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UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

School of English

Volume 1 of 2

Kiss Your Comrades

by

Jenn Lee Shaller

Thesis for the degree of PhD Creative Writing

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ABSTRACT

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

English

Thesis for the degree of PhD Creative Writing

KISS YOUR COMRADES

Jenn Lee Shaller

Kiss Your Comrades consists of my short story collection, *Kiss Your Comrades*, and a critical commentary, detailing both the writing and research process.

Kiss Your Comrades is a collection of linked narratives centring trans perspectives and using storytelling as a method to challenge cis-heteronormativity and explore beyond-the-binary politics. Organised around five recurring trans-queer characters who live on the margins of society, this group is connected through geography and community, with stories emphasising their intimacy and tenacity.

Kiss Your Comrades is a trans narrative imagining transness *beyond* the body. The collection presents transition as a non-linear and ongoing process and constructs transness through friendship and tactics of survival to highlight the community's muscle of resistance and to celebrate trans-queer resilience.

The commentary sets forth the context for, and the particularities of constructing a trans narrative. The first half of the commentary overviews the state of British/American trans writing; examines the *transition memoir* and the focus on surgical transition as the dominant theme within the mainstream trans narrative. It then moves into a discussion about the gender binary as an oppressive force on trans lives, setting forth the queer theory and scholarship that shaped the characters' praxis and identities. The second half of the commentary delves into the particularities of constructing a trans narrative; beginning with a discussion of the short form and establishing its shared history with marginalised practitioners, before moving into an examination of linked narratives and short story cycles as a chief structural scheme. Finally, it explores the collection's thematic depictions of trans lived experience.

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I, [please print name]

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Acknowledgements

Kiss Your Comrades was nourished by the support and guidance of many who believe in the power of storytelling and representation.

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KISS YOUR COMRADES
VOLUME 1: A Short Story Collection

Masquerade

There is no suitable weather for gender. The light reliably radiates or replicates, shading every hue with expectation. It streamed across her face, coaxing Sadie awake from her nap. Swatting at it, she rolled away from the glare, but the damage was done. She yawned, shuddered, and slipped her face beneath the covers.

The apartment was full of windows, making it impossible to keep the bite of winter out, and every morning she rose with a frosted nose. Her neighbour, Ms. Martín, had lent Sadie a space heater while she was in Dorchester visiting her daughter for the holidays, so Sadie and Ty had been able to exchange gifts that year without gloves and scarves on. But the frenzy of December holidays had faded, and January left only the lull of wasted resolutions and too few hours of daylight.

Sadie blew into her palms, warming them. *Say it out loud*, she thought. *At least once*. Her phone vibrated on the bedside table beside her and she poked her hand out of the covers to retrieve it.

Getting on T now.

Ty was on their way. *Better get on with it*. Sadie shrieked when her toes hit the hardwood floor and she scurried toward her dresser to retrieve a pair of socks. *The true irony would be that I freeze to death before visiting my mother in hospice*. She straightened her spine, surprised at her candour, and made her way to the bathroom. It was in desperate need of cleaning. Ty's dark curls clung to the sides of the basin and Sadie's rouge had fallen from its palette, dusting the sink raisin. *I have too many lipsticks*, she thought. Half were half-used and in need of tossing; the wax had smudged against the edges of the plastic encasing, spoiling the shape. Sadie threw away a blue she would never wear and couldn't remember buying.

Her fingers felt stiff as she squeezed toothpaste onto the brush. Turning on the faucet, she watched one of Ty's curls eddy toward the drain and smiled. Ty was always leaving pieces of themselves around—filters, clippers, scraps of paper. Sadie didn't mind. It was nice to find pieces of them. It reminded her she wasn't alone anymore, she had a friend so close they were leaving curls in her sink from the last time they cleaned up their undercut; a friend that returned.

'It's the isolation that kills us,' the first trans woman Sadie had met had told her that. Belinda was a performer who hosted a drag night at the first queer club Sadie ever went to at nineteen. After the show, in the smoking area near the front of the bar, Belinda clocked her and gestured toward her with her chin. 'Do your parents know?' Sadie shook her head no. 'You start HRT?' Sadie nodded yes now, too shy to look up at the woman who towered over her, dazzling in the faint orange mist of the streetlight. Sadie kept glancing up, sneaking peeks at her dark lips pulsing in the afterglow of the performance, the twirl of smoke trailing off her cigarette, her fluttering lashes. 'Get an accomplice. You'll need different friends for different favours, but only an accomplice will pick up the hammer.'

At nineteen, she couldn't grasp the insight, but Belinda's conviction dropped the word *accomplice* like a token in Sadie's palm. Pocketing the term, Sadie sewed it to her breastbone for safekeeping. She certainly hadn't anticipated her accomplice would be a moody Jewish tomboy from Cambridge, but Ty came with a toolbox.

That's why, when Sadie received the call that her mother would be entering hospice, she had known instantly there would be no one to ask but Ty.

'Cancer?' Ty had asked, and Sadie nodded. 'I'm sorry, babe.'

'I need you to come with me to see her,' Sadie said, fidgeting with the hem of her dress.

'Anything you need.'

Sadie pulled on the collar of her dress, slipped a hand between the lace and her skin, tracing her neck with the tip of her finger. Ty had this habit of verbalising Sadie's thoughts before even she could recognise their shape. She wished for that now, Ty's chance clairvoyance, but they only ashed their cigarette, waiting for Sadie to speak. With a deep breath, Sadie tried to weigh the rehearsed words, but once she'd finally opened her mouth, they all came spilling out, a jumble of explanations and pleas.

'You know mama isn't down,' she gestured toward her dress. 'She's religious but in this really pure way where she just wants everyone to settle down and make babies. It was her dream to see me with a nice girl, you know, as a boy. I know it's a lot to ask but I can't bear doing this alone. I know she wouldn't accept me the way I am, but she

accepted me in her own way all my life. I want to give her what she wants, just for one day, you know? So, she can die thinking I found the kind of happiness she imagined for me.'

Ty was an active listener. They nodded their head in cue with buzzwords, furrowing their brow or widening their eyes in reaction. Sadie watched them as her words settled between their ears.

'So, you're going to drag as a boy,' Ty said slowly. 'And you want me to do girl drag so we look... straight?' Ty pinched some tobacco into a flimsy paper and smiled. 'Are you asking me to marry you, Sadie Jones?'

'For a night, anyway,' Sadie's lips spread slowly into a grateful smile.

'My wife,' Ty winked.

'You mean your husband!' she pointed a playful finger at Ty and then poked them in the ribs.

'Right, my husband,' they chuckled. Sadie being anyone's husband was only as ridiculous as Ty being someone's wife.

'Don't confuse my poor mother on her deathbed.'

'I promise I'll have all my lines memorised by show time.'

'So, you don't mind? You'll come?'

Ty lifted Sadie's chin with their finger and gave her a soft smile. 'Where else would I be?'

Sadie washed her hands, smiling at the memory, as she touched up her eyeliner. Outside the bathroom window, the world was already fading to grey in the winter light. Only naked branches and white noise in lieu of flower beds; a soft ambiguous space. Sadie heard the front door creak open and close.

'Honey, I'm home,' Ty's voice called out.

'Be right there,' she said, brushing her bangs.

Sadie found Ty in the living room, predictably broody, with a cigarette hanging out of the corner of their mouth. They were on their phone, squinting to read the screen, because as always, they'd 'forgotten' their glasses. They glanced up and back down, finished typing, and then slipped the phone into the back pocket of their trousers.

'Are you ready?' Sadie asked, eyeing their ripped jeans.

‘Ready as I’ll ever be.’

Ty saw Sadie staring at their knees and looked down.

‘We’ll need an outfit,’ she told them.

Ty looked down at their trousers and black hoodie a second time and furrowed their brow. ‘What’s wrong with what I’m wearing?’

Sadie motioned for Ty to follow her into the bedroom where she’d compiled an assortment of options and dumped them onto her duvet. She took an A-line skirt and paired it with a peach blouse; tossed the skirt, matched the blouse with a pair of slacks instead, and then frowned, discarding both. Ty rubbed the velour skirt she’d flung on the bed and waited for Sadie’s direction. At last, she held up a red dress and cinched a brown belt around the middle, looking satisfied.

‘What do you think?’ she asked.

‘Cute.’

‘For you.’ Sadie motioned at them with the hanger and Ty made a face. ‘You can’t be picky,’ she chided.

Ty put their cigarette out in an ashtray and sighed. ‘Can’t I be a girl who wears jeans?’

‘We need all the help we can get.’

Ty dragged their fingers across the mounds of skirts and tops piled high on Sadie’s bed, picking up a pink tube top and stretching it between their hands, before throwing it back.

Sadie clucked her tongue and walked over to Ty, placing a hand on either of their shoulders. ‘Are you in or out? Because this is my mama. I can’t do this halfway. It’s cool if you don’t want in, but you’ve gotta tell me.’

They held one another for a moment, Sadie searching Ty’s eyes for hesitation, but she only saw grey before they broke the silence. ‘I’m in.’

Sadie sucked in a grateful breath and squeezed Ty’s shoulders.

‘I can’t tell you how much this means to me,’ she said, before placing a hand on her hip and furrowing her brow as though scheming; her eyes moving down Ty’s body in examination. ‘It’s really hard for me to tell what will suit you,’ she pursed her lips.

‘Take off your sweatshirt.’

Pulling the hoodie over their arms, they shuddered. ‘It’s chilly in here.’

‘Your tits are tiny,’ Sadie frowned, looking disappointed. Ty looked down at their own chest as though they didn’t know what they might find there.

‘Yeah, and?’ Ty asked.

‘How are you going to fill out a dress?’

Ty looked bewildered at the question and Sadie shook her head. ‘I’m working with a genderless stick figure... Do you even have hips?’ Sadie bent down to Ty’s crotch and unzipped their jeans. As she pulled them down, she fell back in mock horror. ‘You’re a little boy!’

‘A boy in a dress,’ Ty postured and they both began snickering, perhaps too hard, but they were in unmapped territory. It was one thing to come out but a whole other to go back in.

‘Come on then,’ Ty stood in only their briefs and extended their arms out to either side. ‘Dress me.’

‘Here,’ Sadie tossed Ty a black pencil skirt. ‘Try that.’

Ty pulled the skirt around their hips looking uncertain, clinging to the comfort of their briefs beneath the hanging fabric.

In the centre of the bedroom, Sadie stood with one hand resting beneath her chin as she studied Ty and frowned. ‘Too long,’ she muttered under her breath. ‘See how it’s hitting you here?’ She walked over to Ty and knelt before them, touching them lightly right above the ankle. ‘It should be hitting your mid-calf. This will make you look short.’

Cocking their head to the side, Ty said, ‘But I am short.’

Sadie stood up and started rummaging through her closet. ‘Take it off.’

Ty unzipped the skirt and wriggled out of it, letting it drop to the floor and then stepping out of its sphere. Glancing down at it, with one tentative toe, they kicked the skirt away from them. Sadie turned around holding up a floral wraparound dress and Ty pulled a face.

‘Absolutely not.’

‘What about this?’ she asked, dangling a black cotton skirt from her finger. ‘It’s elastic, so maybe it will fit.’

Ty shrugged so Sadie tossed them the skirt and they stepped into the pliant cotton, one reluctant foot at a time. They pulled it up to their hips where it sat comfortably

around them. It didn't look so bad. Ty moved from side to side, wiggling their hips a bit, and then looked at Sadie. 'It's comfortable.'

'Not bad. Not bad at all.'

Sadie matched a white blouse with the skirt and had Ty throw over the black blazer they'd brought along with them. The outfit looked smart and Sadie reasoned her mother would think Ty had just come from some office job, which consequently, was exactly what they were going to say Ty did if she happened to ask.

'Okay,' Sadie laced her hands together. 'The dreaded moment.'

'Makeup?' Ty crinkled their nose.

In the bathroom, Sadie cleaned a few brushes and examined the translucent powder she'd borrowed from a co-worker for Ty's fair skin. Ty appeared in the doorway, a joint rolled and tucked behind their ear.

'Get in here,' Sadie said when she saw them. 'No more stalling.'

Ty sat on the toilet.

'Here.' She handed them a moist towelette. 'Clean your face.'

When Ty finished wiping, they glanced down at the dirtied tissue and stuck their tongue out. 'Ew.'

'Never mind that. Your pores are nice and clean now,' Sadie said, grabbing the towelette and tossing it into the rubbish. 'I borrowed this from Trish who is about as ghostly as you are, so here's hoping.' In her palm, she held a small bottle of foundation in front of Ty's face and shook it back and forth a few times. 'Ready?'

'Ready as I'll ever be.'

Sadie squeezed the cream onto her hand.

Ty watched as she applied makeup to their face with a remarkably steady hand. They had never noticed but they marvelled now as Sadie came toward their eyes, brows, and lips, with tiny brushes and an unshakable fist. 'You're so professional.'

'You have great cheekbones.' Sadie said the words mostly to herself as she blended out bronzer.

Ty had never been any good with makeup. They had confessed as much to Sadie, told her that as a child they had watched with wonder as their mother applied makeup at

her vanity. *‘I thought it was beautiful, but I never felt a desire to do it. And that was something she couldn’t accept about me. That lack.’*

As a child, Sadie too had watched her mother in awe and wonder as she painted her face each Sunday for church. But unlike Ty, Sadie would churn with longing, wanting desperately to brush blush across her own cheeks beside her mother. The two friends had bonded through this shared childhood ritual. Despite differing positions across the spectrum, in childhood they both straddled the axis of being too much and not enough. *A girl-boy*, they’d laughed together.

As Sadie painted Ty’s face, she could tell they felt uncomfortable. ‘I look like a clown in makeup,’ they had said once, ‘painted thick with so many layers, I look like I’m hiding something.’

As though sensing her empathy, Ty peeped one eye open and looked up at Sadie. ‘Do I look ridiculous?’

‘Would I make you look ridiculous?’

‘No,’ Ty said, trying to sound unbothered. Sadie handed them a small compact, so they wouldn’t be overwhelmed with the full-size effect of their painted face.

‘It’s subtle,’ Ty said. ‘I don’t look too weird.’

Sadie nodded encouragingly. ‘Final touch is the wig.’

‘No, no,’ Ty jumped up from the toilet seat and shook their head back and forth in protest. ‘Women have short hair!’

‘Not like this!’ Sadie ruffled Ty’s hair. ‘Buzzed on one side? My mother is Catholic.’

Ty groaned.

‘It will sell you as a femme.’ Sadie walked back to the bedroom where her wigs sat in pristine condition on the shelf Ty had installed a few years before, each one snugly atop a cheap Styrofoam head.

‘I think blonde will go best with your complexion,’ she reasoned.

‘Blondes have more funding,’ Ty quipped.

Sadie stretched a wig cap over Ty’s hair to keep the strays in and then fitted the wig atop Ty’s scalp, pulling at either side to render it straight before brushing out the bangs with a small black comb. Ty scratched at their scalp beneath the cap. ‘This better look good,’ they grumbled.

Sadie took a step back from Ty and clasped her hands beneath her chin in delight. 'You actually look really cute,' she said, holding out a mirror for them to see.

Leaning back tentatively, as though unsure of what they might find in the reflection, Ty frowned.

'You look cute.' Sadie said again.

'I look like my mother.'

'Oh stop. You're nothing like your mother and we're doing this for mine. So, stop pouting.' Sadie puffed out her lower lip and then pulled a face until Ty smiled. 'Now move so I can take my makeup off,' she said, tapping Ty on the bum until they stood up.

'At least you get to be a girl.'

'It's true,' Ty agreed. 'I definitely have the better end of this deal.'

They shared a smile and then Sadie, sitting at her small vanity, sighed.

'I don't want to do this,' she said finally, hanging her head as though defeated. Ty dropped to their knees placing a gentle hand on either of her thighs.

'Listen to me,' they commanded, giving her thighs a gentle squeeze.

They'd been squeezing one another for years; a code alerting significance. Ty would squeeze Sadie's arm. *I need to get out of here.* Sadie would squeeze Ty's hand. *This person is transphobic.* It was their signal. It took on its own meaning in every context and their friendship was the apparatus that allowed them to correctly interpret each firm press.

Sadie's brown eyes were brimming with tears, but she lifted them to meet Ty's gaze. They squeezed her thighs a second time. 'You are a beautiful woman. And you are always a woman, Sadie. No matter what you're doing or wearing.'

Try as she might to hold in the tears, they leaked out the corner of her eyes and dropped onto her lap. Sadie kept nodding as Ty spoke, as though the act would help her believe their words.

'You don't have to do this,' Ty finished.

'It's not having to drag as a boy that's bothering me. Well, maybe it is. But all this lying... We're creating a huge production just so my mother doesn't... what? Disown me? I'm twenty-nine. She'll be dead in a few weeks regardless. What difference will it

make if I come out to her now? Maybe I should just show up as me. Dress and plaits and a damn good manicure.'

'Do you *want* to come out to your mother?'

They'd been friends many years now and weren't afraid to push the other, also knowing when to pull back, relent; after all, what is friendship if not the balancing act of leaps and limits?

'Fuck no. There is no *coming out* to my mother. She wouldn't understand. Boy. Girl. You're born one, you stay one. This is how she thinks. It can't be changed, Ty, trust me.' She sniffled and tried to rectify the eyeliner now smudged beneath her lids. 'God doesn't make mistakes.' she finished.

Ty didn't launch into their usual diatribe about gender as oppressive framework and for this, Sadie was grateful. There were moments for critique and then there was the empirical practice of surviving as a trans person in present reality. Ty had learned much about nuance from Sadie and stayed quiet for a moment before asking, 'What can I do?'

Sadie knew from their tone they would lasso the moon if she asked and sometimes the mere offer was enough. She smiled, taking Ty's face in her hands. 'First, stop kneeling in that skirt because you're going to stretch it.' They laughed and stood up, adjusting the waistband. 'Secondly, you can help by ironing my slacks. If I'm forced to dress this way, I'm at least going to be well put together.'

Ty nodded and then pulled Sadie into a hug. 'You're a beautiful woman,' they whispered before kissing her cheek and leaving her to prepare for boy drag. They didn't think she would want an audience.

Sadie looked in the mirror at her perfectly contoured cheeks and polished lips one last time and sighed. *It's only one day*. While pulling off her lashes, she thought of her mother. They'd seen one another only a handful of times the last ten years, mailing cards each Christmas and sharing phone calls on birthdays, but other than that, they had shared very little. Her mother wasn't unkind or cold, merely practical. Even in her faith. For Sadie's mother the answers were simple and provided. *Jesus Christ is our Lord and Saviour, do unto others, mind your manners, Ps & Qs*. Sadie and Ty had that in common. For a pair of anti-establishment queers, their manners were refined, showing up at odd times, baffling and amusing whatever company they happened to be in.

Sadie's strongest memories were of her mother getting ready for church. That and her mother's gloves. A simple woman, her mother did not fuss with trends. She wore a shapeless skirt and blouse in some variation of the same drab colour all week, but church days, as tradition instructed, she donned her Sunday best. Pastel skirts and blouses of fine lace with small opaque buttons that resembled pearls.

Her mother would apply a coat of pale lipstick and adjust one of two hats to her head, topping it all off with one of three pairs of gloves: lilac, pink, or lily white. Watching her mother adorn herself for God became Sadie's favourite ritual. She fancied her mother an angel in her pastels; proud, pink, potent. It was always spring on Sundays.

'Do you dress up for God?' Sadie had asked once.

'God has better things to do than look at me,' her mother replied pulling her right hand into the lilac glove.

'Then why?'

'Why what? Finish your thoughts or don't start them at all.'

'Why do you dress up for Church?'

Marjorie slipped her hand into the second glove and retrieved her purse from the dresser. 'I suppose I like to look my best when I'm doing my most important work.'

'But you work during the week,' Sadie pointed out

'Praying, son. I do my best work when I'm serving God.'

Sadie had wondered what it meant to serve God. She pictured human-like creatures with wings and white gloves, offering bowls of flowers and fruit at the feet of a giant statue made of stone. She did not ask her mother what it was to serve God. She thought surely if one were in service to a god, they would know, and here too she did not wish to out herself.

'Truth is, it's silly,' her mother continued. 'It doesn't matter what's on your body. What matters is what's in here,' she pointed to her chest, 'and here,' pointing to her head.

Sadie considered this conversation at length as an adult. Sometimes, she would squint her eyes trying to conjure the moment, looking for signs of her mother's approval, a gentle endorsement. But Sadie only saw her own small body sweating in the

wrong clothes and her mother's fine suit, pressed; a line of pearls, kept modestly buttoned, shining in the autumn sunlight.

Ty rapped their knuckles on the door, interrupting Sadie's thoughts. 'It's half five,' they reminded her.

'Thanks,' she called back, quickly wiping off the rest of her makeup.

'I'm going to smoke a joint before we go,' they called.

'Fine, but don't get too high. Mama can always tell.'

Sadie struggled to describe Ty to the girls she worked with because the two descriptors that came to mind contradicted one another. Ty was simultaneously hugely intense and hopelessly blasé. Ty was cool with a quiet confidence in any given situation and they could make conversation with anyone if they chose to—which they often didn't, a fact that made them cooler still.

They were a thinker, they mused. They liked to discuss ideas and concepts. Their overthinking tended to amuse Sadie who found it an endearing reminder of her late father's most prominent quality. Still, despite all their thinking, Ty could be blithely unaware of their actions. Restless was a quick slope into reckless and they'd disappear for days, sometimes weeks at a time, burying themselves in pussy and powder and then emerging, seemingly from air, with new stories to laugh at and new lovers to contend with. Every few months or so, Ty was involved in another soap opera, wide-eyed and innocuous, genuinely surprised at how they'd arrived at their current romantic predicament.

'You have to tell these girls it doesn't mean anything to you,' Sadie would say to Ty, who would furrow their brow.

'But it does mean something.'

'You have to make it clear how casual it is.'

'Is fucking ever casual?'

And Sadie would laugh and say, 'You're hopeless.'

Ty was one of the first queer people Sadie had befriended years ago at a local LGBT support group. Her teenage years had been spent avoiding queer space for fear of being outed. As an adult, she often found herself having to choose between queer spaces too white and too cis, many of which outright shut their doors to trans women. Talk

about community. Ty had been a breath of fresh air. Sadie didn't need to fill in any blanks because they always saw her for who she was.

Sadie looked at herself in the mirror now. Ty will see beneath the costume, that's why I asked them.

'Here we go,' she whispered, removing her wig. Peeling the cap from her scalp, she winced. She didn't keep much height, always preferring wigs, because she enjoyed corresponding her hair to her outfit, but she hadn't left her house with her hair short like this for many years. She rubbed the back of her neck and felt duped, as though her fingers should have touched something they could not find.

She removed her nail polish and trimmed her nails, pondering what more there was to do. Masquerading as a boy required a lot less work than her usual routine. She felt desperate to do makeup. *At least my brows.*

'*Brows define the face,*' she always told her girlfriends and co-workers when they ignored plucking and eyebrow pencils. '*If eyes are the window to the soul, eyebrows are the fucking frame and you better respect that.*' She'd said it to Ty years before when they'd first met, and Ty had saluted her and bought an eyebrow pencil.

With little else to do in the bathroom, she returned to the bedroom to get dressed and noticed Ty was still outside smoking their joint. Sadie wondered if they knew they were the only person she would ever allow to see her like this. As the very thing she'd spent her life trying to create distance from. She would cut conversations short when eyes lingered too long on her throat, leave spaces in a hurry when women said things like *womb-en only*, obsessing for days over what gave her away. Being outed was like a spotlight on your neurosis; loud, sudden, and flashing.

Sadie unzipped the tote bag containing baggy blue trousers and a button down. She didn't have any 'boy' clothes anymore, having happily donated the box of ties and khaki slacks to charity when she began living authentically full-time. She'd borrowed men's clothes from her friend Darnell, who had asked if Ty was going to use them for drag. Sadie said yes because she couldn't bring herself to say the truth aloud.

She tried now to pull Ty's binder over her chest and inhaled sharply, crying out in pain. Ty appeared in the doorway, a look of concern spread across their painted face.

‘I don’t think I’ve put this on right,’ Sadie squirmed within the confines of the white band, twisting her body and sucking her stomach in to try and relieve the pinching.

Ty put a cool hand on Sadie’s spine to calm her. ‘Straighten your back,’ they coaxed, trying to flatten the elastic band around Sadie’s middle.

‘It hurts really bad.’

‘It’s a tad too small,’ Ty observed. ‘But these things are always a nightmare to wear.’

‘My ribs are going to crack,’ Sadie winced.

‘Take it off.’

‘And show up to my mother’s deathbed with tits?’

Ty frowned and folded their arms across their own small chest.

‘Okay, hand it to me,’ they said. Grateful to give her ribs a break, Sadie pulled it off and handed them the binder with a welcomed exhale.

‘I can’t believe you wear this every day,’ she said.

Ty put both their hands into the binder and then stretched the fabric as much as they could, scrunching up their nose as they tried to extend the mesh. ‘Fuck, it’s too tight.’

‘Too bad. I have to wear it.’

‘And hurt yourself? No way.’ Ty shook their head. ‘Do you have any bandages?’

Sadie retrieved the first aid kit she kept in the bathroom and handed it to Ty, who opened the white box and shuffled through the materials until they found what they were looking for and tore open the wrapper.

‘Ready?’

Sadie nodded.

‘Hold this,’ they instructed, handing her one end of a bandage. Sadie held the white gauze to her chest and Ty began to circle her slowly, wrapping the bandage around her gingerly. They kept asking, *you okay?* and Sadie kept nodding, *keep going*.

When they’d finished, Ty stood behind Sadie and fastened the bandage into place with a small silver clasp.

‘Perfect,’ they said.

Sadie reached behind and grabbed Ty’s hand squeezing it in her own. ‘Thank you for doing this.’

Ty smiled, bent their face forward so the tip of their chin met Sadie's shoulder. They stood there for a moment, holding one another, body to body, painted face to binded chest, aligning their heartbeats.

‘Where else would I be?’

Trans Nationals

I

Sadie paced the length of the foyer in a peach satin dressing gown, chain-smoking a cigarette.

‘Phone Jerry,’ she demanded.

I ignored her. I’d already called Jerry three times. Motherfucker was probably smacked out himself. I kept saying I needed to find a dealer who didn’t use, but I was as likely to look as I was to find one.

‘Dan, Carlos, Henry...’ Sadie was just listing off names now. Some didn’t even use, others I didn’t recognise.

‘Sadie, please,’ I said. ‘Jerry will get back to us.’

‘Phone him again.’

I rolled my eyes and stood up. My kneecaps were itchy. We were both fiending and her pestering was grinding away on my open nerves. ‘I’m going to get some air,’ I said. Sadie looked worried. ‘I’ll keep trying Jerry,’ I added. She nodded and continued to pace.

Outside, the Cape Cod air was thick as molasses. Hardly refreshing. I rolled a cigarette and sat by the pool. Removing my shoes and socks, I dipped my feet into the cool water. Above me, imported palm fronds hung limp and yellowed and a mosquito buzzed around my head, attracted to the pools of sweat gathering at my temples and dripping down my face. I slapped it away, missed, wiped the sweat from my face, and sighed.

My feet looked strange underwater. Blue-tinted from the tiles and the tattoo atop my foot blurred beneath the surface, washing the colour out. ‘*Top of the foot has no fat,*’ the tattooist had warned me. I told her I had a high threshold for pain and she smiled with pity and doubt. ‘*Just let me know when you need a break, okay?*’

I didn’t stop her once during our session. Contrarily, I had found the experience pleasant and she marvelled when she had finished wrapping my freshly perforated skin with gauze. ‘*You do have a high threshold for pain!*’ I didn’t tell her I had been waiting my whole life to feel something.

Now I felt nothing (heroin) and everything (withdrawal) in equal measure. I finished my cigarette and immediately rolled another. *Where the fuck was Jerry?*

Sadie came outside, frowning. 'Have you heard anything?'

It had been about three minutes since we'd been inside together. I shook my head no and beckoned her toward me. 'Come put your feet in. The water is nice.'

'Fuck no, man. Water makes me feel weird when I'm fiending.'

As soon as she said this, my feet sprouted slime-ridden scales and I removed them from the pool and tried to shake them dry.

'So, you have the house to yourself for a whole month?' I asked, trying to distract from the fact that we were dry, dry as day, and about to be really sick.

'Yes. Philip has gone to Rome for the month. Or maybe Spain. Somewhere in Europe. Anyway, his wife hates the Cape, so it's always empty here.'

'It's amazing, Sadie. No rent. You could take the whole month off work.' I noticed then my hands had started to shake and checked my phone even though it hadn't buzzed.

Sadie scoffed and sat down in one of the blue and white lounge chairs beside me. 'Taking time off isn't an option,' she told me. 'I've decided I'm going to see my johns here for the month.' She fussed with the straps of her nightgown while I picked at my leg hair. 'You'll stay with me, won't you?' she asked.

'Sure, what do I have going on?'

'It's too big to stay in by yourself. And you can help keep me safe from cis scum.'

'I'm kind of small,' I said, looking at my reedy arms.

'Honey, please. You keep a bat handy, and they'll never see you coming.' She smiled, and I laughed for the first time all morning.

The phone rang then, perking us both up, and Sadie clapped her hands together excitedly. 'Is it Jerry?' I waved at her to shut up and answered the phone.

Jerry explained he'd been fucked off his face all week and how much did I want and could we come to him.

Sadie and I were already in my jeep and on the road by the time I ended the call.

II

We took a taste at Jerry's just so we could stop feeling sick and scratching at our elbows. Jerry hadn't lied, the shit was good. I leaned back into his couch and felt myself melt into the soft corduroy. His house always smelled like soured milk, sweat and metal, and something distinct to junkies but otherwise indescribable.

There were, as there always are, several people in his house; regulars whom we recognised and always a newbie or two, pretending they knew everyone better than they did, as if any of us had a fuck to part with.

A blonde girl I'd seen once or twice sat beside me with half-closed eyes, humming something sweet and sad that I recognised but couldn't quite recall.

'I know you,' she said, without opening her eyes. 'You're... Ty?'

'I am. And you're—'

'Billie. We hooked up once... at Trent's?'

I had no idea if this were so, but looking at her I knew she was my type (girl) so it was most likely true.

'You gave great head,' she continued, opening her eyes now. 'I remember. Did this thing with your mouth...' Overhearing the conversation, Sadie caught my eye and winked. 'Is she your girlfriend?' Billie nodded toward Sadie.

'No.'

'Because she was born a dude?'

The girl was too high to even try to soften her words with a whisper, conceal them. How I wish the words had solidified above our heads, so I could have grabbed and shattered them. But Sadie heard each one and her eyes dimmed; I could see her trying to fold in on herself, become smaller.

'No,' I said, not making any effort to conceal my disgust. I got off the couch, gathered our stash and offered my hand to Sadie.

'Let's get out of here, babe,' I said. 'This place is crawling with gender detectives.' The girl rolled her eyes and then closed them again, returning to her inane humming while I bore daggers between her thighs.

Jerry walked us out to my car trying to apologise on her behalf. 'Ignore her. She's been here for hours,' he circled his finger around his temple to show us just how fucked she was. We nodded, but it didn't really matter, the mood had been killed.

After we climbed into my jeep, I could tell Sadie was upset. I put the key into the ignition and rolled the window down. This summer, the New England heat was relentless. Already sweating in my stifling jeep, with my hands gripping the steering wheel, I thought of how to break the silence.

'Apparently, I sleep with cis scum too,' I said, hoping to make her laugh.

Sadie broke out into the fluorescent grin I had come to know and love.

'I can't believe you slept with that basic bitch,' she said.

'And I did it for free!'

She banged her hands on the dashboard and I laughed along, fuming internally that she seemed grateful for such small favours.

III

I had an apartment of my own in Allston with two housemates, but I stayed with Sadie in Philip's Cape Cod colonial for the month, renting out my room in Allston for some extra cash.

Sadie and I fell into routine with ease. Around noon we'd wake, and Sadie would make coffee while I would cut lines to start our hearts up. I'd make some toast with lots of butter for Sadie and peel back an orange for myself. I was something of a talented cook but there isn't much need for elaborate meals when you're on the brown grind. Instead, I'd roll us a joint and we'd smoke together by the pool and chat about our plans for the day.

Mid-afternoon, Sadie would start seeing clients and I'd write in the room beside her, with a bat leaning against the wall.

After the last client left each evening, the first thing Sadie would do is shower. Some days it was quick, ten minutes in and out; she wanted to rub the filth off her skin and forget about it. Other days, nice days with big tips and decent conversation, she'd take a bath, draping a calf lazily over the tub and inhaling gratefully when I came to slip

a joint into her mouth. Those days, she'd ask me to wash her back and I'd squeeze a sponge of soapy water over her shoulders, watching the water stream down her back in sleek torrents. We'd chat about her clients and lovers, hormones and sex.

'I don't know if I want to be a *chick with a dick* my whole life,' she'd said, gathering bubbles in a small colony before her, extending her index finger toward the suds and then popping them one at a time with a polished nail. I dipped the sponge into the tub to absorb more water.

'Why not, women with cocks are hot,' I said, squeezing the water back out onto her shoulders.

'Well I'm glad you think so because vaginoplasty is sixteen grand.'

The price stressed me out and I started to massage her shoulders in response.

'That feels good,' she said closing her eyes while I pushed my thumbs into her shoulder blades.

'Let's talk about the little minx you hooked up with last night,' she said, changing the subject.

'Ellie,' I said. 'Cute, right?'

'Gorgeous.'

'And she asked for my pronouns.'

'A keeper!'

'I did my best work,' I said, laughing. 'Gratitude as aphrodisiac.'

'Whores for validation!' We both laughed before she dunked her head under the milky water.

IV

Sadie didn't have a pimp or work with an agency. She didn't want anyone getting a cut of her money. Of course, this meant she didn't enjoy the perks of having anyone vet clients to help keep her safe. As safe as they could, anyway. Sex work comes with a risk mostly because men can't be trusted not to take what isn't theirs.

We only had to use the bat twice in three weeks which according to Sadie were pretty good stats. The first john—a sorry looking man who reeked of drug store cologne and tuna fish—hadn't brought along enough money. Sadie burst into the living room

with her silk robe open around her body, flowing out behind her like flames, as she moved toward the wall to grab the bat.

‘This motherfucker is trying to get a free taste,’ she yelled at me, holding the bat to his neck as though it were a knife. ‘You’re going to give me my money, motherfucker. Or else me and my pimp are going to beat you so bad not even your sorry-ass wife is going to be able to recognise you.’

I thought at only five-foot-five, this dude probably wasn’t too scared of me, or even bought me in my role of pimp—but he looked terrified of Sadie, who at six feet stood eye to eye with him, clutching the bat like she knew what to do with it.

‘Tell him, Ty. Tell this motherfucker what’s waiting for him.’

I puffed out my chest a bit and tried to look tough. ‘Look, man,’ I said. ‘Services aren’t free. Why don’t we all go to an ATM and you get us the money?’ I didn’t think a pimp would behave so reasonably but I didn’t really know how to break anyone’s kneecaps.

The man looked at me gratefully as a pool of sweat dripped down his beat red face. ‘I’ll do it,’ he whimpered.

