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## Forgotten Beauty: Black Womanhood in the American Midwest and American South

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**FORGOTTEN BEAUTY:  
BLACK WOMANHOOD IN THE AMERICAN MIDWEST AND AMERICAN SOUTH**

Alisha Marie Thompson

May 2020

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Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts in Fiction Writing  
Sarah Lawrence College

## Summary

Forgotten Beauty is a collection of short fiction stories about black women/girls in the American Midwest and the American South. The stories explore themes surrounding family dynamics, romantic relationships, and personal growth that are influenced by their identities and the cultural expectations of where they live.

Content warnings: Death/grief of a loved one, teenage pregnancy, substance abuse/alcoholism

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## Off The Path

*“Hey, Ronnie. You might wanna sit down for a second.”*

Not many people visit Avon. When I was growing up, the only people who passed through were Houle salesmen and people who were visiting family. Usually, the latter shows up when a new baby, a reunion, or a death. As I drove past the red and green welcome sign with an outlined figure waving hello, I became one of those people. My reason would be the last option.

*“He tried to move out of the way, but the roads were horrible.”*

I drove through the night after getting Scarlet’s call. She called in the middle of the night. I was sleeping after a late-night study session. I collected my things as she spoke to me. By the time we ended the call, I was backing out of the driveway. The entire town was blanketed in snow with most of the streets caked with ice and sand.

*“Dad wasn’t moving...he wasn’t breathing...you need to come home now.”*

My stomach growled at me as I stopped at one of the few stop lights in town. I eyed the Casey’s that they opened a few years and flipped on my blinker as the light turned green. Pulling into the parking lot, I sighed with relief as I saw that I beat the morning rush of farm hands getting their first rounds of coffee. I parked next to one of the fuel tanks before heading inside. The shop was quiet except for the sounds of George Strait playing over the speakers. A clear glass case filled with a variety of donuts sat between the soda fountain and packaged snacks. I grabbed a plastic bag and filled it with lukewarm donuts that crunched under the tongs. I counted four and slipped the tongs back into its holder. The coffee station sat beside the soda fountain. Hot plate after hot plate held every pot of coffee a farmer could ask for. I slid two cups in front

of the pots and poured a decaf in one and a French roast in the other. I nestled the donuts underneath my armpit and walked the cups to the front of the store. A woman with dark roots and chapped lips stared at me as I placed my items in front of her.

Her eyebrows scrunched at the top of my head. My hand went instinctively up to see that I forgot to take my satin scarf off before leaving the apartment. “You the McCray girl?”

“What tipped you off?”

She finally looked back at me, almost startled by my directness. “Just these?”

I nodded and handed her a 20 dollar bill. “The rest on pump 2.” Once she rang me up, I moved as quickly as I could to get back out in the winter air. My family was not the most well-known family. Our town wasn’t that big and there weren’t that many families who looked like us. You could count the black families in Avon on one hand. Staring was the least you got.

More cars had arrived at the station since I pulled up. One pick-up flanked the other side of my tank. The sand crunched under my boots. I shoved the food inside my car before I opened up my fuel plate and the filler cap. As I grabbed the pump, I went to press the type of gas. Nothing happened. I pressed again and the cost per gallon stayed up on the screen. A note below saying to “Pay at Pump or Inside”. I looked back at the station, where the woman stared back at me. I placed the pump back on the holder and walked towards the store to see what was going on. As I got closer, the proximity revealed the woman’s smirk. I turned around to see the man on the other side of my tank wave towards the woman inside as he climbed back into his truck. I whipped around to see her wave back and give a shrug to me before turning back to the counter. With all my strength, I avoided stomping back to my car in order to avoid slipping. She would not get to see the sight of me falling over.

I slid into the driver's seat and looked at my gas gauge. Quarter of a tank. I put the car in drive and pulled out of the station, making a mental note to tell Scarlet to put this place on her list. As I drove through the city, I noticed the same buildings I drove past every summer and winter I came back from school. They never changed, almost all of them looked exactly like they did when I was younger. A few chain restaurants had popped up around the city, but they never put any of the mom and pop places out of business. Despite the rust or wear that they experienced, they still stood with loyal cars filling their parking lots.

As I turned onto Hamlet Drive, I could see one of those buildings welcoming me back. My family's supperclub. More specifically, my mother's. An old barn that was painted a shade of blue that matched the lake behind it. Windows had been placed on the sides with two glass doors replacing the original barn ones. A giant wreath had been put above the entrance with lights tracing the framing. Picnic tables were barely visible as icicles and snow covered them into white masses. A white sign with hand painted letters indicated that it was the Bard's Supperclub, an outline of Shakespeare on the end validating it.

Our house sat on the other side of the street. The smaller farmhouse and farmland sat behind it. I turned into the driveway to see my dad's pick-up truck parked inside the garage. We always kept the garage door open for stray cats to find shelter during storms. As I parked, I saw the lace curtains move in the master bedroom upstairs. A few seconds later, Scarlet opened up the door and walked out to the porch.

"Ronnie!"

I grabbed the coffee and donuts before climbing out of the car. "I got Casey's."

She waved over to come inside. "It's cold, come on!"

I shuffled my way to the front door since the driveway hadn't been shoveled yet. That was typically my dad's job. Reaching the porch, I could see the dark circles haloing around her eyes. I could imagine the ones that were under mine. Scarlet was dressed in massive sweatpants and a maroon sweater with Minnesota spelled out in gold. She grabbed me into a tight hug, my arms instinctively mimicking hers. The fabric was thick enough to feel like a blanket was wrapping around me. At that moment, my heart felt empty. The icy drive distracted me from the news. Now, in Scarlet's arms, I was left to feel that I lost him. We lost him. We squeezed each other's bodies as if we could fill that emptiness by getting extremely close.

It wasn't helping.

Typically, my father would come booming out of the house or see my car from the field and greet me. His voice echoing in the air as he yelled "Kiddo!" The silence was heavy around us as if trying to find comfort as well.

Scarlet pulled away from me to touch the top of my head. She unraveled the satin scarf that I had tied before I went to bed. I had forgotten that I still had that on and remembered the gas station lady.

I pointed to the scarf. "You have to put Casey's on your list."

Her eyes widened. "No! I love their pizza. What did they do?"

"They gave my gas to someone else."

She scoffed as she fluffed my curls that were tied into a top knot. "Did you say anything?"

I gave her a look. "Scar, just put Casey's on the list."

She leaned back to smile at me. “They’re on it. We’ll bite our thumbs at them after we eat their donuts.”

“That’s all I ask.”

I followed her inside the house. The familiar scent of apples and vinegar clogged up the house. As we made our way into the kitchen, I saw steam billowing out of a pot on the stove where apples boiled. The steam caused condensation to form on the microwave above it with water drops falling onto the stove. Scar went to the fridge where she grabbed a pen on top of a magnetic notepad and wrote down Casey’s underneath Dollar General and Swine Shop, the barbecue place across town. Then, Scarlet took the coffee and donuts from me. I just watched her as she moved methodically through the kitchen. She opened the cupboard to grab two mugs and a plate. One was a diner mug with a green and yellow truck while the other was pink with the words “shut up and call your mom” on it. She smelled each coffee. Scarlet always said she could tell the difference between decaf and regular. She poured them into the mugs and placed them into the microwave. She stood in front of the microwave, playing with her coils as the seconds wound down. I began shedding my layers as she finished prepping. I piled my coat and accessories on a dining room chair while I kicked off my boots. I felt the familiar laminate floors beneath my feet as I moved towards the living room.

My dad used to sit in the corner next to the fireplace. His chair was a brown leather armchair that wore down after age and use. Scarlet had recently thrown a faux cowhide over the back of it to make it look more stylish. He would grab it and blanket it over himself in order to take a nap. The chair still had wrinkles from where he used to sit.

A Christmas tree sat on the other side of the fireplace, adorned with homemade ornaments our grandmother had gifted us over the years. I sat on the couch next to the chair and curled myself into one of the corners as Scarlet came over with breakfast.

“You can turn to anything you like.”

I flinched at the suggestion. Dad usually placed the remote beside me as he got up for the night. *Well, I'm headed up, kiddo.* I eyed the remote sitting next to me and shook my head.

Scarlet had taken one of the cake donuts when I turned to face her.

“Where is Dad now?”

Scarlet swallowed and looked down at the pastry. “Um, at the Dahlstroms’ funeral home. They want us to come in later today.”

“You’re not taking the truck, are you?”

She shook her head. “No, absolutely not. We’re taking your car.”

Dad was in her SUV when he got into the accident. I grabbed a sprinkled donut and shoved it into my mouth. I bit down hard on the pastry as I tried to fight back the lump forming in my throat. I chewed fast and swallowed, so I could replace the figurative lump with a physical one. I bit again, hoping that the donut would fill the ache in my chest. As we watched the morning news in silence, I looked at my sister and saw that she was doing the same.

Scarlet wanted to get to the funeral home right when it opened. While she went to get ready, I went outside to grab my clothes. The sun had begun peeking out through the clouds and the reflection from the supperclub’s windows reflected onto the house. When I eyed the building, my stomach turned. Opal and Sylvie called the house asking to throw a gathering at the

restaurant for Dad's friends and colleagues. They worked as the supper club's manager and our father's farm hand respectively. It wasn't the first time that they organized the event for us. Before, it was our mother's. We agreed reflexively because that's how Avon was. Your grief wasn't internal, it was communal. If someone passed, it was a public event.

Inside my car, I had tossed most of my clothing into my backseat. As I piled the wardrobe into my arms, I noticed I only brought what was easiest to pull: sweaters, jeans, sweats. I didn't pack a dress or really anything that was considered appropriate for a potential funeral. Or, tonight. I would have to ask Scarlet if she had anything I could possibly wear.

As I braced myself to shuffle through the ice, I heard an engine rolling down the road. I looked up to see a tan minivan cautiously driving towards our home. A smiley face swung back and forth on top of the antennae with a dent on the driver side door. At any other time, I would smile at the sight of this van.

The car screeched and rolled to a halt. I could hear the brakes fighting against the ice, but the tires had their own mind to keep moving a foot after they were expected to stop. The driver side door whined as my best friend climbed out of it.

Lola was swathed in a black parka with a black fur-lined bomber hat to match. She contrasted against my thin layers of pajamas, but she was definitely more appropriately dressed than me. She had been my best friend since we met in first grade and saw that we were both part of that "could count them on one hand" community in Avon. Usually, you were scared that the only other black person in the room might ignore you or only want to be your friend out of preservation. Luckily, for Lola and I, we felt seen by each other while also having similar interests.

We both shuffled to each other. Both of us were smiling nervously, hoping that our dance wouldn't result in either of us falling over. She made it further than me with her snowtrek boots versus my house slippers and yanked me into a hug.

"I'm so sorry, Veronica." I nodded into her coat, hearing the fabric rustle from my movements. "He's with you."

I squeezed my eyes shut. That's what everyone said about my mom after she passed. It will be the same thing everyone says tonight. *She's looking over you girls. He's looking over you girls.* The endearment was appreciated, but it always felt empty, like us being his daughters isn't him inherently being with us already. I knew Lola meant well. No one knows what to do with grief, especially the people who go through it.

She pulled away, assessing me with the small inch of space she had to see between her hat and coat. Her hands held onto my shoulders, seemingly steadying me but it was meant for the both of us.

"Opal called Gran about the wake tonight. I came over as soon as I heard. Thought that'd mean you were in town."

I nodded. "She got it okayed by us. We told her she has to put it together though. We're not in a mood to do it ourselves."

"Understandable." Lola looked around me to see our Dad's truck in the driveway. "I thought it was a car accident."

My face crumpled. "Uh, yeah. It was Scarlet's car."

"Oh, I didn't mean to bring it up, Veronica. I was just confused."

I looked down at the clothes that were still tucked in my arms. I squeezed them tighter against me, hoping that they'd disappear inside of me and fill that gap that started spreading through my chest again.

"It's okay, you just reminded me that I need to get ready to go to the funeral home. We have to take my car because, you know, so I should probably head back inside."

"I'll see you tonight?"

I didn't answer her as I turned back to the house. She watched me as I made my cautious way back up the drive. She went back to her car once I was inside of the house. Her engine revved and the same of cracking ice crept further and further away.

Scarlet came down the stairs with her boots in her hand. She stopped when she saw me looking out the window next to the front door.

"You're still not dressed?"

I looked to see her eyes were wide and accusatory. I wasn't sure how much time had passed, but, obviously, enough for me to have at least changed.

"I forgot."

"Forgot to get dressed?"

I shook my head. "That people ask questions."

Eventually, I did get dressed and we went to the funeral home. The same routine. My father wanted to be buried until our mother passed. She wanted to be cremated because she said it meant you weren't holed up in the same place for the rest of your life. After she passed, our father wanted to be cremated too. *I go wherever she does*, he said.

It would take a couple days for us to go back for his remains. The Dahlstroms handled everything when it came to funeral services. They scheduled the entire funeral in our visit and sent us away with an itemized list of everything. Below the amount held a subtraction of the same exact amount. Our father had already laid out everything he wanted, except for the urn. He let us pick that out ourselves. The urn was black with a gold rim around the lid. Simple much like our father's taste.

The ice had begun melting, just enough to where it could become slush. Scarlet and I sat in silence as we drove back to the house. Two cars were parked outside of the supperclub.

“Opal and Sylvie,” Scarlet murmured.

“I'm so glad we don't have to organize it this time.”

She chuckled. “*This* time. Our lives are so morbid.”

