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HOLD YOURSELF TOGETHER: STORIES

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ABSTRACT

Through short fiction, this thesis explores modern issues in love and identity. At times serious and at others ludicrous, this collection tells the stories of the cynical, the tired, and the confused. People often shy away from confusion, but humor and satire often guide these characters' confrontation of what they don't understand. These stories deal with adapting the self to unforeseen or unexpected circumstances, the past we carry into our adult lives, and the cyclic nature of life. This collection balances the snarky and satiric narrative voice in some stories with the serious and analytical one in others, revealing the complicated and, often, nonlinear way people deal with life. Contemporary themes, including social media, pop-culture, and the prevalence of reality TV are woven with the "sampling" of the past ever-present in contemporary arts culture. Ultimately, the aim of this thesis is to serve as a reminder that levity can provide comfort and can guide towards acceptance and clarity in senseless times.

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Reflective Essay

Throughout the process of writing this thesis, I fully realized words I heard a while ago. In 2017, David Armstrong, the author of two collections of short stories called *Reiterations* and *Going Anywhere*, spoke to my Introduction to Fiction Writing class. One student asked, “Where do you get your ideas?” Armstrong responded with something along the lines of, “I think.” I thought this was a cop-out response until I began writing for this thesis. I found the process of developing stories is 35% thinking, which feels too obvious to point out but was something I needed to experience to learn. Most of the stories started as patchworks of what ifs, interesting things I heard in conversation, and desires to experiment with compelling story structures I came across in my reading. I often found myself writing short notes on my phone about each of these things, and then going back to the note to add more, until I formed a good foundation to start writing.. This process took a long time, and I used to think I was just lazy when I claimed to let my stories “ferment” and sit as virtually-dusty, untouched files on my phone or computer until I was ready to confront them. But I was really just giving myself the time and distance necessary to think about them in a removed way.

As I embarked on my short story collection, *Vampires in the Lemon Grove* by Karen Russell, particularly its titular story, was critical in the conception of “La Cocaína Imperecedo.” Maureen Corrigan, book critic for *NPR*’s “Fresh Air,” writes of Russell’s collection, “Russell is so grand a writer—so otherworldly, yet emotionally devastating” (“Karen Russell’s ‘Vampires’ Deserve the Raves”). This “otherworldly” quality of Russell’s writing was aspirational for me; writing anything remotely fantastical was terrifying. But Russell’s *Vampires* showed me I was

overcomplicating it. Russell makes the life of vampires, using Italian lemons and lemonade to hush their thirst for blood, feel in-the-ordinary and exciting simultaneously. “Vampires in the Lemon Grove,” as well as other stories in the collection, stitched the supernatural and the fantastical to the ordinary so seamlessly, which encouraged me to attempt the same.

Lorrie Moore’s collection published in 1985, *Self-Help* was another source of direct inspiration. The structure of “How to be an Other Woman” was intriguing and unlike anything I have ever read: actions phrased like commands the reader must execute (“Meet in expensive beige raincoats, on a pea-soupy night” (3)) and scenes in the second person made me feel involved in the story, rather than just a spectator of it. “How to be an Other Woman” served as a structure on which to project an idea that had previously been difficult to finesse; thus, I finally wrote, “How to Date a Soft Boy.” I used second person and the idea of “Other” womanhood to create a modern-day homage to Moore. Her work comments on what it is like to be and willingly allow oneself to be a mistress. Similar to Moore’s story, “How to Date a Soft Boy” is about a protagonist who makes unhealthy romantic decisions, and, despite her self-awareness, continues her adverse behavior. Additionally, Moore inspired me to make more overt commentary on men, specifically male writers, in “Beware of the Male Writer.” The visceral commentary and criticism on gender dynamics in “How to be an Other Woman” influenced my motivation to write something similar.

Two collections/authors remained in the periphery but guided me through the journey of writing my own collection: *Swimmer Among the Stars* by Kanishk Tharoor and *No One Belongs Here More Than You* by Miranda July. For *NPR*, Jason Heller wrote of “Swimmer Among the Stars,” “It’s a testament to the author’s empathy, rich voice, and immaculate craftsmanship that the book succeeds in being all these things—even as it comforts, illuminates, and unnerves”

(“Swimmer Among the Stars’ Infuses Relics with Resonance”). Tharoor’s example set a standard for me to aspire towards. The craft and intention were palpable when I read his work, and intention has been reiterated over my study of writing fiction. Of July’s work, Josh Lacey writes for *The Guardian*, “July can be too cute and quirky, as if she’d prefer to be loveable than taken seriously. However, there’s a toughness underlying her prose...” (“In an Ideal World”). This contradiction Lacey points out feels like a balance between the delicate and light and the potent and robust. July’s clean, sparing, and conversational voice contrasted with the gritty lives of her characters captures the paradoxical nature of human life and emotions. Her artistry and skill combined with my desire to explore similar contradictions made her work a staple in my mind throughout this project. July’s writing style with Tharoor’s craftsmanship and originality drove my personal growth as a writer.

“Lust” by Susan Minot is the final piece of fiction to profoundly impact my writing. Her clipped and succinct yet revealing writing style was moving, and I was excited to imitate it. Minot covers a lot of time in “Lust,” which is something I do in most of the stories in this collection. Her work helped me ground my own stories when it was difficult to account for so much time. Her influence is most apparent in “Scarred Kid,” but her work was a reliable source of inspiration when I felt unmotivated or lost.

There are many authors and artists who deserve an honorable mention, but I’m unable to list all of them here since every piece of fiction and creative nonfiction that made me lose track of time, every movie that comforted and unsettled, and every song that I rediscovered after tiring of it, has inspired me in some way. I will, however, mention by name those authors and artists who, I am certain, impacted my writing. Haruki Murakami’s *Men Without Women* and David Armstrong’s *Reiterations* were the first collections of short stories I read and truly loved. Three

years ago, when I first started calling myself a writer, Murakami's and Armstrong's collections were the first pieces of evidence I found to support the idea that short stories have the capacity to satisfy both literary connoisseurs and just-for-fun readers, as I was more the latter at the time. (I'm not sure if I could currently call myself the former.) Before *Reiterations* and *Men Without Women*, I feared short fiction would be something I appreciated but didn't enjoy. Though graphic novels and memoirs are far out of my creative scope, the writing styles of Craig Thompson's *Blankets* and *Habibi* and David Mazzuchelli's *Asterios Polyp* have a lyrical finesse which served as examples of writing romance. They depicted love with a refreshing depth and intricacy. David Foster Wallace's *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* helped me out of the ditch of stagnation purely because it differs from what I've written for this project. Wes Anderson's *The Royal Tenenbaums* was essential in moving the details of my first drafts towards the *right* details, even if they are not quite there yet.

I had many personal writing goals for this project, the most basic of which was writing endings. Before this thesis, the end of a story was never in sight. My fiction writing classes at Penn State Harrisburg, sensitive to the often-fickle writing process, never required a complete and whole revision of a story. And since I found it difficult to come up with satisfying endings, I wouldn't try. Part of the reason why I wanted to write short stories for this thesis was because I wanted to force myself into a situation where I had to write endings and had to write like I never have before, and the latter manifested in many ways. Besides writing endings, a writing challenge I forced myself to confront was discontinuity, which appears in most of the stories in this collection. Because most of the stories I wrote before this collection have been two to four pages, I also challenged myself to sustain longer stories. "La Cocaína Imperecedo" and "The Palace of Eden" are the longest pieces of my creative writing corpus. There were many

organization obstacles, but I was surprised at how naturally the ideas came. “Scarred Kid” and “Hold Yourself Together” were also firsts in my writing repertoire. They are the most experimental pieces I’ve ever written, “Scarred Kid” in its minimalism and “Hold Yourself Together” in its perspective and its role as a unifier. In general, I wanted to challenge myself beyond the writing adage of “write what you know” because I knew I would spend a lot of time with these stories; only writing what I know would have definitely gotten boring. As much as I hope my research supports my stories enough to make it feel like what I write is what I know, all of these stories are works in progress, in content and in technique. Going forward, I hope to strengthen the skills related to these in-motion writing efforts, such as character and resolution development and heightening tension and conflict, as well as making fresh attempts at writing anti-heroes and writing linked stories.

I drew inspiration from the confusion, the acceptance, and the need to laugh at the absurdity commonplace in my own life and the lives of my peers, which shows in the themes of this collection. New media in general and its place in how we connect with others is captured heavily in “How to Date a Soft Boy” and “The Palace of Eden,” and captured in smaller roles in “Trouble at Scripp’s,” “Tears of Llorona,” and “La Cocaína Imperecedo.” The cyclic nature of life and the weight of our pasts are also addressed in almost all of the stories in this collection. These heavy themes are balanced out with humor and satire; ultimately, my aim in this thesis is to remind myself and readers that levity has the power to provide comfort and clarity when things don’t make sense.

Story 1

The Palace of Eden

Too many stars dotting a clear black sky glitter like sequins onto blue-ass water contained in an inground pool. The pool deck is filled with people, men and women all around the age of twenty-one, chattering. Some sit on fancy pool chairs or stand on the pool deck. The people wear country-club chic, all pastel almost-cocktail dresses and high heels and loafers and slacks and polo shirts. They sit on one side of the pool, amidst plastic potted fiddle leaf fig trees. On the other side, a woman stands on a raised platform made of loosely-laid fake wood with a base of wicker. The woman's heels look about ready to pierce through the platform and send her falling through. Fake candles flicker all around the wicker. A few feet in front of the woman sit about fifty people, dressed in plainer clothes that look like a tragic attempt at effortless formal-casual. At least, it does to the people on the opposite side of the pool. As if waiting for a wedding to start, they sit in their seats covered in white cloth with giant red bows on the back. Their seating area is sectioned off with a trellis-like structure woven with waxy pothos leaves, outlining four invisible walls, caging the live studio audience.

A man, the director, offstage says, "And, we're rolling!"

An "APPLAUSE" sign glares in front of the fifty people in plainer clothes, and they comply enthusiastically. Once the applause dies down:

Tracking shot on a man and a woman, who walk away from the crowd of people among fiddle leaf fig trees and step onto the wicker platform. They smile and wave at the camera and the live studio audience. They turn their gazes down; a façade of humility.

"Welcome back to *The Palace of Eden!* I'm your host, Mykinzee Courtney. Thank you for joining us!" She smiles hugely, flashing all of her teeth, as the audience applauds again.

“Before the break, we found out who our winning couple is. Let’s give it up for Leon and Renata!” The audience applauds. Some whoop. One says, “I love you, Renata!” which Renata answers in a sheepish smile. Mykinzee and Leon laugh.

The man with the camera poised on Mykinzee, Leon, and Renata holds up three fingers, signaling that they don’t have too much more time before they need to cut to commercial again.

Mykinzee gives a faint nod and continues, looking directly at the camera. “But you two are not off the hook yet. You have one more task to complete before you can fully claim your titles as winners of *The Palace of Eden*,” and bites her lip. She looks at Renata for a few seconds and swivels her head to face Leon, her chin-length platinum hair swishing and brushing her girlish chin. Re-centering her gaze back on the camera, Mykinzee says, “And we’ll find out what that task is after a short break! Stay right where you are because you won’t want to miss what will become of our couple when we come back!”

“APPLAUSE.” The sudden void of raucous clapping indicates they are no longer live.

Mykinzee leaves the wicker platform for a drink of water. Leon and Renata look at each other. The latter audibly exhales. Even though it’s commercial, there were still a couple hundred eyes on them. The people in the crowd Leon and Renata came from have glasses in their hands, some with deep red wine or sparkly gin and tonics complete with lime wedges or amber Manhattans with Maraschino cherries, stems still on. One woman, sitting on a deck chair so close to a man that their thighs touch, tilts her glass of wine up to Renata, who meets her gaze briefly.

In response to Renata’s deep sigh, Leon sweeps his fingertips over Renata’s knuckles. “Hey,” he says and smiles when she looks up at him. “It’s almost over.”

“Mmm,” Renata breathes and closes her eyes. She wraps her fingers around Leon’s, which he returns with a squeeze.

“Alright everybody! We’re back in thirty seconds!” The director stands behind a camera and waves people back into their places. Renata releases Leon’s hand, and they each take a half-step back. Mykinzee rushes through the path lined with candles, almost tipping one over, and climbs back onto the platform between Leon and Renata. She holds two red envelopes in her hands.

“Are you ready?” Mykinzee asks when she gets on stage. Leon and Renata nod, lips tight. Mykinzee tucks her hair behind her ears and looks at the camera.

“And, action!” the director says.

“Welcome back!” It hurts to see Mykinzee’s mouth stretch so wide. “If any of you are just joining us, I’ll give a quick recap.” Mykinzee’s mouth softens, thank god.

Cue the montage of the last eight weeks, starting with a clip of a group of men in swim trunks, including Leon, strutting out of the backdoor onto the empty pool deck. Then a clip of women doing the same. Mykinzee’s voice covers the clips: “Eight weeks ago, sixteen hot singles entered the Palace of Eden looking for love. Each week, they completed challenges and you, the audience, had to vote to keep couples in and throw other couples. The palace had eight couples to begin with. After many twists, turns, surprises, and betrayals, at the start of this episode, three couples remained: Charlotte and Andy...”

Medium shot of them waving to the camera from one of the pool chairs. Charlotte, whom Renata waved at earlier, has a leg crossed over her own and draped over Andy’s. Andy’s arm is wrapped around Charlotte’s waist. He tilts his glass of bourbon towards the camera. The audience applauds and whistles.

“... Kim and Eli...”

Medium shot of them waving to the camera. Kim sits on Eli's lap, robotically moving her individual fingers in a wave. Eli offers his weird two-fingered salute to the camera, while his hand creeps into view passed Kim's waist and squeezes the side of her thigh. Scattered, polite applause.

"... And finally, our winning couple, Renata and Leon! Give them a round of applause!"
The audience whoops and whistles.

Medium long shot of Mykinzee, Leon, and Renata. Mykinzee beams at Leon and Renata; the couple gives small waves. Renata tucks her hair behind her ears and Leon drags his hand over his bashfully smiling mouth. Earlier in the show, about a week after Renata showed up to the palace, they were told to play up their shyness. The audience loves it. They never had to fake it; they just needed to be more obvious about it.

"But of course," Mykinzee continues as the applause wanes, "it wouldn't be *The Palace of Eden* without a couple of curve balls. Leon." She turns to Leon. "Renata." She turns to Renata. "As you know, you're not quite done yet. I will give each of you one of these envelopes." Mykinzee holds up the red envelopes for the audience to see. "On the cards inside, you will each answer this question: did you play for love or for money? If one of you answers love and the other answers money, the one who answers money will get everything, every bit of that quarter of a million dollars." She pauses. "If you both answer money, neither of you will get anything." Pause. "If you both answer love, the prize money will get split between you. Choose wisely." She hands one envelope to Leon and the other to Renata and holds a pen out to each of them. "Please fill in the bubble to the left of your selection. Once you're done, place the card back into the envelope and give it to me."

After taking their cards, Renata and Leon tilt their heads down to look at their envelopes and then flick their eyes up at each other from beneath their eyebrows. They smirk at each other. Renata fills in her bubble; Leon fills in his. She fumbles to put her card back into the envelope and hands it to Mykinzee. Leon slides his card back into the envelope and gives it to Mykinzee with a flourish of his hand. Renata rolls her eyes.

“Let’s find out what our winning couple said—” Mykinzee sees the director twirl his pointer fingers around each other. “—after a quick break! We’ll be right back!”

* * *

Twangy Western music soundtracks the entire clip. Camera pans across a woodsy area and lands in a long shot on a man in his late fifties in the middle of a clearing, facing a tree. Medium long shot on the man as he leans on the end of the hilt of an axe, which rests on the ground. The man assesses the tree and nods and smiles to himself. He picks up the axe and swings it into the tree, but it bounces off, as if the axe and the tree are made of rubber. Medium shot on the man looking at the camera. VOICE OVER by a man with a gravelly voice: “You’re at an age where you already know how to adapt.” The man standing in the woods tosses the axe aside, shrugs, and chuckles. He walks out of the frame and reappears with a chainsaw. He revs it. VOICE OVER: “So, why would you let something like erectile dysfunction get in your way?” The man in the woods starts successfully cutting through the tree. VOICE OVER: “Isn’t it time you start talking to your doctor about KeepUp? Twenty million men already have.” Long shot of the man completely cutting through the tree. Shot of the tree falling down from the man’s point of view. He bends down to examine the tree rings. VOICE OVER: “With age comes responsibility. Talk to your doctor to see if your heart is healthy enough for sex. Do not take KeepUp if you’ve ever experience numbness in your testicles. Side effects may include

headache, upset stomach, swelling of the frenulum, darkened foreskin, and dizziness.” Zoom out to a bird’s-eye-view of the man standing and looking at the downed tree. VOICE OVER: “To avoid injury or death, call your doctor if you have an erection lasting longer than seventeen hours.” Tracking shot behind the man. He holds the axe in his left hand, leaning it on his left shoulder. The chainsaw is in his right hand, leaning on his right shoulder. VOICE OVER: “Talk to your doctor to see if KeepUp is right for you.

