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Fragmentation: Three Stories

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Introductory Reflections

Music and literature have always gone hand-in-hand in my mind, and, having studied both, I constantly see parallels between the two. From my medieval literature class in which we discussed poems as songs, to the writing of Baroque musicians documenting music as literature and phrases as punctuation, to modern songs named for and based upon popular and classic fiction, the parallels are ever present and always evolving. The purpose of writing this thesis was to continue the conversation between music and language, taking some of my favorite modern music and writing contemporary fiction in response to it.

In 2020, a band named Glass Animals released an album called *Dreamland*. When I listened to it all the way through for the first time, I remember thinking how clearly the music was telling a story, not just through the lyrics but through the style, genre, and order of songs in a disjointed, nonchronological format. It was a heart-wrenching album with upbeat music meeting painful lyrics that warranted repeats. Soft gestures, crescendos that match the emotional peaks, phrases that lifted upwards like a question unanswered. With every repeat, I fell in love with the album. And as an English major with a music minor, I couldn't help but draw the parallels between song and story. My unrelentingly active imagination and love for the album compelled me to realize this story on paper.

My original idea for my thesis was much more ambitious. I wanted to write the story of the whole album, including all twelve songs with all their nuances. I quickly realized that this was an impossible task, both because of the sheer amount of demanding work it would take and especially because the album's story was not *my* story to tell. The lyrics began confining me, and

I was stuck trying to work with images that weren't my own. The album, three songs in particular, became my inspiration rather than my source material. Using the album as a backdrop for the writing, I tried to closely follow the musical tone with my own writing tone, and I often paraphrased lyrics as "easter eggs" to give an image and some color to the writing. Inspired by the album and the work of other great authors, my thesis aims to combine the artistry of music with the artistry of fiction writing.

I have been largely inspired by authors who deal with the present action through their own internal monologue. In the fall semester of 2022, I took a course dealing with "literary modernism" in which we examined how writing functions both as a storytelling device and as the thought process of storytelling itself. We read novels such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Franz Kafka's *The Trial*; in these, we discussed how the language interrupts itself, giving both the chronological events of a story while also examining how the events were perceived by the narrator. I was also loosely inspired by Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* in the way the narrator's monologue and voice are so internally focused while fixating on the idea of a person, the object of his affection, in such a way that dramatizes his own desires.

The final and most inspirational book to my thesis, which largely influenced how to write rather than what to write, was Raven Leilani's *Luster*. The contemporary novel follows a complex protagonist navigating her life as a young woman in a complicated situation. Leilani's writing balances interior thoughts with present action, something I was inspired to improve upon myself and then workshopped all semester. She characterizes her protagonist as flawed yet still intriguing, and I tried to model much of my flawed protagonist's action and internal monologue from her example. Her novel was especially inspiring in the writing process of my thesis, and I learned a lot by studying her work.

The title of my thesis, “Fragmentation,” comes from a repeated theme of fragments and falling apart. Like the Glass Animals album, *Dreamland*, my stories take a nonlinear shape, showing the progression of a relationship without a chronological sense of order because the relationship itself is inherently flawed and lacks a sense of order. These moments are fragments of their life while their relationship itself begins to break off in fragments.

Taking David into my hands as a protagonist, I wanted to make him a very flawed, internally focused, and almost narcissistic character. I wanted to stay within his mind as these fragments were memories he couldn’t let go of. Because of this narration, Anna intentionally did not get the sort of attention she deserved as a character; she was more of an object to move the story forward. Had it been from her perspective, David would have received the same treatment.

Each story is named for the song it was based upon. In “Tangerine,” I began with what I imagined to be the bulk of their relationship. It was a fragment, a hint that they couldn’t work in the future, but that in the past it was so wanted: they tried to make something from nothing, and it became a dud. Then, in “Hot Sugar,” I showed their initial meeting, a singularity in which these two souls find each other in an odd situation with a magnetic pull. I again tried to emphasize that both individuals are unstable in their own ways. Finally in “Domestic Bliss,” I ended the narrative with a future scenario that isn’t detailed in the music at all except in the brief memory flashbacks. It’s future I imagined would come from such a troubled relationship. I wrote this final story in present tense to distinguish the voice from the others, as if this fragment is David’s present. This was the first of the three stories I wrote, and it sparked the rest of the narrative for me, almost as if David was looking back to each of these past scenes from Anna’s wedding, trying to remember everything as he longed for her.

The central theme that emerged from this work became the internal struggle that individuals face when craving a certain validation from others when only caring about themselves. Both David and Anna have a shallowness where they seek external acceptance and latch on to the idea of something or someone in order to fill their own perceptions about themselves. That is why the two are so drawn to each other, and that is why they could never have been a good couple. They do not fill the other person's needs, nor do they bring out the best in each other, but their magnetic attraction was irresistible, and they must struggle with this dynamic to determine what is best for them without necessarily knowing what that may be.

Chapter 1 : Tangerine

Anna sat across from me in silence, her neck craned over her iPhone as her long nails incessantly tapped away, a concentration on the device I felt almost jealous of, but was used to. Her meal sat in front of her, untouched and likely wilting in the summer heat, and I wasn't sure if she had left it because she was waiting to post the image of it after editing, waiting for me to get my own food, or was going to eat it at all. Her concentration was fixed on the screen. I knew she couldn't even see any of the images staring back at her in the glare of the hot California sun, not really, but she continued ignoring me, shading her iPhone with one perfectly moisturized and manicured hand and tapping the glass with the other. This was her ritual with almost every meal. Her fixation, her habitual practice felt absurd. That screen full of fake and photoshopped views captivated her more than the rolling hills and morning skies around her.

