

After We Rose

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About the Book

Although I didn't immediately know what story I wanted to tell for my Senior Project, I knew that I wanted to write a novella. At the end of high school, I was able to complete a novella, entitled, *I would take a bullet for my dog, but not you*. I edited it, revised it, and self-published it through a website. Being able to complete a longer story, with multiple chapters and characters and plot lines, felt amazing and solidified my ability to self-identify as a writer. Since then, I haven't attempted to write anything longer than two chapters. I have focused solely on the art of short story, as well as poetry. But now, towards the end of my college career, I finally feel ready to exert myself creatively and write a novella once again.

Through a variety of classes about science fiction and dystopian literature, I have come to be extremely interested and also inspired by the politically-charged worlds these authors have created. Some of these titles include, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* by Phillip K. Dick, *1984* by George Orwell, and *The Handmaid's Tale*, by Margaret Atwood. In return, it inspired me to want to create a world of my own. My introduction into college was an interesting one, with the 2016 election between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump heating it up during the first semester. I have spent the last three years wishing and wondering what America would be like if Donald Trump had lost the election. At the time, I was so sure that we would have the first woman President, that I had never dreamed of what the future would be like if Trump won. Now, I am left wondering the opposite. What would it be like if Hillary Clinton had won the election?

When I was younger, I thought I knew what feminism was. In my head, it was all about removing power from the man and sharing it with women. Equality was easy like that. As I have grown older, I have learned the term, "intersectional feminism," and that not all

feminism is inclusive, or truly as equal as it may appear. This world I have created is set in 2055, almost a full forty years after the 2016 Presidential election. In this world, Hillary Clinton has won the election, and the power is put in the hands of the women in society. To some, that sounds like a utopia. And for me, I had always pictured my perfect world ruled by women, too. But this novella is an exploration of that world gone wrong. Power in the hands of the women that had the privilege to take it in the first place, like white, cis, wealthy women. The “feminism” in the new world is not intersectional, and is not a utopia for many, despite it being advertised that way by the government and women that gained an advantage from it. Because of this, I have come to understand that my biggest inspiration for this story was, in fact, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, due to the dystopia being based on one gender ruling society.

This story will firstly be presented as a perfect world, but slowly but surely, the reader will start noticing cracks. They’ll think, “This is nice...but where are the men?” And this tension will build, and build, until finally, the world I have been explaining to them won’t answer the questions they have and the reader will grow suspicious. I have made the decision for it to be this way because I want it to mimic aspects of the real world. Like how everything may seem fine on the surface, until you decide to dig deeper to find the truth, and the harsh reality unfolds before your eyes. This way, the reader will hopefully be able to take something away from the story and be able to apply it to their own lives.

For me, this is an important part of why I write, and what I look for when people read my writing. I want to say something that matters, and that can impact a person’s life or a person’s way of thinking for the better. I think the best way to do this is through story. It’s how humans learn to empathize and think about others’ lives critically. I believe this story can do just that.

Because of this desire, I created two starkly different characters. One character, Audrey, is able to ignore the discrepancies in her world because of her privilege. The reader sees from her perspective most of the time in order to be able to track her complacency. She is a bystander. Sam, on the other hand, is disadvantaged in her world, not only due to her race but also because of how she was conceived. She is curious, and questions the status-quo. This is a novella about choices, and how we react when we are faced with an injustice that ultimately benefits us.

November 8, 2016

The radio station was in the basement of the college's dining hall. Cold, dark, damp. It had been that way since the 80's, when the campus was first built. Originally, it was a storage room for files, and faxes, and minutes of meetings nobody would ever read. But once students got their hands on it, it magnificently transformed into something much more palatable. Live music, radio shows streaming 24/7, warm bodies dancing fueled by booze and tobacco. The carpets were moldy and the ceilings had asbestos, and yet, the students continued to flock to the cold, dark, and damp space every night to play music to their listeners. Usually, the listener count would only reach twenty students at most, and that was if it was a popular show. On this particular night, Marguerite and her friends had the station from 10 pm to midnight. The highest number of listeners her show reached was five.

“Hell-o everyone, what is up with y'all on this Tuesday evening? You're catchin' Marguerite and the gang right now on KSR radio, and- hey, gang, say hello to our listeners! Shit, don't be rude.”

“Heyo,” said Travis from behind her, “what's good?” he lightly puffed on a j and blew it into the air. The smoke swirled around and around, making the cramped station even

cloudier. The fire alarm had been disabled long ago by students, and the faculty did not make it their priority to visit the student hideout. He reached out his hand and put it on Marguerite's shoulder, and in return, her cheeks darkened to a deep red.

"We out here just chillin,' waiting for the results," Augustina said, "I'm terrified that the bright orange Cheeto-lookin' motherfucker is gonna win," she looked around the room with a grimace at her friends. Marguerite pouted back at her, and turned back to the microphone.

"It was just announced that Trump has taken Ohio. We're all wincing at the thought. I hope you all voted today!" she said.

And it was true. That same feeling was being felt all throughout the country that night. Everyone was on the edge of their seats wondering who would win. Although Donald Trump had seemingly embarrassed himself so badly during the campaign, the votes kept ticking in, and the race was way closer of a call than anybody could have predicted. Travis had bitten his nails all the way down to the stub out of pure trepidation.

"This is crazy," Travis said, inching closer to the microphone, and with that, Marguerite as well. "I never thought I would live to see the day where a TV personality would win the Presidential election," he laughed. His tan skin appeared golden under the dim, yellow lights. His eyes were hazel, with shades of both burnt umber and sunglow. Marguerite could hardly remember to respond, for she was looking so deeply into them. Thankfully, Augustina jumped to grab the mic.

"Well, that's very true, Travis," she said, "but this really is no laughing matter. Real people's lives are a stake. If he wins..." she trailed off. The radio show was silent for just a moment. They ate the silence together, and took one another by the hand.

“Let’s just hope that’s not the case,” Travis said. Marguerite nodded her head. And in just another second, Trump took Florida. The three flocked to the computer screen to see if it was true. Despite the fact that Florida had voted for Obama in both elections, the state was suddenly painted a ghastly shade of red. Augustina gave a big sigh.

“I don’t like this. I’m getting a beer from the fridge,” she said, and walked out of the room.

That left the two in the room alone. Travis was still on the couch behind Marguerite, and suddenly she felt very aware of how sweaty she was. She peeked down at her shirt to find pit stains. Her heart tightened as she saw them, and wondered if Travis had seen them, too. Not that she even had decided whether or not she liked him. But still, she didn’t want him to think that she was some sweaty girl. To counteract this, she pulled her V-neck lower down, revealing more cleavage from her push-up bra. That alone should be a good distraction.

Augustina returned with her Bud Light lime and took a huge swig. “Really guys, you should have one. It’s making the night better already,” and with that, she let out a huge burp. Marguerite squealed, and Travis gave her a small fist bump.

“Maybe she’s right. We need a break from this. Put on some Kanye, close the computer, and I’ll grab us some beers, too,” he said. “I’ll be right back.”

When he left, the girls gave each other a knowing look. Augustina raised an eyebrow at her and took another sip. She looked so effortlessly beautiful all the time. She never had a hard time grabbing a boy’s attention. Her hair was luxurious and long, and her eyes always had a sexy, mischievous glimmer to them. Ever since they had become friends freshman year, Marguerite had longed to look like her. Instead, she was stuck with frizzy hair and clammy hands.

“So?” she said. Marguerite let out a laugh.

“So what?” she responded.

“Come on!” Augustina kicked her chair, “Are you into him or not?”

Marguerite giggled. “Umm...yeah I think so,” she glanced at the door, “But can you see my pit stain-”

“Oh, *hey*, Travis!” Augustina yelled. Travis gave her a smirk and passed Marguerite a beer. She took it with a small thank you, but her face was all red again.

The station was very small, small enough that each of the three friends could feel each other’s breath heating up the room. The smoke from the weed had not completely disappeared, but rather, had collected on every fiber of the old couch cushions and lingered in scent. The night seemed to pass by slowly, as if time worked differently so deep underground. Marguerite tried to open her beer with her fingernail, but she was wearing acrylics, and instead, the nail cracked off at the end.

“Fuck!” she said, shaking her hand. “Jesus Christ, this sucks.”

“Are you okay?” asked Travis, “did it hurt you?” he inched over to examine the nail. Marguerite shook her head at him.

“No, no, it doesn’t hurt. It’s just that they were fifty bucks, and now I gotta get them redone,” she said. Travis widened his eyes at this.

“Fifty bucks?” he exclaimed, “That would get me, like, a whole set of Magic: The Gathering cards, and like, a thirty pack of beer. Heck, probably even could go to the movies, too, maybe, if it was a matinee.”

“Yeah, well, it’s tough being a girl. Beauty is expensive,” she said, cracking the rest of the nail off where it had been weakened, “Not to mention painful.”

“Guys, guys come here!” Augustina called to them from the computer screen, “more votes have been counted, they’re going to announce a winner!” Both of them quickly scooted

their rolling chairs over to the desk to join their friend. The race was so close at this point that different news channels had varying results.

“God, I don’t know if I’m ready for this,” Marguerite said, her words almost catching in her throat. The pictures of the two nominees were up on the screen. Their faces conjured up completely separate images for what their presidency would look like. One was hope. One was destruction. The three of them all clung to each other in the KSR radio as they watched a live stream over the internet, to which they were broadcasting to their own audience. As each second ticked by, the anticipation grew and grew, until finally, they had enough votes to announce a winner.

“And the winner of the 2016 Presidential election is...Hillary Clinton!”

Chapter One: Women's Magazines

It was an overcast, autumn morning in New Pittsburgh, and all of the mid-youth girls from the surrounding area rushed in to take their seats at The Table. Excitement and anticipation grew as a radio broadcast rang out from the speakers, "The previously known and inhabited, 'Long Island,' which has been legally deserted for over a decade, has been completely engulfed by water. Any lingering Agitators will be forced inland, or they will die." And with this, a sounding cheer came from all the girls. All of the girls except one.

"I can't believe we've resorted to cheering death," Sam whispered to Audrey. Audrey paid this comment no mind, for her attention was drawn to zest of the room. Each girl was on her feet, chatting excitedly about their political predictions for the upcoming months. The radio blared some final, lingering comments before it was shut off by the CEO.

