

**Even as I am now, there are things to change**

by

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Essay	• 3
Growing Pains	• 8
Orange	• 9
Divorce Settlement	• 23
Am I meant to be a man in love with all the girls?	• 25
Love/Lust	• 27
Another Time	• 28
Lesbian Daydreams	• 34
I'd give anything for foresight	• 39
dessert	• 44
Sunday Morning in Chicken Town	• 45
Untitled	• 49
Mommy's Universe	• 50
You're My Kinda Girl	• 51
long island love letter	• 59
Making Sense of the Paternal	• 60
Sun	• 61
That Gum You Like is Back in Style	• 66
A hand to hold, if she'll let me	• 73

An Essay prefacing *Even as I am now, there are things to change*

“Why is one compelled to write? To set oneself apart,  
cocooned, rapt in solitude, despite the wants of others.”

Patti Smith, *Devotion*

At the start of senior year, I had no clue as to what I wanted my senior project to be. I attempted to prepare myself during the summer, but come August, all I had were a few half-formulated motifs that sparked my interest but were hollow at their core. Ideas such as: *stories written entirely in nonsense verse, abstract dialogue about what it means to be happy, and passages I had written in the Notes app on my iPhone!* The truth was – that up until that point – I was unhappy with most of the creative pieces I had written. I couldn’t stand what I wrote in and out of classes. There was nothing to salvage or commit to in those works. I was at a loss for ideas, but I also didn’t want to force something. If I was scared to push myself in a direction that would eventually leave me impassioned. In my spiraling overthinking, I doubted if I even enjoyed

writing enough to go through with such an extensive project. But the answer was clear when my solution was to sit down and *write* it out.

For a few weeks, instead of stressing about what to write, I wrote down any floating words, sentences, or vague narratives that came to mind. I usually make it a point to carry a notebook with me, and whenever an impulse arises, I make a note; a habit that I believe truly defines a writer. That distinction is made when one engages with that urge and writes the possibilities into a reality, even if it is a bunch of nonsense. There was a night, late in the fall semester, that a story formed in my mind. Instead of writing things down, I recorded myself saying what actively came into my mind. The story, originally entitled “Xenophobic Warrior Princess”, drops the reader into the middle of an uncomfortable conversation between lovers about mixed ethnicity and queerness that takes a turn when a conservative parent enters the room. After transcribing and fleshing the story out a bit more, I knew I had found the beginnings of my senior project.

*Even as I am now, there are things to change* is a collection of short stories and poetry exploring the desire for belonging through a dissociative gaze. This form of empathetic loneliness is most focused in the fragmented relationships the protagonist has with her divorced parents, consistently challenging her desire to belong somewhere whether it's emotional or corporeal. In addition to being a mixed woman, our protagonist grows to realize that she's queer, adding yet another layer in her quest for belonging. The project engages in a conversation about a lack of loving and how it branches throughout one's place in the world. I try to convey this through a progression of time in our protagonist's life. The reader is introduced to our protagonist as she is approaching middle school. We're brought into her messy home to find recently separated parents who never genuinely felt love for the other and a demon-spawn of a

younger sister. In this home, loneliness thrives and our protagonist – the older sibling of the two children – takes the blunt end of its rough edge. Continuing through the project, our protagonist grows up dividing her time between parents and forming her own meaningful relationships.

Having a queer protagonist was most important to me when approaching this project. My queer identity has shaped me from a young age even when I wasn't aware of it until years later. With the subtleties of my queerness appearing in all aspects of my life, it's second nature to incorporate it into my senior project. I have gone through a ridiculous number of phases within my queerness before getting to where I am now; some of which were so rooted in internalized homophobia, I would lose track of who I really was. It feels redundant to talk about my own coming of age, but in all honesty, writing these pieces helped me escape that insecure routine. Realizing I'm a non-binary lesbian is one of the best things to come out of my time in college. I felt a kinship with my own character in her journey in that regard.

I tried to touch on this fluid feeling of growing into your full self in the piece "Am I meant to be a man in love with all the girls?". In this short prose poem, the protagonist is spiraling in her mind about her realization that she's gay. Instead of accepting herself first and foremost, she questions its legitimacy by theorizing that if she were a boy, liking girls would be welcomed. The last thing our protagonist wants is to be pushed farther away from the world she feels she's barely holding onto. In this same piece, the reader is given a brief window into one of the nicer moments between her and her mother. Their "usual comfortable silence" is one that may feel tense to the reader, but in actuality is a safe space for our protagonist. She knows how to exist there, with nothing said, but at least in this moment for her, her mother is accepting. This warm parenting is few and far in between throughout the project and with moments like these, it hones-in on their fragmented dynamic.

The repeated notion of varying levels of meaningful silence is how I wanted to convey the dissociative gaze that I mentioned before. The idea of a comfortable silence is a passive one, but it's fueled by one of two things: trust or anger. But it's this same comfortable silence that our protagonist's relationships with her parents thrives upon. It's a form of miscommunication in that one person will feel something and not convey it fully, but to some degree assume the other shares the thought or inherently understands it. Through our protagonist's eyes, we see the distance between her and her parents grow, physically and emotionally. They exist in the same spaces, but never seem to be in tune. Her parents, as she progresses in observing and knowing them, don't have the language to consider her being without seeing themselves first. Their absence not only creates those empty places in their children, but fuels their own empathetic ignorance. Now, this isn't me trying to crap on parents or point fingers at my parents for "what they did wrong". No. Through these adult characters, the reader gains perspective. They see the stunted world of two people that made mistakes, as most do, and passed the guilt along. It's that persistence of loneliness that I feel sources so much of our pain. A parent or guardian's love or lack thereof, in most cases, sets the precedent early on for their children. In short, children can embody dirty laundry.

Although I often take inspiration through observation, watching those around me act out their physicalities and interpersonal dynamics, the most important way to gain perspective is through consuming art. While writing and conceptualizing this project, I found myself gravitating toward memoirs and psychological fiction. I read through Patti Smith's series of memoirs, *Weight of the Earth* by David Wojnarowicz, *Chelsea Girls* by Eileen Myles, and Haruki Murakami's epic, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*. Their writing wasn't just an outlet for relatable understanding, but their creative capabilities reach gospel-quality levels of worldly

charm; it's difficult not to be in awe. Other mediums I explored or kept returning to maintain those same reflective qualities. From Angel Olsen and Leonard Cohen's melancholic lyrics, to the passionate yearning of the angel, Daniel, in *Wings of Desire* (d. Wim Wenders, 1987), to Cy Twombly's chaotic scribbling. Upon consumption, their work makes the world make sense in all its complicated beauty. The psychological realizations of the individual narratives within these works channel of what I would like to think is the same pool of vulnerability. They consider their humanity through reflection and mistake. I know my writing isn't at that level of humane empathy, but it's my dream to reach that point and beyond.

I'm inspired to create, to persist through time, knowing that there is a place to belong. Like my protagonist, I hope to land somewhere warm and exciting. There is no short cut to get there, but I have two key devices that will help: love and writing. As cheesy and ridiculous as that sounds, it makes the world taste better.

*Growing Pains*

I don't like the way you look at me,  
I don't like the way I talk to you.  
Erase it all———  
happiness shouldn't be too far away.

I will go to sleep with nothing  
and wake up full.  
Here's to hoping my dreams  
are tasty,  
deliciously tangible,  
and kind.



*Orange*

There are two months left of my childhood; in September, I'll be starting sixth grade. But for now, it's still summertime—the weather is perfectly warm, that pre-climate change kind of warmth. My sister, Iz, just turned six. Her age matches up with whatever grade I'm in. Our parents broke up in August of the last summer, so hopes are pretty low for how this one will go. Iz doesn't really believe they split up. Even though school only ended a week ago, we're already dreadfully bored. Dad said he “planned the best vacation ever for the family!” He insists on using the word ‘family’ even though it no longer includes Mom. Iz thinks this means they're back together. “Oh!! I knew it!” is how she celebrates the news.

Dad glares at me, silently urging me to jump in with something sisterly. He's hopeless in what to do, but it wasn't my job to make amends. What could he say? He couldn't say sorry. “No, honey. Your mom and I are... still... getting a divorce. She's not coming with us.”

Iz's ability to produce mass tears on command is Oscar-worthy. She's at her most impressionable and with two out of love adults arguing around the house like clockwork, she's not lacking for dramatic inspiration.

“Honey, honey. Please.” Dad tries to comfort her. I see no point. Even if she tries to forget about it, she is bound to find another reason to be equally upset. “This trip is going to be really fun. We're going across the country!”

Her face lights up as if Dad just told her we're going to Disney. Then she actually asks it, wasting no time in grabbing for good news. “To Disney???”

“Oh... well, no. But we're driving across the country! Just the three of us.” He makes himself excitable, like he's egging on an adorable puppy. “We're going to see so many beautiful

places and animals. We'll visit monuments and museums. Maybe we'll camp! It's going to be fun."

Lips pursed, Iz crosses her arms and stomps down the stairs. She wants to let it be known the world has disappointed her. And it has, but she's just gotta live with it. I understand that it's melodramatic to say, but it all feels inevitable. Our parents never tried to paint the world in positivity for me, so I was blessed with insight. Seeing the way other parents at school coddle their children, trying to right their wrongs early in a kid's life, never sat right with me. They're liars if they think they could salvage themselves now. I want to sit Iz down and tell her to lower her expectations. "You'll feel better that way, if something pleasant comes along. It'll be a happy surprise," I'd tell her.

Dad had the trip mapped—generally speaking. He knew where he wanted to take us, generally. Philadelphia, Chicago, Crazy Horse, Yellowstone, and any places in between that he could justify a visit to. Anything classically Americana like diners that haven't changed their décor in decades, wide open plains with a horse or two, maybe even a moderately sized hill we could climb. One that looks intimidating enough in pictures for Dad's Facebook friends. He insisted on the Grand Canyon being our main destination. Our motel stops and driving time were both vaguely considered. Seeing as I can't drive, he would be the only one behind the wheel. It didn't make much sense to me, but I didn't bother asking. I didn't want it to concern me. He borrowed the car from Tata Fatima up in Yonkers, a musty brown SUV capable of holding an alarming number of children after my little cousin's soccer practice. Dad took off work for two weeks, his sheer will to jampack the trip with memories for bragging points is enough fuel for the trip and back. He promised to email Mom photos of Iz and I so she wouldn't call the police

on him in the middle of Bumfuck, USA. With the break-up being so fresh, anytime Dad would take us out—even if it was for ice cream—Mom would assume he kidnapped us and ran away.

I asked her once why she was so worried about it.

“I need you to understand, kiddo, that if your dad were to take you to Morocco...I have no rights over there. I would *lose* you both.” When I told her Daddy wouldn’t do something like that, that he wasn’t evil, Mom just hissed as if she didn’t hear me. “I would be powerless. What do I have in that country? What do I know *over there*? Fucking *asshole*...”

Mom told me so much so soon. She would confide in me like I was a near and dear friend, a friend with tenure in her life. I guess because I was in her womb for so long, by proxy I became an extension of her subconscious. I’d like to think she was capable of becoming unhinged at any moment, that she wanted Dad to do something fucked up so she could test what she was capable of.

