

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY  
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

NIGHT TERRORS

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SPRING 2019

A thesis  
submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements  
for a baccalaureate degree  
in English  
with honors in English

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## **ABSTRACT**

This series of short stories was written as an exploration of the genre, gothic literature. I use themes that are common in classic gothic literature such as the supernatural, an antihero, romance, madness, and many more. Each story is inspired by different gothic novels, short stories, and poems that I have read and have influenced me. These short stories demonstrate the different themes and how they work together to form a gothic short story. Through the process of writing this thesis, I was able to experiment with characters and setting that provoke a scene full of gloom, suspense, and excitement just as gothic scenes should. After completing each of these stories I feel like I have a better grasp on the concept of gothic literature as a genre and which qualities make a story more powerful and have a greater effect on the reader.

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## Reflective Essay

“If you want to be a writer, you must do two things above all others: read a lot and write a lot.

There's no way around these two things that I'm aware of, no shortcut.” –Stephen King

Along my journey of writing this creative thesis, I became more aware of the things that were inspiring me. Some were novels, poems, a simple phrase in a song, or a conversation I overhear on my walk to class. The main lesson that I learned is to always keep my eyes open and a pen in my pocket because you never really know when an idea will hit you. These stories carry in them pieces of myself, people who I have met, places that I have been, and most importantly: things that I have read. Reading a single line could spark a simple thought in your head that creates an entire outline for a story within seconds. In my writing process, that outline doesn't always turn into a cohesive story but occasionally it will and this is how inspiration begins for me. When it doesn't, I just take the bits and pieces of it that I like and throw out the rest and start over, looking for creative influence elsewhere.

One of the most valuable things that I have learned from my English classes is that writing is a lot about stealing. We read and read and steal little things that we love from each thing we read and put it all together into our own masterpiece. Even if I am not specifically trying to, I always find myself subconsciously remembering techniques that certain writers use while I'm writing my own work. There are specific authors and works that influenced my writing of these short stories in different ways and deserve credit for the inspiration that they provided for me along the way. From some of these works I stole themes or styles directly, and some I simply saw as inspiration or idea generators for things that I like and dislike in a short story. Either way, these writers helped to shape my own work in many ways.

The genre of my thesis is gothic literature, which has always been my favorite genre to read. I was first really introduced to the genre in my Junior year of high school English class. We read short stories such as “Bartleby,” “The Minister’s Black Veil,” and “The Birth-mark;” all of which captured my attention and admiration and pulled me into the genre of gothic literature. Some authors in this genre that have influenced my writing to this day include Emily Dickinson, Edgar Allen Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and William Faulkner.

The story “Out of My Hands” was greatly inspired by Emily Dickinson. She focuses on the topic of mental health in many of her poems, including *I felt a Funeral in my Brain*. This has been one of my favorite poems since I was young. In my interpretation of the poem I see a woman who is going mad; she is losing grip with reality because she cannot handle her own life anymore and her sanity is slowly slipping away from her. It is a poem representing the mentally ill and how hard it can be for others to be aware that someone is struggling because the funeral is going on “in her brain.” My story “Out of My Hands” is about a young girl entering college, who struggles with anxiety. She has a bad history with her mother that she wants to escape from and enters a whole new world that she is not mentally prepared for. The anxiety starts to take a toll on her mind and causes her to start talking in her sleep. This leads to night terrors where she has no control over her actions at all. “And hit a World, at every Plunge,/ and Finished knowing-then- ” are the last lines of Dickinson’s poem. She leaves the ending open to interpretation. We do not know what narrator has come to find or what will happen next. This is similar to “Out of My Hands” because in the end, we do not know what happens to Blair, we only know that she is in a mental hospital but whether or not she recovers is just as ambiguous as the ending to Dickinson’s poem. This story takes inspiration from Emily Dickinson’s poetry and comments on

mental illness and what it can do to a person; the story ends tragically as do most gothic stories. Anxiety and mental health are topics that I feel are not paid enough attention to in a college setting. So many people are internally struggling and have to deal with their issues on their own while balancing school and work. I wanted at least one of my stories to shine a light on mental illness in college, and this one is it.

Writing has always been a passion of mine, but it wasn't until Junior year of high school that I discovered my favorite author: Nathaniel Hawthorne. *The Scarlet Letter* is a novel that I have read over and over again, each time discovering new symbolism or details that I had missed the time before. So, I picked the main theme of my favorite book and I went with it; "A De-Wrinkle in Time" is a short story about sin. Hawthorne uses sin as a theme in his gothic tale and creates an entire novel around the sin of one woman, Hester Prynne. In this tale, a dissatisfied middle-aged professor discovers a potion that will rejuvenate her looks and give her youth and vitality, only it will suck that life-force from her daughter. She must choose either herself or her daughter, and confront the darkness in her soul with that decision. There is a witch involved in the story that presents this potion to her; this is consistent with the supernatural theme presented in much of gothic literature. In addition to the choice that she makes, there are other ways in which the professor is sinning, including committing adultery with one of her students. The entire story is centered around the choices that she makes and how everything unravels afterwards for herself and her family. The story is a more modern version of a story about sin and includes mythological forces playing a role in the fate of the characters rather than religion or law as in Hawthorne's writing. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester Prynne is similar to the main character in my story, Caroline, because they both commit adultery and their entire worlds unravel around their

sins. Hester is put on trial for the whole town to see and forced to wear a red “A” on her chest forever. Hester is made out to be a likeable character by Hawthorne. I chose to take the opposite approach and make Caroline a very unlikable character. She is selfish and obsessive over herself and her looks. In the end, Caroline gets what is coming to her but it still does not feel like she learned enough of a lesson. From him I stole the concept of a woman paying for her sins in some way, and then changed the whole world around it to make it its own unique tale about a woman’s sins.

In addition to being influenced by *The Scarlet Letter*, “A De-Wrinkle in time” was also inspired by Stephen King’s *Thinner*. *Thinner* is about a man who ends up being cursed for a car accident that he caused; the curse causes him to progressively lose more and more weight until he eventually withers away and dies. The gypsy woman who cursed him in the novel is similar to the gypsy who gave Caroline the potion in my short story. However, in my story it is difficult to tell whether or not this lady is good or bad because she attempts to warn Caroline of the dangers of the potion and it is because of Caroline’s own stubbornness that she is not able to be warned. This magical element of my story was adapted from Stephen King’s novel.

Another of my stories that includes the theme of sin is “Tastes Like Honey”. The main character is running away because of her father moving on to another woman so quickly after her mother’s long battle and eventual death. She is appalled by her father’s actions and chooses to leave and enter the big world of New York City, which she has thought about for years. New York leads her to a whole new world full of responsibility that she thought she was ready to handle and her own choices that she was not prepared to make. After she makes some decisions that lead her down the wrong path, she is forced back to her father. This story is not so much

focused on sin itself, but on the main character's journey to find answers in the wrong places. The inspiration for this idea was the only one that began with the title. When putting honey in my tea I thought of the words "Tastes Like Honey" and soon an entire story was formed around this simple phrase. This is an example of how a story can come quite organically and form into something that you never even expected.

Originally, my thesis was supposed to be a research based critical analysis of Shakespeare, however, after taking specific creative writing courses, I realized that this path would be a much more fulfilling one for me. Creative writing has opened new doors and allowed me to discover more about both the world and myself. A source of motivation for me has been reading Stephen King's "On Writing." His memoir details his life and how he began writing. It goes through the small childhood things that seem so insignificant and can barely be remembered until suddenly they come out in your writing. This has showed me that writing can reveal pieces of who you are, big and small. In his memoir, King specifically says that he does not claim to remember exactly what happened in all of the events he details from his childhood because naturally, people change stories in their heads all the time. As time goes by, memories morph into something more like a fictional story than any real fictional story is. He simply tells us what he does recall and what he does with that information (17-18). Thinking like this has helped to free my mind in the writing process and stop worrying about little things and allow my mind to write freely and naturally. Once I am able to do this, I can more easily come up with ideas and not get bogged down by attempting to force ideas and remember things that will eventually come naturally to me.



For my story “Candy Hearts” the first aspect that I thought of was the setting. Alaska has always been a very intriguing place to me and seemed like a perfect location for a story. It’s uniqueness as a state creates a perfect setting that feels both real and made-up at the same time. Originally, the story was meant to be set in the period of complete darkness in Alaska because to me that is what makes the location so intriguing. However, the idea for “Candy Hearts” changed many times and in the end turned out to be about a fishing boat accident in Alaska. A man drowns on a fishing boat and comes back as a ghost to watch over his wife and make sure she is going to be okay while she is in denial of his death. Finally, he reveals to her that he actually did not make it off the fishing boat and brings her to his washed up dead body so that she believes him. She must then choose to pull herself up off of the ground and choose to live. It is a story of heartbreak, struggle, and survival in Alaska. Interestingly enough, I have an uncle who works on a fishing boat in Alaska who I haven’t seen in years. A small piece of my life made its way into this story and I didn’t even realize it until it was down on paper. When I put those pieces together I thought of King’s memoir and how pieces of your childhood are sometimes revealed to you only after they make their way on to paper in the form of a character or story.

As a writer I have always been told to be like a sponge absorbing every little part of each day that I can, hoping to be inspired by the little things and turn them into art. In the past two years working on my thesis, this is what I have attempted to do. With the help of previous authors whose work I have always admired and strived to steal from, I blended ideas together into stories. In doing this, I was able to write and re-write and re-write some more, this creative thesis.

### Tastes Like Honey

Branson appears smaller than usual as it trails into the background through the big glass window as the train speeds away. My breath fogs up a small circle on the glass and I keep it there, letting it block my vision of my life being swept out from under my feet. I feel sick at the thought of leaving everything I know behind. My stomach churns and my vision gets blurry. I look towards the back of the train car and see a green vacant sign above the bathroom; I walk quickly past feet and hurdle over bags in the aisle and close the door behind me before leaning over the toilet and throwing up. Only a yellowish-green bile comes out, burning my chest on the way up. I haven't eaten anything since I walked in on my dad with that skank three days ago. And I also haven't really eaten much at all since my mom died last month. I sit on the dirty bathroom floor leaning against the toilet, fifteen pounds lighter than I was a month ago, on a train headed into a city that I have only seen in magazines.

It was a Friday night and I had gotten back early from work. I walked in the house and threw my purse down. My dad was usually up in the living room reading some Stephen King novel when I got home from work, but this particular Friday his reading chair was empty and the light switched off. I walked to the kitchen to grab a snack but was stopped by a noise upstairs. Slowly, I walked up each step as the sound grew closer and closer. In my head I knew that there was only one thing that sound could be, but my heart wouldn't let me jump to that conclusion. I approached my parent's bedroom door and cracked it slightly open. The sound of the woman's moaning made the blood boil in my veins. I slammed the door open to find her, a complete stranger, on top of my newly widowed dad. My heart dropped into my stomach.

“Anna wait!” my dad yelled while zipping up his pants.

After two days of locking myself in my room and trying to get that image permanently erased from my mind, I realized that it wouldn't be possible to stay in that house. My mother's death was still fresh and seeing my dad move on so quickly made me despise him. He spent those days apologizing to me through my door and telling me that it wouldn't happen again until I was comfortable with it. He left plates of food outside the door that remained untouched and paced back and forth trying to figure out how to get me to listen to his pleas of forgiveness. But, I guess I'm not that forgiving of a person.

"Anna your mother is gone. She is not coming back," he finally said. "We have to move on at some point."

It was only a month ago that she ended her battle with cancer, or I guess it ended her. One month. One month was all it took for my dad to get over a twenty-five-year marriage to the kindest woman in the world. All I could think of was her waking up two hours before she had to every morning just to brew him coffee and pack his lunch for him before he left for work. Twenty-five years of ironing his clothes and loving him even on days when he was a complete asshole. So, I packed my shit and I got on this train.

Finally, I stand up, wipe myself off, and leave the bathroom with slightly less dignity than I had when I went in. My phone lights up with three missed calls from my dad and a text that says "Please call when you get there. I'm worried about you." I toss my phone in my purse and lean back up against the window. The cold November air pushes up against it on the outside and freezes the beads of sweat to my forehead. I open up my magazine to look through the pictures of the city that I had pinned to my wall since middle school. Eventually, I let the rhythm of the train rattling in its tracks lull me to sleep.

We arrive in New York City, my dream home, and I immediately feel smaller than I ever have before. Branson isn't a small town by any means, but it is nothing like *this*. The tops of the buildings are so high that they get lost in the clouds, and people rush around catching taxis and weaving through the crowd like a different species, a stronger species. I step off the train into a totally different planet. Like an astronaut exploring a foreign galaxy I walk further and further away from the safety of that train. A part of me wants to turn around and ask the conductor to take me back to Missouri, or honestly anywhere less intimidating than here. I hear yelling and honking and the sound of construction from every single direction and all I crave is the comfort of home. Then, I think of my dad. I think of what he did to my mother. She won't be there standing at the door waiting for me to come home from this nightmare. She won't be able to hug me and tell me that everything is going to be okay; the same way she did when she picked me up from my first ever sleepover in sixth grade when I got too scared and asked to call home. I stood there with the wall phone pressed to my ear and the cord twirled around my finger, waiting for everyone to be mad at me for calling so late. All she said was "I'll be right there, sweetie" and hung up the phone. She drove all the way there and picked me up in the middle of the night and I don't doubt that if she were still alive, she would drive from Branson to New York City right now just to make me feel safe again. But my mother is gone and the thought of returning to a house full of loneliness and betrayal sounds much worse than any reality that I could find here.

I get out of the taxi somewhere in Brooklyn and pull out my map. Even though my move to New York was abrupt, I stayed up all night planning. I highlight my route to my new apartment in Brooklyn and follow the lines until I look up and see the red brick building staring back at me. I look down at the circle on my map with the words "new home" written in black sharpie next to

it. Sucking the cold air deep into my lungs, I walk into the building and up to apartment 4C. The smell of must fills my nose in this creaky old studio apartment. The heel of my boot clicks on the hardwood floors and echoes. The apartment is bigger than it looked online, but also colder. In the photos I looked at ahead of time, the apartment was furnished. I guess I just assumed that the furniture would be here waiting for me. Buying furniture wasn't really something I thought about. The lack of windows makes the loneliness set in even more. I walk over to the one single window that overlooks a fenced in courtyard. The fence is barbed wire and the courtyard grass is yellow and there is one single bench up against the brick wall. *It looks like prison.* I put all of my bags down and begin to unpack the few items I brought. I fold my clothes and put them in piles along the wall, organizing them by what they are; jeans in one pile, sweaters in another, jackets in another. I didn't bother to bring any summer clothes because I needed to save room and decided that I would worry about that when the time came. Next on the list was to go get a job.

