

**Unbecoming**

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## How I Got Here

I first applied to Purchase College in the winter of 2020 for Visual Art because I knew I liked to paint and draw and thought it was *cool* or something to be an artist in that way. Deep down I knew I only wanted to do it superficially, it wasn't actually something I wanted to do all day everyday. It was what I thought I wanted to say when someone asked me my major. I was seventeen and wasn't thinking about anything in any way that wasn't shrouded in some sort of superficiality. When I got my acceptance letter (which I remember was just an email), we were weeks deep into quarantine and all of my previous feelings of being "cool" were soon replaced by an all consuming boredom and anxiety that came with being in a tiny apartment with my entire family living the same day over and over. I didn't even tell my parents that I got into the program because it became unimportant, an afterthought. The city was a ghost town and I didn't think there was really a point in going to college or doing much of anything, certainly not in pursuing art, which I was hardly interested in by then. I began to write about my days to give myself some sort of structure and be able to separate my days. I'd write about the people I'd see on my walks to the supermarket or to the park, the way I felt about everything. It started off as a journal and it slowly evolved to more structured stories and narratives. I realized I hadn't even touched my old art supplies and had no real urge to. I also realized I did not want to go to school for visual art, and if I did I wouldn't be doing it for myself. I ended up going to Hunter College for a year as an English major and loved all my literature classes, but they were all on zoom of course and I grew tired of being a hermit in my childhood bedroom and my mom grew sick of me complaining about my self inflicted loneliness. She suggested I apply to Purchase again, this time for Creative Writing.

Between my last semester of Hunter and my first at Purchase, I still spent most of my time reading anything I could get my hands on as most bookstores were still largely closed for in-person shopping. I remember going through my mother's old books collecting dust on her bookshelf and reading the majority of them. *The Girls Guide to Hunting and Fishing* by Melissa Bank, everything by Mary Gaitskill, specifically stories from her collection *Bad Behavior*, and Ann Beattie's book *My Life, Starring Dara Falcon*. They were all books I found on my Mother's bookshelf, which was overflowing with books from all genres. Books she had to read for class in college, books from middle school and even elementary school. She kept all of her copies. All I wanted to do was go through her bookshelf and find my next book, mainly because it was a break from the constant blue-light that glowed from my computer screen or T.V, but also because it required my full attention. It was meditative. I wasn't thinking about graduating high school through Google Hangout or how I had to choose a college to attend while millions of people die from an illness that is extremely contagious. How there was no end in sight and I didn't know if I'd ever have a "normal" life, along with the guilt I felt for even having those feelings because there were people actually suffering. When life very slowly became more "normal," though I've grown to resent that word because of its overuse during the pandemic, my love for reading and writing remained. I continued to read everything from strange ramblings about drugs in Tao Lin's *Trip* and love and loss in books like *The Passion* by Jeanette Winterson and Ottessa Moshfegh's *Eileen*.

Arguably, the writer who has influenced me the most for this project, and my writing in general, was Ottessa Moshfegh. Her character's are typically young women who are blunt, smart, and unreliable. In *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* the main character would rather sleep than deal with her friend's issues and is steeped in her own selfishness, but we can understand why

and we still root for her, though she is undeniably a bad person. In *Eileen*, the main character attempts to frame her father for murder, yet because we understand her intentions we almost feel bad for her. Moshfegh's ability to make readers completely captivated by her character's bluntness and their unwavering confidence, though a lot of times her character's are in the wrong. I tried to emulate this in my stories in this collection by, for the most part, creating insular narratives and writing characters who are both observant and critical. Ottessa Moshfegh also is a writer who inspired me to write what I want to write about, not what I think others want to read. She is blunt and writes what she wants, something I find incredibly admirable. Moshfegh also usually writes from the perspective of a female protagonist, and usually one that does not fit into any stereotypes. Her protagonists feel genuine and Moshfegh is not using them to prove a point about feminism or femininity. She is using them to tell a story, something I think is not always explored in literature. They're grimey and unimpressed, yet fall into these insular narratives that I am completely captivated by. All of my stories for this project are from the perspective of young women for this very reason, I don't want them to be used to prove a point. I want them to be genuine people, and I think too often we allow female characters to fall into tropes, something I have fervently avoided in these pieces, thanks to Moshfegh mainly. I think it is important to keep female characters real and well rounded, prevent them from falling into stereotypes that are unrealistic and at times boring. I think it's hard to walk this line between genuine and unlikeable, but Moshfegh does it incredibly well in all of her writing (especially *Eileen*) and I hope I was able to do the same in my own work.

I first found the idea of a senior project to be incredibly daunting, I didn't know where to begin or what I wanted the stories to be about. Originally, my plan was to write a novella which I was working on for my class Art of the Novella, which was about a girl who's grappling with the

loss of her older brother while trying to maintain some sense of normalcy. This project became too chaotic for me to work on because I couldn't really figure out where I wanted the piece to go or what I wanted the piece to say. The other stories I wrote were also unmanageable because I didn't feel connected to the characters or to the plots. I wrote about an old married couple's struggle with a brain injury and a girl trying to piece together a night after blacking out from drinking too much. I didn't feel passionate or defensive over these stories, something I noticed I feel when I'm proud of the story or feel like the characters, themes, and plot are something of importance, something meaningful to me. The three stories that I did select were the three that I felt the most proud of and the three I felt the most confident in, specifically in the character's motivations and the plots. They were also the three that I found myself thinking about and wanting to work on the most, whenever I started to work on my project I always opened up one of these three to work on.

The first story in my collection is called *What Was Said*. I first wrote this piece in the spring semester 2023 for my Fiction II class. I wanted to write a piece that dealt with the responses that people have to mass tragedies because of my own experiences witnessing this in high school. I always struggled with the idea that "thoughts and prayers" was a proper response to these very unimaginable events like school shootings or climate change. I also wanted to portray how many words feel meaningless when trying to understand horrific and traumatic events. I also was interested in writing a story from a pretty dissociated voice, one that is just relaying information and playing with the idea of the voice floating between "we" and "I" and being able to toy with this collective voice along with a dissociated narrator. The second piece is titled *I-80* and it follows two childhood friends on their way to their high school reunion. I started writing this story mainly to deal with my own feelings of growing up and the feeling that

your life is changing at an uncontrollable rate. I also wanted to write about childhood friends because it's something I have never written about, yet my childhood friends are some of the most valuable relationships in my life. I did not think this story would make it into this project because I didn't really know where the climax lied, but as I kept writing and fleshing out the characters, it became a very important piece to me and one that I think reflects my own feelings about aging and changing. The final story in this collection is titled *What We Meant*. This story saw many revisions and started out as a completely different piece. I originally just wanted to write about the complexities of a new relationship and one that is codependent and unequal. Even while writing it I could feel myself falling into cliches or just not really believing the characters I was writing in terms of their motivations or their personalities. After heavily revising it multiple times, it became more about realizing who someone is outside of a relationship and finding the ability and bravery to walk away from something that no longer serves you. It became less of a romantic story and more about the protagonist's growth and the ways in which an unhealthy relationship can change all aspects of your life, but the fact that you can always walk away.

## What Was Said

Alexa says she didn't see anything. She carries it like a badge of honor. She lets everyone know that she isn't traumatized or triggered by anything. She says that she walked out of the building and then realized it wasn't a drill.

Sabrina tells everyone about it. She tells strangers on trains who look lonely enough to listen. She tells waitresses and baristas who look at her with such forcibly sad eyes she almost smirks. When she was drunk last weekend, she told me that her heart swells when she sees the shock on their faces. She told me that she gets turned on by it. She told me that she loves it so much she didn't even feel bad about it anymore.

Jacob said he never told anyone. Jacob said he *wouldn't* tell anyone.

At the funerals, we all sat in the church pews with our hands on shaking legs and our lips sealed shut. We watched the bereaved fathers and mothers stand in the front of the church and look at our faces, which they said were full of hope and promise. They wept.

We exchanged condolences. We exchanged niceties and small hugs that meant nothing. All the kids say we're sorry that it happened. We're sorry that they died. We're sorry that the parents are sad. That the teachers are sad. That they're all sad, that we're sad and how hard it is for us all. People brought flowers and looked at the ground. My mother squeezed my hand and then went to speak to the parents, trying to console them by patting their weeping shoulders.

She told me this is unimaginable pain. At night, she sat on the edge of my bed and said that she was afraid to leave my side. She told me that she was scared to let me out of her sight. I told her that I was fine. And I *was* fine.

Kai's funeral was the first. The school sent an email explaining how it would be good for all of us to mourn together, to support each other through dark and trying times. Kai's casket was

closed and his girlfriend, Lucy, draped her body over his coffin. She held on tightly. Kai's mother had to peel her off, weeping, so they could continue with the rituals and carry him out to be buried.

Jacob watched in awe. On the walk home, he said that he has never felt that amount of love for someone else— let alone someone dead. No one Jacob loved died, which is why we all assumed he couldn't understand.

"I, like, didn't even know him so I don't feel the need to mourn him." He looked at me so intensely while saying this.

"Yeah." I didn't know what else to say. His expression scared me.

"The worst fucking part is that everyone is acting like they knew everyone so personally. Sabrina is fucking sobbing on her story every second of the day because she now knows dead kids. Like everyone else. She didn't even fucking talk to any of those kids. Why is she getting sympathy? She's not special just because she's broadcasting her so-called grief. We have to say sorry you're feeling this way to *her*. As if she was a victim herself. It's just so psychotic." He kicked a stone, as if his frustration was one that must be performed in order for someone to believe it.

"She doesn't know what to do," I said.

"She should fucking figure it out."

We turned a corner and saw a huddle of our classmates.

"They're getting high after his funeral," Jacob said. "Meanwhile on their Instagrams it's all tears and fucking building shrines, spreading awareness or whatever."

I didn't say anything because there was nothing left to say. Jacob was angry and scared; it was all that he knew.

Doves were released at the end of Josie's funeral. Jacob laughed. He said it wasn't a wedding— there's no point. He told me on the walk to the funeral that this would be the worst one, and he was right. Josie's funeral was the last one and I think at that point the funerals became boring and tiresome. They felt normal. None of us had any tears left for Josie. Her casket was propped open slightly so we could see through a crack. I didn't look. I knew I'd scream if I saw her lying there. I knew if I saw her all stitched up and wearing pounds of makeup to distract the living from the fact that her skin was decomposing, I'd want to throw up all over her corpse. I knew I wouldn't have an appropriate reaction and I knew people would think I was being disrespectful or rude. I didn't need to see her dead to know she was dead. I watched her take the knife to her neck. None of us understood why they would leave a gap for us to see her. No one wanted to look.

The other funerals blurred together. People recited happy memories. They stated their complete disbelief. They cried; tissues were offered. We all said our goodbyes leaning over brown, shiny caskets.

Overall, four students died. We mourned and grieved for four weeks straight. Each Sunday we would be emailed a schedule of funerals for the upcoming weekend along with mental health resources and hotlines we could call in case of emergencies. We received messages telling us that we weren't alone. We had assemblies lasting hours run by mental health advocacy groups with videos and speeches about how we were never alone.

We started to hate the dead. We started to resent them for making us hear about suicide and about how depression is directly linked to social media use. We were given lectures on how PTSD and trauma is complex and should not be spoken about lightly, especially not after what

we all experienced. Sabrina and Alexa would leave halfway through and hide in the bathroom. Jacob always stayed; he wanted to have something to make fun of for the rest of the day.

He wanted to get something malicious out of it. He would say shit about how stupid the lady looked, or how ugly she was. He was right, but I couldn't help but feel bad for her and think about how depressing her life was. A high school hired her to give students lectures on *suicide*.

I stayed during every lecture because I didn't know where else to go. I didn't know what to do with what I saw. There was nowhere for me to put the grief or shock or whatever people were calling it. There was nothing for me to do with it. Everyone was worried about all of us. Everyone wanted something from us. They wanted more tragedy, more tears, more heartbreak. They kept spewing statistics. They kept telling us everything we didn't want to hear— there was hope but we probably didn't feel very hopeful right then, and that was completely normal. Everything we felt was completely normal except for the suicidal ideations.

Jacob whispered under his breath that he wished he was a victim so he wouldn't have to sit there. I kicked him in the shin, but I couldn't blame him.

“Let's say you walk by your classmate and they're sitting with their head down in their hands. They look really upset about something. What would you do?” The lady on the stage pointed to an unsuspecting kid in the audience.

The kid knew the script and said, “Check in on them. Be their friend. Call a teacher.”

The lady on the stage smiled too enthusiastically to be talking about teen suicide.

When we went to Josie's funeral, they played the last playlist she ever made. It was weird because it was all pop music from the 80's. We walked up to her casket to Prince and Madonna while her mother screamed and wailed. We lined up to pay our respects to “Raspberry Beret” and everyone acted like that was completely normal and respectable.

I remember walking up to her father after saying my final goodbye and apologizing. He said I didn't need to. He said that he was sorry for me, too. I didn't say anything back.