We shove our bags into the sizable trunk, but our luggage still spills over the backseat. The bags are dangerously close to blocking the reassurance of the rearview mirror—something my dad would refer to as a “suggested guidance.” He asks if I wanted to sit in the passenger’s seat next to him, but I turn him down without hesitation. The thought of sitting a foot adjacent to him for hours on end made me crawl in my skin. With each roadside spectacle, he’ll shake my arm under the impression that his excitement is infectious. Instead, I sit diagonally from him in the back, next to Iz, where I have the option to rest my head on the cup holder divider when I get sleepy.

As we’re crossing over the GW bridge, Iz asks, “How long until we get there?” Her tone demands a definite answer.

“Arizona’s a few days away,” Dad responds from the side of his mouth, his eyes alternating between the road and the rearview mirror. Eye contact has always been important to him, he told me once “if someone isn’t looking you in the eyes when you’re talking to them, they aren’t listening.”

“We’re making stops along the way, hon. We’ll see some historical spots that you can tell your teachers about!”

Iz lets out a deep groan, surprising for a kid of six. Her irritation festers throughout the car. She’s taking pride in the knowledge that her misery is contagious. Out of the two of us, Iz is the typical spoiled brat whereas I’m the moody tween. My money is on the next few years training it out of us. I’m not sure where she got all this unfortunate confidence, but it’s constantly on.

“Don’t give me that attitude,” Dad snaps back. “We’re going to have fun.”

The saturated oranges, blues, and greens of the never-ending road—while they make for some beautiful still-life images—don’t work well with the smell of the car and miscellaneous roadkill. Whenever I roll the window down in anticipation of vomiting, Iz pokes me until I cater to her antics, yelling idiot, annoying, and other names at her. She gives me a reason for Dad for yelling at her for annoying me. Dad sides with Iz most times, but empty lies only fuel her budding self-centrism. My sister is an egotist, her eyes give her away, there is a look of power that comes into them whenever she decides she is bored and wants to fuck with you. She does what she wants simply because she can. She is smart enough to know her power over me just because she is the younger sibling.

We drive until we reach the border of Ohio. Iz and I slept for most of it, so by the time we get to a motel our energy is off the walls. We loosen the crisp sheets by jumping across them both beds. After a few laps Dad throws a sneaker at us. “Go to bed.”

In the morning, we munch on some stale crackers for breakfast. We didn’t wake up early enough for the complimentary breakfast in the motel lobby. Apparently, they had pancakes.

Somewhere in Indiana, we stop to get gas. We eat some lunch in the form of a few loosely made sandwiches, courtesy from our non-chef of a father. He bought a loaf of sliced whole wheat bread, turkey cold cuts, and sliced swiss cheese. He refused to buy mayonnaise because it’s “too fatty” so our sandwiches were incredibly dry. The town looks like a set, inspired by vague notions of what an urban planner imagines suburbia to look like. The number of tropes you could tick off a Bingo sheet of “small town” would win you BINGO several times over.

Dad thinks it’s the perfect photo-op. There’s an antique store on what feels like every corner. Each one looking more and more deserted than the last. One of the stores has a flyer taped to the door advertising a local auction event that happened 14 years ago. *Hosted by Stephen Bradshaw* it said. I assumed he was their version of a celebrity.

We wander into one of the antique stores, despite my protest, for no other reason than to browse and create forced memories. Moments that I’ll look back on and cherish when I’m older! “Feel lucky we’re doing this,” Dad hisses to get me moving.

Down a crumbling aisle, Dad finds a collection of raggedy dolls. They’re faded, but I can’t tell whether they are so worn from laying around on this shelf in this dusty store, or because some kid loved so hard before letting them go. Before I can decide, Dad waves an urgent hand to the two of us from an aisle over. He wants us to pose for a picture, his attempt at

reigning us in to play happy family, something he could use to prove we enjoyed ourselves. I'm not sure if it'll hold up much in a court of law. Iz obliges with no issues, placing herself perfectly in frame. I trudge over, fueled by angst. Iz picks up one of the dolls like she's known it for years. She even considers a name. Jennifer.

“Because she's blonde,” Iz declares.

The doll is the polar opposite of how we look. Blonde, straight hair with classic rosy cheeks and a slimmed waist. We're too Arab-Italian to compare.

Dad has his phone ready. He wishes we would candidly pose for him on our own accord, but it won't happen. Not in his wildest dreams. So, he has to position us into frame. He grunts in disappointment when the composition isn't how he wants it. I'm too far to one side. Iz and I repel each other naturally, like trying to sandwich together the wrong ends of two magnets. We're standing about a yard apart, certainly too uncomfortable to make for a good picture.

“Daddy, can we get candy after?” Iz asks, batting her eyes like a cartoon baby. Jennifer the doll isn't helping revert the image.

“If your sister gets into frame, we can do *anything*.” Dad glares me down.

I return the same in kind, my hands fist deep into an unnecessarily long hoodie. I reluctantly play into his vision, a myth where we are happy together. If I play into to it enough, maybe we could start to believe it: the fragmented happy family making do with what we've got.

Dad steps in to push us closer together. He places my hand around Iz's shoulder to project the idea of affection. I can't stand to be in the same house as her, let alone hugging her for an uncomfortable photo, but she's good at playing pretend. So good in fact that she almost convinced me that she enjoys being my sister.

From Indiana, we continue to drive along the northern part of the states. Toward the Dakotas. When I was little, I used to think these states were useless. I thought they were blank spots in the middle of the country with nothing in them except for grass. A lot of very green grass. Maybe some birds and deer. I realize now, my theory was only half true.

South Dakota has a lot of grass, but it's drier than I had pictured. Instead of a crisp green, the terrain is brown and orange. There are rigged mountains twisting into each other. The car AC isn't doing us much good under the beating sun. Iz keeps rolling her window down, but the suctioning of the air while we're driving is unbearable.

"Iz! Can you please keep your window closed?!" I beg her. "It gives me a headache."

She refuses to listen, but Dad closes it for her from the driver's seat. He's as pissed off as I am. If you look closely, the veins in his visible temple are angrily throbbing. Iz kicks at the back of his seat.

"But it's so hot!" She complains.

Without saying a word, Dad pulls over to the side of the road. He signals at the last moment so as we're parking, the car behind us honks as it zooms by.

"Why are we stopping?" Iz demands.

Dad unbuckles his seatbelt and turns around to glare into the backseat clearly.

"You need to stop being such a brat," he says. "Your sister and I are also sweating. It's uncomfortable for all of us. So, stop being a pain in the ass!"

Iz won't look him in directly in the eyes. Her arms are crossed, and face pouted like a newborn baby. Her young privilege is wearing away in front of her eyes.

“We are almost at the place I planned for us to visit today.” Dad emphasizes each syllable. He’s still seething with anger, but he doesn’t want to take it out on Iz in its entirety. I’m surprised he hasn’t tried to slap her small leg. It’s still perched at the base of his seat.

“Where are we going?” I ask.

“You’ll see. It’s a surprise.” He settles back into his seat, buckles up, and waits for a few cars to pass us before getting back on the road.

Almost every stop we’ve made during this trip, he labels as a ‘surprise’; I’m starting to believe he has no clue what we are doing. Not until a few hours beforehand at least. I can’t decide, however, if I’m impressed with this feat or annoyed at his incompetence. What if we had just gone down to Disney World? That’s something simple, normal even. Iz would have been happy at least. Yet that isn’t what happened, and it can’t be changed now. Dad said he fought for this trip, but has he fought hard enough?

After driving for another hour, we pull into a massive parking lot. It’s full of whole families—mother, father, and children close together out of love and not obligation—walking toward a faded red mountain that looms above us. It’s Mount Rushmore, but from where we parked you can only see the tops of the presidents’ heads. There’s

When we get out of the car, Dad stares proudly at the mountain as if he had a hand in sculpting the wonder. He stops a stranger passing by and asks them to take a photo of us.

“Make sure to get Rushmore in the background,” he requests, automatically doubting the intuition of our fellow tourist. Dad hands them his digital camera and rounds Iz and I into frame. The three of us stand at such varied heights that being close together feels overwhelmingly awkward. We’re exhausted, but at this point in the trip, we know that faking a smile is easier to



do than fighting with each other to pretend we're happy. The passerby snaps a few photos and walks on. Dad checks through the photos on his camera.

"We have to buy our entry tickets. Don't forget your sweaters, it'll get cold once the sun goes down," he says. Spoken like a true father.

It's too late to climb about the mountain, so we buy tickets for the *Patriotic Light Show*. We walk into an amphitheater that sits right below the large sculpted faces. Its widespread and full of those families we saw not too long ago. We find some seats, they're closer to the stage than preferred, but then again, this was a close to last minute venture. The sun is already setting. Lights around the amphitheater turn on one after the other, but the mountain remains in the darkness. Our presidential buddies slipping into the shadows for a break.

"Daddy, we can't see them anymore!" Iz complains. Her angry pointing at the dark statues caught the attention of some of our neighbors. They start to giggle at her naivety. The happy families find her endearing. I wish I could say the same.

"Just you wait," Dad says. He puts one arm around her shoulder and squeezes her. "The show should start soon."

Ten minutes go by and the lights around us dim, the whispers and laughs of everyone around us quiet down, and solid blocks of red, white, and blue lights inch up the mountain. When the blocks of light reach the faces, they transform into hundreds of tiny 5-pointed stars. They continue to dance about soundtracked by the national anthem. Toward the end of the lightshow, silhouettes of each of the presidents are projected in patriotic colors onto the mountain.

I look over at Iz and Dad. Iz is laying down on the hard bench, her head leaning on Dad's thigh for some comfort. But isn't asleep, instead her eyes are following the colorful stars

waltzing about the mountain. Dad checks his watch. American themes don't really pertain to a Moroccan man, but at least the lights are pretty.

I'm ahead of the two of them when we exit the amphitheater. Iz took too long getting up so I decided to start walking with the rest of the audience. A wave of families pass-me-by as I wait in front of the gate before the horizon-breaching parking lot. I eye the faces for a tall, light brown man with dark curly hair with a little girl that vaguely bears the same features. Only she'll most likely be shouting. Minutes that feel like eternity pass and the sea of families hasn't eased. There's no sign of my family so I turn my focus to counting cars leaving the spots. Most of the cars parked up front have gone, one of the last close cars carefully backs out of its spot. As it turns onto the road in front of me and drives off, I see a wolf standing tall where the car once was. No one else seems to notice it. Silhouetted by headlights beyond it, it remains in place. Another car turns out of a spot, casting a light onto the wolf briefly. In that moment I see that the wolf's fur is a dirty white with some black around its crystal blue eyes. It looks like it's staring right at me. Iz pokes my arm, breaking my gaze from the wolf. When I look back, the wolf is gone. Its presence seemingly unnoticed by those around it.

"Dad, I think I just saw a wolf."

"Wolf?" He responds, eyebrows arched in skepticism. "South Dakota doesn't have any wolves. Must have been a coyote."

I don't want to believe him. As we drive away from the faced mountain, I look around for it, but to no avail. The parking lot and Mount Rushmore fade into the distance. My mind stays on the wolf, on its loneliness. If it was a wolf, it would have been with its pack. Where was its family?

It's pouring rain when we arrive at the Canyon. Not enough, however, that Dad saw to be a reason to go back to the motel. Lightning strikes and thunder echoes in the distance, the two clashing unapologetically through the canyon. I loathe every drop of rain hitting my face, curse any bug that dares land on my arm, and scrunch my face mockingly behind my dad's back every moment I can. The anger comes to me so easily. A grudge against my father festers within me in his annoying desire to 'make memories.'

