

Peel and Other Stories
by Carly Sorenson

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Sponsor: Professor Mehdi Okasi
Second Reader: Professor Donna Cornachio

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Preface: The First Moves

This short story cycle was born last March, as I bawled my eyes out on the PATH train over a breakup. This was not my first breakup - in fact, for the previous five years I had sailed from one long-term relationship to the next. I realized that I'd had enough drama. As my train sailed toward Port Authority, I resolved to avoid romance for a while.

This time alone has elevated my writing life. I chose to stay single for the sake of my personal growth, not my creative output, but clearly the two are linked. Now that I'm not trying to translate my own romantic relationship into words, I feel satisfied with my work. In more than one of my early stories, the characterization of my protagonist was weak. Because I identified too closely with her, I couldn't distance myself from her perspective. So I portrayed her as blameless because that is how I wished to see myself.

But a blameless protagonist makes for dull reading. I based only one character in this collection on a real person, and that person is not me. Through fictional couples, I've found that I can express the mysteries and anxieties of intimacy in a way I never could when I was coupled. And since I'm focusing on myself these days, I have more time to write anyway.

In the months after my last breakup, especially over the summer, I had more time to devote to reading as well, which is how I stumbled upon *Conversations with Friends* by Sally Rooney. It's not a perfect novel—in fact, it left me with unshakable feelings of ambivalence. I was unsettled by the unusual depiction of intimacy among four people - an older artistic couple and a pair of college-aged ex girlfriends-turned-best friends. In spite of the tensions and confrontations among them, they share some beautiful moments of companionship, support, romance, and passion. Through their intersecting alliances,

Rooney asks, what is love? And how do we distinguish the romantic from the platonic, the toxic from the sublime? Rooney's writing inspired me to pose similar questions in my senior project. What draws us to other people? Does that longing have value, and at what point does it start to sour?

To continue this line of thought, I wrote a story about a straight girl named Krystal who believes a threesome will prevent her boyfriend from cheating on her. Initially, I called this story "Three Ways" and divided it into three parts, each with a different narrator. Krystal narrated the first part, and her boyfriend Jacob narrated the second. The final part was told from the perspective of Vee, the nonbinary person whom Krystal invites into their bed.

I liked this narrative structure because I thought it was clever. However, I preferred writing from Krystal's perspective, and it showed in the quality of my writing. She's mean-spirited and domineering, but her desire for control - particularly over her boyfriend - comes from a place of insecurity. She's so caught up in posturing that she's incapable of love. This combination of traits makes her an unsympathetic character, but an interesting one nonetheless. With that in mind, I rewrote the story with Krystal as the sole narrator and changed the title to "Look for a Third."

"The Biggest Drill" (forthcoming in *Gandy Dancer* issue 8.2) is about a timid waitress named Missy who questions her sexuality when a butch carpenter asks her on a date. In "Escape," an angry daughter and her anxious father struggle to reconcile. "Peel" captures a moment between Eleanor, a college senior who has been accepted to a graduate school on the other side of the country, and her younger girlfriend Chase, who

has already begun to mourn the end of their relationship. Finally, I brought Mars and Missy together at a bar in “Those Who Know.”

Halfway through writing “Escape,” I noticed some common threads among these stories. My characters share superficial traits in addition to a sense of longing. They are all young and living in the New York area. Most are queer, and several are college students. *Maybe my characters know each other*, I thought. And so I gave certain characters cameos in stories told from other perspectives. For example, I added Chase to Krystal’s story as Vee’s friend and introduced Vee as an intern to one of Mars’ lovers. And, of course, Mars and Missy meet in the final story.

Once I realized that my characters live in the same world, I set about building that world around them. Although they all live in the New York area, Missy lives in Bayonne (a suburb in Hudson County, New Jersey), while Krystal, Vee, and Chase reside in dorms on a college campus on Long Island. Mars recently graduated from the same college and lives with her father in a former squat on the gentrified Lower East Side.

The setting of “Escape” posed a particular challenge because it required a lot of research. Although I grew up in Queens, I went to high school in downtown Manhattan, so I’m familiar with the Lower East Side in its current state. However, I did not know much about the neighborhood’s history. Nevertheless, I wanted to write about former squatters with accuracy and compassion, so I immersed myself in research. I pored over digitized urban homesteading zines such as *Squatters’ Handbook: “Political” Squatting Tips*, and watched “Captured,” a documentary about videographer Clayton Patterson’s vision of the Lower East Side. I also went on a LES Radical History walking tour led by the Museum of Reclaimed Urban Space, which visited local community gardens and

former squats. All of this research charged “Escape” with a sense of loss - loss of homes to gentrification, loss of artistic creation, loss of queer, POC, and immigrant communities, loss of intimacy between father and daughter. That is a kind of longing as well.

In “Escape,” as well as other stories, I used humor as a device to talk about love and longing. I followed my characters into ridiculous situations - pursuing a threesome to prolong a relationship, for example, or forcing one’s father out of the house by booking him his own show at an art gallery. These situations are amusing and exasperating but well within the realm of possibility. This gives even the funniest moments an edge of anxiety.

I haven’t always used humor in my writing. In fact, when my advisor first read “Look for a Third,” he asked, *Carly, when did you get so funny?* He was kidding, but he also had a point - the stories I’d shown him in the past were quite solemn. Strange as it may seem, I gravitated toward humor as I came to terms with my bisexual identity. Once I got to know the queer dating scene, its idiosyncrasies made me laugh. And once I knew what it was like to have a girlfriend, cishet (or cisgender, heteronormative) dating started to look pretty funny.

Although my humor draws on the queer community for inspiration, not every joke is mine to tell. Neither is every story. As a cis white woman, it is my responsibility to amplify the voices of people of color and trans folks, rather than monopolizing their stories for myself. However, I knew from the start that I could not populate my New York-based stories with a cast of all-white, all-cisgender characters. I don’t write dystopian science fiction.

Ultimately, my characters revealed their various identities to me over the course of countless drafts. Most of my narrators are white and female, like me. Their perceptions are shaped by racial hierarchy and the gender binary, whether or not they notice. For example, Krystal fears and disregards Asian women and nonbinary people in “Look for a Third.” Her fear and ignorance limit the reader’s acquaintance with Vee, who nevertheless emerges as one of the most endearing and surprising characters in the collection.

One of my narrators, Mars, has a Puerto Rican mother and a white father who hails from the Midwest. While her Puerto Rican ancestry is significant to her character, it’s not the focus of “Escape.” Like I said, that’s not my story to tell. The story I chose to tell is that of a father and a daughter.

Through this world and its characters, I mulled over the questions posed on the first page of this essay. What draws them to one another? And can those feelings be trusted? Chase longs for Eleanor, even when Eleanor is in the same room; Mars longs for emotional intimacy but pursues casual sex instead. Krystal’s desire for control of her boyfriend outweighs her jealousy of Vee, while Missy’s longing for Casey is not enough to overcome her fear of exposure.

In the end, only a few characters get some semblance of what they want. In spite of social conditioning, personal shortcomings, trauma, and censure, these characters know what they want and ask for it. Vee does this explicitly, by negotiating the roles and acts they enjoy in a BDSM scene. This clarity is one of the hallmarks of healthy BDSM culture. Meanwhile, Krystal has no understanding of her own sexual desires until the story’s climax.

I've come to believe that asking is the opposite of longing. Although longing is a poignant and universal emotion, it doesn't achieve much. Longing doesn't get laid. It doesn't mend relationships. Sometimes, longing is completely misplaced. If nothing else, I hope this anthology inspires a couple dykes to make the first move.

Peel

When Chase awoke in her girlfriend's bed, she pretended to be asleep for several minutes so that she could listen to the sounds Eleanor made as she moved around the dorm room. She listened to her footsteps, the click of the cap on a tube of lotion, and the moans of dresser drawers, trying to lock these sounds into her memory. Then she sat up and swung her legs off the bed.

"Hey, baby," said Eleanor, smiling. "You're awake."

"M-hm." Chase went to Eleanor's mini-fridge, selected a clementine, and returned to bed to peel it.

"Want to borrow something to wear?" asked Eleanor, plugging her electric tea kettle into the power strip on her desk. She was wet from the shower and wore a towel twisted on her head. The wide sleeve of her pink dressing gown crumpled against the power strip as she pressed the plug into place. She was the only college student Chase had ever known to call her bathrobe a *dressing gown*.

"I think I'm good," said Chase. She set the clementine she'd been peeling on Eleanor's bed and felt around the mattress, hoping to find her shirt.

"Suit yourself," said Eleanor, shrugging. "And I think it's under the pillow."

It was. A white men's undershirt, the kind that comes in packs. Chase put her arms through the sleeves and pulled it over her head. When she emerged from the shirt, Eleanor was bent over the open bottom drawer of her wardrobe, her dressing gown in a pile on the floor.

Chase watched and missed her. Last night, Eleanor had run her hand up Chase's thigh, grazing the places she knew best, and still failed to excite her. Chase had asked

Eleanor to hold her instead, but the holding was just that, holding together and holding in place. It was not an embrace. Chase regretted her reluctance as she watched Eleanor dress, up until Eleanor turned around wearing a sweater with the name of a grad school across the chest, the grad school to which she'd been accepted.

“I think you spilled something on your shirt,” said Eleanor. She liked to preserve things, keep them clean and pretty. During the fall, she pressed dead orange leaves between the pages of Chase's textbooks so that Chase would find them while she was studying. Next fall, at her grad school on the opposite coast, would Eleanor press leaves for someone else? Did leaves change color in Southern California? Who would make hospital corners in Chase's dirty sheets?

“Um, did I?” Chase asked. She stared at the name on Eleanor's sweater.

“You did. I think it's a coffee stain.” Eleanor cupped her left hand at the edge of the bed and, with her right, smoothed the peel into her waiting palm before dropping it into the wastebasket.

“Hey, I'm not finished eating,” said Chase, scooping the remaining clementine sections into her lap.

Eleanor laughed and sat down beside her. She smelled like spearmint, and when she stroked the fringe at Chase's temples, Chase found that her fingers smelled of citrus, bright and bitter. “Not finished with what? The peel?”

Eleanor and Chase never discussed breaking up next fall. Instead, Eleanor planned to call daily with a cup of chamomile tea. She bought stationery and browsed cross-country plane tickets. She wanted to press the pink of her dressing gown and the scent of toothpaste and peelings between the pages of Chase's textbooks.

Chase lay her head back on the pillow. She wanted to crush a clementine wedge against the white sheets. She wanted to explode its stringy citrus guts and leave a stain. She wanted to lie forever in her girlfriend's bed, watching the peel curl and brown and crisp in the wastebasket. If she focused, she might not even notice the day that Eleanor left.

Look for a Third

While Jacob is in the bathroom, I go through his phone and discover a dating app. At first, I give him the benefit of the doubt - maybe it's a two-year-old relic from before we met. Then I realize the pictures on his profile are recent. I stare at his stupid, gorgeous face grinning over a mug of beer and wonder what to do.

When he emerges from the bathroom, I hold up his phone and say, "I was just thinking we should look for a third."

He freezes in the doorway, then lets the door slam behind him. "Kris, I can explain. I was gonna delete it tonight. I was just looking, I swear." Jacob reaches for his phone, but I hold it out of reach.

"Any takers yet?"

"No! That's what I'm saying! I didn't swipe right on anyone. I wasn't looking for anything."

It's true. He has no matches.

I lift my eyes from the screen to his anxious face. I want him to feel worse - more penitent and bewildered, more desperate to kiss my ass. "Well then, *I* think we should look for a third."

"Don't mind me," says Jacob's roommate, Henry, who sits hunched at his desk.

“Dude, give me a second,” Jacob snaps. Then he turns back to me, rakes his fingers through his long hair, and laces them at the back of his head. “Like... for a threesome?”

“Yeah, Jayjay. Somebody cute.” I lean forward to kiss him, but he pulls back. “Don’t be like that, babe. I’m serious.”

“You’re not mad?”

“No, I told you. I’ve been thinking of looking for a third. I was thinking of surprising you.”

“So was I!” says Jacob, sitting beside me on the bed and leaning in close. “It was just a vague idea, you know, but I was thinking of surprising you.”

“That is *so* sweet.” I clutch the front of his shirt and pull him in for a kiss.

“Okay, I’m leaving,” says Henry. I hear his chair scrape across the floor, followed by the slam of the door.

“Delete your account,” I say, pulling away. “I’ve got this.”

I download the same dating app, write a short but explicit bio, and let Jacob pick four photos to go with it. He chooses photos of me, taken by him.