I didn't know that he knew I watched her die violently by her own hands. He told me that he asked the teacher for a class list, that for some reason knowing who saw her last made him feel closer to her. Made him feel like he could one day understand it all. I didn't know what to say. I stood there and stared at him, blankly, for a moment. He said I probably think he's crazy, but I didn't. I didn't think that at all.

I went to Josie's house once in fourth grade. It was strange— not small, but not big either. It felt cramped. Her mother was a hoarder so there was a lot of trash around. Her father gave us snacks and apologized for the garbage everywhere, Josie blushed and went back to eating her chicken nuggets. I remember not saying anything and just watching Josie eat, wondering why she seemed embarrassed of her family. Of her own mother. Why her father didn't just clean up, why Josie's room was the only one in the house where you could easily get around. When my mom picked me up, she explained what hoarding was. I told her that Josie's dad gave me chicken nuggets and she sucked her teeth and said I shouldn't have eaten in that house. I wonder if Josie's room will stay the same forever now. Her father doesn't seem like he'll be able to bear losing that too.

Sabrina went online every day and read through every article written about our school. She posted each obituary as if we hadn't already read them. Alexa told her to stop, and Jacob said she was acting insane, but Sabrina didn't care.

I told them she was just trying to mourn.

Sabrina watched Kai die. She told me that he stood up on the desk and pulled out his knife so quickly that no one could even comprehend the words he said before he took the blade

to his neck. Blood poured out and pooled on the ground. The sight of it made their English teacher pass out.

I told her what Josie told my class before pulling out her knife. That she was part of a group of radicals who had found the Messiah. The Messiah lived off I-86. God was dead and the story of Jesus was a farce. We lived in fiction, rapture was coming, and she was dying for our sins.

I told Sabrina that Ms. O'Malley tried to stop Josie from slitting her throat. The student teacher, Ms. Mark, pulled out her phone and called 911. She told the dispatcher that there was a student with a knife and that the student seemed unstable. Every single kid was completely silent because we didn't know what else to do. We didn't know how to act when there was a girl standing on her desk threatening to slit her throat. No emergency protocol prepared us for this. We couldn't silently hide against the wall with the lights off. We couldn't lock the door. We couldn't calmly line up in a single file line and exit the room. There was nothing to do but watch.

I told her how when Ms. O'Malley walked up to Josie, she stopped talking and slid the blade along her throat. She collapsed. Her body fell and draped over the desk. I told Sabrina that every kid gasped and Jane, this random girl we hardly knew, grabbed my hand. She started to scream.

I stayed glued to my seat. I couldn't move. I couldn't cry. I couldn't shield my eyes against Josie's lifeless body lying in a pool of her own blood. I told Sabrina that the blood got on Jacob's shoes and that Jacob threw up and started to cry. She asked me if I thought we could've stopped them, she asked me earnestly, and looked to me for an answer. Jacob had said the same thing a few days earlier, telling me he wished that he had done something to stop her. I shook my head even though I wasn't sure if we could've. I told her there was nothing anyone could've

done, it happened too fast. She nodded her head and looked like she was going to cry. Instead, she just said she was sure I was right. There was nothing we could do now to change it anyway.

During the suicides, the school went into lockdown because the administration in the main office didn't know what was happening. They didn't know the killers were students and the people dying were themselves. Clueless, or maybe just afraid, Ms. O'Malley locked the door and turned off the lights out of habit. She told us to lean against the wall. We backed away from Josie's body, which was now in everyone's unobstructed view. Her blood continued to pour out of neck and onto the tiled floor. Jacob's vomit sat at the center of the room. It mixed with Josie's blood. He moved his body towards mine, grabbed my hand and held it so tightly I thought it would break my bones.

We were in lockdown for thirty minutes before the cops "cleared" us. Only two kids in my class cried during those thirty minutes. Jacob stared and held my hand. Every kid walked out of the classrooms with our hands on our heads. We looked confused, disturbed, panicked, and shocked. We looked sick. We all looked at each other wide eyed and confused. The cops told us everyone was safe and was going to be okay. When we left, there were ambulances, cops, and parents everywhere. We looked at all of them like we were dead. They looked back at us with fear and sympathy, their eyes wide and hands covering their mouths. My mother wore sunglasses and her work clothes. She took them off when she saw me. Her mascara was running, her hands didn't leave her face. Jacob's dad looked haunted.

The school closed for a week. We were each called by the guidance counselor to have a check-in. If you saw a suicide, you were called twice— once for an initial meeting, and then again for a follow up. My mom answered both times and took advantage of the free therapy for herself before giving me the phone. She'd tell them that she was so worried, that it's so scary.

“My daughter. She watched it y’know, and now I see her and don’t know what to think or do. Every time she leaves the room, I’m so worried that she won’t walk back in. I don’t know how to let go anymore. People always talk about suicide having a ripple effect. It’s just so hard.” She’d go on and on. She’d talk for thirty minutes straight. All I could do was roll my eyes. I knew she was worried, but it felt selfish.

Then she’d pass the phone to me. The counselors asked me how I felt about what happened and I said I felt sad. I said I felt scared. I said I didn’t know how to act at all because no one was telling me the truth. The guidance counselor told me she was sorry. She told me that she was there for me when I was ready to talk. I said I was ready to talk then. She said she would be there when I knew what I needed to say. I hung up. My mom would yell at me for not utilizing resources, for not caring about my mental health.

When school reopened, Jacob had to go to their office three times because of his “visceral reaction,” which we all determined was a pretty normal reaction. He walked out rolling his eyes. He told me he only threw up because he hated blood. He said he didn’t even like Josie, but everyone was acting like she was his best friend. I knew he was lying; he has had a crush on Josie since third grade, but I told him they’re just worried. He said they should stop worrying and let him be normal again. His usual clean and kempt self was rotting away, his hair was getting long, his hair always covering his eyes. His clothes smelled and he wore the same jeans every day. None of us said anything. None of us told him he wasn’t acting normal.

Sabrina told me she didn’t care anymore. She didn’t know how she was supposed to still feel upset and must do homework. Nothing mattered. Kids were dead and we were supposed to be traumatized, but we still went to class, we still were urged to get good grades so we could have the shiny happy future the dead would never have, that the dead would never know. My

mom told me that the world doesn't stop for grief while crying into her coffee cup one morning. I left without saying goodbye.

A month after the event, the news broke that the dead were brainwashed, or something, by this guy named Joseph who targeted students and sent them messages over Instagram. He claimed that he somehow heard from God that they were important.

Josie's messages were released. At first, they were normal. She would leave him on *seen* and he would send her another message. Then he started to reveal personal information about her that she said he couldn't have known.

She responded to him. He told her to meet him and the other chosen ones at *Denny's* on the main strip the following week.

The rest of the information came directly from his confession, so no one knows how accurate it is. Apparently, they would meet there twice a week for over six months. On the weekends he would choose two kid to come to his house. He showed them his writings and manifestos about how modern life was ruining humanity and how salvation awaited those who were smart enough to choose it. He told them about how the world was a dangerous place, how there was crime and heartbreak, how there were unstoppable wars and how the government wanted to kill them all with vaccinations and technology. He said the government was brainwashing them.

According to Joseph, God would hold each of the chosen ones in the palm of His hand—the ones who have seen the truth about humanity and all its downfalls.

Apparently, no one questioned him. He was charismatic. The press called him “charming and smart.”

He used to be a janitor at our school. He stalked students, watching them through their bedroom windows. He scrolled through their online accounts. He knew Josie's mom was mentally ill and that Kai's dad had just died in some freak accident. He knew these things because everyone talked about everyone else's lives like we were all competing in some fucked up trauma Olympics; the grand prize was to die by suicide.

He knew that the other kids, like Jake and Abby, all had fucked up childhoods and home lives without an adult to trust. He knew Jake's brother killed himself last May and that his father left him and his mom that July. He heard us all whisper about Abby's dad and how he went to jail for possession of heroin and that her mom was a junkie, too. He heard us all call her a crack baby.

Kai's mom wrote a letter that got published in the local newspaper about the pain she felt for ignoring the clear signs. She admitted her guilt. She claimed she felt ashamed. She said she was going to start a foundation for families "afflicted by the plague of teenage mental illness" and would dedicate the rest of her life to "social media awareness and safety."

My mom read it aloud at breakfast one morning and wept. I couldn't shed a tear for either of them. I couldn't even force a frown. I didn't feel like it.

It felt like they missed the point purposefully. They fell on their own swords over and over in order to prove how horrible they all felt for something out of everyone's hands. I thought it was a cop out to blame social media rather than the man who suggested their kids kill themselves. Kai's mom lost the two people she probably loved the most and we still expected something from her. We still expected her to put her grief to good use.

I didn't know what I should think. My mom made me give her all my logins and passwords for my social media accounts because, apparently, it was dangerous to let us have

online access without parental supervision. After the story came out, I told her that I would delete all the accounts if she wanted me to. I guess my tone was too sarcastic because she yelled at me about how immature I was being, how I wasn't thinking about anything clearly because I experienced trauma. She told me that she would always be there for me and that I should always go to her with any problem I may have. She was crying and yelling, and I sat there and took it.

I knew at that moment she felt a different type of sadness than me. I knew she felt like a child that I had to comfort, but I had no words left. I had nothing to say. There's rarely anything to say to your mother when *she's* crying about something *you* saw.

Jacob said his parents were the same. They wanted to send him on some retreat for mentally ill kids even though Jacob wasn't mentally ill— he just watched a mentally ill girl kill herself. Alexa's mom tried to pretend like nothing happened. She greeted her each morning with breakfast made and told her that she loved her and asked what the weather was going to look like. Sabrina's mom just got her a therapist. She stayed at work later than she had to and went to bars. She returned home too drunk to talk to Sabrina in any meaningful way. Sabrina said she didn't care; she knew her mom didn't have anything to say either.

My mom started to wake me up in the middle of the night by sneaking into my room and looking through my things. I didn't have anything to hide. I told Alexa about this, and she said she'd kill her mom if she went through her things.

No one wanted our parents to grieve the loss of our innocence. No one wanted to know they felt even more worried about us than they already did. Jacob said the world was changing fast; they had to speed up and adapt. I rolled my eyes.

Eventually people stopped talking about it. People stopped needing to incorporate it into small talk and their hellos didn't need to start with an apology. But we all felt it. It hung over all

of us every day. The rooms the kids died in got plaques commemorating their lives, the school created an annual “mental health awareness” day. Our parents always tracked our locations.

It was the elephant in every room, and no one wanted to acknowledge it. The elephant trampled over other students and our families, and we all just smiled and said how lovely it was that it was finally getting warm again. There was hardly anything meaningful to say about suicide and death and cults that hadn’t been already said.

We just ignored it. We went out on the weekends and drank until we couldn’t remember our last names. We’d drink until we could finally cry for the dead. We cried for the living, too. We’d drink until it wasn’t awkward for us to say we were upset, until we were able to blame the fake Messiah and the words he sent to Jake, Abby, Kai, and Josie.

We all forgot the conversations the next day. We went back to silence and our private grief. There didn’t seem to be a problem with it. There wasn’t a way to fix it. No words or actions could change anything that happened or our feelings about it.

Nothing could fix it at all.

“I only dream of aging.” I turn to Veronica and wait for her reaction. She stares at the road in front of us as if there’s something different about it, as if we haven’t driven here before. We grew up 20 minutes away. We’ve driven down Route 19 from Paterson countless times. She is staring at the road probably to avoid my existential feelings, she’s tired of hearing about them. She’s told me it pisses her off when I get like this, but I can’t help myself. I want to be reassured that the existential dread I’m feeling is normal, that I’m going through what everyone else is going through. I want her to tell me I’m not completely alone in feeling this.

“It’s the only thing in life you feel is promised, you’ve told me this before. Birth, aging, death. It’s what we all have in common. Are you just thinking like this because we’re going to the reunion?” Veronica says this bluntly. I hate that she thinks she figured it out, I hate when people make problems so situational. As if going to this high school reunion suddenly made life depressing. She smiles at me and waits for the light to turn green. She’s sitting in the driver's seat of her mother’s Subaru. The seats are soft and gray, the car smells old, almost like moth balls but not quite. There’s a faint smell of cigarettes and sticky beer in the back, she never cleans her car which is a bizarre juxtaposition to everything else about her. Her hair is pin straight, her clothes fit perfectly, she carries herself glamorously and with poise I’ve never had, that I used to wait for as if it would come with puberty like it did for her.

“No,” my tone is too sheepish, “I’m just thinking about aging is all.”

“Well yeah, you measure your life in birthdays. Six months till you’re twenty five, it’s all you’ve been talking about. The distance between the present and your birthday, as if that’s the only marker of time. You don’t think about the time in between and what you’ll do, you just think that one day you’ll be older, but in those days so much shit happens Claudia. It’s so

depressing to think about life so numerically.” She presses her foot down on the gas pedal and the car jolts ahead. I worry that she thinks I’m self obsessed. If my neurotic thoughts aren’t called for. I know she thinks I just need to start living my life and stop thinking about how I’m supposed to live my life. But I don’t know how to do that. No one told me how to do that.