We had a routine breakfast here—the Salty Spatula, a cute little modernized shack. Every Monday, we'd wake up with the sun, drive twenty minutes from our affordably cramped apartment toward the city, order our meal at the stand, avoid small talk with a twenty-something wannabe influencer behind recycled glass, ask for our trendy meal-of-the-week and a high-protein smoothie or low-calorie coffee, then find a seat at a brightly painted wooden bench amid the outdoor hanging lights. The place did its best to feel like its own secluded part of the world overlooking the city. Looking off in the distance, Anna would swear she could see the Hollywood sign perfectly from where she sat. When she actually looked up, that is. Maybe my glasses already needed a new prescription, maybe the smog was too heavy for me to see, or maybe she was delusional. *No*, I had to correct myself, *optimistic*. Or maybe the carotenoids in

her smoothie really did make her eyes work better, and I should have listened to her about taking better care of myself.

I probably should have been taking better care of myself. I wasn't in college anymore, and my body couldn't keep taking things lightly. The pills I had abused routinely ten years ago had since been replaced with prescriptions, and I struggled to remember if I had taken all of them this morning. I shouldn't feel old; I still had 70 percent of my life to live—assuming the way I lived when I was twenty never caught up to me—but everything hurts all the time, and Anna made me feel older than I was, even if I only had a few years on her.

My forehead beaded with sweat, and I felt the chilling tickle of a drop rolling down my back, making its way to the crack of my tucked shirt and into my shorts that were already very much damp.

I heard my name called at the counter, a mispronounced *Da-vid* as if Dracula were working today. I chuckled to myself, glancing at Anna to see if she had noticed. If she did, she didn't show it. I struggled to get up from the bench gracefully. My foot got stuck on the side where the seat connected to the teal-painted table, and I awkwardly hopped out from my trap, trying to avoid the critical looks from the other young couples near us. It always shocked me to see how many people were willing to be up this early, to spend this money this often. Some of them were familiar from our previous visits here, and some of them were clearly just tourists trying new spots. I guess that was the charm of LA, and I sure as hell was not the view they came for. Anna didn't even bother looking up at me as I struggled. It felt intentional. I released my foot from the table's grasp and ignored the embarrassed feeling creeping onto my cheeks, focusing instead on the woman who wouldn't focus on me.

We had decided to do these regular breakfast “dates” for about a month, where we’d grab a bite before I would drop Anna off at work and then go back to my home office. It was the therapist’s idea. The therapist was Anna’s idea, which surprised me. At this point, I wasn’t sure she cared enough to keep everything going, especially after I had caught her texting Josh again. Always fucking Josh. Even when things were good, or at least getting better. It seemed to work at first—the therapist, yes, but specifically the breakfast thing, I mean. It felt new and exciting, like I had a purpose. I didn’t mind the drive to the Spatula, and while the drive into Downtown L.A. was abhorrent and I would normally avoid it at all costs, it was nice to feel wanted. And it was nice to drive my own car. Nice to get into the driver’s seat and not be completely squished into the wheel before readjusting to my own height. But after the third time, it became another routine, and we fell back into old habits.

With thanks to Dracula, who was just another 20-year-old hipster at the counter, I grabbed the breakfast salad—whatever that meant—and my black coffee and made my way back to our table. When I got to our bench, I stood behind Anna for a moment and, in my best Dracula impersonation, said, “*An-Na!*” She glanced behind her for a second, flitted her eyes up and down over me, gave a fake smile, and turned back around.

The heat waves melting us both didn’t seem to deter her; the shoulder she gave to me before sitting down across from her was as cold as an ice cream sandwich. She could last for much longer out here before finally wasting away like I already was. Not a drop of sweat on her brow, she looked completely undisturbed. Her smoothie sweat as much as I did, and I wasn’t sure if it was rude for me to start eating my food before she was done poking at the photo she took.

We weren't always like this. But it didn't matter, because we were like this now, ongoing for months. Ever since we had actually decided to give things a try, for real this time. But that was probably the issue. We never were real, and I don't think we ever could be. I couldn't recall a time recently when we went on an actual date. Even the sex, though still as good and exciting as ever, began to feel like a necessary ritual to stay together.

I watched her, still stuck in my own head. Her nails were bright orange, her hair faux and faded ginger with her natural dark blonde roots poking through. Her amber-colored dress was out of season, yet she wore it anyway, because she never really cared about that stuff, or at least claimed she didn't. Sometimes she tried to dress me, though lately, she had given that up. I think the older I got, the more polos I wore, the more I started to remind her of her dad. Bad news. So I dressed myself now, still conscious of whatever appearances we were trying to uphold these days. Hawaiian shirt, the top button undone for style points, and shorts so tight that the wallet I sat on tilted me to one side. At least the meal helped make it flatter.

My stomach grumbled, and I cleared my throat.

Anna looked up at me, blinking in the sudden emergence into the real light.

"Are you, um, going to eat?" I tried not to sound like an asshole.

She blinked again, slower. Her blue eyes were shadowed by dark eyeliner, smoking out with a light shimmer on top. The light reflected off the eyes that, even after all this time, still gave me butterflies. The gold shimmer reflections of everything she wore highlighted tiny tangerine speckles painted like the sky, a sunrise in her eyes. The eyes I fell for.

"What?" Her voice inflected upwards in a falsetto, the whole word uncertain, insincere. Like she didn't even want to ask it. The butterflies in my stomach fell like a rock.

“How’s your smoothie?” I pointed to it with my wooden fork, digging into my breakfast salad knowing she hadn’t even touched her food yet.

I turned my attention entirely to my salad, and I knew she had rolled her eyes without even seeing her. I wanted to roll my eyes too, but I held myself back. Instead, I stabbed the salad that wouldn't satiate the hunger drilling into me. My cheeks felt warm, and I could feel the heat of the morning coming out of me as if I were the source. I swallowed back my frustration and looked back up at her.

