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AMELIA

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**ABSTRACT**

This is a story about a young woman named Amelia and her relationship with a rich Manhattan woman named Joan who happens to be nearly forty years her senior. Amelia believes that she is in control by using Joan for her money, but there is a shift in their relationship which places Amelia in a precarious situation.

## REFLECTIVE ESSAY

In my head, the words “femme fatale” always conjured images of women like those out of noir films: Jane Greer in *Out of the Past* and Barbara Stanwyck in *Double Indemnity*, irresistible women who destroy men for money. I wanted to play with my idea of the classic femme fatale and place her in a different circumstance. When I started writing this, I hadn’t expected my femme fatale to be a rich married woman of sixty years who carries on affairs with younger women while her husband is away.

Sugar babies as a concept are nothing particularly new. There seems to be a new wave happening right now of young people’s using their sexuality in a variety of ways to finance their lives. I tried to imagine what this would be like as a young woman to enter into an intimate relationship with an individual with the intention of using them for their money. I envisioned extravagant shopping trips, expensive jewelry, and elegant dinners. One factor that I thought would be important is the lack of emotional investment. In a crude sense, it is an exchanging of goods from one person to another. These relationships aren’t meant to last forever, they are meant to be thrilling but temporary. From this idea is how Amelia and Joan came to grow in my imagination.

*Amelia* came about originally as a crossover between femme fatale meets modern day sugar baby. I had every intention of making my protagonist a cold, money hungry individual, with little regard for anyone’s feeling besides her own. Along with this I originally had intended for Joan to be naïve and almost helpless to Amelia’s charm because of the emotional and physical neglect she receives from her absent husband. In action, this idea fell flat. I brainstormed for a while in an attempt to make Amelia and Joan more dynamic characters. Amelia needed to be someone who was emotionally invested in her relationship with Joan to make her more than someone who preys

on an older woman for her money. Along the way, Joan became the powerful woman of this story, having full control over the relationship.

While trying to gain some inspiration for my story I invested some time in reading novels about women who have affairs. I looked toward Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and Greene's *The End of the Affair* for a little guidance on how to handle this topic. These novels challenged me to look at how relationships with family and friends are mixed into the messiness of an affair. I went into this thinking about how other characters would react to a public affair. How would they react to an affair that isn't a secret?

With *Anna Karenina* in particular I was interested in the family dynamics. I wanted some of that familial tension in *Amelia* which is why I brought in Joan's daughters. The pair help to shed light on Joan's very private life, a life that Amelia does not belong to. From this I realized that I wanted to use the idea of the outsider to be a part of Amelia's character. There was a time in my life where I always felt as though I didn't belong and that I was on the outside looking in. On occasion, there are times when I'll be at a function or out in public, and I realize that I am getting intentionally treated as an outsider because of the color of my skin, or my social standing, or my ethnicity, or a combination of these. My experience as a Penn State student is no exception to this fact, having dealt with discrimination my entire life. Being Afro-Latina, it was important for me to have Amelia be a black woman. She is aware of the preconceived notions that people may have of her, especially Joan's family and friends, that goes beyond the vast age difference.

I read novels that have femme fatale characters that don't fit the typical mold, such as *Lolita* and *Naomi*. These titular characters had power and influence over the men in the lives through their sexuality. With my story I wanted to take inspiration from those characters and see what it would be like if money were no concern. Right before my eyes, the femme fatale of my story

wasn't the protagonist, Amelia: It was her lover, Joan. The tables had turned on my original concept and I realized that it was important for Amelia to be vulnerable and with the most to lose in their relationship.

I took a lot of inspiration from the people around me and their experiences with relationships. Over and over again I was confronted with the idea of expectation. What did someone expect to get out of the relationship? It became clear that everyone has some sort of self-serving agenda when it comes to entering into a relationship. There is a great list of wants one may have that can cause a relationship to fail. I've seen first-hand how quickly a romance can fall apart simply because the other was not meeting expectations. I channeled this energy into Amelia, having her be the only person to not see her relationship with Joan clearly and be filled with hopeful expectations of the future they could have together.

Many of my characters came from this idea of Amelia being delusional, but everyone else being able to see through their relationship. For this I also drew from personal experience. Most people tend to keep their noses out of other people's business, but that becomes more difficult to do when it is a close friend or family member that is involved in a troubling relationship. I thought about the close friendships that I have and times when I didn't approve of a significant other. There needed to be someone in Amelia's life that would provide a voice of reason as she becomes financially depended on Joan. I know from my experience how hard it can be to separate the idea of a person from who they really are, and that sometimes it takes a friend to be a guiding light back to shore. I wanted the curtain to be slowly pushed back, for Amelia to not recognize the truth until it's staring her in the face because that is often how I feel when waking up from a fantasy.

This story was a challenge for a number of reasons. There was so much that I needed to figure out about the relationship built between Joan and Amelia. Fitting all the pieces of this

romance together was hard. I've never written a piece like this before, so it was difficult organizing out how I wanted this sort of unreciprocated love story to go. There were any moments where I found myself having to walk away from this story for a while and focus my energy elsewhere otherwise, I'd go crazy. It was in these times that I tried out people watching, paying particular attention to the couples I saw around me. Every now and then I would catch a lover's quarrel – arguments about what to eat, fights about a drunken mistake, tiffs about nothing at all. I eavesdropped, only half guilty at having done so, and figured out what I could gain from my observations.

There were multiples times in which I put myself in the place of every character to understand why they act the way that they do and what they would have to say about Amelia's relationship with Joan. I asked myself how the world would see them versus how they see themselves. Every few pages I changed my mind about how I wanted my characters to act. *Amelia* allowed me to explore relationships under a different lens than I normally would. I was able to play with my interpretation on the femme fatale as well as the challenges of being young and naïve. By some miracle I ended up here.

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## Chapter 1

Amelia thought there was something magical about waking up naked in a bed wrapped in silk sheets. Real silk, imported from a little traditional shop in China, smooth and cool like heaven against her skin. She traced her fingers over the fabric, humming to herself. *This is the life I was meant to live*, she thought.

Joan sighed in her sleep, faded blonde hair fallen across her face, soft wrinkles relaxed. It made Amelia laugh that she refused to sleep in the nude, the light pink nightgown always bunched around her arms – forever modest. She wouldn't be up for a while, tending to sleep heavily until the morning sun was too bright to ignore. Without disturbing her Amelia leaned over and pressed a soft kiss to her cheek. She slunk out of bed, limbs stretched like a cat, bones fit slowly back into place as she padded across the warm hardwood floor. Amelia slid on Joan's satin robe, the black fabric covered in embroidered pastel flowers, the stitching so delicate it seemed a single touch would unravel it.

Early Tuesday mornings were reserved for peppermint tea and a trip to Joan's closet. In the kitchen, placid yellow light poured through an east facing window which made the copper pots that hung from the ceiling over a granite island gleam like little sparks of fire. Joan had her tea specially imported from Fortnum & Mason, kept them in their own cupboard stacked in neat Tiffany blue tins.