“That’s all I can think about,” I cross my legs, “I didn’t realize how much pressure I’d feel after graduating college. I guess it means I have to decide on something. I’m worried I’m never going to grow up at all, I feel stunted.” I uncross my legs. I read somewhere that crossing your legs is bad for you, that it messes with your back or something. Veronica shrugs.

“Claudia, it’s going to be fine, it’s not going to turn out badly for you. You know how to be a grown up.” She keeps her eyes on the road but adjusts her hair, tucking a blonde strand behind her delicate, childlike ear revealing a small diamond stud earring.

“Do I though? All I can think about is getting older and I can’t stop it. I feel like I’m becoming *something*, but the only thing I feel I’m becoming is unbecoming. I can’t even afford my own apartment in Newark. I’m not asking for fancy, I’m not asking to live in Jersey City.” Veronica chuckles after rolling her eyes. It’s an airy laugh, almost forced, too breathy.

“You work at a Stop and Shop, you could look for a real job, not that it’s not a real job but one where you have benefits and stuff. You have a Bachelor’s degree, that counts for a lot on the job market.” Veronica’s voice sounds cautious, as if she feels my mood shift before it’s even able to, before I even notice it. I hate that she brought up my job. I want to tell her she doesn’t get it. I want to tell her she will never get it. She’s always had it easier. Since we were kids. Her father is a banker and her mother is a lawyer. She doesn’t have debt. She was a legacy at Princeton. Her parents pay for her rent. I swallow my pride, or jealousy. My mother is a kindergarten teacher and my father is an EMT. I was always jealous of her, her parents took her

to Bora Bora and we'd go to the shore. I felt dumb for even feeling jealous of her, my mother would always say people have it worse than us, children are starving in Africa, all the classic "be grateful for what you have" idioms of the middle class. I knew I was ungrateful, but something in me couldn't help it. Her wealth was, and still is, something that she unintentionally shoves in my face. I know it's my own jealousy. I wish I had grown out of it by now. I wish that by knowing all of this, knowing why I feel some sort of resentment towards her, that I could stop, but it keeps growing like a cancer. I can feel it in my fucking blood cells.

"A degree in literature from fucking Montclair state." I say this quietly, knowing it's an emotional response, knowing that it's going to piss her off. Whenever I mention our differences she gets defensive, and I do too.

"Claudia, for fucks sake. No one forced you to study that. You're not some disenfranchised youth because you got a degree in literature. There are options, I mean you could work at a publishing company or something, you'd probably enjoy that. Or an English teacher? What do people say? Like if you can't *do* teach or whatever." She sounds annoyed, but continues to try to help me. I never understood this, how she could be angry and helpful at the same time. How she could hold two things at once, be two things at once.

"I'd rather work my way up the Stop and Shop ladder than do that. Become store manager, then who knows maybe *regional* manager." I chuckle at my own joke but Veronica doesn't laugh. There's nothing worse than management at grocery stores. It's a glorified dead end job, they care so deeply about the store, about how we stock the shelves, how we check the customers out, how the people in the back pack orders. I could never care so much about something that doesn't matter in the long run. Something so menial and depressing. Veronica

knows this, and I've made this joke before, that working at a grocery store is my career now, knowing that someday I will probably get a "real" job. I just can't figure out how.

Veronica merges onto I-80 and quietly curses when the Jeep in front of her cuts her off. I slouch further down into the passenger seat. I look out the window and see the other cars speeding along. Veronica hums along to the radio, playing *Back to Black* by Amy Winehouse. The car feels tense, she starts to quietly sing, not responding to my comment, focusing on the road and the song. She's off-key, which is endearing. In high school when the boy she had a crush on, Gabe, started dating some sophomore when we were seniors, she started to play Amy Winehouse on repeat. We spent countless hours talking shit about Gabe and how he's basically a pedophile for dating her, dissecting why he didn't choose age appropriate Veronica instead. She'd constantly ask me why boys liked younger girls and I never had an answer. I would just say he was a prick or an pedo or whatever but it never satisfied her.

"I'm sorry for being a bitch about this." I feel like a sullen little girl around her. I'm not entirely sure why I'm apologizing, other for just being jealous, for not taking her advice.

"It's fine Claudia, I know you're just stressed. You could move back home, save up, get a Masters in like, fuck I don't know. God no one in this fucking state knows how to drive a goddamn car," she slams the steering wheel as a car cuts in front of us, "What we need is some fucking driving teachers, you should open up a driving school, huh? How about that? That would be really helpful, and no office job. No computer job or whatever you call it." She giggles to herself but I don't laugh.

"Whatever Veronica."

"No I mean it, like why don't you go back to school? You say it's impossible with only a Bachelor's... really for fucks sake why is it so hard for people to merge. One and one, one and

one! God, sorry I have such bad road rage today. I think you should think about it, Claudia. You'll figure it out. I mean, I kind of did. I know sales is boring to you, especially because I'm selling software which isn't world changing or like benefitting the *real* physical world, and I'll admit at times I want to blow my brains out, but it's overall a good job. My coworkers are nice and it's nice to have my own money to spend, it's nice to feel like a grown up. Plus I get dental." She smiles at me and shows me her teeth.

"Well *dental*, I'm sold." I hate when Veronica talks about her new friends at her job, about how they go out on Friday's to get drinks and order office lunches. Her new yuppie friends that I'll never meet or remember the names of.

Veronica disregards my snarky comment. "You were into criminal justice right? What about going into something with that? You remember Charlie from middle school? The guy with the blonde hair, well was it blonde? He was fat though, or was that Felix?" Veronica always remembers people by their weight, something she drunkenly told me during prom, because her mother always emphasized the importance of being thin, skinny, and pretty. I remember thinking that it was strange that her mom could be so superficial and so successful, seemingly smart, but then I got older and realized it's all anyone can think about, any normal person at least. How fat we are compared to last year, how fat someone else is compared to us. At least Veronica is honest about it with me, she's always been honest. I admired that about her when we were in high school, she was blunt, didn't take shit from other people like I would. She told them off, she spoke her mind. She's gotten more and more quiet, more content with going along with others. Conforming to the norm I guess. Going to work out classes on Saturday mornings and brunch on Sunday. Shit she would make ruthless fun of when we were younger. Call it depressing and ask me if I thought that's all there was to life, if life was just going to work and looking forward to

getting drunk on a Sunday morning. I didn't have an answer for her then, but I think she's becoming what she used to claim was her worst fear.

Veronica taps her fingers on the steering wheel. "I can't remember, whatever, he works at some company focused on helping people who got out of Fort Dix rehabilitate and re-enter the world. Social worker I guess. I saw it on LinkedIn, you should make a profile and connect with him. He's also cuter now, skinny too if he was the fat one. Well, marginally cuter, kind of just like office cute you know, like someone you can watch during meetings, whatever. I'll help you make a profile!"

I wonder if she's embarrassed by me. If she doesn't want to be seen with me because I've done nothing of importance since high school. I went to Montclair State and she went to Princeton. I have no big dreams of running a company or becoming something important. I don't drool over bottomless mimosas and hot yoga. I want to tell her that Charlie was the fat one, but I don't want more advice about LinkedIn or networking. I change the subject. "Do you remember Annabelle?"

"Annabelle?" She tilts her head.

"From our tenth grade homeroom? The girl with hair down to her ass and people would always wonder what she did when she had to shit, the boys would call her something mean like 'shit hair' or something stupid. Anyway, she's dating some guy in jail. Has this whole page about it on Instagram. I'll send it to you later. She's insane. He's in for murder and she posts about how all she dreams about is him coming home, but they've never met. She met him on some website where you can find a prisoner to write to and like eventually date. She has a pixie cut now too. But her boyfriend is crazy buff, he's kind of hot." I wait for Veronica's reaction, waiting to see if she still finds me funny, if she still wants to talk shit about the people we went to school with or

if she's above that now. I wait to see if her getting a grown up job made her rise above all of this, if she thinks I'm immature for still stalking people's Instagrams and looking them up on Facebook like we used to spend hours doing when we were teenagers. Veronica was obsessed with looking other kids up online, looking up teachers, stalking them to see if they were married or alone. Whenever a couple broke up she was the first to know about it. We both had a sick fascination, almost obsession, with other people and their lives. We gossiped incessantly, starting every conversation with "Don't tell anyone I told you" and "Who would I tell?" Our secrets were always safe with each other. Once we graduated from high school, Veronica told me she was determined to change, she was determined to become someone that didn't have enough time to gossip about others, who was too busy living their own life. I didn't think she was serious, but when I called her the first week of school to tell her that Gabe was in my Bio class and had broken up with his still high school aged girlfriend all she said was "Good for him" and went on to tell me about her own life.

"Oh my god. Of course she would. I hope she shows up for this shit show reunion." I feel both relieved and like an asshole for ever being pissed with Veronica for things out of her control like growing up with more money or trying to better herself. I shake the thought and guilt from my head and try to ground myself in the conversation.

"She's not usually one for parties— but anyway, I'll look into school or talking to Charlie or something. You're right." I don't want her to think that I think she's a sellout for working a corporate job no more than I want her to think I'm trashy for still working at a grocery store. Veronica smiles, seemingly more sure of herself, she sits up a little taller.

"Yeah, some schools aren't too expensive. You could look at state schools or you could commute to a CUNY. You have time is all I'm saying." Veronica shrugs again.

“Yeah, I know. It’s just, I am older now. I am *getting older*.”

“We’re the same age. It’s not that old. Can you check how long this will be? I don’t want to be early to this reunion. I feel like people would see us as desperate or something. I don’t even know why we’re going to this.” She hands me her phone, a huge iPhone, almost comically large. We contemplated going to this reunion for the past few weeks, since Janice, the class president, sent us an email about it. It hasn’t been ten years but she wanted to catch up with people, let people rekindle friendships, whatever. We at first found it pathetic to go to, we didn’t miss anyone and didn’t really want to see anyone. Then a few of our friends from school, Jackie and Annika, started a group chat about going and we kind of got roped into it, making plans for drinks after. We both told ourselves and the other that it would be nice to see people, even if it’s awkward. Veronica said she’s curious what the two of them are up to and that this is a good excuse to just see.

“Ten more minutes. Do you want to skip it? We can just say that we had car trouble or just say nothing.” Part of me hopes she gets off at the next exit and we just go to a diner like we used to.

“No, no, we should go. It’ll be good to go, see what everyone is doing. It’s just, I don’t want to like– whatever.” I know Veronica means she’s afraid to see what everyone is doing, afraid to see who’s married, who might have a kid soon. Be reminded of things she missed out on in high school, things we thought were lame. I know she’s afraid of seeing futures she could’ve had, futures she could’ve been a part of but isn’t. She was always good at pretending like she didn’t care about all of that, about never having a “real” long term relationship. In college she’d drunkenly text me about how she fears no one will ever love her enough to want to be with her and only her, that no one will ever love her enough to commit to her, that she’ll die alone. I

texted her back, drunkenly, that she is beautiful and perfect, that she'll never be alone as long as we're friends. We would never bring up these conversations soberly, probably out of shame or fear of seeming weak to the other, or to anyone.

“Ok, well it's up to you, you're the driver.”

“Well, we're going. We said we would go.” Veronica takes a deep breath as if to further convince herself that it's the right decision to go to this. I nod in agreement, even though I don't really feel like going to this either, but I also want to go to a party, I think. I haven't been to a real party in awhile. I start biting my nails but taste blood. I suck on my thumb and open up her glove box looking for a band aid.

“What do you need? Don't go through that.” A condom falls out along with a pack of cigarettes, a lighter, and a baggy of weed. I laugh and look and see Veronica physically cringe.

“Oh my god Veronica! You're like a teenager. Who are you having car sex with?” I nudge her and she recoils. I can feel my heart start beating faster from the possibility of hearing something new, having new gossip to think about. Excited by the opportunity arising to talk shit.

“Shut up, Claudia.” Veronica blushes. My heart beats faster, I can feel my eyes widen with suspense, or something, I can't tell. I worry I want to know she's a fuck up like me, but maybe I'm being too hard on myself. I'm being too hard on her. I don't know.

“No really, who is it? Tell me. Please tell me. Let me live vicariously through you please.” I put my hands in a prayer position and make a pouty face, raise my eyebrows and frown. She doesn't budge, “Who are you having car sex with? Who would I even tell? C'mon I thought we were adults.”

“It's no one, I'm not. It's just like for emergencies.”

