

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Stitches: A Novella in Pieces

MORGAN SEIFF
SPRING 2021

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

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ABSTRACT

“Stitches: A Novella in Pieces” tells the story of sixteen-year-old Arthur, a young writer trapped in a cycle of self-inflicted anger for constantly falling short of his own unhealthy expectations. After an attempt to self-sabotage a scholarship opportunity to a prestigious boarding school, he, unexpectedly, gets in. His scholarship donor, an accomplished author, tells him to use his pain as material; he can transform it into something powerful. But he interprets this as a need to suffer for his art, a greenlight to continue his self-harm, and a challenge of how far he can push himself. Emboldened by his new circumstances, Arthur discovers that he is brutal and manipulative and surprisingly willing to put himself in traumatic situations. He chooses for the first time to live recklessly, entangling himself with another dangerous, troubled boy, and spirals into self-destruction. My thesis explores the question: is suffering necessary to create art?

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
Reflective Essay	1
Preface.....	6
Chapter 1	7
Chapter 2	12
Chapter 3	27
Chapter 4.....	32
Epilogue	40
BIBLIOGRAPHY	44

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Elizabeth May, my incredible thesis supervisor, for her unwavering belief in me and my characters for over two years; knowing exactly what to say in my episodes of self-doubt; and hours spent providing feedback, revisions, and recommendations to support my creative vision. She has strengthened me so much as a writer—not just in technique, but in practice and self-compassion for my work, and inspiring a lifelong passion for the writing craft.

Carla Mulford, for taking on this creative project that has changed course quite a few times. Anne Triolo, for pushing me to be bold and take risks with my story. Heather Holleman, whose pep talks were instrumental in overcoming my fear of failure. Pearl Gluck, whose mentorship over the past four years has taught me the importance of knowing myself and my artistic identity.

I would like to thank Erin Boyle, an endless well of warmth and kindness for ten-plus years, my Bird-by-Bird friend, and my creative partner-in-crime; Ellie Fetting, for her emotional support during my earliest drafts; Nicholas Piper, for his unconditional love.

Mom and Dad, for taking their chances on my pursuit of a creative career, for their investment in my education and belief in my worth. I won't take it for granted.

Thank you all who I've moaned to over the past year about my thesis—how it might finish me before I finished it—for lending me their ears and kind words of encouragement.

Thank you to the Schreyer Honors College and the Penn State English Department for the opportunity to pursue a creative thesis and develop my passion for writing as an undergraduate. I will cherish my four years here for the rest of my life.

Reflective Essay

When I first undertook this creative thesis, I envisioned it as a series of short, interconnected stories exploring the different perspectives of my characters with whom I've lived for two years now, if not longer. I heard somewhere, probably on some podcast I started listening to in quarantine, that short stories were the best way to start as a creative writer because, as a beginner, they are bound to suck, but at least they'll be over with quickly and I can move onto the next story which, if I'm lucky, might be a little better. But when my first short story for the collection was creeping up on 10,000 words and it hardly felt half-done, I knew I needed to rethink the structure. Actually, I needed to rethink a lot of things.

This is a story over two years in the making, although the thesis still feels like a work in progress for me. I realized this probably in late November of last year; working on the story most evenings, and then thinking about the story in all the spaces in between—my room littered with sloppy notecards each trying to capture the precipice of an idea—I realized that submitting my thesis, despite the hard work and research I have dedicated to it, feels like prying a premature moth out of a cocoon; it's painful, underdeveloped and not ready to survive the world yet.

However, after hearing the advice from Professor May, Professor Holleman, and other great writing professors I've had at Penn State, I've concluded that submitting this thing now is the best thing I can do for my writing career. I need to get comfortable with imperfection. I need to face the challenge of submitting something that isn't one-hundred-percent my best work, or else I will never be bold enough to share anything—in other words, it doesn't need to be *perfect*, it just needs to be *done*. There will be time to improve it later. This thesis let me grapple with the

real-world struggles of the writing process on an undergraduate level. When I finally read Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird* from cover-to-cover this semester, it felt like the warmest hug; she told me that I wasn't a failure, or a hack, or a wannabe. My story wasn't hopeless, or stupid, or over my head. The self-doubt, the obsession, the procrastination—all these emotions I wrestled in the painstaking process of distilling thoughts into words into story, were normal. After reading and listening to interviews with my favorite authors, I learned that the self-doubt never goes away, no matter how many best-sellers you write. If I ever want to write for a living, which is my ultimate dream, I need to learn to live with this feeling, and submitting this in its current state is a great exercise in breaking my perfectionism, the killer of my productivity and my confidence. I'm lucky that my thesis allowed me to gain this perspective on both writing and life.

The story itself began as a seedling in my TV Scriptwriting class with Professor Anne Triolo when I was a sophomore. Back then the story was more of a floaty drama/romance, but as I changed over the years, and I developed the characters more, the story changed, too. It was always about Arthur. The idea of setting it at a boarding school came later, and I was hoping to take inspiration from my eight years as a catholic school student, which, at the time, I found awfully oppressive. But after seeking out further research on British boarding schools, such as Joy Schaverien's *Boarding School Syndrome*, I learned that I was dealing with an entirely separate, trauma-ridden beast—but playing a little bit outside what I know from immediate experience was a fantastic way to research and play. The time period, too, and the country, are outside the realm of my own. (But my summer 2019 study abroad, where I frequently visited Arthur's neighborhood in North London, was a tremendous help!) It is a rule-of-thumb for beginners to “write what you know,” but over the past four years of creative writing and film classes, I have created so much autobiographical material—arguably more than what justifies my

22 years—and I am so sick of my self exactly as I know her. So this project has been a breath of fresh air, to live through a new character with whom I can empathize and experience different parts of the world in new ways.

However, Arthur is very much me—but our differences gave me the freedom to explore the darker, angrier, and more honest parts of myself. Like me, Arthur is a young writer, trapped in a cycle of self-inflicted anger for constantly falling short of his own unhealthy expectations. After an attempt to self-sabotage a scholarship opportunity to a prestigious boarding school, he, unexpectedly, gets in. His scholarship donor, an accomplished author, tells him to use his pain as material; he can transform it into something powerful. But he interprets this as a need to suffer for his art, a greenlight to continue his self-harm, and a challenge of how far he can push himself. Emboldened by his new circumstances, Arthur discovers that he is brutal and manipulative and surprisingly willing to put himself in traumatic situations. He feels both trapped and freed by his new environment and chooses for the first time to live recklessly, entangling himself with another dangerous, troubled boy, and spirals into self-destruction.

Arthur's philosophy towards writing mirrors my own struggle with my creative work over the past year or so. I will avoid personal details here so I can focus them on Arthur. But I will say, after a mental health relapse just before quarantine, I was inspired, like Arthur, to capture that pain, make sense of it, and even worsen it—just to see what might happen. I find novels about self-harm, particularly about adolescents, tend to be preachy or artificial or shallow or insulting. The self-harm narratives I have read never really capture the mundanity; rather, it is treated as this precious, terrifying act that must be approached cautiously, like a wild animal. Of course, there is no one way, or “right” way, to experience self-harm, but I wanted to expand upon the current literature through the vengeance, morbid sexuality, and dry wit of Arthur.

