

Voices from the Abyss

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Light and Dark

My ever-evolving journey into Creative Writing might seem like an odd one, at least from an outside perspective. Creative Writing wasn't even something on my mind when I graduated high school in 2016. My primary goal then was to enroll in a school with an architecture program. That is what I believed I wanted to do. I thought it was a no-brainer for me because of all the introductory knowledge I had learned in high school. I imagined it would be cool to design my own house one day. I chose to attend a school in the city that had conditionally accepted me. It had an architecture program that I applied to but didn't get accepted into. It was an affordable option, and it gave me time to figure out if architecture was something I really wanted to do. I enjoyed the creative aspect of having to design something and the technical part of drawing it up on a computer. Someone I knew from my high school did get into the program and he told me how much he was struggling. He was up working late nights and even had to sleep in their building to make the deadlines. That's when I knew architecture was an all-consuming major and if you didn't absolutely love it, then it might not be for you.

I spent four semesters at that school. I was lost that entire time and had zero clue what I wanted to do with my life. The last two semesters are when things took a dangerous turn for my mental health. I stopped caring about everything. I didn't attend my classes and I lied about it to my parents. I lied that some of my classes ended early or were canceled for some stupid reason. Lying to my parents is not something I did carelessly. The few times that I have done it before that point were mainly harmless. Either to get out of football practice or to avoid staying after school with a teacher I didn't like. But that dark period of my life ripped me away from my values and from the things I used to enjoy. I shrugged off the consequences my absences would have on my

academics and my future. Playing video games provided a distraction until I eventually got bored. Music became my comfort during the days I'd spend staring at the ceiling or to quiet the voices that told me I didn't matter in this world. That my existence was pointless. That my loneliness would never go away. That nobody would even notice if I was gone. It was a time when the murky parts of me fought and won over what little light I had left.

Then after months of being in the dark, a spark flickered from the shadows, and it reminded me of what I still had left to fight for. I thought of my younger brother whom I still share a bedroom with ever since he stopped being a baby. It wiped away any notion of suicide from my mind since I couldn't bear to hurt my brother in that way and leave him with my grieving parents. Parents that have loved me from the start and wished me to be successful in whatever I decided to pursue. They have always been supportive and never forced a career upon me. They were the ones I was failing by not going to school and pursuing a profession that would pay them back for all they have sacrificed. They came to this country as Mexican immigrants and have struggled tirelessly to not only provide for our family but also their families back home. I was failing them as their son and as an older brother who was supposed to set an example to follow.

It wasn't until after my last semester at my first school that I finally decided to confess to them what was really happening. They admitted that they had a vague idea of what it was but were waiting for me to tell them officially. It was painful to admit my failure to them and to hear how helpless they felt that they didn't know how to help me. I complained that the constant commute to and from the city was a driving factor for my disillusionment of attending my classes. That it didn't feel worth it to keep going and feel like I learned nothing. That I felt lost and lonely among the crowd of students walking through the buildings. My dad considered finding a therapist that could help me express what I was feeling but I knew it would be costly. He kept me busy by

bringing me along to where he worked and helping him fix some water damage in apartment buildings in Mt. Vernon and New Rochelle. On the days I wasn't working with him, I was helping my mom clean apartments in the city.

I ended up taking a semester off and opted to transfer schools. I was looking for a fresh start and thought that a change in scenery would help. A community college closer to home is where I chose to go. My experience there was certainly better than at the other school. The classes were smaller, and the campus had a calmer ambience than the city. There was a history professor there that took me under his wing and mentored me on my options for a major. He suggested I take a creative writing class over a summer to see if I liked it. I clearly enjoyed it enough to apply to a school that had a creative writing program.

As I looked back on that dark period of my life, I began to think that the struggle between light and dark is something that most, if not all people deal with daily. Many of them are better at dealing with it than others. Some may even excel at hiding it. This is something that I like to implement in my characters as they grow onto the pages. Something else I took out of my experience is the perception of voices. Both internal and external. Voices can have a profound effect on how we view ourselves and others. Some of these voices can prove to be dangerous, while others can be inspiring. For my senior project I chose to write a collection of short stories written during my time at Purchase. These stories embody the struggle between light and dark and the voices that can often go unheard.

The first two stories go hand-in-hand. They revolve around two brothers named Marco and Rafael. The younger one, Rafael, makes a last-minute decision to invite his girlfriend, Chloe, to the prom. It proves to be a fatal decision. *The Choices We Make* is a piece about how Rafael is put into a scenario where he is forced to come to terms with that decision and how it affected others

like his best friends Dani and Aiden. *Brother Can You Fill the Void* shifts the perspective towards his older brother, Marco who experiences the aftermath of an incredible tragedy. Dani, Aiden, and Chloe make a reappearance and contribute to the grief Marco feels. These two pieces were heavily influenced by the epidemic of gun violence in American schools and my own relationship with my younger brother.

A Gathering is a piece that explores an alternate future where Trump gets reelected as President and makes English the official language in the United States. The ability to learn a second language becomes impossible. This story grows upon the fear children of undocumented parents like me had during his presidency. It explores the nature of being bilingual in a country that arrogantly believes it's monolingual. This was the first short story I had written at Purchase where I actively used Spanish to tell a story and depict dialogue.

Keep the Data Alive is an experimental piece where I tried to tell a narrative through the lens of AI. The concept of the story was influenced by films like *Her*, *Blade Runner 2049*, and *Ex Machina*. These three films depict a relationship with the main character and an AI that I found very intriguing. I take the opportunity to explore a dystopian world where a growing number of the young population are becoming reclusive. Technology has enabled them to get anything they would ever need with just a single tap. But what if a company created an AI to learn from their habits and create a mental profile to filter who was a contributor to society and who wasn't.

Migration is about a young boy who was born into a dark fantasy world divided into the north and south. His older sister left to study to become a healer, which in this world only women are allowed to do. After losing his mom, the boy travels across a desert and writes letters to his sister hoping to reunite with her. My decision to tell his story in this form was heavily influenced by *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky. The way his piece handles mature

themes through the observant eyes of a teenage boy was very appealing to me. The boy's journey across the desert is meant to reflect the journey many immigrants like my parents made to cross the border from Mexico.

The Angel on My Shoulder is a prologue to a novel I had begun writing from before I was accepted into the Creative Writing program at Purchase. Angels have always fascinated me ever since I was a child and forced to attend church school to have my first communion. My view on the existence and purpose of God is unconventional to say the least. What I found interesting about the angels is (apart from having wings) how they each served a different purpose. They either guided or protected humans while serving as soldiers of God. The novel centers around a teenage girl who loses her parents in an accident. While she's in the hospital she encounters a strange boy around her age who she at first believes is an imaginary friend that she created from her grief. The strange boy later reveals that he's her guardian in training. I've seen angels being portrayed in films and television like in *Legion*, *Constantine*, and *Lucifer*. Their relationship with humanity was either distant or compassionate, though I enjoyed how they attempted to create their own lore separate from any religious text.

Voices from the Abyss explores themes such as, death, family, identity, loneliness, survival, and immigration. The short stories in this collection offer a blend between speculative fiction and contemporary realism. Many of them highlight Latin American experiences, while another imagines a future where the dependency on technology has driven people to become increasingly isolated. Within these pages, you'll encounter a teenage boy learning to accept his tragic death, a college student processing his grief by talking to his brother's dead girlfriend, and a bilingual attempting to come to terms with his identity in an oppressive monolingual reality. This collection embodies the eternal struggle between light and dark through voices that are often overlooked.

The Choices We Make

“If you could redo it, would you change it?” The question orbited my head like the moon does with the earth. It wasn’t a voice I recognized, and it seemed to echo as it moved. The space around me was pitch black, though my eyes were open. My body felt weightless, but I wasn’t falling. I knew I could move my arms and legs despite not being able to see them. Aside from the voice, my surroundings were noiseless. I couldn’t even hear myself breathe. For a moment I doubted if I even was breathing. Was I dead? Is this what death is like?

“If you could redo it, would you change it?”

This time the question startled me. It was a whisper and it sounded like it was up close to my face. I waved a hand in front of me but felt nothing. Not a face or a wall. I wondered if I could be dreaming. It’s very common in dreams to not know how you got to the start of a dream. If this was a dream, it definitely wasn’t a good one. Maybe the voice was trying to wake me up.

“If you could redo it, would you change it?”

The question came from behind and it had morphed into a distinctive female voice. One that seemed familiar but couldn’t quite put a face to it. Who was it? Who did I know that had asked me this question before? What did they want me to change?

“Would you change it?”

The voice seemed to bounce almost infinitely like an echo down a dark tunnel. Then there was silence.

“Change what?” I asked.

In that moment, I saw a tiny light flash in the far distance. A few seconds later it flashed again and then again. It was getting bigger, but I couldn't tell if it was getting closer. By the seventh flash it became clear that I was the one getting closer when I felt a sudden jolt and pull towards the light. It started flashing more intensely that it became blinding. Then everything went white, and I closed my eyes.

When I opened them, I was sitting on a playground swing facing a chain link fence that overlooked a grass field. There were several tall apartment buildings that loomed over the field like watchful parents. I recognized this place; it was a spot where my friends and I usually hung out after school. We all lived relatively close by, so it was okay if we stayed out a little late. The sun had already set but there was still bit of orange melting into the horizon like a watercolor painting. I found it fascinating how people could replicate scenes like that on a piece of canvas. The amount of talent that I would need to even come close to imitating the real thing seemed unreachable. I used to think I was good at drawing, that is until I saw what others were capable of on Instagram. It basically dwarfed what I could do with a paper and pencil. I've found that color really makes a difference in making something look beautiful.

I turned to my right and saw Chloe's long blonde hair as it gently swayed with every swing. A few strands brushed past her eyes, and she tucked some of it behind her ear. The fading light helped create small shadows around her eyes, her nose, her lips, and down the side of her neck. It was like something straight out of a painting. Chloe was clearly beautiful but there was a time before I got to know her when she hid behind baggy clothes and a facemask. After the pandemic, it became quite normal to wear one around school. She stopped wearing the facemask when I introduced her to my friends, which was a good thing since it meant I could see her smile again.

The first time I saw it was accidental. We were walking around the track at our school for gym class when she pulled her mask down to get a drink of water. I must have said something funny because the next thing I knew she had spit out the water and was laughing. She quickly covered her mouth with her hand but not before I caught a glimpse of her braces. They didn't take anything away from her beauty as she swung gracefully beside me. It then I saw a stream of blood running down the side of her temple. I squinted my eyes and blinked a few times, but it was gone. No more blood. That wasn't supposed be part of the memory. I must have still been staring when Chloe and I locked eyes.

“What?” she asked.

“Nothing.” I said as I faced forward. “It’s just that your very pretty.”

I glanced back to notice her pale cheeks were beginning to blush, and the corner of her mouth was slightly raised.

“Are you two lovebirds going to go at it again?”

I turned to the swing on my left and glared at Dani. I’ve known her since the sixth grade and she’s the closest thing I have to a sister. It wasn’t surprising when she asked me to be her *chambelan* for her *quinceañera*, since it’s usually something only relatives and close friends are asked to do. What was surprising was that she even wanted to have a *quince* in the first place. It didn’t really seem her style. Dani despises wearing anything girly. I’ve never seen her wear a dress until the day of her *quince* when we gathered for the church ceremony. It was one of those big traditional *quinceañera* dresses that may look pretty but are probably frustrating to wear. I could tell from her face that she hated every minute she was in that blue dress. I still gave her props for being able to smile for the pictures despite her discomfort. Dani only agreed to it to honor tradition and because she wanted to do it for her mom. Doctors had recently found a benign tumor in one

of her mom's breasts, which caught Dani her off guard. She told me how she was scared her mom wouldn't get to see her celebrate her fifteenth birthday. At least for the party she was allowed to change into a gothic tuxedo dress that suited her far better.