* * *

Mykinzee’s Barbie-doll hair moves like littered napkins in the wind as she greets the camera. “And we’re back! Before we find out what our couples said, let’s have a look back at their journey through *The Palace of Eden*.”

Clips of the first episode roll.

“Hi,” Leon smiles and chuckles. He stands on a balcony overlooking a beach. “My name’s Leon. I’m a 26-year-old male stripper. But during the summers, I take a break from that to coach football—uh, soccer to high schoolers. I was born in Sierra Leone, but grew up in South London. Now, I call Los Angeles home.” Intercut various images of him: on the job, in an action shot kicking a ball in a Leeds Beckett University football uniform, and in front of the Hollywood sign. “On the side, I’m a model and a photographer.” Cut to clip of him, shirtless and sporting a six-pack in front of flashing cameras. “Yeah, some of my friends say I’m a bit of a player, but what can I say? All the ladies love me.” He laughs, as if at himself. “But I’m not on *The Palace of Eden* to fool around. I’m looking for something real. Something special. It’s tough to find real love when you’re a stripper, you know?”

A quick cut of a recording of Leon entering the Palace of Eden. He daps up Eddie, the first one to arrive at the palace and one of the first to leave it. “How’s it going man?”

Another cut of Leon standing on the shallow side of the inground pool next to the other seven guys in the house. Mykinzee stands next to a woman in a forest green bikini. She's got a blond pixie cut, a gymnast's build, and skin so red it looks sunburnt.

"If any of you guys are interested in getting to know Iris," Mykinzee gestures to the sunburnt woman, "please step forward."

Leon steps forward, along with a couple of other guys.

"Now, Iris, you can choose to couple up with any of the guys here, not just from the ones who've stepped forward." Mykinzee steps back to let Iris make her choice.

Iris bites her finger tip.

Nathan, one of the guys who stepped forward, says, "Come on, babe, don't make us wait too long." He smiles and extends a hand to her.

Her eyes roam over the men. "I'll choose you," she locks her eyes onto Leon's. She struts over to him.

"Hey," Leon says and kisses her cheek.

Clips of Leon stepping forward for two other girls. Iris is visibly annoyed, but no one else picks Leon so they're stuck with each other.

Cut to a clip two weeks into the show.

"So, how are you feeling about Leon?" Kim asks Iris. They sit on pool chairs on one side of the pool as Leon and some of the other houseguests play volleyball.

"I was a bit annoyed with him at first, you know. But I like him a lot. We get along really well. Plus, he's fine as hell." Shot from Iris's point of view at Leon. Iris takes a sip of her Corona Light. "And he's a laugh. But I think it a bit too early to tell, don't you think? You can't force these things. I'm just trying to see what happens."

“Right,” Kim says.

“What about you and Eddie? Do you see anything happening there?”

“I don’t know. He told me that he has every season of the original *Star Trek* on VHS. He may be some big-shot entertainment lawyer, but that’s just not my type.”

“You got to start seeing if any of the other boys are interested in you, then. And if they’re not, well, then make them interested.”

“Well, Eli and I have been flirting, like a lot. There’s chemistry there. There is no chemistry between me and Eddie.”

“You should talk to him.”

Cut to a bird’s-eye-view shot on the same day of Renata entering the Palace. She comes in through the front door into the living room, but it’s empty because everyone’s outside. Cross-cut to outside, where Mykinzee appears on a TV screen calling the houseguests to listen. The houseguests crowd onto the seats in front of the TV.

“Houseguests,” Mykinzee says. “How have your two weeks at the palace been thus far?” The houseguests whoop and voice their praises about the Palace. “Glad to hear it. A new face has arrived. Please go to the living room to greet him or her.”

The houseguests scoff and squeal and run into the living room to find Renata, dressed in a burgundy bikini with a gauzy black cover-up over her shoulders. Charlotte is the first to greet her; Renata is surprised by her embrace. Others introduce themselves. Leon hugs her and says it’s nice to meet her. Eli tries to one-up him and gives her a kiss on the cheek. Kim purses her lips. The houseguests, including Renata, go back to sitting in front of the TV where Mykinzee waits.

“Hello, Renata!” Mykinzee waves.

Cut to a clip of Renata speaking to the camera. “Hello, my name is Renata. I’m 28 years old.” She sits on a park bench with a backdrop of trees. “I’m a merchandise graphic designer for Universal Music Group in Santa Monica, but before that I lived in Portland, Oregon for ten years.” She bites her lip. “Hm, a fun fact about me... Well, I grew up speaking Portuguese. Yeah, my parents moved to Arizona from Brazil a few years before I was born.” Cut to a video of her emerging from a pool and smoothing her wet hair back. “I’ve never had any trouble with guys, but I’m on *The Palace of Eden* to have a bit of fun, at least. Maybe meet some different kinds of people. My job gets so busy and hectic, I can hardly find the time to find someone I really like.”

Cut back to the houseguests sitting around the TV.

“Renata, as the new houseguest, you may choose any of the boys in the house to couple up with for now. After she decides, there will be too many people in the house. Tonight, the public will vote on who will go home. Currently established couples will have a fresh start in the recoupling after the elimination. Got it?” All the women except for Renata exchange worried looks.

The houseguests chorused, “Yes, Mykinzee.”

“Good. Renata, who here strikes your fancy?”

The women look hostile. The men look excited. All eyes are on Renata.

“I think I’ll choose Leon.”

“Excellent. Houseguests, I will see you all again this evening with news of who’s heading home.”

Iris heads to the private room to talk to the diary-camera. Leon watches her leave, looking guilty as he sits down next to Renata.

In the private room, Iris says, “You know, it is what it is.” Her arms are crossed over her stomach. “I’m just a little,” she brings her fingers in front of her face with a small space between her thumb and pointer finger. “Just a little bit upset that a slut like her can just come out of nowhere and turn everything upside down. I didn’t even get a chance to get to know Leon. Ugh.”

That night, a girl named Cecily goes home. Iris recouples with Nathan.

Establishing shot back to the wicker platform, the live studio audience, and the people in country club chic.

“It’s been a long eight weeks, hasn’t it?” Mykinzee looks serious.

Leon and Renata nod.

“Now, let’s have a look to see how you answered my question. Did you play for money or love? Renata’s answer was...” Leon glances up at Renata. “Love! Now Leon’s answer...” Mykinzee opens the flap of Leon’s envelope, hand poised to pull the card out. “We will find out after a quick break! Don’t go anywhere because you won’t want to miss this!”

After the break, cut to a clip of Renata and Charlotte sitting in the living room and talking. It’s week four. Eddie, Cecily, and a couple of others have been voted off, and one more houseguest, a man, entered. Mykinzee just popped onto the TV screen by the pool to list off the people who were vulnerable this week. Iris enters the living room from the pool deck/patio and glares at Charlotte and Renata before stalking up the stairs. The two take notice.

Renata and Charlotte continue talking until Iris comes back down the steps.

Charlotte says, “You got something you want to say, Iris?”

“Charlotte!” Renata hisses through her teeth. “Just leave it alone!”

Charlotte ignores her; Iris approaches them.

Iris faces Charlotte, eyes slitted. “You better watch your back before your skank friend over here steals your man.” She turns to Renata. “Thanks a lot,” she says, her face pinched.

Renata purses her lips.

Iris walks away. Off screen: Iris asks, “Was that okay?” The director nods.

Later that night:

Medium shot on Renata sitting on a pool chair by herself. Zoom out to get Leon walking into frame. He sits on the end of the chair, setting Renata’s ankles in his lap. “What’re you thinking?”

Renata shrugs and shakes her head.

“Hey,” Leon lifts her chin. “She’ll be out of here soon. I can feel it.”

Renata gives him a small smile. “That’s not it.” She sighs. “Being here—” she gestures to the Palace. “It’s getting to me. Just a little bit.”

Leon moves up in the pool chair and pulls Renata into his lap. “I get you. I do. It gets to me a bit sometimes, too. But this place brought us here. Together. Plus, there’s only a few weeks left.”

Renata bites her lip. “You’re right, I know you are.” She looks finished, but she sighs. “It’s just—what about after that? What if, regardless of if we win, we leave this place and we just crumble?”

Leon looks down his nose at her, his lips slightly parted. “If you’re really afraid of that, I’ll give you my two cents. Even if we don’t work out, would you rewind and never have entered the game?”

“No.”

“There you go. Me neither.” He smiled. “Besides, you’re the only person who’s ever beaten me in Scrabble. And,” he gives her a squeeze. “You make the best empanadas I’ve ever had. I’m not letting that go without a fight.”

She laughs.

“Houseguests!” comes Mykinzee’s voice from off-screen. “I’ve got an announcement.”

As soon as they all arrive, Mykinzee says, “I will announce who will leave us today.”

She closes her mouth. Some of the houseguests hold each other’s hands. Thirty seconds go by. “Iris, I’m sorry. Please pack your bags.”

* * *

A pop easy-listening song starts playing over a tracking shot following a woman in her late twenties with a spring in her step as she walks through a farmers’ market in a city. She picks up various produce, and stops occasionally to make a purchase. VOICE OVER by a woman with a steady, empowered voice: “It’s time for me to take full control.” The woman wears a flared midi-skirt and a button-up blouse. She struts up to the end of the street, where the farmers’ market ends. A trio is playing instruments that turns the pop easy-listening sound diegetic.

VOICE OVER: “Are you ready to take control?” The woman is swaying to the beat of the music.

VOICE OVER: “Yes. You. Are. Ask your doctor about LauvLite, the monthly birth control pill.”

The music gets faster, and the woman lifts her arms and sways to the music. VOICE OVER:

“This pill is not suitable for women who are pregnant or breastfeeding. Ask your doctor before using LauvLite if you’ve had a history of endometriosis.” Other women join the dancing and swaying. They all look free and completely content. VOICE OVER: “Side effects may include:

severe depression, weight gain, death, mood swings, abdominal pain, more frequent periods, and migraines.” The music continues, but the trio of musicians stop playing their instruments. The

women who were dancing stop and clap for the musicians. Close up on the main woman as she smiles and claps. “Talk to your doctor to take control and see if LauvLite is right for you.”

* * *

“And we’re back!” Mykinzee’s teeth shine, almost glow. “In answering the question, ‘Did you play for money or love?’, Renata said love. Let’s now find out what Leon said.” Mykinzee takes the card out of the envelope and looks at the camera. “Leon said…” Mykinzee looks from left to right and presses her lips into a smirk. “Love! Congratulations, guys!” Confetti starts falling over the raised platform. Mykinzee hugs Renata, then Leon. “You’ve found love and won a quarter of a million dollars!”

Leon takes Renata’s hand and brings it up between them in victory.

All of the people on both sides of the pool, contents covered with a thin film of shimmering blue cellophane, hold flutes of champagne. Silver and gold balloons make a graceful descent over everyone, raining down from the black tarp mimicking a night sky. Everyone’s smiles hurt the corners of their mouths.

* * *

One Year Later

Mykinzee sits on a white sofa on the same wicker platform across from Renata and Leon, on a matching white love seat. “Hello, hello!” Mykinzee smiles at the camera. “Thank you for joining us. Today, on the season finale of *The Palace of Eden*, we have three special guests: last season’s winners, Renata and Leon, as well as the first, highly anticipated *Palace of Eden* baby!” Applause. The camera zooms onto Renata’s pregnant stomach.

Leon’s arm is around Renata’s shoulders. Both of them stroke her stomach.

“Welcome back, you two!” Mykinzee says. “Before we catch up with our *Palace of Eden* darlings and hear their predictions for who will win this season, we’ll take a short break! Stay right where you are because you won’t want to miss this!”

The camera stops rolling and Leon and Renata shift away from each other. Their arms are crossed, Leon’s over his stomach and Renata’s resting over her bump.

Then, Leon holds out his hand in the space between them, palm up but unexpectant. Renata looks at it and places her hand in it.

“Don’t worry,” Leon says. “It’s almost over.”

Renata closes her eyes and exhales. “If only that were true to begin with.”

Mykinzee comes rushing up the platform to her seat, combing her hair with her fingers.

“We’re back on in thirty seconds!” the camera man says.

Renata and Leon release each other’s hands and scoot closer to each other. While Mykinzee interviews them about the couples of the current season, Renata’s hand finds its way back to Leon’s. As they pull their hands away to applaud the new finalists, the already loose hold they have on each other dissolves.

Story 2

Tears of Llorona

It was winter, around six o'clock. For the past five months, I drank tequila every night to help me go to sleep. Seven months ago, Les gave me a bottle of Tears of Llorona for my twenty-eighth birthday. I didn't touch it until a month ago, at four o'clock on a Tuesday morning when my ceiling started to blur because I'd been staring at it for so long. I planned on saving it for something impromptu and special. Maybe it was wishful, thinking I'd get to celebrate having an easy case where the parents would agree on 50/50 shared custody without any fuss, since there always seemed to be children involved. Or maybe Les would come to my door and tell me I was going to be an aunt, despite neither of us having an affinity for children. Maybe we wouldn't drink to celebrate. But I had run out of Cazadores. And the persuasion of sleep won over those improbable scenarios. The bottle of Tears of Llorona was all I had left. After that, I couldn't stop myself from drinking it every night; the sleep was so deep after that first glass. It lasted for a month, thirty half-glasses (to conserve it) and at least five hours of sleep for thirty nights straight. As reliable as the hairband on my wrist. It put me to sleep like no other medication, not Nyquil or any of those new millennial sleep aids. A squirt of lime juice made it all the better.

But I stood at the liquor store gaping at the price of a bottle of Tears of Llorona: \$230. Jesus, how did Les afford this? I certainly couldn't. Maybe he and Mareesa split it? No, that would never happen. Either way, \$230 was a huge chunk of my paycheck that I refused to part with. But I couldn't go back to the mediocre naps of Cazadores. I picked up a thirty-dollar bottle of Suerte, hoping it lives up to its name and puts me in a goddamn coma.

The liquor store was nestled into the corner of a half-abandoned strip mall. "For lease" signs accompanied by various 505 numbers whipped in the wind on a couple of the surrounding

units. I wiggled my gloved fingers to keep them from growing stiff in the cold as the plastic handles of the shopping bag rested where my fingers met my palm. The bottle of Suerte bumped against my leg as I walked out of the store. Before I could pluck the keys out of my jacket pocket, I noticed a couple making out against the passenger door of my car. The setting sun reflected the window they leaned on, like the amber gradient of Tears of Llorona, extra añejo, mocking me.

The woman's leg was draped over the man's arm, so the man was half carrying her and half holding her against my door. Their hips thrust against each other. I'll have to make sure the people at the dealership double-check my car alarm the next time I get it serviced. It goes off for no reason in the middle of my work day or when I'm visiting my parents for dinner, but when a couple humps each other on it? Nothing.

"Ugh," I said, so only I could hear. My breath fogged in front of me. After considering the couple for a moment, I started to wonder why they chose here of all places. Not their own car, not their home, or even the bathroom of that sticky bar up the road. They chose the passenger door of my used Hyundai as the site to reach first base. Maybe they only needed each other to keep warm. Maybe they didn't want to ruin the black paint on their Lexus. Maybe he couldn't bend her over their SUV as much as he could've on mine. Gag.

I unlocked my car. The couple jumped and separated from each other. The man scurried away to a dark pick-up truck, parked in front of a joint called Crabs 'n' Critters. The woman climbed into the Lexus. A handprint cut through the fogged glass on my window. The man's hand, I assumed. I rolled the window open to make it disappear, and I saw the woman through her window. She stared at the logo on her steering wheel, but she didn't notice me looking. It was getting darker and darker, and I could just barely see the flare of her nostrils and hear her

quiet sniffs. She didn't even seem to notice I was there. Funny, considering she was just pushed up against a car that isn't hers or her lover's. I thought maybe she'd like to know the owner of the car, maybe to thank her for letting them use it. My passenger door isn't real estate for your ass, and my passenger window isn't a site where your husband, boyfriend, friends-with-benefits, whatever, can commemorate this moment. A little thanks would be nice.