Sadie seemed pleased with this, but she didn’t loosen her grip on the bat. ‘That’s right, pig, let’s go,’ she said, nudging him in the chest. I grabbed my keys and we all started walking slowly toward the front door.

The nearest gas station was only a few minutes down the road. Sadie told me to get out of the car and go with him to make sure he didn’t try anything. I followed him to the machine and watched as he fumbled to punch in his code. His shaking hands made me feel powerful and I cracked my knuckles, just for effect, and told him, ‘I think you owe her a little extra for the trouble.’

He nodded, withdrew several bills, and paid Sadie triple the fare.

Back at the Colonial, Sadie put the money in the emptied coffee can she kept in the freezer. ‘You were good today,’ she said.

‘At intimidating a man?’ I asked with a sly smile.

‘Trans vengeance.’

The second time the bat came into play, no one could call it a victory. It was a Friday in late July and her last john had freaked when he discovered her status. It felt

like I had grabbed the bat before I'd even heard Sadie scream, but that order of events wouldn't make sense. Maybe it felt that way because she didn't stop screaming. It rang through my ears, elevated my heart, and left my pulse throbbing wildly against my neck. I threw the door open with the bat already raised above me.

'Stop!' I yelled, before I even knew what was going on.

The man turned away from a struggling Sadie, pinned on the bed, surprised to find someone else in the house. Sadie kicked him in the shoulder, but he retaliated quickly—punched her square in the face before turning back to me. I screamed. Stupid, really, revealing my fear like that, but I hadn't been able to swallow it. He turned to look at me and screwed up his face into a weird and menacing smile.

'You scared, dyke?' He started walking slowly toward me while the bat shook above me. His face was twisted with rage, like poison, and my knees begged me to run but I stood, trembling, love compelling me to fight. He leapt toward me, grabbing the bat and throwing it aside, causing a terrible sound as it hit the tiled floor. His hand went around my throat and he pushed me up against the wall with force, crushing my windpipe between his fingers; a look of victory plastered on his face while he held me in place.

I struggled, trying to pry his hands open, and he laughed at my attempt, spit spraying from his mouth. I tried kicking, bringing my knee up to his groin, but this only made him laugh harder and he punched me in the stomach with his free hand and called me *dyke* again. I felt tears brim in my eyes, though I was sure I was not crying. Gasping for breath, I felt my chest constrict as though air were desperate to break through it. Stars and lights appeared before my eyelids and I closed them, both my hands on his, clawing at his skin like a feral animal trying to free itself.

I didn't see Sadie coming but suddenly she was behind him, sinking her teeth into his shoulder. He screamed *bitch* and turned toward her, dropping me to the floor like a sack of rubbish. I landed with a thud and began panting, each attempt at inhalation burning my oesophagus, as though choking on ocean water. Sadie was backing away from him, both her hands upright in defence. I rubbed my neck and crawled to the left to retrieve the bat while he tried to grab Sadie, but she was quick and ducked beneath his arms.

'Sadie,' I tried to yell, rubbing my throat. 'Sadie, are you okay?'

‘Don’t worry about that faggot,’ he spat at me, sure he had won.

The slur was meant to shrink us to our knees before him, I’m sure of it, but the rage coloured within me a refusal to bend so I shut my eyes and swung.

I opened them to find him gone.

Bewildered and shaking, I blinked a few times, wondering if I’d dreamt the whole thing. But there was Sadie against the dresser, clutching her face in pain, looking at me with red cheeks and black tears as mascara streamed down her face. I felt moisture on my own cheeks and above my lip, but I didn’t know if it was sweat, tears, or both. I dropped the bat and wiped my face.

‘Did I kill him?’ I asked, stepping over his body to get to her. ‘Are you okay?’

‘Get ice,’ she instructed.

I didn’t want to leave her alone with him, but he seemed, for the time being, indisposed. I ran to the kitchen and got some ice cubes from the tray, wrapping them in a paper towel and then running back to the bedroom. Sadie was dressed now in a denim skirt and sweatshirt, standing beside our victim. She winced when I held the ice to her cheek.

‘We have to do something,’ she said.

‘What?’ My throat felt sore as I asked.

‘Feel for a pulse?’

I reached my fingers toward his neck. He moaned a little, twitched, and we leapt back.

‘We have to get out of here,’ I said hoarsely.

We couldn’t call the police. We both knew that. Two trans queers staying in an expensive house that was not ours? The police would surely never believe the owner invited us to stay here. Never mind trying to explain why we bashed in some nice white man’s head. No, we couldn’t call anyone. And when he fully came to, he was going to be furious. The only option was to leave.

‘Grab your shit,’ I said. ‘Fast.’

Sadie started gathering clothes in her arms while I grabbed the box of drugs we kept under the couch and my car keys. ‘Let’s go,’ I yelled.

Sadie flew out of the bedroom in a panic. ‘He’s waking up!’

We ran to the car and I started the ignition, peeling out of the driveway without closing my door. We drove for an hour in silence on the highway because we didn't know what else to do. Eventually, I pulled into a rest stop where we shared a few lines. After we sunk into the high a bit, I rummaged through my car for some change and bought Sadie a strawberry milkshake at the drive-through.

We figured the man would just leave. If he didn't, well, it wasn't our house. Obviously, Philip wouldn't be pleased. Who knew what state we left the house in and if the man would trash it. Either way, it wasn't our problem now. The man wouldn't know where to find us. Sadie never used a real name with clients and I, for all intents and purposes, didn't exist beyond my temporary status as the dyke with the bat.

We talked briefly about whether the john would go to the cops but figured his transphobic ass probably didn't want to admit to having sex with a trans woman. We never found out, and after that night, we never talked about it again. What would be the point?

V

Sadie stayed with me for a few weeks in my apartment. We slept side by side in my narrow bed and I would trace love letters on her back and hold her hand while she dozed. Some nights, she would wake with a jolt and start crying. I would hold her then, fold her into my chest, and chase away the nightmares with lavender and joints. Other nights, she didn't sleep. We'd stay up into the wee hours of the morning listening to records and folding foil pipes, smoking line after line, trying to realign. At the end of the third week, she announced that she would be returning to her own apartment so she could get back to work. I tried to argue, asked if she would consider working at a café or bar and she told me to wipe the concerned look off my face.

'I'll be fine.'

'Are you sure you want to get back to it?' I asked.

She lit a cigarette and smiled.

'Of course, honey. This pussy ain't gonna buy itself.'

Black Market Hormones

It was snowing the day I accompanied my lover to their GP appointment to discuss hormone replacement therapy. The white earth crunched beneath our boots as we walked through the parking lot and the light bounced off car mirrors, startling our eyes and causing us to squint.

In the waiting room, I took a seat along the beige wall, pulled my gloves off and glanced at the generic magazines fanned out on the table. Once Ty had signed in, they joined me, flopping back into the chair beside me and gesturing toward the clipboard they'd been handed by the receptionist.

'Second question: *male or female*. Shall I just colour the space between?' They smirked, and I gave them a hopeful smile as they bent their head over the form.

My lover Ty is a fighter. By fighter I don't mean quarrelsome, but rather warrior. Though I'd be lying if I said they didn't dig their heels in on occasion and huff.

They were born blue, their first gasp stifled by a chord wrapped round their neck, and they have been fighting for the right to breathe ever since. Their mother wanted them manageable, meek; what she got was a force to be reckoned with. A force I would not deign to contain. The first time we met, I thought they were so miraculous they should belong to every woman. And I'd felt grateful that they wanted to belong to me too, because I knew their fear of bruising.

I watched as they scribbled responses across the form wondering if they were being truthful. They aren't a liar per se but are custom to withholding.

'Make sure you mention your panic attacks,' I said, dropping my voice low in their ear so no one would overhear. They nodded vaguely, the tip of their tongue poking out the right side of their mouth as they scribbled.

I discovered early on that there are two Tys. The first stirred me and the second broke my heart, but not in the way you might expect. They have never left me, and they never will—their familial abandonment has endowed them with staying power—it's more that they are prone to getting lost.

For the first six months we were lovers, I was love-stoned, mesmerised by their charm and intensity, and we would have deep and strange conversations and then fuck

for hours in a fevered frenzy. Ty is almost painfully handsome, with their father's dark Mizrahi curls, the thick brows they've mastered the art of arching; and those impossibly high cheekbones. Their voice is raspy and low, and they tend to drop it lower still when they want something.

Once we'd consumed the other, they would roll us both cigarettes, prop their head up on an elbow, and read me Neruda, one hand lazily trailing my thigh. Other times, they would stand up and pull on their briefs with a furrowed brow, as though they were looking for something. I'd ask what they were after and their brow would crease further before launching into an intense political tirade. They had a knack for linking anything to the perils of capitalism.

I was transfixed. They were deeply charming and clever, and this is the Ty they presented to the world, intense and brooding.

It took time for me to meet the second Ty. If I moved too quickly they would retract like a doe in the woods, shifting focus so I couldn't pry further. Slowly though, they warmed to my trust, coloured in the details of their past permeated with abuse.

The first glimpse I had of their violent childhood was a few months after we started dating when I woke to their shaking. I had been spending the night when I woke with a start to sweat-laced sheets, their body beside me tensing and twitching, muttering as though in prayer, begging, their fists clenched and gripping the blanket. I stroked their cheek and said their name, and when they finally woke, wild-eyed, I pulled their reluctant torso into my chest to slow their thrashing heartbeat.

'I'm not weak,' they had whispered into my hair, trembling.

'You're a warrior,' I whispered back.

I glanced at them to see they'd finished filling in the form and were now reading over their responses. They stood, stretching a bit as they did, and then swaggered over toward the reception desk to return the form. I couldn't hear what they were saying but I saw the receptionist blush as she retrieved the clipboard from under the panelled glass. It would be so like Ty to flirt in this moment, to offer compliment as distraction from the list of undesirable symptoms on the form. They returned to the chair and pulled a paperback out of their pocket, draping a hand over my knee as they sat.

‘Hopefully it’s not too long a wait,’ they said, their eyes already moving across the page. I laced my hand in their own and squeezed reassuringly.

We’d made the appointment three months ago when Ty finally cracked under what their best friend Sadie calls the *gender pressure*. Sadie had invited us over for dinner one Thursday night, and we’d agreed to meet at her apartment at six.

At ten past six, I had been chopping fennel in Sadie’s kitchen; by six fifteen, I had rolled my eyes but by six thirty, when I had not received word from my considerate lover who always lets me know when they’re running late, I was unnerved.

I called twice, to no avail, and frowned at Sadie. ‘Something is wrong,’ I said. Sadie pressed the juice from the flesh of a lemon into a glass bowl and shook her head.

‘Maybe they’re on the T,’ she offered. ‘No service.’

But by seven, we were both concerned. Sadie turned the oven on low and leaned against it, picking at her nail beds. I kept pressing redial but now the call was just going to voicemail. Feeling my cheeks flush with worry, my fear sat in my stomach like a hot stone. I started to pace across the grey linoleum.

‘Quit it, V,’ Sadie said, tucking her hair behind her ear. ‘Let’s make a plan. Do you want to stay here while I go look for them?’

I stopped in the middle of the kitchen and considered. But just as I opened my mouth to respond, we heard a crash outside; a burst of tin barrels knocked to the ground, rolling across the concrete and trying to settle. Alarmed, we both rushed out without jackets, leaving the front door open behind us.

Ty was slumped against the only rubbish bin left erect, one hand haphazardly trying to stop one of the tin lids from rattling against the concrete. The lids of their eyes were drooping low over their irises and their body seemed to twist the wrong way, one leg swung awkwardly over the other, shoulders hunched, mouth parted, confused, as though they weren’t sure where they were or how they ended up there.

‘Ty, what the ever-loving fuck?’ Sadie had said, rushing toward the street to retrieve the barrels and lids. I stood frozen on the pathway, too flushed with the heat of my anger to feel the nip of autumn chill against my skin.

‘What the hell is wrong with you?’ I asked. Ty seemed surprised to hear my voice, looked up at me with a poor attempt to widen their eyes, and tried to stand. Stumbling twice against the rubbish bins, they eventually pulled themselves up and returned the

abandoned lid to its can. They wobbled a bit on their feet before steadying themselves on the bin and took a few steps toward me. I could smell the alcohol on their breath.

‘You’re drunk,’ I said, my heart dipping.

Sadie finished gathering the rubbish bins and rearranging them along the fence, and then smacked Ty in the back of the head.

‘Explain yourself,’ she said, her brow ruttled with fury.

‘I’m not fish or fowl,’ they slurred. When they stepped into the porchlight, I saw their left eye was swelling shut, a pool of red spreading around their temple and down beneath their bottom eyelid. They blinked, and a tear rolled down their cheek and disappeared at their chin.

Sadie swore and I gasped. ‘Who did this to you?’

‘Let’s get inside,’ Sadie said. ‘I have a pack of peas in the freezer.’ She put her arm around Ty and motioned for me to do the same. Together, we balanced Ty between us and got them up the porch stairs and into the apartment.

Sadie retrieved the frozen peas and handed them to me. We situated Ty at the kitchen table and I stroked their knee lightly before bringing the frozen package to their cheek. They winced when I did, leaning back into the chair away from the frost. Sadie handed me a paper towel and I wrapped the peas before pressing it back beneath Ty’s eye. They seemed soothed by the soft padding of the paper towel and I squeezed their knee again. Behind me, Sadie had flipped the oven back on to reheat the food then joined us at the table where Ty was resting their head against my hand, reddening from the frost. Sadie gave me a grave look across the table and I took the peas away from Ty’s eye and sucked air between my teeth.

‘Who did this to you?’ I asked.

The skin beneath their eyes was turning a strange, putrid shade and their lid was swollen red and tender. Ty sat up in the chair, swaying a bit as they did.

‘Let’s get some food in you,’ Sadie said.

‘Ty, baby,’ I said, squeezing their thigh. ‘What happened? Who did this to you?’

Ty moaned and picked the frozen peas up off the table bringing it to their swollen eye, wincing once more with the chill.

‘Food first,’ Sadie muttered, placing a steaming plate in front of Ty who merely stared at it blankly. I picked up the fork and scooped some rice pilaf onto the tip, bringing it to my lover’s mouth.

‘Eat,’ I instructed. They scowled at me like a petulant child but obeyed, closing their mouth around the fork, chewing as though in retaliation.

Two mugs of tea and a cigarette later, Ty had sobered up enough to hold the peas to their own face and tell us what happened. They had apologised several times for being late while I impatiently waited for them to explain where on the course of being punched they’d had time to get drunk.

‘I just needed tobacco,’ they said. ‘The guy wanted to see my ID.’

My throat went dry and I tightened my grip on their thigh already knowing where the story was headed. Sadie knew it too. She reached her hand across the table and offered it to Ty who slid their own over her palm as though by instinct. In a formed circle, we stayed skin to skin until Ty was finished.

‘He laughed,’ they continued, ‘right in my face. Just kept looking from my ID back to me mocking. He said, “Never woulda guessed there was a pussy between those legs.”’

Sadie tutted her lips and shook her head. ‘And then he hit you?’ she asked.

‘Nah, but it made me upset. So, I bought a few nibs and drank them outside to try and calm down. I didn’t want to come over and ruin the evening,’ they paused to look between us and then rolled their eyes. ‘Irony.’

‘You’re not ruining anything,’ I said.

‘I got drunk. And then these two dudebros started shit. Calling me *dyke* and asking if I wanted to fuck their girlfriends.’

‘Gross’, Sadie said.

‘You know the rest...’ their voice trailed off.

The hot stone started cycling in my stomach. Feeling a wave of nausea come over me, I closed my eyes for a moment to let it pass.

‘You okay, babe?’ Ty looked down at me and lifted my chin toward their face, never missing anything.

‘I’m fine,’ I told them, wanting to kiss them better.

‘I’m just sorry I ruined dinner,’ they said, looking down at the peas and poking the package.

‘Honey, please,’ Sadie said, kissing Ty on the palm. ‘If we had to postpone dinner every time some piece of cis scum ran his mouth, we’d never eat.’

But that night when we left Sadie’s, I knew Ty wasn’t fine. They were quiet on the train home. Just sat staring off into space with their hand firmly laced in mine.

They always feel a bit feverish; hot to the touch. The first time I touched them I attributed it to the late August heat, but the second time we touched, Halloween in Boston, I commented on it; pressing my palms into them trying to absorb their heat.

‘I run a few degrees hotter,’ they had said, sinking their teeth into me.

Their hand was cool now, and I began to rub their knuckles, trying to encourage blood flow. They looked down as though they’d forgotten our hands were laced and smiled at me, but not for me. I saw their eyes were empty, and I tried to enfold their palm into my own, envelop them. ‘We’re almost home,’ I told them. They nodded vaguely and closed their eyes for the duration of the ride.

At home, I had sat them down on the edge of the tub and ran the water. I unbuttoned their shirt and they shook it off their arms, letting it drop to the bathroom floor. They stood, and I unzipped their trousers while they unfastened their binder. The wrapped skin was red from a full day encased. They stretched their back and breathed a sigh of relief, trailing a hand on the tender skin and then winced at the pain in their now bluing eye. They stepped out of their briefs and tossed them aside with their foot before getting into the tub. Cupping some water in their hands, they wet their curls, slicking them back out of their face before laying back against the porcelain. They breathed another sigh of relief. ‘I feel better,’ they’d said, closing their eyes.

‘I’m glad,’ I said, getting a washcloth from the rack and dipping it into the tub. ‘Do you want more ice?’

‘I think I want to start T.’

I had been waiting for this moment since we met really, since Ty had begun describing their dysphoria to me. It was a slow blossom. One of the first things I noticed about them—once the dust of lust had settled and we could be around one another without pouncing—was that they were quite tender. ‘*My tender butch,*’ I had joked

easily once, testing the waters, and they smiled. *'Soft butch with a femme heart,'* they said.

Their masculinity seemed entirely defined by pleasing, pleasuring, prioritising women. Opening doors, paying for everything quietly, without boast; buying me flowers nearly every time they saw me, and making note of all mentions of my favourite colours, flavours, and things; surprising me with a new set of brushes I'd mentioned casually in conversation, or restocking my hair dye when they noticed I was running low.

Looking at them now lying in the tub, the colour spreading across their face, turning mauve, I turned the water off. *'Okay, let's make the appointment,'* I'd said, wringing out the washcloth between my hands.

'Tamar Halevi,' a nurse called out into the waiting room. I am so unused to hearing their birth name, that when they stood upon being called, for a moment I didn't know why. With the stone weighing heavy at the bottom of my throat, they gave me a quick kiss on the cheek before nodding at the nurse and following her down the hallway. I watched their black boots scuffle down the corridor until they took a left and disappeared, then I closed my eyes and prayed the physician had met someone like Ty before.

Last night, before the appointment, we had drinks with Sadie and she'd expressed her concerns. By the rehearsed speech she delivered, I knew she'd given Ty's decision some thought.

'You know hormones were a necessity for me,' she began. *'So, if I thought you wanted this for the right reasons, if I believed in my heart this would bring you wholeness the way mine have, I would support you. But I'm hesitant, Ty. Sometimes when I hear you talk about hormones, it feels like a score you need to settle with your mother to prove you're trans enough.'*

'Fuck Sadie, tell me how you really feel,' Ty had said, kicking their boots off in her apartment.

'Tell me I'm wrong,' Sadie leaned back in her chair, eyes fixated on Ty's.

'I wouldn't mind having a deeper voice,' they said.

'A voice is a voice is a voice,' I chimed in.

‘Exactly,’ Sadie gestured toward me. ‘Does my low voice make me a man?’

‘Obviously not,’ Ty said.

‘*Obviously*,’ Sadie repeated.

Sadie and I stared at one another while Ty pulled at a loose string on their jeans. They poked at the red tip of their finger where they’d wrapped the string several times. As lovers do, I tried to take a decidedly gentler approach.

‘What parts of yourself cause you anxiety that hormones could help relieve? What needs to shift for you to feel whole?’

‘Nothing feels wrong,’ Ty said, yanking the string free from the hem. ‘It’s just that nothing feels right, either.’

A young child and his mother walked into the waiting room and sat across from me. The mother pulled off the child’s mittens and unzipped his coat, piling everything onto the chair beside her. Once free from his coat, the child ran toward the small assemblage of toys in the corner of the waiting room. He scribbled a bit on the chalkboard and pushed a fire engine around a few times before picking up a doll, holding it to his chest. He spun around a few times saying *my baby, my baby*.

‘Put that down, Charlie,’ the mother urged, ‘dollies are for little girls.’ I watched as he tossed the doll to the side as though suddenly allergic to her stitched body. I considered saying something, but what would be the point? At that moment, the reliable shuffle of my lover’s boots appeared, and I looked up to see them returning down the hallway. Ty looked grave though, and I felt the stone sink further down. I joined them at the receptionist’s desk where they paid the fee and then we left together through the double doors.

I shivered a bit as we stepped into the winter chill, having grown used to the heated waiting room. ‘What happened?’ I asked.

They pulled the tobacco pouch out of their pocket and rolled a quick cigarette, handing it to me, and then rolled a second. ‘Crazy can’t have agency,’ they said.

‘She said that?’

‘Nicely put and in that *neurotypical-knows-best* tone,’ Ty said, searching their pockets. ‘You got a lighter?’

I reached into my pocket and handed them a blue zippo. ‘Well, fuck that,’ I said. ‘And her. We can find another doctor.’

‘Like it will be different.’ Ty scoffed. ‘Oh, fuck V, she was just like my mother. Condescending and masking it all with pleasantries.’

I frowned, reaching for their hand. ‘Let’s get out of here, go home, have some tea, regroup.’

But Ty dodged my reach and had started pacing a bit in the parking lot. ‘Like I need some cis doctor telling me who the fuck I am,’ they said, waving their hand in the air for emphasis. ‘Like I’m just some mentally unstable fuckwit. Like some confused child.’ Bits of ash fell from the tip of their cigarette as they paced. ‘Oh, she called me a pretty girl though,’ Ty said, smiling manically, framing their face with their hands.

‘Your anger is valid,’ I said, glancing around the parking lot.

‘Please, you’re thrilled about this,’ they practically spit the words out. ‘You and Sadie both.’

‘Take it easy, Ty’ I said, narrowing my eyes. ‘Don’t take this out on me.’

They closed their eyes and shook out their hair a few times, before taking the last drag of their cigarette and tossing it. ‘Let’s get out of here. I don’t want to be here anymore.’

At home, I made tea, and got the full story. Apparently, the doctor thought Ty’s dysphoria was linked with their mental health.

‘She said, “If you’re not trying to be a man, I’m not sure why we’re discussing HRT,”’ Ty told me. ‘And I was just so tired, V, I didn’t feel like launching into Gender Theory 101 to my own doctor—while seeking treatment no less.’

I nodded and set a mug of tea in front of them before slinging my arms around their neck.

‘I’m just fucked up, I guess,’ they said, taking one of my hands in their own and kissing it. I shook my head.

‘Society is fucked up,’ I told them. ‘Ableism? Fucked up. Transphobia? Fucked up. But you?’ I pressed my lips to their mouth. ‘Not a chance.’

Two joints and a teapot later, Ty was more themselves, but still tender. They took a shower to wash the day’s grime off them, and I changed into the black negligée they liked and laid in bed waiting for them. They walked into the room lean, wet, and naked,

towelling their hair dry distractedly. When they noticed me on the bed, their mouth upturned into a small smirk, and they threw the towel to the floor, lifting themselves up and onto the bed, hovering above me. They shook their head and looked at me in wonderment, which is something they do often and something I never tire of.

‘You’re unbelievable,’ they said, trailing a slow tongue across my collarbone. ‘The perfect femme.’

I let them fawn over me for a moment, both of us suspended in the trance of their admiration, before sliding my hand up their neck and around the back of their head.

‘Come on, daddy,’ I whispered, tugging at their curls. ‘Show me what you’re made of.’

Tuesday Curse

I

Tilly went missing on a Tuesday.

I remember because our friend Marisol was complaining that Tuesday is the week's most tedious day. 'Wednesday—hump day. Thursday is the new Friday and Friday will always be Friday. But Tuesday?' Marisol blew air out of her mouth. 'Fucking lame, man.'

'Don't go cursing Tuesdays,' Sadie warned. 'The world thrives on throwing wrenches.'

Marisol shrugged. 'So, where is Tilly then?'

'That's the question of the hour,' I said.

We'd spent the morning phoning friends, dealers, and junkies alike trying to find my housemate, but we kept coming up empty.

'How long has she been gone this time?' Marisol asked.

I bit at my thumbnail and didn't respond.

Sadie, who had been half-heartedly scrolling through her contacts for the third time, stopped with an exasperated sigh. 'I'm running out of names. Who else do we know?'

I ripped a small sliver of skin off my thumb and chewed at the rubber between my teeth. 'Fuck it,' I said. 'I'm going to look for her.'

And Sadie, who has no habit of excessive worry, said, 'I'm coming with.'

II

When Tilly feels fine, the world is alive for her taking, but when Tilly turns, the earth cracks and falls into her lap, torn flesh and tattered maps, terminal and blazing.

Tip-top Tilly is candid, sharp as a whip, curious.

We were avid David Lynch fans. *Blue Velvet*, *Twin Peaks*, *Eraserhead*. We spoke of his talent—mostly, his ability to capture the uncanny. Tilly and I were both drawn to the uncanny—to the strange wind pulling a lone swing on abandoned blacktop, the early

morning lull of an empty airport or the mist of twilight circling a cul-de-sac. Not fear, no—the hair-raise before.

‘Discipline,’ Tilly told me. ‘That’s what we lack, Ty. David’s discipline.’

‘At least we’re tortured,’ I offered.

‘Not tortured enough if we have time to sit around and talk about it.’

A story can be both concrete and abstract, or a concrete story can hold abstractions. And abstractions are things that really can’t be said so well with words.

Tilly had written the Lynch quote on her bathroom mirror in red marker. Every morning, when she pulled coconut oil through her teeth (‘only a fool would use that processed paste,’ she justified), she told me she would admire the way *concrete* and *abstract* fell over either eye, teetering between her temples.

Tilly spoke often of teetering.

In an episode, Tilly spoke of many things abstractly but never concretely. You had to sift through mixed messages and deflated balloons; half-truths and half-thoughts lit up neon and dusted over with her prevailing sentiment. I came to collect her words, swept my curious finger through the soft edges of her silence, learning to meander with her mania, *lean*.

She started sliding in July.

‘Isn’t it strange the way we try to avoid change?’ she had asked me.

We were on the red line heading into Cambridge where Sadie had recently gotten a bartending gig.

‘Hypocrites,’ Tilly continued. ‘We say we crave adventure but then go out of our way to ensure routine. Taking the same lines, walking the same paths, going to the same places we hate, making inane small talk with people we can’t stand, praying our lovers stay even though we’re bored of them.’

A sweat-laced man with ruddy cheeks approached with his palm outstretched. He was wrapped in several layers, a consequence of having to haul his home around with him. ‘Spare change?’

Tilly looked delighted. ‘Change, yes!’ The man, too, looked pleased. ‘I thank you for having the pluck to demand what we are so hell-bent on avoiding...’ She began a

long, rambling speech while I dug through my pockets and produced a few dimes. The man nodded and shuffled away while Tilly continued to prophesise for several stops. She grabbed my knee. ‘We need change, Ty. Right now. Can’t you feel it—even a little—the utter urgency of this moment?’

I didn’t.

‘We have to do something.’ She grabbed my arm and pulled me up off the plastic seat. ‘We’re getting off.’

‘We’re meant to visit Sadie.’

‘Sadie is frozen. We can always find her now. And she believes we are coming. She anticipates. No. We won’t go. And this will change the course of our lives and disrupt expectation. Don’t you see?’

I followed Tilly through the sliding doors onto the platform. She rushed up the escalator ahead of me and when she arrived outside, she inhaled deeply, as though the stale air would revive her.

‘Porter Square,’ I said, looking around.

‘You know where we are?’ she demanded. Her cheeks were a deep pink, ablaze; and her eyes, wide and bright, narrowed. She looked determined, dramatic, and just a little bit off; endearingly so.

‘Tilly, *you* know where we are,’ I pointed across the street to the familiar café.

Looking at me as though I was a petulant child she said, ‘Starting today, I don’t drink coffee.’ And then, pulling me by the arm, she told me, ‘We have to keep walking until nothing is familiar.’

Boston is a fine city for walking and you couldn’t hope for a more perfect season than autumn. Too bad it was mid-July. The humidity seemed to settle in every pore; stifled. The sky, threatening rain, didn’t fulfil her pledge; only hung, static, like white noise.

‘Tilly, I’m sweating,’ I said. Past cafés and doorsteps we turned every few corners, stopping once to examine some chewing gum on the pavement.

‘Who is chewing all this black gum?’ She’d made the same joke four times in the past two weeks.

We pressed on. I didn’t ask what we were looking for because I knew Tilly didn’t have a goal to reach, only a moment to arrive at. I took my phone out of my pocket and

sent Sadie a quick text while Tilly remained fixated on finding the unforeseeable. *Tilly is in one of her moods*, I typed.

I followed Tilly through the back roads for two hours. It seemed we kept circling around the same parts of the city, but so many of the houses looked alike, it was difficult to say. Eventually, we made it to a park. A few dogs were running about, their red-faced owners looking antsy and beat.

Tilly thrust her fist into the air, triumphant, and rolling my eyes I followed her to the square of yellowed grass.

Sitting side by side on one of the benches, I looked out to the sad little lot. In one corner, a playground had been erected, though it had certainly seen better days. Even from across the park, one could see it was rusting brown, downtrodden. The plastic slide was faded beige, one swing had chains and no seat while the other hung limply in the air, bent out of shape; certainly unable to weather any weight, even a child's. Beside us, a green bin was piled to the top with rubbish, spilling out on either side. A few measly flies buzzed above it and the land adjacent was littered with Styrofoam cups and discarded newspapers. A yellow lab trotted by and Tilly called out to her until she approached, wagging tail and slobbering tongue.

'What a beautiful creature!' Tilly leaned down to kiss the dog's face as her tail shook in excitement. Just as soon as she'd arrived, her owner called her back to stop pestering us and the lab trotted away, just as eager.

Tilly turned to me and then smacked the bench excitedly as though she'd proved something. 'Did you expect to meet such an incredible creature today?'

I wiped the sweat from my face with my T-shirt.

'We were headed to a bar. Who knows who we would have met there?'

'Oh, but you knew it,' Tilly sung out the words. 'You knew it. You anticipated. Of course you'd meet people in a bar, but you didn't know you would walk with me through the city, you didn't know you would stumble into this most depressing park and that we would befriend a Labrador.'

I sighed, rolled a cigarette, and rubbed my throbbing temples.

'You got me there, Till,' I said. This seemed to satisfy her. She took the cigarette from my swollen fingers and dragged on it deeply while looking out to the bleached grass.

‘It’s better not knowing.’

She said it twice.

III

Downswing Tilly is waves of anxiety and rage, rippled with sorrow and impulsivity. She fell in and out of love swiftly. People, places, things. We would be chained to the same coffee shop for three weeks and then, suddenly, the place was dead to her.

These shifts happened without notice or explanation. As her friend, I’ve learned to move on. Her favourite pizza topping for two years was green olives, until she told me one Friday night that olives had betrayed her. I never saw her eat one again. On it went. She gave her love freely and loosely, but never for long, never categorically.

‘I’ve met a girl,’ she told me on her twenty-third birthday. We were celebrating, a small group of us, in the apartment Tilly and I’d shared since May, when I had moved in to keep an eye on her. Her bar craze had been put on pause. As of late, she didn’t appreciate noise, strangers, or the smell of fried food.

Sadie, my lover Vero, Marisol and I gathered to smoke a birthday blunt and give Tilly some attention—but not too much; then she would be overstimulated, overwhelmed, over it, over us. We sat knee-to-knee in the living room and passed the blunt. Vero played a record, *The Dead Weather*, I think, and after Tilly exhaled a long stream of smoke between her teeth, she informed me, ‘I’ve met a girl.’

Sadie overheard the comment. ‘Ooh,’ she started making teasing sounds with her mouth and I bugged my eyes out of my head to dissuade her. Tilly wasn’t big on extended vowels that week.

‘Where did you meet her?’ I asked, trying to direct the conversation away from spectacle.

‘Online,’ Tilly said. ‘She’s studying queer theory at Lesley.’

‘Right up Ty’s alley,’ Vero said.

‘She is nothing like Ty,’ Tilly went on. I pretended to pout, and Vero waggled her eyebrows at me. We were used to the way Tilly navigated conversation. When she was in this headspace, she always seemed preoccupied, and her tongue was bold and loose. She didn’t speak to converse, more to profess. She didn’t have patience for social

graces. Kindness only made her bite harder. It was best in these moments to just be along for the ride.

‘She is absolutely brilliant—’

‘Ty’s antithesis,’ Vero quipped. The interruption of laughter annoyed Tilly, who crossed her arms and waited for us to quiet.

‘She is absolutely brilliant,’ Tilly began again. ‘She has two dogs and can lucid dream. That means she is a time traveller.’

Sadie raised her eyebrows and Marisol shook her sceptical and pitying head.

‘She is a time traveller,’ Tilly continued. ‘She has astral-planed across several dimensions and she says ours is the most primitive of them all. We humans haven’t even touched our full potential. That’s what she says. We’re stagnant. Most likely just a Social Studies project for some alien student... and all his alien classmates laugh at us for being so primitive, so pedestrian.’

As she finished, I looked around to the other three faces and silently wished someone would break the silence without popping Tilly’s bubble of bliss.

‘She sounds great,’ Vero said, and I squeezed her thigh, grateful for her grace. Everyone nodded in agreement and Tilly beamed.

Later, in the kitchen, while I cut Tilly’s cake (with strict instruction not to sing happy birthday or light even one candle), Sadie joined me. She grabbed a beer from the fridge, let it click shut, and then leaned against it. ‘I’m worried about Tilly,’ she said.

‘Aren’t we all.’

‘I’m serious, Ty.’

‘She’s just in one of her moods,’ I said. ‘She’ll come back. She always does.’

Sadie looked less sure, maybe even a little pissed off. She’d always said she didn’t grow up around hippy-dippy queers who make allowance for all the colours of the crazy rainbow. She’d told me her mama was tough. If something breaks, you either fix it or throw it away. ‘*You can’t look at people that way,*’ I’d said. But Sadie told me, ‘*It’s how I survive.*’

I kissed Sadie on the cheek because I knew her cross is another queer’s worry. We returned arm-in-arm to the living room with the cake in hand and I set it in front of Tilly without much fuss, as demanded, but she just stared at the frosting, confused.

‘Whose birthday is it?’ she asked, looking up at us blankly.

We all exchanged a frantic glance trying to wordlessly elect one speaker, so we didn't all say 'mine' at once.

IV

Rock bottom Tilly is caustic.

The sleeping goes first. And with no sleep, she sporadically slips in and out of psychosis.

She would ask about the shadows. *Do you think they're here for me?*

Worry about the lightbulbs. Do you think the man living inside is lonely?

Mumble about the weather. *It's been a long winter.* I would point to the summer trees alive and abloom outside our window, but she'd crinkle her brow and tell me to shut the blinds.

