

She looked out at the dead grass and the chicken coop, years abandoned. She thought about how Beckett used to have chickens in there and wondered about the accuracy of that

memory - how had Beckett had chickens? Her mother must have been given them or bought them during one of her hopeful episodes, episodes which had been becoming much less frequent.

She wished she could have Mimi over at her house.

Grace started to cry and Nate wondered if Constance was soothing her. That made sense. Constance and Grace. They were a good pair. Constance and Grace, the family's girls, quiet or innocent. Nate wasn't like that, not at all.

She moved from the window and to her bed as she heard someone's feet pounding against the stairs, turning her back to the room just as the door flew open.

It was Beckett. She knew by his breath. He panted like a dog when he ran. She knew he was staring at her back but she didn't turn. The door was still open, the argument snapping in at them.

"I hate you," Beckett whispered. Someone downstairs screamed his name. "I hate you."  
Nate closed her eyes and in the sun-drenched room the space behind them was red.

\*

When you got to high school you could eat lunch outside as long as you didn't leave school grounds. Neither Nate nor Mimi had eaten inside once that year.

They settled in at their usual place, a table-bench combination that sat entirely within the school's shade. It was behind the building on a slab of concrete and Nate guessed they'd planned on making more of them but realized no one would want to sit in such a dismal spot and left just the one.

Mimi always had packed lunches that her father made, tucked away in little see-through plastic boxes with 'Mimiko Ann' written across a sticker which was slapped on every one of them. Nate sometimes got school lunch, sometimes brought something from home, sometimes ate whatever Mimi had. That day she wasn't eating anything, nursing a juice box she'd been able to snatch from one of the unattended carts instead.

"My mom said the next time I see her we can go catch that movie everyone's talking about, the one with the guy?"

"Right. The one with the guy," Nate said. Mimi flipped through a new magazine, marking the pages with various symbols - some faces were circled, others were starred, entombed in hearts. She continued, either ignoring or being too engrossed in her task to hear Nate's sarcasm.

"I don't care about him though. I mean he's *dreamy* but there's this scene where our heroine comes down a flight of stairs and the whole time you think she's this nobody but there she is with her hair up all fancy and she has this gorgeous yellow dress and you realize she's *somebody*. Somebody special."

“What do you mean special?” Nate asked.

Mimi’s hand stilled for a moment. “Huh?” she asked.

“What do you mean special? Anyone can put on a dress and lipstick or whatever, right?”

Nate thought about the floorboard in the attic. She thought about the night Bill caught her in the creek, how blissful the time before it had been was eclipsed by that one moment. “What makes her somebody special?”

Mimi flipped to the next page, returning to her groove. “When you feel it you just know,” she said, wisely.

“C’mon-” Nate snorted just as a voice to the left of them shouted; “Ooh, someone’s a date!”

They turned to see Ralph sitting on top of the chain link fence that signified the end of the school’s property. Luke and Bill were with him, Luke rattling the fence in a gleeful attempt to scare Ralph and Bill leaning against a tree with an anxious glare.

Nate smiled, locking eyes with him. She laughed when he looked away. She knew Bill hated her guts, wanted her dead, what have you. She knew he’d do it too, if he could, but he couldn’t. Because whenever she came around and he wasn’t with *her* ex-goons he’d look like he was gonna piss his pants, chickenshit coward that he was.

Mimi frowned at the three boys. “Get lost,” she shouted to a chorus of jeers.

“Ooh, get lost...!” Luke laughed as Nate slid off the table and picked a rock up from the ground.

“Do you want to get your asses kicked that badly?” She asked, casually tossing the rock into the air and catching it again.

Luke rattled the fence so hard that Ralph nearly fell off onto the concrete. “Stop! What the hell-?” he whined. They always called him a crybaby before Nate left. He was the one they used to pick on, Ralphy-baby with his spilled milk tears. The mama’s boy who always went home before dark. He lived in town right above the grocery store. They used to go in whenever Ralph was manning the counter and smile all wide and say he was a real pal as they swiped whatever they could hold off the shelves, watching his eyes widen with every new item they sure as hell weren’t gonna pay for. But he never said anything. And that was what was important.

“Last I remember we were the ones kicking *your* ass, fairy.” Luke shouted. “You and your darkie brother.”

“Shut the hell up!” Nate shouted back. She shouldn’t have said shit, she knew that. She should have walked away. They couldn’t catch up quick, having to climb the fence and all, but she couldn’t help it. There was something in her that just made her keep going even when it was stupid, she just kept jerking herself forward - yelling and spitting with her fists in the air.



She remembered when Luke had been straddling her in the dirt outside the bus, the rock in his hands poised to come down on her. She'd been scared, terrified, but a part of her also wanted it to happen. She wanted to feel the rock come down on her. To be squashed and silent and finally still.

“Go over there, Ralph!” Luke shouted.