November feels colder and harsher in New York City than it does in Branson. I had always heard that the North East gets pretty cold but I didn't expect the wind to be this violent. It burns my face and ears as I walk along the pathway to the restaurant that I applied to online. Queens, an Italian restaurant, agreed to interview me the day that I get into New York for a serving job. I waitressed all four years of high school, so I feel calm and confident walking into the interview. The guy who interviews me is tall and lanky with a dark mustache and dark hair that falls to his shoulders, a typical Italian man. He wears an apron covered in pasta sauce and sits down in the booth across from me. The place is upscale and fancy for being in Brooklyn. The interview goes smoothly and the Italian man who introduced himself as Milo tells me to come in tomorrow to

start working. Satisfied, I walk out of Queens with a smile on my face, ready to take on New York City.

After buying some groceries and a mattress with bedding, I check my bank account. Since I had to splurge on the mattress, I am left with only \$600. The sun quickly disappears behind the brick buildings and I sink down into my mattress. When I am not walking around getting things done, the constant feeling in my stomach becomes more noticeable. I feel nauseous and empty. My stomach is empty but the feeling comes from my heart. I lie there on my mattress under the beam of moonlight coming in through the curtain-less window, in a room with no furniture or decorations. I am half of a country away from a place that I have called home since the day I was born. Realizing that there is no one here to take care of me, I begin to forget what home feels like. My dad has called four more times since the train ride and texted a couple too. I erase the messages in hopes that it will erase what he did from my memory; erase him from my memory. I close my eyes and try to fall asleep as salty tears soak my brand new mattress.

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My first day of work goes smoothly. I walk out with over \$100 in my pocket and a couple new friends. Cecelia, a girl who works in the restaurant, asks me for my number on my way out and offers to give me a tour of New York City. Cecelia is pretty in a way that I have never seen before. Her face is round and features are flawless. She's petite but looks rough under her dark hair with a purple streak in it and eyebrow piercing. She looks like the type of girl who my father would not want me hanging around. But, this is New York and this is the new me, so the next day I hop in a taxi and meet her in Center City.

Snow starts falling lightly from the sky and coating the tops of buildings and the giant Christmas Tree covered in red orbs. *This* is the New York that I had always dreamed about. Each light pole has a festive wreath hanging on it and *All I Want for Christmas is You* blasts from nowhere. I close my eyes and soak in the Christmas wonderland around me.

“So, what do you think?” says Cecelia.

“It’s amazing. It is literally all I ever dreamed of,” I say, looking around with my mouth wide open.

We walk around and talk about our lives for a while. She tells me about her abusive father and mother who left when she was younger, but all I tell her is that I graduated from high school a year ago with a 3.6 GPA and no desire to go to college. I tell her that I want to be a writer and plan to publish my first novel within the next two years.

“Is that why you came to New York City? To get published?” she asks. I hesitate.

“Yeah, that’s why I’m here.” I throw my arms up. It’s technically not a lie, just not the full truth.

Somehow I feel comforted by Cecelia. I don’t know if it’s because she has lived here her whole life or because she has the same crystal blue eyes as my mother, but either way I am glad that I met her. I spend the next week working to get by, but still can’t afford any more furniture. My clothes are now scattered across the floor instead of in neat piles and I am slowly running out of food. The restaurant gives me a lot of shifts, but I can’t afford much more than my rent. It only takes a week before my rent bill comes in and reality slaps me in the face like never before.

My whole life I was privileged. I have always been spoiled but I always appreciated everything that was given to me. We were never rich but we definitely weren’t poor. Regardless

of our financial situation, my parents always made sure to give me everything that I needed to live comfortably. My decision to not go to college was a hard one for them to swallow, even though they encouraged my writing. They always thought I should still get a degree, “just in case the writing thing falls through”. I look around at my disheveled apartment. My hair is a mess so I throw it in a low bun before putting on my jacket, gloves, and scarf and walking to work. Cecelia is working tonight too; she usually works the same nights as me. I can tell that she re-dyed her purple streak, making her stand out even more among the other waiters.

“Your hair looks good,” I say, picking up her purple streak and running it through my fingers.

“Thanks! Had to fix it up for tonight,” she winks. “I’m having some friends over that I know from my other job.”

“You have another job?” I ask.

“Yeah, I work there nights. You should come over!” she says.

Given that I have nothing else to do, I agree to go with her after work. I spend the rest of my shift fantasizing about my first ever New York City party. I picture scenes from Gatsby and drinking champagne out of fancy glasses instead of just the bottle like I did in high school. I think about the people I am going to meet and the start of a real social life in New York. A slow smile creeps across my face as I walk until I stumble over a chair and nearly splatter spaghetti all over my table of guests.

That night I put on a cute pair of jeans and sweater and head to the address that Cecelia gave me as hers. I get slightly nervous pulling up because I realize that after knowing her for a couple weeks now, I have never been to her place before. She lives in Manhattan, the Upper East Side of New York City. This is where the rich people live. I walk in to all white furniture and a crystal



chandelier hanging from her high ceilings. The place is normal loft size but extravagant, with windows for walls that overlook the city; it's nothing that could be afforded on one waitress salary.

"Is your dad or anyone home?" I ask.

"Nah I don't live with my parents. I live here with a couple people I work with at my night job," she says.

The sound of the words "night job" is starting to sound a little more suspicious than it did the first time Cecelia said it at Queens. Two girls walk down the stairs in short dresses and high heels; heels that I would never be able to walk in. They sit down on the couch opposite Cecelia and I. She introduces them as Jackie and Angela.

"Those are their names by day. But at work, they're Crystal and Bambi," she says. She smirks and all three of them look right at me, waiting for a response.

"Uhm, okay. Nice to meet you guys. What is your night job anyways?"

The girls all look at each other.

"We work at Lace Gentleman's," says Crystal. "It's the hottest strip club in New York City."

I start to feel sick. I think of my mom and the things that she would have to say about me hanging out with three *strippers*.

"Are you alright?" asks Cecelia.

I clear my throat and nod my head yes with a big fake smile plastered across my face. After an hour of sitting there listening to their stories of things men have said to them while stripping, the door to the loft swings open. A guy with a speaker on his shoulder comes through the door with a bunch more girls in stilettos and tight dresses. I suddenly feel extremely out of place in

my orange sweater and jeans. The guy blasts some music and the girls get up and immediately start dancing on each other. Three more guys trail in behind, one with a backpack that looks packed so tight the zipper barely closes.

“The party favors have arrived ladies and gentleman,” he yells with his hands cupped around his mouth.

I look frantically at the party scene going on around me. I want to sink into the couch and disappear. Nothing like this ever happened in Branson, Missouri. People like this simply don't exist there. I sit and wonder how I, of all people, ended up in a place like this surrounded by people like this. I think back to parties with my friends where we drank cheap wine from our mother's cabinets and then prank called boys in our pajamas and slippers. We made brownies and gossiped all night until we fell asleep full and happy. *This* felt nothing like that.

The guy with the backpack unzips it and pulls out bottles of Cîroc. Cecelia pours two shots, takes one, and gives the other to me. I stare at the shot glass filled to the rim. Cecelia pours another for herself and downs it instantly.

“C'mon Anna just take it! I promise you will have a good time,” she says.

I look around once more at everyone around me having fun and laughing. *One shot won't kill me*. I close my eyes, bring the shot glass up to my lips, and throw my head back. The peach flavored liquor slides down my throat more smoothly than any other liquor I've ever tried. My experience with drinking is slim to none. I went to a few parties in high school and a couple the summer after, but never anything like this. Cecelia pours two more shots and hands both of them to me. Crystal and Bambi come over and sit on either side of me. Crystal puts her arm around me and pushes the shot up to my lips. I take it. And then I take the other. I think of my dad sitting at

home with that woman pretending to care about where I am and how I'm doing. I set the empty shot glasses down and immediately feel altered. My face tingles, starting at my lips and spreading outward. After a couple more minutes, my body feels free. It feels free from all of the anger and resentment it has been holding. The sadness in my heart escapes me and I start to feel happy for the first time in a long time. The alcohol hits my stomach all at once and for a second I think I might get sick, but soon the sick feeling passes and I feel like I can fly. I get up off the couch and stumble over the backpack on the floor. The room spins around me but I am ready to spin with it. I grab Cecelia by the hand and spin her around. I dance with everyone in the room like I have never danced before. The chandelier sparkles and the music blasts songs that make me smile and laugh. I twirl in ways that I never knew I could twirl and watch the sun go down on the other side of the big window. All of us dance around the living room for a couple hours until one of the guys, whose name I learned is Jack, starts to head up the stairs, leading Crystal and Bambi up behind him. I lean on Cecelia's shoulder.

“Do they know him well? They're all going upstairs,” I ask concerned.

Cecelia laughs at me and drags me up the stairs. Stairs are hard to climb up when you can barely see the floor in front of you. We get to a bedroom and see the two girls and Jack on the bed. Jack is leaning over a mirror that was taken off a nail in the wall and set on the bed. The girls lie down behind him. Cecelia and I walk over to the other side of the bed and see a white powder being organized into thin lines on the mirror. There are five of them and five of us. Jack gets down on the ground first and kneels over the mirror. He rolls up a dollar bill from his pocket and snorts one line. He passes the dollar bill to Crystal and Bambi and they do the same. Cecelia looks at me and then leans down to snort her line. She passes the dollar bill to me and they slide

the mirror over. I look down at the line of white powder and the rolled up bill in my hand. The alcohol is heavy in my stomach and my chest still burns from how it went down. Four faces stare at me, waiting for me to snort my line. In my whole life I have never known anyone to *actually* do cocaine before. I knew it was a party thing but I have only ever seen it in movies and heard about the dangers of it in health class.

“You don’t have to Anna,” says Cecelia. “Jack can do your line.”

After a moment of hesitation, I lean down, cover one nostril, and imitate exactly what everyone else did before me. I look down at the clean mirror in front of me and wipe the excess powder off the tip of my nose. The reflection in the white speckled mirror is a warped version of the person I was. My cheeks are bright red from the heat inside my body and my eyes are trapped behind a glass case. I stand up to follow everyone back downstairs but before I make it out the door, I stumble over my own feet and fall to the ground. My limbs feel like they are not my own and I can’t lift myself up. Cecelia grabs me and props me up onto the bed. She helps take off my sweater and jeans.

“You can sleep here tonight. I’ll wake you up for work tomorrow,” she says.

I barely hear what she says through the ringing in my ears. I curl over on my side and throw up off the side of the bed into the trash can she put there. I think of my mother and what she would say about me right now. I wonder whether my father has tried to call or text again. I wonder if he is with her. The thought that he may be happy that I left because now he doesn’t have to hide his other woman crosses my mind and I begin to cry. My nose burns from the coke and my body trembles. I close my eyes and from there, everything goes black.

“Anna get up, you gotta go to work,” says Cecelia.

My eyes flutter open and I see her leaning over me. There is puke smeared down my chin and I have no clue why I am in only underwear and a bra. Cecelia whacks me with a pillow and laughs. The light from outside comes in through the blinds and makes me nauseous. My head throbs. Cecelia hands me a bottle of water and I sit up and begin to chug.

“Did you have fun last night?” Cecelia asks.

“I ... I think so. I don't think I remember a lot of it,” I say.

Blurry memories of dancing with strangers play through my mind. I remember happiness. I remember the feeling of ecstasy when I hit my highest point of the night. I don't remember all of the small details, but I remember feeling at peace and finally free from all of the weight that has been bringing me down for so long now.

“I had a lot of fun until we did that.” I point to the mirror with a little bit of white powder scattered across it.

“The coke?” Cecelia asks. “Well you don't have to do coke if you don't wanna. We just got used to it cause sometimes it's necessary to get through a night shift.”

“Wait?! Is today the first?” I ask. Cecelia looks at her phone.

“Yep. Holy shit Christmas is in twenty-five days,” she says.

I run down the stairs and grab my phone. I check my bank account and see that I am \$300 short on my rent, that is due tomorrow. I fall into the couch and lean my head on my hands. Cecelia comes down and sits next to me.

“If I don't make \$300 at work today then I'm fucked. I will have no way to pay my rent and have to go back to Missouri,” I say, trying not to cry.

“Well... I was actually gonna suggest this but I didn’t know if you’d be down or not,” she says. “You really should come work with us at Lace. I make at least \$500 a night; you’ll make your rent in a weekend. You have the body for it for sure.”

I try to imagine myself in lingerie on a pole in front of an audience. I have never felt sexy in my life. I cringe at the thought of dancing like that in front of strangers. The Missouri version of me could definitely never be a stripper. I start to remember bits and pieces of last night. I was bold and fun dancing with people I barely knew. I was a different version of myself, a spontaneous version of myself. I really could use \$500 a night. I start to imagine this new New York City version of me being a stripper.

“I’ll think about it at work today and let you know,” I say.

“Okay, I go in at 11 p.m. Meet me there if you wanna,” she says.

I make only \$80 at Queens and spend the whole shift thinking about my conversation with Cecelia. I walk out of the restaurant, still broke, hungry, and short on rent. I feel an overwhelming sense of guilt for doing cocaine and hope that if my mom is up there watching over me, she closed her eyes for that part. The thought of working at a strip club had never even seemed like a possibility until now. This whole world feels surreal. When I leave work, it is 10 p.m., meaning that I would have to go straight to Lace in order to meet Cecelia. With my mind still not made-up, I flag down a cab. I hesitate before telling the cab driver where to take me.

“C’mon lady I don’t have all night,” the taxi driver says.

“Lace Gentleman’s Club please,” I say.

When I get there, Cecelia is standing outside in a long puffy jacket, smoking a cigarette. She leans against the building with the cig between her cherry red lips. She doesn't look surprised to see me at all.

"Hey there. I thought you might show up," she says.

She puts out the cigarette and walks around the building in stiletto heels. She walks in a door on the side and makes no signal to follow her but I do anyways. Inside the door there are girls putting on makeup and fixing the small amount of clothing that they're wearing. A fog of hairspray lingers in the air and there are bottles of alcohol on each vanity. The girls don't act drunk, just numb.

"This is the girl I told you about," says Cecelia.

A man with ripped jeans and a white tank top on looks me up and down. He rubs the small patch of hair on his chin.

"You sure she can handle it?" he says. He talks to Cecelia but looks at me.

"Anna we will show you all the moves. It's not hard you just go up there and shake it for a little while people throw money at ya," she says.