I started counting her pills. Antidepressant—small, oblong, white—morning, with food. Anxiolytic, thrice daily, and her antipsychotic twice. Ambien at 9 p.m., lest she'd be groggy the next day, and beta blockers for migraines.

Every morning, it was the same rabid routine. I'd find her somewhere, bleary eyed, her mind glued in place with the half dreams she'd chased during the night and the terror she tried to turn from. 'The lamp is aggressive,' she would say, and I would move it into the closet.

Tilly, I'm worried...

But I don't say it. You never say it.

I put four pills on the counter. 'Come on,' I would say, acting as though it's trivial, as though I hardly care either way.

'Why is it so important to you I take these pills?'

'You know medication helps manage your symptoms.'

She threw her head back and howled.

'Is that how you prefer me, Ty?' she started knocking her knees together.

'Managed? Managed... Bandage. Cabbage. Savage. The savage managed to bandage his cabbage before it vanished. Fancy a cabbage Ty, a bandaged cabbage?'

She was skipping around the kitchen now, repeating the rhyme, slightly altered each time.

The cabbage is savage and in search of a bandage.

The vanished cabbage longs for his savage.

The fancy savage managed to vanish.

I tried again.

‘Tilly, please, just take your meds,’ I held the pills out to her and she knocked them from my hand, and we watched together as they rolled across the linoleum. The antidepressant slipped out of sight, under the fridge.

‘No depressant for me!’ she said, and her skipping intensified. I dropped to my knees and tried to retrieve the pill but it had rolled all the way to the sticky edge.

I sighed. ‘How about some breakfast?’ I asked, still on my knees.

‘Pickle juice,’ she said. I held my face in my hands and she stopped her skipping and dropped down beside me. ‘Don’t cry, Ty. Cry Ty, tie, tied, crying Ty-Ty.’ She put her arm around me. ‘I’m the most alive right now.’

I nodded and fried her some eggs, served with pickles on the side, but she only poked at the yolk and then drank the pickle juice right from the jar.

I tried twice more with the pills before she threatened to kill us both with a kitchen knife. I’m never scared, only tired in these moments; tired yet determined as I talk her down from the tub where she presses the blade to her neck for effect.

After locking all of the sharp instruments in a drawer, I called my lifeline, Vero, while Tilly knocked her head into the wall singing broken nursery rhymes.

‘You have to call 911,’ she said.

‘They’ll lock her up again. Pump her full of Thorazine until she is drooling and nameless.’

‘What about her mom?’ Vero asked.

‘Not an option,’ I replied.

‘Savage ravage cabbage! TY! Let’s go out and buy some cabbages. Are they green or purple? Or am I thinking of grapes? Grape, ape, great escape. Come on, I’m hungry,’ Tilly’s voice came from the kitchen.

Vero sounded panicked.

‘Fuck’s sake, Ty, you have to—’

I hung up.

‘Ty, I’m hungry,’ Tilly said again.

‘Maybe you should try eating more than pickle juice,’ I reasoned, and Tilly threw her head back and laughed, as though it were the funniest thing she had ever heard.

V

Tilly went missing on a Tuesday.

An angry August Tuesday; the world dipped in grey, all clouds and concrete. The thick air seemed to encase us—Sadie and me—as we trudged around the city calling Tilly’s name, in vain, in hope, in desperation, in lieu of.

We went to all her favourite hangouts and some random places, too: the pizza parlour on Smith Street, a café where she liked the light fixtures, a random bus stop she favoured for its sloping lamppost. We went to every bar within a mile radius and to the fountains where once upon a time, Tilly used to sit and sketch. We knocked on the door of everyone we knew, even though they’d already told us they hadn’t seen her. We walked aimlessly, calling out her name, just to feel useful.

At dusk, we collapsed side by side on a bench and Sadie rolled me a cigarette. I tried to light it, but my hands were shaking, so Sadie did that too.

‘We’ll find her,’ she said.

‘Don’t curse Tuesdays,’ I said mockingly.

‘She’s probably off somewhere hooking up with an old friend. Or maybe she took the bus to the beach. Who knows? We’ll find her.’

‘Tilly hates the bus.’

‘She’s probably on the move... We just keep missing her.’

I flicked my cigarette.

‘This isn’t your fault, Ty.’

I nodded vaguely and closed my eyes.

Where the fuck are you Tilly? I squeezed my eyes together and tried to astral plane to her. *Is that where I’ll find you, Tilly? In the liminal space?* I tried to retrace our steps—locate any warning signs on our timeline so I might unearth her coordinates. But

our whole friendship was littered with omens and worst-case scenarios. *Should I have called your mother? What should I have done? Where are you now?*

Time was starting to shift into that ominous stretch of too long. Sadie felt it too. We knew numbers weren't on our side. Neither was fairness. I opened my eyes and watched neon dots blink around my peripheral.

'Might as well go back home,' Sadie said. 'To wait for her,' she added, to make it sound better.

I didn't want to return to an empty apartment but there didn't seem anywhere left to look. We took a shortcut through the park as the streetlights came on, one right after the other, like dominoes. I studied the orange light. How strange, I thought, that such a putrid shade is so comforting against the evening sky.

It was as I had this thought that I heard Sadie scream. The sound erupted from her mouth and solidified above us, suspended in the twilight. I ignored her, kept my eyes focused on the orange embers. Sadie grabbed my hand with her own sweat-laced palm and started running uphill toward the blacktop, pulling me behind her.

'We need to check if she has a pulse!' She was speaking quickly. Repeating herself.

I started counting the streetlamps.

'For fuck's sake, Ty, call 911.'

Instead, I dropped to my knees beside her body. I could not bear to look, so I closed my eyes and stretched my fingers out to feel her. Odd. She did not feel cold, but tepid. Not stiff or fluid but inflexible, alien; like puddy stretched thin. I placed my thumbs on either temple. *Tilly, can you hear me?*

It seemed obvious to me this was a body in transit. Was she floating only slightly above? Hovering? When did the moment shift from pre- to post- and was this the present? I opened my eyes to find any angels but I saw only Sadie, panicking, doing her best to answer the dispatcher's questions.

I laid down beside Tilly and studied the streetlamps from a new angle.

'Get up, Ty! What the hell is the matter with you?' Sadie nudged me with her foot.

I stayed where I was and listened to Sadie's shoes clatter on the pavement until her footsteps were joined with the wail of sirens. I smiled. My orange orbs were no longer alone; they were accompanied now by the persistent twirl of light, cherry red and cornflower blue, cycling like comets. I watched them dance above me in the sky.

‘Which one is it?’

‘The redhead,’ Sadie responded. ‘I don’t know what’s wrong with Ty.’

‘Shock,’ the EMT said. ‘Can you hear me?’ He spoke in a calm, even tone. ‘Do you know your name?’

‘Get the hell up, Ty. You’re acting crazy,’ Sadie pleaded.

Their voices floated in and out like the sirens that preceded them. Responding wouldn’t make any difference so I laid still beside Tilly, kept my tired eyes closed. When they’d finally lifted her, one of her fingers brushed against my thigh and I reached forward to fold her hand into my own, but my fingers only met empty space. What would happen to her now, I wondered. Would they handle her with care or would she be business as usual? Would they load her into the back of the ambulance and begin paperwork? Would she once again be a list of symptoms? Who would consider her circumstance, her complexity?

I vowed then to tell her story.

The opening and ending one and the same: *Tilly went missing on a Tuesday.*

Tuesday: day of tedium and curses.

Tilly went missing on a Tuesday; she slipped between doctors’ grips and the concrete cracks of a city she felt could never love her. She went missing on a Tuesday and became the liminal space, the vapour. She teetered between lucidity and dreams and wandered.

Tilly went missing on a Tuesday.

And though we always saw it coming, we never saw it coming, because that’s what it is to love someone like Tilly.

One Tuesday, she simply dissolved into a languid wisp
of city mist,
and evaporated.

Field of Violets

In my dreams, the angels look like Hazel; liquorice hair rolling like waves to kiss hip shorelines and mouths, a sort of purpled-red, plump and parted.

Hazel's scent precedes her. When she walks into a room, her aroma casts a net and engulfs the crowd; coconut oiled hair and honeyed wrists. She is the perfume of sex and roses.

Late summer, Ty sent me a text asking if I wanted to meet them at a party in Allston. *Lots of queer cuties*. The text is like Ty, unfussed and full of possibility. I decided to shower the day off me and step into prospect.

Outside, the humidity swarmed like bees, even in twilight. By the time I reached the T, I was sweating and wiped the moisture from my face with my head scarf. Once seated, I noticed a woman staring and when she caught me watching her watch me, she dropped her eyes quickly and returned to reading. I always wonder what outs me. I wouldn't say I'm clocky, but one pair of lingering eyes destabilises certainty.

At the party, Ty was flushed, a little drunk, endearing. They had their arm around some girl, and I saw another making jealous eyes at them from across the room.

'Let me get you a drink,' they offered. Always considerate. We've been best friends for nearly ten years and they've set the bar on reciprocity. But I was feeling fine with my nude lip and sun dress so I told them lovingly they had their hands full and that I will get the drink myself.

Through a cloud of tattooed arms, side shaves and septum rings, I made my way into the kitchen where the hosts had converted the counter into a bar. Some bear with a glittered beard bumped his hips along to the blaring music while pouring grenadine into a glass. I smiled brightly and asked if he could make me the same.

'Well of course, pretty lady,' he said, and I warmed at his use of *lady*.

We chatted a bit while he stirred, and I thought it nice that I'd found a friend for the evening. Leaning back into the counter, listening to him complain about the bear scene in Brighton, I saw her across the room; all hair and eyes. Feeling something flutter in my chest, I took one last swing of the over-sugared drink, and then excused myself.

As though a force propelled me, I glided toward her. She was illuminated in the party's purple glow, marked like treasure, and I sailed into her light. When I reached

her, I faltered, because she was taller than she seemed across the floor, as tall as I wanted her to be, as tall as me.

‘I’m Sadie,’ I said. It was the only thing I could think of. My name. So, I gave it to her.

‘Hazel,’ she said, and I repeated it.

‘Just like your eyes.’

She commented on the embroidery of my headscarf and I flushed, wanting to stitch her breath into my pocket, so I might always have her voice to soothe me.

We chatted easily, eagerly; swapping stories and tips and cis nonsense.

‘Some suburban housewife clocked me on the train,’ I told her, and she grimaced.

‘She’s just bitter she hasn’t had an orgasm in over a decade.’

That’s when I had smelled her. No, not smelled her. That’s when I realised the smell I’d come under spell with belonged to her. Coconut, lavender, and something else. Something honeyed. I closed my eyes to inhale her. ‘You smell delicious,’ I said, and then wavered, sure I’d said something over the line, strange.

‘Do you want to get out of here?’

I was so eager to get out of there with her, I didn’t bother telling Ty goodbye. Outside, the heat must have gathered in an angry bout of thunder and buckled. I hadn’t heard the rain but the sidewalks had deepened in grey and streams of water were rushing toward the gutters.

‘Your place or mine?’

I said *mine*, even though I was curious to see her space. I get quite anxious being too far from home, always wondering if and how I’ll get back.

I told her I was off the green line but if she didn’t mind a bit of a walk, ‘it’s manageable,’ and she said a walk would be lovely and pointed to the moon above us.

‘I love the sky after rain.’

We turned left down a side street to find uneven cobblestones slicked wet with rain. Hazel looked down at her heels and laughed. ‘On second thought, I’m not wearing the right shoes.’ I offered her my arm.

We wobbled down the street together because I wasn’t faring much better in my platforms, but I was determined in my aim. The wobbling was nice. We kept clutching

each other's arms more often than the slippery road demanded—it was nice to have an excuse.

I asked about her name and she laughed and told me no one had ever asked, and I knew then she had a story.

She described her mother as 'theatrical and kind' and her father as an Iranian poet, smiling warmly as she pronounced a few of the fairy tales he used to tell her as a child in his mother tongue.

'They made me beneath a tree,' she told me, shaking her head as though she too couldn't believe she knew the story of her conception. 'Apparently, when they'd finished, my mother was complaining of an ache in her back. When my father lifted the blanket, he found a lone hazelnut wedged in the earth.'

'So, you chose the name Hazel,' I said, marvelling.

'Or the name Hazel chose me,' she grinned.

'We're here,' I said, gesturing toward my apartment, hoping she wouldn't find it too plain. She waited patiently as I fumbled to retrieve the key from my purse. While I cursed the bottom of my bag, she stunned me; put a soft hand beneath my chin and lifted my face up to her own, to kiss me.

Her mouth was sweet like cream, and I parted her lips with my tongue and moved around inside her. She moaned as we tangled, pressed her body into mine. 'Find the damn key,' she murmured, and I dived back into my pocketbook with purpose.

Inside, Hazel paused for a moment like she was going to look around the apartment but then decided to devour me instead. The heat of her mouth and the slither of her tongue sent me spiralling and I pulled her toward my bedroom forgetting about the rubbish bin along the way. We knocked it over and kept kissing.

Between the sheets, we pressed our bodies together like we wanted to meld them. I took a moment to tear myself away from her and without skipping a beat, she began kissing my neck instead. Dizzy and unable to remember why I had stopped for a breath, my eyes closed as she darted her tongue into my ear.

'Is there anywhere I shouldn't touch you?' I asked, remembering.

She stopped kissing my neck then, looked straight through my soul and smiled.

'I love my lady cock and you can touch me anywhere you want,' she told me. Closing her eyes, she started moving toward my face to kiss me again and then opened

them, paused. ‘Thank you for asking,’ she’d said, before tugging on my breast with her teeth.

I throbbed; floated above our bodies, euphoric. Hazel opened for me like a flower; a damp, blooming bud. I put my mouth on her; let my tongue travel the length of her spine and slip between her shoulder blades. I kissed each dip and crevice, slid across every freckle and scar, charted moans and gasps to craft a map of her body. And there, between her thighs, I found the field of violets.

‘Please,’ she begged, and I swallowed her. Waded through her cobalt petals and splashed moon water behind each knee. Each one of her moans made me grow with desire. Digging my fingers into her hipbones, I pulled her as she pushed herself into me, just as frantic.

When she came, I thought she would lie back in wonder, but the release seemed to fuel her fever. Pushing me down on the bed, she licked herself from my face, purred.

‘Is there anywhere I shouldn’t touch you?’ She returned the kindness, slowly, seductively, nipping at my skin, and I shook my head, desperate for her to touch me, *anywhere, anywhere.*

She sunk into me with a smile, disappeared between my thighs while I swelled and tensed beneath her touch. At her heels, I pitched a fever; slept for a hundred years in the blades of her heat and wild grass, and when I woke, I was woman, woman once more.

Creature of the Night

I

Holly drove two hours out of the city to retrieve her protégé from rehab. It was August in New England, and the season had been unusually dim. The summer without sun. She stayed on one highway nearly the entire journey, speeding up a bit as the sky darkened, hoping to make it before the rainfall.

Some years before, Holly had met Ty, twenty-five years her junior, at a Dyke Night in Boston's theatre district. They'd remarked on her leather jacket. *Dyke staple*, they'd called it. Holly told them she probably owned it longer than they'd been alive and they laughed and asked to buy her a drink. As they chatted, she noticed their eye wander around the bar, scanning girls' bodies with a quick lowering of their lids. 'This place is tired,' they'd told her, retrieving a few folded bills from their pocket and tossing them onto the bar. 'I know a better one.'

It had taken some time for the friendship to shift and settle. From a clumsy version of Holly, afraid to show her age, pretending not to be awed by the queer raves and warehouse parties Ty took her to, toward a slow reveal of Ty's humanity, also clumsy, a fragmented child trying to glue their pieces in place. Ty was less glamorous at nine the next morning, with their head lowered over the toilet bowl, asking Holly to colour in the details of the previous night.

Holly's best friend Mara neither understood nor approved of the friendship with Ty. 'Young and stupid,' she said, 'why waste your breath?'

'Don't be ageist,' Holly said, filling her mug.

'I'm not,' Mara blew on the tea to cool it, 'but the difference between you will rear its head eventually. Just be prepared. That's all I'm saying.'

But as unique as Ty may have imagined themselves to be, Holly thought they were just like the rest at that age. She said as much to Mara.

'Headstrong, pissed off butches, a little softer than we let on, more sexist than we cared to admit. Ty has enough swag to take a girl home, but not quite enough to make a woman stay.'

Holly was endeared by this; it was a new queer moment, becoming the elder, guiding rather than being guided. She still spoke to her own queer papa, Jessa, once a week. It was nice to become that for someone else.

‘Ty might not be looking for a mentor,’ Mara had said, before changing the subject.

Seeing the sign for the exit, she pulled the car into the right lane. Ty had been too uncomfortable to outright ask for a favour. Holly could almost see them twirling the phone cord around their fingers.

‘A cord’, they told her in disbelief, ‘how retro.’

‘Where is your cell phone?’ Holly asked.

‘We’re not allowed,’ they said, ‘like children.’

Holly knew then how arduous this ordeal must have been for them. A millennial without their third hand.

‘Do you think I could stay with you a bit while I get on my feet?’

When she told them yes, Ty sounded more like themselves, the tease returning to their tone. ‘And can you pick me up? Next Thursday. I’ll email you the address.’

Holly found the treatment centre easily after she pulled off the exit. Signs pointed her toward the recovery house and she pulled up to what looked like a cottage where an elderly woman might live, small and brick and with a modest garden planted out front. The only sign of addict life was an ashtray spilling over with butts situated on a side table between two chairs. Holly knew from the burst of coke addiction in the eighties that recovery often included, even encouraged, habitual smoking to rid addicts of their more pressing vices.

Flipping open the car mirror, Holly checked her reflection, though was unsure why. It wasn’t habit but she sat for a moment with the engine rumbling beneath her boots, studying her lines. A few more wrinkles creased her forehead now than all those years before at college women’s nights and lesbian potlucks. Still, her eyes were the same dark brown and her jaw was defined and handsome. Femmes always said so. Her hair was shorter than it was in the eighties when every dyke thought a mullet was prerequisite. Since thirty, Holly had been waiting to turn grey. Didn’t have qualms about aging. *Still got it*, she thought, snapping the mirror shut.

Walking up the dusty pathway toward the front door, Holly noticed the small sign nailed beside it, welcoming folks to Aviva House Recovery Centre, established 1985. Pressing her finger into the buzzer, the door swung open before her hand dropped back down to her side.

‘Holly!’ Ty pulled her into a tight hug, pressing their chest into hers so she could smell them; cigarettes, cherry cough drops, and something lavender, shampoo perhaps.

‘Hi kiddo,’ she said, ‘ready to get sprung?’

Cracking a wide smile, Ty gestured her away from the entrance hall, toward a quaint living room. A few girls were scattered on overstuffed chairs, feet hanging over the arms, nodding in time with their headphones, doodling or scribbling.

‘This is my counsellor, Claudia.’ Ty beamed. ‘Claudia, this is my friend, Holly. The one I told you about.’

Holly took Claudia’s offered hand in her own, and shook it, trying to act gracious, and as though she too had heard good things.

‘We’re so grateful you’ve agreed to take Ty in. Transition is such a fragile time and having a support network is so important.’

Feeling her palm begin to sweat between Claudia’s hands, Holly tried to pull her hand back politely.

‘Oh, I’m sorry, dear, look at me holding your hand hostage! We’re just so very proud of Ty and all the work they’ve accomplished here.’ Ty rolled their eyes and then lovingly tilted their head onto Claudia’s shoulder.

‘Of course, leaving is the point,’ Claudia said, lifting Ty’s head off her shoulder, ‘But it never does get easier saying goodbye.’

Wiping her hand on her jeans, Holly nodded. ‘Yes, I’m very proud of Ty’s sobriety.’

Claudia smiled warmly and then turned to face Ty. ‘You remember,’ she said, pointing to their head. ‘It’s a bad neighbourhood in there.’

‘Good to get out,’ Ty said, nodding. ‘I’ll remember.’

They embraced then and Holly shifted her weight uncomfortably, glancing around the room. Catching one of the girl’s eyes accidentally, she watched as the girl puckered her lips into a chapped pout and kissed the air, blowing the invisible lips toward Holly.

‘Should I wait in the car?’

‘Nope, I’m all signed out,’ Ty said, picking up a black duffel bag off the floor. ‘Bye girls,’ they said with a slight wave and Holly saw the kisser twirl her hair around her finger and scowl.

Thanking Claudia a final time, Holly followed Ty out the front door and down the pathway to the car. ‘Want a hand with that?’

‘I’m good,’ they said, tossing the bag over their shoulder.

Holly popped the lock on the trunk and Ty tossed the bag inside with one hand.

‘Let’s get the hell out of here,’ they said, the twinkle returning to their eye.

As soon as they got into the car, Ty asked Holly for a cigarette.

‘Finally, I have a use,’ she said, flipping open the pack and bumping one up from the bottom. Ty grabbed it and rolled it between their fingers.

‘Straights,’ they put the stick beneath their nose and breathed in before sticking it between their lips. ‘I can only ever afford to roll.’

Holly held a lighter beneath the tip and sparked the flame. Ty inhaled deeply, closing their eyes as they did.

‘The good shit,’ they exhaled.

Sliding the key into the ignition, Holly backed out of the winding driveway. As the pair rolled away from the house, Ty tapped the window twice with their knuckles.

‘Thanks for the strange times.’

Thunder roared in the distance as Holly pulled onto the main road.

‘Hope we make it back before the rain,’ she said.

‘I’m starving,’ Ty rolled down the window to toss out the butt.

‘Bet the food sucked.’

Ty made a face to indicate just how much, then took another cigarette from Holly’s pack.

‘I’ll order pizza when we get home. I don’t want to risk getting caught in the rain. My tires don’t have the best traction anymore.’

Ty kept their head turned toward the window and said nothing, just watched the tree leaves flapping angrily in the wind.

‘Is that cool?’

‘Fine,’ they said, leaning their head back on the seat and closing their eyes.

Peering up and out the windshield, Holly frowned at the cloud. 'Please don't rain,' she whispered, pressing her foot on the accelerator. But just as they pulled onto the highway, the sky clapped open, and the rain poured down, slapping angrily against the roof in thick, fast drops.

II

Holly lived in the same house her mother had for thirty-six years. When she died, she'd left it and all its odds and ends to Holly. Beeswax candles and chipped teacups, patched quilts and mismatched silverware complete with the shell spoons that Holly had begged her mother to choose as a child because they reminded Holly of the sea. The house's third, fifth and ninth step creaked when you walked up to the second floor and the pipes rattled whenever the hot water was turned on. The radiator in the living room got dangerously hot and more than once, something had been left too close and burned. Holly's favourite sweater had been accidentally tossed over it by a feisty femme during a one-night stand and they'd woken from a post-fuck snooze to blaring alarms. The smell of scorched fibre had lingered, even though that had been years before.

Holly showed Ty the guestroom, the same bedroom she had slept in as a child.

'It's small and a bit musty,' she told them, pulling the curtains closed. 'But the mattress is comfortable and there is tons of cupboard space.'

Ty looked around the room and swept their hand across the panel of cupboards above the bed frame and then sat down on the bed and bounced themselves a few times on the mattress.

'Did you sneak girls in here?' they asked, tapping the bedspread with their hand.

'God, no,' Holly laughed. 'My mother was old fashioned. Plus, every other floorboard in this damn house creaks. I would have never gotten away with it.'

Bouncing a few more times on the bed, Ty thanked her for letting them stay and Holly waved her hand.

'Bathroom is down the hall to the left, fresh towels in the linen closet beside it. I'm sure you want to shower after the journey. Come down when you're ready and we'll have pizza,' she said, pulling the door shut behind her.

In the kitchen, she dug through the designated takeaway drawer and glanced through a few of the menus. Dialling the number for Tony's, a panicked teenager assured her it would be 45 minutes, so she knew it'd be an hour and a half at least. Retrieving her mother's ceramic teapot from above the refrigerator, Holly grabbed a handful of hibiscus flowers and a stick of cinnamon placing both in the pot, always preferring to make her own blends. It required so little effort and tasted that much better. The scent burst forward before she'd even finished pouring the water, and she waved some of the cinnamon steam toward her pores, before covering the teapot with its lid and setting the timer on the stove.

Setting two mugs on the table, she decided to search the cupboards for some cookies but found them bare. The timer on the stove buzzed angrily and she turned it off and strained the tea through a colander. The shower tap turned off above her and the pipes rumbled as Ty made their way down the hallway.

'Honey?' Holly called up to them.

'Yes dear?' Ty called back.

Holly smirked and retrieved a spoon from the drawer.

'Do you want honey in your tea?' She called back up the stairs.

'Yes dear!'

Chuckling, Holly spooned a generous heap into each mug, and Ty thundered down the stairs a few moments later.

'Please tell me you have weed,' they said, towelling their tangled, black hair. Holly retrieved a mason jar from her desk filled with plump, juniper-hued nuggets.

'I was wondering when you'd ask.'

'Hey, you're the one who told me if it comes from the earth, it's okay.' Ty smiled, whipping their damp hair back in one swoop. Holly retrieved one of the nuggets from the mason jar and placed it into the grinder turning the wheels between her hands. She studied Ty from the corner of her eye as they scrolled through their phone.

'Happy to be reunited?'

Ty was very good looking and probably knew it, though never said so. While they were away at rehab, multiple girls had texted Holly asking about them, and whenever she was at a gay bar, some frantic femme would grab her arm: *'Where's Ty, are they okay? Tell them I say hi.'*

‘You were missed,’ Holly said, pinching the weed into the paper.

Ty snorted and then tossed their phone onto the table.

‘This tea smells amazing,’ they said. ‘Everything we had in rehab tasted like sand.’

‘Smoke up,’ Holly handed them the joint.

‘Fuck,’ they exhaled the smoke into a long steady stream. ‘I feel like myself again.’

‘As long as it doesn’t lead to anything harder,’ Holly said sternly, taking the joint from them. ‘Powders go on femmes’ cheeks, not up butches’ nostrils.’

‘Noted,’ Ty laughed. Their phone vibrated beside them and they picked it up, their eyes darting quickly from left to right, before their hands typed a quick response and then dropped the phone down into their lap.

‘Your admirers are happy to have you back,’ Holly sipped her tea.

Ty waved an unconcerned hand in the air. ‘Tell me what you’ve been up to since I’ve been locked up.’

Cupping her hands around the steaming mug, Holly grinned, holding the secret between her teeth. ‘Her name is Marisol. She’s your age and infuriating but completely gorgeous and charming.’

‘Why infuriating?’ Ty blew on the tea.

‘I text her to hang out, she says yes, we meet up, and fifteen of her friends are there too. Back in my day, dates were just the two of you. Now I feel like I have to impress her and her whole fucking entourage.’

‘She’s a pack rat,’ Ty said.

‘She makes out with other people while I’m around too. Says only cishets are monogamous,’ Holly rolled her eyes.

‘She’s right though,’ Ty said, relighting the joint. ‘We’re all filthy poly whores.’

Leaning back into the chair, her eyes limp with the weed’s effect, Holly laughed and then sighed. Closing her lids, she saw tiny speckles of light streak across them.

The nineties had been a simpler time. Women wanted romance. Commitment. If you could open up about your childhood trauma and were willing to raise a cat or dog with her, you were set. Dates were duos, the asker and the asked. You went somewhere nice; somewhere hip with the dykes, a vegetarian café or coffee shop, and you swapped coming out stories and first girl kisses and then you argued about who would pay the bill, and sometimes the femme insisted, or you’d split it in the spirit of equality.

Now, the queer scene was a tremendous blur of glitter and politics. In Holly's day, a few butches in her circle had taken up hormones and a few drag queens she knew called themselves *round the clock* queens. But Ty's generation seemed to want to take gender and fuck it into oblivion. Genderqueer, demiguy, bi and even tri-gender. One person with silver hair and a septum ring had tried to explain the politics to her once at a drag show: *'We pretty much think gender is dead. We're not born this way but constructed to be othered. Meaning, everyone is trans, like if cis people loosened up they'd realise they're not fully "men" or "women" the way they believe they are because "men" and "women" are social classes; constructs, they don't reference anything ontological.'* Holly had blinked, trying to absorb the wealth of information she'd been handed, wondering if she and her friends had ever used the word 'ontological' in casual conversation. *'But if everyone is trans, no one is trans,'* Holly had meant it as a question, but the person slapped her on the back and nodded vigorously. *'Exactly!'*

Ty gave a loud yawn as they extended their hands back up over their head and stretched. Holly opened her eyes to their sternum thrust forward and blinked.

'Do you think everyone is trans?' Holly wasn't sure whether the words were hers or if somehow, Ty had seeped into her mind, and articulated the memory aloud.

'Hell yeah,' Ty said, returning their arms beside them.

Three loud knocks rung out in the kitchen, startling Holly, causing her to jump and knock into the table, a bit of tea splashing over her mug.

'Paranoid much?' Ty laughed. 'It's the pizza. I'll get it.'

And Holly shook her head a few times and blinked, trying to rid the tingle in her cheeks.

III

The next morning over breakfast, Holly asked if Marisol could come over that night.

'It's your house, Hol,' Ty said, taking the last swig of their coffee.

‘I know, but you’ve just gotten out of rehab. I know being around people can be stressful.’ Holly poured more coffee into their mug. ‘Claudia would be proud of me for asking,’ she added, and Ty smirked.

‘I’ll be fine. I want to meet this firecracker,’ they said, dropping a splash of cream into the mug.

‘Well, I’m off to work,’ Holly said, pouring the last of the coffee into a thermos and screwing it shut. ‘The T is down the street, on the left, and there are a bunch of my mother’s books upstairs in the armoire. You’ll text me if you need anything?’

Ty nodded while they finished rolling their morning cigarette, placing it behind their ear when they’d finished. ‘I’ll stay out of trouble, mom, I promise,’ they said, punching Holly playfully in the arm.

Holly closed the door behind her and went to lock it out of habit before catching herself. She took a deep breath of morning air and looked around. Her street was always quiet this time of year, though it never ceased to be strange to her when it was. The students hadn’t yet returned for Fall semester to their-term time rentals. In a few weeks, the streets would vibrate with student hum, late night chatter and heavy bass, and the smell of piss every Saturday morning. *Better enjoy the quiet while it lasts*, she thought.

As a kid, Holly had loved living in a student neighbourhood. She’d sit on the front steps and watch the college kids stumble to and fro, arms around one another, singing songs and laughing. Now, she appreciated the ability to rent the spare room out whenever she needed cash, and the books and records they left alongside the road at summers end. But she wished them quieter at times, less prone to kicking over rubbish bins and urinating in gutters.

Holly worked as a janitor in the Humanities building at one of Boston’s junior colleges for the last fifteen years. Each day, she restocked six floors worth of restrooms with toilet paper and rolls of paper towels, cleaned the filth from the stalls, and disposed of the maxi pads, condoms, and gum wrappers people couldn’t manage to place in the garbage. She would line the bins with fresh trash bags before cleaning the mirrors, faucets, and counters. Once finished with the restrooms, she made her way through the halls, collecting rubbish, wiping down chalk boards and vacuuming the carpets. Once every six months, she waxed the floors.

Hers was a profession that acquired tasks not officially regulated to the job. And her time spent in the position meant Holly could do things no one else in the building seemed to know how to do. The projectors, which the professors are meant to check out of the tech closet, were always pushed down the hall and brought into classrooms by Holly. The lights, which were meant to be changed by an electrician, were changed by Holly, and the Wi-Fi cables which always ended up tangled and lost, were untangled and found by Holly.

The students flittered around her as though she didn't exist. She mostly moved through the halls while the doors were closed and the students were inside the classrooms, where they belonged. Sometimes, they played pranks or tossed paper on the floor in front of her, with some sort of 'pick it up' comment, but mostly they'd ignored her just as she ignored them. It was just a job and the hours suited her well.

Summers were slow but there were a few stragglers that kept Holly in action. Students taking summer courses and conferences held in the lecture halls. Holly enjoyed the summer months when the building was cool and quiet and felt like it was hers. She'd play music on the old radio she hooked to her supply cart, singing along to the Cranberries and Hole while she mopped.

Holly tapped herself into the building and nodded good morning to Gregory the security guard.

'Hot, isn't it?'

'Enjoy the last days of summer,' Holly warned him. 'Student's will be back next week and then we'll be wishing it was July.' He laughed knowingly and waved as she headed toward the stairs.

On her office door, she found a note attached from her boss apologising for the mess left in the boys' bathroom on the fifth floor and could she please be sure to have it taken care of before the orientation meeting at eleven? Holly sighed. For Doug to leave a note must mean it was really something. The messiest she'd ever seen the boys room was after a senior prank involving silly string, but the worst was when some student used excrement for stall graffiti. She hoped it was more akin to the former while she loaded up her supply cart and went to deal with the mess.

When Holly finally finished work that evening, she locked her supply cart in the closet without bothering to unload it. Marisol would be at the house soon and Holly thought it better if she could introduce Ty properly, so they didn't feel bombarded.

But when she arrived back home at nearly eight that evening, she found Ty and Marisol on her porch with a bong between them. Ty's phone was playing music, something electronic but sultry, and the two of them were clearly stoned with red eyes and foolish smiles. Ty noticed Holly first and widened their smile, beckoning her toward them. Seeing Ty summon and wave, Marisol turned around and dropped her mouth in surprise.

'Babe,' she said, standing to give Holly a kiss. 'We've been waiting for you.'

'I got caught up at work,' Holly said, looking around at the cigarette butts littering her porch.

'Sit,' Marisol pulled on her arm.

Removing her bag from her shoulder, Holly sat beside them on the hard wood. 'Ty was just showing me some French house,' Marisol held the bong beneath her mouth.

'What's better than moody French babes?' Ty asked with a shrug.

Holly's back ached from scrubbing the bathroom floor all morning and she was uncomfortable with her knees folded beneath her and tried sitting cross-legged instead.

'Have you been here long, Mari?' she asked, rubbing the small of her back.

'Not too long,' Marisol said, lighting the bowl. 'Two hours' tops.'

Holly squinted and looked at her watch. That didn't seem like not too long ago. Especially for Marisol, who tapped her foot impatiently if Holly ran more than ten minutes late.

'You usually get off work at five,' Marisol said, exhaling a dense cloud of smoke in Holly's face. 'You need to chill.' She handed Holly the bong and lighter, and nodded at her. 'Go on.'

Holly sparked an untouched corner of green and felt the smoke burn her lungs, indeed feeling better when she released the smoke. Ty handed Marisol a rolie and stuck a second in their own mouth, offering the lighter first to Marisol, who accepted gratefully and lit the cigarette with one flick of her thumb.

'What are we doing for dinner?' Marisol asked. 'I'm starving.'

‘We could go out,’ Holly said, leaning forward to touch Marisol’s knee. She realised other than the initial greeting, they’d barely touched.

‘Nah,’ Marisol took a strand of her hip length hair and put it beneath her nose like a moustache.

‘We could order in,’ Holly offered.

‘I could cook,’ Ty said, stamping out the cigarette in the ashtray. ‘You’re being so kind letting me stay here. It’s the least I could do. There’s a shop, nearby right? I make a great peach salsa.’

Holly heard herself say it was a great idea, reaching into her pockets to retrieve some cash.

‘No way, this is on me,’ Ty said, tying their shoelaces before thundering down the steps.

Holly noticed Marisol too was watching them go. They caught one another’s eyes and Marisol smiled. ‘They’re cool,’ she said, reaching for the grinder.