“You come over here and you die, Ralph. I mean it,” Nate shouted back. Mimi stood and moved behind her, grabbing the arm that wasn't wielding the rock.

Ralph looked nervously between Nate and the boys behind the fence. “Yeah, bet you couldn't without-”

Nate tossed the rock which only narrowly missed and picked up another without breaking eye contact. Ralph squealed. “Don't need to prove shit to you. Come over here, see what happens,” Nate said.

“Yeah, go over there and kiss!” Luke shouted, laughing. He always talked too much. “Hey, what'ja rather we call you if you don't like fairy? Honey, fag, creampuff, cocksucker?”

“Laura?” Bill said, hiding behind Luke’s manic energy. So quiet Nate almost didn’t hear it, the other two certainly didn’t, but she did. And it made her feel like sludge was being poured into her stomach through her chest. Then it began to heat. To burn.

“What the fuck did you say to me?”

Luke smiled wide before realizing Nate wasn’t talking to him, and was instead turning to look at Bill. Nate couldn’t see his face, but whatever it was drove Luke into one of his dog-like frenzies. “What’d you say? What’d you say to him?” he screamed.

“Nothing,” Bill said, looking away with a victorious little smile that made Nate’s blood boil. The same smile he’d had that night, at the play.

“Say it to my face,” she demanded, stalking over to the fence and shrugging off Mimi’s hand. “Say it to my face!”

Bill turned and glared at her, disgust and triumph twitching at his lips. He didn’t respond and Nate grabbed hold of the fence, shaking it as she screamed for him to stop being a pussy and say it again.

Mimi grabbed her arm again. “Come on, let’s-”

Nate wrenched her arm away again, barely hearing the other girl. "I wouldn't be so damn smug if I were you. Wouldn't go around smiling about shit - you and your whore mom," Nate spat. She could feel the anger rushing to her head, she was a natural disaster when she started going, really. She was unstoppable, nothing in the world felt better than to keep going. Like running downhill. So she kept going, even when Luke went quiet and Mimi moved away.

"She still cooking dinner for every dud in town? Only reason you haven't got a million little rat faced brothers running around is 'cause she's too damn ugly for anyone with eyes to fuck her. Where's your daddy, huh? What're you smiling for? Wouldn't be *near* so damn smug if I were you! Fuck off. Fuck off and fucking die, shitbrain!"

Nate breathed. Her face was hot and her body was shaking from adrenaline, chest heaving. She felt tired and a bit ill, lightheaded, because she hadn't eaten anything that day. Her father told her that to be strong like him she should eat as much as she could and she wanted to stay small. She wanted to keep the kid-body she'd known all her life.

"Man..." Luke said, scratching the back of his head. He was looking slowly between Bill and Nate, sucking at his teeth. "Man..." he repeated as Ralph crawled back down to his side.

Nate had known Bill all her life. They'd grown up together, they'd been friends since they met each other on the bus first day of school. She knew Bill. He was the thinker of the group. If Nate and Luke were egging each other on to do something wild then Bill was thinking of how to get away with it. So while anyone else might have yelled back or cried or climbed over

the fence, fists blazing, Bill raised his head and looked at Nate with solid eyes. Eyes that were packed to the brim with hate, unreasonable and unyielding in the same way her anger was.

“I know where you go on Saturdays,” he said. Then he turned around and left, vanishing down into the brush beyond the chain link fence. Luke and Ralph quickly followed, shooting Nate looks equal parts contempt and confusion as they left.

Nate stood, holding herself upright by tightening her grip on the fence. She let out a panicked breath, heat rising up the back of her neck as everything else went a hollow cold. She could still hear the crunching of leaves under the three boys' shoes. She let out another panicked huff, trembling.

“I didn't know you could talk like that,” Mimi said behind her.

Nate didn't turn. “Fuck you.”

“Who's Laura?”

Nate was surprised she'd heard. She tightened her grip again. “Fuck you.”

She was every bit her father's child, wasn't she? Quick-flare anger that consumed and felt better the more it did. And then there was nothing left. She was a natural disaster, always sifting through the wreckage. She always forgot the wreckage. She was a mad dog, rabid. She needed to be shot. She needed a rock to paint her brains across. She was sick in too many ways to live. She ruined everything good ever given to her. If Bill knew about Farrah's place then Nate was going to lose Farrah's place. That was how it worked and she knew that but she hadn't thought Bill

would still care so she hadn't been careful. She was going to lose it. Bill was going to snatch it away somehow, she was sure of it.

Something solid but soft hit her back and Nate turned to see a saran wrapped sandwich in the dirt. When she looked up Mimi tossed an apple that Nate only just managed to catch.

"What-?" she began but Mimi didn't stop, wordlessly tossing her lunch piece by piece. Then rocks. Then dirt. Then she began to cry.