Amelia put water to boil in a sturdy black kettle. A stainless-steel electric kettle poised on the counter, but she enjoyed the authentic feel of boiling water on the stove – even though the

stove itself was electric and not the dated gas style Amelia was used to. She looked around and pretended that all of this was hers. The elegant modern paintings purchased at auction, the overstuffed chocolate-colored couch, the kitchen stocked with organic produce and fresh fruit. Amelia indulged in her fantasy when she could, before she was reminded by the elegant wedding portraits of Joan and William that this life didn't belong to her.

She wandered back into the master bedroom, glancing quickly to make sure Joan was still in deep sleep before entering the walk-in closet. Of all the rooms of the Central Park West penthouse, this was her favorite. The closet was split into his and hers sections lined with clean white shelves, plush cream carpet on the floor. Regardless of how many stolen weekends she spent with her lover in her luxurious dwelling, this was the one place she never tired of. Amelia adored the way it smelled like fresh linen and Chanel perfume. The rows of cashmere and chiffon in varying shades of creamy pastels and rich neutrals excited her. She ran her fingers across each item as she walked past.

Amelia ignored the neat rows of men's tailored suits and Italian shoes and headed straight toward the white vanity at the back of the closet. She sat on the velvet covered vanity chair, in the company of Joan's clothes. Amelia's hands moved with practiced care as she opened the top drawer and pulled out a red necklace box. She paid no attention to the smaller jewelry boxes, knowing already that Joan's rings were too small for her fingers. The metal clasp opened with a satisfying click that made her ears perk up, then the pearls revealed themselves. She handled them as if they were a precious newborn, every movement careful.

Amelia slipped the pearls around her neck with an easy familiarity, soothed by the cool feel of them on her skin. The pearls rested at the base of her throat. She felt reunited with old friends. In the small vanity mirror she admired the way they gleamed on her dark, supple skin in a

way that diamonds never could. Not that she owned many diamond necklaces, only the one that Joan had given her over dinner not long after they met. Nobody bought pearl necklaces anymore, which is what made her feel special.

When she returned to the kitchen, she checked the time. It was eight o'clock. She had at least another hour to wear the pearls and lounge about before Joan woke up and reclaimed her life. When the kettle whistled loudly, she jerked it from the burner in fear of waking her sleeping lover. Amelia was pouring water over her tea ball when she heard the ding of the private elevator announcing a new arrival. For a moment her heart stopped while she imagined William walking through the door. She had never met him in person, but she had seen enough pictures around the apartment to know his face. When Sylvie walked in Amelia let out a small sigh. Of course, it couldn't be William, he was away on business somewhere in Asia. Joan wasn't dumb enough to invite Amelia over if her husband was expected home.

Sylvie didn't bother hiding a grimace at the sight of Amelia in the kitchen, her eyes traveling across her mussed curls and landing pointedly at the pearls on her neck. Amelia felt herself get hot in the chest, guilty as a child caught stealing candy.

"Is that Mrs. Bellville's necklace?" Sylvie's slight accent was Ukrainian accent but the perpetual look of distrust in her eyes was universal. She intimidated Amelia even though she only stood at five feet and was built like a snowman with a mousy brown bob. Amelia knew that Sylvie despised her, at least partly, she thought, because she was black. The other part would have to be because of the affair.

Amelia didn't know what to say, throat gone tight. Sylvie had an unwavering stare, blue eyes cold, challenging the young woman in front of her.

"I was just —"

“That is her necklace!” Triumph was written on her face.

Amelia wracked her brain for an excuse, flustered and almost ashamed of herself. *She’s going to use this against me. She’s going to tell Joan, and this will all be over. How could I have been so stupid?*

“It looks beautiful on you,” Joan said, her soft voice soothing the tension. Both women turned to look at Joan, elegant even when she first got out of bed. She stood next to Sylvie and her grace seemed more evident. Joan was all smooth lines and slim build, blonde hair glowing like a halo around her in the morning sun. She approached Amelia and stood on her toes to plant a quick kiss on her cheek. Sylvie huffed and moved toward the refrigerator, passing Amelia without a second glance.

“Do you think so?” Amelia touched her neck gently and traced the string of pearls.

“Radiant is the word I would use. You can keep it. I haven’t worn them in quite some time.”

“I couldn’t possibly.” Amelia smiled but made no move to remove her necklace. Joan only laughed under her breath and made herself a cup of tea, Earl Grey as usual. She knew that Amelia had no intention of giving them back and Joan was sincere in her gift – she hadn’t even thought twice about the pearls.

Emboldened, Amelia turned to Sylvie. “Make us those lemon poppy seed pancakes for breakfast, will you?” she said, a hint of smugness in her voice.

“Is that what you want Mrs. Belville?”

“Yes, that’ll be fine. Would you add some fruit, raspberries maybe?”

Sylvie nodded, her neck flushing a deep tomato red. Amelia thought her loyalty to William probably kept Sylvie from showing her kindness, though her loyalty to Joan kept her from exposing them.

Joan left the kitchen then with Amelia following closely on her heels, a small smile framing her lips. They went out onto the balcony, Joan enjoyed taking in the morning air. New York City was already alive beneath them, cars honking, early birds jogging into Central Park. Lovely June breeze carried Joan's scent, like autumn – cinnamon and falling leaves. Amelia breathed it in greedily. She hugged Joan from behind, feeling her petite frame beneath her solid arms.

They made an odd pair. Amelia was all legs and voluptuous curves, dark cocoa skin and untamable curly hair. Joan was ethereal, with her soft facial features, slim build, and ballerina like posture. The age difference was another matter.

Amelia recalled the first night they spent together which happened after one too many gin and tonics over an expensive dinner, Joan's treat. After their tentative yet passionate evening filled with curious hands and eager kisses, Amelia admired the penthouse while Joan washed up. She had never been in a place like it, a place filled with modern fixtures, oak floors, and foreign rugs. The entire space felt staged, as if no one actually lived here and it existed for the sole purpose of looking beautiful and being photographed.

That night she took a moment to look at the tasteful array of family photos framed above the fireplace mantel. She admired most the one of Joan and her husband on their wedding day. She found it hard to look away, realizing that she had just slept with a married woman, a woman who was more than twice her age. Amelia thought Joan looked lovely in her white gown with the lace sleeves, a veil twice her size, and golden Farrah Fawcett hair. William was a little more difficult

to study. He was a very handsome man with broad shoulders and an expensive-looking smile. Months passed before Amelia dared to ask Joan about that picture, about her husband.

When she did, Joan sighed and said, “I was so young then,” a wistfulness slipping from her lips, “only a few years younger than you are now.”

“Will she tell William?” Amelia asked after Sylvie brought the pancakes out onto the balcony.

“There’s nothing money can’t buy,” Joan laughed. She cut her pancakes into neat triangles and then covered them in maple syrup. The sight made Amelia’s teeth hurt. Amelia ate her lemon poppyseed pancakes plain, with the slightest hesitation, wondering if Sylvie had done something grotesque to her portion.