"Yeah I can do that. But uh, I don't really have anything to wear," I say. My face turns pink as I remember that I'm wearing light blue granny panties and an old sports bra.

"Don't worry. I got something," says the man.

Cecelia tosses the lingerie at me. Awkwardly, I take my clothes off and put on the yellow sequin bra and yellow thong that was given to me. Cecelia does my makeup, yellow sparkles around my eyes to match my lingerie and black mascara. I look around and see that all the girls are wearing different colors. Crystal and Bambi are in the corner taking shots. We walk over to

them and they hold the bottle out for me. I take it, thinking about the feelings I had last night when I was about three shots in and try to get there again. This time, we drink straight from the bottle. I gulp down as much as I can handle and hand the bottle over. Cecelia, Crystal, and Bambi show me different moves they do and teach me how to spin around a practice pole they have in the back. Surprisingly, I catch on quick. My arms are naturally drawn to cross over my stomach and I face my backside against the wall whenever a guy walks by. I feel naked and vulnerable; more naked than I have ever been in public before.

“You need to get over the whole self-conscious thing- like, now,” says Cecelia. “It’s gonna affect how much money you make.”

The other girls nod so I pull my hands away from my stomach and take another swig from the bottle. The liquor burns less than it did last night, going down my throat. My mind races and I get that sick feeling again. The liquor isn’t what upsets my stomach, it’s the atmosphere. This time it’s more of a nervous sickness, like before taking a test. I cannot get my mom out of my mind. I sit in a chair in front of a vanity mirror and look at the reflection in front of me. This person is not a person that my mom would be proud of. I think back to last December and remember making hot cocoa and watching Christmas movies in bed with her. This December, I am a totally different person. I watch all the girls one by one go through the curtain and on to the stage. I observe them through the crack in the curtain to try to learn some moves. The crowd is huge but I can’t see a single face. They are all just bodies in chairs with drinks in their hands. The lights are bright pointing directly on the stage. I start to feel self-conscious and draw my arms across my stomach again. Crystal goes, then Bambi.



“So I’m up next by the way. The order is written on this paper every day when you come in. See, it says Crystal, Bambi, Cece,” she says.

“Cece?” I ask.

“Oh shit yeah. You need a name,” she says. She looks my yellow outfit up and down. “How about... Honey? Yeah, I like Honey.” She snaps the strap of my yellow thong against my hip and winks.

I look down at the yellow lingerie clinging to my breasts and thighs. “Honey,” I say under my breath. Honey sounds like something my dad would call me after asking how my day was. I swing around the pole in the back and practice for a while longer until my name is called. The alcohol sets into my stomach and I feel free again. I feel on top of the world. In the mirror, my body doesn’t even look like my own. I feel like a stripper, and a hot one at that. I’m flying even higher than I was last night and suddenly, I remember how to move freely again.

“Honey! You’re up,” says the man in the wife beater. He checks a name off on his clipboard.

Cece comes around the curtain with wads of cash in her hands. She shakes them around before stuffing them all into a bag.

“You got this, just don’t even think about it. And here, you’ll need some more of this,” she says.

She hands me the bottle and I take another long, hard sip; just enough to loosen myself up a little bit more. Cece smacks my ass and opens the curtain for me. The crowd sees my bright yellow lingerie and roars.

“Think sexy, think sexy,” I repeat to myself, going over the moves I was shown in the back.

I strut on to the stage, the best that I can in these five-inch heels. I feel more confident on heels drunk than I do sober. I step into the beam of light and am instantly blinded. My arm goes up to cover my eyes but I play it off by running my hand through my hair. It's stiff with hairspray but still flows softly around my head. I know I look awkward at first but as my eyes adjust to the light, I let myself be taken away by the rhythm of the music. I grab the pole and go down. The men in the crowd howl and throw money. *This is easier than I thought.* I go up and down different ways for what feels like an hour. I shake and dance all while men throw money at me. A man grabs at my ass as he puts money in my underwear and I am thrown back into the reality that I am really naked on a stage right now. The lights feel hot on my bare skin and my heart sinks down to the bottom of my stomach. After that man makes that first move, more decide that they can grab at me as well. I feel rough, wet hands all over my body. I push the hands away and begin to feel dizzy. My ass hits the cold stage and I throw my arms back to catch myself and crawl further away from the men. They don't stop. I turn around to see Cece walking out on stage. She pulls me up and walks me back behind the curtains.

"You did so good Honey! You looked hot out there," she says.

"They grabbed me," I say out of breath. "I didn't like how they grabbed me." My lip quivers and my whole body shakes.

"Well, ya better get used to that cause the next part is where the real money comes from," she says.

Cece sits down and Crystal demonstrates how to give a lap dance on her. Cece pulls me onto her lap and tells me to try. First, I grab the bottle and drink some more, then I mimic exactly what Crystal just did.

“This is where it really gets handsy Anna. You need to just suck it up and think of the money. Don’t even think of them as people. If you drink enough it’ll be like an out-of-body experience and you won’t even feel violated by it,” says Cece.

All of the girls are led out around the stage. I am last in line. We walk around in the crowd while men throw money at us. I do what the other girls do and choose the largest bill that I see being offered and wrap my arms around the man’s neck. He is short and pudgy, with a thick mustache. The mustache is the only hair on his whole head besides his eye brows. I lean in and smell bacon grease and whiskey. I hold back cringing at the thought of touching this man. I close my eyes and hold my breath as I turn around and rub myself against him. He groans and runs his calloused hands up my thighs. I feel the alcohol climbing its way back up my throat. After he stuffs the bill in my bra, I jump up and run back behind the curtain. I go into the back room where some of the girls sit and organize cocaine into lines. The girls in here are wearing bright red, hot pink, and baby blue lingerie. The room is small and closed in. The air flow is minimal and the walls are made of planks of wood. There is one desk that has a tag that says ‘Joseph Prescott, Manager’ on it. I throw myself down into the empty chair and catch my breath. I watch the girls pour shots into glasses and take them. I hold back tears at the thought of that man touching me. I think of all the money that has been thrown at me tonight and if it’s really worth this. The puke that is rising my chest slides back down and I let my head fall against the desk. I feel empty and void of any dignity that I had left. I want to forget about all of this and disappear into these wooden walls. The three girls look over at me and hand me the bottle.

“You look like you need it,” one of them says.

I shake my head no and push it away. The one in the red lingerie shrugs and pulls a bag of cocaine out of her purse. She separates it into lines on a mirror from her purse and slides it next to me on the desk. The three girls get up and walk out of the room, closing the door behind them. I wait until I can no longer hear the clinking of their heels on the ground and then sob. Those three white lines may be my only way to get through this night. *I can't go back to my dad in Missouri. I just can't.* I lean down to take one line but a man stumbling loudly through the door startles me. He looks young, maybe around thirty years old. He slurs his words and stumbles into the chair next to me.

“Wow I am fucked up,” he laughs. “What are ya doing in here by yourself?”

“I just needed to get away from everything,” I say. I lean back in my chair.

The guy introduces himself as Andy. He bartends here at Lace and takes free shots whenever he wants to. He unbuttons his button-up shirt to reveal a chiseled six-pack. We talk for a while, both of us knowing that we probably won't remember the conversation in the morning. He's comforting. Comforting enough for me to tell him the *real* reason why I came to New York. He gives me a genuine look of empathy.

“That's fucked up about your dad,” he says. “And I'm really sorry about your mom, she sounds like she was great and you were lucky to have her for the time you did.”

I nod and smile with mascara pooled under my eyes.

“Are you gonna do those lines?” he asks, nodding in the direction of the coke.

“Nah you can have them,” I say.

Andy leans down with the rolled up dollar bill to his nose. He snorts one line, followed quickly by the other two. He looks me in the eyes. His brown eyes immediately gloss over and

roll backwards in his head. Two white circles stare at me. He begins to convulse, knocking the mirror off the table. It shatters on the floor and Andy falls off of the chair into the broken glass. His body convulses some more and I jump back off of my chair to give him room. I push the desk and chairs away from him so he doesn't hit his head. My heart beats hard against my rib cage and my hands tremble. I try to yell for help but the words come out in a high pitched squeal. His body stops convulsing after a minute and he lays still on the ground. I lean down and brush the shards of glass to the side to make a place for my knees to rest. I kneel next to Andy's body and grab his wrist to feel for a pulse. There is none. My breathing becomes audible and I shake his still body hard. The room spins under my feet and I quickly lose balance, stumbling against the wall behind me and falling to the floor.

"Nooo! Someone help!" I scream between sobs. I blindly reach my hand behind me to search for the doorknob.

My voice comes out raspy and intoxicated. The liquor comes back up all over myself. *I gave this man the lines of coke that killed him. I killed him.*

I grab the long jacket from the back of the chair and wrap it around my shaking body. I step around the glass and Andy, dead on the floor, leaning down one last time to check his pulse. Still nothing. I run out the door of the office with every intention to find help. I stop in my tracks when I pass the back door of the building that I entered through before this horrible night began. I could leave now and forget all of this. I close the jacket tighter around me and suddenly I feel the cold December air against my exposed skin. My tears freeze against my cheeks and I close my eyes with my face pressed up against the wall of the alleyway.

In the taxi home I feel numb. I think about nothing; I feel nothing. I stare straight ahead at the seat in front of me. The driver tries to make small talk but gives up after receiving no response. When we reach my apartment I lie awake and still on my mattress until the sun rises. Images of the bartender's inert body on the floor play through my mind. I flashback to me sliding the coke over to him and him leaning down. He's the only person in New York who knows my story and I *killed* him. My single white sheet brushes against my thigh and I kick it on the floor, feeling the strange men's hands all over my body again. Andy's white eyes stare at me when I try to close mine; so they remain open and fixed on the cracked ceiling all night long.

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The train leaves around seven in the morning. The tips of the skyscrapers become lost in the clouds in the rearview. I don't look out the window this time; there is no point. There is nothing that I want to remember about New York City. In fact, I hope that time will erase every memory that I have of it. I did not quit my job at Queens, or Lace. I did not say goodbye to Cecelia. The train rumbles in its tracks but I don't feel sick this time because I am only numb. My body and mind are numb. I pull my phone out of my bag and open up a blank message to my dad. 'I'm on the train, will be home very late. Leave the door unlocked' it says. I think of the woman who has probably taken my mother's place in our house by now. When I get home she will be there with my dad and I will lock myself back in my room.

The waitress on the train comes over to me and asks if I'd like some tea. I nod my head yes and she pours me a mug.

"Honey?" she asks. My eyes open wide and I shoot her a startled look.

"What did you say?" I ask.

“Honey... Did you want honey in your tea?” she says. Her eyebrows raise up at my response. I relax my muscles and nod my head no, sinking back into my seat with the mug in my hands.

I leave my dream of being a writer in New York City behind me. It remains dead in my small, empty apartment in Brooklyn. I went to the city to escape reality and instead I sacrificed my dignity and accidentally killed someone. I close my eyes and picture my mom. Her warm eyes comfort me and a tear rolls down my cheek. I swallow the reality that she will not be there waiting for me at the front door when I get home. I will never again feel her hold me and comfort me. I see my pathetic reflection in the foggy windows staring back at me and brace myself to be back in Branson, Missouri as a shell of who I used to be.

## Out of My Hands

On a campus of 23,800 students, it is easy to lose yourself; to become lost in a sea of personalities. From day one at Ole Miss, Blair was surprised by how small she could feel in such a large place. While rolling her desk chair from the U-Haul through the double doors of her dormitory, she stops. She stares blankly at the unfamiliar faces hustling around her like swarms of bees pollinating the entire campus. 983 miles is a lot for anyone, especially when you're moving into a population four times the size you are used to. Blair brushes a strand of honey-colored hair away from her eyes and thinks of home. Memories of a Jack Daniels soaked carpet permeate her thoughts. Jack was her mother's drink of choice. Ironically, Jack was also the name of one of the many men that entered and left the apartment since her father left. Of all the memories she has of life growing up, her least favorite one sits at the front of her mind. The electricity had been out for three days; that meant no heat, no refrigerator, no lights. Homework by the light of candles and flashlights while eating leftovers she saved from her lunch at school is what Blair became used to, at least for a couple days each month. It was the night of her senior prom, but Blair was not that lucky. Instead of heading over to Ivy's house with the rest of the girls and painting their faces with makeup, she put on her apron, threw her hair in a bun on the top of her head, and went to work at the restaurant. Catherine's is a small mom-and-pop type restaurant that the locals love. Lucky for her, the prices are high which means so are the tips. After one shift the electric bill would be paid. Her mom had a job there too, but that particular night Blair knew that she was too deep into her bottle to show up to work her shift. Whenever this happened, Blair either had to go in and work for her mom, or continue living without electricity and food. And just like that, there went her senior prom; wasted away taking care of



an alcoholic mother just like the rest of her high school years. Missing out on things to pick up her mother's slack wasn't unusual to Blair. Which is exactly the motivation she needed to turn her anxiety into excitement entering her new life at the University of Mississippi.

"Hurry up, we gotta move in quick and make it to orientation," said Ivy. She shoves Blair with her shoulder while walking by holding a box overflowing with string bikinis.

Ivy has always exuded a confidence that Blair doesn't have. It was instilled in Ivy through her parent's unconditional love and support no matter what she did. Her confidence peaked when she joined cheerleading in ninth grade and was handed a royal blue short skirt and pom-poms. Those pom-poms helped Ivy float her way effortlessly through all four years of high school. It was one big party to her. In fact, life is one big party to her. It's easy to dance your way through a life that is funded and supported by two picture perfect parents in a big house with a golden retriever and white picket fence.

Blair was never bitter over Ivy's picture perfect life. In fact, she felt lucky that they were always willing to treat her like their own. She turns around to see Mr. and Mrs. McCann unpacking the U-Haul they bought for her and Ivy. Mr. McCann picks up one of Blair's boxes and carries it into the building. Blair pushes the desk chair and follows closely behind until they are in the elevator headed up to the fourth floor. She swings open the door to her new dorm and sees Ivy already stringing lights around their beds. She turns around and smiles wide, flipping her ashy blonde perfect curls behind her shoulder.