I kissed my self-control goodbye as I popped the cork out of the bottle of Suerte. After a swig, I closed the cork cap and looked at the woman a bit longer. The tequila cleared my vision and the cold coming from the open passenger window quieted my head enough to process her. It had been a while since I'd last seen her. The round cheeks that made her look like an adult cherub. The hairline that crept a little too far down her giant forehead. I thought I was just projecting until she turned on the light to look for something in the glove compartment. The last time I'd seen those features was in my apartment at my last birthday party.

* * *

Mareesa sat by herself, in the corner of the sectional my parents gave to me after redecorating. She nursed a wine glass filled with the Riesling she brought, while everyone else, including Les, played Flip Cup with Pabst Blue Ribbon.

Les usually dominated at every drinking game. He would've won this one, but he kept looking at his phone and typing on it. I couldn't see anything on his lock screen except for a tiny smudge of white, purple, pink, and orange. The Instagram icon. I wished I had my contacts on, but I knew I wouldn't have taken them out before going to sleep after getting completely shit-faced.

I didn't care at the time anyway. I only voiced what I cared about. After winning the game of Flip Cup, I slurred, "Les! Why don't you follow me on Instagram?"

“What are you talking about?” he said. “I don’t have an Instagram.”

“Oh. Maybe I’m just drunk.”

“Yeah, you are.” He smiled at me and poured two screwdrivers. “Want another?” he asked pushing the glass into my hand. We clinked them. “Happy birthday, Steph. You’re getting really old.”

I poked my tongue at him and downed my screwdriver.

* * *

Fuck! If only I wasn’t so wasted that night; that might’ve given me a hint as to what’s going on with Mareesa. I did sleep well, though. You can’t have everything.

Before Mareesa could turn and see me, openly and unashamedly staring at her, I gunned the engine of my car and peeled off, Suerte gripped between my thighs.

I stopped in the parking lot of the sticky bar so I had a view of the street. The bar is in the direction of Les and Mareesa’s house. If that really was her, she’d have to pass by. Where else would she go, if not home?

Lucky for me, traffic was light and the cars slowed down because there was a light close by. I counted cars. One, a blue one. Two, a silver one. Maybe it wasn’t Mareesa. Three, another silver one. I hope it wasn’t Mareesa. Four, a champagne-colored one. She wouldn’t take this long, if I had actually seen her. Right? Five, a white one and six, a black one. This one was smaller than her car. Two more cars. Another car—a black SUV! I couldn’t tell if it was hers. *No shit*, I thought, *it’s too dark and you’re too far to see inside, dumbass*. I pulled out of the parking lot and trailed her. She drove in the left lane; I drove in the right. She had about a quarter of a mile on me. We stopped at the same light, and I was a few cars behind hers, still in the right lane. No one was behind her, so I saw the Lexus emblem, thankful for wearing my contacts.

She turned right after a while, onto the winding road that led to another main road. I slowed, wanting to get out of Mareesa's view since the cars in front of me had taken their separate ways. She turned left, into the development of townhouses where she and Les live. She parked in front of the house. Pulled the keys out of her pocket and unlocked the front door. It was definitely Mareesa.

Dammit, Les! I told him he shouldn't have married her, not so soon anyway. I told him people are more likely, *highly* likely, to get divorced if they commit before twenty-three. Engaged at nineteen and married at twenty. It was statistically doomed, and I let him know.

"So what? What if it's different? Do you want me to end up like you?" he said. "A twenty-four-year-old with no life outside of law school? I don't think so."

Four years later, now look where they were.

I reversed into a driveway and left the way I came. Back home. A glass of Suerte over ice, too lazy even for a squirt of lime. Three and a half hours of sleep. Dreams of Mareesa and my client, Mr. Crichter together. I'll take what I can get.

* * *

By the time I left the office, *I* was ready to divorce Mr. Crichter for his obsessiveness.

He called my phone while I prepared for our court appearance.

"Don't forget to talk about how she cheated on me. With Dan. Ugh."

With my fingertips on my temples, I said, "Mr. Crichter, I assure you, it is emphasized in our records."

"Okay, but don't forget." He paused. "And don't forget to mention that I'm much taller than Dan."

"That really isn't a matter the judge would be interested in."

“Just thought I’d mention it. You know, for the record.”

“If you could stop calling me, I’ll have some time to prepare your case—”

“Don’t you mean ‘our’ case?” Jesus Christ.

“—and I’ll contact you to review it all. I’ll call you later, Mr. Crichter. Goodbye.”

“But—” he started.

I disconnected.

This happened seven more times. Don’t forget about how she killed my pet snake. Don’t forget about how she put my boxers in the dryer, even though I specifically told her I like when they’re line dried. Don’t forget about how she broke my Wham! CD—she said it was an accident, but I know it was on purpose! Blah, blah, blah.

God, how can anyone stand being married? At least they don’t have children.

At 6:50, just as I was about to clock out, he called me crying. “You have to tell me how I can get her back. I can’t live without her.”

Oh, brother. “Mr. Crichter, that really isn’t a matter I’m qualified to handle ...”

“Please, Steph. Can I call you ‘Steph’? Anything will help. What am I doing wrong?”

I couldn’t do it. I’m a lawyer, not a therapist. I referred him to one.

I pulled up to Les’s house after I finally left the office. The Lexus was nowhere in sight; maybe it’s better she’s not there.

Les opened the door, shirtless with grey sweatpants on. “Steph? What’re you doing here?”

“Is Mareesa home?” I asked.

“Um, no. She’s got an event to run. A sweet sixteen, I think.” He didn’t move out of the doorway to let me in. “Why?”

“We gotta talk.” I moved to enter, but he stood still. “Are you gonna let me in? Come on, it’s freezing out here.”

He stepped out of the doorway, and I followed him into his kitchen. Noise from the TV leaked out of his bedroom. An empty pizza box and a half-full bottle of Apothic Red sat on the table in front of me. I raised my eyebrow at him. “Since when do you like red wine?”

“Don’t judge. It’s good with pizza.” He fidgeted with the watch on his wrist, a gift from Mareesa from their first anniversary. “Can you make this quick? I was about to go to sleep.”

“At eight o’clock?”

“Yes,” he said, slowly. “What’s up?”

Laughter came from his room. Definitely a woman, definitely not a laugh track. Les’s eyes widened as mine narrowed.

“I thought you said Mareesa wasn’t home.”

“She isn’t,” he stammered. “That—that was just the TV. Anyway, what was it you wanted to tell—”

“Les,” came a sing-song voice with a hiss on the S. When she got to the kitchen, she crossed her arms and leaned on the wall. She wore nothing but a t-shirt that just passed her hip bones. “Who’s this?”

I stared. She shifted her weight so her black lace panties peeked out. Good lord. She looked about twenty-five years older than Les with a classic suburban mom haircut—layered, curled at the ends, tasteful side bangs. “You know, I was wondering the exact same thing.”

Les’s knuckles paled between his teeth. “Sylvia. This is Steph. My sister.”

“Oh shit,” she said under her breath. Recovering herself with a panicked smile, she said, “Steph! Did you like the tequila?”

I whipped my head to Les. “What? What does she mean?”

Les covered his face with his hands.

Sylvia didn’t seem to notice. “The tequila?” She frowned. “Tears of Llorona? Did you like it?”

“Oh, I sure did, Sylvia.”

Silence lasted for a couple of beats.

“Well,” Sylvia smacked her lips. “It’s nice to meet you. You look exactly like Les!”

Les dragged his hands off of his face and blinked.

I gave a dry laugh. “Hmm, I’m not quite sure what you mean by that.”

Her eyes widened. “I—er—I—that didn’t come out right. I just meant—”

“You know what?” I said over her. “I’m just gonna go.”

I stood to leave, with Les following behind.

“Steph, wait.”

“What?” I called still moving toward my car. His hand stopped me from getting in.

“I—” whatever he wanted to say seemed to die in his throat. “What did you want to tell me?”

“Doesn’t matter anymore.” Before slamming the door, I decided to let him have it.

“Christ, Les! The tequila? Really? God, I should’ve known. You never would’ve been able to afford it, and Maresa definitely wouldn’t have spotted you.”

“Come on, would you listen—”

“Nope, I’m done. I warned you. I warned you! If you just listened to me you would’ve been able to do whatever this—” I flapped my hands around, at a loss because of his choice in

mistress. “—is. How dare you involve me in this? God, do you think I’m stupid? Well, I guess I am, considering.”

“No, I—”

“It doesn’t matter. Have fun with your marriage.” I bit my lip to keep from saying more and left him in the street with his hands tangled in his hair.

When I finally got home, I sat with my glass of Suerte and lime and took another look at the birthday card Les gave me, still in my kitchen after pulling it off of the bottle of Tears of Llorona. It said, “Steph—happy 28th birthday! Hope it’s a good one. -Les”

Les was never known for his sentiment, but I should’ve known—there was something off about his handwriting. The wide letters looked different from Les’s spiky, condensed handwriting. There was too little space between the line and the dot of his “i.” And it wasn’t Mareesa’s bubbly handwriting, either. It even looked a bit like the type on the Tears of Llorona bottle. I can’t believe I didn’t notice it sooner.

The full glass of Suerte I downed went straight to my head, and the orange bunny on the bottle winked at me. I slept until my alarm rang the next morning.

Story 3

How to Date a Soft Boy

You consider making one. Just for fun, you tell your friends. Just to people watch. Nothing you'd ever take seriously. But still, you practice your smize in the mirror every night before you leave for work. You try it on the men sitting at the bar yelling "Excuse me, miss!" over house music to order their tequila sodas and screwdrivers from you. Your success is ten digits scratched onto signed receipts with the words, "Give me a call some time." You scrap them. Too eager.

You become the photo-queen in your brunch circle. While you sip a mimosa or sit in front of a plate of eggs benedict and home fries, one of your friends takes a picture of you. When your parents visit, you drag them to art museums where you pose in front of paintings and sculptures and your mom takes your picture, bending down to get a flattering angle. Your dad wanders off, and it's only after the museum visit that you have a conversation with him. When he asks about your friends, who you've known since high school, you can't come up with a single satisfactory answer even though you just had brunch with them.

"Does Jordana still teach yoga on the side?" he asks.

"I don't know. Probably."

"What about Michael? Is he still a tour guide at the Broad?"

"Dad, I don't know. We just never seem to talk about those things."

Your dad sighs but doesn't press on.

You call up your friends and ask if they want to go to the beach over the weekend.

"What? I thought you hated the beach." You do, but it looks nicer than a camping trip or a hike, especially in the San Diego summer.

After attending one day of Outside Lands (the lineup was boring), visiting your friend in L.A. and take a walk in Griffith Park where she lets you take pictures with her dog, and two bubble tea friend dates, you finally feel you have enough to populate your SocialHouse profile.

If you were a guy, would you swipe right on yourself? Is the first photo of you kneeling on the sand in a strapless bikini and with squinty eyes and the water in the background enough to catch people's eyes? Does your toothy smile while you hold a dog on the trails of Griffith Park convey how loveable and friendly you are? What about your bio? "25. Accountant by day, bartender by night. Catch me in the park on the weekends feeding bread to the ducks. Not on here much, so drop a line on my Insta @-----." Does it leave people wanting more? Possibly. Maybe you're just overthinking it.

Get to it. Swipe right on the twenty-something named Quentin. Future you will regret it, but present you doesn't care. His first photo is in black and white; he stands on train tracks and smokes a cigarette. His profile reads, "I'll be your biggest fan and you'll be mine / But I still wanna break your heart and make you cry." Ignore the voice in your head saying *those are not just song lyrics*. You match and he messages.

Enthusiastically pretend to like his music recommendations, even though King Krule make you want to gouge your eyes out. Think about witty responses to his various "film" criticisms, just in case he gives you time to get a word in about them. Obviously, he's a fan of Quentin Tarantino (who, he might claim, is his namesake). It's not a witty response, but say, "I hate *Pulp Fiction*." He does not message back. Shrug it off. Move on.

To a man named Ezra. He wears dark blue skinny jeans, a green dad sweater, and a beanie in a photo standing next to Kevin Parker, better known as Tame Impala. Comment on this. Tell him how jealous you are, gush about how much of a legend Kevin Parker is, even

though you only know one Tame Impala song (“The Less I Know the Better”). He’ll respond, delighted to know at least *one* woman with a good taste in music exists. At least *someone* knows the potential Kevin Parker has to save modern music. And Ezra got all this from your responses of “lol” and “true.” Every day for two weeks, he recommends a song to you and asks for your opinion on them. Don’t take the latter request too seriously; he’s just using these questions as a vehicle to assert his own opinion.

Quentin adds you on Snapchat but doesn’t say anything to you. He sees that you don’t watch his story. You see that he watches yours. In response to a video meeting at your office captioned, “Could’ve been in an email,” he responds “Haha.” In response to your story of you reading and drinking tea, he messages, “Whatcha reading?” And when you leave him on read, “My favorite author’s Jack Kerouac. Who’s yours?”

You wake up to a Snapchat notification from Quentin. It’s a selfie with the caption, “You up?”

Three weeks after you and Ezra started talking (or, more like, Ezra started talking *at* you), he comments on a new photo on your profile. He says, “You look like weed and iced coffee smells.” In the picture, you’re petting your parents’ new cat. Ignore him.

Ezra tries again. “I want to meet you. You’re so beautiful and broken.”

Refrain from telling him he’s an asshole. Instead, down a shot and respond, “Time and place?”

Before you enter the record store across town that Ezra told you to meet him at, you get a message from Quentin. It reads, “You’re clearly not making any effort in this. Let me know when you’re done wasting my time and ready for a man to be good to you.”

When Ezra is forty-five minutes late to the record store, don't say anything about it. Don't think about how his pink pullover hoodie is so pastel, it's almost white. Don't think about the knee holes in his jeans and wonder if his legs got cold in the oddly chilly breezes of San Diego at night.

Before you can say anything, he looks you up and down. "You look so moody. It's kind of hot."

Don't respond but ask, "Are you looking for anything specific?"

"Nah," he says. "I just like being around old records. The smell helps me think."

Don't vocalize your elongated "okay." Tuck your hair behind your ears and flip through the records.

When he slips his hand into your back pocket or starts tugging at one of your belt loops, choose not to resist. Choose to listen him when he says, "I can take you places you've never been before."

And he does. But not in the way he probably meant it. His apartment was just like anybody else's; there was nothing even uniquely shitty about. Not even a record player in sight. But you've never been there before, so he wasn't lying. Maybe that's why you let him lead you to his bed and unroll a condom. At least he had the decency to do that.

Ghost him.

Find a request from @julian_dre to message you in your Instagram DMs. The profile picture shows a man with Warby Parker glasses, curls falling into his eyes, a heather-grey pullover under a black jean jacket. His bio says, "Don't do drugs, kids." His message says, "Hey, I saw your profile on SocialHouse, but I don't know if you saw me. I'm here to just shoot my shot, I guess (smiling sweating emoji)."

Wonder how you missed him or if you even saw him on SocialHouse; don't let yourself feel good yet. Respond with something like, "Hey Julian! Nice to meet you. I promise I don't do drugs." Let it flow.

"Lol, in that case, do you wanna meet up in the park and start an organization called No Duck Hungry?"

Feel yourself genuinely start to laugh for the first time since you made your profile. Agree to go. When you meet up with him, banter about who of the two of you would win in a hypothetical fight and settle the matter with an arm-wrestling match. Don't just let him win, put some effort into it. On your second date, go to the Broad. Confirm that, yes, Michael still works there, and nod when he mouths, "Is that who you've been talking to?" while Julian's back is turned. When you and Julian stand in front of a wall filled with separately framed photographs of people, listen to him when he tells you to stand next to one and copy the subject's face. By the third date, you consider deleting SocialHouse and making your Instagram private. But something tells you not to. It's only the third date.

That "something" turned out to be right. Julian ghosts you before your sixth date, leaving you standing at the entrance of the San Diego Zoo, realizing you won't get an explanation for all the unanswered calls and messages.