Nate looked up again, eyes squinted in preparation to be hit but when she saw Mimi sitting in the grass she gathered up all the pieces of her lunch in her arms and walked over. Her fingers ached from holding the fence so tightly. There'd been a time where she could hang from that sort of fence, just hold on with her fingers through the hard loops and dangle her entire body over whatever was on the other side. Her body changed no matter how much she willed it to stay the same.

She sat down beside Mimi with a soft grunt and watched the girl cry. Nate hadn't ever comforted anyone before. She clenched the apple in her hand and tried to think of what to do. She remembered how Louis had held her when she'd cried on that strange boy's bathroom floor. It was the day that she'd gotten in that fight with Luke and Ralph - where Luke'd had that rock poised over her head and she'd been screaming at him to do it - kill her. Then Louis had pulled him off and dragged her away. He'd taken her hand when he told her to run and it'd been the first time Nate remembered holding someone's hand.

“It’s okay,” she said to Mimi. Her voice was stiff and she tried again. “It’s okay.”

Mimi didn’t respond and Nate began lining up the food in front of her. “I’m sorry,” she said without looking at the other girl.

“I was really scared,” Mimi sobbed. Of course she’d been scared. Her house had a small, beautiful garden where nothing had ever died. She had a father who made sauce and gave it out to awkward wide-eyed children, who packed her lunch with love. She’d probably never seen anything close to a real fight. Nate was sorry that she’d seen it, even though they hadn’t even really fought - it wasn’t that bad but she was still sorry. She wondered if her dad used to feel sorry too, before he got big and old.

“I’m sorry,” she said again. She raised an arm then let it drop. “Do you, uh...want a hug?”

Mimi shook her head then nodded.

“Which is it?” Nate asked.

Wordlessly, Mimi wrapped her arms around the other girl and Nate relaxed a bit. She awkwardly patted her back, hesitating to return the gesture.

“I hate those guys,” Mimi said.

“But not me?” Nate asked.

“No. Hug me back,” she demanded.

Nate wordlessly obliged. She closed her eyes for a moment and for a moment she was part of a little ball - Mimi and herself. Then she opened them and let go. "He's gonna do something- Bill."

"He's scary," Mimi said, wiping her face on her sleeve.

"Not really, but he's gonna do something."

Nate's quiet urgency broke through Mimi's haze. She looked at her and frowned. "What should we do?"

Nate blinked. "I'll think of something," she promised. Behind them the bell rang, a shrill vibrato that agitated the air. Birds abandoned the grass and Nate followed them up, neck craned severely. She wished she too could fly away. She was tired. Even if she did have wings, she was too tired. "Don't worry."

\*

Unlike Bill, Nate was not a thinker. And unlike Mimi she was not a girl who ate love everyday. She ate nothing and she came up empty when she tried to conceive of a plan.

So when Saturday came she woke up early, before even Louis did, and snuck out into the chill. It was early morning on the cusp of night or vice versa and Nate had on a thin jacket that she hunched in. It'd been Beckett's before he grew out of it. Everything she owned had been someone else's first.

As she walked down the hill to May's house she tried to think of a name. Maybe something blander. Sandra? Jane? Kelly? She hopped the low fence and knocked on May's window. Sue? Nancy?

May opened it with a knife in hand and quickly tossed it onto the bed when she saw who was there. Despite the early hour she was dressed. Oddly too, like a cowboy, complete with a ten gallon hat.

"What's that for?" Nate asked.

"Noneya," May responded, crossing her arms. "What's *this* for?"

Nate knew she and Beckett used to wreck shit. They used to run around like missionaries or angels, muttering to themselves about God's wrath - always his wrath. Their God seemed to be made of the church-God's bitterness distilled.

She'd considered going to Beckett but he wouldn't understand anymore. He'd gotten older and more skittish. Nate heard him in the bath one night when she got up hoping to piss. She'd heard him moving slowly in the water, crying for forgiveness and repeating Hail Mary. She didn't know how many times. He was still repeating it when she crept back into bed. Beckett wasn't angry anymore, except at her. He hated her.

"Come to Wellner with me? Something bad's gonna happen."



“Why would I go anywhere with you?” May asked. “What’s in it for me?”

Nate looked at the barren trees. Almost every leaf had fallen. Winter was fast approaching. She was freezing in Beckett’s jacket. May lifted her hat to scratch her head and Nate looked at forehead and saw the beige-brown scar slashed through it. It was small, all things considered but she’d made it. She’d left something permanent on someone else’s skin and that made her feel like scum sometimes and sometimes it made her feel powerful. If Beckett and May were angels then Nate was a devil. Nothing about her anger was punishing, rational, it was born of nothing and vanished into air but she wanted to do something with it now. Something good.