“What plans do you have for today?” Amelia said between bites. “I was thinking we could go shopping, then grab a late lunch. There’s a new sushi place in Midtown that I’m dying to try.”

“I’m getting together with Kitty for a while, then I think I’ll paint.”

Joan enjoyed her afternoons on her balcony with a set of acrylic paints at her side. She filled her days making paintings that weren’t half bad, in Amelia’s opinion. Joan had even gifted Amelia a painting – a messy landscape covered in snow that now hung over Amelia’s bed in her small Brooklyn apartment.

“You’re welcome to join us,” said Joan.

“Kitty wouldn’t be happy with that.” Amelia sighed and pushed her plate away. “I think I may go shopping on my own,” she said, letting her words hang there.

“I’ll give you some cash before you leave.”

“Rent is due soon.” She picked up her fork and ate another bite, keeping her eyes on her food.

“I already have the check written.”

Amelia looked up and smiled shyly at Joan. Joan smiled back, and with that the talk of money stopped.

Their circumstances were clear, from the first night they slept together, and Joan had asked her to spend the night.

“I can’t stay, I have work in the morning,” Amelia giggled, still floating on air.

“Then quit your job.” Joan grinned, cheeks pink and hair a mess.

“I have to pay my bills! This city isn’t cheap.” Amelia moved to get out of bed, but Joan held onto her arm, playfully pulling her back into bed.

“Then let me pay them, as long as I can see more of you.”

Amelia laughed, but the laugh was caught quickly in her throat when she saw the earnest sincerity in Joan’s eyes. “Joan, I like you, but you barely know me.”

“Allow me to get to know you. Stay a while. I’ll take care of you.”

Amelia was skeptical. It sounded too good to be true, that Joan wanted her so much. In that moment she pitied Joan, a lonely woman abandoned by her husband, in need of a little affection, which Amelia had just given for free.

*What’s the harm?* Amelia thought. *I can always find another job once this is over.* Amelia hadn’t anticipated their affair to go on for six months. Soon she was living off of Joan without giving it a second thought. She relished in the luxury Joan offered her, content with being the other woman, taken care of in the wake of an absent husband.

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Joan looked at Amelia over the rim of her tea cup. Finally, she said, “You should buy a red dress; you look lovely in red.”

An hour later, Amelia wore the pearls proudly around her neck as she left the penthouse. She caught Sylvie staring when she got into the elevator, and holding her gaze, gave her a wink as the doors closed.

Amelia stopped at a boutique a few blocks from Joan’s apartment, the kind of store she’d never thought of entering before Joan made it a routine. Now she slipped under Carly’s tasteful pink awning and a soft little bell announced her entrance. Amelia greedily let the expensive scent of the place fill her lungs.

Near the front of the store, little tables held jewelry, rings, bracelets, and earrings, which Amelia tried on and admired in the gilt mirror, though nothing could compete with the pearl necklace.

“Can I help you find anything?” said a gorgeous woman in a knee length black dress and heels asked from over her shoulder.

Amelia removed the amethyst ring she’d been admiring and looked up at her. “I need a red dress. Something sexy.” She looked right into her eyes.

The woman didn’t flinch. “I’ve got just the dress for you. You’re a size four?”

“Six.”

“Perfect. One moment.” The woman glided away, across the carpeted floor.

Amelia tried on another ring as she waited, a bit tacky for her taste, silver with a large blue rock in the middle wrapped in thin wire. Some part of her wanted to buy it, just because she could. And for a brief moment she contemplated stealing it as the cold metal rolled in her palm. Her fist



closed tightly around the ring and was about to slip it in her pocket when the sales associate returned. Amelia put the ring back on the table, and rubbed her hands together, burnishing away the desire.

“I’ve put the dresses in a fitting room for you, miss. Shall I bring anything else?”

Amelia waved her hand dismissively. “That’s all for now,” she said, and walked past the woman. She turned at the dressing room door, remembering her manners, and murmured, “Thank you for all of your help.”

A mixture of cocktail dresses and evening dresses in shades of crimson and scarlet waited for her in the brightly lit dressing room. The shimmery crimson dress that was curve hugging and had a slit up the thigh was just tantalizing enough.

She paid the bill, eight hundred dollars, placing each crisp bill deliberately in the sales woman’s outstretched hand, and waited while the woman wrapped the dress carefully in tissue before sliding it into a pale pink shopping bag.

Eight hundred was only half of what Joan had given her. With a check in her wallet for the rent, Amelia contemplated how else to spend the cash. Perhaps she’d go for a facial.

## Chapter 2

Back in Brooklyn, Amelia climbed toward her fourth-floor walkup. Her building was visibly old, with scuffed, dirty tiles in the hall and badly listing stairs that couldn't possibly be up to code. The entire building felt like it was melting. The chipped iron railing had possibly never been cleaned. She avoided touching anything as she climbed the stairs, remembering how happy she'd been to find a rent-stabilized apartment, one that she could afford to live in on her own. Of course, the entire apartment was about the size of Joan's closet, kitchen and bathroom barely three feet from one another. Soon, she'd ask Joan to get her a nicer place, maybe in Manhattan.

When Amelia reached her floor she knocked with purpose on the door next to hers.

"Who is it?" A deep voice asked from behind the door.

"Your favorite person!"

Damion opened the door, thick beard and wide frame towering over her. "Look who's back," he said, crossing his arms against his broad chest and giving Amelia a sideways grin.

"And I come with goodies." She smiled widely, flashing even white teeth. "I want to show you my new dress."

"Still taking advantage of the old lady?"

"I'm not taking advantage; I never ask her for anything. She just gives it to me. I'm not going to say no." Amelia could see the disapproval in his eyes as she hurried on. "Come on, I want to hear you tell me how nice I look in it."

Damion sighed and shook his head, “I’ll be over in thirty.” He closed the door and Amelia grinned, already knowing that Damion wasn’t going to say no to her.

“Do you want some wine?” Amelia sauntered over to her dented refrigerator, exaggerating the movements of her hips with the knowledge that her guest was watching the shimmering red dress.

From her rumpled brown couch, Damion sighed. “Don’t you have any beer?”

“Excuse me, I’m a lady. I don’t drink beer.” She placed a hand on her hip and pulled out a bottle of chilled chardonnay. “You’re not going to make me drink, alone are you?” She pouted, waving the green bottle at him.

“Pour me a glass,” Damion grunted.

Amelia poured two generous glasses and joined him on the couch. They clinked glasses and sipped their wine in comfortable silence. She sat close enough that her bare thigh was nearly touching the rough denim of his jeans. Damion didn’t move away, but didn’t move closer, either.

She leaned toward him. “So, how do I look?”

Nice, really nice.” He took another generous sip and leaned back against the cushion.

“Nice? Is that all I get?”

Damion sighed. “Beautiful then, you look beautiful.”

“Well, I only want you to say it if you mean it.” She moved a little further away from him, put as much distance between herself and Damion as she could on the tiny couch. She enjoyed this little game, always careful not to take it too far. Amelia knew Damion was attracted to her, but on some deeper level she valued their friendship.