Holly pushed herself up off the porch and brushed her knees.

‘Let’s smoke the next bowl inside. My back is killing me sitting out here like this.’

‘Okay, pops,’ Marisol winked.

Inside though, she softened, bringing Holly a mug of tea and rubbing her shoulders while she lifted her sore feet up onto the ottoman. After the massage, Marisol snuggled into Holly’s neck and kissed it a few times. ‘Happy to see me?’ She asked, and Holly nodded yes, ‘Always.’

Ty made empanadas, elotes, and three kinds of salsa.

‘I didn’t know you could cook like this,’ Holly said, licking the cotija cheese from her fingers.

‘I got better in rehab,’ Ty said, chasing down a large swallow with a gulp of mango juice. ‘Loads of time on my hands.’

‘What were you in for?’

‘Heroin.’

‘I’ve never tried it.’

‘Don’t. You’ll never stop,’ Ty brushed the crumbs from their fingers.

‘That good?’ Marisol asked, twirling the end of her hair around her index finger.

‘Better.’

‘Well, we’re proud of you for getting clean,’ Holly said, piling the last of the mango salsa onto a tortilla chip, and folding it into her mouth.

‘But she doesn’t even know me,’ Ty said, at the exact moment Marisol said: ‘Well not me, I don’t know them.’

The trio sat there for a moment in silence before Ty and Marisol threw their heads back and cackled in unison and the high-fiving across the table.

After dinner, Ty offered to wash the dishes, and Holly and Marisol retreated upstairs to be alone. Marisol unzipped her jeans and stepped out of them, pulling her bra off through her left shirt sleeve and then flopping onto the bed. Trailing a suggestive hand over her knee, Holly offered to eat her out, but Marisol groaned. ‘I’m too full.’

Holly’s own stomach was bloated so she rolled onto her back.

‘What do you want to do instead?’

Pulling Holly’s laptop from the bedside table, Marisol proposed they watch a movie and started scrolling through Netflix.

‘What do you think of Ty?’

Marisol shrugged as her eyes darted around the screen reading titles.

‘They have good taste in music,’ she said, before pointing excitedly to the screen. ‘Bling Ring is on Netflix again.’

‘We’ve watched it three times,’ Holly frowned.

‘So?’

‘So, how about trying one of my favourites. Like Ginger Snaps.’

Marisol frowned, and then, as though thinking better of it, she pushed out her bottom lip and started to beg, fluttered her eyelashes, until the two were rolling around the bed, laughing and kissing.

‘Fine, you win,’ Holly said. ‘Whatever makes you happy.’

And Marisol nodded and winked, as though she already knew this.

IV

The next morning, Holly kissed a still-sleeping Marisol goodbye and left her in the bed. Careful not to wake Ty, she tiptoed down the hallway to have a shower, and then left

coffee on the burner with a note beside it telling Ty what time she'd be home. She worried about them, whether they would find their way too easily into trouble without anything to keep them busy. But they said they were going to start looking for a job soon, and they seemed in high enough spirits.

The morning ran as usual. Holly cleaned all the bathrooms, collected the rubbish, and when she went out back to the dumpsters to deposit the bags, decided to take a short break and smoke a cigarette. Across the road, she sat on one of the benches where a few students were scattered around the grass, smoking and chatting. Holly lit her cigarette and sighed. Marisol was confusing. One day, she kept Holly at arm's length, and others, like last night, they rolled around the covers teasing one another like lovers. Was this an age thing, a poly thing, a queer thing? A few of her friends were poly and things always seemed messy and incestuous. Not in a bad way, just complicated. There was a lot of talking. Is Susan okay with Molly's girlfriend Shannon and how does Shannon feel about Molly's femme Carmen and how does Carmen feel about Susan's cat beansprout. It made Holly dizzy. She didn't mind that Ty and Marisol had carved their own way of loving, but really, she just wanted a nice girl to cosy up to on the couch after a long day. Inside jokes and slippers and too many birthday cards stuffed into drawers because your life together is that precious, precious enough to want to save. *Someday*, Holly thought, flicking the cigarette onto the grass and then returning inside to finish her shift.

That evening when she returned home from work, she found Ty and Marisol side by side giggling on the couch, their heads tilted toward one another, staring at the screen. Holly stood in the doorway unnoticed, watching them. Reading aloud from their phone, Ty was trying to get through the text without laughing while Marisol swatted their arm, trying to hold the laughter between her cheeks, and looking as though she might burst. Holly cleared her throat and they both looked up together from the phone.

'You're home!' Marisol placed a hand on Ty's shoulder to lift herself up from the couch.

'I'm home.'

Holly closed the door behind her and dropped the keys into the bowl atop the bureau. The living room table was littered with gum, candy wrappers and packets of chips. Ty noticed Holly staring and told her they were just about to clean up. Ignoring

them, she dropped her shoulder bag to the floor. 'I'm going to lie down,' she said, turning up the stairs.

Marisol followed her up asking what was wrong, but Holly ignored her too, blinking away the ache that had started throbbing behind her lids. Marisol closed the bedroom door and sat down on the edge of the bed.

'What's wrong?' she asked again.

'Have you been here all day?' Holly asked, kicking off her boots.

'Yeah, so? I woke up and Ty was making breakfast.'

'It's amazing how much you've been around lately. Usually, I have to text you three different days before I see you and now suddenly you're around all the time.'

Marisol narrowed her eyes.

'I came over last night because I thought *you* would be home around six as usual. It's not my fault you worked late. And today just happened. You know I don't have anything to do this week until classes start. Ty is *your* friend. I thought it would make you happy that I'm getting to know them.'

Holly laid back on the bed and considered this, while Marisol muttered under her breath a bit and tucked her hair behind her ears. Everything she'd said made perfect sense, Holly reasoned; the ache dulling a bit behind her eyes. Why had she jumped to conclusions this way? Holly told Marisol about Ty several times, stressing the importance of their friendship. It seemed the other end of suspicious that Marisol would try to get to know them. Not to mention they were the same age with loads in common. Holly sighed and pulled Marisol, who resisted a bit at first, toward her, and whispered that she was sorry. Marisol laid her head reluctantly on Holly's chest.

'Make it up to me,' she demanded.

Holly laughed, and pulling her arm out from beneath Marisol, repositioned herself above her, kissing her a few times and whispering apologies into her neck.

'Show me how sorry you are,' Marisol said, lifting her hips. Holly slid down her lover's zipper and slipped a hand into her trousers to show her.

V

For a few weeks, the three of them went on that way, sharing meals and cigarettes and watching films, but each night Marisol retreated upstairs to Holly's bed, and Holly was content. Their makeup sex a few weeks earlier had shaken off doubt and she was grateful that two people so important to her were becoming important to each other. She'd bought Marisol a back to school gift, a set of Derwent pencils, and Marisol had slung her arms around Holly's neck and squeezed excitedly, declaring them the nicest pencils she'd ever owned.

They'd darted around the idea of monogamy, but Marisol seemed to tense each time the conversation headed in that direction. But given she was over at Holly's three nights a week, Holly didn't press. Ty had gotten a job waiting tables at a café in Somerville and told Holly as soon as they saved up for the first months' rent and deposit, they'd be out of her hair. But Holly didn't mind the company, and they were hardly a nuisance, cooking and cleaning with only the fervour and energy an ex-addict could muster, scrubbing corners and the tops of cupboards when the urge to use struck. The three of them had become something of a family, anticipating one another's needs and performing different tasks to lessen daily stress, and they were in no rush for the arrangement to end. Ty cooked most nights, Holly supplied the weed, and Marisol always brought snacks, little Debbie's for Holly and liquorice for Ty.

Still, Holly hadn't quite seen it coming.

Marisol had started to rub Ty's shoulders while they strummed absentmindedly on the guitar. It had become a common scene. Spread on the sofa, chain smoking cigarettes and passing blunts, offering neck rubs and massages, cuddling during films, and kissing one another goodnight. Still, when Marisol took Ty's face in her hands and turned it toward her, the world slowed.

Holly watched in confusion, shock, and a twinge of delight, as her girlfriend kissed their friend squarely on the mouth, Ty's eyebrows darting upwards in surprise, and then the fluttering shift, both leaning into the moment, of enjoyment, of desire. Holly blinked. Was she too high? She watched Marisol dip her tongue into Ty's mouth and then extend her hand toward Holly in offering. Staring at the lines drawn on her palms,

Holly considered for a few seconds the implication, and then leaned forward to take the hand in her own.

They kissed, the three of them, and it reminded Holly of the first time she'd been at a gay bar and two girls had pinned her in the bathroom stall and kissed her together. Holly watched as Marisol positioned herself on Ty's lap and then pulled their t-shirt over their head. Marisol turned, as though in triumph, and coached Holly to do the same. Marisol nodded as Holly pulled off her own t-shirt and then with a cheeky grin, pushed Holly forward toward Ty.

'Take Ty's binder off,' Marisol instructed.

It took a moment for Holly to register that the words were meant for her. She had just assumed Mari would do it. Moving forward toward Ty, Holly flustered a bit. Not at Ty, who was leaning back into the couch looking unfussed and amused, but it had dawned on her that for all the bras she'd taken off, the only binder she had ever removed was her own.

'I've never fucked another butch,' she heard herself say.

Marisol gasped a bit and then clapped her hands excitedly.

'Oh, well now we have to do this,' she said.

Ty laughed and said 'Really? I'm the first? I'm touched.'

'Not yet, but you're about to be,' Marisol said, pinning them down. 'Come on, babe, take their binder off.'

Holly had never seen Marisol act like such a top, always letting Holly do all the work. It was arousing to see her bossy and instructive now.

Holly unsnapped the trio of buttons on the side of Ty's binder and unravelled the cloth exposing their chest. Marisol moaned and leaned forward to bite at their nipple. Holly went to take off her own binder but Marisol stopped her and instructed Ty to take it off instead. When the pair were chest to chest, Marisol inhaled deeply and then pulled off her trousers. Standing before them, she slid her hand into her polka dot panties.

'I want to watch my two butches fuck.'

VI

The next morning, when Holly woke up, she couldn't remember if it had been a dream. She felt Marisol's hand on her back and turned to move her slightly to the left, seeing then that Ty too was asleep in the bed, with their arm swung around Marisol's waist.

Guess it happened.

Slipping out from beneath the sheets, Holly went to the bathroom to brush her teeth. Downstairs, she made coffee and then scanned the fridge for breakfast options, finding few, so with the two of them sleeping upstairs, she decided to run to the shop for some milk and eggs.

When she returned from the shop, she heard them upstairs and went to say hello. They were both in the bathroom, door ajar, Marisol naked in the bath, one leg up on the tub shaving her thigh, and Ty on the closed toilet seat beside her, scrolling through their phone, a toothbrush hanging out of their mouth.

Staring at the duo, Holly waited for one of them to notice her, but Marisol just tapped the excess cream off her razor and continued to shave. With a blink of rage, Holly thundered down the hall and smacked open the door.

'What's going on?' She asked, hearing the accusation solidify with her tone. It startled Marisol who jumped in the tub splashing water over the sides, which startled Ty causing the toothbrush to fall out of their open mouth. The two looked at one another and then back at Holly, puzzled. And even though Holly hadn't felt angry before that moment, their bewilderment sent something ablaze.

'What's wrong?' Marisol asked, standing up and pulling a towel around her body.

'I didn't sign up for this,' she said, picking up Ty's toothbrush off the floor and flinging it at them. 'I know, I know,' Holly went on in a mocking tone. 'Your generation is all poly and genderless but I'm not. I don't want to be in some three-way couple.'

Ty's eyes widened so they bugged out of their head while Marisol rolled her eyes and towelled her hair.

'You didn't want this to happen?' Marisol asked, as though challenging the claim. 'The three of us living together, sharing meals, bonding? You encouraged this whole fucking dynamic.'

Holly blinked, her hands clenched in two tight fists.

‘I’m not into jealousy and I don’t want to be possessed,’ Marisol continued, dropping the towel to the ground. ‘Call me if you can deal with me having other lovers, if not...’ she let the sentence trail off and then stepped past Holly into the hall.

Ty’s eyes were downcast now as they rubbed their bottom lip uneasily.

‘I’ll get out of your way, Hol,’ they said, before turning to leave. ‘Call me when you want...’

Standing alone in the bathroom, Holly seethed, and then wavered; cooled, and then heated again. Locking the door, she sat with her knees hugged to her chest until she heard the front door close a second time and knew they both had left.

She stood to splash some cool water on her face and noticed the mirror was fogged from the heat. Holly wiped it away and stared at her blurred reflection. She hadn’t minded the sex last night. Not at all. So why did she make such a fuss?

Glancing to the left, she noticed that Marisol had left the tub full of water, something that had always irritated her. *Such a simple thing*, Holly told Marisol time and time again, *just drain the water once you’re finished bathing*. Guess habits are hard to break, she thought, reaching her arm into the lukewarm water and pulling the plug.

Topography

Vero walked along the shoreline in the early evening sun watching the tide play with her toes.

Gradual is its intensity, the sand was amaranth where the water kissed the shoreline, and cyan far out as the eye can see, sporadic flecks of champagne gold glimmering on the surface. Vero had been told by her hosts that the red dye from reefs infiltrate the skeletons of sea urchins, and when the Atlantic washes them ashore, they mingle with fragmented clams tinting the grains of Eleuthera's sand a most subtle pink. Vero had never seen pink sand and had spent every free moment digging her toes into the grains.

She perched on a mass of rocks that she'd discovered her first day on the island, and brushed the sand from her kneecaps. She had dangled her toes from the rocks that first evening until a dinner guest at her host's home put her off the idea. Chuck taught Marine Biology at the Institute of Nassau and had informed her that twilight brought sharks close to the shoreline. Though Vero thought an attack unlikely, she found she couldn't swim in the fading light without her mind playing tricks. Every mass was a threat, every shadow a shark and thus, that first day, she swore off swimming past four o'clock.

Her hosts were husband and wife Mark and Melissa Withers, who Vero had never heard of but were apparently well-known producers in Hollywood. When Vero had asked Mark the first evening if he had made anything she might have seen, he laughed and laid his hand on hers. She understood the reaction to imply *of course* but because she'd only been politely making small talk, she didn't press. Luckily, Mark made it clear he didn't care to talk about his work.

A fish jumped out of the water then and shook its tail wildly before diving back into the waves. Vero had never seen a more beautiful place. This was certainly the most luxurious job she'd ever taken. It hadn't been hers initially. But Mark's usual girl—her friend Daniela—decided to study abroad that semester and had asked Vero if she was interested in some easy cash.

Vero had appreciated how clear and specific Mark's email had been, detailing the logistics. He and his wife were *unconventional*—that's how he put it. They were happily married while still enjoying the company of others but had to be careful because *those damn paparazzi are ruthless and will write anything*. He explained that she would be required to sign a confidentiality agreement and that no pictures of him and his wife, the house, or the gated community would be allowed. They would be travelling to their second home in the Bahamas for a two-week holiday and Vero found it reassuring that he *and* his wife would each be bringing a companion along. She had signed the contract and clicked send without hesitation. Of all the arrangements, this was the dream. She would be travelling to the Bahamas for the first, and likely only time, not to mention she was intrigued by the couple who had affairs side by side.

The fish jumped out the water a second time and Vero decided to head back to the house. She had arrived two days before Melissa's companion, who would be arriving tonight, and they were all meant to have dinner together at seven. Vero hadn't given the second companion much thought when she'd read the email from Mark; imagining a tanned, toned boy pulling a mesh net through a pool. Gathering her sandals, she hopped down off the mound, landing in the soft sand, and headed back toward the house.

The Wither's house was painted cherry blossom pink, a shade Vero would find tacky in the States, but here, on the Island, all the homes were coloured vividly; it was part of the charm. The house was set a few yards back from the beach with only a wooden walkway between it and the shoreline. In an elite private residential community known as Windermere, the houses had names instead of numbers, and the Wither's was 'Sandcastle.'

Vero arrived at Sandcastle around half past six and went to her bedroom to shower. She'd been surprised when she found out she wouldn't be expected to sleep with Mark. In his bed or otherwise.

'My proclivities are somewhat different,' he'd told her, and intrigued she'd asked him to divulge but what he described had hardly shocked her. When she told him via their second email that she was fine with it, he commented that he had never been with such a tall woman before and was excited to meet her. Vero feigned flattery as having her height fetishised was nothing new. Men approached her on the street sometimes and

told her what impressive and tall babies they could make together. At least Mark would pay for his make-believe.

Vero came into the living room at five to seven for drinks and appetisers and saw a particularly lavish spread had been laid out by the chef, Cecilia. First to arrive, Vero dunked a pepper strip into a creamy white dip. She nearly moaned with pleasure, the food was always so fresh and well spiced. Hearing voices in the front hall, she quickly wiped her lips clean with a napkin, smoothed her skirt, and stood to greet the new companion.

Melissa appeared first, looking effortlessly glamorous in white linen trousers and a fitted tank.

‘Ah Vero, you’re already here. Wonderful, I’d like to introduce you to Peyton. She’ll be joining our little troupe for the duration of the holiday.’

Peyton was not a tanned, muscular pool boy but a hip tomboy in cut-off denim shorts and a t-shirt, with a buzzed head and a tattooed neck. Vero blinked, taken aback, then smiled and stepped forward to shake her hand. Melissa’s smile faded as she looked around the living room.

‘My husband?’ She asked. But Vero jutted out her bottom lip and shook her head. ‘I haven’t seen him since I went for a walk.’

Melissa excused herself to find him and as soon as she was out of the room, Vero turned to face Peyton, who was stretching her neck to either side, and then cracked it.

‘Not what you were expecting,’ she said, leaning down to pluck a grape from the bowl.

‘Melissa is queer!’ Vero whispered excitedly. ‘I had no idea. I thought you were going to be some tanned juicehead.’

‘Ew no,’ Peyton giggled. ‘Is that who you wanted here?’

‘Are you kidding? This is amazing. I understand a bit more now about all the fuss with confidentiality. Don’t want a gay scandal, I suppose.’

Peyton popped a few more grapes in her mouth stuffing her cheeks, and then struck a flamboyant pose. ‘I always welcome a gay scandal,’ she said, wiggling her fingers.

At dinner, it became apparent that Peyton and Mark already knew each other. They had an established repartee, and Peyton had the table in stitches telling an amusing story about stepping on a sea urchin as a teenager. Vero noticed how Melissa lit up when

Peyton spoke. How each word and anecdote tickled and delighted her. She noticed Peyton take Melissa's hand under the table and stroke it, reminding Vero to turn her attention to Mark. Vero had thought it would be fun to be in this with another dyke, but Peyton was going to make her look bad. *The boring whore*, she thought, flashing Mark a smile when he caught her eye. But Mark was as merry and tipsy as the others and after they'd polished off the fourth bottle of wine, Mark suggested they retreat to the terrace for drinks and dessert.

Mark and Vero sat side by side in a loveseat facing the sea while Melissa and Peyton rustled up some records.

'Peyton loves music,' Mark said, handing Vero a heavy glass. She'd never drank brandy and she sniffed at the liquid a bit before sipping it, a burn erupting down her oesophagus when she did. 'That's how I know when she's around,' he continued.

'So, your wife knows Peyton,' Vero said, frowning at the brandy glass and placing it on the side table.

'My wife adores Peyton. Wait until you see the two of them with the records,' he smiled softly at some faded memory and Vero smoothed his shirt.

'It's nice. Your arrangement with your wife.'

Peyton appeared lugging a large crate of records in her toned arms, and Melissa followed with the record player. The group spent the remainder of the evening dancing under the moonlight with the gentle crash of the waves coming through every song change. Peyton played Bowie and Prince, and upon Melissa's request, Cher and they all danced on the veranda, twirling around each other, and dipping one another low to the ground and Peyton impressed them all with a triple pirouette.

It was past midnight when Mark finally stood, signalling Vero to accompany him. Nodding, Vero pulled Melissa into a hug and thanked her for the wonderful evening. Turning to hug Peyton goodbye, she whispered into her ear to meet her later on the terrace and Peyton giggled, nodded, and then turned around to change the record.

In his master suite, Mark presented Vero with a pair of red stilettos in exactly her size. She'd never owned heels this high. Being nearly six feet without them, she usually focused on trying to make herself smaller.

'Won't this hurt?' Vero frowned.

'I want to see you in them.'

Vero slipped out of her sandals and strapped the heels around her ankles. She stood, making a show of it, thrusting her arches forward to accentuate them. Mark kept his eyes fixated on her toes, his mouth slightly parted and moist.

‘Walk around,’ he told her, ‘slowly.’

Vero was happy for the training. She hadn’t heard of trampling until her friend detailed the job for her. *You know, like being stepped on. Don’t worry. He doesn’t care much for interaction.* But Vero had just been delighted to discover she’d be stepping on him instead of fucking him. She wouldn’t have to worry about birth control or disease or faking orgasm, which she’d never found easy.

After she strolled the length of the room a few times and lifted each foot to her knee, posing with his every instruction, he laid on the floor and told her to walk along his back. As she approached him, he moaned at the clacks her heels made against the tiles. Apprehensive, Vero lifted one shoe and hovered above his back, anxious she might puncture and wound him. *Though maybe that’s what he wants.*

When Vero brought the spike to his spine, his moans elevated and intensified.

‘Again,’ he begged, ‘please.’

Vero pushed the heel into his flesh and then released it gradually, watching rosebuds appear on his skin. She hadn’t spent more than five minutes teasing him between her heel and toe before he stopped her, stood, and asked for the shoes. Vero unfastened the straps and handed him the heels. ‘See you tomorrow,’ he said, rushing her to the door. ‘And thank you,’ he rushed on, heels in hand, closing the door quickly behind him.

Vero smirked as the pieces fell together in the dim hallway, noticing how cool the tiles were beneath her bare feet. *Easiest money I ever made.*

She decided to change before meeting Peyton on the terrace. The designer skirt she’d worn for dinner was her best thrift find, so she kept it through the years letting out the seams when she put on weight in her hips. The skirt’s zipper had pressed into her side all night and when she finally unzipped it, she breathed a sigh of relief, and noticed a red crosshatch imprinted on her skin. She pulled on a pair of shorts and a loose white t-shirt, not bothering with a bra and clipped her hair up into a messy bun. They hadn’t specified a time for their rendezvous, but Vero figured she could lie on one of the longue chairs and listen to the waves until Peyton showed up.

Vero counted the palm fronds that hung above her while she lay. The green spears interlaced in tufts at the end of each stem, settling in vague intervals along the stalk. When she had first arrived, her neck craned back admiring the leaves, and Cecilia told her that palm fronds are a symbol of victory. She'd also told her that unbeknownst to most, palm trees have flowers, but without need for the tiny green buds, the tree ejects the flowers and lets them fall to the ground where they wilt into the sandy earth. Vero was enchanted by Cecilia and her wealth of island wisdom and had spent much of her free time in the kitchen, listening to her stories.

She wondered now if Mark would mind that she was meeting up with Peyton. If this constituted fraternising. If Melissa knew, if it mattered.

Peyton arrived flushed pink, a thread of sweat lacing their upper lip. She sat beside Vero on the lounge and produced a joint from behind her ear. Vero's eyes lit up in delight. Pressing the joint between her lips, Peyton lit the tip with a smile, equally delighted at her enthusiasm. Inhaling deeply, Vero passed the joint back, feeling her shoulders loosen and her eyes draw softly down, tingling slightly with effect.

'So, what do you do?' she asked Peyton, leaning back into the lounge, this time painfully aware of the bristles which tickled the backs of her knees.

'Drag, which is why I have to hoe,' she laughed. 'For glitter and props.'

'I feel like I'm not even working for this money,' Vero said. 'Not that I should complain.'

She noticed the crinkle of the palm fronds in the breeze and closed her eyes. The air was light and cool, unlike the bi-annual Daytona Beach vacations her and her mother had taken when she was a child. Vero could still remember the way the air seemed to choke you; just stepping outside caused sweat to pour from each pore, a suffocating sort of bubble that enveloped you as you walked.

'Mark finishes on his own,' Peyton said. 'I have to wait for Melissa to pass out.'

Vero was momentarily surprised Peyton knew about Mark's desires because she knew so little of Melissa. But it made sense—being Melissa's pet for a time—Peyton would be privy to more of the couple's secrets.

'It's not me, is it?' Vero asked, feeling slightly self-conscious. It was strange. She had no attachment to Mark the man, but she felt desire for desirability, that she was performing her duties at least as well as the others.

Peyton shook their head. 'He finishes on the shoes,' she smirked. 'Trust me,' she continued, passing Vero the joint. 'You won't see those shoes again.'

The words combined with the weed produced a sad image of a flustered Mark kneeling over a pair of heels stroking himself and Vero winced and then laughed.

'Rich people,' Peyton said, shaking her head. 'What a waste. I know so many queens who would kill for those heels...'

'Do you think he keeps them somewhere or tosses them?'

'A closet of hoe heels,' Peyton cackled. 'Come on, let's walk down to the water.'

Vero stuck a cigarette between her lips and stood, taking Peyton's offered hand. They made their way down the stairs connecting the terrace with the beach. When they got to the bottom of the stairs, Peyton kicked off her shoes leaving them at the step and gestured upwards toward the sky.

'Have you ever seen anything like it?' She tilted her head all the way back, craning her neck to admire the blanket of stars above them. The sky was different than the city sky Vero was used to. It was so much brighter away from the synthetic neon of city living. The stars hung low here, not some distant diamonds. They were bright and big, as though one could reach their hand out and graze them with their fingertips. It was astonishing, a sight Vero had noticed her fight night on the Island. She dropped her eyes from the stars to Peyton's face, turned upwards, admiring the starlight.

'A romantic, buzzed, butch,' Vero said.

'Among other things,' Peyton smiled, pulling off her shirt. 'Let's swim.'

'But the sharks...'

Peyton ignored her, pulling off her shorts so she stood only in boxers. She shimmied her breasts at Vero, smirked, and then took off running toward the shoreline.

Vero watched as she dived headfirst into the waves. Stripping down to her underwear, Vero tossed her clothes in a pile on the sand beside Peyton's and tiptoed toward the shoreline. At the edge, she let the waves approach her toes, expecting the water to be cold this late hour, but she found the waves were as warm as daylight. Delighted, she waded to her knees, watching Peyton bob in the distance.

As Vero walked deeper into the sea, the saltwater stung the sensitive slot of skin where the zipper had pierced her earlier and she winced in discomfort. Noticing her flinch, Peyton swam toward her with inquisitive eyes. Finding the problem instantly,

Peyton brought her hand beneath the side of Vero's breast, where the sliver of exposed skin lay. Peyton's fingertips fluttered around the mark, and Vero felt a stream of water drip from their hands down her stomach.

'Saltwater is good for abrasions,' she said, cupping some water in her hand and bringing it to Vero's side. 'This is going to sting,' she warned, before pouring it down her skin. Vero inhaled sharply, but the angry red already seemed to be fading to a tender pink. 'I get all kinds of weird cuts and bruises from doing drag,' she told Vero before diving back into the water and swimming out a few laps. 'Come on,' she called, spitting water out from between her cheeks.

'The sharks,' Vero complained, gesturing longingly to the sandy shoreline.

Peyton laughed, inhaled deeply, and then plunged into the water. Vero tried to search for her beneath the surface, but it was useless in the moonlight. She called out her name. Twice to no avail. When she saw a shadow moving toward her, she told herself it was only Peyton playing a nasty trick and not to lose her cool, calling her name once again, more shakily this time. When the girl did not surface, Vero's heart accelerated behind her ribs. She turned around herself looking in all directions. Should she make her way back to the shore?

She felt something grip her ankle and screamed, just as Peyton's head broke through the surface, slick with wet. Furious, Vero knocked her back into the water, pushing her head beneath the surface, keeping her there while calling her names.

'I can't breathe,' she laughed, trying to expel water from her nose, struggling against Vero's steadfast grip.

'Serves you right,' she said, pushing Peyton underwater once more.

When Vero felt that Peyton had adequately paid for their crime, they retreated to the beach and collapsed side by side on the sand. Peyton was still panting slightly, trying to catch her breath, and pleased with herself, Vero grinned.

'Big bad butch,' Vero said, 'you know you deserved it.'

Peyton leaned back on her elbows, wiping water from her face and chuckled. 'I deserved it,' she agreed.

Vero leaned forward to kiss her then; and finding her lips laced with salt, Vero felt hungry, wanting to chew the salt off them. They rolled around in the sand, kissing

furiously, until they paused, breathless, eyelash to eyelash, their chests rising and falling in harmonious pants.

‘I deserved it,’ Peyton said again, her eyes changing slightly with the moonlight, setting forth a request. ‘I’ve been a bad butch and I think I should be punished.’

Vero’s lips curled into a smile and she flipped Peyton around, so her back was pressed against Vero’s chest, their knees digging into the pink sand. Vero slid one arm across Peyton’s chest, holding her in place, and let the other trail down the girl’s side until she brought her palm to her ass, cupping her cheek, bringing the moment to a tense and pulsating pause.

‘Is this what you want?’ Vero whispered. But before the girl could respond, Vero brought her palm to Peyton’s cheek with a gratifying smack and Peyton moaned while her neck rolled back in pleasure.

‘Does my bad butch like that?’ Vero asked, and Peyton nodded fervently while Vero pulled her hand back from Peyton’s ass and then smacked it repeatedly in three quick whips. Peyton grunted with pleasure now, arousing Vero, and she flipped the girl once more to face her.

‘Hard limits?’ Vero asked, placing Peyton’s wrists behind her back one arm at a time.

‘Just ask for my colour occasionally.’

Droplets of water had gathered between them, slithering and dripping across their flesh, settling into crevices. Peyton moaned as a drop of water fell from Vero’s cheek and onto her breast. Vero slapped her cheek and then held it between her fingers, in warning.

‘I don’t want you to make one sound unless I ask for your colour. Do you understand.’

‘Yes, mistress,’ she said, and they shared a smirk before Vero sunk her top teeth into Peyton’s salted skin.

Clock and Roll

I

‘Have you ever seen anything so majestic?’

I studied the structure in all its bygone glory. The panels were scratched as though a cat had fancied them a scratch post. Whatever glass had protected the pendulum was gone; the swing hung low now, cracked in half, attached to a limp chain rusted brown. The moon dial was scarred and split and there was no proud finial fastened atop, so it sort of just poked into the air, unfinished.

Sofi examined the clock with the tenderness she usually reserved for loose powders and feral cats.

‘Isn’t he gorgeous?’

‘He?’

‘Grandfather clock. Must be a *he*. Aren’t you, old chap?’ Sofi stroked the fractured panel.

I had taken the red line to Dorchester that morning after Sofi had texted me to *come see the coolest thing*. The last time she’d lured me with the promise of coolness, Citizen Cope had played a free show in Porter Square and the time before that, she found a three-legged fox who ate chips from the palm of your hand. Two for two.

I stomped my boots to get warm.

‘I’m just in love with it,’ Sofi hummed. She hadn’t moved her hand from the panel and her pale knuckles were glowing ghost-white against the fading cherry wood.

I blew hot breath into my palms and shook my head at Sofi who did not shiver in only a sweater, stretched thin from too many wears.

‘Let’s get out of here.’

‘Sure thing,’ Sofi motioned toward the clock with her head. ‘Just give me a hand.’

Ignoring the potential for a pun, I rubbed my forehead trying to think. There was no practical way we were going to lug this massive hunk of junk halfway across Boston. Did she expect to bring it on the T?

‘Let me call Rashaad,’ I said finally, knowing we wouldn’t be leaving the lot without the clock in tow.

‘Why?’

‘Because he has a van,’ I said, getting my phone from my pocket.

Rashaad and his two brothers owned a small moving business and if he found my request odd, he didn’t say so, only asked about the size.

‘Uhh,’ I looked at Sofi standing beside it trying to wager a guess. ‘Over six feet?’

‘See you in twenty.’

Forty-five minutes later Rashaad pulled into the parking lot and waved at us through the windshield. ‘Don’t you two have anything better to do on a Sunday morning?’ He kissed both of my cheeks hello and then turned to stare at Sofi.

‘Hey queerdo,’ he said. She wriggled a few fingers hello in his direction, but her eyes remained transfixed on the clock.

‘High?’

‘Beyond,’ I confirmed.

Rashaad wrapped the clock in the blanket and then taped it in place before the three of us lifted it gingerly into the back of the van.

We piled into the front seat together, Rashaad behind the wheel and Sofi on my lap. With the engine rumbling beneath us, we defrosted our hands on the air vents and passed a joint between us, while Rashaad told us about the weird shit people had asked him to move: a collection of bobble heads and a backyard of gnomes that his client referred to by name and demanded be wrapped individually and laid flat so they would not be uncomfortable on the drive.

‘White people are by far the worst’ he handed me the joint. ‘Scared of my beard and they never tip.’

After a few cigarettes and another joint, we pulled out of the parking lot and jumped on I-95 toward Sofi’s apartment in Allston.

Rashaad helped us lift the clock back out of the van and into Sofi’s apartment and then he pulled the tape off with a flourish, letting the blanket fall to the floor.

‘There you go, crazies,’ he said.

I gave him a few more joints for the road and he kissed both my cheeks and told me to call soon. In the hallway, Sofi was dragging the awkward block of wood toward the living room, streaking marks across the floor. She stepped back finally to admire the clock, now wedged between two mismatched tables and a bookshelf without shelves.

‘It’s just gorgeous, isn’t it?’ She sighed. Even I could admit he looked at home here.

II

After Sofi discovered the clock, she took up street thrifting. In and out of the apartment eight or nine times a day returning every few hours with what she called gems. Radios with broken speakers, cracked records, books with torn spines, dishes and doorknobs, a crate of discarded pint glasses, mildew-dipped pillows, broken picture frames and an oversized mug that read: *I’m the Boss*. She started piling her *gems* on top of one another, so her apartment came to resemble an antique shop for throwaways.

A few months into her newest habit, she lugged in the third broken typewriter that spring, while I was still asleep in her bed. I rubbed my eyes and asked what her endgame was.

‘It’s an investment. A transvestment,’ she said, laughing at herself.

‘If this stuff was profitable people would have sold it rather than tossed it out,’ I said, appealing to reason—a gamble with Sofi, depending on her mood.

She lifted the typewriter onto one of the desks she’d had me help carry in the day before.

‘Rich people toss things out because they can,’ she said.

I cleared my throat and began rolling a cigarette.

‘Come back to bed.’

‘Can’t. I have two more streets I want to hit today.’

‘It’s getting a bit crowded in here,’ I said. ‘Why don’t we try to sell some stuff before bringing in more?’

She nodded and came toward the bed, but she just stood beside it twirling her hair round her ear. ‘There are two more streets I want to hit.’

‘Let me make you some tea.’

But when I returned from the kitchen, two steaming mugs in hand, she was gone. Two hours later, she returned with a lampshade and a plastic figurine of a circus monkey holding a pair of cymbals.

‘Isn’t he precious?’ She asked.

I knocked the cymbals together twice.

III

Sofi put no effort toward selling the items because she was too busy collecting them. The pile of junk kept amassing until it inevitably became hazardous. Alarm clocks and picture frames were constantly toppling off sloppily stacked tables and crates, crashing to the floor, threatening our heads and toes.

