

Green Eyes  
by Taylor Johnson

Submitted to the Board of Creative Writing  
School of Humanities  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

Purchase College  
State University of New York

May 2019

Sponsor: Mehdi Tavana Okasi  
Second Reader: Catherine Lewis

Table of Contents:

The Beautifully Disturbed: My New Approach to Writing.....	2
Green Eyes.....	7
April.....	7
Meghan.....	29
Phoebe.....	53
Hanna.....	68

## The Beautifully Disturbed: My New Approach To Writing

It was 2009 when I first decided that I wanted to pursue writing. I had just reread the *Twilight* series for about the fourth time and was sick and tired of my favorite books ending. I had so many adventure ideas for these characters that were cluttering my brain. I decided to share my ideas on the story-sharing site, Fanfiction. Though I didn't submit there for very long, the positive feedback I did receive from my stories was encouragement enough to start taking writing seriously and make my own stories. The first "book" I ever wrote was handwritten and 150 pages long. It was a sad riff of the *Twilight* series and I cringe today thinking about it. But then, I couldn't have been prouder. The friends who I let read it ate up every word and I was happy that I could bring such joy to someone's life.

Throughout middle school, I continued writing stories and formulating plans for larger pieces I wanted to do, if I ever got the chance. I was excited and felt a part of this secret exclusive club of writers no one else knew about. Except for the times, I felt like I was its only black member. It wasn't until my freshman year of college that I encountered black YA writers and even then, they weren't in the paranormal genre I was interested in. This discouraged my writing a great deal and was the reason for my creative pause during high school. I was constantly criticized by peers, and in some cases teachers, that my stories were not black enough. I wasn't touching on black social topics or featured a lot of black characters. I felt shoved into a box, where I was only allowed to write about social injustice and/or urban fiction. I didn't feel like those stories reflected who I was as a writer.

I had always been and continue to be interested in the paranormal realm of YA fiction. I enjoyed bending the rules of the universe and creating new worlds and creatures. I viewed it as an escape from my reality, a place where I could be free to express myself. I enjoyed telling

stories about young star-crossed lovers and immortal rivalries. Inspiration during this time included the *Vampire Academy* series by Richelle Mead and *Blood and Chocolate* by Annette Curtis Klause. In addition to the paranormal, I also felt drawn to the world of dystopian fiction through books like *Blood Red Road* by Moria Young and *City of Ember* by Jeanna Duprau. I consider these genres my foundation and always come back to them when I'm struggling in my writing and need a reminder for why I love the world of books. As I thought about my future in writing, I saw myself coming back to these topics and publishing under them.

With that in mind, I decided to use my college career to explore other genres and writing styles. I wanted to use workshops as a testing ground for ideas that I wasn't totally confident in or was discovering and wanting to fine tune. I stayed strictly in the realm of fiction, dabbling with more realistic fiction and unsettling subject matters. My senior project, *Green Eyes*, was born out of such experimentation in a workshop. I came up with the idea one night after watching *Mindhunters* on Netflix. The show is a dramatization of the exploration of serial killers in the 1970s. The show sparked in me a curiosity about how the mind of criminal works and if it's something that is the result of the home life or something that someone is born with. I began to think about news stories of men who act out when their wives cheat in drastic ways and thus, *Green Eyes* was born. Bringing it to workshop terrified me, but also excited. I was thrilled to be exploring my creative depth as a writer.

Choosing *Green Eyes* as my senior project wasn't an easy decision. I initially wanted to do a piece that I began writing in my senior year of high school, but never returned to. In the end I chose to focus on this piece, because of how outlandish it was. It was a topic I enjoyed reading about and watching on television, but never actually saw myself doing. The challenge of writing sex scenes and disturbing action intrigued me. I wanted my senior project to have meaning and

not just be another story I write and not learn anything from. I knew my senior project would demand a lot of my time and I wanted to spend it doing something I would stay interested in. I felt that if I chose a safer or easier story, I would quickly lose interest and write half-heartedly.

Green Eyes can best be described as, a collection of beautifully disturbing images that attempt to explain the psyche of a troubled man and his understanding of infidelity. Among its main themes include betrayal, incest, manipulation, abuse, violence, lust, and sexuality. The novella follows a man named Robert, who recounts his childhood, and how he came to have a distaste for women who cheat. The reader follows him through the years as he explores different relationships and is taught the secrets of being a man by his abusive father. The story is dark and filled unsettling imagery of non-traditional sexual acts. The conception of this piece began as an incestuous scene between Robert and his sister and how Robert responds when she gets an actual boyfriend.

Through its production, I found the hardest part of the story to write was its believability. It was easy to think of absurd and creepy situations for my characters but it was harder to mold them into plausible realities. I wanted to create scenes that seemed almost ok, but not quite and those tiny differences are what throws the entire thing out of whack. I drew a lot of inspiration from *The Twilight Zone* and *Black Mirror* when working with the structure of the scenes. Reading *A Bastard Out of Carolina* by Dorothy Allison and *The End of Alice* by A.M. Homes helped me in handling some of the abuse scenes. *The End of Alice* was particularly helpful in showing how a predator converses with prey and manipulates someone into doing what they want. The novel also helped me in craftily writing the sex scenes so that they were graphic but not untasteful.

The characters were also an area of weakness for me when writing this piece. I treated them more like props in my main character's plot rather than as their own beings. I hadn't explored each one as in-depth as I would've liked which then forced them to turn out 2-dimensional and without motivation. In some cases, I feel like it worked, like in the case of the father, who on paper seems like just a villain. This makes the reader question his personality but also makes it harder to swallow that Robert idolizes him so much. The mother staying in an abusive home seems like a hard truth to believe as well but I actually thought that having her stay was more reflective of the average woman in her position. The reality is that most women in her state would be too scared to leave, especially with children.

I was initially scared to bring the story up in the workshop, for fear of what others might think. I had gone most of my life seeking the approval of others and even though I was trying to break out of my shell and into a more confident one, I was still apprehensive about sharing such a triggering story. The general response to the story was discomfort and fear of the context, which to me was a success. It made me feel as though I achieved my goal of creating a character that was unsettling to read but still engaging. The reviews were generally positive in terms of content and style. I knew that the story wouldn't appeal to all audiences and it was encouraging to hear reviews from people with all kinds of interests.

The story is finished but not complete. There are still major elements I wish to explore in the piece, focusing specifically on the characters and fleshing them out further. Looking forward, I hope to be able to give each character their own structure and voice so that they can stand alone instead of leaning on Robert. I also want to toy with Robert's life after he commits these acts and really explore into the structure of the house. I touch on it briefly, going into the minds of the women, but not as closely as I would've liked. I want to focus on the roles of the women in the

house now and how his last victim, Hanna assimilates. At this point in the process, I feel that I need to take a step back from the project to really examine it in bits and pieces without a time restriction. Writing this story proved harder than I initially thought and took a toll on my mental health having to think about such dark subjects. I did, however, enjoy the overall process and pushing myself to new depths. It is not something I see myself pursuing professionally but definitely an area I would dabble with, in my personal time.

Writing this piece helped me explore my creative integrity as a writer and stand by my work. Throughout the editing process, a lot of my scenes were challenged for inclusion and it was up to me to determine whether or not I wanted to keep them. Some scenes I did away with easily but others I had a hard time letting go of. I felt as though these scenes were the heart of the piece and by letting them go, I was going to lose the story altogether. I had to learn to feel confident in the story I was telling and letting my work be my own. A part of me still wanted to please others and let the story take a new form, but I knew doing that would be defeating the purpose of why I wanted to tell the story in the first place. I had to learn to be confident in my words even if that meant no one else would be.

Taking the chance in writing *Green Eyes* I feel, has helped me develop as a writer and gain more confidence in my skills. While this is not typically the type of story I would write or see myself writing much of in the future, it was one that interested me when I began my senior project. I got to see how what kind of situations I felt comfortable writing and what I want to focus on in the upcoming years whether it be at grad school or through independent study. This project has given me the courage to stand up for my craft and be proud of my weird. There were certain expectations of my writing because of who I am, but I hope that with this it'll become clear to people that you can't judge a book by its cover.

# April

*She sits staring at her reflection, wondering how she ended up in such a peculiar situation. The cushion underneath her is soft and squishy, filled with those tiny plastic balls you sometimes find stuffed inside instead of cotton. Her childhood dolls were stuffed with the same materials, but that was all she remembers. There is a small hole in the cushion that drops out a few beads if you shift in the seat. She coughs slightly and three beads clatter to the ground. She watches them roll, thinking back to the safety she had in her childhood with those dolls. The quiet afternoons playing in the sun, unaware of the danger that lurked outside her doors. How quickly that safety was taken from her when she met him.*

*“Alright, here we go.” His voice haunts her nightmares, echoing in her head whenever the night grows just a little too dark. His footsteps are heavy and echo even on the plush carpeting of the floor. She knows he is there and still jumps a little when his hand touches her, causing three more beads to fall out.*

*“You girls should fix this chair otherwise, someone might get hurt slipping on one of these beads.”*

*We should be so lucky, she thinks to herself. She nods slightly in response to him, careful not to look up and see his face. She feels a comb run through her hair, the teeth scratching her scalp.*

*“I love when we get to have these moments together she. Don’t you?” he asks, absentmindedly combing her hair as if it were fine silk. She nods again causing him to sigh.*

*“I know you like it longer, but this is better right?” She nods again. Suddenly she is on the ground with her cheek stinging and hot.*



*“When I ask you a question you answer me properly.” She begins to nod again but stops short.*

*“Yes. I’m sorry.”*

*“Good. That’s better. Now get up. I have to finish.” She stands back up and climbs into the chair. She glances at her cheek in the mirror and sees that it’s cut and already starting to purple. Soon it will match the rest of her face.*

*“Remind me, why do we do this?” A pair of scissor run across her hair, snipping away an inch, the pieces falling to the floor. She bites her lip to keep from crying.*

*“To keep me pure. Because this is the hair I had when I was pure.” Another snip.*

*“Very good. I’m glad you understand.” He continues to snip away at her hair, going in all sorts of direction. When he is done, he sets the scissors down on a table and crouches next to her.*

*“There. Now isn’t that better?” she looks up, tears pooling in her eyes, to stare at herself. Her hair is lopsided and sticking up in some areas. The uneven length is striking. She lifts up a hand to touch the ends, a tear escapes from her eye and rolls down her cheek.*

*“I know. Your transformation moves me to tears too.” He hugs her and she stares at him through the glass, with his too skinny face and two sunken black holes for eyes.*

\*\*\*\*\*

April was special. Being around her always made me feel a new level of safety I never experienced before. Some people say the same of their mothers but not me. My memories of my mother are not fond, often just of her trying to destroy our family. I never wanted to be around her. I treated her with disdain and knew she was not satisfied with me either. She was always trying to get me to go along with whatever she wanted, or trying to turn me into something I’m

not. As I reflect on my childhood, I wonder if the reason that she did all those terrible things to try and tear our family apart, was because I wasn't the cookie cutter son she always wanted me to be. Down to my first day of school, I was painted as a disappointment to her in her mind.

I sat on the ground, staring at my shoelaces. I made no motion to tie them, just stared at them, terrified as if they were two small snakes threatening to strangle me by my feet. Then in a huff, I kicked off my shoes and threw them across the room against the far wall. They thudded rhythmically one after the other.

“Bobby, what was that?”

I jumped hearing the voice of my mother and quickly scrambled into the closet for a pair of velcro strap sneakers. They had mud caked onto them from the last time it rained and dirt so thick it was hard to tell that they were once blue and not black. I slipped them on, velcroing the last strap just as my mother walked in.

“Bobby what is taking you so long, we have to-” her nasal, Long Island voice stopped short, looking at my feet. “Bobby, why are you wearing those?”

I stared at the ground, shuffling my feet. My mother looked around the room, fixing her gaze on the fresh pair of Nike sneakers that I just threw across the room.

“Is this what I heard? Bobby, you have to stop throwing things every time you get frustrated. That is no way for a little man to behave. You're 5 years old. Now sit here and let me put these on.”

I stayed where I was, staring down my mother. It was hard to tell from an outside perspective that we were related, much less mother and son. My mother favored fairer features, with honey blonde hair and large bright green eyes one of which was slightly swollen and purple around the edges. She was short, standing at only 5 foot and lean with elbows and ribs jutting out

of several places. I, on the other hand, had thick dark brown hair and deep hazel eyes that always stayed half closed, brooding, judging.

My mother, frustrated, picked me up and sat me on the bed. I made no sound, fingering the small hole in the Batman sheets as my mother replaced my shoes and tied the laces. I glanced up for a moment at her shoulder, the four rounded purple lines that were etched into her skin.

“Let's go now, Bobby. We're already late as it is and I left your sister in the car.”

I followed my mother silently out of the room and down the stairs to the front of the house. Before exiting, I watched my mother toss the blue velcro sneakers she had grabbed as we left the room into the trash. A small tinge grew in my chest and my eyes narrowed at my mother. Her efforts were as futile then as they are today, as I still haven't learned to tie my laces.