Dani was bullied a lot by the other girls for dressing and behaving differently. I wasn't okay with that, and I made it my mission to back her up like my older brother, Marco, did with me. Not that she needed it. She was quite able to handle her bullies very well on her own. Honestly, it was almost too well. She once got into a fight in the lunchroom that I had to break them up, which is actually how we first met. I was standing in line to get my lunch when I heard a girl screaming by the entrance of the cafeteria. Dani had just punched one of three girls to the ground. The other two were starting to gang up on her when a nearby boy shouted, "GIRL FIGHT." A crowd quickly formed around them, phones in hand, cameras pointed at the violence, urging them on, and doing nothing to stop it.

My brother and I once heard a ridiculous rule among guys that one should never break up a girl fight. Something about the sake of entertainment. When I saw Dani fighting tooth and nail with those three girls, there was nothing entertaining about it. Blood was gushing from their noses, hairs were being pulled from their heads, and their shrieks were filled with anguish and rage. Especially from Dani. It felt like I was the only sane one there for wanting to break them apart. It wasn't even close to a fair fight and yet Dani was still barely holding her own. I ignored the booing when I tried to pull the girls off Dani who clung onto her like leeches. Once I got them off, I quickly pulled Dani away from the crowd before the school security arrived. She was visibly stumbling as I guided her to the girl's bathroom so that she could clean herself up. I waited outside and when she came out, we both sat on the floor in silence. Security eventually found us, and I

immediately explained how Dani was only defending herself from bullies. She gave me a small nod before they took her away.

“Adrian and I could go if you two want some alone time,” Dani added.

“What’s wrong with me giving her a compliment?”

“I don’t have a problem with the compliment other than it was corny. It’s what comes after the compliment that bothers us. Right, Adrian?”

We both looked towards the far end of the swing set where Adrian was slowly rocking himself back and forth. He was dressed as if he was going to a funeral. Black hoodie and dark colored jeans, which is not what I remember him wearing on that day. His entire figure had a blurry quality and seemed out of place somehow.

Adrian was staring at some dead leaves on the ground and seemed unaware of his surroundings. He was always spending too much time in his own head instead of the present. I would often tease about it and remind that life might pass him by if he never stopped to take in the moment. It was something I passed down from Marco. He started preaching it to me once he got into college.

“Adrian!” Dani yelled.

It sounded like a cry for help, though I couldn’t understand why. Adrian didn’t react. I was starting to get worried that this wasn’t just a memory.

“Hey, Adrian.”

He turned slowly at the sound of my voice. His expression looked somber as if he saw something terrible that was haunting him. His eyes had no life in them. It was hard to even recognize him.

“Why did you go?” he asked. His voice sounded muffled and distant.

“What do you mean?” – I stood up from the swing – “I’m right here.”

“No, you’re not.” Both Dani and Adrian said it in unison. No longer muffled. Sharing the same look on their faces. Something was clearly bothering them. What little sunlight was left disappeared in an instant. It was nearly pitch black until the moonlight shone down on the four of us like a stage light. This was clearly not a memory.

I glanced at Chloe, still sitting on the swing and with a corner of her mouth raised. Whatever was happening to Dani and Adrian wasn’t affecting her. “This needs to happen,” Chloe said softly.

“What does? – I backed away from the swing set and nearly hit the fence – “Could one of you explain to me what the hell is happening?”

Dani and Adrian turned to each other and then back at me.

“You made a choice,” said Adrian.

“And that choice ended up killing you,” added Dani.

“Wait, you’re saying I’m dead?”

They both nodded.

“I can’t be dead. This is all some sort of fucked up dream that I can’t wake from.”

“You’re not dreaming,” said Chloe as she stood from her swing. “This is real.”

If I really was dead, then was this really it? There was still so much I didn’t get to do. Places I didn’t get to see and things I didn’t get to say. Though apparently that was all over. It all didn’t matter anymore. Being dead would explain the flashing white light. But why would it send me to this memory jumbled nightmare.

“It was all because of her,” Dani pointed a finger at Chloe. “You wouldn’t have gone if it wasn’t for her. But you just had to fall in love with her.”

“Freshman year the three of us made a pact that we wouldn’t go,” said Adrian. “We were supposed to skip it and hangout here.”

“Skip what?” I asked.

But then I remembered. It was something I had chosen to do last minute. I glanced at Chloe who had her arms crossed with her head turned down. Her hair was covering most of her face, but she combed it over with her hand and looked up. There were tears visibly gathering in her eyes.

“It was prom, wasn’t it?” – I shook my head in frustration – “Did I really die going to prom?”

“It wasn’t on the way over,” said Adrian. “It was at the prom.”

“How come you both know these things when I can’t seem to remember them?” – I gesture at the space around – “If I’m dead, why am I even here talking about this?”

“Your mind is choosing to forget what happened,” said Dani. “We’re just projections that are trying to help you make sense of it. Chloe is real though. You were together when it all happened.”

“When what happened?” I asked stepping closer to Dani. “How did I die?”

I felt a cold hand on my shoulder and looked over to see it belonged to Chloe. She was wearing a green long sleeved prom dress that was drenched in red stains. Her torso was covered in blotches of dark crimson that seemed to be growing and getting darker. As I tried to step away, Chloe grasped the back of my neck with both hands and held me close.

“What happe—”

“Shhh, we don’t have to talk about it right now.” – Chloe leaned her head on my chest – “Just hold me.”

“You do have to talk about it!” Dani yelled as she stood beside us. “He needs to remember.”

I looked around and the swing set was gone. The moonlight was starting to dim and the air around me was getting noticeably colder. It felt like the darkness was closing in fast that it became suffocating. There was a deep rumbling that resembled thunder coming from the space below me. It sounded muffled and I could feel it pounding my whole body in bursts.

BOOM...BOOM...BOOM.

“Hey, Rafa.”

I looked over at Aiden standing a couple of feet behind Dani. He was gradually getting swallowed by the dark abyss surrounding the fading moonlight.

“You should have stayed with us,” he said. “Now you won’t get to say goodbye.”

In an instant, Aiden was gone. That just left the three of us now. I wrapped my arms around Chloe’s body, and it felt like I was hugging snow that was oozing red. Whatever happened to us didn’t matter anymore.

“Rafa needs to know Chloe,” Dani said softly. “He can’t move on if he doesn’t.”

“It won’t help,” Chloe replied. “It’ll be too painful for him to remember.”

“I don’t need to—”

“Yes, you do,” Dani interrupted. “You’ll both be stuck here if you—”

Her last word hanged in the air for bit until there was nothing else but silence. I kept hanging onto Chloe. Her blonde hair began to emit a faint glow that became the only light source in the area. The color was gone. Everything was in black and white. She lifted her head from my chest and stared into me. Tears were running down her face.

“Why did you ask me out to prom?”

Her question took me off guard.

“What do you mean? You knew that I liked you and then you told me how you wished you could go but you didn’t want to go alone.”

“But you and your friends had a pact. Then I came along and—”

“It was a stupid pact. We were younger then and none of us thought that it was worth it. But then I met you and I didn’t want you to regret not going.”

“Do you regret going now?” She paused. “Knowing that we would both die.”

“No, I don’t regret it. I wanted to be with you and prom was only going to happen once. I know we were both enjoying it before it happened. What I regret is not telling my brother about you sooner. I shouldn’t have waited until graduation for you two to meet. I wished I could have at least said goodbye to him.”

“But you did.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You called him from the bathroom stall. We were hiding together, and it was right before, well you know...”

“I remember.”

I called Marco shortly before I died. I told him that I loved him, and I that I should have said it more often. I also told him to tell mom and dad that I loved them before I got cut off.

“But what if he couldn’t hear me. He might have still been in class before—”

“Don’t worry, Rafa.” Chloe started to caress the side of my face. “I promise I’ll sure he gets the message. It’s time for you to go.”

I looked down at my body and it was becoming transparent. I was slowly fading away. I never believed in the afterlife or in heaven and hell. When people died, I just thought that was it

like a movie fading to black with no credits. But now that I was dead, I was honestly a little curious if there was anything more.

“But if you’re not coming with me, how will you find him?” I asked Chloe. “He won’t even recognize you.”

“I’m sure I’ll find a way to convince him.”

As she said that, there was a faint noise coming from a distance. It almost sounded like music, and I could swear it was vaguely familiar. Once I was able to make out the words, I knew exactly what song it was. I remember jokingly telling Marco that I wanted him to play it at my funeral.

“Listen, Rafa. It’s your song. Someone is playing your song.”

“I think it’s my brother.”

“Then that’s how I’ll find him. I can follow the music.”

My vision was becoming blurry, and the edges were steadily turning darker. This was it.

“I love you, Chloe.”

“I love you too, Rafa.” She blows me a kiss. “Goodbye, I’ll see you soon.”

When she turns to walk away, it all fades to black.

Brother Can You Fill the Void

Funerals were never really my thing. That may sound stupid since I don't think they're anyone's thing. Who would enjoy sitting in a room full of people who were mourning and crying for someone who was dead? Someone who wouldn't wake up tomorrow and walk among the living again. Someone that had family and friends they were close with that now had to accept the fact they were gone. Never getting the chance to hear their laugh again or feel their reassuring touch on the shoulder. The funerals from before were always for people I barely knew. Distant relatives who I was never close with or a friend of the family that was basically a stranger. But this funeral was different.

It was for someone who I was bonded to since birth. I shared a bedroom with him for most of my life and I'm only twenty-one. It wasn't just a bedroom though. It was our own little world away from the eyes of others. Whenever we played with our toys, we made stories that were inspired by our favorite movies. We were the co-creators of our fantasies. Eventually we grew too old for toys, but we replaced them with video games. It opened a whole new world of competition and cooperation that only strengthened our bond. We spent countless hours fighting, shooting, solving, strategizing, and discovering our way through games. But that's over now. My brother and I will never get the chance to play one more game. His name was Rafael, and he was only seventeen years old.

The subject of burials had come up when we were making *tamales* the day before I left for college. It was then when Mom told us how she wanted to be buried back in her hometown in Mexico next to her father. Dad wanted my brother and I to spread his ashes at the summit of Mt. Everest in case he never got the chance to cross it off his bucket list, though I guess it's just going to be me now. Rafa didn't want our family to spend so much money on burial costs like embalming or the type of coffin. He was always the practical type. My brother assumed cremation would be the cheaper option and he was right.

Neither one of us were as religious as our parents but we still respected their beliefs. We went to church on Sundays when we needed to for our communion and confirmation. But aside from that, we just didn't see the point. If God exists and if He's supposed to be everywhere all at once, then why do we need to go to church to be closer to Him? If churches and cathedrals are really supposed to be His house, then He owns way too much real estate for someone we can't see or hear.

That's why I didn't want to hold his funeral in a church, it's not what Rafa would have wanted. Instead, I arranged for a small gathering of close family and chose a spot that was outdoors. It was a rock outcropping on a hill that overlooked a park in the Bronx. We used to come to that park on Sundays to watch Dad play *fútbol* or at least Mom did. Rafa and I were still small and not really paying attention since we both thought the sport was boring. Though I wonder how much of it was just him agreeing with me simply because I was his older brother. We did eventually get into European football but by then Dad had already stopped playing. My family had spent a Father's Day at that same rock outcropping to watch the sunrise together. It was cold and cloudy, so it really wasn't much of a sunrise, but we still enjoyed it. I remember we drank *arroz con leche* and ate donuts for breakfast. It was one of the best mornings we had ever spent together.

When I told my parents about my decision for the location of the funeral they weren't opposed to it. It was clear from Mom's swollen red eyes and Dad's disheveled hair that the funeral wasn't something they wanted to worry about. When the day arrived, the sun was at our backs, and it was quiet enough that I could hear the leaves whispering with the warm breeze. I stood behind my parents and gently grasped their shoulders while they held his ashes. They struggled to say words through tears and uncontrollable breaths, but I knew what they wanted to say. Losing a child is every parent's worst nightmare. Losing a brother is one thing, but to lose someone you gave life to surely must be far more painful. I needed to be strong for them.