“*Emergencies?*” Veronica’s eyes stay glued to the road, her cheeks are bright red, “Veronica, it’s not embarrassing to have sex.” Veronica was not a prude in high school, though we were both virgins when we graduated. She started watching porn in middle school and watched videos on how to give a handjob on youtube, teaching me through giggles and whispers using cucumbers her mother bought. We’d have sleepovers and discuss techniques, which boys we want to fuck, which teachers we’d sleep with. In gym class she’d nudge me when she could see a guy’s junk through his shorts. Neither of us really talked to boys, at least none that were even remotely attractive, we’d both sooner shit our pants than admit to one that we liked them. The first week of college I remember she called me and told me she put all her studying to good use and finally got laid. I asked if he was her boyfriend and she laughed me off. She hooked up with fifteen guys by the end of the first semester. Then she told me during winter break that year that she was going to go celibate and focus on her studies. I didn’t believe her and told her so and she never told me about another hook up again. I think I made her feel like a slut, which I didn’t mean to do, even though I thought deep down that she was for giving it up so easily.

“Really it’s no one. I just have it from when I was dating around, probably. I honestly don’t even remember putting it there. And the weed is just for when I can’t sleep. You know my landlord hates the smell of weed so I try to keep it out of my apartment. The cigarettes are because I smoke them, you know that. Anyway I don’t know why I’m even explaining myself to you.” She fusses with her hair and then honks her horn, even though there is not a real reason to.

“Veronica, it’s just congestion. It’ll clear up.” I know she’s just agitated because I’m pressing her for answers, because I want to know something about her life that isn’t easy to explain like hooking up with someone, but I’m glad that she is. I’m glad that she’s not just

focused on her career like she said she was. She seemed so boring to me when that was all she claimed to care about.

“God it’s just so annoying.” She honks again and I put my hand on hers to stop her next honk.

“It’ll clear up. Chill out.” Veronica turns to me with tears in her eyes, “What? Veronica? What is going on?”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” Veronica wipes her eyes and we both go silent except for her whimpers, she covers her mouth as the car inches forward. “I’m going to get off at this exit. I need something– I need something like a snack or water or... I’m probably just hungry.” She looks at me for reassurance. I nod and smile, trying to show her that I’m there or some sort of me is there. Show her that some empathetic being is sitting in the car with her. She flips on her turn signal and eventually, slowly, merges into the far left lane. She holds her hand up to thank the other drivers. She still has tears in her eyes, it will ruin her sparse mascara. I don’t mention that it is already running, I know it will only upset her even more. I want to ask about the condom again, ask her about who she’s sleeping with. I hate that she won’t tell me. She doesn’t trust me anymore and hasn’t since I called her a slut in college. I shouldn’t have done that. I was being a bitch and a teenager, the worst combination. I wonder if it’s too late to apologize. My chest tightens with the thought that we’re not close enough to tell each other everything anymore.

She exits the highway and we enter Clifton. I’m relieved to be back in Clifton where we grew up, where we met, where our parents are. Its streets are mundane, the people cut from the same cloth. White, middle class. Downtown is just stores and restaurants on Main Street. It’s everywhere else. Veronica in high school used to shit on Clifton and say that it was just America, it’s nothing special. It’s stuck in time but I think that’s part of its charm. Much of Jersey stays the

same, the pull of New York I think is what kills it. I don't have the same disdain for the city that others do, but I know that it's what impedes Jersey's growth. But I can't leave Jersey. It's too comforting. Veronica once said I was racist for not wanting to leave suburbia, that my life will be filled with run of the mill white people and my days will consist of office politics and cooking dinner for my husband. Our vacations would be to the city for a trip, Broadway shows and seeing the Rockefeller Christmas tree.

"I always end up back here. I can't escape it." She laughs and I laugh along with her, even though I don't fully understand what she means, she speaks in hyperbole and I've always found it somewhat annoying.

"Yeah, old neighborhoods are like that. I remember when I first went to your house in like, what was it? Like first grade?" I see Veronica smile and nod, "I thought you had the prettiest house, I loved the screened in porch, God we used to do so much dumb shit on your porch. I had my first kiss on that porch."

"That's where you first kissed Aidan?" I nod embarrassedly. I forgot that I had lied to her and told her we had kissed somewhere else, I didn't want her to think of me kissing a boy on her porch I guess. I was using twelve year old logic. I look out the window and see the line of one story houses with small front yards and white picket fences.

"Well, yeah. I guess I lied about that." The car comes to a stop at the red light across the street from the bleak gas station that used to sell beer and cigarettes to minors, but only if the minor was a hot teenage girl with huge boobs. Neither of us fit the bill, but our other friends did. The guys filling up trucks or smoking outside the small mart would gawk at them as they walked up with such confidence and glamor I thought they'd all drop dead. We'd wait in the car as

Jackie and Annika went in with their best push-up bras and tight tank tops, adorned with their flashiest boardwalk jewelry.

“Do you remember when Annika and Jackie first went in there to get us beer and neither of us even finished a can? I pretended to be drunk and they called me a lightweight, I didn’t know that was a bad thing back then. I thought it was cool to be drunk.” I try to lighten her mood, I try to distract her from the condom in the glove compartment and the fact that at some point she’ll have to tell me who she’s hooking up with.

Veronica nods and smiles. “Do you know what happened to Jackie?” Veronica’s voice verges on cruel.

“You know what happened to her. She dropped out of Bergen Community College and then became a fucking stripper and married a drug dealer,” I can see Veronica’s tight lips curl into a wicked smirk, “God, are you still mad because she hooked up with Theo?”

“Claudia, she *knew* I liked him– I practically *loved* him, and yet she had the audacity–”

“God you really can hold a grudge.” She presses on the gas and the car jolts forwards. She messily pulls into the gas station and parks the car off to the side.

“Want anything?” I shake my head no, and she unbuckles herself and slides out of the car, “You not coming?” I shake my head again. She rolls her eyes and looks annoyed. She slams the car door shut. I stare at the skinny trees and gray sky. I open the glove compartment again and look through old receipts and wrappers, her registration along with discarded notes. Another condom and some ashed out cigarette butts. I pocket a cigarette and a condom, not that I need either. I’m not too sure why I do it. Something about Clifton makes me impulsive. The closeness of everything, the secrecy of everyone. Everyone knows everybody’s business and there’s nothing you can do about it. I used to steal when I was younger in the mall whenever I was

alone. I needed a secret for myself. I needed something that could be mine. I close the glove compartment and open up the center compartment between my seat and the driver's seat. There's a bloodied tissue and a crumpled up receipt. I see Veronica walk out of the gas station market and pocket the receipt.

"They didn't have any fucking Milanos, they only had Famous Amos. What has this place come to?" She opens up her bag of cookies and offers me one. I accept it. The cookie tastes stale like they always do, covered in crumbs and cookie dust, but it tastes like being a little kid again. It tastes like after school when I was seven.

"I always loved these." I say.

"Eh, I could do without." She pops another cookie into her mouth and places the bag on top of the compartment in between us. She then turns around and backs out of the spot. I think about how if she were a man I'd be attracted to this motion, for some reason. There's something attractive about a guy turning around to check their surroundings. "Are you mad at me Claudia?"

"What? No?"

"Oh, good. I just didn't want you to be offended or upset about the Jackie comment. I don't know why I'm like this. I guess part of me is jealous because her life looks all glamorous, though don't get me wrong I know her life is also full of danger and sleazy men and pimps or whatever." She merges back onto the normal road and starts to drive aimlessly, or at least it seems to be somewhat aimless, "But there's something so *hot* about it all. Being a stripper and doing drugs. She's living cinematically." Veronica places another cookie in her mouth.

"No, I mean I get it. Sometimes I look at the photos she posts or the clothes she wears or whatever and get jealous. But also I just remember it's Jackie y'know? She's a good person."

"Well I don't know about *good* person, but anyway."

“Veronica—”

“*Claudia*” She says my name passionately but I know she’s teasing me. She says “Cloud-ia” when she does this, trying to be seductive and cruel all at once. We’re slipping into our high school selves again, and part of me doesn’t mind. She probably just wants me to talk shit with her, something she claimed that she was done with. Something she’s told me she hates to do, hates when I do it.

“Having car sex isn’t cinematic enough for you?” I look at her profile, her straight nose but weak jawline, her high cheekbones and plump lips, her hair looks silky. She’s wearing a loose fitting gray sweater and slacks, she’s dressed casually but still looks somehow glamorously put together. I’m wearing a cardigan over a tank top with spaghetti straps and baggy jeans. I feel underdressed next to her. The sun hits the other side of her face. I see her wince when the words come out of my mouth, though it’s not totally a wince, it’s just subtle disappointment at the fact that I didn’t let it go, that I want an answer that she doesn’t want to give me. She giggles uncomfortably and then switches on the radio. *Linger* by The Cranberries is playing. Veronica hums along again.

“I’m like racking my brain for a person that could be so bad that you’re this embarrassed to tell me. Is it like someone from high school? Is it someone I’ve hooked up with? You know I wouldn’t care unless it was like Ivan or Walt, and that’s only because we were seriously dating. I don’t hold grudges like you do with Jackie. But anyway, I can’t figure it out and it’s eating me alive. Just tell me, I won’t judge, I promise.” I put my hands in a prayer position and plead for an answer. I know I look pathetic.

“You will judge me, you’ll be mean. Just fucking drop it. Ok?”

“Okay, whatever, you don’t trust me.” I look out the window and see the houses rushing by, all lived in and homey. The trees outside are blooming, though it’s still chilly outside.

“God, Claudia you’re going to be pissed.”

“I’m already pissed.” Veronica laughs, maybe relieved or just to ease her own fear of awkwardness.

“It’s just so fucking embarrassing and I haven’t told anyone. You’ll just think it’s fucked up because it is– I guess I need to tell someone. It’s been kind of ruining my life. I like, fuck Claudia.” Veronica slams her hands on the steering wheel. She pulls over and parks in front of a brick house with flags hanging off the porch. She looks out of her window and avoids my gaze. I hear her sigh and she runs her hands through her hair as she turns back to me, finally facing me.

“I fucked my boss to get a promotion.” She said it so matter of factly it takes a moment to hit me. She looks at her feet, her ballet flats, a little scuffed up.

“Holy shit.” I knew that her life was too easy, that I wasn’t actually doing anything wrong. I’m just surrounded by people who are so avaricious that they lack any real morals. None of this was my fault. It was mostly the fact that I’m not willing to fuck some schmuck to work my way up the ladder, to make the most amount of money I can in the shortest amount of time possible. I can’t imagine what he looks like, if he’s ugly and old or if he’s a hot boss. If he’s like 38 and just beginning to gray. No family so he can still work out and stay fit. He’s probably not though, he’s probably overweight and balding, he’s probably an insecure drunk. He’s probably a creep. I’m angry that she keeps telling me to go back to school, to get a better job, to be a grown up and not sell myself short when she is acting like the epitome of someone who is selling themselves short. Fucking someone with power in order to get more money, not working her ass off like she always claims she is. I don’t know if I should be angry with her or just accept her for

who she is. I don't even know if I think she's a bad person for this, or if I think she's just confused and trying her best, if she's just struggling but won't admit it. She's always been like this, secretive when it comes to big things like this, or when she knows she's fucked up. I don't know if I should ask her why or how it all started, if she initiated it or if he did. I don't know if I'm supposed to be supportive of her or if I should question her intentions, if I should believe that it was truly only for a promotion, or if she's lying about that too and she actually likes him.

"I know, it's bad and gross." Veronica whimpers.

"It's fine, just shocking I guess." I see her make herself physically smaller, crossing her arms and slouching in the driver's seat.

"I'm being messy, I'm being a caricature of a woman with an office job." She begins to cry. I don't want to comfort her but I know I should. It's annoying that she's so self aware, I can't even be mad at her. She always knows when what she's doing is immoral, but she does it anyway. She always has. She'll lie and cheat but it's never for a good reason. She never had anything real to rebel against or be super upset over, her parents rarely scolded her for breaking curfew or coming home drunk. I'd get grounded for a week and she'd get nothing. I can feel my chest tighten. I feel like a teenager again, aware of responsibility as her friend but ignoring it anyway. Calling her my best friend so I have someone to love in my life who I'm not related to, but not really meaning it. Whenever I call her my best friend, I feel selfish for the sake of making a point that I'm not totally alone. I look at her again and see her as herself. As the Veronica I knew when I was six with messy long hair and pee stains on her ripped leggings, as the one at sixteen wearing too much makeup and stuffing her bra, the scared Veronica sitting next to me. The one who puts on a show for strangers by straightening her already straight hair, drinking green juice and doing pilates. Sunday brunch and meal prepping her way through adulthood. I

see her flyaways and her chipped nail polish, her under eye circles. She is just as confused as me, she's just better at hiding it. Maybe I just envy that. Maybe I should try to have more empathy for her.