Inside the car, I sat next to my younger sister Phoebe who cooed over her baby doll. Though she was almost three, with a messy patch of light blonde hair and green eyes identical to our mother's, I always found myself thoroughly engrossed in her, watching her for hours and finding it hard to be separated. I stared at her now, some of the anger I felt about losing my shoes disappearing with each passing second.

“Now Bobby listen here. This is a new school and it took a lot to get you in here so don't mess it up. I can't keep calling out of work to take care of you. You need to learn to play nice with the other kids. That means no biting, kicking, shoving or yelling. You got that? It's for kids like you so you should fit right in”

I stayed quiet, staring at Phoebe who began to drool a little.

“Bobby answer me.”

I reached underneath Phoebe's chin and let a few drops of drool drip onto my finger. I rolled it in hand, finding its thick consistency intriguing. I slowly brought my fingers to my lips

and sucked the drool from them. Excited by the new sensation, I turned back to my sister wanting more. I leaned over her and stuck my mouth to hers, sucking the drool off of her. Phoebe yelled in distress and started wiggling in her seat.

“Bobby! What are you doing? Stop that right now.” My mother reached behind and grabbed at my shirt. Surprised, I jumped and hit my head on the hood of the car. A surge of pain quickly passed through my scalp.

“See what happens when you play around in the car. Now sit down and leave your sister alone.” I obeyed, wiping some of the excess drool off my chin.

I stared hatefully at my mother but made no movement for the rest of the ride. A short time later, we pulled into the parking lot. Once the car was at a stop, I opened the door and jumped out. I tried to run, but my mother grabbed me and dragged me inside a large trailer with chipping green paint and big glass windows. Inside we checked in and walked down the hall to my classroom.

“Alright, remember what I told you. I love you. Now come on Bobby, give me a hug.”

“I don’t like being called Bobby.” She ignore me and wrapped her arms around me in a tight embrace. I stood very still until she was done then, walked into the classroom.

The room was quiet, as it would be all day. None of the 7 children spoke to one another, playing in separate sections of the room. Sometimes the teachers would move one child next to another and facilitate play between the two of them. But never me. I always refused and threw a fit when they tried so they left me alone, except during circle time when everyone was required to be together. I found a spot by the blocks early on and sat, building small towers and knocking

them down. My back was turned to all the other children in the room and no one bothered me. I was happy.

One of the more persistent teachers would come over to me every so often and ask me if I wanted to play blocks with the other children. I would, just as I did any other time, scream and kick and throw things around until they left me alone. That how it was for the first week. I would play alone all day from the time my mother dropped me off to the moment she picked me up again in the afternoon.

Then April came.

I sat in my spot building my tower when a figure appeared beside me. She didn't say a word or even look at me. She just picked up a block and began stacking. I watched her with ferocity. How dare she sit in my corner and take my blocks? The next one she reached for, I grabbed her arm before she could touch it and bit her hand. She made no sound and when I let go, she grabbed me and bit my arm. The bite hurt me a lot but I held back my screams.

"April, that is not what we do here." one of the teachers said. She grabbed April and pulled her off of me. "If you cannot play nice then I'm going to tell your mom."

The teacher left and I returned smugly to my tower. I reached for a block, but April grabbed it first and placed it on her tower. She looked at me and gave me a soft smile. I stared at her green eyes, then reached for another block and placed it on my tower.

That evening, I sat at the table with my mother, and Phoebe, trying desperately to keep my peas from rolling into my mash potatoes. Phoebe smacked her spoon against her tray, causing her food to fly everywhere but into her mouth. Our father was late for dinner as usual which typically annoyed our mother, but not this evening. This time she sat quite content, smiling at the pictures in her head. She lifted a spoonful of mash potatoes into her mouth. I

watched as she opened her small mouth just wide enough to let the spoon in. A bit escaped from the spoon and sat on the corner of her mouth, unbeknown to her. Slowly the thick white creamy substance dripped down her mouth, making it to her jawline. In one fluid motion, she took her finger and wiped it backup and into her mouth.

The phone rang and our mother quickly got up from the table to answer it. We went silent as we listened to her giggle and speak in hushed tones over the phone. The front door opened and three loud footsteps echoed throughout the house.

We heard our mother try to cover up.

We heard our father yell.

Then we heard a smack and thud to the floor.

Silence in the house.

I got up from the table and walked to where our parents were. Our father, a tall man, with dark bushy eyebrows and too big lips, looked down at me then back at my mother. My mother, who sat on the floor holding her cheek that was bright red and shiny with a sliver of blood.

“Whore” my father said walking past the two of us into the kitchen.

I stared at my mother and felt an odd sensation within me. One I had never felt before, one that started in my chest and grew downward till it buckled my legs and wanting desperately to burst out. My mother reached out for me, a tear escaping her eyes and a sob caught in her throat. I stepped forward cautiously. Then another, then another until I was close enough for her to pull me in. She hugged me tight and I could feel her body trembling against me. I reached around and hugged her back softly.

Suddenly I was torn from her grasp, floating in suspense. My father had returned and snatched me away from my mother. I looked down at her broken disposition, as if a part of her being was ripped away.

“Boys shouldn’t be around their mothers so much. It’ll make them weak.”

My father sat at the head of the table, to my right, hungrily tearing into his dinner. Phoebe continued her babbling as if nothing occurred in the other room. I slipped in my chair and pushed around my food with my fork while taking small glances at my father. My mother had gotten off the floor and rushed past us into the kitchen. Moments later she returned to the table, having cleaned the blood off her face and carrying a beer.

“Why thank you, sweetheart. You’re so thoughtful.” my father gushed while pulling her closer to him by the waist. My mother tensed slightly but didn’t fight his grip. My father leaned up and kissed my mother on the cheek as she set the beer in front of him.

“Anything for you darling.” She returned to her seat slowly, almost robotic in nature.

“You see son, your mother is a gem. You’ll never find another like her.” My mother smiled uncomfortably at me. “That’s why you can’t ever let them go. They stray too far and you lose them forever.”

That night my mother decided to give me and Phoebe a bath together, claiming that she was too tired to try and do us separately. Even at such a young age, I was eager to share the bath with my baby sister. I found her so interesting. Though she could barely talk, she was still more fun to be around than anyone else at school. Anyone except for April that was.

My mother placed her next to me, then left for a moment to let us soak while she went to fetch some towels. There, in the warm soapy water, I noticed that she, was like my mother. I found it odd that she didn't have power like me or my father. My father first told me about the power in his study one night. We stood naked together and I was shocked to see how much bigger he was than me. I stared in awe at him, envious of it. He told me how important the power was and showed me what it could do. I was upset when I saw that Phoebe didn't have any power. I thought she would. I frowned staring at her slit, troubled.

“Here Phoebe”. I took her hand and placed it on myself. “Feel the power.”

Phoebe squealed and giggled next to me, gripping it as hard as her little hand could. She jerk her arm up and down, splashing it in the water. I felt myself getting warm again down there and it felt good. I didn't want her to ever let go.

“BOBBY! WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!” my mother screamed, dropping the towels as she entered the bathroom. She ran over, and yanked Phoebe out of the bath, pulling her from me. Phoebe began to cry and struggling in my mother's arms but she ignored her thrashing, carrying the toddler out of the bathroom, mumbling to herself.

I sat in the now lukewarm water, staring down at myself, letting the ghost of Phoebe's hand slowly lift away. That was the last time we took a bath together.

The next day at school, I sat idly by the blocks. I was the third one to arrive and all the other children were busy in their section paying no mind to me. Teresa, a chubby eastern Asian girl with short black hair and a too long nose stood at the sand table making larger circles with her index fingers. Oliver, a too small boy who always smelled like watermelon flipped through



the pages of the books in the reading corner, staring at the pictures for a full 5 minutes before turning to the next one. Neither one of them was who I wanted to see.

One of the teachers came over to me to ask why I wasn't playing with any of the blocks. I stared at her silently until she shrugged and moved on to one of the other children. Two more kids came into class but still, neither one peaked my interest. After the sixth child came in, I began to lose hope and turned to face my blocks. Dumping them on all on the floor, I slowly began building my tower. I grabbed a triangle block and went to place to when suddenly it was out of my hands. I looked up to see a smiling April, hair newly trimmed in a bob, that came to her shoulders, looking down at me. She took her block and sat down next to me building her tower in silence.

I was not one to express emotions but in this moment I let them overtake me and allowed a smile to inch across my face.

We played like that for weeks on end, sitting and enjoying each other's company but never talking. I would always arrive at the school before her and would wait by the blocks, evenly divided between us. I would build, knock it down and rebuild again, but never would I touch the tower that April made. She worked meticulously, focused on the placement of each block, a delicate balancing act of wooden shapes. Sometimes I would just sit and watch her build without moving until she had used all the blocks. Then I'd watch as she slowly deconstructed each piece.

When lessons began the two of us would sit next to each other at the table, close enough for the side of our shoes to be touching. We were the only two in the class to do so. Every day my mother would get a call telling her how much I had been advancing in the class, making a friend and forming healthy relationships. She didn't seem too impressed until one day when she

picked me up and I, before leaving, hugged April. It wasn't a long hug. Quick, lasting only two seconds, but it was two seconds of human normalcy.

That night I heard my parents fight. It wasn't the first time I had heard them. It was becoming a regular occurrence where my father would scream at my mother and she would try desperately to shush him. I couldn't understand what they were fighting about, focused too much on the lump that dropped from my throat to my stomach and back up again. I tried tuning them out by humming but it never worked. Sometimes I'd picture Christmas day. Christmas was the only time my parents never fought. They danced around the house and laughed. My father was the softest I'd had ever seen him on those days and my mother looked genuinely happy. There were many nights in my adolescence where I wished for it to be Christmas every day.

On October 5, I didn't go to school. My mother didn't wake me up or yell for me to put on my shoes and get in the car. Instead, my father walked into the room and got me ready. I didn't fear my father but respected him more than I ever did my mother. My father worked as a taxidermist in our basement. The entire space was transformed into a quality workshop over the years, with some of his most impressive creations lining the walls and decorating the floor.

This week my father decided that I should start to see more of what he does, to eventually become his partner. I always loved going down to the basement and sitting to the side while my father worked. My mother thought it was too inappropriate for children, but that never stopped me. I would sit far enough away so I wouldn't be a bother, and watched as my father carefully stitched and glued the animals back to life.

When we went down that morning, my father set a stool for me right next to him and had me hold the light while he finished the last few stitches on a fox.

I sat holding the light, and scanned the room. It was mostly pieces people didn't pick up or my father claimed to have killed. I had never seen my father hold a gun or have any in the house, but I believed him. He made everything from squirrels to bears. I liked to imagine, when I was young, that all these animals were my pets. I would talk to them in my head and pet them when my father wasn't looking. I keep a few of my favorites with me now, bits of him, ghosts coming together. The bear, a deep black grizzly, really helps tie a room together. My favorite however, was the lion's head. It sat on the wall behind my father's main work desk. My father was said to have killed it himself before I was born. It was the finest work he had ever done, capturing the lion mid-roar. I stared at the lion then, focusing on its golden, red-orange fur and dark eyes. When I would come down and watched my father work at that desk, I would often imagine that the lion would come to life and eat my father whole. I would then stand behind the desk with the lion towering over me.

"You see that," my father said, as he finished the last few stitches. "You have to make sure you finish nice and strong, otherwise the whole thing will come undone."

I touched the seam, admiring how smooth and straight the lines were.

"You know son, it doesn't matter how powerful an animal is out there. Once it enters my workshop, I become its master. I can tame the most ferocious of beasts with just a needle and thread."

After my father finished the fox, we moved to the sink and he taught me for the first time how to properly skin and clean a deer to prepare it for stuffing. I liked the slimy texture of the

inside though the smell made me uncomfortable. I didn't dare leave however, for fear of looking weak in front of my father.

When we finished with the deer, my father took me back upstairs to his study and taught me another lesson in power. We were having so many of these lessons recently and each time I was more and more excited. First he would compare me to himself, insisting that I had gotten a little bigger than before. Then he would show me what the power could do and have me try and do the same. I could never release the power like him though and it would upset me. He always assured me that I would someday. Some lessons I would help him release the power to practice and sometimes he would try and help me though it still never worked. One may ask why I never told my mother of these lessons in my father's study. It's simple, I didn't want her to know. I didn't want her to ruin what was sacred and special between him and me. I only wanted us to know.

Saturdays were days my father spent exclusively with me and Phoebe. He took us most anywhere a child would want to go. To the aquarium, amusement parks, zoo, concerts. I looked forwards to Saturday more than I did any other day in the week. Especially because my mother wasn't allowed to come. My father would always make her stay behind when we would go out, not that she cared very much. I am inclined to believe that she enjoyed the time she got to spend away from us. The times where she could forget she had a family.