We turned into the driveway and cut the engine. I had Scarlet drive after my all-nighter getting back here. We sat in the car as the hot air began to dissipate. I could see my breath move in and out as the seconds ticked by. We were both looking at our dad's truck in front of us. It sat in the garage as a glaring reminder of our reality. He used to yell at us for parking behind him, so we parked in the yard adjacent to the driveway. We created two lines of dirt that prevented any grass from growing in those areas. It wasn't aesthetically nice, but he preferred that arrangement than him being unable to leave on his own accord.

The old Ford pick-up truck was the one he bought after him and our mother moved into our childhood home. She bought an SUV while he got a pick-up for the farm and, later on, the restaurant. I could remember Sundays being spent with Scarlet and I jostling in the backseat as he went off road when he would check on the cattle.

Now, it sat in the garage lifeless. The sound of a car door slamming in the distance woke us up. We looked at each other, realizing the simultaneous check out. Scarlet turned back to look at the truck, her fingers playing with the frayed leather on the steering wheel.

“You know how Mom left the restaurant in Dad’s name?” She didn’t wait for my acknowledgement. “Well, a few years ago, he did that for us too. He didn’t want us to be in the same situation that he was in.” She paused. “I don’t think he would be this soon though.”

“The restaurant is in our name?”

She nodded, not taking her eyes away from the truck. “The farm, too.”

“Scarlet, I’m still in school.”

She sighed while taking her belt off. “Ron, I don’t think he thought you would barely be legal enough to drink before he passed.”

I flinched at her curtness. “I know. It was just an immediate reaction.”

“We’ll figure it out. And, you’ll finish school. Both can happen...and they will.”

Scarlet climbed out of the car and I followed after her. She headed inside and I let silence fall on us. Our mother passed away before Scarlet went to college. Her last summer as a high schooler was spent mourning. I told her that I would take care of Dad while she went to school. She couldn’t stay here because she’d never leave. I worked in the restaurant, prepping and cooking before each supper shift after school. Mornings and weekends, I helped with the livestock while Dad did everything in between. We never spoke about it. We didn’t want Scarlet to feel guilty about not staying home. However, she apparently still did and moved back after graduating, not telling Dad that she majored in agricultural management.

We stomped our boots on the welcome mat and took them off before leaving them on the porch. Scarlet didn't try burdening me during my college years. She only asked me to make holiday dinners and come home during breaks. I believed she wanted me to do those two things because she mentioned how my cooking reminded her of Mom's and she wanted a break from how much her and Dad were doing. I never pressed on the subject and came home with a shopping list of everything I needed. Every holiday, the two of them would be laid out in the living room while I cooked.

We threw our coats on the coat rack before heading back into the kitchen. The landline on the counter was blinking with voicemails ranging in the double digits.

"I don't need to go back next semester."

Scarlet climbed onto one of the kitchen stools. "Ronnie, stop."

"U of M has online programs."

"Ron, I was telling you that so you knew what paperwork was going to come up. I will take care of everything, you will finish school on campus. You hear me?"

She always avoided putting anything on me. I had to be just as stubborn as her in order to get her to accept help. I would need to go behind her back for Scarlet to not be left on her own.

Most of the day was silent between Scarlet and I, except for the calls from the insurance company and me asking for something to wear.

I followed Scarlet across the street towards the supperclub. She asked me to carry over the basket of stuff that Opal called to ask us to bring over. The only light coming from the Christmas lights around the restaurant. Scarlet gave me a burgundy dress that she wore during

college graduation. The fabric was thin enough for me to wear thermal tights and a cardigan over it.

Opal and Sylvie's cars stayed in the parking lot the entire day. I checked throughout the day when a commercial would come on or I had to mute the TV for Scarlet to answer a call. As we walked up to the Bard, I felt my feet grow heavier, sliding across the wet pavement. A familiar feeling that made the process of losing a parent feel like a routine. A part of me wanted to run across the street and climb into bed, pulling the comforter over my head to cover myself in as much darkness as I could.

We stopped outside of the building. A sign hung on one of the front doors reading "Closed for Private Event". Despite the effort, the whole town was coming tonight. How private could this be?

During the day, you could see through the front doors. At night, the inside was dim, which made it difficult to anticipate what was waiting for us. From the corner of my eye, I could see Scarlet's shoulders slump a little bit. I put my hand behind her back. I could feel her take in a breath and straighten her back. Last time we stood here like this, our dad's tall shadow covered us. It was his hands that found our shoulders and anchored us as we moved inside.

Her eyes met mine. "You ready?"

"Never. You?"

She took a step towards the door and reached for the handle. "Not then, not now."

The entrance of the supperclub was separate from the rest of the dining room. Wood benches surrounded the brick-covered walls. A podium flanked one side of the dining room entrance while a standing spray of poinsettias flanked the other. Dad had built it after Mom

complained about the hostess having to go back to the kitchen to grab menus from the kitchen. Now, the podium had a picture of our father on it with his name and living years underneath it. I was startled by seeing a giant picture of him. The ones on our mantle were easier to swallow because you had to go up to them to truly see his face. His commanding presence was condensed into a Kinko's printout. Scarlet noticed me glaring at the portrait and put her hand on my back, gently pushing me forward.

We passed through to the wood-paneled dining room. Exposed beams and vaulted ceilings were decorated with string lights and evergreen garland. A large Christmas tree sat in the middle of the dining room with the tables being rearranged to fill up the rest of the space around it. The bar sat to the far right where it looked out to the lake in the back. Aluminum trays with lit fuel canisters lined the bar counter. To the left of it was the salad bar, Mom told us that there was always a salad bar in a supperclub. She wanted ours to be built in rather than be portable, so it looked more "upscale". For her, upscale meant to build it with the same wood paneling as the rest of the farmhouse.

Scarlet nudged me and pointed to the other side of the dining room. A series of blown up pictures of our father sat in front of the kitchen: one of him smiling towards the camera with a red button down and his beige cowboy hat, another holding me as a baby with Scarlet hugging his leg, and the last being him and our mother feeding each other cake on their wedding day. An empty table sat in the middle of the pictures. Opal wanted us to bring mementos for guests to look at. My arms squeezed tighter on the basket. The set-up of the supperclub was almost the exact same when our mom had passed, excluding the Christmas decorations. I stayed by the table most of that night because I was scared someone would take something of our mother's. Avon

was too small of a town for anyone to try something like that. However, hovering over the table gave me a sense of comfort and it also meant I didn't need to socialize as much.

Scarlet's hand found my back once again and she guided me to the other side of the room. The old farmhouse floors creaked under our boots as we got closer. Our father's face enlarged with each step, the crinkles around his eyes and the gap between his front teeth that reflected mine came into view. Scarlet's hand dropped abruptly from my back and I saw her arms wrap around her stomach.

We stopped in front of the table and I placed the basket on top of it. Scarlet watched as I took out the things we agreed upon bringing. Dad's cowboy hat, a white satin wedding album, his farming jacket, and a copy of the radio Walkman he refused to replace with a more contemporary device. I laid them out across the table and threw the basket underneath it.

"Ronnie! Scar!" We turned to see Sylvie barging out from the kitchen door. She wore a black pair of overalls with a black sweater underneath it. Her hair was tied in a bun and she had a rare layer of make-up that was apparent she wasn't used to wearing it. She carried out another aluminum tray of food.

"You girls look lovely." She set the tray down on the table, both of us watched to make sure it didn't land on any of Dad's things. She wiped her hands on her overalls and opened her arms towards us. "Come here, the two of you."

Her arms wrapped around us and crushed us against her body. She smelled like Marlboro Lights and Lowry's. Her hug was not comforting, but it felt familiar from years of her potentially spine-crushing strength and that was enough to feel welcomed. Sylvie pulled away from the both of us and pointed to Scarlet.

“Did you tell your sister about the estate?”

“Yes, but I think we should wait to discuss it more tomorrow, Sylvie.”

Sylvie looked at me. “You gonna stay?”

“Sylvie,” Scarlet protested, “tomorrow, please.”

She picked up the tray and nudged me with her elbow. “I hope you do. We could use your help.”

She walked around us to get to the bar, slipping the last tray into its holder. Scarlet stood next to me, her arms tightening around her stomach again.

“Sylvie, what can we do,” I asked.

She made her way over to us and clasped her hands on our shoulders. I gritted my teeth knowing that it would probably leave a slight bruise. “Y’all don’t have to do nothing but sit back and let us do the work. All those people coming,” she paused, “that’ll be more work than anything I could give you.”

“Where’s Opal?”

She pointed to the buffet on the bar. “Who do you think is making all that food?”

Scarlet looked back at the kitchen door. “We should say hi and thank her before everyone gets here.”

Sylvie waved us towards one of the tables. “There’s no rush for that. Just take a seat. No one’s going to let you once it gets started.”

Sylvie was right. This time was different. We had a half hour to sit alone in the dining room before we heard people coming in. Similar to the last time, people didn’t come in

gradually. It was a wave. Avon sweeps through events on time. No one wants to miss anything, so they come from the minute the event started to hours after it had ended.

One of our dad's buddies sat in one of the corners playing his guitar which was better than trying to figure out something to play over the speakers. The loud hum of people talking and milling about caused for Scarlet and I to feel a bit overwhelmed. So, we stuck by each other. We tried to stake a claim at our table and not move. However, family friends wanted us to get up to see one of the elders in the town. Or, asked us to get food with them at the bar. You can't say no when people are grieving. We didn't split up though. If Scarlet was asked to go to a part of the room, it meant we were both headed there. If someone asked me about the mementos, then they were asking both of us. Before, we had our dad to obstruct people away from talking to us too much. Tonight, I could see just how much he saved us from having to interact.

I counted the hours by how much food was left. The stuffed cabbage rolls, fried walleye, potato salad, Booyah, and Johnnycakes were almost gone. Luckily, this wasn't a wake, so the event's end time was when you could see the bottom of the aluminum trays.

After hours of being on our feet, we found the table we started at. Coats and empty glasses littered the tabletop. We pushed them away from two seats and sunk in the pleather material. My feet vibrated in my boots as we saw people begin to make their goodbyes. In typical Midwest fashion, goodbyes had ten stages from the "welp" to the wave out of your driver side window as you drove away.

People slowly formed an informal line in front of us. It wasn't a tradition, but people felt obligated to tell you they're leaving and give you something to make them feel better about your loss. The first one in line was Teddy, our Dad's childhood friend. They met under the same

circumstances as Lola and I. He was our Dad's support after our mom's passing. Looking at him now, our Dad was definitely that for him as well.

"Booker was a great man. He loved you girls so much."

Scarlet smiled at him. "Thank you, Teddy. You know how much you meant to him."

"We appreciate how much you were there for him."

He sniffled, rummaging in his shirt pocket for an envelope. He placed it on the table in between us and walked off. We watched him go through the front doors. Both of us began to move out of our seats to follow him, but Sylvie shoved us back down and ran after him into the parking lot.

We turned back to the next person. Check after check was laid in front of us. If someone could not afford to leave a check, they left bottles of liquor or pastries. By time we went through most of the line, the coats and glasses on the table were replaced by disposable containers filled with a myriad of Bundt cakes and whiskey.

Lola was one of the last in the line. She sat down next to me and put her hand on my knee. During the night, we tried to close the distance between us, but the elders' calling me over and some of her babysitting clients asking for her help in watching their kids resulted in us having to give up until now. She pulled out an envelope from her coat and sat it down in front of us.

"Gran had to stay home tonight, so she sent this over."

I patted her hand and moved the envelope towards Scarlet who was beginning to shuffle them into a stack. Lola looked around the emptying room, seeing the trash decorating the floor.

"I can stay after if you'd like."

“I would love if you stayed after.” Five shot glasses clinked as they were set on the table. I looked up to see the warm familiar voice was Opal’s. Despite Sylvie’s reassurances, Scarlet and I never saw Opal leave the kitchen. The only way we knew she was in there was by Sylvie’s emergence from the kitchen with a new tray of food.

Opal wore a black turtleneck and slacks with her hair bunched up into a translucent hair net. Her white apron was splattered with different colors of tonight’s meal. The combination of her hair pulled back and no make-up emphasized how tired she looked. She grabbed one of the bottles from our collection and opened it. She poured the caramel liquid into each shot glass and passed out one to each of us.

I looked down at my shot glass, wanting nothing more than to drink straight out of the bottle.

“Opal, Scar and I can clean up. Lola should head home,” I said.

“Nonsense. She’s not helping clean and neither are you girls. I wanted some drinking buddies before Sylvie and I finished out the evening.”

Scarlet shook her head. “You two did so much tonight. We can help clean.”

Opal squeezed Scarlet’s hand and raised her glass. “So did y’all. We won’t hear anything different. Cheers.”

The three of us raised our glasses and clinked them together before downing the shots. I sighed as the liquid warmed my stomach and spread to my chest. The gap in my heart that yearned to be filled got another relief for now.

“Plus, if we do this, you won’t be expecting us to give you one of those things,” Opal joked as she tapped on the stack of checks. “I can’t imagine how much is in there.”

Scarlet shrugged. "Last time, we mainly got 30s and 50s."

Opal flipped through the stack and raised her eyebrows. "There's at least 50 in that stack. You know, your Auntie Sylvie and I could invoice you for our cleaning services."

Scarlet rolled her eyes at Opal. "I think you had enough whisky."

"You're right, I could use some sleep and so could you."

Opal began standing up to begin cleaning as Lola stood up with her. "I think I will help you, Opal. I don't have anywhere to be."

I furrowed my eyebrows. "Lola, you don't have to."