"Quickly, and surely, Manhattan will follow suit," and with that, the broadcast cut off. A disappointed groan echoed from the students, but each took their seat at The Table regardless. Sam and Audrey were able to squeeze in next to each other. The Table was round

and long, with a dark, speckled flat top and curved edges. Each room of the building was adorned with one just like it, crafted meticulously for the learning space. Everything else in the room was white. As soon as the CEO, Kiera, took her spot at the head of The Table, each girl simultaneously leaned in.

“Hello Girls, happy Friday. I hope everyone read today’s chapters on Women’s Magazines from the 2000’s,” Kiera said. Everyone nodded. “Then as you all know one of the things we are going to cover today is the subjugation of Women to the cruel act of removing body hair,” she said, and allowed a moment for the “boos” to quiet down before she continued. “Can someone please tell me a few techniques women were forced to use to remove their hair?” At this, Sam’s voice was the first to cut in.

“Women used to shave, wax, use body hair removal cream, and sometimes even laser the hair off,” she answered, “There were even documented videos of Women using duct tape to rip their hair out as a last resort.” Audrey winced at this, as did many of the other girls.

“Can you tell me which was the most destructive?” Kiera asked, eyebrows raised. Kiera herself had extremely bushy eyebrows that almost met in the middle.

“I-” Sam started, but was interrupted by another girl at The Table. “The textbook states that laser hair removal was the most destructive, because it didn’t target hair above the skin, but rather, it used high-heat radiation to damage the actual hair follicle,” said Emma.

Kiera nodded at her, “Good, I’m glad you invested your studying time wisely.” Sam threw out a small glare, to which Audrey chuckled and put a reassuring hand on her friend’s shoulder. Emma was the kind of the girl who was going to be a bosses’ boss someday. It was admirable, to say the least, but her journey to the top was going to include a bit of pushing and shoving. Sam was her first victim of the day. Audrey looked around the room. There was something she wanted to add but she didn’t know if she should say it. In the Women’s

History textbook, on the side, there was a paragraph written in smaller font than the rest of the chapter. When she read it, she could feel goosebumps on her arms, each hair poking up at her. She looked down at her arms to see that they had returned again.

“I have something to say,” Audrey said. She couldn’t tell if she had interrupted anybody or not, for she had been too wrapped up in her own thoughts. People turned to look at her. “It’s about the chapter,” she said.

“Go right ahead,” Kiera said, motioning to her.

“Well...I also read something that mentioned how the laser treatment was basically a permanent mark on a Woman, that lingered even after the rebellion. That when Women started growing their hair out, no longer confined by the men’s regime, some Women still couldn’t due to the damage caused by the treatment...” she said, looking around to see if anyone would finish her thought for her. But everyone continued to respectfully give her the floor, and nobody, not even Emma, decided to interject. Audrey took a deep breath before she finished.

“Sort of reminiscent to the tattoos of Holocaust victims.”

There was a silence that echoed after she said that. Contemplation. Consideration. Visualization. At first, she was regretful that she had mentioned it. Maybe it was too far of a stretch and it was disrespectful to compare the two. Although the author had felt that way, that didn’t necessarily mean that was the opinion of her class. Perhaps the notion was too radical. Some girls stared down at their hands, not meeting her eyes. A few more silent moments passed by until one girl leaned in.

“I believe it,” she said. Audrey looked up. It was a girl named Nicole. She had short, blonde hair and green-blue eyes. She was not much of a talker, usually, and the fact that she had responded so strongly enticed Audrey. Everyone turned to hear what she had to say next.

Nicole cleared her throat before she spoke, suddenly seeming weary that she had spoken up at all.

“My Grandmother was one of those Women who were subjugated to laser hair removal. She told me about it before she passed away, and...she even showed me the lingering effects of it on her underarms and legs,” by now, her voice was trembling slightly, “There was barely any hair that could grow, and the ones that did looked lightened and brittle. Apparently she spent thousands of dollars to do that. For guess who?” she was getting angry at this point. A few responded, “Husband.” Nicole shook her head. “Nope. Not even a husband. Her boyfriend asked her to do it.” At this, the girls grimaced. The mere mention of boyfriends or husbands made many of them feel sick. The words conjured up images of control, domestic violence, entrapment. Relationships between men and women had been outlawed a long time ago, to many a male’s dismay. But once the official Separation occurred, their whines were silenced, and Women were free to live a life sans-men. A life of healing and recovery. None of the girls at The Table ever dreamt of having a boyfriend, and it seemed silly to a lot of them that anyone ever did. These girls were born after the revolution, birthed by artificial insemination to a single Mother. This was the way of 2055, and the past and history of integration seemed to become blurrier and blurrier with each passing day, feeling ever-distant to mid-youth Girls with one thing on their mind: the future.

The girls at The Table began to hiss and spit, growing more rowdy as the seconds ticked by. Each comment overlapped each other, one after the other.

“That’s disgusting!” “Poor Woman!”

“He owes her reparations!” “She deserved better!”

“I hope he’s dead, now, too!”

Kiera let the girls' reactions continue on until they naturally died down. Audrey and Sam glanced at each other, both of them saying nothing. The room seemed to go mad, until it just wasn't anymore. Kiera took a breath.

"I understand how...painful these history lessons can be. Each one of us, including myself, have traumatic stories that involve our testosterone-affected counterparts. But I want you to know that these lessons are focused on the *past*. Things are no longer this way. You are safe, now," she smiled at her students. Even at this, Audrey had to smile back. She liked the sound of that. Being safe. It was something she had felt her whole life, thanks to the Separation. She turned to see how Sam was doing, but she was still sitting, silently.

Class was dismissed shortly thereafter. The students had trouble focusing on any one topic, and the CEO respected the reason why. It was hard to not feel like each lesson was completely personal, despite the fact that the topics were centered around a timeline they weren't involved in. The Table was within walking or biking distance to each of the student's houses. The two friends walked towards Sam's home, because Audrey's mother wouldn't be getting back from work until later that night. She liked going over to Sam's house, anyway.

"So, what did you think of the lesson today?" Sam asked. She wore a dark green knit cardigan, with a loose cotton long-sleeve that was tucked into linen pants. When the wind blew, gusts flew up her pants and tickled her skin.

"Fairly intense, I would say. I'm surprised Nicole spoke out like that...revealing that secret about her Grandmother. It's not easy to admit that your family was on the wrong side of history," Audrey said, reaching up to throw her hair into a ponytail. The dirt path they walked on was pristine. On the sides of the path, there were strong, bountiful shrubbery that

grew red berries by the mouthful. It was then that she reached for some and popped them in her mouth. She didn't notice her friend hadn't stopped staring at her since she had spoken.

"What do you mean, 'wrong side of history?'" Her Grandmother didn't do anything wrong," Sam said, dead-faced. At this, Audrey giggled. She reached a hand out and pushed her friend on the shoulder.

"Relax! It's not like I'm saying she's an Agitator," she said. Sam didn't respond for a moment. They continued to walk in silence, as the wind picked up the leaves that bristled around their feet. Each step their shoes lightly crunched the hardened debris.

"You care about me as a friend, right?" Sam asked. Audrey shook her head yes.

"There isn't any reason you wouldn't trust me?" Audrey shook her head no.

"Then I have something I want to show you," she said, and with that, she stopped and put her bookbag down on the floor. She removed the cardigan slowly off her shoulders, and placed it down next to her stuff. Audrey stood back, watching. Curious. They had made love once before, but this didn't feel like intimacy. It felt vulnerable.

Sam then looked her friend in the eye, turning slightly red, as she lifted up her entire shirt over her head, revealing her tummy, breasts, collarbones, and underarms. Audrey gasped at the sight of her. It wasn't her revealed chest that made her so sick to the stomach, it was her underarms. They were completely bare.

"How could you?" Audrey whispered. Sam stood in front of her, naked from the waist up, elbows high in the air. Her nipples erect from the chill of the autumn day. She peered down at her armpit herself, running her fingers along the smooth surface. With this, she gave a small smile

"Because I wanted to," she said, looking back up to meet her eye. Audrey began to scan the forest for spectators, but the forest around them was empty. There was no one

around but the two of them, but even with just them it felt claustrophobic. Her throat tightened, and she didn't know how to outwardly respond. Each urge felt too offensive, or wicked, or embarrassing. Sam stood there for a minute longer before reaching down to put her shirt back on, looking deflated.

“Wait!” she called out, before she could put her shirt over her head. “Can...I touch it?” Sam paused, and nodded for her to come over. A small smile grew on her face as Audrey's eyes locked to her skin. Audrey took a hand to her own armpit, feeling the long, scraggly hair that grew there. Then she reached out to her friend's skin, feeling the place where hair was supposed to be, but no longer was.

“This is crazy,” she breathed, rubbing the area.

Chapter Two: A Friend Unknown

When they finally reached the house, it was already getting dark. The sun had begun to set behind trees, and it cast a low glow on the older house. On each side of the gravel, there were remnants of the summer garden that was planted by Miss Amelia, Sam's mother. In the summertimes, their yard would boast chrysanthemums, lilies of the valley, daisies, and even some wild strawberries. It puzzled Audrey how she learned to garden so well, which seemed both archaically feminine and impressive at the same time.

By the time their feet reached the stoop, Miss Amelia's head was already picking out of the front door. "What are you girls doing home?" she asked, curiosity and apprehension tickling her voice.

The house was beautiful in a small way, compared to the expansive manors on the other side of town. It had a modest two floors, with a lot of detailing surrounding the edges of the roof and windows. Their house has looked the same ever since Audrey had met them.

"Hey Mom," Sam said, kissing her cheek. She completely ignored the uneasiness of her mother's voice and instead motioned for Audrey to follow her inside. She gave a small

head bow as she passed her. She made a point to sneak by without bumping into her, worrying that she could have completely fallen over if she had. As she did, she noticed a small bandage on the inside of the mother's wrist. When Amelia noticed her eyes on it, she covered her wound with her other hand, shielding it. Amelia had short, blonde hair with some gray ones sprouting through. Her eyes were brilliantly green, with small lips and high cheekbones. That day, she was wearing denim overalls with a long-sleeved shirt underneath, and no shoes. Her bare feet were dirty, with bits of grass between her toes.