There aren't many people at the Canyon. Most sane people know to stay out of the rain. Those who are crazy enough like Dad to force this visit despite the weather, plant themselves in the warmth of the gift shop. I don't blame them. The three of us have been out of the car for maybe five minutes and we're already soaked.

"Let's climb down the canyon," Dad says. I don't understand how he can stand this weather, let alone have the willpower to continue with our plans.

"Can we turn around? Please? I wanna go back to the motel room," Iz pouts.

"I'm with her." For once, the two of us can agree on something for our greater good.

Dad growls. Both he and mom share this ability to reach a surprising level of anger that turns them into wild animals for a brief moment. When at that place emotionally, they are unable to properly speak. They can't convert their feelings into cohesive sentences, nothing constructive least of all. So instead, they growl. Maybe they could have tried to stay together on this common trait alone, their internal animals could get along great.

"We are going down into the canyon, at least halfway." He wants to compromise.

Iz and I know it's useless to argue, so we lumber after him, our blanketed way of showing defeat. This overrated crevice has no support rail. With all this rain, I'm shocked not to

see even one yellow caution wet floor sign. All I can dream of is being warm and comfortable back inside the car, but Dad pushes on with our hike. The rain subsides for a few moments.

“It’s clearing up. Let’s take advantage,” he says. He tries to sound encouraging, but it doesn’t matter. We aren’t going to turn back now, not without him. With the two of us in front of him, Dad shuffles a little faster behind us, “chop-chop!”

Iz and I pick up the pace just ahead of him. I get that it’s meant to ensure our safety, but it feels more like if one of us fell, he can at least save one kid. One is better than none. We continue to hike down along the thin, muddied rock path lining the inside of the canyon. We aren’t the only ones walking in the canyon. I spot two or three other crazed families. Whenever someone needs to pass by, Iz and I pin ourselves against the wall to let them by.

We make it around one bend of the canyon until a cocky burst of thunder echoes against the rocky walls around us, triggering every car alarm in the parking lot above. Iz grabs my hand, choosing me as her protector in that moment from the death drop maybe six or so inches off. We hold onto each other for dear life. The thunder subsides and when we realize we’re still alive, that the trail hasn’t crumbled under our feet, we scream at our father over the blare of car alarms.

“Take us back! Now!”

Iz is sobbing, “Mommy. I want mommy…….”

Once we get back to the car, we drive to a nearby diner. The diner was a carbon copy of every single other one in America. It was nice to know they maintain a secret consistency. We each choose something off the menu that’s comfortable and grounding. Waffles, tea, fruit. They make us feel good in the moment. The canyon took its toll on us. Dad asks for the check once we get our food. Iz falls asleep not too long after finishing one waffle.

On the drive to the motel, I decide to sit in the front seat with Dad. Iz is snoring a bit too loudly. The drive takes about fifteen minutes. It's late enough where cars are sparse, maybe one passing by every other mile or so. Dad is drifting off slightly at the wheel, his head bobs down and up, down and up.

"Dad." I say, I jab his faltering arm with my finger. He jolts back into position.

"I wasn't sleeping. We're fine." He retorts automatically.

I don't bother fighting his truth.

We get back to the motel, and Iz, within mere seconds of entering the room, falls asleep sprawled out on one of the two tackily dressed Queen-sized beds. Usually, the two of us would share the bed, but Dad doesn't feel like moving her over.

"We'll just sleep in the same bed," he decides. His dollar store reading glasses dip a little too low on his nose while he extracts his boxer briefs and toothbrush from his bag.

I don't put up much of a fight. I'm too tired to, but the thought of sleeping in the same bed as my father upsets me. It lingers in my mind like a bad smell. I know nothing bad will come of it, but it feels old. It feels wrong, like a sour joke I'm uncomfortably waiting for a punch line to. I'm past the age where I want to sleep in the same bed as a parent, let alone my dad.

I try to fall asleep quickly while he's using the bathroom, but it doesn't work. Even though I kept my eyes closed, my mind is too loud. I sift through my discomfort, egging on my growing angst into the night. As much as I want to stop—to cap these thoughts and breathe safely in my own skin—I fall privy to them. I want to fall asleep, but my mind is too noisy. I keep my eyes closed until Dad gets into the bed. I play pretend that I'm asleep, that I've been asleep. I don't think he notices because he doesn't say anything, not even a goodnight or a tap on the back confirming I'm still there. He stays up for some time, rustling through week old

newspapers to piece together what he's missed in the news. Nothing of terrible importance it seems because eventually, the rustling of the newspaper is replaced by soft snores. It's soothing. I'm finally able to let my guard down. I reach over to turn off the desk lamp and close my eyes again. When I'm finally asleep, I dream of orange rocks and lightning. I dream of loud noises and pretty lights. I dream of the lonely wolf. I dream of it searching for its family in the midst of the mountains, so far from home.

*Divorce Settlement*

split custody of the children  
SUN THROUGH TUES  
to the father  
WED THROUGH SAT  
to the mother

sell the house because  
neither can decide on  
which parent can live here,  
split the profit on the house  
and use it to pay off the lawyers  
the rest can be for rent,  
and groceries

have one last argument in the home  
you built together while the kids  
sit in the stairwell outside the door  
hugging each other,  
impatient and confused

the bright orange and blue walls,  
colors that reminded him of his real  
home stripped of its life over petty  
disagreements.  
it worked for everyone before,  
but not now

move into apartments  
on opposite ends of the city  
argue in the middle of the street  
when dropping off the kids  
complaining about the unequal distance  
between.  
it's unfair

tell the kids to learn the subway system,  
at 10 and 5,  
too overwhelmed in their own business  
they forget the sacrifice of sanity  
that comes with children

vacations need to be  
negotiated.  
you can't go too far,

but it's not far enough.

dip into the kid's college savings accounts  
they won't need it for a while  
and it'll come back around  
anyways

get mad about the other's  
girlfriend/boyfriend  
how dare you include them  
in the lives of our children!  
but both are guilty

their parents will say something about  
how they always knew you picked the wrong  
lovely

look for more things to get angry about  
it could be leverage in court.

divorced and  
easily adjustable, they  
could've worked it out lawyerlessly.



*Am I meant to be a man in love with all the girls?*

As I am now, there are things to change. If this is true, if I am what I've only heard my mom refer to her friends, Maurine, Paulie, and Jean as – *gay* – what do I do? I could be a boy, if need be. I'll get around the world real easy. I'm not sure how I feel about approaching the surgery, but what about breast cancer? What if I just happened to get the disease? If it's possible to achieve, to activate on a moment's notice, it would take my breasts away. *Naturally*.

A seamed boy that could like girls as he pleased. No questions asked, and insurance would cover the whole thing! I'd need a doctor's opinion before going forward with this hypothetical. But to set up the appointment, I'd have to talk to my mom about it. Making your own doctor's appointments at fourteen? That's unheard of! But how do I explain the good this would do for me? Aren't Guidance Counselors doctors? (They are not, but it's the thought that counts.) I can talk to her to talk to my mom to talk to the doctor, and so on. Would my parents get behind any other option? Anything else would be too *political*.

Oh, there must be something simpler than this normalization in the form of misplaced heterosexuality!

2

I am sitting in a 4-wheeled cushioned chair in a room covered in miscellaneous drapery. The deep purples are meant to be comforting, but I find them exhausting, hanging heavy on top of cliched beige walls. Guidance Counselor Anderson is sitting in front of me, comfortably behind her desk. I'm skipping math class to talk to her. She said it's fine and not to make a habit of it. But I'll make it our little secret.

I tell her, *I want to be a boy.*

Why? She asks. Do you think the boys are cute?

*No. I wanna be a boy because then girls would like me. Being a straight guy makes things easier.*

I'm not sure I'm understanding the full picture here. What do you think about when you think about your fellow classmates... that are girls?

She made it sound dirty. Undesirable. Fake.

*I only think good things—the loveliest things—about them. I like girls. But they don't like me as I am.*

And how do you know this for sure?

*'Cause they seem scared.*

We go back-and-forth like this. She isn't equipped with the language to tell me what I am or could be and I'm not sure what I'm meant to ask. I think I just wanted a yesman. She calls my mother, letting the ringer play aloud for me to hear. The two of us sit silently adjacent. It goes to voicemail, so she calls again, making a little coo noise with pursed lips for noise's sake. My mom answers this time and is mostly silent with the exception of confirming grunts or breaths in response to Ms. Anderson's summary. She recommended to my mom that I take an "emotional health day"; within the next hour, my mom was in front of the school to pick me up. I hop into the passenger's seat of her metallic blue Jeep.

Seatbelt, she says. We exist in our usual comfortable quiet until we pull up a block from her apartment.

Remember the birds and the bees talk we had?

*Yeah...*

It still applies to lesbians.

*Love/Lust*

*Dad, was it love or lust that first attracted you to mom?*

He told me he couldn't remember. He said, we met at the gym. Everyone looks good there. She was even and clean. Long dark hair always pulled tight in a long pony. She got around as she pleased.

*Dad!*

What? He chuckles. It's true.

We dated for a few years, some weeks or months at a time. We were both seeing other people simultaneously, neither of us minded much. Except when it was convenient to complain about during our break-ups. Both of us craved validation in the easiest, pettiest ways.

I ended things—or maybe she did—once more over something insignificantly small. About two months later I came home to a message on my answering machine from her. It was nice hearing her voice, I thought. I had fallen back in so quickly. She was renting a cabin from a friend of a friend. Her dog had to be put down—the fucker got rabies, she said—and she couldn't afford a full treatment. Fresh air was what she needed, but it got to be too much to take it all in by herself. She asked me to come over, stay a night or two. Bring some wine! It'll be good to talk again. So, I went. Nine months later, you happened. Iz happened four years after that, and five years after *that*, we split. Does that answer your question?

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*Mom, was it love or lust that first attracted you to dad?*

I was horny and your father was a beautiful exotic man. Why would I say no?

*Okay, but you got married so there had to be something else there right?*

I liked him, sure. But we got married because I got pregnant with you, and I wasn't having a kid alone. He said yes because he loved that he could tell his mom he got married to an American woman. Iz was the result of our attempt at love.

*All I can do is laugh.*

*Another Time*

I keep reading about people loving themselves. They talk about how they've never felt better, that life is capable of being great, it's simply up to YOU to make it that way. It's a trend I'm not sure I can get behind. I'm capable of being happy, but not if it means I look like those poster board babies, white teeth sparkling. I won't sacrifice my integrity for a clean face and some slacks. My dad isn't one of them, yet he wants to be when it's convenient to wear the mask. He smiles for others the way faces do on the cover of *People* magazine. Sometimes he saves newspaper clippings about teenage girls doing something that a teenage girl wouldn't typically do to encourage me to get out of my shell.

In hopes of maintaining our beloved emotional distance, I assure him, "Wow! That's amazing. I'll read this later."

He doesn't buy it, "No, you won't. Just read it now. We aren't doing anything else."

"Okay." I don't want to make a clear promise.

I reach for the torn newspaper article, but his welcoming hand resists. He's eyeing me as if he were passing along a family secret. He needs to know I'll come back to him showing progress, that I'll harvest this information and become a new person. I reach for the clipping again, engaging in this repetitive bond.