In one, I’m applying makeup, leaning into a mirror and stretching my eyelid toward my temple. My pale hair spills over my shoulder and conceals part of my face, including the eye that I have yet to outline. Jacob is visible in the mirror too, disheveled

and broad-shouldered, standing behind me with an expensive camera in front of his face. The photo looks candid, especially since you can see down my shirt, but it's not.

At first, he hardly dares to watch as I swipe through the lineup of girls. But I draw him in by asking for his input and giving my opinion as well - *she's cute, she's fat, she looks like a hot mess*. Eventually he pulls my legs across his lap and begins volunteering his thoughts, though never with too much enthusiasm.

"If we did this...and we got *her*," he indicates the girl on the screen, who evidently cut her own hair with one hand tied behind her back, "what would you do to her?"

"Oh, her?" I say, as he kisses my neck. "I would, uh, kiss her. So hard."

"And then?"

"And then... I would touch her. All over her body."

Jacob's breathing quickens. He stops kissing me and stares. "You'd touch her boobs? You wanna touch them?"

Sex hardly interests me, and that includes boob-touching. What interests me is the weakness it arouses in men. If I let Jacob fuck me, will he notice I'm fucking with him? Probably not. Jacob is rich, amicable, and weak at the knees for me, which is what makes his lapse in loyalty so disturbing.

"Yeah, *especially* her boobs." I hold his gaze and slip the straps of my tank top off my shoulders, one by one.

"How bad do you want to?" Jacob asks with shining eyes.

I pull my top down and his gaze drops. “So bad, Jayjay. And I want you to watch.”

He moans. “Babe, you’re amazing.”

We have sex and fall asleep around 2 a.m.

In the morning, I’m disturbed to find that we have only one match, and she isn’t pretty. On the one hand, that’s fine by me because I don’t want our third to be hotter. But on the other hand, the thought of seeing an ugly girl naked makes my stomach turn.

Our one match is an Asian girl with blue hair and bad skin. She wears foundation to hide it, but you can tell from the texture on her cheeks. Hormonal acne for sure. It would clear right up if she went on birth control.

Anyway, I don’t recognize her but her profile says she goes to our school, a state university on Long Island. Her profile also says that her name is Vee and she uses they/ them pronouns.

I’m not stupid enough to believe that Jacob intended to surprise me with a threesome. I’m smart enough to give him exactly what he wants in exactly the wrong context - with my vehement consent. If Vee keeps Jacob under my thumb, then so be it.

If I’m being honest, I can think of a couple reasons why Jacob might wander outside our relationship. I may have gone a bit too far when he showed me his outfit for a job interview. The interview was for a position ripping tickets at a concert venue, and his

outfit was better suited to the mosh pit than the ticket booth. I said so when he showed it to me, and he sulked for the rest of the night.

But the next morning, a few hours before the interview, he called me. I assumed he'd ask me to pick an outfit out of the pile of clothes on his floor, which he did, but once I got to his room, he asked me to drive him to the interview as well. He got the job. He never thanked me, although he should have.

But there's another, more likely possibility, which is this: men cheat. They always do. My dad did, and my mom embarrassed us all by trying to stop him.

I caught on when I was in middle school. I remember laying on my side, my ear pressed against the floorboards, listening to her accusations when my dad came home late. Another time, I watched from the schoolyard as she sat in the car across the street, her shoulders shaking, her head bent over the steering wheel. She didn't take me to dance class that day. Instead, we went to the mall and she bought me a denim skirt. She held my hand and only let go so I could try on the skirt in the dressing room. As we walked out of the store, I squeezed her hand so hard that she stopped walking.

“Stop that,” she snapped. “Krystal, stop it.”

“I thought you wanted to hold my hand,” I said, squeezing so hard that my thin arm trembled.

My mom yanked her hand away and glanced at the store we'd just left. She held the pretty pink bag in her hand, the one I hadn't squeezed, on the opposite side of her body. "What's gotten into you?"

"I just love you so much," I said.

Her eyes glistened. "Baby, I love you too." She set down the pretty pink bag to give me a hug. "I'm so sorry. About all this."

I buried my face in her almond-scented hair and imagined sinking my teeth into her shoulder. Would she cry out like she cried for my dad? Or would I plumb a reservoir of secret strength beneath her skin?

I was ashamed of her, of her borrowed dollars and futile tears. None of it stopped him.

When she released me, I grabbed the pink bag's handle with one hand, and her fingers with the other.

When I show Vee's profile to Jacob, he says, "Nice. Let's message her."

"No." I snatch the phone away. I'm sitting on his bed with my knees tucked under my chin, and he's lying with his head on the pillow. "God, you're such a boy. I'm not texting her first. I never have and I won't start now."

He frowns. "So how are we gonna get her to come over?"

"She's going to message us."

“I don’t know, Kris.” Jacob rests his hands behind his head. “Girls don’t text first. Not on a dating app.”

“Well, she’ll have to make an exception.”

“Can I see her picture again?”

I hand him the phone. “Don’t look too hard. You might change your mind.”

He squints at the screen. “Where’s she from?”

“How should I know? Someplace Asian.” I wonder if he’s into that. A lot of guys are, not that he’d admit it to me. Would his roommate know?

Jacob says, “Oh,” and gives the phone back. “I thought I knew her from somewhere! She works at the coffee shop. The one right off campus.”

“I think I know the one you’re talking about,” I say, squeezing Jacob’s knee.

“Maybe I need some coffee.”

“But you don’t drink coffee.”

I wink and slide off the bed, scooping last night’s dress off the floor. “No, I don’t. I’ll get you something, Jayjay.”

He blinks. “You’re going to her job?”

“I’m going to make searing eye contact with her across the counter. Then she’ll come to me. I’m pretty hard to ignore in person.”

Two years ago, I was a college freshman and single. I felt like I was falling through outer space - sleeping through classes, smoking with moody bitches I barely knew, and wearing dirty clothes.

One night I went to a dorm party, drank too much too fast, and wound up heaving over the toilet. Nothing actually came up, although I knew that I'd feel better if it did. But my body refused. Eventually I groaned, put a hand on the sink, and pulled myself to my feet. I caught my own eye in the mirror and couldn't look away. A halo of flyaway hairs framed my face, my forehead and nose were beaded with sweat, and there was makeup melted into the creases of my eyelids.

But my face didn't just look a mess, it looked wrong. Maybe it was a trick of the liquor or the awful dorm lighting, but my features seemed to be in the wrong places. My eyes were a few millimeters too close together. My mouth was a bit too wide. My nose was off-center. I gripped the rim of the sink.

Just then, the bathroom door opened, colliding with my ass.

"Fuck!" I said.

"Oh shit, sorry," said the guy on the other side.

But instead of closing the door, Jacob just stood there. I met his eyes in the mirror and realized that he was staring at me. "Wow," he breathed.

"What?"

He squinted at the mirror. "You're really hot."

“You’re drunk,” I said, slamming the door so he wouldn’t see me smile.

When I emerged from the bathroom, Jacob offered me a beer and tried to explain.

“It’s not just that you look hot. I know how that sounds.”

“Uh-huh,” I said, and cracked my beer to signal that he should continue. I recalled him from when I first arrived at the party; he was one of the many boys standing against a wall, drink in hand, looking like he’d lost something.

“The look on your face was what got me. Like, you looked intense. Like you were backstage at a concert, you know, getting ready to kick some ass onstage.”

“I like that,” I said, and tried to picture what he saw in that mirror.

“So are you gonna kick this party’s ass?”

I laughed. “Hell, yeah.”

We ended up making out on the couch. I trusted the beer he’d given me to cover the taste of bile in my mouth, and as we walked out together, he slipped his hand into my back pocket.

I see Vee as soon as I step into the coffee shop, but she doesn’t see me, which gives me a moment to unzip my coat and rearrange my hair. After walking across campus, walloped by the November wind and wearing a sundress better suited to yesterday’s weather than today’s, I don’t feel enticing. But I tell myself that I look it even if I don’t feel it, and shoot glances toward the counter until she notices me. She looks

away, then looks back, and we exchange smiles. Vee puts her hand on her co-worker's arm and whispers something in her ear. The other girl glances at me. She has a men's haircut and a coffee stain down the front of her shirt.

Glowing with the attention, I join the line. When I get to the front, Vee takes over the register from her co-worker.

"What can I get you?" she asks, smiling, like we share a joke. She's wearing cobalt eyeshadow, which is a bold choice for a daytime look.

"A large black coffee," I say, because that's what Jacob wanted. I pause, but her smile tells me to continue. "It's nice to meet you - in real life, I mean."

"Yeah, it is," she says, bobbing her head. "You're really pretty. Is that your real hair color?"

I drag my fingers through my hair, combing it over my shoulder. "Yup, it's natural."

"Wow. This" - she takes her long blue hair in her fist and tugs - "this shit is so much work to maintain."

"But it's totally worth it," I say.

Vee beams. "I'm glad you think so. Your name's Krystal, right?"

I nod, and she scrawls my name on a paper cup. "And your name is Vee."

"And I'm Chase," says her coworker. She is pretending to look for something in the pastry display case, even though there are clearly customers waiting to order.

I walk to the other end of the counter to wait. I feel warm with praise, pretty, and poised to get what I want. I make sure to touch Vee's hand as she hands me my drink.

"We should do this again," I say.

"Definitely. Maybe next time you'll make the coffee," she replies. "I'm glad you came in today. I was hoping you'd message me."

"And I was waiting for *you* to message *me*. My boyfriend said - "

Chase makes a noise in her throat, interrupting me. She looks sharply at Vee.

"What did he say?" asks Vee, ignoring Chase.

"He said ... he said you wouldn't. Message me that is." I raise my eyebrows at Chase, who shrugs and calls for the following customer.

"About that," Vee leans in and lowers her voice, "can we talk about what you're looking for, exactly? But not right now, obviously." Her smile is stretched and uncertain.

"Of course," I say, flashing a reassuring smile in return. "When do you get off?"

"In half an hour. Stick around?"

"Sure."

After Vee clocks out, she brings two iced drinks to my table.

"What is this, juice? Iced tea?" I ask. "Does it have pulp? I don't like pulp."

"Just try it. I made it up, you won't find it on the menu."

The first mouthful tastes like a tart, tropical summer, not too sweet. As I sip, she speaks in a low voice, and the more she speaks, the less I say.

After we reach an agreement, I go back to Jay's room. Upon seeing my face, he asks, "Did you strike out, babe?"

"Of course not," I snap, handing over his large lukewarm coffee.

"So she said yes?" He accepts the cup, sips, makes a face, and then sets it on the dresser. He's in bed, right where I left him. His laptop sits open on his chest.

"Yes. Obviously, that's what I mean."

"It's just, you don't look excited."

"I am excited." I sit on the bed, at his feet, and frown at the opposite wall. "She's just a weird girl, that's all."

"Weird how?" Jacob shuts his laptop.

"Like, what she's into. She's into some weird shit."

"Like what? Hot dogging? Bloodletting? Toe sucking?"

"What? No. Ew."

Jacob shrinks back into his pillows.

"She wants to dominate us."

He cocks his head. "For free?"

"Obviously." I recoil. "I would never have sex for money. Would you?"

"No, but like, *she* wants to dominate *us* - for free?"

"Oh. Yeah." I lean toward him again. "We talked about it and it could just be, like, her telling us what to do. Nothing crazy."

“Right, nothing crazy.”

“Define ‘crazy,’” says a muffled voice from under the comforter on the other bed.

I turn on Jacob. “Oh my god, has he been here this whole time?”

“Um. Yes? He’s usually here.”

“I live here,” says Henry.

“That is so embarrassing. He heard everything.” I put my hands over my face.

“Jacob, I need a moment.”

“What? Why?”

“I’m giving you a threesome, and you can’t even give me some space?” I gesture at the door. “Just leave.”

Once the door shuts behind him, I get up off Jacob’s bed and step across the narrow divide to Henry’s. “Hey, you.”

His forehead and eyes emerge from beneath the comforter. “Yes?”

“Does Jacob have a thing for Asian girls? You can tell me.”

Henry groans. “How should I know?”

I smooth the demanding edge from my voice. That attitude works on Jacob, but it might alienate Henry. A guy like Henry, I think, wants to feel important. “You can be real with me. I know how guys talk to each other. I bet he told you when he downloaded that dating app, right?”

His eyes crinkle with a nasty grin, confirming that Jacob exposed me to ridicule.