The living room was the biggest room in the house, with a long couch facing the window and a recliner perpendicular to it. The couch was newer, but the recliner appeared ancient and musty. Although it had evidence of wear and tear all over the place, Audrey had never seen it before. Perhaps it could have been a recent thrift. When they all entered the room, each one of them avoided it. It smelled of grime and old age. Instead, they all sat around it.

Audrey looked around. The house seemed quiet, and peaceful. Sam and her mother were different kinds of people compared to Audrey and hers. And what happened that day only further cemented this thought in her head. Her own mother felt that way, as well, about these two. She would always be a little too present when Sam came around to the house. If they were in the kitchen getting something to eat, her mother would suddenly be quite parched and need a drink from the refrigerator. If they were hanging out in the den, she would get the sudden urge to watch the news. It was both too subtle and too obvious, and after a while, they stopped hanging at her house.

Sam's living room was quite bare, apart from the seating furniture, and did not have a television. In fact, no room in the house had one. Comparatively, Audrey had a television in every room of her house, including each bathroom.

“So why are you girls home from school today so early?” Miss Amelia asked them. Sam and Audrey explained to her what had occurred at The Table earlier that afternoon, noting its intensity and emotional atmosphere. She nodded at this, “Good, then, I am glad they let you out. You deserve a break sometimes,” she smiled, and took a drink of water.

“How was your day?” Audrey asked her.

“Oh, you know, the usual. I didn’t do much, just stayed around the house, mostly,” she giggled a bit, “I’m not the normal kind of Mother these days, you could say. More of a homebody, rather than a go-getter. Very much unlike your Mother, obviously,” she said. Sam gave her a quick look. Amelia reddened a bit.

“All I mean is that...your Mother must be so busy with her museum, getting prepared for the new exhibit and all. A lot of factors to juggle with curation, and so forth.”

Audrey turned her head a bit to the side, “Well, of course she’s also busy, she is a Woman, afterall!” she said, and then realized what she said and quieted her voice a bit. Amelia, however, didn’t look hurt in the slightest, so she continued with her train of thought. “But I’m not so sure by what you mean by ‘new exhibit.’ I mean, I don’t think I have heard of anything,” Audrey finished. Amelia and Sam now looked at each other once again, this time slightly more nervously.

“You haven’t heard of anything?” Amelia asked, warily. Audrey shook her head no. “My apologies, then, I was sure I heard that around town. I could be wrong.” The way she said the words, “around town,” gave Audrey a slight shiver down her spine. She hadn’t heard her Mother discuss any upcoming exhibitions. If there was something new, she would know about it before the people around town knew about it. Before Amelia knew about it.

“Do you want to head upstairs, Audrey?” Sam asked her, “Or we could go outside if you want to?” Before she could respond, Amelia began to cough into her arm. When she removed her face from her sweater, blood appeared on the fibers. Sam’s eyes widened.

“Mom, are you okay?” she ran over and kneeled down next to her. Instead of responding, she continued to cough roughly, each cough deepening in sound. More blood spurted from her mouth, now staining both the couch and her daughter. She reached for the cup of water on the table beside her, and drank from it every time she had a second of relief. Sam rubbed her knee, noticing the blood splattered on their belongings. Instinctively, she removed her cardigan and began to wipe her mother clean. In the midst of this, Amelia reached down and slapped Sam’s cheek in between coughs. Sam retreated, shocked.

“Mom? What the hell?” she said. Audrey sat there, frozen. No one spoke another word until Amelia’s cough subsided, and she was able to spit out-

“Virgin Mary!” she coughed out, “Are those bare armpits?” Sam paled at the sound of this, and peeked down at her underarms. Even with her t-shirt on, one could see the absence of hair. But she didn’t seem immediately embarrassed or remorseful. Instead, she looked her mother in her eyes and said, “Yes.”

“Why would you embarrass us like that?” she said, voice loudening. “You know the odds are stacked against us already!” Her eyes were no longer at her daughter; they were looking far past her. “Has anybody else seen?” her eyes flicked over to Audrey.

Audrey slithered away from the two, resting her bottom on the musty recliner a few feet away. She tried not to look at either of them, and hid in the pretend cove on the recliner. But she couldn’t focus on anything else, despite feeling that she was watching something that shouldn’t be exposed. It was cracking open right in front of her.

“No, Mom,” Sam got up, “Nobody else has seen. But it shouldn’t matter that much if they did. It’s my own body,” she said. Amelia laughed.

“Oh, is it your own body? What if the wrong person saw, and they reported you as an Agitator, huh? Then what about my body? Don’t you think they would take me away, too?” she said.

“Nobody would take you away,” Audrey quickly jumped in, “You guys are good people, this really isn’t that big an issue,” she smiled nervously, trying to calm the situation down.

“What if she tells her-”

“She’s not going to tell her Mother,” she said, and then turned to Audrey, “You’re not going to tell your Mother, right?” This made Audrey’s inside curdle.

“Um...yeah. I’m not gonna say anything,” she said sheepishly. Amelia put her head in her hands, sighing. Sam sat down next to her, and put a hand on her back.

“It’s just that...there’s no need to keep adding targets on our back. Please, just ask me next time. I know more about the political climate right now more than you do, even if you don’t think so. And at school...I know Kiera doesn’t treat you right...those Table people never have. No matter how bright you burn, they poke their own eyes out to be blind to it.”

“Why doesn’t Kiera treat you right?” asked Audrey. Amelia opened her mouth but Sam cut her off.

“Because I’m Latina,” Sam said. A moment of silence or two ticked by, and the room around them felt heavier. Amelia bit her lip.

“I think I’m gonna go,” Audrey said, startled by the sound of her own voice. She started to get up out of her seat when Amelia put her hand up.

“Stay,” she said. Audrey stopped moving.

“You don’t leave. I’ll go. I have a few things I need to think about privately. I’m sorry this conversation took a turn. I’m deeply embarrassed. I would appreciate it if this stays between us, but I wouldn’t want to ask you to hide things from your own family,” she said. She started to leave the room when she called over her shoulder, “And Sam, tell your friend to get out of Dad’s chair,” and with that she briskly walked out of the den, into the foyer, and out of the house.

Audrey looked down at the chair and realized how obvious that it was that it was someone else’s chair. If she inhaled deeply she could even smell the remnants of a past person; a man. She does this a lot- not notice important details. It’s like skating through life, but not noticing it was on thin ice until after a fall. She moved her gaze to Sam, who was sitting there not looking her in the eye. Her long, brown hair fell beautifully over her shoulders. She pictured Amelia’s blonde hair.

She didn’t know Aubrey was Latina.

Chapter Three: Mother Knows Best

Jackie was six feet tall. She towered over all of her coworkers and friends, and she most definitely towered over Audrey. She moved to the refrigerator and grabbed a beer. She cracked it open on the marble island in the kitchen and the cap fell to the ground with a “cling.” Neither one of them reached to pick it up. Audrey watched her take a swig of the golden bubbly and rolled my eyes. She was just making her wait, wait. It had to be on her time. All the time. She plopped down on one of the stools near the island and pressed her forehead to the cool surface. It was late, and she was tired after this long day of revelations. The kitchen around them was expansive, white. She thought back to Sam’s house, her home, and noticed how different it feels here. She wondered if all her friends felt welcome in her house. They’re always invited, of course, but that doesn’t mean they feel comfortable when they get there. Even she feels on thin ice, sometimes, simply skating around the house, waiting for something to crack.

“You are aware work has picked up lately,” she looked at her, “so I am sorry if I haven’t been able to be as attentive as I should be. But it’s simply because I trust you,” she started walking towards her. Instinctively, Audrey moved backwards. She stopped, then, and continued her thought, “I trust you so much actually that I want you to be involved with work. It would be on the condition that it would be something you would want to do. I don’t need an unsatisfied adolescent running around. I would need the focused, smart, and dedicated Audrey I know you can be. I have created a role for you. It’s yours if you’re interested. But I swear to Virgin Mary, you know how important the museum is to me, so I hope you would consider this offer thoughtfully. You can’t go around hanging out with girls from school all the time.”

Her lips parted slightly when she said this. For weeks, she had been working day and night to make sure the museum would open on time. It was going to be in honor of the 50th anniversary of the first woman president. She had dozens of people working under her, and yet, she wanted to add her daughter to the roster.

“Okay,” Audrey said sort of sheepishly.

“Okay?” she asked, “Just okay? It’s gotta be better than okay if you want to work for your Mother!”

“Okay! It’s better than okay! It’s great!” she said.

Later that same night, Audrey was told to stay in her room and focus on her studies. Her mother was going to invite some friends over for a get together, and it was imperative that she have separate time away from being a “mother.” The house was so big that this wasn’t going to be hard, and her mother’s party was going to be held in the basement, anyway. That was her cave. Audrey didn’t necessarily have a cave in the house all to herself, other than her bedroom. In it, posters of Amelia Earhart and Susan B. Anthony were plastered

on the walls. She had fake flowers draped over her bedframe and piles upon piles of books in the corner, mostly autobiographies and history books. She knew a lot about the history of her country, as did most girls her age, but she was particularly fascinated by it. When she was younger, she spent hours with her nose in the autobiographies of people like Chelsea Clinton, Gwyneth Paltrow, and Millie Bobby Brown. Growing up, those were some of her heroes. She thought those women were quite interesting, both in their roads to fame but also in their roads to revolution. They don't allow just anybody to be the face of the twenty dollar bill, but Chelsea Clinton was a good choice. A national treasure.

Below her, she could hear women start to pile in the door. Her mother had lots and lots of friends and colleagues, both at the museum and from around the neighborhood. She didn't have a lot of friends from childhood, however. She had kept pretty private about her past. For instance, Audrey never even got to know her grandmother or understand really anything about her. Her mother was born from artificial insemination, as most people were after the revolution, except for a few traitors. Other than that, the details are missing. Audrey had pressed her, but after a while it just became outrightly disrespectful, because her mother had shut her lips and refused to talk to her. That was three years ago, and she hasn't asked about it since. It's not her childhood to know. But it is her grandmother to know.