It's a Sunday. Still and dry, but not to our inherent tension. We're sitting on the same side of the couch. Our knees are pointed in the same direction, facing away from the window and toward the television. My dad's apartment is small, but not in a cute quaint way. It's tight and messy, there are unorganized stacks of newspapers, homework, bills, and other memories scattered throughout. There's a pile of photos stacked on his desk. At the top of the pile is the

photo from our Mount Rushmore visit. My bright red crewneck stands out next to the light colors on Iz and Dad. Things decorate the floor, tables, and the few shelves that were meant to relieve the mess but provide the opposite service. Properly, the apartment can fit two people who are comfortable sleeping in the same bed. When Iz and I are at Mom's, family members crash on his couch. They come in like clockwork, on a perfectly rotating basis. Moroccans aren't privy to the concept of personal space, or space at all for that matter.

Dad when he talks to someone – even his kids – he somehow appears within a foot of you. He holds your forearm close, like you might just try and make a run for it, instinctually threatened that you'll attempt to take yourself out of your dialogue. But he plays it off well, in his own charming way. Or maybe it's more desperate, like he's hoping his excitement about whatever he's saying will transfer to you by touch. Regardless, once my dad is talking to you, it's always up close. It isn't easy to take your leave.

He spreads the newspaper out as if the pages were fresh bedsheets. His reading glasses slide to the tip of his nose. He needs real glasses, but he complains they're too expensive. He says he got this pair at the CVS up the street for \$5, why would he go anywhere else? He seems insulted at the suggestion of spending more money. The price was out of the question and I was spoiled for asking.

Iz is at a friend's place. She's at sleepover age, and I finally have peace of mind. I have never been more grateful for the extra bit of silence. I can breathe. I didn't think it was possible, but Iz has gotten significantly more spoiled. She's eleven now and knows more. She goes to a new middle school in downtown Manhattan, surrounded by a bunch of white rich kids. I think she's picking up on their habits. The thing is, they have the money to act that way. We don't.

Dad's phone vibrates on the table obnoxiously. The dog, sleeping against the Moroccan marble table, readjusts her position elsewhere. She's ticked off. Dad picks up the phone, exhaling disappointment so that I know, before he says a word, who it is.

"Your mom is asking me what time you're going to her place." He paraphrases the text, expecting an answer as if he had asked a question. He's the messenger, don't shoot.

The two of them are on speaking terms now, but it's not of their own volition. Earlier in the week, when we were at our mom's, Iz caught me burning myself in the bathroom. It was early in the morning. I had been getting ready for school, figuring that everyone else in the apartment was still fighting real consciousness. A festering discomfort beyond borne teenage angst bubbled within. I was *angry sad ugly stupid fucking idiot no one will ever love you*.

But you're only sixteen, I tried to self-rationalize. Stop getting so down on yourself.

*Look at you don't fucking lie to yourself*, the feeling continued.

*I know what you dream of at night you piece of shit*. Fuck.

I needed it to shut up, to stop being so loud in case something else, some other mental illness, heard it and wanted to join in. I couldn't risk it. It made sense to shove a lit match into my arm and repeat. It made sense to hold the red, crispy end against my skin until it bubbled up, ever so slightly.

When Iz opened the bathroom door and screamed, "what are you doing! Oh my God, what are you doing! Mom! Mom come help!" The will of my own hand surprised me too, waking me from my trance. It wasn't the first time I fell back within myself. There have been times when my consciousness leaves my body behind for moments at a time. A temporarily deserted vessel used strictly for absent observation. Ease my mind, I beg, do something *more*.

“I’ll text her,” I tell Dad. “She could’ve just messaged me.”

“She could have.” His tone holds no weight. He picks up his newspaper again, ignoring the disturbance as if he is better than it. His nose is even pointed up slightly, his glasses pushing down against gravity. “...How are you feeling?” He glances quickly at my arm. His eyes are unsure where to look exactly. I didn’t plan on showing him. We don’t talk about our feelings much, we simply exist in the same vicinity. It’s easier that way.

“I’m fine. It’s healing.” I can’t look him in the eye. I catch myself rubbing my thumb into my leg where my dad wouldn’t properly see it.

“You shouldn’t do that... to yourself.” He won’t look me in the eye. To a stranger’s eye, it would look like the two of us were both talking to the floor. Maybe even the dog. “Do you want to start seeing someone? Like... a therapist?”

Dad trying to form the right language is endearing. He doesn’t need to say more; I get it.

“Maybe. I dunno yet. I can ask the guidance counselor at school for a recommendation I guess.” I shy away from concrete solutions. I worry if I marry myself to one, I’ll have to get better.

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Mom now lives in East Harlem, in a two-bedroom apartment. It’s a homey place with trinkets and things covering the walls, enough that one would think she had lived there for a lifetime. The furniture is a classic New Yorker mix of hand-me-downs and modern pick-outs from Ikea. One bedroom belongs to Mom, and the other is split by Iz and me. Our aesthetics clash, but they don’t meet. Instead of one queen-sized bed split between us like at Dad’s, the room is divided in half by a curtain. Opposing worlds on either side of the opaque sheet. That

extra bit of personal space is key, until Iz is on the phone with her ‘not boyfriend’ at an annoying hour of the night. We’re good about handling our own problems. Mom doesn’t get involved because she doesn’t need to.

“Hello?” I project down the slim, creaky hallway. I lock the apartment door behind me. No one answers, but I hear an echo of a blade hitting a piece of wood. I toss my things into my corner of the shared bedroom and walk toward the noise.

My mom is standing at a makeshift countertop, a wide, rolling wooden cabinet with canvas thrown across it. We call it our kitchen island. Diced tomatoes are spread across the cutting board in front of her, a large knife beside it. She goes to the fridge to get out an array of salad ingredients. Her go-to meal.

“Hi.” I kiss her once on both cheeks. We are both indifferent to the formality. The delayed still air fills the room. Mom doesn’t hesitate a moment longer.

“We never actually talked about why you hurt yourself,” she says. “Do you want to tell me why you did that?”

I hold my tongue. She has a persuasive way about her that tempts me to tell all, but I don’t want to this time. I want it for myself for as long as it can be.

“So?” She is waiting, she wants me to know she’s waiting. Not a moment longer should I keep her from what she was doing before I walked in.

“I don’t want to talk about anything.”

“Don’t give me that shit,” she scoffs. “You want to be like everyone else? All of those kids you see online hurting themselves? Where does that get them? You know fucking well it does nothing.”

“I want to be anything but a cliché,” I tell my mom.



She laughs, then halts her laughter with a closed palm. It doesn't hold, she laughs again. I refrain from pouting because I realize that would defeat the purpose of what I had just told her. I didn't want to go back on my bold words so soon, I have more integrity than that. The echo of the curled end of her chuckle taunts me. It isn't a justified laugh.

"What do you think you are then? I hate to say it, but honey, that's what you are." She offers me the benefit of the doubt. I want to take it in, crumple it up, crush it until it is anything but and hand it back to her. I'll leave a ribbon on top for the flourish. "You're a teenager. It's your destiny to be a cliché."

"You don't have to talk to me like that. I'm your fucking daughter."

"Exactly. You're *my* fucking daughter. I can talk to you however I want."

"That isn't fair. You need to realize what you say has an effect on me. It effects both of us." I pretend Iz's absent spirit is with us in hopes of proving my point. I don't want to stand down because the woman in front of me calls herself my mom. She has no right. "Then act like a mom for once!"

Her body is still. Not even her hands are shaking. Mom's lifeless eyes meet me at my soul. If she wants to hurt me, banish me, or worse I'm not sure. Nothing is registering on the surface, I'm unsure what she's willing to do next.

"I won't hurt you. That would be stupid." Her restraint shows in the blue veins crawling up her stiff neck. "Go to your room. I don't want to look at you."

As I'm about to close my door, I hear her say to the apartment, "Maybe I don't want to be your mother."

*Lesbian Daydreams*

No one is correctly gay in college. At least none of the lesbians I knew. I wasn't, but I wanted to be. Maybe that's redundant to say when sexuality at its heart is fluid, but I had been so sure of my allegiance to women until that point. All for quick validation. I thought too much about the idea of attention and how badly I wanted it at that immediate moment. I wouldn't settle for less because it felt so prominent in that moment. It gets tiring; constantly worrying about being unloved or worse, being intrinsically unlovable. God, what a dramatic pain. Those anxieties did nothing but strip me of time and sanity. It didn't pay my tuition, didn't do my homework, didn't let me be comfortable in my sexuality. I fell into the trap of doubting the one part of me I was secure in.

I'd fuck a man if I needed fucking. I didn't enjoy it, but if sex was on my mind and I didn't want to work for it, I had guy friends I knew who wanted to sleep with me. They were all average looking, usually around my height, and wouldn't make it well as attractive women. I wanted to be on top, always. Without fail each time, the male mistake of the night would do one of two things: shy away from it, scared his masculine position was being impeded upon or forgetting there was a person attached to the vagina they were fucking, making me a play toy for his cock.

My roommate, Kaya, religiously told me, "you need a fucking girlfriend, dude" whenever I'd come back to our dorm room after each disappointingly straight hookup. I would never have that post sex glow you're supposed to have when you're satisfied. I craved synchronicity in physical pleasures. I wasn't allowing myself to feel good. Yet when I talked to a pretty girl, I

was instantly rejuvenated, but I didn't use that as a sign. I indulged myself in the ignorant cycle of disappointment.

There was one consistent fuck-friend, Sean, who wouldn't engage with my insecurities. If the night ended with us having sex, it wasn't a situation. The sex was just sex. He wouldn't tell me that he "knew I wasn't a real lesbian" or that he thought "obviously all lesbians like dick." I don't believe he considered it that way, but the other guys did. I'd usually be the one to initiate it. A few drinks and smokes down in the system, and he'd be getting a call from me or vice versa. On occasion, we'd just want to hang out. Play a video game together or watch a movie. We never did anything sexual during those moments. Although once he called me, asking to come over in a few hours. My roommate went home for a few nights, that much he knew.

"I'm out with friends, but I want to see you later. If that's okay with you?"

"Yeah, absolutely," I tell him, eyeing my room in its messy glory. "I'll be around. Keep me updated."

"Sweet." And he hung up.

A few hours later, roughly around 2:30 to 3am, Sean's knocking at my door, incredibly drunk. Thankfully, there was no vomit and he wasn't loud much. He barely spoke, mumbled mannerisms and discrepancies fell out of his mouth every few minutes, but nothing I could hold onto. Making it to the bathroom wasn't an option right then, so I cleaned his face and hands with makeup wipes. I texted Kaya: *I'm sleeping in ur bed tonight. Sean's in mine. He's drunk. Also, I used some of ur makeup wipes. Will pay u back.*

I laid out pajamas in front of him. "Change into the clothes yourself, if you can." I didn't want to baby him.

Sean stared at the clothes, or even past the clothes. I couldn't tell how deep his gaze was. I eased his clothes off of his body and put my large sleep shirt over his body. He had boxers on, that was enough.

"If you get cold, there's an extra blanket at the end of the bed. Okay?" I remember thinking to myself, I'd make a good mom. But I realized later, it was just one moment of making myself available. It isn't privy to a reward system.

I tucked him under my constellation decorated covers and placed a glass of filtered water on the cabinet by the pillows. I lay in Kaya's bed, watching Sean for any sign of worry. He was staring right back at me.

"You're every priddy, but we shouldn't be sleepin' together," he said. He squinted his eyes and continued, "it's a good thing yer gay."

He fell asleep immediately after, like he had been harvesting his energy in that last hour to deliver one clear sentiment. I appreciated it then. I still do.