I flip my hair over my shoulder and lean over the bed, molding my features into a look of supplication. “He respects you more than you know. I wouldn’t ask if he didn’t, because I need your help.”

Henry sits up. The comforter slides down his stomach. I have to stop myself from flinching because I’ve never been this close to him before.

“He doesn’t respect you, you know,” Henry says, looking me up and down.

I drop my eyes to the comforter over his legs. “I don’t know. Like I said, that’s just how guys talk.”

“No, that’s how he talks,” Henry corrects me. “Not all guys are like that.”

I offer him a sad half-smile, like the beleaguered dream girl in a romantic comedy. “He won’t leave me. He wouldn’t dare.”

Henry frowns. “I get the sense that you’re in a bad situation, Kris.”

“Don’t you agree?” I ask, gritting my teeth at the nickname. “He wouldn’t.”

“Listen, Kris,” he says, falling back onto his pillows with a smug smile. “I’ve seen a lot of you since the beginning of the year. I’ve heard how he talks to you. I don’t think infidelity is the issue here.”

I squeeze his leg. “Great! Let me know if he tells you anything else.”

This next part was Vee's idea, not mine. On Friday, the day of the threesome, she texted me to say she was feeling nervous, and could I come over early to get ready with her.

like for a party?

yeah lol. do u ever feel like getting ready is the best part?

I'd rather not be alone with her, especially without Jacob as a foil. Her sexual proclivities are weird, sure, but her shamelessness concerns me even more. Maybe "shameless" is the wrong word - after all, she didn't go into detail within earshot of her coworkers. But Vee's missing something, a certain coy deference, that I consider inherent in girls.

Despite my distaste, I agree because I don't want her getting annoyed and backing out. Besides, if we get ready together, I can have some control over how she looks for Jacob - cute, obviously, but not distinctive, not too freaky, nothing that would distract him from me.

I show up at her door at 8 p.m., wearing a pink shorts-and-tank set with track stripes down the sides. Jacob is scheduled to arrive at nine. I would prefer for the threesome to take place in his room, but Vee has a coveted single and I have decided to maintain an informative alliance with Jacob's roommate.

She answers the door in black mesh, fishnets, and a full face of garish makeup - blue lipstick and glitter on her cheeks. "Sorry I didn't wait," she says, drawing a circle around her face with her finger. "But I know what works for me."

"You look so pretty," I say, leaning against the door frame. "Where did you get your top?"

She blushes and plucks at the mesh material stretched across her belly. "What, this? I don't even remember. I've had it for years."

"It's so Y2K. I love it. About your makeup, though - can I make a few changes?"

Several reactions flicker across Vee's face - anxiety, indignation, mortification, and indulgence. In the end she giggles and says, "Sure."

I step past her into her room, which is smaller and cleaner than Jacob's, but more cluttered. I notice a rolling triple-decker caddy, a plastic storage container, and a hanging wall organizer, each packed with makeup, hair, and skincare products. The top of her dresser is covered in beauty detritus as well. Above her dresser hangs a mirror framed by glowing light bulbs. I steer Vee toward the mirror and look into it, over her shoulder. We look like a still from some very specific porn.

"Do you have a makeup sponge?" I ask.

"Here." Vee opens a drawer in the caddy.

I come around to face Vee instead of the mirror. Using the makeup sponge, I dab at her cheekbones, removing most of the glitter. "You really are ready for a party."

“You don’t like it?” she asks, her voice rising.

“I do, I do, I just want to tone down the glitter.”

“My ex felt the same way.”

“Oh?” I don’t like where this is going.

“Not that you’re like my ex,” Vee corrects herself. “That’s not what I’m saying.

Just that she wanted me to tone it down too. She was ruder about it though.”

“Really.”

“Yeah! Like, last time we went out, she told me I was made up like a Christmas tree.”

“Makeup wipes?” I ask, hoping she’ll drop the subject.

Vee grabs a pack off her dresser. I take one and use it to remove her lipstick. The heavy color clings to her lips, leaving them faintly purple. I reach into my pocket for a pot of clear balm and apply that on top.

“You took off everything,” Vee complains.

“I did not. You did a great job on your eyes.”

Vee presses a palm to her forehead. “Oh my god, imagine if you tried to fix my eyeliner. Have you ever lined monolids before?”

“I don’t even know what that is.”

“Never mind,” she says, dropping her hand. “Would you do something else?”

“I can try.” If she wants me to fix her foundation, that’s beyond my power. I can’t change her oily skin type.

Vee sinks onto the bed and holds out her hands, palms down, for me to admire. “I did my nails last night, but not my toenails. Would you do them for me?”

I hesitate. For years I’ve gotten pedicures at salons, but I can’t remember the last time I gave a pedicure, even to a friend. In fact, I can’t remember the last time someone asked me for such a frivolous favor. What I mean is, Vee could paint her own toenails, but she wants me to do it.

“I just feel unstoppable when my fingers match my toes. I feel like I could do anything.”

I purse my lips. “Anything?”

“Pretty much.”

“All right,” I say, holding out my hand.

Vee plucks a bottle of blue nail polish off her dresser and passes it to me. Then she peels off her socks and settles into her pillows, while I sit on the opposite end of the bed and pull her foot into my lap. It’s cold and clammy, but at least her toenails are clean. I unscrew the cap from the bottle and pinch her big toe between my thumb and forefinger.

Vee giggles and curls her toes.

“Hold still, or I’ll fuck it up.”

I brush a layer of blue first over her big toenail, then the others. I bow my head to concentrate on keeping a steady hand.

“You’re so pretty,” says Vee.

I look up, startled. The word “pretty” is not what startles me; it’s more the context in which she says it.

The glowing mirror behind her casts half of Vee’s face into shadow. She smiles, hazy and alluring. There’s only the length of her legs between us.

“So are you,” I say. I’m not lying.

“Thank you,” she says, peering at her toes. “That looks great already.”

To my surprise, I feel my face warm with pleasure.

I pour my attention into painting, spreading color to the edges of her nails while avoiding the cuticles, wiping smears away with my thumb. After three coats of polish, I screw the cap back onto the bottle. In spite of the acrid smell, my mind feels calm and pleasant in a way that I had not anticipated.

Vee swings her legs off the bed, taking care not to stain the sheets, and wiggles her toes. “Gorgeous. Now it’s your turn. How about I do your makeup?”

“It’s done.” I touch my face to ensure it’s still there.

“But there’s nothing special about it. No offense,” says Vee, sliding onto the floor and hobbling on her heels to the dresser. “Let me add a little something.”

“Like what?”

“How about body glitter?” She turns around, holding a sparkly dispenser. “I’ll be very subtle, just a little on your collar bones.”

The calm in my brain dissuades me from refusing her help. If Vee wants glitter on her sheets, that’s on her. I shake the hair off my shoulders and lift my chin to give her better access.

Vee leans in close and dabs at my skin with cool, smooth fingers. I feel her breath on my neck. The glitter spreads far beyond my collar bones, but I don’t stop her.

“My ex would never let me do this, you know,” says Vee. She steps back to survey her work. “That’s part of why I wanted to do this. Not the body glitter, but this whole thing with you and your boyfriend. To remind myself there are other people out there, you know? People who want me, who will treat me different.”

“Glitter must mean a lot to you.”

Vee frowns and opens her mouth to reply, but at that moment there’s a knock at the door. “It’s not that simple,” she says as she lets Jacob in.

“What’s not that simple?” he asks, wiping his palms on the front of his shirt. His eyes wander from Vee’s thighs in fishnets to my tits in pink terry cloth.

“Nothing,” says Vee, smiling. I understand, with a pang, that our conversation is over, even though I never liked her subject to begin with. “I’m Vee.”

“This is Jacob,” I say.

He bobs his head and for a split second, it looks like Jacob is going to hug her. Then he looks at me and thinks better of it. “Nice hair,” he says instead. There is nothing he could do right now that would not irritate me.

“Thank you.” Her voice is different now, self-assured and stripped of levity.

“Your hair looks great too,” he adds, pivoting to me. In contrast with Vee, he sounds almost frantic. “And your outfit. You both look great.” He turns back to Vee.

“Are your tights part of the whole, you know, dominatrix thing?”

I roll my eyes. “Really, Jacob?”

“Sort of. But I always dress like this. About that—” Vee smiles at me. “Krystal and I have discussed this, but I want to hear from you, too.”

“About—”

“What you want to do. With me. With her.”

“I want to have a threesome. Right?” he asks me. “Isn’t that what we’re doing?”

“Of course,” says Vee in a soothing voice. “But here’s what I’m thinking. I want to lead the both of you in a scene involving vanilla acts. Kissing, fucking, that kind of thing. But I would be telling you what to do.”

“Okay,” says Jacob, drawing out the word. “But I do want to watch you, you know, together.” He looks from Vee to me, from the fishnets on her thighs to the terry cloth on my tits.

“Of course. It’s all about what each of you wants,” says Vee. “In my fantasy, I’m mostly directing, but I can participate too. What do you want?” She looks at me.

“Krystal?”

I blanch.

Before I can think of an answer, Jacob responds. “Can we start with you kissing her?”

“We can do that,” says Vee, smiling at me. She climbs into bed, draws my legs across her lap, and kisses me. Her lips are slick with balm and I am relieved when she pulls away to address Jacob. “Stop that,” she says.

“I wasn’t doing anything,” he protests, raising his hands.

“It’s all right, you’re allowed to touch your dick,” says Vee.

He laces his fingers behind his head, red-faced.

“Unless I say not to, which I just did. Am I turning you on?” she continues. Her voice is different, even paced and stripped of nervous giggling.

Jacob lowers his hands, his eyes never wavering from Vee’s. “Yeah, you are.”

“You like taking orders?”

“Yes,” he whispers.

“Come here.”

He approaches and joins us on the bed, which creaks under our collective weight. Vee and I are entwined at the foot of the bed and he sits at the other end, facing us. She runs her hands over my body, from the top to the bottom of my pink terry cloth set.

“Have I told you how pretty you are, Krystal?” she asks.

“Yes,” I say, my eyes fixed on Jacob’s face. With his wide eyes and twitching, empty hands, he looks sick and frightened. He looks rapturous. I want to fill his hands.

“Isn’t she pretty, Jacob?” she asks. “Do you mind that I’m teasing you?”

He swallows and shakes his head. “I like it.”

“Don’t you want to touch her?”

“Yes.”

“Touch yourself,” says Vee, and he does.

I watch his hands move.

“What about you, Krystal? Do you want to touch him?”

“Yes.” And I do. In Vee’s room my desires are stark, all distractions stripped away.

“Then touch him.”

I crawl across the mattress. He takes his hand off his dick and takes me by my hips and pulls me down. I feel Vee press against me from behind. I feel her hands on my tits and her mouth on my neck. I feel good and I know that in this moment I have lost control of us all.

“Kiss him,” Vee whispers, and I do, melting against Jacob with the sort of abandon I could never allow for myself. I feel like a banana with the skin peeled back—mushy, sweet, and sickening. I can’t stomach the smell, let alone the taste, of bananas.

It is this thought that closes my throat. Tears crowd my eyes, and one slides down the bridge of my nose. Before I can control myself, I sob into Jacob’s open mouth.

The Biggest Drill

During high school, Missy worked part time at Gino's Pizzeria. But the summer after she graduated, the manager promoted her to a full-time position. She got a new red T-shirt with *GINOS* stamped across the chest in white letters, and most days she wore a red bandanna over her hair to match.

The guys from Connolly Carpentry showed up in July. That first time, Missy watched them emerge from the Catholic church across the street and point to Gino's. One man shoved open the door with his shoulder and the shop filled instantly with their laughter and complaints.

"Christ, it's hot in here."

"You're telling me," said Missy. "What can I get you?"

"A cold beer, for the love of god." The voice that answered was husky but high-pitched, with a thick Jersey accent. Missy looked for its owner, and was surprised to see a woman on their crew. Or something like a woman, anyhow. Her hair was dark and curly, like Missy's, but she kept it tucked under a Yankees cap instead of a bandanna. She was short and broad, and the outline of a sports bra showed through her company T-shirt. She spoke like she was throwing something.

"Drill Bit, you better hope the foreman doesn't catch you with a beer," said one of the carpenters, bumping her with his elbow. He was a doughy blond guy with translucent eyelashes.

Drill Bit's face split with a conspiratorial smile. "He won't know if you don't tell him."

“He’s tired of your shit,” mumbled another carpenter. He looked the oldest, perhaps because of his bald pink head.