After three weeks and a shot of Patrón, match with someone with the worst features of Julian and the best of Ezra. But this one responds to the name "Jesse." Convince yourself that his "Currently Reading: *Lolita* by Nabokov" is completely harmless and that his mentioning it doesn't *necessarily* mean he's a prick.

Tell him that, yes, you'd like to go for a drink and yes, you'd *love* to hear about why he thinks astrology is horse shit. Do not tell him that he's taking astrology more seriously than anyone with any degree of belief in it.

Believe him when he says you're really smart.

When you see the black slip-on Vans near his entryway, convince yourself they're his even though they're way too small.

In the morning when he finally wakes up, after you haven't batted an eyelash of sleep, lean into him when he puts his arm around your waist,

When he says, "I actually have a girlfriend," go ahead and say it.

"I know." Stay as still as possible.

"So... you're okay with that?"

Don't. Say. Anything.

You feel him relax against you.

In the next few weeks, tell him it's okay when he cancels on you fifteen times to be with his girlfriend. You know, his *real* girlfriend.

But you don't care. You don't. And if his girlfriend finds out, better for her. She's probably more experienced. She'd probably dump his ass.

He finally makes one of the plans the two of you had. Let him win at pool but make it a close game. He'll be impressed. From then on out, it's the same. Drinks. Bed.

One morning's different. Someone requests to DM you on Instagram. You can't place her. Red hair. Fake eyelashes. Never seems to wear anything besides peasant tops and skinny jeans and thigh-high boots.

“I’m so sorry,” she writes. “I can’t do this anymore. Jesse’s been cheating on you. With me.”

You scan her profile, but he’s not on there. You circle back to Jesse’s profile. No redheads in sight. Only a brown-haired girl with a smile as big as her hair.

Drop your phone, but don’t wake him up. You draw the line at sharing the role of “the side-piece,” funnily enough.

Your phone vibrates with a message from Julian. “Hey.”

So it goes.

Story 4

Trouble at Scripp's

I was working on a new assignment. Potential interview questions for an author of a tarot reading/astrology book pair, scheduled to come out in four months. I had been staring at the same page for about fifteen minutes, trying to skim it, but it felt like I was reading an academic article on the Proteus Effect or dual processing models. I was stuck on the word “retrograde.” R-E-T-R-O-G-R-A-D-E. I looked at it long enough for it to stop looking like a word, even after I blinked. It was funny, because I used the word plenty of times, as I attributed my woes to Mercury in retrograde when I relayed the highlights of my life to my friends. It was the end of my second week working full-time at Scripp's Publishing House, and I was already getting bored.

At least until a shadow fell over the pages I was skimming, blocking the fluorescent lights. Alana Darte, Editorial Director at Scripp's, stood at the threshold of my cubicle with her forehead creased and her jaw clenched so tightly, I could almost hear it straining to shatter. Today, her tight curls were pulled into an elegant bun, but so tightly that it lifted her eyebrows just slightly, so she looked angry-surprised. I'm pretty sure she was just angry, though.

I felt like a wide-eyed doe, at the barrel of a hunter's rifle.

“Why—” Alana started, forehead vein about to pop. “Why—the fuck—did I just get a call from Bryan about Coen's interview yesterday?”

Oh. I can say I felt bad. I was grateful to Alana and everyone at Scripp's. I graduated from college in May, then I got an internship here, and afterward, they offered a full-time

position. Every project I started over the summer, I was allowed to see through. Though she wasn't my direct supervisor, Alana became somewhat of a mentor in that time.

But even as I cowered in my cubicle seat and as my cheeks flushed, I can't say I regret what I did, even though technically it was an accident.

Only now that Alana towered over me, my mind offered clarity on the muddled day I sent the talking points for Michaela Coen's interview. Her debut self-improvement book about the power of gratitude, *The Pursuit of Happiness*, was set for release a week from the day Alana arrived at my cubicle.

Way before that on a slow Tuesday, I asked my supervisor, Jess, if there was anything I could work on. I was very aware of how I had no real impact on the company, but I also felt guilty for every moment I spent not doing work. I didn't mind functioning as the person to help anyone in need with daily administrative minutiae, but no one gave me anything that day. As Jess looked around her office for books in need of publicity work, she told me that she didn't think she had anything for me. Until—

“Oh, here. We need talking points for this book.” She handed me *The Pursuit of Happiness*. “The author also hosts a podcast about life in her fifties. I forget what it's called, but it might help to look it up.”

“Thank you!” I scurried out of her office, afraid to take up too much of her time.

After reading the synopsis on the back, I wasn't thrilled the assignment was on this book, which referred to the author's fiftieth birthday as a “golden jubilee birthday.” But it was better than browsing *Vice*.

With a galley of Coen's book in one hand and a mug of shitty Keurig coffee in another, I started skimming. *The Pursuit of Happiness* was... interesting? A few notable excerpts:

“As my birth-giver and sperm-provider, my mother and father were the first people I decided to sit down with for coffee (in my father’s case) and wine (in my mother’s case) to tell them how thankful I was for the way they raised me. I thanked them for my genes—my inability to tolerate spices hotter than salt (much to my husband’s chagrin!), my devout sense of faith, my appreciation for mayo on sliced bread!”

“In a world filled with instant, performative, and impersonal communication, sitting your loved ones down and telling them how much they mean to you can make all the difference. The time you take and the love they will feel from you will leave you both glowing.”

“It might be hard to talk to everyone who had a significant impact on your life that you are grateful for, whether the situation was positive or negative. The first person you had sex with might’ve been present for a monumental moment, but don’t feel obligated to track them down. An equally gratifying alternative would be to write down what you would say to them. Likewise, the person who introduced you to the joys of cosplay might be completely out of your life, and while the photos and costumes remain, you don’t need to dredge up any negative feelings to express gratitude.”

I looked at her Instagram, just as grating as her book, and saw a post about how her mother died, including a picture of a closed casket with the caption:

“Mama, I will miss you so much. I am forever grateful for you (sad face emoji).”

Coen’s book was memorable only because of her sickening tone and her stunningly sheltered life.

My questions started out pretty standard:

Besides your upcoming fiftieth birthday, what other catalysts were there for you to actively start pulling your loved ones aside and express your gratitude to them? What was your research process like?

But then they slipped into something more malicious:

How do the people to whom you expressed your gratitude feel about you sharing it in this book? Does that feel performative to you?

When you write, "As a writer...", who are you trying to convince of your writer ethos?

The next morning, my supervisor had more pressing and enjoyable assignments for me to do. She didn't ask me about the Coen talking points for the rest of the summer, and to be honest, I forgot about them. The document filled with horrible questions that would potentially make Coen cry (because that is undoubtedly what she'd do) sat untouched on my work computer.

That is, until a couple of months later, when my frazzled supervisor asked me to email *NPR* with my talking points as soon as possible. It wasn't until Alana asked me why I was a dumbass could I picture Terry Gross or Lakshmi Singh uttering the near-bullying questions I wrote. And poor Jess, she's been going through a nasty divorce, no wonder she asked me to send it straight to *NPR* without checking it.

Well, I had my excuses, too. My girlfriend broke up with me. And for a man! She said that I turned her straight, but how's that possible? Well, fuck her. Plus, I had other more engaging projects to worry about to give much of my effort to Coen's publicity campaign. I trusted my past self too much and attached the word document with all of the questions that I

thought would never see the light of day. That's how much I didn't care. Or, to cut myself some slack, that's how much else I had to worry about.

I'm surprised the folks at *NPR* didn't question my questions. It's like the world conspired against Michaela Coen and decided to give her a very public beating. Or maybe everyone just trusts each other too much and has too much going on in their own lives.

The video version of Coen's interview went viral. Terry Gross got through my nice questions, which Coen, true to form, answered with saccharine enthusiasm. But the shift was noticeable.

"Your mother died recently?" Gross asked. I braced myself.

Coen's smile faded into skepticism. "Yes."

"Can you speak to your Instagram post about it and your call for the audience to avoid performative emotions?" I could see Gross's regret flicker across her face.

Coen looked offended. "I—er—I don't—" She said some nonsense about how sometimes, sharing your grief with others relieves a bit of the burden.

Her discomfort still invisible, Gross continued: "What makes you an authority on happiness, since you present your own life as effortless?"

Coen choke-laughed. "It wasn't effortless, Terry, I just—um—I'm just an optimistic person." An okay answer, I'll give her that.

Gross ran her hand through her hair. She was definitely starting to lose her cool. "Why are you—" so annoying, she should've read, instead of spluttering. Terry Gross! Spluttering! Come on, Terry, where's that signature lack of inflection?

I had to stop there. Gross fumbling with her interview sheet and Coen getting all red and huffy was the note I wanted the video to end on. My questions made *NPR* look like a clickbait

news outlet. I could imagine the headline: “Sheltered No-Name Author Gets Roasted by Terry Gross.”

When Alana came to my cubicle, she fired me. I can’t decide if she was right to do so or not. Coen’s interview did end up going viral, and it was only after that did *The Pursuit of Happiness* start climbing *the New York Times*’ Best Seller List and sales shot up. No matter how well Coen did with book sales, Scripp’s still got a bad reputation. If I recall correctly, *Shelf Awareness* said this incident was “absolutely careless” and questioned the current state of publishing. Coen was portrayed as the victim of the situation, and Alana gave a public apology to her.

And me, well, now I’m a barista at Starbucks. Karma comes to greet me every day in a caramel cloud macchiato.

Story 5

The Girl Who Killed God

The girl slipped the sheet of Uncle Jesus out of her back pocket, the one with tessellations of the hands in the *Creation of Adam*. It was three squares long and three squares wide, each square a small scene of God and Adam creating, creating, creating. As she scanned the rows, the space between the fingers seemed to grow minutely bigger and bigger with each pane. The corner she tore, the corner where God's and Adam's fingers were closest, left a clean right angle, despite her harshness. She leaned back on the itchy cushion of her living room couch and let the tab dissolve under her tongue. The sun was at its peak outside of her window, warming her face, and, she thought, drying the inside of her mouth. She licked her lips, fixated on the vase of wilted flowers on the plastic coffee table, too short for beer pong. The flowers picked from the church's gardens drooped in their repurposed kombucha bottle, swiped from a house party from the previous year. She stared as the petals dripped, each splatter echoing in the room and staining the coffee table grey-tinged purple and grey-tinged yellow. She watched the petals drip for hours, but the sun outside her window didn't seem to keep up.

The petal drippings ran off of the table onto the floor. The sound was so deafening, the girl's feet carried her out of the door of her apartment. Passed the low-tier pizza place, gagging at the thought of eating. Passed the apartment building she swore she went into once, though she couldn't remember why. Passed the convenience store with the only ATM without surcharge within walking distance of the campus. Passed the sign announcing the university: Clarus University, Fidem. Familia. Benefactum.

The next block was just a stretch of road flanked by lush trees and scattered streetlamp class gifts. She walked by the class of 1958's streetlamp three separate times before quickening her pace. Once the scenery changed slightly and the girl felt she made some progress to wherever her feet were taking her, the class of 1958's streetlamp reappeared, as if she was on a mile-long conveyor belt, pushing her forward, then shoving her back. Her breath quickened as she labored onward, feeling like she was trudging through a layer of mud. Head whipping from side to side, tears rolled down her cheeks in fear of her repetitive surroundings. But through her tears, the yellow and purple flowers of the church's gardens peeked through the too-familiar greenery. Relief leaked onto her cheeks. The sun still laid on the horizon. Night still hadn't fallen. The girl feared it would never get dark again.

She scrubbed her palms underneath her eyes and rested a shaking hand on the pewter door handle of the Albert Clarus Protestant Church of Lenetta, Virginia. Upon entry, she shivered as the cool of the church nipped at her sweat-drenched clothes.

The girl warmed her hands over the flickering candles covering the table that greeted her. She tried to light one but kept burning herself with the lighter. The smell of the fire and melting wax rushed to her head and urged her forward to settle onto the pew closest to the tables. She closed her eyes and put her head between her knees, but she still felt the lighter's flame sting her thumb and the glare of the candles on the inside of her eye lids.

* * *

The girl stood outside of the hospital, lighting a cigarette. After the first inhale, the nausea in her stomach settled, but the scenes of him (them?) remained.

He looked undamaged, as if he would open his eyes and push the curls off of his forehead. But the fluorescent lights jaundiced his usually pale skin. They exacerbated the lines

on his face so his cheeks looked like bread dough. The five o'clock shadow he always wore was overgrown, so a thick layer of hair covered the bottom halves of his cheeks. Her tears came slowly and darkened the hairs on her father's lifeless arm as she sat at his bedside. No one, not even God, it seemed, could bring him back. At the sound of her mother's knock, the girl stood, but felt resistance at her wrist.

She turned her head slowly, not believing what she felt. In her father's place, a man smiled up at her. Her father's short brown curls were replaced with wavy black hair that fell passed his shoulders. The overgrown five o'clock shadow was erased from his cheeks. Her eyes widened and she tugged her arm away, but it stayed in the man's grasp. His skin glowed golden against the warm almond-color of her own.

The man hushed her. "Don't be afraid," he cooed. "I'm still here."

She heard the doorknob of the room turn but didn't dare take her eyes off of the man. But it didn't matter, his grip on the girl slackened as he started to dissolve into a series of computer-like glitches.

"Honey?" came her mother's thick, shaky voice from the door.

Her father reappeared before her mother could notice anything wrong.

The girl held up her mother as she struggled through the eulogy: "He wouldn't have wanted us to mourn for too long. He would've wanted us to trust God's plan and trust that, by His grace, we will all be reunited with him."

The girl held her tongue. *What plan?* she wanted to vocalize. *Aren't plans predictable? Don't plans have some sort of obvious logic? Where's the reason? Oh right, there isn't one.*

Immediately, guilt bubbled into her stomach. The girl remembered asking her father similar questions, once she got old enough to start really thinking about what she learned on

Sunday mornings at church. And, in his measured voice, her father would answer, “I don’t know. That’s part of the beauty of it. There’s surrender in faith. But if your faith’s strong, you never need to worry about the uncertainties. He will make sure it all goes right, just maybe not in the way you expected.”

Pastor Jacob hugged her at the close of the funeral. “Your continual presence here assures me of your resilience.”

The funny thing is, the girl would’ve rather been anywhere else.

* * *

The girl rested her chin on her knees once the dizziness subsided. She looked around her, at the chapel lined with scenes of biblical stories frozen in stained glass. She sat beneath the pane of Mary cradling Jesus, with her back to the wall and her shoulder resting on the seatback of the pew. The girl tucked her chin into her chest and hugged her knees tightly in an attempt to block out the sound of her pounding heart.

* * *

Four years earlier, a year after her father died, the girl and her mother sat beneath Mary cradling Jesus in stained glass. The day before, they moved the girl into her dorm for her first year at Clarus. It’s not what the girl wanted, but she knew her father would be overjoyed if he was there, knowing his daughter was attending his alma mater. She’d probably feel better about it, too, if he were still alive. After the girl and her mother unpacked, they fell asleep on the twin bed the university provided. The girl woke up to find her mother curled up on the floor beside it.

The next morning, they attended a “Welcome, freshman” church service. The preacher’s sermon was one the girl has heard many times before. He spoke about how everyone in the room was about to enter a vastly new environment in which child has to live without parent and parent

has to live without child. “There shouldn’t be any fear in the change because,” he said, “God is constant. God is always with you.”

The girl went through the motions but tried to tap into the time in her life when they weren’t just motions. She knelt. She folded her hands. She closed her eyes. She could almost feel that old part of herself come back, until she let her eyes flutter and she saw her mother, silently sobbing and mouthing words she couldn’t make out. Wisps of her mother’s muted black hair obstructed the girl’s view a bit, but the wetness made her face shine through. The girl resumed her position, eyes closed, head facing forward, hands folded, so her mother wouldn’t see that she saw.

When it was time for her mother to leave, she cupped the girl’s face in both of her hands and said, “Take care, my love.” Without another word, she was gone.

* * *

Lying down on the pew, the girl stared up at Mary cradling Jesus. The yellowish glass of Mary and Jesus’s faces reddened into the same brown as the girl and her mother’s faces. Mary’s now brown glass hand stroked Jesus’s cheek.

* * *

“It was a Sunday morning. We were in the car, on our way to church,” her mother would say, time and time again, before the girl’s father died. “The U-turn your father made when my water broke almost gave us whiplash. You made us miss church.” Her mother’s eyes would twinkle every time she got to this part. “My holy baby.”