I asked him the next morning if he remembered anything from the night before.

"Nah. Just remembering a lot of rum n' cokes and pulling up to your door. Did anything else go down?"

"No, no. You were mumbling a lot in your sleep is all. From what I could pick up, it sounded like you were having a very dedicated discussion with a gnome about Obama's state of the union speech?"

"Yeah, that tracks."

Sean and I got along well. It worked for a while when it did until I said I didn't want to do it anymore. The day after I came to that conclusion, I made it a point to pass by his dorm

room before grabbing breakfast. I knew his schedule well enough by this point to drop in appropriately. He was sitting up in bed on his laptop. His roommate, whose side of the room was significantly messier, had just left for class. I didn't hesitate in telling him I didn't want to sleep with him anymore. He understood entirely, no faltered emotions. We were comfortable with each other. We had trust enough to fuck and have it mean nothing more than a physical necessity. I think we'd be a great team on a deserted island.

“Did ya finally meet someone?” He asked. His voice was excited, almost proud.

I nodded. I had met a girl; her name was Diane. She was fucking hot and two years younger. She transferred in last semester but made fast friends with people around campus so I would see her around everywhere. Floating between groups, participating. I said hi to her one day when we passed each other in the Art building. She didn't seem surprised. Diane embraced it like it was meant to be between us. We existed together even when we were tending to our individual duties. Sometimes I'd surprise her at her painting studio. I would sit at her desk as she painted—often not noticing me at first—observing her speculate her brush's opinions. It was live poetry, an answer to every twenty-two-year old's queries.

That love didn't last very long after I graduated. We spent the summer together and I visited campus again here and there to spend time with her. We held ourselves back from other things or maybe we both required that constant physical presence, but it wasn't realistic for the time. She made me feel real though, when we were together, she knew how to make me feel present. There was not a speculated moment between us, everything was written out beautifully.

We don't keep in touch. Hardly ever does she come to mind, but when she does it's nothing but fond thoughts. Diane put my lesbianism on the pedestal it needed. I worried what the

other men I had slept with would think when I came out again. Would they think I'm a liar? *But I'm not*, I realized. And it's not their narrative to decide.

*I'd give anything for foresight*

“I want to call my daddy,” Mom says. “I want to call him and say ‘Merry Christmas. How are you doing today? Don’t be a stranger!’”

She’s talking to the rice in the pot, stirring it to make sure it doesn’t stick to the sides. I’m leaning against her kitchen island, texting a few friends. I’m largely uninterested in what I’m doing, but don’t have the mental capacity to do anything else. Iz is downstairs in her room, she’s on her winter break this month. The three of us being back in the same house has been difficult. I’m on my way out, searching for an apartment with Colby and her cousin and Iz is in-an-out for months at a time now that she’s a sophomore in college.

Mom hums to herself. She’s humming to the beats of what she had just shared with the rice. I tune my mom out in these moments. Her outward ramblings take over my own thoughts and at times, I’ll become an extension of her anxieties. Iz absorbs the butt end of those emotions too, I think that’s why she’s been staying at our dad’s place more often. The two of us talked about it once, on how our mom doesn’t realize the emotional weight she radiates when she refuses to talk to anyone except her subconscious. She speaks in puzzle pieces for whoever happens to be paying attention, a dedicated role that alternates between myself and the dog. She’s stubborn that way. She forgets that people can’t peer into her uncategorized brain and make sense of it, but it used to be much worse.

Her dad – our grandfather, our Papa – passed away two years ago. He didn’t suffer when we went. It was after he had dinner with Nana, he complained that he was tired, went up the stairs and laid down. A few moments later, he was dead. Simple as that. It wasn’t the first grandparent Iz and I had lost, but it hit our mom pretty hard, being without her father. She had

his Italian expectations pressing down on her shoulders at all times because she was the oldest of five. The first daughter in the family. Mom was expected to grow up a glowing example of familial perfection, patriarchy at the heart.

The weeks after he died, Mom withdrew into herself. Her mumbling was at its worst. She still went about the motions of walking the dog, making food, cleaning around the house; the typical routine. But she wasn't there, not really. Her eyes seemed glazed, like she was watching a very long Shakespearean dramatization of her life. Over and over. Enough so she could make sense of it. I don't recall exactly when she picked up again where her mind was before Papa's death, but she was talking to Iz and me regularly again about the world outside of her own. Mom was considering things about herself that she refused to realize before. She started taking the time to dial down her temper and hold conversations with us instead of resorting to verbal torture. Our grandfather dying was the best thing that could happen to her. She was finally free of his Italian guilt.

Her mumbling fits are ongoing still, I don't think they'll ever leave her day-to-day. She knows there are others around her now, but it's convenient for her to pretend there aren't when it's just us in the same space. Mom's hums escalate in tone, mimicking an operatic voice laughably off-pitch. She uses different lyrics this time.

“Where did I go wrong?! Whyyyy didn't I try?”

It becomes hard to ignore her screeching pleas. “Mom.”

She doesn't respond, but instead, continues to sing. “I want to be young again!”

“Mom... mom... mom...” I repeat. “Mom!”

Her shoulders shift as if she's stepped out of a rift. She turns away from her rice to face me. “What?”



“What’s going on? You usually sing when you’re stressed.” I tuck my phone in my back pocket.

“No, nothing. I’m just thinking about your dad.” She turns off the stove and pours the fluffy rice into three bowls.

“Okay uh, that’s not something you do though. At least, not fondly.” I try to poke fun at her, hoping it’ll get her to engage. “What were you thinking about?”

Mom gathers the washed vegetables that are sitting on the counter next to the stove. She dumps them into a pot with boiling water. She decorates them in several spices and churns it with a wooden spoon. It feels like there’s something about to leave her mouth, but it’s not yet formed. She lets her thoughts marinate on her tongue a little longer than her mind wants to allow. She lets the spoon go mid-spin, it taps lightly on the side of the pot and inches clockwise for another moment.

“Did I make a mistake?” Her stare is intense and curious. She’s expecting an answer to her half coherent question as if I was in her mind listening to her internal dialogue this whole time.

“With what?” I ask.

“With your dad. Did I make a mistake divorcing your dad? Should I have stayed?”

“I... You weren’t happy, right?” I blank on the right words, but what would they be? Even if I did have them at my disposal. They divorced 12, maybe 13 years ago. I wasn’t as privy to others true emotions as I am now. “Why are you thinking about this?”

“I wasn’t happy. Your dad was an absolute shit. I don’t think he’s changed much either. He wasn’t receptive or good with communication at all, but he’s still the same way. Right? You still see him, talk to him, do you think he’s changed at all?” I can see her thoughts stirring

themselves in her glare. “I think I’ve changed. But what if I tried to change then? With him present. Would you guys have turned out better? We’d have more money, that’s for sure.”

“Mom,” I try to interrupt her spiral.

“He was incapable of listening! He was such a... such a *man*. There was never a solution to a problem because to him, I was always the problem. Maybe we shouldn’t have gotten married. But then I would’ve had you alone, and I couldn’t do that alone. Oh, and Iz. I wouldn’t have had Iz. Fuck. We could’ve tried to change. If we had the language we have now...”

“Mom. You can’t think like that. What’s done is done.”

“If he wasn’t such an asshole, we would still have the house. I wouldn’t be fearing debt every month. Maybe we would have a better dynamic. Something healthier. You could’ve gone to a more expensive school or some shit. I don’t know. I don’t fucking know.” She shakes her head aggressively and screams, “aHHHHHHHHHHH!”

I pull her hand away from the stove. I turn off the flame to ground her. She slaps my hand away, but I wrap my arms around hers. Both of us stand there still as stones, no flow of energy was being shared. Just the blatant physical act. Mom leans her head – nose first – into my shoulder. I have nothing to say so I hold her tighter. I want nothing more than to be wise, but I can’t rush it.

“What if this is it?” she mumbles into my shirt.

“It’s not. Please don’t talk like this.” I squeeze her tighter, maybe my hug will expel this mindset from her body. Wishful thinking didn’t do anybody no harm. I let her go and pull the island chair closer to her. She takes the offer and sits. I pour the cooked veggies into the three bowls.

“What do you want to drink?” I asked. Mom shrugs in response. A faltering hopelessness lingers in her energy.

“I’ll open that bottle of red we got the other day. Can Iz have a little?”

She nods and stands to grab the wine glasses from the cabinet. “Call your sister,” she says.

“Iz! Come on! Dinner’s ready!”

Iz’s door opens from down the hall. “Did you say something?”

“Yeah! Dinner’s ready.”

“Cool, be right there!” She pulls her earbud microphone closer to her mouth, “Yeah, okay dude. I’ll call you later, I’m gonna eat.”

Iz lightly jogs to the kitchen island. We don’t feel like moving the dishes over to the dinner table, so we pull some more tall stools over and sit down to eat.

“This looks really good, Mom.” Iz says.

Mom nods with a smile in response. She takes a bite of the rice, probably in an effort to excuse herself from actually talking. Halfway through dinner, I realize I can’t remember the last time we shared a meal.

*dessert*

slightly stiff n' chewy gummy bears  
reminds me of ice cream in Montauk  
with crunchy rainbow sprinkles  
spilling over the cup into the sand

sally the seagulls glide above  
there's a cold breeze, I've got  
a cozy sweater on,  
the wind freed strands of hair  
from my ponytail, but mom(my) will  
detangle it later after a bath  
my head resting on her squished  
thigh, her leg hair poking my cheeks

I try to read a page of my book,  
but it's hard to tune out the  
conversations. my mom  
to my dad to my sister to me,  
rhythmic banter joined by the sea

I miss the taste of a home.

*Sunday Morning in Chicken Town*

It's 4:33 in the morning. I'm on a train home slightly tipsy and tucked into the nook of a corner window seat. I was supposed to grab drinks with some friends after my shift. We talked about possibly doing karaoke, *maaaaaybe*. But they called it quits early, so I went out with some coworkers. The bars were packed with thirty-somethings pretending to listen to each other, their internal clocks ticking impatiently for an opening to interject. Nothing but reciprocated aesthetic admiration—an urge that practically dripped out from their mouths—held the conversation together. Blah, blah, blah, their voices sewn together into a blanket of background noise. At the end of our night, I said goodnight to my coworkers as they decided to split a cab. I wanted to listen to music on my way home.

So here I am, on a proportionately lit train, resisting the muscle instinct to close my eyes. The paced thumping of the rails is calming. Everyone is falling asleep on one another, but I can't afford it. I want to have nothing to offer a passing stranger. My mom would be pissed if I let something happen to me. She'd call me stupid and curse under her breath about how ungrateful I am that she's kept me around this long. I think of the scene in *A Clockwork Orange* where Malcom McDowell's eyelids are forced open with a claw. While I'm sure that would hurt, it'd be pretty damn convenient at the moment.

The train is stripped of its usual noise. Scattered coughs and unconscious grumbles are the only things to signify any of us are alive. None of us are friends, although our close proximity at this hour could make us acquaintances. Collectively, we understand the other's situation.

I want to text a girl—any girl—but it would end up working against me in the morning. I don't drink too much, but I scavenge for sexless affection when I do. For a few hours, I'll fall in love at my earliest convenience.

A funky smell spreads through the train, tired heads lift with a delayed bounce to watch a girl vomiting red and yellow chunks at the opposite end. It looks like she ate packaged noodles. No one is phased enough to move.