The crew sat on stools at the plastic counter and called for five beers and two pepperoni pies, then ripped into one another until their pizzas arrived. The guys were so big and the stools were so small that they looked like top-heavy beige flamingos suspended on one leg.

As Missy set their pizzas on the counter, redolent of hot oil and oregano, she said, “I haven’t seen you all before. Are you new in town?”

“We’re here on a job, refinishing the pews in that church,” said the blond carpenter.

“That one across the street?” Missy pointed.

He nodded.

“What’s wrong with the pews?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” the blond carpenter replied. “They just need a new coat of stain.”

“I’m glad we’re refinishing, not replacing them,” Drill Bit added. “Under all that wear, they’re solid maple.”

“You won’t be so glad after a full day of scrubbing seats,” said the bald carpenter. He looked at Missy and winked. “She’s an apprentice, so she gets the shit jobs.”

“Thanks for that,” said Drill Bit, rolling her eyes.

To change the subject, Missy asked, “Is Drill Bit a nickname?”

Drill Bit lifted a slice off the pan, stretching ropes of mozzarella until they snapped. “Of course it is.” Having separated her slice from the pie, Drill Bit squinted at Missy’s name tag. “Is Missy a nickname?”

“No, that’s actually my name. Why do they call you Drill Bit?”

The bald carpenter threw an arm around Drill Bit’s shoulders and grinned. “It’s ‘cause she’s little, but she’s got the biggest drill on the crew!”

Drill Bit ducked out of his grasp and rested her elbow on the counter. Missy caught her eye, and Drill Bit shrugged.

The crew teased Missy, describing the potency of that enormous drill. With a tool like that, they assured her, Drill Bit could screw anything. Missy played innocent, asking them if it was difficult to refinish furniture, and how long did it take. They said they didn’t expect this job to take longer than a week.

For a while Drill Bit said nothing, just smiled as Missy danced around their innuendos with practiced expertise. Under her eyes, Missy felt elegant and in-the-know. If there was any danger here, it came from herself and not the five large men she served.

They finished eating within twenty minutes and left a big tip. Drill Bit was the last one out the door, and as she left, she said, “My real name is Casey. In case you wanted to know.”

Casey’s crew returned on Tuesday and then again on Wednesday. On Thursday, during a story about a beehive in the wall of a client’s house, Casey caught Missy staring from behind the register. “*She* knows what I mean,” said Casey. “I bet bees follow her everywhere thinking she’s a flower. Right, sweetheart?”

There was a beat of silence as Casey, her crew, and Missy's coworkers waited for Missy to deflect. But she didn't. She stood with a stupid smile on her face and color in her cheeks. Behind her, a cook chuckled. "I don't think so," she said at last.

Casey raised her eyebrows.

Missy cringed through the rest of her shift and worried that Casey's crew would stop coming in. But the next day they were back and more boisterous than ever. At first she was relieved, but then she noticed a sharpness to the crews' jokes, an edge directed at Casey. They shoved her and grinned at Missy and returned to the subject of Casey's drill. They grew more insistent as their lunch hour waned. Before they left, Casey wrote her number on the back of the receipt and returned it to Missy.

"Let me take you out," she said.

The crew snickered, ready for Missy to lay their doubts to rest.

Missy heard herself say, "Okay."

As soon as the door slammed behind Casey, the cook whooped. "All right, Missy!"

"That's enough," said the manager. Missy didn't dare turn her head. She didn't want to catch his eye or see his tight, knowing smile.

"Look at you." The other waitress, Kendall, sidled up and nudged her. She smiled not at Missy, but at the door.

"I don't know why I did that."

"I think *I* do."

"That's enough, Kendall," said the manager.

Kendall lowered her voice. “All this time I’ve been dishing about my boyfriend, and you never had anything to say. Now I know why.”

“It’s not like that,” said Missy, slapping her palm on the counter, over Casey’s receipt. She dragged her palm to the edge of the counter and let the receipt drop into the trash can below.

Behind them, the cook laughed. “So, what? You said yes to not hurt her feelings?”

“You’re too sweet, Missy,” said Kendall. “You better learn to say no or people will take advantage.”

Missy pocketed the receipt when she took out the trash. Kendall offered to drive her home after work, but Missy refused. As she walked home along the highway, Missy pinched and worried the paper in her pocket, wondering what to do.

It took her 45 minutes to reach the narrow clapboard house in which she’d grown up. She sat on the steps out front, peeled off her sweaty jacket, and fished out the receipt to take a closer look. To her horror, she saw that the ink had smeared, obscuring Casey’s phone number. The 5’s resembled 6’s and the 1’s could have been 7’s, or vice versa.

Once she realized some smudged ink might prevent her from calling Casey, she stopped wondering what to do with Casey’s number. Missy knew she wanted to call her - she just needed to figure out how. On the same receipt, below the smudged number, she wrote out as many possible combinations as she could think of. She swapped 5’s for 6’s and 1’s for 7’s, keeping the legible numbers constant. Then she dialed each possibility on her smartphone, one by one, until she heard Casey’s voice on a voicemail recording.

Missy hadn't expected Casey to pick up anyway - she didn't know anyone her age who picked up calls from unknown numbers, and Casey didn't look more than a few years older.

Casey here. You know what to do.

"Hey," Missy said after the beep. "It's Missy. From the pizza shop. I just thought I would call." She hung up because she didn't know what else to say, and fretted until she felt her phone vibrate in her back pocket during dinner.

She bolted up from the table.

"You okay?" asked her dad, pausing with a forkful of string beans halfway to his lips.

"Sit down," her mom demanded. "We're saying grace."

"It's my friend," said Missy, improvising. "She needs homework help."

"Didn't you graduate?" quipped her older sister Bree.

"Yeah, but she didn't," Missy snapped.

"Sit down," her mom said again. Her white cardigan set off her dark hair and brows. "We'll say grace and then you can go."

Missy bowed her head, heart pounding, and listened to her dad recite a prayer in Polish.

Bless us, O Lord, and these, Thy gifts, which we are about to receive.

The prayer was short, so Missy had time to get to her bedroom before she answered the phone.

"Hey, Missy. Sorry I missed you before."

"It's okay."

“Is this a good time to talk? You seem out of breath.”

Missy made an effort to slow her breathing. “No, no. Now’s a good time. What’s up?”

Casey laughed. “I guess - I want to know if you want to see me. When we’re both off the clock.”

“Yes.”

When Missy didn’t elaborate, Casey asked, “So...are you free tomorrow night?”

“You mean Saturday?” She paused, then forced herself to continue. “Saturday I’m free. But can we drive somewhere new? I’m sick of Bayonne.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll think of someplace,” said Casey. “Is that where you live, Bayonne? Can I pick you up?”

Missy struggled to think of a suitably anonymous meeting place. Her house was out of the question, as was Gino’s Pizzeria. In the end she gave the name of a local Korean grocery, because none of her parents’ friends shopped there.

The next day, Missy felt overwhelmed by the task of dressing for their date. In high school, she’d dressed in whatever clothes her peers wore, noting the most popular styles of blue jeans and ballet flats. She saved her paychecks and bought the right brand of backpack. She gravitated toward shirts with brand names splashed across the front. Now that she worked full time, she wore her Gino’s tee almost every day.

But with Casey, she couldn’t rely on context to dress. She didn’t know Casey from high school, and she certainly couldn’t wear her employee uniform on their date. The thought of dressing like Casey, in Carharts and flannel, crossed her mind. But she couldn’t imagine wearing Casey’s clothes, anymore than she could imagine Casey in a

dress. The image embarrassed her, and brought to mind how appalled she had been by Casey's appearance that first day in the pizza shop. Or maybe she wasn't appalled - maybe that was just the name she gave to feelings of another kind. She finally decided on sandals, capri pants, and her pink church cardigan, buttoned up to hide the little gold cross she wore around her neck.

That evening, Casey picked her up and drove north along the Hudson River, stopping at Liberty State Park. From there they could see the backside of the Statue of Liberty, as well as lower Manhattan. Casey parked the car and bought two ice cream cones from a truck. Then they crawled under a railing and found a place to sit on the rocks, with the river just a foot away. The sun set behind them, leaving the cityscape before them to glitter against a dim eastern sky.

"Have you always lived in Bayonne?" asked Casey, licking a drip off the side of her ice cream cone. Tonight she wore a clean shirt and jeans, in addition to her usual Yankees cap.

"Pretty much." Missy smiled. "You know the church you're working on? I grew up going to that church."

Casey grinned and said, "No way!"

Missy remembered her First Communion, standing at the altar in a frothy gown. She remembered her first bittersweet sip from the communal chalice, and the ham hocks her mom brought to the potluck after the service. That night, her parents gave her the little gold cross she wears every day, out of habit more than devotion.

"The windows are beautiful," Casey continued. "And so are the pews, with the new stain and all. Do you like going there?"

“I’ve always gone. My mom likes it.”

“And you like going to church with her? Living with her?”

“What do you mean?” Maybe Casey looked down on her for living with her parents.

“I just meant, how is that like for you? Tell me about your family.”

“My family,” said Missy, running a curl between her fingers. “Well, my parents are Polish immigrants. My dad is an electrician and my mom is very Catholic.”

Casey raised her eyebrows.

Missy braced herself for more questions about her beliefs, about her mother, but none came. Relieved, she added, “My mom and my sister always butt heads.”

“Why?”

Missy rolled her eyes. “A million reasons. Stupid reasons. I think Bree will be happy once she has kids of her own to boss around.”

“Oh, she wants to be the boss. I get it, I’m like that too.”

Missy felt a little thrill. Then she felt embarrassed and exposed. What was she doing on a dark riverbank with a woman who dressed like a man? Her mother thought she was at Kendall’s house. She should be at Kendall’s house. If Casey had picked Missy up from her house rather than the Korean grocery, would her mom have shaken Casey’s hand?

To distract herself from hypotheticals, Missy said, “Let me tell you about my sister. When I was little, we would play house and she would make me be the dog.”

“That’s kind of mean.”

“It was! Bree would be the mom, our friend would be the dad, and she’d get a doll to be the baby.”

“She couldn’t let you be the baby?”

“No! I had to be the dog. She made me drink from a cup on the floor - ”

Casey laughed so hard that Missy had to stop.

“You shouldn’t laugh at my sad story,” she teased.

“It’s not the story that’s so funny. It’s your delivery.”

“My delivery?”

“Yeah,” said Casey, looking from her to Manhattan. “Like at the pizza shop, when my crew was making dick jokes. You went along with it, all sweet and simple, until you looked at me. Then the joke was on them. You know what I’m saying?”

“Not really.”

“It’s not a bad thing. When I first saw you, I thought you were pretty and mysterious. But I didn’t know you were funny until later.”

Missy looked down at the Hudson River. She was flattered and flustered, but at the same time she felt like she’d been caught in a lie. Missy changed the subject. “Where did you grow up?”

“I live in Newark,” said Casey, pulling down the brim of her Yankees cap. “I have an apartment and a couple roommates.”

Missy waited for elaboration, then asked, “But where are you from?”

“Trenton. I haven’t been back in a while, though.”

A drop of sweat slid down Missy's spine. Had Casey's family rejected her? She decided not to press any further, and instead pointed across the water. "Do you ever work there?"

"In Manhattan?" Casey laughed bitterly. "No. I'm not ready for a Manhattan job, and if my crew keeps giving me grunt work, I never will be."

"So you've never been?"

"I go to Manhattan every chance I get. Mostly weekends," said Casey, resting her hand on the rock beneath them, behind Missy's back, barely touching her. "You should join me sometime." The phrase was heavy with bravado, so different from the gesture, which was cautious and shy.

Tenderness welled in Missy's chest. She leaned back, and Casey's arm flexed to support her weight. Missy felt light in her arms. Casey's fingers curled around her hip and Missy put her hand on Casey's thigh. She felt muscles tense beneath her hand as she stared across the water, picking out blinking pearls of light, square panels of light, rhinestone strips of light, white-hot balls of light. Rows of windows glistened like scales. She felt the rough cotton of Casey's jeans, and the promise of soft skin underneath. She turned away from the lights and toward Casey, kissing her in the dark, with water rushing past them out to sea.

"I can tell you more if you want," Casey mumbled.

Missy giggled.

"I can tell you everything I know about Manhattan - the communist bookstore in the Bowery, the lesbian bar that doesn't card, the best cannoli you ever—"

Missy's giggles turned to snorts as she collapsed into Casey's arms.

“Stop laughing, I’m serious. The best cannoli you ever had.”

“Shut up, shut up,” said Missy. She pulled Casey’s face to hers but missed her mouth in the dark, getting her cheek instead.