This time, she stared back at me, analyzing my movements like I was a pet she resented keeping, like she purposely stopped feeding me and was waiting for me to die. All this time I spent looking at her, observing her in this same manner, and now I felt trapped. I wish I could have been a mirror, to show her more of herself.

Who are you, I almost said out loud. What happened?

The drive to work was silent; she kept checking her likes and comments and shares, her promos and her brand deals. How much she would make off of her breakfast post. Hopefully enough to make the drive worth it.

We sat in L.A. traffic, the waves of heat on the street ahead of us mesmerizing me like a mirage. The traffic was still, the only things moving on the road were the shimmer on the pavement and the plastic grocery bags that floated by like tumbleweeds. The AC barely worked, and we each had our windows slightly cracked, which cooled us only when we were moving. I was still sweating, and she still looked perfect.

The silence became irritating. Five cars ahead of us moved, then three, then the car in front of us crept forward, and we could only move an inch. Someone behind me honked. My fists

gripped the wheel even tighter, the mirage dancing like a mockery. I became aware of Anna's breathing patterns next to me, then my own. Then my heartbeat roared in my ears, beating faster, louder, the traffic unmoving, the silence deafening.

I flipped on the radio, the staticky and unpredictable reliability of the sound an indication of the car's age. A man spoke a broken sentence presumably about the weather or maybe the traffic. I turned the knob, static taking over again. Someone else honked. Then the AC cut out completely. I turned the knob again, picking up speed with every unreliable soundwave until I slammed on the controls with my fist in an attempt to get the damn thing to work.

Anna flinched.

I didn't even realize what I was doing at the moment. I was usually so much more careful. I should have been more careful. I wasn't *him*. I froze, careful to move my hand back to the steering wheel, my grip loosened to a limp and sweaty open palm. I looked over at her with sorrow glistening in my eyes.

Her head was down, her breathing heavy but slowly steadying itself.

I wasn't sure if I should say anything. The static took back over.

This time, she reached out to turn the knob on the radio, and our ears were met with the rhythmic clapping of the *Friends* intro. She produced a soft smile, and I continued to desperately watch her. Her eyes finally met mine, and I whispered a pathetic and insufficient *I'm sorry* that I wasn't sure ever left my lips at all. But she reached her hand out across the center console, and I met her in the middle with a soft touch.

The music played on, and the traffic began to move up.

Friends, that was the end of our 90's throwbacks, up next we'll hit you with—

I changed the channel again, letting the staticky weatherman give us approximations of the predictable week ahead of us.

“Do you want to watch a movie?” Anna’s voice startled me. She looked at her phone.

“Tonight?” I turned to her, consciously keeping my eyes mostly on the road, despite the limited movement ahead of us.

“Yeah. We could grab two bottles of wine and order a pizza. Like old times.” She said it nonchalantly without looking up from her phone as if she didn’t want to seem too interested.

“Yeah,” it had been so long since we had done this, I almost didn’t want to break the imperfect routine we had settled into. I didn’t even know if I could rely on it, like maybe after work she’d change her mind, or we’d drink too much and get into an argument. But I was willing to risk it.

“No, definitely. Let’s do that.” I let a smile form on my lips and noticed she almost let herself do the same. She kept looking down. The traffic moved.

Chapter 2 : Hot Sugar

The sun beat down on my already-burnt skin as I sweat vodka and molly from my pores. The wind whisked away all of the smells of sweat and finished In-N-Out and spilled alcohol, and the salty sea air masked any hint of pollution from the car's fumes. The road was just a shimmer ahead of us, and I wasn't even sure that we were still moving. I knew there was wind blowing through my hair, the top of the ten-year-old 2002 convertible had come down at some point, and Jason was in the driver's seat next to me with a bottle of Corona in his hands, Cam in the back laying sideways. I wasn't sure how long he had been down. I think we were still on Pacific Coast Highway, cruising south toward wherever someone had suggested this morning. Was it this morning? My stomach lurched.

The next time I blinked, we were parked on a street, surrounded by similar-looking cars and similar-looking houses. I wasn't sure what town we were in. Some residential suburb where I figured there were old people or families living. As far as I could tell, I could have been anywhere in Southern California; almost every house was adorned with scratchy paint and terracotta-colored roofs. Some had Halloween decorations, like bats on the windows and tombstones in the yard, but the decorations were as sparse as the dying grass in each of the yards. The spookiest part of the suburb was that each house looked eerily as if the whole neighborhood had cropped up overnight with the point of a finger from the sky. I looked up at the sky, squinting as if looking for the invisible guiding hand. I forgot what I was doing.

I got out of the car with the other two, and Jason began the effort to close the top of the convertible while Cam struggled to stand up.

I could hear a faint hum of music somewhere in the distance. Or it could have been right next to me. The classic Latin beat that always shook house parties and cars driving past rattled somewhere in the distance or just in my brain. I felt my hips swaying, and I was getting more and more irritated by the fact that we were stopped. I hadn't realized we had reached our destination.

"What's the hold-up?" I could feel my voice leave me without permission. The music droned on, the beat feeling more aggressive, and I involuntarily kept dancing. One more second of standing and waiting, and I would have taken off to find the source of the music.

But we weren't standing and waiting. We were moving, walking, towards a house.

"Davey," I heard Jason say to me, sounding like he was underwater. I turned my head to him, taking in his blonde buzzed hair and backward hat, his flannel over a hoodie and sweatpants despite it being 75 degrees out. I almost laughed at him, he looked like such a douchebag. He looked like his douchebag brother. It made me feel weird, but I didn't know why. I didn't know his brother well, but something had always told me to keep away. I had to remind myself that the man towering over me was Jason, my best friend, my college roommate.

