The Things that Belong to Us

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Introduction: Mental Health and Black Life

This project contains the beginning chapters of a longer novel, but one of my windows into this work was actually a poem. I was working at a sleepaway camp in Pennsylvania when one of my fellow counselors gave me and another counselor a prompt. *Neighborhood days,* he said. Two words, that's it. With those two words in mind, I put pen to paper and one of my favorite things happened. Words appeared without coaxing or begging. They spilled.

The phrase, *neighborhood days,* for me, conjured images of black children, black joy, black feet on pavement, black loss, and black life. I saw them clearly in my mind, saw the bottoms of their feet as they horse-played on their block, saw them huddled together in groups, saw them laugh together and cry together. When I reached the poem's end, it seemed my soul had responded to something that Gwendolyn Brooks drew out of me with her 1960 poem *We Real Cool*. Neighborhood days was the product of black voices in conversation with each other— my own internal conversation with Gwendolyn Brooks, and my work, which was written with the knowledge that I would share it with my fellow black counselors and friends.

I knew that I wanted to write about mental illness with my senior project, however this discussion of mental illness within my narrative began in the abstract. At first, I wanted to create an alternate world called The Inbetween, which would have been a metaphor for the space we inhabit when in mental distress. The Inbetween was going to be an ungrounded place that was neither here nor there. My characters were going to end up in The Inbetween in moments where their mental selves were denying the present moment, either while battling anxiety or depression.

I wanted to unpack an existential feeling I had become familiar with. During phases of life where my depression was heavy and my anxiety was debilitating, I felt a dissonance between the space my body occupied and the rest of me— a fractured state of being. I sought out to abstract this feeling with the creation of The Inbetween in an attempt to find some sort of deeper truth or understanding.

My first journey into The Inbetween was blurry and confusing. It was a vague place whose rules I didn't understand. I was lost in my story, and not in a good way. I grappled with a lofty philosophical idea and didn't have enough of a sense of my protagonist.

In search of a conflict that would allow me to move through this world, I found Esi. I could say I created Esi, but I much rather say I found her, or pieces of her, in my poetry, my prose, my writing exercises, and in the scribbles in my journal. Esi was not me, but we were similar. We both struggled with anxiety. We both experienced moments where the world was intolerable. We both, at some point or another, forgot how to function. I wanted to explore mental illness— specifically anxiety and depression, but it was important for me to conceptualize that these things do not exist in a vacuum. Every mental illness belongs to a person and manifests itself in someone's mind and body. It interacts with a person's history, experiences, personality, and choices and possibly is triggered by or onset by these things as well. Focussing on the conceptual idea of The Inbetween was not going to lead me to the truth I was hoping to find. It was Esi. Who she is and what molded her into being. Once I began to ask myself the important questions about her background and where she grew up, it only made sense that the neighborhood I wrote about in *Neighborhood Days*, was Esi's neighborhood. I saw her interacting with the children I visualized as she grew up. I saw her family's house on this block. I

saw the parents of these children barbequing with her parents. Once I came to this realization, her voice, and her soul began to round itself out for me.

Furthermore, the opportunity to discuss and represent black life while talking about mental illness presented itself to me. What are the cultural implications of being black and struggling with anxiety or depression? What kinds of conflict does it create within the familial unit? What happens when the black experience and mental illness intersect? What kind of human being does this produce and how are they socialized? As someone that finds themself at this point of intersection, I found it necessary to write towards and around these questions.

The story itself is about a young woman, Esi, born and raised in Brooklyn, New York, who goes away to a meditative writing retreat in an attempt to save herself. The person she needs saving from, ultimately, is herself. There are a few points of conflict. She doesn't just struggle with Generalized Anxiety and depression; she is also an empath. Throughout her life, she finds herself absorbing the emotions of others—oftentimes the negative emotions, which exacerbates her own problems and deepens the intimacy of the relationship between herself and pain. Other people's emotions and negative energy are foreign in her body, and when she taps into them unintentionally, they take a toll on her. Though the meditative writing retreat is supposed to be her saving grace, she will be pushed and challenged. Her external conflict: a devastatingly handsome young man named Nile whose pain she can't help but tap into.

As she is growing up, Esi finds an unlikely ally in an agoraphobic white woman named Marian that lives on her block. They share a familiarity with pain and empathic abilities. With Marian as one of the lingering voices in Esi's mind, along with that of her mother and father, I

hope to highlight, emphasize, and unpack, not just the general intersection between blackness and mental illness, but Esi's experience specifically.

I've said the word *soul* a couple of times in this introduction, so it's important for me to talk a little bit about that and what the soul means to me in relation to this project. I would like to call upon Eckhart Tolle's definition of the soul, partially because it is one that comes quite close to what I believe the soul is and partially because his book, *The Power of Now* and his philosophical discussion of presence and being largely influenced the beginning of this project. Tolle says, "The soul is your innermost being. The presence that you are beyond form. The consciousness that you are beyond form, that is the soul. That is who you are in essence." What does this mean for this project?

The answer is in the different forms of spirituality that Esi encounters and the spirituality that is inherent in her power as an empath. Though there are many different spiritual perspectives, one that I find particularly fascinating is spirituality in the connectivity of us all as human beings and also spirituality as the belief that there is something larger than ourselves that we are all apart of. The idea that there is something inside our bodies and our bones, a core that is the ultimate self or essence, and that this essence and other people's essences, and the universe as a whole are connected in ways beyond complete intellectual understanding, lingers within my pages. The relationship between this, God as Esi understands him, and other people's ideas of God presents itself as well. The fact that she is going away to a meditative retreat for healing offers up more in the realm of spirituality, as she spends time trying to achieve peaceful stillness in her own mind while also being able to access some pieces of the essence of others through her empathic abilities.

Neighborhood Days

Barefoot, barefeet
bare street, concrete
popsicle sticks on sidewalks
hopscotch with white chalk

and black feet
cookouts: we all eat
we lay back
we chill out
we come together and fall out

we sleep long, hide in the shade
with the kool aid that granny made

Barefoot, barefeet
we freeze tag, on your street
Isaiah got picked up with a dime of weed
he swallowed it with high speed
the baggy got stuck and Izzy choked
we inhale
we blow smoke

Barefoot, barefeet
we make love, we lose sleep
we breathe hard, we moan loud
we lay back, we chill out

Lisa got raped in a driveway
by five guys, with five names
she cried hard, she felt shame
we held her hands, then walked away.

Barefoot, barefeet
we put our hands up and don't breathe

We run home and shut the door
we laugh hard and tip-toe.

Barefoot, barefeet
black street, concrete
when night falls we slink away, at the end of all our
neighborhood days.

Chapter One

The only white lady on the block died last week Sunday and I am the one person in the neighborhood that cares. I think the rest of them don't care because she's white and crazy, and for them, it's that simple. Whiteness and craziness aside, that white lady, whose name was actually Marian and not 'That White Lady', was one of the few people in the world that understood me. Marian is the reason I sit here now, in a yurt, hundreds of miles away from home, beneath the stars. I am in the middle of the open space on a firm but soft pink mat, made of both plastic and foam, and the fabric encasing of this yurt stretches upward into a three dimensional parabola with a see through dome top. This is nice, I think. There are no stars like this in Brooklyn.

It's kind of funny the way life works. In our neighborhood, Marian was the only white person, surrounded by a small but lively fragment of Brooklyn's second generation caribbean population. In this yurt, and God, I hate the word yurt, only four of us are some kind of colored, so now I'm the fish out of water.

With my eyes shut tight and legs crossed in what the instructor has called: sukhasana, I remember her.

"It's a demon in that one," my dad used to say whenever we passed Marian's house on the walk home from school. This was eleven years ago, when I was nine years old, and the white lady stood at her window like a waxy ghost, watching the neighborhood kids walk home from school every day like it was her job, so I halfway believed him. Sometimes, when we were

walking and Dad was far away in his own head, I'd look straight at her. She didn't comb her hair so it locked together in an unkempt, nasty kind of way, and she dressed in old wrinkly flannels, and button downs, and every now and then in nurse scrubs. For a long time, I thought she was an old lady, but once I got a good look at her face, I realized that she was middle aged, and not much older than my own parents. This is the first time since she has died that I am allowing myself to remember Marian. I press my palms faced down on my yoga mat like it will allow me to push all the pressure that has built up inside me into the ground, so that I don't have to hold onto it anymore.

When I was thirteen, during the summer before high school, Dad said it again: "It's a demon in that one." We were barbecuing for the fourth of July in the front yard. The fathers were playing a game of dominos on the white fold out table and the mothers were sipping on fruity drinks that the kids weren't allowed to touch, gossiping amongst themselves. Mom was walking in and out of the house busily, tending to everyone's needs, bringing out extra napkins or a new bag of ice, or some freshly seasoned meat for Dad to throw on the grill. The seasoning was the most important part, but Dad felt like the man in charge when he stood over that huge black grill and laid jerk chicken over rods of green pimento wood.

"How do you know she's got a demon in her?" I asked him. It was just the two of us standing over there. The smoke from the grill was too thick and spicy for common comfort so everyone else was on the other side of the yard. I was Dad's assistant, glazing all the meat in his special sauce before he flipped it over. The white lady was a few houses down and across the street, but we could see her from where we stood, seated in the dusty, white, weathered garden

chair under the shade of her patio. She rarely ever came outside, but there she was, perhaps her own celebration of the fourth.

"Cause I know a demon when I see one," he said. "She's bad minded, that one. Looking at all of us through her window, probably muttering *nigger nigger nigger* under her breath. They all do it you know. Say nigger when no niggers are around to hear it." I cringed at the hard *er* at the end of the word.

"How do you know if you aren't around to hear it?" I asked.

"Because some things you just know."

"But why do you say she's got a demon though?" I asked.

"You don't feel it? When you walk past that house there's something wrong. Some kind of wickedness. She used to have kids I think. But they took them away. Someone told me that."

"Who?"

"I don't know. Someone."

"Seems a reliable source."

Dad rolled his eyes and clicked his tongue. "Don't get smart," he said, slipping into a very subtle twang of Jamaican patois. "You not too old for me to break a piece ah wood across your back." He never actually broke a piece of wood across my back. I'd gotten some beatings in my life, but usually with my mother's bare hands or my father's belt. Never with a piece of wood.

The breathy collective exhale of the yoga class around me brings me back to the present moment and the instructor tells us that we are supposed to be focusing on our breath, on the way it feels coming in and out, on the expansion of our lungs that we usually ignore. She is telling us

that if our mind drifts, that is okay, but to be conscious of it and to bring it back. Now is not the time for remembering, but right now I don't care. I have never been very good at meditating anyway and am much better at medicating, which is probably part of the problem.

Halfway through my freshman year of high school, about seven years ago, I wound up in the nurse's office with a stomach ache, which quickly escalated into a full on frantic spell of terror and panic. I vaguely remember it. The only clear image in my mind is of the nurse's face. She was tired and frustrated and she wasn't helping me anymore. Her eyes had dark circles under them and she wore reading glasses and blue jeans. She was a thick woman with thundering thighs, permed hair, and lots of extra flesh under her arms. She had tried to help, had offered me water, tea, an ice pack, a heating pad, some ginger ale, none of which I accepted. Once I began pacing wildly and refusing to sit down for her to take my temperature, she resigned to the seat at her desk and called my parents.