Suddenly, below her, things began to quiet down as the party was starting to be moved to the basement. Strangely, she heard a few "shushing," amongst the giggling. Audrey looked to her bedroom door just as she heard the basement door shut. She went to her dresser and pulled out the softest, thickest socks she owned. She slid them over her feet, over her ankle hair and up her shins. They were very fluffy and in the shape of puppy dogs. In fact, Sam had gotten them for her for Easter one year, back when they were still intimate like that. She stood up in her room. If she had a mirror in there, she would look at herself in the face

and put on a game face. But alas, no mirrors allowed in the bedrooms. Too much vanity, apparently. As if her reflection would make her so captivated that it would hypnotize her. Her mother ran a tight ship around here, just like she did at the museum. She had wanted to work there growing up, but she was never allowed. She was either too young, or too naive. Not anymore.

She opened the door of her bedroom and stepped out into the hallway. The hallway was painted grey, with pictures of her mother with important women she had met throughout the years imprinted on the walls. She glanced around her, as if someone was going to pop out at her and tell her to go back and hide in her bedroom. But no one popped out, and her curiosity tugged at her, pulling her downstairs. She stepped quietly down the hallway and to the staircase, where she could peer down into the living room. No one was there. Just a lone clock, ticking, ticking. The lights were automatic, so although they were once dim, Audrey's presence made them glow brighter. This made her cringe, and think about turning back, but she also thought about what the worst case scenario could really be for her. Probably not much. She just wanted to see what they were doing. So she continued on, all the way down the staircase and to the edge of the door frame that led the basement. She pressed her ear up against the door, and although the basement was soundproofed for parties like exactly this one, she could still hear music playing through the door. It even had a beat to it. She checked the clock. It was past midnight. Through the door, she heard what sounded like a bottle of champagne pop, and an echo of "oohs," after it. All of the sound was muffled, but she could still hear. Very celebratory. What were these women doing at her house celebrating at a time like this? Lately, things hadn't felt like a celebration. They just felt confusing. These women didn't seem to agree.

Audrey eyed the doorknob for a moment before twisting it, let the sound fill the living room. It was a long staircase that led down into the basement, with most of it hidden by a wall, until the bottom of the stairs, where it opened up. Audrey tip-toed down a few of the steps, stopping every few to listen in on the women. She was creeping down when suddenly she heard something that made her hold her breath.

“Now you ladies get crazy, huh?” a deep voice said. A man’s voice. Audrey’s blood went cold. She had never had a man in her house before. Not once in all her years. The way her mother spoke about them, it was as if they were all diseased. And now there was one in her basement.

“Yeah we sure do!” said one of the women. Audrey recognized her voice as one of her next door neighbors, Sheila. Sheila had an even bigger house than they did, and not one child. Just a mansion all to herself.

Before she even took another step down the stairs, new smells wafted up to greet her. It was cigarette smoke mixed with an unfamiliar smell. It was herbal and thick and made her want to sneeze. More man talk, and giggling, and another pop of the champagne bottle. She felt unsafe. Even just the presence of a man in her own home made her feel defensive, even though it was obvious the women didn’t deem him as a threat. She heard her mother’s voice, then.

“Move those hips like that, yes,” Jackie purred. The other women cheered after a moment. Audrey couldn’t even believe what she was hearing. She had to see with her own eyes. She crouched down low to the ground, and slithered down the stairs one by one, until the wall and the railing opened up a sliver. She bent her head upside down to get a glimpse through the opening. None of the women could see her through the darkness, but she could see everything, all of it, in the lights of the party.

Standing with his shirt off, in just a gold speedo, was a dark-skinned man with muscles. His skin was glistening with oil, as he stood in the middle of the circle of middle-aged women. Some of the women, by now, were slumped to the side, passed out drunk. The others that were still awake, were vibrant with excitement and enthusiasm. The man had his back turned towards Audrey, so she couldn't see his face. But she didn't want to. She felt sick. Right past him, her mother lay topless with a bottle of wine at her lips, laughing. She looked like a drunken ringleader of the world's most evil circus. She looked more powerful than she ever had before. Before anything more happened, Audrey flung upright and raced back up the stairs, feet and hands scrambling her body up. When she got to the top, she heard a last, "He's going to look really, really good-" before she shut the door to the basement and never opened it again for the rest of the night.

Chapter Four: Portland, Maine

The rain had just begun to hit the dirt when the group of nine women started their trek up Cadillac Mountain. Beneath their feet, the smoky earth turned into sludge in a matter of minutes, which stuck to their boots and splashed up their pant legs. Each woman carried a light backpack, as well as some sort of hiking stick, allowing their heavy, soaking bodies relief from the ever-growing pressure. Around them, leaves tinted yellow and orange fell from their branches. The women quickly consumed the leaves under their feet, pushing the

dried foliage deeper into the mud. They hiked for over two hours like this, until the rain finally lightened up, and the clouds relinquished their stubborn confederation.

As soon as their feet hit the summit, the group collectively cried out in triumph. Some of them fell down to the wet ground and sat right on their rumps, wheezing for air. Others ran to the edge of the landing, letting the winds of Frenchman Bay hit their face. Maine in mid-October was breath-taking. The Porcupine Islands dotted the expansive view, as the warm sun modestly poked holes through the sky, which seemed to be so much nearer than it ever was before. Audrey, the youngest of the group, took off her backpack and sat right on top of it, letting her body rest while her eyes indulged. This may have been the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

Mariah, the leader of the retreat, turned her back on the view and faced the women. All eyes flickered to meet her gaze.

“This is why we do this,” she said slowly. She looked down at her dirty hands, and mud-soaked pants. “This is why we woke up at five a.m this morning, hiked through the freezing rain, and exhausted ourselves out completely,” she then turned back to the view, “For this.” Everyone nodded their heads in unison. The cold winds were striking their jackets and cheeks, reddening their skins, but at this point nobody was paying attention to that. They were in awe.

“I didn’t know there was this much beauty in the world,” Audrey said, breathless, “Everyone only seems to talk about climate disaster, the end of the world...but this seems like just the beginning to me.” Mariah smiled at her, and went to squat down next to her. She put an arm around her shoulder.

“The world is a scary place, darlin’. It’s our job to protect it, no one else can. But why would we protect something we don’t love, first? You gotta fall in love with this planet

before you get around to saving it,” she said. Audrey began to shiver under her arm, so Mariah pulled her in closer. The other women around were sitting on the edge of the mountaintop, but to them, it felt like the edge of the world.

“This is a great retreat, Mar,” an older woman named Beth called out. She was covered head-to-toe in colorful scarves and jackets. The scarves appeared to endlessly wrap around her neck and arms, creating a somewhat rainbow effect. “Thank you so much.”

Mariah chuckled softly, “No need to thank me, Beth. This was just as beneficial for me as it was for all of you ladies. And heck, this trip was completely sponsored by that new museum, anyways. The real person we should be thanking is Jackie, Audrey’s Mother.” At this, she gave Audrey a small squeeze. The Table had allowed her to take the week off for this retreat. She felt like she really needed this break from reality, and her Mother had handed her one on a silver platter.

Chapter Five: The Duarte Museum of Us

From afar, The Duarte Museum of Us seemed to loom over the city, with its glass walls bending and stretching over many of the streets below. The building was so gargantuan that it blocked the sun from nearby city-goers, including any shrubbery or plant life that attempted to grow underneath its shade, so the sidewalks stayed deserted and the dirt lay cold and lifeless. Audrey was running to work there, her feet tripping underneath her long skirt

with every step. She wasn't going to be late, but the words of her mother pulsed in her head, "Come early. The lines will be out the door." This was the first time she was ever asked to be involved with the museum, and she wanted to make a good first impression.

The sidewalk below her was cracked and crumbling, reminiscent of the neighborhood that surrounded it. Although it was a bright morning, shades were drawn and the grasses on each lawn stayed untrimmed and overgrowing. She passed by this neighborhood every day that seemed a lot like her own, but only much closer to the museum than hers was. Here, people didn't wave good morning to her, didn't smile, didn't stop to chat about the weather. But she would occasionally catch someone staring at her from the shade of their porch, their dark skin blending in, but their pale eyes reaching out to meet her, to watch. The dogs here never barked, but when you drew nearer, they always would bite. The people were pretty much the same. This morning, there was a Missing Person sign posted to a telephone pole. It was a picture of a young man from the nearby colonies.

But Audrey didn't have time to think about that today. That day was the grand opening of a new exhibition at the museum, and since the budget had allotted for plenty of advertisement, there was sure to be people coming from all over to see it. As she jogged closer to The Duarte, she could already see that their predictions had come true. Cars of all different sizes lined the streets, including multiple limousines and Hummers. Those were a rare sight. Ever since the EPA reported a less than fifty-year countdown until eco-apocalyptic disaster back in 2033, the government under her Queenship outlawed almost all gasoline-powered vehicles. They also halted the production of beef and tobacco, banned single-use plastics, and established a travel ban across borders. People who were born after this ban had never stepped foot outside of the country they were born in, which was a lot different than the county it used to be regardless. The sky was hardly ever blue, there were

simply less people, caused by the high amounts of death from disease, as well as a huge decrease in childbirth, and men and women no longer interacted at all. The last two changes were steps in the right direction, however, leading to a better and brighter future for all.

“Prime Minister, welcome!” Jackie shouted from her perch on the entryway steps, “We are delighted to have you!” She flew down the stairs in one swift motion to shake the large minister’s hand as she stepped out of the black limousine. Audrey gawked at her mother as she embraced the Prime Minister of Canada as if they have been lifelong friends. “Please, the pleasure is all mine,” she replied with a smile, “And please, you know you can call me Charlotte!” she turned to the audience that had materialized beside him, “This Woman has been a wonderful partner of mine for the past few months on this exhibition!” Jackie laughed next to her, delighted, and invited her into the museum, pushing past many of the people who had been in line for seemingly hours. Audrey rushed in right behind the duo, flashing her identification card to the security as she slinked by. She could hear a collective sigh from the crowd as the doors closed, their necks craning to get a peek inside. It was 7:57 a.m and doors would officially open any minute now. She began panicking at this, for she still needed to be briefed on what they would expect from her today, and she couldn’t foresee a lapse in her mother’s conversation with the minister.