Once Ivy's parents leave and most of the boxes are unpacked, they head to freshman orientation. A long sidewalk pathway between all of the dorm buildings is lined with booths of all the clubs that Ole Miss has to offer; from fencing to painting to learning mandarin, there are

as many clubs as a brand new college student could possibly imagine. Blair looks around hesitantly while Ivy bounces from booth to booth talking to each and every person. The trees are filled with crisp apples lining the walkway behind the booths. Mississippi heat in August is suffocating but there is a lot of scenery to admire. There are cheerleaders doing cheers to Blair's left and sorority shirts lining the booth to her right, but nothing seems to catch her interest. She walks behind Ivy, tuning out all the noise. She glances at the booths but becomes overwhelmed by the whole scene and stares straight ahead until Ivy is done looking. By the time they reach the end of the walkway, Ivy holds up seven different pamphlets and happily dances around with them. She beams about how many new people she is going to meet and how good all of these clubs will look on her resume.

“How many clubs did you sign up for?” Ivy asks.

“I didn't really see any I liked yet,” says Blair. They both look down at Blair's empty hands.

She slides her ring up and down her pointer finger and bites her lip while turning her head away from Ivy's vision.

Back in their dorm, they unpack the rest of their clothes and begin to line the walls with photos of them from high school dances and Ivy's family vacations that Blair was always a part of. Ivy heads to the closet and pulls out two different dresses.

“Which one should I wear for recruitment tomorrow? I wanna look hot but not like, too hot, ya know?” she says. She holds the dresses up to herself one by one.

Blair points towards the yellow dress in Ivy's right hand but is too distracted by the photo of them that she just pulled out of the box from their Freshman year winter dance. In the picture Ivy is wearing a tight red dress that shows off her long tanned legs and curves. Blair wears a black

dress that hangs straight down and is a slightly looser fit. They look much younger than they do now, but still have the same faces. Looking at that photo, Blair vaguely remembers the snowflake cookies they served at the dance or the hours it took them to get ready. The only part of that dance she remembers in great detail are the hours she spent lying awake sick the night before from the anxiety it gave her. She remembers begging Ivy not to make her go because she was going to look horrible with the bags under her eyes from not sleeping. Then she thinks of all the sleepless nights she spent worrying about every little detail of not only the dance, but that entire year. Freshman year of high school was the worst year of Blair's life. After countless appointments with psychiatrists trying to figure out what was wrong with her, she was finally diagnosed with panic disorder. She spent most of her high school years battling some level of anxiety whether it be simply backing out of plans or having nightmares that made her talk and sometimes even yell in her sleep. Thankfully, those nightmares subsided; but the anxiety never went away.

“Blair you really should do this with me. I think joining a sorority would be good for you and the girls that I was talking to at the Delta Zeta booth asked me who you were,” says Ivy. “They seemed interested in you.”

A sorority was the last type of social situation Blair wanted to put herself in. She thought of all the pointless drama and high demands that would come with it. Completing all kinds of crazy tasks and hazing rituals just to be accepted by a group of girls sounded absurd to her. Plus, she couldn't afford to *buy* her friends.

“I'll think about it,” Blair lies.

Blair and Ivy spend the rest of that night decorating to their favorite playlist before they both sink down into the couch they took from Ivy's parents basement.

“Shall we celebrate our first night in our own apartment with some wine and a chick flick?”

Ivy asks as she shimmies to the kitchen to grab the bottle of Pink Moscato her mom had left for them. She pops out the cork and turns on a Nicholas Sparks movie, knowing that's the only thing that they both would immediately agree on. It doesn't take long before both girls fall asleep curled up in their corners of the couch.

They sleep for hours until Ivy wakes up to the sound of Blair's voice. She fights through the grogginess and sees Blair, still asleep on the other end of the couch. Her eyes are closed but she's cringing as if someone just tried to hit her. Ivy sits up and leans closer to Blair.

“Stop it! No really, please stop it!” Blair mumbles.

Ivy retreats backwards into the couch, startled at Blair's voice. She leans in and grabs Blair's shoulders.

“Blair wake up,” Ivy says while shaking her. Blair flings her arms up around her face and breaths heavily.

“Blair it's just a dream- wake up!” Ivy thinks of the first time she witnessed Blair talk in her sleep. She was woken up by a scream in the middle of the night and jumped up out of bed to turn the light on and see Blair swinging her fists in the air and screaming words that Ivy could not understand. Her parents ran in and grabbed Blair to wake her up and calm her down. Since then, she only witnessed Blair's nocturnal panic attacks a couple other times, but she could tell by the heaviness of the bags under her eyes and their lack of sleepovers when she was having them frequently. Blair walked around high school like a zombie for weeks on end. Every time

Ivy had tried to talk to Blair about what was going on, she would shut down. As far as she knew, the night terrors had stopped by the time Senior year rolled around.

Blair gasps for air and sits straight up on the couch, clutching her chest with both hands.

“Blair... are you okay? What just- why did that just happen?” Blair sees the fear in Ivy’s eyes. She wipes the bead of sweat off her nose.

“It was just a dream. It’s fine it wasn’t a big deal. I don’t even remember it.”

They both look out the window as the sun begins to peer over the horizon. Blair is the first one to get up and head into their room to shower and change for their first day of classes. Ivy follows closely behind after taking a minute to contemplate what just happened. She rubs her eyes and heads into the room. They spend the couple of hours before their 9 a.m. classes discussing their schedules for the day and trying to plan times to meet up. Since Blair has all nursing classes and Ivy is in random classes until she decides what major she wants to pursue, their schedules don’t align that often. Blair goes through her day trying her hardest not to think about her nightmare. Luckily she only has two classes to get through and in both, the professor goes through the syllabus. In her second class she decides to take out her planner and write down all of her assignments for the semester. She color-codes them by class and realizes that she has an assignment highlighted in every single color every week day of the semester. Her heart races as she flips through the rainbow pages of her planner. Then she thinks of her bank account, and how badly she needs to go find a job in order to pay her rent and tuition. She searches for time in her schedule that she is able to work. Overwhelmed with her packed schedule and how hard it is going to be to get straight A’s while working so often, she runs into the bathroom and bursts into tears the second that the professor dismisses the class. With her hands to her face she leans on

the edge of the sink and focuses on breathing. Blair thinks back to panic attacks that she has had in the past and the tricks that her doctor told her to use. *In through the nose, out through the mouth.* She repeats this fifteen times until she can feel air naturally flowing through her airways again. She pulls her phone out of her pocket and dials “Mom” into her contacts. Her thumb lingers over the call button for a long minute until finally deciding to return her phone to her pocket.

The streets of Oxford are filled with people trying to get to and from work. Having never been to Mississippi, Blair had no clue how beautiful it would be. The dogwoods are in full bloom, covered from branch to branch in white flowers, and the cobblestone paths are lined with dog bowls left outside by store owners. The biggest difference between Pennsylvania and Oxford is a certain softness on people’s faces. Instead of pushing right by without acknowledging anyone else’s existence, they smile at every face they see. As Blair notices these smiles, she becomes more and more relaxed. Her shoulders sink from their normal position crunched up to her ears and she lets go of the constant tension in her jaw. She looks into each shop and restaurant she passes until she sees one that looks like it would be a good enough place to work. She walks through the doors and looks around to get a feel for the atmosphere before making eye contact with the hostess. A smile stretches effortlessly across the young girl’s face.

“Welcome to McEwen’s! Table for one?” she says.

“I actually was wondering if you guys were hiring? I’m looking for a job. I have a lot of experience,” says Blair. A guy in a black collared shirt with a badge that says “manager” walks up behind the hostess.

“Hello! My name is Dan.” He reaches his hand out. Dan’s face is warm and friendly, but his handshake is firm. “Ya served before ya say?”

Blair nods.

“Criminal record?” he says.

“No, sir,” Blair says.

“Come on in Thursday and we’ll start training ya,” he says.

Blair thanked him and left McEwen’s in a hurry excited to tell Ivy about her new job. At home, Ivy twirls around in front of the mirror with clothes scattered all around the room.

“Wow- we moved in yesterday and you already trashed the room,” Blair says.

“I just cannot decide Blair! It’s so important that I look good for this but I’m breaking out and my hair is a mess and I have no clothes!” Ivy yells as she tosses another outfit into the growing pile on her bed. After another hour of ranting about how ugly she is, Ivy puts the finishing touches of hairspray on her curls and smooths out her dress.

“Blair...” Her tone changes from frantic to concerned. “Are you sure you don’t want to come? I really want to do something with you this semester. It IS our first semester of college together after all,” she says.

Blair sighs. “You know that being in a sorority isn’t really my thing, Ivy. We will find something to do together, I promise.”

Ivy struts out the door after hugging Blair goodbye. Blair flops her exhausted body down into the couch and pulls out her laptop to get started crossing things off in her planner. She starts with her chemistry worksheet and then moves on to reading three chapters in her psych textbook. That’s two colors for today that she can cross off: green and pink. She breaths a small sigh of

relief as she drags the pen through the vibrant colors. *Two less things to worry about.* Having finished her homework, she stares blankly at the TV screen contemplating what to do with herself. She thinks of turning on the TV and relaxing but instead, decides that she needs to be more productive. She pulls out a blank piece of paper and pulls up her degree requirements on her laptop. Then, she separates the paper into boxes and writes all of the classes she will need to take each semester until graduation. She figures out what days she will be able to work with her class schedule and calculates how much money she predicts she will make those days and then subtracts her rent and the rest of her bills from that amount. By the time she has gone through seventeen pieces of paper and is done planning out the entire next four years of her life in color coded writing, she looks down at her hands. Her nail beds are chewed up with pieces of skin peeled off in all directions like a banana. Her nails are bitten down to stubs and blood drops stain a few fingers. She heads to the bathroom to wipe off her hands and put Band-Aids on the fingers that look the worst.

Ivy stumbles through the door after midnight to find Blair in bed. She quietly changes into a t-shirt, takes her makeup off, and gets in bed without a second thought about doing any homework. As she drifts off to sleep, she thinks of her night bouncing around between sorority sisters, trying to impress each and every one. She closes her eyes and smiles, imagining all the bids she will get and the feeling of finally meeting her new sisters. Ivy falls asleep overjoyed with the thought of officially being a college student.

Blair opens her eyes and stares at the ceiling after three more hours of trying to fall asleep. Her eyes burn and fingers still throb from biting them raw. Sleep was the first thing to be affected by Blair's anxiety. A tear soaks a small spot on her pillow at the thought of all the



sleepless nights she can already tell are ahead of her. She thinks of her mother passed out on the couch with no electricity and too drunk to go to work. She wonders how long it will be until she gets evicted and if then, maybe she would try to get her life together. Blair bites her lip hard and cries silently hoping that it won't wake Ivy up. Eventually, she falls asleep with tear stains streaked down both cheeks to end her first day ever as a college freshman.

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The week flies by quicker than both girls had expected. Ivy gets her bid for Delta Zeta and Blair finishes her homework for the next entire week. Thursday afternoon has finally arrived and Blair grabs her apron that she used when she worked at Catherine's and walks to her new job at McEwen's. Dan is standing near the door with a different hostess this time and welcomes her with a strong handshake just as he did before. After filling out some paperwork, Blair is thrown right into action bringing tables drinks, taking orders, and running food all while being trained on the menu by a girl named Tracy.

"Ready to take one by yourself?" Tracy asks.

"Wow, they really just throw you into it here, huh?" Blair brushes a sweaty strand of hair off her forehead.

"Dan's philosophy is that you learn by doing not by watching," says Tracy as she slides a guest check book across the table to Blair.

Blair walks over to her first table and turns reluctantly to see Tracy and Dan watching her from behind. She closes her eyes and remembers how easy it was for her to waitress at Catherine's. If this doesn't go well, it may be a while before she finds another place to work at and then she'll be short on rent. Confidently, Blair strides over to the table.

“Hi, my name is Blair! Welcome to McEwen’s! Can I start you off with one of our specialty beverages?” Her customer service voice sounds like a different person.

Blair walks out of that shift with a smile on her face and \$120 in her pocket. By the time she makes it home it is almost one in the morning. The exhaustion hits when she opens the door to a quiet apartment. Ivy is already asleep in bed and the lights are all off. Blair is too tired from homework, classes, and work to shower so she crawls right into bed to rest her eyes. Her apron hits the floor and the bun on her head slowly falls loose as she tosses and turns. The girls sleep soundly for hours until the silence is broken by the sound of Blair’s voice.

Her voice gets louder and louder until it fills the otherwise silent room in the middle of the night. Ivy, heart racing, leaps out of bed and throws herself backwards against the wall. She holds her breath and squints through the darkness. All she sees is black so she grabs her phone from under her pillow and shines the flashlight.

“Blair stop! What is going on?!” she tries to yell over Blair’s voice. In the small beam of light coming from her phone, she sees Blair fighting against her sheets and yelling. She swings her body so hard that she knocks the lamp off the night stand next to her. Ivy jumps up out of bed and runs over to Blair grabbing hold of one of her arms and holding it down against the bed. For how small Ivy is, she has a lot of strength from all the kick boxing classes she took through high school. Blair screams so loudly that it makes Ivy draw back and cover her ears with her hands. She falls backwards on Blair’s bed and Blair flips herself off the bed, elbow striking Ivy hard in the face on her way down.

“Shit!” Ivy yells. “Blair what the fuck!” Her head falls into her hands and she collapses into the bed.

Blair sits straight up on the floor. The fall from her lofted bed to the ground startles her awake. They stay in silence for what feels like an eternity with Ivy grasping her bleeding nose on the bed and Blair sitting stunned on the floor. Eventually, Blair sets the lamp back on the night stand slowly and turns it on. As soon as she sees the pool of blood on her comforter, she runs to the kitchen to grab paper towels and an ice pack.

“Ivy I- I don’t even know what to say. I’m so sorry,” she says. Her lip quivers.

Ivy lifts her head up off the red stained blanket. Under her left eye is a red spot in the shape of Blair’s elbow. Blair holds the paper towels up to Ivy’s nose to stop the blood. As soon as it slows down, she heads to the bathroom. In the mirror she sees an apparition of herself. Her bun has fallen almost all the way out and her hair is spread around her head like the feathers of a peacock. She changes out of the work clothes she fell asleep in and wipes the mascara from under her eyes. She leans her hands on the sink and closes the door to muffle her cries so Ivy doesn’t hear her. Ivy is already gathering Blair’s sheets off the bed and taking them to the washing machine by the time Blair walks out of the bathroom.

“You can just sleep in my bed for the rest of the night, okay?” Ivy says.

Blair nods and goes to help her with the laundry. Ivy cleans herself up in the bathroom while Blair crawls into her bed. She lays down next to her with an ice pack on her face.

“Blair, you need to see someone,” she says. “Before this gets too out of hand like before.”

Both girls lay there stunned to silence.

“I’ll call someone in the morning,” says Blair.

They both turn to face opposite sides. Ivy falls asleep quickly with the ice pack still balanced on her cheek and Blair stays awake until the sun rises.