Walking on the sidewalk, an older woman thinks I'm following her. She reminds me a lot of my grandmother in her smock dress with abstract flowers all over. Her hair is held back with a bandana. Lining her forearms are bags full of used kitchen supplies, baby toys, and other homemade pieces. Waltzing paranoia shoots her eyes back every few moments for good measure. She's safe, but she doesn't want to hear it from me. To her, I'm another shadow wandering around at night with no other reason to be out than to haunt her. Maybe she thinks anyone can be a danger when they're out at this hour, no matter how I'm sympathetic to our mutual womanhood.

She crosses the street, her colorful reusable bags slapping against her leg as she shuffles away. There's more space in front of me now so I walk faster, it's more comfortable this way. My legs are too long for a slow stroll. Tote in hand, I breathe heavily down the street, passing by a construction site. There's a nice Cadillac in front of the barely protected rubble. Red. One that you'd see in movies, but I've passed it on another night, so it isn't anything new.

The woman is behind me now, across the street and seemingly unaware of my existence. She's comfortable in the narrative that I'm a world away, she made it unscathed another night. Me too, lady. Me too.

I enter my apartment building, pausing a few steps in to check the mail. The room smells vaguely of potato skin and tomato sauce. Someone left their day-old garbage in front of the vertically ribbed mailboxes. Nothing's in our mailbox, but I'm sure Mom may have checked it already. I like getting mail, even when there are spam companies reminding me about the deal of a lifetime. There are moments I'm in the mood to hear them out. I'm rooting for the slim chance it might just be the best deal ever, and I'm the one who gave it a fighting shot. Imagine it. Me, a winner.

My mom has a package on the floor waiting. But I'm already carrying two bags... I'll give myself that excuse. I'll pretend I didn't see anything. *Oh no, Mom! I was a little drunk, I'm sorry.* My slight stumble with the keys in the door will rest my case. I can suck up whatever complaint about drinking she may have. There's a chance she might not notice.

I wanted to make a quiet entrance otherwise, but the dog barks. He barks at any noise on the other side of our door in case it's an intruder. He seems happy that it's me. He escorts me to my bedroom door, sneezing with excitement. He's proud of himself; it's a job well done. I use the small amount of energy I have left to clean myself up a bit and slip into pajamas. As I drift off, I hear my mom grunt in her sleep from across the hall.

A tense air pries my eyes open a few hours later. My mom is sitting at my desk drinking her morning tea. I faintly smell the cinnamon rising from her cup. It's a black mug with the sun on one side and the moon on the other; it's her favorite. Her face is collected, matter-of-factly taking in the space around her. *My space.* She's been in my room before, so many times, but this time she looked like an intuitive tourist. Slightly uncomfortable with the unknown terrain yet

calm in the face of potential panic. She's waiting, patiently. I can't tell how long she's been there. She could have been sitting there for some time, but just now decided to let her presence be known, exuding disappointment.

"Good morning," I mumble. I don't feel like a real person just yet, for all I know this could be an unwillingly realistic dream.

But she doesn't say anything. She isn't through processing the new space she's just created between the two of us when she entered my unconscious room. I want to miss her. I want to be certain that she is right in front of me, but I can't be sure.

"Is everything okay?" I ask.

"Yes. Just wanted to make sure you made it back alive."

Her tone is harsh and quick. She sips her tea. The hot water stirring in her mug is always on the verge of singeing off a few taste buds, but she doesn't mind. It wakes her up when she likes.

"You make it sound so dramatic." I sit up in bed and continue, "yeah, I'm fine. I went out with coworkers."

"Okay, well. Hope you had fun," she grunts. As she stands up from my desk, I see she left a post-it-note behind. She leaves, her favorite mug in hand.

I fall back asleep almost immediately.

I read the note aloud to myself when I'm fully awake. It read: "Don't scare me like that again." I'm at a loss to understand her tone, her intentions. I know she feels my absence more than she feels my being when I'm right beside her.



*Untitled*

For all the women I've had,  
I think on my mother and  
My father

Will they be mad  
if they figure I've been  
watching this closely? Is  
it something I shouldn't have?  
Wouldn't it help to know—  
I am an extension of you

Am I stripping them of their humanity  
When I consider them silently?  
Commiserating on what I determine to  
Be faults. Is it derogatory to belittle  
Them as they have belittled me?  
Or is this cycle simply meant to exist  
In harmony with our rogue anger?

I live for the nights where it feels  
No one else exists, separate from the  
World as we live it; something that  
Dreams are made of

And I realize,  
if I want to have a cup  
of mint tea in the habous,  
I need a steady income  
and a proper tongue.

*Mommy's Universe*

I exist now with my mother's face.  
My eyes are hers in their second try;  
my lifetime, a dedicated sequel,  
is one to amend her wrongs.  
From friends, family, and strangers,  
it's confirmed a billion times over.  
You look just like your mother!  
You two could be sisters!

When I was small, our pride was one,  
we even had matching leather jackets.  
Our lapels decorated with a single  
shiny silver unicorn brooch. A mystical  
creature meant for only us two, a  
pair of curly-haired smiling bodies. She'd  
carry me around in her arms like a prize.  
I want to believe she loved me then,  
that I was more than a decoration, an obligation.  
Here's to thinking that it all meant so much more.

A mother and a daughter  
can only go so far together until  
one realizes they can step out of the other.  
I wish it was easier to find  
where we went wrong,  
maybe we can try again.

*You're My Kinda Girl*

Gay and proper, that's the best way to describe Lina. We met through a dating app. She messaged me almost immediately asking if I wanted to grab a drink. Forward, I thought. But I loved it. I love feeling wanted so I let the message linger a few days, stretching out the thin string of desire as long as I could. The following weekend, Lina suggested meeting at a bar equidistant. "This way, we begin with an equitable dynamic," she said. "Y'know, if we do end up liking each other."

Somehow it felt like she already knew what was to come; that she'd lived into our future and was back to live through it again. She could be a boomerang, for all I know. Her certainty urged a greedy energy in me; I craved more. Forget rage or entitlement, it engaged an unknown hunger. In her photos, her cheekbones were daggers, her eyes were a chalky cinnamon color and her lips perfectly lined like a happy dream. *She's such a pretty one*, I thought. *She has... Moroccan features too. I wonder.* I couldn't wait to meet her.

Before our date, I checked her profile obsessively. I scrolled through her photos to take in her appearance. I didn't doubt her beauty, but with each moment I still felt she knew what I was doing, alert to my every viewing. Even though I knew there was no way, it felt like she saw through my phone and had it all figured out. I wanted to understand all of her.

She was waiting outside of the bar, dressed for the summer night with a light sweater. "Just in case," she said. It was bound to come in handy. She didn't strike me as someone who would be insecure with wishy-washy preparations. Every feature of her face that I focused on so intensely felt foreign to me. I knew them, I was sure of it, but now she was something real. Not just a fantasy. It felt like we had met lifetimes ago.

We spent a few drinks getting to know each other. We talk about her childhood home in Long Island, how she spent a lot of summers out in Montauk because her dad had a friend with a beach house. We pick up on a conversation on music we were having the night before on the dating app. She's more into singer-songwriters and whatever else is softly alternative, while I'm most into anything with a chaotic tempo. We exchange recommendations. I tell her about my complicated lesbian blooming, she laughs at this story. She tells me that her parents saved their holiday season bonuses for a number of years to send her to an all-girls boarding school.

"That sure backfired," I laughed.

"Dude, you're telling me? It took me a few years of sifting through denial to realize I liked girls. It made it easier to bring friends home at least. I could just say 'this is my friend, we're going upstairs to my room now.' It was so much easier that way."

I laughed for her, she smiled. I wouldn't break my gaze. I loved looking at her talk. Her lips curved beautifully when she shaped each word, they moved how honey tastes. I wanted to keep her image in my mind. She was so much better than my own thoughts. I know she noticed me staring. It wasn't that hard to ignore. We sat less than a foot away apart. Our knees were essentially engaged. I kept coming back to her eyes. Their shape felt familiar, I had seen them in others. I could even say I saw them in my own reflection.

"Do you kiss on the first date?" I asked.

She grinned. "Not usually."

"Oh!" A faint red color filled in my cheeks. "I'm so sorry."

As I shied into myself, Lina picked my chin up gently with her hand and kissed me. Her lips cushioned my lips perfectly.

“You’re an exception,” Lina said, her smile was pushed into the palm of her hand. Her face looked so soft. “I’m glad we avoided talking about family and childhood trauma. So many people do on a first date, but I think it brings things down. I don’t need to know those things now.”

“What’s that?” I asked, still recuperating from her kiss.

She caught the attention of the waiter simply by sitting up. She wrote into the air, asking for our checks.

“I have faith we’ll get to those things soon, I’m sure. I don’t wanna ruin the fun just yet. It’s stressful remembering who you are in the vain of others.”

“Well, at least answer me this…” I tried my hand at being coy. I’m sure you’ve figured out flirting isn’t really my thing. “Where’s your family from? Are you Moroccan, by any chance?”

She was full of laughter, boasting chuckles. The waiter dropped our checks, the bill split evenly. beside our adjacent elbows. “How’d you know?!” She asked.

“I’m also Moroccan, or half. You looked familiar in that way, if that makes sense.” My hand covers my mouth, I laugh into it like I’m meant to hide.

“That’s so funny! What a coincidence.” She continued to laugh, well after she’d signed her check. “I had no idea there were other queer Moroccans. Didn’t know it was possible.”

My cheeks were pink from the alcohol. “My dad would be glad to know it. I think.”

“Not sure if I can say the same,” Lina let out a nervous laugh, but I didn’t notice it much.

Her genuine surprise about our shared background was exciting. It makes me feel special in her eyes. It gives her something to remember me by, something she’ll think on if time passes and our shared time is past. The two of us sharing a part of our identities. I hoped she would kiss

and tell. One more step closer to permanency between us, something tangible that had authority over my fantasies. I wasn't sure I could handle another empty-handed date. No one wants to go home alone. And we didn't, not that night.

We date for some months and still, I don't tell my Dad about Lina. We haven't talked much about our families. Like Lina said, I don't want to rush the fun. There's been plenty of it. I'm scared that if we unpack who we are because of our parents, we won't be able to look at each other the same. We'll become reminders of the lingering guilt.

It's safe to say I'm in love. It's my first time, truly being in love. This was more than infatuation. Lina knows that much. She's reminded of it each time I panic about my place in the world.

"I'm not sure where I'm meant to be," I tell her. I consider not being with her as if I have somewhere else to be. The uncertainty consumes me. I want to be with her, but I've only known the chase for acknowledgment. I'm used to dating around. If I'm perceived by many, I feel seen, my existence confirmed in the eyes of others.

Fairly early on in our companionship, we had a conversation about my fickle thoughts. Our uncomfortable talks never turn into arguments. Not even one of those slimy whispered in public. This is where Lina's patience shined most, reigning judiciously over the two of us. I wish I could share the same mentality.

"Why is this attention so important to you?" she asked. This was one of the few moments I could feel a flicker of pain in her voice. That made me panic more. I ate it up and fueled my dramatics.

“It’s not important, really. I think…” I knew the words were there, I had to dig where it hurt. “It’s a routine. It’s what I’ve known to do. It’s feels strange defying that habit.”

“Oh.”

“But we feel right!” I reassure her. “I’ve never been involved with anyone else for more than a few weeks. But I’ve wanted to find something more honest, but I haven’t had much luck.”