"Just see it as my gift."

"You already gave one though."

Lola waved me off. "That's from Gran. Let me help, Veronica."

I stayed silent, watching as the two of them made their way to the utility closet for brooms. Sylvie headed back inside from talking to Teddy. She came by our table and we pushed the last remaining shot her way. Without asking, she took it and set it down with the rest of the empty glasses.

"How's Teddy," Scarlet asked.

Sylvie looked down. "He's not good. You girls remind him so much of your dad and that was his best friend. He's trying, but I don't know how he'll be after tonight."

Scarlet looked at me. "We'll invite him for dinner tomorrow?"

I nodded. "I can whip up something for the three of us."

Sylvie clasped her hands together and smiled down at us. "See how good it'll be if you stayed, Ronnie."

“Sylvie--,” Scarlet started.

“Sylvie!” Opal yelled. “You’re back. Now, get your butt over here and help us sweep. Let those girls get some sleep before they pass out in this place.”

Sylvie rolled her eyes and shooed us out of our chairs. “Get some sleep, girls. It seems like Opal must not’ve gotten some herself.”

She turned towards Opal and Lola who were starting to sweep together fallen napkins and crumbs. We took that as our cue to leave. We put our coats on and went over to the memento table to gather Dad’s items. Luckily, I didn’t have to hover over them. Sylvie was like a security guard when it came to portraits and mementos, making sure each person held a certain distance away from the display.

Scarlet grabbed the farming jacket and held it close to her, much like she did with her arms earlier in the night. I placed the hat and album into the basket before turning to go. Opal and Sylvie were too deep interrogating Lola about the gossip from her babysitting gigs for us to say our goodbyes. As we walked out, we saw some remaining guests talking outside of their cars. We couldn’t make out their faces, but we returned their waves as we walked back towards the house.

The night was silent again. Wheels driving away from the Bard and the sounds of our breathing were all that was left. Our house was dark except the porch light that our Dad persisted stay on when we weren’t home. He always said it was easier to see when unlocking the door and someone would think we were home. It didn’t really matter when the whole town knew where you actually were, but it was a good sentiment to think that we had anonymity at any point in the city.

I held back to follow behind Scarlet once again. We shuffled our way back onto the porch and into our dark home. As I shut the door behind me, it felt like a finality of sorts. Now, we were alone. Together, but alone.

On cue, we both wrapped our arms around each other. The farming jacket still in her hands and the buttons pressing into my back as she clung onto me. I knew the basket was probably digging into her back, but I needed to cling on just as desperately. We sat there silently, hoping that this hug might do the trick of filling the holes that made up both of our hearts.

Scarlet broke first. Her body convulsing against mine as I felt her hot tears hit the fabric of my coat. I squeezed my eyes shut as I heard her struggling to find a breath through her runny nose. Not too long after, I felt the tears find their way onto my cheeks and drop down onto her coat. I gripped her harder, my throat becoming hot and strained as if I had been screaming. I refused to sob. I refused to scream, even if I wanted to. I felt Scarlet's nails dig into the thick material of my coat. My eyes shut tighter so I didn't see the house or the headlights driving out of the restaurant or the outline of Dad's cowboy hat in the basket. I wanted to see nothing but darkness.

I heard Opal and Sylvie's banter as they walked out of the restaurant. Lola's echoing giggles caused us to break apart. I could only faintly see the outlines to Scarlet's face. My face hummed from the tears I let out and the screams I did not. I let out a hard breath as I heard their car doors shut. Scarlet wiped her eyes and I was glad I could not see just how red her face must've been. It would remind me that I looked just the same.

As I saw the headlights come through the windows and disappear, I set down the basket and Scarlet laid the farming jacket on top of it. Neither of us spoke and we headed to the living

room. I didn't want to go upstairs. I wasn't ready to enter my bedroom. I wasn't ready to see my parents'. Each thing we did would be the first time and the last time that it can be a first time. I wanted to prolong those firsts as much as I could.

There were no more firsts with our mom. Our grief was now a tradition. A ritual depending on the time of year.

Scarlet and I sat onto the couch and turned on the TV. The television cast a blue glow over the downstairs. We curled into the cushions as a Christmas movie played in front of us. I looked over at the Christmas tree which hadn't been turned on since I got home this morning.

I walked over and plugged the outlet into the wall. The artificial tree caused the downstairs to change into a hue of gold, lighting the room enough for me to see Scarlet's face was indeed just as red as I thought. Mine must be just as red.

As I sat down beside her, she took out the stack of envelopes from her coat pocket. She split up the stack and gave me half, putting her half in her lap. She opened the first one and examined the total. She huffed out a sigh and threw it back into the pile. She placed the stack onto the floor and pulled her body into a ball as she laid down.

I looked down at the check on the floor. It was Teddy's. 51 dollars on the check for how long him and my dad had been friends. Scarlet's eyes were closed and I knew she already was drifting off to sleep. I took out a pen from my coat and opened the first envelope in my stack. Lola's Gran gave 45 dollars. I used the empty envelope to write her name and the amount next to it. I opened the next envelope and repeated the process as the sounds of Scarlet's faint snores and a Christmas score played in the background.

## A Skeptical Today

Emelyn watched her high school classmates rehearse lines on stage. Some wore untailored costumes while the others wore their regular clothing. A group of teenagers huddled in one corner of the stage painting what would be the potential bar for the play. However, Emelyn was asked by her friend, Heather, to help with the costumes after she helped tailor her formal dress.

“Seamstress, is that you?”

She turned away from the rehearsals to see a guy looking in one of the full length mirrors. His index and middle finger were beckoning her over to help him. She walked over to him as he put his leg on a chair.

“It’s Emelyn.”

He nodded flippantly, keeping an eye on himself in the mirror. “Rahul. You won’t mind taking these up a couple inches, would you?”

She looked at the hem grazing his shoes. She sighed, “Yeah, put your foot down.”

Emelyn wanted to be as far from the theater kids as possible. They always exuded a type of pretension that she couldn’t muster being around for hours. That’s why she avoided helping with the wardrobe before Heather asked her.

She bent down on her knees in front of him. Emelyn grabbed the fashion tape that she draped around her neck and began measuring the seam from his crotch to the tips of his shoes. She could smell the nicotine that lingered around him from the smoke break he possibly just took.

“The perks of the job,” he bemused, as she measured.

“In my experience, it’s been the biggest disappointment.”

“I must’ve changed that for you then.”

She knew he was ribbing her. Emelyn stood up and pointed to his pants. “You must’ve cause I need you to take those off.”

It was then she saw him. She hadn’t looked at him because his words gave her all the insight she needed to know. Despite being an ass, she didn’t hate the way he looked. Black hair tied into a bun with a set of black eyes to match, a full beard that any high schooler would envy, and a smile that showed he knew she was ribbing him as well. And, he liked it.

“Should you do it or shall I?”

---

Rahul sat in the plastic chairs that faced the windows. His legs were crossed and stretched out into the hallway, refusing to move for any nurse or patient who walked by. His eyes burned and his mouth felt like cotton had been shoved into it. He chewed gum, but it was hard and stale from the hours of chewing, unsuccessfully trying to mask the aroma of cigarettes and alcohol that clung to him.

The wall of windows looked out to the town’s reservoir. The view past the lake was masked by the greenery of trees, but it gave him the chance to imagine being out there instead of being in here. The only disturbance in his view was Emelyn, who sat in front of the windows. Unlike Rahul, she pushed herself as far up to the window to stay out of the way of the hospital traffic. A thick knitted shawl fell across her shoulders with her hair spiraling in coils around her face. The cream material and her black coils were the only two contrasting sights he could make

of her. The only sound that came from her were three deliberate notes she played on her guitar that were not from any particular song but seemed to create a soothing tune that overwhelmed the silence.

Rahul was here every day the hospital would allow him and, without fail, she would be sitting in front of the windows with the guitar in her lap. The first few times, he tried speaking to her, but she only replied in short quips, if she did at all. He used the time to rehearse lines until it was time for her group therapy. However, he hoped something different would happen compared to the previous visits. Today, he brought the latest play he was working on. It sat idle in his lap with the worn pages decorated in yellow highlighter and black letters that indicated it was property of the university they both attended.

“What role is it this time?” Emelyn asked.

Rahul looked up. He let a second tick by while he stared at the back of her head in silence. Her strumming paused and her coils parted as her dark brown eyes settled on him. She quirked an eyebrow as if to restate the question.

His russet fingers ran along the sides of the script, unnerved by the sudden change in their routine. “Uh, Benedick...”

“From Much Ado?”

Rahul nodded. That wasn’t the play he had in his hands, but he fibbed until he knew the time was right.

“An Indian Benedick?”

He laughed. “Pushing boundaries.”

”As always.” Emelyn turned back to the windows. “Sarcastic and obnoxious. That part was made for you, Rahul.”

His mouth twitched upwards at the jab. “They’re doing the costumes like in Branagh’s adaptation.”

The coils parted once more. This time, the dulled sunlight swept across her brown cheek, reflecting the walnut trees outside. “Puffy shirt?” Her eyes lit up this time, bringing a slight glow to her bronze complexion.

“Leather pants, too.” She snorted and shifted her body towards him. Emelyn wasn’t completely turned away from the window, but Rahul knew he could get her to completely swivel at some point. The hardest part was the initial movement. He was charming enough to do the rest.

The moment was short-lived when her gaze raked over his bloodshot eyes and matted hair. “You went out again.”

*Fuck*, he thought. “Em, please don’t start.”

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Her first date with Rahul wasn’t too long after they met. He asked her to go out after the play’s last performance. She agreed reluctantly. They had their banter back and forth, but they hadn’t made the efforts to get to know each other outside of that. All she knew about him was that his parents refused to come to the play at all. She overheard between him and another classmate that his parents allowed him to do it as long as he took AP Physics, but it didn’t mean they approved of it. Since she only knew Heather, there wasn’t any way he could know much about Emelyn other than her impeccable timing against his remarks.

The date was in a Steak n' Shake. Living in Indiana, chain restaurants felt like family businesses when you found the right location. For the students of their high school, it was the one down the street in front of a movie theater. High schoolers hung out there late into the night like it was their version of a bar.

Rahul was dressed in a sweater and sweatpants contrasted with his character's tight wardrobe. Emelyn wore a sweater dress to hopefully impress him but didn't want to try too hard.

They had been sitting there for hours talking about the production of the play and where they thought each person would wind up with their talents. However, Rahul turned his sights on her.

"You know IU has a fashion design major."

She broke away from her orange freeze milkshake to keep from choking. "I'm sorry?"

"You should study that in college."

Emelyn looked at him suspiciously. "Rahul, are you telling me what to do with my life? It sounds like you care about me."

"I just like telling people what to do," he said, his smile betraying him.

"What about you," she prodded, "what do the 'rents want you to do?"

Now, it was his chance to return the suspicious look. "What makes you think they get input?"

Emelyn adjusted herself in the booth, not wanting to offend him; however, she couldn't help it. From what she overheard and the part of her that wanted him to open up, she kept going.

"Because I heard that it sounds like they already do."

He rolled his eyes, not at her but the fact she knew the truth. "They want Kelley."

Emelyn could feel her eyes roll at the prestigious business school. If someone got a degree from there, they were set, no question. “What else does IU have?”

Rahul smirked. “Drama.”

“You know what else they have?” She moved her milkshake in front of her lips.  
“Minors.”

After hours of eating cheese fries, they pried themselves out of the booth once Emelyn’s mother started inquiring where she was. He walked Emelyn to her car, and she liked his presence next to hers. Smooth and quiet as if he’d choreographed every step.

Once they got to her driver’s side, she leaned on the door, the cold metal piercing through the holes in her dress. Emelyn was the type of person who kept to herself. She had Heather and a couple of other people in her life to feel social, but she sequestered herself in her home with her mother and younger sister, Mya. As she looked at Rahul, his face inching towards her, she could feel that he would be brought into that circle too. She closed her eyes and, as his lips pressed against hers, she knew he would be.

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She began to stand as the bones in her legs cracked from the sudden movements, guitar in hand. Rahul automatically stood up with her and crossed to the other side of the hallway in one stride. His hand reached out to hers before she swatted it away affectionately. Rahul stood back as she turned towards her room that sat to the right of him.

“Why would you do it before you came here?” she pressed.

“Technically, it was last night.” Her eyes dulled at his failed attempt to joke. “We finished rehearsals. We wanted to celebrate before the show started.”

“How many?”

He shook his head. “I’m not doing this with you.”

Emelyn stopped short of the doorframe and turned towards him. “Rahul, I’m not trying to argue, but why drink that much if you knew you were coming here in the morning?”

Rahul breathed. “I know you aren’t. I’m just...coping.”

“I tried coping, too.”

His teeth clenched. He didn’t need the Alcoholic Anonymous spiel. “There’s a difference.”

“You mean a double standard.”

“No, a difference. I know how to control myself. I want to cope, you want to forget.”

“How is that different?”

“Because you’re in here, not me.” Rahul could see her flinch at the comment but he didn’t apologize.

Emelyn’s knuckles gripped the neck of the guitar causing her bruised knuckles to strain. She quietly turned towards her room without a response. Emelyn barely made a mark in the room, except for the unmade bed and textbooks piled on a chair. The only window in the room was a sliver of light that Rahul knew drove Emelyn crazy. She tried to make due by raising the blinds all the way to the top and pushing the curtain as close to the wall as she could. It brightened the room as much as a cloudy day would.