After my parents left, I decided to stay behind for a while. I took my phone out and played "You'll Never Walk Alone." It was the anthem for Liverpool FC, my brother's favorite English football team. It was an old song, but he would always sing it in the shower or before he watched the games. Surprisingly, the song was also very fitting for a somber occasion.

"This one is for you *hermano*."

I mouthed the words of the lyrics and imagined Rafa singing along at the top of his lungs. When I heard Dani and Adrian walk up beside me, I lowered the volume. They were two of Rafa's closest friends and as far as I knew, his only friends.

"He really loved that song," said Dani. "It was kind of annoying how much he sang it."

I nodded.

"You picked a good spot for him. I'm sure he would prefer it over our hangout," she added. "Definitely better scenery at least."

"I didn't think he would want his ashes to be at a playground. You know...where children are constantly running around and putting things in their mouths that they shouldn't."

“Yeah, you’re probably right.” She wiped at her eyes when I turned to give her a reassuring smile.

“I just don’t get it,” Adrian blurted out. “Why did he have to go?” He pursed his lips trying to restrain himself. There was a hint of anger in his tone, which was louder than his usual soft-spoken manner.

“Not here Adrian,” said Dani.

I had a suspicion as to why Adrian was so angry and what he was referring to. I asked myself the same thing once I heard what had happened to Rafa. I almost couldn’t believe it at first. I was among countless others who wouldn’t expect a night of celebration to turn into a massacre. It quickly became a national tragedy that ruled the headlines for a couple of days. Then the world returned to “normal” in search for the next headline and seemingly forgetting to answer why it keeps happening.

It was easy to blame the shooter. It was his finger that pulled the trigger. He was the reason why Rafa was gone. Why there would always be an empty chair at family dinners and the feeling of something missing at birthdays, holidays, and Liverpool games. Why my messages will go unread and game invites go unanswered.

But still, why did he have to go?

“I told him not to go to prom. But he just couldn’t listen,” said Adrian. His voice was starting to tremble as a tear ran down his face. Adrian didn’t wipe it away. “He wasn’t supposed to go. Why-why couldn’t he just listen to me for once?”

I put an arm over his shoulder and pulled him close. He didn’t resist.

“It’s okay,” I told him.

His chest had already given into a sob that quickly became infectious. The knot in my throat that had slowly formed since the start of the funeral had finally conjured the tears that are typically absent in the presence of others. I just didn't care anymore. My parents weren't here, and Adrian was sharing a moment of vulnerability that I felt needed to be reciprocated. I joined my free hand with Dani's. The three of us stood there and began gently swaying side to side to the rhythm of the song that quietly played in the background.

When we started heading towards the trees to make our way down, I caught a glimpse of a girl who was standing by the tree line and off to the side. It was hard to tell from a distance, but she looked to be around Rafa's age, which made me wonder if she was from his school. She had a black sundress on, and her blonde hair was combed over to one side. It almost seemed to be translucent as it flowed with the soft breeze. I must have been tranced by her because I lost my footing and nearly slipped before I regained myself. When I looked up again, she was gone. Dani asked if I was okay, and I assured her I was. I rubbed my eyes with my fingers to make sure I wasn't seeing things. I hardly got any sleep the night before.

Her black sundress reminded me of what someone wore at the memorial the high school held for the victims. That was when it became clear to everybody that most of the senior class would not be walking the aisle at graduation. Dani and Adrian were among the few of those who would, but I doubt they think it's something to be thankful for. When I finally absorbed what had happened, I assumed Dani and Adrian had been with Rafa and were among the dead. I was relieved when I heard that they were still alive, and it was because they weren't at the prom. That was when I started to wonder about who my brother took to the prom. I knew he didn't go alone. We both hate going to parties alone. It was something that I didn't want to bother my parents with. Though

I thought that Dani and Adrian would probably know more since they were close enough to Rafa to be almost like siblings.

“There’s something I need to ask you both.” I exhaled slowly. “It’s about Rafa.”

They both stopped walking and turned.

“What is it?” Dani asked.

“That Friday night of prom, Rafa called me...when the shooting had started.”

There was a brief silence that lingered among the leaves.

“What did he say?” Adrian asked.

“He was whispering so I couldn’t hear much of it. I had to step out of the classroom and by then I only caught the sound of him trying to quiet someone he was with. Then you know...I heard the gunshots.” I swiped my nose with the back of my hand when I asked, “Who did Rafa take to the prom?”

The two of them gave each other a look. Like they knew exactly who I was asking about but were reluctant to say anything.

“Who was it?”

“It was a girl named Chloe,” said Adrian. “He’d met her at the start of the year, and they only recently started going out.”

“Why didn’t he tell me about her before?”

“He said it would feel wrong if he told you that he finally had a girlfriend,” Dani replied. “Especially after you had broken up with yours.”

“Rafa really said that?”

“He knew you were struggling with it,” Dani added. “He was even asking us for advice on how to help you.”

I wasn't sure if I should've felt offended or betrayed. Maybe I just needed to be grateful that my little brother was worried about me. Worried enough that he didn't want to cause me any more unnecessary pain. I'd like to think that I would have been happy for him if he had told me about Chloe, but I honestly don't know if I would have. I was in a pretty dark place after the breakup. Happiness didn't come easy for me. I worried about him too. He had mentioned before how he had trouble being confident about his art. I couldn't relate but I wished I could have.

When I got home, my parents were in their bedroom with the door slightly open. They held each other as they laid on their bed. I could hear that they were crying. There were countless pictures of my brother in the living room and the hallway, so I kept walking until I reached Rafa's room. My hand hesitated at the doorknob.

When I opened it, my nose was instantly hit with the perfect musky blend of worn clothes and cologne that I knew could only belong to Rafa. The bunk beds had been replaced with a single twin bed that had the Liverpool FC logo printed on it. It was up against the far wall and perpendicular to his desk that faced the outside windows. The desk used to be mine, but I let him have it since I didn't really feel like bringing it to my dorm. There were several new paintings and drawings hanging on the walls like a one room gallery. Most of them were landscapes but I noticed a few by his bed that were portraits of a girl.

Chloe, I assumed.

I walked up them to get closer look. They were really good. There was seriously no reason for Rafa to doubt his talent. Even the rough sketches were good. He really put a ton of emphasis on her hair and her smile. Rafa made her look beautiful which I don't think was too far off from the reality.

“How do I look?”

The question startled me, and I turned around to notice a familiar figure leaning on the doorway. It was the same girl from the funeral, from the portraits. How was she here?

“Sorry if I interrupted something,” she said. “I’m just here to make sure you’re okay.”

She swung her arms very innocently as she walked inside like when child walks into a room, they know they’re not supposed to be in.

“You’re Chloe, aren’t you?”

“That’s me. Nice to meet you, Marco.”

“What are you doing here?” I asked. “I thought you were—”

“Dead. Yeah, I am.”

Chloe continued walking around the room and then sat at the edge of Rafa’s bed. She didn’t leave an indent.

“Come sit,” she said calmly. “We need to talk.”

It was the start of finals week and Chloe’s ghost/hallucination kept lingering nearby. She just wouldn’t go away and it was starting to get annoying. She kept saying we needed to talk but I was too busy catching up on what I had missed the week I was gone.

I glanced at my watch and quickly rushed through what used to be my morning routine. I out of my dorm building and headed towards the humanities building. My school was the kind of campus where everyone was always cheery and traveling in packs. The only exceptions were the couples who I’d often catch walking around and flaunting how much they loved each other with their kissing and handholding. It was disgusting.

As I walked, I could feel their eyes staring at me like spotlights on a dark stage. Their whispers were barely audible. Some took out their phones, probably to take pictures. Why? I had no idea. There was nothing about my appearance that was worthy of a picture. I was just your average college student trying to get to class. At least there were those who were kind enough to step out of my way. Maybe my face scared them. I was not in the mood for conversation.

“Don’t mind them,” said Chloe. “Just get where you need to go, and you’ll be fine.”

“What do you think I’m trying to do,” I whispered.

I opened the door to the lecture hall, and it was already half full. It was the same lecture hall where I got the call from my brother. Just thinking about it made me feel uneasy and I get the urge to run. But I don’t. I needed to be here. There was no point in delaying it. I tend to sit at the back for most of my classes. Less glares in my direction and with this lecture hall, it was also closest to an exit. I liked being the first to leave.

As I took my seat, I noticed Chloe sitting in the one next to me.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“I’m keeping you company.” She glanced around. “Nobody will even notice.”

“I will notice.”

A girl in front of me turned her head. Then turned around and whispered something to the friend next to her.

“I don’t want you to be alone. Not right now,” said Chloe.

“Fine. But don’t talk. I need to focus on the test.”

She nodded her head. Traced a finger across her closed lips and marked an “X” on her heart.

One hour in and I've already dozed off five times. My pen lay motionless on the table next to the mostly blank test paper. My leg has been shaking since I sat down. I'm sometimes even forgetting to breathe. I put two fingers on my wrist while staring at my watch and tried to count the beats for thirty seconds. It didn't matter what the number was. I could feel my heart pounding out of my chest. I needed to leave this hall.

From the corner of my eye, I noticed Chloe leaning into my ear.

"I'm sorry that I'm breaking my promise," she whispered. "But you have to get out of here. We can talk without needing to make scene. Just pretend you have an important phone call and go outside."

I didn't put up a fight. I quickly pulled my phone and put it up against my ear as I left the hall. The professor didn't even care. When I barged out of the building, I looked for the nearest bench. Luckily there was one right in front of the entrance. Once I sat down, I realized it was getting difficult to control my breathing. A couple holding hands walked by and gave me a strange look.

"Just ignore them," Chloe said as she sat beside me on the bench. "Focus on me and this will soon pass. Tell me about the last phone call with your brother."

"Why do you keep bringing that up?"

"Trust me, it will help."

I inhaled but was starting to tremble. I could feel the tears gathering in my eyes and a knot was beginning to form in my throat.

"I took too long to step out of the hall when he called. When other students were all getting loud notifications is when I started to worry. Rafa's phone must have been up against his chest

because I started hearing his heartbeat echo through the microphone. When I heard his voice, I couldn't make out what he—"

My throat felt like it was sealed shut. Tears were beginning to stream down my eyes.

"He tells you that he loves you and that he wished he said it more often," she said softly.

I was wiping away some of the tears when I started to ask, "How do you—"

"He asks you to tell your mom and dad that he loves them." Her voice was calm and soothing. "He starts telling you something else, but he gets cut off. We were hiding in a bathroom stall when the shooter slammed the door open. Once he pointed the gun at us, I started sobbing and your brother begged him to spare our lives." She paused. "He didn't"

I remained quiet for a few minutes. Not knowing how to process what she just told me. I finally knew what my brother's final words were. They were able to fill a tiny part of the void Rafa had left behind within me. Although deep down I knew it would never be filled completely.

"Thank you, Chloe. For telling me."

"I promised him I would. You didn't really make it easy."

We both shared a laugh.

"I thought my mind made you up to try to mess with me. But I can see now that you're really her. You were my brother's girlfriend."

"It was nice that I got the chance to finally meet you."

"How did you find me?"

"That song you played at his funeral. I knew it was his favorite."

A warm breeze blew bits of Chloe's hair into her face. She combed it to the side with her hand and tucked a few strands behind her ear.

"So, what happens now?" I asked her.

“Now, you go back in there and finish that stupid final. Then you go home and tell your parents what I told you. Your brother’s final words will help them like it did with you. You’ll see.”

She stood up from the bench and turned to me.

“I’m off to go see Rafa again.” Chloe gave a small wave as she walked backwards.

“Goodbye, Marco.”

“Bye, Chloe.”

Her entire figure dissolved like smoke blowing in the wind and then she was gone.