“I know you’re a good person, May. You’re like...you care about shit and I didn’t use to care about shit but I care about it now. Aw, hell...” She scratched at the back of her neck and shifted from foot to foot. “I care about Mimi and Louis and Farrah and everyone, you know? I care about all that and it’s all in one place and someone’s going to raze it to hell ‘cause I opened my mouth. And I opened my mouth ‘cause I’m a fucking moron and I don’t think.”

May considered the girl outside her window. It occurred to Nate that May had no idea what she was talking about but it didn’t show in her eyes. May had narrow, steady eyes. She sniffed. “You got a plan?”

Nate shrugged. “Bash ‘em up.”

May rolled her eyes with a grin. “Smiths...That’s a-okay. I’ve always got a plan,” she ducked inside.

“Can I take the knife?” Nate asked, leaning in over the window sill.

“It’s just a prop,” May explained. She turned, baffled. “Did you think I really had a knife?”

Nate shrugged. “I don’t know what you’re capable of.”

Their bus ride to Wellner was silent. They sat together in the back. Nate with her body curled up against her and May cross-legged, her knees flapping constantly, anxious to fly.

When they reached their stop Nate led her past the rows of cookie cutter houses, weaving through town and heading down to Farrah’s bar. It felt like it was just the two of them at times. Like it was just them and the birds, then a stray person would appear and they’d all look a bit surprised to see each other.

Bill was waiting in front of Farrah’s place and Nate stopped a few paces away, holding out an arm to stop May as well. Bill looked up. He was holding a box of matches. He was alone. Nate had expected Ralph and Luke to be there too.

“Well,” Bill said. He crossed his arms and smiled, that same little victorious smirk. Nate was stupid. She was boy-stupid for caring about something and showing it but she wanted to

save it, desperately. She had to even though she didn't know if she could. She'd never tried before. She'd never cared about anything enough to.

Her train of thought was derailed by a warmth from above and when she jerked away she realized May had given her her hat. It was heavy on her head.

"You looked cold," May said and for a moment Nate was overwhelmed by how cool she was, giving her that hat. It was like a movie; A girl and her hero. She didn't know May well but in that moment she felt connected to her - she hadn't had that in a fight before. Even when she had been friends with Bill and then the fighting had been all for none and none for all.

"Thanks," Nate said. Then the two of them charged forward, yelling like maniacs, like people who cared desperately - just a little too much to not be stupid.

When Louis found them they were just inside, sitting at a booth. Farrah was saying something about danger and recklessness but Nate couldn't hear it over the pain in her mouth. She'd lost a tooth and it wouldn't grow back. She'd skinned her knee so bad it looked like a can's peeled tin and when she saw Louis she sprung up, being balanced by Burke's steady hand as she stumbled from the pain.

When they'd descended on Bill he'd gone down easy. He wasn't a good fighter, hadn't ever been and he was alone. Nate had been proud of herself, her head was as cool as the early morning air. Her punches were precise, solid, and they landed hard. Bill fought like he was afraid

to get hurt, neither girl did. Both of them cared too much about what they were fighting for to pay heed to themselves. Nate wondered if that was what it was like to be angelic.

Then she'd gotten him to the ground, May somewhere behind her. The girl had been kicked so hard in the stomach she'd stumbled to the gutter and began to retch but Nate had twisted that small victory and managed to catch Bill off guard, get him in the ground. Then he'd smiled that little fucking smile.

"What do you think I'm going to *do*, Iggy?" he asked, voice bubbling with amusement and that one remark consumed her and she was flame again. She was devilish and unstoppable.

Bill's face wasn't Bill's Face anymore. It was a thing that she wanted to destroy, to mash into nothing. Bill's face was her own, was the whole world, laughing at her and she was giant above it. "Your mama's not here to save you now, huh?" She screamed and then she kept screaming and then arms were around her waist and she was being pulled away. She tried to beat the thing pulling her away but it beat her back and she tripped, falling off the curb and into the street.

She'd blinked, the back of her head blooming with pain-heat. She'd sat up, immediately feeling a headache coming on. May was on her knees, panting as Bill got up and slowly zig-zagged away. He was sobbing, low sobs that made something inside Nate glow. It calmed her immediately, like balm on a wound.

When she'd looked at May the other girl's eyes were wide with fear. The matches Bill had been holding were crumpled by her knee. "It's a brick building," she said and Nate smiled dreamily. Then the door opened and Farrah raced out.

"We won!" She screamed. May was lying opposite her. Her eyes were closed. Louis stood in the doorway, face twisted with such concern it almost dampened his sister's manic joy. Nate's nose had begun to bleed and she felt it running down her lips, into her mouth. when she pressed her finger up to her bottom lip it came back a fabulous shade of red. She was somebody *special*. "We fucking won!"

\*

The house was quiet. It was never good when the house was quiet. Nate sat in the living room beside Louis. She knew Beckett was just outside, as close as he could be without being sent away.