The next year, the school counselor, who was white and made all the students call her Bethany, met with my parents and suggested that I might have some kind of anxiety disorder. Dad scoffed.

"Disorder?" he asked. "No. There's something stuck onto her because she isn't faithful to the lord. Something wicked. It would go away if she prayed more."

I wanted to ask him how it got stuck on me but I knew better. The counselor looked at him with expressionless eyes that reminded me of the marbles in the heads of my old teddy bears, and I looked away, embarrassed.

"What do you suggest we do?" Mom asked, as if my father hadn't spoken at all.

"I think her anxiety is severe. I'm not qualified to make a diagnosis but I definitely think she should talk to someone. Maybe a therapist, maybe a psychiatrist that can prescribe something to help her manage."

"Prescribe something?" my mom asked.

"I won't hear this bullshit," Dad grunted. "These people want to put pills in her and make her stupid. That's what they do. You get one likkle dege-dege itch on your nose and they throw pills at you."

"I believe that your daughter is at a point where her mental health is negatively affecting other parts of her life. Her schoolwork for example—"

"You haven't been doing your schoolwork?" Dad interrupted, staring at me. "This is the first I'm hearing of this."

"No. That isn't what I was saying," Bethany said, her face reddening.

"Well what is it that you're saying then?" he said sharply. It was amazing how clean and precise his American pronunciations were when he wanted them to be.

"I-I…" Bethany sputtered. I kept my head down. "I'm trying to tell you that--"

"You said there's problems with her schoolwork, right?"

"Jesus *fucking* Christ. Could you let her speak." Mom snapped. The voice didn't sound like hers but it was. Straight from my mother's voice box and past her lips, the words: Jesus *fucking* Christ. I could feel my father's rage. I wondered if anyone could feel it the way I could. He was silent, with his face tightly composed, but the anger was a white hot fire burning through his organs. I could feel this myself, though it didn't belong to me. Sometimes I felt things that didn't belong to me. I wasn't angry with my mother so I knew this fire was not my own. I was

proud of her. My father spoke loud and she often sat in quiet disagreement. For some reason, in that room, I could feel his fire like it was my own. A fire safety class once taught me that different colored flames had different temperatures. A dull red flame could be maybe seven hundred degrees, a bright orange: a thousand one hundred degrees. A flame that is bright white: one thousand five hundred degrees. Enough to melt stainless steel. That was my dad in that room. One thousand five hundred degrees and not even showing it on his face.

The yurt is quiet except for the subtle sound of everyone's breath. I try to focus on my body, the way the instructor wants me to. I feel my black crystal in my front pocket, pressing at the crease where my legs connect and fold into my pelvis. I adjust my posture in sukhasana and find myself retrieving the crystal from the pocket, very slowly so that the instructor doesn't notice. This crystal used to belong to Marian, but she gave it to me when she thought I needed it more. It is called black tourmaline and it is meant to keep negative energy away from you, if you're the kind that believes in that sort of thing. I hold the black crystal so tightly it makes an imprint in my hand that looks vaguely like a teeny collection of skyscrapers. It's edges aren't sharp but they look like they could have been once. Somewhere in existing space time, there is a big black crystal, bigger than me, bigger than this entire yurt even, and someone is cutting chunks out of it so they can distribute its pieces. They can sell a chunk here and another there, perhaps keep some in their home for psychic use, or for decoration. It is a beautiful crystal--black but not dull. It has luster. It catches light. I wonder if this crystal would know the rest of itself if it saw it—another shard that came from that first originating crystal, the size of this yurt. It's a silly thought. Crystals don't have eyes.

I open my own eyes and see that everyone else has theirs closed. I tilt my head back just slightly and look at the stars, a splattering of tiny white dots against a black canvas. I think about the trees that surround us outside of this small, dome-like structure, deep in the woods of The Poconos. It is obvious that we are some place quieter. Much quieter than Manhattan, where I boarded the bus over here, and quieter than Brooklyn too, where I live. I try not to let the new scenery disturb me, or the fact that I wouldn't be able to find my way home if I tried. I can't drive and I have no money. I could turn the GPS on my phone on and walk back in the direction from which I came, if I could find my way, but it'd probably die on me. I think about how I am surrounded by white people, in front of me, behind me. They sit still in sukhasana, a word for the pose that I like much better than "criss-cross indian style". Maybe I shouldn't call them white people and just call them people. Maybe it would serve me better. Would it? I don't know. I close my eyes again and tighten my hands around Marian's crystal.

When I was sixteen, Mom and Dad divorced. I remember the night where he packed some clothes in a big brown leather duffle and left, the ground catching on hot white fire in his wake. Of course no one could see this fire but me. I knew it wasn't actually there, so I wasn't worried the house would burn to the ground or anything. I stared at the floor where his feet had stepped and as the fire dimmed, I wondered if time would dim all the other impressions of Dad that had collected around the house. He wasn't always angry. Traces of his laughter were caught in between couch cushions and on table tops. And there were the wedding photos, which, when I touched them felt rosy and pink. Framed images of him and Mom with less stress lines in their dark skin. I was the lightest one of the three of us, which made Dad sometimes joke that Mom had some explaining to do, but really she didn't. I was his carbon copy. Often I wished I looked

more like my mom. She was soft and birdlike in the most beautiful way, with her small heart shaped face, prominent cheekbones, and big full lips. Her dreads were down to her waist back then and she refused to cut them, saying, “I won’t give myself to the Philistines.” A biblical reference.

Also when I was sixteen, I skipped school for three weeks. My mother couldn’t get me out of bed in the mornings, not for lack of begging, pleading, and crying, holding my hand and saying, “We’ll get you the medicine you need. Whatever you need” and “What are you so afraid of, Esi? Has someone hurt you?” If someone had hurt me or I had suffered some kind of debilitating trauma, it would all make more sense, but I hadn’t. I simply felt an unrelenting dread and fear that wracked my entire body, my stomach, my chest, my vision. I shook sometimes and crouched down on the bathroom floor to steady myself again. My mother dragged me to doctors who did tests and said nothing was wrong. Doctors that said that it could be psychosomatic, a mental thing. Mom asked if I wanted to go to church. She said: God helps with the mental. God can take the pain away. I said: Shut up, and then I apologized for speaking to her that way.

I felt worse outside my house. The inside of my house was the safest place, and in there I could shut my bedroom door and no one else could see me falling apart. A social worker came to my house one day, sent by my school counselor to check that I was alive, and some kind of arrangement was made for me to get home schooled.

This next part will be hard for me to remember. This next part is of Marian. The same Marian I’ve been talking about, who ran into the street a week ago when paramedics tried to put her in an ambulance. She got away from them and ran straight into the street without looking, after which a car hit her and then rolled over her guts. I saw this, pretended not to see this, failed.

I spoke to Marian for the first time when I was sixteen and bedridden due to my mental illness that had been by then diagnosed as severe Generalized Anxiety Disorder. When the lack of sunshine in my house was starting to get to me, I forced myself outside for a walk. It was the evening. The neighborhood kids would be coming home from school soon. The fear came as soon as I opened the door. I was thinking: Panic attacks are the worst. If I go outside, I will get one. Home is safe and no one can see me. If I have a panic attack inside, no one will see. Outside, I will start shaking and they'll think I'm crazy, or weak, or sick. It will be disgusting. It will feel disgusting. What if I throw up? What if I have a heart attack? Am I too young for a heart attack? It's not impossible for a young person to have a heart attack. What if I pass out? What if I end up in the hospital. I hate hospitals. That's where people go to die. I could die. If I go outside I might die. If I go outside I might feel like I'm dying and that's almost just as bad. What if—

No. I got angry at myself. Unable to go outside? Why? It makes no sense. It's illogical. I forced myself out the front door, through the dizziness. I ignored the tremor in my hands. I was going to fight. I was going to walk to the end of the block. I had no good reason not to. I had no good reason to be afraid. I got to the bottom of the front steps. All I had to do was walk. Literally. That was the task of the day. Just walk. It was bright outside and January cold but I hadn't bothered to put on a jacket. It had been stuffy in the house and I wanted to feel the cold. I had on blue sweatpants and a big gray shirt. I looked unshowered. I looked like a bum. I looked at the sneakers hung over the telephone wires overhead. Raggedy old Nikes and the words Free My Nigga Izzy scrawled in black permanent marker on the telephone pole. Under that, carved into the wood was RIP Lil Soso. I remembered Lil Soso. He was black but had, what we called

"chinky" eyes, so everyone called him Lil Soso. He was shot two neighborhoods over when we were thirteen. The boys said it was over a pair of Jordans so I stopped wearing expensive shoes. I made a right and had only taken two steps forward before I saw Lisa. She was my friend. I hadn't been a friend to anyone as of recent, but I'd grown up with Lisa. Had been at her side through some dark times. Times no one in the neighborhood talked about anymore. She was walking at an even pace. At first she was in her own head and her eyes were empty and distant, but when she saw me, she smiled and approached faster.

"Esi! Oh my god, girl, I haven't seen you forever. My mom said you've been sick. Are you okay?" Her excitement was genuine. This I knew. But there was something else there. Something old and buried. Something that didn't belong to me.

I focussed on holding myself together, on not shaking, on not passing out. I gave her a weak smile.

"Yeah. I haven't been feeling well. How are you doing though?"

"What is it? Do the doctors know?" Lisa asked. She was a stunning girl. Darker in complexion than me and more beautiful too, with much more of a womanly figure. She always thought the opposite. Said, "All the boys like that light skin of yours, Esi. They think it makes you look Spanish or something. Plus you're skinny." Sometimes I liked it when people said I looked Spanish. It was a compliment. Or so I thought.

"No," I answered, and then quickly changed the subject. "What about you? How are you feeling?" The buried thing that sat inside her, sat inside me too. A big dark knot in our stomachs. That's how it felt in my body anyway. Like I'd eaten something bad and it was rotting inside me. I didn't have it before and now it was there, unignorable, tight, and nauseating.

"I'm good," she said. And it was really believable too. "There's this older guy. He's eighteen and he buys me things. Bought me this bracelet." She held her hand out. It was a sparkly silver charm bracelet. She pointed at the dance shoe charm. "This one is real diamond."

"Shit! Where does he get the money?" I asked.

Lisa shrugged. "Here and there, you know." I nodded. I ignored the heaviness in my stomach and blinked a few times to focus my eyes. "But anyway, do you still write those poems?"

"Not as much...But sometimes."

"Next time I see you, you should show me one! I got to go though. My brother's getting home soon and he can't be left alone or my mom'll have a fit," she said.

"Yeah, of course. Tell Ryan I said hi," I said to her. "And to stop causing trouble."

She laughed and touched her hand to my shoulder tenderly, before walking away. I kept myself together long enough for her to disappear, then I took a step forward and my stomach lurched, or rather, the heavy buried thing inside it did. I stumbled to the edge of the sidewalk, fell to my knees, and wretched. I felt someone beside me, pushing my hair away from my face and rubbing my back, but I didn't have the capacity, strength, or energy to look and see who it was. Once my stomach was completely empty, the person beside me sighed and said, "You poor thing. That's not yours."