I don't know when I started to have less sympathy or slack for her. Probably in college when she started to lie to me, when I watched her make other friends who I thought knew more about her than I could. I met new people too, I did the same thing to her, but we never talked about how an intense friendship can blow up when new people are introduced. She'd bring her Princeton friends back to Clifton and she'd apologize for the fact that she didn't have a pool in her backyard. Her friends complained about a lack of nightclubs in the area and I remember laughing, thinking they were kidding, but all I was met with was anger from Veronica for embarrassing her in front of her new friends. I wanted to tell her that if I was her real friend she wouldn't feel embarrassed by me, but instead I just apologized and didn't speak for the rest of the night. She apologized the day after, she said she was just drunk but I knew she wasn't. I got mad at her, held this against her. She noticed, but we never talked about it. We rarely spoke, we'd call every couple of months and tell each other about classes and surface level things. She'd go to the city each summer for internships and I'd work at the mall or Stop and Shop for the summer. Our schedules rarely lined up so we didn't have to really see each other. After graduation we started to hang out again, pretending like nothing happened between us, pretending like when we weren't speaking never happened.. We should've talked about it. I should've apologized. Maybe then she would've told me about this. Maybe then we'd still be real friends.

“It's fine, you just did what you had to do for more money it's whatever Veronica—”

“You don’t get it.” Her voice somehow shrinks too. I try not to roll my eyes or have much of a reaction at all. I look at her and watch her cry some more. I think she wanted a reaction out of me. I think she wanted me to be angry or scared or think she was dumb. Maybe wanted me to act the way I would’ve at sixteen, impressed or worried about her, but worried in a good way. In the way that proves to her that she’s really living.

“It’s okay—”

“He like, well he doesn’t make me, but I don’t know, it’s just hard to say no, it’s hard to tell my boss no. He like asked me if I wanted to get a drink with me while we were out at this conference in Manhattan that originally I was just going to so I seemed like a valuable asset and they would promote me, and I like couldn’t say no to the drink. So I went, we got too drunk to take the train back so we stayed in this really dingy hotel near Penn Station and we were drunk and one thing led to another. Plus it was cheaper to just share a room.” She glances at me then goes back to staring at her feet.

“So you’re like dating this guy?”

“No, no. We can’t.”

“Is he married?”

“No, God no! You know I’d never do that to another woman.” She looks at me and pouts. I realize that I actually don’t know that she wouldn’t do that to another woman. I don’t know much about her anymore. I know the basics. I know the bare necessities. I fiddle with the cigarette I took from her in my pocket and look out the window at the mostly empty road ahead of us. I think about being little with Veronica. Playing jump rope in the street, laughing about the boys in our classes, complaining about our mothers. We don’t know each other intimately anymore. We don’t feel each other’s breathing while wrapped up in quilts during sleepovers, we

don't smell each other's sweat after gym class, we don't speak in whispers about secrets we never thought we'd tell anyone but our teddy bears. I don't know if I should feel sad. I don't know if I only agreed to come to this because I wanted that feeling back. I don't know if I'm afraid to admit that I miss Veronica, but a version of her and me that no longer exists. That will never exist again. I swallow these thoughts whole and exhale.

“Right, right. It was just for the promotion.” I sigh and turn to her again. I see her face. Her button nose and her silky hair. Her blue eyes with long lashes. Her mascara rests gently in streaks along her cheekbones and is clumpy on her lashes. Her golden hoop earrings dangle gently barely reaching her jaw.

“Are you mad at me for doing this?” She used to ask me if I was mad at her for little things, like her not showing up to school or not letting me sleepover, small things. She is always afraid of making people angry, and so am I, but she voices it. I think it's why she fucked her boss, she was probably afraid of making him mad or offended. She can't say no if it might hurt someone else even if the person might deserve it. She puts another cookie in her mouth and looks at me with her sad eyes. I shake my head even though I'm not sure how I feel. I want to make a joke about fucking my manager, the college kid who just turned twenty but I don't. I want to make myself feel lighter. Make myself feel like I won't lose Veronica, that I haven't lost her. A joke would make this inevitable loss of something feel sillier. Some part of me thinks I need to feel this grief, part of me thinks it is a part of growing up. But she probably wouldn't laugh anyway.

“I think you should stop having sex with him if you got what you wanted.” She reaches for my hand and squeezes it, tears still welling up in her eyes. I can't think of anything more to say. Nothing I say feels meaningful anymore. Nothing I say will change anything.

“I don’t think I will, is the thing.” She lets out a long sigh as if she’s been holding onto this secret for a long time. I nod, acting like I understand why she wants to keep hooking up with him. I imagine he’s on a powertrip and every time they fuck it just fuels his ego because he bagged his hot young employee.

“I think you might have to.” I don’t know if I actually think this, but I don’t know what else I should say. A good friend would tell her to stop. A good friend would help her get out of this mess.

“I’m too deep in it.” Veronica sighs. I don’t think she was looking for advice, but I can’t help but give it to her. I want to tell her she should quit her job and look for something else if she’s too deep into it with her boss. If ending things would mean an end for her job as well. I know I won’t say anything to her, I know I will keep letting her mess up and will keep getting frustrated with her for being too afraid to make people angry, for her insecurities. I ask her what she means instead.

“It’s not something that can be finished without a conversation, something would need to happen I guess. I think I’d need a catalyst.” She stares out of her window at the brick house again. I watch her look at the flags blowing in the wind. She sighs. I can’t tell if she’s feigning fear or worry, pretending like she can’t get out of this. I never understood why people don’t realize that things can just end, just because you have sex with someone doesn’t make you eternally tied to them. I want to drill this into her brain, but I’ll try to be more understanding, try to see where she’s coming from.

“Things can just peter out...”

“No they can’t. They really can’t. Things might not seem like a big deal to you because you’ve never been in this situation before but— things don’t just end Claudia. That’s not how it

happens. Not with sex. Not with this job. I can't lose this job." She still looks out of the window. Her right leg is shaking incessantly. I want to put my hand on her thigh to calm her, but I don't.

"I mean you're parents pay for everything—" I cut myself off. I don't know what came over me. I don't know why all of a sudden I thought it would be a good idea to speak my mind, I don't even know if I really meant it. I think I just am jealous, I know I'm jealous.

"Well fuck Claudia." She sighs loudly and places her hands on the steering wheel as if she's about to drive without putting the car in drive. I know I won't apologize. She clenches her jaw. I look at my feet. I shift in the seat and cross my legs again.

"They don't pay for everything." She doesn't look at me and I don't look at her either. Her tone is tense. My heart starts pounding, I feel like I can hear it and I feel like I can feel the blood rushing through my veins. The silence is painful now. I wish the car was on so that the radio would keep playing, so that there would be at least some noise to drown out the sound of my own heart pumping.

"I just mean they can help." I break it. I don't know why. I never know how to properly apologize, my mother taught me how to apologize but it never stuck. She always told me to just say sorry when you mean it, when you hurt someone else. When it feels important to. I know that it's important to tell her I'm sorry, or that I shouldn't have said it, but I don't think it would make either of us actually feel any better.

"You didn't mean that. You know you didn't." She turns back to me and stares at me straight in the eyes. Her pupils are dilated. I didn't mean to say it, but I know I meant it. I know I meant it because it's the truth.

"I just hate the idea of you fucking—" I try to walk my statements back but she cuts me off.

“Stop it. Stop it. You don’t. I know we grew up differently, I know me having money and your family being not *as fortunate*— though you’re still fucking middle class— pisses you off. I know it. You can stop fucking pretending.” She doesn’t raise her voice. She’s poised. Composed.

“It doesn't piss me off, it pisses me off that you won’t admit it.” My voice raises, my blood is boiling, my cheeks red, I can never act the way she can when I’m angry. I get mad, I get heated, fired up.

“I just did.” She smirks.

“Oh fuck off.”

“It’s not something I have to admit to. It just is. I shouldn’t have to apologize for being born, for going to Princeton and making something of myself, of at least fucking trying to do something important with my life. I know you hate all my new friends and you think my new life is so fucking boring and lame or whatever but at least I’m *living* it. You just sit in your depressing room and judge people then go to fucking Stop and Shop and stock shelves. Sue me for fucking my boss, fucking sue me.” She knows what she’s doing. She knows she’s just pissing me off more and more so I can be the one to blow up and get mad. I can be the one to act out.

“You sound like a rich fucking asshole. You know that? Sorry I’m pissed off that you have a great job because your parents are rich and went to Princeton so *you* could go there. Sorry I’m pissed that your fucking up your great job by fucking your boss. I’m sorry that you really get under my skin when you can’t just admit that your life is better than mine.”

“You’re a child Claudia. You’re acting like a fucking child. You act like all of this shit is out of your control, but it’s not. You could’ve tried a little harder. You could’ve gotten a better job, taken more internship opportunities. There are kids from war torn countries that become rich doctors. You have to stop acting like a fucking child who isn’t getting their way.” I blush. I feel

tears well up in my eyes. I wipe my eyes and try to avoid eye contact with her. I know she's right. I know deep down that she's being honest with me, that she's probably just as mad at me as I am with her.

“Stop it. Stop crying.” Her voice is soothing, but I won't let it work. Something in me won't let it work. She places her hand on my shoulder and I shrug it off. I keep crying as a form of protest almost, or at least that's what I tell myself. I don't know if it really is. It probably isn't.

“Look, I'm sorry Claudia. I didn't mean for...” Her voice trails off and she looks at me and I fully begin to sob. I can't stop the tears from flowing from my eyes. She turns her entire body towards me. I can see her bra strap. Her golden heart necklace is tangled with her cross necklace she wears even though she's never believed in God. She keeps talking about how sorry she is, but I don't understand why she's apologizing or why I'm crying this much. She tells me that it'll be okay and that it's all unfair but that it's always been this way. We've never talked about it. We never bring it up. Money is too hard and awkward to talk about. It's shameful. It's taboo. She apologizes for being harsh, but says that I need to start thinking about getting another job if I'm so angry about not having a better one by now. She keeps talking and all I can think about is the way things used to be and the way we used to talk to each other. How we used to do everything together and how I would've been the first person to know about her boss and how I fucked it all up. Or we both did. Maybe it was time or maybe it was just us putting less effort into being good to each other. It is so hard to be good to each other.

“I'm sorry Veronica. I didn't mean any of it.” I sniffle and sound pathetic. I speak through whimpers and tell her she is my oldest and closest friend. She smiles and I think about what I mean by closest friend, how part of me means only friend but I'm too scared to say it.

“You did but it’s okay. I meant it too.” She laughs and I feel offended for a second. I laugh too. I wipe the tears from my face and feel the mascara that is dripping down and drying on my cheeks.

“No I really didn’t, I just think it’s dumb that your fucking your boss, it’s like the one thing you’re not supposed to do—”

“I know, you don’t think I know? I’ve wanted to tell you, I wanted to tell you the second it happened because I knew you wouldn’t judge me the same way my newer friends would. They’d probably stop being my friend all together, but *you* are too loyal. I’m sorry about everything”

“I’m sorry I was a bitch to your friends, and still am. I’m just...” The word jealous gets caught in my throat. I still can’t say it. She just nods her head and gives me an awkward but soothing hug.

“We need to tell each other the truth from now on, Claudia.” She looks at me dead in the eyes and grabs my face with her hands. I nod and stare at her.

“I’m not fucking around.” Her tone is stern.

“I’m not either.”

“Good.” Veronica releases my head from her grip. “I’ll stop fucking him if you get a new job.” She laughs, cruelly, and I do too.

“Stock up on car condoms.”

“Shut up.” Veronica rolls her eyes and buckles her seatbelt.

Veronica pulls out of the parking spot outside the brick house and starts driving again. I don’t know if we fixed anything, if anything truly has changed. I don’t know if we will start telling each other the truth, if we will try to make things the way they used to be, or if this is all a

lost cause. I don't know if she'll actually stop sleeping with him or if I'll get a real job. Someday I know we will. Someday I know we will look back on this conversation or this time in our lives and feel bad for the younger versions of ourselves for being so clueless and scared. Or maybe we won't remember it at all. Maybe we'll romanticize our twenties and we'll tell our daughters to never be like us, to never mess up the ways we did, never have sex with your boss or work at Stop and Shop. We'll get drinks and secretly yearn for the time when things were simpler though seemed so complicated. We'll laugh until our voices turn hoarse.

I ask if we're still going to the party even though we're headed towards Brookdale and the party is in Garfield. She shrugs and keeps driving.

"Do you feel like it?" She turns to me and doesn't look at the road. I shrug this time.

"I don't know."

## What We Meant

We fell asleep on the train, my head resting on his shoulder. I can feel his bones underneath my ear and think about the sounds his body makes without anyone noticing. The way his stomach digests his food, the sound of his heart pumping blood, his lungs expanding and contracting, the sound of his brain waves. I'm awake now but he's still sleeping, his breath deep and resonant. His breath is warm. His shoulder is soft yet boney. I fear moving my head will wake him, so I stay still. I hear the train against the tracks, the baby cooing behind us, her mother gently singing a nursery rhyme. I feel him wake, his head moving back up, his deep breath, him stretching. I act like I just woke up too. I look at him and smile, he kisses me on the cheek.