Before she could try again, Missy heard footsteps on the path above. She looked up and saw a figure hurry by, already growing smaller in the distance.

“What’s wrong?” asked Casey.

Missy sat up and adjusted her cardigan. “I heard someone.”

“Yeah?”

“I know a lot of people in this area. I’m just nervous.”

“I thought you lived in Bayonne.”

“I do. But some people from my church live around here.” She paused. “And I’m not gay, you know.”

Casey adjusted her cap, ran a hand over her ponytail, and gave a short laugh.

“No?”

“No.”

“So you kissed me, what? For the hell of it?”

“No,” Missy blurted. She paused, searching for the words to manage Casey’s reaction. “I just, I wanted to try it.”

“You were nicer at the pizza shop.”

Missy felt her throat close.

“At least you smell good. You smell like pizza crust,” Casey said.

“Stop it.” Her voice wobbled.

“Aw, sweetheart.” Casey squeezed her knee. “Can I drive you home?”

Missy sniffled and nodded.

They scrambled off the rocks and back onto the path, where streetlamps and a few pedestrians made Missy's palms sweat and eyes burn. Casey unlocked the car as they approached and opened the door on the passenger side.

As Casey walked around the front of the car to the driver's seat, Missy blurted, "That wasn't right, what I said. I'm sorry."

"It's okay." Casey paused to kick the front tire of her car. With her eyes on her work boots, she said, "I did think this would make a cute story, though."

Missy gripped the edge of the car door. "What do you mean?"

"Like, if it worked out between us, if you were the waitress that I met on my lunch break. That would be a cute story."

On Sunday morning, Missy walked into church and gasped.

"You okay?" her dad asked.

"Missy, you can't stop in the middle of the aisle," said her mom, pulling on her arm. Today she wore a summery yellow cardigan.

"Look at the pews," said Missy.

"What about them?" asked Bree.

"Oh! They've been refinished," said her dad, nodding. "I think Father Kaminski mentioned something about it last week. Looks nice."

Missy followed her family to the front of the church. They sat in their usual pew, three rows from the pulpit on the left-hand side. The organ music tapered off and the priest began to speak, but Missy wasn't listening. She stared down at the pew itself, at the

wood beneath her fingertips, wood she would have called 'yellow' just last week. Now she saw tiger stripes in its glossy surface, ripples of bronze and gold, glistening scales, luminous as pearls. *Solid maple*, Casey had said. *Beautiful*.

While her mom gazed at the priest, Missy peeled off her cardigan.

Escape

I'm standing on the sidewalk with my suitcase, staring up at my childhood home. As a former squat in Alphabet City, it's a bit unusual. In the '80s it was a shooting gallery. In the '90s my dad, Ben, broke in with a few other squatters and brought it up to building code.

The building's most distinguishing feature is the *trompe l'oeil* shutters painted in blue on either side of the windows. Ben painted the first set by sitting on a window ledge with his knees inside his bedroom and his torso outside the building. When Tati, a fellow squatter, noticed him working, she asked him to paint some for her windows as well. Soon everyone in the building had blue shutters.

The shutters are still there, as is the fire escape to which Ben once welded a bike when the cops tried to climb up. I haven't been home since last summer, and at this point it's been three weeks since my college graduation. As I stand and stare, a window opens on the third floor and a face haloed in curly red hair pops out.

"Margarita, is that you?"

"Tati?" I ask, shading my eyes with a hand.

The windows glare white from the setting sun, and the brick walls glow a more intense red than I remember. I can't make out Tati's expression. A siren wails a few blocks away, the city version of crickets.

"Did you miss me?" I ask. There's a pathetic note of need in my voice, although I want to sound lighthearted.

"Hold on, I'm coming down," Tati says at last. She withdraws her head and the window slams shut.

Tati moved in at the same time Ben did, and she was still there when the building converted to a co-op. But unlike Ben, she'd grown up in the neighborhood - specifically, in the Jacob Riis Houses on Avenue D. She even received her First Communion at the Catholic church next door, and was instrumental in reassuring the congregation that the squatters would be good neighbors, not drug addicts or sexual deviants. They allowed her to run a power cord from the church to the first floor of the squat, and that's where they got their power for several years. It was Tati who introduced Ben to my mother, Sophia.

I'm sure Tati has a lecture prepared for me, but I don't care. I'm 21 years old - why should she care if I stay away?

I unlock the front door and climb the stairs to the second floor, dragging my suitcase behind me. Then I wait and listen to Tati's thumping footsteps on the stairs above. When she reaches the landing, she leans against the banister and crosses her arms. Her hair is tightly curled and dyed red as the walls of our walkup. Her eyes are dark and critical as she looks me over — at my shaved head and unfamiliar clothes, a borrowed beater and sweatpants.

“What?”

“Don't *what* me, Margarita,” says Tati. “It's been three weeks since graduation. Where have you been?”

“You'll never guess,” I say with cheerful exuberance. Her anger will pass if I can just get her to laugh.

“I don't want to.”

“I eloped. We had our honeymoon in Orchard Beach.”

“You better be lying,” says Tati, raising her voice.

“Okay, I’m lying.” I hold up my hands. “What happened was, I joined the freak show at Coney Island.”

“I swear to god - ”

If I can’t get her to laugh, it might help to change the subject. “Is Eddie cooking? I smell adobo.” Eddie is her son and my childhood friend.

“Tatiana, are you all right?” I hear Ben’s voice as he struggles with the lock on his side of the door. It swings open and there he is in the doorway, wearing stained coveralls and thick round glasses that magnify his startled eyes. He freezes at the sight of me, but then his surprise turns to relief and he pulls me into a hug. His arms are thin but strong. His coveralls smell strongly of acrylic paint, and faintly of weed.

My desire to sink into that familiar scent startles me so much that I pull away. I thought I was over what he did.

Ben removes his glasses and wipes them on his coveralls, which look dirtier than the glasses themselves. “I didn’t know when you were coming,” he says, “I didn’t get things ready. I’m sorry.”

“*You’re* sorry?” snaps Tati. “She was supposed to be home weeks ago.” She turns on me. “Eddie and I come to your graduation, and you disappear before the ceremony is over. No *thank you*, no nothing, no word to anyone.”

I raise my finger. “Actually, I texted Eddie.” He replied with a series of questions, none of which I answered.

“I’m just happy she’s home,” Ben says. The two of them engage in a silent conversation consisting of subtle facial movements.

At last Tati throws up her hands. “Well, sure. Of course, I’m happy she’s alive.”

“I knew you’d come around,” I say, throwing my arms around her. “You’re going to love my freak show coworkers. The tattooed lady is a riot.”

At first, Tati stiffens in my embrace. Then she puts her arms around me and squeezes. “You’ve gotten too skinny. Come up and eat. Eddie made chicken and rice.”

During my last year of college, I almost forgot how it feels to be swept up in Tati’s embrace, and by extension the embrace of the neighborhood. I feel safe, but also stifled.

I consider refusing her offer. I’d like to unpack and take a shower. But then I decide I’d rather put off facing Ben alone for a few more hours. Besides, Eddie’s cooking smells great. “Sure.”

“How about you, Ben?”

Ben hesitates, then shakes his head. “I have to pass. I’ve been working on some new paintings and I can’t leave them alone.”

This is the same excuse he used for skipping my graduation. “The ones you told me about,” I say, my voice flat.

Ben removes his glasses again to polish them, bowing his head. “Those are the ones. Here, let me take your suitcase.”

I hand it over and Ben looks almost relieved to take it inside.

“I’ll open your bedroom door,” he says. “That way your room will get nice and cold.” We have one air conditioner crammed into the living room window, so in the summer all bedroom doors stay open.

I follow Tati upstairs. Her skirt swishes around her ankles, wafting the scent of patchouli. When she opens the door to her apartment, a wave of warmth, food smells, and

incense rolls over me, drowning out my resentment. Inside, Eddie stoops over a pot on the stove. He turns at the sound of the door.

“Mars, I thought we got rid of you,” says Eddie. He’s a year younger than me and studies biology at City College. I went to a state school on Long Island.

I put a hand to my chest. “Tati, do you hear this?”

Tati has her face in a kitchen cupboard, looking for dinner plates. She withdraws her head so I can see her rolling eyes. “I guess we’re stuck with you, *nena*.”

I smile. *Nena* bodes well for me. Tati doesn’t use my real name, the name Sophia gave me, unless she’s angry.

I reach up to rub Eddie’s stubbly scalp. “Look, we’re twins now!”

Eddie and I would make a good Coney Island clown act, with me as his shorter, squatter, noisier counterpart. He could be the gangly, solemn clown with a tear painted on his cheek.

Eddie allows me a full second of scalp-rubbing before leaning out of my reach. “Oh yeah, we’re basically identical. When did you shave your head?”

“Right before she auditioned for the freak show,” Tati suggests.

I don’t correct her. Instead I peer into Eddie’s pot, admiring the golden chicken thighs, the *arroz con habichuelas* seasoned with adobo, sofrito, and sazón. “That looks ready.”

In Tati’s apartment, the kitchen and living area share one room. There’s a table, four mismatched chairs, and a sofa. Potted plants crowd the floor and hang from the ceiling. The plaster walls are hung with a patchwork of goddess imagery - blue-skinned Kali, mournful Isis, misty Ix Chel, Yemaya with the sea in her skirt. My earliest, queerest

memories are of staring up at these goddesses. (They didn't have the same effect on Eddie, who is more into gods.) The exposed brick wall opposite the door is packed with deities as well, tiny figurines pressed into gaps in the mortar. Eddie and I used to play with them like action figures.

The three of us sit at the table and dish.

"This is great, Eddie," says Tati between bites. "You got the cooking gene from your *abuela*. God knows you didn't get it from me."

It's true. I've known Tati to wander off while cooking and burn the rice to the bottom of the pot. She says she prefers gardening because you bury the seed, you forget about it, and *boom*, you have a beanstalk.

When Tati first moved in, it was her idea to plant a garden in the empty lot next to the squat. She enlisted the squatters to clear away trash and invited the congregation next door to plant rows of vegetables. Sophia tacked the Puerto Rican flag to the wall and embedded bricks and bits of crockery in the dirt to form a path between the plots. Ben built a compost bin. That's how he and Sophia first met.

"You're not so bad, *Mami*," says Eddie.

"When you were younger, Ben used to cook for us, remember that?" Tati smiles at me. "*Dio' sabe*, he was as bad as me. But I was so tired back then that I took all the help I could get."

When Eddie and I were little, Ben used to cook dinner for us on weeknights, simple things like grilled cheese or pancakes. Tati joined us after she got off work. During the day, she would leave Eddie in Ben's care while she cleaned office buildings uptown. Ben works part-time as the co-op super, so he never had to leave us - we just

trailed after him as he responded to the complaints of tenants. He changed light bulbs and fixed leaking sinks, while we collected mints and candies wrapped to look like strawberries at each door.

The memory reignites my resentment.

“You’re right, Tati,” I say. “Too bad Ben isn’t here now. I guess he’d rather eat paint. Alone.”

She sets down her cutlery, a defensive curtain falling across her face. “I bring him groceries, but I don’t know what he makes of them. Maybe if you go with him, he’ll be more comfortable going to the store.”

“You don’t need to wait on him. Ben can get his own groceries.”

Tati looks me in the eye. “No ... no, he can’t.”

For once, I have nothing clever to say. I bolt up from my seat. Eddie widens his eyes and shakes his head, his mouth full of food.

“*Nena*, you hardly ate,” says Tati. Her tone is placating now.

“I — I have to unpack,” I reply, and leave the table.

After I shut the apartment door behind me, I linger on the landing. I want Eddie to follow me, and he does, carrying my plate.

“When did Tati start bringing him groceries?” I ask, accepting the plate.

Eddie squints over my shoulder. “A few weeks ago, I guess.”

“So, what? He can’t walk to the store anymore? Not even the bodega? He used to spend hours over there.”

Eddie twists his mouth into a conspiratorial smile. “Do you think Leo misses him?” Leo runs the bodega on the corner.

“Are you kidding? Ben drove him crazy, hanging around the store all day.” Then I pause. “Actually, Leo needs to be irritated. That’s his whole thing. I bet he’s bored without Ben.”

Eddie’s mouth isn’t twisted anymore. It’s wide open, laughing.

“Eddie, you’re throwing me off. Why is Tati bringing him groceries?”

“It hasn’t been that long.”

“What, Eddie? Just spit it out.”

“He won’t leave the building.”