‘This is ridiculous,’ I said after a chess board crashed to my feet.

‘It’s definitely getting a little stuffy,’ she said looking around. I rolled my eyes and slipped my feet into sneakers.

‘Let’s sell it,’ she said.

‘To whom?’ My voice rose. ‘Who is going to buy this, Sof?’

Her face fell. ‘Being tossed out doesn’t make it junk,’ she said. She started twirling her hair round her ears. I knew this gesture well. Every time she was feeling insecure or dysphoric, she’d twirl her hair. She told me the length, which she wasn’t allowed to grow out until she had left her abusive home, reminded her she was a girl even when the world forgot.

I made a fist and tapped myself square in the face.

‘We’ll think of something.’

She came up to me then and wrapped her arms around my middle. Sofi’s affection is tender and seldom, so I never take her touch lightly.

‘You always know what to do,’ she said, folding herself into me.

The following week I walked to Zakim Bridge to find my friend Ollie. He was an anarchist who maintained his tent on a wooden perch amidst a maze of roads fenced in by a constant whirl of cars.

I walked through the lot examining tents to find his, identifiable by the spray-painted sickle and hammer on the front. When I’d found it, I rapped my knuckles against the tethered tarp and called his name.

He poked his matted hair through the zipper.

‘Ty,’ he smiled. ‘My favourite comrade.’

‘I brought provisions,’ I held up two coffees and gestured to the joint behind my ear. He beamed, unzipped the tent, and we made our way through the trash littered lot before climbing up the side of the hill, slipping on a few scattered rocks as we made our way into the sunlight. We walked down a few streets and found a bench facing the wharf where I lit the joint and offered it to him.

‘Cheers,’ he said gratefully.

We sat for a moment in silence before Ollie asked about Sofi, whom he knew well from her teenage days bumming around shelters.

‘She’s taken up street thrifting,’ I said.

A woman walked by then and crinkled her nose at the smell of weed looking back at us twice, so we could be sure to know just how disgusting she found us.

‘Bourgie scum,’ we said together and then laughed.

‘She’s been collecting junk,’ I told him. ‘With the intent to sell it so she can use the money toward her transition.’

‘Nothing is without value,’ Ollie said carefully. ‘You just have to find your angle.’

I leaned back into the bench and watched as he turned his eyes upwards as though seeking counsel from the clouds.

‘Have you seen Exit Through the Gift Shop?’

I had seen it. What was marketed as a documentary about Banksy had turned out to be an astonishing biopic about a ‘filmmaker’ named Thierry, whose quest to document street artists led him to befriend graffiti’s most notorious gangster. Charmed by the eager filmmaker, Banksy had sent Thierry off to edit his footage and make a documentary about street art with the sincere message: *it’s not about the money*.

What Thierry created was more like a spasm than a film. Short, erratic clips rapidly changing on the screen for ninety minutes; he called it *Remote Control Life* and the title couldn’t have been more fitting.

What happened next is truly remarkable. Taking Banksy’s advice to *go make art* very seriously, Thierry took a photo of his own face, blew it up at a Kinko’s, and plastered it all over LA in the same spots he had been shown by the local street artists he’d interviewed for his documentary.

He adopted the nickname Mr. Brainwash, invested his life savings in a studio, and hired a production team. Dictating his ideas to a team of highly skilled artists, they

amassed a vast collection of screen prints and stencils fusing historical and contemporary pop culture imagery.

He continued to plaster the streets of LA with his Brainwash tag and requested endorsement from his ‘fellow’ street artists to create hype so by the time he opened his exhibition, thousands of people were gathered to attend, and LA weekly was calling it the art event of the year.

Tierry had seemed to skip all the steps, all the years of perfecting craft; he’d fast-forwarded nearly overnight to successful ‘artist’. It was easy to see the ‘art’ he produced was derivative, but being sold at astronomical prices and revered so highly in the public eye had given him credibility. It was one of the most astonishing art documentaries I’d ever seen.

I remember asking my lover Vero if this meant art was meaningless, and she had answered, *‘No but I think public acclaim is.’*

‘Perceived power becomes real power,’ Ollie quoted the film bringing me back from my thoughts.

‘Perceived value...’ I said.

‘Exactly.’ We tapped our coffee cups together in triumph.

When I returned to Sofi’s apartment that evening, I was surprised to find her home. She was lying on the couch with her legs shot straight into the air sucking an ice cube between her teeth.

‘It’s too hot,’ she complained.

My own legs were lead and my right eye stung where sweat had dripped from my brow. I stripped down to my briefs and joined her on the couch.

‘You were gone when I woke up,’ she complained.

‘I went to have coffee with Ollie. I think I know how we can sell it.’

Sofi crunched the ice between her teeth and grinned.

IV

As it turned out, FOMO, fear of missing out, the phenomenon plaguing hipsters and yuppies alike would be our golden ticket.

I called reinforcement in the form of Vero, a talented artist and handy DIY dyke. I invited her to the apartment the weekend Sofi went to visit her grandmother because even though neither of them would say it, they weren't too fond of the other. Vero found Sofi self-centred and unreliable. Sofi didn't have a reason for disliking Vero other than she felt Vero disliked her.

I kept the two apart.

After Vero had arrived, she spent ten minutes standing in the middle of the living room, turning slowly around herself, muttering in disbelief.

'You downplayed this.'

I shrugged. 'It was just one of those things you had to see for yourself,' I explained.

'Where to start?' Vero asked, tapping a finger to her chin.

'Let's toss the shit that is beyond repair,' I said.

'Won't she be mad if you do that? I seem to remember Sofi being quite... fussy.' I shook my head. Fussy as Sofi was, there was entirely too much junk in the apartment for her to notice if even a third went missing.

With a roll of trash bags, Vero and I started working our way through the piles. I put *Keep on Your Mean Side* on the record player and we sung along with the Kills while sifting through junk. We tossed out broken light bulbs, book spines, records scratched beyond repair, candles melted down to the wick, sunglasses, paintbrushes with no bristles, glass jars with no bottoms, and pictures frames with no frame.

It took four hours.

When we were finished, we lugged the bags outside to the dumpster and tossed them into the bin.

'Good riddance.'

'Now the real work begins,' Vero said.

'Break first.'

I plugged in the fan and we both flopped back onto the couch. Pinching some weed from the grinder, I started on a blunt while Vero rolled us cigarettes.

'So, we just spruce up the rest?' she asked.

I had hardly explained my *plan* to Vero, only the basics. The beauty of us is that when the other calls, we come, no questions asked.

'We spruce up the rest,' I confirmed.

‘What’s to stop her from bringing in more once you get rid of this?’

I took the blunt back from her and pressed it between my teeth.

‘I didn’t think about that,’ I confessed.

Vero chewed at the side of her lip. ‘You can’t live this way forever, Ty.’

Vero has the heart of a dog and a striking habit of being right.

With our backs aching from all the lifting and sifting, we decided to take the rest of the night off and watched *Nosferatu* with the Kills playing in the background. After the sun had been down for a few hours and we could move about without sweating, I drew a lukewarm bath, and we fucked under the water and washed each other’s backs. We slept side by side in Sofi’s bed and when we woke in the morning, Vero had brewed coffee and I poached us some eggs.

After breakfast, we organised the junk into identifiable piles of likeness: teapots, posters, lamps, clocks, doorknobs, mugs, pint glasses, and figurines.

We bought wood and silver polish at the hardware shop and Vero had brought all her art supplies, including six kinds of glue and four types of paint. We sat on the floor with our legs spread wide, the junk between our thighs, making our way through the paraphernalia one at a time, painting and polishing as the item demanded.

‘Do you really think this will work?’ Vero asked as she polished one of the doorknobs with a dirty cloth.

‘Sof could really use the money.’

‘How is she doing?’ Vero asked, and I warmed for a moment at the solidarity, that she would ask even though she wasn’t particularly fond of Sofi. But it stands time and time again, we prove it; queers show up for each other.

‘She’s in an endless loop of drugs, denial, and dysphoria,’ I said. Vero nodded slowly.

‘Look at us. Trying to repair literal trash so our friend can access health services.’

‘Capitalism,’ I said, scoffing but then softening as I watched Vero polish a teapot.

‘Thanks for helping me, V. We couldn’t have done it without you.’

Vero blushed, an act she always said was reserved for me.

I kissed her in gratitude and she slapped me playfully with the filthy cloth: ‘No fucking until we’ve finished.’

I grinned and kissed her again, laying her down on the floor amidst paint cans and doorknobs.

‘This is how you thank people?’ Vero teased.

‘Payment in full,’ I said, kissing her neck and sliding my hand into her trousers.

After we fucked twice among the wreckage, she lay her head on my chest, blue hair fanned out over my shoulder.

‘I don’t know what I’d do without you.’ I told her.

She reads my subtext. Every time I say anything remotely sentimental, she knows I am half in love and incapable of saying so. She lets it go. She knows when to push and pull me. It’s her gift.

Heart of a dog; V’s not going anywhere.

And I keep working up to (and breaking down) my potential.

V

The heat finally broke Monday morning when I picked Sofi up from South Station. She leapt into my arms and bit my ear, so I knew she was in high spirits. The newly polished trinkets didn’t catch her eye, which was somewhat unbelievable, but very Sofi. I pointed out the bronze polish I had applied to the doorknobs and the small flowers Vero painted back onto the tea set. Sofi shrugged.

‘They’ve always looked this way.’

She removed three wraps from her jean shorts.

‘Grab some foil.’

In the kitchen, the counters had been wiped clean, gleaming beneath the florescent light. Food had been scraped off the oven and all the dishes had been washed and dried, my favourite mug atop the dishrack, like an offering. *Vero*.

I heated both sides of the foil over the open flame, otherwise Sof would try to do it with a lighter and burn her fingertips.

‘Make a pipe too,’ she said. ‘Yours are better.’

I got a pencil from the desk and took back one of the sheets.

‘We’re ready,’ I slid the utensil out of the foil and handed her the slender pipe, the silver tip sharp like a dart. Unravelling the wrap, I tapped some powder onto the plate.

Sofi used the pipe's tip to scoop some powder onto the sheet's crease, then held the flame beneath the foil and began chasing the swell of amassing smoke. She sucked her chest in, holding the smoke between her lungs, and then released the vapour in a steady stream. Almost immediately, her eyes softened, dulled to a dopey amber, two lenient irises in a sweet lull.

'Cigarette?' I asked.

Sofi nodded. Of all cigarettes, the post-chasing-dragon drag was the best one. It loosened the high, broadened its border, sent it spiralling. I pinched tobacco from the pouch and rolled two cigarettes.

'I thought it would be cool if we sold everything at a Punk Knot show,' I said.

Sofi, who was now melted into the couch, propped her head up on an elbow.

'That sounds cool,' she said.

Punk Knot was a band who had achieved relative fame in the nineties after touring with one of the Queens of Grunge and infamously turned down a mainstream record label telling the industry to go fuck itself. Despite tumultuous careers hindered by excessive drug use, they maintained a cult following in Boston's Punk scene. The erratic, infrequent gigs and no-fucks-given attitude just solidified them as an exclusive band that would never lose their allure.

Sofi had dated the bassist Micki for five years and the two had remained friends, following their dramatic and sordid breakup.

A Punk Knot gig would provide us both venue and endorsement. It was the end of summer and tourist season was in full swing. I knew Ollie could find the perfect warehouse and we could paper the city with flyers building a massive hype for the underground event of the summer: a Punk Knot gig where they would sell items they'd collected on tour.

It was too perfect, but the key ingredient was Punk Knot's involvement and Sofi was the link between us that would solidify the scam.

'You could split the proceeds with them,' I said. '50/50, since we'll be using their name.'

Sofi was picking at a loose thread on the sofa, pulling at it until it ripped clean from the seam.

'40/60,' she said. 'I found the stuff.'

I smiled. She was in.

‘Punk Knot can announce it on social media,’ I said.

Sofi started to laugh.

‘All these hipsters will come thinking they’re buying a piece of punk history,’ she said.

‘Exactly.’

‘I’ll call Micki now.’

As it turned out, ripping off hipsters was enough of an incentive for Punk Knot. They agreed to organise a show if we found a suitable warehouse. I told them it was a done deal and hung up the phone.

Ollie came around the next day to survey the junk.

‘It’s brilliant,’ he said, eyeing the trinkets. I didn’t know if he meant the hoard of oddly coloured items or the event.

‘There’s a squat near Pine Park,’ he continued. I looked to Sofi for approval.

‘The clouds always taste sweet there,’ she said.

‘Pine Park it is then. I’d recommend checking the city calendar to find a day where something else is going on in the city. That way police will be preoccupied and less likely to come by.’

‘That’s brilliant,’ I said, banging my hand on the table for emphasis.

Sofi started banging on the table and chanting ‘Fuck the police.’

‘Don’t give out the address. Just provide a number to text for details.’

‘Sof, go grab some foil, would you?’ I asked for Ollie’s sake.

‘She’s out of her head,’ he said, as she skipped into the kitchen.

‘It’s transient.’

Sofi returned moments later with a few sheets of foil and a bowl of purple grapes. She plucked one from the vine and started picking at its skin with her nails.

‘What are you doing?’ Ollie asked. ‘What is she doing?’

‘She’s peeling the skin off,’ I said, as Sofi answered: ‘Surgery.’

Ollie lifted an inquisitive brow at me.

‘Surgeons practice sutures on grapes,’ I explained.

Ollie nodded as Sofi freed the grape from its skin and popped it into her mouth.

‘Flesh,’ she grinned.

‘So, what’s the plan?’ Ollie asked, trying to ignore Sofi as she slid her thumbnail along the grape, slicing through the skin to free it from its encasing.

‘Just to sell everything as merch Punk Knot amassed during their tours.’

‘It’s brilliant, Ty.’

‘Dr. Ty,’ Sofi said, as she stuck her tongue out and laid the grape’s skin delicately across it.

On the afternoon of the gig, Rashaad lent us his van and he, Sof, Ollie, and I spent two hours loading knick-knacks into the van. Three trips later, the grandfather clock, an assortment of tea sets, alarm clocks, and doorknobs were out of the apartment and set along four tables in the warehouse.

Sofi’s apartment looked naked once we were through. Our footsteps, which I had never noticed, now echoed in the airy living room. Sofi sat cross-legged on the floor where the junk had made a home for so many months and made a low ticking sound with her mouth.

‘Less claustrophobic, no?’ I asked. ‘Feels like we can breathe again.’

If Sofi heard me, she didn’t acknowledge it. Merely traced her fingertips along the floor in a crescent moon shape.

‘Are you excited for the gig? We haven’t seen Punk Knot play in ages.’

‘I’m tired of everything,’ Sofi said, trailing her finger across the linoleum.

‘Everyone too.’

‘Oh, come now. They’re your favourite band.’ I folded my arms across my chest and tried to think of something reassuring to say but before my tongue could find the rhythm, she stood up and pulled off her clothes.

‘I’m going to get ready,’ she said, without turning to look at me.

VI

With the sun down, the warehouse cooled. The dim glow of Christmas lights we’d strung from pillars joined the red stage lights, thawing the space and grunging it down. There weren’t any windows, but the space was open and a reliable draft wafted through.

It smelled a bit sour, of piss and bleach, but our friend Melody, who agreed to DJ the event, said the acoustics were matchless.

Four long tables lined the Southern wall with Sofi's treasures which took on a peculiar charm in the cherry light. The objects were just outdated enough. Patched and polished they plucked themselves up in offering; hipster bait.

At seven, Punk Knot arrived to set up and Devon, the guitarist, laughed when she saw the 'merch' tables. She picked up a comb.

'Tell 'em this is what I used to pretty up my pubes the first time I got fisted,' she'd snickered.

At eight, we opened the doors. 'Looking good,' I said.

Sofi chipped off some nail varnish from her left hand and scrunched her nose.

'I'm going to find Micki,' she said, walking off into the crowd.

I called after her to no avail and then continued waving people through the doors.

The bodies poured in, amassing in the centre of the room. No one seemed too interested in the merch tables at first, but as I sat down to the table beside Ollie with a tin box for cash, a girl appeared before me, rolling face and sucking on a lollypop.

'All this shit is from their tour?'

'You bet.'

'This?' She picked up a small figurine of a frog holding a tennis racket above his head.

'Micki jacked that from an antique shop outside Orlando,' Ollie piped in. I nodded to confirm.

'And this?' She picked up a wristwatch with no hands and a smashed face.

'Devon wore it during their first gig. It broke when it fell off her wrist during Shock Wave,' I said.

'Shock Wave is my favourite,' the girl said, her dilated pupils examining the weathered strap.

'Great song,' I agreed.

'I'll give you 20 bucks,' she said, smacking the lollypop between eager teeth.

Ollie and I glanced at one another.

'Sold,' we said in unison.

At half past nine, the lights dimmed, and the crowd quieted. Every sweat laced head turned to face the stage. Cherry lights circled their feet as Punk Knot took the stage and the lights came up just as Devon screamed into the microphone. The crowd erupted into cheer; bodies began to jerk with the bass line, the swarm become the hive, Punk Knot their faithful queen. After the third song, a frizzy haired Devon took the microphone in both her hands and gestured toward the merch tables.

‘Make sure to buy our shit and support local music, cunts,’ she said, breaking into a lipstick smeared grin. The crowd exploded, thrusting their fists into the air chanting Punk Knot’s name.

After that, we couldn’t keep the broken alarm clocks and rusting doorknobs on the table. Everyone wanted a piece of Punk Knot history. They asked after each trinket and I heard myself telling tales of travel and angst to mark up the value. The fans devoured every sordid detail. And why shouldn’t they? Punk Knot themselves had endorsed it. Terry was right, of course. Backing is everything.

We sold out by midnight. Made three grand, four wraps and six tabs of ecstasy. (*‘We accept all kinds of currency here,’* Ollie had said).

‘Now what?’ I asked, sorting the bills into two envelopes.

‘We party.’

I thanked Ollie for his help and fed him a piece of ecstasy before taking off to find Sofi, whom I hadn’t seen since she’d gone after Micki. I figured she was in the backroom with Punk Knot getting in on their post-gig speed balling.

As I pried my way through moist torsos and flailing arms, Devon saw me and grabbed me by my shoulder.

‘Fucking brilliant,’ she said, holding my shoulder and shaking me. ‘This whole night.’

‘All thanks to you,’ I said. Punk Knot always embraced a good stroke of the ego.

‘How much money did we make then?’

‘Couple thousand.’

Devon clapped her hands together and snorted.

‘Fucking hipsters, right?’

‘Have you seen Sofi?’ I yelled into her ear.

We were next to one of Melody's speakers and the bass reverberated irately beside me.

'She just left with Micki. It looked like they were about to have a little reunion of their own,' she winked. 'You can probably still catch them.' Pointing to a small door marked EXIT, she shrugged, and then followed a gaggle of girls as they streaked past us to the dancefloor. 'Thanks again for setting up the gig,' she yelled over her shoulder, before disappearing into the crowd after them.

I pushed my way through the crowd toward the back door and pushed it open to find an alley littered with partygoers smoking joints and making out. I looked around before spotting them straight ahead, hand in hand, making their way down the alley and toward the main street.

I yelled Sofi's name and she turned on her heel, stopping to squint and find where the voice was coming from. I ran the length of the alley toward them, panting slightly once I'd reached the end.

'Where are you going?' I asked.

'Micki and I are going to her place.'

'We made a shit-ton of money.' Both their eyes perked with this.

'How much?' Micki asked.

'Three grand,' I said, eyeing Micki. Sofi's eyes widened, and she jumped into my arms, wrapping her legs around my middle squealing with glee. I returned the squeeze, twirled her twice, then set her down.

'Let's celebrate,' I said. 'You did it babe. This can all go toward your transition.'

Sofi and Micki glanced at one another before Micki took her phone out of her pocket, pretending to busy herself while Sofi stared down at her shoes.

'Can I have my cut?' she asked.

'Why not stay?' I tried to force her eyes on mine. 'The party is just getting started.'

'Gig's over,' she said. 'We're going to Micki's to get high.'

I handed her the envelope I'd put aside for her and she peered inside and smiled.

'You're gonna save it right?' I asked.

Micki took the envelope from Sofi and slipped it into her coat pocket without looking at me once. Just as they were searching for a subtle way to get away from me, a car pulled into the side street and honked twice.

‘That’s our ride,’ Sofi said, gratefully. ‘Look, it’s probably best you sleep at your place tonight.’ And then, she leaned over, still avoiding my gaze and pecked me hastily on the cheek.

‘See ya.’

‘When?’ I asked.

But she had already turned away, hurrying down the uneven pavement with Micki. The car door opened and they slid inside, and just as quickly, the door slammed and the small beige car backed down the alley. I watched the space where the car had been long after it had peeled off down the street, finally lighting a cigarette and sighing.

Sofi would spend the money on drugs. A temporary fix to her discomfort. I had thought, or perhaps more aptly, had wanted to think that this kind of money would inspire her to get clean and seek the treatments she’d always fantasised about, but addiction is a disobliging beast.

Sofi and I have said so many goodbyes and it’s always easier when you don’t see it coming. I prefer her way to mine. She rips me off like a band aid. It’s for the best, no need to drag on partings. Making too much of a farewell only causes you to say things you later regret. This way we all keep our secrets.

A boy behind me yelled, ‘This is the best night of my life,’ before keeling over and vomiting on his shoes.

I popped a tab under my tongue and smiled.

‘See ya soon, Sof,’ I whispered.

Nine Postcards

1

I've met a group of punks in London and hitchhiked to Berlin. Cool lot. You'd get along with two or three. Ada sings Bowie in the evenings and we all share oranges and Polish beer. The city is damp in that way you like. At night, I walk around and take pictures of pictures. You know? Adverts and billboards. I love when I catch something moving in my photographs. A train perhaps. Blurred between ticks. I've been trying to practice my German but they speak English better than we do.

- Sofi

2

Paris is a sea of rooftops blanketed with cherry blossom rain. Monique and I rise at noon smelling of sweat and rose water and we drink blush wine and read Renée Vivien and Rimbaud because it is here I understand the bridges. At twilight, we place tea lights in blue glass jars and play Brigitte Bardot. Monique makes hummus and at three we move to a darker bouquet. We roll our cigarettes five at a time, and then smoke them one right after the other, talking of intimacy, of sex, of love as abstract concept, as construct. The French are not so uptight about sex. Or monogamy. I think you'd like it here.

- S. x

3

It's easy to pretend I'm in Boston on a rooftop. I look out into the city and the bustle is the same. The elms are maybe taller, maybe there is a white wall where there should be blue, but you can always place your palm to the heartbeat of a city and feel its buzz. I want to leave Paris but I don't have enough money for a ticket. I'm saving all I can but it's not so easy to stay sober in these conditions. Expect me soon or consider me dead.

- S

4

I am underfoot wherever I am. Even when I go to the market, Monique rolls her eyes at my return, disappointed it didn't take me longer. I've met a bloke named Bill at the fish market; he is very bland and sort of pedantic but I think I could live with him for a week or two while I put together a plan. Maybe he is very rich and I will marry him just to spite Monique. I will send out ivory invitations with delicate lace and a pearl fastened to each envelope. Madalena would kill herself if I married first.

- SOS (Save our Sofi)

5

Dearest one, how lucky we had these three days. I write this from Victoria station, Amsterdam bound. I can still see your dark, tousled hair moving through the bays. You will turn a corner soon and be out of my sight. I'm always so soft when I leave you.

- S. xxx

6

Amsterdam is my favourite place to be trans. The sweet smell of weed has always comforted me and to see myself reflected I need only walk down the street in the purple light. How beautiful those girls are, lit up like stars. One day I too will be a star on display but not in any window. I much prefer the sky. I met a punk recently who was talking about robotic communism. It sounds nuts, but he was using Marxist theory and applications of artificial intelligence and anarchy, you know it just made a lot of sense. Think macro, act local, he said. Or something. Either way, I hope I live to see the revolution.

- Little wolf

7

I've met an artist from Barcelona. She paints these strange, ethereal landscapes that make you sad if you look at them too long. She uses colour so freely. I'm certain you'd

fall in love with her. I have taken to noticing hands ever since your confession; it's how I noticed hers are beautiful peach instruments, for making.

We are nearly always at the sea and all the locals seem very proud of their shoreline and I like that everyone is topless and nobody cares. I drink tequila and rum because these things tend to taste better beachside. I hardly wash my hair anymore; I'm well suited to this life. I wish I could always be arm's length from the ocean with sand between my toes, I think it would be very hard to feel unhappy in such conditions.

- S

8

Do you remember the first night we met? Shameless. I wanted to go to bed with you immediately because I knew you loved women. I could smell it on you. Some lovers are too shy to really taste a woman, but I knew I could spread across your palm, marinate. I wasn't scared for a moment to take off my panties. I knew you would be happy with whatever you found between my thighs.

We were inseparable that winter. Holed up in my flat; you were so sweet and love sick and I was so sick and in need of love. You read me Whitman; sex and death: our preferred melodies. We took lavender baths and long afternoon naps; and we took in a stray cat, remember? Artemis, we called her. Our huntress. You loved me in tights. We would dress for a party and end up fucking on the way there. Death by garter belt, you called it. I always think of us this way. Straightening your tie, only to loosen it later.

- S. x

9

Summer will come to an end and I will pretend to be relieved. You know how fond I have always been of palm fronds... well, even the red carnations I found so common charm and delight me now. (When in Rome!) I open the window every night while I sleep and listen to the waves kiss the shoreline. Reading Neruda here makes me want to swallow the sunlight.

Some nights, I do dream of Boston or the smell of rain. But in the mornings, when my bare feet hit the cool Spanish tiles and my flat smells of sea and citrus, I can't imagine coming home. Oh, but don't you worry, Ty. You know how little my words mean. This too will fade into a series of photographs and postcards and I will have a new favourite flower. Even as I write this, I think of poppies and feel impatient.

- Sof

Kiss Your Comrades

I

The New England summer had meandered that year, as summers do when you're poor and without family down the Cape to visit for reprieve from the sizzling concrete tangle. They were living together then in a small one-bedroom apartment in Allston, hustling, drugs and sex. They'd split the profits, letting the gas company turn off their electricity for the summer; they couldn't afford air conditioning anyway, and why pay for lights with days so long and sun filled?

Some days, they sat together in cold bathwater passing time and cigarettes. Sadie on her phone finding clients, Ty on their phone making deals. Still, the humidity clung to them, and each night they laid on top of their sheets with the windows open and moist washcloths on their heads cooling, for however brief a moment, their red cheeks and foreheads. So, when Sadie received the call from her friend Aliana to do a six-week run as a dancer at Calista's Cabaret, she jumped at the opportunity.

'We can lay out at the beach all day, drink rum, swim,' Sadie said, pulling a suitcase out from under the bed.

'Miami in July will be brutal,' Ty scrunched their face.

'The bungalow will have A.C.' Sadie rummaged through the drawer pulling out bikinis and piling them into her left hand. 'Everything I own is neon,' she mumbled.

Ty flopped back onto the bed and checked their phone. 'Andy keeps texting me.'

'Girl got a taste of something she liked,' Sadie wiggled her tongue at them.

'I need an out.'

Sadie turned slowly on her heel and arched one of her shapely brows. 'I just gave you one.'

Sadie invited their friend Luciana to join them on their adventure to the Sunshine State. Luciana's family most likely *did* have beachside property somewhere in Brazil but she had been urged by her father to stay the summer in Boston—where she was studying finance at Harvard—to build character.' Building character on a monthly allowance with an apartment on Beacon Street looked a lot like how Sadie and Ty blew

off steam: relaxing into couches with fat blunts, drug-fuelled ragers with strangers, and all-night escapades; though Luciana's benders were corrected with brunch, a luxury that amused Sadie and Ty. Luciana's pockets never emptied and the pair of trans queers were her favourite people in the city. She thought tragedy was its own sort of glamour and she fancied Ty's flavour and Sadie's bite.

'What's in Miami?' she asked, sucking iced coffee through a straw.

'Calista's Cabaret,' Sadie reached into Ty's pocket for a lighter.

'We're staying in some beachside bungalow,' Ty chimed in. 'With air conditioning.'

This selling point didn't have much of an effect on Luciana who'd been properly cooled all summer. Still, the beach, a bungalow, these things resonated.

'How are you going to afford a beachside bungalow?' Luciana asked.

The pair of friends feigned insult.

'Don't you worry about that,' Sadie said as Ty snickered: 'We know people.'

Luciana leaned into the mesh back of the coffee shop's chair and gnawed on the end of her straw. Boston was dreadfully dead in the summer. She'd attended all of Newbury Street's summer sales, walked through the Common and even gone on a duck tour. What was left to do, really?

'Fuck it, I'm in.'

II

They took turns driving down the coast, listening to Ty ramble on about the sinking city, which made headlines from time to time, inked arguments over whether rising sea levels or rising industry are to blame. (*'It's always the poor who drown or burn. Highly-orchestrated negligence that will be referred to as an Act of God. As though hurricanes just happen to drain into the poorest neighbourhoods. It's a damn good plan though, playing on the volatility of weather. Still, when Miami sinks, and she will, it won't be the bourgeoisie who pay for the ocean's "impulsivity."*')

Once they'd reached Miami, they marvelled at her out the windows. White condominiums reached high into the blue-lined streets, but a simple turn and colour

bled into the scene; vibrant street art and flags of mother countries proudly draped over fences and in windows.

Tucked into street corners were pop-up eateries serving fresh empanadas and elotes, rolled in cotija cheese and cayenne pepper, and beer kept in buckets of ice, slices of lime beside them. The patrons stood around shovelling food into their mouths with their hands. Young children with avocado smeared faces ran circles around their mothers' heels, while young men on bicycles waited outside the entrance with bags of weed and cocaine, keenly weighed.

They stopped for lunch and Ty spooned a third taco into their mouth, washing it down with a swig of beer. 'I take back everything bad I said about Miami.'

Sadie smiled and smoothed out the map.

'Why do you insist on bringing that thing everywhere we go? For fuck's sake, we have phones.'

'And what if your phone dies?' Sadie looked at them pointedly.

'I can't even read a map,' Luciana said.

'Seriously, who is making these tacos?' Ty arched their neck back to try and peer behind the bar. 'I want to wife down the chef.'

Sadie circled something on the map and then made a note on the paper napkin beside her. 'Three nights at least, Ty.'

'Weekend and one weekday. Thursday maybe,' Ty replied.

Sadie nodded her head and wrote down a few more notes on the napkin while Luciana examined her manicure. She felt good here, in the Miami heat. It reminded her of home and even the scene unfolding before her felt familiar, sitting on her father's lap as a little girl while he smoked cigars with her uncle Guilherme and talked shop.

'Are you going to sell hard stuff too?' Luciana asked them.

'Blow,' Ty said. 'Everyone's always after a little powder in strip joints.'

'Doug already promised me a corner table near the bar,' Sadie said, folding up the map. 'The dance rooms are round the back and the staircase up to the private rooms is right beside it.'

'Private rooms?' Luciana looked up from her nails.

'Oh, don't look so shocked,' Ty said. 'Anyone want another taco?'

Sadie shook her head no and wrote down a few more notes while Luciana pulled a face. 'How can you eat more?'

'I'm a growing boy,' Ty grinned.

III

That night, Ty drove the trio to Calista's. The disappearing sun offered no reprieve and the air stayed thick even in evening, the scent of salt and sulphur hanging heavily with the humidity.

Sadie pulled down the mirror to fix her highlight and Luciana sat in the backseat behind Ty, smoking a cigarette through the open window. The Miami landscape whizzing past, a tremendous blur of colour and light.

Ty lit a joint and passed it to Sadie who finished wiping excess powder from beneath her eyes and inhaled gratefully. Ty took their hand from the wheel to squeeze her arm. 'You're going to be great,' they told her.

Sadie reached back to pass Luciana the joint and then let her hand rest on Ty's shoulder. Luciana watched the two, Sadie's hand draped over Ty's arm like an afterthought. Ashing the joint out the window, she held it between two fingers, not wanting to interrupt the moment by passing it back. She found their intimacy tender and foreign. Sadie anticipated Ty's moods; sticking a joint in their mouth at random and Ty seemed to hear Sadie's thoughts, responding to words Sadie hadn't yet spoken aloud. They were push and pull, a pendulum swinging.

'What's going on back there?' Ty called over the music. 'You gonna finish that joint yourself?' Luciana handed the joint back to Ty.

'It's up here on the left,' Sadie said, rolling up the map.

Luciana was surprised to see the club looked quite unremarkable from the outside. It was just a boxy grey structure set in the middle of a concrete lot with no windows or surrounding buildings. Ty pulled up beside an unmarked door around the rear of the building. Sadie took one last glance in the mirror, widening her eyes and closing them to ensure no powder had shifted or fallen.

'How do I look?' She directed the question to Luciana.

'Muy hermosa.'

Sadie clapped the mirror back into place and blew them both a kiss. Luciana watched her hop down out of the jeep and disappear behind the unmarked door. Ty smacked the leather seat three times with their palm. 'Hop up. I'm not your chauffeur.'

They pulled around to the front of the building and Luciana saw that a blue carpet had been rolled toward the entrance. Two men were standing in red vests, hands folded dutifully in front of them.

'Valet?' Luciana asked.

'Of course there is a valet. Don't let the exterior fool you.' Ty pulled into a spot toward the left of the lot.

As promised, Doug met them at the entrance, waving his hand at the woman checking IDs to allow them through without payment. Ty shook his hand and introduced Luciana while he led them through the club. Once settled into a red velvet booth, a waitress arrived with menus and an ashtray.

'I'm Charlotte, I'll be taking care of you tonight. Let me know if you need anything. Or anyone,' she said, gesturing toward the main stage. Ty handed her a few bills and asked for champagne. Charlotte nodded with a wide smile and then zipped away.

Luciana looked around. She had never been to a strip club, though she knew from her mother's drunken tirades that her father was a fan. The club had three bars set back along each wall, stools surrounding them, and several tables scattered where mostly men were sitting and smoking. A large stage was centred in the middle and Luciana noticed that there were also smaller side stages scattered throughout the room. The velvet booths, where she and Ty sat, were set around the perimeter of the club, and raised a bit above, providing a clear view of all the stages.

Luciana surveyed the women: sculpted, shining, gorgeous. Four of them were on the main stage but it was a single dancer on a smaller side stage that caught Luciana's eye. Her skin glowed gold, while her teeth, pearly white, flashed into smiles and winks whenever she caught eyes, whipping her hair behind her body's every move with suggestion.

The dancer found Luciana's eyes for a second but the beat changed and she whirled around the pole to face admirers in the other direction. Luciana watched the woman

undulate, turning to ask Ty if they thought her ass was real but there was only empty space, their cigarette stamped out in the ashtray.

Another waitress whizzed by the booth and then stopped abruptly, taking two steps back, upon spotting the cigarette. Her arms swooped down to remove the ashtray before Luciana could stop her. Knowing Ty would want the ashtray, she looked for Charlotte to ask for another, but the second waitress returned, placing a clean ashtray on the table with a smile before once again whizzing off. *Talk about service*, Luciana thought. Ty returned a few moments later and poured two glasses of champagne.

‘Having fun?’ Luciana asked shimmying her shoulders in Ty’s direction.

‘Business first,’ they said. ‘Did you see anyone you like?’