With each iteration of this story, the girl felt more and more like she was present in the story. Not surrounded by warmth, in her mother’s womb. She could see the labyrinth of peak suburbia outside of the windows of her father’s CR-V as they pulled out of their neighborhood.

Her mother in the passenger seat; her father in the driver's seat, caressing her mother's belly. Sunlight spilled through the windows, and trees shadowed her mother's and father's faces. "In the hours before you were born," her mother would continue, "God smiled down on us. Rightfully so." The last time her mother told this story was a month before the girl's father died. It was the times her mother told it that the girl found it hard to believe that her mother was not always a Christian. It was even harder to believe that she only found God at Alcoholics Anonymous meetings that her secular parents forced her to go to.

Her mother told the story of how she found God to the girl. "After I started believing, life stopped seeming so hopeless. Your father and I met soon after I was baptized. And you two are my reminders, every day, that life isn't so hopeless." The only time her mother told this story was when the girl was fifteen.

Between the time the girl was born and the time of her father's death, she embodied her mother's label of "holy baby." She'd go to church with her parents every Sunday, prayed and read her Bible every night, and tried to live her best guess of what God wanted.

After her father died, she did her best to keep her faith alive, but everything just felt different. But the girl didn't know what else to do, so when she got into Clarus, she did what her mother insisted she do and enrolled.

* * *

The girl's shoulder blades hurt against the seat of the wooden pew. She could no longer see the point of her mother's declaration that she was a "holy baby." Isn't everyone holy before life corrupts them?

When the girl's back started hurting, she roamed around the chapel, taking deliberate steps between the pews. She even set her hands on the lectern and mimicked what she knew of

Pastor Casey, based on the handful of times she came to the Clarus Church. Her old friends, the ones who actually went to church weekly, said Pastor Casey would always rub his palms together whenever he started reciting the New Testament and swore he got hard once, a few minutes into singing hymns. The girl only ever saw the former.

Heart still pounding and mouth still dry, the girl rubbed her palms together. Her imitation sermons started as yells but turned into illegible whispers when they came out of her mouth. She concluded in a haughty, booming voice similar to Pastor Casey's: "Amen."

She drifted away from her old friends when their invitations to join them at church and their "you had to be there" stories became too much.

The girl did try, though. She tried to find the man her father was to her mother in her group of old friends. She hoped, whoever he was, he might give her a sign to convince her the life her mother wants and her father would've wanted her to live is truly the one she's meant to have.

* * *

The girl didn't know what she wanted, but Blake, a boy in her forensic science general education class, did. Their social circles overlapped, so they ended up spending a lot of time together outside of class in her first semester at Clarus.

It took a while for the girl to notice him whenever they ended up hanging out together with their other mutual friends. He was so quiet and rarely contributed to their Bible study discussions. She soon learned, mostly from her other old friends talking about him, how devout he was and about his dreams to go on a mission trip.

It didn't even cross her mind that he would be her sign until he showed up at her dorm room door with a flower in one hand after she agreed they should study for an upcoming exam

together. He confessed that he didn't really know why he felt so compelled to court her, but he leaned into the uncertainty because its presence had to mean something.

The first couple of months were good. They wrote each other love letters saying things like "How could I have only known you for a few weeks? You already feel like home." And "Do you know that song that goes 'tell me do you look both ways when you cross my mind?'" They hosted multiple karaoke parties where Blake's twenty-one-year-old friend brought them alcohol. Once they were tipsy enough, they'd sing every *High School Musical* Troy and Gabriella duet song until one of their friends took the mics away from them. The girl really believed Blake was her sign. She even went to church more consecutive Sundays since before her father died. It felt weird, but she told herself she'd get used to it.

But school got in the way. Church with Blake started to feel like a chore. Her other friends started to hang out with other their other friends, so she thought she ought to do the same. Life got really boring: school, church, school, church. No one wanted to do anything else. Until she found out that even the highest degrees of religious devotion didn't keep people from the alcohol-soaked nights, tinted with the amber glow of some drug she'd never heard of. She found a home among new friends, whose faces she recognized in the darkness with frequent flashes of purple and blue strobe lights. It was only after they approached her could she recognize them under the fluorescent lights of their Early-Childhood Development or Psychology of the Child and Adolescent classes. All that mattered was dull nights didn't exist in her life and her sign was there to shake her awake to go to church on Sunday mornings.

Then she started skipping church, despite Blake's prodding. Sunday service started to get mechanical, even if she hadn't gone out the night before. She started slipping back into her pre-

Blake routines, even though he was always there to smooth her hair back until she fell asleep after an ungodly Saturday-night bender.

Then finally, while they sat on the sofa watching *The Great British Baking Show* on one of the girl's quieter nights after midterms, he said, "I can't do this anymore."

"We can watch something else if you want, whatever's—"

He paused at the show. "No. Us. I can't do it anymore." He exhaled. "I can't keep putting you back together or turning a blind eye to what you're doing. I just can't."

The girl nodded.

Blake squeezed her hand, and she squeezed her eyes shut. He released it, and she heard the door close. Another hand filled the space Blake's vacated and squeezed, startling the girl's eyes open. She saw familiar gold skin and long, black, wavy hair.

"Don't worry," he said, before she could say anything. "I'm still here." And again, he dissolved in computer-like glitches, leaving her palm itchy and empty.

* * *

The girl's vision came back to the ceiling. She was lying on a pew again. She felt something wet tickle her upper lip; it tasted metallic. She swiped beneath her nose; her arm came away smeared with blood. She remained still.

The flush of a toilet from towards the entrance made it sound like she was sliding down a sewage pipe. The water roared louder and reeked more than she ever remembered it. And it signaled she wasn't alone.

Whoever it was slammed the door to the bathroom and stomped into the chapel. The girl sat up and saw him, the man with the glowing gold skin, in a white t-shirt.

"Who are you?" she projected across the room.

He smiled his grotesque slot-machine smile. His teeth fell out one by one over and over again, replaced with new teeth or flashing shards of colored and clear glass or ragged chunks of rose quartz. No matter what they were, they were too bright, they hurt her eyes and her head.

“It doesn’t matter,” he boomed, advancing towards her pew, “who I am.” He extended his hand, where glossy scales started coating his arms, starting at his knuckles. “I’m glad you’re here with me.”

She pressed herself into a corner where the pew met the wall, contorting herself away from his hand. Now, having seen him for more time than she had in the past, his wicked beauty sped the churn in her stomach and returned the suffocating dryness to the back of her throat. His hand came closer and closer until its knuckles stroked her jawline. The scales scraped her skin.

“They’re gone,” he whispered into her ear, one hand cradling the back of her head in a light yet unescapable grip. “But I’m still here.” He sat next to her and forced her to meet his eyes. “Your dad sends his regards, by the way.” She felt her heart pound in her stomach and her temples as he released her head. He paced in front of her. “Why did you leave me? I never left you.”

She slumped against the wall, breathing hard.

“If you don’t want to see me anymore, you don’t have to. I was just wondering. Your father was too.”

The girl looked from side to side to see if there was anything, anything that could help her. He was still pacing.

The stained-glass pane above her. Cain threatening Abel with a dagger. He kept pacing back and forth, not even looking at the girl. So when he turned on his heel to pace away from her, she stood up, ignoring the whirling feeling in her head, and extracted the dagger from Cain’s

stained-glass hand.

She turned away from the pane. He was there, a few feet away, looking at her from beneath his eyelashes, challenging her.

He smirked. "Really?"

That was enough. She threw the knife, straight and fast, whistling through the air. She looked at her empty hand with horror and turned to see the knife's trajectory. The man didn't even blink. Just before the knife hit, he smiled at her.

With the knife lodged into his chest and blood the same color as his hair soaking into his t-shirt, he whispered, "I'm still here." His form shifted to look like Blake, then again to look like her father. He shifted back into himself, but didn't disappear. The black blood pooled around him.

The girl pushed open the church doors with all of her weight. The sky was blue bordering on black. The fatigue weighed on her back but the cool air kept her awake. She swiped at her nose, feeling lighter than she had in years.

Story 6

Beware of the Male Writer

When considering how to approach a cis-het Male Writer, proceed with caution. If said Male Writer is white, be extra wary. If said Male Writer is a beginner at writing, with little to no self-awareness, maturity, or formal writing experience, don't be surprised to find yourself treading deep waters.

I can't speak for all Male Writers, and I definitely do not speak for them. Many of my own writing mentors and friends happen to be males, but those are male writers, no caps. By claiming all of this, I'm not saying my writing's great. I know there's a lot of improvement to be made. But that's the difference between me and most Male Writers. This is just a gentle warning.

With the small-ish sample size of Male Writers whose company I've been in, I am claiming that their approach to writing is consistent with the confidence the patriarchy lends to most straight, white males. You might be wondering, where does this chick get off on being so hostile? Am I a bra-burning feminist? Maybe. Am I a bitter lesbian? I wish, because then none of these Male Writers would've had the chance to fool me. Do I have enough academic or experiential credence to convince you of my ethos? I do, but does it matter? You don't have to believe me, but don't say I didn't warn you. And please, don't put up with a Male Writer solely out of the contempt you may have for me. I promise, it'll exhaust you more than it will ever hurt me.

The Superiority Complex

The first taste you get of a Male Writer is in your Intro to Fiction Writing class. You'll never forget the whiny, nasal voice and the disjointed walk of your classmate and how you prayed every day before you had class for his screamo band t-shirts to be absent.

He was overtly a Male Writer, and you knew to be skeptical of him. He read H.P. Lovecraft and claimed to be a “nice guy,” but explains his single-ness by claiming he’s “too talented for anyone.” You know he uses Reddit and online chat rooms where he and his online friends jerk each other off validating each other’s superiority complexes.

The Superiority Complex was not hard to place. The minute he first spoke, you knew. But you didn’t know how bad it would get.

Your professor, a woman, assigns the second of six readings from a *Best American Short Stories* anthology. You, personally, don’t like the readings, but you can find some value in them. You can also get an idea of what “best” means to people higher than you in the writing arena.

When class starts, your professor asks everyone to go around and briefly talk about the strengths and weaknesses of the story you’ve read. Great development of suspense. The main character was well developed, but the rest of the characters fell a little flat. Clunky dialogue. Etc.

Finally, when you get to the Superiority Complex, he pauses for a moment.

Your professor says, “What did you think of today’s reading?”

He hesitates. “I didn’t do the reading. I’m boycotting this book because they’re not the ‘best.’ I don’t like any of them.”

Your professor moves on.

The comment he makes on the piece he uploads for workshop already makes you dread class. “Try to keep up with my story.” You think about skipping, but you might miss out on something very entertaining.

Your professor has strict rules about workshop time: the author is not allowed to talk. But she’s so done with this student, that she doesn’t stop him from talking. He talks almost the entire duration of his workshop, refuting every comment with a lengthy explanation. You don’t say

anything. You don't give him any feedback. You can't bring yourself to, and frankly, you're fine with that.

One of your friends in that class, another male writer (no caps), the good kind of male writer, has the balls to speak up about it. Everyone else just looks tired.

Your professor says, "Any last comments before we move on?" Her lips are pressed together like seaweed on sticky rice.

Your friend raises his hand and looks at the Superiority Complex. "I just want to say that if you want anyone to critique your work in any meaningful way in the future, it would probably be best not to insult their intelligence or flaunt your piece as being the most challenging. And it would probably be best to just take feedback and not argue with what people say."

This is the only comment the Superiority Complex doesn't respond to.

"Let's move on," your professor says.

The following types of Male Writers are harder to get a read on. They seem like nice, normal male writers. At first.

The Beatnik Boy

This type of Male Writer is heavily inspired by male writers of the Beat Generation and their characters. For instance, my personal least favorites are those Kerouacian Holden-Caulfield-esque writers. Those writers who write in a shitty stream-of-conscious narrative about "profound," "unique" emotions and experiences (usually dealing with some form of rejection or some feeling of angsty coming-of-age). Beatnik boys imitate Kerouac's spontaneous prose or poetry writing style and believe revision makes writing "phony." The subjects they write about aren't inherently bad, but they write about them as if they are the first and only person to ever

experience them. Plus, what they don't see is the eye-roll of authors who treat writing not as a journal, but as a craft to hone.

Here's a few examples of things Beatnik Boys might say or do, since they're a bit harder to identify than Superiority Complexes:

1. Beatnik Boy: Yeah, I've hired a hooker before. We didn't have sex, though.

You: What did you do then?

Beatnik Boy: Oh, you know. We just talked about the universe and stuff. Just some deep shit.

You: O-kay then. Did you pay her?

Beatnik Boy: No.

2. When he says he's a writer, calls his ex a bitch, and doesn't stop talking about his ex. The latter two by themselves should be glowing red flags.
3. Beatnik Boy (takes a drag of a cigarette): Have you ever done acid?
4. Beatnik Boy: I don't know, something just came over me, and I *had* to write it down.

You can read it if you want.

His writing: Incomprehensible bullshit, that, under his smug expression, you know he's way too proud of.

I'm not trying to criticize Kerouac himself. I am, however, criticizing his impact on Male Writers. I've never read *On the Road*, or any of Kerouac's other works. Maybe they are truly fantastic pieces of writing, and I'm just a prejudiced bitch. What I do know of him was that he was a whining piss-baby who emotionally abused his girlfriend. And, when *On the Road* garnered shit reviews, he dumped his misery on her. He shouldn't have expected anything better for an unrevised piece of work that Truman Capote called typing not writing.

But, I digress. Kerouac's spontaneous prose movement has afflicted some kinds of Male Writers and supported their opinion of the immediate "brilliance" and value of their work. But the use of spontaneous prose isn't the mark of a great writer; it's the mark of an arrogant and lazy one. It's also an excuse that perpetuates the idea of the introverted writer and rationalizes the decision not to seek out feedback. No one should write in a vacuum if he or she wants any sort of acclaim outside of his- or herself and/or his or her inner circle.

But the allure of a Beatnik Boy is a little stronger than that of the Superiority Complex, who has no allure whatsoever. If you encounter a writer that has any of the qualities of a Beatnik Boy, don't make the same mistakes I made. Ditch him.

The OG Asshole

The OG Asshole is a variation of the Beatnik Boy but is arguably worse. The OG Asshole is a Male Writer who doesn't claim to be influenced by anything. Except maybe by his own thoughts or the quiet beauty of a leaf. If you can't tell if he's being serious or ironic about his inspiration (or lack thereof), he's either lying or ignorant. Whatever the case, I advise you to run.

Not to sound like a boring academic, but every writer joins the tradition of writing. At least a Beatnik Boy acknowledges that; the OG Asshole has a grating entitlement to originality. No writer is entitled to originality. Take this, the thing you're currently reading: revealing how men can be fools is not original!

Anyway, the OG Asshole's prose might be tolerable, but his *poetry*. Poetry is inherently a cringe-worthy endeavor. It's ten times worse coming from an OG Asshole. His, often depressing, poetry is thinly veiled autobiography that won't make you feel any different than if he just spoke plainly about what's wrong. Everybody would be better off if he said, "Life is hard right now,

and I could use a friend,” rather than making someone read, “The lone daisy wilted in it’s clear vase, exposed but unseen.” His pseudo-lyrical stanza about tripping on acid will be so lifeless and hackneyed, you’ll assume he’s lying about even taking acid. “Nobody will understand otherwise,” the OG Asshole might say, as a reason to not speak in plain, prosaic English. Well, writing it in poetry won’t achieve a different end, my guy.

It’s funny, the way OG Assholes insist on their originality, since they can be identified by habits that are cliché to a shit writer (or just an overall shit person):

1. In the middle of a date or getting busy or any other ordinary activity, he pulls out a pen and a notebook, usually pocket-sized, black, and leather bound, and stops whatever he’s doing because, he announces, he’s feeling “inspired.”
2. Without prompt, he’ll describe why he thinks you’re beautiful or smart or exceptionally kind in the most verbose way. Bonus points if what he says is so abstract, you’re not quite sure what he means or if what he says is a compliment or an insult.
3. He plagiarizes your favorite writer or artist, but won’t admit to it. If you point out his plagiarism, he still won’t acknowledge the idea wasn’t his. He’ll say something like, “Great minds think alike.” But fools rarely differ.
4. He drinks his coffee black and tells anyone who’ll listen.