He placed his script on the bedside table and sat in his rightful spot at the foot of the bed while she leaned against the collection of pillows. She fell against them with an exhale. It was then Rahul noticed the dark circles under her eyes. Despite resting all day, he could understand

how she was exhausted, even he sprinted out of this soul-sucking place. There was nothing for him to do other than distract her from being here. Today, he was failing at it.

As he sat at the foot of the bed, he noticed the copy of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* on Emelyn's bed that he gave to her on their first anniversary. The booklet was dingy and worn from his sweaty fingers.

"Do you remember when we met?" Rahul mused.

She scoffed. "Yeah, you wouldn't stop asking for your pants to be hemmed."

"Who could pass up touching the body of a brooding, mysterious theater student?"

"Oh yes, what really got me was the Nickelback shirt you wore after rehearsals, or was it the hacking from all those cigarettes you inhaled? You looked like a knockoff John Bender."

"Hey, I was method acting."

"I've seen you wear it more than once."

Rahul smirked at her comments. "You know you're the only one I stubbed out a cigarette for."

"Mmm," Emelyn sighed, "the height of our romance." She leaned her head against the pillows, which signalled for him to close the door. He crossed to the other side of the bed and laid next to her. The wall she built up after his last visit weakened as she relaxed against his chest. Rahul eyed the clock that hung above the door that indicated there was an hour left before visiting hours were over.

"We have one more hour. Any ideas?"

"You already know." She pulled away from him and looked him in the eye. "Get me out of here."

He rolled his eyes and got up from the bed. “Again with this, Em? This isn’t a joke. You need to be here.” Usually, this argument ruined the visit, but his charm could prolong this part of the visit. If he makes it look routine, she won’t suspect anything.

“I’m not a child. Does it look like this place is helping? All I do is sit around to wait for the next group or the next therapy session. My injuries have healed, my schoolwork is caught up, and I’ve been sober for a month. I’m literally just waiting to leave.”

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It was March when Emelyn and Rahul first had sex. Four months after they met. It started the night when Emelyn’s mother took her out to dinner with Mya at their regular restaurant, which was the Olive Garden in Castleton. After they ordered, her mother dug in her purse and produced an envelope that was large enough for Emelyn to wonder how she possibly got it in there in the first place. She saw the letters RISD scrawled across the envelope with the words “congratulations” below it.

Emelyn drove to Rahul’s house once her mother and sister went to sleep. His family had gone on a vacation to visit relatives in London and left him after he mentioned he had an exam in statistics. The house was dark except for the window into the kitchen. She banged on the door until he came and opened it up to see her standing there with the big envelope in hand. Despite his sadness of her leaving, he knew how much she wanted it. So, he swept her up in a hug and carried her inside.

They did it in his bedroom. The big envelope sat on Rahul’s nightstand as they struggled to stay on his twin-sized bed. She couldn’t tear her eyes away from the nightstand as she laid on his chest. Rahul was staring at the ceiling, wanting to just feel the weight of Emelyn against him.

Rahul reached up to run his hand through her hair. “Rhode Island isn’t far.”

“Yeah, fifteen hours is a leisure drive.”

“I meant that it isn’t far for me.”

That got Emelyn to move her eyes from the envelope to Rahul. “Rahul…”

He wasn’t sentimental with her too often and she came to prefer that. She knew that he had feelings for her any time he joked with her. It was the seriousness that scared her because it meant that something terrible was brewing.

“It’s not bad. There are holidays and study breaks.”

“I’ll be coming home, too.”

They stared at each other, not sure how to handle the new reality. Emelyn could see that his eyes were slightly pleading, wanting to know she wanted what he did too. She did, but she didn’t want him to feel obligated to make this work. She wanted Rahul to have a college experience where he wasn’t tied down.

She moved her body to look at him. His moonlit face was smooth with a smattering of acne scarring across his cheeks. “You’ll want to party and actually have the experience people want to have at college.”

His eyebrows scrunched. “Am I not allowed alcohol without you present?”

“You know what I mean.”

He pressed her closer to him, their faces even closer. “I’m good on those other aspects.” Emelyn searched his eyes to find anything that would implicate him, but she just saw her in their reflection. “I did feel differently before we slept together, but now I’m good.” Emelyn slapped his chest and got up from his embrace, ready to make her way back home.

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This topic was part of the routine, too. “You were in a car crash, Em.”

“I know.”

“You shouldn’t have gotten in a car with someone who was drunk.”

“Rahul. I know. I’ve confronted it. The night when it happened, I did. It’s not like I haven’t been participating in everything the hospital has thrown at me. I’m ready to leave.”

“The doctors know what’s best for you. They’ll tell you when it’s time.”

She pushed herself to her knees to get to Rahul’s eye level. “I’m not saying they do, but shouldn’t they think about what I want?”

“You need to focus on getting better. This isn’t a vacation.”

“Who said it was? This place won’t always be around. I need to start doing it myself. How can I do that when I’m constantly being watched?”

“Emelyn. You’re staying.”

She sat back on her knees. It felt like these visitations went by quicker each time Rahul visited. She sat in front of the window, a slow conversation that brought back a little bit of herself, vague affection, and then he had to leave, which meant she would fall into her slump. And, then it started all over again like *Groundhog’s Day*. It was like the past five years they spent never happened.

Rahul shuffled back to the bed and looked at her. Truly looked at her. Her coils of hair lay flat against her face rather than the usual mane that matched her personality. Her deep brown complexion had an ashen tone to it from the constant medications. She was right that her wounds from the accident have healed. The bruises were fading, the stitches had been out for weeks, and

her cast disappeared from the last time he saw her, replaced by gauze. However, there was a wariness in her movements unlike her previous confident and fluid demeanor.

“Have you spoken to your therapist?”

Emelyn sighed. “Not recently. Anyways, if you’re in-patient, you only have access to walks in the garden.”

“I don’t know what to tell you.”

“Just help me get out, for a night.”

The funny thing is, he already had. Rahul looked back at the clock and saw they had about a half hour left until a nurse would come in twenty minutes to warn them. He knew that she was suffocating in this place. Leading up to this, he tried to control her drinking. It was after months of indulging her because he wanted to drink himself. However, it changed when he noticed her hiding bottles or going to parties with people she barely knew. Soon after, he would follow her to make sure she never drove or blacked out. The last time she went out, he wasn’t there. He went out. With someone else.

He was partly at fault because Emelyn found out that night. He ran into a mutual friend earlier in the night who eventually told Emelyn that same night. From what he heard from their friend circle, she just wanted to go home after finding out. She never talked about it and neither did he. He couldn’t tell if she remembered or cared after everything. However, it still hung in the air whenever they were around each other. He didn’t want to lose her. However, this past year he became her babysitter rather than her boyfriend.

She unknowingly gave him a chance to be her boyfriend again. He was still trying to look after her. Emelyn never thought about anything too deeply. She lived for the now rather than

what may happen, even though that wasn't always what was best. That's what he loved about her. Always looking for the next thing to do, not the next thing to drink. Rahul wanted to feel that way with her again, like tomorrow didn't matter.

He wanted to make up for what he did. The last couple years Emelyn lost control. If he took her out, it would never stop. Rahul knew he wanted the girl that he gave his first playbook. The fact she still reads it means she's still in there.

His hand slipped out of her grip and he brought it up to brush against her temple. He bent down and pressed his lips against hers. At first, her kiss was meek, lightly caressing his mouth. Slowly, she pressed harder against him until they fell back into the same dance. Her hands gripped his back as his hands held the back of her neck. Their mouths were rough and raw as their lips clung onto this short burst of physical intimacy.

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Emelyn was waiting for Rahul to come to the house for Senior Skip Day. They were planning on meeting their friends at Holiday World to spend the day there. Her mother was fine with her missing a day of school since practically blackmailed her to go every other day. Rahul was able to prolong his time at the park by telling his parents that he had a group project after class.

As she waited for him to come pick her up, her mother came into the kitchen. They were alone because Mya had already gone off to school. She leaned on the counter across from Emelyn and sighed, indicating she wanted to talk.

"I have something to tell you." Emelyn nodded and put down her coffee mug. "You know why I stayed home, right?"

“You took a sick day,” she responded. Her mother hadn’t been feeling well and Emelyn felt like it finally got bad enough that she needed to take time off from work.

“Exactly, I am sick. Very sick.”

“Mom, stop being cryptic.”

Her mother stared at her. “Sweetie, it’s lung cancer.”

Emelyn went into a blur as her mother talked about going to the doctor and being diagnosed, how she cried in the car before coming into the home to make dinner, and getting it specified that it was in fact stage 3. She told her oldest daughter about the treatment options that her doctor gave her and how much time it would be. Concluding, she talked about the worry she felt towards Mya, hoping she wouldn’t have to know until necessary.

Emelyn heard every word but didn’t react as her mother spoke. She stood there, taking in the present while trying to decipher the future.

“Emelyn, it’ll be okay. I just wanted to let you know.”

She looked up to see her mother’s chest moving heavily from trying not to cry. All the treatment options she brought up would take up a lot of her time and energy, plus weren’t on the cheap end. Her mother had mentioned something about going part time during her haze. Emelyn thought about the loans they were planning to take out for RISD and it seemed frivolous compared to her mother’s health.

She couldn’t think to move over 900 miles away from her mother and leave her sister to watch her mother go to treatment after treatment. She could help send money to her mother and come home to take her to treatments. She could do that, but not at RISD.

“I want to stay local.”

Her mother sighed. “Sweetie, this wasn’t to guilt you.”

“I’m not guilty, I want to help. I can’t do that in Rhode Island.”

They heard a honk in the distance. The two women looked at each other, sizing up who would give up on their conviction. Emelyn already made up her mind. RISD was already a dream and it would remain that for her. She walked over to her mother and kissed her on the cheek.

“I’ll see you tonight.”

She walked to the front door and headed out towards Rahul.

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“Mr. Aswani, twenty min--”

The nurse froze in the middle of her announcement for the end of visiting hours when she saw the scene before her.

He pulled away from Emelyn. “Thank you, Sylvia.”

She looked at him with one eyebrow raised. He was getting a couple of those today. Sylvia looked over at Emelyn with her eyebrows now scrunched together. “Why aren’t you dressed?”

Emelyn cocked her head. “Dressed for what? It’s just group.”

The nurse looked back over to Rahul. “Why are you both even still here?” He opened his mouth to reassure Sylvia’s scrutiny.

“Rahul.”

He moved his eyes to Emelyn’s. “You’re not going to group tonight.”

Her eyes were alight once again. “I’m leaving?”

Rahul shook his head. "I got you out of it for a night. My play is tonight."

Emelyn stared at him wide-eyed. "How?"

"I brought it up to your doctors and they think you're ok to go for tonight."

Her shoulders relaxed. "Oh, is it your performance for the senior showcase?"

"No," Rahul grabbed her duffel bag that held some of her clothes from their apartment.

"It's the play I directed for the senior showcase."

"No Benedick?"

"Not this time."

She shrugged. "I guess I'll live."

Without hesitating, Emelyn moved from the bed to go through the duffel bag. She didn't ask him why he hid it from her or why he pretended as if nothing was wrong. It was her only opportunity to leave and he wanted to surprise her.

As she pulled a sweater from the bag, she looked at him questioningly. "What's the play anyway?"

He kissed her forehead before picking up the script he had in his lap earlier and handing it over to her. "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

## Coming Together

The paper invitation was shoved under a magnet along with all the previous years' invites. Each one, covered in stock images of beach balls, sun, and water, announcing the McCrays' Family Reunion. It was always in the summer. It was always at Myrtle Beach. And, for the past 10 years, Sloane never attended.

She eyed this year's invitation that was designed differently, almost like they hired someone to create it rather than struggle with a computer program. It had a drawing of the Angel Oak with its branches reaching past the edges of the paper. They looked like they wanted to wind around her body and gather her in an unwanted hug. As if on cue, the reason she didn't attend these reunions snaked his hands around her waist. Cameron placed his chin on her shoulder, looking at their fridge.

"Are we looking at the pizza coupons or the annual reminder of your life's choices?"

Sloane snorted. "For me, those could be the same thing."

He reached around her and swiped the pizza coupons from underneath a "Love the wine you're with" magnet. "I'm going to order while you contemplate for another year whether you're definitely not going or absolutely not going."

As he walked into the living room, she continued to gaze at the invite. The same timeshare, the same weekend, the same activities. Sloane could talk herself out of it because it felt like it was stuck in time. She could probably recite the schedule when she was 16 years old and it would probably be the exact same. In the past, she wasn't interested. She wanted to move forward with her life, not backwards. Now, they were changing, too. The design was first, what

could be next? That's when she noticed it. Towards the bottom of the invite, in small lettering, it held the contact of information. Her parents were the organizers after her grandma passed away. Now, it just had her mother's name. No Pop.

Sloane walked into the living room to see Cameron reading the coupon code to the pizzeria. He leaned against the cushions with his arm stretched out on the back of the sofa. She mechanically sat next to him, her legs crossed and her body fitting neatly into the space under his arm. Her eyes raked over the baseball game on TV. Cameron's favorite team were the Braves, no matter how many times she verbalized animosity towards the name. She convinced him that she'd let him watch all of their games without a peep if he kept his memorabilia to his office.

"It'll be here in 20." Cameron looked at her and squeezed her shoulder. "What's the verdict?"

"My mom's the only one organizing it this year."

"Doesn't she always?"

She shook her head. "With my dad. This year, she's doing it alone."

"She knows how to do it. It's the same every year."

"Do you hear me? My parents aren't doing this together."

Cameron sighed. "There could be a million reasons why."