\*

Blair picks her phone up to search for a doctor in the area to call. Her eyes burn and the nausea of sleep deprivation sets in. Before she can dial the number, her phone rings. Her heart drops to her stomach when “Mom” appears on the screen. Hesitantly, she answers the call. Before she says anything, she hears her mom’s shaky voice through the line.

“Blair? Hi sweetie, how are you doing?” she slurs.

Blair’s mom practically disowned her when she told her she was going to Mississippi for college. She screamed and threw Blair’s acceptance letter in the trashcan. The only reason she knew she was even accepted was because they sent an email as well. The months following until Blair left for college were silent. She continued to work and pay the bills for her mom while finishing up high school. On the day that Ivy’s parents picked Blair up to head to Ole Miss, she went in to say goodbye to her mom. Her hopes that they would leave things on a good note were instantly crushed when her mom slammed the door in her face.

“My own daughter abandoning me. You don’t even care if I die in this place,” was all she said through the door.

Blair held back tears the whole way to Mississippi while Ivy and her parents sang songs and talked about all of the exciting things ahead of them. She knows that there was no way her mom is calling simply just to check in on her.

“Blair are you there? I need to ask you something,” she says.

“Yeah I’m here,” Blair finally responds.

“I worked a lot this week but the restaurant was dead and I got a lot of shitty tippers. Do you think you could send a check to me for rent?”

The heat rises from her feet to her head. She struggles to find the words to respond.

“Blair? Are you going to answer me?” her mom repeats. “I need money for rent. A lot of your shit is still in this house so technically you still live here.” Her mom’s tone turns from desperate to demanding. Blair stays silent.

“I swear to God I’ll throw your shit onto the street if you don’t send me your portion of the rent,” she yells into the phone.

Blair hears a man’s voice in the background. “Is she gonna give it to you?” he mumbles. Blair can almost smell the whiskey.

“Throw it out then. I won’t be back.”

Before her mom has a chance to say anything else, Blair hangs up the phone. She leaves to look for the clinic that she found online and talk to a psychiatrist. On the walk there she thinks about anything she can to shake that conversation out of her mind. The bridge between her mother and her was burnt down in one six-minute phone call and she knew there would be no going back. The thought of that made her sick. Even though Blair raised her mother more than she raised her, she still felt the pain of a piece of her heart breaking away.

The office is decorated with paintings of flowers that look like they were purchased from a TJ-Maxx and certificates from accredited Universities cover the wall behind the sofa. The sofa itself that the doctor signals toward for Blair to sit on looks like it was taken straight out of a 1950’s movie set. She explains what has been happening to the psychiatrist. The psychiatrist is young but looks aged by the wrinkles around her mouth and forehead. She scribbles notes quickly on her pad of paper while Blair talks; she peeks up over the edge with one crinkled eyebrow as soon as Blair tells her she elbowed her roommate in the face.

“Did you... want to elbow her in the face?” she asks. Blair feels the judgment in her voice.

“No? I was asleep. I didn’t even know it was happening. I told you I get night terrors,” she says. “My psychiatrist at home said it’s a common thing to happen to people with really high anxiety. I guess things are getting bad again. I’ve never hurt anyone before and I would never do it on purpose.”

“I see.” She looks back down at her notes. “Well I do agree that the stress of moving so far away is probably really getting to you. And everything going on with your mom I’m sure isn’t helping.”

After discussing a list of medications that Blair had tried in the past that did not work, she decides to give a new one a shot. The psychiatrist went through the potential side effects: headaches, nausea, throwing up, dizziness, drowsiness, suicidal thoughts, increased anxiety. Nothing that Blair hadn’t heard before, and nothing that she hadn’t also experienced previously as a side effect from the other medications she tried. After filling the prescription at CVS she took one and went home to find Ivy actually doing homework for once.

“I am so behind in all my classes right now, I don’t even know how this happened,” says Ivy. Her hair is up in a messy bun that isn’t really that messy and her fake glasses sit on the tip of her nose. She looks up from her paper and pulls off her glasses. She has worn fake glasses for as long as Blair can remember; she says they give her the confidence to believe that she is smart. Blair stares at Ivy’s face, dark shades of black and blue sit like a crescent moon under her eye. The bruise is surrounded by swollen skin the color of an unripe banana.

“You need any help?” Blair asks out of guilt. She pulls up a chair next to Ivy.

Ivy's homework is easy for Blair. Her classes involve basic Math and basic English. She sits there and calculates algebraic equations that she remembers from high school while Ivy highlights notes in her textbook. After about an hour of no noise besides the sound of pencil scratching against paper, Ivy breaks the silence.

"Did you go to the doctor yet?" she asks, placing her pencil behind her ear and turning to face Blair.

"Yeah, I talked to someone and got a prescription. I started it today but Ivy you know this stuff never worked for me before," Blair says.

"Blair that was scary for me last night. You need to figure out how to stop it from happening again." She points to her eye and then stomps off to their room and closes the door.

\*

Another week passes by and Blair walks home from McEwen's for the third night in a row. Sleeping has been at the back of Blair's mind; far behind getting all A's and making as much money as she needs at work. Mississippi is starting to cool down, especially at nights. She throws her sweatshirt on over her black t-shirt that says "McEwen's" in green letters. The walk home is only about twenty minutes but to Blair it feels like hours. Her adrenaline pumps the whole time. She peeks between buildings before walking by, just to be sure no one is there. Every time a car passes, her heart begins to race hoping that they don't stop and pull her in. She can hear the pounding of her heart echo in her ears the entire walk. Blair hears a noise in the trees to her right and grasps her apron tightly, picking up speed. She gets to the door of her dorm and climbs the stairs to the fourth floor. Ivy is already asleep and has been for hours now. Between work and classes, Blair hasn't had much time to study for her first chemistry exam, so

she cracks open the text book and starts to make flashcards. The living room is quiet and the darkness from outside creeps in through the blinds, making Blair yawn. An alarm goes off on her phone telling her to remember to take her medication. The medication has done nothing except make her constantly exhausted and if anything has increased her anxiety. As soon as she began to notice that her anxiety was increasing, she called the doctor who responded with ‘it’s going to get worse before it gets better’ and told her to keep taking it. She gets through three chapters of studying before falling asleep on the couch covered in scattered notecards.

Just before the sun is due to rise, the front door creaks open. Ivy hears it slam against the wall and wakes up startled. She grabs a pair of scissors from her desk drawer and creeps towards her bedroom door. She peers through the crack and sees the front door wide open but no one in the living room. Her phone is in her hand and her thumb lingers above the nine.

“Blair,” she whispers. “Wake up, I think someone just came in here.” She looks over at Blair’s empty bed.

Ivy runs out the front door and down the hallway. She hears another door slam at the bottom of the stairs so she follows the noise. A notecard that reads “isotopes” sits on one of the stairs. Ivy sprints out the door and sees Blair, walking calmly down the sidewalk.

“Blair stop! Turn around!” Ivy follows her.

She gets to the end of the sidewalk where the road they live on meets the highway. Cars speed by at 60 mph but Blair continues to walk. Ivy finally catches up but just as she is about to reach out and grab Blair, she steps into the street. Ivy screams and tears pour down her face. A black Honda slams on its horn and comes skidding to a stop, causing the jeep behind it to crash into the back. Blair continues to walk and the car coming from the other direction swerves off the road



and slams into a telephone pole. The drivers slowly begin to get out of their cars and scream at each other. They call 911 and when Ivy sees them walking towards Blair, she runs over. Blair wakes up the second Ivy puts her hands on her shoulders to pull her away from the angry drivers. She looks at the scene around her through wide eyes. Her breathing becomes short and chest tightens. Blair looks Ivy in the eyes, one of them still slightly black and blue. The three uninjured drivers follow them over to the side of the road screaming.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?! Was that some kind of sick dare or something?!” screams the Honda driver. “You could have killed someone!” He looks back at his destroyed car and throws his hands up to his bald head.

Blair falls to her knees on the ground and sobs. In seconds, three police cars and an ambulance pull up to the scene. They see Blair on the ground surrounded by the drivers and Ivy beside her still in shock. In her pink pajamas and bunny slippers, she tells the officers exactly what happened.

“How do you know that she was sleep walking?” asks the officer. “Has she expressed any suicidal thoughts to you?”

“What? No. She has night terrors, she’s had them since we were younger, lately they’ve just been... a lot worse than usual,” Ivy says. The police officer glances at Ivy’s eye. He reaches down and helps Blair off the ground and into the ambulance. Ivy slides in next to her and answers the same questions she just answered but with the doctor in the ambulance this time. Blair stares blankly ahead at the gurney she could have been lying on.

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The hospital sheets are cold and hard; Blair lies there and worries about all of the work she might have to miss before they release her from the hospital. She goes through countless tests and tells more people than she can remember that she is *not* suicidal. Once the doctors look through her records, they finally believe her that she was sleep walking and begin to run more tests. They scan her brain waves and ask questions about her sleep habits.

“Blair, is there a number we can call to reach your parents?” says the nurse. “I think they should be here for this.”

“No,” says Blair. The nurse looks at Ivy.

“I’ll call mine- they will want to know,” Ivy says. She dials her mom’s number and walks into the hall. After a few minutes the doctor walks back in.

“How are you feeling?” he asks.

“I feel fine. Any idea when I’ll be able to get out of here?” says Blair.

There is a look of concern on the doctor’s face. He rubs his chin and looks down at the paper in his hands but he is not reading anything. He sighs before he looks back up at Blair.

“Sometimes Blair, life becomes too much for us to handle. Sometimes we need help. You need to let us help you,” he says.

“What does that mean? I have to get back to school and work,” she says with panic in her voice.

The doctor’s eyes are caring. They sit on a pale wrinkled face that looks genuinely concerned. When he looks at Blair he looks at her as a person, a young girl. He looks at her with the kind of care that her parents never showed.

“School might not be the best option for you right now. Your mental health needs to come first. We can’t have you punching your roommate in the face and walking into highways in the middle of the night. You are a danger to others and yourself until you get better. We will find something to fix this, Blair. We will be able to help you if you let us.”

The thought of not being able to get through school feels like the end of the world to Blair. She thinks of the smug look on her mother’s face when she returns home. Her entire body begins to shake. The dream of escaping her old life and leaving her mom behind is destroyed.

“Blair we want to keep you hospitalized for a while. As long as it takes to get this sleep disorder under control. We have a great facility with doctors who care about your mental health and well-being. You’ll be okay I promise,” he says. He puts his hand on hers.

They sign some papers and let Blair rest for the night.

\*

The facility is nice. The walls are peach and it smells like jasmine scented candle. Blair’s hair is stringy and sticks to her face. Her eyes are frantic and outlined in black and her gaze doesn’t come up off the ground the entire time she walks. Ivy walks closely behind her, not saying a word. They take in their surroundings: a canvas splattered with different colored paints, a piano, a table of desserts, and people walking around like real-life zombies. The doctor sees the look of horror on Blair’s face.

“I know this is a lot,” he says. “Just remember it’s only temporary. Just until we figure out how to get your condition under control.” He pats her shoulder.

They arrive at room 103. Blair’s name is written on the small whiteboard outside the door, in permanent marker. The doctor, Blair, Ivy, and a nurse stand outside the door. The nurse unlocks

it and holds it open, signaling for Blair to go inside. She looks up at Ivy and begins to cry. Ivy grabs her hand and walks in first, leading Blair behind her. The walls are white cinderblock and the smell is musty. There is one single bed and a desk in the small room and nothing else. The room itself is much less inviting than the rest of the facility. Her heart begins to race and the walls close in on her. The thought of being trapped between these four walls for an unknown amount of time makes her sick. Ivy stands in the room with her and looks around.

“Can I like... bring Blair’s stuff to her? Like maybe something to put on the walls and a different blanket or something?” says Ivy, concern growing more obvious on her face.

“You can bring anything you want as long as it doesn’t have any sharp points or could break,” says the nurse.

Blair and Ivy look up at the doctor who is standing outside the door still.

“I- I don’t think I can be here. I don’t belong here,” Blair says. She runs out the door past the doctor and books it down the hallway. The doctor and nurse run after her and catch up when she gets to a locked door.

“Blair it’s too late, you signed the papers to be committed for evaluation. We legally have to keep you here now,” says the doctor.

She shakes the door handle hard and cries. Coming to the realization that the door is not going to open and there is no escaping this reality, Blair gives up. She turns around to face the doctor, nurse, and Ivy and slides her back down the locked door. Her face falls into her hands and she sobs loudly. Ivy holds back tears as she watches the doctor and nurse pick up Blair by the arms and pull her down the hallway. Blair gives in and allows herself to be pulled into the depressing room. They sit her down on the bed and Ivy wraps her arms tight around her shoulders.

“You are going to get out of here so soon Blair, I promise. They will figure out why this is happening to you and fix it, okay? I love you Blair,” she whispers into her ear. Ivy brushes the hair off of Blair’s cheeks and wipes away her tears, smearing mascara across her face. Blair’s eyes remain dead.

“It’s time to go now,” the doctor says to Ivy. Ivy walks out the door, followed by the nurse who begins to scribble notes down on a clipboard. Ivy looks past the doctor as he shuts the door. Blair and Ivy make eye contact through the window in the door one more time before she is led out of the facility. On the way out she sees a lady in a pink nightgown with her knees pressed to her chest rocking back and forth while knitting. Two men yell nonsense at each other across a table of cards until one stands up and swipes all of the cards off the table and has to be held back by security. She thinks of Blair, not nearly as deranged as the rest of these people, locked in her room at night. She walks out of the building and wonders whether a place like this could actually *drive* someone crazy. She gets in her car and drives back to Ole Miss with the mental health clinic and her best friend in her rearview mirror. The rain is pouring down against the windshield and Ivy feels lost and empty as she leaves a piece of herself locked in that clinic as well.

### A De-Wrinkle in Time

Caroline looks at herself in the mirror for an abnormal amount of time, as she does every morning before driving to the University to teach her 9 a.m. Psych class. The drive from Caroline's two-car garage suburban home to West Chester University is a short one, which gives her an ample amount of time to paint on a face. She reaches for her makeup brush and applies bronzer just under her cheekbones which are only in the beginning phases of becoming a bit saggy, with a couple of wrinkles under her eyes. She dips a beauty blender into her beige foundation one last time and dabs it over her forehead to make sure that none of her students will notice the wrinkles that she has recently developed within the five years between her 40<sup>th</sup> birthday and now. She would do anything to turn back time and look young again.