“Do you work here?” she heard, and turned around to see a bearded brown man in coveralls and sweat on his face. He was wheeling a tall stack of chairs that looked like it was going to tip over any second. She recoiled at the sight of him.

“Yes,” she said, “but I’m just-”

“Good,” he said quickly, “Just come help me get onto the elevator. This exhibition needs to start on time or there’s going to be an uproar out there,” he said, and began wheeling away.

“Excuse me?” she stopped him, “Who do you think you’re talking to, cad?” He turned around for just a moment and gave a small smile.

“Sorry, *Miss*. Please pardon me. I’m just trying to get this done so that everything can look fresh in here,” he said, “But you’re right. I can wait for you to decide if you’re busy.” At that moment, the front doors to the museum behind them began to burst open, although there were guards on all sides of it. She blushed with anger.

“I could report you instantly!” she said.

“You could...or you could help me with these chairs,” he sighed, and leaned an arm up on the stack, “I’m feeling pretty weak nowadays. Hurts to even get up in the morning, got these weak bones,” he said. Audrey considered the man. He looked to be no older than fifty, and yet, he did look worn down. The doors continued to pound, and, as she looked down at her watch, the clock read 8:07.

“Okay, I’ll help you,” she said, “But you have to hurry.” She began to push the heavy cart alongside him, making sure not to even graze elbows. The trek across the museum was longer than she thought, and after just a minute of pushing, she was out of breath. When they took a break, they stopped in front of the large room where the new exhibition was supposed to be. It was still completely empty.

“What is going on?” Audrey said, “Why isn’t anything hung up yet?” The worker side-eyed her and gave a little snort, but it didn’t sound like a laugh.

“Lady, there ain’t gonna be anything *hung up*. Don’t you know what kinda museum this is? It’s not that kinda game out here anymore,” he said, and began pushing the stack again. When they reached the elevator to go downstairs, he put a hand out.

“Alright, that’s enough, thank ya,” he grunted. Audrey put a hand out to push the “Down” button, but the man grabbed her wrist.

“I’m sorry, I can’t let you go down there. Authorized personnel only.” But Audrey couldn’t hear a word he was saying. Her blood was pumping fast inside her body as her eyes stayed glued to the part of her arm where she was grabbed. She took a step back from him, shaking.

“Hey, I’m sorry if-” he began, but she was already running in the other direction.

Audrey returned to the now ever-growing crowd in the lobby, her boss now on a raised platform. She was smiling ear to ear with bright red cheeks, standing close by the Prime Minister. They both beamed down at the audience, whose volume increased with each passing second. Audrey stood in the front row with the rest of the museum staff, all glancing at each other with both excitement and anxiety. They had never seen so many people in the museum before.

“Ladies,” she took the microphone from its stand, “I would like to welcome you Duarte Museum’s 2055 opening reception for our new exhibition, Our Small, Big World!” Claps emerged from the crowd, with a few whoops and hollers from the staff. Audrey stared up at her boss with new eyes, bright and admiring.

“We all have been working diligently on this exhibit for more than half of the year, and for a very important reason. As you all know, it’s been over ten years now since the recreational travel ban was put in place, leaving many people feeling stranded on their one tiny continent. And although the environment thrived off of this decision, we all have suffered,” she frowned down at the audience, and they all frowned up at her. “But I am pleased to announce that our suffering shall go on no more. No more will we all feel so far away from one another, so disconnected, and so ignorant about the other side of the world,” here, she motioned to her aids, and they started turning knobs and punching codes into their devices. “Because with Our Small, Big World, the world is coming to you!” she motioned to

the empty room behind him with one, grand swing of her arm. Immediately, different sections of the floor separated, and from them sprouted large, long glass boxes that lined the room. The glass boxes were not empty.

“Look! They’re mannequins!” people exclaimed in the crowd.

“Oh my gosh! Oh no-I think, I think they’re moving! Are they robots?”

“No,” Audrey said, eyes wider than ever, “They’re people.” And people they were. Men with paint on their faces, and masks, and leather. They each had different hair styles, and outerwear, and makeup. Real people, separated by glass. They represented everyone, and no one, all at once.

“Who are they?” one woman yelled. Many were cheering in the crowd. The noise was a dull roar of a mixture of questions and exclamations. The Prime Minister had a look of worry on her face, and when Jackie saw this she once again took the microphone, “Let me tell you a little bit about these people. These people come from all over the world, from Egypt to Turkey to Chile. If you peer at their nametags, you will notice the year they were born and the country they originate from.” The crowd rushed to the glass boxes to examine said nametags, but quickly their eyes were glued to the people in the boxes. Audrey couldn’t help but be a sheep in this crowd, and found herself face-to-face with the first person she could get to: a Chinese monk. She gasped when she saw him in there. He peered down at her, but seemed to not really look at her, but rather, past her. He was bald and wore an orange robe and was completely barefoot. A little kid below her got very close to the glass and started tapping it, but it made no sound. The mother quickly grabbed her arm away.

“Ah, yes,” Jackie came over to Audrey and the child, “Do not worry, young one. These boxes are sound proof!” she now was speaking to a more general audience, “We have paid these people generously to have them imported here to see this performance art, and we

also let them take a little snooze if they so please,” she laughed as the monk began to drool on his robe. Audrey looked down the hallway at the rest of the performers. They all sat in chairs, halfway slumped over, eyes glazed or not even open at all. Each box already had a huge audience gathered around, cameras out and flashing. There were men in some boxes who wore long dresses, with jewelry undulating from their faces to their torsos. Bright paint coated eyelids and cheeks of many, and one even had a bone through his nose. She continued walking further into the exhibit. The next box contained a younger man from Kenya, dressed in a one-sided kimono-like sleeve that was colorful and patterned. On top of his head lay matching headwear. At closer look, she realized this man was only twenty years old, most likely the youngest in the exhibit.

“This is...amazing,” Audrey breathed. Her mother smiled at her and put a hand on her shoulder. Audrey was not a world traveler, nor could she ever be since the travel ban was put in place. She had always dreamed of seeing the mountains of Nepal, or meeting the people of Mongolia, or exploring what’s left of the Amazon forest. Now, these people have come from around the world right to her own city. Her heart was racing out of her chest at the thought of being able to speak to them personally. They probably have experienced so much, and could give insight into what the world is really like. It was a shame they were kept away through the thick glass, but the crowds would be much too overbearing otherwise. People could get hurt.

“I’m so happy you enjoy this new exhibit,” Jackie said to her, “I have a feeling we can work much more closely in the upcoming months. I’m going to need you for a lot of different responsibilities.” At this, Audrey nodded her head rapidly. Jackie turned her head to examine the flow of traffic in the exhibit, which continued to bustle.

“This is art,” Audrey declared.

“Our art,” Jackie finished. Audrey remembered the museum worker who grabbed her, and pulled on her mother’s sleeve lightly to tell her what happened. She asked her to describe him, and she did. She told her she would take care of it, and not to worry.

Audrey clocked out of work late that day, for she couldn’t help but to stay longer to appreciate the new exhibit. The crowds also grew so big that they had to cut the line off at some point. She walked home while the sun set behind her, which illuminated the rest of the outskirts of the city in front of her. It looked so beautiful covered in orange and yellow, with small ranches and trees and bicycles on the roads. The new exhibit would bring in so much revenue for the museum. There hadn’t been that many visitors in years. Although she had only been working there for a couple of weeks, she truly felt like this was a step up from where she once was. Her and her mother had grown a lot closer, ever since she started working with her. Because of the new job, she also hadn’t had a lot of free time to hang out with her friends. Mainly, Sam. She hadn’t physically returned to Sam’s house since the day she revealed her hair removal, but her mind wandered back to home on late evenings, when there was nothing to distract her from her own heart.

“Excuse me, girl,” somebody grabbed Audrey by the arm. Audrey flinched away from the grab and the person let go. She turned to see a middle aged woman, with greying, tight curls and downturned, dark eyes. She was about to yell for help when the woman handed her a flyer.

“Please, take this,” she said quickly, “It’s a photo of my son, Efreem. He’s been missing for a few months now.” Audrey looked down at the flyer and recognized it from the one she saw earlier that morning. She started shaking her head, “I’m sorry, I haven’t seen him,” and attempted to hand the woman the flyer back. The woman did not take it back, but

rather, leaned in closer. She smelled of tobacco and body odor, which again made Audrey retreat. She quickly stuffed the flyer in her bag without a second glance. The woman was in what looked like a nightgown, with stains lining the front, and stood about a full half foot shorter than her. Her intense presence scared Audrey to no end. The museum workers had warned her that the museum wasn't in the best neighborhood, and was a lot closer to the colonies than she was used to. She was surprised to hear the word, "son." Women usually abandoned their baby boys to grow up in the colonies with the younger men. If not, they were traitors. Audrey eyed the woman suspiciously. The woman cocked a bushy eyebrow at her, and lowered her voice to almost a whisper, "You work at the museum, don't you?" At this, Audrey paled. How did this crazy lady know where she worked? She began to back up, but the woman grabbed her by the arm again, tighter this time.

"Please, you have to help me, I'm his Mama. There's something going on in that museum, and they won't let me in. I don't got the money for it, you understand? I think they got my son in there. Somethin' evil is afoot," the lady's eyes were wide and scared now, and Audrey took her bag and hit the lady with it, hard enough for her to let go.

"I'm not giving you any money!" she yelled. She started running in the opposite direction when she heard from behind her, "Tell that Misses Jackie we're coming for them! We're all gonna tear that building down to the ground! It's either you're with us, or you're against us!"

She turned around to see the lady standing in the middle of the road, flyers taking to the wind around her. Facing back, the sun was in her eyes now, and the lady seemed more like a dark shadow contrasting the tangerine sun that enveloped her. She couldn't see her eyes anymore, but she could tell she was looking right at her. Not past her, but right at her.

When Audrey arrived at work the next day, there was a small crowd of people again gathered outside. She could see them from far away, and wondered why there was still so many people. But there looked to be a woman-made device just outside of the museum; a tall, wooden structure on wheels. Audrey crept closer to take a peek before work. Strangely enough, Jackie was perched on a podium right next to it. Beside her, there was a man with a bag over his head.