He looked both flustered and annoyed. “I mean it! I do, you look stunning. You always do.”

Amelia was satiated for the moment, content in the compliment. She patted his knee and smiled once more. They went easily into conversation then, Amelia filling the empty air with questions about his life. They spoke of his job as an assistant at the ad agency. She liked talking about him and finding out about his days. Damion was a hard worker and she admired him for that. Two more glasses of wine and they were laughing easily, sharing anecdotes about their lives. She told him about the spa day she had scheduled for herself that did some sort of blood facial.

“And how will you pay for it?”

Amelia winked and sipped her wine. “I have my resources.”

“Don’t get me wrong, you’re young and allowed to have your fun –”

“You’re barely two years older than me.”

“You need to be careful.” Damion’s voice sounded serious. His eyes were hard, and he put the glass down on the ring stained coffee table. “You’ve been seeing the old lady –”

“Joan.”

“. . .Joan for a while now, and you can spend your sugar baby money however you want, but you can’t really believe this will last forever. Maybe you should start saving some of that money. Just to have a little nest egg to fall back on,” Damion continued. “I know that you have real feelings for her even if you pretend not to, I just don’t want to see you get hurt.”

A long awkward stretch of silence opened between them. Amelia knew that what Damion was saying was true, but she hated being reminded of that fact – that it was all temporary. Wasn’t it always meant to be temporary?

*Things have changed. I love Joan, I really love her. And I know she loves me too. Damion doesn't know what he's talking about. He's just jealous.*

“Maybe you should start looking for work again. It's New York, I'm sure there's someone somewhere that could use a studio assistant or something.”

Amelia drank down the rest of her wine in one gulp. And poured herself another glass. She would need to be more buzzed if she was going to get through this conversation. Back before she met Joan, Amelia was struggling to find a secure job, something that would provide her with a steady income and had room for advancement. She refused to go back to being a waitress, with the irregular schedule, shitty pay checks, and rude customers. No amount of money in the world would prompt her to go back into customer service.

“Didn't you say the old lady was some kind of artist?”

“Not a real artist. She just does it for fun.”

“Well, I'm sure she knows someone that could help you find a job. She's bound to have connections somewhere with someone important. What's the harm in asking?”

This suggestion made sense. Maybe Joan wouldn't mind putting her in contact with a few artsy people. Maybe she could finally have the job she always wanted at a fancy gallery in Chelsea.

The loud ring of her phone surprised them both. Joan's name glowed on her screen and she answered quickly.

“Hey, baby, what's —”

“I need you to come over.” Joan's voice sounded both watery and heavy, completely devoid of playfulness and flirtation.

“Is everything all right?”

Joan sniffed. “I just need you to come, please hurry.”

Joan hung up the phone and Amelia felt a pit open in her chest. She had never heard her sound quite like that before. Whenever the topic of her husband came up, she always became distant, but never distraught, not like this. Amelia got up from her seat and felt a little more sober. She went to her room and changed out of her sparkly red dress, into some simple jeans and t-shirt. On impulse she stuffed the dress into her purse, thinking that Joan might enjoy seeing her in it.

“Amelia? Is everything alright?” Damion sounded worried; his voice traveled easily between her thin walls.

“No, I have to go.” She returned to the living room, grabbed her purse, and guided Damion off of the couch.

He followed her out of the apartment, a confused look on his face. “What is going on?”

“Duty calls. I’ll see you later.” Amelia bolted her door shut and made fast work of hailing down a cab.

### Chapter 3

She found Joan curled up on the couch, watery eyed with tear stained cheeks. Kitty was with her, drinking a martini, peach lipstick sinking deeply into the wrinkles that lined her mouth. At the sight of Amelia, Kitty rolled her eyes and drained her glass. “Oh good, the help is here,” she sneered.

Joan didn't come to Amelia's defense, never bothering to admonish her friend for the way she spoke or acted towards her lover. Kitty knew about their relationship; Joan hadn't attempted to hide it from her. She too had her fair share of affairs while her husband was alive. But it still grated on Amelia's nerves that Joan never spoke up. Kitty was older than Joan, but not by much, and she looked much older than her sixty-four years. Her knee replacement caused to her walk with a cane and her dyed red hair appeared fluorescent orange. Amelia thought she looked like one of those troll dolls. But she was Joan's oldest and closest friend, so she had to play nice, even if Kitty didn't.

Amelia smiled sweetly. “You can go, I'm here now.” She went to Joan's side, ready to tell her whatever she needed to hear to make her feel better.

Kitty watched her with clear distaste, dark hooded eyes piercing Amelia. “I'll leave when I'm ready to leave.”

“You should go, I'll be fine,” Joan said, without looking at either of them.

Kitty looked stunned for a moment, surprised that Joan would choose her lover over her oldest friend. She struggled to get off the couch, as she swayed back and forth to get some momentum. Neither Amelia or Joan offered her help. Amelia was sure that if she had offered Kitty would have rejected her offer.

“Call me if you need anything,” Kitty grumbled as she left.

Joan didn't say anything for a long while, she only leaned into Amelia's embrace. Amelia rubbed a reassuring hand soothingly up and down her spine. She wanted to ask what was wrong, what was going on, but she knew Joan would tell her when she was ready. So, they sat there in the living room in silence, Joan's occasional sniffles the only sound.

“He isn't coming,” Joan finally said, voice groggy.

“Who isn't coming where?”

“William isn't going to be here for our anniversary. Forty years and he won't be here.”

For a moment Amelia didn't know what to say. Joan didn't often talk about her husband, William – never Will or god forbid Bill. When she did speak of him, she talked about how happy they were together in the early years of their marriage. They had been in love, a happy family with two lovely and well-adjusted daughters, and a fortune to keep them warm at night.

Amelia had wondered where it all went wrong. “Oh Joan, I'm so sorry.” They sat pressed together and after a few moments Amelia had an idea. “Hey, why don't we go somewhere this weekend? Just me and you? Maybe it'll help you take your mind off of it. Off of him.”

Joan turned to look at her, the hardness of her eyes began to dissipate. “Where would we go?”

“Anywhere you want.”

“I have a house in Connecticut. Would you want to go there?”

“That sounds perfect.” Amelia smiled and kissed her softly. In her head popped up images of what this house would look like. She imagined something modern, with a pool and large windows. With that in mind Amelia attempted to deepen the kiss, but Joan pulled away.

“Have you been drinking?” Her voice was accusatory, a slight pinch in her brow.



“I had a glass with Damion at my place before coming.”

Joan sighed and shook her head. She had never met Damion, but she clearly didn't approve of them spending time together drinking wine in her lover's tiny apartment.

“I'll tell Sylvie to get the house ready for us. We'll leave Friday morning.” With that she took Amelia's hand and guided her to the bedroom. They undressed each other slowly and when they kissed again, a few of Joan's tears found her tongue – they tasted like regret.