Caroline applies her 'cherry red' lipstick, smacks her lips together once, and lets out a sigh as she takes one last long look at the face in the mirror before her. Disgruntled, she tosses the brush into the sink, splattering makeup all over the marble counter for her husband to clean up later. She grabs her Calvin Klein bag and makes her way out the door. It is not until she pulls into the parking lot at Anderson Hall that she realizes she forgot to say goodbye to her daughter, Lily, before John drops her off at Kindergarten on his way to work. She looks down at her phone and considers calling but quickly becomes distracted by the selfie on her phone screen and forgets about it.

Caroline looks out from behind the podium at her lecture hall full of 152 students, give or take the ones who rarely show up to class. Out of all of the exhausted looking faces of eighteen to twenty-two year olds, there is only one that Caroline can focus on; Brandon Burton. He sits in the back row and stares at her with a sexy half smirk spread shamelessly across his face the

entire time that she teaches. His tanned skin and youthful smile take her back to her college days when she dated the star of the football team. She turns towards the blackboard and slides the chalk against it to draw a diagram of the brain and discuss all of its functions. As she begins to label the Cerebellum, she feels his sharp gaze on her backside. Her cheeks turn the same shade of red as the bricks of the building she is teaching in, underneath her thick coating of makeup. Thoughts of last Saturday night flood back through her own brain; the same thoughts that she hasn't been able to shake since that day. She bites her lip hard with the chalk frozen on the board at "Cereb." She remembers Brandon's glowing skin, innocent touch, and abs that haven't yet been ruined by years of takeout food and IPA's. Heat rushes through her veins at the thought of it. She inhales sharply at the sound of the chalk snapping in half, shattering even more when it hits the ground. All 152 faces stare at her in confusion.

"Okay so don't forget there is an exam Tuesday on Chapters fourteen and fifteen," she says as she wipes the white powder off of her hands. "Class dismissed."

She shoots a flirty smile to the back row and rushes to get to the door before all of the students pile out of the classroom.

Caroline spends the rest of her Thursday shopping for new clothes to wear out with the girls tonight. She pulls into her large stone house around five in the afternoon. The lawn has been mowed in even parallel lines across the whole yard, light green to dark green and back to light. It looks fake. She opens the garage door with a remote attached to the inside of her BMW and pulls it into its spot. Every day going through this same routine, Caroline feels more and more claustrophobic. She feels trapped in a stereotypical suburban mom scene that she so desperately

wants to escape from. She chokes back her words and walks in through the kitchen to find John cooking roasted chicken and green beans.

“Can you run and pick up Lily from aftercare while I finish up dinner?” he asks.

“Honey, you know Thursday’s are my margarita nights with the girls! It’s going to take me too long to get ready, just go get her once you’re done with dinner,” replies Caroline.

Caroline grabs her shopping bags and heads up the stairs before John even gets a chance to argue. He clenches his jaw tighter and tighter with each clink of her heels on the hardwood steps. John removes the oven mitt with little pictures of coffee mugs all over it, freeing his fist to bang it hard against the counter. The breath he had been holding in the whole time he was talking to Caroline is finally released and his fingers rub firmly against his temples. After dinner is finished, he covers it to keep it warm and heads to Lily’s school. Lily is sitting outside on the top step, with her legs dangling and blonde curls all tangled from a long day of playing. Her eyes are drawn to the ground when she sees him and the smile fades from her face.

“You said mommy was picking me up today,” she says.

“I know Lil but mommy is really busy,” he says as he scoops her up and wraps his strong arms around her. She hugs him back and kisses his cheek but the look of disappointment remains in her big brown eyes.

When they walk through the door, Lily runs up to find her mother in a short black dress fixing her makeup. She runs from behind with arms wide open and crashes into the back of Caroline’s legs making her smear mascara all the way up to her forehead.

“Shit! Lily you need to watch what you’re doing!” she yells.

She looks down into Lily’s watery eyes.



“I’m sorry sweetie, you just need to be careful. Look, you messed up mommy’s makeup,” she says as she leans down and kisses the little girl on the cheek.

John calls to them to come down for dinner. There are three plates of chicken and green beans at the table with milk for Lily, Merlot for Caroline, and black coffee for himself. Before eating, he reaches into the cabinet and takes out an orange bottle labeled “Prozac” and pops one in his mouth, followed by a whole glass of water. He looks towards Caroline wondering if she notices but she is too busy fixing her hair in the hallway mirror.

“Are you not eating with us?” John asks.

“I don’t have time! I told the girls I’d meet them at Barnaby’s by—,” she cuts herself off when she notices the glass of wine next to the plate he set for her. She grabs it by the stem, purses her lips to avoid ruining her lipstick, and the Merlot glides effortlessly down her throat in one loud gulp. John is unimpressed, but as always, Caroline fails to notice how he feels.

“Caroline we need to talk,” John says.

“I’ll be home late so we can talk tomorrow.”

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Monica and Shelly are already two margaritas in at Barnaby’s so Caroline orders one with a shot of Patron on the side and mixes it in, tossing the lime on the floor. She hugs the girls and takes her seat between them. They talk about most recent episode of *The Bachelor* and laugh at old high school stories they’ve reminisced on over one hundred times. Caroline scans the room looking for Brandon. He usually walks in with his squad of college guys around ten every night from Thursday to Saturday. She looks over at the wall by the bathroom where she ran into him

last Saturday night. He had walked up to her and touched her shoulder from behind as she was walking into the bathroom.

“Mrs. Hartman!” he yelled. His breath wreaked of PBR and mint.

She started by asking how he was in an attempt to remain professional. That attempt was thrown out the window when she couldn’t ignore the way his black t-shirt clung to his chiseled upper body. After she gulped down her third tequila shot of the night, she opened his hand and placed the lime in his palm. Their fingers intertwined around the lime, squeezing it and letting the juice trickle down their forearms. Next thing she knew, her dress was on the floor of his bedroom along with the piles of his dirty clothes, empty containers of food from who knows when, and cans of beer that littered the carpet. She took an uber home to John around 2 a.m. That night was the first time she had cheated on him, but based off the rush that it gave her, she knew it wouldn’t be the last. Caroline’s memories of that night are interrupted by Monica.

“How is John?” Monica asks.

“Boring as ever,” Caroline responds, taking the last gulp of her margarita.

Brandon walks in and high fives a bunch of guys he recognizes; he walks with pride in his steps as if he owns the entire bar. Shelly and Monica feel Caroline’s attention turn immediately to him.

“Oh boy, is that the guy from the other night?” asks Shelly. Caroline doesn’t hear her.

“Yeah. The one that she has as a student,” Monica says, rolling her eyes.

Every hair on Caroline’s body stands straight up and beads of sweat form around her neck, rolling down her back. He puts his hand around her arm and squeezes as he walks by her.

“Hey Mrs. Hartman.” He winks.

“Let’s go. We are leaving now before Caroline gets fired from her job and John finds out about this,” Shelly says. She and Monica grab Caroline by the arms and leave Barnaby’s.

Later that night, after the girls take separate ubers home, Caroline sends hers to Brandon’s apartment. She gets there around midnight and doesn’t have to wait long for him to get home.

“I was hoping you’d come by tonight,” he says.

She stares at the same youthful face that she sees in class every Tuesday and Thursday morning. The same face that she touched last weekend in this very same apartment. She holds her hands up to his face and kisses him, hard, wishing that would be enough to absorb some of his youth into her body. He kisses her back. They stumble back into his bedroom past his roommate’s door, who she also sees in Psych class on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Her dress takes the same spot on the floor as the last one and Caroline closes her eyes and allows Brandon to take her back to her youth again.

Caroline is woken up by the sound of her alarm going off telling her that it is 6 a.m. Adrenaline rushes through every inch of her body and she leaps out of bed and back into her dress from last night.

“Shit! How did this happen? How did we fall asleep?” she shakes Brandon’s arm to wake him up.

Before she can reach the door, she hears Brandon’s roommate knock.

“Yo Brandon, did your old lady leave yet? Jesus it’s so weird, she’s like seventy,” he laughs as he drags his feet into the bathroom and shuts the door.

Heat rises from her toes up to her face. She cannot tell whether she feels angry or embarrassed.

“You told him?!” she yells at Brandon.

“He won’t tell anyone! I swear!” he replies with a terrified look on his face.

“You realize that I could lose everything right? I would get fired from my job, lose my child and everything else that I have.”

Brandon racks his brain for something to say but Caroline rushes out of the apartment before he gets the chance to make any more excuses.

Her driver pulls into the driveway at exactly 6:48 a.m., twelve minutes before John and Lily’s alarms go off. The house is quiet, so she sneaks upstairs to get ready for work and have breakfast ready for them when they get up. As Caroline walks out of her bedroom, she catches a glimpse of herself in the mirror. Her face with no makeup on looks aged and tired. A sick feeling comes over her as she pulls the skin under her eyes tight to the sides. Tears begin to stream down her face quicker than she can collect her thoughts. She thinks of how she felt in Brandon’s bed for the last couple hours: young and alive. Caroline collapses to the ground in a fit of silent tears. She stares at John in bed across the room and feels her chest tighten at the thought of him finding out.

After wiping her tears, Caroline pulls out her Olay under eye cream from her purse and rubs it on her face as she has done religiously every morning and night for the past three years. Then she thinks back to what Brandon’s roommate said through the door and throws the eye cream in the trash can before walking downstairs.

\*

“He really said you look seventy?!” says Monica.

“I’m going to have to get plastic surgery. I have no choice. Just a face lift and maybe some Botox,” Caroline says into the phone.

“No you’re way too young to start that yet. Ya know... I knew a friend who went to some lady out by Philadelphia. She’s some kind of metaphysical fortune-teller, I think her name was Angela. Sounded like some bullshit to me but she swore that it worked for her issue. I’m gonna ask her for the info, it can’t hurt to try,” suggests Monica.

She does research on metaphysical shops and different things they offer. Some people online claim that this Angela lady is some kind of witch that can fix anything. Caroline feels crazy for even considering that but thinks that maybe she will at least offer her some kind of miracle eye cream or something. Willing to try anything, Caroline puts the address in her GPS and heads to Philadelphia right after she attends an open house at the school.

The drive isn’t too far. Caroline’s stomach begins to churn as she pulls into the small, gravel parking lot, fit for barely three cars. *What am I doing? Have I really resorted to this?* She pulls down the mirror in the car and looks at her reflection. Just as she’s about to change her mind and pull out of the parking lot, she sees two old hands with bright blue nail polish push open the curtains. A small, shriveled up, friendly-looking face stares right at her. She stares back into her eyes, so light gray that they almost look white. A smile slowly creeps across the lady’s face as she lets go of the curtains and disappears into the darkness of the room.

Caroline makes her way to the front door, heels sinking into the gravel as she walks. ‘Enter through back’ the sign reads. She trudges through the bushes on the side of the little smurf-looking cottage, trying her best to stay on the skinny stone path so that she doesn’t ruin her favorite pant-suit that she didn’t have time to change out of after the open house. Before she can

lift her hand to knock, the door swings open. It's dark except for the light coming from the few windows and the candles burning in every corner of the room. It smells like one would expect a metaphysical shop to smell: chamomile and vanilla. The walls are a deep purple and the little old lady has a face that calms Caroline. She takes a step inside and allows the door to shut behind her.

“Angela?” she asks.

“Ahh, Caroline Hartman,” she says as she takes her hand.

Caroline pulls her hand away quickly. “How did you know my name?!”

“You're wearing a name tag, dear.” Caroline looks down at the name tag on her suit.

Without another word, she follows Angela to the back into what looks like it could be a changing room if this were a clothing store. Angela shuts the door and they sit across from each other at the table while she shuffles some cards. The room is so tight that Caroline could touch both walls at once just by putting her arms straight out.

“Your energy is extremely unbalanced. I can feel the negative aura just by being in this room with you,” Angela says. She shivers and grabs a sweater from the back of the door to drape around her shoulders.

“You have a secret,” Angela declares, giving Caroline no opportunity to deny it.

Caroline's face gets hot and she looks down at her hands.

“I don't know what you're talking about. I'm here because I want to look young again and I've tried every kind of cream and lotion they sell on the shelves. I feel like I'm getting older by the day.”

“Well dear, you are getting older by the day. That’s how life works.” Angela starts pouring different scented oils into different containers. The combination of scents makes Caroline dizzy.

“If you’re not going to take me seriously then forget it,” Caroline says. “I just thought you might have something that could help.” She gathers her things and heads for the door.

“It’s not me that isn’t taking you seriously. It’s you not taking yourself seriously. I sense guilt and fear about your future.” Angela grabs her attention.

Her face is illuminated by the single candle that she just grabbed from the shelf and Caroline can see clearly how old the lady really is.

Caroline sits back down. Her hands begin to tremble as she thinks about her future and the potential consequences of her actions. She quickly shakes those thoughts away and looks Angela confidently in the eye.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I have no secrets and I am not afraid of my future. I just simply want to look younger. I am busy and don’t have time to waste,” says Caroline.

Angela glares with her white eyes, which are starting to look less friendly than they did in the window.

“Do you have a child?” she asks.

“Yes, my daughter is seven.”

She gets up and goes over to a shelf full of what looks like actual magic potions on the wall. The kind of thing you would see in Harry Potter or something. Caroline tries to glance around Angela’s hunchback to see what she is doing. When she turns around she has one of the potions in her hand. She dusts it off with the sleeve of her sweater and tells Caroline to drink it.

“Absolutely not! What the hell is it?” Caroline says.

“You asked me for my help. This is what I have to reverse aging,” replies Angela.

Caroline looks up and sees her own wrinkly, pathetic reflection in the crystal ball behind her. She opens the vial. It smells like black licorice. The liquid is heavy like syrup but thicker and pitch black. It goes down slow and sticky; Caroline nearly gags it up right when it hits her stomach. Angela smiles a dark smile.

“How long will this take to work?” Caroline asks.

“Oh you are not done yet, dear. That is step one,” says Angela. “The potion does not reverse the aging itself. It simply allows you to inhale the youth from your own immediate blood relative. In your case, your daughter.”

Caroline feels faint. She tries to respond but nothing comes out.

“When she is sound asleep, lean in and kiss her on the lips. When you pull back, you will inhale her youth into yourself and begin to look younger in no time,” finishes Angela. “If you do this there are conseque-,” she is interrupted.

Caroline cuts her off. “That is ridiculous. I never should have come here. I just drank that nasty shit for nothing,” Caroline says.

She throws the empty vial down on the table and grabs her things to leave for real this time. Angela shuffles her feet as quickly as she can behind her trying to catch up.

“Wait!” she calls.