She was silent, her face, blank, but she was listening.

“I realize it’s ridiculous to dwell on that shit. This is different, I feel grounded with you. It’s so nice.”

Lina’s continued silence was comforting. It gave me the strength to say what I knew I had to. The quiet was different than what I was used to, hers made me feel wanted. With past lovers and my parents, the silence was empty. Our hearts would scratch at the void demanding sanity, but it’s calm here with her. I needed to come right out and tell her. “I love you.” My second-guessing brain wants to add. *I think*, but I know I’d be lying to myself and so resist the urge. “Damn, that’s the first time I’ve said that to anyone not family.”

“This is my first time too,” she says. Her voice is soft, just like her lips.

“Being in love?” I ask. I didn’t want to get too ahead of myself in case she wasn’t referring to my hopes of reciprocation. Lina was shying away from me, physically folding within herself behind her crossed arms. If I held her close, I think, would she come back? I want to, but I inched forward with the proper footing.

“No, I’ve been in love before, but it hasn’t been like this.” She looks away from me.

“I’m sorry.” I tell her. “I don’t want to push you, but I’m not sure I understand what you’re saying.”

“Right, no yeah. That makes sense, I’m being vague. I’ve never been with another woman before. That’s what I mean. I’ve only been with men.”

Even though it’d be inappropriate, I want to laugh. Here I was worried for a second that she was going to tell me that what she feels isn’t as good as she’s felt before. But it’s about men. A conversation topic I’ve had the privilege to avoid in my lesbian dynamics.

“Ooooooooooooooh. Well that’s too bad!”

“Why do you say that?” Lina said, she was still hiding behind an internal wall. Maybe she thought I would take back everything I had said.

“Cause women are superior. It’s a shame you haven’t been with more.”

She shoved me lightly, but I held onto her hand and pulled her into a kiss. Cliched, but it felt wildly appropriate. I wanted her to feel like she belonged, something I’d been looking for for so long.

Lina’s mom planned a surprise birthday for her dad out in Long Island and told Lina that she could bring a friend. I was with her when her mom called breaking down the whole event, a thoroughness Lina mirrors seamlessly. She only lingered in the same room as me for a few minutes before continuing the rest of her call in the bathroom. Lina made sure to keep the door closed, but I didn’t mind. Just the idea of talking to a parent on the phone is stressful. When she got out of the bathroom, she asked me to be her ‘plus one’.

“Obviously! How dressed up should I get?” I immediately got up, opened my closet door and rummaged through some options. “Are we thinking...my nice slacks? Or can I wear a button down and jeans?”



Lina sat on my bed, staring outside. Her mind was elsewhere, but she still took a moment to cross her legs with a certain elegance.

“Hey...” I waved. “Earth to Lina...what’s up? Is everything OK with your mom?”

She nods. Her face turned to look at me with somber eyes. The eyes of someone who knows they have to say something they don’t want to. In that moment I understood.

“I haven’t told my parents about you. That you’re more than a friend.” She wasn’t averting her gaze; it was dedicated to me. “They don’t know that I like girls.”

I took a seat next to her. I had never felt more vulnerable in my life. Here was someone who I cared for so deeply, someone who has helped push me to accept myself where I couldn’t, I wanted to give her that world. I would give her that missed belonging where it was needed.

“I can’t tell them,” she continued. “Since it’s against their religion.”

“That feels like an easy cop-out,” I laughed, but I realized Lina thought I was referring to her. “Oh! No! Not you. You aren’t the one copping out. Your parents are. It shouldn’t be that complicated to love a child as they are.”

“Yes, but... Oh, I don’t know. I’ve never actually talked about them. I don’t even have any friends who have been around long enough to know them.”

“You don’t have to talk about it now if you don’t feel ready,” I told her. “Just know, that I am here for you.”

“You aren’t mad?” She pulled her sleep down over her fist. She tried to subtly wipe away some tears without me noticing.

“Absolutely not. There’s nothing to be mad about. Well, except for your parent’s ignorance. That pisses me off, but it’s not *your* fault.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too.” I leaned in and kissed her forehead. “So, should I be picking out clothes that make me look less gay? ‘Cause after I said it, I was kinda really digging the dyke button down look.”

Lina laughed. She took a deep breath and smiled at me. “Wear what you want. I’m not worried anymore.”

*long island love letter*

I fall in love with her all over again this weekend  
 And I tell her,  
 if you squint your eyes, the lights twinkle twonkle.  
     motorized reds and whites tossing about on the LIE, longislandexpressway!  
     I play for attention,  
 she won't give me any.  
 Not while she's driving, she says.  
 Two hours past,      one hour left.  
 And she won't even give me a passing glance.  
 Too focused on the bumper in front of us focused on the bumper in front of them  
 focused on and onandon. It's the end of a blue-collar workday,  
 gas's ticker is closing in on E! oh my, oh me!  
 She asks me kindly to shut up, you're distracting.  
 but the car hasn't moved rightways, not one bit.  
 Boredom gnaws at my sanity, my idle body makes me think too much  
 about thinking too much and i'm not sure if it's worth  
 making this prompt arrival,  
 not sure if the party will be fun after all this mess, not sure if  
 sitting in the corner upon entry—drink and anxiety in hand—  
 will socially suffice, but we won't arrive at that moment.

The stores on the roadside look sewn together  
 seamlessly attached, nowhere to go or grow,  
 pizzasandwichhairsalonwalmart. Tacky clothing stores  
 wed to car dealerships in holy matrimony. Look! That  
 could be us one day, I kid. She tells me I'm wrong, it doesn't work  
 that way! You just don't have the proof.  
 I have my eyes, I tell her.  
 Then we lost ourselves to arguing the logistics of the standard proximity  
 from dealership to retail spot only to realize we passed by an Exxon,  
 tucked away behind an everyperson mattress store.  
 her GPS screams EXIT NOW, she screams FUCK YOU  
 i laugh and cry and laugh for her. i wanna make things fun for you, i wanna  
 make you smiiiiiiile through however long we've got.

*Making Sense of the Paternal*

My father,  
as I understand Him,  
is a man  
who has lived as He needs to,  
provides in ways He assumes  
are good and  
when He is able.  
I believe He can be more.

Strictly economical  
affection pays its dues  
to tilted men whose fathers  
never loved them.  
It does not go wasted,  
persistently untouched.

*Sun*

I'm a stranger to my dad. That's what his vacant stare tells me. My presence is familiar, but we both come empty-handed. There is nothing holding us to one another other than a father and daughter label. Our mutual memories hold on for dear life when they want to. Physically, we never pushed for anything further than a side hug with a pat on the back. Those moments were reserved for graduations, and those days have passed. Yet these are anything but problems. Our unspoken social agreement is our bond in itself. We're both comfortable in our silence. It's louder than anything else we would properly say to one another.

We've held onto our lunch routine for the last two years. We'll meet up every few weeks or so. Our conversations are largely harmless, barely transcending small talk recommendations and quick thoughts we thought the other would share. When the sun is even remotely peeking out, it's automatically understood that we are eating at a place with a patio. Without fail, my dad will make some comment on the beauty of the outside.

Today, he raises his arms and praises the warmth. He says, "Shimsh! The sun is here!"

Dad doesn't look at me when worshipping the sun. It's generally posed. Maybe he's hoping someone likeminded will be nearby and agree with him. That this spontaneous moment will turn into the perfect intellectual conversation about how great the sun truly makes you feel, and he can show off his opinions as if they were facts. The same would be expected from this hypothetical person, of course. A little unexpected competition never hurt no one.

"How've you been?" He asks. He asked me this when we first met up outside of the train station, but I entertain the small talk. There isn't much else to be done.

“I’ve been fine. Things at work are the same. I’ve started seeing someone... uhhh... what else...”

“That’s nice,” Dad says, right on cue.

The back-and-forth banter is nice. It’s like watching a kindergartner making their first friend. It feels appropriate to our limited dynamic. I take solace in our quiet connection as we both get distracted from our conversation to check out the same woman walking by our table. In our hush, we lose ourselves in temporary admiration. We fall in love and lose her all in a matter of a few seconds. Coming to, our fleeting internalized romance is forgotten. We move on just as quick with only a few seconds passing by.

“...You said you were seeing someone?” He comes to.

As do I. “Uh, yeah. It’s been going well so far. Only been a few weeks.”

I never properly came out to my dad. Not out of fear of rejection, or even spite, but it’s more of a complacent stubbornness. I’ve kept everything inside for years and now the time to come forward has breached potential embarrassment. Although, I’m almost certain my mom had said something to him, relayed to him information about their child that makes them other in some form. It could be a parent’s worst nightmare, if they lack the smarts to keep a positive mind. Maybe he figured if I really had something to say, I would say it.

“How’d you meet?” He browses the menu in a script-like fashion. Each food option providing him with the next blanket question to ask his thirty-three-year-old daughter about her semi-closeted gay relationship.

“We met on – um – a dating app.” I mumble that list bit and pick up my menu, mimicking his tactic. Hopefully it’ll give me some answers.

“Oh. Like Tinder or something. I’ve heard about that. Iz mentioned you were on it a while back.” Dad places the menu down.

“I—wait, what did—.”

Before I can properly respond, he flags down a waiter with one smooth flick of the pointer and middle fingers. It’s never aggressive or heavy with pretense but has just the right amount of respect that will get the waiter over to our table instantaneously. He orders first. The salmon, rare, with the grilled asparagus on a separate plate. He’s short, sweet, and particular with his words so not to leave room for confusion. A leftover habit, I believe, from when he was first learning English. His accent wasn’t terribly thick. If anything, it sounded like he was French which isn’t too far off.

I order the same dish, with a salad on the side. The waiter takes their leave seamlessly, as if they were hardly there in the first place.

“Wait. So, what was Iz telling you?” I ask. I’m engaged now. What would my kid sister have to say about my dating life?

“Nothing really. Just that you were on an app. She said she had tried it out herself, but she didn’t like it.” He shrugs it off. She didn’t seem to say much. But she totally lied. Last I spoke to her, she was still on Tinder. And other apps too!

He picks his brown paper bag off the floor. It’s full of days old newspaper clippings. Our lunch dates serve as his catch-up time. I don’t mind, it brings more to our conversations.

When I was younger, Dad used to give me clippings from the paper to read. They were his own version of assigned reading. Any time he would pass me a ripped-out article, I was essentially promising him that I would read them, but in reality, I tucked them away until they

could be deemed trash. He must've picked up on my habit, he stopped taking the time to set aside articles for me.

On occasion, he'll read an article aloud while we're out to lunch. When he's about to read, he'll tip his chin down so his glasses slip down his nose ever-so-slightly. When he reads, he dresses up his voice like a cheesy game show host with an immigrant's pronunciation.

"What's she like?" He asks, his glasses already slipping down his nose.

"She's wonderf—," I pause. "I—"

He looks at me from behind his in-half newspaper. His eyes can be clearly seen over the top of *The New York Times* heading. He isn't stupid, that much I'm aware of. I'd hate to admit he pays attention. His eyes jot back to his article.

I laugh and settle back into fond description. "She's great. Her name's Sara. Oh, and you'll love this..." I wait until he's paying direct attention to me again.

His eyebrows rise above the *Times*.

"...she's half Moroccan too."

"Oh! That's nice." He's not as excited about it as I wanted him to be, but I know it'll be a big deal if I invite Sara out to one of these lunches. That'll be all he'll talk about. Morocco this, Morocco that. It'll matter to him then, and the potential is fine with me right now.