I turned and looked at her through watery eyes. It was the crazy white lady, all the way on this side of the street, in her smelly, beat up nurses scrubs. She was shaking almost as hard as I was and it was clear that she was afraid. For a moment, we were hunched together on that street, afraid together and I wondered what kind of strength it must have taken her to force

herself out of her own house. Did she do it for me? And why? For a moment, I found comfort in this similar pain. But then, with suddenness, I flinched away from her touch, maybe because of the amount of times my dad had told me she'd had a demon in her, maybe because we had never talked before, maybe because I thought she was insane.

"What?" I asked.

"Other people's things can make you sicker than it makes them, especially if you don't know what it is."

"Sorry?" my throat was raw from throwing up and I could smell the mess I had made on the floor.

"That poor girl you were talking to. The one that got raped by all those boys some years ago. I imagine that she has some pain in her that could make anyone sick."

I stared at her dumbly. She might as well have been speaking gibberish. She took the black crystal out of her pocket and held it out in front of my eyes.

"Here," she said. "It's a crystal called black tourmaline. It protects you from the bad things that don't belong to you. Call them energies if you'd like." She moved the shiny black rock closer to me and I stood up quickly.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said.

"Yes you do," she said. "Look we all have our own anxieties and pains to deal with. You have quite a bit of your own. You don't need other people's pain too. At least not now. This might help a little bit. It won't make everything better but it might help with the things that don't belong to you." A few nosy neighbors were staring, as were the people walking by. They were watching me talk to that crazy white lady. I'd been holed up in my house for three weeks. A

recluse, suffering from an illness the doctors said didn't exist. Maybe they'd think we were the same. When she pushed the crystal towards me again, I knocked it straight out of her hand and shook my head.

"You leave me alone," I said. "You've got a demon in you."

I ran back towards my house and when I got to the front door, I looked back at her, standing over my sick with a trembling body and deadness in her eyes. She kneeled down and picked up her crystal.

I couldn't take the black tourmaline crystal from Marian on that day, but now I sit in a yurt, imagine that, a yurt, holding on to it for dear life. There are a lot of new people here and I am nervous enough on my own without taking on anything that doesn't belong to me. I wish I could talk to her now. That crazy white lady who turned out not to be that crazy at all.

A week after Marian offered me the crystal that first time, I showed up at her door at night time, when few people were outside to notice and she welcomed me inside like she was expecting me. From that day on, I spoke to her often. Showed up at her house for advice or comfort or to keep her company. She spent most of her days alone. I wish I could talk to her now. I wish she was sitting beside me.

The yoga instructor tells us to imagine a feather, any feather. I think of a white one, small enough to fit along the middle line in the palm of my hand. She tells us to see this feather. To really *see* it. To see its fuzziness if it is fuzzy, to know its size, to imagine it floating in the air in front of us and to blow. She tells us to call the feather back to ourselves and blow again. I get bored of this quickly and the next time I blow the feather, I blow it all the way to my desk back home. I blow the feather all the way back to last week Sunday.

My desk was at the window on the second level of our house. It was one in the morning and my mother was asleep down the hall. It was summertime and I was a college student, so it was okay that I was at home. This, I had to tell myself. I took classes at Brooklyn College, only a ten minute drive from home. Though I hadn't been bedridden since I was sixteen, and had started taking medication and the occasional session of cognitive behavioral therapy when my mother could afford it, I was not okay. In my life thus far, there were spans of months where I was almost normal. Where I functioned just like anyone else. Went to class, spent time with friends, got good grades, laughed. But there were the times where my illness got the better of me. It would start with one day and move into the next until I was forcing myself to go everywhere that wasn't home, and swallowing pills of Xanax just to get me through it, just to get a little bit of relief from the constant nausea and the downward spiralling staircase of my anxieties. They had not yet cleaned Marian's blood off of the street and there was a lot of it. I could see it from my window, even in the dark, an amorphous section of asphalt that was darker than the rest, and little bits of flesh.

I spilled all my pills out onto my desk. Old pills and new, from different bottles that I had lined up on the desk. Fluoxetine, Xanax, Omeprazole, Propranolol, Ibuprofen. All different colors. Kind of beautiful. I did this a few times in my life. Spilled all my pills on a flat surface and looked at them, aware that I had everything I needed to die. I'd think: I could just eat these and die. It could be that easy. The Xanax and Propranolol looked alike. Small and orange. I couldn't tell them apart except for the tiny engravings on the pills. The Ibuprofen looked like skittles. The Fluoxetine was oval shaped, half white, half green, and was supposed to make it so that I didn't do things like this. I could take two of something and just put the rest back. Go to

sleep and wake back up again, a new day. Wake up again. This wasn't about Marian and her blood on the asphalt. It was about me. It was about the way the pain always came back, and the numbness soon after, like an inevitability. I counted them all. The pills. Ninety seven of them. Enough to sleep and sleep and sleep. I started shaking, thinking about where I'd go in this sleep, thinking about stillness, thinking about evaporating from my body. Seconds later I was screaming for my mother. Screaming MOMMY MOMMY MOMMY in a way I hadn't since I was a child, wailing, panting, shaking, knocking my pills all over the place. She rushed into my room and her panic crashed into mine. I felt it in my body. Two waves under a storm, moving in opposition and slamming into each other.

"Oh god, oh god," I heard her saying. "What are you doing with all those pills?" She pulled me up off the chair and wrapped me up in her arms, squeezing. "Did you take any?"

I was crying, tears splitting both my cheeks in half like salty liquid blades. I shook my head no.

"Are you lying?" she asked.

"No," I said again.

It took half an hour for my crying to subside, for my mother and I to be sitting quietly on the carpeted ground, my head on her chest and my snot on her shirt, pills of different colors scattered here and there. In the silence, I thought of a line from that movie, *The Hours*, where Nicole Kidman, as Virginia Woolf said to Leonard: *You live with the threat of my extinction. I live with it too.* And the line never hit as hard as it did then, when I realized how scared I was of myself.

“Mommy,” I heard my twenty-one year old self saying into my mother’s bosom, sniffling and sloppy and an altogether mess. “You can’t save me forever.”

She was quiet for a good long time, but when she spoke, she said something completely unexpected: “Remember that retreat. The one that crazy—” she cut herself off and began again. “The thing that *Marian*, God rest her soul, told you about? Where you can write and meditate and… I don’t know.”

“Nurture Meditative Writing Retreat,” I mumbled.

“Yes,” her voice was shaky but strong, and I felt the vibration in her chest as she spoke.

“You said I shouldn’t go. You agreed with me when I said it was too far.”

“I know,” she said. “But I think, maybe, going too far might do you some good.”

“Why?” I asked, pulling away from her, my head spinning and my heart thumping so hard I could hear it.

“Because you want to live,” she said. “And you can’t do it here.” I could see her own dried trails of tears on her face. She cupped the side of my face with her hand, firm but gentle. “My sweet girl, Esi. You want to live, else you wouldn’t have called for me. Admit it to yourself, baby. Say it.”

“I’ll go to the retreat,” I decided in that moment.

“Alright, but say it.”

“I want to live.” I said quietly, my voice splitting like the surface of a frozen pond.

“Say it again,” she said.

“I want to live.”

My grasp around the black tourmaline has loosened and I remember the feather the instructor made me create and I call it back to me. I set it behind my eyelids. In the dark, there is that feather, light and weightless.

"Let's end this session with an ohmmmm," the instructor says.

We all say it together. *Ohmmmmmm*, our voices laying on top of each other in unison.

Chapter Two

I heard my mother cry in the shower once. I was six or seven. The bathroom door was off white and the knob was painted gold, still shiny at the top, but chipping away underneath. I think that was the first and only time I heard her cry. It was a shocking sound-- her sobs. We were the only ones in the house and Dad wouldn't be home until half past seven. This was long before he left. He worked as a carpenter for the city and often came home with flecks of wood smeared all over his navy blue shirt in a fine dust and with a heavy neon yellow vest on, but it wasn't half past seven yet, so we were alone.

I remember staring at that knob, knowing that the sound of the running water was supposed to be her cover. It was then that I realized that my mother and I had something in common: We cried sometimes.

Me, usually when I didn't get what I wanted. Her tears, I couldn't quite understand.

I stood there at the door in a helpless kind of way and pressed my bare feet against the ground, extra hard, like I was trying to merge with it, letting my veins pop out like thin green tree roots covered in skin. I could barely hear the sobs-- had heard them by accident in the first place and then searched through the water with my ears to confirm that they were real, as I thought about how mothers were people too and not just angels. That she had tears of her own and didn't just exist to wipe away mine.

My mother's mother had passed when she was young, so the comfort of the shower water was the closest thing she had to a mother's touch. I moved from the door because standing there

felt wrong. Her sobs weren't for my ears. I went to our shared bedroom, where my twin sized bed was on one side and the king sized bed her and dad shared was on the other, and I sat, legs crossed, not knowing what to do with myself-- if I should go off, play with my dolls, and pretend I hadn't heard a thing, or wait. The shower shut off. I tensed and looked straight ahead at the door, wondering if she'd come in with a puffy face and sad eyes.

She didn't.

When she entered, she was ethereal, skin moisturized and dewy with her white towel wrapped around her body and tucked away in deliberate perfection. Her long, thinly twisted dreadlocks were piled atop her head, wound up into a bun that resembled an intricately woven basket. Even stranger, she was smiling; and not in a bright gleaming way that seemed forced or out of place— more like she had smelled something sweet and pleasing. She hummed that Ella Fitzgerald tune that went:

Don't cry, oh honey please don't be that way
Clouds in the sky, should never make you feel that way.

Her voice was light and airy and not quite pitch perfect. I didn't know the words to this song she was singing, but it sounded familiar. Like maybe, she'd sung it to me before.

I don't remember what happened after this, but my Mom said it once some years later, not realizing she was adding on to a memory I already had. She had been sitting at the kitchen table with the pregnant woman that had recently moved into the house at the end of the block with the shiny silver fence and big front yard. I was eleven, leaning up against the orange painted door trying to catch my mother in the act of being more than just a mother-- a person with friends, and a life. Dad was asleep on the couch with a rerun of Criminal Minds on the TV competing with his low grumbling snores.

"I feel like I'm going crazy. I mean the doctors keep saying it's a perfectly healthy pregnancy and that everything is going just right, but I still wake up in the middle of the night sick, checking the bedsheets for blood. And Vincent doesn't get it, you know?" Mom's pregnant friend said. I pressed my ear up against the door and listened as hard as I could.

"Men don't get anything," Mom said.

The pregnant friend laughed and my mother did too. But then Mom said, "Two weeks after *my* miscarriage, Lloyd said: 'Well we weren't trying for one anyway. Maybe it wasn't meant to be.'"

"Oh God. And what did you say back?"

"Nothing," Mom said. There was a silence and I imagined a long stare between the two of them, or maybe an awkward averting of eyes.

"I cried everyday for a good long time, girl. Always in the shower so Esi wouldn't catch it. But one day when she was real young, she sat in the room waiting for me afterwards and I felt like I'd been caught. You put on the brave face, you know? And you hope never to get caught."

"Oh, Liyah."

"I started singing a tune, carrying on like I wasn't just bawling my eyes out, and you wouldn't believe it."

"Believe what?" the friend said.

"Esi walked over to me, six years old, looked up at me and said 'Mommy it's not your fault' in that baby voice of hers. I swear it."