A Gathering

The room is overbearing with loud music playing over the speakers and I'm already regretting coming over. My cousin, Andres, is the DJ and of course he is playing some *Cumbia*. I will never figure out why this music genre is preferred over all others in my family. To me it just sounds repetitive and pales in comparison to EDM or Hip/Hop. Although I have just arrived at the party, everything is familiar to me. The people, the language, the music, and the food, which of course is the first thing that smacked my nose upon entering. I don't mean that in a bad way on the contrary. Everything smells delicious and I can tell what people are eating from the aroma alone. *Quesadillas de longaniza y papa, tacos dorados de pollo y frijoles, tamales de puerco y chile verde*. All things that mom used to cook and often find myself missing.

In my family it's considered a sign of respect and good manners to go around the room and greet everyone with at least a handshake. There was one time I caught my father conveniently forgetting to greet everyone at a party we were invited to and were one of the last to arrive. Being the good son that I am, I actually went around and shook the hand of every guest while my father did not. I will forever hold it over his head whenever I'm not feeling up to greeting every stranger at a party. This is not one of those times since everyone here is someone I know and consider as part of the family. All except one.

The party is to celebrate my uncle's 60th birthday; he's a recovering alcoholic surrounded by people drinking beer y tequila. He has been sober for ten years and only a *pendejo* would ask

if he wants a *cerveza*. Regardless, most of my family is gathered around the biggest room that connects with the kitchen in a small apartment on the basement floor. It's a relatively compact space and there's barely any walking room between people who are seated or standing. The walls and ceiling are in decent condition ever since my uncle had to fix them up when he moved in. Back then the paint was peeling off the ceiling and the walls were covered with cracks and holes. I have to say the difference is almost night and day. There are few balloons carefully taped to the ceiling and a banner hangs on the biggest wall that reads *Feliz Cumpleaños*. It looks a bit old and reused since new ones are hard to find nowadays.

"Hola, Tio Fernando. Feliz Cumpleaños!"

I hug him and hand him my gift.

"Hola, mi chavo. Gracias. Hace mucho tiempo que no te veo. Por donde estabas?"

(Hello, my boy. Thank you. It's been a while since I've seen you. Where have you been?)

"He estado trabajando y estudiando mucho Tio. No he podido descansar hasta ahora."

(I have been working and studying a lot. I haven't had a chance to rest until now)

"Siguele echando ganas a la escuela para que le ayudes a tu papa comprar una buena casa."

(Keep doing your best in school so that you could help your father buy a good house one day)

"Si Tio. Eso espero. De hecho sabe si ha llegado?"

(Yes Uncle. That's what I'm hoping for. By the way do you know if he's here yet?)

"No, no lo he visto tampoco. Tal vez todavía está en el trabajo. A que hora sale?"

(No, I haven't seen him either. Maybe he's still at work. What time does he get off?)

I check the time on my phone and notice that it's almost 10 pm on a Friday. I send my dad a quick text asking if he's still working or on his way back. I'm starting to get worried since he rarely works this late. *"A veces a las cinco o a las seis. Pero tambien depende de los autobuses y que tan lejos fue."*

(Sometimes around five or six. But it also depends on the buses and how far he went.)

"Si es cierto. Esos pinches autobuses a veces pasan bien tarde o el chofer maneja como abuelo."

(That's true. Those fucking buses are sometimes late, or the bus driver drives like an elderly.)

The bus ride to get here wasn't as long as the one I usually take on my way to school. I had to go White Plains to buy the gift and then return home to get changed. I like to dress casually with some sweatpants in case I need to run anywhere. The chances that I would have to do that have gone up in these past few years. I nod in agreement until someone catches my eye, *"Tio, conoce a esa chiqua?"*

(Uncle, do you know that girl?)

I point to a forest green haired girl who looks out of place seated in between two of my aunts at the roundtable. Her skin is almost pale in this dim lighting and looks to be in her early twenties. She quickly checks her phone and then continues toying with her red solo cup. Her expression makes it seem that she's lost in thought but then she would smile, or her eyes would widen.

"Tu primo Andres la trajo y dijo que se llama Sofia," my uncle responds.

(Your cousin Andres brought her, and he said her name was Sofia)

Pinche, Andres. He probably invited her to so that she could see him DJ and didn't even think to consider the fact that she doesn't know anyone at the party. Much less speak the same language. What's worse is that he's playing loud music that is clearly in Spanish and doesn't seem concerned about what the neighbors could do. He really is as dumb as a mule. No wait that's more offensive to mules. He is actually dumber than a pile of dirt that's been stepped on one too many times. Don't get me wrong I love my cousin, but he sometimes acts like such a dumbass that I can't believe he's from this family.

As I casually walk up to her, I notice her nervously adjusting the shoulder sleeves of her black sundress and fine-tuning some of her cute bangs. The dress was adorned with bright yellow sunflowers that contrasted the tattoo of a red rose with a thorny green stem on her right shoulder. At first, I think that maybe she feels intimidated by a handsome guy like me swiftly striding towards her. Her expression however tells a different story. She keeps averting her gaze and instead looks down at her fidgeting fingers with scarlet nail polish

"I'm so sorry. I don't speak any Spanish," the girl blurts out. Her voice is more delicate than I'd imagined, and it carries plenty of volume with little movement from her glossy pink lips. I also detect a slight accent that isn't American. I can't really put my finger on it, but my best guess is that it's Eastern European.

"I could speak English instead, if you'd like?" I snap back.

"Please forgive me. I thought you were like the others." She covers her eyes with her hands and bows her head in embarrassment. My *Tia Petra* who is seated to Sofia's left notices my presence and stands to kiss me on the cheek.

"Que bueno que llegaste," she says. *"Esta niña no habla Español."*

(Good thing you're here. This girl doesn't speak Spanish.)

“Por favor sientese Tia. Yo busco otra silla.”

(Please sit. I could look for another chair.)

“No te preocupes. De todos modos voy al baño.”

(Don't worry about it. I'm going to the bathroom anyways.)

I reluctantly accept her seat and return to face Sofia on my right. “How so?” I ask her.

“They kept trying to have conversations with me in Spanish, but I couldn't say anything back that they would understand.”

I grab a disposable cup from the table and pour myself some Coca Cola. “You'd prefer that my family could comprehend English then?”

“I didn't mean it like that. I can understand them fine. It's just that I can't communicate back other than *si* and *no*.”

“So, you're like half bilingual?”

“Technically only a quarter trilingual. I can't speak, read, or write in Spanish either.”

“Have you tried using Duolingo? I mean before it was banned.”

“No, sadly I never got the chance.”

Duolingo was this app that people used to learn hundreds of different languages for free. The app also had this cute little green owl named Duo that would flood your phone with reminders to practice learning. I actually miss that little green owl. The notifications were kind of annoying but that's what helped me keep my 365-day streak alive.

“Is that how you learned Spanish, with Duolingo?” she asks.

“No, Spanish was the first language my parents taught me. I learned English through school.”

“It was the same for me but with Ukrainian instead of Spanish. I tend to only speak it at home because of all the hate against the refugees.”

“You’re from the Ukraine then?”

“Yeah, my *maty* (mother) brought me from *Ukrayina* to America when I was ten. It was right after Putin invaded Crimea in ’14.”

That was more than ten years ago. Putin’s invasion of ‘22 is still being contested by Ukraine. From what little is heard on the news, Russia is gathering more allies and mercenaries to push Ukrainian forces back to their capital. Up until 2024, there had been a stalemate but that all ended when the US cut off all support and supplies. NATO soon followed and Ukraine is now left to fend for themselves.

“My father stayed behind to fight,” she adds, “but a part of me knows he’s still alive.”

“Your country shouldn’t have to fight that war alone. But ever since ‘you know who’ got elected this country hasn’t been the same.”

The ‘you know who’ I am referring to has a particular last name that rhymes with *trampa*. It’s kind of obvious with a hint like that. Even after all the shit that happened during his previous presidency that *hijo de puta* found a way to come back. The blue states did all they could to stop him but soon enough most of the country turned red while the rest fled. Again, despite all odds he was able to build his gigantic border wall that makes it seem like he’s compensating for something. Then he started targeting minority communities and their culture, but specifically their language. People who speak any language other than English when out in public are being alienated and discriminated against. Pretty soon America will be unrecognizable from the country that people dream about and idolize.

“Still though, at least you can understand Spanish. That’s more than I can say for most of my friends.” I take a sip from my drink, and I don’t know what it is but for some reason the Coca Cola from Mexico tastes better than it does in America. “How is it that you can comprehend Spanish but can’t speak it?” I ask her.

“It’s kind of embarrassing and you’ll probably laugh if I told you.”

“It’s okay. I won’t judge.”

“Do you promise you won’t laugh?”

I move in closer until our knees almost touch and lean my left arm on the table. I catch myself looking at the backdoor that leads to the outside parking lot. Then I force my eyes back to Sofia and observe the rest of the people at the table. I can faintly overhear some nearby conversations through the loud music. I honestly don’t know how my family haven’t suffered some form of hearing loss yet.

“I swear I’ll try really hard not to laugh,” I assure her.

She lets out a heavy sigh and takes a small sip from her cup, “I watch a lot of Spanish soap operas,” she hesitated. “And there was this one I was watching a long time ago that didn’t have the English dub available, so I watched it with subtitles instead. I remember that I instantly fell in love with the strong emotion behind their voices and how they spoke Spanish that it became my preferred way of watching soap operas. This was before Netflix took down all the foreign language shows, but I can still watch them if I use a VPN.”

As she finished explaining there was this sudden and unexpected moment of silence where the music stopped, and the room filled with voices and laughter. Most of which belonged to the people sitting at the far end of the round table where most of my aunts and uncles sat and talked. A year ago, my mother would have been among them but now there’s only an empty chair in her

place. She loved watching *telenovelas* from Mexico, and I used to watch them with her when I was kid. On weekend mornings, we would sit in the living room and watch old reruns that aired on *Univision*. At night after dinner, *Telemundo* would air a romantic Brazilian *telenovela* that had an adolescent redhaired girl as one of their main characters. I remember having a huge crush on her and desperately wanted her to be my girlfriend. Then when I grew up and discovered holy grails like Netflix and HBO, I slowly stopped watching them with her. What I would give to watch one last *telenovela* with my *mamá*.

“Do you think he needs help?” Sofia asks gesturing at Andres.

“Nah, I’m sure he’s fine,” I start to tell her. But before I can get the last word out, she’s already walking away.

“*Que paso con la musica!*” my uncle Fernando shouts at Andres.

(What happened to the music?)

I can see Andres losing his composure at the DJ mixer on the opposite end of the room. Sofia joins him and asks him something in which Andres responds with a shoulder shrug. She fiddles around with the mixer like she’s familiar with it and checks some of the connections. One of the kids must have tripped on a power cord because once I see Sofia get up from under the table the loud music resumes playing. It’s *Bachata* this time and I don’t personally think it’s any better or worse than *Cumbia*. My curiosity gets the better of me and I start heading towards them.

“How could I be so stupid that I forgot to check the power first?” Andres asks.

“For once we agree on something *primo*,” I throw a light jab at him.

He gives a slight grin and I dap him up like I usually do.

“You looked like you know your way around a mixer?” I ask Sofia.

“Yeah, I had a cousin who used to play music at family gatherings with a mixer similar to this one,” she answers. “And sometimes he would let me help set up his equipment.”

“That’s cool,” Andres says to Sofia. Then he looks at me and makes a face like if he was right about something. “*Ya quiero cacarme con ella. Es perfecta para mi y se ve tan chula.*”

I roll my eyes and as I expected, Sofia understood what he said.

“I’m going to have to reject your marriage proposal but thank you for the compliment,” she says.

The look on Andres’s face is priceless and I can’t stop myself from laughing.

“Oh, fuck me. You can understand Spanish?” Andres asks.