I have come to terms with the fact that I will be continuing to work on this story long after I submit this thesis, and it is comforting to know that this submission is not its terminus. In future drafts, I intend to further emphasize the complicated relationship between Arthur and his mother, which inspired the short story “Stitches” and planted the initial seed of this thesis. I will have the time and space to scrap it all and rebuild it from scratch and pull my favorite bits and pieces from here. In fact, pulling this story together through scraps and bits was always part of the original vision; Arthur cuts, and Lorna mends, and I wanted to experiment with the way the story was told, from the timeline—when to reveal what, with the most emotional impact—to the layout; I had visions of incorporating bits of paper relevant to the story, that reveal something about the characters (hugely inspired by Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*), from typewriter essay pages to library receipts. As a film major, I wanted to incorporate visuals, photographs, etc. I can still do these things, but not in this draft. That work comes later.

Inspiration for this story came from everything (even if it did not manifest in what is seen here). Movies, in particular, were a great motivator: *If...* (1968), *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1969), and *Another Country* (1984) for their depictions of British boarding schools and their various politics. Inspiration also came through literature, of course. For example, I rediscovered my love for Sylvia Plath, who gave me a reality check: “The thing about writing is not to talk, but to do it; no matter how bad ... the process and production is the thing, not the sitting and theorizing about how one should write ideally.” I read my first Philip Roth novel (*The Counterlife*) and he taught me that I do not need to seek my audience’s approval. I pulled from the works of those who I seek to engage with: Sally Rooney, Donna Tartt, Ocean Vuong, Susan Choi, and many more who are sitting on my bookshelf, waiting to be devoured this summer. The

problem is, the more I read, the smaller I feel, and the higher the hill in front of me—but this thesis is a big step of the climb.

Preface

13 March 1985

Arthur Caldwell, age 16
18 Fortis Green Way
LONDON
N10 3BL

In Consideration for the Wolfham College Whiting Scholarship

Dear Mr. Whiting:

I am unremarkable in my coursework. I am an embarrassment in sport. I am distinctly devoid of any notable talents that might compensate for these facts. I am a passionate procrastinator and an avid antisocialite. My only after-school activity is therapy. My loving father has described me as “wimpy,” “demonic,” “generally unpleasant,” and, most recently, “misanthropic.” When I laughed at him for pronouncing this incorrectly, he nearly slapped me across the face.

Occasionally, Dad gives me a spark of spiteful inspiration because he sees no future in my writing—that is, until now, when it could potentially get me a free ride to some stuffy boarding school and therefore out of his hair. He doesn’t care to actually read this, of course. He just cares that it’s done and sent off in its neat little envelope, if only for the chance to tell people that his only son is not a complete disappointment. So here I am to prove him wrong.

By this point, you will have tossed my application into the bin where it belongs. Or perhaps it will get lost in the post and save us both the trouble.

I hardly ever write. It’s too embarrassing, too frightening. I feel naked, which, for me, is uniquely uncomfortable. The only thing that has ever motivated me to write is silent rebellion, the ones that only I notice, I feed on them. I am both furious and aimless. I sit in graveyards with

a flashlight and a notebook, waiting for something evil to possess me. Take my body, please! I'm sick of lugging it around. Covering it up. Tending to it. I hope whatever possesses me kills people in my body. I hope he fucks people in my body. I hope he does all the things I've never dared to do. I hope it screams back at my father. I hope it gives my mother a worthier son.

I go through life paralyzed by people's judgment, limbs locked. My harshest judge is buried deep within me, whispers truthing. I am worthless, I will never make my parents happy, I will die alone, my writing is overwrought and underdeveloped, I am a ticking time bomb of disappointment. The judge holds my potential above my head, waves it around a little, and yanks it back quickly, and I'm left here flailing, overcome. Then, slowly, numb. I sabotage myself before I ever give myself the chance to be good.

I flail and gasp through the everyday to stay afloat; I want to slice through it instead. I'm sick of my own complacency. I am in anguish and no one knows it. No one else can see people's pain the way I can. It's exhausting. I want someone to see me. I guess that's why I'm writing this letter. Although no one's reading at this point, no one can take away my own little silent rebellion. This is mine. This is my exercise, the little challenge I've given myself. It's either send this off, or five long slashes down my calf. Actually, I'll do both.

Sincerely, Arthur

Chapter 1

Arthur weaseled his way into Wolfham by means of some phony scholarship. Damian didn't know the details about Arthur's particular award, but he did know that Wolfham's attendance

rates were abysmally low, and therefore they must have been desperate for new students to give Arthur, of all boys, a free ride. Damian peered out at him through the gate, each horizontal rod festooned with a sharp, iron arrow that harpooned the verdant countryside. Damian felt an immediate, visceral disdain for students like Arthur, for which admission to the school was a prize, rather than a punishment.

Arthur arrived at the school like a ghost, inconspicuous but with a foreboding air of morbidity, ubiquitously felt. The only thing that humanized him was his mother at the gate, who clung to him like she'd never see him again. Damian, who could not remember when he had last received a hug from his mother, resented how Arthur slumped pathetically against her, arms dangling lifeless at his sides.

Dragging his leather trunk behind him, Arthur haunted the corridors of the boarding house shrouded in a saggy *Smiths* sweatshirt and choked underneath an unnecessary turtleneck, which seemed an excess for early autumn, sleeves stretched over his spidery hands.

The dormitory was alive with the raucous laughter of Damian and his mates, with whom he'd boarded for three years prior—when Arthur entered the room, sliding through the half-open door like a surgical knife. Arthur didn't utter one word as he found the fifth and final unclaimed bed, farthest from the window. If not for his trunk, they may not have even noticed him at all. But the chatter stopped and all eyes were on sunken, silent Arthur. An antelope in the lions' den.

John, William, and Alex shifted their eyes to Damian, who was used to assuming the responsibility in these sorts of situations—explaining, rationalizing, summarizing, leading—and breaking the uncomfortable silences.

As Arthur busied himself by thoroughly assessing his bed dressings, as if deciding if they were up to his standards, Damian approached him as if trying to take a photograph of a wild animal.

“You’re supposed to be in uniform.”

Arthur whipped around, thorny garden eyes raking over him from head to foot. Damian felt himself fixing his posture.

And then, as if the most natural thing in the world, Arthur crawled into his new narrow bed and pulled the duvet up and over himself completely.

All right, fine. Damian decided that they’d let Arthur sleep. They did not wake him for the required orientation activities later in the afternoon. They padded softly, snickering, out of the room. He’d let Arthur make his bed, and lie in it.

During evening assembly, the headmaster called out for Caldwell. Arthur, now uniformed, swiftly stood among the sea of schoolboys, his spiky blond hair catching the crimson sunset that stabbed through the windowglass, heads snapping toward him as if he were a giant magnet, negatively charged. Arthur started toward the stage, gaze staid and steeled as though carefully rehearsed. It was not unlike performance art, the way he ascended the creaking stairs and, before the headmaster could bark out the command, bent himself over, legs spread apart, fingertips reaching for his loafers, the shelf of his lower back arched up toward the headmaster, awaiting the first strike. He obeyed every order, but the nuances of his movement were a silent rebellion. Arthur’s body said, *Do your worst. I can take it.*

Damian, a prefect-in-training, had a front-row seat to this display. The crowd was suffocated by silence, and Damian briefly found himself dizzy from holding his breath, as the rattan cane

cut through the air and—*WHAP*—struck Arthur’s arse with a force that reverberated in the ceiling’s stony curvature, the youngest boys trembling. Damian flinched. But Arthur did not.