"Did you fall asleep too?" He smiles at me and I nod my head. He grabs my hand and holds it tight. Outside the train's window we see bare trees and a gray sky. Winter has fully settled in and we can feel the cold inside of our bones. January has a way of freezing you to your core. I think about how love songs tell me that love keeps you warm. I squeeze his hand.

"What stop are we getting off at?" I don't know why I ask, I already know this, but something urges me to.

"Poughkeepsie." He rolls his eyes romantically and I flash my teeth.

"Do you know who will be there?"

"Luca, Cormac, Poughkeepsie people." He gets more obviously annoyed so I kiss him on the cheek. He looks at me and kisses me on the mouth, hard and with passion. I know Poughkeepsie people include Christie, that Poughkeepsie people will include the people from his past. I try not to let it bother me, not let the fact that another girl he has slept with will be there. I try to ignore this feeling of impending jealousy. I'm with Tommy. Tommy likes me. I woke up in his bed this morning. We make out for a second and then he pulls away, probably ashamed by the

public display of affection. I rest my head on his shoulder again and feel his skull meet mine. My saliva tastes vaguely like his, sweet and rotted. I play with the bones in his fingers. I feel his jaw clench and release, his bad habit that'll probably lead to TMJ and decayed teeth when he's old and saggy. When his body gets puffy with fat from all the beer he drinks, when his eyes sink deeper from lack of sleep, when his skin is covered in patches from the sun. His black lungs slowly collapsing. I wonder if I'll still see him then or if I won't even be invited to his funeral. I wonder if I'll know the person he turns into. If the name Tommy Giandoro will no longer roll off my tongue with ease. If I'll struggle to remember his name when we run into each other on the street, wearing rings from other lovers, holding the hands of our own kids.

“Are we gonna stay the night at Cormac's?”

“I don't know, I'm probably going to stay there.”

“Can I stay there too?” My heart drops after realizing I'm an afterthought.

“I didn't ask, Soph. I'm not your dad.” He says this knowing my mother and I don't have a relationship with my father, which for some reason makes this comment cut deeper, makes me feel ever more belittled, even more othered.

“Going to this concert was your idea, you didn't think to ask if I could stay too?” I cross my arms and lean away from him, ensuring that no part of me is touching him or his body. That we're completely separated from each other.

“You need to think about these things Soph, you're a grown up.”

I look out the window. I see the houses, the trees, the graffiti, the garbage rush by. I think about what a huge mistake this all could be. I feel the regret build in my stomach. An almost nausea rushing to my throat.

I feel stupid for thinking he'd figure something out. It's the first time we've ever gone away together, although this isn't even going away, we're just going to Poughkeepsie. Cormac and those guys aren't even my friends, I just knew them when they were still in school. I just assumed we'd stay there together. Assumed that he wanted me to be integrated in his life more than I am now. I feel small in a bad way. Too young. He touches the back of my head and runs his hands through my hair. He smells vaguely of the cologne I watched him put on this morning as I laid on his mattress in the center of the room he rents. I was wrapped up in his white duvet, still coming out of my sleep.

"I'll get the train back to my house or stay at Eva's though I haven't talked to her in months." I grunt and feel ugly. I haven't really spoken to anyone besides Tommy and my parents in months, people have gotten away from me, or maybe I've hidden from them. I lost interest in talking to my friends or being around them since Tommy. All I wanted was to be around him or talk to him. They noticed and stopped talking to me too.

"We'll just figure it out." He whines. I still face the window, away from his body.

"Don't worry about me, Tommy."

"C'mon Soph. I'm sorry." He tries to shift my body for me, but I go boneless and refuse. I act like a toddler. "Look at me Sophia, please?" I comply and turn to him. He looks relieved that I've given up my act, that I'm acting my age again. That I'll be twenty again for him.

"I'm sorry Tommy."

"I'll talk to Cormac. I just get stressed about plans and stuff."

"Okay."

"It's almost our stop. You got your bag?" I nod and point to my booted feet where my green backpack rests. He smiles at me and I smile back. He ruffles my hair. Sometimes he likes

to act like our three year age difference is more like ten years. Like he is more established because he has a degree that I don't have yet. Because his birth year ends with a lower number than mine. Sometimes I wonder if he gets off on it, but I don't want to think too much about it. I fear if I do, I'll fall into such a deep state of degradation that he won't see me as a human being anymore.

I put my head back on his shoulder and I feel his cheek rest on my skull again. I put my hand on his thigh and squeeze and he laughs. The fact that he's ticklish is always surprising to me for some reason. I think it's because I want him to seem stronger than he is.

We hear the conductor say that we've arrived at Poughkeepsie. I follow Tommy out of the blue train car and onto the platform. He puts on his hood. He zips up his jacket. I hold my scarf closer around my neck. The cold air hits the back of my throat as I breathe in. He leans down and kisses me for a second then grabs my hand. His hand is dry and cold. The platform is empty except for ads for musicals that are playing on Broadway and reminders to throw out your trash and not to smoke. He pulls out a cigarette and lights it anyway, somehow still holding my hand. He takes long drags from his cigarette, then places it between my lips softly. I inhale and remove it from between my lips and blow the smoke into his mouth, laughing while doing it knowing how corny it all is. He laughs and takes the cigarette and smokes it while we walk towards Cormac's white car sitting in the lot waiting for us.

"Cormac!" Tommy releases me from his grip and gives Cormac a big one armed hug. Cormac is tall and goofy looking, but reassuringly handsome. He's wearing a jean jacket even though it's below freezing.

"Tommy, I'm so fucking happy you're coming to this shit." I stand a few feet away from their big hello, watching as if I'm not even a part of this group.

“You remember Sophia right?” Tommy and Cormac both turn to face me. Cormac gives me a big smile and holds out his gloved hand. I shake it softly. We’ve met briefly at birthday parties for Tommy and other parties in the area, but we never said more than two words to each other. Tommy throws his cigarette on the ground and doesn’t bother stomping it out. When boys get together it turns into a pissing contest. A primal race to the manliest most macho, strong, scary, tall, cool, smart boy. Or man rather.

“Hi Cormac.”

“Sophia.” Cormac gives me a small head nod. I haven’t seen Cormac in a year, not since he moved to Poughkeepsie. He used to come around to Tommy’s apartment more, hang out with the two of us, but we never really spoke. I sat on the couch and listened to the two of them, and watched them. I didn’t mind but now I feel awkward, like I should’ve said something to him back then to solidify my place in their lives. Tommy opens the passenger side door and gets in. I get in the back. Cormac gets in smoothly and puts the keys in the ignition. He drives out of the parking lot with ease. There’s random trash all over, and the car smells, but it’s warm. They talk about things I don’t understand. Music I’ve never heard of, people I’ll never know. I feel stupid and small for a second but then remember not to. I shouldn’t. They’re just boys. They’re just older. Tommy starts talking about something new he’s been writing, how his job is going. Cormac says how crazy everything is, how he misses Tommy, how it’s so great that he’s coming to this. I don’t know what Cormac means by crazy, nothing he’s saying is that out there or unusual. He probably just means it’s weird to officially be a grown up. Weird to not have to go to school or do homework, whatever. Maybe this is why I never really spoke to him, I didn’t understand him, didn’t have anything meaningful to contribute.

Tommy goes back to talking about his life, going into detail about the mundanity of it all. I don't say anything. I laugh when Tommy does, go quiet when Cormac is speaking. I look at my fingers and realize I've been picking at the skin around my nails. My thumb is bleeding. I suck on the side of it.

"How is school Soph?" My heart skips a beat as I hear Cormac say my name.

"I don't live on campus anymore so I don't really know how it is now."

"Tell Cormac about that guy you used to see."

"Can we not Tommy?"

"C'mon he was so funny."

"I don't want to talk about it Tommy. You're being mean." Tommy looks at Cormac.

"This guy Jason—"

"Tommy, please."

"He and Soph were seeing each other before we met, or before we *officially* met. He used to get her drunk and just would bring her to his room and talk about his father. They wouldn't even have sex sometimes. He'd use her as a therapist. Date rape but like trauma dumping I guess. It's so fucking weird. But I guess that's what being a freshman in college will do to you." I blush in the back seat, ripping deeper into the flesh of my thumbs, creating geysers of blood pooling out and gathering in-between my pointer and thumb.

"It honestly wasn't even that weird. Or I guess it was kind of weird. I don't know. I guess he needed someone to talk to just like I never knew what to say. I'd just be like drunk off my ass in his bed saying how sad it is that his dad was addicted to opioids." I sigh, regretting that I said anything. I shouldn't make fun of him, he didn't even do anything wrong.

“Jesus Christ. I don’t think I’ve ever done something like that.” Cormac lets out a big sigh and laughs at the same time. It sounds awkward and forced.

“I mean it’s not a big deal.” I try to walk what I said back, act like it’s nothing, like it means nothing at all.

“It’s still just fucking weird.” Tommy sounds condescending. He reaches his hand back for me to hold but I don’t touch him because my hand has dried blood and I hate that he brought Jason up.

“Bro and he was so fucked up looking. Literally meth head-esque, but I guess Soph likes guys a little fucked up. Daddy issues and all.” Tommy cranes his body to look at me. They both laugh at the joke. I look at my feet. He reaches out his hand again and I don’t take it.

“You’re being mean Tommy.” I feel the blood rush to my cheeks. I hate that I’m blushing. I hate that he brought up my dad. I hate Tommy for inviting me. I hate myself for accepting the invitation.

“C’mon Soph! I’m joking around.” He looks to Cormac for validation. Cormac keeps looking at the road, probably hoping to stay out of our awkward quasi-fight. Our bickering.

“Whatever. I guess I’m like the victim of some new college boy hell, a victim of boys who *love girls* with daddy issues.”

“No, it’s just funny. Sorry Soph.” Tommy turns back to me and forces a smile.

“Christie is gonna be there tonight by the way.” Cormac looks at Tommy. I can’t see what Tommy’s face is doing. He looks uncomfortable or worried or something. Concerned about something I can’t figure out.

“Oh really. Nice.” Tommy’s voice is suspiciously monotone.

“Does Christie have daddy issues too, Tommy?” I try to get back at him for being a dick tonight, but he doesn’t think it’s funny. He slumps deeper into the passenger seat, the car getting more tense and quiet. My heart sinks. I shouldn’t have come. I pick at my cuticles more. I start to bite the skin off, the taste of metallic blood floods my tongue.

Outside the window we pass Poughkeepsie and its grayness. The leafless trees and the gray clouds. We see a few old people trying to cross the street wearing ratty scarves and hats with holes in them. The sidewalks are filled with cracks and cigarette butts. It smells like upstate, clear and grassy, but feels like a rotten part of Manhattan.

“Okay, we’re here.” Cormac pulls into a gravel driveway in front of a yellow apartment building with wood siding. Although it’s probably cheap vinyl. It looks like it could be destroyed by a single hurricane. Cormac unlocks the doors. Tommy hops out quickly and stretches his legs immediately. I step out and feel the bitter air on my face again. I grab my backpack. Cormac and Tommy are speaking quietly to each other. Things I can’t make out. They’ve already started walking towards the stairs up to his apartment. I eventually catch up to them but they’ve stopped talking. Tommy turns around and looks at me for a moment, I mouth “what” and he just shakes his head.

“It’s a little messy. We haven’t cleaned it in a bit, my apologies.” Cormac’s tone is slightly sarcastic. He grabs his keys from his pocket. Tommy grabs my hand as we wait for Cormac to open the door.

When he does, we’re greeted with a fat orange cat who rubs her face against Cormac’s leg. I smile at the cat, almost expecting a response back. I wasn’t raised with animals so I never really know how to act around them. Tommy is still holding my hand, making it more awkward for us to walk in the door. I go in first still holding his hand. Christie is sitting on the couch and

Luca is sitting a few feet away from her. The house is disgusting. It smells like garbage and there are books and paper everywhere. It looks like my mother's house if my mother never threw away anything and she already barely throws away old receipts or bills.

"Soph!" Luca smiles and raises his hand and smiles at me. Christie stands up and walks over to me and Tommy and sticks out her hand for me to shake. I let go of Tommy to shake her hand. I recognize her from somewhere, probably some party I got too drunk at to remember anyone clearly or maybe just from around campus.

"I'm Christie! I'm assuming you're Sophia." Christie smiles at me, almost smugly, and I forcefully nod my head. She looks at Tommy and smiles.

"Yeah we've met—" I try to sound self assured. She ignores me.

"Hi Tommy." Her tone shifts when she addresses him. The way you address someone who has seen you naked. Formal and uncomfortable.

"Hey Chris." Tommy's voice is still monotone. He scratches his head and wipes his nose. He looks at me and raises his eyebrows. My blood drains from my face hearing him call her a nickname.

"You guys want something to drink?" Cormac calls us from the kitchen.