I know the romantic in you might mistake the OG Asshole as appealing, but his shtick will get stale before you know it. You’ll soon realize his frequent leather jacket and turtleneck sweater outfit combo is not a good look. Trust me. Or don’t. Just remember, I’m speaking from experience.

* * *

There are other types of Male Writers, I'm sure, but my experience stops there. I could talk about the type who looks at David Foster Wallace as a writing god (maybe he is, I've never read his work!), but I've found that this type is self-aware enough to come out decent. Just be prepared to feel like a dumbass. He knows a lot, and he'll make sure *you* know that. I could talk about the monotonous Raymond Carvers of the world, but what beginner writer doesn't start out like him or experiment with his style?

If you are a woman writer and you decide to date a Male Writer, please set boundaries you are comfortable with. If you, by some miracle, like the Male Writer as a person but don't want to engage with his writing, make that clear as soon as you realize it. But generally, I'd tell women writers to avoid dating a Male Writer. Date an accountant. Or, I heard that cute guy in the finance department broke up with his girlfriend. Ask him out!

If you really, *really* find yourself drawn to a Male Writer, at least don't make the same mistakes I did. Don't smile and nod as you read through his late-night drivel or stroke his ego because you think there's a slight chance you might have tepid, subpar sex with him. Instead, evaluate your situation and take one of these routes:

1. If you want intimacy that badly, just ask; he'll probably enthusiastically oblige. But don't forget to proceed with caution because Male Writers tend to be... well, it might be hard for them to read the room and respect your boundaries. They often fail to distinguish between solid writing and stream-of-conscious bullshit, so it's highly likely they won't be able to distinguish between a no-strings-attached, friendly fuck and latched little deaths ("Did you come?" he'll whine as you go for the door.)

2. If you don't mind doling out criticism to a man who, quite likely, is a piss-baby, then let him have it. Tell him his writing is fake deep and unenjoyable. Tell him he should work harder and seek criticism. Don't feel obligated to go this route.
3. If it strikes your fancy, leave. Try not to feel bad about it. You're both better off.
4. If you like his work, well, then maybe you shouldn't have read this. Don't waste your time, honey.

Some things to remember: Be honest and clear. Operate within your conscience and try not to be too harsh. Writing might be the only thing he has going for him. And if you're a writer, resist the appeal of having a writing critic, friend, and fuck all in one. It's not worth it. You'll come out feeling like a crumpled page of solid writing at the bottom of his wastepaper basket, never to be recycled.

Story 7

La Cocaína Imperecedo

One slight shift of the earth could send the old church at the end of the street to rubble. The hazard of occupying it was so clear that no one would dare go inside, except stupid teenagers itching for an adventure. But even still, the aesthetic attraction of cracked saints in stained glass wasn't worth getting soaked when the rain poured through the holes in the roof. The drops of water echoed onto the aluminum roofing and ran down the slope of the hole, collecting into a giant drop that extinguished one of the candles lit in the church.

A few tall candelabras holding lit candles glowed beneath the stained glass and mosaic biblical depictions, highlighting the chips and stains. Six grey metal folding chairs were arranged in a circle, out of the way of the leaky hole. Five were occupied. Someone sat, tapping on his computer.

The seats' occupants varied in age; some looked youthful and some looked old. All but two were dressed for another era.

They eyed each other, daring someone to speak.

Kyle, looking twenty-something with a stocky build and a black ponytail, cleared his throat. "So, does anyone have any weather powers or something? I don't know, maybe charm the hole so the rain doesn't fall in?" He gestured his arms at the holes in the ceiling, revealing white scars on his forearms when the candlelight hit them. "Isn't that how this works?" The others stared at him blankly. "No? Well, this blows." He slouched into his seat with his arms crossed over his stomach.

Ted tapped on his laptop keyboard on Kyle's right. He closed the lid and smiled at everyone. "Welcome, everybody. As you can see," he pointed to the empty chair at his right, "one of our members, Carmen, said she had to, er, 'dip' due to unforeseen circumstances."

Across from Ted, Dante nodded.

On Dante's left, came a "What?" from Zahirah with a hard-to-place accent.

"'Dip' is slang for leave," Dante provided.

"Why can't you just say 'leave'?" Annette, to Dante's right, asked with a vaguely British accent.

"Yeah," Dante said. "You're a bit too old for it. At least you *look* too old for it, so I assume you are. You two could use it," he pointed to Annette and Kyle. "You don't *have* to though."

"Right," Ted said. "Great point. The point of this all is to perform modernity, but an age-appropriate kind of modern. And an adaptable kind of modern." He paused. "Anyway, I brought some things that might help you *look* more like the age you look like." To fill the silence as he handed out clothing wrapped in plastic, "Some of you need it more than others." He glanced pointedly at Zahirah, the oldest-looking of the group, wearing a black gauzy tunic with embroidery, once so vibrant, but now almost completely faded. Her pants hung about her legs like puff pastry and held the fragility of gold leafing on milk sweets. Zahirah looked at Annette's white gown with distaste. The shoulders puffed out and the skirts were starched too stiff, but Zahirah could at least appreciate her neatly braided chignon. Annette wrinkled her nose at Kyle, whose neon green fanny pack slung across his chest and whose blue jeans were fitted and cropped to reveal white socks and dirty white sneakers and whose loud sweater wrapped him in waves of blue against purple. "I hope it encourages you to keep up with modern fashion, because

right now, most of you are just calling attention to yourselves.” Ted returned to his own seat, pulling up his khakis on his way down and smoothing his white button-up and blazer as he settled.

Kyle ripped the plastic covering and slid a grey crewneck sweatshirt out of it. The word “Supreme” was italicized in white on a rectangular red patch sewn onto it. He thumbed at the neck of it. “I don’t really get how my sweater’s that much different, but okay.” Ted rolled his eyes.

Annette knitted her eyebrows at the floral midi-skirt and the chunky cream-colored turtle neck sweater, but after a minute, rubbed the sweater against her cheek. Zahirah picked uneasily at her clothes, reluctant to unfold the millennial-pink button-up and high-waisted, wide-leg dress pants. Only Dante slid his new baby-blue, marled wool sweater over his Brockhampton t-shirt with the ease of a daily routine. He left the pair of black jeans in the plastic package it came in. “Do we need to pay for these?”

“No,” Ted replied. “It comes with the price of this group session, which you all paid.” He paused. “Now, from your entrance emails and letters, we’re all still here for the same reason. Why don’t we go around and introduce ourselves and talk about how we ended up here.” Ted cursed himself at how ridiculous that sounds. He could hear it: *Hi, I’m Ted. I’m 220, and I’m here because grief led me to cocaine addiction, which is why I’m STILL here. I’m in this group because I wish I wasn’t alive, but since death isn’t an option, this is the next best thing.* There wasn’t any going back now. He swallowed. “Annette.” He looked across the circle at her. She glared at him. “Why don’t you go first?”

Annette tucked loose hairs behind her ears. “I was eighteen. My family sold me to Sam because they were poor and had my seven younger siblings to feed.” She said this as if she was rehearsing for a play.

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Annette’s hair stood stiff with the tears she rubbed up to her hairline. The chaos in the pub and the fiddle player’s music increased the tension in her body. Annette marched to where Sam nursed a mulled mead.

Sam arched an eyebrow at Annette.

“Sam, I did the fucking work,” Annette said in an odd combination of shrill and steady. “Just fucking pay me. That’s the deal.”

“Look, kid. Thanks for the work.” Annette loath the pity in Sam’s eyes. “But I don’t have any more cash on me tonight. Besides, you’re lucky there are clients even *willing* to pay for you. It’s always a black bitch or a porcelain doll. It’s never been a half-breed like you, where you can’t even tell what you are.” Sam gulped the last of her mead and started to walk to the exit. Before she left, she tossed her head back to face Annette. “I’ll getcha next time around.” She walked out.

Annette’s jaw clenched and she moved her leg to feel the tear in her skirts. She felt the bruises blossoming on her neck and shoulders where her last client, Sam’s “good friend,” held her down. Annette ran after Sam, and before she knew it, the dust beneath Annette’s boots kicked up as she launched herself onto Sam’s back.

“You stupid cunt, what the fuck!” Sam shrieked but no one could hear it over the screeching fiddle in the pub. Annette’s finger’s tangled in and yanked at Sam’s hair.

Annette's legs held firm on Sam's sides, despite how much Sam tried to buck her off and how much the new bruises on Annette's thighs throbbed from the pressure. Sam conceded.

"Fuck, alright, fine!" Annette stopped pulling. "I wasn't lying when I said I don't have cash. But I got something a bit better."

Annette climbed off of Sam's back but held onto a chunk of her hair. Annette's face set in expectation.

Sam took off one of her boots and poked around in it. Out came a cloth satchel, held shut with yarn looped over Sam's finger. "It's yours, kid. Sorry I can't pay you right now."

"Fine." Annette pocketed the satchel.

At the inn where Sam's other workers stayed if they were short on money, Annette exchanged six hours' worth of housekeeping and cooking the following day for a place to stay for the night. After starting a fire in the hearth and rearranging the furniture so a side table came between the hearth and her chair, she dipped her finger, wet with her saliva, into the satchel fill with powder. They were whiter and more like crystals than the dull flour-powder she mistook it for in the dim lights at the back of the pub.

She spilled it onto the table and cut it up into neat lines with the stationary in the room. The first couple burned the back of her nose; it felt like snorting chili powder. After the last few lines, her face glowed and warmed in the light of the fire.

The tickle at the back of her throat was unlike the dull ache she was used to. The steady beat of her heart shifted to slow, measured swoops.

Annette woke up. No nosebleeds, just a bit of spotting. She was ready to do her chores.

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Annette gazed at a candle and bit her bottom lip. “And after that I stopped bruising so easily. I lost my appetite, too. And after a particularly horrible client, I tried to off myself. But I survived. It was supposed to be fail-proof. And here I am. One and a half centuries later.”

Annette shrugged.

“Isn’t killing yourself, like, a sin?” Kyle asked.

“Kyle,” Ted warned.

“It’s okay, Ted,” Annette said and turned to Kyle. “You’re a fool if you think God could help us now. Besides,” she pointed her chin to Kyle’s forearms. “You’re one to talk.”

Kyle pursed his lips.

The group fell silent, and Annette fixed her gaze passed Ted at the rain puddling on the floor.

“Thanks for sharing, Annette.” Ted gave her a tight smile. “Kyle, why don’t you go?”

The tension melted out of Kyle’s face as he began his story. “Man, it was pretty gnarly.” Everyone looked a bit appalled, except Ted, whose face remained in an understanding façade.

* * *

“As any of the Kappa Sig party vets can see, we have new meat,” Dylan yelled over “Don’t You Want Me” by The Human League. “For those new faces: you’ve rushed, you’ve partied, you’ve made some new friends along the way.” He winked at the girls slouched into the couch cushions, most of them long-time Kappa Sig partiers, bored from the rush ritual they’ve endured multiple times throughout their years at university. They patiently waited for the beer keg to roll out and the lights to dim. Dylan tilted his red solo cup to Marco, one of his brothers. “Take it away, Marco.” Dylan rejoined the line of brothers standing like henchman.

“Right,” Marco said. “Today is the day where you start picking up the hustle. It’s time to show us what you’re made of, because in the next few weeks, we,” he gestured to his brothers around him, “will decide which of you,” he made eye contact with each of the potential new recruits, “is worthy of membership into the brotherhood and who’s a pussy. Good luck.” Marco’s gaze lingered on Kyle, wearing a raw-hemmed white crop top revealing a sparse treasure trail on a white, premature beer belly. Kyle wished he opted for something not-as-loud as his neon biking shorts and flower-patterned tube socks. Every other recruit was just in blue jeans. The testosterone in the room was overwhelming compared to the other Kappa Sig parties or recruitment meetings.

Before Kyle could think too much about what he was wearing, Duran Duran’s “Rio” blasted through the floor-length speakers and the brothers started passing out cups for beer and jungle juice.

The following weeks passed in a similar fashion, but with more firsts for Kyle. He smoked his first cigarette (Marlboro) and snorted his first line (the sugar at the bottom of a bag of sour watermelon candy mixed with coke). When the brothers found out he never had sex before (“A virgin! As a sophomore!”), they asked their sister sorority for a virgin to rectify the situation. A Swedish exchange student was dismissed for refusing a hit off a brother’s joint. A quiet Hawaiian native recruit almost died from drinking too much. Kyle was relieved when they were both inducted into the frat a few weeks after he was released from the hospital.

Kyle took hazing like a pro; after he was officially a brother, he was dubbed “Natty” for how organically he assimilated into frat life. He encouraged future recruits to do the same.

Everett, Kappa Sig’s supplier, was a legacy who graduated three years before Kyle arrived.

As they talked, Dylan and Marco appeared at Everett's sides. "So you've met Natty?"

Dylan slurred.

Marco sneered. "Corrupting the Kappa Sig youth, as always."

Everett chuckled.

"See to it that this one is... Well fed." Marco said.

Dylan put his hand on Kyle's shoulder. "Make us proud, brother."

Everett sold Kyle his first gram of coke. From then on, at all Kappa Sig parties, if Everett wasn't trying to hit on girls who just became adults, his arm was slung over Kyle's neck.

"You could have any of the honeys in this room, Nat, don't forget it," Everett would say, reeking of Jack Daniels.

"Okay, buddy, let's get you to bed," Kyle would say every time and let Everett sleep in his bed.

At the beginning of Kyle's senior year, Everett made a delivery to the Kapp Sig house and pulled Kyle aside. "Listen," Everett held a baggie filled with white powder between his middle and pointer fingers. "It's your senior year. Start it out right."

"Thanks, appreciate it. I still have some left, but it's better to be safe than sorry."

Everett's eyes burned into Kyle's. "What I just gave you... that's premium blow. They told me, nothing like anything you've snorted before."

Kyle nodded. "Do you want to share it?"

Everett smiled. "Classic Natty. Good man. Gotta motor. Later." Everett disappeared.

Kyle fled to his room to cut up some lines of Everett's "premium blow." After four vigorous inhales, Kyle stood straight up, wide awake and ready for his lab.

* * *

“And that, my friends, was the best blow I’d ever had the pleasure of snorting.”

“Thanks for that Kyle,” Ted said through a wince. “I, er, appreciate your enthusiasm.”

“A frat kid died at my university,” Dante said. “Glad I decided not to rush.”

“Yeah, it must be harder with social media. Everyone knows everything. You can’t have fun anymore.” Kyle twirled his hair. “When I was young, you could do anything and get away with it.”

“That’s not what I meant.” Dante paused. “And that sounds really weird coming from someone who looks the same age as me.”

“You better get used to it,” Zahirah said under her breath.

“What did you say?” Dante asked. The rain stopped, but the water pooling on the rooftop splashed into the church every now and then.

“Let’s move on, shall we?” Ted said. “Zahirah, you seem to have something to say. Let’s hear it.”

Zahirah sighed. “Let’s get it over with, then.”

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The dry air sucked the moisture from Zahirah and her companions’ eyes. Red sand blew with the reliefless wind of the Osmanian Desert, now called the Arabian Desert. They rode on mules and camels. Loose fabric hung over their heads to ward off the oppressive sunlight and over their faces keep the sand the animals kicked up away from their eyes. They settled and pulled the fabric away from their faces, revealing sun-hardened freckled chestnut skin.

Everybody but Zahirah gracefully dismounted. Zahirah’s body ached from age and the long journey. After unpacking their supplies and taking measured sips from their waterskin, they settled onto the sand.

The four of them were silent and avoided each other's gazes. Finally, Chelem said, "What do we do now?"

Matek, Chelem's older brother, and Talora looked at Zahirah. She was forty-five, the oldest of the group; surely, she knew what to do.

Zahirah took stock of what she had: three acquaintances, bonded by birth in the same village and being the only surviving members of it. Four animals, two camels and two mules. Their clothing. A cloth pouch filled with temporary pain reliever. The gash on her calf where an invader, with his poor sense of aim, hit her. No blade, unfortunately.

"Is anyone hurt?" Zahirah finally said.

The other's scrambled over their bodies, trying to see if they'd been hurt. Talora got away unscathed. A spearhead was lodged into Matek's shoulder. Chelem had a few scrapes on his knees and palms, but was otherwise unhurt.

Zahirah tore up the cloth covering her head and gave Chelem a bit so he could start cleaning his scrapes. He used the water sparingly and dabbed at the blood on his knees. Zahirah and Talora tended to Matek's wounds.