WHAP—Arthur’s jaw clenched at the second lash, but he did not cry out. In the crowd, a thirteen-year-old began to sob. *WHAP*—Arthur’s knees buckled a bit, but any vocalization of pain was lodged deep in his throat and determined to stay there. As Arthur straightened back out, arse aimed upward, Damian found himself overcome with that bitter, twisted viscera that climbed out of his stomach and craved that the headmaster to hit him *harder*, goddammit, make him scream like a slaughterhouse pig. As if he could hear Damian’s thoughts, Arthur’s eyes shot out toward the audience and locked on Damian’s. *WHAP*—Arthur’s body jolted forward from the impact, but his stare dug defiant like heels into the space between Damian’s eyes, challenging him to look away. Damian would not back down. *WHAP*—Arthur squinted and—Damian swore—Arthur smirked at him. Damian flushed and his gaze faltered. With the final *WHAP*—Arthur harnessed the paradoxical power of his current position, his hardened resolve telling the audience of five hundred boys that he had won.

The headmaster barked about Arthur’s crime, but the caning was likely meant to set a bleak example for the new boys if they didn’t behave themselves. Damian hadn’t been caned since prep school, where punishments were not so public. Rather, they took place in the secrecy of an empty classroom or office, each day’s naughty boys lined up outside the door, hearing the smacks and slaps and screams and sobs, Damian anxiously awaiting his turn. The headmaster, who commonly administered the whippings, always had Damian stand at the end of the line, regardless if he arrived before all the other boys. Perhaps this was a kindness, as he would cry before the cane even touched him. He’d even wet himself once. If he were last, no one would ever know.

The headmaster said to Arthur, Do you understand why you received this punishment?

Staring directly at Damian, Arthur lilted the first words that Damian had ever heard him speak: Yes, sir.

Damian prickled at the defiance dripping from Arthur's mouth. Damian despised Arthur for this new image burned into his brain, which would permeate his consciousness when Damian least expected it, of Arthur, bent over, jerking forward, sharp exhalations accenting each lash, smiling at him like he enjoyed the pain. Damian dug his dull fingernails into his fist and remembered that, when he becomes a prefect, he will be authorized to administer corporal punishment. Damian thought how delicious it would feel to make Arthur scream.

Chapter 2

Damian did not remember much of prep school, nor did he wish to. Prep school was a nightmarish blur of silent snotty cries for Mummy and Daddy under the covers. Smacks on the hand with wooden rulers when he flubbed a piano note, the clinker reverberating red in his fingerbones forever. Cheap meat slapdash on a porcelain plate, all veins and tubes and sometimes a bone, which scraped and tore at his throat as it burrowed its way inside him, leaving invisible scars in its wake. But you know what? Damian fucking chewed and swallowed.

Upon recounting his prep school experience to his mentors, Damian would insist, with straight shoulders and a stiff upper lip, that these struggles were essential for his personal growth. A puny eight-year-old when he entered the system with a raging temper and a fiery head of hair to match, prep school had shaped him into the perfect pupil—studious, athletic, talented, well-rounded like clay molded into a ball, hardened and glazed. The more he convinced others of his careful reconstruction, the more he convinced himself, and that was for the best.

When Damian finally escaped, top of his class, he had his pick of prestigious public schools. He initially chose Wolfham not for its stunning campus green or rugby team, but for the school's proximity to his childhood home, in a grassy bubble just outside London. His parents were still last to pick him up for holidays. No matter. Wolfham was his true home, with its Roman-style columns balancing the weight of ancient stone buildings; its impressive collection of sporting greens that seemed to stretch on forever, the fields tidy and thriving despite how much they'd been trampled; its grand, gaping pond with a pointed stone fountain that shot up from the water like an Olympic swimmer celebrating his victory. Yes, this place suited Damian more than anywhere else ever had. Most importantly, there was a caste system, in which the cream of the crop could climb their way to the top. At Wolfham, Damian had something to aspire to, and once

he had proven his worth, he would become a prefect and sit atop of it all. *Untouchable*. No more beatings and scoldings at the whims of his caretakers. Only canings when they were well deserved. The case of Arthur had proved that.

It dawned on Damian that, after weeks of sleeping in the same room, not once had he seen Arthur naked. Damian was well acquainted with the weepy willies of William, John, and Alex (Damian boasting the biggest), the dimples of their pasty-pink arses, the pimples spotting their shuffling shoulderblades as they stripped off their stiff button-up shirts. Arthur's body, however, remained a mystery. Underneath his uniform was a skintight suit of armor. Arthur doffed his blazer's sharp edges and emerged like a moth from a cocoon, revealing an all-black underlayer, long sleeves, long pants, in which he slept. Didn't he sweat through it? In his mind's eye, Damian saw sweat soaking Arthur's flighty, fae body, a male ballerina in mid-spin—and when he caught himself, Damian squashed his imaginary Arthur like a bug. A pathetic pancake of twitching limbs in black underclothes.

You get cold or something? Alex asked Arthur one day, Damian's ears perking with interest for an answer that never came. No surprise there.

Something about Arthur's presence made Damian aware of his own nakedness. When Damian and his roommates would change into their uniforms or sportswear or pajamas without a second thought, Arthur automatically averted his gaze as if he had been trained to look away.

Why doesn't he look at me? Damian heard something inside him growl one day. Damian's body, broad and tall and hard, was his personal testament to what he silently had to endure, how strong he'd become. *Fucking look, you runt*. But Arthur refused to give him that satisfaction.

As Damian limped his way back to the building, he caught a whiff of sickly-sweet smoke, which assaulted his senses like an animal in heat. He followed his nose behind the bleachers, just out of sight, to find Arthur, curled up tight, sucking a clove. His sunken, grassy eyes camouflaged and peering through the metal slant, Arthur must have seen Damian coming long before Damian even knew Arthur was there. Before Damian knew it, the two of them were locked in a duel—who would fire first?

Damian was prepared for the usual silent battle. His expression said, *Your ass is grass, Caldwell.*

“You’re going to tattle?”

Arthur’s voice was lightning slicing through a black cloud, smoke expelling from his mouth as he spoke.

“And what are they going to do about it? Beat me? Perhaps in front of the whole school?” Arthur threw his head back in a sharp laugh, briefly exposing his paper-white neck. “They’ve done that already. Now I’m invincible.”

Arthur’s gaze floated down Damian’s torso and landed on his injured ankle, which hovered just above the grass. Arthur’s face revealed nothing. Damian almost wished he’d sneer, so he’d have something new to hate him for.

“Then why are you hiding?” Damian finally shot back.

Arthur blinked. Swished the question around in his mouth, deciding if he liked the taste.

“Because I’d like to finish my smoke.”

He took a long drag, his two slim fingers tugging softly at his bottom lip. He leaned back against the hard metal of the bleachers as if it were the most comfortable place in the world,

closing his eyes and uncurling his body as he inhaled, loosening his tie and baring his neck once again—even though Damian was standing right there.

Peeking out of one eye, as if expecting Damian to have walked away, seemed impressed that he was still standing over him. Arthur held out the carton. “Here. Nurse Arthur’s cure-all remedy. Sprained ankles included.”

A truce? Damian felt himself tense. Glanced back at the class, still kicking away on the field. And then back at Arthur, and the soft grass beside him. Arthur was staring up at him from below. The arrangement seemed to weaken Damian, somehow.

He took a seat. Twirled the unlit cigarette in his fingers. And then he heard himself say:

“When I was ten and talked back at school, the head matron made me drink Dettol. Her remedy for dirty mouths.”