"Yeah, a beer?" Tommy doesn't yell but he speaks louder than he has to. The apartment isn't that big, the kitchen is only a few feet away. "You want something Soph?" I nod. Tommy walks into the kitchen leaving me alone with Christie and Luca. I feel like a little girl again, even though I'm only a few years younger. I feel like an infant. Like a little sister that their mother forced them to invite to hang out with. I feel so out of place it almost hurts. I want to lurch out of my body, die but only for a second. Skip this trip, fast forward to when I'm back home and don't have to worry about everything I say, every move I make.

“Sophia, you’re still in school right?” Christie smirks at me, only emphasizing our age gap. Making me seem younger than I am. I nod, only infantilizing myself further as I can’t even speak. I’m so little I haven’t even said my first words.

“She’s studying art history, Christie.” Luca speaks for me from the couch. Watching our conversation like it’s a sitcom.

“Oh very cool!” Christie looks at me with huge bug eyes, though I can’t tell if she’s being genuine or not. I feel like they’re babysitting me.

Tommy walks out from the kitchen two beer cans in hand. “I know you don’t like IPAs but the only non IPA they had was Bud Light so I figured this would be better.” Tommy hands me the IPA with an intricate logo on it.

“She doesn’t like IPAs! Blasphemous!” Christie laughs and walks away, back to the couch. I roll my eyes and open the can. I take a sip of the beer even though it tastes like bad breath. I know it will get me more tipsy than a normal beer.

“Thank you, Tommy.” I give his arm a squeeze even though I’m still pissed about the way he spoke to me in the car. We stay awkwardly standing too close to the door. I don’t know where to go, there’s nowhere for me to be, comfortably. My heart is racing so I take a sip of the beer.

“You guys want to sit? I know it’s kind of messy but you can move the shit off the dining table.” Cormac walks out from the kitchen. Tommy and I walk towards the table covered in papers and books and dirty dishes. It’s hardly different from my home even though I live with my mother, a fully grown adult. Established enough to do her own taxes and have a college aged child. I sit down on one of the mismatched wooden chairs with a heart carved out of the seat back.

“Is the show going to be busy or?” Tommy is trying his best to make small talk even though these are his best friends.

“I don’t know, probably marginally busier than usual because it’s been dead here for weeks.” Cormac takes a sip of his beer and so does Tommy, following along unconsciously. Trying to fit back into this group. Primal instincts kicking in. Tommy sinks back into his role. It makes me cringe but another part of me finds it sweet. I’m too afraid to look at Christie. Too afraid to see her watching Tommy. Or worse watching me. I look outside the window and see the sun start to set. My heart starts beating faster. My palms are sweaty. The concert doesn’t start till eight but I know Cormac and Luca will have to leave early because they always need to set up some amps or wires or whatever. I take another sip from my beer and look around the room at the strange posters on the wall for bands I’ve never heard of and horrible drawings I’m assuming one of them or their friends did. I see Christie set down her beer on the table in my peripheral vision. I try not to look at her in hopes that I’ll somehow be able to avoid any further conversation, even though my mom always told me to never make myself small. I never listened to her advice. I tuck my hair behind my ears and adjust my jeans so they are not riding up and exposing my pale calves. I need to shave my legs, I’m still so bad at it. My mom never taught me how to be a proper woman like that. I’m sure Christie’s legs are beautiful even in the winter, hairless and golden. She probably has no extra fat that she still claims is baby fat even though it’s just fat when you’re beyond the age of fifteen.

“Tommy, how is your job going?” Cormac walks over to the table and pulls out the only remaining chair across from Tommy and next to me. Christie goes and puts her hand on Cormac’s shoulder, he places his hand on hers. Tommy’s jaw clenches and he sighs.

“The same, you know.”

“Last time we talked you were at that bar right? Are you still there?” Tommy nods his head, obviously uncomfortable.

“Yeah, I mean it’s a pretty good gig and I like that it’s close to my parents.”

“I figured you’d want to get out of there, but I guess now that you’re seeing Soph it makes sense.” Christie chimes in.

“Well I mean, yeah.” Tommy finally looks up at the two of them.

No one says anything. The room is silent except for the cat scratching on the wall, ruining the white paint.

“How long has this been going on?” Tommy finally acknowledges Cormac and Christie.

“Oh, only a few months. Sorry man, I mean– we just figured–”

“What do you care?” Christie interjects, her tone sharp.

“Sheesh.” Luca lets out a small laugh.

“I mean it’s true.” Christie looks down at her beer on the table. Tommy still stares at the ground. I try to not look anywhere in particular. My eyes keep drifting towards the cat. I decide to watch it for a while. The cat walks towards the couch and jumps up.

“Well, I’m going to get another beer.” Cormac gets up, Luca follows him. Leaving Christie, Tommy, and me all in the living room.

“I didn’t know you were coming. I know we haven’t really talked much since like sophomore year, plus it’s not like I have to tell you these things.” Christie smiles, even though it’s obvious that she is faking it.

“It’s fine Christie, I’m just surprised that you’d go for someone I’m friends with is all.”

“Why’s that?” She feigns confusion, her expression excessive. I smirk, instinctively, how I used to when my mother and father would get into arguments. My mother knew during the last

year of their marriage that he was having an affair with someone he met on a work trip to Tallahassee who he was sending his paycheck to each week. They'd fight and she'd feign confusion too, ask what happened to the money, why we didn't have enough money for gas or groceries, ask him why he won't kiss her anymore, why he doesn't act like he loves her. She'd then trap him in a lie. She got the house and me in the end. She took that as a win.

"Because you told me you hated us all."

"No, I think I made it clear I just hated you. I didn't even tell anyone that it was about you" Christie sinks deeper into her posture, the chair creaking as she leans back, hunches her shoulders more. I wonder if she was skinnier in college, "I thought seeing you would be fine but- I don't know." She looks at me and I take it as a cue to leave. I get up to go towards the kitchen but he grabs my arm before I get up from the table. He shakes his head.

"People suspected."

"Well, whatever." She sighs.

"You can't just do that to someone."

"Does Soph know what you did? Did Cormac? Did Luca? Clearly nothing happened, everything was anonymous, I did that out of respect for you, but clearly I shouldn't have. Should I tell Sophia?" Christie's tone turns conniving and she turns to me.

He still doesn't meet her gaze. I decide to stand up and leave.

I lean into his ear and tell him I'm getting another beer. He grabs my arm and I look at him. I release my arm from his grip and walk towards the kitchen. Cormac gives me a small smile, but it feels pitiful. I hear Tommy sigh. The kitchen is grimey. The sink is filled with dishes caked in old food and oil. The counter's stick and peel is coming off and reveals a moldy wooden countertop, though it's hard to tell if it's even wood. It's sticky, everything is sticky. The trash is

overflowing. I can't even lean on the counter without probably staining the back of my shirt. There's random spills and stains everywhere. The boys don't seem to notice or care.

"People found out anyway, people knew—" Tommy looks down.

"I was hurt." Christie cuts him off. Her voice remains shrill, I can't help but imagine the worst case scenario. Tommy hurting Christie could mean anything, but I don't think he'd do anything bad. I've never seen him be violent or aggressive, he can be mean but usually will apologize. But I didn't know Tommy back then. This whole thing feels bizarre. I look over and see Cormac and Luca listening to the whole conversation too. Cormac rolling his eyes and sighing when Christie speaks. Luca fiddling with the tab on his can. I try to act unassuming, like I'm not scared of what any of this means.

"I'm sorry. I don't know how many times I can say it." Tommy's voice is grating.

"I think that Izzy got into my head, my old roommate, though I'm sure you remember. She told me that being drunk and hooking up is assault." My heart sinks. Christie's tone remains light hearted.

"We were both drunk, like every time." Tommy's voice goes back to nonchalant, calm, cool. Cormac gets more visibly agitated. He's biting his nails. He keeps fidgeting. I look at Luca watching him too. I don't know what to think. I don't know what to think about these things.

"You're a guy though, and like— whatever." Christie turns away, she shrinks into herself.

"I'm not saying you weren't feeling some type of way or upset, but you never did that to Ian who you also only hooked up with when drunk. I just— you can't just do that to someone."

"You can't just assault someone either can you." Christie's tone is stern. I peek my head out of the kitchen and see her put on her jacket to leave. Cormac walks out of the kitchen and I see him whisper something in Christie's ear. Luca mouths "sorry" to me but I'm not sure what

he's apologizing for. I smile and nod my head. I try not to cry or think about what all of this means.

"You told Cormac?" Tommy accuses Christie. I see Cormac blushing even from where I'm standing in the kitchen. Luca fiddles with the bottom of his shirt. I don't know what to do with my hands. I don't know what to do with anything.

"I mean man, I kind of already knew, I just knew the whole story and that there were a bunch of factors." Cormac's tone will annoy Tommy, I know it will.

"So you think I'm a rapist?" Tommy's voice is so condescending I almost want to go out there and slap him.

"Tommy chill, Christie isn't even saying that you are—" Cormac's voice is calming, like a mother calming a toddler. Tommy is acting like a fucking child right now.

"Fuck this." Tommy gets up and walks out of the apartment, slamming the door behind him. Luca sighs.

"I knew this whole fucking thing was a terrible idea. Cormac thought this would be fine, he's so dumb." Luca whispers this to me while opening another beer. "I'm really sorry you're caught up in all this shit.

"I didn't know about this, I knew they had hooked up but... like, *assault*?" I know Luca will tell me the truth, if there is one. I feel myself blush and my heart continues to race, it hasn't stopped since I stepped foot in the door. I feel more uncomfortable than I have in years. I can feel every muscle in my body tighten as the minutes go by.

"I mean," Luca sucks his teeth, "I don't know, they were both crazy drunk every time. It's complicated." He sighs and shrugs. My heart sinks. I don't know how I didn't know any of this, why no one told me. Why no one I knew told me about it or heard about it, or just didn't bother

to tell me. If people think I'm somehow being by seeing this guy or if they think I'm a rape apologist. I thought he'd say the right thing, say that I'm not an idiot for being with Tommy. Tell me that I'm fine, that nothing is wrong. I feel myself begin to cry. I look down at my beer and try to take a deep breath or pretend to yawn so it'll look normal for me to have some tears in my eyes. It doesn't work.

"Oh, Soph, it's fine." Luca passes me a paper towel and I wipe my eyes. I laugh, still trying to cover it all up.

"No it's just, I knew something bad happened, the way he talks about it, but this is just. It's confusing." I take a deep breath. Luca nods sympathetically. I could say more, but I won't. Luca was Tommy's friend first. He passes me another paper towel even though I don't really need it. I thank him.

The door opens and slams shut again. I hear Christie curse and Cormac say something I can't make out. I look out of the kitchen and see Tommy push past Cormac and walk towards Luca and me.

"Why are you crying?" He looks at me, his body is cold. Luca steps out of the kitchen. He wipes a tear from my eye and I almost flinch but don't.

"Nothing it's nothing." I pull away from him.

"He told you." I nod. Tommy sighs and his cheeks get red. I don't know what to say to Tommy. I don't know if I should tell him what he wants to hear or what I think. I don't know what I think. We hear the door slam shut, Christie left.

Cormac appears in the kitchen, making it feel more cramped, too tight. I lean against the sink. He stares at Tommy, dumbfounded.

“Look, uh, I’m sorry. She’s not really mad about any of it anymore y’know? I should’ve told you I guess, told you that I suspected it was about you, but I just– I just didn’t think it mattered because you owned up to your shit and she just needed to work through her own shit and it became what it was, ended up being a bit more public.”

“Why are you with her?” Tommy doesn’t acknowledge Cormac’s apology.

“Well, I mean, she’s grown up too. People change Tommy. I just didn’t think she’d say anything. She told me she was over it, but I don’t know. She can get caught up on things. But man, I don’t think anything less of you or whatever, I don’t think you’re a bad guy and I’ve talked to her about it and she said she wanted to apologize tonight, I’ll talk to her later man, but I love you.” Cormac’s apology seems genuine, but I know Tommy won’t take it. He sighs and says that he loves him too but he’s confused.

“We should go soon.” Luca butts in and walks over and Cormac nods in agreement. They both leave and go to the respective rooms. I’m glued to the sink and can’t even pretend to act like I know how to behave. I don’t know who to believe. I know Tommy. I have to remember that. I’ve spent countless days with him, and have had countless conversations with him. I feel Tommy touch my hand. It’s soft and kind. I look at him and see his doe eyes. I feel my face begin to frown at the sight of him. He looks pathetic, like a wounded animal.

“I’m sorry Soph.” Tommy’s eyes begin to well up with tears but I know they won’t descend down his cheeks. I nod and force a toothless smile.

“Hey, I’m sorry she was here today.” Luca starts his apology as he exits his room and continues it till he reaches Tommy, “But she did fuck you up pretty badly and you should come before her. It’s just hard. And I know I was too hard on her. I’ve just been thinking about it a lot and about how fucked up our friendship has been with all of it. But I know, and I should– I don’t

know. I should be there for you.” Tommy nods and fakes a smile. I chug the rest of my beer, which is quite a bit. I swallow a burp so I remain lady-like.