One Saturday, after a particularly gruesome fight the night before, my father took me and Phoebe on a drive. He wouldn't say where we were going despite the numerous time I asked him. I stared out the window trying to see if I recognized anything, but it all looked foreign to

me, Every so often we would park and my father would lie me and Phoebe on the floor of the car. He would recline his seat all the way back so that he was lying flat. We stayed like that, quiet and flat, for unknown lengths of time and then as suddenly as he put s down, he'd pick us back up and we'd be off to our next destination.

Our last stop was a motel only this time, my father didn't lay us down. He took me and Phoebe inside to the front desk, where he yelled at a man for five minutes straight. He kept saying my mother's name over and over again but much else of the conversation, I can't recall.

I wandered outside, tired of listening to my father scream, and walked down the rows of doors. One door at the end was slightly ajar, which peaked my curiosity considering all the others were close. I pushed in the door and was surprised to find my mother inside.

They were fighting, that was clear to me. Similar to how my cousins would fight when they visited my house, only these two were doing it without clothes on. The man, much larger than my mother seemed to be winning the fight, pinning her to the bed. My mother whimpered underneath him as he made a striking motion with his hips. I didn't know what that move was called and resolved to ask my cousins next time I saw them.

The man had her pinned for a while but then my mother got the better of him and sat on top of his chest. I recognized that move but didn't understand why she was bouncing so much. She grabbed the man by the hair and began to bounce faster. The man screamed out and I thought, how odd a way for two people to wrestle.

"You're supposed to say, uncle," I said aloud trying to be helpful. My mother, mid bounce screamed and fell off the man. The man quickly got up and tried to cover myself with a pillow while my mother grabbed a sheet.

"Bobby! You're supposed to be with your father."

“Who’s that man?”

“He’s no one. Just get out.” my mother grabbed me by the arm and tried to shove me out of the room but I wriggled out of her grip.

“I told you I don’t like to be called Bobby!”

“Stop it and go to you-” His mother’s face went white as she looked up and past me. I turned around slowly and saw my father, cheeks red and eyes black as coal.

My mother backed away from the door starting to plead with me.

“Honey pl...Please. Look. Le...le...Let me explain alright.”

In an instant, my father was across the room, gripping her by the neck. He smacked her across the face knocking her to the ground. The strange man saw his opportunity and left the room, slamming the door behind him, leaving me to watch alone

“Why do you keep doing this to me?” my father screamed over and over again while beating her.

Bruises began to form on her skin and blood broke out across her face. My father yelled and called her a whore. I started away from the door back into the hall, but my father saw me retreating and called me back.

“Robert come here.” I stood still, staring at the two of them. I didn’t remember moving but suddenly, I was less than 5 feet away from him. Pinning my mother down, he reached out, grabbed me and pulled me to stand right next to him.

“It’s time you learn son. Women are disgusting. They only think with what they’ve got between their legs. But we’ve got something more powerful than that, right”

They looked like a pair of dogs I had seen in the park once, only angrier and sweaty. A part of me was scared and wanted to run away. My mother screamed in pain and a tear escaped my eyes. I wanted to turn away, but someone couldn't.

"You see son. This is power." He reached for my pants, and pulled out mine, small and weak in comparison.

"Don't worry. One day you will be as powerful as me. You will grow and be able to use that power to teach women like your mother how to be better. How to be pure."

"Feel the power son. Feel how it controls the beast inside of your mother."

I closed my eyes, not wanting to see any more of it. I could still hear though. I heard the slapping of the skin and my father's grunts. I heard my mother's useless whimpers and pleas for him to stop. I heard it all.

I felt a breeze down my back. I opened my eyes. I was standing outside. The door was closed. I could still hear the muffled grunts and whimpers. I scrambled my brain trying to remember how long I had been out here. Had I gone inside at all? I stared at the door for a long time, listening to them, waiting for them to come out. No one passed by me or came for me. I stood alone, listening.

My mother was back to her usual self for dinner that night. No more secret half smiles or small giggles. She didn't get up from the table to make a phone call. And my father? My father sat proudly in his seat at the head of the table, cutting his steak into thick, bloody chunks. He kissed his wife on the cheek and told her how pretty she was. She bought him a beer and smiled at me with the side of her face that wasn't cut. I on the other hand barely touched my food, trapped in my own mind. I thought about what I saw my mother doing and how upset it made my

father. I couldn't figure out why she would want to make him that mad. I thought about the sensation I felt inside of myself the first time I saw my father beat my mother and how it reappeared today. I thought about how much I liked it.

As the months went by, the children at the school progressed in their social skills. More and more of them each day would voluntarily play with other children for lengths of time. The quiet ones were starting to talk and express emotions. Everyone seemed to be improving. Everyone that is except me. I would still only ever play with April in the corner of the room with the blocks. Her hair had grown longer now, past her shoulders which I didn't like very much. But I liked her so I ignored it. From the moment she entered the room until she left for the day, I kept her by my side. Even during circle time and lunch, she would have to sit next to me, otherwise, I would throw one of my fits. April would try to sneak away to play with the other children without me noticing, but I always would and it never ended well.

Constantly my parents would get calls from the school saying that I had hurt another child. One day it would be that I bit someone. Another, that I pulled someone's hair. On and on the list would continue. My mother tried reprimanding me. My father was proud of me and encourage me to keep doing it. I just wanted to have April all to myself, with her bright green eyes and small soft smile.

Sometime in November, April's hair had grown to the middle of her back now which threw me off every time I saw her. A new boy, Xander had also joined the class then. His family had relocated from Ohio earlier that school year but his parents were worried that Xander wasn't adjusting well to his previous school. He wouldn't talk to any of the other children and would freak out if the noise level got too high, rocking on the floor in the fetal position with his hands



over his ears. So his parents transferred him to my school and from the moment he walked in, I did not like him.

What about the boy specifically bothered me, I couldn't tell. He was a fairly normal looking child with straight brown hair that sat on his head like a dirty mop. He didn't smell or dressed in strange clothing. He never bothered anyone, just sat at the table and counted whatever he could get his hands. Even so, I still did not like him. But April did. While she played with me, she would steal a glance to the mop haired boy, so engrossed in his counting that he never noticed her smiling at him.

April became my new favorite person. At home, I would talk about her to anyone who would listen and at school, I would watch her for unusual lengths of times. Now I know that I was memorizing her, as if I knew somehow that I wasn't going to see her again for a long time. The curve of her small mouth, the color of hair, the way her green eyes sparkled when she finished another tower. It was a special bond I shared with her. She was clever for her young age, making new kinds of structures and building with the blocks, experimenting with shape and size. I was always there, ready with another block for her and even though she secretly didn't like spending all day with me, she still gave me a small smile and said thank you.

At the end of winter, I had gotten sick with the flu and was out from school for a week. The entire time I was bedridden at home, I thought about April, how lonely she must be without me there to build with her. I begged my mother to let me go, even going as far as to try and walk there by myself one morning.

“Bobby stop this foolishness right now.” my mother said tucking me in bed.

“I want to go to school” I huffed, throwing the covers off my body and attempting to jump out of bed. A cough welled in my chest, causing a coughing fit that scratched my throat raw.

“See. You need to rest. You need to stay here.”

“No. I want to go. I don’t want to stay here with you. I want to be with April.” I fought against my mother.

“I know sweetie, but if you go to school, you're going to make all the kids there sick too.

“I don’t care.”

“You don’t care if April gets sick? I paused my efforts and stared at my mother. I thought about April, my April as sick as me. Her pretty skin clammy and cold, her throat sore and scratchy. I shuddered at the thought.

I relaxed back in the bed and allowed my mother to put the covers over me. Proud of herself, my mother smiled and lightly kissed my forehead. She reassured me that I would be better in no time, then left the room. I laid there, staring up at the ceiling thinking of April and what she might be doing at that moment.

The day I returned to school, I woke up on my own accord two hours early feeling much better. I dressed myself even putting on the sneakers with the laces I couldn't tie, but love makes you do crazy things.

“Is that what this was? Love?” I thought to myself.

I sat at the bottom of the stairs waiting for my mother to get ready and when we arrived at the school, I ran to the classroom.

I shoved the door open, my heart full, excited to see April. The teachers in the room all turned towards me and a few tried to block my view but it was too late. I saw. I saw her smile. I

saw her hands building the intricate tower in front of her. I saw Xander. Xander who sat in my spot, and handed my April the blocks. Xander who smiled back at her.

And my heart drained.

If the adults in the room knew what was about to happen, they could've easily prevented it. Anyone of the teachers could have leaped across the room and blocked my path to the pair. My mother could've easily reached out and grabbed me before I took another step. But none of them knew. None of them were prepared and my little body made it across the room in a flash.

Blocks started flying. Kids in every corner screamed and ducked their heads to the floor. I threw relentlessly, screaming at the top of my lungs, my dark eyes cold with rage. I turned my attention to Xander who sat on the floor crying with my hands over my eyes. I stared at him for a moment, how pathetic and weak he looked, then turned to April. My April. She was the only child still standing, trembling and staring at me. She tried to cry but was so scared the tears wouldn't come out.

I looked into her bright green eyes that screamed fear. She reminded me of my mother. I remembered what my father told me. How girls like my mother had to be taught? I walked towards her until I was inches away. I reached up quick and slapped her hard across the face. I lunged and wrapped my fingers around her throat and squeezed. She fought and thrashed underneath me, scratching at my hands trying to rip me off but I stayed. I clutched her throat as hard as he could screaming at her. Her small face was bright red and then slowly began turning purple.

“Whore” I screamed.

Suddenly I was in the air, my mother having ripped me off of April with all her strength. Two teachers rushed to her side while another was busy making phone calls. I continued to reach

for her in my mother's arms screaming whole over and over again. My mother quickly took me from the room, and the last image I had of April, was her small fragile body lying on the floor and her mouth in a tortured frown.

My mother took me home, scolding me the whole way about my behavior back at school. I didn't listen to her. Instead, I sat in the car, staring out the window with tears streaming down my face. I kept replaying the image of April and Xander in the classroom together over in my head and the anger inside of me grew once again.

At home, I didn't wait for my mother, jumping out of my seat and sprinting into the house. I didn't make it very far, collapsing onto the couch, sobbing loudly. Tears dripped from my eyes, staining the light fabric. I sobbed by myself for a moment, tuning out the world around me, until a large hand reached down and lightly gripped my shoulder. I knew immediately that it was my father.

I sat up and saw my father sitting on the couch beside me, with a sullen look on my face. I threw myself against my father and continued to sob. My father wrapped his large arms around me and kissed me on my head.

"It's alright son. It's alright. Your mother told me what happened." I continued to sob into my father's chest.

"She was playing with him. She was playing with him and she was only supposed to play with me." I muffled out between sobs. My father frowned deeply.

"Then you did the right thing son." I looked up at my father, eyes puffy and still wet with tears. "You did the right thing son. She betrayed you. You needed to teach her."

I looked at my father and thought about what he said. That's what my father said he was doing when he gave my mother all those bruises. Was April like my mother? Was she as bad?

Yes, I decided. Yes, she was.

I didn't see April till nearly 30 years after that day. My mother had pulled me from the program and the next year we moved into a different school district than her. I thought about her and what she did to me many sleepless nights after that. When I saw her next, it was by chance in a boring stuffy office. She was a young architect and had been commissioned to build a new headquarters for the business I would eventually take over the following year. At the time I was Co-Vice President and supervising the meeting she was presenting at. She looked straight at me and gave me a small smile. She didn't recognize me but I recognized her. She had let her hair grow down past her shoulders but I still knew. She was the first.

# Meghan

*She enters the bedroom, lights dim and temperature cool. She moves calmly, feeling his eyes on her as she worked. She examines another girl's body, carefully lifting her delicate wrist to check her pulse. She holds her breathe, letting out an audible exhale when she feels the faint pressure signifying life. She lifts the covers off of the sleeping girl, slowly, scared that doing something too quickly would disturb her and off-set the treatment.*

*"Quickly," he says in a stern voice. "We still have much to do to prepare for tonight. We can't waste time on the non-essential."*

*She recoils slightly as his unsympathetic nature, but moves faster though just as carefully. She lifts the dress over her thighs and separates the legs. She smiles slightly, seeing that much of the swelling has gone down. The thread lines zig-zag all over the place, the sleeping girl had twisted around so much that it was hard for him to keep the lines straight. The bleeding has stopped though which gives her some hope.*

*"Things look much better. As long as we keep her clean, I think she'll make it." He nods at her, and she retreats quickly into the adjoining bathroom, returning a moment later with a small bowl of soapy water and a rag.*

*She dips the rag into the water, then carefully wipes the sleeping girl clean, collecting the bits of dried blood from her inner thighs. She tries her hardest to not stare directly at it or think about how she herself must look down there. After cleaning her, she returns the bowl back to the bathroom and covers the sleeping girl over once more with the blankets.*

*"We have to feed her." she says, keeping her head down, not looking at him. "She's too weak to fight it."*

*“I will feed her when she wakes up.” he says, matter-a-fatly. She opens her mouth to protest, but then thinks better of it, and walks out the room.*

*“You’re right. We will wait until she wakes up.” She passes him, going into the hallway and on to the next room. She listens to his footsteps on the ground, thankful that they aren’t angry.*

\*\*\*\*\*

My mother continued for the rest of my childhood up until the age of 14 to try and keep me in programs that would help improve my social skills. I argued with her every time but year after year she would fill my schedule with various after-school clubs, church programs and sports. Everything she enrolled me in, I would eventually age out of or get kicked out of for disrupting everyone. The last place she made me join was a computer coding class at The Y not far from our house. She let me choose the class and coding seemed least likely that I would have to interact with anyone else.