“What do you mean he won’t leave?” I stare. Eddie takes a step back. “Sorry,” I add, softening my voice. “I just don’t get it. Ben is a homebody, okay. He gets anxious. I know he hasn’t left Manhattan since - years ago. But you say he won’t leave the building?”

“So you know he doesn’t leave Manhattan,” says Eddie, ignoring my question.

“Yeah?” I say, before I get his meaning. My commencement ceremony was at a banquet hall on Long Island. “Oh, fuck you. I figured he could make an exception for my graduation.” I pause, breath knocked from my chest by a moment of clarity. “Is that why he won’t go outside?”

“What do you mean?”

“What if he stopped going out when I disappeared. What if I - ”

Eddie widens his eyes. “No one thinks that, Mars. We were just worried about you.”

“So it’s my fault?”

“No, he’s been deteriorating for a while now. You just haven’t noticed.”

That's not good, either.

"You've been away at college. And, well, you're...you."

I sink down to the steps and put my face in my hands. I feel dizzy. After a few moments, I look up. "I can fix it."

"Fix what?"

"There must be something I can do to reverse it. Some way to get him out."

"*Mamá* and I have talked about that," Eddie says, picking his words with care.

"We should let him be."

I shake my head. Eddie is like family, but Ben and I are blood. I know it's not over for him. I know I can get him back out into the city he loves.

Eddie takes a seat beside me. "Mars, where did you go?"

I frown at the linoleum tiles on the lower landing. "I went looking for my mom."

"Wow." He exhales. "Did you find her?"

"Yeah," I snap. "We went road tripping in a little red car with the top down. We robbed banks. It was like *Thelma and Louise*."

"Whatever." Eddie starts to get up.

"Wait." I grab his hand, then bring it to my lips and kiss his knuckles.

"Mars," he says. "Are you okay?"

"Can I sleep with you tonight?"

You wanna know what really happened? I did go looking for Sophia. I left my graduation with a mission. My friend from college came too. He drove me to his parents' bungalow in Far Rockaway. We meant to visit the Jersey pizza shop my mom liked so

much, or at least a police station. We meant to interrogate my extended family in the Bronx. We discussed driving to Miami because Sophia once sent me a postcard from there. Also from San Juan and Seville. Sophia was a wanderer long before she left my father. But our search didn't get far. We started fucking and spent every day on the boardwalk. When my friend told me he loved me, I knew it was time to come home.

Eddie tells me to go through Ben's apartment, open my bedroom window, and climb up the fire escape. He'll let me in through his window so Tati won't ask questions. I tell him I'll come by later tonight. I grab a drink at a yuppie bar and wait until Ben's asleep to go inside.

The apartment is dark when I enter, but I don't need light to navigate the space. I trail my index finger along the wall of the short corridor. I can't see them but I know our shoes are lined up against the wall - my sneakers, his ancient Docs, and his wool slippers.

I pause where the wall ends and turn right. Soon my hand finds the plastic kitchen countertop. My trailing finger encounters no grease or dust. There's a square of moonlight on the floor, which falls from a window above the sink. There are ashes in the sink, the only mess you'll find here. To my right is the counter, and to my left is a table built from scavenged wood. It's empty now, but Ben taught me to play chess there. He spends his summers at the chess tables in Washington Square Park. Or he used to.

The counter ends and I keep walking, trailing my finger along the wall until I hit the bookshelf. I can't see the titles, but I know his art history books from college are there, and books written by old friends, and his cracked-spine paperback Westerns. I texted him when Clive Cussler died. Doesn't that make me a good daughter?

I turn left at the next wall and follow it until I pass Ben's bedroom and studio. I stop and listen to him snore. What does his new work look like? What painting was more important than my graduation? If Eddie's right, the new work was only an excuse. He'd rather give me an excuse than be honest about his condition. No - I can't be mad anymore because I made it worse. I don't know what to feel.

I turn the knob, ease open the door, and poke my head inside.

Ben sleeps on a futon against the left wall, covered by a quilt composed of irregular-sized patches. His white sock feet glow in the moonlight, which pours in from the window opposite the futon. Surrounding him on three sides are plywood panels painted with city skylines. Each panel has been painted with black and white paint - white for the background and black for the buildings. I see Art Deco skyscrapers, brownstones, department stores with big display windows, folding card tables spilling handbags into the street, cardboard boxes, and brick tenements. Some have stoops, some have columns, some have awnings, and some have boarded-up windows. I notice magical elements too - a dragon curled around a church steeple, and a misshapen figure peering out a window. Lined up next to one another, his paintings form one horizon, one long and distant city within the walls of his apartment.

Staring at the city of Ben's making, my flesh prickles. I feel drawn to those quiet and empty towers. I feel those streets in my veins. I need to move out before I'm trapped here forever.

The woman's face is all planes and angles - blunt bangs, prominent nose and cheekbones, parallel lines on either side of her small pointed mouth. She might be in her

forties, but who knows. Elegance obscures age and makes it nearly irrelevant. She wears a bright caftan and large red glasses and seems out of place at this lesbian bar. Most of its patrons are baby gays because the bartenders don't card. She's older, yes, but more self-assured also. Elegant, like I said. When she speaks, her colleagues listen with rapt attention. They sit on hard chairs or stand around her while she gesticulates from her seat on a small velvet sofa, the only one of its kind in the bar. Their attention insulates her, but doesn't stop me from thinking of ways to attract hers.

Before I can come up with a ruse, she reaches into her clutch and withdraws a pack of cigarettes. I bolt for the door, past the vinyl booths, dingy wood counter, and bottles glowing under purple spotlights. I position myself under the awning outside, hoping that none of her colleagues joins her. The night slumps hot and heavy across my shoulders. The woman emerges and stops under the awning as well, but to the right of the door, whereas I'm on the left.

Since I returned home about a month ago, I have a) gotten a job at a call center selling adult diapers, and b) developed an appreciation for the pastime of cruising. In college I saw "going out" as a means to an end, but these days I've begun to savor the process itself. Call me old-fashioned, but I think it's lazy to use a dating app. Like any skill, cruising improves with practice, and I've practiced. This bar is one of my usual spots.

"You need a light?" I ask.

The woman frowns at me and withdraws a lighter from a fold in her caftan.

"You're awfully young to be a smoker."

"Oh, I'm not a smoker," I say.

“Good. It’s a filthy habit.” She inhales. “Why do you have a lighter, then?”

I press my lips together, almost smiling, working up to a line. “I always carry one, in case a lady needs a light.”

“Ha!” the woman says. Her lips twist and she looks me over, noting, no doubt, that in my stretchy black dress I look like a lady myself. Well, sometimes I do, and sometimes I don’t. “How chivalrous. What’s your name?”

“Mars,” I say. “What’s yours?”

“Miriam Glass,” she says, holding out her hand. I approach to shake it. “And what do you do, Mars?”

“I do it all.” I lift my chin. “Some freelance writing, some sales work, all kinds of art...”

“If you make art, surely you’ve heard of me,” says Miriam.

“Your name sounds familiar.” It does not.

“I’m an art critic. I write a column for the *New York Canvas* and my Instagram has 10,000 followers. At least, my intern says it does.”

I wipe my palms on the front of my dress. I like a challenge, but Miriam and her ego might be a waste of my time.

“Where are you from, Mars?” Miriam giggles. “Are you from Mars, Mars?”

“I’m from here. I grew up just—”

“I mean, where are you *really* from?” Miriam’s eyes search my face. “You have such an interesting look.”

She's referring to my olive skin and freckles, my shaved head and androgynous attitude. If I were thinner, she might have called me *exotic* too. "Like I said, I was born here. On that stoop. Actually, I was born on the L train platform."

Miriam laughs. Does she know that she's the butt of my joke?

We wind up at her place in Tribeca. Her top-floor loft has large windows and hardwood floors. On my way to her bed, I nearly stumble into a pedestal displaying a misshapen clay pot.

After sex, I look up her name on my phone. I find quotes scholars calling her the Barbara Rose of our age and the tastemaker of West Side collectors. I find photos of Miriam at galas in drapery, jewel-toned gowns. I find an interview with Ms. Glass in the *Sunday Times*, and an essay on her cultural impact as a lesbian art critic. I find a bio which reads, *Miriam Glass is interested in the intersection of place and design. As a native New Yorker herself, she has a particular weakness for art that says something about her hometown.* She has a little fewer than 10,000 followers. Miriam lies beside me, also scrolling.

Taking all this into consideration, I think of Ben. He's never sold a painting in his life. Wouldn't it be nice to introduce him, get him some attention? I rest my cheek in my hand and gaze at her. "I have someone you should meet."

She looks up and raises an eyebrow. "What, right now? Is he at the door?"

"Funny. You'll have to go to him."

"How mysterious."

"He's a mysterious man." I pause, smiling, savoring the suspense. "He's my client. Ben Larsson. He's a recluse, but a brilliant painter."

“Your client? I thought you worked in sales.”

“I do a little of everything. I’m an agent too, for the right artist.” Wouldn’t it help us both to make some money?

Miriam pulls the sheet over her chest and rolls onto her side, facing me. “Okay, I’ll bite. What makes him the *right* artist?”

I make a sweeping motion with my hands. “He’s a dying breed, Miriam - an East Village artist, a *real* artist. He paints the city as it was, back in the day. He’s an old timer. You ever seen *Rent*?”

“Have I seen it?” Miriam scoffs. “Please. I saw it with the original cast.”

“Then you know what it was. Years have passed and the neighborhood changed, but he never compromised his art.”

Miriam sighs, which is not the reaction I’d hoped for. “New York really has changed, hasn’t it?” She lowers her eyes, looking at my breasts, my belly, with desire and remorse. “You’re so young, you don’t even know what you missed.”

The next day I go off-script on a call. I tell a customer that it is my life’s dream to sell adult diapers. I tell her she’s on call with the proud proprietress of Long Life Briefs, LLC. Unfortunately, my lie does not inspire the customer to purchase even a single disposable panty. My manager isn’t happy, but it’s not my fault the call script doesn’t work. I thought freestyling might make a sale.

When I applied for this job, I liked the notion of selling a customer on just my voice. I imagined my voice floating away to Florida, leaving behind my stocky, freckled

body with the buzzcut and the agitated hands. But it turns out my voice doesn't travel well.

After my shift, I go to a gay bar that caters to lesbians on Monday nights. I need a distraction. If I manage to stop thinking about my manager, then I start thinking about Miriam. She's agreed to pay Ben a visit. I don't like her, or my manager either, but for now I need them.

The bar is full of men when I arrive, so Monday must not be lesbian night after all. I stick around anyway because there's a piano and a man in a sequined vest who plays for tips. I sit on a stool nearby and request current radio hits amid protests from the gray-haired regulars. One of them tells me I look just like a young, bald Rita Moreno, so I tell him that I'm in disguise and not to reveal my true identity to anyone. He laughs, his eyes disappearing into folds of papery pink skin, and buys me a rum-and-coke. My eyes well up with gratitude.

Miriam hits the buzzer just as I shut the microwave door on a frozen dinner. I head to the first floor and find a small crowd waiting outside the front door.

"Hello, Mars," says Miriam. "I brought my team. This is Carlo, my photographer, and Vee, my social media intern." She leans toward me and lowers her voice. "Vee uses they/them pronouns."

Vee flashes a strained smile and runs a few strands of blue hair between their fingers. I'm a sucker for colored hair. If I wasn't focused on impressing Miriam, I'd ask Vee what brand of dye they use.

"I hope you don't mind the extra company," Miriam adds.

“Not at all,” I say, recovering. “Come on in.”

I lead them upstairs and into the apartment. That’s when I realize there’s a fourth person in the group, a small, slender woman with her hair in a steely bun.

“Who are you?” I ask.

“Me? I’m the ex-wife,” the woman says drily.

“Really, Rebekah,” Miriam snaps. “You could just say you’re my friend and leave it at that.”

Before I can formulate a response, I notice Ben standing at the kitchen sink, frozen, with a joint in his hand. I feel a warm draft coming from the open window. “Ben! Hey. My friend is here to see you.”

“Mars, what’s going on?” he asks, putting out his joint in a saucer.

“I told you my friend was coming over.” I didn’t tell him anything else because I didn’t want him to fret.

“Miriam Glass,” says Miriam, stepping forward and offering her hand.

Ben takes her hand, shaking twice, and I feel a surge of pride. He has strong hands. He has always worked with his hands. “I’m sorry. I should have changed or—”

“Don’t apologize. I want to see you in your most primal state of creation.”

“What?” He squints through the fat lenses of his glasses.