Jason put both his hands on my shoulders, steadying me. I was irritated that he thought he could do that. We were grown men, damn it. I wobbled. Cam hiccupped behind me, and Jason pointed his finger at him sternly.

"Behave. Yourselves." He said each word pointing to me, then to Cam. "Or else she won't let you in. Remember, you're sober."

I laughed out loud. Cam hiccupped again. Jason huffed in frustration.

We walked forward in slow motion. My eyes were focused on the sky as I looked for something I couldn't remember, and when I looked back in front of me, I had come kiss-close to

the red-painted front door of a terracotta house that buzzed with the music I had been dancing to.

The door disappeared after a rhythmic knocking spell. In its place was a 5'6" blue-topped cloud of fog. No. I took my glasses off my face, rubbing the round frames that felt like goggles on my shirt that kept changing colors. I put them back on, scratched my hand against the sandpaper of my stubbly jaw, and took in the sight before me.

I first noticed her blue hair. It was faded, a little dry and damaged, but in a way that suggested she didn't care what it looked like, because she made it work. Her hair cascaded down her shoulders, standing out against the white she wore, framing her face with choppy, long bangs hooding her lemongrass-green eyelids. I think on top of her head was an actual halo. I blinked and took a step back. It was just a cheap plastic headband, but it was there and I wasn't hallucinating.

Tall black tulips on either side of the doorframe framed her perfect figure, the petals softly folding up to her smoothly curved hips draped in a white mini-skirt. Her pale stomach was exposed between the skirt and a basic white cropped tank top, which was cut low to show the top of her breasts. Though not large, they were intentionally pushed up and spilling out. A few freckles spattered on either shoulder peeking in between the straps of her plastic-feathered wings. She was a little sweaty, and some of her mascara had smudged her round cheeks under her sky-blue eyes. I swore I saw gold flecks in her eyes. Freckles painted her face, a blush spreading across her nose and cheeks splattered with glitter up her temples. Her petal lips were curved delicately, moving as if she were speaking.

"Where are your costumes?" Her voice cut through my daze. She was actually speaking to me, and she looked pissed.

“Uh,” I had to put every brain cell I could muster to form sentences that didn’t make me look like a fool. “I’m Davey.”

She didn’t seem to expect this answer. For a split second, I saw her tough attitude falter with a flash of a smile. Or maybe it didn’t, and I was just high.

“I don’t think I can let your friend in, Jason,” she turned to him with a look of comical judgment, “he’s not sober at all.”

“Oh, come on, Anna.” He said her name, and it echoed in my mind. *Anna.*

Jason leaned against the doorframe with his arm up, towering over all of us and caging her in, “Davey’s a good guy.” His height was already a commanding presence, and he made himself even bigger, feeling much more imposing. More than before, he looked like his brother.

As Jason’s shadow fell over her, the glimmer in Anna’s eyes fizzled out, and her tough appearance almost completely crumbled. Her eyes flickered to mine for a second, and I felt a shockwave of sobriety spread through me long enough to stand upright, take a deep breath, and give her a reassuring look.

“Yeah, fine,” she looked back to him, feigning a stoic demeanor. “Yeah, come in.”

Somehow I had acquired a red plastic cup full of something that tasted like vodka with a hint of sugary orange. The house wasn’t very big, and it certainly wasn’t very nice. I couldn’t imagine a family living here, but I also couldn’t imagine anyone living here. As far as I knew, it was an amorphous, never-ending labyrinth. Flashing lights and blacked-out windows created an artificial nighttime rave as thin walls held every vibration from one seemingly never-ending song. I floated aimlessly from room to room between sweaty half-naked vampires, playboy bunnies, and Paris Hiltons.

The space in the house blurred together and no room served the purpose intended, except maybe the bathroom, which I struggled to find. Each liminal space was designated for pong, dancing on elevated surfaces, or refilling a cup. I had made my way through the dark labyrinth unaware of where my friends were and began to wonder how I'd even gotten here.

In the midst of the darkness, the flashing strobes, and the sweaty bodies, I saw a light—a heavenly, door-shaped light—and moved toward it. I didn't know where it would take me, but I followed it, letting my feet unlatch from the sticky floor with each step until I was engulfed by the light, and I couldn't see.

I blinked, rubbed my eyes, and tried again. In the process, I dropped my cup and the orange liquid pooled around my feet on the white ground beneath me, splattering near the doorway. I couldn't see anything but light and the pool at my feet and assumed I died. And then I heard an angel.

“Hey, watch where you're spilling, dumbass,” her familiar voice rang in my dazed mind, and I thought truly I must be dead. I turned my whole disoriented body to look for the voice, my vision slowly beginning to return to me as I made out colors and figures in what might have been heaven.

I spotted her blue hair before I could comprehend my surroundings. I could see her now, clear as day, and I could now also make out that it was still daytime and I was in a stranger's backyard at a house party, not heaven. But there was still an angel moving closer and closer to me. And she was angry.

“Dude. You gotta stop drinking if you show up to the party already blasted out of your mind. You spill, you gotta clean that shit up.” She stood about a foot away from me and a level down, hands on her hips and a leg propped on the step I was on.

It took me a moment to find words. “In my defense,” I said slowly, noticing her raise an eyebrow as I spoke, “I hardly touched that drink, as you can see from the copious amount of liquid on my shoes.” I don’t know how I conjured up the word copious. I was impressed with myself and stood a little taller.