“Bobby let’s go.” my mother screamed from her room down the hall.

“Don’t call me Bobby” I muttered to himself. I heard the clack of my mother’s kitten heels as she walked down the hall towards my room. I sighed and turned towards the door as she arrived.

“Bobby, please. We’re going to be late if you don’t come on.”

“I’m not going, and those earrings don’t go with that outfit.” My mother stopped short of putting in the earring and after contemplating it, went to return them to her room and came back with another pair. A healing bruise on her cheek stood out to me.

“I don’t have time for this. Not today. Just put on your shoes and let’s go.” She kicked my sneakers from in front of the door to where I was sitting.

“No” A brief silence and then she walked over to me, kneeling to look me directly in the eye. She wore metal framed glasses that magnified her green eyes. I gazed at her for a moment before turning away.

“Oh, Bobby You know why we have to do this. You’re different. You’ve always been different...I got a call from the doctor yesterday and he said...”

I let her trail off ignoring the rest of what she said and retreating into my mind. Different. All my life, all 14 years of existence I had heard that word. Different, I was always different. I never knew quite what it meant. I couldn’t tell if it was good or bad that I was different but from the way people acted around me, I was starting to think that maybe bad was the more favorable option. I didn’t want to be bad. Everyone else was bad. I wanted to be good

“...they wanted to start you on this pill but your father and I told them no. I said that no child of mine...”

“Ok.”

“Ok what Bobby?” I didn’t answer her. Instead, I reached past her and slipped on my shoes, laces flopping and walked out of the room to the car. I counted the clicks of the kitten heels behind me as I walked.

Outside I sat in the backseat with my head down, counting the number of crumbs stuck to the interior and listening to my mom. She was outside with Mr. Henry, our next door neighbor. He was old and seemed to have an affinity for married women. He saw us leaving the house and caught up with my mother to return some mail that he had gotten. I listened very carefully to the two of them talking, disgusted by my mother’s flirtatious behavior. She offered to help him walk back to his home and I rolled my eyes at her cheap disguise of her behavior. I raised my head for



a moment to look out the window, catching the small peck Mr. Henry placed on my mother's cheek before going back into his house.

Phoebe, now 12, climbed into the backseat with me, texting on her phone. She was wearing a too small bikini top that I remembered she got when she was 10. Her budding breasts stretched the edges of it, daring to come out with the smallest jolt.

“Hey loser”

“Mom is going to get in so much trouble for flirting with Mr. Henry.” I shifted over to give my sister more room.

“What are you talking about? All she did was help him to his house.”

“That's exactly what she wants you to think. She crafty like that. Plus did you see that kiss?”

“It was just a peck on the cheek Robert. He was just thanking her. Grow up.” She slumped in the chair and focused on texting.

“Don't you ever get off that phone?”

“And who would I talk to? Mom? No thank you. Dad? Hard pass. You? I love you bro but you aren't the best conversationalist.” Her fingers clicked away on the screen.

“Who are you talking to anyway?” I leaned over, trying to steal a glance from her phone. She quickly pulled away, blocking my view.

“No one weirdo. Just friends. Not that you would know anything about that.” My face dropped into a frown and I sat back in my seat. Our mother entered the car and we drove off. We all sat in silence for a minute, the only noise being the notification ding from Phoebe's phone.

“Phoebe I don't know how you think you're going to be able to swim in that bathing suit. Don't swimmers usually wear one pieces?”

“Mom its fine. Sarah wears one every week.”

“Yes sweetie but Sarah isn’t as, um developed as you are.”

I glanced down at my sister, tuning out the rest of the conversation. Her chest jumped as the car sped down the street. I sat mesmerized by their subtle jiggle, and their smooth texture. The car crept over a speed bump and her chest jumped higher than before, still moving, long after the car settled. I unknowingly gasped, as my sister glanced at me oddly. I quickly turned and stared out the window until we arrived at the Y.

Our mother took Phoebe to the pool, leaving me to navigate the halls by myself to my class. I quickly found it in the back hallway of the second floor. I walked into a room full of computers and kids mostly my age clicking away at their keyboards. No one looked up at me as I entered, everyone glued to their screens. I scanned the room for a seat, the only one available, across from a large troll looking boy. I sighed and made my way to the seat.

The troll boy looked up as soon as I sat down. He shifted his screen so that we could see each other face to face. I winced at the sight of the boy. His nose was too big for his face and his oily skin was covered in large red pimples. His lips were thin and yet he had a large mouth that took up most of his face. His dark gray eyes were too small and close together, practically touching and his hair was long, unkempt and greasy. Altogether he was just about the ugliest person I had ever seen.

“Hiya, my name is Gabe.” the boy stuck his hand out to me. I stared down at the large, sweaty limb sticking out but made no motion to touch it. The boy confused, slowly pulled his hand back.

“Ok well, you’re a little late to the class. Most of us started coming two weeks ago but don’t worry you’ll catch up fast. Here I’ll show you.” The boy got up and walked around the table to me. He was very large and round and hobbled when he walked.

Gabe began explaining about the software we were using and the project that we were going to be working on. The teacher in charge of the class believed in self-learning and left the room for long periods of time to allow the class solo work. I only half listened to Gabe though, focusing on his hot breath that smelled like Cheetos and chocolate milk.

“You see it’s all fairly simple, but if you ever get lost you can ask me. I first did this software when I was 13 so I’m an old pro.” Gabe smiled a goofy grin down at me.

“Can you please go back to your seat? You’re making me sick.”

Gabe’s face dropped for a moment but quickly picked back up as he waddled back to his seat.

“Sorry. My mom is always telling me that I need to learn boundaries. I’m not so good with that you know. I like to get all up in people’s faces.”

“So I’ve noticed.” I looked down at my keyboard and began typing and clicking, hopefully, to send a signal of disinterest to Gabe.

“So why’d you pick this class? Not to be frank but you seem kind of cool and fairly decent looking. Normal people don’t typically sign up for a computer class.” I stayed silent, focused on my screen. Gabe waited for an answer for a few moments before sighing loudly and turning his computer screen back to its original position.

The class was once again silent, except for the clacking of the computer keys. Gabe didn’t try to engage with me for the rest of the time which made me happy. At the end of the session, I was the first one to leave the classroom and hurried into my mother’s car.

“How’d it go today Bobby?” I stayed silent, next to my sister whose hair was wet and dripping on the space of seat next to us. Her attention was so glued to her phone, that she barely noticed me enter the car.

“Hello Phoebe, how was swim lessons?” She looked up at me and smiled. She turned in her seat so that she could lay on me, her head in my lap, phone stretched above her face. Her hair started to dampen my pants but I didn’t mind very much.

“It was good. Beat my time for the 200 meter. Still not as fast as flat-chested Sarah though.”

“You’ll beat her one day. Don’t worry.” I reached up and stroked the top of her hair. We started driving, and I focused intensely on Phoebe’s breasts which were once again about to fall out of her top.

“How was the computer class?”

“Boring. And this gross-looking kid wouldn’t stop talking to me.’

“How come you answer her but not me?” Me and Phoebe both ignored her.

“Gross how? Like did he smell?”

“His breath did. And he had a face that no mother could ever love. Not even ours and you know she loves everyone.” Phoebe giggled, causing her breast to shake even more.

“Hey that’s enough.” The rest of the car ride was silent except for the occasionally ding on Phoebe’s phone.

When we arrived at home, Phoebe ran upstairs to her room and I followed shortly behind her, leaving our mother in the car, hands still gripping the wheel, too nervous to move. Inside I made my way to my father’s study, the door was open slightly, though the lights were dim. I

pushed open the door to find my father sitting stone hard at his desk, one hand gripping a glass of whiskey.

“Dad. Are you alright?” My father looked up at me, eyes bloodshot red.

“Robert, son. I didn’t hear you kids get home.” I walked further into the office and sat in one of the leather chairs across the desk.

“Dad. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing son.”

We stared at each other in silence for a moment. His face grew hard and angry.

“It’s your damn mother.” He slammed his fists against the desk, breaking the glass. Shards flew everywhere and his hand started to bleed where it pierced him. I didn’t flinch.

“You found out about Mr. Henry.” It wasn’t a question. I knew it was only a matter of time. My mother could be very sloppy.

“Your mother can be so frustrating you know. I spend all this time, all this money. I buy her pretty things, tell her I love her every day. Take her to fancy restaurants and vacations and this is the thanks I get.” He was standing now, pacing furiously around the room.

“It’s disgusting.”

“It’s worse than disgusting son. It’s immoral.” He screamed and started throwing whatever he could grab. Books and papers went flying across the room. Again, I remained motionless.

“What a man and a woman share is sacred son. The bond, the physical connection. Never forget that.”

“I know dad.”

“And for your mother to just squander that away like it’s not. It makes me sick. To think of what she’s doing to you kids, to this family. And Phoebe is getting older. That’s the model of a woman she has?”

“It’s despicable.”

“It’s selfish is what it is. It’s selfish and rude and that’s why I have to teach her son. How else is she going to learn?”

“She won’t.”

“That’s right son.” He bent down and grabbed me by the shoulders. “I love your mother. That’s why I have to try my hardest to make her right again.”

The front door opened and closed in the hallway. Robert and his father listened to his mother’s footsteps overhead as she climbed the stairs and entered the bedroom. The door shut softly but an audible click was heard from the lock in the silence of the house. Robert’s father sighed and stood up once again. He turned to leave the room.

I watched my father leave the room. I listened as his footsteps climbed the stairs quickly and pounded on the door. After a moment the door slammed open, my father screaming at my mother. The sensation rose again inside of me. I walked to the other side of the desk and sat in my father’s chair. The leather was warm underneath me and I could smell the cologne my father wore clinging to it.

I heard the first smack, and thud as my mother fell to the floor. I unzipped my pants and closed my eyes, clutching myself softly. I was much bigger than before, and could now fill the better portion of my hand. My father didn’t have the lessons with me anymore at this point but I suppose you could say I partook greatly in independent study. I stiffened quickly, like a soldier standing at attention. I closed my eyes and listened to them above me, picturing what my father

was doing to her. I pictured me instead of him, exhibiting that power. Thrusting into my mother, teaching her how to be better. A better wife, a better mother, a better woman.

I finished quickly into my hand, careful not to let any drip onto the floor or chair. It was the most I ever produced and I was quite proud of myself. My father never produced that much despite how much bigger he was than me. I wiped my hands with tissues from my father's desk and left the room, feeling like more of a man.

I returned to the computer class the following week and took my seat across from the troll-boy Gabe. Gabe tried speaking to me but again I ignored him, focusing only on my work. For a month it went like this until the teacher made a guest appearance in the class. It was the first time I had actually seen him since I started and so didn't recognize who he was until he spoke.

"I hope that you all learned something from that private study of yours. Now, I want you guys to try something new. Everyone pair up because the next project you are going to be working on will be a larger assignment." The man's voice was very high which threw me off for a moment so I didn't notice the scuffle of chairs around me until everyone had already paired up.

"Looks like it's just you and me," Gabe said cheerfully, moving his monitor to reveal his face. I grimaced. "That does mean you're going to have to talk to me though."

As the teacher spoke, I thought of the different ways I could escape the classroom and never have to return. I knew my mother would drag me back kicking and screaming but I didn't care. There was no way I was going to work with someone so grotesque. I stood to leave the room but was called out by the teacher.

“Ah, you must be the new student Robert. You’re mother told me so much about you. I hope you found everything ok in my absence.” The man was tall and thin, middle age with graying curly hair. He didn’t look like my mother’s type but the inflection in his voice told me they shared more than a brief conversation at an orientation meeting.

“I made sure of it Mr. Clark don’t you worry. I taught Robert everything I know.”

“Very good. You’re in good hands with this one Robert. Now, why don’t you sit? We still have a lot to cover about the project. You guys will be making your own animated shorts.”

I sat slowly back in his chair, frowning at Gabe’s cheerful expression. A few of the other kids in the class snickered around us and I tried my best to tune it out. The rest of the class I stayed silent and bolted for the door the first chance I got.

The following week I tried hard to protest with my mom about not going but she forced me anyway. I walked into the room slowly, taking my time approaching Gabe.

“Howdy partner.” Gabe greeted as I sat down saying nothing in return.

“So I was thinking for the project that we should-”

“How about we just work separately and say that we did it together?”

“We literally can’t do that see. The program needs two responders. Let me show you.”

Gabe began to stand up and come around but I quickly stopped him.

“Ok look. I’ll work with you but you have to stay over there. Understand? And don’t move the screen.” Gabe sat back down and fixed the screen in front of his face.