Luciana turned to the side stage to point out the dancer who’d caught her eye but a different girl, equally beautiful, had replaced her. Luciana looked back at Ty confused.

‘They rotate.’ Ty circled their index finger in the air. ‘Do you remember what she looks like? The VIP host can ask her to come by.’

‘She had the most incredible ass.’

‘Oh, quite easy to find then in a sea of incredible asses,’ Ty smirked.

‘So, who has your eye then?’

‘I told you, business first,’ they adjusted their left sleeve just as a gentleman in a tailored jacket approached the booth. He said a smooth hello and then leaned down toward Ty, whispering a bit in their ear. After a brief conversation, Luciana watched as their hands did a swift exchange of materials, like a handshake. ‘Enjoy your night,’ he said, walking away. Luciana let out a short burst of breath.

‘He was fine.’ She drew out the last word.

‘Rule one,’ Ty said, topping off the champagne. ‘Don’t fall in love in the strip club.’

A voice boomed out over the club’s speakers and both the friends’ eyes moved to the main stage. *Monique and Cheryl-Anne to the main stage, Monique and Cheryl Anne.*

‘That’s her!’ Luciana said, tugging at Ty’s sleeve. ‘That’s my girl.’

‘I told you not to get attached.’ Ty said, finishing their champagne and then disappearing again down the stretch of booths.

When their eyes met this time around, Luciana was sure to flash her own smile back; watching, rapt, as upside down, the girl lowered her legs into a split and then

flipped herself around, sliding down the pole before landing in another split, where she bounced her torso up and down.

Once her slot finished, the dancer climbed down the stairs and made her way toward the booth. Luciana felt a jolt of nerves bolt through her middle and quickly brushed her hair out with her fingers. The dancer bounded right up the steps into the stretch of VIP booths and appeared in front of Luciana, her hair framing her face in wild curls, glistening with the slight layer of sweat that she had worked up dancing.

‘I saw you watching me,’ she said playfully. Luciana felt a twinge of delight at this.

‘How could I not?’

The girl climbed into the booth now and sat beside her, swinging her legs up and over Luciana’s. A little taken aback at how swiftly the interaction unfolded, Luciana flustered.

‘Can I have a drink?’ The woman asked, sensing Luciana’s novelty.

‘Oh, right, of course,’ Luciana leaned forward to retrieve the bottle of champagne from the ice bucket and poured the dancer a generous glass.

‘For you too,’ the dancer nodded toward the empty glass on the table. Luciana felt her cheeks redden. *Relax*, she thought topping off her own glass.

‘What should we toast to?’

‘Your first time in a strip club.’

Luciana blushed a bit and then laughed. ‘What gave me away?’

‘It’s all good, baby,’ the girl tossed her hair. ‘I love virgins.’ Her smile teased only slightly and Luciana marvelled at the girl’s ability to not make her feel daft.

‘So, walk me through it,’ Luciana said.

‘Basics first,’ the dancer held out her hand. ‘I’m Monique.’

‘Luciana.’

‘That’s a beautiful name,’ Monique said, tucking a few strands of Luciana’s hair behind her ear. ‘Luciana,’ she let it slip through her lips slowly, ‘Are you here with someone, Luciana?’

‘My friend Sadie is working here for the summer.’

‘You’re with Sadie?’ Monique reached forward and pulled the bottle of champagne from the bucket. ‘You should have said so!’ She handed Luciana a full glass. ‘By the way, my real name is Nicole.’

IV

Sadie heard her name being called toward the main stage and told the gentlemen she was sitting with that she'd be back. He handed her a folded bill and said *I hope so*, and she smiled to reassure him, but when she unfolded the bill to find a fiver, she didn't bother remembering where he was or his shirt colour. That's how she remembered them. Second booth, blue shirt. Left corner, red tie.

On stage, Sadie fell into movement with ease. Her hips churning in time with every dip in the beat, whipping her hair back every now and again for emphasis. It made her laugh when men asked if it turned her on to dance up there like that or inquired about what dirty thoughts she entertained while she did. Of course, part of the shtick meant playing up just how dirty and naughty it made her feel. But in truth, it was muscle memory. Some days, she'd make her grocery list, others, she'd perform some simple math, calculating costs and crossing overdue bills off her *to pay* list.

A tall man appeared in front of her, waving a few dollars in the air and she bent down toward him, bringing her breasts close to his face. He didn't seem to know what to do with the money so she turned around showing him he could place it in her thong. He tucked it between the strap with a shaking hand and then pulled it away slowly as though unsure what to do next. Sadie spun around to face the other direction and spotted Ty near one of the exits, talking seriously with two men. Sadie turned again, and another man had appeared, looking sullen, as though she hadn't noticed him quickly enough. He laid out some money on the stage but just as Sadie bent to retrieve them, he slammed his hand over the bills to cover them.

'What are you gonna do for it, sweetheart?'

Sadie was tempted to kick him in the face with her stiletto and say: *this IS what I'm doing for it, sweetheart*. But, entitled man-child was just another one of the miserable clientele the girls encountered in this line of work. This industry gave a girl patience. Sadie ignored him, and his money, and continued dancing. He sulked and tried to get her attention each time she faced him, but after a few moments, gave up and walked away, shoulders slumped, like a defeated child.

She tried to count how many songs had played since she began. She has always preferred the walk around to the stage dance. That was where the real money could be

made. *Smile*, she thought, catching the eye of a well-to-do gentleman with slicked-back hair. He raised his glass to her and she batted her eyes as though it made her feel special and then turned around to play coy. *Final song*, she thought, *time to turn it out*. She climbed up the pole, flipped herself upside down and split her legs open, before sliding down and gathering some of the bills that had been left on the stage and rubbing them over her skin.

After Sadie had finished dancing, she hopped down and made a quick beeline for the backroom so she could organise her bills and hide them in her purse. She checked her reflection in the mirror, popped a peppermint into her mouth, and then returned to the club with a full smile already plastered on her face. She remembered the well-dressed gentlemen who had raised his glass to her and made her way toward him. A slight smile curled onto his face when he saw her approach. *Well-off and willing, god willing*, Sadie said her regular silent prayer and touched his arm.

‘Hi, handsome.’

He moved over in the booth, offering her a seat and she swung her legs up and over his as she sat. He slid a hand over her calves and asked for her name.

‘Sapphire,’ she glided her own hand behind his neck and through his hair, tugging a bit on the ends.

‘Tell me your real name.’

Keeping a smile in place of an eye roll, she clicked her tongue teasingly and climbed on top of him to distract him from asking again. Pulling at the strings of her top, she let it fall fluidly over her breasts and he burrowed his face between them just as she’d intended. He slipped some money into her skirt and when she saw it was a fifty, she took his hand and led him around the bar and toward the booth for a private dance.

The second man Sadie serviced was a talker. He requested a private dance almost immediately, but in the booth only wanted to whine about the wife that left him and his theories about the flailing market. Talkers were an annoying but easy mark. She massaged his shoulders while he spoke so he didn’t notice her glazed over stare.

On her way back into the club, she bumped into Ty and asked them how they were getting on.

‘We’re good,’ Ty assured her. ‘I ran into two guys who bought practically everything I had. Bachelor party or some nonsense.’

‘Perfect,’ Sadie said. ‘Go have fun?’

Ty kissed Sadie on the cheek. ‘You don’t have to tell me twice.’

V

Ty joined a red-cheeked Luciana in the booth who was chatting quickly with one of the dancers.

‘Ty! Come meet Monique. Or should I introduce you as Nicole? Monicole!’ she shouted, cracking up at her cleverness. Ty and Nicole shook hands. ‘Nicole is so interesting. Did she tell you she was born in Barbados? Came here when she was seventeen.’

‘Seven,’ Nicole interjected. Luciana leaned over toward Ty and draped her arm across their shoulders. ‘I’m learning so much. Did you know they say your name a lot to make you feel special?’ Nicole and Ty shushed her at the same time. ‘Oh yes! Shh.’ Luciana held her index finger to her lips. ‘I can keep secrets.’

Ty dug a baggie of weed from their blazer pocket and began rolling a blunt, mouthing an apology to Nicole and then asking if Luciana had given her any money.

‘Oh, it’s okay,’ Nicole said. ‘I finished my shift. I’m just hanging out cause y’all know Sadie.’

Ty’s eyes lit up in recognition. ‘*That* Nicole. I’ve heard so much about you. You and Sadie worked together at the Pit?’

‘My god, don’t remind me. I don’t know if it was the name that inspired men to be lazy about hygiene, but I swear we had the smelliest clientele there. Bad breath, smelly pits.’ She made a face and Ty, looking sympathetic, handed her the blunt as though in condolence.

Luciana, who had been dancing near the edge of the booth, gave a sloppy half smile to them both and hiccupped. ‘Can we dance, Nicole? I want a dance!’

Nicole stood up and offered her hand to Luciana telling Ty they’d be around the corner.

Ty stretched out on the velvet couch. Dancers walked by, a few looking over to measure their interest, but they kept their eyes focused forward.

‘Hey handsome, you want a dance?’ A woman leaned down over the booth letting her breasts dangle like bait, but Ty shook their head no and she moved on. Their eyes rotated around, checking out the girls on the side and main stages. They saw Sadie by the main bar and tried to get her attention, but she didn’t catch Ty’s wave.

Taking another hit of the blunt, they surveyed the room a second time before their eyes found a large pair of wings spread across a woman’s shoulder blades and down her spine, the base of the tattoo settling on her tailbone. Ty stroked their bottom lip with their index finger then licked it, standing to signal one of the VIP hosts. One appeared immediately, and Ty asked for the *bird laden beauty* to be brought to them.

‘And another bottle of champagne,’ they added, handing him a few folded bills. The champagne came first, and Ty had just finished pouring two glasses when the VIP host returned with the dancer. She smiled warmly and offered Ty her hand.

‘Gabrielle.’

Ty offered her a flute of champagne.

‘To that gorgeous tattoo,’ Ty said, as they clinked glasses. Gabrielle returned hers to the table before slipping an easy hand behind Ty’s neck and pulling at the back of their hair.

‘So, tell me handsome, are you here alone?’

Ty almost told her they were with Sadie but thought better of it. They handed her fifty bucks and she immediately slipped the money into her purse and climbed onto Ty’s lap. She dripped some champagne onto her nipple and instructed them to lick it.

‘Ayy, you’re making me hot,’ she whimpered. ‘Take me to a private room. Come on. We’ll be able to have way more fun.’

‘Gabrielle, no kissing!’ One of the hosts warned. The pair looked at one another and Gabrielle raised her eyebrow as if to say *see what I mean*. Ty lifted her up off their lap, squeezing her ass as they did.

‘Lead the way, mama.’

VI

Sadie had been scheduled to work until four that morning, but the club was relatively empty. One of the managers told her she could knock off early if she wanted and after

counting her bills, she decided she'd made a decent enough amount for the night. She went to the booth to find Luciana and Ty, but was surprised to find only an empty bottle of champagne and Luciana's jacket, the sleeve of which was hanging over the side of the table nearly resting the floor.

Retrieving her phone from her purse, she sent them both a text before walking round to the booths. Peering in, she saw her co-workers grinding against men who dry humped them in return, but no friends. Sadie rolled her eyes and kept looking. Finally, she found Luciana in one of the last rooms on the left, looking sloppy and happy, with Nicole. Sadie received a slurring Luciana in her arms and looked at her friend in surprise.

'Where's Ty?' She asked, trying to steady a wobbling Luciana.

'We haven't seen them in ages,' Nicole said.

'Well I'm off early and my feet are killing me. I'll find Ty and meet you guys in the back?'

Nicole nodded and led Luciana away by the hand.

Sadie checked the rest of the rooms to no avail. Glancing up at the stairs leading up to the private rooms, she considered for a moment but then shook her head. The girls hustled those rooms for a couple hundred an hour. Surely Ty wouldn't be there. But as she passed the staircase, she saw Doug signalling at the stairs and pointing upwards. *I'll kill them.* She made her way up the stairs, wincing at the ache that had started pulsing in the arch of her left foot.

She located the VIP host easily and asked if a dykey looking boi in a tie had come this way and felt her jaw tighten when the host nodded yes.

'Last room on the right.' Sadie thanked her and started making her way down the hall. 'You can't go in!' The host called out after her. 'They'll be done soon.' She punched a few things into her tablet and then looked back at Sadie. 'Seven minutes.'

Sadie fumed a bit as she sat down to wait, removing one of her shoes and rubbing her heel. The seven minutes seemed to drag, and when the pair finally emerged, hand in hand, Ty noticed Sadie, nodded at her, and said, 'Gabrielle is coming back with us.'

Sadie pursed her lips and took Ty's car keys out of their trouser pocket. 'You're drunk.'

‘I’m good to drive,’ they said, as Gabrielle whispered something in their ear. Sadie rolled her eyes and started down the staircase.

‘No way you’re fucking up twice tonight,’ she muttered under her breath.

VII

At the bungalow, the girls spread across the white couches, pulling off their shoes to stretch their legs and rub their feet while Ty prepared vodka sodas at the bar. Holding four at a time between their fingers, they walked around the room handing them off. Sadie sat on the end of the couch and rubbed her calves and when Ty handed her a drink, she merely shook her head no.

‘Come on babe,’ Ty urged, ‘Take a load off.’

Sadie took the cup and frowned a bit, poking at one of the ice cubes floating near the top of the rim.

Once everyone had drinks, Nicole cleared her throat loudly, so it could be heard over the chatter, and everyone quieted while she raised a glass.

‘I want to toast to Sadie’s first night.’ Everyone nodded raising a glass in agreement. ‘Welcome to the family, mama.’ Nicole blew a kiss, everyone cheered, and Sadie gave a small, tight-lipped smile in return.

‘How do the clients compare with back home?’ Gabrielle asked Sadie.

‘Way more men of colour,’ Sadie said, ‘Which I prefer.’

‘Miami is nice in that way,’ Nicole pressed the tip of the blunt Luciana had passed her between her lips. ‘Nice to see faces like your own.’

‘In life, I agree with you,’ Gabrielle said. ‘But in the club, I prefer the gringos. You colonise land, I colonise your wallet!’ The group burst out laughing, except Sadie, who wiped at the condensation forming on her plastic cup. ‘And they’re such talkers,’ Gabrielle continued, ‘I could be a licensed counsellor with all the therapy I give!’

‘Right?’ Nicole chimed in. ‘I always say my signature move is talk therapy.’

Luciana’s eyes widened and Nicole laughed when she noticed her surprise and continued. ‘Oh yes. Being a stripper is equal parts therapist, mother, and whore.’

The group continued to laugh until Sadie announced she was off to bed. Groaning in protest, the girls tried to convince her to stay, but she smiled weakly and stepped

through the circle. Ty tried to catch Sadie's eye but she deliberately avoided their gaze and with a small, vague goodnight to the group, disappeared upstairs.

Nicole retrieved the bottle of vodka from the bar and refilled everyone's cups.

'I wish you all could have seen this one in the booth,' Nicole said, gesturing toward Luciana.

'Who, me?'

'Yes you,' Nicole laughed. 'Swinging your hips and dropping your ass like you were working for it, honey.' Nicole snapped her fingers and Gabrielle raised her glass. 'Come on, mami, show us your moves then.'

Luciana feigned protest but encouraged with claps and whistles entered the centre of the circle and swivelled her hips. Ty bumped up the volume of the music and Nicole joined her, grinding her hips against Luciana's. The pair rocked their pelvises together for a few seconds before Nicole began introducing more complicated moves into the routine. Luciana pulled a face, trying to keep up, and with her tongue poking out the side of her mouth, she nearly tumbled over into Gabrielle. When the pair completed their impromptu routine, they posed dramatically and Gabrielle and Ty lent them a long applause before the pair collapsed back into the chairs, bright eyed and sweaty.

'Do you see what I mean? Nicole shook her head from side to side. 'Glad I got to hang with a cute stripper in training tonight,' she chuckled.

'Not mine,' Gabrielle said, arm hung casually around Ty. 'Mine is a stripper lover.'

'Woman lover,' Luciana chimed in.

'Are you gay, Ty?' Nicole asked.

'It's complicated,' Ty responded.

'You sleep with men?' Gabrielle's eyes widened in surprise.

'I identify as queer because I feel it's all-encompassing. Orientation, gender, politics.'

'Oh shit, this is getting serious,' Gabrielle said, sitting up. 'I feel like I'm about to get a gender studies lesson.'

Luciana let out a laugh. 'That's exactly how it is with Ty!'

'I prioritise women,' they said, as though this explained it.

'Woman lover!' Luciana yelled again and they all laughed except Nicole, who ashed her cigarette and cocked her head to the side thoughtfully.

‘So, for you, it’s more about privilege,’ she said. ‘You’d rather sleep with people who have similar experiences.’

‘Exactly,’ Ty said.

‘I get that. I identify as bisexual so I sleep with men and women, but a few years ago I stopped sleeping with white men and it was one of the most healing decisions I ever made.’ She paused thoughtfully. ‘I couldn’t sleep with them without hating them. Without thinking of what they represented, what they took from my community, from my ancestors.’

‘I understand that,’ Gabrielle said. ‘I think when I see white men I think: what can I take from you and when I see men of colour I think: what can I build with you.’

It was Nicole’s turn to nod as Luciana sat back into the couch, folding her hands together and cracking her knuckle. ‘I feel stupid that I have never thought of any of this,’ she said.

‘Don’t feel stupid, mami,’ Gabrielle said. ‘This is why us girls stick together.’

‘And Ty,’ Nicole laughed.

‘Yes, and Ty,’ Gabrielle said, ruffling their curls.

‘And it’s your choice at the end of the day.’ Nicole said. ‘Your body, your rules.’

‘I’ll drink to that,’ Ty said, raising their glass and all the girls exchanged meaningful looks and drank to their agency.

VIII

The next morning, Sadie woke to white light streaming through the bungalow’s windows, piercing at her eyes. She stood to stretch and yawn, peering around to see if the others were still asleep. Luciana and Nicole were passed out, head to head, each of their bodies stretching to either end of the couch.

She blinked a few times and looked around for Ty. Tiptoeing to the bathroom to brush her teeth, Sadie’s tongue felt dry and her mouth tasted bad, of ash and metal. Her feet were throbbing; the night of sleep having hardly helped. She walked downstairs expecting to find Ty at the table with coffee, their nose in a book, but the lower level of the bungalow was empty. She opened the front door peering outside to see if they were

smoking, but saw only the hotel staff setting up the loungers around the pool with neatly white rolled towels placed beautifully on each chair for the guests.

Upstairs, Sadie heard the girls stirring. Nicole bounded down the stairs looking surprisingly fresh-faced, while Luciana followed slowly behind, still in the previous night's makeup, rubbing at her temples.

'Oh, Luciana,' Sadie clucked her tongue. 'Girl, you look like you hurt.'

'I can't believe you all let me get so drunk!' She pretended to cry into her hands. Nicole handed her a glass of water and then dropped two Advil into her palm. Luciana swallowed the pills and then retreated to the couch where she laid down and closed her eyes, moaning to herself.

Sadie joined Nicole in the kitchen, who was peering into the cabinets and seemed to be searching for something.

'Coffee?'

'We haven't gone shopping yet.'

'No matter, we'll go out. Where's Ty?'

Sadie shrugged her shoulders and started busying herself by tossing out cups from the previous night and dumping ashtrays into the bin.

'You seem upset.'

'I'm fine.'

'You seemed upset last night when we left the club, you seemed upset on the car ride home, and then here last night before you stomped off moodily to bed. Fess up, what's going on?'

Sadie screwed the cap back onto the nearly empty bottle of vodka and stuck it into the freezer; the momentary burst of cold air soothing her tired face.

'Did something happen last night?'

'It wasn't the clients. It's Ty.'

Nicole narrowed her eyes but Sadie didn't seem much in the mood for talking. She wiped down the counter and tossed the paper towel into the trash.

'I just thought we'd all get coffee this morning, that's all,' Sadie said finally.

'Well, I'm here,' Nicole said brightly. 'Come on, a little caffeine is going to make everything better for us all. Except maybe that one,' she nodded toward Luciana sprawled on the couch and the friends giggled.

‘Thanks for looking after her last night.’

‘Of course! She was a blast.’

‘Yeah, but it wasn’t your responsibility,’ Sadie said, running her hands under the sink.

By the time Sadie started getting ready to return to the club that night for work, Ty was still nowhere to be found. She sat at the large white vanity in the bedroom and started on her makeup, brushing and blending to soften her face. Luciana wandered in, picking at the ends of her hair.

‘My ends are split,’ she complained.

Sadie dabbed a brush in gold shadow, tapping it a few times to dust off the excess powder.

‘Coconut oil.’

‘My mother uses coconut oil on everything,’ Luciana said, pulling apart two strands to examine them more closely. ‘Hair, nails, skin, teeth.’ Luciana flopped back onto the bed and Sadie continued to brush the powder across her lids.

‘Where did Ty disappear to?’

‘Your guess is as good as mine,’ Sadie said, tapping the brush on the vanity a bit harshly.

‘Well, that’s just hardly true,’ Luciana gave her a pointed look in the mirror. Rummaging through her makeup bag, Sadie sighed.

‘Ty has this obnoxious habit of disappearing,’ she explained. ‘They’ll leave parties, clubs, houses, bungalows...’ she stuck her eyeliner into the sharpener and twisted it to the right.

‘You sound mad.’

‘They were my ride,’ she said, careful to remain steady as she moved her hand across the lid to create a perfectly angled wing. Luciana continued to pull at the strands of her hair. ‘Nicole will give me a ride,’ Sadie said, wiping at a small mistake under her lid. ‘But I’m a little miffed.’

Luciana got off the bed and came behind Sadie, leaning over her shoulder and peering into her makeup bag. ‘I love this,’ she said, picking up an eyeshadow palette.

‘Are you coming tonight?’ Sadie asked.

‘I’m still hurting from my hangover. Think I might stay in and watch *Mi Corazón*. The telenovelas in Miami are so good.’

Sadie screwed the cap back onto her foundation. ‘This is as good as it’s going to get.’

Luciana hugged Sadie from behind and kissed the air beside her face.

‘That—’ she pointed to Sadie’s cheekbone, ‘is a highlight.’

IX

The club that night was twice as busy as usual causing the clientele to be aggressive. Men reached out of the booths trying to grab at the girls, whining like children, asking when it was their turn. Sadie kept her smile in place, handing out many *hold on, handsome* and flirtatious grins, falsely promising return. In the bathroom stall, Sadie took a moment to breathe; reapplied her lipstick and organised the crumpled bills before stashing them in her purse. Two dancers wandered in, talking loudly.

‘She is so busted, I don’t know how she got the job,’ said the first, as they stood to touch up their faces in the main mirror.

‘This place has gone downhill,’ the second girl agreed. ‘Do you know one of the alternates is a tranny?’

Sadie felt her heart skip and squeeze around itself, a hot flash of rage and then the sting of shame pulsating between her temples, spreading red across her cheeks.

‘Wow,’ the first girl said elongating the word. ‘I guess they’ll let *anyone* work here.’

‘Seriously,’ the second girl agreed. ‘Is my gloss okay?’

Sadie held her breath in the stall waiting for them to leave before daring to exhale. Shaking, she unlatched the door after hearing the main door swing shut. At the mirror, she splashed some cold water on her cheeks and then fixed her makeup, taking a few deep breaths, readying herself to re-join the circus. Almost immediately, her manager came up beside her, his hand on her elbow leading her around the floor as though he had purchased a dance.

‘Where the hell have you been?’ He said through gritted teeth, faking a smile as he led her toward the bar.

‘Bathroom.’

‘For twenty fucking minutes? We’re at capacity and there aren’t enough girls. You can pee on your own fucking time. I need you all out on the floor.’ He practically pushed Sadie into the crowd, causing her to nearly topple into the lap of a man sitting on one of the barstools. Sadie steadied herself and apologised.

‘Make it up to me with a dance?’ Sadie wanted to say no, needing a moment to compose herself, but her pissed off manager was hovering nearby so she plastered a smile on her face, nodded, and took him by the hand to the booths. There, she faced away from him nearly the entire time, shaking her ass in his face so she wouldn’t have to see him. He seemed satisfied, and two songs later he handed her a hundred-dollar bill, slapping her ass in lieu of thanks.

The velour armchair in the dance booth seemed inviting and Sadie felt the urge to curl up there and sleep, but the night was young, and there was money to be made. She pulled out her phone to check if Ty had texted her and then angrily tossed it back into her purse.

In the main part of the club, the patrons seemed to multiply. If they were at capacity, it was unlikely they were letting anyone else inside, but either the patrons were increasing or the club was shrinking in size. Bodies were pressed up against one another and the VIP hosts kept having to ask men to step back into their booths so the girls had space to walk around. Men swarmed around the main stage leaning too close to the edge, their fists thrust into the air with bills. Even the side stages, which usually only had two or three men attached were swamped, men shoulder to shoulder, fists waving, vying for the dancer’s attention. Though none of the dancers appeared so, Sadie could tell many of the girls were pressed. Instead of leaning down to flirt with a customer on stage as they normally would, tonight they hung back from the crowd, afraid of being pulled down or groped. The girls working the floor walked even faster than usual, so they couldn’t be grabbed by a patron they didn’t care for or pulled onto a lap without their consent.

Sadie spotted a man across the room nodding in her direction and she walked toward him, grabbed at twice along her route. He immediately asked for a dance and she led him to one of the booths without thinking twice. Once alone, he began running his hands along her hips.

‘I like girls like you.’

She just smiled in response. Men often said this. Who knew what kind of girl they meant. Stripper, naughty, trans? It wasn’t always clear what they were fetishizing but Sadie wasn’t there to dismantle semantics. She climbed onto his lap and tried to relax him into the armchair, but he sat up straight tightening his grip on her hips.

‘Did you hear what I said, baby? I like girls like you.’

Trying to hold her composure, she acted flattered and said, ‘Then let me dance for you, handsome.’

He held her firmly in place. ‘How far along are you, baby?’

Sadie felt a small chill run down her spine. She wished they weren’t alone in a booth, away from the watchful eyes of the VIP hosts.

‘The first song is almost up,’ she said, ‘let me dance for you. You know you gotta pay no matter what.’ His hands were firm and his grip strong.

‘I don’t mind what you have between your legs,’ he breathed, running a hand up her thigh. Sadie tried to squeeze her legs together.

‘Come on, you know there’s no touching like that,’ she said, trying to get off his lap.

‘Relax,’ he said, gripping her hips more tightly. ‘I know how hard it is for a girl like you. Not like the others. You work twice as hard for half as much. Come on, take off your bottoms. Let me see it.’

Sadie’s stomach braided itself into knots, twisting around itself in anticipatory dread; as though her body had been hotwired with alarms and each was set off, ringing with his grip.

‘The song is over,’ she tried appealing to reason. ‘I have to work the main stage.’

But his fists remained holding her in place. ‘I’m the best offer you’re going to get all night.’

Sadie felt her body numb, and against instinct, she began to melt into compliance. She calculated how long it had been and how long it might be before the VIP hosts made their rounds through the booths so she could signal distress, but until then her fate was sealed, and frozen in fear, her limbs locked into submission, bracing for the onslaught.

X

At the Bungalow, Ty had finally returned to find Luciana straddling a chair with her phone open to a dance tutorial on YouTube.

‘What the hell are you doing?’ Ty asked, pulling off their T-shirt.

Luciana nearly toppled over in surprise, her cheeks flushed. ‘I didn’t hear you come in,’ she stopped the tutorial and wiped some sweat from her brow. ‘Where have you been all day?’

Ty told her they’d taken Gabrielle to the beach before motioning to Luciana and the previously straddled chair. ‘What’s that about?’

‘Don’t laugh.’ Luciana pleaded. ‘Nicole told me I had the booty for it, so I don’t know, I was just trying out some moves. To see if I have any natural skill.’

‘And do you?’

Luciana scoffed, turned on some music, and started showing Ty what she had learned. They whooped and waved a few bills at her, laughing hysterically when Luciana climbed on top of the chair and tried to bounce her bottom up and down on an invisible lap.

It was this scene that Sadie walked in on after Nicole had dropped her off.

‘Sadie, maybe you should take a few days off. Talk to one of the managers. Nick is an asshole but Juan is nice. I could talk to him. Take over some of your shifts.’

Sadie shook her head no. ‘Money,’ she rubbed her thumb and index together.

Nicole sighed as Sadie unbuckled her seat belt and opened the door. ‘Do you want me to come in with you?’

‘I’m fine,’ Sadie said hopping out of the car. ‘I’ll see you tomorrow.’ She slammed the door shut and walked away toward the hotel before Nicole could say anything else. As she approached the bungalow, she saw the lights on and heard the faint thump of bass coming from the windows.

Opening the door, she saw Luciana humping a chair and Ty, nearly doubled over, waving bills at her. Sadie stood in the doorway and watched them, feeling her stomach knot and unknot. With a swallow, she swung the bungalow door shut behind her, causing them both to turn and shout hello. Staring at them blankly, she watched their

smiles fade and then register that something wasn't right. Luciana switched the music off and Ty approached Sadie in the doorway slowly, their face wrinkled with concern.

'Sadie, what's wrong?'

'Where the hell have you been?' Sadie spat out the words.

'At the beach with Gabrielle.'

Sadie came the rest of the way into the Bungalow. 'How fucking nice that must have been for you.' Ty backed away from her letting her all the way into the living room. 'And what the hell are you doing?' She snapped at Luciana, who was still straddling the chair.

'I wanted to learn some moves,' Luciana stammered. Sadie sneered and sat down to unstrap her shoes and remove them.

'So, one of you spends all day with a stripper and the other is trying to become one,' she scoffed.

'Sadie, what's the matter?' Ty asked again.

'Like you fucking care,' Sadie said, rubbing her feet.

'Of course, I care,' Ty sounded indignant. 'Why are you acting like this?'

Sadie let out a snort, her cheeks reddening as she stood. 'What exactly am I acting like Ty? Because as far as I can tell, I'm the only one here doing my fucking job. The question is why the fuck are you acting like such a piece of shit?'

Ty's mouth dropped open and Sadie could tell by the look on their face they hadn't seen this coming. 'Don't look so galled and affronted.' Ty made a sound as though they had a response, but Sadie raised her voice in warning and continued. 'You leave Luciana drunk and alone so my friend has to babysit her all night while you are living it up in a private room. With OUR money.'

Luciana's eyes enlarged as Ty closed their mouth and then parted it again to speak. 'Sadie, if you're worried about the money, it's all good. I already made it back.'

Sadie rolled her eyes. 'You just hear whatever the fuck you want to. It's not about the money. It's about you looking out for number one. Always. You think you're so much better than those dudes in the club but you're just like them. Fucking selfish and delusional. You think you're Gabrielle's exception? Fuck no. She hustled you like she fucking should have.'

Ty looked bewildered and sat down.

‘Oh please,’ Sadie said, retrieving a glass from the kitchen. ‘Drop the fucking act, Ty. Woman up and admit it.’

‘Alright,’ Ty threw up their hands. ‘It wasn’t cool I spent the money. I said I made it back.’

Sadie huffed. ‘You’re missing the point. You always miss the fucking point. And you know what? I don’t need some selfish motherfucker in my bungalow.’ She picked up their backpack and threw it with impressive force at Ty who ducked as it sailed past them and landed on the floor with a thud.

‘Get out!’ Sadie yelled, running past Ty and opening the door. ‘Both of you,’ she screamed at Luciana, who was cowering now in the chair. ‘Get the fuck out.’

Outside, the humidity clung to them almost immediately, as they stood outside the door. They looked at one another, Luciana wiping away her brimming tears, and Ty, chewing at their nails.

‘Should we go back in and apologise?’

‘You were just a casualty,’ Ty said, bending down to pick up the backpack that had been tossed out alongside them and retrieving their tobacco from the front pocket. Sitting down on the stoop, they began to roll a shaky cigarette. ‘Something happened,’ Ty stuck their tongue out and slid it across the paper sealing the cigarette. ‘It can’t just be about me. I’m willing to admit I’ve been a bit of a dick but something else had to have happened.’

‘I’ve never seen her like this,’ Luciana said, her cheeks stained a bit with the tears that had only just stopped leaking from her eyes.

‘Maybe Nicole knows something,’ Ty said, just as the lights inside the bungalow switched off.

Nicole provided both answers and her living room to the pair who showed up at nearly five in the morning, sweat laced and smelling of stale smoke. ‘Kicked out comrades,’ she smiled as she opened the door in a thin robe, waving them in.

Ty perched against the kitchen counter and bit at their bottom lip while Nicole retrieved three glasses and filled them at the sink. Handing them both a glass of water, she sighed. ‘This chaser clocked Sadie tonight and got super handsy. They were in the

booth and we were packed. The hosts just weren't making the rounds as quickly as usual. She was stuck with him for a few songs.'

Luciana scrunched her forehead and tears started to leak once more from her eyes. Ty ran their thumb alongside the glass, staring out into the middle of the kitchen floor.

'What's a chaser?' Luciana asked, looking between them.

'Just an asshole who fetishises trans women,' Nicole explained. 'I think she was okay. Just a bit shook up. I drove her home as soon as we could leave. And Doug threw him out. Got his license so we could blacklist him.'

'It's not enough,' Ty muttered.

'Never is.' Nicole agreed.

In the living room, Nicole had set a pile of blankets and two pillows on the couch. 'One of you will have to sleep on the floor.'

'Luci can have the couch,' Ty said, 'I doubt I'll be sleeping much tonight.'

Luciana tried asking Ty if they were sure, that they could share, but Ty didn't seem to hear her, only paced the length of the carpet in the darkness, biting at their thumbnail as though there was something to rip away.

In the morning, Luciana woke to a red-eyed Ty, staring blankly at their hands. The two friends walked to the parking lot and climbed into the car, sitting for a moment before Ty turned on the ignition and pulled out of Nicole's driveway. They drove in silence on the freeway and Luciana pressed her hand to the window, watching the palm fronds and cars whizz by beside her.

'Do you think Sadie is okay?' Luciana asked, but Ty did not answer, only turned left toward the bungalow, squinting a bit in the blaring sun.

Back at the bungalow, the door was unlocked, and the pair let themselves in, careful to be quiet in case Sadie was still asleep. But she was sat up at the kitchen table, a steaming mug of coffee between her hands. Looking up at them when they came through the front door, she said nothing, only pushed the spoon around the mug. Luciana dug her nails into her palm, looking between the two friends, wondering who would break the silence.

'You're right,' Ty said finally. 'I'm an asshole. I shouldn't have left Luci alone in the club. She was drunk and it wasn't Nicole's responsibility.' With her mouth set in a thin line, Sadie looked up from the mug and met Ty's eyes. Taking it as a sign to

continue, they said, 'I'm sorry I spent our money. You're right about that too. It was selfish and reckless.' Tears had started to well in Sadie's eyes and Ty walked toward her slowly and then bent down on both knees. Sadie held herself up for a moment, trying not to cry, and then collapsed into Ty's arms and let out a lone and loud sob.

'He kept putting his hands between my thighs,' she cried. 'He kept telling me that I wouldn't find a better guy than him.'

Luciana's throat tightened as she watched Ty's hands clench into fists behind Sadie's back.

'I'm sorry I kicked you out last night.'