Damian didn’t know why he said that. Why did he say that? It was a memory like a mirror he’d long smashed, and even though the broken shards would always be floating around in the back of his brain he trusted they wouldn’t be able to reassemble themselves into anything recognizable. But suddenly Damian saw himself in the matrons’ room, fidgeting in his ill-fitted blazer, as she rummaged the faux-wood cabinets and pulled out a plastic bottle. Poured a swig of the liquid into a paper cup with vibrant poison patterns. Crossed her arms. *You’re not leaving until you drink it all.* Slid the cup toward him like it was a train seconds from flattening him. The walls closing in, the dust particles gleaming and writhing and scrambling in the air screaming *Get out! Run!* But Damian was a good boy. Damian did as told.

“What did it taste like?”

Choking burning scoring his insides like—

“Razor blades.” What was it about Arthur that so compelled Damian to reveal himself?

“I’ll have to try it sometime.”

It concerned Damian. This power that Arthur possessed.

“Here, put it in your mouth,” said Arthur.

Damian did as told.

The edge of Arthur’s lip twisted sharply upward, but there was something soft in his voice when he said, “Wrong end,” and Damian willed his face not to heat up red as he flipped the cigarette around and pinched it precariously between his teeth like delicate flesh, attempting to mimic Arthur. But unlike Arthur, who handled the clove like he had the world between his fingers, in his mouth, Damian worried he looked like a lost puppy holding a bone, anxiously awaiting its owner. And that’s when Arthur crawled toward him, back arching in that obscene way of his, planting his left palm on the grass near Damian’s right hip, leaning into him closer, closer still. Damian didn’t realize his lips were trembling, a moving target, until Arthur placed a cold, steady hand under his chin and brought the tips of their cigarettes together—an apex of heat, crackling and brightening as Arthur inhaled, and just like that, Damian’s clove began to writhe.

It took his entire strength not to tackle Arthur and shove his body under his own and bury the both of them deep, deep, deep into the dirt.

Arthur’s eyes flickered from behind the embers, as if he caught a glimpse of Damian’s wicked thought, lips curling around his cigarette.

“You’re supposed to breathe in,” said Arthur, amused, sitting back on his knees and breaking the spell. To breathe in would be Damian’s tantalizing taste of rebellion, smooth and smoky-sweet. The antithesis of Dettol, the lethal liquid of obedience. But what Damian failed to realize at the time was that he was acting completely under Arthur’s command. Arthur’s eyes twinkled

and teased him through the smoke of his exhale as if he stood before the iron vault of Damian's secrets. To breathe in would grant him access. A feeling deep in his stomach began to churn and swell in warning. Too late. Damian inhaled.

"And don't cough. You'll blow our cover."

Our cover. Our cover. Ours. Arthur's words gave Damian a secret thrill, which he fought to suppress like the cough building at the back of his throat.

"I thought you hated me," said Damian.

"Why?"

"I dunno," he mumbled, sort of feeling stupid. "It just seems like you hate everyone."

"Everyone hates *me*," said Arthur matter-of-factly, tapping away ash to accent his point.

"Well, you haven't really made an effort. To be honest, it seems like you avoid us. I mean, look, you're back here instead of on the field."

Arthur stared solemnly at the smoke spiraling from his clove. Damian took note of the dark bags under his eyes, his sunken and sharp face. "Well, you all go back some years. And you all watched me get beaten on the first night, which started things off a bit awkward."

"Hey, practically everyone has gotten the cane at least once."

"Even you?"

Damian shrugged.

"That would have been nice to hear the night it happened," said Arthur, flipping a switch, any semblance of humor leaving his voice ice cold.

Damian felt what might be guilt puncture and leak in his chest, but shook it off and repeated the words which had been repeated to him a million times in prep school.

"No one is going to baby you here."

Damian tried to recall hearing that phrase for the first time, and couldn't. It was as if the words had always existed inside him forever. He could hardly even remember life before boarding school. He might as well have been born in a dormitory, raised in a mess hall. But now, Damian leaned back against the bleachers and watched the rest of his class tackle and claw at each other through the metal frame, the echoes of yells and pants and grunts seeming so beneath him now, like little bugs crawling all over each other, trapped in their circle jerk, failing to see and feel the things that really mattered. This is how Damian imagined Arthur perceived the world of Wolfham, from the outside looking in, and while Damian wasn't sold on this point of view, he felt he could now understand Arthur just a little.

"I'm not asking to be babied."

This jostled Damian, who had lost the thread of the conversation.

Arthur was standing now, eyes steeled as he yanked down the collar of his button-up and twisted his smoldering cigarette into the thin skin where his neck met his collarbone, leaving a searing circle of ash.

Arthur pivoted on his heel and tossed the butt over his shoulder in Damian's general direction. Damian, whiplashed, could only watch as Arthur walked back toward the school building.

Damian suddenly became conscious of the unpleasant throb in his ankle and snubbed out his own half-finished clove on the metal bleachers. That phrase had been his key to life here. He clung to these words and made armor out of them. He had tried to give them to Arthur like a gift in the guise of advice, to teach him how to survive. But if Arthur would rather wallow in his own misery, then he deserved it.

That night Damian dreamed he was in the arms of his mother, the details of her face generic and hard to pin down because she always looked slightly different at the end of each term, so her appearance was this uncanny amalgam. But her voice stayed the same and, despite its familiarity, always managed to ring his spine up and down with a ripple of relief, like the sensation of a fountain pen writing the final word of an essay, or the first note of Damian's favorite etude. Damian couldn't place his own age in the dream—was he fifteen? Eight? Two? It didn't matter, because his mother stroked his hair like tending a flame, and cooed over and over in his ear.

“Baby, baby, oh, my baby.”

Damian's eyes shot open in a cold sweat. He found himself engulfed in the world he knew best, roommates snoring at varying frequencies and the clock ticking on the wall next to his bed. In the dark, Damian could just barely gleam that the hour hand lingered between three and four. Nausea mounting, he rose swiftly and quietly down the hall, toward the toilet.

As he clutched the edges of a sink, Damian watched his pupils shrink and adjust to the light. It was the first time in a while he had a moment to really look at himself. His little dark mole was still there, mocking him between the left corner of his lip and jaw. When he was twelve, his mother had called it his beauty mark. Something about that enraged Damian so much that he smuggled a pair of her tweezers into his bedroom and tried to pry it out. Alas. Despite the bloody mess it made, the mole stubbornly remained on Damian's face, reminding him of all things about himself he wished he could change, and could not hide.

Damian splashed cold water on his face because people did it in movies to get a grip. No luck. He had not ever lingered so much on the events of his past than he did in the last few weeks. He had not ever questioned his own sanity. This was all Arthur's fault. Arthur, who seemed to look right through him, and lay him bare.

“Fuck!”

As if summoning a demon, a sick, spindly figure reared its head in the mirror, emerging from a stall toward the back of the room in his tight black underlayer, blond hair matted and damp. He looked briefly hesitant, but upon seeing Damian flipped a switch to his usual smug indifference.

“Sorry to scare you.” The teasing lilt in his voice had returned. But even Arthur, invincible Arthur, whispered his words.

“What the hell are you doing showering at three in the morning?”

“I like to wait until the room’s empty. I can take my time.”

Arthur backed up against the sink adjacent Damian’s and leaped up in a dancier way so his arse was perched on the rim. Damian’s eyes flicked down to Arthur’s collarbone and found the burn from earlier peeking out of his crewneck, surrounded by a searing pink ring that looked hot to the touch. The blister had swelled up and hardened like a balloon.

“Do you get off in here or something?”