Their mother's back was to them and Louis stared at it anxiously. She was curled up in the armchair, robe clutched tightly around herself. "They're not going back there," she intoned. "To that fucking *bar*,"

"Course they're not going back," their father scoffed. Both their words were a bit slower than usual. When the police had brought Nate and Louis to the house the two of them were in the

shed out back, doing God knows what. It'd been a sight to see, their mother bursting forth with her fists in the air. It was like the place was haunted.

“Nothing wrong with a good fight every now and then but you start fightin’ on behalf of that...” Their father winced, unsure what to say. Nate bet he’d never seen a *real* fairy before. Just guys he thought were ones ‘cause they drank the wrong kind of beer. “Fag, and people’ll talk,” he decided. Louis stiffened and Nate tried to catch his eye but he refused to look up.

“*You* don’t got much to worry ‘bout but think of your brother, huh? What’s he gonna do if people start getting the wrong idea? Hell, half of ‘em already have it. That’s why I keep trying to tell you and that *rat in the hall*,” he continued, raising his voice and glaring at the doorway. There was a soft creak outside the room. “-To toughen up. Throw your weight around a little. Be like your fucking brother over here, at least he’s *doing* something.”

Nate was tired and her body ached. She’d again come down from the euphoria of rage and was left in the midst of wreckage. She wanted to lean against Louis but couldn’t. She rubbed her face. She wanted to cry. Her leg hurt so badly. Everything did but especially her leg. Her mother had disinfected and wrapped it tightly in beige bandages so the pink seeping through wasn’t quite so clear.

The fight came to her in snapshots, blurred with motion. Bill slinking away like a wounded animal, Nate’s euphoric bliss, the fear in May’s eyes. Nate bet she hadn’t ever seen a *real* fight either but she wasn’t sorry she’d seen it, she was glad. Or she told herself she was.

Beckett had cried out when he saw May. She'd been dropped off at the bottom of the hill but had trekked up after them, holding out a hand towards Nate.

"I need my hat back or my mom's gonna kill me," she said.

"My God, oh- what happened to your *face*?" Beckett nearly screamed. He was dramatic, it wasn't that bad. Nate had blood crusting on her chin and he hadn't batted an eye at *her*.

"You should see the other guy," May said, placing her hat back on her head and smiling in a way that made it clear that it hurt like hell to smile. Then she walked back down the hill with Beckett at her heels, demanding answers and urging her to hurry - she needed to sit down, she needed to walk slower, what happened to her *face*?

Their father was still talking but Nate tuned him out so only the grand gist got through and the gist was that he was proud of her. He was proud he'd raised a child with the same short fuse and as he talked Nate couldn't help but focus on her mother, curled up in the chair, back turned to everything, silent and still. To her dull horror even that sight sparked at the fuse in her. She wanted to grab her by the shoulder, to drag her to the ground.

*Don't just fucking sit there, she wanted to scream. Don't act like you're not part of this.*

“You two got anything to say for yourselves?” Their father finished, breaking Nate from her thoughts. Her heart was beginning to pound again and she wondered if that was going to be the rest of her life. Getting angry and regretting it. One state or the other. She wondered how her dad had lived so long like that. Maybe she should get into booze.

Nate looked at Louis who shook his head, eyes trained on the hands in his lap - squeezing and relaxing over and over again. He never said anything, even when he was upset. Nate knew he got upset. She'd seen him upset but instead of doing *anything* he just got this tight little smile and excused himself. Nate hated it, how damn passive he was, because she kind of loved him. She kind of loved her whole damn family.

“Ignatius,” her mother prodded. She didn't turn.

Nate looked at her father. She wished suddenly that she was anyone else in the world; an ugly girl who got to model anyway, freckle-faced with a wide, bright smile. A small child with her foot like an umbilical cord in the center of her dad's broad back. She wished she had been born like how Beckett talked about sometimes - Immaculate. Then she wouldn't have her short fuse. She'd say a name and it'd be hers and she wouldn't look like anyone else on earth so she wouldn't worry about what parts of hers were whose.

She didn't care that she'd beaten Bill up but she cared that she didn't really remember doing it - that she'd felt so happy afterwards it scared everyone silent. She was tired of people moving away from her. She was tired of living in extremes, from wreck to wreck.



“Fuck you,” she said. She remembered that her father had made Louis sleep on the floor once. And that he’d chased Beckett with a gun. And that he’d nearly hit their mother with a vase full of water- it’d exploded against the wall inches from her head. She remembered this and she remembered the rock that Luke had held above hers and she thought that if her father tried to kill her then she would try her very best to die.

There was a moment of silence. Absolute silence. Then her father grinned.

“That’s my boy.”

### **End : Cuniculture**

Their father told them to go upstairs so they did. Nate saw Beckett’s foot vanish into the room as they climbed and when they came in he was sitting oddly on the windowsill, as if he’d been thrown there. He’d thrown himself there, feeling disturbed. Louis thought he looked like their mother sitting all curled up. He looked across the hall.