When Joan's phone rang in the middle of the night, Amelia was the big spoon. She reached over Joan's shoulder to silence the phone but Joan swatted her hand away. Joan sat up and answered as Amelia hid her face from the abrasive light.

“William.”

Amelia froze. Joan was answering a call from him while she was right there. *Is she out of her mind? Did she forget that I'm right here next to her?* Amelia knew it was important for her to stay silent, but she couldn't help feeling a little jealous that in this moment Joan was choosing William over her. She said, just loud enough that she hoped William could hear her, “Who is it?”

Joan got out of bed, not bothering to spare Amelia a passing glance. Evidently William had the same question because she said into the receiver, “No, no one that you need to worry about,” and disappeared into the living room.

Amelia thought about giving Joan her privacy, just staying in bed and not worrying about the conversation going on just a few feet away, but her curiosity got the best of her. She stood in the hall for a while, only hearing a low voice emitting from the receiver and Joan's own hushed voice. The penthouse felt strange at this time of night, cold when Joan wasn't by her side.

“Hold on a moment,” Joan said as she placed her hand over the receiver and waved Amelia into the room. “You should go; I need to talk to my husband in private.”

“Oh, okay.” Amelia’s cheeks went hot. “Are you sure? I don’t mind staying.”

“I’m sure you don’t. Please, I just need some alone time.” She planted a quick kiss on Amelia’s hand and turned back to her conversation.

## Chapter 4

They sat in the back of a black Mercedes, creamy leather seats hugging their thighs, the air conditioning almost too cold. The other cars in the streets suffocated them, pressed closely at all sides, a harsh cacophony of broken mufflers and angry horns. A frustrated cabby with sweat dribbling down his chin made exaggerated hand motions at the red Prius that merged into his lane without a turn signal. A mother in a silver minivan precariously reached behind her seat, one hand on the wheel another on a bag of chips being handed to her chubby flailing child.

Amelia looked towards her lover who gazed out the window, lost in a distant daydream. Joan didn't seem to notice the world around them, eyes looked toward the sky peeking through the skyscrapers.

“Do you remember how we met?” Amelia asked.

For a moment she regretted breaking into Joan's serene silence. She admired the elegant way Joan sat with perfect posture, ash blonde hair tied in a neat bun at the nape of her neck, head tilted back against the seat. But Amelia was never comfortable with silence in the same way her companion was, so she filled the space with a question she already knew the answer to. She reached for Joan's hand and rubbed her thumb against her soft skin attempting to get her attention. Her palms were warm against the frigid temperature within the car and Amelia held on savoring the feeling.

After a moment Joan smiled and turned to the young woman at her side. “Of course, I remember the day we met. How could I forget?” Her voice sounded tired, but Joan still smiled meeting Amelia's eyes. Seeing the expectation there, she continued, “I was out to lunch at the

Azalea waiting for Kitty who called me when I was already at the table and canceled. But I never leave the house without a book.”

“*Anna Karenina.*”

Joan nodded. She looked younger, as if talking about the past reversed time. “Then came you, my stunning waitress in a crisp white shirt and mandatory blue tie,” Joan laughed with airy breath, the moment forming clearly in her mind, “I thought to myself, ‘William has a tie like that.’ And then you complimented me. First on my scarf –”

“Vintage Chanel, how could I not?”

Amelia had spent the rest of her shift thinking about that scarf, teal silk patterned with soft cream roses. She had imagined herself wearing it on a casual lunch outing. Amelia traced Joan’s fingers with her own, following an imaginary pattern on the delicate skin. She pondered what would have happened had Kitty been there, half-drunk as she usually was; Amelia may not have ever had her chance.

“Then you said, ‘That novel broke my heart.’” Joan placed a hand over her heart, tossed her head back, and attempted to mimic the alto of Amelia’s voice. Joan always managed to make Amelia seem more theatrical than she really was. “You were so cute I nearly fell instantly in love with you.”

“I think I may have fallen for you during that hour. As I poured your sparkling water and served your salad.”

“Maybe it was the good tip I left you.”

Her smile suggested it was a joke, that she was only teasing, but something else was there. A heaviness that couldn’t be concealed behind a grin. Amelia was pulled out of the memory,

slightly stung by her lover's remark. She played with the pearls on her neck, not wanting to linger on this conversation much longer.

“What ever happened to that scarf? I don't think I've ever seen you wear it again.”

“It's in a box in my closet. You can have it if you like.” Joan released her hand, turning away again, this time closing her eyes and settling heavily into her seat, marking the end of their conversation.

Amelia chastised herself for not asking about any gallery jobs, or even work at a museum checking coats. The timing didn't seem right. Joan slept for the rest of the three-hour drive to Connecticut. Amelia thought of curling up beside her, but she thought better of it. Joan appeared to desire a distance and Amelia was not about to poke the sleeping bear. She sat quietly in the cold Mercedes and allowed her mind to wander as the city disappeared behind them.

The house burst from the thick lush green of the summer trees, a three-story Victorian the color of seafoam with eggshell white shutters and neat wrap around porch. Amelia had never seen a house so grand, the kind of house that had a winding driveway on a large piece of land, directly across from a calm lake with a private dock. The gardens surrounding the house were in full bloom, full of flowers Amelia couldn't begin to guess the names of.

Joan awake to the gentle sound of gravel beneath heavy tires. She blinked heavily, a cat like yawn escaping her lips. Once the car came to a stop she quickly got out of the car and Amelia followed suit. They shook the stiffness from their limbs, as the driver took the bags out of the trunk. The afternoon air smelled sweet; Amelia breathed it in greedily. For some reason the atmosphere felt lighter here. The only sounds were that of small birds chirping high up in the trees. Amelia closed her eyes and listened, lifting her face toward the sun, allowing the tranquility to fill

her. She imagined herself spending the rest of her life here. Growing gray, spending summer days on the porch drinking lemonade and reading poetry. *I could die a peaceful death here, in the comfort of this house, with the songbirds singing to me*, Amelia thought.

“Peaceful isn’t it?” Joan went to Amelia’s side, wrapping an arm around her waist.

“Like something from a dream.”

Joan unpacked in the master bedroom as Amelia wandered around the house. The top floor was for William and Joan, the second for their daughters, Clara and Valerie. A house this large had the potential to feel violently lonely, but each room was decorated tastefully in soft neutrals and had the feeling of being alive with memory. The bones of this house were well loved and cared for. She ran her hand across the expensive furniture, grounding herself in its existence. The photographs scattered throughout the house fascinated her. With each family photo, she paused and took in the frozen scene. Some were shot by a professional, in a studio with a white backdrop, the family in coordinating outfits. Her favorites were the snapshots captured in special moments – birthday parties, the girls in dance recital costumes, Joan hugging William at the beach. For a moment Amelia felt as though she were intruding, stepping into a forbidden space. As that feeling settled deep in her chest, she abandoned her roaming and found her way back to Joan.

Joan was still unpacking while quietly humming to herself. Amelia watched her silently, admired her delicate movements and the soft offkey tone of her humming. Amelia smiled to herself, a warmth filling her, removing any sense of discomfort she had been feeling a moment ago. She entered the room and draped her body swiftly over the bed. “Joan, let’s run away here.”