“I know I’m ugly. It’s alright. I’ve grown used to people running away from me. I guess I’m just different.”

Different. There was that word again. I froze and stared at the back of Gabe’s monitor. How could he be different like me? He was so normal? So sane. Sure he was ugly but he wasn’t



different. Slowly I reached up and turned my computer screen so that it exposed my face. Gabe saw me and repeated the action with a goofy grin.

“You’re going to have to lose the grin. And invest in some face cleanser.”

Me and Gabe worked together for weeks following the assignment of the project. I hadn’t had a stable friend since April and relished in the company I didn’t know I was missing. At first, we talked strictly about the project, communicating over messenger, with the occasional brief conversation. It soon, however, shifted to movies we had seen or books we had read. We had a lot in common which surprised me and I strangely found solace in talking to Gabe. I talked to him about my mother and my family and Gabe would tell me about his school and bullies he dealt with. I started looking forward to going to The Y to see him and began talking to him at home as well. Phoebe teased me that I finally had a reason to have a cell phone. My mother was happy to see me engaging normally with another human being. We were attached to the hip. That is until Meghan came along.

“Robert, come look over here.” I stood from my seat and walked around the table to Gabe’s side. After introducing Gabe to medical grade face scrub and mouthwash he was tolerable to be around.

I expected to see another equation for our project and was shocked to see a girl. A pretty girl. She was black, thin with tightly coiled brown hair and high cheekbones. She had green eyes identical to my mother, which was a bit unsettling. Gabe smiled and handed me an earbud. I hesitantly put it in his ear. The girl on the screen spoke in a silvery voice that was smooth and calm.

“Hello Robert.” I turned to Gabe for clarification.

“Robert, this is my girlfriend, Meghan.” The inflection Gabe put on the word girlfriend made me tense a little.

“Girlfriend? Since when?”

“We made it official last night. He wanted you to be the first to know.” Meghan responded with a giggle. I ignored her.

“How did you meet her, Gabe?”

“In that chatroom I was telling you about. She likes the Archie comics too and well we got talking and now,” Gabe smiled widely at the screen. Meghan smiled back at him.

“You do realize how dangerous those chat rooms are right? Those girls are never who they say they are.”

Meghan squirmed uncomfortably in her chair.

“Meghan isn’t like that Robert. And I would appreciate it if you didn’t talk about her that way. Now apologize to her”

“But Gabe surely you-”

“Now!”

I stared at Gabe for a moment, shocked by the assertiveness in his voice. I turned to Meghan who had a slight frown on her face.

“I apologize Meghan. I’m sure you’re a very nice girl.” Meghan smiled slightly.

“It’s ok. You were right Gabe, he does talk like something out of a Stephen King novel.”

“Right?! It’s erry.” Gabe and Meghan continued to chatter away.

I removed the headphone from my ear and returned to my seat. For the rest of the time, I worked alone while listening to Gabe and Meghan talk. The conversation made me extremely

uncomfortable and for the first time in two months, I bolted from the room as soon as the class was over.

Back home, I sat on the couch, turning my phone over in my hand. Gabe hadn't texted me which was odd since he always texted after the class. I became so entranced in my phone that I didn't hear my sister come in the house.

"Hey, weirdo, what your boyfriend didn't text you today?" Phoebe teased, sitting next to me. Her hair was still a little damp for the pool and she smelled strongly of chlorine.

"He's not my boyfriend."

"Well, you sure act like he is." Phoebe lifted her legs and placed them in my lap, leaning against the arm of the couch. I rubbed the smooth texture of her leg and tried hard to not think about how nice she felt underneath my touch.

"He has a girlfriend."

"Porky has a girlfriend? Well good for him. There's someone for everyone I guess." I sighed heavily and stared at the ground.

"Aww, are you scared now your little friend is going to leave you behind? Well, he is. Grow up." Phoebe pulled out her phone and started to text her friends.

"But he's my friend."

"So what? You're 14, he's what, 16?"

"17."

"See. It's about time he got himself a girlfriend and stopped messing around with this kid stuff. You just don't get it." Phoebe said, not looking up from her phone. My face fell.

Phoebe lifted herself up, legs still draped over my lap and reached across me for the remote. Her chest pressed against mine and I stole a glance down her bikini top, admiring their

supple shape. I tried to imagine how soft they must feel and sighed. Phoebe looked at me sympathetically on her way down.

“Come on. It’s not like you’re not his friend anymore. You still have to be there for him and stuff.” I picked his head up a little.

“What?”

“Yeah. Girls are crazy. Take it from one. You have to watch out for him just in case this one takes a ride on the crazy train.” I sat thinking about what my sister said while her show played in the background. What if this Meghan was like my mother? Gabe did have the strength to teach her like my father did. It was up to me to protect him and take drastic measures if necessary. I pulled out my phone and typed a message to Gabe saying I was happy for him. Gabe responded a minute later.

Every week while me and Gabe worked on our project, Gabe video-chatted with Meghan. Most of the time she just listened to us chatter, painting her nails or working on homework. I didn’t like having to share Gabe with her but liked seeing Gabe happy so I kept my mouth shut. Over time I learned little details about her, like how she wore glasses but hated being on camera with them and always took them off, or that she lived three counties over from them and it was likely that they wouldn’t be able to see each other in person until the summertime. She would talk to us about her friends or whatever teen show she was watching or what she bought from the mall that day. I never found what she said particularly interesting but Gabe would listen intensely, offering comments whenever he could.

Around their 3 month anniversary, Gabe and I were getting ready to present our project. Gabe was extremely nervous and wanted to work on it more so I invited him to sleep-over. We sat in my room tweaking a few small things.

“Meghan is so great isn’t she?”

“Yes she sure is Gabe.”

“I mean, she’s so amazing. I don’t think I’ll ever find another girl like her.” Gabe had flopped on the bed, scrolling through pictures of her on his phone.

“You probably won’t.” I stayed focused on the computer.

“You know, I think I’ll go visit her.”

“What?” I swiveled around in my chair to face Gabe.

“Well I was looking up ticket prices online last night and they aren’t that expensive. If I got an after-school job maybe I could...”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.” I turned back to the computer. “You barely know this girl.”

“I do know her Robert. Don’t start this again.” I stayed quiet for a moment.

“I’m sorry. Go see her if you want.” Gabe got up and walked to stand by me.

“It was just an idea. Nothing is set in stone yet.”

We stayed silent for a while, taking turns, working on the project. It was Gabe who spoke again first.

“Robert, what’s with your mom?”

“What do you mean? She’s annoying.”

“No, I mean what’s with all the bruises on her body. Is she ok?” I paused for a second, caught off guard but quickly composed myself.

“She needs to be punished for what she does Gabe.”

“Punished? What does she do?” I didn’t answer him, intently clicking away on the computer. Gabe stared at me for a moment but then dropped the subject and returned to the bed.

There was a heavy knock at the door and my father entered the room. He looked tired from the day his hands dry and calloused.

“Son have you seen- oh I’m sorry. I didn’t know you had company,” he said looking in on Gabe. Gabe immediately sat up straighter, sucking his gut a bit to seem taller.

“Yeah, Gabe and I have to finish this project. Mom is in her room.” I didn’t turn from what I was doing.

“Right. Well it’s good to see you again. I’m taking your mother out this evening. Your sister is downstairs watching television. Are you alright up here?”

“I’m fine dad.”

“Alright. You call if there are any problems ok.” His father left the room, his footsteps echoing once again down the hall.

“Your dad is a scary dude Robert.” Gabe said relaxing once more. I shrugged and continued working.

Silence filled the room once again but was quickly broken by the sound of a loud slap and intangible yelling. The sensation rose once again and I swiveled in my chair away from Gabe, so he wouldn’t see the bulge in my pants. The front door opened and closed quickly. Phoebe just left the house. She usually did when this would happen.

“So Gabe, what were you saying about visiting Meghan?”

“Robert, are you just going to sit there and pretend you don’t hear that? We have to tell someone.” I turned my head to look at Gabe. My face was hard but calm.

“I told you. She has to be punished.”

Gabe never came over after that day and was very careful not to mention my family in our conversations. Our project presentation went well and the class was coming to a close, with the last few weeks dedicated to solo discovery work again. Gabe spent most of the time talking with Meghan, much to my discomfort. I never said anything but always felt a little sick whenever Gabe would giggle or gush over how pretty she was.

The second to last week of the program, Meghan didn't call Gabe. Gabe wasn't worried, prattling off some excuse about her being busy but I didn't buy his coolness. I watched as Gabe fiddled with his phone every few minutes, checking to see if she had texted or tried to call him and he didn't hear. I could see the distress that Gabe was trying to hide on his face and felt bad for him. At the end of the class that day it was Gabe who bolted from the room. He kept his face down and hood up but I could still make a tiny silver tear rolling down his cheek.

That evening my cousins and aunt came to visit for the weekend. My cousins, twins Tyler and Topher were close to me in age though had nothing else in common with me which made family gatherings very awkward for them. I knew exactly why they were over. Every couple of months my mother would get the resolve to leave, only to turn up again a few weeks later. It irritated my father to no end, these little trips she would take.

“Please Bobby. Just go to the movies with them” my mother asked while shoving clothes into a bag. My aunt and cousins were downstairs, flipping through the television channels. I stood in the doorway, texting an anxious Gabe who still hadn't heard from Meghan.

“No. I don't want to.”

“I don’t really care what you want right now. We need you kids out of the house. Your sister is away at her cheer retreat. I just need you to take them out for a few hours.”

“Why can’t you do it?”

“Your aunt and I...we have some things to do. Look just do it. I’m not asking you anymore. I’m telling you. Take them out now.” She went into the closet for a moment and came back out with an armload full of clothes. She shoved them into another suitcase, then turned to the dresser.

I watched my mother, the bruises on her chest, peeking out through the collar of her shirt. I sighed and looked back down at my phone. Gabe had sent a crying face emoticon and proclaimed that he was going to bed. I shook my head at the text and went downstairs.

“Let’s go,” I said as I walked past the living room to the front door, not waiting for my cousins. I stopped where my mother’s purse hung by the door and took out her wallet. Three twenties and a couple ones sat inside. I took all of it and proceeded to the door.

“Bobby, you can’t just take money out of my purse” my mother yelled coming down the stairs with the suitcases. I turned to face her, watching her struggle.

“You’re stupid if you don’t think he’ll find you.” I left the house, not waiting for her response.

Tyler and Topher struggled to keep up with me as I hurried the few blocks it took to get to the small movie theatre in town. Neither one of us spoke to the other, everyone equally uncomfortable being there. When we arrived at the theatre I bought tickets for the very next movie that was playing, which was some rock-and-roll biographical that I had never heard of. Inside my cousins sat three seats away from me, talking among themselves, excited about the



movie. I watched them with discontent. I never liked my aunt, feeling that she was too opinionated and gossipy and her children were just like her.

“Did you see the bruises all over her face?” Tyler whispered as the coming attractions played.

“That was nothing. She was limping everywhere and her mouth is cut.” Topher responded

“Can you believe that he did that to her? Dude is insane.”

“I know. And they just sit there and just let it happen. That’s why mom dragged us out here, again.”

“Let’s face it. They probably help him. At least *he* does”

Tyler and Topher glanced over at me. I could see them in the corner of my eye but stared at the screen, pretending to be interested in the new rom-com premiering in the spring. My jaw was tight and hands clenched by my sides. Tyler and Topher continued their whispering until the movie officially started. I listened to them, remaining as calm as I could. 20 minutes into the movie I got bored and left the theatre to wait in the lobby until it was over. I wandered to a small sitting area in the corner and people watched the crowd. My eyes locked on one particular girl waiting in the snack line, recognizing her by her large green eyes. Meghan. I sat up, unsure of what I was actually seeing. I was sure it was her, having spent enough time in front of the camera with her when Gabe went to the bathroom. I was shocked by her presence in our town and rose to go confront her about why she was ignoring Gabe when I noticed that she wasn’t alone.

Standing next to Meghan was a tall handsome guy with a fade cut and lean muscles pressing against his tight t-shirt. He wrapped an arm around Meghan and pulled her in for a quick kiss. She giggled and smiled up at him, a smile that she never gave Gabe. A part of me

wanted to ignore it to go back to the theatre and watch the stupid movie. But I stayed, stayed and watched them. I watched as she snuggled up to him and he played with the curls in her hair. After they got their snacks, they went to sit at in the waiting area across from where I was. She didn't see me or if she did, she didn't recognize me. I continued to watch, my blood beginning to boil. I couldn't fathom why she would hurt Gabe this way. My friend, whom I stood by when this vixen of a woman entered our lives and tortured his poor soul. I watched as they kissed in front of everyone, flaunting their adultery. Then I did something out of character; I took a picture. A picture of the two of them kissing. Of Gabe's Meghan kissing another man.

I stared at the picture for a long time, debating on whether or not I should send it. Instead, I texted my father. He responded quickly and said that he would be there in five minutes. I sat patiently, watching Meghan and this other man together, anger and hatred growing inside of me.