“I wonder why your mind goes there.” Both Arthurs, the real one and the one in the mirror, were staring into him, all four of his eyes coy and calculating. Outnumbered, Damian looked away.

“It’s a normal question. Everyone has a spot.”

“Do elaborate.”

“You know,” Damian sputtered. “A spot. Where you can wank with the general peace-of-mind that you won’t get caught.”

Privacy was a privilege at Wolfham. It was earned. It was why the oldest boys were put into double-rooms. Until sixth form, there were five boys to a dormitory, with matrons and staff always coming and going. The toilets were open and shared, with doorless stalls and communal

showers. Their schedules were heavily regimented and each boy was always expected to be somewhere, in a class or lunch or sport or prayers or music lessons, and the roll was taken several times a day. “Spots” were a survival tactic. The little quiet nooks and crannies, like the shadow of the bleachers, under a pew when the chapel was empty, or the dusty broom closets that locked from the inside. The boys would often share their secret exploits, sometimes trying to one-up each other with how risky or numerous their spots could get. If one was caught by faculty, he was certainly caned. If one was caught by another, he would be tortured and humiliated for weeks. If it weren’t for Damian’s particularly private spot, he’d likely avoid the trouble altogether, even though he’d probably go berserk.

“Actually, I didn’t know. I’m glad. I was beginning to think you were a repressed automaton with sports violence as your only sexual outlet.” Arthur could be so pretentious, talking as if holding an invisible, perpetually burning cigarette. “Where’s your spot, Damian?”

“As if I’d tell you.”

“That’s not very nice. I’m new. I don’t know any of the good places.” He softened his focus and gazed upward. Bit his bottom lip. His neck was ghostly pale under the harsh fluorescent light. “I’ve haven’t had a good pull since I started here. It’s getting quite painful.”

Damian felt something dangerous pulse in his core, and it was then that he knew Arthur was doing it on purpose. But did he have to be so shameless? So fucking wanton? How had he not been beaten to a bloody pulp already? Damian tried to imagine himself squeezing Arthur’s ugly blister. *Pop.*

“There are rumors about you.”

Arthur feigned a bored expression, but his eyes flashed with warning like lighthouses. “I can handle rumors. They remind me that I exist.”

“Are they true?”

“Would you like them to be? ”

Daman felt that violent viscera in the pit of his stomach twist like the way Arthur twisted his questions, trying to claw its way out and exact its revenge. Damian yanked it back down on its leather leash.

“If there’s a faggot sleeping in our room, I have to report it.”

“What if there are two?”

Arthur’s whisper punctured Damian quiet and sharp, like a needle into a bug.

Damian nearly slipped, and if he didn’t catch himself, Arthur would be choking and sputtering underneath Damian’s grip around his pathetic little neck, fingernails digging their way under his thin skin like parasites. Arthur’s eyes would be shiny with tears, gasping for forgiveness, the mirror cracked and bloody behind him. Damian did not attack Arthur. But he was thinking about it very vividly. He tried to hide his erection under the lip of the sink.

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to tell anyone,” said Arthur, “because I’m not a fucking snitch.”

Arthur hopped off his sink and slunk toward the exit. Damian eyed the curve where Arthur’s small waist met his arse in his tight black pants because he could, now that everything was out in the open.

“Arthur.” Damian said it before he could think twice. His name rung off the porcelain and tile. It made the hair stand tall on the back of his neck. And it made Arthur turn around. “The piano practice room, in the music building. It’s mine evenings from six to seven.”

A grin grew across Arthur’s face in slow motion.

“That’s your spot.”

Damian tilted his chin upward in affirmation. Putting his sharpest bits forward.

Arthur raked his eyes up and down Damian's figure, finally, finally. "Although it seems like you'll be making do here tonight." Damian felt his ears heat up red, and with that, Arthur strode victoriously into the darkness of the corridor like he held fresh prey in his jaws and was looking for the perfect place to enjoy it. Arthur, who seemed to always leave Damian weak and writhing in his own desire. Damian, who fantasized about the day when he'd walk away and leave Arthur begging. But for now, he had the toilet.

Damian's evenings in the piano room were his only true solace—it was a place where he could let himself fumble and hit a sour chord and no one would know because of the semi-soundproof walls and that the majority of the floor was empty by then. Damian was safe to make mistakes here, without beating himself up about it. And he realized he took that for granted, now that Arthur joined him nightly.

After their confrontation in the toilet, Arthur had left him alone for a few days, withdrawn, as if waiting for the perfect moment to pounce. Perhaps Arthur didn't want to seem too eager, but Damian doubted that someone like Arthur would care much about those sorts of formalities. Arthur wanted to throw Damian off guard. Put him on edge. Make him squirm. They had several classes together and yet Arthur would not even spare him a passing glance. He wore the same face, hollow and weary, like he was both too good for this place and out of his depth at the same time. When Damian returned to the dorm that night, Arthur had pulled the duvet completely over his head. You wouldn't even know he was there. Damian began to wonder if he dreamed up the whole encounter. It was certainly possible, what with the severity of his recent flashbacks.

He needed to confront Arthur in person, just to prove to himself he wasn't crazy.

Instead of a P.E. course, yet another requirement which he somehow smoothly squirmed out of, Arthur worked regular shifts at the school library. He usually manned the circulation desk, sorting return slips and such. Damian studied Arthur from the stacks on the floor above, peering over the oak bars of the ornate railing. He was reading—Damian was too far above to catch the title, but it must have been Arthur’s own copy, because he held the cap of a highlighter on the edge of his teeth. When the studying crowd at the tables below began to file out to prepare for formal dinner, he plucked a book from the fiction shelf and descended. Damian imagined taking Arthur by surprise and sliding the novel under his nose, but Arthur glanced up at him before he made it to the desk. Just as quickly, his gaze fell back down to his book, trying to grasp as many words as he could before their inevitable interaction, as if Damian were an annoyance. Arthur was reading *The Death Notebooks* by Anne Sexton. Poetry.

“Is that for a class?” Damian asked.

“No.”

“A bit grim.”

The corner of Arthur’s mouth twitched up involuntarily. Damian was startled by how much this small victory affected him.

“Hypocrite,” Arthur said as he thumbed through Damian’s selection. “I like this edition best.” Arthur held it up next to his head. The cover featured a twisted, deranged, screaming sketch of a face over red.

“You’ve read it?”

Arthur nodded. “You’ll like it.”

“What makes you say that?”

“It’s about a fifteen-year-old boy who acts on his impulses for pleasure and violence until he is forcibly reconditioned by the state.” Arthur’s eyes flicked between the book and Damian.

“Then he goes mad.”

Damian felt his heartbeat in his head. Arthur was turning to the inside front cover, where, in the return slip pocket, Damian had tucked a note. He studied Arthur’s reaction carefully: how his attention paused on the scrap of looseleaf, folded in half, with mild curiosity; how he extracted it from its hiding place with the caution of a game of Operation, as if it could buzz and scream if handled incorrectly; and how, when he opened it gently, like butterfly wings, Arthur’s eyes swept across it once—and then again, in disbelief—and expanded and glistened with glee. The rest of Arthur’s face, however, stayed delicately put. He tucked the invitation into the front pocket of his trousers.

“Well?” Damian’s voice tightened.

Arthur cast his gaze down and slightly left, his blond lashes a shield. He pressed the tip of his pen, which was previously tucked behind his ear, against his bottom lip. Damian declared another victory—he had made Arthur flush—even though he, himself, was tinged red. By now, Damian had endured many prodding, intense stares from Arthur; but his new inability to look Damian in the eyes excited and emboldened him. He got a tiny taste of what that kind of power felt like. Even if Arthur had willingly conceded it.