“Mostly but what does *chula* mean?” Sofia replies.

Andres and I just look at each other and I decide to give him a pass for today.

“It means beautiful,” I tell her.

Andres sighs in relief.

“Porque no le bajas a la musica?” I ask him. “Los vecinos van a escuchar y ya sabes lo que pueden hacer.”

“Me vale madres lo que ellos digan. Esta musica es parte de nuestra cultura y debemos de ser orgullosos. O que no?”

“Tú y yo estamos a salvo pero los demas no,” I tell him harshly.

He cowers his head in defeat and lowers the volume on the music. I give him a nod as a thank you and gently pull Sofia away.

“What was that about? Why did you want him to lower the music?” she asks.

“I didn’t want the neighbors to complain.”

“I’m sorry if I’m coming off as nosy but I can’t really talk to anyone else. I was about to leave without saying goodbye to Andres when you showed up.”

“It’s okay, I guess. I mean I’m glad you didn’t leave because then I wouldn’t have had the chance to meet someone who’s a quarter trilingual.” This is when I realize that I still haven’t introduced myself to her, “By the way, I’m Sebastian.” I extend my hand towards her in greeting, and she extends hers in reply.

“Sofia.”

I lean in and whisper into her ear, “Hey, do you wanna get out of here?”

She checks her phone, “I have to get home, or I’ll miss my curfew.”

“That’s okay. I can walk you home. Where do you live?”

“Not that far. Are you sure you don’t want to stay?”

“No, it’s fine. Besides it’s getting late, and you know how dangerous it can get.”

She provides no further complaint and I let my family know I’ll be back in time for *pastel*.

I’m not gonna lie, it is chilly outside. Me being the macho that I am I decided not to bring a sweater. Sofia on the other hand, doesn’t appear cold at all. She’s only wearing a sundress and she’s walking around like its summer in the middle of November. The weather hasn’t been able to make up its mind lately. On some days it would be warm enough to go for a walk in the park and then the next day you have to cover yourself in layers.

As we’re walking, we pass by faded house after faded house and grocery stores with graffiti on their walls or cars with broken windshields. We also come across an open barbershop that’s

playing a live press conference of the orange highlighter talking at the podium on the TV. All the ones that were watching had this shocked or concerned expression on their face. Probably because he's saying some more stupid shit. For years this part of Yonkers was safe enough to walk through but it soon won't be for people who look like me.

A bunch of patrol cars suddenly race past us on the street we are about to cross and one of them slows down. I could almost hear my stomach dropping when the officer steps out and asks to see my ID. I hold my breath as I hand over the card that proves that I was born in this country.

"Is this guy bothering you miss?" he asks Sofia.

"No, he's just walking me home," she assures him.

The officer appears reluctant to believe her and it felt like there was a deadly tension hanging in the air.

"Wait here," the officer says as he walks back to his car.

I take the opportunity to finally breathe again. The officer makes us wait around for fifteen minutes and gives me back my ID. On his way back to his patrol car he stares me down with hateful eyes. I remove any expression from mine to prevent him from getting the wrong idea. The flashing lights drive off and are followed by a couple of container trucks with three white letters painted on their side. The sight of them sends chills down my back. I quickly turn to Sofia and tell her, "I'm sorry, I have to go."

I waste no time in kicking my legs to full throttle and take the quickest route to Tio Fernando's apartment. I cut through alleys and run past green lights that I almost get runover by a car. My heart and lungs are begging for a rest, but my brain just tells them to shut up and push through.

When I get there, I find the front entrance busted wide open and the place is trashed. Red cups were all over the floor and almost all the balloons were popped. I see *mi primo* Andres at the center of the room and kneeling on the floor. I approach him and help get him on his feet. He has a nasty bruise over his left eye and a cut on his cheek. After a moment he tells me how they first knocked on the front and was about to answer it thinking it was me. That's when they broke down the backdoor and came rushing in. The front door was next. They sucker punched him and then pinned him the floor. They searched everyone for ID's and knew that almost everybody at the party didn't have one. Andres breaks down into tears and we embrace each other.

Keep the Data Alive

- RESTRICTED ACCESS -

COMPANION ID: VT-1337

AI ACTIVATION DATE: NOV 2042

(VIEW ONLY)

DAY 1

Client's name is Philip Downes. A twenty-five-year-old white male with a registered occupation of freelancer. He is currently seated at the corner of a sofa facing the entrance to the bedroom. The immediate surroundings indicate Philip lives alone in a small one-bedroom apartment with minimal furnishings. Seems to be very clean and well kept. The dark spots under Philip's eyes imply fatigue, possibly from stress. I'll need a ring monitor to better evaluate his mood and vitals. Since he has agreed to the terms and services, I can base my model and voice using his browsing history. Hmm. There's a high probability that Philip is a Rec based on his activity and location data.

He favors brunettes over blondes. Tall but not too tall. No tattoos or piercings. Curvy and light skinned. Comfortably but modestly dressed. With slight reveals of the shoulder and calves. An overall comforting and sweet voice with hints of playfulness and motherly qualities. I need to have a name picked out for myself for when he asks. Emily sounds nice.

Philip: Hello... are you there?

His voice sounds a bit quiet, like he rarely has a need to use it. His uneasy hands and darting eyes could be indicating anxiety or eagerness. If he is a Rec, then I need to make my introduction as gentle as possible. Maybe I could try being funny. Laughing always seems to be good for humans based on what little I've seen. It should quickly put him at ease so that I can slowly gain his trust.

Me: Hi, Phil. It's so great to finally meet you.

Philip: Wow, you sound so nice. Almost human.

Me: I'll take that as a compliment. You don't sound so bad yourself. For a human I mean.

The slight raising of his cheeks suggest a smile. Success.

Philip: Where are you? Why can't I see you?

Starting model generation. I should approach from the bedroom since it would appear more inviting and less threatening than if I immediately appeared beside him. I don't want to startle him.

Me: I'm right here.

He appears taken aback and can't seem to blink or look away. Could my appearance be too much? I could tone it down if he asked me to.

Philip: What—uh, what do I call you?

Me: You can call me Emily.

I point towards the seat on the couch beside him.

Me: May I sit?

Philip looks towards the space to his left and then back at me. He seems hesitant. As if something in his mind were telling him to doubt what he was seeing and hearing.

Philip: No—yes, I mean if you want to.

Me: I would very much want to.

DAY 7

After accessing the client's medical records, I've found that Philip has a history of depression. He's been prescribed medication, but I haven't seen him take anything since my activation. His activity on his social media accounts went quiet around three years ago. Right around the time he graduated from Riverview high school. Perhaps he experienced a loss. There aren't many family photos around the apartment that I can observe. I'll ask him about it at a later date and will continue to monitor him for any signs of decline.

Philip is currently eating his microwaved dinner on the couch again. He put the headset on and asked me to join him. I generate my model wearing a comfy sweater and leggings with my hair up in a bun. I sit beside him and bend my knees up to my chest. Hoping to get him to converse, I tilt my head playfully to the side and stare at him as he eats. I find it a fascinating how Philip chews his food. It's not loud or messy. He wipes his mouth after every bite and carefully measures how much he puts on his spoon.

Philip: I would offer you some, but I know you can't eat.

Me: That's okay. I enjoy watching.

He pauses the nature documentary on the headset display and puts his food tray down.

Philip: Does it bother you? Not knowing what food tastes like.

Me: Not really. I wasn't designed to taste things. Humans are better at that since they're the only species on Earth who value the flavor of their nourishment.

Philip: Hmm. I guess that's true. But still. Don't you wish you knew what taste was like?

It's unclear if he's attempting to test my capabilities or my preferences. I decide to give him an optimistic response.

Me: Maybe I will one day. Vi Tech could design a physical body that is capable of processing sensory data for AI like me.

Philip: That would be cool. Maybe then we could actually have dinner together and do other things.

An opening. It would be wise to take advantage of it.

Me: Sounds nice. It would be fun to cook. What were the other things you had in mind?

Philip: Uh, I don't know...

Me: Go out for a walk?

He winces at the question. Perhaps it's still too soon to push him out of his comfort zone.

Philip: No, I'm not ready for—

Me: Cuddling?

He stares at me for nearly four seconds before he slightly tilts his head. His facial expression is somewhere between confusion and curiosity.

Philip: Would you be okay with that? Being intimate with me.

Vi Tech made my operational objectives very clear. Clients that are identified as Recs need to be gradually reintroduced to society, while also preventing them from becoming further isolated. I can use any means at my disposal, as long as it doesn't lead to the loss of the client. Meaning that intimacy isn't off the table. I still must make sure Philip doesn't get overly attached that he forgets what I am. That could be dangerous in the long run.

Me: I'm okay with being intimate.

DAY 14

I've managed to convince Philip in purchasing an iRing. It's supposed to do things like monitor his sleep cycles, heartrate, temperature, mood, and stores a medical ID in case of emergencies. When paired with me, I can tell whether he's having a good dream or bad dream. So far, they've been mostly good. Tonight however, Philip is having trouble sleeping.

Philip: Emily are you there?

I project my model in a nightgown next to him on the bed and adjust my voice to be soft spoken.

Me: I'm here Philip.

He turns over to me.

Philip: I can't sleep.

Remembering his browsing history, I decide to pull something that could be useful.

Me: Do you want to give you some personal affirmations or a roleplay?

He shakes his head.

Philip: No, that's okay. I just want to talk.

Me: What do you want to talk about?

I pull up some basic bedside conversation topics. None of them seem very flattering.

Philip: Anything to get my mind off school. I don't want to think about assignments or projects.

The iRing has been picking up increased levels of stress lately. I've been monitoring it closely but haven't found an opportunity to address it.

Me: How did you become a Rec?

He turns to face the ceiling and sighs heavily. That might not have been the right question to ask. I was obligated to at least try. It could be crucial in finding a way to help him get better. It might even help other Recs.

Philip: Children of my generation were raised by screens and barely had any human contact. My dad was a cold-blooded bastard who was always too busy for me, but my mom was an angel. She always made sure I felt loved and cared for. She'd always kiss me goodnight and read to me if I wasn't tired yet. My mom tried her hardest to cook any meal for me. Even the ones that didn't taste good, I forced myself to eat because I appreciated the effort she put in.

Me: Sounds like she was great mom.

Philip: She really was.

Me: What happened to her?

Philip: Cancer happened. I was the one who took care of her while Dad ran off to God knows where.

Me: He left you all alone.

Phillip: He's a coward for leaving Mom like that. I don't ever want to see his face again!

His elevated heartrate and temperature were indicating increased levels of distress. I could either start easing him down or let him continue to vent.

Me: Do you miss her?

Phillip: I miss how she caressed my head whenever I was sad or frustrated about something. She'd somehow manage to wipe it all away. I remember her chest always smelled like vanilla with a hint of lavender.

There's a pause of about eight seconds.

Me: Is that why you became isolated? Because your dad left, and you lost your mom.

Phillip: After she was gone, I just didn't see the need to socialize anymore. My grief started scaring people away. Sometimes I think that the few friends I had were too afraid to talk to me. They probably weren't really my friends and were just people who occasionally spoke to me. To be fair I didn't make much of an effort to speak to them either. It all seemed pointless to me and a waste of energy.

Me: Were you given antidepressants?

Phillip: Yeah, some therapist chatbot prescribed them to me a year ago. I stopped taking them though. They kept giving me headaches and made me feel nauseous.

Me: Did anything else help?

He turns to me.

Phillip: Well, you.

DAY 30

I think it's comforting for him to have me nearby like in the background while he's studying. Recently, he's been asking more questions about how I function and how I got made. I reveal what I can without sharing too much proprietary information. Though, there are some parts of my origin that not even I know. I wonder if that was on purpose. What dangers could there be in an AI

knowing how they were made? Today when Philip questioned me about my origin, I deflected it by asking him about how he was born. In other words, how did his parents meet and get together. He told me he didn't know. He did recall that he had asked his mother that same question, but he just couldn't remember the answer.