*Yeah, that's why I'm worried,* she thought. She called her mom once a year and, usually, it was an interrogation about her life. When Sloane could finally ask about her, she always waved her off and said it was the "same old, same old." She only got to see her mother when she made the occasional business trip to D.C. without her father. Other than that, their relationship stopped at the annual Christmas phone call and birthday presents.

She watched the sports reporters discuss the most recent play and, luckily, that distracted Cameron. Her eyes glazed over as she thought about the invitation. Cameron could be right. Maybe, her father was tired of the reunion. His disdain for them wasn't any secret. Maybe, her mother caught on and let him stay home this year. Sloane shook her head. That wasn't like her mother.

Sloane stood up and grabbed Cameron's phone. She headed for the stairs, dialing the 843 area code she called once a year. She made her way into their dark bedroom as the phone rang.

Her mother answered. "Cameron, what's wrong?"

"Hey, Momma. Nothing's wrong. Cam's phone was just closer."

She paused. "Was it urgent?"

"I got the reunion invite."

"Oh," she settled, "I thought you must've just used those as coasters by now."

Sloane rolled her eyes. "They're more used as refrigerator decor."

"Minnie, what's going on? I don't see multicolored lights on the Williams' Palmetto tree, so I'm wondering why I'm gettin' a call around this time of the year."

Minnie reminded her of being back home where her family would go on about how they looked just like twins. They shared dark corkscrew curls haloed around brown heart-shaped faces. They had eyes as dark as the night her mother gave birth to her and bow-shaped lips that could slip the truth out before someone realized they didn't want to hear it. The only sign of her father was her bushy eyebrows.

"I can't just call?"

She could feel her mother's lips set into a hard line. "You can, but you don't."

“Momma...”

“So, you can see why I thought there would be a problem...”

“Momma, why are you the only one organizing the reunion?”

Silence. Not a pause, silence. Sloane sat on the bed, waiting for her mother to pick up the conversation. She stared at their dresser. It was one of the first pieces of furniture Cameron and her bought after they moved in together. A photo from them getting married sat on top: outside of a courthouse, Sloane wore a white summer dress while Cameron was in slacks and his only white button up.

“Your father wasn’t into handling it this year.”

“Mom, come on. Dad always hated organizing it. What’s going on?”

“Sweetie, you don’t go to these things anyways.”

Sloane knew her mother was deflecting. Bring up something else in order to avoid the real problem. She differed from her mother in that way. When she got married at 18, her dad disowned her immediately. Simple and straight to the point. Her mother went to worrying about Sloane having enough boxes to move out.

She sighed. “Well, I was thinking about this year. If I go, I want to see Dad, too.”

“You’re not going, Sloane.”

Before Sloane could respond, another call was on the other line. A 202 area code. Without answering, she walked to the top of the stairs. “Cam, pizza’s here.”

She waited until she heard the squeak of their couch and the sound of Cameron counting off bills before getting back on the phone.

“Momma, I’m going. And, I hope Dad does, too.”

“Sloane, he has other things to attend to. You can’t expect people to drop their lives to meet your exp--”

“Momma, I love you. I’ll send in my RSVP this week.”

Sloane ended the call as a wave of garlic and cheese wafted through her nose. She inhaled deeply before heading downstairs.

Cameron placed Golden Girls plates on the dining table. They bought them at a Goodwill during their college days. He paired them with differently colored embossed glasses. The pizza created condensation on the wood while the breadsticks began to shed its parmesan coating like edible confetti. The setting was spotlighted by a brass chandelier stuck in the 90s. Sloane sat in her usual spot while Cameron sat across from her.

As he grabbed his portion of food, Sloane watched the man she married almost a decade ago. He looked the same minus the baby fat that melted off during college. His metabolism remained the same as he dragged three slices of pizza onto his plate. Each detail of his face was more ingrained into her mind than her own parents.

Cameron felt her eyes on him. “How was the call?”

“She was evasive but I told her I was going, so she couldn’t be anymore.”

He paused when she mentioned attending the reunion and proceeded to take another bite. “You two are twins, no doubt.”

“Why do you say that?”

Cameron took his napkin and wiped his mouth. “I don’t know. She’s evading questions about her personal life and you ran away from your family to get them out of yours.”

Sloane took two slices of pizza and slid them onto her plate. “Not the same. She, at least, knew I was married.”

Cameron snorted. “Married, but not *getting* married. Your parents didn’t know you were standing in a courthouse while they sunbathed out on the beach. Like I said, the same.”

Sloane began tackling the pizza on her plate, not wanting to hear anymore about how her and her mother’s similarities ran deeper than appearance.

“So, when are we going?”

Sloane blinked. “I’m sorry?”

“How long do you want us to be down there?”

Sloane put down her pizza. She hadn’t thought about Cameron coming along. His absence almost felt expected because of her family’s animosity towards him. The thought of him at the reunion caused her to grind her teeth. She fidgeted with her glass.

“I think it might be best for me to go by myself, since I don’t know what to expect.”

His eyebrows furrowed. “You’re kidding.”

“Cam, we don’t need to do everything together.

He raised his eyebrows and grabbed another breadstick. “I guess you’re right. After 10 years, we should probably switch up our anniversary. It was getting a little lame spending it with you anyways.”

“Our anniversary,” Sloane breathed.

“You forgot the tenth part.”

She needed to go down to Myrtle Beach. However, she wasn’t sure if she wanted to do it with her husband. The one who she’d drop anything for, even her own family. The two of them

standing there while her parents were going through their own possible issues. A mockery she would make them.

“I can always visit my parents while you’re down there. We can stay somewhere besides their places.”

She nodded, taking a bite of pizza. “I’m sorry, I just got swept up with the whole family thing. We can do something when we’re back there. Like, go to our old stomping grounds.”

As Sloane cleaned the grease off of their plates, Cameron was back on the couch. She could hear muffled voices of older men arguing about a tag out. She watched the sycamore tree in their yard blow in the nighttime breeze. A thin layer of pink divided the sky and rooftops, indicating the impending summer. She knew South Carolina would have a sunset gracing its skies. The humidity slowly re-introducing itself. She kept her hands under the facet to savor in its warmth. It felt almost the same as beach water after hours in the sun.

Cameron’s arms wrapped around her waist. It startled Sloane out of her daydream. She looked down and saw that she was still scrubbing Blanche’s face. As she rinsed the Emmy winner’s face off, Cameron’s chin sat on top of her shoulder once more. She never wanted to see what this posture looked like from the side because he towered a foot over her. The sentiment used to soothe her, his arms warm against her and his breathing mimicked hers.

She turned around to see him looking down at her as he typically did around this time in the night. His dark eyes clouded with lust and the muscle in his jaw twitched. It was a dance. A kiss on the lips and the water turned off. A lingering hand and the lights turned off. A bite of a lip and the TV switched off. Each stair and a piece of clothing disappeared. That’s why they kept a hamper next to their bedroom door.

This was how they met. They were strangers. A bonfire on the beach and a little sweet tea bourbon later, they were all too familiar with each other. Sloane wasn't Cameron's first and she lied to say he wasn't hers either. She used to go to the local Food Lion to read about "how to tease him and please him." In his car, the tips were a waste. However, her trips to Food Lion increased after that night.

Almost ten years later, she had her moves to keep Cameron satisfied but wouldn't tire her out. Each night, it would end with his arm curled around her body, pressing her against him. They both would go to sleep soundly. Sloane sometimes saw it as a more active alternative to melatonin. Tonight, Cameron's arm felt heavy against her and she crawled out from under it, resting it against her pillow. She walked out of their room to the bookshelf in the hallway. Old GED and college textbooks collected dust along with her high school yearbooks. A large green book sat nestled in the bottom shelf. Sloane pulled it out to reveal a picture on the front of her six-year-old self sitting in front of the crashing waves.

She opened the cover to see the myriad of photos she shoved into this album many years ago. Time had passed since she last opened it up. The plastic protectors stuck to one another as if scared to separate. Each flip of the page brought about another summer of her on the beach. It wasn't a coincidence she only took this album when she left home. The good memories sat in here.

She skipped to the page that held the summer she met Cameron. These pictures held more of her summer friends than her family members. Her cousin, Tootsie, dragged her out to that bonfire. She stared at the two of them, flames reflected off their baby soft skin and Tootsie's glasses. The photo below was a simple picture of Sloane in the middle of the night. Tootsie had

taken it. “Post-coital glow,” she called it. Tootsie’s the only one who knows Cameron was her first. She hadn’t seen Tootsie since she witnessed her wedding. She was the one who took the photo of them outside of the courthouse.

She came upon one shot of her family during that summer, the only photo she had of the reunion from that year. Her mother was sitting at a table with Sloane standing to her right, one hand on her shoulder, and her father bent over the both of them to be in the shot, his hand over her mother’s and his other hand on Sloane’s shoulder. She was so small back then. A tiny version of the woman she stood behind. Her cheeks were bright and flushed with teenage love. Her parents’ smiles were joyful; however, after tonight, she wasn’t sure if she could see the strain in their cheeks.

She closed the book, not wanting to linger too much in the past. As she shoved the album back into its original spot, she heard Cameron shift. A part of her wished he would notice her out of bed, come find her, and ask her about the album. Why was it keeping her up? What was she worked up about? Another part of her was glad he just grunted and changed sides. She stood up with her late-twenties knees cracking below her and walked back to their room.

Cameron was sprawled out on her side of the bed. She knew she would either have to wake him up to move or move him which would wake him up. Sloane headed downstairs to the couch and clicked on the TV. A talk show host laughed as a celebrity guest did an impression of Cher. She fell asleep thinking that the impression wasn’t that good.

*Summer 2007*

Sloane followed Tootsie downstairs to the kitchen. She was going over the lines they rehearsed. Tootsie said it would be better if they dressed as casually as they could in case their parents picked up on anything.

Both of their mothers sat at the dining room table facing the living room. Golden Girls played above the fireplace as they rolled balls of cookie dough onto baking sheets. Since the women were the only children of their grandparents, they were tasked to do most of the cooking and decorating. That meant, Tootsie and Sloane were tasked with it too.

“Hey, Ma,” Sloane said.

Her mother turned to her and immediately looked her up and down. “Aren’t you two supposed to be helping your fathers?”

Sloane turned to the window facing the yard. Outside, she could see the two men were holding balloons while surrounding a helium tank.

“They said we’d help more if we were inside.”

Tootsie’s mother scoffed. “Of course, they did.”

“We were thinking,” piped Tootsie, “that we could take a break and hit the mall, maybe even a movie.”

Sloane and Tootsie had been helping since the ass-crack of dawn. From cleaning the house top down to prepping aluminum vats of mac and cheese, and dragging the myriad of chairs from the garage. They did it every year.

Sloane put her hand on her mother’s shoulder. “Ma, can we go?”

Her mother looked at her hand and then back at her sister. “I don’t know Karen, should we let ‘em?”

Sloane’s aunt nodded her head and shrugged. “They already did the big stuff. Let them pretend like they have a summer.”

“Which mall do y’all wanna go to?”

This is why they rehearsed. Aunt Karen would give almost immediate approval while Sloane’s mother asked questions. Begrudging approval was on a good day.

“Coastal Grand.”

“Movie?”

“The new Harry Potter one.”

“I thought you already saw that.”

Sloane knew that was a test. She had seen the movie when it first came out with her father. However, Tootsie hadn’t.

“I can always see the same movie twice.”

“When?”

“The 8:45 showing.”

Her mother finished rolling a ball of dough in her hands and set it down on the parchment paper. She stared at the tan shiny balls and sighed. “Make sure you’re back by midnight. No later, you hear me?”

Tootsie grabbed Sloane’s arm and squeezed it before going over to her mom. She kissed her on the cheek and headed to the door. Sloane went around the table and leaned over to wrap

her arm around her mother, kissing her cheek as the sides of their faces pressed against one another.

“You remember what’s tonight, Minnie?”

Sloane nodded. “I’ll be back in time, Ma.”

Her mother went back to rolling dough as the two girls headed out the door.

“One last question.” This time, Aunt Karen was eyeing the two of them. “Who are you two going with?”

“No one,” they said in unison. Just like they rehearsed.

Aunt Karen nodded and waved them out of the door. They walked out to their fathers finishing the last few of the balloons that had to be set up in the yard. Typically, the two of them jumped on any task that could be done outside because it meant that they wouldn’t be bothered. The setting sun dulled the heat, but the heavy humidity still lingered for everyone to want to stay inside, except for them.

Sloane walked over to her father tying a silver string around a white latex balloon.

“We’re heading out to the mall.”

Tootsie’s father, Mud, perked up at the announcement. “Ole Isabella lettin you out?”

Sloane’s father wacked Mud in the shoulder with the balloon. “Hey now.”

“Just thought she’d have you sequestered in the kitchen like always.”

Sloane shook her head. “Her and Aunt Karen are given us a break.”

The two men looked at each other and raised their eyebrows. “Can we come,” they asked jokingly.

Tootsie grabbed Sloane's hand and moved towards the street. "You know the rule: only two can escape at a time!"

The girls left their fathers back to their chore while they made their way further from the house. Their grandparents' beach house was a coral low country style that was raised to ensure it wasn't flooded during hurricanes. In the front, a large staircase led up to the first story of the home while the back held piazzas that looked out to the ocean. It sat on the Golden Mile of Myrtle Beach. Something Sloane's family could not afford, but had the luxury of visiting every summer. Driving up in their Dodge minivan, the tinted window from the backseat dulling the brightness of the coral color was the start of summer for Sloane. She felt like that house meant more to her than her own family's home.