Caroline throws some money on the counter thinking that is what she wants from her and slams the wooden door of the cottage. Angela opens the door and follows her out.

“It’s not money that I want! You didn’t let me finish. I have to warn you of the consequences! There are dire consequences to this! Please be careful,” Angela yells.



Caroline pulls out of the gravel parking lot before Angela reaches her car. She sees her in her rearview mirror waving her arms frantically as she drives away. A pungent taste of anise lingers on Caroline's tongue.

\*

That night, Caroline gets home just as John is putting Lily to bed. She heads up the stairs and hears a small voice say "Mommy?" as she passes by Lily's room. Lily is tucked into her pink blanket and has her stuffed rabbit by her side under the covers. Caroline combs through Lily's blonde curls with her fingers, thinking back to when her own curls were pure strawberry blonde before the gray roots began to takeover. After only a minute of Caroline petting her hair, Lily falls asleep. She leans down to kiss her goodnight and right before her lips reach her daughters, she thinks of Angela and laughs a little under breath. *If only it were really that easy.* She kisses her daughter goodnight and leaves the room.

Around five in the morning Caroline and John wake up to the sound of Lily's small feet dragging into their bedroom.

"My belly really hurts," she says.

They scoop her up and take her into the kitchen to take her temperature.

"Caroline its 102," John says.

They look at each other for a minute. "I'll have to cancel class and stay home with her," says Caroline.

Caroline heats up some chicken noodle soup and puts on cartoons to keep Lily occupied while she online shops. Every couple of minutes Lily goes into a dry coughing fit that sounds like she

is about to cough up an entire lung. Caroline opens a new tab and searches “pneumonia in young children.”

When John arrives home from work, he takes her temperature again. 102 still. She opens her tiny mouth for a spoonful of Children’s Tylenol and John drops the spoon on the ground in shock, splattering orange syrup all over the carpet.

“Open your mouth a little wider for me Lil,” he says.

The flashlight from his phone shines down her throat and illuminates the open sores covering the inside of her cheeks and throat. He pokes at one with his finger and Lily shrieks and pulls back. Her bottom lip sticks out and starts to quiver as a tear trickles down her face. She puts her stuffed rabbit in front of her face to block him from touching her mouth again.

The phone rings twice before Dr. Robson answers. John tells him her symptoms and he says that it sounds like thrush and possibly an upper respiratory infection.

“Keep her fever down with Tylenol and if it cannot stay down or the sores start to look worse then bring her to the Emergency Room,” he says.

John hangs up the phone and they tuck Lily between them in their King sized bed. They wait until she is sound asleep and then both lean in and kiss her goodnight on the lips.

Lily remains asleep for only a few hours before waking up in a thick coating of sweat. Her breathing is heavy enough to wake both Caroline and John. John leans over and turns the light on, then turns back to see Caroline’s jaw drop open and eyes widen. Lily’s sores coat the outside of her cheeks and spread down to her neck. Some are opened up and have a clear thick liquid oozing from them and others are still closed over by a layer of skin, like a boil. They both feel the heat radiating from Lily’s body from their sides of the bed. Lily cries and screams in pain,

throwing her hands to her face and neck and scratching at the sores. Mid-scream she breaks into a coughing fit so harsh and dry that she throws up bile on the comforter.

“Get ready, I’m going to get her some more Tylenol and water. Meet me at the car in five,” John says. He leaps out of bed with Lily in his arms and rushes down to the kitchen.

Caroline rushes into the bathroom to put on makeup but stops abruptly in the doorway. Her reflection in the mirror looks different than usual. She steps slowly closer to the mirror, one fluffy slipper at a time. She lifts her hands to rub her face and neck, realizing that there are fewer wrinkles for her to touch. *I must be going crazy.* She dabs her beauty blender in foundation anyways and begins to spread it across her face. It glides smoothly across the surface of her skin, interrupted by very few creases. She lifts and relaxes her eyebrows over and over, maneuvering her whole face in different directions. She still can’t find her wrinkles.

“That old hag was right,” says Caroline under her breath. She thinks back to drinking the black syrup from the vial and the warning that Angela tried to give her before she ran out. She wondered what it could have been.

\*

John carries Lily in his arms through the double glass doors of the hospital. The silence of the waiting room is interrupted by the pouring rain outside. The ladies at the front desk both jump out of their seats at the sight of Lily. One drops the phone that she was holding to her ear and a low tone echoes throughout the waiting room. They both run to find a doctor and when one comes out, he takes Lily back immediately. John and Caroline follow closely behind. The hospital is cold and unfriendly with white walls that are tinged yellow and the smell of iron and bleach linger in the air. The rectangular lights on the ceiling shine so brightly that Caroline

almost forgets it is the middle of the night. They watch in fear as the doctor and nurses hook Lily up to IV's and take her vitals. They speak in words that the couple does not understand, like a different language. Caroline looks down and realizes that she is holding John's hand for the first time in as long as she can remember. It is strong and firm, just like the first time she had ever held it at twenty-two years old. John follows Caroline's gaze down and quickly pulls his hand away. The beeping of the monitor hooked up to Lily is so loud that Caroline cannot hear herself think. She watches her daughter's fragile body being tossed around by doctors and nurses trying to get a look at her sores.

"It's up to 105," one nurse says. Lily's eyes flutter and then shut.

"What is happening?! Someone do something! Why are her eyes closed?!" Caroline screams.

"Lil open your eyes!" John says.

"John, they aren't doing enough, her eyes are closed. Why are her eyes closed?" Caroline grabs the nurse with the shamrock tattoo on the back of her neck and shakes her arm.

"She has fallen into a coma," the doctor says.

He turns around. "She needs to be taken out of here immediately," he says.

A nurse grabs Caroline's hand and pulls her out of the room. Caroline pushes the nurse backwards and screams for Lily to wake up.

John helps the nurse by holding Caroline back out of the doorway with his strong arms.

"Oh so now you suddenly care about her?" yells John through the doorway.

He steps back into the room with Lily and closes the door in Caroline's face. She drops to her knees on the hard, cold hospital tile.

Caroline sees her reflection in the window of the next room over. She lifts herself to her feet and walks over to it. With her face inches away from the window, she runs her hands through her blonde curls. The gray at the roots is completely gone and replaced by the rich strawberry blonde that she once was. Her bag-free eyes stare wide and round at her reflection for minutes before reality hits her. She can't shake the image of Angela frantically waving her arms in the rearview mirror. Then her mind returns to Lily and her small, weak body being carried in John's arms. She thinks of how she kissed her goodnight just before this happened.

Rain beats hard on the windshield as Caroline pulls into the driveway. All three spots are empty so Caroline parks crooked and jumps out of the car. She trudges through the bushes in the pouring rain, not giving a damn about her shoes or staying on the skinny stone path this time.

"Angela! Open the door! Let me in now!" she screams.

Caroline bangs loudly on the door with both fists. Her drenched hair clings to her face and neck. After a couple minutes of knocking, Caroline hears a shuffling of slippers on the other side of the door.

"Go away! I tried to warn you," says Angela through the door.

"You stupid bitch! What did you do to my daughter?"

"No dear, if she is in any kind of danger it is because of your own vanity and selfishness. I cannot help you, you've made your own decisions and it is time to face the consequences."

Caroline throws her body weight into the door. Then, she backs up and does it again. She throws herself, shoulder first against the door four times before finally sinking to the muddy ground and sobbing. Her sobs turn to screams and then her screams turn to nothing before she picks herself up and gets back in the car. She feels numb the whole drive back to the hospital.

The kind of numb where you don't even know who you are anymore. She thinks of Brandon and begins to feel nauseous at that thought that this could be her own fault. Her phone rings and she answers but doesn't say a word.

"We lost her, Caroline. She's gone," John says.

And then he hangs up.

\*

Caroline makes it back to the hospital to find John by Lily's bedside, crying into her sheets. Something urges her to go over and wrap her arms around him. He puts his hands out and pushes her away.

"Don't touch me. Don't ever touch me again," he says.

"John..."

"This little girl was the only reason that we are even still together, Caroline. It's over. It's all over." He lowers his head back into the tear stained sheets covering Lily's body.

She cannot gather the strength to look at her daughter lying cold wrapped in hospital sheets. She stumbles out of the hospital with an expression of nothingness on her face. She is absent from her body and from her mind. While walking aimlessly through the hospital parking lot, like a drunk walking home from the bar, she thinks of Brandon and tries to find ways to blame him for everything that has just happened. The old lady's words ring through her mind over and over again like a mosquito that just won't leave you alone. *Vanity and Selfishness.*

Rain has washed all of the makeup off of Caroline's face. The sun begins to come up over the horizon and she sees her reflection in a puddle on the ground outside the hospital. She stops to look at herself, bringing the back of her hands to her soft, supple cheeks rubbing upwards from

her chin to her temples. Then she runs a finger across her forehead and feels nothing but baby-smooth skin. Her fingertips meet the roots of her hair and pull it upwards. Caroline leans in closer to the puddle to get a better look at her new, young appearance; she cannot help but let a giddy smile spread across her new youthful face.

## Candy Hearts

**February 14, 2011**

**Barrow, Alaska**

The sunshine that had illuminated the ocean all morning was quickly disappearing into a sheet of dense, rolling cumulonimbus covering the entire stretch of sky from horizon up. The icy waves fade from turquoise to a grim, violent shade of gray. From calm to vengeful in seconds. Rocky steps out onto the stern of the boat, rubber boots already sloshing in water.

“The weather said sunny all day,” yells Rocky over the rain.

He and the other two crew members head inside to take shelter. The men communicate only through the reluctant fear in their eyes.

“Well we outa head back in, right?” Rocky asks thinking of the dinner he has planned with Stella for tonight.

“In is where the storm is coming from, we’d be going straight into it. Our best bet is to stay put and hope it doesn’t fuck us up too bad,” said one of the other men.

Rocky holds his breath as the gray mass crawls closer. The boat leans left hard, tumbling all three men into the wall. Rocky grasps the rail with white knuckles.

“Shit, hold on tight guys. It’s about to be worse than we thought,” says one of the men.

The intermitted tapping of rain on the windows grows quickly into a roaring that sounds like TV static and the boat rocks harder, taking sharp turns at the will of the storm. The men are tossed around from wall to wall like puppets; their limbs attached to strings coming from the sky. The back end of the shelter is open, allowing waves to slosh inside and soak them with salt water. Thick layers of sopping wet clothing feel like weights attached to Rocky’s body. Feeling



small under a tar-black sky, he had never craved the solidity of land more in his life. Suddenly, the boat flips sideways, thrusting him head-first into the window of the shelter. The world goes black for a second. He hears the muffled yells of his crew through the piercing ringing in his ears.

“Rocky! Man hold on, it’ll be okay just hold on!”

On the ground, Rocky pulls the glove off of his trembling hand and touches his temple as the boat steadies itself. His vision is blurry from the blow but he makes out a dark red ooze dripping from his fingertips. He feels it running hot down the side of his face. The waves continue to crash over them mercilessly. His surroundings come back into focus and he sees that there is only one man inside the boat with him now. He grabs the railing to pull himself up and look around but he can’t find the other one. He looks at the one man left with him, tears pouring down his face, he points out into the water with a shaky finger. Another wave rolls the boat high up into the black sky in slow motion. It feels like they are floating and for a moment time stops. Rocky holds on with one hand and with the other, he reaches in his pocket. The small cardboard box drips water when he pulls it out. He looks at the pastel candy hearts in his trembling palm and squeezes them tight to his own heart. He thinks of Stella and the time they met exactly three years ago today. He thinks of the grocery store where those candy hearts led him to the best thing that ever happened to him. The store was filled with aisles of red heart shaped boxes and giant plush teddy bears and cards covered in hearts. She was putting her bags into her cart and laughing at who knows what. All he knew was that he had never seen something so beautiful in his life. Her blonde hair fell just above her shoulders and her laugh lit up the entire room, grabbing everyone’s attention. As the clerk was ringing up his last couple items he saw boxes of

candy hearts in a bin by the check-out line. He quickly grabbed one and handed it to the clerk, keeping his eyes on her the entire time. He remembers the feeling of his heart racing against his ribcage as he ran up behind her in the parking lot.

“Hey um, excuse me,” he stuttered. He never did things like this.

She turned around and her eyes looked like a water-color painting with shades of green diluted by too much water. He held out the box of candy hearts in his hand with the note “you’re beautiful” scribbled sloppily in pen. She looked stunned at first and then threw her head back and laughed. The milk Rocky had just bought spoiled in his car that day while they talked for hours about anything and everything at the café next door.

Rocky pictured Stella at home waiting for him, looking out the window at the unexpected storm. She was probably pacing back and forth, making calls to the harbor for updates on where he was. He thought of the candlelit dinner that she probably had sitting on the table for their third Valentine’s day together and first wedding anniversary. He thought of the fact that he might not even be coming home from work to have that dinner with her. As his life was flashing before his eyes he thought of what would become of Stella without him; their lives had revolved around each other since the day they met. He couldn’t leave her, especially after dragging her all the way to Alaska for his job.

Rocky felt the ocean ready to drop the boat again so he quickly put the cardboard box of hearts in the inside plastic pocket of his jacket and closed his eyes. His stomach jumped as he was dropped with full force. With eyes shut tight he pretended like he was on a roller coaster and once the drop was done he would open them and walk off to get funnel cake and wait in line for the next ride. Stella’s worried face is all he saw as his helpless body was slammed into the

window, and then the wooden deck, and then suffocated by water, being held down by the current. He fights against the relentless ocean with every ounce of faith he has left in him; his arms flail through waves and his head finally rises back above water for him to take one last gulp of air. He breaths deep but another wave crashes over his head filling his lungs with water and pushing him further and further down until everything goes black again and he slips from consciousness.

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It isn't until I hear the water bubbling over the edge of the pot and down the side of the stove that I finally draw my attention away from the weather channel. I pace the empty living room, sitting on the edge of a packed up cardboard box biting my nails and tapping my foot. The TV is mostly static, probably because of the storm messing with the satellite dish. The satellite dish was the only thing that we had set up so far since we moved in two weeks ago. Our bed is a mattress on the floor of an empty bedroom and all of the walls in the house are bare white. Rocky has been busy with his job and I've been busy looking for one since we moved in; there's not many opportunities in advertising in a small Alaskan town like this one.

Taped up boxes litter the empty house. The only thing in the kitchen is a single table and two chairs, draped in a red table cloth and covered in lit candles. I try to focus on making our Anniversary dinner to take my attention away from the fact that Rocky is stuck on a fishing boat in a storm this bad. I turn off the TV and turn on the radio. I walk over to the wall and place my hand on the phone tapping my fingers against it lightly. This would be the third time I've called the harbor where Rocky works within the last hour.