“This man,” she said into the microphone, “assaulted a woman yesterday here at the museum,” her voice was strong, bold. The crowd whispered at each other before she proclaimed loudly, “And for that, he must die.” Audrey gasped. The man was led up a few stairs and had a rope tied around his neck. Ten seconds later, his legs were swinging wildly in the air. After a minute, his legs were limp and dangling in the wind. Audrey rushed past the crowd, and into the museum. She didn’t need to see any more. The crowd dispersed quickly thereafter.

Chapter Six: Phone a Friend

When she got home later that day, she was still shaken up. The house was quiet, apart from the clock ticking in the living room. “Mother?” she called out, but she heard no reply. She put her bag down and headed to her room upstairs. She couldn’t stop thinking about that lady and what she said yesterday. She didn’t know if she was an Agitator, but she was definitely a traitor, not respecting the Separation and all that. But as she thought about it, she thought back to the night when she saw the man in her basement, being egged on by both her

mother and her colleagues. She had gotten to know some of those colleagues even more now that she worked at the museum, and they were nice women. She couldn't understand why they weren't repulsed by the man. That was how she was raised. Men were pigs. Had to kept away to a different part of town, because if let free, they would rape and pillage. They had done it before in history, and they would do it again. Then why let one in the house, where your daughter is upstairs sleeping? Even though she obviously wasn't sleeping, and didn't quite get a full hour of sleep the rest of the night, either. It's hard for one to sleep with a wild animal in the house.

That's she had told her mother about the incident with the museum worker, and she told her she would take care of it immediately.

As she was thinking about it, the upstairs phone rang. Audrey opened her door and headed to the study. She picked up the phone without a thought, "Hello, Audrey speaking."

"Hey, Audrey," someone said on the line, and Audrey's heart stopped for a moment, "It's Sam."

"Oh...hi Sam. Nice to hear from you," she tried to respond cheerily, but her voice wavered. It came out more like a nervous croak. She cleared her voice.

"Hey. Yeah. I've been trying to reach you for a few weeks now. Your Mother has said you've been really busy, working at the museum and all," Sam said. Audrey's cheeks reddened.

"Yeah, I've been working there. I didn't know you called, I guess my Mother forgot to mention," she said. Which seemed only half-true, now, because her Mother had mentioned Sam called. But only once. Not loads of times. She suddenly felt very guilty.

"Well, okay. I just wanted to call and see how you've been doing. I haven't seen you in a while...and I didn't know if I did something wrong."

“No, no!” Audrey said quickly, “You didn’t do anything wrong. My life has just been really hectic lately, that’s why I haven’t been able to hang.”

“Or call?”

Audrey was silent for a moment. “I’m sorry,” she said.

“It’s fine,” Sam sighed, “It just seemed like you suddenly got really busy when I, um, confessed some things about myself. And my family. Right after that, you just took off. And honestly, I’ve been missing you. But if you stopped hanging out with me because of any of those things, I think that’s pretty pathetic.”

Audrey bit her lip. She didn’t exactly know why she had been avoiding Sam. That day was pretty overwhelming. First, Sam showed her bare armpits. And if that was it, she could have handled it. But then she goes to her house, and also finds out that one of her closer friends is Latina and never even thought to mention it? And, she could have sworn Sam’s mother mentioned a dad. That last part really freaked her out big time. It all seemed too easy to stay away from her. Plus, she really did want to work at the museum, and get closer to her own mother. Sam and her mom’s relationship was an obvious signal to her that she had some gaps to fill with her own relationship with her mom. Or, mother, as she prefers to be called.

“It was a lot,” she admitted, and heard Sam curse on the other end of the line. She quickly continued, “but that’s no reason why I shouldn’t have just talked it out with you. I mean, you’re right, I’ve been missing you, too. I think I just had some stuff to figure out. I got scared.”

“You’re scared of me?” Sam threw at her.

“No, that’s not it,” she said, “I’m just not...as political as you are. You’re so, I don’t know, brave. You’re always pushing the boundaries of what’s right and wrong. That’s awesome. I just don’t know who I am yet. Or if I’m like that.”

“But you are!” Sam burst out, “That’s what I don’t get! You are brave, Audrey. You’re one of the most spunky girls at the whole entire Table. I mean, sure, your Mother brainwashes you a bit...”

“Hey!” Audrey yelled, but couldn’t help but cracking a smile.

“You know it’s true,” Sam said.

“Yeah, well, screw me for wanting to try to foster a relationship with my Mother, Miss Mommy’s Girl.” Just then, she heard the door open downstairs. Her mother didn’t call up to her, but instead headed straight for the kitchen. Audrey brought the phone closer to her face, and quietly shut the door to the study with her foot.

“That’s sort of what I wanted to talk to you about. I have been meaning to talk to you about something. I can’t talk to anyone else about it, not at The Table, at least. But when you ran out on me the other week, I didn’t know if you’re the right person to talk to about it now, either,” Sam said.

Suddenly, Audrey’s heart broke. She really had been missing Sam, and she didn’t even fully realize it. The only person she had been talking to was her mother. And her mother isn’t really a friend.

“I’m so sorry, Sam. You can tell me anything, and I won’t run out on you.”

“You promise?”

“I promise.”

“Well, I think I found my dad. And I think he’s in your museum.”

Chapter Seven: Mom Knows Best

When Audrey arrived at Sam's house, she noticed how still everything was. The garden appeared overgrown, with vines wrapping up the pipes surrounding the house. Birds were chirping in the distance, but all of them were hidden in the trees, not a soul was flying around. The wind blew against her neck, making her peach fuzz erect and prickly. She ran up to the door and knocked a few times. After a moment, Sam opened the door, and let her inside. They embraced.

“I’m happy you came,” Sam said, “I know what I said on the phone was alarming.”

“Well...I guess you’ll just have to tell me more. It’s not that I don’t believe you, it’s just that you haven’t given me any evidence. So we can just talk, first,” she said. She felt slightly awkward saying that, but it was the truth. She wasn’t going to believe something like that without some real proof. Honestly, she came over here not because of Sam’s big news, but more so just because she missed her. From down the hallway, they heard some coughing. It was deep and throaty and sounded awful.

“My Mom’s been pretty sick, recently,” she said, looking down. The coughs kept coming until finally they heard the sound of heaving. Tears welled in her eyes, “The doctors said it’s just a cold and sent her home. They won’t take her into the hospital.” Audrey’s heart fell, as she remembered that her mom was coughing the last time she came over, too. And yet, she hadn’t even asked if she was okay. This made her feel especially bad.

Sam waved her hand, “Let’s just go outside. She’s been like this all week, she’s not getting better or worse if we just listen to it. I’ve been by her side this whole time.” With that, they stepped outside the house and into the light of the sun. They headed straight for the treehouse in the woods. They hadn’t been there in a few months, or maybe it was years, but they remembered how to get there without skipping a beat. The path, too, was overgrown. Grass had grown through the dirt, and they stomped it down as they walked. It’s a place they would go when they had nothing else to do, and nowhere to be. It’s where they talked about music, and meditation, and what life was going to be like when they were older. It’s where they grew up. It’s where they had their first kiss. And their last.

“Oh no,” Audrey exclaimed as the treehouse came into view, “It looks like it rotted.” And it did. The tree that once grew luscious leaves, now only grew brittle sticks. It’s trunk was wet and dark brown, and emitted a ghastly smell.

“Why would it do that?” Sam asked, angrily, as she examined it closely, “It was alive just a few months ago, I swear it.” The treehouse still sat on a thick trunk a few feet above them, with the ladder they left there leaning against it. It didn’t look safe anymore. “Shit, we have stuff up there!” she peered up, “Memories...” she said, quieter. Audrey noticed how sad her friend appeared, and offered up a suggestion, “Why don’t we just scoot up there and grab our things?”

“That’s dangerous, man,” Sam said, shaking her head. Audrey turned and looked at her.

“Did you say call me, ‘man’?” she asked. Sam turned red, “What? No, I would never,” she stammered a bit but didn’t meet her eye.

“Where did you pick that up?” she asked. Sam shrugged. “Come on, Sam. Seems like I’m not the only one who’s been distant. What’s with all the secrets?”

“I don’t know, I didn’t mean to say that. Just back off, alright? I like your idea. I’m gonna go up and grab our pictures and notes,” she said quickly, and put her foot on the ladder. Audrey sighed, and went over to spot her.

“Be careful,” she said, but Sam ignored her and kept climbing. When she got to the branch, she took a slow step inside and grabbed some of the scattered sentimental supplies. The tree moaned and whistled as the wind blew, and Audrey had to keep ahold of the ladder to keep it from falling down. The branch that the treehouse was perched on was also a dark brown color, seemingly a mirror image of the rotting tree trunk.

“I found some stuff,” Sam called down. But as she backed out of the door, her foot slipped and she fell down hard on one of the branches, which let out a cracking sound.

“Sam!” Audrey yelled, “Are you okay? Get out of there!” The treehouse was only a few feet off the ground, but it wouldn’t be good if the whole house collapsed on top of her

and they fell to the ground. So instead, Sam took a blind jump from the treehouse onto the ground with a “thwump,” with some photos clutched in her hands.

“Awh, Jesus fuck,” she yelled, clutching her elbow, “What the hell did I land on?” Audrey came racing over and kneeled down next to her. Her arm was scraped and bloody, but other than that, she looked okay. No cracked skull. Above them, the treehouse swayed in the wind.

“Seriously, what’s this? A root?” Sam whined, and rummaged through some of the debris. Her backside was all wet and dirty. She cleared through a layer of dead pine needles and leaves to reveal a pipe, with water running out of it.

“What is this? The water runoff from my house?” she looked at it.

“I don’t know,” Audrey said, “But are you okay?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Sam said, peering at the pipe, “It’s just a scrape.” It was as if she immediately forgot about her bruised elbow, and was now hypnotized by the pipe. Audrey stood up and reached out her hand to help her up, but she ignored her and stayed in the pile of wet dirt, letting it seep into her pants and shirt. She let out an impatient sigh, and looked around at the woods. None of the other trees appeared to be affected, and grew bright leaves that swirled with different shades of green. Sam noticed her looking around, and looked around at the trees, too. Everything was quiet for a moment.