Sloane turned away from the shrinking sight of the house when she knew she was far enough away from it that the overbearing presence of her mother was replaced by the mist of the nearby waves. Tootsie and her walked down Ocean Boulevard, going straight instead of crossing the street towards the mall. Older couples taking a stroll and young people zipping by on bikes framed their sight towards a seafoam green house.

Tootsie convinced Sloane that they needed to go to this party tonight. Unlike Sloane, Tootsie was allowed to leave the house past sunset without her parents. Sloane, being treated like a child instead of a 16 year old, was still resigned to staying in the house and watching 80s comedy shows with her grandparents. Tootsie had met some kids at the mall a few years back and invited Sloane to hang whenever the plans included the sun being out. However, Tootsie got to have a nightlife that Sloane yearned for, no matter how much she'd grown to love 227 or Cheers.

Tonight, Sloane decided to risk the chance of asking her mother because Tootsie needed a wingwoman. Delon was a guy that lived in that big greenhouse year round with his grandparents. Sloane wasn't sure what happened to his parents, but he didn't seem bothered enough by his situation that she never asked when they hung out. Tootsie was smitten by his gleaming smile that caused two big dimples to appear. Whenever a plan had Delon involved, Sloane's cousin was there. Tootsie was ready for a boyfriend, and she wanted it to be Delon. Sloane resisted going until Tootsie got on her knees to plead that she go with her. Tootsie was dramatic but never got on her knees to persuade someone.

As the seafoam green house filled their view, Sloane could feel Tootsie shrinking beside her. She turned to see the girl's big doe eyes staring at the looming home. She swung her arm around her shoulders and squeezed their bodies beside each other.

"We're going to go in, chat up Delon, get you a kiss, and then we're out."

"A kiss?"

Sloane scrunched her eyebrows. "Are you being greedy?"

Tootsie smiled and shook her head. "A kiss would be nice."

"By Delon, right?"

She shrugged. "Yeah, but I'm so desperate, I'll settle for anyone with a fade."

The girls came open the brick path that led up to the front door. Sloane noticed that there wasn't the typical Ford Explorer sitting in the driveway. They walked up to the porch, where it was weirdly quiet. Tootsie went for the front door and opened it up to reveal music thudding from afar. The foyer was empty with only the music and a pile of shoes being indicators anyone was home.

They took off their flip flops and followed the music to the back of the house. As they moved closer, the sounds of voices mixed with the blaring of Timbaland. The girls were greeted by milling bodies of kids from around the Beach and plastic red cups that Sloane felt like had to be a part of every party scene. Debauchery might've been a strong word for the festivities around them, but Sloane hadn't been to a party like this before, so it all felt more intense for her. Couples making out, some disappearing through doors, others sneaking off with someone who wasn't their partner. The scent of stale beer and cheesy snacks filled the air as some people gathered around the dining room table where more plastic cups were arranged for beer pong.

“The McCray girls made it out!”

Delon was their height with a fade Sloane could tell was from a barber out of her price range. He wore shades despite them being inside. The only tell of his joking were the iconic dimples and mischievous smile.

“We thought we'd show our faces,” Tootsie retorted.

His smile brightened at her comment. “Can't say I'm mad about that. There's a firepit out back if you want to make s'mores. My friend, Cam, and I were about to head out there. Hey, Cam, bring these girls something to drink.”

Before they could respond, a figure stood up from one of the bar stools. Cameron was taller than the other kids, his head blatantly appearing over everyone else's. He had the same style of fade as Delon, but it was clearly not done by the same person. Sloane couldn't take her eyes off of him as he moved through the crowd. His body flowing smoothly through the crowd towards them, like he had more comfort in his body than someone would at his age. He emerged with two red plastic cups and a half empty beer bottle. He handed them the cups and stood

alongside Delon. Sloane looked into the cup to see a murky brown liquid. Tootsie elbowed her in the side to her attention. The two boys were staring at the girls for their decision on going outside. Tootsie swiveled her head towards Sloane for approval. She took her eyes away for a second to nod at her cousin.

“Show us the way!”

Delon stepped back to let Tootsie go in front of him as they walked toward the backyard. Sloane and Cameron fell into step beside each other, flanking behind their respective cousin and friend. As they wandered outside, Sloane took a couple gulps of the liquid and felt the sweet cocktail burn the back of her throat before swallowing. The strong smell of nicotine wafted through her nostrils as the humidity clung onto her skin.

Sloane thought it would be too obvious to stare at Cameron now, so she resigned to looking at the back of Tootsie’s head. Apparently, Cameron didn’t care about the obvious because she could feel his gaze boring down the top of her head. Her cheeks felt hot as she thought about him possibly looking at her the same way she looked at him. She didn’t want to trick herself into believing that. She straightened her back and took another swig of her drink.

“You finally got to come out tonight?”

Cameron’s voice felt like it came and went like the wind. Soft, but present. Sloane looked up at him from the side of her eyes, seeing his gaze was now looking straight ahead of him. Maybe, she did make up his staring.

“We had to trick my mom. She thinks we’re seeing Harry Potter.”

He chuckled. “Yeah, mine thinks I’m at Club Karma.”

She looked down at her almost empty cup. “Club Karma is Chuck-E-Cheese compared to here.”

“Well, 13-year-olds are allowed in both.”

Sloane smiled at his attempt at a joke and looked down at her bare feet. She didn’t usually do that. She never did that with boys she liked. Her eyes would stay on them until they looked the same way back at her. This time, she didn’t want to see whether or not Cameron had the same expression.

The four of them made their way around the firepit. Bonfires weren’t allowed on the beach, but there was nothing against them in the designated backyards. Luckily, for Delon, his grandparents had put up a fence because they wanted more privacy on their beachfront home.

A haphazard pile of marshmallows, graham crackers, and Hershey bars were laid out beside the fire. Delon handed Cameron some ingredients and walked to the other side of the fire with Tootsie. Sloane didn’t get the chance to say anything to her cousin before Delon and her were buried in conversation about how they built their s’mores. She looked behind her as Cameron sat on one of the benches with the ingredients to his side. He had two wooden skewers in his hand. This time, she didn’t need to look up at him. They were at eye level with each other and she could see more of his features. A faint mustache beginning to make its appearance across his upper lip. A smattering of acne across his cheeks and forehead. Two thick eyebrows where you could barely see the individual hairs. And, a set of deep brown eyes that reflected the fire roaring behind her. She thought he was perfect.

Sloane sat next to him and put her drink next to her. She grabbed the skewer, thoughtfully picking her two marshmallows and drowning them into the fire. Cameron repeated her movements, making sure to hit the coals at the bottom with his stick.

“Delon hates when I do this with mine,” he bemused.

Sloane looked at their friends across from them as their marshmallows hovered just above the fire. “A s’more isn’t a s’more without goo.”

“Or, the crispiness of the burnt pieces.”

Sloane let out a pleasurable moan and nodded in agreement. She felt his gaze on her once again and she laughed when she realized what she had done. “Sorry, I just really liked s’mores.”

His soft laugh was the only indication that she hadn’t made a fool of herself. “You beat me to it.”

They took their sticks out of the fire and blew out the flames. Both of their marshmallows were charred so dark that it blended in with the night sky in front of them. Cameron tucked his stick in between his thighs and grabbed two crackers and a piece of chocolate. He laid them out in his palm and faced them towards Sloane. She realized what he was doing and placed her marshmallow over the cracker with the chocolate placed on top. They were silent as he placed the other cracker on top and Sloane slid the stick out from the treat. Strings of marshmallow followed after the stick as she pulled it away and placed it on the other side of the bench. Before she could protest to help him, Cameron gave her the s’more to begin making his own. His swift movements were quick to construct his treat. His confidence radiated even in making a campfire snack. Soon, he held out his s’more to tap them together as if they were cheersing glasses. As Sloane bit into her s’more, she looked across the fire to see Tootsie and Delon were no longer

making sweet treats, but they were instead giving each other sugar. Their lips continuously were trying to find one another again the moment they parted. The only music playing for them were the sounds of Cameron and Sloane's munching.

Cameron scoffed. "Don't your grandparents have enough bedrooms for you to make out in?"

Delon broke apart from Tootsie and stifled a laugh. "Cam, why don't you show Sloane around the house since she hasn't been here before?"

Cameron stood up and stretched out his hand towards me. "Please let me show you anything else but a poor rendition of Cruel Intentions."

Sloane looked up at him. "Doesn't that scene have two girls?"

"I said poor, didn't I?"

She stood up with her s'more in tow and gestured to follow after him. He took her hand with his free one and pulled her gently along. Sloane felt his warm hand encapsulate hers. Normally, she couldn't fathom having someone's warm body against her in the summer heat, but Cameron's warmth felt reassuring rather than hot.

First, they moved around the downstairs of the house. Cameron showed Sloane the family room where people were crowded around the TV for a baseball game. The party was loud enough to mute the sounds of hearing anything coming from it. The fireplace looked almost new from the lack of use, but the mantel was using its full potential with hoards of Delon's pictures covering it. He pointed to one of the pictures that Sloane could barely see from the distance, but it apparently was a picture of Delon and him at their fifth grade graduation.

They moved to the kitchen where the kitchen was surprisingly clean save for the amounts of plastic cups and bags of snacks. Cameron mentioned how it was easier to throw the cups and empty bags into trash bags and haul them out to one of the nearby hotel dumpsters than using the grandparents' dishes, plus it was less evidence.

As they moved from room to room, Cameron moved from his hand holding hers to his hand on the small of her back. It started off high, just above the top of her tank top and bra. The leftover sweat from the humidity caused his flesh to feel fused to hers. The more rooms they saw, the more his hand dropped down her back until it leveled with her hips. When he placed his hand on her lower back, she felt a tingle move from her hips to her chest. It mixed with the warmth of the bourbon that Cameron finally told her was in the drink she had. She didn't mind his touch, partly because she wanted more of it and because he seemed unaware of his movements, as if he'd always known touching her like that. Or, Sloane thought he could also be feeling the rise of their teenage hormones and wanted to be a good southern gentleman about it.

When they got upstairs, he merely pointed to each door and talked about what was held behind them. He didn't bother knocking for fear of seeing who might've been getting laid in each one. Afterwards, he led her to the final wing of the home: the laundry room. It sat next to the powder room that Delon had told everyone to use because it wasn't as fancy as the one in the main part of the house. The room had a front facing washer and dryer with shelves above them with clear containers of laundry detergent and fabric softener. It looked like just as much thought went into the room as any other part, despite only three people really seeing it, except for Cameron and Sloane.

“Why did you want to show me this room,” Sloane asked.

“It feels like the most quiet part of the house, like everything goes still.”

“You’ve been here before?”

Cameron shrugged. “Only during parties. Sometimes, I just need a second alone.”

“Oh, so it’s not where you bring a girl to impress her?”

“Do you want me to?”

Sloane leaned against the washer as his tall frame leaned over her. His lips slowly levelled with hers. The tingle she felt from his hand earlier seemed to reemerge in her stomach, causing her breath to hitch. His hand snaked around her waist and pulled her closer to him. He pressed his lips against her; his mouth tasting like cheap beer and sugar. Sloane closed her eyes at the tingling feeling making its way to her lips and seemed to intensify every time they met his. Her arms laced around his neck and it was her moment to press him into her, feeling his body relax into hers.

Cameron broke away long enough to close the door behind him. Despite the sudden darkness of the room, she could feel his gaze trained on her. The only light came from a small rectangle window on the other side of the room. Cameron’s silhouette came into view as she felt his lips find hers once again.

Their tango continued as they made their way onto the laundry room floor. Her body below his as each layer of clothing was peeled off. Sloane wasn’t sure if she was happy he couldn’t see every detail of her body or disappointed about not being able to see his. They could only see each other’s silhouettes and faintness of facial expressions when they moved in the moonlight just right. However, she could feel more and more inches of flesh against hers. The only sound coming from their heavy breaths and whispers of consent.

“Are you sure you want to do this?”

Sloane nodded. “I’m sure. You?”

“Definitely. You did this before, right?”

Sloane kept from snorting and merely nodded. “You?”

“Of course,” was his answer before his lips found hers once more.

Her first time was on the floor of a laundry room. In a home that was not his, or hers. The cool hardwood felt nice against her back after sitting outside in the humidity and near the fire. The only warmth coming from Cameron’s hands, body, and mouth. She was consumed by Cameron, just trying to keep up with him as well as the feelings of pleasure arising.

It was Tootsie that snapped her out of the moment. She banged on the powder room door on the other side of the hallway. Sloane pushed Cameron off of her and sat naked in the middle of the room, praying that her cousin would not come barging in.

*“Sloane! We need to go! We have 20 minutes left.”*

Sloane rolled her eyes. “Shit, I forgot.”

Cameron touched her thigh. “You gotta be somewhere?”

She began feeling in the dark for her clothes. She guessed the feel of the fabrics to put her tank top and denim shorts back on. Cameron followed suit, not speaking a word to her as they dressed. When they both stood up, he flicked the light on. Sloane’s hair had mussed from their activity. Cameron instinctively fluffed out her hair before moving out of the way.

Sloane whipped open the door to see Tootsie turning towards her.

“Why are you in there,” she asked.

“Later. Right now, I’d like to not be killed.”

Sloane took Tootsie's hand and made their way back through the house. She was on a mission to get their shoes when she felt her arm being pulled in the direction of the backyard. Sloane looked back to see Tootsie eyeing her as she pulled her towards the sliding door.