"Nuh uh," the friend said.

"Yes ma'am. So I said, 'what's that, Baby?' And she just said it right back again. Didn't even know what she was saying, I don't think. Or what it meant to me. Cause she couldn't have, right? But then she squeezed my hand and I felt the sadness slip away real slow and natural-like. Like a realization. Like a big rock was lifted off me. Can you believe that?"

*

The water pressure in the cabin is strong enough to turn my skin red and it has one of those adjustable shower heads, but it might as well not have one because I don't know how to use it. It's okay. I've had worse showers. I've had cold showers the winter after Dad left when Mom didn't have enough to pay for heat, or when the boiler broke and was too expensive to fix. This shower is more than okay. It's clean and spacious. The water is warm and a light steam expands in the tub. I turn the faucet and make the water too hot, a tiny twist away from burning. I want to be covered in steam. I want to emerge from the shower in skin that feels brand new. I want my pores to open up completely and ooze every ounce of poison out and I want the hot water to rinse it all away.

I'm not exactly sure what all the poison inside is made up of, but I know that I feel it under my skin quite frequently. Sometimes, I think I know exactly what it is. It's this illness or that. It's some cancer that the doctors don't know I have. Some autoimmune disease that hasn't yet been discovered. And if science doesn't offer an answer then maybe its a demon—even though I only believe in those in a far away kind of way, the way you believe in things your parents tell you about that you've never really experienced yourself. My mind restricts demons to hell and if not hell, then rare extraordinary places, not like under my skin, perhaps only in places where great atrocities have happened. My body is not home to any genocide, massacre,

slave trade, or holocaust. Demons should linger in those places. Not in me. I am not extraordinary enough to have any demons. I haven't experienced anything worthy of any profound heaviness. Have I? What do other bodies feel like on the inside? How do other people feel under their skin. I tilt my face up and look at the showerhead, think of the pills I poured out on my desk the week before, and imagine that this heavy pressure against my skin is pills instead of water. Pills in technicolor, raining all over me. I shut the water off and all sound goes away.

I leave the bathroom awkwardly, my fluffy white towel tied tightly around me so as to not accidentally flash my cabin mate, Shayla, who is lounging on her bed, scribbling in one of the complementary journals, made of recycled paper and bound in twine. We have an entire cabin to ourselves, with two of everything. Two full sized beds, two dressers, two drawers, two closets. It has an old rustic style but is polished and fresh looking, almost each wooden surface with some kind of glaze, gloss, or finish. The decor is simplistic, with a few landscape paintings hung up on the walls, depicting scenes with trees or mountains, and there are small stone statuettes of figures in meditative poses on flat surfaces here and there.

"Question," Shayla says, setting her journal down and looking at me. I wish she wouldn't do that. I'm still in my towel and I'd prefer to get dressed while shes focussed on something else.

"Uh huh," I reply, moving over to my dresser and grabbing a clean pair of underwear.

"It's your first time here, right?" she asks.

"Yeah."

"What brought you here? I always like to ask. Everyone has different stories." She is one of the few other black people here and I wonder if they did this on purpose. Thought we'd be more comfortable together. Would they be so thoughtful?

I slide my underwear on under my towel and grab a clean T shirt from the second drawer. We just moved in yesterday, so everything is still neat and organized. We will be here for a month. I think about how much I want to tell her.

"I needed to get away from home I guess," I say.

"Oh come on," she says. "You can do better than that! Alright let me tell you how I ended up here a couple years ago." I put on a pair of lounge pants and walk over to my bed, suddenly interested in the conversation.

"So it was the summer after I graduated from college and I had this whole plan. Grad school in the fall at Brandeis University, the perfect boyfriend, all that. I was gonna get my MFA in English. Right?"

"Yeah."

"Then I find out that perfect boyfriend had been cheating on me and all the plans start to unravel, you know? Cause I made decisions around him and the life we were supposed to have together. I chose Brandeis because it was a seventeen minute drive from Harvard where he was gonna be studying medicine." She sighs and shakes her head. "Where I really wanted to go was Johns Hopkins for The Writing Sessions but that would of been like six hours from him so I compromised, like I always did."

"Shit," I tsked and didn't bother telling her what my mother always told me: Don't ever *ever* make any big life decisions around no man. You gotta like yourself fine without him. The two of us sat on our parallel beds and faced each other like we were sharing sleepover secrets.

"Girl. I went crazy. That's the short story. I was in a courtroom for keying his car, and I remember this cause he talked about it all the time, a 1955 Porsche by someone named Wendler."

"1955 Porsche?" I interrupted. "This a white man?"

Shayla laughed and said, "Yes, I know. But this white man was *my* white man." This I understood.

"And a rich one at that."

"Richer than a motherfucker. An old money white boy with a Connecticut mansion like in the Gilmore Girls."

"Then I'm not judging, sis," I say, the corner of my mouth turning up. I notice the way we are talking to each other now. Neither of us pretending and dressing our words and sentences up to be perfect and proper. I relax into my body, allowing my shoulders to slouch as I wait for the next part of her story.

"Esi, I was angrier than I'd ever been in my life when the judge said to me 'you should try meditation'. An off hand snarky kind of comment, you know? But it stuck with me. So that night I was on the internet looking for something. Didn't know what, really. And I found *this* place. A meditative writing retreat for young writers. And it seemed just the thing, you know?"

I nod and when the silence collects, I roll my eyes and say, "Ah, so it's my turn now I suppose."

She waits, a patient expression on her face. We have fifteen minutes until breakfast begins in the lodge. Maybe I can distract her with something meaningless.

"My things are still raw," I say quietly. "But um… I had to pick something I'd never do and do it, go somewhere a good distance from everything I knew."

"Why?" she asks gently.

"Well," I take a long time to think about this and make myself say, "To save myself."

The way her face changes, it looks like she understands completely, and I find comfort in this.

"A friend of mine died and left an envelope full of money with my name on it. More money than I'd ever seen altogether in one place like that. Used it to come here," I disclose.

"I'm sorry for your loss."

"I hate how formal people get when someone dies," I say. "Condolences and apologies and solemn respectful faces. Like walking on eggshells. Thank you though."

"It's a good place to heal," Shayla says. "It's quiet during the nights and the air is clean. We get to write everything out and it's beautiful here. Anywhere you go you see something beautiful. And enough structure to make things feel purposeful."

"And stars," I say. "The first night here, in that yurt, I looked up and I couldn't get over it. All those stars. I wanted to scoop them out of the sky and put them in my pocket."

Shayla smiles at this. "You say that like you never seen stars."

"Not like that. They have lots of stars where you're from?"

"Connecticut," she says. "Yeah, they have stars there but I've lived in some cities so I know what you're talking about. You from New York?"

"Uh huh. Brooklyn."

"Do you like it over there?"

"Sometimes."

*

It is noon, but I remember this morning's mist on the lake. We always wake up in time to see it. It's a part of the routine. It's only day three and I know this, know that each morning will begin with an elongated glance out my cabin window to take notice of the marshmallowy white air, the way it feels like we are wrapped up in a cloud that is overflowing and spilling out from the heavens. The mist is gone now and we sit on the logs just behind one of the docks, writing. The lake is sharp and in focus, but I remember when it was not. When I looked out my window at the mist, and thought I might still be dreaming. Our workshop leader, Jessica, has her head in her own journal, as does everyone else besides me, but the young man sitting on the log in front of me is looking up at the clear blue sky. He is ordinary, short straight brown hair, glasses, a plain faded green shirt and jean shorts, but in this moment, with the sun beaming over him the way it does, he looks like the perfect portrait of someone at peace. A person who knows things the rest of us don't. Watching him makes me feel at peace. This is a rare thing.

"Psst," I hear myself say, unsure of where this comfort to engage has come from. He isn't startled by my interruption. He doesn't jump or flinch the way I expect him to, and instead turns his head to me with smoothness and calm. There are only fifteen people in this workshop and we are spaced out on these logs so as to not invade each other's space. Shayla has a different workshop than I do and right now, I am thankful for this one, for this view of the lake, for the painless presence of this young man.

"Hi," he says. "You don't have to whisper, I don't think. This space is good at holding quiet."

"What do you mean?"

"Well this clearing where the logs are, the bit of distance between the trees right here and the open air. There's not much for sound to bounce off of. Echoes are created by sound reflected back to the ears. Waves bounce off of this surface and the next and make things sound larger and amplified. But this special spot right here, as soon as you cut the quiet away with your tongue it comes right back. No bouncing, no reverberation, just voice and then no voice."

I smile at this. "So you're a science guy, huh?" He laughs and looks a bit embarrassed by this.

"I like science, yes," he says. "I'm kind of a nerd."

"That's alright. I grew up kind of a nerd too. How old are you?"

"Nineteen," he says. I knew he was younger than me. His peace is uncommon for his age, or for any age, but he has a smooth skinned, naive look to him. It might be the big eyes behind the small wiry glasses. We exchange names. His is Samson, but he says he lets his friends call him Sam and that I can call him Sam if I'd like.

"Can I ask you something, Sammy?" I ask. "Since you're a Bill Nye kind of guy."

He laughs hard. "I can't tell which part of what you said I'm rejecting the most. The 'Sammy' or the 'Bill Nye kind of guy' part. It's a toss up. What's the question?"

"What causes the mist on the lake?" I ask. "In the morning."

He smiles at this question, like it's a pleasant surprise, then says, "The sunrise."

"Go on."

"I will," he chuckles. "So there's this thing called dew point temperature, alright?"

"Yes." He swings his legs over his log and we lean closer together.

"And basically dew point temperature is where water vapor condenses to liquid water. Are you following?"

"Sort of."

"Condensation is when gas changes to water and evaporation is when water changes to a gas. So dew point is that temperature where the moisture in the air that we can't see gets closer to liquid. That make any sense?"

"Yes, actually."

"Cool. So that's dew point. The mist on the lake happens when the sun rises over the lake, it heats up the air over the water's surface. So when this warmer air touches the cooler surface of the water, it reaches dew point and then you have, well… dew. Or mist over the lake. It's the same kinda thing that happens when you breathe out in the winter and that smokey looking air comes out of your mouth. Cold air and warm air collide together and create vapor."

"I wish I had you as my science tutor ten years ago," I say. His face reddens only slightly and he shakes his head.

"Tomorrow morning, when you look at the mist, think about the cold air and the warm air disappearing into each other that way. No energy is ever lost. Just transmuted. Nothing ever comes out of nowhere. Think about that equilibrium and put it inside of you. That's what I do. It makes me feel calm."

Marian said something like that to me once. *Energy is never created or destroyed. It is only ever transmuted.* I never knew what to make of it. I still don't know completely, but his words keep echoing in my mind like they are speaking to something inside me. Something important. Something I can't quite put my finger around. I stop prying at the thought and just

think about the mist, think about the cold air dancing with the warm air until they saturate each other in moisture, think about lake, think about water altogether.

"Thank you," I say to him. And I mean it. Then, I begin to write.

It's drizzling.

Or somewhere in between drizzling and raining.

The ground is polka dotted with puddles in the places where the floor gets low-- or even just a slight bit lower than the rest.

Places you might not have ever noticed, had a tiny pond not taken up residence there.

You hear the quiet popping of the droplets on the tight surface of your umbrella and you look at the motion inside of the puddles.