“We already have!” Joan laughed airily.

“I mean, let’s stay here forever.” Amelia meant what she said. She wanted to stay in this house with this woman that she adored. No worries, no cares, just peaceful days in a beautiful house by a lake.

Joan looked pensive. “Maybe, my love, maybe.” She spread herself next to Amelia on the bed and kissed her deeply, stopping her lover from saying anything else. She began to touch her in the way that she liked, hand traveling around Amelia’s body skillfully. They fell into each other’s embrace, saving talk of the future for another time.

## Chapter 5

The next day Amelia woke to an empty bed. She worried for a moment; Joan had always enjoyed sleeping in. She covered her bare skin with Joan's robe and headed downstairs to look for her. She noticed the voices floating toward the foyer in the direction from the kitchen. There was light laughter and the sound of dishware shuffling across a table. Joan was pouring tea for two women, a little older than Amelia herself. She observed them from the hall, none of them noticing her yet. It took her a moment to realize these were Joan's daughters. Clara with the dark hair and eyes of her father, Valerie a fuzzy mirror of her mother with soft blonde hair and petite frame. They moved with an ease around each other, speaking about people she didn't know and places she had not been. Joan caught her eye then and waved Amelia over to join them.

*There no way they know who I am is there? Joan didn't talk about me with her children,* Amelia thought a panic rising within her. All three women turned to look at her, Amelia had never felt so exposed.

"Amelia, these are my daughters, I'm so excited for you to finally meet them."

"Good morning," she said, easy smile adorned her face, despite her growing panic.

"So, this is the Amelia we've heard so much about. You've become quite close to our mother, haven't you?" Clara's voice was raspier than she'd imagined.

"It's really nice to meet you," Valerie grinned widely, plump pink lips revealing even white teeth. She seemed sincere, reaching across the kitchen island to shake her hand.



“You seem surprised to see us,” said Clara, slim fingers tapping at a measured pace. Her dark eyes narrowed as she took in every inch of Amelia, looking for something.

“Well I am a bit surprised, but I like surprises.” Amelia made herself a cup of tea, attempting not to seem fazed by Clara’s evident enmity.

Joan stayed quiet as she began cracking eggs into a teal ceramic bowl. She whisked them and turned her back on the group. Amelia wanted to reach out and touch Joan, to silently ask for help, but a gesture like that would be too intimate, too familiar. Sylvie wouldn’t arrive until lunch time, so Joan took advantage of the quaintness of making her own breakfast, all of her attention placed on the activity at hand.

“Mom, why didn’t you think to tell your friend that we were coming?”

“Come on, leave her alone,” Valerie nudged her sister, and released an agitated sigh.

“What? It’s a simple enough question.”

“It slipped my mind, is all,” replied Joan, as she buttered the skillet on the stove. “I had been meaning to mention it to you, Amelia.”

Amelia nodded and tried not to seem displeased and uncomfortable. She never thought that she would have to interact with Joan’s family. Kitty she could handle, crotchety old friends didn’t worry her. But having been confronted with her daughters, she felt suddenly the weight of their relationship.

“We come here every year, for their anniversary. And even though Dad won’t be here, we thought it would be special to come down here to be with Mom. We weren’t going to come, but it was all planned very last minute, so don’t feel too bad about not being in the loop. Clara and I sort of invited ourselves.” Valerie was sweet, brushing off her mother’s lapse of judgement so easily.

“Yes, it was very last minute,” Joan replied.

The air hung heavy in the kitchen, a tenseness that was tangible. Amelia watched as Clara rolled her eyes at her mother's response, biting the inside of her lip. She knew that expression well, it was the same one she had given her own mother time and time again. The face of agitation and frustration – the face a daughter makes when her mother's back is turned. Amelia wondered if their relationship had always been like this.

“Is scrambled okay?” Joan asked to no one in particular.

When Amelia asked if she should sleep in a different bedroom, Joan simply laughed and told her not to be silly, but she felt silly. It didn't seem like Joan understood the complete severity of her actions. They could be discovered and then this would be all over. While Joan went out to paint Amelia moved her clothes to the room down the hall. It felt strange to her, acting like an ordinary guest around Joan. She was used to feeling like this life was hers, and now part of that illusion had been shattered.

Amelia went out to the lake for a swim, deciding it was best if she stayed out of the house for a little while. She had imagined this weekend to be filled with laughter, sex, and relaxation. But now, everything was complicated, and she needed to step away from it for a moment. The water was colder than she'd thought it be, but it wasn't unbearable. She plunged herself fully under the water, allowing the chill to consume her.

As she swam back and forth around the lake, Amelia pondered Joan's motives. *Was this her slick way of introducing me to her daughters? Was this planned, or was she genuine in her forgetfulness?* Amelia didn't enjoy the thought of Joan toying with her in such a way. She swam down as deep as she dared until her lungs begged air. *What did William know about all of this?*

*Would he too be making a surprise appearance? After all, it is their anniversary.* She started to feel nauseated at the thought of meeting William. She didn't think she could stand to see them together.

Amelia looked up at the house, the mansion, the château. It stood like a giant against the canopy of summer green trees. There were so many windows, gossamer white curtains shielding the inside from curious eyes. It was made to appear soft, the seafoam green paneling subdued.

Amelia returned to the house after an hour, feeling unwell. Joan was painting on the front porch which made it easier to avoid her. After a quick hot shower, she put herself in comfortable clothes and looked for a quiet place to hide. She didn't feel confident in confronting Joan with all her questions quite yet. Sylvie had returned to the house with groceries and toiletries, which was enough of a distraction to allow Amelia to slip away. She found a spot in the back of the house, a small room with a couch, Persian looking rug, bookshelf, and a large window letting in beams of bright light. Here she stayed for what felt like ages, sitting on the couch looking out the window at nothing in particular, flipping through a book that didn't interest her.

"Oh, looks like you found it," Valerie's voice rang out.

"Found what?"

"Our hiding spot. This is where we used to go as kids when we wanted to get away from our parents." She fully entered the room, letting the door close quietly behind her, and sat on the couch next to Amelia.

"It's a really good spot."

"Listen, you shouldn't pay Clara any mind. Everything with Mom and Dad has been really hard for her to handle. I think she's just looking for someone to take it out on."

“I guess that makes sense.”

“And for what it’s worth, I personally think it’s great that you and Mom have become such close friends. She needs someone like you right now.”

“Someone like me?”

“Yeah, someone to care about and share things with. I always worry about her getting lonely,” Valerie looked at Amelia and smiled. “Everyone needs a friend.”

Amelia nodded, feeling momentarily comforted by her words. Some of the anxiety that she had been feeling earlier began to fade away which was replaced by guilt of having avoided Joan since breakfast. She was filled with the need to kiss her and tell her how in love she was. But there was still one thing she needed to know before she let go of all her fears.