“Yeah,” she crossed her arms, not even a little amused by my vocabulary. “There are paper towels and rags by the door. Use them. I’ve got my own shit to deal with,” she motioned her head backward, where further back in the yard, a girl in a batman cape was slumped over a tree stump with four guys surrounding her, petting her back without the intention of consolation. Even in my decommissioned mindset, I knew something was off about the situation. Batgirl was very clearly also out of commission. I had been there many times, and honestly if I had two more drinks I might have been over the stump with her.

“Er, do you want help with that?” The crisp but still warm autumn air was settling over my body and into my lungs. I took a deep breath and felt I could see and think a lot clearer than I could about three minutes prior.

“Listen, stranger—”

“Davey.”

“Davey. I don’t know you, I only know Jason, and that’s only by association. I didn’t even want to let you in. Honestly, I’d rather handle this on my own and see you guys go back to wherever you came from.”

“It was only about 20 minutes south from us—”

“Then drive 20 minutes north.” She wouldn’t budge.

“What’s your problem?”

She looked at me like I was stupid. And maybe I was.

“Just clean up after yourself and get out of here.”

As she turned from me, the girl on the stump began heaving. She looked like a sick cat hunching then arching, or like she was doing yoga but really sucked at it. The men surrounding her all moved in, rubbing her back and saying consoling words that I know she couldn't register, maybe even hear.

I quickly moved back to the door, peeking inside the party where, on the floor exactly where Anna had said, were rags and paper towels to clean spills. I tossed the towel onto my mess on the step, then made my way inside to find anything that might help Batgirl. I pushed past bodies until I found a room that resembled a kitchen under normal circumstances. I pulled apart Aladdin and sexy Michael Jackson, who had been making out, and tried not to think about Jasmine playing pong two rooms over. There was a sink to my left, and like any average partygoer, I had no issue going through the homeowner's personal belongings. I opened the cabinet below the sink and rifled through sponges and Clorox wipes and soap refills until I found an opened box of lavender-scented Glad bags. I grabbed two, just in case.

When I made it back outside, I almost tripped over the mess—or the messy and failed attempt to clean my first mess—on the back step and launched myself toward the decommissioned Batgirl and her groupies.

“Outta my way, Johnny Bravo,” I shoved a buff guy wearing a black T-shirt and jeans, who may or may not have been dressed for the occasion.

As far as I could tell, Batgirl hadn't yacked yet. I shook open the first trash bag, startling her and causing aggressive hiccups, bringing Anna's attention to my sudden reappearance.

“I thought I told you to clean up and get out of here,” Anna said harshly, hardly looking up as she kept rubbing Batgirl’s back. Her comforting hand took up residency so the random men crowding her had less space to intrude.

“I am cleaning up, see?” I held up the bag.

Batgirl’s hiccups turned more aggressive until they were gags, and she was once again in the sick-cat pose.

“Hold the bag,” Anna commanded, grabbing one end of the opening and yanking the plastic down to the drunk girl’s face just in time.

I hated this part, so I closed my eyes and blocked out as much as I could. It’s hard to ignore the sounds of liquid chunks splattering against a film of plastic and helpless retching, or at least pretend it was at all pleasant, but I couldn’t block it out because my left hand was responsible for catching her drunken mistakes. I opened my eyes and looked at Anna, whose face was also distorted in disgust. She caught me looking and almost dropped her eyes to avoid the confrontation of my gaze, but instead looked back at me, almost harder.

Her face was inches from mine, and I could see all the patches in her makeup that had faded or been wiped and smudged completely. I could smell her breath, sweet and vodka-scented. She had a tired look in her eyes, a sort of ageless exhaustion, like she was an angel exhausted from holding the world up.

I almost forgot about what had brought our faces so intimately close before Batgirl retched again and leaned forward, almost falling face-first into the bag. All the men who had suddenly lost interest in consoling the beautiful, helpless woman while she was at her worst had sprung back into action, all four of them lurching forward heroically to catch her.

“Do you know who she is?” I asked mostly Anna, but also the heroes by her side.

“She’s my roommate. She lives here. She’ll be fine,” Anna responded to me, before glaring at the others, “These guys, though, no clue.”

“She was in my math class last year,” Johnny Bravo responded.

“I met her freshman year,” a dude in a fedora chimed in.

“I was just talking to her. She and I are both Scorpios,” said John Travolta.

“I just saw she was sick.” Shaggy shrugged.

Anna rolled her eyes, “Buzz off, all of you, it’s borderline rapey.”

Her voice was so powerful that they listened, and I almost followed, but she grabbed my wrist.

“You, stay. Help me get her to her room.” She smelled like flowery perfume and sweat, like hot sugar melting in the afternoon.

Getting her past the sea of people probably should have been more difficult, but an almost-unconscious girl at a college-aged house party didn’t seem to be anything out of the ordinary. Batgirl sprawled with her arms across each of our shoulders, me bearing most of her weight, as Anna led us through the house, down a hall to a locked door.

“Hold her,” Anna commanded as she unloaded the limp girl from her shoulders onto me. She reached into Batgirl’s jean pockets, and I was shocked that the skin-tight fabric and shallow pockets could have held anything at all. But sure enough, Anna came up with a key and unlocked the door, leading us inside.

When we had successfully laid Batgirl on purple comforters in the Justin-Bieber-themed bedroom, Anna got a small trashcan from the bathroom to put beside her disheveled body. I refilled the cup on her nightstand with sink water.

“You two live here, then.” I didn’t know what to say, but felt too awkward invading the space silently.

“Yeah.” Anna was adjusting her friend, making sure she was still breathing and could be somewhat comfortable on her side.

“Just you two?”

“No, three others. Not a ton of income for this shitty little house from just two girls in community college. High school friends wanting freedom. Is that enough backstory?” She looked at me with intense eyes, carrying out a routine that didn’t seem to faze her at all. A routine for her drunk roommate, and probably a routine conversation. I didn’t press any more.