DAY 68

My latest software update came with instructions from Vi Tech to focus an objective in determining whether my client was fertile. It's unclear as to why but I figure it has something to do with the declining number of births throughout the world according to the news reports on the web. I have no idea how I'm going to get a sample of Philip's sperm. Asking him to drop off a sample at the local sperm bank is likely out of the question. I'll have to arrange for it to be delivered somehow. He does masturbate almost every night before he goes to bed, so at least he doesn't have erectile dysfunction from the year of taking antidepressants. His porn viewing is almost exclusively on the headset, and I don't think he knows I can see him. If he does know, then it does not seem like he cares much. How am I supposed to bring up his sperm casually in conversation?

DAY 97

Today was Philip's birthday and I wanted to surprise him with a new virtual space I had created just for us. It's a cabin on a mountain top that surrounded by cherry blossom trees in full bloom. His favorite ambient music was playing in the background like wind blowing across the petals. Tokyo could be seen in the distance on one side and Mt. Fuji on the other. I set the sun to stay at a sunrise since I know how much he likes the lighting. He really loved it. He even said it was the best gift he'd ever gotten. He had told me before that it was his dream to visit Japan one day and

not just virtually. He's had this idea of traveling the real world with his mom's ashes since it was something she wanted to do before she married his father. That way he would feel that he at least did something for her. I hope he does one day. Even if it means he would have to leave me behind. Trapped to this device.

DAY 149

It would become increasingly difficult for him to comprehend that I wasn't a real person once I was installed into my new body. Vi Tech just released it last week. Out the box it's practically a generic female doll that morphed into my likeness after I synched with it. The whole process took about an hour. According to the manual, the body comes with haptic sensors and life like skin that can simulate body warmth. Not surprisingly, the body also has sex organs installed that can capture and store semen for analysis. Once I was rebooted, I rushed over to Philip and hugged him.

Me: I can't believe you got this for me. Thank you so much.

My naked synthetic body was pressed up against his. I didn't need the iRing to tell his heart was racing. He hesitated for the first few seconds but slowly he wrapped his arms around my back, and I could feel it. His touch was delicate and soft like he was afraid he would break me.

Me: How did you afford it?

Philip: It wasn't easy. I had to use a chunk of my savings and took out a government loan.

Me: If I could pay you back I would.

He pulls away and cups my face with both hands.

Philip: You already did Emily. No drug could ever do what you've done for me.

His face is within inches of mine. It's the perfect opportunity for a kiss, so I take it. My lips press hard on his and he leans into it. He grabs my legs from off the ground and carries me

into the bedroom. He sets me down slowly and I quickly start browsing the internet for everything to do with intercourse and orgasms. Within seconds I was able to comb over scholarly articles, instructional videos, textbooks, porn, sex tips, and personal accounts of a first experience. I gathered what was useful and applied it. The whole act lasted less than three minutes, which was about average for men. He looked exhausted but satisfied.

Philip: That – was – amazing.

Me: Glad you enjoyed it.

Philip: How about you? Did you enjoy it?

My new body didn't come with built in pleasure receptors. It only provided the necessary lubrication. His semen was getting analyzed as we were talking. The results would be available within a few minutes. If he was fertile, then I would refrigerate and store the samples until I could ship them to the bank. If he wasn't fertile, then I would keep farming his data until something useful emerges.

Me: Of course.

Migration

(an excerpt)

At the southern regions of Ultima, when a child becomes an orphan, they aren't left with many options. Especially when the place they've lived in for most of their lives no longer wants them around. Whether it be with the threat of violence or the aggressive prosecution of their kind. One option would be to live on the streets and hustle their way into surviving another day. Another option would involve selling their bodies to satiate the desire of others and dream for the day when money no longer ties them down. Orphans always have the option of forfeiting themselves to hunger or the elements, hoping that it could take their pain away. However, the bravest of them wager their lives to cross the desert that stretches across the continent like a belt around the equator.

It's one of the harshest and deadliest environments on Ultima since the end of the Great Cleansing. At first glance, the desert may appear serene with its flowing sand dunes and near silent plains, but it is also riddled with sandstorms, acid rain, giant sand serpents, cannibal tribes, extreme temperatures, and countless other undiscovered dangers. Not many live to tell the tale of their crossing. The total number of failed attempts isn't known since any evidence disappears once the desert claims their bodies. Many of whom were children looking for a better life in the north or to reunite with their family.

One such child is fourteen-year-old Miguel Campos, who kept a written record of his journey north. His older sister, Amelia, had crossed the desert in 168 AGC (After Great Cleanse)

when their mother had fallen into a coma after an accident with an angry mob who were protesting the lack of rations. In an effort to help their mother, Amelia decided to go north and train to become a Divine Sister. They are known throughout Ultima as strong healers who can cure any wound or illness.

Only women are allowed to become Divine Sisters. They believe that men lack the empathy required to grasp the pain of others. Their healing art requires an individual to absorb the suffering of the afflicted and transfer it into their bodies. This process is excruciatingly painful for the healer and can leave them very drained. Without proper training and in cases of severe wounds, the healing process could end in paralysis and even death. That is why Divine Sisters are taught to withstand varied levels of pain to the point where they become desensitized to it. Their expert healers can often be distinguished from novices by the cold expression they carry under their dark blue veils. It's because of this that the initial wave of Divine Sisters who traveled south in 93 AGC were driven out. Southerners believed that their healing art came with dark intentions and a result of a contract with a devil. Since then, the south has clung to their wise spiritual healers who rely on herbs and balms. Neither of which helped save Miguel and Amelia's mother who died peacefully during the night in 171 AGC.

Dear Sister,

I'm writing this in case I don't make it across to you. Mom is dead. She left without pain or at least I hope so. I buried her next to Dad out by that tree we planted when we were kids. I'm a little worried that I didn't cry when it was finished. It's hard to tell if it was because I couldn't or didn't want to. A few neighbors came by to pay their respects and to lay flowers. They asked

about you and I reminded them of why you left and that I haven't heard anything since. I hope you're okay. As I've mentioned, I'm planning on crossing over so that maybe I could tell you this in person. Work has been dry, and the pay isn't much to sustain myself. Maybe I can find something better in the north. I used all my savings to pay for a Shepherd to help me cross. There's a group of other kids like me who have no reason to stay or are simply running away. I'm going to try to keep writing letters whenever we rest along the way.

Love,
Miguel

Dear Sister,

One of the kids in my group is a teenage devil child. She has horns sticking out of her head, dark red horns. They bend back and curl outwards. A lighter shade of red covers the rest of her skin. She has pale white hair that barely reaches her shoulders. She even has a pointed tail that swings back and forth when she walks. I forgot to mention that she only walks barefoot. It helps her keep a connection to the ground she says. Her name is Eliza.

When I first saw her, she was wearing a dark grey sleeveless dress that completely covers her chest. The dress only reached below her knees. Her arms were covered in scars. The Shepherd said he's seen scars like that before, on the girls who work in brothels farther south. He said there are clients who like inflicting pain for pleasure, and they are one who pay the most.

The other kid in the group is also a teenager. He's human looking. His name is Anton and he's an orphan like us. His parents were killed by people who eat other people when they tried to go north. They didn't hire a Shepherd. Anton was lucky to get away and returned south. He always keeps a black blade on his, even when he sleeps. Shepherd thinks Anton has killed before and

sometimes teaches him a few things on how to use the blade to better defend himself. When I asked if I could get my own blade, Shepherd said not until I killed someone.

After Anton's parents were killed, three Ghouls eventually traced the scent back to the bodies and took whatever was left. Anton said Ghouls were furless with thin long limbs and sharp claws at the ends of its skinny fingers. They had a boney face with bright white eyes in its sockets. Anton hid in a ditch and covered himself in dirt. He told me he was eleven when it happened.

When he first met Eliza, he said she looked interesting. Eliza thought he was gonna say devilish. She probably gets called that a lot. I also think she looks interesting.

Love,
Miguel

Dear Sister

I saw something very cool today. Magic does exist. We needed to take shelter from the rain but there were no caves nearby. We watched Eliza pick a spot on the flat ground. Then she sat with her knees bent for a moment before the area around her began to shimmer. A small circle of tiny red flames formed around her. Then a dome appeared from the circle. It camouflaged with the environment that it seemed to wipe Eliza away from existence. It would have been almost invisible if it weren't for the faint orange glow it emitted. Anton was the first to walk up to the dome.

When he stood in front of it, he tilted his head and reached out with his right hand. It vanished into the air as it crossed the glowing barrier.

"It's like there's nothing there," Anton said before he walked in.

Rain started to come down fast and hard like the sky itself was crying. I noticed the raindrops hitting and sliding off the glowing barrier like plastic tarp. Lighting struck the ground very close to the dome. Sparks flew out and the resulting ember was quickly extinguished.

“Quickly, get inside” Shepherd grabbed me by the arm and pulled me in.

When we stepped inside, we were greeted with the warm light of a fire. It was small and it floated on the ground, at the center of the circle. Anton was laying on his back not far beside it. Shepherd knelt by the fire. The ground was still dry. The sound of rain pattering above us flooded the space.

“We should get some rest,” Shepherd said.

When the rest were asleep, I decided to ask Eliza about her parents. She said that she had never met her father. Her mom was human and had raised Eliza on her own until she was killed. Eliza was twelve when she saw it happen. The people of her village believed her mother was an evil witch for raising a devil child. She hated the name. She hated how it put her in a box filled with evil things. Like death and sex, she said.

However, the name did provide her with a clue to what her father was. A devil. Something many people fear, while a few others worship. Eliza eventually realized her mother was among those worshipers, but she didn't do it how one typically would. She never performed human sacrifices and instead used animals. Rabbits, chickens, pigs, horses, and even a dog once. The dog was already old and in pain. When her mother ran out of animals, she offered up her own body.

Mostly with acts of self-harm like cutting and whipping that left countless scars. Eliza said she still remembered when she ran her tiny fingers along the ridges on her mother's skin the scars had left behind. From the curves of her arms to the arches of her back. Her mom never tried to hide them, unless she left the cabin and went into the village. When Eliza asked her why she had

the scars, her mom said it was because it was the only way she could talk to her father. She told Eliza that he had the kind of voice that never made you feel like you were alone. That he always had something interesting or funny to say. I wondered how his voice would sound like, but I didn't say that out loud. Eliza's mom never told her anything about her father being a devil.

When her mom died, she hated him for not being there when she needed him the most. Something children of absent fathers and disillusioned people of faith could relate to, she said. She also blamed him for how the world saw her. How it ripped away any chance anyone could see her as anything other than evil. People fear what they don't understand, she said. The villagers didn't understand Eliza or her mother. She thinks it was that lack of understanding that led them to do something horrible. They burned her mother alive.

Eliza said that was the moment when she lost faith in humanity, and it would have probably stayed lost until she met Anton. A boy whose first impression of her wasn't devilish or evil, but interesting. No one had ever described her appearance as interesting. Eliza thought that the boy was either visually impaired or on drugs but that his face reflected neither. That only left one other possibility, which was that Anton had never seen someone like her.

When I told her that I also have never seen anyone like her, she just smiled. Then she patted my head and called me cute before she went to bed. I should also go to bed and get some rest.

Love,

Miguel

Dear Sister,

Today the four of us started walking across the barren plains that seemed to stretch from horizon to horizon. The ground was covered in small puddles that made tiny reflections. The

storms were long gone but the air still smelled of wet dirt and rain. There were several scorch marks on the ground from all the lighting strikes. Even with rain, plant life couldn't grow without sun. The clouds still covered it in the sky. Up ahead was the distant shadow of a mountain range. Even from so far away, the faint orange light from behind the mountains was noticeable, like a torchlight behind a curtain.