Sylvie was in the kitchen when Amelia went to get a snack before dinner. She was huddled with Clara, quick whispers exchanged back and forth, heads bowed like children exchanging secrets. When Amelia entered, they exchanged glances, and Amelia had the horrible feeling that they had been talking about her. *She wouldn’t tell Joan’s daughters, would she?* Amelia thought. She nodded to them both and retrieved an apple from the counter. They resumed their conversation once she was out of the room, and as hard as she tried to eavesdrop, she couldn’t make out their hushed words.

## Chapter 6

Sylvie announced that dinner would be served at 6:30 sharp. She had been prepping a beef bourgeoising all day; the scent of it filtered through the house and made Amelia's mouth water. The few clothes that she did bring were folded neatly in the drawers and hung carefully in the armoire. That sparkly red dress she had bought less than a week ago glistened in the early evening sun, catching the light and bouncing it back across the wall like little stars.

*Do they get dressed up for dinner?* she wondered. *Is this a Downton Abbey situation?*

Amelia and Joan had never eaten a formal dinner at home, never had a dinner party, or a simple gathering of friends. They didn't have the same friends. When she and Joan usually dined together, it was expected that Amelia be dressed according to where they were eating. There were no rules here, or at least rules that no one bothered to tell her.

*I should just go ask Joan, she's right down the hall.*

Amelia was feeling stubborn. She was in the mood to pick a fight, not that Joan is the kind of woman that's smart to pick a fight with. For a moment she thought about calling an Uber and getting dropped off at the closest train station. Her apartment wasn't that far, she could be home before midnight. But for some reason she couldn't bring herself to leave. This place, it felt like her future, it felt like everything she had ever wanted, and it felt impossible to turn her back on it. This experiment of hers, it went farther than she had ever expected to. Amelia realized for the first time that she needed Joan, she needed what her lover could provide, she needed everything. Joan could love Amelia, could take care of her for the rest of her life.

Her phone buzzed on the dresser, flashing an incoming call from Damion. Amelia could hear cars honking through the phone receiver and the sound of chewing smacking against her ear. It was an obnoxious sound that was amplified in the silence and calm of Connecticut. The thought of New York seemed even more miserable now.

“Let me guess, that cart on 48<sup>th</sup>? The one that gives you the shits.”

“It’s delicious! I can’t help it.”

“I can’t talk long. I’m getting ready for dinner.”

“Time for the red dress?”

“Hmm, I haven’t decided yet. Can I ask why you’re calling?”

“I think I found a job for you, ya know, to put that expensive degree to good use.”

Amelia sighed loudly. This wasn’t the first conversation that they had about this, about Amelia making something of her life. A degree in Art History didn’t seem to have much value, especially in New York where everyone and their grandmother considered themselves an artist. Even Joan, with her almost talented paintings she made to fill her days.

“I don’t need a job, Damion.”

“Of course, you do. It’s at an art gallery,” He took a breath between bites, “it’s super trendy. I know a guy who knows a guy, I mentioned that I have this friend with an Art degree, and he said he could help get you the job. If you want it.”

*An art gallery job. A real art gallery job. That would be nice.*

“I don’t know ... I need to be around if Joan needs me.”

“All right, but what about when she stops needing you.” There was a long pause between the two of them. The sounds of chewing halted, but the sounds of New York persisted. She wanted to hang up the phone, her fingers were itching to do so, but she couldn’t. “I didn’t mean to make

you upset, just trying to look out for you. And if it makes you feel better, you'd still have to interview. But I don't know, I just thought it would be a good fit."

"Yeah I know."

"You should wear the dress."

Everyone was seated in the dining room when Amelia arrived, the heels of her shoes sinking into the plush accent rug covering the cherry wood floor. Joan's daughters watched as she walked in, Valerie raised an eyebrow, Clara didn't attempt to hide a smirk. They were dressed in the same clothes as earlier, as was Joan. No one but Amelia had changed. Sweat gathered under Amelia's armpits and palms, mouth gone dry. She gave them a tight-lipped smile and sat next to Joan who hadn't looked up from her phone.

"Aww look, the cow put on some lip stick! How cute," said Clara. Valerie's eyes went wide at the statement, but Amelia could see the amusement shining behind them.

*At least she's nice enough to not laugh in my face.*

"Don't be rude that isn't how I raised you," Joan chimed in putting her phone on silent and face down on the table. "You didn't have to dress up for us, but you do look very nice. And look, you wore the pearls, that makes me happy." She rubbed her hand over Amelia's, but there was no warmth in her face. Not even a fake smile which concerned her.

Very little was said over dinner. The sound of forks and knives scraping inconsistently in the silence. Amelia ate small bites of her food even though she was ravenous, she didn't need to give the women seated around her another reason to judge. Valerie was the first to speak up.

"So, what is it that you do? You're twenty-five?"

"Twenty-three, but my birthday is in a few months."

Clara and Valerie shared a quick glance and Amelia pretended not to notice. It seemed the time had come for the interrogation portion of the evening. She had known there was a chance that it would, but she had hoped to have something a little harder than red wine to drink while it happened. Amelia took a healthy sip waiting for more questions.

“You’re younger than the last one,” Clara remarked as she looked toward her mother who seemed to not be paying attention to the conversation. The comment shocked Amelia, the nerves that had settled inside of her landed like a boulder in her gut, no longer hungry. She also turned to look at Joan and witnessed the tiniest of eye rolls.

“You never said what it is that you do,” Valerie continued.

“Oh, um, I’m between jobs right now, but I studied art history. I hope to get a job at a gallery or something.” *Younger than the last one? What the fuck does that mean? Why isn’t Joan saying anything? What last one? What does that mean?* “The job market is a little rough right now.” Amelia finished the rest of the wine in her glass and filled it again with a generous pour. Valerie pinched her lips together and nodded. Amelia assumed she had just given her all the answers Joan’s youngest daughter needed.

“So, how long have you been seeing my mother?” Clara’s eyes were hard and unwavering. The question shot right through Amelia, her eyes gone wide, wine glass lifted halfway to her lips hovered in mid-air. “You’re mom’s ‘special friend’ right?”

“Why bother with the dramatics, Clara? It’s not like we don’t know that dad has special friends of his own.” Valerie sighed, seeming tired of the conversation.

Joan looked up then, where Amelia expected to see shock and anger on her face, she only saw boredom. She wasn’t entertained or surprised by what her daughter has said. Amelia didn’t



know how to feel, she didn't know what to say, so she didn't say anything and waited for Joan.

"Are you pleased with yourself now? Are you satisfied?" Joan asked mildly.

"No, I'm not! Why would you bring her here?"

"This is my house and I can invite who I please!"

"This is dad's house!"

"And where is your father? He's not here! He should have been here on our anniversary and he's not."

"Can you two please not do this?" Valerie looked annoyed, but continued to eat her food, unfazed by the argument happening between her mother and sister.

"Doesn't this bother you, Val?" Clara spat.

"No, not really. Mom and Dad have been having affairs since we were little. It's nothing new. I don't know why you're so upset."