On the return slip, Arthur stamped the due date—15 NOV 1985—and slid it, along with the pen, towards Damian.

“Tonight?” The question slipped out of Arthur’s mouth low and delicate, and Damian buzzed with what he could pick up in Arthur’s voice as insecurity. The idea that they might do something together filled the air with a perceptible noise—not just any noise, but Arthur’s

breathy voice, was hot and overwhelming. With one word, Arthur had disabled Damian, staring down at the return slip and momentarily forgetting his name. He could not respond. Doing so might reveal Damian's weakness for him. Instead, he wrote out *Damian Stoffard* in black ink. A confirmation. A yes.

Chapter 3

Damian probably thought that he came off hard and unreadable like a chiseled statue, but Arthur could feel the aura of Damian's anguish as if he were standing next to a hot oven. Just beneath his steel surface, Damian broiled with emotion like a boiling kettle that Arthur would take great pleasure in pressing his hands against when no one was looking. This became obvious to Arthur when they first started rooming together. Damian had approached Arthur with such naked contempt that the force of Damian's inner turmoil hit him like a double-decker bus. Arthur almost felt embarrassed for him. But then he came to realize that it was one of those things only Arthur could see. Damian was regarded as not only popular but a glossy example of the best sort of boy Wolfham had to offer, sturdy and decorous, an obvious nomination for senior prefect next year, to have his name forever gilded in gold in the marble of the chapel. Permanent, tangible, expensive proof of his worth. Arthur would have preferred to see his own name printed on a book cover. More than just his name, he'd have hundreds of pages to explain himself.

The current of Arthur's emotions was too strong to ignore or repress—his chest swelled and sunk with waves of it, trying to pull him below the surface. He knew this would be a problem as early as year one. He was five and prided himself on his good behavior. His teacher, plump and pleasant, with whom Arthur believed he had cultivated a trusting and sensible relationship, was reading a story to the class cross-legged on their carpet squares. But the two boys behind Arthur were chatty and her temper was quicker than usual that day. She surveyed the class like a whip and snapped, "Arthur, be quiet."

"Sorry." The accusation pierced and hooked his chest.

She continued reading, but Arthur remained locked in that moment. Unable to listen, unable to speak. He didn't think to defend himself, to say, "It wasn't me, Miss." His classmates knew

that Arthur was certainly not the culprit, and Arthur knew that they knew, yet they had all watched him acquiesce. They saw his weakness—his misting eyes, his hot cheeks—and took note. He could feel the weight of their judgment, getting worked up over something so small and stupid. It nearly crushed him. But he held himself together until the bell rang for lunch, and the boys lined up in the toilet taking turns to wash their hands. Last in line, Arthur found himself alone. He turned up the hot water until steam fogged up the mirror, and he stuck his hands underneath the faucet and watched his skin turn bright red. He cried not in pain, but relief.

“You feel such a strong need to prove your suffering,” Dr. Harper once said. Arthur pulled his hair. He could see and feel everyone else’s emotions clear as day, yet no one could see and feel his own, even when he tried to make it obvious. He went much of his young life thinking that people could see his pain but simply did not care. He eventually learned the term *empath* in therapy. It was described to his thirteen-year-old self like some kind of sick superpower. But was it really a superpower if it only made him weaker? “I feel you, Arthur. I see you,” Dr. Harper would say. As if she were mocking him.

For the remainder of primary school, Arthur did not speak unless spoken to. And even beyond primary school, Arthur stayed stubbornly on the periphery. For instance, age eight, when there was a birthday party at a local lido, and he went because all the boys in his form were invited, he sat on the edge of the pool while he watched the other boys play sharks and minnows, reckless and loud and carefree in their printed swim trunks, their smooth skin. This is what boyhood was supposed to look like, and Arthur deprived himself intentionally. It’s not as if he felt above the other boys; no, he secretly wished they would swim over and yank him into the water, shrieking with laughter as he went under. But he stayed on the ledge with his fantasies, watching them splash and tackle and touch each other without fear of drowning.

There was only one way Arthur knew how to cope. To him, the words “self-harm” sounded like hushing a baby to sleep. Cutting was closer, but not quite. He was also burning, clawing, tearing, slicing, slamming, flirting with death—but also with love. After he watched his blood dilute fetal-pink around his toes and down the rusty shower drain, Arthur would wrap the gauze taut around his gashes like an embrace. The bandage softened the sting of his open wounds and transformed the rawness into something tender. The routine precision of his aftercare was the only way he knew how to love himself. On the days he wanted to suffer, he’d bleed into the bedclothes and let future Arthur deal with the mess.

He would purchase the gauze and blades at the Boots on his walk home from school with his meager earnings from the odd jobs he did for his neighbors. He lived in a semidetached in a bushy, well-to-do corner of North London that his parents could just barely afford, but Arthur’s father didn’t mind stretching their pounds for food and forsaking their summer holidays for the status that the house granted them. That’s why when Arthur was offered a scholarship at some stuffy public boarding school an hour’s drive north, he had no choice. He was going.

Arthur had gained admission through means of a creative writing contest held by Wolfham. The authors of the top three selections were promised an interview with the dean of the school’s English department and took the entrance exams for free and, if accepted, only paid a fraction of the tuition. Wolfham was primarily home to only those who could afford it. They were seeking new boys to balance out the scholar-to-jock ratio, and with some recent gifts from rich alum, they were able to send out their feelers into some notable comprehensives and recruit promising boys on scholarship. Arthur was never planning on entering the contest, but when Arthur’s father caught wind, he bore down on Arthur with harsh insistence. Arthur replied with scorn, a gut reaction to everything his father told him to do.

However, there were very few things that brought Arthur joy, and a teacher complimenting his writing was at the top of the list. He couldn't help but feel a pleasant pulse of elation when he heard that his English teacher had called home and encouraged Arthur's parents that he apply. It grew into an all-consuming high that he rode for days, until he actually found himself sitting in front of the Smith-Corona. If Arthur was addicted to anything more than literary praise, it was catapulting himself into a self-destructive loop that would strip it all away. It was Arthur's subconscious reaction to his own happiness, which affected him with the same whirlwind intensity as his despair. He needed balance. He was much more comfortable in his misery than he was in his happiness, which felt floaty and dangerous like hang gliding, and if he didn't put an end to it on his own account, he knew something else would instead, something out of his control, something that would lead to a fatal crash.

So, yes, Arthur wrote something. He typed in a hurried, frenzied heat. But he wrote something so frighteningly honest about himself, so embarrassingly morbid and depressing, that surely the school would never take him. Arthur would scare them off. And Arthur took an aching comfort in knowing that no one would ever read it besides some stuffy master who'd only skim it and throw his heart and soul in the bin.

His parents drove him an hour north for his interview a month later. "I don't know how you fooled 'em, Arthur, but I will say I'm proud," his father said from the driver's seat, which left Arthur in a swampy state of unease in the back. Arthur should have been rejoicing over his selection, but instead his stomach hardened like lead. His impending interview felt like a trial, and his story was cold, hard evidence for a horrible crime for which he was guilty.