The raindrop is the centerpoint of a silent pulse in the shape of a circle, and it seems that there are millions of these pulses, whether in the same circle or the circle just beside.

The scattering of all these puddles and circles yields a subtle kind of symphony of concentric pulses, starting with a raindrop, vibrating outward, disappearing just as another begins,

or reaches its half life,

or disappears too.

You try not to step in them, try to let them live out this moment in infinity without disruption. You let the puddle inhale and exhale and you inhale and exhale as the sky inhales and exhales and squeezes water out of itself like a rag soaked in water.

You step over and around an abundance of pulsing puddles collected in the low points and cracks.

You listen to the sound of spilling, spilling, spilling

and you wonder if spilling ever ends

or begins or stops even for a moment,

and the quiet space inside of you answers no,

it never does.

Something about this journal entry leaves me thinking about my mother, of that time she came out of the shower when I was six years old, dewy skinned and ethereal, hurting. Of myself searching through the water for the sound of her sobs. I don't remember the part of the story she told that pregnant lady. I don't remember touching her and saying, "Mommy, it's not your fault." But I do remember the story in her voice. Her telling her friend: "But then she squeezed my hand and I felt the sadness slip away real slow and natural-like. Like a realization. Like a big rock was lifted off me. Can you believe that?" And I remember something else. A feeling, if you can call it that. Something ineffable, indescribable, surreal. A feeling that felt like an evaporation that I was in control of. I think of myself as warm air, dancing with someone else who is cold air. A shifting in form from air and water to mist. I think about pain and peace and then pain again, about how I can touch someone else's and shake it around in my own body. The thought slips away. Stops making sense, not yet fully realized. I know the word transmutation. I've looked it up before. Marian has said it to me. Said that when I realized it's meaning, like *really* realized it, it would change my entire life. I looked it up and memorized it right after.

Transmute: To change or alter in form, appearance, or nature. Especially to a higher form.

To change or alter what?

who?

Higher?

Energy is never created or destroyed, just transmuted.

Energy. Everything is energy. I know this to be true.

Feelings are never created or destroyed, just transmuted.

Feelings. Emotions. Love becomes pain becomes something else and something else and something else. Always changing. I feel things that don't belong to me. But can I do more.

Empath. Marian ~~says~~ said it was a gift.

what kind of gift is it?

Chapter Three

"Today, you are going to tell each other about your pain," Eloise, the leader of our daily Group Share session says. A second ago, I was zoning out, waiting for the meeting to begin, but now I sit straight and stare at her, waiting for her to take her words back. Pain is what I came here to get away from.

Our class's session is in a place called the Tree Tower, which is a cabin made of dark wood, built at least ten feet off the ground and nestled into the canopies of the trees that surround it. When I approached the structure a few minutes ago, I half expected a family of fairies, dwarves, or mythical woodland creatures to rush down the long winding wooden ramp that connected the ground to the front door of the dwelling. There were two lanterns set on the endcaps of the railing, and I expected to find inside, an environment of peace and healing. The place looked magical.

But no. Here I sit with my legs crossed in a circle with fifteen others as someone tells us to share our pain. The clenching of my body is a response I have no control over. I don't want to hear about anyone's pain and I sure as hell don't want to share mine. The black tourmaline crystal is in my pocket and I want to reach for it, but I can't move. I feel my bottom teeth and my top teeth pushing against each other, I feel my hands balling into fists, I feel trapped in this Tree Tower, which looked so much like a paradise from afar.

The person beside me touches my shoulder and my head snaps in their direction. Another response that is outside of my control. Anxiety heightens, as if new fear is brought on by this

touch. My body clenches harder and I feel lightheaded, like the yellow light in the room from the overhead chandelier has gone from warm to menacing. But then, I feel something conflicting. Something sweet and relieving, a peak in interest that one gets when looking at something beautiful. I have lived in my body long enough to know that some of these feelings are not mine, but right now I don't know which ones, how to dull them, or how to separate them. Feeling them all at once and with such body flooding intensity makes my head throb.

"Sorry," he says, dropping his hand from my shoulder and searching my eyes. "I felt you shaking."

"You *felt* me?" I ask. Eloise is talking to the group, so we are whispering to each other.

"Yeah," he shrugs. "Just noticed that you got nervous or something."

"So you thought it was okay to touch me?" I mutter, with a questioning glare. He cocks his head just slightly and maintains eye contact, amusement replacing his concern. At this, I narrow my eyes in irritation. He is beautiful. An undeniable, undebatable kind of beautiful. He has a mess of brown, curly hair, which is not quite an afro, but still full of body and volume. His curls are healthy and defined, yet unkempt at the same time, like he was gifted with a head of gorgeous hair but not with the sense to take care of it. I don't use the word beautiful lightly. Most men are not beautiful. Even the good looking ones. This one is. He is so beautiful that I don't even want to speak to him. I would much rather he go and be that beautiful somewhere else, perhaps in a room with someone that doesn't mind it too much. I decide that he is a mix of black and something else. When I don't relent on the eye contact, which I must say is quite unusual for me, he raises one of his caterpillar thick eyebrows and I quickly look away.

“Let’s get started,” Eloise says looking at me. “Since the two of you were chattering over there, why don’t we start with you.” I blink.

“Me?” I ask.

“Yes, you. Esi, right?” I look around at the rest of the room, at all the white skin, and I wonder, just for a second, if their pain is made up of something different than mine. I don’t have to wonder. I could look behind their eyes if I wanted to. I feel everyone looking at me expectantly. Especially the beautiful man that sits beside me. Aside from his distinctive curly hair, is his macchiato colored skin, his full lips beneath a bit of a mustache and above a closely shaved beard. He looks like he knows he is pretty, like he is one of those light skinned men that squints their eyes and licks their lips too much. I will keep my interactions with him to a minimum and avoid him at all costs. Besides, I’ve always preferred dark skinned men. Men the color of my father.

“I can go first,” he offers to Eloise when I am silent for too long.

Eloise shakes her head. “No, Nile,” she says with slow deliberation. “Esi will go first.”

“And what if I don’t,” I say back. A lot of things scare me, but this white woman with her sandy blonde hair and yoga pants does not. She looks like the kind of person that has been comfortable for her entire life, and I resent her for thinking she has a right to my pain.

My response doesn’t shake her. She smiles back at me in a way that seems genuine. “You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to,” she says. “But I’m sure you came here for a reason. And if you want to walk out of here with something, you need to trust in the process.”

“What does pain have to do with the process?” I ask. The rest of the room just spectates. I feel the tension and uncertainty as they watch the two of us in this tango. She sits across the circle from me and faces me like an overly sweet opponent.

“Everything,” she says. “The things you run from don’t disappear. This place isn’t just a getaway. You don’t heal by getting away.”

“What would you like me to say?” I ask, trying to simmer down.

“Tell us something that hurt you,” she says. “It can be anything.” I know that I won’t talk about Marian, so I search for something else. For a moment, I think about telling them about my father. I think about telling them about his abandonment, the woman he remarried, and his new home in Harlem that is not ours. I think about telling them about how I ignore his phone calls because I love him too much and hate him too much. I consider telling them that I think he left because he thinks that I’ve got a demon in me. All the fights him and my mother got into when disagreeing on how to deal with my anxiety. I think about telling them that sometimes, I’d sit next to him when he watched TV on the sofa and talked to the characters like they were real. Once, someone at school asked me about my parents and I told them my father died. I still don’t know why I said that, and I still feel guilty over it. But all this would be too hard to say. I choose something easier.

“There was this kid that lived on my block,” I say reluctantly. “Izzy.”

“Go on,” Eloise says. Without thinking about it very much, I take my black tourmaline crystal out of my pocket and begin fidgeting with it, tracing it’s edges, turning it around in the palm of my hand.

"I knew him since I was a kid. He was one of us. The kids in my hood— we stuck together. He's the only boy I ever loved. He's not dead or anything but he's doing some years in prison for drug possession. Got picked up when I was sixteen... and you want to hear something selfish? I was relieved," I say. "Cause I wouldn't of left him otherwise. And cause I did something bad to him that I'd like to forget. I guess he's someone who hurt me. Never beat me or raped me or anything but he had lots of problems, and being with him made me forget where I ended and he began. So then we both had problems. And he did lots of fucked up shit for money too. Sometimes I thought he'd end up dead in the street by some cop or something. Or even by one of our own. When he was high, I was high. And when he was low, I was too. Sometimes I didn't even know who I was—shit. But Mom and Dad were having problems and Izzy lived just down the block. Didn't have to deal with them there. And when he kissed me… I felt like somebody."

I could go on and on about this. I could talk about all the fear and sadness I felt inside Izzy all the time. I could talk about the times I tried to take it away. Once, I looked behind his eyes and started trying to fix him. Tried to take his pain like I did that one time with my mother, but I messed up and got really sick and depressed for a few weeks. And that wasn't even the worst part. One day, I'd been talking to him and he mentioned his dead older brother like he was still alive, and when I asked him why he was doing that, he looked at me like I was crazy and said *John John* is *alive. What are you talking about?* And I knew I'd done that to him. I just knew. It's easily the worst thing I've ever done.

"Thank you for sharing Esi," Eloise says. The rest of the group nods. I don't look at her.

"One of my old professors recommended this place to me," Nile says. "He said he went here once and that it saved his life. Literally. That maybe he wouldn't be alive if it weren't for this place. I don't need saving or anything, but I haven't been able to write anything good in a while and he thinks I'm emotionally blocked."

"What do *you* think?" Eloise asks. This question catches Nile off guard.

"I don't know."

When she coaxes him into sharing something that hurt him, he says, "My mother got sick or something and had to give me up. I spent a lot of time in the system so I guess that's something. I—fuck, I don't know what you want me to say. Do most people know what's hurting them?" Eloise lets the question hang in the air and another guy in the circle chimes in.

"I never do," he says. "I'm a busy guy because I have to be. Once I slow down I start thinking and once I start thinking, my head ends up hurting and I don't even know why. Like I lay in bed at night and all of a sudden it feels like something's fuckin' sitting on my chest or something and I don't even know what I'm thinking of. Sometimes I don't even think I'm thinking. I'm zoned the fuck out but wide awake too. I came here to figure that out maybe. Writing has helped me work things out in the past."

"My mom died a year ago," a girl named Zena says. "And she was my best friend. I feel lost without her. I think I haven't really processed her death. It came out of nowhere. An embolism. So one day she was grocery shopping for a family reunion and then the next day she was gone. And I haven't been able to write about her. I think that's a problem." The two people beside her put a comforting hand on her back and she looks at them both with gratitude.

"This is my third year here," a young woman named Gia says. "I first came after I got discharged from this institution for people with severe bulimia. I'm healthy now. But coming here is cleansing for me. It's one of my forms of self care." The group nods at this, soberly and with understanding.

"BPD runs in my family," a freckled girl with faintly colored red hair says. Her voice is quiet and hesitant, so we all stop moving to hear her better. "I'm always reading that writers and artists and creatives struggle with mental illness and mood disorders more than the rest of the population. At first it was kind of comforting. Like yeah, I'm fucked up but maybe if I wasn't fucked up I wouldn't be able to write. Like maybe I'd never be passionate about anything or feel deeply and I probably wouldn't even notice. But then, like… how do I put this feeling in words."