Downstairs an argument was brewing, nothing new. Their father was angry that their mother wouldn’t look at him and Louis closed the door before they could find out why. It didn’t matter, they’d all wake up the next day and the next night another fight would be brewing.

Beckett was worried, very worried, for no clear reason. His stomach hurt a bit and he glared at Nate as if he’d found the cause. “You,” he hissed. “You fuckup.”

Louis was cut by this though it wasn't directed at him but Nate only rolled her eyes.

"Wow, great insult. Powerful stuff," she drawled, ducking onto her bed. "You got me."

Louis looked anxiously at her back.

It'd been hours since the morning's chaos, since he'd gone to Farrah's place and seen his sister bloodied and victorious. Their own little gripes and annoyances had been marinating during the day which'd been spent in silence - everyone to their own corners until the sun went down and the fighting could start.

Beckett tugged at his hair. "I can't believe you dragged May into your *brawl*. She can't mess up her face, she's making a movie. About...black cowboys catching white criminals for indians. She can't-"

"She could have gotten killed," Louis interrupted. He spoke from the corner the door created when shut. "You made me ride in a police car," he said. He couldn't be seen in the back of a police car. People would talk. He couldn't be seen looking like he didn't want to be seen in the back of a police car either.

"Was it fun?" Nate mocked. "Grow up. Bill didn't have a gun or nothing."

"*Police* have guns," Louis emphasized.

"And?" Nate asked but Louis didn't elaborate, going quiet instead. Nate spun around.

"Speak up. If you've got a problem, say it."

“You’re the one who has a problem,” Beckett said. Nate was the problem, always the problem. Constance and Louis always came quietly when he fetched them while Nate had to be dragged back screaming. Firecracker Ignatius, golden boy, Dad Jr.

“*You’re* the one who has a problem!” Nate shouted, hopping out of bed and stalking over to her brother. “What’s with you? You’re so fucking scared, what are you scared of?” She threw her arms out, daring something to strike her. She was invincible. “Both of you, what’re you scared of?”

“There’s plenty to be scared of,” Beckett said, clutching his stomach. What wasn’t there to be scared of? To him the whole world loomed. “Why do you always do this? Do you *like* making people worry? Mom was-”

Nate threw her hands in the air. “No one fucking worries about me! My leg’s practically torn in half and no one said shit about it!”

Louis was sure he’d said something about Nate’s knee. Perhaps his words weren’t enough, cents to anyone else’s dollar. He wondered what *Beckett* had to be scared of. He bit his lip and quietly counted his annoyance down.

“Because you’re always getting hurt!” Beckett exclaimed, standing on the bed. He blocked a good deal of the window and they all realized how dark the room was. “God, Nate!

Why should I care if you're not going to *stop*? Would that make you stop? If I kissed all your *boos-boos* away?"

"Fuck you," Nate spat.

"We're scared of dad," Louis said from his corner. "But *you* don't have to worry about that," flippant venom. He could only be verbally spiteful in bursts unlike the other two.

"Yeah. 'Cause I'm the favorite," Nate said. She moved her body in a violent shrug. "Get the fuck over it. Whatever. I'm the favorite and you hate me for it. I can't help that I'm not a pussy."

"I don't hate you because you're the favorite, Nate." Beckett said, jumping down from the bed and getting in her face. He poked at her chest. "I hate you because you. don't. think. And why should you? Like Louis said, life's *daisies* for you."

"I didn't say-" Louis began.

"You don't know shit about my life," Nate growled.

"I know you run off into the night and do stupid shit and punch me when I try to bring you back and then you come in here crying that I don't *care* enough. I'm *sick* with care about you, all of you. Okay? I'm *sick* with it," Beckett said, whirling away from Nate and wrapping his fingers around the back of his neck. For a moment he sounded a bit like his old self, like a

preacher in the throes of sermon. Then he faltered. “You have no idea what could happen out there. Ugh,” he moaned, slowed. “You’re so...stupid.”

“Like you’re so smart? Like you’re so great?” Nate asked, following his dizzy stumble around the room. “What about those little fucking jabs about Louis’ mom? Or Constance?” She spun to look at Louis, hitting the bone over her heart. “He- Bill, he called you *darkie*. What was I supposed to do?”

Louis looked away, hugging himself. “Ignore it...?” he suggested meekly, guessing at the ‘right’ answer. Nate hated him for a second, then loved him again.

“I can’t,” she whispered. If she were weaker she would have wailed the words.

“Since when were you two so close?” Beckett hissed. He was leaning against the bunk bed’s wooden post. It was a sickly lean, as if he’d collapse without the pole to prop him up.

Louis slipped behind Nate and out into the hall. For the moment the door was open the three of them could hear the downstairs argument in sharp focus. It’d moved past whatever the original spark was and expanded out, gone down the line. It was now about how she never should have married him, a point they both agreed on for different reasons.