“Hey this is Stella again, sorry to call so many times. Any update on Rocky’s boat yet?” I come off as more calm than I am.

“Not yet. We’ve lost our radio signal to them and we can’t track them either. I’m sorry, I promise you we will call as soon as we know anything. Don’t lose hope.” He hangs up the phone.

For hours I pace the vacant house waiting for any sign that he’s okay. Every noise begins to sound like the front door opening, but it never does. The storm finally slows to a drizzle and my thoughts get louder. Cold pasta sits on paper plates on the dining room table and there is a soft tapping of rain on the roof. I don’t bother to blow the candles out because I know that Rocky will be home and ready to eat any minute. I watch the sun go down and the hands of the clock turn as the hours pass by. I sink onto the tile floor in the kitchen, my back leaning up against an open box full of pots and pans. Trying to keep my mind from wandering to dark places, I try to remember one of my favorite days with Rocky. We had spent the day on the beach back in Santa Monica right outside my parent’s little shack. Rocky turned from tan to even more tan and I turned from Snow White to a lobster within a couple hours. All I remember is Rocky tossing me in the ocean fully dressed and laughing so hard that I cried. Crying isn’t an option right now because that would mean that something is wrong and it can’t be. I spend the rest of the night with my shoulder pressed against the kitchen cabinet waiting for the door to open or the phone to ring.

The sun rises and peeks through the blinds as if it had never left. I throw away the stale pasta stuck to paper plates and blow out the last candle that held its tiny flame through the night.

Reluctantly, I go to the phone to call the harbor again when the front door clicks open and I see him standing in the doorway. His face is covered in dried blood and his clothes are torn apart but he's here. He is here and he is alive. I drop the phone and it slams against the wall, dangling from its cord. He sees me and smiles. I run up to him and throw my arms around his neck, grazing my fingers along the wound on his head lightly.

"We need to get you to the hospital right now," I say. I grab my keys and an extra jacket to throw over Rocky.

"Stella, no." He grabs my arm and pulls me in. "The hospital is too far. We would have to go all the way into town and it's really not that bad. I just need to disinfect the cut and get into some dry clothes."

He looks like he's been through hell and back. And smells like a creature that just emerged from a swamp. I follow him upstairs to the bathroom while he changes into dry clothes.

"I don't know what I would have done if you didn't make it Rocky," I say. Tears roll down my cheeks. "I mean I called so many times, I think I was driving that poor guy crazy!"

"Yeah Stel, you have a way of driving people crazy that's for sure." He smirks.

"Rocky I'm serious. You scared me half to death. Are you sure you don't need some stitches? That looks pretty bad." I lean in closer to the gash on his head, dabbing it with warm water.

"It's not deep, don't worry about it. And I could never leave you alone," he says. "How would you open pickle jars and reach the highest shelf in the kitchen?" I punch him in the arm and he laughs.

I finish cleaning the dried blood off of him and make him breakfast downstairs while we talk about when he will go back to work. He agrees to take at least two weeks off to rest and make

sure he doesn't have a concussion before getting back on the boat. I stare into the eyes that I almost lost last night.

"I don't know if I can even handle you working this job anymore. That was the scariest night of my life. Rocky I really thought I was going to lose you."

"How about for now we just worry about getting all these boxes unpacked and making this house feel like a home," he says. He grabs my hand and rubs it between his calloused fingers. They feel colder than usual.

We leave the dirty dishes on the table and start unpacking boxes. Rocky puts on *A Moment Like This*, our wedding song, and we dance around the living room hanging pictures on walls and carefully placing throw pillows on the couches. I begin to unpack clothes from the boxes upstairs while he paints the bathroom a light yellow color.

"Why yellow?" I ask.

"Yellow brightens up a room. It's a happy color. When you wake up and walk into the bathroom every morning it will automatically guarantee that you have a good day," he says.

I stop unpacking and sit on the bed, watching Rocky paint. Somehow, he's still as tan as ever as if we never left that Santa Monica beach. Any tan that I had has faded so much that I match the snow coating the ground of our new home in Alaska. I've always hated snow. Anything below sixty-degrees is not for me; but I'd go anywhere with Rocky. His muscles bulge through his shirt as he strokes the wall with the brush, careful not to get it on the trim. His bicep is covered in yellow streaks and drips of paint cover the legs of his gray sweatpants. I bite my lip.

We wake up on our mattress that we still haven't gotten around to buying a bed frame or box spring for. Our legs are tangled together under the sheets and I am happy to be with him even though it is a high of eight degrees outside and the wind is blowing so hard that it's rattling the house. Rocky stayed up all night and finished the house. I slept while he painted, hung photos, and moved furniture. My clothes are all folded in my drawers and hung in the closet. I get out of bed, my hair a mess wearing one of Rocky's old t-shirts. I notice that there are still a couple packed up boxes in the back of the closet. One of them is full of Rocky's shirts, the other his pants, and another his socks and underwear.

"Rock, why didn't you unpack your clothes?" I ask. He looks down at the ground.

"Just didn't get around to it yet," he says.

We head downstairs where bacon is popping on the stove and scrambled eggs sit on a plate on the table. There is a lit candle in the center of the table and rose petals surrounding my chair and plate.

"Happy late anniversary Stella," he says with a huge, cheesy grin on his face.

I wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him, hard.

"Sorry it's not the most luxurious Anniversary. It's only eggs and bacon and I'm sorry that we are in Alaska for it. I know how much you hate the cold," he says.

My eyes fill with tears and I kiss him again before sitting down to eat.

"It's amazing Rocky. You know that I'm happy anywhere in this world as long as it's with you," I say. I look around the kitchen. "Why aren't you eating?"

He hesitates before saying, "I ate late last night while I was finishing up the house. I'm not hungry."

He leans in next to me and I trace the gash on his head with my finger. “Jesus Rocky, you’re really sure you don’t need to get your head checked out?” I grab his arm to roll up his sleeve and expose the massive dark- purple bruise on his bicep and gash near his elbow.

“I think that we really should go to a doctor...” My voice trails off when I notice the hesitation on his face.

“Stella I think it’s time that I show you something,” he says. He kisses my face and hands me my thick jacket, hat, and gloves.

“Where are we going?” He leads me out the door without a word.

“Well wait a minute Rocky, you are gonna freeze to death! You didn’t even put your jacket on,” I say. He doesn’t even shiver as an ice cold gust of wind blows right on us, nearly knocking me over. There’s barely any light out today. Some days in Alaska in the winter the sun just doesn’t shine very bright or for very long. I haven’t really had time to adjust to that yet.

I follow Rocky down an icy path to the water. It’s not snowing right now but there is some kind of freezing cold precipitation hitting the only exposed area of my face. Neither of us say a word. If it wasn’t for the temperature, Alaska would be really pretty. I look up into the snow coated mountains and out at the horizon in the distance. The water is rough but beautiful at the same time. I cling to Rocky’s arm so I don’t slip.

“Be careful, it gets really rocky right here,” he says.

“Where are we going? Are we gonna be out here for long? I’m getting really cold, how are you not freezing without a jacket on?” I ask.

We walk for about ten more minutes until we reach the water’s edge. He leads me down the rocks and sits down. I sit beside him.



“Stella, I need you to be strong right now, can you do that?” He slides my hat up off my eyes and looks right at me. “Can you do that Stella?”

“What’s going on?” I ask. My heart sinks down to my stomach. “Rocky tell me now.”

“The day of the storm, my boat got caught in it. It wasn’t strong enough to withstand the waves and-”

I stop him mid-sentence. “Yeah but you made it and you’re okay. You don’t need to think about it anymore, I know it was scary.” I put my hand up to caress his face.

“That’s the thing Stella. I didn’t make it. The boat sank and my three men and I- we drowned.”

I stared at him for a second until laughing out loud even though this was far from a funny joke. I kept laughing until I looked up and realized that Rocky was staring blankly out into the water. He turned to me and grabbed my hand.

“You need to accept this and move on. Continue living your life, for me. I needed to make sure that you would be okay, that’s why I’m still here. But I have to go Stella,” he says.

“This can’t be real. What the hell are you talking about?” I threw his hand off of mine and got up to walk back to the house.

“Stella stop! This is the reason why I brought you here. So you could see for yourself and move on.”

He gets up and walks over past the rocks to where there is a thick layer of ice and snow over the water. I follow and catch a glimpse of something stuck in the branches under the snow bank.

“Be strong like I know you are and remember that I will always love you.” He kisses my head.

\*

The body is frozen solid, like raw meat in a freezer. I've been staring at it for what feels like an eternity now. The wind hits my face but I don't feel it. I lean in to see his face, with dried frozen blood against the temple. One hand has a glove and the other does not, his wedding ring shines through. My knees hit the ice hard and I lie down on the frozen solid ground beside him. I want to cry but I feel nothing at all. I grab on to the jacket that he's wearing and remember what he looked like walking out the door in it that morning. He spilled a couple drips of coffee on the sheets when he leaned in to kiss me goodbye. I pretended I didn't see it as he mumbled "shit" under his breath. In the inside pocket of his jacket I feel something hard. I unzip the plastic zipper and pull out a faded pink box. Slushed ice falls off of the front to reveal the candy hearts inside. "Loved you since the day I saw you. Happy Valentines and Anniversary" is written in faded and smeared ink on the box.

I look up at Rocky but he is gone. The only thing that remains of him is his frozen body lying next to me on the ice.

"Rocky! Come back, please!" I yell into the snow covered trees. My voice can barely carry itself over this ice bank. My fist slams hard against the ice over and over again and blood drips from it, turning the snow a light shade of pink.

The little bit of light that existed falls dark behind clouds but I cannot move. I refuse to move. My nails dig into the ice and I pull myself up to get sick. After hours of lying on the ice, I realize that I can't feel any of my fingers or toes. My heart begins to race and I attempt to prop myself up but my hands, completely numb, can't hold me. The tide is rising and splashing below-freezing ocean water against my back. I breath heavily and watch my breath linger in the air

before disappearing. A sudden rush of adrenaline beats slowly through my veins, urging me to pull myself up off the ground. A survival instinct kicks in and suddenly, I know that I have to live. The skin on my fingers is light purple and covered in ice; they don't move no matter how hard I try. I roll myself over the snow bank, taking one last look at Rocky's body.

"Help! Someone help me. Please," I cry as I crawl back up the hill on my elbows and knees. There are houses and shops just over the hill where I hear people talking and doors opening and closing. The journey down the path that Rocky led me down feels like it's taking hours. I stumble on frozen feet down the path, barely catching myself on trees and rocks.

"Please help me!" My yell is barely louder than a raspy whisper. It gets caught in my throat and I throw up again into the dead branches on the side of the path. I finally see the small town and catch the attention of a family walking by. The mom runs up and grabs me by the arms. She turns and tells the dad to call 911 while she wraps her coat around me. I fall weak in her arms, sobbing and coughing into her. The police arrive quickly but the ambulance takes a while, coming from the hospital a couple towns over. They put me in the back and change me into dry clothes. When I finally calm down, I tell the police about Rocky's body, washed up on the shore. After a while, I see them carrying a gurney with his body strapped to it covered in a sheet. It takes four men to carry his soaking wet body up the hill. Water drips off the sides of the sheet they have over him as they lift him up into the back of the ambulance and take him away from me.

\*

After the funeral I get straight on the plane, still dressed in black. I was the only person at the funeral besides the men he works with and their wives. I've never met any of them but they told me they were very sorry for my loss. The only voice I recognized was the voice of the man who answered every time that I called the night of the storm. I arrived in Alaska with the love of my life and I'm leaving as a widow. Alaska stole the best thing in my life. My parents offered to fly up for the funeral but I told them not to. I'd be home to see them soon.

The plane for Santa Monica leaves at noon and I have only one suitcase with me; the rest I left behind. I feel everyone's eyes on the plane staring me: a woman dressed in all black with mascara under her eyes, clutching a faded box of candy hearts that looks like it has been through just as much as she has. My eyes don't stray from the clouds on the other side of the window and my grip on the box doesn't loosen until I arrive in Santa Monica. When I step off the plane, I close my eyes and breathe in the warm salty air and begin to heal.

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## Academic Vita

### EDUCATION

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**The Pennsylvania State University, Schreyer Honors College**

Bachelor of Arts in English

Minor: Political Science

**University Park, PA**

**Expected Graduation: May 2019**

### RELEVANT WORK EXPERIENCE

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**ValleyDel Publications, County Lines Magazine**

*Editorial Intern*

**West Chester, PA**

May 2018-August 2018

- Researched and wrote articles for the monthly print edition of the magazine on a strict deadline
- Wrote articles for and updated the magazine's online blog
- Updated the publication's Twitter and Instagram on a daily basis
- Assisted in the publications distribution department
- Assisted in selling advertisement space in the magazine to companies

**Penn State News**

*Editorial Intern*

**State College, PA**

January 2018-May 2018

- Researched and wrote articles to be posted on Penn State News Online for the College of Agricultural Sciences
- Conducted interviews and gathered information and quotes for articles
- Used AP Style writing
- Met a strict weekly deadline with engaging and accurate articles

### INVOLVEMENTS

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**Penn State American Marketing Association (PSAMA)**

*Digital Division Member*

**State College, PA**

September 2018-Present

- Gain project management experience leading a team of four
- Use Canva, Photoshop, and other tools to create digital content
- Create social media and blog content on a regular basis

**Lion's Eye Newspaper**

*Writer and Editor*

**Media, PA**

January 2017-May 2017

- Worked as a team with 10-15 other students to come up with relevant topic ideas
- Researched, conducted interviews, and wrote articles for the Lion's Eye Newspaper in print and online
- Edited other student's articles for the newspaper
- Organized and created the layout of the newspaper on InDesign

**The Odyssey Online**

*Article Writer*

March 2017-June 2017

- Came up with relevant article topics every week
- Wrote and submitted one article per week, meeting a very strict deadline

### ADDITIONAL WORK EXPERIENCE

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**Buffalo Wild Wings**

*Server*

**Glen Mills, PA**

December 2015-Present

**Marble Slab Creamery**

*Assistant Manager*

**Glen Mills, PA**

June 2013-December 2015

### CERTIFICATIONS/ SKILLS

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- Google Analytics and Google Ads Certification
- Proficient in Spanish (speaking, writing, reading)
- Social Media Outlets (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter)
- Proficient in Adobe InDesign
- Adaptable to different writing styles (AP, Chicago, etc.)
- Proficient in Canva