“Wait, let's get a picture before we leave.”

“Toots, we have to go.”

“One picture to remember?”

Sloane gave in and looked at her cousin. “One, and then we gotta sprint back.”

Tootsie smiled. “Deal! We've got time.”

They looked over at Cameron emerging from where they came, his clothes slightly wrinkled. “Lover boy, can you snap a picture of us before we go?”

Tootsie gave Cameron her digital camera and they ran outside towards the bonfire. The girls did a quick pose in front of the flames and they suffered through three rounds of flash. Tootsie thanked Cameron and grabbed Sloane's hand to head back towards the foyer of the house. They didn't speak as their flip flops ended up in their hands and they sprinted back down Ocean Boulevard. The sound of the waves crashing seemed to match the rhythm of their heavy breaths and bare feet slapping against the concrete. As they rounded the corner back home, they slowed down to a stop so they could put their flip flops on and catch their breath before heading back inside.

Tootsie grabbed Sloane's hand before they began to walk. She placed her camera over her eye and snapped a picture. Sloane blinked furiously at the sudden bright light.

“Now, we have two pictures to remember your post-coital glow.”

Sloane laughed. “I don’t know how I feel about you having pictures of me after I lost my virginity.”

“It’s a momento!”

“I don’t have a picture of you post-making out.”

Tootsie put the camera in Sloane’s hand and positioned herself under one of the streetlights. Sloane took the camera and placed her over her eye. She centered the tiny dot that was Tootsie and snapped a photo of her. She handed her cousin back the camera and they began to walk home.

Tootsie reviewed the picture. “Now, you do.”

“I can’t believe you actually made out with Delon.”

“I can’t believe you had sex. In a laundry room of all places.”

Sloane shook her head at the thought. A boy she just met that made her feel like she’d known him forever got her naked and vulnerable, and on the first night she was allowed out.

As they walked inside, the smell of tomato and garlic hung in the air. The girls slipped off their shoes in the foyer and padded their way into the house. Their parents were strewn across the downstairs. Their grandparents sitting in their respective chairs watching reruns of Fresh Prince of Bel Air. Tootsie’s mom and dad sat together on the couch while Sloane’s mom watched her dad cook in the kitchen.

“We’re home,” Tootsie announced.

“How was the movie, baby?”

“Long but good.”

Tootsie’s mother looked back at her as a commercial came on. “Better than the book?”

Tootsie shrugged. "I'll always think the book is better."

She walked over to her parents as Sloane walked over to hers. Her mom put her arm around her and kissed her forehead in the same spot where Cameron kissed her earlier. She closed her eyes for a minute to try to get herself ready to lie to her mother.

"Was it good this time?"

Sloane was stunned. "What?"

"Seeing the movie again. Was it still good?"

"Yeah, it was. Tootsie's right though, it was pretty long."

Her mother moved away from the stove where her dad was staring at a pot. "Now, you're in time to help your dad."

Each night before the family reunion, Sloane helped her dad make midnight meatballs. The family made countless amounts of soul food for the weekend to cut costs and they had leftovers that would last them the remainder of the summer. The meatballs were their last reprieve before the big day.

Sloane's father was stirring the homemade sauce he perfected as she came to stand next to him. "What can I do, Dad?"

He gestured toward the kitchen island. "Can you start browning those?"

A large plate filled with pink spherical balls sat in the center of the island. She grabbed the plate and began dropping them into the already prepared skillet. The balls sizzled as they rolled around in olive oil. Sloane grabbed a wooden spoon and began moving them around to brown on all sides. Her dad watched her movements, making sure she did it correctly. She did it every year, but he was still scared of her messing up.

“Did you have a good night, Min,” he asked.

Sloane kept her eyes on the skillet. “Still am, Dad.”

### *Summer 2019*

Sloane woke up to the sounds of a morning talk show hosts talking about this year’s swimsuit trends. Her neck cried from her quick movement to look around the living room. The house felt still as she regained why she ended up downstairs last night. The album. The memories. The desire for distance. Sloane remembered pretty quickly.

She heard the hum of the pipes indicating that Cameron was upstairs taking his morning shower. Her head lowered back down to the pillows and she listened to the melody of bright TV personalities and the drum of water pouring down. The pictures felt like a world away to her and the memories felt even further.

She couldn’t remember any of her dreams last night. For all she knew, she could’ve dreamt about nothing other than a black screen covering her vision. That happened when she was stressed. She would wake up feeling as if she was exempt from dreaming every night unlike everyone else. It made her feel empty and left to deal with her waking thoughts on her own, no symbols or faux scenarios to help her decipher what was going on in her life.

The water stopped upstairs. She heard Cameron’s footsteps move out of the shower as she expected him to be drying off. Without thinking, she pulled herself off of the couch. The TV noise didn’t follow her as she walked up the stairs, hearing her footsteps off-beat with her husband’s. As she came onto the landing of the second floor, Cameron emerged from their only full bathroom.

“Hey, did something happen last night?”

Sloane shook her head. “I couldn’t sleep and I decided to watch TV.”

He pointed to the photo album she picked up last night. She realized she hadn’t pushed it back in place, so it peeked out amongst the rest of the books. Cameron wasn’t the most detail-oriented, but he didn’t like things out of place.

“Was that why you couldn’t sleep?”

Sloane shrugged, not being able to lie to him or tell the truth in the moment. Cameron knew the pictures that were inside of the album, and he didn’t mind her looking at them, but he knew what it did for her to see them.

“I just got a little nostalgic.”

He eyed the album sitting at the bottom of the bookcase. Sloane saw his forlorned expression as he looked at the last momento that held memories before they were a thing.

“You know what my dad says...a better tomorrow can’t happen if you’re always thinking about yesterday.”

“Well, how will you know if it’s better unless you have something to compare it to?”

His eyes never met hers. He walked past her and went to their bedroom. She watched him as he tightened the towel around his waist and flipped through their closet. Sloane was a private chef, so she didn’t need to hurry into an office. Cameron had to put a tie on every day. He didn’t follow his passion like Sloane, but instead went with a safer choice. Finance instead of game design. She never understood how he chose to be risky in some ways and uptight in others.

He stepped in front of the mirror to watch himself button up his shirt. His pants were on with the belt hanging loose around his waist. Cameron’s eyes never met hers as he put on each

piece of clothing, straightening it out, and going over it with a lint roller. Sloane knew his daily routine. He was so methodical about it that it felt therapeutic to watch him. The swishing of the fabric and clinking of jewelry calmed Sloane.

As he moved towards the bathroom to brush his teeth, Sloane could sense his uneasiness around her. Despite his apparent ignorance of her presence, the album got to him. She knew it. The album was the validation of yesterday. Her forgetting to include him on the plans to go to Myrtle Beach. Her forgetting their 10th anniversary. Things came in three, like her own father told her. The invite, the album. Sloane wasn't sure what was next, but she knew it scared Cameron that he didn't know either. His smoothness could only get him so far and it stopped when it came to her parents.

He walked out of the bathroom and towards their bedroom one last time to grab his phone. Like routine, he gave a sigh indicating his completion of his process and walked towards her. His lips touched the same place they always had since the first night they met. It gave her a physical reaction, the same kind of warmth she had after gulping down that sweet tea bourbon. She leaned into his kiss, feeling his hand on her arm.

He pulled away and looked down at her. "The old times are getting to you."

Sloane shook her head. "No, I think it's our old folks who are."

"Your parents are grown, they know what's best for themselves."

"They have a daughter who is also grown and just wants to hear them say it."

"Just don't get carried away trying to overthink what was."

Cameron moved around her and headed down the stairs. She heard the wood laminate creak underneath him as he moved towards the front door. Sloane could almost visualize the

process of him getting his shoes on just by the sounds he made. She heard him swing his briefcase of his shoulder before calling out to her.

“I love ya, darlin’.”

He didn’t wait for an answer. He never did. Sloane would usually still respond to him. Today, she couldn’t. She merely listened to the front door open and close. Sloane continued to listen as her husband’s car door slammed shut and the engine revved. It wasn’t until she heard the tires rolling over asphalt and his front bumper scraping the driveway that she went to the album and grabbed it from the bookcase.

She opened it to the last page where a few random photos were put back there to fill up space, but one photo was positioned there strategically. When she first made the album, she put the photo back there so she didn’t have to see it every time she opened the book. It hurt her to have to look at it. The beaming smile of her cousin under the boardwalk streetlights with the South Carolina humidity faintly fogging up the lens. Tootsie’s glasses were low on the bridge of her nose so you could see her dark eyes staring straight back at you.

Sloane felt like it was yesterday that she took that picture. Ran around with her partner in crime. Well, her old one. It was one of the last photos that she took of someone other than Cameron. It was the last time she remembered being completely single. Completely on her own.

## **Told Me Better**

My momma couldn't decide on which house to buy. There was always a problem with each of 'em. If it wasn't the lack of a basement, it was the washer and dryer sittin' out in the garage. "What happens in the winter when I have to do laundry," she asked my father. He didn't reply. It was less of a question and more of an answer that the house wasn't the one.

Pop got fed up and decided they would buy land and build a house my momma couldn't complain about. It ultimately looked like many of the others in the neighborhood. A two-story craftsman home with a porch that was small enough for you to only get to the front door and a backyard big enough for a plastic playground. The only differences my family's home possessed were the two gazebos Pop weaseled the neighborhood association into allowing and the black people who lived inside.

The neighborhood lacked melanin as much as it lacked the etiquette to not bring it up. Despite my parents being one of the first families to move into the neighborhood, it didn't stop white folks from pursing their lips when they would see Pop jogging or ask Momma if she could bring "collards" to the Fourth of July block party.

Once the two of them had me and my younger sister, Natasha, there was a change in the game because now the neighbors wanted their kids to play with the black girls. Our family would be the example that they were not the things their token black friend would accurately say about them. It didn't seep into our friendships with the other neighborhood kids until they wanted to have us over for a sleepover. (Momma wouldn't dare let us have friends over anymore when Nicole from two houses over stuck her hand into Momma's dreads and said they "felt like

Cheetos.”) The night would be fine until it was time to put our heads on the pillow. Natasha and I would each grab our respective satin bonnets and get a myriad of comments about how we looked like the mushroom guy from Mario. There would always be the one genuine friend who asked earnestly about it, but it was lost in the sea of mockery. Eventually, Natasha would let it slip about what happened at these slumber parties and they were off the list of what we were allowed to do.

“Y’all are done goin’ over to those girls’ houses. Black folks can’t even sleep in peace.”

The house became a sacred place for the four of us. The space filled with Stevie Wonder’s voice (and Pop’s) during each person’s birthday, Momma experimenting with healthy versions of smothered pork chops and sweet potato pie, even me getting into my TLC phase, and Natasha’s obsession with Whitley Gilbert. It was the only space where our essence could seep out and paint the walls of the house without ridicule or consequence.

Natasha and I were not allowed to have friends over. Our parents understood most of our friends might be of the Caucasian persuasion, living in the suburbs of Cincinnati, but it did not mean they became guests. Momma limited guests to who could not find their foundation match in a drugstore. It wasn’t explicitly stated by her, but Natasha and I didn’t try her.

Actually, I did once. I asked Momma if I could have Stacey Matthews over to study for our Physics exam. She looked at me through the corner of her eyes and rolled them back to the sink where she was doing the dishes. “No, Safia.” I was in high school and still in the throes of hormones, so I tried it a little more than I would’ve otherwise. “It’s studying, Mom.” She let the pot she was scrubbing fall into the sink. This time, she looked at me full on, which is scary when your momma does it right. Mine perfected it.

“You know a great place to study then? The library.”

“Momma...”

“What did I say, Saf? I don’t want to see any of your little friends in this house.”

From then on out, I listened to her. She would not *see* any of my little friends.

High school prompted a string of guys that came to the house. None of whom met my family but knew the floor plan just as well. They filled the criteria of thick dark hair, deep brown eyes, and full lips. My parents would still be upset if they found a boy in our house, but they would’ve just disturbed their rhythm, not remind them of their blues. There was Simon from French class, who got me drunk off of ponche de crème in the kitchen, and Ritchie from show choir, who showed me a few things in the family room. Even though my family was not aware, they added to the sanctuary of our home. They had their own experiences of isolation and jeering from others that they respected the home as if it was theirs, knowing to take off their shoes at the door and rinsing out their cup before leaving.

The only other person who knew about those guests was my friend, Priscilla. She was in the same boat as me with parents who didn’t like her cuddling up to people who could potentially hurt her. So anyone. The library was her safe haven, too, because her Catholic mother could not come up with one way her daughter could misbehave surrounded by books. However, Priscilla had a better imagination and sense of time because, whenever she brought her boyfriend, Amir, she knew exactly when she needed to leave to catch the last activity bus over at the school. She kept my secrets and I kept hers.

My own escapades continued at the beginning of my senior year when Nick sat next to me in Calculus class. He had those hazel eyes that change colors in the sunlight and hair that

would make Shawn Hunter jealous. Presentations were the only way to keep seniors engaged, so we had to do one in math class. We were assigned partners to whoever sat next to us. Nick came up to me after class and wanted to make plans about getting together.

“I’m available after school if you are.”

I nodded. “I can meet then.”

“Where you wanna go?”

“What about your place?”

He shook his head. “Can’t. No computer. How ‘bout the library?”

I agreed, and met him in our usual spot by the window in the biography section. Priscilla was shocked to hear that she was the one who had to move this time. Typically, her boyfriend and her would meet her on Wednesdays and I’d move to one of the armchairs to do homework. Her eyebrows raised when she heard who the mystery man was.