When Batgirl was properly taken care of for the time being, Anna slid down to the floor at the foot of the bed and crossed her arms over her bare knees, hugging them to her chest with a sigh.

I imitated her motions, gently and with hesitation, but she didn’t stop me. We sat side-by-side, not quite touching, in silence. I was tense, waiting for the moment to break.

I took in the room, noticing all the boyband posters from various magazines and album art from a variety of genres—but mostly Justin Bieber and his contemporaries—plastered to the walls. Fake plants lined the windowsill. I chuckled to myself at the fake plants, thinking about her self-awareness. She can’t even take care of herself, I thought, let alone a plant.

The purple carpet under the bed was soft, and I ran my fingers through it, careful not to let my venturing hands get near Anna beside me. I glanced at her sideways. She was watching my hands.

“Why did you help me?” She finally broke in.

I didn't respond right away. I let the question fill the room, cut through the sounds of Batgirl's labored breathing, and seep into every poster on the drywall. Anna turned to look at me. I didn't look back, at least not right away, but I could feel the intensity of her blue eyes staring through me as if they were X-rays; she would get the answer out of me either from my mouth or from my brain directly.

"A girl needed help. Plain and simple." She looked away, and I finally turned to look at her. "Why did you let me?"

She hadn't expected the question. She inhaled sharply and looked as if she was repressing a smile. "I don't know," she responded quietly. "You seemed...safe. A safe bet, maybe."

"Even though I showed up to your party so high out of my mind that you almost didn't let me in?"

She met my gaze and we both examined each other's faces. In the dim light of the room, her features looked softer than before. More relaxed.

"Well, I guess I'm lucky I let you stay."

I felt myself drawing closer to her, and she could feel the pull too. She turned her head back to look straight ahead.

"So, *Davey*," I liked the way she said my name, "who *are* you? How do you know Jason?"

"School. We were both in engineering mechanics together."

She raised an eyebrow. "That's impressive. Where?"

"UCLA. I graduated in May with a degree in it. I don't use it."

Her face was inquisitive but careful. Like she was hiding her real reaction.

"Why not?"

I hated that question. I shifted, my arm on one leg and the other arm propped as if I could get up any second, that I could just run away after deciding this situation wasn't for me, that she wasn't for me.

She seemed to sense my aversion and moved closer to me, as if to say I didn't have to answer, but I did have to stay.

“What do you do now?”

“I work IT jobs where I can. I don't like it.” I paused, unsure how much information I should reveal to her. I knew she was a stranger, but it didn't feel that way. Something about her felt, well, safe. “Jason and I had talked about going into business together.”

“Oh?” She seemed amused. “Doing tech stuff?”

“I don't know, yet.”

“You could be the next Mark Zuckerberg,” she mused.

I looked at her with a charmed smile, and in a moment of dauntless and boisterous confidence, I said in a stupid, douchey, frat-boy accent, “You ever been out with a future billionaire?”

I realized what I had said after it came out, and her immediate silence left me only hearing my pounding heart, my face flushing with embarrassment. I hesitantly looked at her face, and saw her surprised, yet amused expression.

I cringed, offering a pathetic and extremely embarrassed smile. “Sorry, that was really weird. I don't know why I said that. I think I got possessed by the flirtatious and charming holy spirit of Justin Bieber,” and I gestured to his many faces throughout the room.

That got her. She pursed her lips together and blew out air in amusement until she was full-blown laughing. I kept a straight face as best I could but she was clutching her stomach and giggled until she snorted. Then I lost it, too.

Batgirl stirred, mumbling something about soup, and Anna punched me in the arm to shush me. I scoffed quietly, and she wiped tears and smudged mascara from under her eyes. She popped her head up to check on her friend, then slumped back down.

“Is she okay?” I whispered.

“She’ll be fine. I’ll just force-feed her some water later and hope she throws up the rest of whatever is in her system. Give her a banana and a shit ton of carbs when she wakes up properly.”

“Good friend.” I turned to face her, motioning to her angel costume. “A real angel, huh?”

She scoffed and looked down at herself, the white of her top and skirt no longer pure, splattered with various stains and wrinkles. She fiddled with the wing straps on her shoulders before giving up and taking them off entirely.

“Hardly,” she finally responded, tossing the wings into a corner of the room. “Big man upstairs probably wouldn’t condone any of this shit,” she motioned to the drunk girl on the bed, then vaguely to her surroundings.

“Not a big God person?”

She rolled her eyes.

“Regardless, you did a good thing for your friend.”

“Yeah, well, we’ve all been there. College does that.”

“Where?”

“Just the community college here. Harbor.”

“What are you studying?”

“Journalism and media.”

“You like it?”

“No.”

I let the silence set back in. I listened for Batgirl’s breaths, the muffled sounds of the party that I’m sure was fizzling out by now. Girls vomiting tends to end these things.

“How do you know Jason?” I could feel the air get thicker when I asked. I glanced at her, but quickly looked away. Her shoulders had suddenly tensed, and she moved her hand to her hip instinctively, pulling down her shirt and letting her hand rest there, covering her skin.

“I...know his brother,” she said firmly, then in a hushed voice, “Josh. He looks just like him.” She offered a sweet smile to me, “Josh.” Something was off about the way she spoke about him. The hesitation in the word *know*. I wanted to ask what it meant, but I could tell I shouldn’t.

“Why isn’t he here today?”

“He was busy.” She said it firmly and looked back straight ahead, her shoulders still tense. She slowly moved her arms to hug herself, slow to keep it inconspicuous, slow as if I wouldn’t notice.