"Take your time," someone says.

"Yeah, take your time. We're listening," another. I appreciate these comments and recognize them as kindness.

The girl begins speaking again. "I guess, um, well. We know what happened to Hemingway. Shotgun to the head. And Virginia Woolf… she had my illness and she ended up walking into that water with all those rocks in her pocket. And Sylvia Plath, god, she was a genius. I hear her words in my head sometimes. The 'I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart: I am, I am, I am.' First time I read her I thought: I want to *be* her. But then, and I hate to say this, I hate it— but I wonder if the stuff that made her a brilliant writer and the stuff that made her put her head in the oven aren't the same things, you know? And I get scared. I don't want to kill myself at all, that's not what I'm saying. But like...do I have it in me? Like, will I wake up one day with what it takes to put my head in an oven?"

We all sit quietly, letting this settle. I feel everyone else's uncertainty and hesitance beating in my own chest.

"No," I hear someone say firmly. The small red haired girl, whose head had lowered, looks up, her eyes glistening.

"No," another person says, this time louder.

"No you won't, Marta."

"No."

"Never."

"No." The word *no* appears like slow popping popcorn, everyone taking a turn saying it, each with more and more conviction. We look at each other, nod at each other, make eye contact, the way people do when making promises they plan on keeping.

I try the word out myself. "No." And then I say it again, like I mean it.

*

After the pain sharing activity, Eloise tells us that Group Share will be a time where we have the opportunity to share the new things we write. We will do read alouds. She also says that we will each have a private reader— someone we can share our work with when we want to share but don't want to share with a large group. Each day, after the open group share, we will meet with our private readers for a one on one experience. During private share time, we can also do writing exercises with our partner if we so choose. Leaving the Tree Tower is also an option, so long as we return before the end of the time block. Then, she goes around the circle pairing people up that are sitting beside one another.

“Great,” I mutter. Nile grins and shakes his head. Once Eloise moves on to the pair beside us, we both stand up and look at each other directly. His posture embodies ease and nonchalance and his eyes are steady, as if to challenge me. I notice something draped from his neck. The pendant of his necklace is tucked into his shirt, so all I can see of it is the thin black leather cord that hangs around his neck. The rest of it disappears beneath the part of his shirt just below the hollow at the bottom of his neck. He stares at me blankly, like he is waiting for me to speak first. The stubborn part inside of me stares back and remains silent. He smirks and digs both hands into his sweater pockets.

“What’s your problem with me?” he asks.

“I don’t have a problem with you.” My problem with him is probably how attracted to him I am.

“Yeah?” he asks, raising an eyebrow.

“Yeah.”

“What does that name mean anyway? Esi.”

“Born on a Sunday,” I tell him. He smiles at this and his dimples cut into his face with disarming quickness.

“Is it true?” he asks.

“Is what true?”

“Were you born on a sunday?”

“Nah,” I shake my head. “But I would of been if I was born three hours earlier. You named for the river?”

“I’m not sure,” he says. “But I like to think so.”

The rest of our group has separated off into pairs. Some of them wander out of the Tree Tower.

"Do you want to share your work with me?" he asks. I notice the dip at the top of his lips, the hair in his stache is sparser there. I notice the vague shine at the round tip of his nose.

"Not at all," I say. "Do you want to share yours?"

"Nope," he says. "Let's get out of here so Eloise doesn't see us not doing what we're supposed to be doing."

I am about to say no when Eloise walks over to check in. "How are you guys doing?"

"Good," Nile says. "We were just about to head over to the docks to do some writing. We're not ready to share anything yet."

"Oh yes. Such a good idea. I've done some of my best writing at the docks. Just be back on time, yes?"

"Of course," Nile says with a sweet smile. I narrow my eyes at him as he starts towards the Tree Tower's door and then reluctantly follow. Ideally, I would have stood there and let him walk away all by himself, letting him know that whatever he is used to, I am not it. I will not be charmed into bending to his will by that face, that smirk, those dimples. I am not here for him. I am not here for his beauty. I am here for me. I am here because I want to live.

"If you don't want to participate then why are you here?" I say sharply as I walk down the ramp behind him. There are string lights along the wooden railings which are turned on, even though the sun hasn't set.

"Last I checked you didn't want to share either," he says.

"I'm not ready yet."

He shrugs. “Me neither.”

Once we get to the end of the ramp, he turns to the left, which starts us on a grassy incline with a narrow dirt path.

“Well I’m not going with you,” I say.

“Can you chill? She said we can go off and write or whatever. We’ll be back in time.”

“Well why can’t we write here with everyone else?”

He stops abruptly, which causes me to walk face first into his broad back, and he turns around before I can gather myself. Nile cocks his head to the side.

“Everyone else?” he asks. “What? Are you afraid of me or something.”

I give a short harsh laugh. I can’t even begin to count the amount of things I fear. For a long time, going outside was one of them. Being looked at was another. Dealing with other people’s emotions was one too. I hate that he has brought up the idea of fear. Fear of *him* no less. He thinks he is so special. The audacity of him. The audacity of beautiful people. I feel my chest begin to tighten and my throat close, which is a familiar feeling. One that belongs to me.

Marian taught me about guards. Not security guards. The guards you put up inside yourself to keep other people out. She told me that a person like me has to get good at having guards so that I don’t end up retching on the side of the road because I’ve felt someone else’s pain and couldn’t handle it. Sometimes, I felt someone else by accident, the way you look at a person crying and start feeling sad for them, but my empathy was stronger. This was a dangerous thing. I learned how not to do this by keeping my eyes down. For a while, that's what I did. Kept my eyes down so that I didn’t look at someone good enough to feel for them. Then, I got good at looking at people but not paying them much attention. Not letting them stand too close, not

looking them in the eyes, not letting them touch me, letting most people fade into the background like unfocused images. A kind of isolation. I had acquaintances but stayed away from close friendships. Especially after what had happened with Izzy. Those are the ones you feel for the most. Those are the ones whose things cling on to you. The ones you let close. I can look at people now— can even look them in the eyes and still keep them at a distance. That's how I control it. With all my distance and all my guards.

Nile looks at me with his stupid smirk and his head tilted to the side.

"Afraid of *you*?" I ask and I brush past him on the path, leading the way, trekking up the incline. I am terrified, obviously, but he doesn't need to know that.

"I like bothering you," he says.

"Clearly." I'm still walking.

"It's too easy," he laughs. "And you look shy and quiet but you're fiery on the inside. I like that."

"Shut up."

I dig my hand into my pocket and squeeze Marian's crystal, feel it's edges dig into the skin of my palms and focus on this instead of my tight chest and inability to swallow. I walk briskly, staying always a few steps ahead of him. It makes me feel in control. It makes me feel—

"Wait," I turn around after a few minutes of walking. "The lakes aren't uphill. They're towards the center." He begins laughing then, like he's known this for a good long while.

"Seemed like you knew where you were going, Sunday. I trusted you."

"Don't call me Sunday," I frown. "You started walking this way first."

“Did I do something to upset you?” he asks, completely unapologetically. When I don’t respond, he juts his chin out in the direction I was walking. “Keep going straight.”

“Why?”

“I found this cool place the other night. I wanted to see what it looked like with the sun out.”

“You go wandering in the woods at night?”

“You don’t?” He begins walking again and continues past me. The trees have gotten denser, so much so that all I can see surrounding the path is brush and leaves. I turn to look behind me and what is behind doesn’t look much different from what is in front. Were we walking longer than I thought? I look up at the sky, obscured by the canopy of trees, and think: This is where I die. Right here in these woods. If I turn around and walk back, it would be because I am afraid. And maybe I have every reason to be. A fear of being alone in the woods with a man I don’t know is not an irrational one. It is not like being afraid of walking outside. But I didn’t come all the way here to be afraid. I think of the time I forced myself out of my house and made myself walk, despite the dizziness, despite the anxiety, despite the tossing and turning of my stomach. Once I am beside him, he gives me a quick sideways look and then a second look which lasts longer, starts at my face and moves down to my hand, which is balled tightly around the crystal.

“Do I make you nervous?” he asks.

“What would make you think that?”

“You roll that around in your hand when you’re nervous,” Nile says. “Can I see it?”

“No.”

Oh? It's that special?" he asks. And then he's moving closer to me, trying to get a look at it.

"Mind yours," I say, actually laughing. It's a childlike thing he's doing, trying to peek around me to get a look at my secret treasure. He tries to reach his arm around me and I dodge it, walking faster. "God, you're so annoying."

"What are you hiding? Let me see it."

"No," I laugh. "Leave me alone."

"Come on. I want to see it."

"Oh and I bet you always get what you want, don't you," I say, not meaning for it to sound as suggestive as it does. As my face reddens at this, I notice that we've stopped walking, and that we stand, facing each other, in the middle of the trail, which has somehow gotten narrower. He clenches and releases his jaw and looks me directly in my eyes with unrelenting precision. The playful glint is still there but so is something else, something visceral and unnerving.

"What gave you that impression?" he asks, raising an eyebrow. While my focus is on his face and not on the crystal in my hand, he reaches forward and I flinch, dropping it in the dirt. The both of us grab for it at the same time and he wins, but once it is in his hand and he can see it, he freezes.

"What?" I ask, not even trying to fight him for it anymore.

"It's just what I thought it was," he says. "Black tourmaline."

.With his other hand, he sweeps his finger under the leather cord around his neck and pulls the hidden part of his necklace out from under his shirt. It hangs there, his own black

tourmaline crystal. His has been made into a pendant, which comes to a dull point on either end and is wrapped around and held in place with silver wire, through which the thin leather cord is strung.

"You believe in coincidences?" he asks. I think back to something my mom once said to me when I found a five dollar bill on the ground just in time for a homeless man to approach and ask if we had money to spare: *There are no coincidences. Just God.*

"Well what else could it be?"

Nile clears his throat. "It's over there," he says, making a right into the brush outside the path and walking through a patch of waist high grass. I follow him because I've come this far and now I'm actually kind of curious.

Once we step out of all of the green, I find that we are standing way too close to an impossibly high ledge made of stone and rock. It's like a cliff with a small surface area, barely wide enough for two people to sit on and so high up that I can see what seems like miles and miles of unbothered wildlife. The trees huddle together like the heads of broccoli, and beyond that I see another lake, just a bit smaller than the one on the grounds of our retreat. He begins to walk toward the edge.

"Be careful," I say.

"Come here."

"Absolutely not."

"Don't you want to see?"

"I can see from here," I say back.

“Alright but everything is better on the edge,” he says. “Come here. Just take two steps forward. It’s terrifying.”

“That’s convincing.”

“Terrifying in the best way.” I look at him standing there, his back to me and his curls lifted by the slight wind around us. The shape of him is cut out in the cool blue sky and because I can’t make myself look down, I only look at him. He looks straight down, right over the edge like it’s calling to him. I picture this place in the dark and the hairs on my arms stand on end. I picture him alone here in the dark, staring over that ledge and I remember the glimpse into him that I got when he touched me. What I felt wasn’t long enough to make much sense of, but it wasn’t serenity and it wasn’t happiness and it wasn’t contentment. Not even close.

“There’s no way you came here at night,” I say quietly, standing in a place where the ground feels sturdy.