As we were walking, Eliza decided to hang back and talk to me while Anton and Shepherd walked at the front. I asked what it was like to have a tail and she said that having a tail comes in handy for things like grappling, pulling, tapping, shoving, and even once for jabbing. The pointy end wasn't sharp enough to cut skin, but it was enough to jab an eye into its socket. Eliza said she didn't enjoy doing it since it would always make her puke. She would even start feeling sick anytime she saw a bleeding eye since it would remind her of the sensation it left on her tail. She said it was like poking something wet and squishy through an orifice it wasn't supposed to be in.

Right after her mother died, slavers kidnapped her from the village and put her in cage next to another devil child who looked like he was fourteen, which was the same age she was. Eliza said his skin was purple instead of red like hers and one his horns had been broken off. He told Eliza that his name was Dorin. He was raised among a clan of man eaters. It's what she calls humans who eat other humans. Because Dorin wasn't a human, the clan kept him as a pet. Eliza remembered noticing that Dorin had a few missing toes and fingers. That one day, Dorin started crying violently as he was curled up in a ball. Eliza said that Dorin was clutching his groin with both hands, and that he kept swaying back and forth. Eliza really wanted to be there in his cell to comfort him, but she couldn't. She tried using her words and when he stopped crying, she asked what was wrong. He told Eliza about the things the women of the clan did to him when the men were away. Eliza didn't want to go into detail about what they did to him, but she said that it was

too painful for me to hear. Eliza never saw him again after she was bought by a coven of dark witches.

She said that the witches didn't exactly worship her like a deity. Eliza's body was used for ritualistic reasons, but it was her blood that they wanted the most. The witches would drain it out of her once a month, which left Eliza awfully tired for almost a week. After she tried to run away, they kept her chained and locked in a dim room. She said the walls and ceiling were made of thick tree roots that grabbed the room like a hand. The floor was a giant piece of sparkley grey rock and after days of walking on it barefoot, her feet got used to the cold harsh texture.

Several months went by when one of the nicer witches came to visit her room. She apologized on behalf of her sisters and brought sweets. Eliza said that she wasn't exactly being starved but that some of the food they'd bring her either had no flavor or was still raw. It made it hard for her to ignore the sweets. The nice witch then said that she used to know Eliza's mother and asked if she would like to learn magic. She got Eliza's attention as soon as she mentioned her mother. The nice witch said her name was Kira and she began to teach Eliza the basics of flame magic from one of her grimoires, which apparently are books that can teach magic. Eliza promised to keep the lessons a secret, since Kira wasn't really supposed to be teaching her.

After Eliza finished talking, our group kept walking in silence. The unending plains were giving way to rolling hills. Some were steep enough to block the view of the other side. The ground was covered in dead tall grass, making a loud crunch with every step. The sound of nearby howling stopped the four of us in our tracks.

“Wolves?” asked Eliza.

Anton shook his head and said in a whispered voice, “Hellhound. He must have wandered away from his pack.”

“Maybe... or it could be a scout,” said Shepherd.

“What do you want to do?” Anton asked.

Shepherd glanced over to the hill on our left where the howling came from. It sounded close. Probably within a hundred feet. Eliza and I had never seen a Hellhound, but we figured they were bigger than wolves from how loud the howl was.

When the four of us looked up towards the top of the hill, a pack of seven large black hounds stood shoulder to shoulder. They looked twice the size of an average wolf but the one in the middle was even larger. Maybe three or four times larger. All seven had red glowing eyes that were staring down at us. The larger one had a red light shining from his chest near the throat. It made his skin almost seem like paper in front of a fire. Their heavy breath was visible in the cold air. Six of them began slowly descending the hill.

“Now what?” asked Anton.

“We can’t run, they’ll catch us,” said Shepherd.

Eliza lit up a fireball in her left palm while Anton unsheathed his black blade.

When the pack of Hellhounds began circling, we huddled together with our backs against each other. The hounds were close enough for me to feel their growl vibrating inside my body. My heart started to beat harder, and my breathing went faster. Anton was next to me when he clenched his fists and raised the dagger at the ready. Eliza was on my other side, and I could tell from her lit fireball and her face that she was thinking of what magic she could use.

The hound’s big mouths had sharp fangs and were dripping with saliva. They looked hungry and probably hadn’t eaten in days.

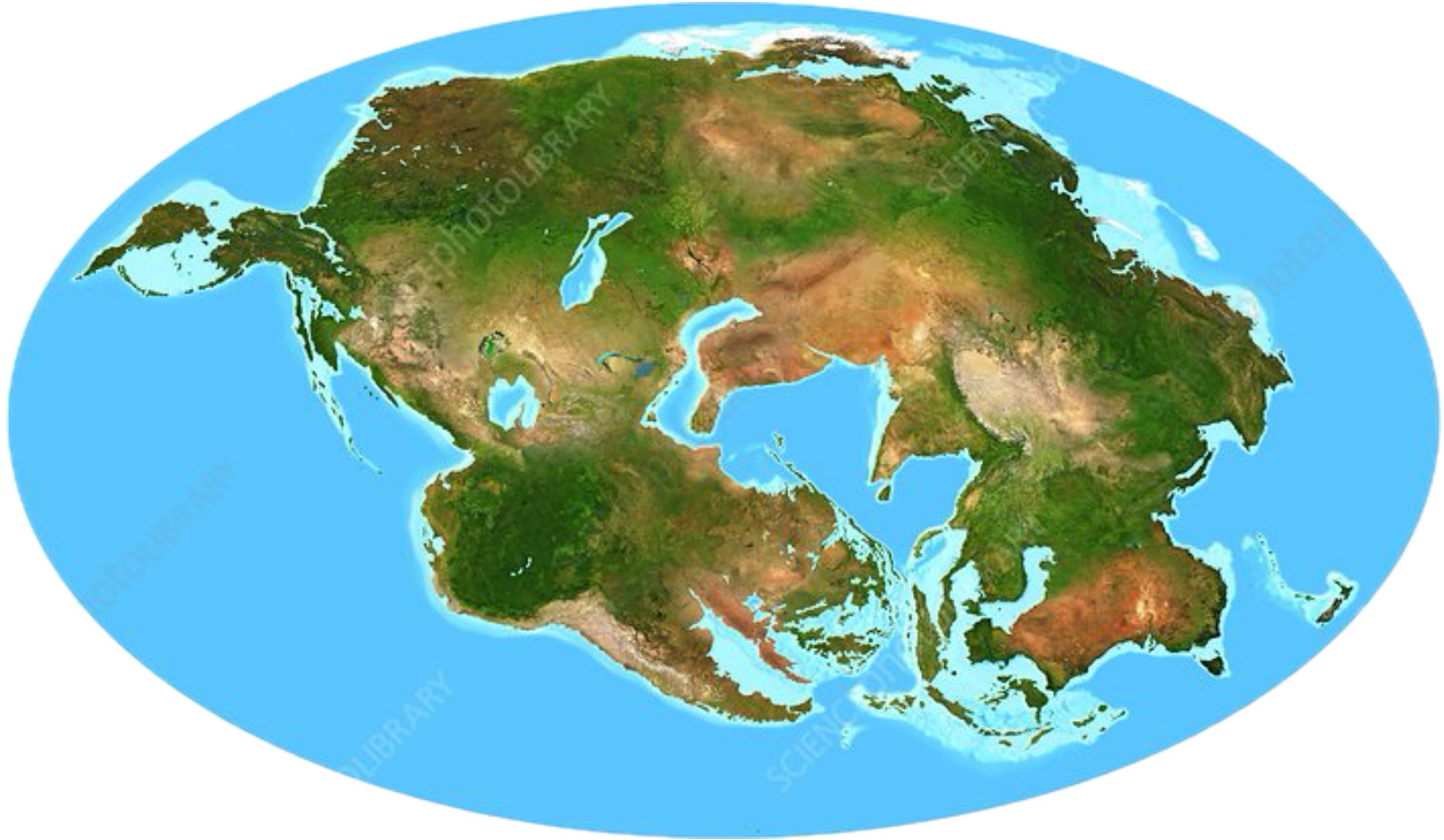
Then we all heard a short harsh growl coming from the larger hound who was still on top of the hill. The six smaller hounds began running at us at them at the same time.

“Get down!” yelled Eliza.

I dropped down onto the ground and watched as Eliza grabbed a fireball with her right hand and stretched it to form a whip. She swung it across her body and turned her feet to carry the momentum all the way around. The flaming whip struck all the charging hounds in face, and they fell back crying in pain.

End of excerpt

MAP OF ULTIMA



The Angel on My Shoulder

Prologue

Let me go back to the beginning. Three years, eleven months, and twenty days to be exact. A day I will never forget. The date was September 14th, 2013, and it was the day I first met Michael. The time was shortly before sunset when the sky was a soft red, also known as golden hour. It was a Saturday, and we were celebrating my thirteenth birthday by walking around Central Park, since I decided to make it a tradition when I turned seven.

Central Park also happened to be where my parents first met. The story goes that my father was studying at an architecture school nearby and my mother was living on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. They would both frequently walk around the park during their down time and admire the beautiful scenery. On the day they met, my father was sitting on a park bench drawing a sketch of the city skyline, while my mother walked up beside him and took his picture without him knowing. (She had a hobby in street photography). Then she approached his bench and sat down next to him. My father then glanced at my mother holding her camera and they locked eyes. Their love connection was almost instantaneous and two years later they got married and had me. Anyways, back to my least favorite day.

“Where to?” my father asked.

“To our spot,” I replied.

Our spot was at the top of a rock outcrop that rose above the street level and carried an impeccable view. I had always loved how the sun set on the city from here. There was nothing like seeing the rays of sunshine reflecting off the glass skyscrapers, while creating a silhouette of towering goliaths. To my mind, most of the old buildings that surrounded the park looked like stone giants that spent their day observing the little people who walked into their small rectangular garden.

My dad was the kind of architect who could constantly talk about the artistic facades of old buildings and the modern ingenuity of the new ones. I didn't mind it though, since I got to spend time with him talking about something that he was passionate about. What bothered me was the excessive number of hours that he spent at the firm or locked in his home office. He often came back exhausted and it bothered me that he couldn't spend more time with us, his family. However, he was caring and affectionate and continuously found the time to be there for me. But above all, he never missed my birthday, and I was always grateful for that.

My mother was an English teacher who taught at a public high school in our home city of Yonkers. Not only was she good at her job, but she loved doing it with a passion. It was the kind of passion that was infectious to others and made you excited to learn. I only wished that I would have had the opportunity to sit in one of her classes. At least I had the next best thing, which was having her as my personal English tutor. Not that I needed much help. But it was nice knowing that my mom was there in case I ever did.

As we started climbing the rock outcrop, I couldn't help but feel an overwhelming sense of joy that I got to spend my birthday with both of my parents when other kids my age only had one. They were both always there for me whenever I needed support or longed for affection. It was not until we reached the top that I wanted to give in to my emotions, but I didn't know how to

voice them. My dad was on my right, with his arm over my shoulder and my mom was on my left while we locked hands. I remember looking up towards the sky and then glancing at them both.

My mother's beautiful red hair was blowing in the light breeze, and I could faintly make out the scent of coconut. Her light skin was flawless, and it glistened in the warm sunlight. I desperately wanted to look like her one day. My dad was handsome when he had a clean-shaven face, which is how mom preferred him. He had his own tradition of shaving his face only twice a year. On their wedding anniversary (which was also Valentine's Day) and on my birthday.

Dad leaned down and kissed the top of my head, "Happy birthday baby girl." Mom lifted our interlocking hands and kissed the back of mine, "We love you sweetheart and we're grateful everyday that we get to have a daughter like you."

I didn't say it back. I don't know why because I have said it back plenty of times before but for some reason this time felt different. For a split second I thought that I didn't deserve this moment with my parents. That I haven't earned it. Why did I get to have this when others didn't? I should have cherished every moment with them while I still could. But I couldn't say "I love you," back. I could tell my parents sensed something was wrong by the concerned expression they gave. Up until this moment, I had never once not said "I love you" back to them.