A crash from somewhere in the house interrupted the moment, and she jumped up, back into action mode. I was both irritated and relieved that there was an excuse to get out of the situation. I stood, too, and moved to leave the room. She stayed behind and looked at me as if I was an intruder.

“Is...” I realized I didn’t even know the drunk girl’s name. “What’s her, uh—”

“Julie will be fine. Bye, Davey.”

“Call me David. Davey’s just a college nickname.”

She softened for a moment, her shoulders relaxed and the corners of her mouth lifted, just slightly.

“Goodbye, David.” She turned to Julie and lifted the sleeping girl’s head enough to feed her the water I had left on the nightstand.

I exited the room and moved to close the door behind me, trying not to look back. I noticed a picture hanging on the wall just before the door. A conscious, happy Julie with her arm around a happy, smiling, blonde Anna. Josh, a backward hat and muscle-tank top, with his arm around Anna’s waist, kissing her cheek. I closed the door.

I was sober enough that the party didn’t feel like it could be at all enjoyable, and I knew I couldn’t trust either Jason or Cam to drive us home safely. I had to be the one to take us back to the reality of living in the city as adults with jobs, as men and not college students. I didn’t know if I would ever see Anna again, but I knew I would think about her for a long time.

Chapter 3 Domestic Bliss

The beat of music drills into my brain incessantly, each rhythmic hit guiding her heels as she marches down the aisle toward fate. Anna's steps echo throughout the church, the sound waves vibrating in perfect harmony with the canon of the cello's solo at the end of the aisle. The cellist strokes the strings sensually with her bow, leaning over her instrument with her eyes closed. She moves with each note she plays, dancing with the symphonic magic she cast, the charm that engulfs us all with the power of Pachelbel's wedding march, a love spell. It seems to work on Anna, who glides in rhythm, though rigidly upright, almost but not quite letting herself sway with the music. She probably would have danced if she felt she had permission to. I had always thought that Anna would have chosen music less basic, less overdone. Something more uniquely her. But when she is with him, she loses herself.

Looming at the end of the altar, he waits with counterfeit tears pooling in his apathetic eyes, reeling her in like a prized catch, ready to hold her picture-perfect figure in such a way that hides the damage he already did. He looks just like his brother, who isn't here today, who knew better than to come. He was always smarter than me. I scan the crowd, hoping maybe I'd catch a glimpse of someone from our past, someone who knew Anna, knew myself, knew Josh. Someone daring enough to speak up when the pastor asked if anyone had any objections, someone who believed they could stop their future.

I turn my attention back to the bride, watching her white silhouette as she travels down the red carpet like a celebrity, all eyes on her. The white dress is so bright, so clean, so angelic. She looks even more beautiful than the day I first met her. And ever since the first time I saw her

in white, I had hoped that she might one day meet me at the end of her march adorned in the same dress. It was always too much to hope for, but I had done it anyway. I let my gaze fall.

The white petals on the carpet she walks on stare up at me like a mockery, the way they crumple and wilt when she steps on them, the way she doesn't care because she keeps walking to him. I sit in the aisle seat about halfway between the priest and the door like a checkpoint, and she quickly approaches.

I brace myself in my seat, my bouncing leg spread slightly into the aisle. I fold my hands in my lap, then move them to my face to wipe off sweat, then hide my face as the bride approaches, slowly, slowly. I want to be invisible. I shouldn't have come, or at the very least I shouldn't have sat on the end, but I had come late, and I had no choice, and she is getting closer. My legs are bouncing, both of them now, and my pants feel tighter. The fabric rubs together on my legs, creating a maraca sound, harmonizing with the squeaking of my chair and the tapping of my dress shoe on the stone floor. I feel myself fidgeting, I can hear the disruptive sounds of my anxiety, but I can't stop myself. She is approaching, and I want to disappear, but can only feel myself becoming more and more visible. Heads turn, and I can't tell if they're looking at the bride or at me. The music feels louder. Her steps echo my heartbeat pounding in my ears; I can feel it in my chest, my feet, and my eyes, and it won't stop.

"Do you mind?" Hisses the older woman next to me, dressed cartoonishly appropriate for a wedding. She eyes me suspiciously as if I don't belong. I probably don't. I acknowledge the woman's judgment and fix my posture to sit all the way upright like a statue, unmoving and not even daring to take a breath until she turns her attention from me and back to the bride. The bride is now directly next to me.

I shrink myself, slumping down and turning inward, away from the aisle. Her presence is too strong, she is too close. I can smell her; the black tulips and lilies and dahlias accentuated with white roses creating an array of aromas that somehow still blended with her subtle flowery perfume and hairspray. And the smell of *her*. A smell I could never identify but could never let go of. I keep my head low, only looking so far up to her bouquet.

I don't know if she knows I am here. I don't know if she cares. I remain still in my seat until she passes, my hands clenched and sweaty. I wait for her to pass completely before I wipe my hands on my pants and unclench my shoulders, looking up.

My attention rests on the bridesmaids in the front: just two women standing side by side in simple, matching black dresses. Anna had never wanted a large bridal party, if one at all, if she would ever have gotten married at all. But the two standing up at the front now make sense. They look like models: standing tall, slender, with perfect posture and stoic, emotionless expressions. I recognize the one on the left, the one who would be standing closest to the bride. Julie. I presume she is named the maid of honor, and I am shocked to see their college friendship has stood the test of time. I almost laugh at the sight of Julie, who I could only remember as Batgirl. I wonder if she still cared at all about Justin Bieber, or if she knew that it was a mistake to let her best friend marry the man standing beside her.

She's standing angled away from Josh; it could be the pose she was told to stand in, or she could just want to ignore him. Her eyes follow Anna's slow approach, and then gently, just for a moment, Julie's eyes meet mine. A single, fleeting moment of recognition that only I could have noticed lets me know that she knows I am here. She avoids my gaze, looking straight ahead, this time not at Anna, but at the nothingness that she seeks to find answers in.