My father arrived at the theatre and approached me in a haste.

"Son, what's wrong? Why are you here?" I didn't say anything, scared that if I opened my mouth, I would scream. I just pointed a finger across the room at Meghan. My father looked and watched the teens for a moment, as they cuddled up to each other.

"That's your friend's girlfriend isn't it?" I nodded, not taking his eyes off of them. "Well then son, you know what you must do." I looked up at his father, confused.

"She is like your mother son. She will tear men apart with her lies and deceit. She cares about no one but herself and she needs to be taught."

I knew my father was right. I knew how much Gabe loved this girl and for her to do something like this was downright evil.

"Go son. You know what must be done."

Meghan got up to go to the bathroom, leaving the boy behind. My legs felt as if they were acting on their own accord as I rose, and followed her into the bathroom. She was inside the stall by the time I entered. I was grateful no one else was in the bathroom and locked the door behind myself. I put my phone away, and waited for her to come out.

I expected her to scream but she didn't. She just stared at me, her eyes huge with shock. She froze in place, barely breathing. I didn't say anything. I didn't want to talk to her. My chest was full of anger, replaying her with that guy over and over in my head. I thought about Gabe, how worried he was. How much he loved her. I thought about my father, how hurt he had been over my mother's infidelity. I didn't want Gabe to feel that way.

I lunged at her, knocking her to the ground. I slapped her hard across the face before she gathered enough strength to scream. She thrashed underneath me, but I pinned her down, clutching my knees against her side. I slapped her again, causing her to bleed. Tears began pooling out of her eyes but I didn't care.

I reached down and unbuttoned my pants. I was already hard and ready to teach her. She screamed when she saw and fought even harder beneath me. I shifted slightly to get between her legs, and she seized the opportunity, slipping out from under me. She wasted no time getting out of the bathroom, screaming all the while. I quickly dressed myself, and exited the bathroom. All eyes were on me and I knew I was in trouble. Before anyone could react, my father grabbed me and dragged me out of the theatre. We drove home in silence, my insides burning the whole way.

I threw myself through the door and up the stairs, ignoring my aunt's urging questions about where my cousins were. I collapsed on my bed, tears streaming down my eyes rapidly. I listened as his father entered the house and my mother stammering out excuses for the bags. He

ignored her for the moment and strode up the stairs to my room. I kept my face buried into my pillow, even when the weight of the bed shifted when my father sat down.

“It’s alright son. It’s ok.” He placed a comforting hand on my back.

“I was weak. I couldn’t do it.” I whispered, having calmed down a bit.

“It’s hard, I know. There are so many women I let get away with their selfish ways. So many still out there hurting person after person, treating them like scum all because I was too weak. I wish I could back and right those wrongs. But I can’t I can only focus on moving forward and helping as many as I can. That’s what you have to do. Learn from today and never let another woman slip through like she did. You are stronger than them.”

“But wasn’t he wrong too? The guy she was with I mean. He must’ve known about Gabe and still did it anyway.” My father’s face turned stern and he shook his head.

“No son. It’s never a man fault. A man cannot help his urges. It’s not his fault these things happen. The man is a warrior. It is the woman’s fault for straying. She knows where she belongs and yet she think that what she’s got between her legs is more powerful than what we have.”

“It isn’t.”

“No son, it isn’t. And don’t you ever forget that.”

I showed Gabe the picture that week in class. His bulldog face turned tomato red and he immediately skyped her, holding up the photo. She looked at the photo, then him for a moment, then without saying a word ended the call. He tried skyping her back three times but each time she didn’t answer. He spent the rest of the session texting and calling her with no luck. She was gone. He stormed out of the building 10 minutes before the session ended without saying

anything to me. I tried messaging him when he got home with no luck. That was the last day I saw him. The following week I found out he had killed himself. I didn't attend the funeral.

I saw Megan at a birthday party for a mutual friend of ours at a club when we were much older. She came alone, apparently single and undesirable from what I gathered through the whispers of the party. She was drunk beyond belief and couldn't walk without falling onto someone or into something. I offered to help her get home in a cab to which she easily complied. She didn't know who I was. Just thought I was a nice guy who was doing a good thing. She was right in a way, I was doing a good thing. I didn't take her home that night. She was the second.

# Phoebe

*The girl with the blonde hair lies in bed asleep, though the pain still creeps through her dreams. She tries pretending it's not there and escaping to a more pleasant time. If anyone had told her growing up, what kind of man her brother would grow up to be, she wouldn't have believed. She never thought that he would be capable of something so horrendous. Sure he was odd, and yes he had a bit of an anger problem, but never did she imagine something as outlandish as what he had become.*

*She felt his breath before his lips touched hers. It is hot and thick, coating the inside of her nose. It has no foul smell, just the stench of pain for her. He kisses her roughly, tearing some of the dry skin on her lips. When he pulls away, she can taste the blood running into her mouth. She quickly licks her to try and stop it.*

*"Taste good, I know. Time to get up now sweetheart." His voice sends shivers down her spine and it takes everything in her to open her eyes.*

*The light blinds her for a moment, and as she tries to get them adjusting, she lifts herself up slowly. She feels a light hand on the small of her back, helping her up. Her mood lifts slightly at the sight of her companion. How strange, in so grotesque a situation, to find such a gracious friend. The girl with the blonde hair was grateful for her presence in this time of her life. She could not imagine having to endure him alone. At least they have each other, and soon there will be three of them. Even sooner four.*

*She swings her legs over the side of the bed and winces at the pain. Her legs feel like jello and it takes her a considerable amount of time to stand.*

*“Are you sure I have to be there today?” she pleads with him. “I’m still in a lot of pain and I don’t know how useful I would be to you, if I can barely stand.”*

*“Nonsense, you’re doing wonderfully. You’re making marked improvement. And plus, you are meeting my bride for the first time. Wouldn’t want to give off the wrong impression now would we?”*

*The girl with the blonde hair glances and at her friend, and shakes her head in defeat.*

*“No, you’re right. Of course. I don’t want to be rude.” She stands from the bed slowly, legs buckling underneath her. Her friend holds onto her, until she has a chance to steady herself and then the two walk towards the door.*

*“Excellent. Look, you’re fine. Now you two go downstairs and get her ready. I’ll be down in a moment.” He leaves the room, the two girls staring after him.*

*“It was a good try.” her friend whispers. The girl with the blonde hair sighs and hobbles out of the room.*

\*\*\*\*\*

My first love was my sister. It was always her, I don’t know how I could’ve ever doubted it. But I was scared. Scared to speak my truths. A few weeks prior to our first night together, there was a story about a couple who were siblings. They were being arrested for loving each other but I couldn’t understand why. My mother whispered hateful things about them under her breathe and I knew I could never admit my feelings to her. But perhaps my father would be able to provide a more accepting outlook on my attraction.

After Gabe, I never went back to the Y. My mother had given up trying to help me make friends, retreating silently into herself. She had left with my aunt for a while but returned a month later like it never happened. My father told me, that she finally learned her lesson and

knew that she was needed in the house. Nothing more was ever spoken about it. I was confused why she even came back at all. She didn't want to be a mother. She didn't love us. That's what I thought anyway.

She had changed though. She was quiet, and always moving as if she was too scared to sit down for more than a minute. She started to remind me of a hummingbird, so fragile and small, always flitting about. She never smiled like she used to when my father wasn't home. Not a genuinely happy smile. All her smiles now seemed forced, as if she was putting on a show for someone else. For us I suspected. But my father was happy.

I started spending a lot more time with my father after Gabe. When school finished for the day, I would go to my father's workshop and help him clean the skin or fit the casings with extra features. I enjoyed the time I got to spend with my father, feeling more connected to him. I liked seeing how powerful my father was and wanted to be just like him. I miss him now and wish some nights, that I hadn't been so rash in my discussion to leave home. I didn't grasp at the time, that leaving meant leaving him behind and if I could go back and change it, I would bring him with me. We could complete my work together.

"Dad," I started one afternoon while removing the skin of a deer for washing. I was 17 now and stood almost as tall as my father. I looked a lot like his father which made me very happy. Perhaps I thought, if I looked like him more and more, I could potentially be like him. As powerful as he was.

"Yes, son?" my father answered, not looking up from the project he was focused on. He was trying to fit a set of glass eyeballs into a tiger's head. I paused for a moment, choosing my word very carefully.



“Dad do you ever, I mean, do you ever think about someone you shouldn’t? Like, sexually?” I kept my face down, scared to see my father’s reaction. I knew from health class, the mechanics of it and that it was natural, to think of others this way, but this particular person, I was wary about. The hesitations and disapproval about such copulations made me scared for what my father might think. He stopped his work and set the eyeball in his head carefully on the table, slowly turning towards me.

“Why do you ask that?” I swallowed the lump in my throat and turned slowly to face my father.

“Recently I have been having urges and I’m unsure of what I should do about them. Stronger than the normal ones.”

“What have you been doing? About these urges I mean.”

“Nothing so far. But I want to.” He rose from his chair and walked over to me. My eyes stayed glued to the floor and my hands shook nervously.

“It’s alright son.” my father said, gripping my shoulders. “If you having urges, you need to let them out. Keeping them bottled inside is no good. It’s alright to be attracted to people. There’s no such thing as a bad attraction.”

I looked up at my father, feeling as though a weight had been lifted off my chest. My father smiled down at me, and laughed a low throaty laugh, pulling me in for a hug.

“After all, you’re a man and a man has needs son. Now tell me, what does this girl look like that’s got you all hot and bothered?”

Phoebe’s face snapped into my mind. My face fell slightly and I pulled away from my father.

“What is it a guy? Because that’s alright son. It’s alright to um experiment and-”

“Dad, I’m not gay.” I turned back to the deer.

“Well you know it’s alright if you are. And if those are the uh...urges you’re talking about well then-”

“Dad. Not gay.” He cleared his throat and returned to his work, dropping the subject.

That evening me and my father returned home later than usual, trying to finish a collection of pieces for a client coming in first thing in the morning. I thought about what my father said on the car ride home. Needs. I thought back to a conversation I had with Gabe before he killed himself. We were talking about Meghan and Gabe had told me that she would send him photos of herself. Gabe even showed me one of the less scandalous photos of her. I sat there, staring at her curved figured half naked in a too small crop top and thong panties, listening to Gabe talk about their late night conversations. I tried to pull that image back now and wished I still had Gabe to talk about this stuff. Did Gabe think about Meghan the way I thought about Phoebe? What made him right and me wrong?

At home, my mother and Phoebe were sitting quietly at the table waiting for us. Phoebe was home more often now that our mother had bettered herself, which pleased me a lot. I adored my younger sister, though now she didn’t seem all that young. At 15, her breasts had grown a considerable amount and peeked out from under her shirts and sweaters. No one else in the house seemed to notice the way I did. I was mesmerized by them. At dinner that evening, she wore a spaghetti strap tank top with no bra as she often did when she was home. Her nipples poked through the fabric and I couldn’t help but steal glances across at my sister in between bites. Looking at my sister, I began feeling the urges again. I wondered what my father would say about them now. Still today, I think back on those subtle glances at the table and how warm her

body would feel. It's these brief moments, late at night, that I doubt my resolve and what I've done.

That evening, when everyone had gone to bed, I masturbated. I went about it slowly, taking my time reaching the climax. I tried to keep my breathing low in case anyone in the house woke and heard me. All the while I thought about Phoebe. The way her body curved now that she was older. Her tight, round butt bent over when she would pick something up off the floor. The way she would rest herself on me when they would watch television together and how I could feel her every breath. And her breasts. Her smooth round breasts that made my mouth dry and my pants stiffen. As I unloaded myself, I whispered her name so low I couldn't have been sure he actually said it aloud.

At school, I sat with Phoebe and her friends during lunch to avoid being subjected to the bullies in our school, that tended to pick on the alone and weak. The stories Gabe used to tell me of how he was treated, still haunted me and I made sure to avoid reliving the same fate as him. I rarely spoke to anyone but Phoebe, preferring to listen to their nonsensical ramblings for the hour. That day I watched my sister again as she squealed with her friends over some television show they enjoyed. A tall boy with blonde hair walked up to Phoebe and whispered something in her ear. Discussion at the table ceased, as her friends watched her, giggling. I sat up defensive but before I could say anything the guy was gone. Immediately, her friends bombarded her with questions about what he said and how long they had been talking. Phoebe tried hard to respond without smiling, covering her mouth if she did. I frowned. I hated that she did that, but sat silently listening to their chatters.

On the walk home from school, I questioned Phoebe about it.

“Why do always cover your mouth when you smile?” She was looking at her phone and I had to repeat the question twice before she heard him.

“My smile sucks. I look like an idiot.”

“I bet that guy doesn’t think so,” I said, a tinge of envy in my voice.

“Do you mean Jared?”

“Is that his name?”

“No need to get all protective big bro. He’s just some guy. He asked to go to the movies with him this weekend. That’s it.” Phoebe giggled, remembering. I scowled.

“Don’t you think he’s a little old for you?”