Matek bit down on his knuckles and cried out when Zahirah dislodged the spearhead from his shoulder.

"Sorry." Zahirah cleaned his wound with another scrap of cloth and dressed the wound with the remaining cloth. She then gave Matek the pain reliever. "Breathe this in. The pain should subside." She cleaned and dressed her own wound and sniffed the remaining powder.

Matek did what he was told and lied down. The cloth dressing on his shoulder was already soaked in blood, so Talora redressed it with one of her own.

"How do you feel?" Zahirah asked him.

“Okay. Sleepy. I think the powder worked.” Matek said.

The sun started to set, and the four of them fell asleep as night took over day.

Zahirah was first to wake, and Chelem and Talora woke as the sun started to rise. Matek still wasn't awake by midday, despite the sun beaming right onto him.

Chelem shook him by his unwounded shoulder. “Brother, wake up.”

Matek still didn't respond. Chelem put his hand at Matek's heart and felt nothing. He met an eerie coolness when he put his hand on Matek's forehead. A slap did nothing to stir Matek.

Chelem wept. The dry air felt weighted around Zahirah's stomach and eyes.

“Matek,” Talora called. “Matek!” She laid a hand on Chelem's shoulder and tried to hush him. He shook her off.

“Chelem—” Zahirah started.

“Quiet!” Chelem said as he sobbed, cradling Matek's head.

She let him be. He had just lost his parents, his village. Zahirah had done enough to this seventeen-year-old boy; the least she could do was feel her shame quietly.

The rest of the day passed in silence. When it was time to sleep, Zahirah felt too restless but kept her eyes closed.

The next morning, Zahirah found herself alone, only in the company of her mule. Even the waterskin was gone. She mounted her mule and held her leg so her mule wouldn't disturb it.

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The clouds crowded together in anticipation of another bout of rain. “I guess Matek bled out before the cocaine could take effect. Even after the centuries I've lived, I don't know whose fate was worse, his or mine. He was only twenty-two.” Zahirah folded her hands in her lap.

“You killed him?” Annette said.

“She didn’t technically *kill* him, she just didn’t *save* him,” Kyle answered. “Weren’t you listening?”

“Enough!” Zahirah’s hands were clenched now. “Ted, let’s move on.”

“Right,” Ted said. “Dante?”

Dante looked thoughtful. “Why don’t you go first, Ted?”

Ted pressed the tips of his teeth together. “I just want to make it clear that while I have similar experiences to you all, I’m here to serve as a facilitator, *not* a participant. This is about you all, not me so—”

“Hold up, hold up,” Kyle said, shaking his head. “You never planned on telling us what happened to *you*?”

Ted’s eyebrows lifted. “I mean, I could, but I don’t really see the point.”

“No,” Zahirah chimed in. “Kyle and Dante are right. What if you have some ulterior motive? How can we trust you? What if you’re just some conspiracy theorist trying to collect evidence about us? Trying to turn us in. Get people to study us in the lab. And the like.” She pinched her face.

Annette’s eyes widened into full moons, the complete opposite of Jesus’s eyes on the discolored crucifix behind her.

“Hey, I’m not any of those things. I just think I would foster a better sense of *community* if I just served as a facilitator—”

Annette snorted. “Yeah, this community’s *great*. I *love* not trusting my ‘leader.’”

Ted winced and looked resigned. “Fine.”

* * *

In the early 1830s, Ted wandered towards the heart of Missouri. Days passed in a blur, but muddled with grief and exhaustion, he didn't register time passing. His feet just carried him, disconnected from the rest of his body.

As he walked, he felt the almost-dead weight of his wife and his children, struggling to walk along the Mississippi River. The sounds of them pleading with him to let them rest on the banks, and that, when they see the last of their friends and neighbors, they'll catch up with the rest of them. He should've insisted they keep going; help was waiting at their destination. He convinced himself, despite knowing the cruelty of those who set them on this journey.

His voice echoed in his head as he stumbled along. "Come on. We've got to go. *Come on.*" Shaking and prodding at his family. The last of their tribe trickled farther into the distance as he tried to wake his family. His children curled against their mother, eyes closed, with a new peace on their faces.

When Ted looked back at the foliage around him, he saw military officials with bayonets on their backs dragging his fellow Cherokee by their hair and pushing them into wooden wagons. Another look back, and he saw children looking out of the windows of the wagon, crying as their homes grew smaller and smaller. And again, Ted could see his family, his tribe, wiping their noses on their sleeves, limping from blisters forming and bursting, and stumbling from fever. All huddled together to shield themselves from the cold and wet.

It wasn't until he saw smoke in the distance that he returned to himself. Ted dragged himself toward it, and a small farm came into the foreground.

A sturdy white woman answered the door. Her loose hair fell passed her shoulders and her eyes knitted at the sight of Ted. "Jack!" she yelled into the house. "Come out here!"

"Louise?" came a voice inside the house then appeared at Louise's side.

Jack assessed Ted. “What’s your name, sir?”

“Ted. Just call me Ted.” Ted wept at the sight of them. “My family—my tribe—” He fell to his knees, remembering all of his loved ones, left behind. “They’re all gone.”

Louise knelt in front of him, inspected his gaunt face and matted hair. “We need to get you a bath. And some bread.” The woman pulled Ted’s arm over her shoulders and guided him into their farm. She looked at Jack. “You gonna help me or what?”

Jack obliged.

Ted, clean and fed, choked his way through an abridged description of the last few... days? Weeks? Ted felt Louise’s warmth radiate through the entire house, and even more so when he got to the part about his family, motionless on the banks of the Mississippi River.

“Damn that Jackson and his Indian Removal Act!” Jack said.

Louise took Jack’s hand. “We sure are sorry. About your family. About everything. It just ain’t right.”

Ted hung his head. “Yeah.”

Jack and Louise let Ted stay with them in exchange for help with farm and house work. But Ted couldn’t ease any of the tension out of his body, so he couldn’t sleep. His work was slow and sluggish, and Jack and Louise grew irritated.

Until Louise gave him a sleep aid her friend uses. Normally, Ted would refuse something that looked so refined, but he was tired of burdening them. After he took it, he worked until he tired himself enough to sleep. When he didn’t take it, he could only do minimal house work, but he couldn’t focus enough to cut vegetables or to remain gentle when milking the cows.

Louise’s supplier, Christian, started coming biweekly, and Ted started doing work for him too, in exchange for the sleep aid. It was the least he could do.

Somewhere in these exchanges, Ted felt better. Invincible, almost. He finished the work Jack and Louise asked him to do faster and slept well. When he cut himself harvesting the corn, the cuts would heal before he could say anything about them. He stopped needing Christian and his medicine. The void of losing his family subsided to a dull ache and an intrusive thought, visiting only when his hands were empty and idle.

* * *

Everyone stayed silent until rain started to trickle into the church once again.

Zahirah sighed. “Well, it’s good to know you’re not a fake.”

Annette nodded. “But god, that’s awful, Ted.”

“We all have unhappy stories, yeah?” Ted moved his eyes between each person. “Let’s just move on. Dante?”

“I—um—” Dante stuttered; he’s clearly never told this story out loud. He’d said it over and over in his head. He thought he’d be sick of it. But now, he couldn’t even remember it. “I don’t really remember the exact events. But from what I could piece together, my mother—er— took the coke shortly before she gave birth to me. And I guess, the effects of it missed her, since she’s dead, and went to me. Like one of those genetic conditions. The real shitheads in middle school would call me ‘son-of-a-crackhead’ or ‘half-breed’ because my mom was white and my dad’s black.” Dante smiled bitterly.

“How do you know you’re immortal?” Zahirah asked.

“From birth, I’ve had some weird heart problems. The doctors who delivered me thought I didn’t have enough problems as the child of a coke addict. My doctor now thinks my heartbeat is slower than it ought to be.”

Ted leaned towards Dante. “Can you tell us a little more?”

Dante darted his eyes around to the other group members; all of their eyes narrowed as he told his story. “I—I think that’s enough. You know, for now.”

“Fair enough. Now I think it would be best if—”

“So how old are you? How old are you actually?” Annette asked.

“Twenty-three.”

Kyle whistled. “Damn, you’re young.”

Zahirah pursed her lips. “You have no idea what it’s like. To live century after century. You don’t know the pain.” In the candlelight, Zahirah’s grave face and words felt much heavier than she intended.

“Hey,” Dante warned. “Sorry I’m not a thousand years old like you are, *grandma*, but—”

“Am I wrong though? No. Did you not hear our stories? Did you not hear the struggle?”

Zahirah trained her gaze on her lap.

Dante clenched his fists on his thighs. “Well, what about Kyle? Technically, he’d still be alive.” Dante turned to Kyle. “You went to college in the eighties?”

Kyle nodded. “Duh, were you not listening?”

“Yeah, you’re right. I should’ve known because it looks like the eighties threw up on you.” This time, the candlelight threw a harshness on Dante’s face, which was normally relaxed.

“What’s wrong with the eighties? So many people compliment what I wear. The eighties are coming back!”

Dante exhaled. “Never mind. The point is, if Kyle wasn’t immortal, he’d still be alive. He’d just be like sixty or whatever. Not even a century old. So why is it different for me?”

Annette looked at Ted, expectant, but he just sat back in his seat with two finger tips to his lips.

Annette joined the conversation reluctantly. “You didn’t even make the decision to snort coke! Your mom made the decision for you! What makes you think you belong here besides the fact that you *think* you’re immortal?”

“And how do we know you’re not a fake? How do we know you’re not going to report us?” Kyle chewed at his lip. His chill, college student demeanor started to crumble.

“Why don’t we ease off Dante a little? Don’t forget, we’re all here to help each other.” Ted ran his hand through his hair. “I wouldn’t have invited him to this group if I didn’t believe his story was legitimate. Not that he isn’t inherently valuable, but he’s already given us information that we can all learn from: slang. Modern language.”

“Thanks, Ted.” Dante said bitterly, hiding his annoyance at Ted letting the others rip into him for a little while before stepping in. “You guys need me. I belong here. I don’t have centuries worth of pain and experience, but I *know* what it’s like out there. You know, in the present.”

Zahirah bit her lip. “Alright.”

Ted sighed. “Okay. Like I was saying before, I think we should talk about why our—you know—condition has been a struggle. Annette, you mentioned trying to kill yourself.” He didn’t notice her wince. “Can anyone else relate to that? Do you want to speak more to that, Annette?”

Annette remained silent, chewing on her lip.

“Well, I for one, cannot relate,” Dante said.

“Oh,” Zahirah said. “Of *course*, you can’t.”

Dante rolled his eyes. “Well, can you?”

“Christ, are you an idiot? What do you think—living century after century is all rainbows and butterflies?”

Dante sulked in his seat.

“Anyway,” Kyle offered. “I know I’m not as old as some of you, but I feel pretty lucky. I’ve tried every drug I could get my hands on.” The moon started to shine through the stained-glass pane onto his face.

Annette covered a laugh with a cough. “You’re the only one here who actually needs help,” she muttered.

Kyle pretended like he didn’t hear. “But it has been tough. All these women start hitting on me, but I feel so grodie because they all think I’m younger than I actually am.”

Dante scoffed. “Well, at least you’re a little more decent than I thought.”

Ted clapped his hands, the others’ turned to him. “Just an observation: you all keep dismissing really important struggles that I’m sure are relatable in one way or another.”

“Great observation,” Zahirah rolled her eyes. “You said you wanted to act as a facilitator? So? Facilitate!”

He considered her for a moment, then nodded. “I’ll start the conversation: Kyle, I can kind of relate. Whenever I try to pursue any sort of companionship, I feel a lot of guilt. I should only exist in my after life, whatever that is, with my family.”

Zahirah’s face softened. “I do understand. It’s hard not to feel guilty when you have to lie to them about basically everything in your past.”

“And everything in your future, too,” Annette added. “I mean, suppose you’ve found yourself someone you would like to know. Do you get to know them? Do you let them know you? When do you cut it off? To what extent are you just using them?”

Everyone was silent for a moment.

Dante cleared his throat. “There’s a lot you can do to make yourself look older, Kyle, if you want a more age-appropriate, uh, companion. You can learn to do your make-up. There’s definitely tutorials on YouTube.”

Kyle nodded.

Zahirah squinted her eyes at Dante. “YouTube?”

“It’s a video sharing website,” Dante said, his voice rising to match his exasperation. “Kyle looks really young—Annette, you’re really small, but I think you look around twenty-five, maybe? You could date a thirty-year-old, maybe a forty-year-old. Same with you, Zahirah,” he said, not quite meeting her eyes. “There are much weirder things than two people with a huge age gap in a relationship.”

“I know,” Zahirah, Ted, and Annette said in unison. The three looked at each other.

“Well, I’m just going to ignore that,” Kyle said, clapping his hands on his thighs. “Cause I don’t want to know what *that* was about, to be honest.”

“Ugh, Kyle!” Annette said. “Not everything is like that!”

Kyle shrugged. “Whatever, man.”

The immortals continued to bicker, and the figures in the stained-glass panes seemed eager to join in. All of them shifted in their seats, unaware of the tired creaking floorboards, moaning at them to please, be quiet. The rain kept falling into the church and the immortals kept refusing to understand each other, despite Ted’s efforts. There was something about their ignorance, the patters of the rain on the rooftop, and the cracks on the church walls that created an overwhelming sense of déjà vu.

Story 8

Scarred Kid

Papa had recently taught me how to ride a bicycle. At this point, Mama and Papa no longer told me to wait for them when I said I wanted to ride. They didn't cheer the last time I successfully rode over a stretch of land, but it's okay because they cheered when I did it a bunch of times before that. When I told them I was going to go ride, they just said, "Okay, be safe." And they let me go. So I went.

I walked my bicycle over to the peak of the slope at the abandoned Cleff County K-Mart parking lot, a half a mile from my house, where everyone rode their bikes. Today, it was empty and I felt like a disappointed queen. Where were all of my people? What had I done wrong?

I mounted my bicycle to face the K-Mart entrance, on the peak of the steep slope. I only pedaled for a moment before stopping and letting the slope carry me, feet braced on the pedals. The momentum built and built. I squinted in the dry Arizona wind that only comes when you go really fast. It blew my hair away from my face and my neck. I'd only ever felt this free twice before: when Mama made churros and she let me roll them in the sugar and cinnamon; when Papa showed me how to Mambo and we danced and he swung me around for hours and hours.

Too close to the curb, I let my legs dangle and graze the blacktop. But I was too slow to stop. The front wheel of my bicycle hit the curb; I felt it in the seat before it threw me off. My legs skidded and scraped at the curb, and my bike fell on top of me. After crawling out from underneath my bike, I cursed myself for not listening to Papa and wearing shorts. I assessed my legs. The scrapes were damp, thin stripes of bright red. The only alarming thing about that moment was the whirling feeling in my head. I could've vomited. I didn't though. Happy to say Papa's tamales didn't go to waste.

The walk home took longer than usual. It was harder to drag the bicycle, which felt as big as it was. A hand-me-down from my only maternal cousin, who is eight years older than me. But I was used to things being too big for me.

“I’m back,” I said to my parents, whose gazes were trained at the TV. They looked concerned, out of place among the always-happy Barbie dolls and the thin hardback books all colored as brightly as *The Giving Tree*. The reporter kept saying “recession.” Recess is fun, so how bad could “recession” be?

“How was it?” Mama asked, not looking away.

“Good,” I said. “I’m going to shower.”

“Okay,” Papa said

I sat on the closed toilet, cleaning the blood from my legs. I studied the red on the wet paper towels and the open and pink scrapes the blood revealed. Soon, scars would form, darker on dark skin.

The place where my bike fell on my thigh didn’t bruise. I was disappointed.

* * *

Mama wanted to read my tea leaves again. She’d been doing this quite often lately. I couldn’t tell if her questions were about the near future or the far future. She’d never tell me. I wish she’d let me ask my own questions. I wanted to know if the watermelon seed I’d planted would grow. Or if Papa would still let me help make tamales next time, since I was so messy the last time I helped.

I took the metal tin of tea leaves down from the cabinet and pried the lid off and inhaled the earthy smell.

“Theresa?” my mother called. “Is everything okay? Did you find the leaves?”

“Yes, Mama.” In my hurry, I pinched the pad of my thumb between the lid and the container. I drew my thumb away from the tin and the container clattered on the counter. I sucked at the pinch for a moment and pulled it back to see a rich reddish-brown teardrop shape, raised above the rest of my thumb. Instead of pink on dark or darker on dark, it was dark and red and rich on the pale skin of the palm-side of my hand.