“Why is only this tree dead,” Sam said, blankly, as if it were a statement and not a question. She looked down at the pipe underneath her body, and traced her fingers along the rim of the pipe. The water was cool and clear as it poured out of it and into the earth, and also onto her body.

“Maybe it’s the water,” Audrey said.

“Maybe it’s the water,” Sam repeated.

They walked back to the house silently, with Sam's clothes dripping wet with mud and debris. In the midst of the chaos, she had even left the photos back at the treehouse, stuck under some dirt and sticks. Sam seemed far away, distant. Her mind was somewhere else, and yet Audrey was still standing right there next to her. It's strange, to be physically close to someone, but know they do not sense you. In contrast, she was keenly aware of every step they took, and every second of silence that passed by. When they reached the opening of the woods, they stopped and looked at the house in the distance. From here, it seemed even smaller.

Sam didn't look at her when she spoke, and when she spoke, the words came out mumbled, and disjointed. Audrey didn't even know if she was supposed to hear what she was saying, or if she was speaking just to herself. But when she didn't answer, Sam spoke again, but louder this time.

"What if bad things are happening," she said, and then turned to look at her, "would you do something?"

"What do you mean?" Audrey said, smally.

Sam continued on, "Okay, let's say you didn't do something. Because you're so wrapped up in everything you can't see it. But what if I did? Because I can see it? Would you listen to me, or would you need to see it for yourself in order to do something?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"I mean the world, Audrey, the country! Things are happening all around us, all of the time. I mean, really, I tell you that I think my dad is in your Mother's museum, and you haven't even mentioned it once. It must have been on your mind, this whole time? Why not inquire?" she was getting worked up now, and in response, Audrey got worked up, too.

“Because that’s crazy-talk!” she exploded, “Because why do you even have a dad, Sam? I don’t ask because I don’t want to know. If you weren’t born from artificial insemination, your Mother is a traitor, and-”

“And if she is?”

“If she is a traitor?”

“Yes, if she is a traitor, what would you do? Tell on us? Tell your Mother? Take her away from me?” Sam pressed, “Poison our water?” Audrey’s mouth was agape.

“Is that what you think is happening?” she asked. Sam turned and kicked the ground her with her foot. “I don’t know what is happening,” she said, but Audrey was riled up now.

“How do you know that your dad is in the museum? How do you know of his whereabouts?” she asked, stepping closer to her. Sam sat down on the ground again, letting her wet pants soak into the dirt.

“Because my Mom and I have kept in contact with him, all these years. Not all of the time, but sometimes. They were in love during the Separation, but kept sneaking around to see each other, and that’s when she got pregnant with me. When I was younger, he used to be able to sneak out of the colonies and come to the house, but they have really tightened their restraints and I wasn’t able to see him for years. When I got older, I decided it was my right to see him, so I went to him,” she began smiling, “and he’s great. He’s a really great man,” she said.

Audrey was paralyzed during the story. A part of her wanted to scream and hide, but the other part of her wanted to know everything Sam knew, as if she had been waiting for years to know exactly this.

“Where is he now?” Audrey whispered.

“He disappeared. I went to see him a couple of months ago, but all of his friends said he disappeared in the nighttime. Apparently a few other men did, too, around the same time. So I’ve still been visiting the colony, trying to track down information about his whereabouts. The only thing they think is that he was taken to work at the museum.”

Audrey thought back to the museum. Not a lot of men worked there. Especially not anymore. Had Sam heard what happened there? She felt like a spotlight was being shown on her, and it made her squirm, uncomfortable.

“You think I have the answers, but I don’t,” she squeaked. Sam shook her head.

“No, I don’t think you have all the answers. In fact, I know you don’t. But I just don’t know why you never asked for them.” With this, she got up, and looked back towards her house.

“I have to go talk to my Mom,” she said, “Do you want to come with me?”

Audrey bit her lip, and hesitated before whispering a quiet, “Yes.”

“Mom!” Sam called into the house, with Audrey right behind her. The door swung open as they flew in, and stayed open as they rushed to her room. Sam knocked on the door.

“Mom? Can I come in? Audrey’s here!” she asked, turning the doorknob. A moment flew by, and with no reply, Sam flung it open.

“Mom!” she exclaimed, when she saw her mom in the bed, unmoving. Audrey went pale when she saw Sam crouch down beside her bed and grab her hand. But after a second, her mom let out a cough.

“Oh, Mom,” tears welled in her eyes, “are you alright? I’m so worried about you.”

She nodded, “Yes, honey, I was just sleeping. Don’t you worry about me-” but as she said it, she began coughing again. Audrey stood stiff in the corner, worried that the woman was going to die right before their eyes. But instead, she sat up and put a pillow behind her head.

“Sam...maybe it’s not the right time for company right now, I’m so tired...and dizzy,” she breathed loudly, and reached for her cup of water. At this point, Sam stopped her.

“Mom, this is what we came here to talk to you about,” she turned and looked at Audrey with pleading eyes, so Audrey came a few steps closer.

“We have suspicions that our water’s been poisoned,” Sam said. Her mom closed her eyes and shook her head back and forth, “No, no, no, you’re wrong. I’m just sick. I’m just very...tired,” and as she said that, her head pressed into the pillow deeper.

“Please don’t go to sleep, we have to talk to you.”

“No, no, no...”

“Audrey and I found something in the woods.”

She shook her head again, “Get your cousin out of here-” she breathed, “I think I’m gonna yak-” she sat up violently and heaved. Sam fell backwards into Audrey’s legs, and they both backed up as vomit spilled everywhere on the bed. They stumbled out into the hallway into the fresh air, leaving Amelia with some essence of privacy. Audrey cleared her throat, but didn’t look at Sam.

“Cousins.” Audrey said. “I don’t think so. She’s delirious right now,” despite saying this, she shifted away from her. Sam didn’t move.

“I didn’t know,” Sam said, a little too quickly.

“Shut up,” Audrey told her, “it’s not real. Of course it’s not real. We’ve been together in the past...our Mothers would have told us. Besides, they look nothing alike.”

“You’re right, they don’t,” Sam hesitated, “But...your Mother and my dad kind of do.”

Audrey went pale again.

Chapter Eight: Us and Them

The night was near. Winds were stirring up in the trees, and in the shadows, the museum looked larger and more menacing, as if it was a predator waiting to go in for the kill. The two girls were dressed in gray, the zipper tails of their jackets whipping in the wind. It was a warm wind, and carried scent of pine and smoke. Far away, someone was having a bonfire, and the smell trickled through the air into their noses.

Audrey pulled out her key to the museum, given to her on her first day of work. It made her grimace, remembering the trust her mother had placed in her, and how disappointed she would be if she saw her now. But things were changing faster than they ever had been, and the last image that flicked through her mind was the oily, dark skin of the man in her basement. She turned the key.

They entered, making each footstep light and purposeful. They spoke with eye-contact and head nods, slipping past the empty front desk and into the galleries. The museum was grand on the inside and expansive on the inside. It reeked of wealth. Jackie had been promoted when the museum was on the brink of bankruptcy, but in just a few years with just a few ideas, she was able to turn it in to one of the country's greatest attractions. People from all over had come to see the men from Tanzania, Japan, Ecuador. They couldn't visit these places themselves ever, or if they were lucky, anymore.

Audrey's heart beat fast in her chest; she felt like a scared little bunny. Sam, however, had a look of intent on her face. She moved ahead of her and led the way through the art. Audrey stayed a few feet away from her, leaving room for her to move as she pleased, careful not to touch. She felt filthy for ever touching her, but more than anything, she felt angry at their mothers for never telling them. It wasn't her fault. It was theirs.

It made sense why whenever Sam was over at the house, her Mother would linger just a little bit longer. Hovering. Watching. Curious. But if they were family, if it was true, why hide it? Was it because he was an Agitator, and she was ashamed? That isn't an excuse to withhold the truth, and now it had left her confused and angry. She regarded Amelia, and how mysterious she was. She had this relationship with a man, illegally, and now had allowed her daughter to be wrapped up in it, too.

“This way,” Sam whispered in the dark. She followed her into the gallery of Our Big Small World, expecting the glass boxes to at least be there, even if the men weren’t. When the gallery was empty, they looked at each other, eyebrows raised. They stood in the dark, not knowing what to do. And then Audrey thought of the worker, and a ping of guilt hit her stomach.

“I know how to get to them,” she said, her throat tightening.

When the elevator hit the ground floor, it landed with a heavy thud. It opened up, quietly, without a bell or welcoming chime. The doors slid back to reveal yet another dark room, one neither of them had been in before. Audrey could see in the dark the glass boxes, and realized they were right under where the gallery was. But they weren’t looking for the boxes, they were looking for the men, which they had expected to be somewhere in bedrooms down there in the basement. But when they turned on the lights, they gasped.

The basement resembled the white room of the new exhibit, with the same glass boxes lining the walls. Each box stood at attention and engrossed the room. There had to be over twenty five of them, and the men were indeed, still inside. No bed, but just the same chairs they were sitting in when they were being displayed. Beside each of them lay a cool, metal tray, with a filled syringe and a napkin on top. The end of a tube that connected to the inside of the box lay exposed on the tray, waiting and ready to ingest the liquid. Sam found herself tip-toeing over to the first box, and Audrey followed right behind. It was almost twice as tall as her and just as wide. The tip of the syringe was both sharp and inviting, and she was nervous for just a moment that she would prick herself.

Audrey’s mind was racing and her heart was pounding so loudly in her chest. But these worries quickly escaped her mind when she looked up to meet the eyes of the young

Kenyan man, whose eyes were no longer small slits but bright, and wide, and staring at her. She jumped back at the sight of him, covering her mouth. His headgear had fallen off his head, and his hands and feet were strapped down to the chair he sat in. She couldn't help but to feel exhilarated by the very sight of him, so close to her and so intimate. She stepped closer to him, without ever breaking their eye-contact.

The young man, although his eyes stayed broad and open, was noticeably tired. His shoulders remained slightly slumped over and his neck hung lower than it should have. Nothing about him seemed alert or erect. Audrey regarded him. She pressed her hand to the glass and peered deeply at him. As her eyes fell upon him directly, he began to open his mouth. He opened his mouth wider, and wider, until finally his whole face was scrunched up and his head was shaking. His chest heaved inwards and outwards heavily for many breaths. She didn't understand what he was doing, until she saw a single tear fall down his cheek.