“I told you, she wants to see your art,” I remind him.

Ben shrugs. “If you say so.”

I walk past him to his bedroom and open the door, leading Miriam and her team inside. For several long minutes Miriam stalks back and forth, appraising the paintings leaned against each wall. She frowns, touches her fingertips to her chin, and finally

makes an inviting gesture with her hand. Vee and Carlo rush forward in response, armed with a smartphone and a large camera respectively, to photograph the art.

Miriam looks over her shoulder and winks at me. I glance at Rebekah, wondering if she saw, wondering if she cares. Rebekah is already looking at me. She raises her eyebrows.

“You like it?” asks Ben. He’s behind us, peering through the doorway.

“She loves it,” says Rebekah.

Miriam scowls. “Rebekah!”

“Most artists don’t even get a photograph. She wants to write you up for the *Canvas*.”

Ben frowns. “She wants to what?”

“Really, I don’t know why I bring you to these things,” says Miriam, crossing her arms. Her tone is both resigned and indulgent. “You ruin my aura of mystery. The artist should sweat a little.”

“Look at him,” says Rebekah, jerking a thumb at Ben. “He’s sweat enough.”

Ben grimaces and removes his glasses, which have gone almost opaque with steam.

“So what’s next?” I ask.

“I have a few questions for Ben,” says Miriam, eyeing him.

Ben doesn’t react, just carries on polishing his glasses.

“Can I sit in on the interview?” I ask, hoping my presence will reassure him.

Ben puts his glasses back on and smiles. “Sure. Can I get you all some tea?”

Every night, I get naked. It's only safe to do so in the dark. I'm looking for someone in these beds, but I finish so fast that if I found her, I wouldn't know it.

I stay out so late one night that by the time I get home, Eddie and Ben are in the kitchen making breakfast.

"I thought we got rid of you," says Eddie.

I rub my eyes and groan. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm here for Friday brunch. We do this every week."

"You do?"

"Yeah," says Eddie, exchanging a look with Ben. "You're usually asleep."

"Whatever." I shuffle toward my bedroom door.

"Wait," says Ben. "Don't you want pancakes?"

My stomach grumbles. As tired as I am, I'm too hungry to fall asleep. I sink into a chair to watch Ben's back as he stirs a bowl of batter. There's a flash outside the kitchen window

"We were talking about Paris," Ben says.

"Paris?" I turn to Eddie. "Who's going to Paris?"

"You don't know Paris?" Ben asks, looking over his shoulder.

"I mean, I've heard of Paris. But I've never been."

Eddie grimaces and waves his hand. "Ben, forget it."

"Paris is a boy," says Ben, wiggling his eyebrows. "They met last semester."

"In improv class." Eddie shudders. "I wasn't very good at that."

"Eddie won't stop talking about him."

"Not to me," I say, leaning back and crossing my arms. I feel left out.

“I’ve mentioned him,” Eddie protests, narrowing his eyes at me. “You don’t listen.”

“You know what, Eddie,” says Ben. “This is what Paris was talking about. You don’t communicate.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter anymore.” Eddie drums his fingers on the counter.

“Yikes,” I say. “Did he dump you?”

“Let’s talk about something else,” says Eddie. He bangs a frying pan onto the stove. “Is the batter ready?”

Ben nods and drops a pat of butter into the pan. Eddie tilts the pan, letting the butter gurgle and snap. Raindrops fall against the kitchen window. I’m lucky I got home before the storm.

Did Eddie cry over Paris? I haven’t seen him cry in years. I remember one time he bawled when Tati dropped him off at our apartment. To cheer him up, Ben promised to make breakfast for dinner. By the time Tati got home from work, we were eating little pancakes fried in butter, spongy with artificial syrup, and Eddie was happy.

The memory makes me soft. “What kind of a name is Paris, anyway? He sounds like an idiot.”

“It’s his stage name,” says Eddie, as Ben pours batter into the pan.

“His what?”

Eddie suppresses a smile. “He never told me his real name, just his stage name. He’s a singer.”

“He won’t even tell you his name, but he wants *you* to communicate?” I shake my head. “Eddie, let him go.”

“You don’t even know the context,” Ben protests.

“I know enough.”

“I wouldn’t be so quick to dismiss love,” says Ben, flipping the first finished pancakes onto a plate. Eddie brings them to the table, then returns for more plates, forks, and a bottle of syrup.

“What I’m saying,” Ben continues, “is that I’ve been in love before, and even though it was a flawed love, I wouldn’t have changed it for the world.”

I press my cheek against the table and fold my arms over my head. Ben was always a weird dude, so I don’t blame Sophia for leaving him. Maybe if Ben had made some changes, she would have stayed. Maybe she would have taken me with her. Maybe then I would have had a parent at my graduation.

“You got a headache?” Eddie asks through a mouthful of pancakes.

“No,” I mumble, lifting my head.

“I mean that, Eddie. The good times are worth it. Tatiana would tell you the same thing.” Ben turns his back to the stove and his eyes acquire a dreamy glaze. “I remember one time, the police stopped Sophia and me outside the squat and barred us from going in. I was arguing with one of the cops when I heard Tatiana’s voice from above. She said, ‘Heads up, pigs!’ and tipped a bucket of piss out the window.”

“No way,” says Eddie.

“Yup. We had just enough time to duck and get past the cops, back into the building.” Ben laughs. “She had a lot of trouble with her plumbing, so she was using my toilet during the day and a bucket at night. Thank god for that.”

Sometimes I hold parts of Ben in my mind and I think I know him. I call him a father, a fixer, a direct activist, a chess player, a man who likes plumbing and paint. A man who made a daughter and kept her, knowing that the mother wouldn't stick.

The man Sophia knew is the same man in the kitchen making me pancakes. And yet, the man in the kitchen would never argue with a cop on the street. He wouldn't be in the street to begin with.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. It's a text from Miriam.

My column went up a few hours ago ... my friend called ... he says Void wants first dibs on a show.

I bolt up from my seat, wide awake.

"Mars, are you good?" Eddie asks.

I ignore him. "Ben. I got you a show."

Confusion crosses Ben's face, then elation, then terror. "A show? In a gallery?"

"I think so," I say. "Hold on, I'm asking Miriam."

Miriam confirms that yes, Void is a gallery, and yes, her friend is a curator who wants to show Ben's paintings.

"I know Void," says Eddie, narrowing his eyes at me. "It's in Chelsea. On the West Side."

"He knows where Chelsea is," I snap. Turning to Ben, I say, "That's just half an hour on the L."

"I know where Chelsea is," says Ben, pouring syrup over his pancakes.

I feel a twinge of fear. What if he refuses to show his work? How will I make 20% off sales of his paintings? How can I fix what I broke inside him?

Eddie stares at me with raised eyebrows. His resignation is infuriating.

“Do they want *me* at Void, or just my paintings?” Ben asks, without looking up from his pancakes.

“Maybe you could just—”

I cut Eddie off. “They want you *and* your paintings!” I clutch his hand, something I haven’t done since I was a little kid.

Finally, Ben looks at me. He blinks several times, quickly, and I know he wants to drop my hand and polish his glasses. But he doesn’t. I see the effort on his face, and the shame.

“The world should know what you can do,” I whisper. “I want you to show up.”

Ben’s eyes, magnified by his thick lenses, glisten with tears. He blinks again, and nods.

The night before Ben’s show, I can’t sleep. I practically vibrate with excitement. At sunrise, Eddie banishes me from his bed.

“You move too much,” he mumbles, stretching like a starfish, crowding me out. “Go home.”

“You’re the worst,” I say, sitting up at the edge of the bed. “Fine.”

I crawl out the window and squint at the dark clouds above. The air is already thick and humid, almost too hot to breathe. I scale the fire escape and return to my bedroom, where I fall back to sleep. Ben wakes me around 10 a.m. by knocking at my door.

“What?” I demand, opening the door a crack.

“Mars!” His eyes bulge behind his glasses. “I need a favor.”

I sigh and sidle past him to sit at the kitchen table. “What is it?”

Ben doesn’t sit with me. Instead he plucks a half-smoked joint off a saucer on the table and leans out the window over the kitchen sink. He lights the joint, takes a drag, and turns back to face me. “I made another painting. I need you to get it to the show.”

“I thought your show was all set up,” I say. “All those moving guys came last week and took care of it.”

“Well, this painting didn’t exist last week.” He leans out the window again to smoke.

“Can’t you run it over yourself?”

Ben exhales. “Not yet, Mars. Give me a couple hours.”

For a moment, I’m speechless. This is the closest Ben has ever come to saying, *I am afraid to go outside*.

He sets down his joint and removes his glasses. “The show opens tonight. I need you to get it to the gallery as soon as possible. They won’t want to add anything last minute, but I know you can convince them.”

I stand and snatch the glasses from his hands. “Stop fidgeting, okay? I can do it, no problem.”

Ben drags the painting from his room to the kitchen. It’s roughly the size of his body, wrapped in duct tape and cardboard.

“Why is it so important that *this* painting get to Void?” I ask.

“Each painting is an important part of my city,” he insists. “This one is too.”

I roll my eyes. In spite of the intricacy of Ben's recent work, when you see them from a distance, there's not much difference between them. "Okay, I might need my skateboard for this."

Together, we get the painting out the door and down the stairs. I step onto the sidewalk while Ben watches from the doorway. Before the door swings shut, I see Ben's face, his thick round glasses, his anxious fingers tugging at the collar of his shirt. Gingerly, I lower the painting onto my skateboard and push the painting ahead of me, heading for the train station three blocks away.

As I roll past the community garden next door, I see Tati on her knees in the dirt. She has a spade in one hand and a bulb in the other, and she's kneeling on her grandmother's dish towel. I can't see it but I know it's there, the towel her grandma sent from Puerto Rico, now too soiled and full of holes to be used in the kitchen. She never gardens without it.

At the sound of my skateboard, Tati looks up and smiles. She forgot our dispute when I started buying Ben's groceries.

"Nena, ¿adónde andas?"

Tati tries Spanish with me from time to time. If I was meaner, I'd tell her it's too late. I know she knows and blames herself for not teaching me in Sophia's absence. When Tati addresses me in Spanish, I feel a pang of loss. If I don't understand her, I feel even worse.

"I'm on my way to Void. Ben painted this just last night," I say, patting the side of the package.

"Ooh," says Tati. "Can I get Eddie to help you?"

“Good luck getting him out of bed.”

Tati laughs. “Okay, *nená*. See you at the show.”

I rattle off down the block, over the curb, and across the street. I pass Leo’s bodega and the yuppie bar. I reach the L train.

Getting down the stairs to the subway is a puzzle. I wind up asking a solicitous stranger to hold my skateboard while I carry the painting. He insists on carrying the painting instead, then asks for my number.

But once I reach the bottom, I’m on my own. I stare at the turnstiles, wondering how I’ll ever get through with my person-sized package. Luckily, a woman with a stroller exits through the emergency door and holds it open for me. We trade smiles as we roll past one another.

The L train arrives packed with NYU students headed crosstown for brunch. I get some disgusted looks as I trundle onto the train, mumbling *‘scuse me* with every step. I get off in Chelsea, push open the emergency exit, and roll to the foot of the stairs. This time, there’s no one to ask for help. I sweat and stare at the rectangle of gray, humid sky visible at the top. Then I tuck the skateboard under my arm, lift the package with both hands, and begin side-stepping up the stairs.

I make it to the top of the steps, emerge onto the sidewalk, and feel raindrops on my scalp. Moments later, I trip on the curb and drop Ben’s painting face-first into the gutter, where it makes a splash.

I say, “FUCK,” lift the painting out of the puddle, and prop it against a storefront. I peel away the dirty, sopping cardboard to keep it from damaging the painting. But as I

do so, the rain falls harder and each drop discolors the canvas. The black paint is still fresh and runs in tracks down the canvas, onto the sidewalk.

Instead of a city skyline, this painting depicts a window and a fire escape drawn to scale. The window has been pulled up halfway and there's a woman on the fire escape. She has one foot on the ladder to the floor above, but she's not looking up. Instead, she faces the viewer. She grips the railing with one hand and holds out a postcard with the other. The postcard bears the word *Miami* and the image of an orange.

The rain falls harder. Mesmerized, I watch a droplet carve through layers of paint, exposing pencil marks, false starts, the figure of a man scrapped early in the painting process. The woman's hair runs in rivulets down the canvas, as do her clothes. But her modesty is preserved by the limitations of two-dimensional painting. There's nothing but blank canvas underneath.