'Don't you dare apologise,' Ty said, and Luciana nodded in agreement and joined the two friends, wrapping her arms around them. They stayed there, Ty holding Sadie close to their chest and Luciana hovering above them as though her body were an umbrella, sheltering them from a storm she could not quite comprehend.

After Ty had run Sadie a bath, given her a massage, and put her to bed for a nap, they returned downstairs spotting Luciana sitting stiffly in one of the armchairs.

'How is she?'

'Stronger than either of us will ever be.'

Putting a gentle hand on Ty's shoulder, Luciana told them to get some sleep. But they unplugged their phone from the charger and started reading through messages telling her they had some things to take care of.

'What could you possibly have to do now? Just lie down, I'll close the blinds to keep the sun out.'

'I told you,' Ty said, pulling on their boots, 'business always comes first.' Their face was solemn as they stood to leave.

'Does this have to do with Sadie?'

Ty nodded, and Luciana started pulling on her sandals.

'Then I'm coming with.'

XI

Ski masks weren't easily found in South Florida, but they had to swing by a sporting goods store anyway and there, in the winter sports section, they found a modest

selection. Ty reached up and retrieved a black one from the rack and Luciana grabbed the same before putting it back to retrieve a hot pink mask instead.

‘Suits you,’ Ty told her.

In the car, they drove in silence down the highway toward Lighthouse Point, a wealthy waterfront neighbourhood just north of Miami.

‘How did you get his address?’ Luciana asked, removing the tags from both masks.

‘Doug,’ Ty replied. ‘He was more than happy to pass the information along. “Long as you don’t get caught,” he said.’ Ty turned to Luciana now and gave her the first genuine smile she’d seen since the night before. ‘But I never get caught.’

Feeling her heart pump with purpose in her chest, the beat quickened in pace as they sped down the highway. But it was not anxiety as much as ammunition; Luciana felt fuelled with rage and purpose.

Once they turned into his neighbourhood, Ty instructed Luciana to pull the mask over her face.

‘Does Sadie know we’re doing this?’ Luciana asked.

‘She doesn’t *know* but she *knows*,’ Ty looked at Luciana and wiggled their eyebrows. ‘You know?’

‘What if he’s home?’

‘He’s not.’

‘What if cameras catch your plates?’

‘I muddied the plates,’ Ty said, as though it were customary to think of such things.

‘Have you done this before?’

Slowing the car as they turned onto his street, Ty pointed out Luciana’s window, telling her to keep an eye out for 3570.

‘You want to get an education about trans queers, here is lesson number one,’ Ty said, pulling to a stop near the curb. ‘When it comes to justice, we only have ourselves to rely on.’ They put the car in park and reached one hand back to retrieve the freshly purchased metal bat, twirling it in their hands and tapping their palm twice.

‘It’s unlikely too many people are around this time of day, but white folk love calling the cops so we’ve only got like two minutes to smash and dash.’ Ty tossed their keys at Luciana. ‘You key the sides and I’ll go for the headlights. Unless you want to wait in the car—’

‘Fuck no, I’m coming with.’ Luciana spread Ty’s keys in her palm so each stuck out between one of her fingers like spikes. ‘This is for Sadie.’

‘For Sadie,’ Ty affirmed.

Jumping out the jeep, the pair walked down his street and up the impressively long driveway. And though Luciana felt her heart pounding in fear, she couldn’t help but grin, already victorious. Her father had always taught her to protect things of value and as she approached the Bentley, gleaming blue in the white Miami sun, she thought she had never seen a car asking for it so much.

Femme Hearts

It's hard to pinpoint the when of it. I'm sure observation and inception are distinct. I observed, for example, on a Wednesday that I had stopped painting. Painting well—with purpose or aim, guided by lights, inspired; not frustrated, frowning, brush in mouth, unable to make a meaningful stroke across the canvas.

'Like writer's block,' Ty said, lying back on the mattress. They never had a shirt on if they could help it. I considered, briefly, the shape of their shoulders in the sunlight but let the thought quickly fade. I needed new angles.

Ty had met one of my paintings before me; a triptych of surreal urban landscapes. The largest canvas was a portrayal of the Boston skyline painted in blues and greys; the tops of buildings extending into a charcoal smog; Custom House Tower leaning slightly to the left with a purple face and black hands and the Zakim Bridge twisting through the city like a roller coaster, encompassing the skyline in each of her kinks. On either side of the largest canvas were two smaller ones, the Charles River painted gold and green with small orange orbs for boats, and the red line, blurred and in motion.

Finding my name easily beside the triptych, Ty had asked someone about me in the gallery, my friend Afsha who told me with spirited eyes: *'they were cute, make sure you find them.'*

The way Ty knows our story is slightly different than the way I know it; than the way that it is.

Despite asking Afsha and one other about me, I remained the mystery girl, a name without a face. The second woman they asked remains—to this day—a mystery too, though we've both tried to recall inane details (*pink scarf? a mole beneath her eye?*) in attempts to identify her. It's just one of those ongoing melodies between couples, the delightful debates and discussions that travel with you through the years, never failing to make you flare or chuckle.

Ty recalls asking Afsha and one mystery other, before smoking one final cigarette with their eyes on the door hoping to catch a glimpse of me; before at last, accepting defeat, tossing the butt into a puddle, and turning on a heel toward Porter Square.

What they don't know, what I keep pocketed, is that while they smoked that night, eyes glued to the entrance hoping I would appear, I saw them from down the alley. I had used the side entrance that the artists bring their work through as I tend to need a quiet post-social cigarette. Spotting them, I knew somehow that they were the cute person Afsha had told me about only a few minutes before.

They were leaning against the wall, knee up, boot to brick, sweating slightly in the humid air. I remember their arms in that cut-off shirt, the subtle curve of their muscles, the veins in their hands, swollen blue with the heat, and the slight outline of their hip jutted out with their stance.

I could have easily approached them. I wanted to, and they were waiting. But something else, something playful and shy and feminine and fierce made me want to keep them waiting. Not forever, just longer. *So handsome* I thought, *they should be made to wait.*

I watched them leave with a disappointed mouth purse. They turned once, glanced back, and then walked off, hands in pockets.

I'd delighted in the witnessing of it; tried to stifle the squeal between my palms and spun around myself. It wasn't like me to squeal and twirl, but I'd delighted in the knowing, to recognise something was going to happen before it unfolded, to hold that power, to feel it dangle and pulsate before letting it unfurl and meander.

Ty, an avid and animated storyteller, had detailed for me more than once the month-long period of angst they experienced between the gallery opening and finally meeting me.

'I couldn't get those paintings out of my head. That gnarled, twisting city, the T blurred fast, as though the neon caught in the paintbrush and streaked across the canvas in intentional fits of electric colour.'

They were irresistible when they spoke that way. Lit up and wild, enthused, their mouth moving quickly, shaking their head and widening their eyes for emphasis and effect; it was magnetic.

'A poet and a painter,' I'd said, climbing onto their lap and hooking my fingers around the base of their neck. *'Which of us is the muse?'* I whispered the last word in their ear, letting it flutter and settle. I could feel their grip on my hip tighten as they lifted themselves into me, eyes closed, grinning.

'Muse, whore, lover, mother of my fever.' They kissed my neck. *'You know I don't care for labels.'*

We'd fucked then among my sketches. I hadn't noticed as the charcoal from the sketches of their shoulders I'd drawn earlier that afternoon smudged across my bare skin. Only later, when I showered, did I notice as the grey dust streamed down my body and toward the drain, swirling across the white tile in smoky coils.

But before the fucking, before our meeting, Ty was brooding and searching until we finally met at a dyke night in Cambridge. A mutual friend had introduced us, naming me as an artist, and I watched, amused, as Ty's eyes lit up in disbelief.

'You're Vero Woods?'

I had smiled, delighting once more in knowing more than they did, in being one step ahead.

'I've been looking for you for weeks. For weeks.' They said it twice, shaking their head, and then stepping toward me, our friend raising their eyebrows and backing away from us saying something like *seems these two have met before*. But we hadn't, not really. But almost. Sort of. And I delighted, in the knowing.

They stepped toward me in the overcrowded club, in awe, like they couldn't fathom I was real, and I took a deep breath because I knew what I had already known, that drawing breath wouldn't be the same again.

All these years later, I still haven't told them that I knew all along who they were and what they wanted from me, that I'd intentionally stayed off the radar for a few weeks to keep them dangling on my hook. I can't explain how I knew I would love them just from seeing them across an alley that first night, but maybe that, too, is for knowing and not telling.

'Call Aliana,' Ty said.

I almost asked them *what for* and then remembered the painter's block as I looked down at my hands, noticing I was organising my brushes.

It was a good suggestion. Aliana was both mentor and friend, a brilliant artist who had spent the last six months using dance as an active space to build bond and intimacy through touch and movement. But painting was her first love, her ultimate method of expression. She worked in oils mostly, sometimes watercolours, and could always be

found in her studio, bending down with a straw in her mouth, blowing paint across the canvas or spraying her designs with vinegar. They were astounding, her paintings; overwhelming, intense, unexpected, odd.

Aliana herself was more predictable than her paintings, though never boring.

She was bisexual, bigender, bipolar. She didn't apologise for passion or pleasure, and pursued both earnestly. She thought technique was useless without taste and that there was a fine line between propaganda and art.

We met up for drinks the following evening at a small bar uptown that I'd never been to. It was dimly lit and mostly empty. Aliana seemed to know the bartender.

She told me I had to fuck the concept out. 'The brush is caught in your cunt.'

I shook my head thinking of insatiable Ty and whimpering Audrey.

'Sex isn't the answer,' I said, signalling the bartender for another drink. 'It's the symptom.'

'Then it's not time to create,' Aliana said, swirling the remaining whiskey around her glass. 'It's time to fuck.'

Familiar sentiments coming from Aliana, for whom sex and art were intertwined. She described painting to me once as coming on a canvas. A familiar sentiment for me. Sometimes, I couldn't believe no one commented on the sapphic undertones so inherent in my work. In the swirling colours, all I saw were the curves and lengths of women. But mostly, people just commented on my use of colour, or my framing.

I'd been contemplating colour since childhood. Every time my mother buttoned my jacket and buckled me into the car to run an errand or visit a relative, my eyes glued to the window beside me, studying the leaves against the sky and the colour of the cars in the lanes beside us. I would pray for a fire engine because I loved the bright red in the otherwise grey city. Wherever we were, I would touch the carpets or stroke the drapes, hide between racks of fabrics, or finger the trinkets, things that glimmered or sparkled.

In school, I doodled in the margins of all my notes. Teachers would scold me for not paying attention, but I listened better when my hands were moving, when I was putting shapes together.

It's what first attracted me to Audrey, a fashion student who I had seen around campus a few times before dropping out. The fashion students were often a sight to see, but I had been drawn to Audrey's aesthetic. It's hard to define or contain, she just

knows how to play with shapes and patterns, how to layer, use colour as a statement or piece of cheek. And there's always an element of surprise—not necessarily in an over-the-top way, more because of its simplicity—an oversized jacket, perhaps, or a simple pair of slacks; a sort of relaxed glamour that was striking and chic.

We'd caught eyes across campus one winter afternoon right before Christmas break. I'd sort of nodded at her, always a precarious moment with femme on femme interaction, when you're trying to make it known: *homo intended*.

I asked if I could buy her a coffee and we walked to one of the cafes on campus, making small talk, giggling. There weren't too many people around not only because it was five in the evening and already dark but because most of the students had finished their assignments for the semester and gone home. Audrey and I discovered the reason we were both on campus so close to the holiday is because we both didn't have anywhere else to be.

'I haven't really been welcome home since I came out.' She told me this with lowered eyes and a vocal waver so slight and tender, if you weren't listening with the eardrums of one who knows its hum, you might have missed it. 'It's not overt or anything. They haven't kicked me out but, it's never been the same. My mother always wanted a wedding. You know, a *proper* one.' She made air quotes and I knew it to mean: with a man, a white dress, the hetero fantasy.

'Now they just talk around me, or through me, or ask vague and non-confrontational questions. I stopped coming home nine months ago. Haven't heard from them since.'

Without thinking, I reached across the table and stroked her arm. Flushing a most subtle pink, she laughed.

'Didn't mean to go so deep on a first date—' she looked stunned when she said it, then self-conscious, her cheeks deepening in shade. Stroking her arm a few more times, she finally became brave enough to look up at me.

'First date, huh?' I said.

She nodded, her mouth spreading into a slow smile. 'I was hoping so...'

'Me too.'

Our sex wasn't sudden. It unfurled leisurely, shyly, without gust but not without urgency. Audrey was submissive but inexperienced with kink, and I was a switch who preferred to be subbing. Still, something moved us toward the other. I'd found myself enchanted with her purrs and whimpers, her delight in tights or garters, how she relished pulling at straps or loosening buttons. I would kiss her knee, her thigh, her navel, and she would arch her back and moan, and then cover her mouth, worried she was making too much noise. I would remove her hand and she would smile at me like I'd gifted her something, permission to indulge.

We've been lovers a few years now and the sex is delicious. It's different than with Ty, where I feel ravenous and desperate, craving to be owned, to feel release. Instead, Audrey and I move like honey, languid and a little sweet.

Audrey is sweet, too, like the sex, like her cunt. Always showing me her designs, asking how my work is going, asking about Ty, about my friends. She commits each name or event I mention to memory and then asks about it the next time we see each other. She always remembers my birthday and every few months or so surprises me with a sweet and thoughtful gift I would never buy myself but somehow can't recall living without; the crock pot she bought me last autumn, and the set of mason jars she got me for Christmas where I keep all my felt-tip pens.

I called now to see if she was up for a chat, imagining creative block surely extends to all artists, though I could not recall Audrey ever claiming stress or expressing an inability to design.

She answered on the first ring.

'I can't paint,' I said, lighting a cigarette.

'Poor baby. Why?'

Sweet Audrey. Always putting the ball in your court, asking the simplest questions, which often turn out to be the most necessary.

Why? I didn't really know. There were beautiful things all around me. No shortage of subjects. Perhaps it was conceptual. I did not know what I wanted to say. But that had never been my process; to intend to say something. It was always an afterthought. Sometimes even imposed by someone else.

You can really feel a sense of rage here, they would say. And I would think about it. And often, I would recall, or more aptly, come to recognise a rage most present while

I painted the piece. Always leading me to wonder which came first: the observation or the intent?

I certainly did not apply everyone's criticism or comments to my work. In fact, most of the time I seemed to fundamentally disagree. But someone thoughtful comes along every now and again leaving a comment on my website and I think to myself, *why, that's eerily apt* even though I didn't recognise it in the moment of creation.

'I feel trapped,' I told Audrey now.

'You need to travel,' she said, and I imagined her, sweet and helpful, sitting up straight on the couch, planning my itinerary in her head.

'With what money?'

'It doesn't have to be far. Take a bus somewhere cheap, get off, walk around, take some photos, let it marinate.'

I considered this. Ty often told me when they needed to write but found their fingers stiff or unwilling, they would sit in cafés and watch the patrons. Often inspired, they told me, not by something big or extraordinary but by something seemingly insignificant, small; the brush of a cheek by an unsuspecting hand, the crumbs of a croissant left behind on the table.

'Where, though?' I closed my eyes trying to imagine something beyond the grey, steel, ash of city living.

'The beach perhaps,' she said. 'Or a forest.'

Beach sounded dreadful, not because I didn't enjoy the shore, but because the closest beach, Revere Beach, with its trash-ridden boardwalk and washed out waves would hardly inspire me. There might be something to the strong bark of trunks though, to the whistling leaves in the treetops.

I thanked Audrey and she asked when we would see each other next, and I told her *as soon as I get the paintbrush out of my cunt*, and she laughed and told me to call her soon.

The following day, I borrowed Ty's jeep and drove 45 minutes south out of Boston to Carver to visit Myles Standish. Ty offered to drive me, but I didn't need us pulling over to the side of the road for a quickie or fucking amid the pines. I was there for observation and Ty couldn't be trusted to keep their hands to themselves.

I was thirty minutes out of the city when Ty's heap of junk we lovingly called the *Jeep Beep* rumbled and jerked beneath me. A light appeared and I didn't know exactly what needed doing, but I knew lights came on to alert the driver to maintenance. Something whistled, bumped, and then I spotted smoke coiling out the hood; Jeep Beep appeared to be dying. I signalled right and pulled onto a thin patch of grass, turning the car off and getting out the passenger side so I wouldn't become roadkill. I darted a few feet back from Jeep Beep because I didn't know anything about cars and was worried she would explode and kill me. And I didn't want to die before I've painted anything worthwhile.

I called Triple A like I knew Ty would instruct, and a tired sounding man told me they'd be there in 30 minutes. I then dialled Ty to come and pick me up.

'Shit babe, I totally would but I have to figure out how since you have my car...' I smacked myself in the head for not thinking of this obvious fact. 'Let me call Audrey,' they said, 'her girlfriend has a car. A Buick or something.'

I bit at my nails and nodded my head. *Hurry*, I urged them because the cars whizzing past were making me nervous.

Twenty minutes later Ty, Audrey, and Audrey's girlfriend Hila pulled up in a small blue Buick, a feat given I was thirty minutes outside the city line.

'You're a maniac,' Audrey said, stepping out of the car. Ty's head popped out the driver side and tossed her the keys over the roof.

'I didn't want V stranded on the side of the road longer than she had to be.'

They both turned to me then and Audrey rushed forward making a fuss. *Are you alright? How frightening? Where's the car? What did Triple A say? Are you alright?*

Ty ushered us into the Buick. 'Let's not stand here longer than we have to, especially since it's getting dark.'

We piled into the car, Hila in the driver seat now who turned around and extended her hand. 'Nice to meet you,' she said with a smile. 'Sorry your car broke down.'

'My piece of shit car,' Ty said, slipping beside her in the passenger seat. 'Fucking carburettor.'

Audrey and I huddled in the backseat and she put an arm around me and kissing my forehead. I leaned my head down on her shoulder and watched my lover and hers settle in the front seat and pull onto the road.

I bit at my cheeks to hide my smile. How funny a scene. No matter how far you stray from the line, how much work you do to undo, you still find yourself in moments of wonderment, awe-struck at the life you've chosen, crafted, carved, created for yourself. There we were, the love of my life, my lover, and hers, nestled in a car navigating us to the nearest eatery so they could nourish me after my ordeal. I remember only feeling touched and tired, my eyes fluttering slowly closed while Audrey stroked my hair. 'Take a nap,' she whispered, 'I'll wake you up when we find somewhere to eat.'

I let my lids settle, a dark orange orb encompassing my sight. Ty flicked on the radio, changed the station twice, and then settled on a song; the melody lulling me into a languid and sentimental sleep.

Little Wolf

At her mother's funeral, Sofi sat wedged and wilting between her father and sister, both of whom fared appropriate displays of grief.

The church was stifling. Fans spun above their heads but the Miami sun shone through the stained windows relentlessly, warming the pews, colouring cheeks. Sofi fanned herself and pleaded with her left hand not to rip the little actress's lace kerchief from her chubby hands. That's what Sofi called her older sister Madalena, *little actress*.

As children, when something went amiss by way of flailing limbs or high spirits, Madalena would be right alongside Sofi, in the thick of combat, but the second a vase shattered or juice pooled into a stain, Madalena transformed from accomplice to witness, regaling the incident with colourful detail to the nearest adult; an act that prompted praise from their father, who would commend Madalena for her willingness to expose.

Madalena poked her in the ribs and shook her head firmly once, glaring at Sofi's fanned out fingers. Sofi shot Madalena a look and rubbed her ribs, forever tender with all the nights their father had returned drunk, slurs and fists shrinking their mother down while the pair of sisters trembled in closets or hid beneath beds as he kicked about whatever laid in his path.

Beside her in the pew, her father closed his eyes as the priest rambled on, as though a wave of pain hit that he could not bear to ride. She rolled her eyes upward. *God help me*.

The church they'd attended since childhood was tall and hollow; rows of umber pews and glass windows Sofi had daydreamed through as a child. Hip to hip with her mother in the pew, the Floridian sun streaming through panes of purple and red, Sofi would slip into the iridescent light, floating softly between two spheres.

Where do you go?

Her mother asked Sofi this once after finding her beneath a palm tree, a frond in her hand and a lizard on her knee. 'I couldn't believe it,' she'd heard her mother tell grandmother later, when she thought Sofi was asleep. 'He was sitting so still I think the lizard thought he was a stump. And his eyes were glazed over... When I tapped his shoulder, it was like he'd never seen me before.'

Where do you go?

Sofi hadn't known how to answer at twelve; she blinked, watched the orange tail of a lizard scurry from her direction and up the trunk of the palm tree. Noticing the grains of sand beneath her thighs, she readjusted her seat to release them from her skin. *I'm just here in the shade*, she thought of telling her mother, but though she didn't know why, she knew this wasn't the answer; or rather it was an answer, but not the truth.

Where do you go?

Sofi had wondered the same: *where do I go?* Different than dreaming but indeed she woke, not from sleep, but from a daze, to find everything different; a different room, or a different shade of day. One minute, she would be swinging in the backyard and some stretch later, she would find herself in the kitchen or across the street, unable to remember the steps in between.

Around twelve, she started marking; etched an S in her desk at school, drew shapes in the dust, carved her initial into bark and stumps. Unsure why, she thought perhaps it would create a map, at least telling a lucid Sofi where she'd been, where she went. But it was imperfect, and too subject to her habit of going missing.

Where do you go?

Letting the question solidify above them it shifted to silence, and they hung there together, mother and child, suspended and staring. Her mother finally broke gaze with a wave of her wrist. *'Ahh, it doesn't matter. You always come back.'*

She'd said it again when Sofi returned home upon learning her mother was ill.

'My dreamer girl always comes back to me.'

Sofi had picked at the bedspread, held her mother's hand, cried. *She called me girl.*

Madalena poked her in the ribs again and gestured her head toward the priest advising Sofi to pay attention, or else. Madalena loved being the older sister almost as much as she detested Sofi for being the younger one, for being one at all; offering unsolicited critique in the form of a question: *why do wear your hair like that? You call that a hem? Don't you think it's slutty to leave the third button undone?*

Sofi rubbed her ribs again and looked to her right, past her father's head toward the aisle; a long open stretch of space running down the middle of the church. Sofi felt the familiar impulse to strip off all her clothes and streak through the crowd. She stifled a

smile now, imagining her relatives' horror and the priests' certain stroke. It wasn't really to shock others, though, this impulse; she just felt stifled, contained, and always seemed to be looking for a way out. Upon her grandmother's death, Sofi received the family's ancestral dagger, and her first thought as she turned the etched blade over in her hands was how it might pierce through her chest and liberate the beast.

Little wolf. That's what grandmother called Sofi, long as she could remember. Sofi had always loved the nickname. As a child, she looked forward to visiting her grandmother's house, away from her volatile father and her weeping mother and the pile of unpaid bills and the leaky faucet that left the bathroom smelling of mould. Grandmother had cookies and air-conditioning. They picked lemons and oranges to juice from the trees each morning, and grandmother let the girls run naked through the sprinklers all afternoon. In the evenings, they would make up stories and act them out. Sofi would pull grey cotton socks over hands to mimic paws, get down on all fours and then growl and bark. Magdalena would whine: *why can't you ever play the prince?* And grandmother would laugh and clap her hands: *what a terrible beast!*

Their bond always bothered Madalena, who viewed affection and attention as scores to settle, pushing her essays and tests beneath their grandmother's nose. Never unkind, Grandmother would smile and tack them up on the fridge, *you're such a hard worker, Lena.* It had always made Sofi ooze with delight that Madalena's nickname was only a watering down of letters, an edit.

Noticing suddenly, the absence of her sister's thigh pressed against her own in the pew, Sofi glanced to her left and bewildered, realised everyone was standing now; the service had apparently ended and people were making their way down the aisle and out of the church.

Sofi stood, slapping her cheek gently to coax herself awake.

'Daydreaming at mama's funeral,' Madalena hissed. 'Really, Sofia?'

'Better than lying through life, little actress.'

She went to poke Sofi in the ribs a third time, but Sofi lurched to the left so she missed and stumbled right into the pew. 'Bitch,' Madalena hissed, glancing around quickly to make sure the priest wasn't in earshot.

'Really, Lena? Cussing in church?' Sofi clucked her tongue.

Outside, Sofi snuck to the side to smoke. A familiar scene. She'd done the same two years before at her grandmother's funeral; leaning against the eggshell wall of the church, blowing smoke into the courtyard.

Her mother had been stoic. Maybe it was shock. Sofi had seen her crumpled on the floor after many of her father's tirades, but when her own mother passed, she was calm; sad but reasonable.

'I suppose I'll have to go through her closet,' her mother had told Sofi immediately after telling her grandmother had died.

'What closet? For what?' Sofi was confused, panicked. The news hadn't even settled into shock yet and she couldn't make sense of her mother's words.

'To bury her in something nice. I don't think she left any instruction about that. But I'd like her to wear something beautiful. I think it would be important to her. To look her best one last time.'

Sofi had blinked. *Last time*. The words had reverberated through her and then she flung the phone across the room into the wall, sure if it didn't come through the speaker, it could not reach her.

Her mother had been stoic. Maybe it was strength. She'd sat tall in church, hands folded in her lap like an angel, like a prayer. When Madalena started to sob and while Sofi was chewing through her lip, their mother had unfolded her palms and placed a hand on either of theirs. '*My loves*,' she'd whispered, holding her daughters' hands like she'd do anything to absorb the pain; like a mother.

Sofi hadn't anticipated that nearly two years to the day later, they'd all gather at the same church to bury her own mother. She hadn't even fully realised the implications of her mother's death; that Sofi and Madalena's father, their mother's ex-husband, would attend, that he would *dare* to attend, dare to cry; or that Madalena—not that she wasn't devastated about their mother's death—would also view the moment as her ascension to family matriarch.

Sofi exhaled the smoke between her teeth now, spotting Madalena from the corner of her eye. She was stomping toward Sofi like a bull, her high heels sinking into the grass, slowing her stride. Sofi snickered and flicked the cigarette into the dust.

'Did you just throw a cigarette into the courtyard of our church?'

‘It’s just grass,’ Sofi said.

She studied her sister’s face. Her hair was pulled into an updo, twisted atop her head and fastened with one of their mother’s barrettes. A thin layer of sweat had gathered above her lip and her lipstick was creased and in need of reapplying. Sofi didn’t tell her so though, only stared and towered, relishing being half a foot taller.

Sofi lit another cigarette, not because she wanted one, but because blowing smoke in Madalena’s face would infuriate her.

‘Seriously, Sofia, I don’t know what to do with you,’ she said, waving the smoke out of her face. ‘Acting as though you’re the only one affected. Daddy is a mess. I’m barely holding it together...’

‘You’re always barely holding it together.’

Madalena’s eyes flashed and widened as though it were the first cruel thing she’d ever heard about herself. She always performed; wide eyes, dramatic gestures, and monologues Sofi had the feeling she prepared in front of mirrors just in case the moment ever happened to arise.

‘You as good as killed our mother. Running away like some small-town girl in the movies.’

‘Murder, Lena? I know I’m not one for subtlety but-’

‘Who was there when she got sick? To nurse her? To administer medication? You did nothing. But who did mama want? Not Lena, oh no, not reliable, dependable Lena, but precious, free-spirited Salvino.’

Lena spat Sofi’s dead name out so it dripped between them like venom, landing amid the sisters’ toes and then sizzling in the mid-afternoon heat.

‘Low blows because you can’t aim high.’

‘You listen to me you, brat.’ Lena pointed her finger at Sofi’s chest. ‘You’re going to stop spacing out and sneaking off. You will not make a spectacle at our mother’s funeral. You will act normal for our guests. For our mother. You got it?’

Sofi’s face remained the same throughout the speech; blank. Only glancing once past Madalena at the thick green trunk beyond her silhouette and then back at her sister’s sweating, dour face.

‘Okay, Lena,’ she said, tucking a stray strand of hair behind her sister’s ear. ‘Lead the way.’

Lena faltered, shifted her weight from one plump calf to the other and then sucked in her cheeks.

‘You mean it? You’ll behave?’

Sofi nodded and gave her an encouraging smile. Madalena clapped, victorious, and then led Sofi by the elbow through the courtyard and to the front of the church where a swarm of guests were waiting in black, a hyacinth—their mother’s favourite—pinned to many of their tops.

Standing on the concrete, the white light caught Sofi’s eyes, hit the bridge of her nose, and warmed her. She tilted her face toward the sun, and let the rays ripen her flesh. With barred eyes, orange embers streaked across her lids in lustrous blossoms of neon light. She took a deep breath to fill her muted lungs with air. ‘Go mingle,’ she heard Lena’s voice urge in her ear.

And just like that, like the snap of a twig beneath oblivious feet, Sofi slipped through the crack.

She opened her mouth and started digging, past uvula and down her throat, swimming through intestines toward the belly of the beast. When she’d found it, she stretched the stem of her neck toward the base of her spine and pushed the sound out from deep within her, letting the vowels elongate and curtail with hurricane force. She howled; the sound coming up through her belly like a song, warm and wished for.

The guests turned their heads in shock and then watched in confusion and horror and pity while she foamed at the mouth, snarled.

She howled, while Madalena clasped her rosary beads to her chest, mouth open, aghast. She howled, while her father begged her to stop and then walked away cursing her name, and she howled, while the priest explained to concerned guests that grief took many forms.

The howl rippled through the earth, sent wails spiralling like comets past trees and into stratosphere. Sofi howled, in short bursts and long measures; a lone wolf beneath the white and blaring sun.

The Trans Witch

Tallulah is the trans witch; a healer who travels with a trunk. In it are many soothing aids: valerian root for anxiety, hibiscus for inflammation, peppermint for digestion, rosemary and clary sage to promote hair growth, lavender for lullabies, sticks of cinnamon for distress, cloves and roses for luck.

The herbs and oils only made Tallulah extraordinary. Everything she needed she already had, and this, she told us, is what it is to be a witch. To see your hands as the tools, to know your mind to be the magic that glues the spells in place.

‘What is this?’ She asks, taking my face in her hands, examining the landscape of angry red spreading across my jaw.

‘A rash.’

Her eyes narrow at the obvious. ‘From stress or the hormones?’ She angles my face toward the light and I shrug. ‘Marigold,’ she mutters, pulling a pouch of flowers from her trunk. She has a mortar and pestle that is deceptively deep. I like watching her wrists work while she grinds flowers to dust. She closes her eyes and mutters a little prayer to the elements before applying the cool paste to my cheek. ‘There,’ she whispers.

I sigh into her softness. The angry red soothed, I feel myself turn blue under her touch.

‘What else?’ She asks, wiping her hands on a cloth.

‘Nothing I can think of.’

But my lover Vero folds her arms across her chest. ‘Mood swings,’ she says.

I roll my eyes and Tallulah lifts an inquisitive brow. ‘How bad, how often?’

My bad mood is chronic, since puberty at least.

‘Brush your hair. Close your legs,’ my mother would warn. ‘Young ladies don’t sit with their legs spread.’

As a child, I would sit on the bed and open my legs as wide as they would go, pushing past discomfort in my hips to take up more space on the mattress. Alone in my room I played make-believe casting myself as the hero: Robin Hood robbing the rich

and saving an imaginary Maid Marion from the perils of an evil king. My mother had little patience for my tomboy ways.

‘Sit still,’ she would command, pulling a brush through my unruly hair, which frizzed out and was not easily brushed like her own silken strands. ‘*Of course* you would get your father’s hair,’ she said, referring to his thick Jewish curls. She would attempt to fasten pink plastic barrettes near the top of my head, and I would squeal in pain, trying to wiggle free. ‘Fine, have it your way,’ she’d yell pushing me out from between her knees.

When my tights dirtied playing baseball with the neighbourhood boys, she would throw her hands up.

‘Take them off, Tamar,’ she’d instruct, turning the hot water on full blast. ‘How many times have I told you to keep your tights clean?’

‘Then let me wear shorts like the boys,’ I’d reason. She’d roll her eyes and cluck her tongue, dipping the tights in the scalding water.

As I grew to be a lanky teenager, my mother’s irritation with my appearance amplified.

‘Where are your hips?’ she’d wonder, turning me around in her hands like the tenderloin she examined at the Butcher’s counter every Friday. ‘You’ve bled two years now.’

My mother and I were both waiting on me to become whole. Though we had very different ideas of what that wholeness would be. For my mother, I would grow to be delicate and feminine. *Light*. But my whole identity was heavy. Complex and grey, not neatly packaged. It was an array of fragmented pieces, of halves and dualities strung up like twinkle lights around my broken brain.

‘I think I’m a lesbian,’ I’d told her one afternoon as she drove me home from school. Traffic was at a near stop, as it usually was that time of day, made worse by the rain that started to fall on the roof of our temperamental Volvo.

‘No, you don’t, Tamar. Don’t speak nonsense,’ she’d said, leaning forward to peer at the rain through the windshield. I considered this. It wasn’t liking girls I was confused about. That was irrefutable. I just didn’t know if I *qualified* as a girl.

‘I definitely like girls,’ I tried.

‘You just told me you *think*. Think means unsure. And you can’t be unsure about things like this.’ She tapped the left blinker on and began gliding the car slowly into the next lane. I pressed my nose to the cool window and exhaled, drawing a flower with my breath on the glass.

‘Quit it!’ my mother groaned, turning her head back to check for cars. ‘For heaven’s sake, Tamar, don’t be disgusting.’

Tallulah is tall and plump. Her red hair is frizzy like mine and seems to stand on end, spilling up and over, a bushy bouquet atop her head. Her nose is large with a slight bump in the bridge and her lips are plum, parted even when she does not speak, and there is a small space between her two front teeth that she whistles through while she works.

Dropping a rose quartz into my palm, she says, ‘You need some love today.’ I rub my thumb along the smooth stone and take a few deep breaths as instructed.

Tallulah brings her middle finger and thumb together and snaps in each corner of the apartment, clearing out the unwanted clutter of energy that has gathered in each nook of my nest without my knowing. From her trunk she produces a stick of dried herbs wrapped in white thread and inhales deeply three times before lighting the end. She walks through the apartment, with the stick in her hand, distributing the smoke billowing from black and orange embers with her breath, whispering love songs to spirits. Once she clears the energetic debris, she sits before me, takes my hands in her own and closes her eyes.

‘You’re having trouble sleeping,’ she says. I’ve stopped bothering to nod yes, since everything Tallulah says is right. She never frames anything as a question even though she couldn’t possibly know these things for fact. Vero nods though, quickly, impressed with Tallulah’s precision.

‘They’re having nightmares too,’ Vero says.

‘Nightmares,’ Tallulah repeats, stroking my palms, ‘have you put lavender under your pillow like I told you to?’

I bite at my bottom lip and shake my head no, feeling like a child caught red-handed. But Tallulah has no judgement to impart. She gets up and pulls some tinctures from her trunk.

‘Valerian tea before bed and lavender under the pillow,’ she says, unbothered at having to repeat herself but handing the tea blend to Vero instead of me.

‘Now let’s do something about those shoulders,’ she says.

‘Shoulders?’ I ask.

‘They’re practically up at your ears,’ Tallulah says. ‘Come on, let me lay my hands on you.’