Amelia felt like crying. She wanted to storm off and cause a dramatic scene. It was clear now that this wasn't the first relationship Joan had had outside of her marriage. Amelia felt as though as light had been turned on, like the curtain had been pulled back and she could finally see things clearly.

"Oh please, don't act like you didn't know!" said Joan, her tone sharp and cruel. "We both knew what this was."

A tight ball of pain nestled itself in Amelia's chest.

Sylvie rushed into the room, face flushed and eyes shining with worry. She held a phone in her hand and rushed it over to Joan. "They couldn't reach you."

"Who couldn't reach me?"

“The hospital.”

When Joan took the phone into the other room no one followed her. Joan’s daughters waited in the dining room with Sylvie, the food on the table forgotten. Amelia excused herself, needing a moment to catch her breath. In the privacy of her room, she allowed herself to unravel.

*I can’t believe I was so stupid! All that time wasted. What do I have to show for it? Nothing. I have nothing. She never loved me. She never loved me. She never –*

There was a knock at the door, interrupting her thoughts. Joan entered without waiting for Amelia to respond. Her face was blotchy, and tear stained. She cleared her throat before speaking.

“William has had a heart attack. Apparently, they had been trying to reach me, but I don’t usually answer unknown numbers.”

“Is he okay?”

“He’s stable. We’re going to the hospital now.”

Amelia nodded, not knowing what to say. Joan seemed almost like a stranger now. She didn’t know how to feel about her or any of this. All of it felt like betrayal. Amelia turned away from Joan, not wanting her to see the hurt that she knew was written across her face. Joan kept her distance, but Amelia could feel her stare. A part of Amelia still wanted to hold her, consoling her, comfort her but she felt it wouldn’t be right. Things were going to change now. Amelia didn’t know what she could even say to her lover that could possibly make things better.

*How did I get here? Where do I go now?*

Amelia turned to face Joan. There was clear heaviness weighing on her, causing her frame to shrink into itself. The glow around Joan, the one that Amelia always seemed to see, was gone. It was then that she realized that there was no chance of going back to the way things were. But

there was still love beating steadily in Amelia's heart. Love that had grown from delusions she fabricated from a fantasy life was still alive inside of her.

"Joan, I just want to be here for you. I can't even imagine –" Amelia stopped as she saw Joan begin to cry again, "I'm sorry."

"I want you to go. Please just go."

Amelia reached out to touch her, but Joan backed away.

"I love you."

"Sylvie will take you to the train station."

Joan turned and left without another word. Amelia realized that she had been dismissed. She no longer had anything that Joan wanted.

The train was cold. Amelia, in her haste to leave, had the good sense to change into her casual clothes. There were hardly any passengers, so she felt little shame at crying quietly in her seat. She refused to think that maybe Joan would change her mind, that she needed her just as much. By the time she arrived back to her apartment it was well past midnight. Amelia thought of Damion and imagined the lecture he would give. She thought of the gallery job. She thought of Earl Grey tea and copper pots. She wondered how much money was actually in her bank account. When she looked in the mirror there were heavy dark bags under her eyes, her hair was a matted tangled nest of curls, she looked tired and old. Amelia didn't recognize herself. She fell heavily into her bed, exhausted and drained. She curled into herself, arms pulled tightly to her chest. Before succumbing to sleep, Amelia made a plan to sell the pearls.

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## ACADEMIC VITA

# Lauren A. Bello

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### Education:

#### The Pennsylvania State University | Schreyer Honors College

University Park, PA

M.A. Creative Fiction Writing | B.A. English | Minor in World Literature |

- Honors: Paterno Fellowship, Dean's List (7/7 semesters), Eddie Nichols Scholarship
- Organizations: Comparative Literature Club, Empower Orphans PSU, Springfield Philanthropy FTK
- Advanced Coursework: Advanced Fiction Writing, English Renaissance Literature, Post-Colonial Literature & Culture, Reinventing the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Television Script Writing

#### Queen Mary University of London

London, GB

Study Abroad Program | Comparative Literature

Jan 2019 – May 2019

### Work Experience:

#### The Philadelphia Museum of Art

Philadelphia, PA

Editorial Intern

Jun 2019 – Aug 2019

- Collaborated within a cross-functional team to design and organize digital archives for special exhibitions, including "Designs for Different Futures" and "Off the Wall: American Art to Wear."
- Managed copy editing, proof reading, and fact checking efforts for various art pieces and their respective tombstones, as well as architectural additions to the museum.
- Developed large data sets of contact sheets and information regarding new art pieces within Excel, ultimately assisting editorial and graphic design departments in analyzing clear and concise data regarding historical, technical, and financial components of said art pieces.

#### Penn State Housing & Residence Life

University Park, PA

Resident Assistant

Aug 2018 – Dec 2018

- Fostered the positive development and transition of freshman students into college through mentorship, morale boosting initiatives, and social event coordination in Pollock Residence Halls.
- Established and enforced regulations, University Policies, and ethical peer guidance through mediation and conflict resolution, duty rounds, and personal coaching on a daily basis.
- Strive to exhibit role model qualities to embellish the academic, personal, and social goals of students through transparent counseling, open door policies, floor meetings and dinners, and 24/7 care and response.

#### Ben & Irv's Deli & Restaurant

Huntingdon Valley, PA

Front-of-House Associate

May 2018 – Aug 2018

- Acted as a liaison between kitchen and customers to prep food orders, maximize logistical efficiency of the restaurant experience and streamline communications as a business.
- Facilitated POS technology, stocked and organized kitchen, and consulted with customers to assess their specific culinary needs on daily 8+ hour shifts. This resulted in receiving two pay raises in four months.

### Leadership Experience:

#### Planned Parenthood: Generation Action PSU

University Park, PA

Executive Chair, Social Media

Sep 2017 – present

Student Volunteer

Jan 2017 – Aug 2017

- Manage the event organization, social media marketing, and volunteer initiatives for the organization to expand the scope of the chapter's vision and goals on daily basis.
- Streamline a campaign to reach out to senators and governors to deliberate law policies pertaining to women's health and reproductive rights.
- Propose a campaign to reach out to Penn State department officials and Health Services to discuss inflated rates for STD testing.

#### VALLEY Magazine

University Park, PA

Creative Advisor

Aug 2017 – present

- Attend visual sessions and act as a consultant to foster unique and creative development solutions for print issues of the Penn State-based fashion magazine.
- Improve creative facets of sessions including lighting, setup, clothing options, makeup, model management, vision, and scope of projects through team-building and stylistic advisory.

#### Penn State College of Liberal Arts

University Park, PA

Peer Editor

Feb 2017 – present

- Consult with students to help improve and synthesize writing projects for various organizations and goals.
- Collaborate with roughly 5 students per semester in projects surrounding poetry, script writing, and articles concerning personal web blogs and official Penn State publications.

### Skills & Interests:

- Skills: Fluent in Spanish, creative writing, editing, public speaking, Microsoft Office, journalism
- Interests: photography, reading (Austin, Bronte, Browning, Tolstoy), singing, botany, the world of fashion