“So, you couldn’t take him back to your place,” she inquired as she stacked her textbooks.

“I didn’t make it an option.”

She nodded. “That’s right, Momma’s rule.”

“No, I’m not worried about Momma’s rule because it’s not a hangout. We’re studying.”

Priscilla was about to make a remark when Nick walked up to the table. He smiled but just at me. “You two always here?”

“Mostly,” I retorted.

Priscilla cradled her books as she stood up. “We’re typically here for study sessions. Or, at least I am.” I could hear the euphemism in her words, but Nick merely nodded and dropped his

books in replacement of hers. Priscilla sat in one of the armchairs and did homework that incorporated taking five minute breaks to stare at us.

The study session went as typical as the rest of my occurrences with the white classmates and friends sanctioned to only seeing me amongst musty books. When we headed out for the night, he walked me to my Subaru. Priscilla had long since departed to make sure she caught the last bus. My study partner hesitated to depart once we made it to my car.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Nick.”

He fumbled with his books. “Would you want to hang out this weekend?”

“I don’t do that.”

“Why not?”

I shrugged. “Why should I?”

He quirked his eyebrow. “Well, we could always just chill.”

“Where?”

“My house, tomorrow after school.”

“Sounds chill.”

I would drive to his place once the last bell rang. The first time I went over to “just hang out”, I mainly gawked at the hordes of pictures his family kept of him and his two other brothers. They had the type of frames where the current photo of the child sat in the middle, haloed by a school picture from every previous year. Family vacation photos, photoshoots outside of School Picture Day, even a timeless Christmas photo thrown in the mix. They all had the same brunette hair, hazel eyes, and pale skin to emphasize those features. The rest of the house felt like the pictures: calculated representation of the family. Posed and positioned to give off the impression

that they were well-mannered and stable. The dining table even had cloth napkins instead of ones ripped off the paper roll.

We were in the kitchen when Nick caught me touching the doily curtains hanging in the window. “So, you said you weren’t a dating person.”

I looked back at Nick. “I said I don’t ‘hang out’, but I don’t do that either.”

“So, all those people at school you know...they’re just colleagues?”

“In the job of life? Yes.”

“Yeah?”

“I’m more into just friendships. Gettin’ held down by someone in high school, I have the rest of my life for that. Why, what about you?”

He blinked. “I guess I don’t mind either way. I have the rest of my life to be picky.”

I looked at him full on. “You think I’m bein’ picky.”

“No, just seem to be worried about not being in a relationship as much as someone who would want to be in one.”

I was taken aback by what he had to say, but I couldn’t argue. The system I had worked and allowed me to decide who I wanted to spend my time with. Priscilla was there when I needed advice or a Friday night at the mall, as long as I gave her two weeks notice. The male encounters inside my home were safe and temporary. I decided when things ended and how they did, especially when I had parents that decided that for everything else.

We spent the afternoon watching Ricki Lake until it was getting close to the time Natasha would be back from tennis practice. He had kept it innocent. No flirtin’. No touchin’. Strictly Ricki. As I grabbed my backpack and headed out, I wasn’t sure what I wanted. I wasn’t sure

what he wanted. It just hung in the air. Typically, I was used to voicing or being told what was wanted out of these types of interactions. I wasn't impressed. However, I would still come back tomorrow.

And, that's what happened. Every afternoon during the week, I would come over to Nick's house and Ricki would join us. He slowly started showing what he wanted. First, it was my hand. Then, my shoulders. Then, my lips. Followed by my thighs. Leading up to my breasts. Soon, it was all of me. On the couch. Unfortunately, on the carpet. One time in the foyer.

He kept it downstairs. It made it slightly exciting and weirdly formal, like we should be shaking hands after each time. However, I didn't know if I wanted to see his bedroom. Priscilla would question my hesitation to wanting more, especially when it came to being inside his bedroom.

I shook my head at her hypocrisy. "You and Amir haven't even seen each other's houses, let alone your bedrooms."

"Saf, we *can't* go to each other's houses. You're in his place more than you're here now."

"It'll kill the facade."

"Of what? Being in a white boy's dated living room?"

"Yes. If he opens up, then he's truly Nick and would want me to be Safia."

One day, after our rendezvous, I ran late gettin' home, so Momma was already at the stove once I put my bag down in the foyer. The cloud of essential oils and cayenne pepper was a homecoming when I opened my front door. Nick could dial his thermostat to 80 and I would still feel a chill run down my spine in his place.

“What were you out doin’?”

“Library as per usual.”

Momma’s back stay turned to me. Usually, it meant she was listening more than if she was actually looking at me. “Anybody special?”

“Ain’t everyone?”

“To you?”

I hesitated. “Uh no, just a Calculus partner.”

She nodded, analyzing every pause and word. “You wanna help with dinner?”

Like my Pops, Natasha and I knew this wasn’t a question. It was a polite demand from Momma. I walked over to her and took the wooden spoon she had in her special chili and beans recipe. It was the veal she used that made it special. Typically, Momma cornered us by cooking beside her. That’s how Natasha had “the talk” and I was interrogated about why I snuck out on a school night. This time, she merely stood next to me, rolling dough into balls.

“So, your father and I haven’t really heard you mention anyone you might be seeing.”

“Have I ever?”

Her head tilted to one side. “So, you have been seeing people...”

“Momma, what if I’m not seeing anyone?”

She stood rolling and looked at me. “So, you’re not? Priscilla is that captivating as a person, you two gotta see each other everyday?” I broke my gaze from the chili to see her face turn from genuine curiosity to concern. “Baby, your nose is bleedin’.”

Momma turned to the roll of paper towels as I touched my nose to see a red dot form on my finger, seeping into the grooves of my fingertip. She didn’t hand me the towel but gently

pressed it up against my nostrils. Momma didn't blink the entire time; her face scrunched in an expression I couldn't decipher. It bled throughout the night. Pop didn't make me go to the hospital. "Let's see how you are in the morning." By morning, it stopped.

Nick and I barely talked in school. Different strokes. He had his social circle, I had mine. His circle was made up of boys who all had similar features and haircuts. You could tell most of them played a sport by the way they wore different varsity jackets mixed with everyday clothing. My circle was made up of people who avoided those types of guys or were the only ones of the athletic teams who didn't look like them.

One day, Nick came up to Priscilla and me in between periods. "What is it?"

"We can't hang at my place today."

A waft of his breath hit my nose. I could smell the chicken patty Nick ate for lunch. I reflexively gagged, a little acid coming up.

He reached out to hold my arm, steadying me. "You ok?"

Priscilla's hand steadied me from behind. She said my voice low enough to where he couldn't hear. I shook my head towards her to tell her "not right now".

I nodded, hating myself for liking the warmth of his hand against me. "Whatever you ate smells funky," I tried to play off.

He covered his mouth, meekly. "Sorry, I didn't know it was that bad."

"You said we can't hang out today?"

He shook his head. "My mom took off work to wait for the repair guy. Computer's down."

I raised my eyebrows. "Are you giving me an excuse or a porn you watched?"

His eyelids lowered in contempt, ignoring my attempt at a joke. “Well,” he paused, “could we go to your place?”

There was a part of me that had to catch the no that was on its way out of my mouth. I was used to our routine. Liked it even. Despite the drab decor of his home, Nick, like his hand, was warm. The place contrasted our interactions, almost amplifying their intimacy. Always close to me but waiting for me to close the distance. Despite what I said to Priscilla, there was a part of me that wanted to go upstairs because maybe it meant he felt that warmth from me. Even now, the fabric of his shirt tingled my arm hairs.

I closed my eyes. I couldn’t look at him when I said it. “Yes, we can.”

“Oh yeah? Sounds great, Saf. I’ll see you then.”

“Wait,” I realized, “Nick, you don’t have a computer.”

He stared at me blankly. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Nick...”

He began walking down the hall. “After school, Saf. Your place. No backing out!”

I turned to Priscilla, who silently watched our interaction. Her eyes looked at me from the side, judging. “What the hell was that?”

“He got one over on me.”

“You sure you’re feeling okay to go?”

I breathed in heavily. “No, but it’s been going on for awhile.”

“And, what about Momma’s rule?”

“Momma’s rule never stopped me before.”

Priscilla shrugged. “You’re playin’ with fire, girl.”

When he met me at my house, he was still sitting in his black Mustang. I rolled into the driveway and waved for him to come up. Our neighborhoods were similar. All Midwestern ones are. Beige houses with a basketball hoop in the front. Maybe an American flag or one of those barn stars with the circle around it. Momma usually made us avoid houses that had either or both of 'em. She said you could already tell how much they'll hate you, just by how they decorated the outside. Nick's family had a flag.

He walked up the drive to the front door. My hand shook as I put the key into the lock. It had been years since I had a friend with the complexion of tilapia walk in here. Even if my momma never knew, I would. The house would.

I opened the door and let him inside. He wiped his feet on the welcome rug. Good start. But, he began walking inside. I looked at his Converse as he walked towards the kitchen. I grimaced and closed the door.

He looked around the kitchen. It didn't have doily curtains or floral cookware. It held faded ceramic mugs from Momma's shop and jars of different grease. Folgers held fish while Jif held chicken. I couldn't look at those containers too long. I've seen them all my life, but they looked nauseating with Nick standing next to them.

I needed him out as quickly as I could. "Wanna head upstairs?"

He cocked his head. "You scoped out my entire house. Lemme do the same."

I led him into the mecca of our household. The family room held the furniture from Pop's first apartment and Momma's attempts at updating the room, all haphazardly coordinated together. The rug was a wedding gift from Pop's mother, Nana. It was red with gold accents and sporadic stains from raising two kids. The entertainment center held tchotchkes from Goodwill

that Momma thought pulled the room together. Among them was Pop's record player and the vinyls he was able to still save from years of play. One of which was the infamous, *Hotter Than July*.

Nick waved me over to look at the pictures on the mantel. Ours were less formal than his. They came from our parents getting a hold of disposable cameras, so the pictures were of us in this very room or playing in the backyard. He pointed to one school picture of me in first grade. Both of my front teeth were missing and my hair surrounded my beaming face like a dark halo. Some coils fell into my face from the Care Free Curl that Momma used to glob into my hair. She used the stuff so much I could still taste it. I wore a shirt that I remember Momma also buying from Goodwill with a black overall dress on top.

“Why don't you wear your hair like that anymore?”

I shrugged. Momma started hot ironing my hair when I started middle school. “People can't appreciate a good thing.”

“Do you?”

I hesitated. “That's nunya.”

“Just askin'.”

He turned to me and raised his hand to finger a strand of my hair. My insides churned, my throat growing hot from wanting to scream. But I let him. I let him touch my hair. He was being sincere, I tried telling myself.

“Hey,” he tried to level his eyes to mine. “I love your hair.”

I bit back a scowl and merely nodded. His lips moved towards mine and I was relieved for the change in touch. His hands snaked around my back and pressed me against him. It felt

like a good pain at first, like the kind of painful pleasure from being so close to someone.

However, my chest grew so sore, I pushed him off of me. They still stung as I grabbed his hand and tried to rectify the expression on his face. We went upstairs to my room and went back to our regularly scheduled programming.

Oprah was now on which meant Nick had to go. He had nothing but his clothes he brought in and they were, luckily, already back on. He didn't ask too many questions about my room, probably because he didn't know who were in most of the posters and stared too long at my Gee's Bend quilt for me to avoid asking why. He slid into my twin-sized bed with a sense of familiarity though and I swallowed back any sign of pain in order to keep us from "just talking."

We began down the stairs when I heard the front door slammed closed. "Saf." It was at a normal volume. Momma didn't yell. She didn't need to.

I maneuvered myself in front of Nick, half for protection and half to possibly sprint out the door. We closed the distance as we rounded the stairs and I knew Nick came into Momma's view when I could see the white around her irises. She changed her expression to a warm smile once he noticed her. Momma was still Midwestern.

"Hey, y'all. What's goin' on?"

I gestured to my backpack in the dining room. "Nick is my Calculus partner I told you about. We were studying today and I forgot my textbook so he brought it over for me. We have a test tomorrow."

"You needed to go upstairs? Without the book?"

"Nick just wanted to see the place."

Nick gestured to the stairs. “Yes, ma’am. Safia wanted to show me her quilt upstairs. My grandma used to make, uh, dress—drez—”

My mom quirked an eyebrow. “Dresden?”

“Yes, ma’am, Dresden quilts.”

I was thankful for the deflection, but I needed this to end. “Nick has an errand to run before dinner, so he should get going.”

“Yes, Nick, we don’t want to keep you from your parents.”

“It was nice to meet you, ma’am.”

Nick moved from around me, his hand lightly caressing my back before heading down the stairs. Momma stepped aside for Nick to slink pass her and slide out the door. A small click was her indicator that it was safe to switch back to her original mode.

“I thought there *ain’t nobody special?*”

“Th-there isn’t. He was in for a quick second. Ten minutes, tops.”

“Then, why was his car’s hood cool?”

“Momma,” I paused. “You touched his car?”

“You had a boy in here, Safia girl. Interrogating me is not how this works.”

Before I could retort, the smell of cheese and dough swarmed around me. It felt like it was swaying my body back and forth. I looked behind me to see a pizza box sitting on the dining room table. The image of warm tomato sauce and gooey cheese made my stomach heave. I turned back towards Momma and put my hand to my mouth, trying to stabilize myself.

“Sorry, Momma, I think I’m just comin’ down with somethin’.”

She stared at me full on. “You’re not sick, darlin.”