In the painting's last discernable moments, my eyes wander to the window. The room behind it is dark. There's a grubby saucer on the sill, and a screwdriver beside it. Half a joint remains in the saucer, with smoke still curling from the tip.

Those Who Know

From her perch on a bar stool, Missy felt a draft on the back of her neck. Then she heard footsteps. The steps were quick and clicked against the concrete floor. She wanted to know to whom they belonged. The footsteps grew louder before their owner entered her field of vision. The footsteps belonged to a woman with long red hair and a yellow leather handbag.

The woman wore olive culottes and her handbag dangled from the crook of her elbow. With the opposite hand she reached inside for her wallet as she waited for the bartender to notice her, which didn't take long. Her fingers were short with long, pointed nails painted mauve to match her lipstick. She had a downturned mouth and eyes that looked past whatever was in front of her, including the bartender, even as she ordered a drink.

Missy realized she was staring and looked down, smoothing her hands over the red-and-white gingham fabric, the fitted bodice and full skirt of her dress. The pattern was loud but reminded her of the waxy tablecloths at Gino's, the Bayonne pizzeria where she worked as a waitress. She'd bought it in August from the Goodwill in North Bergen and saved it for this occasion, her first time going to a lesbian bar. She'd decided to go to Manhattan, far from anyone she knew, and scoured the internet until she found the bar Casey had mentioned, the one that didn't card. To get there, she'd taken a bus to Grand Central, then the F train downtown. Getting home would be trickier because with any luck she'd be out late, very late. The thought of navigating the subway after midnight filled her with dread, and yet she couldn't afford a taxi home. Her best plan so far was to install herself at a 24-hour diner, drinking coffee until the first commuters trickled past

her window. She had a twenty-dollar bill tucked in her coat pocket as well, because her friend Kendall's mother, who was from Brooklyn, always said she carried "mugger money" growing up.

The more Missy appraised her own dress, however, the more she worried that the gingham wasn't just loud - it was obnoxious. She looked around. No one else was wearing red-and-white gingham. The other patrons wore battle jackets, or shirts fastened with only two buttons, or neon-colored elastane, or underwear as outerwear.

One woman wore a dress in a similar shape, but from her bumper bangs and cat eye glasses it was clear she was going for a more retro look. She fit right in. Missy was sure she caught the retro woman staring at Missy's white flats, which matched her dress but not the late November weather. She'd stepped in some slush on the walk from the F and it showed. She crossed her ankles under the bar stool to hide her shoes.

Missy stole another look at the woman with the yellow handbag. She had her drink now and was looking for a place to sit. Her eyes met Missy's and lingered. She smiled and Missy felt herself flash like a highway sign under high beams. The feeling was so intense that Missy dropped her eyes. Once again, she studied her own dress. By the time she looked up, the woman had stepped away from the counter and settled into the booth farthest from the door, and from Missy.

"If you don't talk to her soon, I will."

Missy turned her head and saw a girl with a buzz cut leaning up against the bar. "You what?"

“You’re staring. I’m giving you a head start.” The girl grinned, showing a crooked front tooth and scattering freckles like reflections off a disco ball. She wore a leather jacket and one long earring on her left ear.

Missy smoothed her hair behind her ears. She’d left the red bandanna she wore to Gino’s at home. Without it, she worried that her curls might stick out and glow in the purple light of the bar. “Is it that obvious?”

“My friends and I have been rooting for you.” She jerks her thumb at two guys sitting behind them, in a booth by the door, holding hands across the table.

One of them offered her a thumbs up. His head was shaved, like the girl’s. But unlike her, he was tall and stoop-shouldered. The smaller guy had a lot of hair, which he wore in dreadlocks. He had gold rings on his fingers and in his ears.

“Well, that’s embarrassing.”

“What’s embarrassing is you taking so long to talk to her!” The girl grinned at her friends over Missy’s shoulder. “Look, I can be your wing woman.”

“You don’t have to do that.” Missy grimaced. “I don’t even know you.”

“What, you need references? Hey Eddie!” The girl raised her voice. Missy, horrified, glanced at the woman with the yellow handbag and found that she was already looking in their direction.

Eddie, the taller boy, came over, leading his boyfriend by the hand. “Is Mars bothering you?”

“Kind of,” said Missy, laughing in spite of herself. Although the attention made her nervous, Mars and her friends took her mind off the nagging suspicion that her dress was ridiculous.

“Eddie, am I qualified as a wing woman?”

Eddie stroked an imaginary beard. “That depends on the qualifications. Are you experienced? Yes. Are you likely to go home with the person your friend is into? Also yes.”

“I would not! I’ve never done that.”

“You might by accident.”

“Well, I’m a huge fan of your work,” said Eddie’s boyfriend, hugging Eddie’s shoulder.

“Thank you, Paris. At least someone appreciates me.” Mars leaned toward Missy and lowered her voice. “She’s looking this way.”

“I know! Because you were so loud.”

“At least she noticed! And now it looks like you made friends at the bar. That’s cool. She’ll want to know you.”

Mars’ reasoning made sense. Charisma is attractive. Missy just wished Mars had said so in a whisper.

“You seem very nervous,” said Paris. “Maybe a drink will help.”

“I wasn’t going to drink,” said Missy, lowering her voice. “I’m only 19.”

“Oh, that’s not a problem here,” said Paris, patting her arm. He and Eddie exchanged patronizing grins.

Mars raised one eyebrow. “If you didn’t come to drink, what did you come here for?”

Missy glowered at her. She knew the answer but refused to say it aloud.

Eddie looked back and forth between them. “I’m sensing some tension here.”

“Shut up, Eddie.” Mars slumped over the bar, resting her face on her forearms, and groaned. “There can’t be more than five dykes in Manhattan who know how to make the first move, and I’m one of them. What are you all so afraid of? We’re in a lesbian bar, for god’s sake.”

The bartender approached, eyeing Mars. “Can I get you all anything?”

“We’ll have three rum and cokes,” said Paris.

Eddie laid a hand on Mars’ shoulder and added, “None for her. She’s uninhibited enough as it is.”

“I am,” said Mars, her voice muffled.

“One more drink and you might make a move on our new friend,” he added.

“Ignore Eddie. He resents the fact that I fuck.”

Hoping to change the subject, Missy asked, “Did you guys shave your heads together?”

“No,” said Eddie.

“Yes,” said Mars, raising her head. “I shaved my head and then I shaved his head so I wouldn’t lose him in a crowd. Now all I have to do is look for the tall bald boy.”

Paris rubbed Eddie’s scalp, and Eddie giggled. Mars rolled her eyes.

The bartender set out three full glasses. Missy took hers and glanced at the woman in the last booth.

“I’m just tired,” said Mars, pressing her palm to her chest. “I feel like I give my all to this community and it gives nothing back. I mean, do you know how easy it is to sleep with men?”

“Very,” said Paris.

“Right. I could sleep with a new guy every night, and still I go to lesbian spaces and work my ass off for a phone number.”

The bartender shot her a look.

“I thought we were just hanging out tonight,” Eddie protested. “You better not disappear on us.”

“I won’t! I won’t. I’m just helping...” She squinted at Missy, waiting for a name.

“Missy.” She sipped at her rum and coke. It was bittersweet, like the memory of her First Communion.

“Okay, Missy. I want you to go over there and tell that woman that you love her nails. Hold out your hand for a closer look. If she’s wearing rings, and I think she is, ask about them. And then offer her another of whatever she ordered.”

“I don’t think I can.” Missy plucked at the little gold cross around her neck. “I don’t know what I’m doing here.”

Mars kicked the base of the stool with her heel. “Yeah, you do.”

Missy’s stomach twisted and her temples grew damp. She thought of Casey, three months and many miles away, kicking the front tire of her car, saying, “I did think this would make a cute story.” And Missy heard her own words, tumbling terrified from her mouth - “I just wanted to try it.” She imagined what she must have looked like, shrinking away from Casey and the light of the streetlamps. As the nights lengthened, she thought more and more of that moment by the Hudson when she was fearless. Her courage didn’t last, and was followed by emphatic denial, but under its influence she had kissed a coarse and beautiful woman in a Yankees cap. Thinking of her fleeting courage and that kiss, she slept less and less.

Her insomnia had driven her out of her bedroom window and onto the street, where she walked in search of unfamiliar houses and highways. One damp autumn night she got on a bus and rode it to Port Authority and back. That was when she first thought of going to Manhattan by herself, at night, for a drink with a stranger.

At first, the role of a passenger on a bus or train had comforted Missy. She didn't have to do a damn thing but buy a ticket. But as she roamed farther, her attitude changed and her nocturnal round trips felt hollow. She spoke to no one and didn't leave a single station, not even to transfer. If Missy went home now, she might as well have never left the station.

Mars looked at Missy, then past her. The look was quick but potent enough for Missy to feel that familiar flash. In Casey's eyes she was a coward, but for Mars she could be fearless.

Missy slid off her stool amid gasps of excitement from Paris and Eddie. As she walked along the bar, toward the woman with the yellow handbag, she felt another cold draft against the back of her neck. The woman looked up from her phone and smiled in Missy's direction. Missy smiled back until she realized that the woman was smiling not at her, but at someone over her shoulder. Without pausing, Missy turned her head just enough to see someone in jeans and suspenders overtake her and head for the last booth. As soon as her friend sat down, the woman with the yellow handbag grabbed her chin and drew her in for a kiss on the mouth. Her long nails pressed against the flesh of her friend's cheeks.

To hide her initial trajectory, Missy strode past the last booth and the couple inside it, toward the restroom at the back of the bar. She shoved the bathroom door with her shoulder and sank onto the edge of the sink.

No sooner had she sat down, then the door banged open again. Mars stood in the doorway, laughing. “You! Oh my god,” she gasped, leaning against the door once it closed. “That was great.”

“Don’t laugh at me,” said Missy, stung. “You hyped me up in the first place. This is your fault.”

“I’m not laughing at you,” Mars said, between giggles. “I’m laughing at your bad luck. Your luck is truly homophobic.”

“Homophobic?”

“It’s a joke. Because your luck won’t let you ... never mind.”

Missy scowled and plucked at her gold cross. Then she ran her hands over her hair, searching for stray curls, searching for somewhere to place her resolve. The back of her neck was damp and cold with sweat.

“You did great, though! You were totally gonna do it, I saw. God, I could kiss you right now.” She stepped forward, grabbed Missy’s face, and gave her a comical peck on the lips.

When Mars released her face, Missy grabbed her hands and said, “Wait.”

“What?”

Missy kissed her with an open mouth. Mars hesitated for half a moment before backing her up against the edge of the sink. Missy tried to wrap her legs around Margo’s

waist but lost her balance, sliding backwards into the sink and knocking her head against the mirror.

Mars cupped the back of Missy's head. "You okay?"

Missy giggled.

The bathroom door opened just then and Missy saw, over Mars' shoulder, the woman with the yellow handbag in the doorway. "Oh shit, sorry," said the woman, backing out. The door swung shut.

"Want to get out of here?" Missy asked.

"I want to, yeah," said Mars. "But not tonight. I'm supposed to be bonding with Eddie's ex-, now current boyfriend." She rolled her eyes, but without bitterness. Then she held out her hand. "Give me your phone."

"Why?"

"So I can give you my number."

Missy handed it over.

As Mars tapped at the screen, she added, "Your girl has terrible taste. Did you see the suspenders on her partner? They look corny as hell."

"Good thing she's not my girl," said Missy. Her heart pounded, her head spun, but she felt an inner calm as well, a satisfaction distinct from the buzz of a good kiss.

Mars returned the phone, grabbed both of Missy's hands, and tugged, peeling Missy away from the mirror. Missy allowed herself to be pulled off the sink, back onto her feet. "Let's go back to the bar. I'm sure Eddie is dying to make fun of us."

As they emerged from the bathroom, the woman with the yellow handbag glanced at Missy and rose from her seat. She passed them on her way to the bathroom.

Missy felt smug until she noticed the bartender making shrewd eye contact with a busboy. The bartender saw Missy looking and smirked. Missy looked away, chastened.

“Paris,” said Eddie, loud enough for Missy and Mars to hear him, “why do girls go to the bathroom together?”

Margo gave him the finger. “I came back, didn’t I?”

“Leave them alone,” Paris chided him. He beamed at Missy. “I wasn’t sure you had it in you, sweetheart.”

Missy felt warm and flushed, like she’d finished a race. She felt a giggly kind of shame, an exhilaration born of risk and reward. She wondered if the rum and coke was finally hitting. She wished Mars would take her hand, but feared she wouldn’t know when to let go.