We all walk outside. The cool air hits my face, but I hardly feel it after drinking the two beers on basically an empty stomach. I reach for Tommy’s hand as we walk down the stairs, a bit awkwardly, growing more oblivious to the intensity of Tommy’s anger and sadness in regards to Christie, the betrayal he must feel from Cormac.

We load into Cormac’s car, Tommy and I riding in the backseat this time. The conversation remains sparse, I stare out the window and think about how Tommy must’ve been Freshman year to make Christie this mad. If he was treating her the way he treats me and if I should be upset too. If I’m settling the way my mother did with my father out of fear of ending up alone. I wish I had snuck a beer into my bag. All I have is vodka and that seems too intense for a moment like this. I want to get more drunk so I can stop reconsidering my feelings for Tommy. So I can get the whole story and actually remember it clearly tomorrow. The trees are all bare and the sun has set, but it hardly makes a difference. It’s perpetually gray in the winter and only marginally better in the summer. The sun beats down for a few weeks and warms all the unairconditioned houses and apartment complexes. The winter is harsh, but at least the heat works. I look out the window and see old people holding hands and walking their dogs. Part of me can’t believe we’re still going to this fucking concert, but I don’t know what else we would do. We’re all too afraid.

Cormac comes to a stop sign but plows through anyway, probably a little tipsy from the beer he’s been drinking since two o’clock. I think about how my mother said to never get into a car with a drunk boy and how I’m doing just that. Breaking all of her rules. Tommy says something under his breath. Cormac keeps driving somewhat recklessly, but everything is

starting to feel reckless. I want to ask if we can stop for something to eat, but I'm not brave enough.

Cormac continues to drive above the speed limit and Luca talks to no one in particular about some new movie he watched last weekend about vaping and the transformation of Big Tobacco.

"We're almost there." Cormac interrupts Luca's long rant about the vaping industry and the exploitation of teenagers, all things we all learned about in health class. Tommy says something I can't make out, and I assume no one else can either. Something about vaping, or Christie. I look through my bag and find a crushed up energy bar and begin to eat it.

"You guys like, uh, you guys like believe me right?" Tommy doesn't look up from his shoes as the words slowly trickle out of his mouth. He fidgets with his fingers, a nervous habit he's had since the day I met him.

"Yeah, man, you're our friend." Luca reassures Tommy.

"No but like, besides that, even if I wasn't. Like if you heard the story and it was about some other guy you didn't know, and you heard both sides, who would you believe?" I swallow the remains of my granola bar and ball up the wrapper and stuff it in my pocket. Tommy clears his throat. "Like you saw the post or whatever and didn't know me or her, would you be like 'oh that guys a fucking pig' or would you like... fuck I don't know. Would you believe me?"

Cormac drives slowly along a street lined with small houses with metal fences. Some have trash on the small lawns. Tommy doesn't say anything. Cormac doesn't say anything. I don't either. The car is silent. All we hear is muffled sounds from the street. Dogs barking. The sound of the tires on the cold road. Distant sirens and you can barely hear the sound of the train chugging along the tracks.

The street is only illuminated by the street lights, which really only shows the bare skinny trees and bleak houses that are along the street. The house Cormac pulls up to is blue, the one next to it white. There's a metal fence. There's only two cars in the driveway. Cormac parks in front of the house in an empty spot, which there are plenty of.

"I think it's because I know you I believe you, it's quite situational." Luca attempts to be the voice of reason. I don't say anything. Cormac and Luca both turn to look at Tommy.

"I don't know how to make you guys believe me." I can tell he's being honest which is the worst part. "I know you guys think shit like that is stupid too y'know. Like posting and doxxing people." Tommy's tone errs on the side of a whine but I try my best to remain sympathetic.

"I don't know what happened Tommy, but I think you've changed since you were eighteen, I think you might have to move on from it too." I don't know why I'm trying to reason with him too, why I'm telling him it's okay. Maybe it's because I used to watch my mother tell my father it was okay to treat her like shit, defend him in front of her parents before she got fed up and left.

"How can you move on from something like this?" Tommy's voice fully steps into a whine, Cormac and Luca seem to recognize this too.

"How does anyone move on from anything? You just do. You've let this inhibit every aspect of your life. You won't even move from Castle Point. You used to want to live in the city or up here, and you just seem so held back." Cormac turns paternal.

"Fuck you." Tommy opens his door and gets out of the car. He slams the door shut and starts walking away from the car, the party, from all of us. I feel like I should follow him, but I

don't know if I want to. I try to think of the appropriate thing to say, but can't think of anything. We sit in silence, uncomfortably. I turn and see Tommy.

"He's just on the corner, smoking." I tell Cormac and Luca this, expecting a laugh or a light reaction, but they give me neither. They continue to sit in silence. I let out an airy laugh, almost to signal to them that I think Tommy is acting strangely. They don't bite.

"You should go talk to him." Cormac's voice is suspiciously monotone. I want to tell them I don't want to, that I think Tommy has been acting like a child, but for some reason I comply. I step out of the car, leaving my bag and scarf on my seat. I don't want to be stuck out there with him for too long. Cormac turns on the car radio, I slam the door shut.

"Don't, Soph." Tommy yells from the corner but I don't listen. I keep walking towards him. He continues to smoke, as if it's the most therapeutic thing in the world. I'm craving one too but won't ask for one. He won't give me a whole one anyway.

"Tommy, what's going on? Can you just be normal for five—"

"Shut up Soph. You're so fucking annoying." He turns away from me. For some reason I'm not offended. I just feel exhausted by him.

"I don't even know why I agreed to come with you. I think I'm scared of who I am without you in my life— but— you just make everything so fucking unbearable. Someone made a post about you, big fucking whoop."

"You don't get it Sophia, you weren't there."

"Jesus Christ. Yeah, I wasn't. I didn't even know about it. That's how fucking irrelevant it is." I cross my arms and shift my weight between my legs, fidgeting with my fingers. My body feels anxious but my mind is completely clear. This must be how it feels to fight logically, to fight with confidence.

“It’s not like you’re even that relevant. If you ever left your fucking room you’d know.”

“Oh fuck you! As if you leave yours!” I raise my voice a little too much, a woman across the street walking her dog watches us intently.

“Great comeback, Soph.” He throws his cigarette on the ground and stomps it out.

“Why are you so concerned with whether or not people believe you and not what Christie feels?” I sigh and realize that’s what I’ve wanted to say since the beginning of this whole thing, since I found out about what happened.

“You think I’m a rapist Soph? Everytime we fuck do you think I raped you?”

“What the fuck is wrong with you Tommy? Why are you acting like this?”

“I’m just fucking mad. Everyone’s a fucking bitch. Cormac is dating the girl who tried to ruin my fucking life, Luca hangs out with her. Now you probably think I’m a fucking rapist. Everyone just wants me to end up fucking alone. I deserve it all too! That’s the worst part, I know I deserve it all.” Tommy pulls out another cigarette and lights it.

“I’m not saying you’re a rapist, no one is, no one that you care about is. You just, you’re being really shit right now. Cormac and Luca were trying to talk to you and you just ignored them. I try to talk to you and you storm off.”

“Whatever.” Tommy takes another drag from his cigarette. I feel my heart start to pound in my chest. I feel like I could slap him hard across his face and feel fine about it. I could beat him into a pulp and not care. I’d feel relieved. I wouldn’t have to deal with his bullshit, with his fear of being a bad person while simultaneously being a horrible person to the people trying to help him. I cross my arms and walk back towards the car. I slide back into the backseat.

“What happened?” Cormac asks as he turns around. I can feel my cheeks blushing and my eyes watering.

“He’s just being– y’know.”

“Yeah.” Cormac nods his head. I rub my hands together and feel the warmth. I rummage through my bag filled with dirty tissues and gum wrappers and fish out my water bottle filled with vodka and take a sip, unembarrassed. No one says anything as the smell of the alcohol wafts into the car, or as I cough after taking a shot. I put it back in my bag and zip it up as if nothing happened.

“Oh fuck.” Luca sinks down in the passenger seat.

“What–” I look out my window and see Christie walk into the house confidently. She curled her hair and did her makeup. She’s wearing a suede coat with fur lining, flared jeans, and cowboy boots. She looks gorgeous. I smile, knowing why she did it, understanding why she was so hurt by what Tommy did to her. It got too real for him. He regretted it. He upset her. She made a rash decision. Or maybe she did feel violated by him, maybe she thought about her feelings about the whole thing, about what Tommy presumably said about her. Maybe she was upset by the boys continuing to be *boys* and getting away with it because we’ve decided to let them. Because we all have decided we can let it get so bad that even when they have an affair with a woman in Tallahassee, even with a wife and kid at home, we still will stay with them. We’ll stay with them till we’re beaten to a pulp. Maybe we’ve let it get too far, claim we haven’t, that we can still come back from it but we can’t unless we hurt them back. Until we stoop to their level. Until we stop letting boys be boys and treat women like dogs.

“She looks good.” I break the silence in the car. She’s entered the house. Cormac and Luca look shocked that I said that.

“What?”

“I said she looks good, she looks pretty.” They both look at me with blank faces.

The other door opens. Tommy slides in. He smells like cigarettes. His brown hair is all in his eyes, his cheeks still gaunt. His fingers are stained from the tobacco. "I'm sorry." His apology is half-hearted, but it takes a lot for him to apologize, it always has. I chalked it up to shyness, or anxiety, but now I think he's a coward. He's afraid to be wrong, to be guilty of something.

"Nah— you're good man." Cormac's voice is still cautious.

"It's fine Tommy, but... I don't think you should go in." Luca is still looking out the window, as if he just saw a zombie or a bear.

"What happened?" Tommy sounds confused, but I'm sure he can guess what Cormac is talking about.

"Christie is in there Tommy." I butt in. The car goes quiet again. Tommy blushes.

"Oh." Tommy then goes quiet.

"We don't have to go, I mean we should go, but we don't have to." Luca now tries to reason with everyone. They all act like this is a big deal, as if this will all matter in five years time. As if the decision they make now will make any difference in our lives in the long run, not just the immediate future.

"We said we'd help set up and shit, it hasn't even started. Why is she already here?" Luca speaks to no one in particular, more likely he's just thinking out loud. I hate when people do that.

"To prove a point maybe? Prove that she's not scared of us? To be a bitch, probably. Make our lives hell on earth again." Tommy slumps back.

"Fuck off, I told her she could come early with me." Cormac's tone is stern, rough.

I want to say I think Tommy is thinking too deeply about it, putting too much thought behind someone's actions. That not everything has to do with pissing off Tommy. I don't know why my confidence keeps coming in waves. I wish I could just say what I wanted to say, instead

I dig my nail into my cuticle until I draw blood. I suck it up and taste the metallic liquid hit my tongue.

“Soph even said she looked good.” Cormac throws me under the bus.

“Oh yeah?” Tommy turns to me. I don’t know why Cormac is doing this to me, I don’t know why he’s calling me out. I shrug my shoulders. Tommy rolls his eyes.

“Cormac we need to go in though, we said we’d help.” Luca ignores the tension. Cormac nods. The two of them get out of the car after Cormac takes a big, long, dramatic breath and sighs it out.

“You don’t have to defend her just because she’s a girl.” Tommy accuses me.

“I’m not. I’m just pissed off with you.”

“Why?”

“Because this whole trip you’ve acted like a bitch.” I regret saying it immediately.

“Fuck Soph. I’m just— I just am, well. I’m just stressed out and I’m stressed about you and Christie and my friends. It’s just all too much for me.” I want to tell him that doesn’t make it okay to treat me this way but I decide to say nothing. It goes nowhere. We are holding onto something that doesn’t exist anymore. Holding onto a memory of the past, of what it used to feel like when we hung out. When we used to get excited to see each other. When we would fight and it would end with us fucking or doing something that wasn’t crying and screaming and abusing each other until the other crumbles underneath the sole of the others boot.

“Tommy, I’m gonna go.” I wrap my scarf around my neck and zip up my jacket again.

“Go inside?” I shake my head. He looks surprised. “Where? Where are you going to go?”

“Back home.” He spends the next few minutes pleading for me to stay, and I let him, for no reason other than the shot of vodka is starting to take full effect and I’m scared I’m going to

puke. He tells me that he's afraid of being alone, that he's scared that he won't ever meet someone like me again. He's scared that no one likes him anymore. That he was scared of being coming to this because he knew something fucked would happen. He tells me that I'm his only real friend. No one else loves him like I do. I nod my head and kiss him on the cheek. I didn't mean it as a goodbye or as an affirmation of my "love" for him. I just did it to do it. He holds my hand.

"I'm going home Tommy, we can talk some other time." I pull away from him. I don't feel bad but I don't feel good either. I just have to leave. He looks like he's going to cry so I open the car door before any real tears can come rushing from his eyes. The cool air hits my face. I don't turn back.