“It’s really beautiful here at night,” he says, almost to himself.

“How? I’m sure you can’t even see anything,” I say.

“That’s the beauty of it. It gets so dark all you can see is a whole lot of nothing, but you can feel it. The distance from the ground. You can feel how high up you are. There’s the edge and then there’s nothing. It’s like looking straight into a void.”

“Why do you wear the crystal around your neck?”

“Why do you carry it in your pocket?”

“I asked first.”

“Keeps the bad vibes away.”

“You get a lot of those?” I ask. “Bad vibes?”

"Oh man. I show you a pretty view and you think, what? That I want to jump off it?"

"I didn't say that."

"It's adrenaline, Esi. You stand here for a second and it's such a rush."

"You've been there more than a second," I say, blinking away my dizziness.

"Look at all this sky," he says, turning to face me.

"*Nile*," I say. "Be careful. Please." My arm reaches out to him in a kind of begging.

"*Esi*—"

"You asked me earlier if I was afraid," I say seriously.

"Yeah," the amusement on his face fades.

"I am."

He meets my eyes without his cockiness or amusement. Without his ego and teasing, and him voice cracks as he asks, "Aren't you tired of being afraid?"

"What do I do about it?" I ask.

"Just stand next to me on this edge and let yourself feel something. Let yourself feel the high. It's like nothing else, being right here, I promise." The thought is seductive, the promise of a high, of a feeling, of the conquering of fear.

When he reaches out, I slip my hand into his and step forward. My eyes are shut tight and I don't realize I am squeezing his hand until he squeezes back and says, "Look at it. Just for a second." And I do. I look straight down at all that air and imagine myself in freefall, wrapped around in wind and cutting through the sky. It's not a horrible feeling. In fact, for a moment, I feel free and thoughtless. I turn to him and see that he is already looking at me. Here, on the top

of this cliff, my heart beating fast with adrenaline and my skin flushing red, I make a decision. I decide to look behind Nile's eyes.

This is not what I came here to do. This is not what I am here for. I am here for me. I am here to fix all my broken parts, or try. I think of something Marian said to me once. She had some empathic ability too, though, she'd said, not as much as me. *All you have to do is look behind their eyes.* His palm is slick with sweat. Or mine is. I can't tell the difference. *That's where all their secrets are. Right behind their eyes. Most of us can do it just by being human, but you can do it better.*

It's not easy, looking behind someone's eyes. I try not to do it often. I think of it as a kind of stealing, for lack of a better word. Or perhaps, like peeping at someone when they're naked and unaware, accessing something they don't mean to show you. Also, I never know what I'll find. If it will hurt me, if it will linger, or stick onto me and make me sick. I decide to look behind Nile's eyes anyway. He is a special case. I don't know if I am doing it for him—because I want to know why he crawls to the end of a cliff after dark to look into the void. Or for me—because I want to feel him. Because I've spent so much time being afraid of feeling anyone.

A sparkling brown. His eyes. They are full where some people's eyes are empty. They are heavy and severe and unrelenting. This is where I let myself look. This is where I allow him to be in sharp focus. It isn't just like looking past his eyes. It's more like feeling past them, sifting through layer after layer of defense, quieting everything else, listening, listening, listening, until there's nothing left to listen to anymore. Until I can't hear anything that is actually making a sound. This is hard to describe— feeling someone else's emotions. In some ways, it's like a radio. I switch the channel from my own mind to another's and I listen.

Sometimes there's lots of static, a loud crumpling sound, a resistance. Mostly I feel it in my body. There is nothing verbal, no forming of words, nothing concrete or sensical.

My heart begins to beat differently, partially in speed and partially in rhythm and I know that this is not my heart, but his. There have been times when I couldn't tell the difference between another person's heart and my own and there likely will be times again, but this is not one of them. I am focussed and I feel through him with deliberate intention and care. He won't know that I'm doing this. I'm careful to leave everything where it is.

We are confused, we are excited, we are nervous. We are uncertain, we are cautious, we are intrigued. We are self conscious, confused again, vulnerable, raw, aroused. I am careful not to react. If I react, he might feel it. Reacting, I think, is what I did to my mother when I was six that one time. When I touched her and let her know it wasn't her fault. What I did to Izzy too when I made things worse. I am careful just to feel and not to do. We are confused, we are sympathetic, we are longing. We are holding ourselves together. This doesn't take long to do. This passes in between us in the space of a second. There is a dull ache in my chest. Not in my chest, in my ribs, in my bones. It hurts from the outside in and spreads like frozen fire. That burning feeling you get when something is so cold it isn't cold anymore. I feel blackness, I feel nothing. I feel like someone has scooped something out of me using a large spoon with sharp edges. I've gone too deep, so I bring myself back to the beginning:

We are confused, we are excited, we are nervous. We are uncertain, we are cautious, we are intrigued. We are self conscious, confused again, vulnerable, raw, aroused. He pushes my box braids away from my neck and keeps his hand there, his grip firm and his thumb pressing against the center of my neck, tilting my head back. I breathe in as he moves his thumb up,

touching it to my mouth and parting my lips. His mouth and my mouth collide in anger, in desire, in heat, in high, in pain, in pleasure, in flesh to flesh. I can't remember what belongs to me or what belongs to him, and I do not care.

Chapter Four

I'm thinking about Isaiah and his memory. I'm thinking about his fresh fade and crooked teeth. He wasn't the most handsome guy but he had a way of moving and talking that had most girls fooled. He had hoodies in every color and sneakers to match. A whole wall of sneakers even though his momma was on welfare. His momma never knew where he got his money from, and never bothered asking. That was what he called her. Momma. I thought it was sweet. Izzy's dad came and went. Sometimes with gifts. Sometimes disappeared for long periods of time and reappeared smiling like he'd never even left. His older brother was a gang banger. I don't know how he died, just that he did. I remember him walking around the hood with the older boys with their pants low, always talking loud and laughing about something. Making Izzy forget his brother died is the worst thing I ever did. I didn't mean to. Thought I was fixing something. It made his momma cry when he asked when John John was coming home. Seeing someone's momma cry is the worst thing. I didn't know his pain when I felt it. It felt like something big and dark that I couldn't make sense of. That's how pain feels sometimes when you don't do the work to make sense of it. Just big and dark and heavy. I didn't know how to make sense of it yet and what it was connected to, and so when I tried to take it away, I took something else. Sometimes I wonder what else I took by accident and this wrecks me. I should have left him alone.

I'm thinking about my dad. About how he taught me to swim at the YMCA. I don't know what that has to do with anything but I'm thinking of it. And I'm thinking of my mom, home all by herself. They don't let us have our phones here. I wish I could call her and see if she's alright.

I'm thinking about Nile. About that kiss and about how I told him I couldn't and then walked away. It's better that way. For a lot of reasons. For him and me.

I'm thinking about pain and all the things it's connected to. I'm thinking about how everyone has it. I'm wondering if that's one of the things that makes us human. Pain. That's sad. Why can't happiness be the thing that makes us human? Why can't it be the only thing?

I'm thinking about empathy. About how beautiful it was when Marta shared her pain and everyone responded with support. How we spilled everything out and felt less alone. How it felt like we weren't alone. I'm thinking about how the sharing of pain can lead to relief and how and why.

Sometimes I wonder if I'm really a writer and not just a person in pain, with a pen.

“Esi,” Shayla says. We are back in our cabin and she’s rummaging through her drawers looking for something. It’s forty minutes into our free time.

“Wait,” I say, not looking up from my journal. “Not finished.”

“You wrote anything good?” she asks.

“I’m just processing some things.”

“What things?”

I close my journal and set it in front of me on the bed. “I kissed this guy in my Group Share,” I say suddenly. Shayla spins around to face me, her eyes popping out of her head.

“Girl, *what*?” she says. “Ima need you to elaborate.”

I cover my face in embarrassment and exasperation and sigh. “He’s infuriating. Everything about him pushes my buttons. I don’t even know why. But I’m attracted to him and we hiked up the trail and stood on the edge of this little cliff and we kissed.”

“Okay sis!” she yells. “As you should! Get you some!”

I roll my eyes. “No, but I don’t *want* to get me some. I want to figure my shit out and, ugh, I didn’t come here for this.”

“Esi,” she says, setting both hands on her hips. “Whatever expectations you have, you’ve gotta throw them out. That, ‘I didn’t come here for this’ business ain’t gonna do you any good. You don’t know what your journey is supposed to be until it's done.”

“Whatever,” I shake my head.

“What’s his name?” Shayla asks. I think about if I want to disclose this.

“Nile.”

“Don’t know him. Must be new.”

“There’s this other thing that’s been bothering me,” I say. “And I can’t quite put my finger on it.”

“Try.”

“In Group Share we had to go around the circle sharing our pain,” I begin.

“Oh, you’ve got Eloise. I had her once. That session can get intense.”

“It was,” I say. “And I hated the idea of it at first but some parts were comforting too.”

“Yeah.”

“But I came here to get away from pain, you know? Not to talk about it.”

Shayla shakes her head and pulls two bikinis out of her drawer. One is seafoam green and the other is bright yellow. “I had an aunt that once said ‘if you keep sweeping things under the rug you make a mountain’.” Shayla holds both swimsuits up. “Which one?”

“The yellow,” I say. She grins at this and tosses the green one aside.

“Good choice,” she says. “Yellow is made for women dark like me.”

“This girl Marta said something about creatives having mental health problems. Like depression and other mood disorders. She mentioned Sylvia Plath with her head in the oven.”

“I’ve read things about that too,” Shayla says. “And I mean, yeah, a lot of creatives struggle with mental illness. That’s true. A lot of people in general struggle with it. We all go through stuff at one time or another. But that kind of ending isn’t an inevitability. It’s one of the reasons this place means so much to me. A place that nourishes us writers and lets us heal. All of us. A place that makes us stop and breathe.”

“I guess so.”

Shayla crosses the room and sits on my bed. She grabs both of my hands and looks me in my eyes earnestly.

"If you don't like something, change it. If you can't change it, change your attitude," Shayla says. "You know who said that?"

"Who?"

"Maya Angelou. Phenomenal poet. Lived past eighty." I smile.

"You wanna fly? You gotta give up that shit that weighs you down."

"Toni Morrison," I laugh.

"A legend, an activist, a visionary. Lived past eighty."

"Yes," I nod. She squeezes my hands.

"The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any," Shayla say. "Alice Walker. Novelist and more. Seventy five and still alive!"

"You just naming black women?" I ask.

"All my heroes are black women," Shayla states matter-of-factly. "Let me give you another one."

"Alright."

"Struggling with mental illness does not make you less. Neither does dying by it. Rest in peace to the brilliant Sylvia Plath. But you have more control than you think. Creatives are gifts to this world and, yes, some of us struggle with mental illness but we do not have to be victims of it. And we suffer sometimes, yes, but we also move mountains and make art and live life and laugh. We laugh!"

I laugh. "Who said that one?" I ask with a cheeky smile.

Shayla winks. “Me.”

“Thank you for that,” I tell her.

“You’re welcome! Come with me to the volleyball courts to repay me.”

*

Once Shayla and I arrive at the courts, I state the obvious: “What is this? The black student union?”