“Why don’t you sleep in your own bed?” Louis asked, closing the door.

Nate was surprised Grace wasn’t crying yet.

Beckett grew cold.

“Yeah, and I heard you in the bathroom,” Nate said, whirling around. Louis had left her ammunition and she was going to use it. It was her turn to get in her brother’s face. “Why were you taking a bath so late?”

Beckett attempted to side-step her but she tripped him and they both pitched sideways onto Beckett’s bed. He frantically pushed Nate off in a wordless panic when he realized she was on top of him and when she grabbed his shirt, bringing him down with her, he screamed.

“Get off me!”

“No!”

“Get off me, get off, get off, get off!” Beckett shouted, bashing his fists against her own, tangled in the fabric of his shirt. “Get off of me!”

“What’s wrong with you?” Nate shrieked, letting go and watching as her brother skittered away. She’d thought herself the family’s only animal. “What-”

The door opened and Louis stood looking at the window between them, eyes wide. The moon was low in the sky, off to the side, obscured useless by trees. Beckett had his back pressed against the side of his bed, face buried in his hands and Nate was looking at Louis who looked at the window but not beyond it. “Constance is gone,” he said. “Grace too.”

They didn't alert their parents to the danger. They were fighting in the living room and it seemed impossible to break through to them, almost silly. So they went alone, a lopsided pack. They stumbled outside armed with flashlights, Nate trailing behind her brothers, lugging herself forward with a limp. Once they covered the yard they stepped into the trees and began to call their sisters' names, sounding like repentants - like desperates in hope of something everlasting: Constance! Grace! Constance! Grace!

Beckett shoved a stick into Nate's hand, thick enough to lean on.

Nate didn't say anything.

Both of them kept their eyes on Louis. He was louder than either had ever heard him. He called the girls' names as if he were mourning them already. Raw, vulnerable. "Constance! Grace! Constance! Grace!" they hadn't known his voice could be so loud.

Beckett was the one who spotted them. He held out a weather-vane arm, standing atop a rock, squinting. "They're over there!" He pointed. "They're by the creek!" and they all ran like dogs to the spot.

"You don't understand," were the first words out of Constance's mouth. She was standing over the creek, on a moss-covered patch of rock. She was barefoot and it was the first thing Nate noticed. Beckett gasped at the baby, held over the water and Louis' eyes locked onto the gun - their father's gun. He'd checked the drawer before they left, while he was looking for the flashlights and found it empty.

“You don’t understand, we have to die. It’s the only way, I’m sorry. We have to die,” Constance explained. She was bereft. She looked like she was haunting something there, on the other side of the water. The sound of it rushing between them was thunderous.

Beckett thought of the rocks - they could split their heads open.

Nate thought of the water - they could drown.

Louis thought of the gun and reached out, palms open towards her. “Connie...” he pleaded.

“Grace didn’t do anything bad, she’s not bad so I think she should- I’m going to put her in the water and she’ll die clean and I’m...I’ll...shoot myself. Put down. I need to be put down. I’m diseased,” Constance said.

“What are you talking about?” Beckett shouted, voice shrill. “Get down from there, you’re crazy!”

Constance nodded, wobbling a bit. Beckett covered his face and fell, his legs giving out. She laughed softly. “No, it’s okay...” she said, all kindness. It was the same voice she always used for them, soft and reassuring. “Neither of us is a person yet. So it’s okay, she’ll go to heaven and I’ll go...I don’t know. Nowhere, maybe. I don’t think God would know what to do with me. I don’t know if I have a soul. I think I’m empty.”



“You’re not empty, Constance, please!” Louis screamed. He’d fallen too, to take care of Beckett. It reminded him of when Beckett kept chickens and their dad would kill them all for meat come winter, leaving the chicks. They’d all huddle together then and Constance would be pressed against Louis’ back. He sobbed. He pressed his forehead against Beckett’s bony shoulder. “Connie...connie...” he whispered, drowned out by the water.

Grace shrieked and the boys on the ground tensed. Nate stared at the water.

“I’m bad. Deep-down bad. I don’t belong, I only make things worse- you don’t understand. There’s a sickness in me, there’s nothing...you don’t understand,” Constance said and each of her siblings flinched at a sentence.

Beckett and his deep-down bad.

Louis and his non-belonging.

And Nate.

The water was running fast. It was cold. Nate shivered as she stepped forward.

“Do you know what herd immunity is?” she called. Grace squirmed and kicked at her voice, shrieking again with excitement. Constance held her closer. “It’s when...you’re so healthy it doesn’t matter if someone else’s sick. They can be sick as they want without it hurting you, you don’t have to worry or nothing.”

Louis was sobbing behind her and Beckett had wrapped his arms around him, holding his head tight so he couldn't turn and see the creek.