"It's okay, it's okay, don't cry!" she said, and placed her other hand on the glass. Sam continued to walk along the room, checking every one for her father. Inside the box, he continued to sob uncontrollably, almost to the point where she thought she could make out his cries. She wished desperately to help him, but didn't know what she should do. Let him out for a little while? Would that make him feel better? But she realized if she let him go, he would be able to over power her.

"Just remember: That is art. That is art we paid for. And that's all there is to it," Jackie had said to her at the opening of the exhibit, and then rushed away to make phone calls. These men were all under contract, and they were just performers. Maybe this guy was having a bad day. There wasn't much she could do about it, really. She was about to walk away from him, when his mouth began to change shape. His lips pushed together as if he were saying something to her, to someone. She examined him closely, now, and was so

enticed by what he was trying to communicate. Maybe they could actually have a conversation through the glass. But he was only saying one word, over and over. A Kenyan word, Audrey first thought, until she looked into his eyes when he said it.

“Ma-ma!” he screamed silently, “Ma-ma, Mama!” Audrey grimaced at the sad sight of this young boy. This boy inside the glass box. He didn’t even look so traditional without his headgear on, but instead just like anyone else, screaming for their Mama. And that’s when Audrey froze. Her eyes darted around the empty room around her, as if there were someone there that could read her thoughts. Whatever she was thinking was impossible. It couldn’t be. But the image of the young man burned in her memory, fiery and unrelenting. Without a word, she carefully reached her hand into her bag. Her hand rummaged around for just a moment until it finally landed on a crumpled piece of paper. Her fingers were shaking as she removed the flyer from her bag and held it up. She took one last look at the weeping boy in front of her before her eyes darted to the page in front of her. What she saw shattered her to the very core.

EFREM. Age 20.

MISSING since November.

Last seen near The Duarte Museum of Us.

DO. NOT. TRUST. THEM.

Above the lettering was a picture of the young Kenyan boy in front of her. Same eyes, same skin tone, same hair. But instead of the smiling boy in the photo, he was the weeping boy in front of her. Fear struck her as she looked around at the other men. She could almost feel the tight grip from the woman’s grasp on her, so pleading and desperate. How bright the

sun was behind her as the flyers flew through the air like birds, and how cold the night seemed now, deep underground in this basement of ruin. With tears streaming down her own face now, she turned the flyer around to face the boy. To face Efrem. It took him a moment to stop crying behind the glass, and to even notice her at all. But when he did, his eyebrows shot upwards and he shook his head up and down. A look of recognition.

“What are you doing?” came the voice of Jackie, in the front of the room. Audrey quickly slid down behind her box to hide, but Sam was standing in almost the middle of the room. Sam froze at the sound of her voice, and she slowly turned around to face her.

“Hello, Aunt Jackie,” she said. Jackie laughed at the sound of this, her mouth agape.

“Wow, okay. I see you have been snooping around in more places than one, I see,” she said.

“Or maybe I just have a good relationship with my Mom,” Sam said pointedly. Jackie shook her head.

“There’s no need to get hostile, now. What are you doing in my basement in the middle of the night? Did you swipe the key card from my Daughter with your grubby little fingers?” she asked. At this, Audrey’s blood left her head. She felt dizzy. She didn’t want to stand up and face her, not like this, not tonight.

“Yep,” Sam said. “You caught me! You know everything there is to know about me,” Sam said. Audrey’s eyes began to well with relief when she heard this. When this was all over, she was going to give Sam a big hug. She wanted to give her one right now.

Jackie took a step forward, “That might be true, young Girl, but you certainly don’t know everything there is to know about yourself,” she smiled, “So I understand why you dig. I would dig, too, but at a certain point I would stop.”

Audrey peered around and noticed that all in the men in the boxes had their eyes turned towards Sam and her mother. Dozens of piercing eyes. It even made her uncomfortable. She wanted Sam to stop fooling around and get out of there, so she could get out, too.

“You think I don’t know everything about myself, Jackie? About my father, your brother?”

“Half-brother,” Jackie spit. “Only half. Marguerite was a whore when she had your father with that disgusting spic Travis, and then had me the right way. And your “Mommy” was a whore too, which makes you a bastard.”

Sam didn’t say anything, it felt like all the air had left her chest. She had never heard those words used before, only had read them in history books. And it was directed at every member of her family. Her knees felt weak.

“Just let my dad go,” she whispered, not meeting her eyes.

Jackie snorted. “Oh, honey, you don’t know anything.”

“I know you have my dad locked up in one of these boxes,” Sam growled.

Jackie laughed and shook her head, “Are you close? You and Leo?” Sam didn’t respond, so she continued. “Well, it seemed like you were close, the last time we talked. Just like he was so close with Marguerite. He actually told me to tell you something,” she said.

Sam’s eyes widened, “What is it?” she stepped closer, meeting her eyes.

Jackie shrugged, “I can’t remember,” she smirked. Sam scowled. Audrey’s heart fell in her chest for her friend, but she stayed hidden, and prayed for Sam to hurry up.

“Where is he?” Sam’s voice grew louder and angrier.

“Haven’t you spoken with Audrey in a while? She could tell you. She’s the one that made the call, ratted him out. I had nothing to do with it, honestly. I just followed protocol,

the protocol followed the law, and the law made the judgement. Or, really, your dad did, when he assaulted Audrey.”

“You’re lying!” Sam yelled. Audrey’s jaw dropped to the floor, she felt the sudden urge to puke everywhere, right on her legs. Her head felt dizzy as she thought back to the museum worker 's legs, dangling in the wind. No, not the museum worker. Sam’s dad. Leo.

“And he’s strung up outside in the back if you want to see him, got what was coming to him. He was a criminal and a disgusting piece of meat for a half-brother, I don’t know what my Mother ever saw in him, but whatever she saw, she didn’t see in me.”

Sam fell to the ground, now, right in front of Jackie. Audrey’s head was between her legs, breathing heavily. She felt like she was having a panic attack.

“It can’t be true,” Sam whispered, crumbling to the floor. Jackie walked over to one of the metal trays and grabbed a syringe, and Audrey watched in horror and she quickly pressed the needle deep into Sam’s arm.

“Hey! What are you doing? Get away from...me,” Sam said between sobs, but began to lose consciousness in the middle of her sentence. Jackie stood up above the limp body for just a moment before she dragged Sam into another room. Audrey sat there hiding.

Us

The moon was bright the night that the Separation took effect. Things were still until they weren't. All over the country, married couples were being ripped from each other's arms

in their own houses, the men taken away kicking and screaming. Some needing three, four police women to overpower them. The women that were crying were left with a single business card, offering a year's worth of free therapy sessions sponsored by the state. The men were thrown in vans, bruised and busted, and taken to temporary housing for the next few months while the colonies were finished being built. That was when the most rioting occurred, the most violence and pain and death. The housing became slaughterhouses for both the men in there and the women securing them inside. That was when the state came up with starving the men, to make them weaker. By the time they go to the colonies, they were poisoning the food they fed them. They no longer had the strength or energy to fight.

Marguerite and Travis had heard of the married couples being separated, because the government had documentation of their relationships, but would they know of theirs? They hugged each other closer, and wrapped the sheets tighter around their bodies. It was warm. Their foreheads knocked together and they touched noses. Marguerite closed her eyes, feeling his body on hers. He smelled sweet. They had talked the day away, thinking of places to run or hide, but by the time they finished it was nightfall, and they had nowhere to go. They felt like they had wasted the day arguing, when the whole time they could have been doing just this. So they were doing just this for as long as they could.

“You’re my sweetie,” Travis whispered to her in the dark, stroking her cheek. Those words made her smile as a tear formed in her eye.

“You’re my sweetie,” she said back.

They kissed, pressing their soft lips to each other. Their lips felt like magnets, always near each other and always touching.

“Do you think if we just-” Marguerite started, but Travis shut her up with kisses. They were exhausted from the day, and fell into each other by the time the moon rose. They didn’t

know if this was their last night together, before Marguerite would try to sneak away to find him. But it wasn't a promise she was sure she could keep, and he knew that, and forgave her for it. They forgave each other for everything that night, and made love, twice.

By the time it was two a.m, they had both begun to doze off. Marguerite had just begun to dream a better dream when a pounding was heard from outside. Both of their eyes shot open and they sat up quickly. They heard a loud, "Open up," but it was coming from further away- it was from next door. Travis stood up and walked to the window in his boxers. He crouched down and pulled the curtain to the side. Policewomen were at their neighbor's front door, a herd of them. Dogs were barking from inside their vehicles. After a minute of no response, they kicked down the door and burst in. Marguerite and Travis heard screaming from both Jerome and Nicole, and fighting, and breaking of lamps, and shattering of glass. Travis ran back to her in bed and jumped under the covers to hold her.

"Don't listen, don't listen to them. It's going to be okay," he said. At this point Marguerite was crying, but Travis shoved her face to his chest and held her tightly, "We're not going to be like them. We're going to fight, but not now. I'll go peacefully so we don't get hurt. But listen to me, listen my honey, you have to promise we're always going to fight. We're always going to fight for what we believe in. We're never going to back down."

"Always," she cried from his armpit. Just then, a loud thud came from outside. It was a closing of the van's doors.

"No..." Marguerite whispered, and then looked up at Travis, "I need more time with you. I need our forever."

"We are forever," Travis told her, and kissed her forehead. The van started up again and all the police women got inside. Marguerite's heart lept in her chest as the van moved towards their house. Travis squeezed her, one last tight hug. They both held their breath.

The van passed their house.

They looked at each other with wide eyes. The van drove down the road, took a left, and was out of soon out of sight. The rumble grew evermore distant until it was finally no more, and it was silent again. The moon shone in through the window onto their bed, illuminating the couple. They kissed each other with wet cheeks.

“They don’t know about us yet,” Marguerite said to him.

Travis smiled, “No, honey, they don’t know about us *at all*.” They embraced in the bed, unsure of what the morning would bring, but sure that together they would find a way to be loved, and to love.