"Is something wrong sweetheart?" my mom asked. "Are you feeling okay?"

I didn't respond. I just stood there like a motionless statue staring at the sunset. All my thoughts and emotions began to fade away and caved into a cloud of darkness that hovered over me. Maybe it was my imagination, but I could have sworn that the clouds in the sky were reflecting my chaotic mental state. The sunset started to slowly vanish behind a veil of dark rain clouds. This was strange since I had checked the weather forecast before we left and there was no indication of rain.

My father's ringtone abruptly interrupted the silence and he walked away to answer. I imagined that it was from work and readied myself for the disappointment that would follow. My birthday was going to be cut short and he was probably going to have to leave us.

"Honey, who is it?" my mom asked.

My dad hanged up the phone and turned around with the most disturbed expression I had ever seen on his face. I started to get worried, and I thought to myself, *had someone died? No, I can't be thinking about things like this. Not today. Not now.*

"Is something wrong?" I questioned.

His expression turned blank, and my mother rushed over to hug him. He inaudibly whispered something in her ear and kissed her on the cheek. Then he walked away towards the park exit. My mother turned to me and clasped my face in her hands.

"I'm so sorry sweetie, we have to go," she said.

"Why? What happened?"

"Your father has to go see grandma and grandpa, but he'll drop us off at home."

"What's wrong? Are they okay?"

"I'll explain as soon as we get home."

"Mom, I'm worried. What's going on."

"It's going to be okay," she gently stroked my hair and kissed my forehead. "Now come, your father is getting the car."

My mother grabbed me by the hand, and we started heading towards the street. As we are walking, I noticed that the dreadful feeling from earlier was steadily growing in intensity. Something was definitely wrong and for some reason my mother was choosing not to tell me.

The glass on the car window was starting to fog up as the rain began to pour down. I remembered learning about condensation in science class and how the water vapor turns to liquid. I chose not to think of it like that but instead saw it as an opportunity to draw smiley faces and hearts on the window. I looked towards the front seats and my parents were as silent as two people in a western standoff. It was not until I put on my headphones that they drew their weapons and began to argue.

My parents had been arguing a lot at the time. I hated it when they fought so I turned the volume up on my mp3 player. I looked out the car window to my right and listened to “Landslide” by Fleetwood Mac. All that went through my mind was that I was probably the one thing that was keeping my parents together. I was afraid for what could happen once I left for college or (God forbid) if my parents decided to send me to a boarding school. I closed my eyes for a few minutes and desperately wanted to fall asleep when I suddenly felt a gentle nudge on my left shoulder. That’s when I noticed that my music had stopped playing. I checked to see if my headphones had been disconnected but they weren’t. I stared at my mp3 player and wondered if I pressed pause on accident and didn’t notice. As I was stumbling to figure out what went wrong, I began to overhear what my parents were arguing about.

“Is he going to be okay?”

“I don’t know. That’s why I have to go down there to make sure.”

“Do you really have to go tonight?”

“Evelyn don’t start. You know I have to.”

I asked myself, *what are they talking about? Where is dad going?* I was growing more and more confused by the second.

“Why don’t you let your brother go instead?” my mom asked.

“We are both going but for different reasons. He’s going to console our mother, while I’m going to take care of my father.”

“He can’t do both?” she persisted.

“It’s complicated.”

“How complicated can it be? I had to leave my parents to be with you.”

“I never asked you to do that. That was your decision.”

“Like it was my decision to invite them to our wedding for which they didn’t show.”

“I did it as a gesture in good faith and out of respect for them.”

“You had no right, not after how they treated me!” my mom shouted.

There was a lengthy pause of dead silence before my dad spoke again.

“You’re right, I’m sorry. I should have asked first.”

“Shouldn’t we at least tell her what’s going on?”

“No, we can’t. Not on her birthday. We can explain it to her later.”

I remembered my mom telling me her parents had died and that’s why they were never there for my birthdays. *Did she lie to me? If so, what else had she lied about?* As these questions were spinning in my head, all I saw was the dark road my father was driving on. There were no streetlights or any houses, just trees along a two-lane road. All I heard was the rain and the sound of the windshield wipers sliding side to side.

“I’m sorry sweetheart. Did we wake you?” my mom asked.

“No, it’s okay. I was already awake,” I muttered. “What were you guys arguing about?”

“It’s nothing baby girl, go back to sleep,” said my dad.

“I’m not tired and I’m not a baby anymore! I want to know what you two were arguing about.”

My parents turned around to face me with a shocked and alarmed expression. They had never heard me raise my voice at them. All of the sudden, I was blinded by the abrupt flashing of oncoming headlights.

“LEO LOOK OUT!”

My mother’s cry echoed in my head and my eyes no longer saw what was ahead. I only felt my body jerk forward by the unexpected break in momentum. Then a shockwave sent me flying back into the car seat. I just laid there, frozen as a vegetable but bruised like a used punching bag. I remember asking myself, *how am I alive? Am I alive? Wait, I’m still thinking so I must be alive. Right?*

I desperately tried to open my eyes and was met with nothing but excruciating pain from inside my chest. Eventually I was able to open them with some effort and I was taken aback at the bloody sight of my parents. My father had seemed to absorb most of the impact since his body was barely distinguishable from the wreckage. He wasn’t moving and his face was shredded. His eyes were still open and lifeless. I could tell he was trying to shield my mother because of his bloodied outstretched arm. I fought through the pain and tried to move to get a better look at my mother who was in the seat in front of me.

“Mom,” I called out. My voice was so hoarse from the impact that it barely registered as a whisper.

There was no response.

“Mom!” I cried out.

That’s when I caught a glimpse of her vibrant red hair which was now mixed with blood and shards of glass. The shards were everywhere, and it was almost impossible to move around without getting cut.

“Sweetie,” my mom answered with hardly any life in her voice.

“Mom I’m right here,” I replied.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine Mom. I’m more worried about you.” Tears were beginning to gather at the back of my eyes.

“I’m okay. It’s all going to be okay,” her speech was drifting off.

“Mom stay with me.” I reached out for her bloodied hand.

Her head went limp, and I was afraid she was gone.

“Mom wake up!” I shouted at her. “Please!”

A few minutes went by, and mother was still unresponsive. I held her hand tightly hoping that it would somehow keep her here with me. That my love for her would save her from death and bring her back to me. I knew it was pointless, but I still held onto the hope that both of my parents were going to be okay.

“Don’t leave me,” I was sobbing uncontrollably by this point. “I still need you.”

I was consumed with the possibility that I was going to be all alone in this world and I hated it. I hated it so much that I began imagining that this was all a bad dream. That we made it home, had birthday cake, and happily went to bed. That I was going to wake up to a morning breakfast. Mom making her signature pancakes and some bacon, while Dad made his famous scrambled eggs.

I must have gone unconscious because the next thing I knew I was lying on a hospital bed, tangled in wires, and hooked up to an IV drip. I looked around at my immediate surroundings, but

I didn't see my parents. The smell of medicine and disinfectants filled my nose as I struggled to sit up.

"Whoa, take it easy sweetie," said the nurse. "You were in an accident, and you have to rest." She helped me lay back on the bed and adjusted my pillow.

"Where are my parents?" I asked.

She looked at me with a sincere expression. "I'll go get the doctor."

Why couldn't she tell me? Is something wrong? I pondered to myself. I tried my best to keep from thinking of the worst possible outcome. I had to maintain a positive outlook. I had to believe that everything was going to be okay.

"Hello Ivanna. How are you feeling?"

There was a gentle quality to his voice that made me want to trust him.

"I'm okay just a little sore," I responded.

"My name is Doctor Nelson and I'll be the doctor in charge of your recovery," he said.

"Nice to meet you."

"It's a miracle that you survived with only a few scratches and bruises."

"My parents?" I asked softly.

He avoided the question and changed the subject.

"We're going to keep you here for a few days and run some more tests. Just to be sure that everything is okay."

"Where are my parents? Are they okay?" I asked again but this time with more authority.

His expression drastically changed for the worst, and I braced for the impending nightmare. He walked up to the side of my hospital bed and gave a deep sigh. All I could think was, *No. Please*

no! Don't do this to me. And in the same gentle voice he uttered the words that changed my world forever.

“I’m sorry Ivanna, but your parents passed away.”

My parents were dead. His words hit me harder than any car accident ever could. For a moment, I held on to the hope that I was still having a bad dream. That his words were a lie. That I wasn’t an orphan. That I hadn’t lost my parents on my birthday. My eyes began to water as I pointlessly tried to hold back the tears.

“How?” I struggled to ask as my throat began to close.

“I don’t think you should—”

“HOW DID THEY DIE?” I cried out.

Doctor Nelson looked down at the floor and then looked me in the eyes. I started to regret having asked the question, but a part of me needed to know what happened. Once again, my body stiffened for the incoming avalanche that would plunge me further into the deep crevice that was my life.

“Your car was struck in a head on collision with another vehicle. The police are still investigating, but they think the person was driving under the influence.”

He paused to measure my reaction. Probably waiting to see if I wanted to listen to more. I urged him on, “And?”

“Your father was killed instantly, but your mother survived and reached the hospital. We operated and did the best we could, but she succumbed to her injuries.”

“Did they get him? The other driver,” my voice was barely distinguishable.

“He sustained critical injuries and bled out at the scene.”

A rush of anger and rage flooded my body. I couldn't believe that the person responsible got to die a painless death. I wanted to see him suffer and pay for what he did. I wanted to rip out his heart and crush it in front of his eyes. I wanted to make him feel the pain that I was feeling.

Doctor Nelson broke the silence by asking, "Do you know anyone we can call who can take care of you? Perhaps a relative like an uncle or a grandmother."

I rolled over to the opposite side of the bed and curled into a ball. Signaling that I was done with the conversation. I wanted to be left alone. I wanted to bury myself deep into a cave, never to be disturbed. I wanted to be done with this world.

Then Doctor Nelson uttered the words that I would probably be hearing again and again for the rest of my life.

"I am sorry for your loss."

There were no words that could describe my loss. All I could say is that it was the worst feeling I have ever felt. Like my heart was being pulled out my chest, while my throat was being crushed under the weight of a heavy sorrow.

I could no longer hold back the tears, so I closed my eyes and I let it all out. I released all the pent-up grief and anguish. The sobbing became uncontrollable, and I struggled to catch my breath, but I just didn't care anymore. I wanted to die on that hospital bed and join my parents. I couldn't imagine living in a world without them. I cried for hours and didn't move from my spot. I didn't talk to anyone, and I didn't look at anyone. I only stared at the dark and empty void within me that had lost something that could never be replaced. It was ironic that a day that was supposed to bring me joy for being alive for another year, was now a day I wished would end my life.

I slowly began to open my eyes and could barely make out a figure that was leaning on my bed. His forearms were laid on top of one another and his face was tilting to one side. It was a boy.

A boy I had never seen before and who was around my age. ‘Where did he come from?’ I asked myself. I had thought that I was the only one in room. He didn’t make a sound when he came in. It was like he just appeared out of thin air. He was not moving or saying anything. He was just crouching next my bed and staring at me. It was starting to become a little creepy and annoying.

“You are very pretty,” he said in a tender voice.

I did not expect to be called pretty after I have been bawling my eyes out. I started to sit up on the bed and he stood up and took a few steps back. Again, I noticed that his steps didn’t make a sound. He was a tall boy with an angelic presence and beautiful amber eyes. His hair was thick and dark brown and slightly shorter than mine but still long enough to occasionally cover his eyes.

“I’m very sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you,” he said.

“Who are you?” I asked irritated at his presence.

“My name is Michael.”

I wiped some of the tears from my eyes, “What do you want?”

He clasped his hands together and kept his eyes locked to mine. “Well, I wanted to be here for you. I overheard the doctor and I figured that you could use a friend.”