I pull off my shirt quickly while Tallulah and Vero erect the table in the kitchen. ‘Laying on hands’ had to be my favourite of all Tallulah’s practices. She described it as light work, a transfer of universal energy between her hands and my muscles, and though the sceptic in me had wanted to protest the act, now I found myself pleading for it each time I saw her. Whatever magic she had in her hands did in fact seem to seep through my skin and into my bloodstream, loosening my tired muscles and aligning my spine.

I climb onto the table and lay myself flat trying to let my bones settle, but my hips are hinged, unable to meet squarely in the middle. I wince as Tallulah hums between her cheeks and then flutters her fingers before pressing into my spine.

‘Ooft,’ she says, to herself, while she works on me. Her *ooft* always aligns with mine, something sinister and uneven that she manages to soothe with her cool, purposeful palms.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Vero cross and uncross her legs and then bounce them. She had been apprehensive about my accessing HRT.

‘Your moods are already unstable,’ she had reasoned, brow creased with worry.

‘I’ve read they help stabilise moods for some people,’ I said.

‘I hope so,’ she’d said, meaning it.

My best friend Sadie had been the one to recommend Tallulah.

‘What’s this trans witch gonna do? Hocus-pocus me some hormones? Cast a spell so I can grow a beard?’

‘She’s a community healer. Especially for those of us who can’t access or afford treatment,’ Sadie said, shutting me up.

‘Obviously, if you want hormones, you’re going to take them. But there is no harm in seeing a healer,’ Sadie had said. ‘Tallulah helped me with aspects of my transition doctors never even attempted to address.’

‘Like what?’ I asked.

‘Like how it feels to transition. Everything within the medical institution is...’ Sadie tilted her head to the left and scratched her cheek. ‘So cis,’ she finished the thought. ‘Every pain, doubt, or fear is somehow proof that this isn’t what you’re meant to be doing. It feels like they’re always trying to trip you up in your own lie. And having that mistrust rather than support when you’re trying to take in the changes and let them settle, it’s not good,’ she clucked her tongue. ‘Tallulah repairs that bridge. Between the medical and emotional aspects of transitioning.’

Vero set three steaming mugs of coffee on the table and joined us.

‘You’re honestly making me want to see Tallulah,’ she told Sadie.

‘Everyone should,’ Sadie said, lifting the mug to her lips.

‘Why is this the first time I’m hearing about her?’ I asked.

‘Because I knew how you would react.’

Vero chuckled into her coffee.

‘Alright, I have my appointment with the doctor soon. I can see Tallulah sometime after that.’

‘I’ll give her a call,’ Sadie said.

The doctor wouldn’t prescribe me hormones. She fed me some ableist heteronormative bullshit including that I was pretty as a girl, my dysphoria might be linked to my depression, and finally did I have money for six months of therapy because she couldn’t write a prescription without a note *confirming* my identity.

I hadn’t expected her to prescribe them to me, if I’m honest. And I didn’t seek her out to validate my decision. I’d only wanted to ask about the potential interaction between my current SSRI and HRT and what, if any, effect they might have on my mood. No matter. The internet is more informative than doctors and as long as people are oppressed, the down low will be a space we frequent.

I knew a few girls who worked the corner near the squat I’d made a home of when my mom kicked me out. They all knew a guy who knew a guy. Some of their tricks

came in quite useful and I got the T for a third of the price from a guy named Dionne, who delivered.

V had been with me when I gave myself the first shot. We knew of course effects would take time, and having read extensively and watching our friends, we knew what to expect when. But with that first dosage, I felt resurrected, like I was giving birth to myself.

‘Does it hurt?’ Vero asked, examining the prick.

‘Not anymore,’ I said, feeling stoned.

But the changes on my mood were apparent. I was teenager-moody and constantly hungry, and when Vero told Sadie about my mood swings, she gave Tallulah a call to arrange an appointment for me.

As always, Sadie knew what she was talking about, and if I’d given birth to myself with the hormones, Tallulah’s healing was a mother. With tinctures and tarot, she alleviates the disconnect between expectation and experience. Her care is not replacement for, or incompatible with, any other. She helps us transling through the process. Hers is not a practice of discrimination, the only qualifier required for her service is desire.

‘Forget the definitions you’ve learned to attach to masculine and feminine,’ she says now, pointing to the Queen of Swords and the King of Cups beside her. ‘You, Ty, are both nurturer *and* navigator.’

This positioning of energies is the first conceptualisation of gender that makes sense to me. I close my eyes and relax into the quiet purr of Tallulah’s humming.

Nurturer and navigator.

Once the tarot reading is complete, she thanks the cards for their wisdom before kissing the deck and wrapping it in a black cloth.

‘Anything else I can help with?’ she asks, handing Vero and I both mugs of valerian tea.

‘Nothing I can think of,’ I say. ‘Seriously, Tallulah, I can’t sing your praises enough. I feel a fool for being hesitant at first.’

‘I’m used to the doubt,’ Tallulah laughs. ‘It makes victory all the sweeter’

‘We need a hundred more of you,’ Vero says, ‘One in every city.’

Tallulah blushes slightly at the praise.

‘Encouraging more twitches to come forward with their gifts and help heal our community is one of my major objectives,’ she says, stirring her tea with her finger.

‘We need to start directing our own courses of treatment.’

‘Amen to that,’ Vero says.

‘Twitches?’ I ask.

‘Trans witches.’

When we finish our tea, Tallulah checks my rash one last time, which has already started to fade from an angry red to a gentle pink. Tallulah packs up her trunk and kisses both our cheeks, slipping rose petals and cinnamon sticks into our pockets before she leaves. Then she glides out into the night, as swiftly as she arrived, tenderly, and in all black, pulling her russet trunk behind her.

The Ruah Girls

Iris stopped praying to the moon the day she'd found out men landed on it. She named her daughter Aster, for the stars that hadn't betrayed her, and raised the child to hold light in her hands. When Aster fell in love with the cellist, Iris blamed the moon.

You'll only ever be a muse, she'd warned her daughter.

The two lovebirds would meet in his favourite practice room at Berkeley where he was a professor of Music Theory and Composition. Aster fancied herself his sternum as he played Casals' *Song of the Birds* and the second movement of Lalo's concerto in D Minor, his eyes glazed over in two crescent slits. To impress him, she'd privately learned the anatomy of the cello; memorising the fingerboard strings with a mnemonic device naming birds: Canary, Gallinule, Dove, Albatross.

Albatross mate for life, she'd told him.

He responded with *The Swan* from *Carnival of the Animals*, his nimble fingers freezing Aster's faith. After three thrilling months, Aster revealed their blessing to him, rubbing her slightly swollen belly at a drab Chinese restaurant downtown. The cellist told her that he didn't wish for his life to change and Aster was shocked that a man who loved Schubert could be so impassive.

A smiling waiter left two fortune cookies with the check and the cellist cracked his in half and held the fortune up for Aster to read. *Remember yesterday but live for today*. He remarked these words were as good as any to part with, and took both her hands in his, kissing them before disappearing into the brisk Boston night.

Aster rode home in a cab, tears streaming down her wide, pale face, made paler still in the moonlight. Iris, who had been watching the night sky from her rocking chair, rose to catch her daughter in the porch light. She did not tell her daughter *I told you so*, only held her to her breast, cooing softly, running her fingers through Aster's frizzy red strands.

That night, Aster cried herself to sleep cursing swans and Schubert and especially the moonlight for making a fool out of her. Downstairs, Iris sat in her rocking chair beneath the waxing moon and for the first time since 1969, closed her eyes in prayer. Eight months and one week later, at the witching hour, Tallulah was born under the Crow moon.

Tallulah was born with expressive brows and dark, dreamy eyes that followed the two women around the room as they fussed and puttered.

Isn't she intense? Iris would say to Aster, who would close her eyes, exhausted.

She can be whatever you want if you leave me alone.

Without a father, Aster was afraid Tallulah would grow fragmented, halved where she might be whole. Iris thought Aster was too concerned with what she believed Tallulah should be rather than with who she was.

Identifying her daughter's gifts early on, Iris guided Aster; seeing her daughter's affinity for plants she had taken her to the public library to check out books on gardening and botany, bought her a spade and gloves for her sixth birthday. Aster had taken to it immediately, running inside to show Iris her daily gatherings. Often, Iris would fondly recall the golden afternoon one autumn when Aster, aged six or seven, had run inside the house to show Iris the barely-blue berries she'd collected in the yard, and how sad Aster had been to discover the buckeyes were poisonous. *'So beautiful,'* she had cried, *'it's not fair such a lovely thing is inedible.'*

Aster had always been eloquent. A reader. Talking like thirty at ten. Her first word of note was *gingerly*. *You have to do it gingerly, mama, she'd* say about brushing her frizzy hair or checking the oozing middle of a pie. *If you do it gingerly, you only have to do it once.*

Ginger too was her nature, and Aster didn't seem to trust herself or anyone else. She had trouble expressing her needs, sitting politely and suffering in silence rather than dare trouble someone for directions or a glass of water. *Speak up*, Iris would tell her. *I'm not a mind reader*. Aster would lower her head in defeat. She believed if someone truly loved her, they would intuit her desires, otherwise, it wasn't worth the breath.

Tallulah had been the glue that melded the two women together, though they fought constantly about how best to raise the child. Aster wouldn't admit it was nice to have her mother around to watch the baby, so she could nap or wash, and Iris didn't tell her daughter that she admired her mothering, how she encouraged Tallulah to be both brazen and bright.

The Ruah girls have three rules, but the third is a secret. Honesty when the moment calls and storytelling as salvation are the other two.

Honesty hardly implied the girls never lied, for protection or kindness or convenience, but they had a pact that when confronted directly, they'd speak freely and true. Iris had always detested the idea of parents lying to their children to preserve innocence or soften some blow. *Children understand more than we give them credit for*, she'd told Aster who nodded in agreement because when she'd confronted her own mother years before, Iris had told her, *your father was a good man, an interesting lover, but he wasn't mature enough to be a father, and too selfish to try*. Aster had appreciated this truth over some lie to assuage her. So, when the time came, she told Tallulah about their shared fatherless fate, but because the child already had two loving mothers, she remained unbothered by his absence.

The Ruah girls were Sephardic mystikan, Jewish witches who honoured the power of storytelling. Keeping their texts and incantations locked in a trick drawer in the dining room cupboard, all their most important secrets were memorised. Tallulah followed in her mother's footsteps committing their magic to memory, reciting spells and recipes aloud to the women each Saturday afternoon. On Sundays, Tallulah would climb into her grandmother's lap and listen to ancestral tales of her great-great-grandmother Esther, and her great cousins, Anat and Liora; *all powerful witches*, Iris assured her, *just like you*.

Once, when she was nine, Tallulah found her grandmother's book of hexes which Aster ripped out of her hands with a gasp, hiding it behind her back.

We don't hex, she'd told her daughter, *not anymore*. Tallulah was intrigued however, as all are when waved away too zealously. Aster had burst into her mother's bedroom, the shade of her face matching the strands of hair.

I don't want this in the house! Iris promised to lock it away but Aster was fire-red, adamant. *Tallulah has already seen it. We burn it. Tonight*, she said, slamming the door.

They burned the book of hexes beneath the Harvest moon and Aster convinced herself darkness was behind them, as though it was something she could box and store. But a few months later, Tallulah started telling a tale birthed seemingly from air, accusing her mother of sending her father away. Wide-eyed, Aster had put a hand to her heart, not because she'd been caught in a lie, but because of the unnerving detail with which Tallulah regaled the tale.

She'd described her father, his dark hair and the bump in his nose, how he'd arrived at the Ruah' cottage in the dead of night and demanded to see Tallulah. Apparently, he stood on the porch without knocking and Aster had appeared, flipped on the porch light and told him to leave, that the girl wasn't his, and he had no right to intrude.

She dreamed it, Iris said.

How would she know what he looks like? Aster's hands shook as she asked.

She's heard you talk about him or seen a photo. There are many explanations, Iris said, waving concern away with a flick of her wrist.

But Aster was less certain. The fury in her daughter's eyes when she accused Aster burned in her iris like acid; shifting something in her daughter's face, the first display of repulse where there had only ever been need and adoration. The seed planted. Aster had arrived on the other end of maternal disappointment. Tallulah grew with angst and rage; rage reserved, it seemed, only for Aster.

She thinks I'm keeping something from her, Aster wailed.

She's a teenager. Teenagers are terrible, Iris reasoned, she'll grow out of it.

But it was the fuel to every fire. Each time they disagreed on any point, Tallulah would remind her mother of her original sin. Each sentiment seemed to expand like a balloon before popping, and Tallulah would erupt with venom, accusing her mother of keeping father and daughter apart.

When she moved to the city at eighteen, Iris saw it as a testament to Tallulah's will that she wanted to make her own way. But Aster only saw her daughter's final move in an eight-year battle, able at last to rid herself of the mother she blamed and hated, the way she had always wanted to since that first day the acid burned through her iris.

Noa lugged the suitcases down the footpath, lining them at the bottom stair and then piling them into the trunk. Ellie was in the kitchen wrapping freshly baked bread in cling film and snapping Tupperware lids into place.

'Let's get a move on, babes,' Noa called into the house.

Ellie came rushing through the front door, a pile of plates and food in her arms.

'Help,' she laughed, and Noa rushed forward to retrieve the tray of cookies and the banana bread teetering on the top.

‘We have enough food to feed a small country,’ Noa said, placing the food in the backseat.

‘Well I had to make gingerbread for my dad and banana bread for Aster and three kinds of cookies because Iris doesn’t like chocolate and Carol hates pecans.’ With a hand on either hip, Ellie frowned. ‘What if I forgot something?’

‘You know all three of the houses will have kitchens,’ Noa said, shaking her head, and Ellie stuck her tongue out and wagged it.

‘Grab Tallulah, will you? I just want to pack a few more spices,’ Ellie kissed her on the cheek and then skipped back toward the house. Noa threw the last bag into the trunk and chuckled softly to herself. All three kitchens would be fully stocked but Ellie would worry the whole trip if she didn’t take everything she even anticipated needing.

Noa wandered through the house calling Tallulah’s name before finally finding her in the backroom, watering plants. Tallulah’s red hair was pulled into a sloppy bun, loose strands flowing like streamers around her face, dipping with her as she tipped her watering can into the pots of fresh earth. In black leggings and an oversized sweater, she hummed to herself, and to the plants, giving their leaves a gentle stroke as she passed.

‘Babe, we have to get on the road,’ Noa leaned against the door frame. Time meant nothing to Tallulah, who moved instead according to tides and cycles. ‘Look at you,’ Noa shook her head. ‘You don’t even have shoes on.’

‘I’m worried about the plants,’ Tallulah said, without turning to face her.

‘Claudia said she would come by and water them,’ Noa reminded her gently.

Tallulah clucked her tongue. ‘But she doesn’t know them.’

Noa came behind Tallulah and slid her arms around her waist. ‘Your mom and mom-mom are waiting,’ she whispered, squeezing Tallulah around the middle.

‘Mom-mom,’ she breathed, leaning her head back into Noa’s shoulder. ‘I can’t wait to see her.’

‘Not Aster?’

Tallulah’s eyes narrowed and she pulled away from the embrace.

‘Where are the instructions I wrote out for Claudia,’ Tallulah snipped. ‘I want to make sure I didn’t forget anything.’

Noa had sent Claudia an email the day before with Tallulah's detailed instructions. Claudia had responded, *No problem, Noa. Enjoy the holiday with the girls. P.S. Do I really need to sing to them?*

'She won't sing to them,' Tallulah frowned, as though seeing the email in Noa's head.

'Babe, they're going to be fine. They're plants.' Noa said, before quickly adding: 'they're resilient.'

Tallulah cocked her head thoughtfully to the left. 'You're right,' she said, chewing the ends of her hair. 'Now,' she turned around herself, 'where did I leave my boots?'

Roughly four hours later, the three lovers pulled into the gravel driveway. The Dutch colonial was purchased by Tallulah's great grandfather in 1933 and left to his only child, Iris Philippa Ruah. The slate grey house is all windows: double hung sash casements with outward swinging wooden shutters painted white years ago but now faded ash.

'We Ruah girls call it the Cottage,' Tallulah told them.

As they got out of the car, Tallulah gestured toward the porch that extended the full length of the house telling her loves that her grandfather had built it with his bare hands.

'Gorgeous,' Ellie said, squeezing Tallulah's hand.

'Really something,' Noa agreed.

'When I was a child I thought of the flaring eaves as my house's hat,' Tallulah said, pointing to the broad, gambrel roof.

Inside, Iris moved the curtain to the left and peered out at the trio. 'They're here,' she called to Aster, who was puttering around the kitchen, opening drawers and closing them, trying to find something to do.

'We should have prepared food,' Aster hissed back.

'The blonde one is a chef,' Iris said. 'Lulah told me she's talented.'

'But it's our house.' Iris rolled her eyes as her daughter joined her at the window.

'The brown-haired one is tall.'

'And noble. She has a noble brow, don't you think?' They watched as the triad began unpacking the car.

‘They’ve brought trays of food!’ Aster said, her mouth dropping open.

‘I told you the blonde one is a chef.’

The group fumbled a bit through introductions. Aster found Ellie’s hug overeager and Noa’s outstretched hand solemn. Tallulah kissed the air near her mother’s face before practically jumping into her grandmother’s arms and everyone did the polite thing and pretended not to notice the glaring favouritism.

‘Come in, come in,’ Iris waved them through. ‘Close the door, the draft will freeze us all.’

‘I’ll light a fire,’ Aster said, grateful to have found something that needed doing. Two stone chimneys stood erect on either end of the house to ease the New England drafts and in winter, Aster would light both fireplaces and let the flames hug the house around the middle.

Stepping out into the brisk evening air, Aster shuddered, walking around to the side of the house where they kept the logs. She felt the underbelly to make sure they weren’t slick with any wet. *The tall one seemed okay*, Aster thought. She’d unpacked the trunk without complaint, lining the bags up and bringing them to the porch one by one while the other two cooed about the Maple tree.

Still, a triad?

Aster had just learned the word last week when Iris told her that Tallulah was bringing home two girls for Yule. She’d done an extensive internet search for three-person couples and after sifting through porn links and advertisements from couples looking for a third, she’d discovered an article about polyamory. Aster had read for hours, wondering how it was possible to love two people equally. What were the odds all three found each other attractive? And though she kept trying to push it away, she wondered what the mechanics of sex were. If one was tired, did the other two still fuck?

It’s hard to maintain a relationship with one person, let alone two, she’d told her mother over evening tea.

Can’t you appreciate what a remarkable heart she must have? Iris replied. Aster had rolled her eyes, as she often did where the three generations of women were concerned. Aster would always be the killjoy who didn’t let Tallulah overdose on honey and hot cocoa as a child and made sure she finished naming her herbs before playing

outside. Iris got to be the fun parent, the one who would bring Tallulah with her to the fields to collect lavender at the end of each summer and wake her up at midnight to dance under the stars.

‘Need some help?’

Aster jumped.

‘Didn’t meant to startle you,’ Noa said. ‘I just came to see if you needed help. I know you have two fireplaces.’

‘We do,’ Aster said, trying to slow her startled heartbeat. ‘My grandfather didn’t anticipate central heating.’

‘No one’s perfect,’ Noa smiled, picking up a few logs off the top of the pile.

‘Virgo?’ Aster asked piling the logs onto Noa’s open arms.

‘What gave me away?’

‘You seem practical. I noticed you unpack the car while the other two marvelled at the Maple. Got your head less in the clouds. My own Tallulah hardly knows which way is up,’

Aster was surprised at herself, a loose tongue wasn’t a quality she was particularly known for.

‘Someone has to be the grounding force in this relationship,’ Noa said. Aster studied the wood she’d been piling in the girl’s arms.

‘We’ve got enough oak and hickory. I should collect some dry branches and twigs though,’ she said, brushing the debris off her hands. Noa deposited the wood on the porch and then asked if she could join Aster to collect the rest. Slowly, Aster nodded. ‘That would be nice.’

Inside, Ellie was fussing in the kitchen. Opening cupboards and peering inside, gathering vegetables for prep, and lining up spices and herbs on the counter. Iris asked her granddaughter if they should lend Ellie a hand, but Tallulah shook her head and told her grandmother the kitchen was Ellie’s element. Iris shivered slightly as a cool draft passed through the dining room.

‘Where is that fire?’

‘Noa is trying to bond with mom.’

‘A woman with a plan,’ Iris smiled.

‘Virgo,’ Tallulah said, sitting down across her grandmother with a pot of tea.

Iris asked her granddaughter about her plants and Tallulah frowned, telling her their house had too many windows for the fern. 'I should really rehome her, but I can't bear it.'

'Double potting could help,' Aster said, causing the two women to turn in surprise. She stood in the doorway with Noa, their cheeks flushed pink with cold.

'Humidifier is another option,' Aster continued.

'My dad probably has a humidifier we could bring home with us, babe,' Noa said. Tallulah's eyes fluttered, and it was clear she thought it a fine idea but wouldn't give her mother the satisfaction of gratitude.

Iris looked between them. 'Let's get that fire started, shall we? These old bones ache,' she said. Within ten minutes, the house thawed and warmed, an orange hue glowing between the cracks and bouncing off walls. Tallulah thanked Noa for the fire.

'Thank your mom,' Noa said, unbuttoning her jacket and slinging it round the back of the chair. 'I just got quite the botany lesson. Didn't know the difference between soft and hard wood.'

Aster straightened up beside her mother and almost smiled, coloured with a small hue of victory. It felt nice to have an ally. *Noble, just like her brow*, Aster thought.

Ellie came in the dining room, frowning at Noa's jacket on the chair. She folded it under her arm instead and with one hand on Tallulah and Noa's shoulder respectively, announced that dinner was ready. She'd prepared a small feast: sausage and peppers, potatoes two ways—boiled, the way Noa preferred, and mashed for Tallulah—green beans sautéed in garlic butter, squash sprinkled with cinnamon, a proper roast with baby carrots, rosemary, and thyme; two different salads with her homemade lemon vinaigrette, and a basket of freshly baked rolls.

Everyone cooed in admiration as Ellie placed trays and serving bowls on the table—everyone except Aster, who eyed the food with reservation. Iris complimented Ellie on the impressive spread and Aster squeezed her napkin between both hands and then tore it beneath the table.

'Dig in, please,' Ellie said, with a long sip of the wine. Noa lovingly kissed her cheek and both she and Tallulah told her how wonderful dinner smelled. Now everyone has said something kind, Aster thought. She had to say something to diminish the gleam

of her silence. Questions were good. Question kept the conversation moving and few people liked anything more than to talk about themselves.

‘So, Ellie, where did you learn to cook?’

‘My grandmother taught me,’ she said, warmly. ‘Nana was more of a baker, but the skills translated.’

‘Baking is more of a science,’ Iris said, serving herself a generous heap of salad, ‘cooking—an art.’

‘That’s exactly true,’ Ellie nodded her head eagerly. ‘My grandmother had exact instructions for baking. Measurements, methods, time slots. But cooking? You just keep throwing things into a pot until it’s right.’

‘Sounds like us,’ Noa joked, gesturing to the triad but the joke sailed right over Aster’s head while she served herself some potatoes which she thought looked oddly coloured and overcooked.

It was always Noa who broke the tension; the only one of the triad who knew how to guide people into the idea of being three lovers instead of two. Ellie feared the worse of everyone before they were even given a chance to react, and Tallulah didn’t care much for social graces or unsolicited opinions. They both left the niceties to Noa.

Bottles of wine went quickly, and the group settled a bit more into the backs of their chairs; everyone except Aster, who didn’t drink wine, or any alcohol for that matter. She didn’t like the way her cheeks grew hot and how her ears tended to tingle. She never understood the appeal of floating outside oneself or of not being fully in control of one’s faculties.

Iris asked about Noa’s parents.

‘My father is a successful musician and my mother is a failed painter turned art teacher. But my father reminds her she’s an artist every day, believes it you know, in his marrow.’ Noa bit a cherry tomato off her fork and chewed. ‘That’s why she loves him.’

She went into a bit of detail about the instruments her father played and the landscapes her mother had tried to paint with no feel for shadows or colour and Aster listened carefully while examining her hands beneath the table.

Ellie chimed in with nervous chatter; trying to make light of her family of WASPs who would faint and erupt upon learning their golden child was in a sapphic triad. Aster

stopped listening, merely nodded when she sensed she should, folding and unfolding her napkin into tiny squares.

After dinner, Ellie stood to clean, but the group insisted she'd done enough for the evening, and Tallulah cleared while Noa washed and Iris kissed all three girls and told them she was turning in for the night. Before turning up the stairs to her bedroom, Iris watched as her daughter poked at the fire, so the flame could breathe. Within seconds, it grew brazenly in the fireplace.

'Such finesse,' Iris said. 'You always had the gentle touch the elements require.'

'A compliment? At this late hour?' Aster said, blowing stray hairs away from her eyes. 'You're getting soft on me mother.'

Iris chuckled. 'Maybe so' she said, turning up the stairs.

Aster returned to the dining room to find it empty. The girls had dispersed, and the table had been cleared of any evidence of the feast they'd just shared, not even a crumb left behind on the table. No one had bothered saying goodnight to Aster, but she was quite used to being left out and behind. She sighed, flicked off the lights, and turned on her heel to follow her mother to bed.

Before turning up the stairs, however, she noticed a yellow glow peeking through the wooden shutters. Someone had left the light on. She sighed again and walked to the front door, pulling it open to flick off the switch before registering the body leaning over the edge of the railing.

Aster flicked the light back on to see Noa fully illuminated in the porch light.

'I'm sorry, I didn't know anyone was out here.'

'Just smoking,' Noa said. 'Want some?'

'Oh no, I hate tobacco,' Aster said, wrinkling her mouth.

'It's cannabis,' Noa said, showing her the joint.

Aster stood in the doorway, a sort of buzz growing from her stomach and working its way up to her throat. Theirs had never been a traditional home. Still, her daughter's girlfriend casually smoking marijuana on her porch and offering it to her as though it were a sip of water wasn't exactly a scene she'd anticipated.

Aster felt the reactionary 'no' growing in the back of her throat but swallowed it. How cool this girl was; unfussed. Not acting as though she'd been caught doing something she shouldn't put Aster at ease. *It is just a plant*, she thought.

‘I’ve only smoked it once,’ she told Noa, joining her at the railing. ‘When I was seventeen, with this boy I couldn’t stand. From an apple of all things. I’m not sure I even felt the effects.’

Aster took the joint from Noa’s fingers and pressed the tip to her lips. It tasted smoother than she remembered, although perhaps this was a better method of inhalation. She held the smoke in as Noa instructed and exhaled slowly, letting it swirl out her mouth in a white stream.

Almost immediately, her shoulders unclenched from their usual spot at her ears, and her eyes became heavy, though not in an unpleasant way; and the porch swayed beneath her feet though she did not feel unsteady. Aster looked out into the front yard and noticed how the leaves seemed to flicker in the moonlight, the bright glow she’d loved as a child, but hadn’t taken time to notice of late.

‘Look how the light streams through the trees,’ she said, tugging on Noa’s sleeve.

‘It’s marvellous here,’ Noa agreed, ‘away from the bright lights of the city.’

When Aster heard Noa speak, the words dripped like molasses, slow and low they twirled in the air and danced through her ears, the way the cellist’s music had, all those years before. Sliding her hands across the railing, she felt the cool wood beneath her palms and spoke in a low voice she hardly recognised as her own.

‘I was in love with a man like your father.’

‘Tallulah’s father.’

‘Lulah talks about him?’

‘Not much,’ Noa said, lighting a cigarette.

Aster waved the smoke out of her face and Noa switched the cigarette considerably to her right hand instead. A wiry breeze rustled through the trees, causing Aster to shiver and rub her hands together.

‘What about me?’ she asked, keeping her eyes to the moon.

Noa didn’t respond right away and Aster wondered if she’d only thought the words rather than speak them aloud. But when she glanced sideways at Noa, looking serious and thoughtful, she knew the girl was contemplating response.

Aster’s heart beat in her chest, eager for answers. She weighed possibility in her head; it would be terrible to hear Lulah never spoke of her, to be so insignificant. Of

course, to be significant could be worse. Aster clung to the railing now, afraid her knees would buckle and give out if she released her grip.

‘Of course she does,’ Noa said, finally. ‘You’re her mother.’

Aster looked down at her hands which were turning white and loosened her grip, wiggling her fingers to encourage the blood to flow again. Aster wondered how to proceed. There were so many questions she’d always had and now Noa stood before her, a keeper of her daughter’s disdain and disappointment. *Does she hate me? Does she wish she knew her father? Have I screwed her up? Does she love mother more? Is she happy? Does she miss me when we’re apart? Does she know how much I love her? That I would do anything for her? That I have...*

As Aster tried to formulate a question, Noa opened her mouth to speak, closed it, and then opened it again. ‘Being in a triad demands patience and communication,’ she said, picking at a bit of paint that was coming up off the railing. ‘So many of us just wait for our turn to speak instead of listening.’

Aster considered this. How many times had she had approached Tallulah already tense, determined to get her point across? How many times had she felt revved up and ready to go before they’d even exchanged words? It was true, by the time she’d started speaking to Lulah, it was more like telling her off in anticipation for the rejection she was so sure she’d receive.

Aster moved her hand over Noa’s on the railing, covering it beneath her palm.

‘Thank you,’ she whispered.

‘I’m rooting for you two,’ Noa whispered back.

Upstairs, Iris sat at her vanity and spread coconut oil beneath her eyes and across her cheeks. She untied the long silver braid that hung down her back, brushing the ends out with her fingers. Catching her reflection in the mirror, she noted a few new wrinkles that formed at the corners of her mouth but was unbothered. Beauty was accidental, but age was earned, she thought, and every line that drew itself on her skin was a mark of memory.

The soft tap against the door could only be her granddaughter’s and she called out for Tallulah to come in when she heard it. ‘I didn’t know if you were asleep yet.’

‘Too much muscle and fuss in this old house tonight,’ Iris said, moving over on the small seat so her granddaughter could join her at the vanity. Tallulah sat so close their thighs touched, and then traced her fingers gently over the tops of her grandmother’s perfume bottles.

‘You’ve always liked those,’ Iris said, turning her body toward Tallulah and fluffing out the frizzy red strands.

‘The perfumes?’ Tallulah asked dreamily, leaning into her grandmother’s hands.

‘Yes. Used to line them up and tell me stories about them as though they were people.’ Iris tilted Tallulah’s head forward and began to part her granddaughter’s hair into three sections with the comb.

‘What about mom? Did she play make believe?’

‘Oh no,’ Iris said, sticking the comb between her teeth. ‘She was far too serious for such things. She studied and worried.’

Once Iris had sectioned Tallulah’s hair, the braid formed itself quickly down her back and Iris fastened it into place with a green ribbon.

‘There, all finished.’

Tallulah did not lift her eyes to examine the braid, merely leaned her head down on her grandmother’s shoulder. Iris brought her hand up to Tallulah’s cheek and gave it a gentle stroke.

‘Your mother is trying, you know,’ Iris said.

Tallulah did not respond but Iris knew that she’d heard.

‘What do you think of my girlfriends?’ she asked.

‘Noa is smart and strong and Ellie is quite the nurturer. I like how you all complement one another.’

Tallulah smiled sleepily into her grandmother’s shoulder while Iris watched her in the mirror. Her delicate features and wide set eyes, the sporadic splash of freckles that she’d always likened to a constellation on her granddaughter’s cheeks.

Iris had many tender moments like this one with her granddaughter. But how many did Aster have, she wondered. Other than when Tallulah was a baby and the two of them slept in Iris’s rocking chair under the strawberry moon each summer.

‘I’ve never loved like this,’ Aster had told her mother. Whispered it sweetly into the baby’s head, the soft wisps of hair that smelled of powder and newness, something un-soured by life.

Iris kissed the top of Tallulah’s head now and whispered: ‘It was me. All those years ago. I sent your father away. You remembered the story correctly, but cast the wrong parent.’

Tallulah sat upright and blinked. ‘But, why?’ She stammered.

‘He didn’t come for you. He came for your mother. But he wasn’t ready to be a husband or a father. I sent him away, so he couldn’t hurt either of you. It was me.’

In the morning, Ellie rose first to prepare maple scones and coffee. Noa came down second, greeted Ellie with a kiss, and took her coffee outside to enjoy the sunrise. Iris descended third, freshly washed, commenting on how delicious the kitchen smelled and inquiring about Tallulah.

‘I haven’t seen her all night. I thought she slept with you,’ Ellie said, pouring Iris a cup of coffee. Iris raised a brow at this information but said nothing to Ellie, quietly returning upstairs. Knowing how sensitive her house was to the weight of feet, she was careful to tread lightly on the floorboards, especially the pesky third stair. At Aster’s bedroom, she turned the doorknob carefully to the left, opening it slowly, so it, too, would not whine. With the drapes drawn, the bedroom was dark, but a stream of light peaked through beneath the curtain illuminating enough to see the two bodies, huddled together for warmth without the fire’s blaze, a wild tangle of red hair on either pillow.

Aster’s eyes fluttered open and she saw Tallulah’s face, the tip of her daughter’s nose nearly touching her own. Blinking and wiping the sleep from her eyes, Aster was sure she was dreaming. But when she opened them again, her daughter’s face was still close, lips parted slightly as her shoulder raised and then fell with her even breath.

Aster lay quite still, afraid any small movement would shatter the dream. She lifted a gentle hand, then lowered it. Sucking in her cheeks, she studied her daughter’s mouth. She’d never told her it was his. The mouth she fell in love with. The mouth she kissed feverishly the night they’d made Tallulah in a practice room with the hum of a saxophone buzzing beside them. How he’d trailed a finger across Aster’s lips before kissing them.

Aster held her breath and lifted her hand once more toward Tallulah's face. And when she didn't stir, Aster brought one finger to her bottom lip and hovered. When she did finally press her finger to her daughter's lip, her mouth puckered a bit in response and something swelled in Aster's throat, causing her to take her own hand back and press it to her own lips.

Unafraid to touch her now, Aster brought a hand to Tallulah's cheek and then brushed through her daughter's hair—so like her own—a few times before tucking the loose strands behind her ear. Aster wouldn't have noticed Iris at all, had it not been for the strand of light that appeared from the hallway window.

Pressing a quick finger to her mouth to keep her mother quiet, Aster lifted herself gingerly from the bed.

'Can you believe it?' Aster spoke in an excited whisper. 'In my bed.' Iris gave her a long smile and then took both her daughter's hands in her own.

'I told her it was me. All those years ago. I told her it was me.'

Aster's face changed from delight to puzzlement, her eyebrows angling toward one another. 'But why?' She asked, dropping her mother's hands.

'It's easier for a girl to forgive anyone before her mother,' Iris said. 'The idea is seared in her head, so I told her it was me and that it was for the best. That he didn't want to be a father and that's true. We both know that's the truth, so, I told her.'

Aster nodded slowly as though once again weighing possibility. 'I want to be there when she wakes up,' she told her mother, turning back to the bedroom. 'And... thank you,' she said, shyly, before closing the door.

Iris stood outside the frame for a moment, stroking a gentle knuckle down the pane. Tonight, after the triad left, she would sit in her rocking chair and give thanks to the moon, the fateful Crow moon, who always seemed to answer the Ruah girls' prayers, both uttered and not.

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