“Who are you, dad? He’s a nice guy, and harmless. I just hope he didn’t see my mole.” Her hand lifted up to touch the mole beneath her left ear. I grabbed her hand, tearing it away.

“Your mole is fine. And if he did care, he’s too superficial for you.” Phoebe looked up me and gave me a small smile. She stopped walking. We were outside of our house now.

“You’re right. But do me a favor and don’t tell mom and dad about Jared. I don’t want to cause a big thing if it’s not even going to go anywhere ok?” I stared at my little sister before giving her a small nod. She hugged me, giving me a small kiss on the cheek and skipped into the house.

That evening, I pleased myself again to my sister. I pictured her smile. How soft and pillowy her lips felt on my face. I imagined how her lips would feel if I kissed her. I thought how warm her chest felt against me when she hugged me and how her body jiggled when she laughed. I whispered her name again as I relieved myself, surprised by the amount that came out of me.

I continued this way for several nights, picturing my sister and letting more and more of myself go each time. I started stealing her underwear from her laundry bin when she wasn't looking and wrapping them around as I pleased myself. For weeks I kept it up like that.

But it wasn't enough. Soon it was taking me longer and longer to reach climax and I began to wonder if I no longer found her attractive. But I would still grow hard if she sat too close to me or let her touch linger for a second too long. I soon figured out that I needed more. I needed to touch her.

One evening after I was sure everyone had gone to bed, I snuck into her room and stood over my sister. Her windows were open and the chill in the room made her nipples stiffen against her shirt. I felt myself grow just watching her began to slowly stroke myself. I softly caressed her breasts and slid my fingers lightly down her arms and over her legs. Her skin was smooth like velvet and rich like milk. She had always been a deep sleeper and didn't feel when I moved the blankets from off her skin or when I touched her. I had never experienced such pleasure in my life as he did in those moments with my sister. When I came, I made sure to catch all of it, not leaving a trace of myself behind.

Nowadays I still find myself every now and again, slipping into her room and softly caressing her skin. There's no doubt that she would easily submit to me, but there is more power in taking what is mine. To have her whenever I want, as it intended.

Phoebe started dating Jared and introduced him to our parents one night at dinner. Our parents were polite, asking him questions about his studies and offering him more food and drink. I stayed silent that evening, watching Phoebe and the way she acted around him. She sat close to him at the table and reached out to grab his hand whenever he could. I spoke coolly to

Jared and Phoebe shot me glances the whole time but I didn't care. At the time I couldn't figure out why I was so mad but now I recognize the feeling as envy. I was envious of how openly they could be with each other. How they didn't have to find these feelings that were growing inside.

After Jared left, Phoebe retreated to her room to tell her friends how the evening went and I followed my father into the study.

"Dad," I began, closing the door behind me. My father sat at his desk and began pouring himself a glass of scotch.

"About Phoebe."

"You watch her with that boy. I don't know if I trust him yet." He took a swig from his glass.

"Of course, but--"

"Because you know these boys are only after one thing and your sister, well she's a pretty girl. She going to attract a lot of attention. Not all of them are going to give her the love she deserves."

"I know."

"You're her brother. You have to watch out for her. Don't want her to get into any trouble." Robert nodded. He watched his father finish the first glass and pour himself another one.

"I'm trusting you to keep an eye on our girl Robert. Can you do that?"

"Yes, sir." I agreed. My father smiled at him and offered me a sip from his glass. I took the glasses and down the brown liquid in one gulp, barely tasting it. My father laughed.

“That’s my boy. Bout time you started to grow a little hair on your chest.” I smiled at him, happy to have him proud of me. He rose to close the door and locked it. “How about we have another lesson? You show me what you remember, what you’ve learned.”

I nodded and began undoing my pants as my father took another swig from his glass.

That night, as I stood over my sister, tracing the curves of her hips and butt, I thought back to what my father; *the love she deserves*. I knew what my father meant. I had to protect Phoebe from all those that would want to hurt her. I had to give her the love she deserves. I knew my sister was special and wanted her to have everything her heart desired. I worried about who would be able to give that to her. No one loved her, like I did. Was it wrong for me to love her? I didn’t think so. Why shouldn’t she be loved by me? I just wanted to protect her and make her happy. Was she not human? Did she not deserve love?

I stood closer than I ever had to my sister, wanting to feel more of her warmth. I thought about how much I loved her. How she had been there all my life and how much I wanted to keep her safe. I didn’t want anyone else around her or anyone else to touch her. I reached out to cup her breast, when she unexpectedly turned over, brushing her hand on my shaft while lifting her arm. I came in that moment, surprised, and quickly left the room. I lied in bed that night thinking about that moment, that brush and how I wanted more. I needed more.

At school the next day, I watched Phoebe and Jared together. He had started sitting at our table once they became official, which bothered me. I spoke even less than before and scowled at Jared the entire hour. Jared didn’t notice, focused on Phoebe. He would kiss her cheek and trace the outline of her jaw when he thought no one was looking. But I was. I was always looking. I

hated how freely Jared could touch my sister. I knew Jared didn't love her like I did. I knew Jared only thought vile, dirty thoughts about her. He didn't appreciate her the right way. He never would. Only I could.

That night I went into Phoebe's room and locked the door behind me. I stood over my sister and looked at her beautiful small face in the moonlight like I had done so many times before. I pulled down my pants, to reveal myself, already erect. I reached slowly for her hand and wrapped her limp fingers around and began to caress myself with her hand. The velvet of her skin against my manhood made me quiver and I let out a soft moan. I looked down at her face and watched as her eyes opened slowly then snapped wide quickly when she realized. In the seconds before her scream, I cupped her mouth and wrapped my fingers around her throat. She stared at me with her large doll-like green eyes. Eyes just like our mother though I knew Phoebe would always be better than her. I stared back before shifting my gaze to my erection and then back at her. Slowly she reached back down and continued what I had started.

The life in her had woke something in me, an animal who was hungry with desire. I let go of her mouth and cupped one of her breasts while she continued to stroke me. It was good. It was so good. I could feel myself ready to burst but I didn't want to do it. Not this way. I reached down, and ripped the covers off her, revealing her whole body. She was gorgeous and she was mine. I climbed over her and inserted myself inside her, making us one. Towering over her in this way, I had never felt more powerful, with each thrust inside her warm walls, I gained invincibility. I stared into her eyes, which welled with tears. Tears of joy, I told myself. I believed to be true. Cheerful weeps from our union. Faster and faster I drove myself into her until finally, I released, letting out a deep gasp as I did, like a lion roaring after a kill. I stared at



my sister who stared back at me before kissing her on the cheek and whispering a goodnight in her ear.

Phoebe was out of the house the next morning before I had come downstairs. Our mother said that she needed to meet with one of her teachers beforehand about a test grade she had gotten. I knew this was a lie but didn't push the issue. At lunch that day, I sat at a table alone and waited for her. When she entered, I caught her eye and called her over. She paused for a moment and then slowly made her way over to me. She sat across from me but didn't look up.

"Phoebe," I spoke in a soft voice. She didn't say anything or look up.

"Mom told me that you left early this morning. Why did you lie Phoebe?" Still nothing. I reached out to touch my sister's hand. She flinched away which made me frown.

"Phoebe I know you're scared but it's ok. I'm not going to let anyone hurt you. I love you. And I know you love me. There's no need to hide anymore. We can be together. Its ok" Tears began to pool in Phoebe's eyes and she quickly wiped them away.

"Oh Phoebe, don't cry. It's ok. I know. It's like a release that we can finally be honest with each other and we can love each other now. We don't have to pretend anymore."

Jared walked over to the table then, sitting down next to Phoebe. I stiffened and glared at him.

"Hey, babe. Why are you sitting over here?" She didn't respond to him, looking down at the table.

"Why are you crying?" Jared grabbed her shoulder and turned her to face him. "What's going on? Talk to me, baby."

"This is a family matter, Jared, I think you should go," I said in a low voice.

“I’m not leaving until she talks to me.”

“Go, Jared,” Phoebe whispered not looking up at him. Her voice was hoarse and rough.

Jared looked at her confused.

“What? Baby, what is going on?”

“Go. Just go.” Phoebe turned back to the table.

“You heard her Jared. Go,” I said smugly. Jared opened his mouth to say something else but closed it again, got up from the table and walked out of the room. I smiled at Phoebe.

“Now that he’s gone, this is going to be much easier. Don’t worry Phoebe. I’m going to take care of you. You’ll see. Don’t worry.”

I went into Phoebe’s room that night and locked the door once again. She lied awake this time, staring silently at the ceiling with the covers pulled up to her neck. I looked at her and smiled. I slipped next to her in bed, wrapping an arm around her.

“I love you” I whispered in her ear and reached up to cup her breast.

Every night for almost a year we continued like that. I would go into her room and we would commune together through sex, her body becoming my temple. My love for her grew and grew with each day. I told her we couldn’t tell anyone until we were older because people wouldn’t understand and drive us from each other. I was too scared to lose her. I would grabbed her, shaking her, making sure she understood the urgency of the situation. She obeyed and told no one. She was mine. After her 16 birthday, she began to change. She was quiet more, spent more time in her room when she was home and hung out later with her friends. She started coming home minutes before dinner and wouldn’t talk for the whole meal. She dressed more

conservatively, covering as much of her skin as the weather would allow. She skipped lunch at school and joined after-school clubs so she wouldn't have to walk home with me.

I began worrying about her and started plotting to take her away from the house. I figured that if she was away from all the questioning eyes that would try to tear us apart then maybe she would feel better. One weekend, our parents left for a getaway, leaving us home alone together. I relished in the opportunity of having her to myself for three days. To not have to hide or be quiet but to be free. They were gone by the time school let out and I walked home high as a cloud, ready to be with my beloved.

When I got home, I immediately ran to her room and opened the door but was stopped short by the sight they befell me. There over my sister, my love, was another man. A man with a face I did not recognize, who had himself inside of her. She had laid her body for this man. She had presented to him what was sacred and private to me. I let out a scream and the two stopped staring at me in horror. The man spoke rapidly while trying to cover himself and gather his clothes but I heard nothing he said. I was focused on Phoebe. She stared at me her green eyes bright with fear. As I walked slowly to her, she sat frozen on her bed watching me. So much anger filled me, to find her like this with another man. The same anger that I felt when I saw April or Meghan. My skin burned red hot with anger. Whatever held me back with Meghan wasn't present now.

Before I knew what I was doing, I punched her in the face. Her eye turned purple and she began to cry. But I was empowered again. I let out another punch and another, beating on her like a bag. The man who stole her grabbed me and dragged me away from her. I didn't fight him, screaming the hateful slurs I heard my father yell at Phoebe who was naked, huddled and bruised. She was still beautiful. The man threw me on the street and slammed the door. I sat

there for a time, before getting up and walking down the road. That was the last time I had seen my house. My father would try and get me to come home but I couldn't. Not after what happened there. What I had seen. It was tainted.

Years later when I was successful and had made a name for myself, mine and Phoebe's paths crossed again. I was driving down the street looking for some late night female companionship when I saw her. She was slumped against a building wearing dirty, too small clothes and her hair matted in a ponytail. Her green eyes had faded slightly but there was still some life left in them. I called her over and told her to get in. She didn't remember me at first but as the night progressed she did. She was the third.

# Hanna

*They stand in the large basement, undressing an unconscious woman on the table. The two girls silently make note of the bruises on her body. They undress her quickly, knowing that he might come down at any moment. Yet knowing this, the girl with the blonde hair still takes the chance for quiet whispers.*

*“Another one? When do you think he will stop?”*

*“When we’re all pure like how he wants us to be.”*

*“How he wants us to be.”*

*“Yes how he wants us to be. Because you know he’s right.”*

*“He is right, this is true. But does he have to be so rough with us? Does he have to-?”*

*“Until we learn. Until we learn not to be such insolent creatures of filth and decent. You know that.”*

*“I do but, will she?”*

*“She will learn like we did. The pain is part of the process.”*

*“The pain is part of the process.”*

*They carefully shave the woman, making her as bald as a prepubescent child. The girl with the blonde hair is careful to get every hair, know that he will be mad if even one stray one ended up in his work space.*

*“Are we ready down there girls?” His voice shocks both of them, causing them to jump. The woman on the table moans and stirs slightly on the table. April rushing quickly to strap her down.*

*“Yes she is beginning to wake up.” one calls up to him, and scurries to the side room, to place the clothes down. The other follows shortly behind her with the shaving supplies.*

*“Excellent. Let the purification begin.*

\*\*\*\*\*

After I left home, I began watching movies. I had accepted the fact that I was different and that wasn't going to change. Now that I was away from my family, away from my father, I needed to blend in. I figured movies would help give me a diverse palate to study from. I followed my father in the taxidermist business and would put on films in the background while I did my work. I would study them day and night, memorizing their patterns and stories. I created new past for myself with bits and pieces of these films.

I soon realized however that, real life wasn't exactly like the movies and so on warm Sunday afternoons I would go outside and watch the people in my neighborhood. Exam their movements and patterns. Study how husband and wife engaged with one another. How friends communicated, how siblings reacted to each other. I kept to myself most of these days, until I met her.