She laughs hard at this. “Basically,” she says, dragging me over to the sand where a group of seven people have a good volley going. “Hey, we’re in The Poconos with a bunch of white folk. We need to stick together just in case they try some Get Out business,” she adds, causing me to snicker and roll my eyes.

I spot Nile immediately on the opposite side of the net and he meets my eyes briefly before shifting back to the game and giving the ball a powerful hit, sending it flying over the net so fast no one on the other side can hit it.

“Four to one!” An overly tall guy with a sharp chin and red swim trunks says. The guy smiles and his teeth shine bright white against his skin.

“That’s Suly,” Shayla says. “Fine as hell.”

I swallow. “The one that hit the ball is Nile,” I say.

“Oh *shit*, Girl! He’s model sexy.” I press my lips together and narrow my eyes at her.

“Shayla!” a girl with fulani braids calls out. Suly catches the ball once it comes back his way, ending the volley, and the girl that called out to Shayla bumps up against his shoulder playfully and snatches the ball. The rest of the group turns to face us as we walk towards them. I

focus on the warm feel of the sand in between my toes for comfort as I near all these unfamiliar faces.

"Introduce yourself to my roomie, guys!" Shayla commands.

"I'm Day," the girl with the fulani braids says. "It's short for Ayomide. But nobody ever says it right. That's Ama over there." She points to a smaller girl opposite her, with chunky twists.

"I can introduce myself, thanks." Ama says with sass. "Ama!" Day laughs.

"We doing introductions?" the short, chubby guy next to Suly joins in. "I'm Dedrick and I use she/her pronouns."

Before anyone can even say anything, the volleyball hits him in the back of his head.

"Grow up. That's not fuckin' funny Dedrick," Day says. "No he doesn't. Ignore him." Dedrick is laughing and rubbing the back of his head. He reminds me of a lot of the boys back home.

"Disha," a girl next to Ama says. She has what my father would call 'coolie' hair— thick and coiled but shiny and full of luster.

"E-man," the guy next to her waves. He is just as tall as Suly but more meaty. "Or Emmanuel. Most people say E-man though." Suly introduces himself as well.

Nile's curls reach his shoulders. His eyes stay on me for a second and then they flit to Shayla. "I've met Esi, but I haven't met you," he says. "I'm Nile." I look down at the sand awkwardly and scrunch my toes.

“Get in on this, Esi!” Suly says. “You can be on my team. Never seen you play but Shayla is ass at volleyball so I’ll take the chance.” The rest of them laugh and Dedrick says something slick that causes Day to flick him in the back of his neck.

Shayla sticks her middle finger up at Suly and joins the other side while I join the team with him, Day, Dedrick, and Nile. We have one extra person on our side.

“Yall ready?” Day asks, as Ama grabs the ball and prepares to serve.

“Let’s get it!” Nile shouts jumping from one foot to the other in anticipation.

“Wait, wait!” I yell. “Give me a refresher on the rules!”

“Don’t think too hard about it,” Ama says, winking at me. Dedrick is turned around, chatting to Nile when Ama flings the ball towards the back of Dedrick’s head. He senses it and catches it before it hits him, which solicits a roaring cacophony of hoots and cheers from the rest of the boys, Nile included.

“Dedrick’s got moves,” E-man says. “Saw how he caught that? He’s the next MJ!”

“Nah, he not on MJ level, fam. He the next Jeremy Lin!” Suly says.

“Fuck all yall,” Dedrick laughs, tossing the ball to Nile, who smiles and makes brief eye contact with me. “Just for that, it’s our serve!” I look away, still laughing.

Once we get a smooth volley, we lose time. Hitting the ball back and forth, laughing when it gets away from us and someone has to go chase it, or when Shayla faceplants in the sand while trying to hit it. When the game is done, we all gather on one side of the net, laughing and congratulating each other on a good game, unsure of which side won because we’d stopped keeping track of the points.

“Dej,” E-man says, “If you can run back to the cabin without stopping, I’ll give you half of whatever they put on my plate for dinner.” Day and Disha laugh hard at this. We stand barefoot in the sand chatting and wasting time.

“You’d prolly think you could win that race but next thing you know you’re tripping over your big ass feet.”

Suly snickers.

“You too Suly! Your tall ass prolly hit your head on a cloud.” The three of them, all laughing, begin walking side by side with their arms around each other’s shoulders in the direction of the cabins, not one hard feeling amongst them.

This bunch of us reminds me a bit of my childhood. Before highschool and growing up and apart, there were the neighborhood kids, rolling deep in groups, sometimes split in different subsections but still altogether at the same time. Nile walks beside the guys, talking to E-man.

“Esi, go talk to him,” Shayla says. “You keep looking at him. Go say hi.”

I glare at her and hope no one else heard that.

“This your first year?” Ama asks me.

“Yeah,” I say.

“It’s a great retreat,” Day begins, standing on the other side of Ama. “White as fuck but still amazing. You’ll meet so many good people here and you’ll write things you didn’t even know you had in you. Plus we sneak off all the time and have fun.”

“Yeah, we look out for each other,” Disha agrees. “And now you’re one of us.”

“Why?” I ask.

“Because you just are!” Shayla says. “Accept it.” Dedrick overhears this bit of our conversation and says, “Nile’s one of us too. At least, half of him is.”

The guys laugh at this, Nile included.

“Nah man, we accept your white half too. Witcho Corbin Bleu looking ass.”

“Tonight’s evening session is the Burn it Bonfire,” Ama tells me, waving the boys off. “It’s tradition. We write shit down that we want to be free of on a piece of paper and we toss it into the fire. Not everyone burns something but a lot of us do. It feels good.”

I nod at this, wondering if I’ll decide to burn anything. We peel off from each other once we near the cabins, running off to our rooms to change before dinner. The guys split up and Nile walks over to Shayla and I, which causes her to grin annoyingly.

“I’ll see you later, Esi,” she says, nudging me, and then she’s gone.

“What,” I say to him. We continue walking on the gravel road in between the two rows of cabins.

“You’re so nice to me,” he says, his voice sounding like sarcasm dipped in honey.

“What do you want, Nile?”

“So you kiss me and pretend it didn’t happen?” he asks.

“Did I? I can’t remember.” I put a finger to my chin in contemplation.

He laughs at this and shakes his head. “You’re beautiful. Do you know that?”

“Shut up.” He takes a step forward, and my body tenses.

“Are you allergic to feelings?”

“Something like that.”

“Follow me to my cabin.”.

“No,” I say immediately. “Look I don’t know what ideas you have in your head, but—”

“Relax. I wrote something for the Burn it Bonfire and wanted to show it to someone before I burned it, and you’re my reader.”

“No,” I say quickly.

“Oh my god,” he sighs. “Do you go out of your way to be difficult?”

We are walking alongside the cabins now. Most of the others have already disappeared up their steps and into their rooms. I look at him. His head is bowed and his curls hide his face. He is walking slower.

“This is me,” he says, nodding up at the cabin to our left.

“You want to share it before you burn it?” I ask. He nods and focuses his brown eyes on mine. His face is wiped of all of its arrogance and none of its beauty. I don’t want to be the keeper of his secrets. I am afraid. But he’s looking at me like he needs this.

“What will that do for you?” I ask.

“It’s not anything big, or long, or good, even. But I think it came from somewhere. I haven’t been able to write anything that mattered to me in a while. And even though I know I want to burn it, I also want someone else to know it existed. It doesn’t make any sense...I know—”

“No. It makes sense,” I say. “I’ll read it. I’m your reader. I’ll read it.” I see something like gratitude in his expression.

“Wait here,” he says. And I do. I wait as he runs into his cabin and then reappears. He hands me a folded up paper torn out of his complimentary journal. I open it up and read.

Life support.

Do not resuscitate.

Mail truck.

Brown eyes like mine.

Blood. Same type. O Neg.

My fault.

Parents don't look at me the same.

Not my parents.

Ventilator.

Brain Death.

United States Postal Services.

My parents.

Brown eyes like mine.

Brown eyes like mine.

Brown eyes like mine.

I fold it back up quietly without saying a word. I read it. Just as he asked. My eyes brimming as his are hollow. He reaches out to take the paper back from me and I can't tell if it's his hands that are shaking or mine. He swallows and I watch his Adam's apple slide up and down. Both our hands hold the paper and we stand there as he waits for me to release. I want to say: *That was not mine. Not to read. Not to hold. Not to remember. It did not belong to me. Why did you give it to me? Why did you make me take it? It hurts.*

I let go and don't say any of that. Say, "See you at the bonfire," instead.

*

The bonfire has pop music, smores, and a big conflagration fueled by thick logs and firewood. There are at least a hundred of us, sitting on rows of logs around it, sitting too close and just close enough. It gets chilly here at night but my new group of friends and I sit close enough to the fire not to feel the cold too much. We all engage in separate conversations, inserting ourselves briefly into the conversations of others, standing up to dance, to get more smores from the snack table, to skewer marshmallows on sticks and roast them, or to toss something into the fire when we are ready. Nile is quiet tonight, seated next to E-man and Suly, participating but also disappearing into his own mind every now and then. He still holds his piece of paper in his hand. It takes him a while to build up the courage to walk up to the fire, but when he does, I excuse myself from the girls and stand beside him. The light of the fire tinges some parts of his face orange and casts shadows on other parts.

"You okay?" I ask.

"Yeah," he nods. "I'm fine. Just trying not to make a big deal of this. Or maybe I should? Maybe it should be a big deal."

"Who has brown eyes like yours?" I ask quietly.

He looks at me quickly, like he never expected me to refer to what he wrote out loud. It takes him a while to say, "My sister." And then, "Had."

"Sorry."

"You're from Brooklyn, right?" he says. "I think I heard you tell someone you're from Brooklyn."

"Yeah, why?"

"I was born there."

"Really?"

"Uh huh. But shit happened to my parents so I ended up living with my grandmother. And then when she died, me and my sister were left to the state."

"How long were you in the system?" I ask. His gaze is fixed on the bonfire and flames dance in his pupils.

"Gen and I were adopted by my parents when I was thirteen and she was seven. My parents are both black but my birth mom was white. You know, sometimes it makes me sick to my stomach thinking of her out there not knowing that Gen is dead. Even though I don't know her, I know she didn't want to give us up. My grandmother used to tell me that. She even gave me this crystal. The one you and I have in common. That's why I wear it around my neck, I guess. For my birth mom, wherever she is. I hope she's alright. Wonder if she's still in Brooklyn."

My chest tightens and I stay quiet.

"I guess I'm thinking of my birth mom because Genesis wasn't just ours. She was hers too. And she probably doesn't even know she…" he trails off. "What things should you let go of and what things should you keep?" He looks at me, holding the folded up paper tight in his hand.

"I don't know the answer to that," I admit. He sighs and without further hesitation, tosses the paper into the flame.

The fire eats his secret, turns it black, turns it to ash.

"Nile," I say quietly, trying hard to keep my voice from cracking.

"Yes?"

"Can I ask her name?"

"Huh?" I reconsider if I want the answer to this question and decide that I do.

"Your birth mom. Can I ask her name?"

"Marian Ward," he says. "One of the few things I know about her."

I feel like my chest might split open.

"Marian Ward," I repeat, and I take his hand, slipping my fingers through his. This surprises him but he doesn't pull away. "I like that name."

I'm sure he feels me shaking, but he doesn't dare ask why.