The waiter brings out our food. Dad moves his tall newspaper out of the way. It almost hits a man walking past on the other side of the patio barrier. My dad makes an apologetic face and waves as if to say he was sorry. The man barely turns around to consider it. He crumples up the clipping he was tending to and pulls out another. It's from a week ago.

"How's your mom doing? Any better?" He asks. Mom's been sick. Diagnosed with breast cancer a year back but she didn't tell us until recently. I wouldn't be surprised if she knew



even earlier than that. Sometimes Mom will text Iz and me in a joint chat with a thumbs-up emoji or something equally as cryptic to tell us that she's feeling okay. Iz spends more time finding out updates and filling everyone in. I can't find it in me to make an effort. I know I should. But it hasn't come naturally, I think, so why push it?

“Mom's alright. She seems to be fine some days, but most, it's just a lot of coughing.” I poke at a few balsamic drowned lettuce leaves. “I haven't talked to her in a bit.”

“You should give her a call.”

I forget my father is a real person. Looking at him, to think about him as more than what he was to me growing up feels silly. I think about how he doesn't really go out unless it's for work. I think about how he doesn't have any friends, no girlfriend either. He is alone in himself. I wonder who he talks to besides Iz and me. I wonder if he is seeing someone. There's so much he doesn't tell me, even in our small talk questionnaires. I hope he can at least find comfort in our routine, like our silence is home to me.

*That Gum You Like is Back in Style*

I saw some of that rainbow zebra gum in a deli today. It made me think of Mom. There was half a shelf dedicated to it, a sea of vibrant striped rectangle wrapping mixed in with the other candies. Chocolates, gummies, taffies—the normal ones. The wrapping on each stick of gum had rainbow zebras dancing, biking, skiing – sporting in any form to distract you from the fact that the gum was tasteless. The first few chomps were great, just what you’d hope for, but what little flavor there was, the vibrant tanginess you yearn to hold onto, was soon expended. So, I unwrapped and popped in another stick until I’ve lost the brief juiciness yet again to an overbearing stale aftertaste. Rinse and repeat.

Mom surprised me with a pack once after school back when she still had to pick me up. She was in a good mood then. She and Dad were married, but still having sex. This was before Iz was born, so I was still her baby. That extra bit of attention, when she wanted to spare it, was all mine back then. Sometimes I forget there was a time when we acted like a family. What hurts most is that we had a taste of it, but it got all fucked up somewhere down the line. Our combination must have been flawed from the start.

I bought a few packs of the gum. I couldn’t just leave it there; the nostalgia would’ve gnawed at me. It’s a chance to feel warm again like Mom’s gesture did then, I thought. It felt strange stepping into her shoes, placing the gum alongside my other necessities in front of the cashier. He picked up the gum before scanning, “I haven’t had this in so long! No one ever buys it though. I’m not even sure why we keep it stocked anymore.”

When I get home, I want to call Mom and tell her about my discovery. I can tell her that I’m scared to chew it because I know what will happen. I wonder if it’ll make her feel a little

better since she received her diagnosis. But she'll probably scold me for wasting that money then she'll proceed to make passive aggressive remark like: *Dwelling on memories wastes time*. I realize I haven't called her in a few weeks. Or maybe months. I wish I could place it. I guess I could've called her in that moment when I came across the gum in the store. My instinct is to come up with another excuse, another obstacle as to why I can't call her, but I bought this gum in her name. *Just call her. Ask how she is!* Now you sound just like her, I tell myself, scolding me to call someone. It's the nice thing to do! But it makes me want to call less. I know what should be done, but I've never been good with listening to my 'right' mind.

I pull my phone out and stare at it like it might dial on its own. Sadly, it doesn't. Shame. I drop my phone on the table, next to the gum.

"Go on," I encourage the gum. "Call her."

The gum doesn't listen.

"Well, what are you waiting for? I'll chew you up if you don't do it." But we both know I'd get the raw end of that deal. "Oh, fine. Fuck off. I'll do it."

The gum patiently waits as I pick up my phone and call my mother. It's ringing. Ringing. Ringing. I glance at the gum. It hasn't gone anywhere. I wonder if Mom sees my name and is choosing to ignore it. If I have to call again just to make her feel wanted. If I have to cater to her ego for a phone call about fucking zebra gum, I'll scream. I won't actually. I'll most likely chew the whole pack of gum within a few minutes out of pure spite. She doesn't pick up the phone. The call doesn't go to voicemail, it automatically hangs up on me. The pettiness that surrounds her, even when she's absent, astounds me. I call again and this time there is an answer.

"Hello?" I don't recognize the voice.

“Hi, Mom?” I pretend it’s her in the chance it is her and being sick has had an effect on her voice.

“No, I’m sorry. This isn’t Harmony. Who am I speaking with?” The voice is feminine and friendly, in that pleasant professional way. I’ve always been jealous of voices like that. They’re meant to be heard over the phone, or a television commercial for skin cream.

“Oh, this is Harmony’s oldest daughter.” I’m sure whoever this is has talked to Iz before. Iz is in consistent contact with Mom. I’m a little hurt that Iz didn’t fill me in on whatever the deal is. I want to sound equally polite, mirroring her voice with a hint of competition. “Who... am I speaking with?”

“Hi! So sorry. I’m Lisa! I’m your mom’s live-in assistant.” Somehow her voice sounds nicer. I’m sure she’s perfectly shaped, curves and all those pretty things. I want pretty things to like me.

“Live-in assistant? Since when?”

“Your sister hired me. I started working about... hmmm...” Even her pauses feel calming over the phone. “Maybe a week and a half ago?”

“Gotcha. Uh, does this mean my mom has gotten worse?” I try to find it within me to care further than a polite responsibility.

“Yes and no. The infection in her body has worsened so she’s bedridden.” She is serious now, but in a hopeful way. She continues, “I’d like to think I’m also keeping your mom company! We’ve become fast friends.”

“That’s nice.” I can’t stay focused. Why did I call again? “Is she awake? Could I speak to her?”

“Just one moment. Let me check.” It sounds like she’s smiling into the phone.

I put the call on speaker phone and lay the phone next to the gum again. I stare at the striped packaging. The rainbow colors scatter around. They dance around me like the last scene in Dumbo with the translucent elephants misting about. My mind slips further into dissociation, who knew blank thoughts could be so loud?

“Hi, honey.” Speaker phone is much louder than I thought it would be. Mom’s voice vibrates my phone slightly. She sounds tired, but neutral. No externalized pain involved.

“Hey Mom, how are you feeling?” My voice falls neutrally too. I hesitate in the possible ridiculing of public emotion. If I show that I’m worried, then she’s bound to make a comment about my lack of communication. *If you’re worried, then why haven’t you called?* She’ll say, taunting me about taking advantage of when it’s convenient to feel bad for her.

“Not great. I’m in a lot of pain.” Short and sweet, she keeps it. She’s still Mom-like. “Why are you calling?”

“I just wanted to check in.” I tell her.

“You’ve checked in. What else is going on?”

For a moment, I can’t remember. I was ashamed of myself for not calling. I challenged the legitimacy of my self-made excuses. Her inherent abrasiveness upsets me, but I don’t want to make up for my silence. I want to keep it; fueling it like a human’s obsession with being loved. Her tight grip around my emotions can’t force my hand like a toy.

“Just wanted to say hi. That’s all.” Through my teeth, I mimic her. I want her to know how she sounds. “Have you talked to Iz today?”

“Mmm.” Skepticism oozes through the phone. “Iz stopped by earlier today. You could come with her next time.”

She states it like it's a law of nature, not a suggestion. Iz and I have been friendly, or rather we understand each other now, since she grew out of her demon state. She's in her late twenties, tall, pretty, recycles boyfriends like it's a business. I wouldn't consider us sisterly, or even friends for that matter; we're more like two acquaintances that know way too much about the other as a result of existing in such close proximity. We only see each other at family funerals. We don't gather otherwise.

"Iz doesn't tell me when she plans on visiting. I'd come with her otherwise."

"You don't ask."

"Mmm," I say. I crave the urgency of having the last word. I want to dethrone her. My unmotherly mom is sick—potentially laying on her death bed—yet all I want to consider is how I don't want her to have the satisfaction of knowing I no longer care, that I've ran with her mistakes to a place of redemption without her.

"What's bothering you? You're quiet." It seems in her excessive time alone Mom has mastered passive aggression to an inhumane degree. She's able to surpass the cliched lift of tone at the end of a sentence, her words stab. She doesn't care.

"Nothing is. Like I said, I called to find out how you were doing. I did, and I mean... you sound fine. You sound great, really."

"You're kidding...what's going on with you?"

"*Nothing*. Why do you keep asking that?"

"Because something is obviously going on and you're keeping it in your head. You can talk to me, if you need." She says it like she's my last or only option. Like she's a mother.

“No, I can’t.” My face is warm. I rest it in my palms and groan. Her words writhe underneath my skin. I can’t control it. I’m angry. It’s coming from a place deeper than this moment, but I can’t explain why. Not outside of myself, and most certainly not to her.

“Seriously? You can’t? Yeah, right.” Mom’s urge to hang up on me radiates from the phone. But I know she won’t. She needs to have the last word, but so do I.

“You don’t have to speak to me like that. I said I didn’t want to talk, and I don’t have to.”

I hear her scoff on the other end of the line, “I did a great job at raising you to be a fucking asshole,” she says, a satisfaction seething through.

“Of course, you did,” I laugh. “I had the best teacher.”

“Why did you call me, huh? To upset me?” She demands.

“No. I—”

“So???”

“I…” I breathe in. And out. My clouded mind clears and I realize, I won’t let go of our shared context. I hold onto her self-centered neglect from our past. It nags at me, shadowing me in every one of our conversations. It’s why I haven’t called. It’s why I have her in my phone as her full name, not *Mom*. I live in anticipation of existing as a disappointment, as the burden or her token of struggle.

“So, are you going to tell me what the fuck is going on?”

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, overwhelmed tears drip down my face. Some splash lightly onto the pack of gum. “I… I just wanted to tell you…”

“Are you crying?” She sounds skeptical, unsure at the legitimacy of her own proposition.

I sniffle for a few seconds further. “I just wanted to tell you that I found some of that Zebra rainbow gum. You bought it for me as a kid.”

“Oh...” She sighs, I’ve exhausted her sanity as she has mine. “It was that gum that tasted like shit after two seconds, right?”

“Mhm,” I try to hold back more tears. My face is curling, my eyes squeezing together in an effort to not implode.

“Right. I remember buying that for you.” Mom takes a few moments, reminiscing. “Wow, that was a while ago. I’m surprised you remember that.”

“I try to remember good things,” I mumble. I’m not certain she hears me, but there’s a few moments of silence. It’s numbing, but secure. The two of us typically, as mother and daughter, bask in the tension of the time. We encourage its toxicity. But this lull is distinct, an individual warmth clinging for dear life. If only she learned to love me, and not to possess me, we would have a home shaped only for the two of us.



*A hand to hold, if she'll let me*

I am an asset of my surroundings.  
I push and pull in its name.  
I reach backwards for a smooth escape,  
and start over again.

My head falls back, what can be done  
I'm slipping into the rising sun.  
It holds me close,  
and keeps me warm.  
I know I'll be safe  
when the morning comes.

Viable and visible,  
that's all we yearn to be.