I exited my building, taking in the heat of the sun on my skin. I was older now, a man with large burly arms and a deep 5 o'clock shadow. I breathed in deeply and walked down the steps and into the front garden. I enjoyed the greenspace my building provided and tried to spend as much time in it as I could in it. There was a white wooden gazebo surrounded by a ring of flowers in the middle that I liked to sit in and watch as the neighbors walked by. I sat there almost every Sunday watching.

One afternoon, someone joined me. Most of the tenants in the building didn't utilize the gazebo like I did. On occasion, a young mother would come and sit, while her child played in the

flowers but other than that I was alone. But this afternoon someone new came and sat with me. She was curvy with light brown hair in a tight bun atop her head and soft green eyes. I couldn't take his eyes off of her. I was entranced by her beauty, her soft oval face and full pink lips. I felt inferior in her presence and never spoke to her. She didn't seem to mind however, enthralled in whatever book she was reading. She always had a book with her every time I saw her here after. We sat there together for the whole of the afternoon in silence, me watching the neighborhood and her reading her book. As she rose to go inside, she gave me a small smile. I smiled back, looking forward to seeing her again.

Every Sunday following that day, I would sit outside and wait for her to come down. Like clockwork, she would arrive at 1pm, sit in the gazebo and read her book. I felt content with her there but was always too afraid to speak to her. I feared that by speaking I would break the circle of serenity the two of us shared in our anonymity. But apparently, the sentiment wasn't shared by the both of us.

"Hello, are you the tenant in 4-C?" She said one morning, sitting next to me instead of her usual spot across the way.

"Yes," I answered too afraid to say anything more.

"I'm in 3-C. Your ceiling in my floor." she giggled. Her giggle was breathy and soft like a gentle breeze carrying a feather. I wanted to keep hearing her laugh.

"Oh I'm sorry, am I making too much noise?"

"Not at all. To be honest, I got your apartment from the building manager. I wanted to talk to you but didn't know what to say."

I stared at her, taking her in, but the rush of color to her cheeks signaled that perhaps I was making her uncomfortable.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Oh it’s nothing. It’s just your eyes, they’re green. Just like my mother’s.”

“Oh,” she giggled, “Well you know that’s interesting because both my parents had brown eyes but somehow I turned out with green.”

“Oh,” was all I could muster. We sat in silence for a moment, then I spoke again. I tried hard to sound suave like the men in the movies I studied, but still stumbled over the words.

“I know that you seem partial to this bench, but if you wouldn’t mind a change of scenery, I know a great coffee shop a few blocks away.”

“Sounds wonderful.” she giggled again and smiled at me. My heart lifted and I rose with her.

We left the gazebo and walked to the coffee shop, chatting the whole way. That began a long tradition of coffee shops visits on Sunday afternoons and dinners Thursday nights. We went to the movies together and soon graduated to morning brunches in each other’s apartments. I was happy and wondered why I held such hesitation before in the two of us talking.

The days turned into weeks, and the weeks into months and before long a year had passed since we started dating. Over that time my love for her grew and I would whisper her name to himself whenever I was alone or in need of comfort.

Hanna.

After 14 months together, I proposed to Hanna, to which she graciously accepted. She was an only child with both parents dead and as far as she knew, I had no relatives to speak of so we had a small ceremony at the court. I bought us a house and it wasn’t before long that Hanna wanted to start a family.



“It’ll be nice,” she said one evening while chopping vegetables for a stew. I sat at the table flipping through the newspaper. I sighed and closed the newspaper, tired of having this conversation.

“It’s too soon Hanna. We have only been married a few months. Shouldn’t we get settled in more before we start thinking about that?”

“I know, and I’m not saying that we should actively try just yet. But maybe, I don’t know, throw caution to the wind.” I rose from my seat to go stand behind her, gripping her waist and pulling her close to me. I hope she didn’t notice that I was mimicking what we watched in a rom-com the previous night.

“Oh yeah? And what does that mean?”

“It means,” she started turning around to face me, knife still in hand, “that I stop taking that little pill on my dresser and whatever happens, happens.” She leaned up and gave me a swift peck on the lips before turning back to her vegetables.

“Are we ready for that though? For something to happen?”

“Well, I don’t know. Is anyone ever ready for that? It kind of just happens and you worry about if you’re ready after.” I grabbed her again, leaning my cheek against her back.

“But couldn’t we just wait a little bit longer to be ready, because I don’t want to have to share you just yet.” Hanna sighed, defeated.

“Ok, but we will talk about this again.” I smiled and returned to my seat, picking up the newspaper once more.

“I promise.”

But I couldn’t stand to disappoint Hanna and soon we started trying. For six months we tried and failed to get pregnant, each time. Hanna growing more and more disappointed. We

visited numerous doctors, all of whom said that they were both fine and there shouldn't be a reason why we weren't getting pregnant. We went on various fertility treatments and still nothing aided. Our relationship grew distant. A year passed and still, Hanna could not get pregnant. Her depression worsened and soon she stopped talking to me altogether. I, in secret, signed us up for adoption but the process was taking too long.

Hanna wasn't getting any better and I feared what she might do. I contacted a therapist for her to talk to. She was to visit him as often as she liked and for a while, it was better. She would go twice a week and soon color began to return to her cheeks. She spoke again and I gained some hope. We tried again, but she miscarried which sent her on another downward spiral. I didn't want to give up, however, believing that if she could have a child then she would go back to the Hanna that I loved. The Hanna that sat with me in the gazebo on Sunday mornings all those years ago. But nothing worked. Each failed attempt, she would add another day of therapy and after another year, she was going every of the week. I didn't know what to do and tried to remain supportive but was losing hope fast.

One afternoon I decided to go surprise Hanna after her session and take her out to dinner. I arrived at the building and waited in the lobby, for almost 10 minutes before I heard it. A moan. A soft quiet moan that I knew all too well. A moan that I had heard on my wedding night. A moan that whispered in my ear every time we laid together hoping to conceive a child. Hanna's moan. I burst into the office to find her sprawled on the desk, legs wrapped around a balding middle-aged man, whose pants were around his ankles and had sweat dripping down his nose. She looked at me and screamed for me to leave. I stood there horrified, anger building. My mind flashed to when I found Phoebe in similar position and I screamed out. The man tried to talk to

me while pulling up his pants but I tuned him out, focusing only on Hanna. I took a step towards her but felt a strong tug on my arm. Security had heard me scream and was trying to pull me back. I fought against them, but they were too strong and I found myself on the street, angry and tears flowing down my cheeks.

Years later, after the divorced had been finalized and filed away, and Hanna had moved in with the balding man, I saw her again. She shouldn't have been alone in bed that night, but Paul, the balding man was away visiting his mother. I laid next to her in bed, as he did so long ago. She pressed herself against me, stroking my soft arm hair. She paused, confused why there was hair when Paul had no hair on his arms. She jumped up when she realized and screamed at me. I grabbed her before she could run. You will purified. I whispered those exact words in her ear before banging her head into the wall.

\*\*\*\*\*

I walk down the stairs to the basement, feeling a chill down my spine. I had called someone to install installation down here and they were coming Tuesday. This, however, couldn't wait that long. The lights are bright white bulbs like the ones you find in a hospital. It's amazing what you can find on the internet. All around are pieces my father made, that I scoured for over the years. I like to have as much of him with me as I can when I perform my work. I walk across the cold, stone floor to the middle of the room where waiting for me is Hanna, naked and strapped to a metal operating table with her legs high in the stirrups. Her eyes are open and looking around frantically.

“Where am I?” her voice quivering slightly from fear but she was still trying to put on a tough face.

“You don’t recognize your own house? What a shame.”

“Robert? Is that you?”

“Yes, Hanna. Live and in the flesh sweetheart. Surprised? Hope I didn’t frighten you” I walk up the table to her face so she can see me clearly. I see the fear in her green eyes, and a reflection of myself; tall and powerful.

“What are you doing? Let me go. I want no part in this sick twisted little-”

“Shhh, Hanna. Quiet yourself. All will be revealed in time.” She stares up at me but makes no motion to speak. “That’s a good girl. I had forgotten how obedient you could be sometimes.” I smiled and circled her body twice before stopping on her left side.

“You look well, that’s good. You’ll need your full strength to recover. April, come with the sponge. It’s time to give our new friend a bath.” From the corner, April walks slowly to me, holding a bowl of soapy water and a sponge. Her hair bob sways as she walks, brushing her cheek.

“Hanna I’d like for you to meet April. She underwent the procedure first and has made a full recovery.” April walked out and went to stand my Hanna’s head. Her cheek was still purple from when I disciplined her. Sometimes I amaze myself with the dedication I put in to ensuring that these girls are wholesome and pure.

“Good evening miss. Please do not struggle. He does not like it when you struggle. Let us wash you.” Hanna still twists in her grips but remained silent. I dip the sponge in the water and slowly work my way around her body, cleaning her.

“I should thank you, Hanna. You inspired me for without you I would have never seen the true depth of evil people like you possess. Surely I went through it before with April and Phoebe, witnessing it with Megan but you were the sun that opened my eyes.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Infidelity my dear.” I wash her legs now, nearly finished. “The evil which you so casually commit. I wonder, how many others did you hurt before me? How many other souls did you torture?”

“If this is about Paul, please Robert I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for it to happen. I didn’t want to hurt you.

“BUT IT DID HAPPEN AND YOU DID HURT ME” April jumps back slightly frightened by my outburst and I quickly compose myself. “I apologize. Sometimes I get myself worked up. But you see I must do this. There is no other way for you to understand. My father figured it out many years ago and it’s taken me until now to put the pieces together. To have complete control over the animal, you must seal it up.”

I place the sponge back in the bowl, finished with the cleaning.

“I’m sealing you, just like I did them. You won’t get better as long as there is a way, a vessel for the perversion to travel. Now there will be none.”

April scurries off, returning a moment later with a tray containing a spool of thread, a needle, and gloves. Phoebe wobbles behind her, carrying my work chair. As she places it next to me, I grip her chin in my fingers and kiss her cheek in thanks. I glance at the skin behind her ear which was unusually bare.

“Phoebe, where is your mole?” She stares at me with a dumbfounded expression, with no explanation. I raise my hand and strike her across the cheek, knocking her to the ground. She knows better than to be in my presence without her mole.

“Don’t mind Phoebe. She’s still healing, and she’s is the least obedient of my girls. Say hello to our guest, Phoebe.”

“Nice to meet you, Hanna. I am sorry I missed yours and my brother’s wedding.” She stands up and walks to her side. Hanna’s eyes widen in horror and she begins to speak but April places a hand over her mouth. I pull the gloves onto my hands and begin to thread the needle.

“Now Hanna I’m going to need you to stay very still alright? This procedure can hurt a lot but you must try not to move. If you do, I might mess up and you can end up like Meghan.” Her eyes widen again. “Oh no she’s not dead. She’s just in critical condition but she should be fine in about a week or so.”

I pull the chair close to the table and examine my work area. The girls did a nice job of prepping her, she is as bald as a newborn baby. I run my finger across her pink frilly lips, the feeling still familiar to me. She is already very tight which will make sewing her up much easier.

“Now don’t worry you will still be able to use the bathroom and such. I’m not a monster.” I chuckle to myself and pick up the needle. “Phoebe hold her. We are ready to begin. Hanna take a deep breath in.”

There’s nothing more satisfying than feeling the needle puncture through the skin and watching as the thread pulls the skin of the lips closer together. Purification is happening before my eyes and I am the purifier. Hanna had always been a bleeder and my work was proof of that fact. April runs to get some tissue to help mop up the mess and for a moment Hanna’s screams are audible.

It is a beautiful sound. She is rejoicing in her cleansing. She is releasing her past self and becoming free. Phoebe holds her down for the most part and I finish with a series of straight black lines down her slit. I stare at my work and smile proudly that I have saved another. I only wish my father could be here to witness this.

“April and Phoebe will help you clean up and take you to your room for recovery. Tomorrow we will go over house rules and your new life here with us.” I turn back towards the stairs, climbing them slowly, softly so that my feet are barely audible on the wood. I listen to Hanna’s sobbing and smile knowing that she’s back under my roof.

Upstairs, I walk into the kitchen and pull a glass from the shelf. I grab the whiskey decanter and pour myself a glass. I walk with the glass to the sitting room, and relax on the dark leather couch. A fire glows brightly and I listen to the burn snaps of the wood. Above the fireplace is the lion’s head from my father’s study. I look at how the golds and orange light up in the light of the fire and think of the lessons he taught me in there. I raise my glass to the lion and take a long sip as Hanna’s muffled screams break through the floor.

Three loud knocks rap on the door.

My heart skips a beat for a moment and I freeze in place. I listen as two more knock follow. I close my eyes, collecting myself, opening them slowly. I rise from the chair, leaving the glass on the arm rest. I walk calmly to the door. I reach for the knob, palm sweaty with fear. I pull the door open a crack and am greeted with a pair of tired, worn green eyes.