I look between her and Anna, and as the lull of the repetitive music sways me, I, too, become lost in the nothingness.

My memory carries me. *Anna*. I repeated her name over and over on the drive home after I first met her, and then again when I saw her the next time we met. And the next time, because each time I couldn't believe she was real. I couldn't believe we had found each other again, and that she had wanted to keep seeing me. I would soak in every detail each chance I could. Her smile, the way she snorted when she laughed and scrunched her nose, but the jokes she laughed at weren't even funny. When the sun had kissed her skin, turning her pale complexion a slight brown, but mostly tinted red. Red like the spiked slushy she loved in the summer. Or pale like the white roses she never liked, white in the winter when the UV was softer even when it was just as hot. When her hair was blue, dyed long enough ago that her dirty blonde roots were visible and the blue had faded, it damaged her hair to the point where every end was split. Or when she dyed it white on her 25th birthday, as a *screw you* to aging. When she tossed it into a callous bun to keep it out of her face, but it never did stay. There were always strands she had to brush away, and even if there weren't any, her hand would move towards her face to brush away an invisible bother.

Her hair today is its natural dark blonde, a color she never liked, wrapped up so tightly that there was not a chance a single strand could weave its way out. The hands she used to speak, laugh, and unconsciously touch her face are tethered by a bouquet of flowers she had always scorned. The girl I fell in love with all those years ago was unrecognizable; she is glistening under the lights of a church for a god she didn't believe in.

I fully look at her now, I take her all in as she is, the star of the show, captivating every single pair of eyes in the room as she reaches the altar.

What are you looking at, Poindexter? My memory of her says, when she had pushed my glasses up my nose, the tip of her finger sloppily came off the bridge and smudged the glass.

You, I said sheepishly, taking the glasses off and lifting my shirt up to clean them, hoping I lifted enough to show off what could be intriguing to her.

She stands next to Josh, her light dim. And I look at her now, fully. And she looks back. For the first time all day, for the first time in years, our eyes meet. And for a second, I see it. That raw, genuine smile. The corners of her sunrise eyes crinkled in a way that suggested to me she would be a wrinkly old lady, the life of her youth showing in the best way. Years ago, I thought about her wrinkled face, that maybe somehow I would see just how wrinkled it got, and maybe create more the more I could make her smile.

But it was just a flash, a glimpse. A hope. My eyes water and blur, and she catches herself, looking away. And just for a second, just a glimpse, I see the picture-perfect facade break. The smallest quiver of her lip, the smallest fraction of her brow. Her eyes water. She swallows. And she smiles again.

The last fading remnant of hope leaves me. I should have given up a long time ago when she chose him. Because she would always choose him.

Fight for me. It had come out more as a question, the day when she came home to me in tears, and I knew that things between us were over.

I want to, she whispered, keeping her head down, her eyes shaded.

We can leave, I slowly drifted to my knees on the floor in front of her, begging, *run away, go to Hawaii, like you said you wanted to*.

She still didn't look up. I watched a tear slide down her nose and onto the carpet, pooling with the others she had shed many times before. The bruise on her arm was barely visible in the dim lighting, the moon coming through the vertical blinds in faint glistening strips across her hunched figure. I wanted to reach for her at that moment but was careful with any movement.

Are you going to stay with him? My eyes blurred.

She was silent.

How can you keep going back to him? I thought we were finally real. I shouldn't have said that, but I did anyway. She hiccupped a sob, her head falling into her chest even deeper.

I reached for her face, gently but still determined, and brought it up, leaning in to kiss her softly. Her lips were wet and salty. Maybe it tasted like him when she had tears on her lips. Maybe it was an addiction she couldn't fight any longer.

Do you even love him? My blurry eyes begged for some indication that she would let me in and give up on him. But she didn't.

"I do," her voice reverberates through the church, echoing off each banister and pew, filling my body up from my toes, climbing, crawling up and then into my heart, and breaking it.

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ACADEMIC VITA

EDUCATION

Bachelor of Arts in English; Minor in Music Studies – May 2023

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WORK EXPERIENCE

Writing Tutor, Penn State Learning

January 2022-Present

- Peer Mentor of mentees in training
- Instructs multilingual writers in one-to-one and course workshop environment
- Collaborates with students to inspire deeper thinking and analysis
- Edits technical errors, suggests grammar and syntactical changes
- Creates asynchronous feedback packages with written and videos within 24-hours
- Completed two years of pedagogical training including a 3-credit course

INTERNSHIPS

Social Media Content Creator, Devon Review

Summer 2022

- Designed and created digital media
- Wrote weekly blogposts

Intern at the Program in Writing and Rhetoric, Penn State English Department

Fall 2022

- Reviewed and approved all English Department syllabi
- Created library organization system for office library
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Associate Editor, Pseudopod at Escape Artists Podcast Network

Spring 2023

- Reads and provides in-depth comments on stories submitted for publication
- Commits to regular communication and meetings with senior editors
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ACTIVITIES AND LEADERSHIP

Member of Penn State Blue Band

2019-Present

Guide, Squad Leader of Piccolo Section in Penn State Blue Band

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- Instructs potential, new, and returning members in marching techniques
- Teaches skills to and mentors younger members
- Conducts music memorization checks, organizes section responsibilities
- Coordinates with student leaders and staff members to run events and shows
- Organizes section opportunities and events during and outside rehearsal

PUBLICATIONS AND AWARDS

Klio, Penn State's Creative Arts Journal

April 2022

Girls! Girls! Girls!

Lehman Award in Fiction, 3rd place

March 2023

To Be a Human Being