Arthur had expected the donor to be old and fat, with coattails and a pipe, unreachable behind a pair of smeared wire glasses. Instead, a man in his forties wearing a wooly blazer and cheery

bowtie gestured for him to take a seat in an upholstered chair just as regal as his own, as if they were equals. They must have been in some master's lounge because they sat next to a fireplace, and Arthur unconsciously leaned into its pleasant warmth. The flames cast a friendly glow on Mr. Whiting, the flicker reflecting in his eyes. "I don't want to assume your piece was about you, Arthur, but clearly you're going through something," he said. Arthur felt a familiar pressure behind his face, which should have been mortifying. But, oddly, it wasn't. Arthur felt seen.

"You don't have to tell me, that's none of my business. But you should know that you possess a great talent. Your writing is not only mature; it's brutal and exacting, yet sensitive and empathetic. It pulses with feeling. That's quite rare for boys your age." Arthur felt euphoric. "Your emotion is your greatest strength. So let me give you some advice. The pain you're going through, it's not for nothing. Use it. I can see you've already started—but don't shy away from it. Don't be afraid of what anyone thinks. As an author, you can't. Your pain is not a hindrance, so don't let it be. It's a strength. Embrace it. Claim it. It's yours. And if you spin your words right, you can turn it into something powerful."

On the drive home, Arthur let himself fantasize about going to a school with fireplaces.

Chapter 4

1981

When deep purple clouds began to bruise the blushing sky above Alexandra Park, and a familiar chill electrified the thin blonde hairs on his arms, Arthur tossed his backpack over one shoulder and headed home with the reluctance of a death row inmate to the chair. For his last meal, he devoured the sight of London's steady silhouette, distant and hazy beyond the winding semis.

His narrow street was flanked by a row of lime trees, the neighbors' geraniums burgeoning beyond their iron gates and into the crooked walkway. Arthur could appreciate the coziness when he was in the mood, but for a twelve-year-old boy, the suburb was suffocating. The air hung heavy and quiet, save for the murmur of toads and warblers, and the crunch of fallen leaves beneath his loafers.

Arthur made a habit of avoiding cracks in the sidewalk. He remembered that silly chant from primary school, *step on a crack, break your mother's back*, and since then he was never able to shake the image of his mum bending, as if possessed, further and further backward until she snapped in half. A mangled mess of weedy limbs and blonde hair on the cold tile of the kitchen floor. All because of Arthur's misstep.

Lorna, his mother, did not have a body built for loving him. She was all thin lines and jagged edges. Her hugs felt like being pressed against a washboard, and her kisses were dry and reticent. The wrinkles that whispered around her eyes added a decade to her age, which was thirty.

Arthur's father loved coming home to her. Curt relished in her passivity, her daintiness, her pastel complexion, her habits and rituals that kept them stable.

She and Arthur were so much alike.

But what his father loved in Lorna, he loathed in Arthur. Every day at the table, Curt would criticize something new while Lorna pushed around the food on her plate. Tonight, it was the way he picked at his dinner "like a little blue tit." Rather than admit that his stomach was upset by what happened at school, he backtalked with the sharpness of a double-edged sword. "The less I eat, the less money you have to spend on food for me. You're welcome."

Arthur blocked out his father's oncoming tirade—"Who do you think you are? Johnny Rotten?"—until his angry red ears returned to their normal fleshy color. Curt's attention had shifted to the fuzzy news jingle from the micro-telly. They were airing a story about the first baby from Oldham born *in vitro*.

As Lorna so often did when Curt was distracted, she met Arthur's stare from across the table and offered him a shadow of a smile. It was like they shared a secret, but Arthur had no idea what it was. He just wished she would say something. He tried to tell her this with his eyes, but she went back to stirring her mushy peas.

Earlier that day was the first time Arthur was shoved into a P.E. locker, accused of peeking at crotches. The boys told Miss that he injured himself doing pull-ups and had to see the nurse. But really, he was trapped between narrow steel walls in darkness. You might guess that he was frightened and sobbing and banging from the inside for help. Instead, he curled himself up in a tight ball and didn't make a sound. He fantasized about dying in there, the smell of his death growing worse than their sweaty gym shorts, so come next class, when they opened that locker,

his limp body would come tumbling out, and they'd have no choice but to face the reality of what they had done to him.

Unfortunately, another boy had given Arthur away after only a few hours. With a yank of his elbow, he was gracelessly freed by the gym teacher who wore a faint look of disgust rather than pity.

His heart was a hummingbird when he realized his backpack was missing, along with everything inside.

—

The hallway was dead silent during classtime, save for the oppressive whir of fluorescent light. Arthur's eyes were locked onto the heavy oak door, its window obscured by a thick layer of film that made the people inside move like phantoms. His chest grew weak as a silhouette approached, dreading the turn of the knob—but it never came. The shadow retreated further back into the office. He still had to wait.

Arthur forced out a dizzy breath and steadied himself against the wall. He loathed the way his feet dangled pathetically from the bench, the floor just out of reach. The way his sharp knee-bones protruded awkwardly between the wool hem of his shorts and stupid high socks, the skin pink and vulnerable. He began his routine of cracking his knuckles, contorting each finger until it yielded a satisfying snap, before moving onto the next.

Snap. Snap. Snap.

The sound not only bubbled from beneath his fingerbones, but also echoed from down the hallway. Heels against polished wood.

Snap, snap. Snap, snap.

Something about this particular rhythm gave him temporary comfort, even as it grew louder and louder. He looked up, and weary, familiar eyes looked back.

Oh my god. They called his mum.

When Arthur's throat went dry and his cheeks began to burn, she joined him on the bench and wrapped an arm across his shoulders, her thumb kneading the seam of his blazer. Her eyes met his, and she started to speak.

Then the door creaked open.

—

“Ms. Caldwell, let me reiterate that your son is a fine student.” The headmaster had abandoned his chair in favor of pacing back and forth behind his desk. An impressive bookshelf towered behind him, filled with coordinating leatherbound volumes not really made for reading. The man glanced occasionally at Lorna but avoided all eye contact with Arthur.

“But please understand, well, this sort of...” he was struggling to say “...*homoerotic* literature is simply not appropriate for a boy in Year Seven. For any boy, really.”

The headmaster held the paperback in question: David Rees's *The Milkman's On His Way*. If Arthur wasn't mortified, he would explain that it was a book meant for teens, and there was hardly anything erotic about it. But the painting of a shirtless guy on the cover was pretty damning. So Arthur stayed silent.

No one entertained the question of how Arthur and his book were separated in the first place. His eyes bore holes into his mother's profile, but she just continued to nod in agreement, feigning shock.

“You see why we might be concerned if Arthur were to, well, *act* on these compulsions.”

Arthur sunk into the unforgiving metal chair and looked to the apple-shaped paperweight, the grimy keys of the typewriter, the tough turf of the sports field just out the window.

“So”—his voice rose sharp with finality—“if Arthur is to remain at Fortis Green, we will be referring him to a therapist. He’ll be required to meet her at least twice a month to keep his thoughts and behaviors in check.” He added, like an afterthought, “And, of course, to ensure his well-being.”

Finally, thumbs moving against one another, Lorna spoke.

“I think quite a bit of good could come from this.”

Arthur stared at her, completely numb.

“What do you think, Arthur?”

He churned the saliva viscous in his mouth and said nothing.

—

One week later, Arthur left Dr. Harper’s office—he assumed she was a “Dr.”—with a rubber band around his wrist and a bundle of extras in his pocket.

His mother waited at the curb in her blue Vauxhall Viva. She rolled down the window and gave him a sorry little wave. Arthur gazed blankly back, standing a few moments longer under the awning before slinking toward the car, the first sign of rain polkadotting the white fabric of his button-up.