Boiled water rested in a tea cup in front of Mama when I handed her the tin of tea leaves. She took my hands in hers. Upon seeing my thumb, she clucked her tongue at me. I smiled in return.

Mama prepared the tea. “Lean close,” she said as the leaves steeped. “Smell the leaves. They won’t hurt you now.” The tea steeped to the same color as the most fruitful bruises, the same red as when they are fresh.

Mama nodded and I gulped it down. It scalded my tongue and my throat, but felt good in my belly.

I gave the cup to Mama. She took it in both of her hands and her eyes fluttered closed. She silently asked her question.

In a swift motion, she inverted the cup onto its saucer and kept it there for a moment. The dregs sat in lumps. She scrutinized the bottom of the tea cup. Her eyebrows knitted up, and she let out a soft gasp, which she quickly covered with her mouth. She knew I was watching her.

“What do you see, Mama?”

“I don’t see anything, *mija*.” She tried to hide her face behind the thick strands at her hairline that came out of her ponytail, but her big emerald eyes couldn’t hide. Her smile wobbled. “Maybe I didn’t do the reading right this time.” She was lying. Water dripped from one of her eyelids, but I was too afraid to ask any more questions.

Maybe she saw pain. But pain is temporary; why would Mama be worried about that?

The tin of tea leaves was the last thing that would hurt me for a while. The pinch stayed with me for a couple of weeks, but dried up and scabbed off soon after, leaving clean, pink skin where the lines of my thumb flowed without a trace of damage.

* * *

Papa took me to work with him. Mama had a special doctor's appointment. I had a lot of questions for Papa.

"What's Mama's appointment for?"

"To fix her head, *mija*."

"What's wrong with her head?"

"Don't worry about it."

"Why can't I stay home by myself while you're at work? I'd done it before. And Mama said the appointment will only last an hour."

He didn't answer that question. All he said was, "Come on. You could help me out. It'll be fun."

The warehouse was full of shelves and the shelves were filled with pallets and the pallets were filled with things that people wanted to buy. Everything from hot dog rolls to TVs. Papa said we wouldn't worry about the TVs; we'd focus on the smaller stuff that I could hold.

I stood on a stool. It wobbled a bit, so Papa put some scrap cardboard underneath one of the legs to keep it still. Papa asked me to cut the plastic covering over the pallets and hand the items to him. It was kind of fun, like he had said. Papa whistled and I guessed the tune. He warned me not to tap my feet, or I might lose my balance.

I heeded his warning, but I lost my balance anyway. I didn't position the stool close enough to the shelves, but I thought I could make it.

"*Mija!*" Papa said when he heard me hit the ground.

My nose broke my fall, but it didn't break. It just bled and bled and bled. The corner of the microwave oven box that I was taking down hit my thigh along the way; it bruised!

I told Papa I was fine, but he took me to the hospital anyway. Mama got really angry when we got home. She sent me to my room, and I tried not to listen to what they were saying.

* * *

"You're crazy," Papa said.

Mama bit her lip and her eyes got glassy. She grabbed my arm and lead me to the door.

"Where will you go?" Papa shouted at Mama. This stopped her. "You won't survive on your own."

Mama's nails dug into the thin skin of my wrist. Papa grabbed my shoulder and pulled me towards him. I saw my skin cells beneath Mama's fingernails.

"What about her?" he asked. "Doesn't she deserve more?"

Mama walked out of the door.

Papa spun me around to face him and hugged me, scratching my cheek with his stubble and cradling the back of my head with his hands. I hugged him back and imagined bruises the size of Papa's fingertips on my shoulder.

"When is Mama coming back?"

"I don't know," he said, relieved.

* * *

Mama taught me how to shave my legs on one of the few weekends I got to spend with her. She tsked when I emerged from the bathroom with teeny cuts all down my shins.

“There’ll be nothing left of your legs by the time you graduate.”

I took the mug full of tea-bag tea she offered. “Maybe I’d be more careful if I lived with you.”

She bit her lip. “You know your father would never let that happen.”

“Right.” I sipped my tea and busied myself with Torres’s *We the Animals*.

* * *

I plucked the cigarette out of his mouth and took a drag. I ashed it. Pressed the cherry onto my palm and gave it back. The tiny cuts and bruises of his affection have faded, but at least this burn will last. I walked away. He called out my name. I didn’t look back. He already said goodbye.

Papa asked what happened.

“Nothing.”

He left me alone.

* * *

Again, I sat on my second-hand bicycle, propped up with my foot, on the suburban outskirts of Swaithe University. It was October. Too hot for anyone to spend more than a few moments out in the sun and wonder how an adult could fall off of her bicycle, if it came to that. At least the Arizona heat was good for something.

In control. In control. I wouldn’t go home for Thanksgiving break. Thud. Hit the curb. I’d only get to see Mama once, and Papa would pretend like I didn’t miss her. Thrown over the right handle bar. Again. I was glad to be alone.

Scraped knees. Scraped legs. Sharper than the first time. Sharper than Papa's nails on my skin when he lifted me from the ground in the warehouse or my still-stinging nose buried into Mama's collar when she held me tight before sending me to my room. Sharper than Papa's *lawyer* telling me that my mother was "unfit" to take care of me, even though she didn't know my mama like *I* knew her. Sharper than losing my virginity, though my breath didn't hitch in quite the same way.

Story 9

Hold Yourself Together

I first became aware of my existence when a chubby-fingered child, with sticky, sweet-smelling skin bent me out of shape into an S, seeming amused by the excruciating pain it gave me. The child returned me to my usual state and flicked me out of his hands, like a booger into the ether. But I couldn't return to my original shape. Maybe that's why I can still feel my own existence.

I can only assume it was the enduring pain that caused this first vision to come to me. Or come back to me? I call them "visions from my past life," even though I can't have a past life. I can't even die. I'm made of metal. But "visions from my past life" sounds cooler than "visions before I gained consciousness" or "visions of events I'm not even sure happened," so I'll stick with the first one. Life gets pretty boring, lying on this tiled floor, so it's very possible my mind made them up to keep me from ruminating on the complete lack of control I have in my newly conscious life.

Anyway, this first vision fit the vibe of my rude awakening.

A blurry flash of stiff and rubbery blue material and fluorescent lights. I held together a short stack of papers, a welcoming feeling compared to getting jerked into existence by a child. One of the papers spoke with urgency, to the other papers in the stack, I assume. "Description of procedure: Patient is a twenty-eight-year-old female. Prepared for vaginal delivery; medication administered after adoptive parents settled payment issues. Weak contractions resulted in

unscheduled C-section. Successful delivery. Severe scarring likely for patient.” Yikes. At least my pain was subsiding. She’d have a reminder of hers forever.

The vision (memory? Dream?) was exciting, but still, I remained on the tile. In the company of dust bunnies and lollipop sticks, beneath the overhang of what looked like children’s cubbies. I lost count of the times the light went on and off on and off. But then a woman with a cart full of cleaning tools came into what I assumed was a classroom. She started to sweep! *To the front of the room, ma’am! When the kids return, they are bound to notice me there!* And I felt it. I was lifted off of the cold tile and dropped into a container holding a bunch of other paper clips. I wish I could’ve thanked her. Could these paper clips talk? No, probably not. They have no words on them.

When the lights turned back on and the people came back, life was even more maddening than on the tile. I was getting tired of hearing a high-pitched voice say, “Does anyone have a stapler?” and the growing exasperation each time I couldn’t voice, *No, but I have a paperclip!* It felt like I was getting cheated on. I needed them more than staples did. Or... are staples sentient?

This feeling of betrayal triggered more visions, two this time.

In the first, I sweltered on a metal table, the sun beaming down on me as I held together some pages. The vision dropped me right in the middle of a conversation between the papers I held, with condensation running off a glass of iced tea with a lemon wedge, coming towards me to give relief from this heat.

Page two in the stack spoke. “What? Don’t tell me you don’t like *Pulp Fiction!* It’s a cinematic masterpiece!”

“I’ve never seen it, for obvious reasons. Excuse me if I have a hard time believing that you’ve—” Page one stopped talking when voices from outside of the stack started speaking. A person.

“Eve!” a human voice close to the papers called.

“Hey,” another voice, presumably Eve, said.

The first voice cleared her throat. “Thanks for coming to meet me.”

“Sure,” Eve said. She pulled her long, rust-colored hair into a ponytail.

The first voice lifted the papers. “I fictionalized you, obviously” it said. “So don’t pay too much attention to your description. I had to keep your red hair, though.”

“Got it,” Eve said, creating wind from flipping the pages. “I think it looks good. The Jesse character is spot-on. A great name for him too. He looks like his name should be Jesse.”

“Thanks.”

“Well, if that’s it...” Eve said, clipping me back onto the papers.

“Actually,” the first voice said. “Are you hungry? The quiche here is amazing.”

Eve was silent for a moment. “Listen. I don’t mean to be a bitch, but we’re not friends. I just wanted to do what I felt was right.”

“Right. Okay, then.”

“Alright. I’ll see you.”

The first voice let out a sigh and stuffed me and the papers into her bag. Back into the darkness.

In the second vision, I held together a thick stack of papers, which was probably more suitable for a binder clip. I didn’t complain, though. It was nice to feel used.

A manila envelope hugged me and the papers, who were silent for most of the time in the manila folder, except for one part.

“I’m glad they agreed to evenly split the amount of time each of them gets with their child.” Page five sighed. “It’s a shame, your parents getting divorced before you’re even born.”

The other pages chimed their agreement.

Outside of the manila envelope, the woman took us out and sat in front of two other people, a man and a woman.

The lone woman said, “I just need you both to sign these papers.”

The man turned to the woman at his side. “Are you sure this is what you want?”

The woman next to him stared right at me. “Yes.” She frowned. “I think so.”

“Think?” the man’s voice sounded hopeful.

“Maybe,” the lone woman said, “You guys would like more time?”

“Okay,” the other woman said.

“We’ll give it a week.” And it was back into the folder, until she took us out again and placed us on a wooden table.

She leafed through the pages with a glass of some clear liquid close by. She pulled her hand back to flip the page—

“Shit!” she said, going for a napkin. But it was too late. The liquid ran toward us and soaked into the papers. I lied in a puddle of some sharp-smelling liquid.

More lights turning on and off. I didn’t have visions for a while. I just felt the paperclips beneath me. One of them even got pulled out of the container and slipped onto a stack of papers. I deserved that spot. Or maybe not. I’m just the asshole that jumped the queue.

Another series of visions—three this time.

I held papers together, thankfully.

From the papers' whispers and giggles among each other, I held termination papers.

"Did you hear why it happened?" one paper asked.

"Apparently, she couldn't hold her tongue! She's getting the boot!"

"Publishing is a volatile game."

"She's not even getting a severance package."

"Once she signs the acknowledgement, it's adios!"

Someone slipped me off of those papers and something slipped me onto a single worn page in a stack of bound pages.

It read its contents, to no one in particular:

"You know. One of those stories with a lot of phony, lean-jawed guys named David in it, and a lot of phony girls named Linda or Marcia that are always lighting all the goddam Davids' pipes for them. I can even read one of those lousy stories on a train at night, usually. But this time, it was different. I just didn't feel like it. I just sort of sat and not did anything. All I did was take off my hunting hat and put it in my pocket."

I got as close to unconsciousness with this piece of paper as I was ever going to get, but I got jolted into another vision.

Page one sounded professional. "This client's name is Luka Palanos. He's thirty-five years old. The subject he's looking for is named Carmen, but there's no last name?"

"What? Why doesn't she have a last name? All the other forms all talk about people with last names." Page two sounded nervous.

"I don't know," page one continued. "But listen to this: she just left. Out of nowhere. The reason for the investigation is Luka had been dating Carmen for a little while, but all of a sudden,

Carmen's nowhere to be found. Her phone number's disconnected, her place of residence no longer seems to be there, even though Luka had visited the address he gave just before Carmen's disappearance."

Page three chimed in, "She's on the run."

"What makes you say that? What if she got kidnapped?" page one asked.

"I don't know where they got this information," page three continued, "But there are profiles of a bunch of people who were born centuries ago. Carmen's profile is affiliated with them."

Page one scoffed. "You're kidding me, right?"

"You know as well as I do that I can't make this up. I'm just telling you what's written on me."

Page two followed page one. "Quit messing with us. What kind of paper have you been in the company of lately?"

"I'm not kidding!" There was an edge to page three's voice. "Fine, if you guys don't want to believe me, go ahead."

Page one and page two continued talking.

"They have a theory that Carmen's done this before. They're going to reach out to other organizations to see if they can get any information on her. They say their best bet is if she gets sloppy in her over-confidence."

"Wow," page two said. "That's crazy."

I wish I could've talked to page three. It seemed like it had a good story.

Ugh, paper has it so good. They have the whole story. I only got pieces of it. Plus, they fulfill their purpose in one go. Oh, to have that immediacy, instead of constantly getting ripped

away from the thing I want most. Paper + clip = less than paper itself. All I want is to hold papers together, but I can't even ask for it. I'm just a slave to whoever's hands I'm in, wondering if I'll get to hold papers or if I'll get forgotten.

And what's a paperclip to paper? I give order and stability to meaning, but I don't give meaning. There are versions of me that are fun shapes: clothes hangers, music notes, smiley faces. Replaceable, but less so than me, just a thin, curled up metal stick, slightly bent out of shape.

I resigned myself to enduring life stuck in this container full of paperclips. I stopped keeping track of the number of times the lights turned on and off or the people came and went. Visions were less frequent, at this time when I longed for one, holding papers together, even if it isn't real life.

My last vision before I completely lost hope was a relief, because I held a single, thin page in a thick stack of them. It was also scary because the papers seemed... on edge.

"Are you ready to accept God into your heart?" the page I marked said. To me, it seemed. What even is 'god'? I didn't understand the question and the way the page asked felt pressuring. But I would've said yes just to keep holding this page.

"She never visits anymore!"

"She's going to Hell."

"Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works." Yikes. It's a good thing I couldn't talk

because these pages certainly would've learned I couldn't understand anything they were saying.

They couldn't make me leave, though.

"I miss her," another page said with a despondent voice

Something disturbed my vision and took me away from it in a choppy mess of black and white.

And I felt it. Fingertips lifted me by the space between my inner and outer curves. Hope was not lost! The owner of the fingers, the adult, I assumed, who took care of all these children, move me towards a stack of papers. I was ready. The finger tips warmed my curves. I would've whooped if I could've.

I don't know what I expected. Something magical, I guess. Or for things to go back to the way they were. There was no pain when I slid onto the papers, unlike when that little bastard first bent me out of shape. The papers were warm and quiet. I fulfilled my purpose, for real this time. But it didn't feel as good as in the visions. I still feared the possibility of getting taken off. I still remained sentient.

All these stories of people whose lives are unravelling. I held their affairs together and gave order to them, according to my visions: their divorces and custody arrangements, their stories of pain and loss, what seemed like the aftermath of letting their ego get out of hand. I even marked a page they thought worthy of marking in a stack of papers. Their lives wouldn't have any order without me. But they get the control.

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ITtKE3yPoPIPNGg

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PUBLICATIONS

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EXPERIENCE

Running Press of Hachette Book Group

Marketing and Publicity Intern

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- Wrote press releases once a week for upcoming publications
- Compiled media contacts through Instagram and Cision; corresponded with these contacts to solicit publicity
- Created talking points for interviews with authors
- Created Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook posts and copy for the Running Press, Running Press Kids, and Running Press Mini accounts
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- Created flyers to advertise the magazine, calls for submission, and events using Canva and Adobe InDesign and Photoshop
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- Reviewed Penn State undergraduate students’ unsolicited fiction and discussed which of these pieces should be published in *Kalliope* with the rest of the committee

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Planned Parenthood Generation Action

Web Team Coordinator

University Park, PA
Fall 2019-Spring 2020

- Created content and copy got Planned Parenthood Generation Action's Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook accounts
- Assisted in planning weekly meetings and social events with executive board for general members
- Promoted Planned Parenthood's mission with events like tabling and rallying

Elbow Lane Day Camp

Assistant Ceramics Instructor

Warrington, PA
Summer 2018

- Assisted in ceramic instruction to 5 to 7 groups of 7- to 12-year-olds
- Helped maintain materials, equipment, and studio space