“We have the complete fucking opposite of that. We have...herd poison. We're a terrific flock of brain dead sheep because that's what we come from.” Nate's leg hurt and went dead sometimes, threatening to pull her under. She grit her teeth and shouted through the pain.

“There was this chart you know, in school. We were learning about blue eyes and how if your mom has blue eyes there's a 50/50 chance but if both- both our parents...None of our hair's the same color!” She exclaimed.

She was speaking frantically, she'd waded out into the water and found a large rock to hold onto just below where Grace had been dangling. The baby reached for her and when she found herself too far away she began to cry.

“But we all fight like hell, don't we? We all got that. That gene that makes us want to kill each other everyday. You're a person, Constance. You're not a fucking dog. You're not special, you don't have to die!” Nate screamed. She was going numb. She wasn't good at comfort or distraction. She was going to get her sisters killed.

Constance blinked and loosened her grip on Grace. Nate closed her eyes and didn't scream, gritting her chattering teeth.

“You bite your nails,” Louis shouted. He raised his face despite Beckett's pleas for him not to look, tears and snot shining in what little light there was. His sisters looked to him. “You

bite your nails and you used to collect dolls and...and you have the best imagination I've ever known." He blinked and coughed. "You used to smile a lot and sing when we were alone...and you told me you wanted to be a ballerina one time and mom heard and said you were too clumsy. And you cried and it was the first time I hated her."

Louis would hate the creek if Constance died in it. He'd hate the whole world.

"Grace!" Beckett wailed. "Grace, oh...no, Grace!"

Constance balked suddenly as if she'd woken from a dream. She looked at her sister, screeching in her arms. She did not look down at Nate's renewed struggle against the current to make it to her side.

"Grace..." She looked at the baby then down at the rushing water before bringing her in from over the ledge and placing her on the rock. She took the gun from her pocket and it was the first time Beckett noticed it. He screamed but Constance only shook her head, raising it to her own temple. "Don't look, okay?"

Beckett and Louis screamed in perfect unison as Nate leapt despite the searing pain that deadened her leg. She grabbed her sister's wrist, jerking it back so the gun was pressed against her own temple instead. She held on tightly, refusing to move. Her heart was in her ears. Water and blood, both rushing. Both cold.

"You have to shoot me first," she said.

“Nate-” Constance said, trying again to pull her hand away but Nate held fast.

“You’re gonna have to, Con, I mean it.” She was shaking from the water. She couldn’t feel her body and everything was unreal, a horrible dream. She thought of the rock, her head splattered against it. She thought of how much she hated the sight of that damn door shut tight across the hall. She couldn’t deal with there being nothing behind it. She understood the urge but she couldn’t deal with it. She was selfish like that. It came with being the youngest, she guessed.

“If you wanna shoot yourself you’ll have to shoot me first. I’m not lettin’ go. I’ll stand here with you all night if you want ‘cause I’m not living without you,” Nate said.

There was a long beat of silence, a tug. Then she felt Constance’s finger slowly ghost along the curve of the trigger. Then the gun clattered to the rock, sliding off and into the water below. Nate immediately scooped Grace into her arms and yanked Constance away from the water’s edge.

They stumbled down the little incline and found themselves sprawled out in the damp grass, chests heaving as adrenaline seeped from them. Nate checked Grace then looked across the way at her brothers, still huddled and holding one another, faces covered.

Constance laid still in the grass, eyes open listlessly. Nate used the rest of the strength to stand and raise Grace into the air. “We won!” She shouted so her brothers knew it was okay to look - look across the water at her and the life she held in her hands, the life in the grass beside her.

“We won!” She shouted and they did, amazed by her and loving her and then Louis broke forward, jumping as far across the water as he could, an outstretched hand being caught by Nate who set Grace in the grass and bent down to grab it the second she saw him move. Then he was on the other side, holding Constance to him and sobbing over her as if she *had* died.

Nate looked across the way at Beckett, staring after them. She looked at his lonely body on the other side and thought about how tired she was of wreckage. Just once she wanted to make something whole. So she stuck her hand out as far as it would go and screamed for her brother to grab it. He looked at it, then the water, he frowned.

He took her hand.

Nate pulled him ashore.

And all of them were together on the other side.

“We made it,” Nate whispered to the sky as she thought, for the first time, a very complicated web of things. Things about rabid dogs you loved and rabbits born to be hunted and punnett squares that all came out like bad fortunes and communion water with blood mixed in and how you didn’t have to eat love to be full of it. But, because it was the first time and she was only fourteen, she could not articulate all of it. It would take years and even still it would be difficult. So instead, soaked to the bone and freezing, Nate looked around.

At Beckett trying to warm her hands in his.

At Louis whispering something into Constance's pink ear.

At Constance looking at the sky and listening.

At Grace in the grass, looking at her.

And she thought, simply; *It's good to be alive.*