As he climbed into the passenger seat, and she asked how it went, he pulled up his sleeve and explained. It was simple conditioning, completely harmless. He would wear the elastic at all times, and whenever he had an inappropriate thought, he would pull the band taut, and release. A short, stinging snap to put him straight.

His mother went silent. Arthur expected nothing more. As she drove, her eyes wavered between the road and the photograph on the dashboard—Mum, Dad, and baby Arthur—but seemed incapable of looking at him in the flesh. Raindrops that danced down the windshield were dashed by the wipers that tore violently through them. Arthur’s pupils followed their path back and forth, back and forth.

When they came to a red light, the shrunken voice of his mother snapped him out of his haze. She stared at the punishment wrapped around his wrist and said, “Honey, you don’t have to do that.”

Arthur pressed his ankles into the leather seat. “But that’s what I was told to do.”

“It doesn’t matter, I don’t like it.”

Arthur glared at her the way he had learned to look into the eyes of his bullies.

“Then how do you propose we’ll fix me?”

As rain began to slap the windows, the wipers redoubled their efforts, *back-forth-back-forth*.

“Arthur. You’re being difficult.”

“That’s why they gave me the elastic.”

Backforth-backforth-backforth.

“I said, I don’t like it for you.”

“You said, *quite a bit of good can come from this!*”

SNAP.

The strike of thick rubber against impressionable flesh made a horrid slapping sound that made Lorna want to hurl and cry and grab her son and shake him. She did the next best thing and pulled over.

Her face scrunched up into something like anger, but she lost her words when Arthur crumbled.

“That’s what you said, Mum.” Arthur’s palms rubbed harshly at his eyelids until the darkness gave way to ghostly specks of light, floating, aimless.

With a breath, Lorna mustered up the surety of mother characters she admired on television and extended a hand over the emergency brake. “Give it here, now.”

“That’s against doctor’s orders,” he croaked through his fingers.

“I don’t bloody care what she told you, I get final say!”

They both were startled at the rise of her voice.

Arthur lowered his hands from his face, blurred vision adjusting to the light, and their eyes met the way they always did. Except now, just for a moment, they could see each other clearly—even the bits they’d rather keep behind glass. The torrent of rain enveloped the Viva, creating a bubble for only Arthur and Lorna, as if they were in a surfacing submarine instead of on the shoulder of the A504.

Arthur tried to ignore the stinging ring of red developing on his arm, but as pain turned to unbearable itch he couldn’t help but try to soothe it. His mum made a cup with her hand, and Arthur surrendered, dropping the elastic into her palm. Lorna considered the shape, coiled up like a snake ready to strike, before sliding it onto her own wrist.

“What will I tell Dr. Harper?” Arthur said to his lap.

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get there.” Lorna’s kitten heel tapped the gas. “But to be clear, this is not a topic for dinner table conversation, Arthur.” And they drove home, slowly, cautiously, through the rainstorm.

Late that night, unable to sleep, Arthur crept down the stairs to find his mother sitting on the couch by the warm lamplight. With the precision and steadiness that kept the Caldwell family sane, she was embroidering Arthur's name into his backpack.

"So people will know it's yours, in case it's taken from you again," she explained as he watched her through the doorframe. She looked up from her work and patted the spot beside her. Arthur sat.

He watched as she stitched an ivory H through the tough blue weave, slim fingers moving under and over with practiced ease to form the U, guiding the needle through a loop as she finished off the second R and, with a careful tug, snipped the thread with her scissors like an umbilical cord.

Arthur nestled his face into the depression of her collarbone, and when she wrapped him up in her wiry arms, he wept, and wept, and wept. And the edges of her fingernails traced hearts on his back and combed love through his hair until she turned his shaky gasps to steady breaths, and slowed the wet hot tears that tickled her shoulder.

Epilogue

An evening haze softened the gothic architecture and turned the campus countryside gold. The bell tower struck eight—and for the first time, to Arthur, it sounded like a melody rather than a toll.

MUSIC ROOM NO. 4, 8:15

He couldn't help fiddling with the note, folding and unfolding it with origami delight. Arthur buzzed with the excitement of a lovestruck schoolgirl, which seemed silly but maybe not far off. He might have been embarrassed to smile, but everyone was in the dining hall. So he smiled, and let himself feel it.

His gaze flickered to his wrist. A beige rubber band peeked out from beneath the sleeve of his uniform shirt. He undid the button and shimmied down the additional black layer underneath, just a bit. Wrapped around the thin skin of his wrist, laden with years of ugly scars, he gave the band a final, playful tug-*snap*, before tearing it off completely. It hung wriggly and limp like an earthworm between his fingers.

Arthur flicked it into the bushes and entered the music building.

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- Van, der K. B. A. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. Penguin, 2014.
- Wolff, Tobias. *Old School*. Knopf, 2003.

Morgan Seiff.

Education

The Pennsylvania State University, Schreyer Honors College

August 2017 - May 2021

Film-Video major, Bachelor of Arts | Bellisario College of Communications

English & Jewish Studies minors | College of the Liberal Arts

University College London

Summer 2019

Modules | London on Film, Literary London

Honors & Awards

Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi (2021) • Hartman Honors Scholarship in Communications (2019 & 2020) • Grossman Grant & Chaiken Grant to fund my short documentary, "Halfway," shot in Poland (2019) • Best Student Film Award at Centre Film Festival, "Halfway" (2020) • Short fiction published in undergraduate literary journals: "Stitches," *Kalliope* 2020; "Fairy," *Folio* 2020 • Provost Award (2020) • President Sparks Award (2019) • Academic Excellence Scholarship (2018) • Pollock Scholarship (2018) • Dean's List (2017 - 2020)

Work Experience

Kalliope Literary Magazine

September 2017 - Present

University Park, PA

EDITOR IN CHIEF (June 2020 - Present)

- Orchestrate production of 200-page print literary journal from conception to distribution: submission evaluations, copy editing, production, distribution, and advertising
- Lead 30 members in bimonthly meetings and delegate tasks to leadership team
- Revitalized social media presence with elegant, brand-consistent content and tripled Instagram following

PRODUCTION CHAIR (January 2018 - May 2020)

- Designed sophisticated, clean layout for 5 print journals in Adobe InDesign
- Delegated tasks to production team, taught newbies InDesign, and streamlined file sharing procedure
- Adapted swiftly to circumstances of COVID-19 and ran virtual work sessions with production team

Rock Ethics Institute

August 2020 - Present

University Park, PA

FILM RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT INTERN

- Research assigned topics for feature film and contribute ideas to script in development
- Organize notes and present findings to writing team at weekly meetings

Palinka Pictures Production Company

September 2017 - December 2020

State College, PA

INTERN & PRODUCTION ASSISTANT

- Traveled to festivals and conferences to help strengthen connection between filmmaker and audience
- Created marketing graphics with Adobe Photoshop to promote films on social media and campus

Centre Film Festival & Pride on Screen

Fall 2019, Summer 2020, & Fall 2020

Centre County, PA

CREATIVE DEVELOPMENT & YOUTH VOLUNTEER

- Co-led youth storytelling workshop and film competition and engaged local teen film enthusiasts
- Composed and copy edited 72-page print program with InDesign and managed Squarespace website

Underground Student Media

January 2018 - May 2019

University Park, PA

VIDEOGRAPHER & REPORTER

- Produced, directed, and shot video/multimedia stories in less than 24 hours using Adobe Premiere