

UGLY GOOD

AN HONORS THESIS

SUBMITTED ON THE FOURTH DAY OF MAY, 2021

TO THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

OF THE HONORS PROGRAM

OF NEWCOMB-TULANE COLLEGE

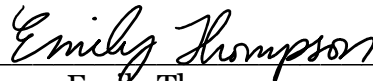
TULANE UNIVERSITY

FOR THE DEGREE OF

BACHELOR OF LIBERAL ARTS

WITH HONORS IN ENGLISH

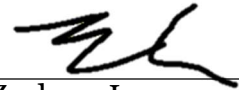
BY



---

Emily Thompson

APPROVED:



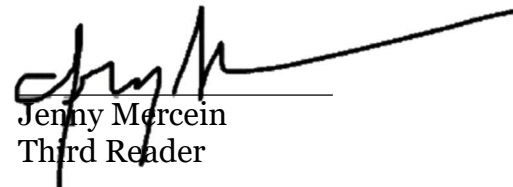
---

Zachary Lazar  
Director of Thesis



---

Thomas Beller  
Second Reader



---

Jenny Mercein  
Third Reader



Emily Thompson. Ugly Good.

(Professor Zachary Lazar, English)

In this short story collection, you will find four stories about what I think are the passions of life, and the paradoxes they bring. There is a story about religion and sexuality, a story about trauma and family, a story about sex, and a story about love. These are the lights and darks I know; these are the passions that separate life from death. They all have deep south settings, because this is my tribute to the place I am from. It's a place to be admired and improved, preserved and progressed. Like anything worth attention, it is not perfect, but balancing light and dark. These are stories of southern young people turning corners that will define the rest of their lives. They're thick in the good and bad and not yet indoctrinated; coming of age in a world that's always turned up to 100 degrees of its best and worst. Each generation takes their family's traumas and teachings and balances being better with staying loyal. We grow up, we get better. The introduction is called *Light and Dark: Finding Meaning in Opposites*. I engage with five works of fiction: Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, John Irving's *The Cider House Rules*, Ruth Ware's *In a Dark, Dark Wood*, John Green's *Looking For Alaska*, and Annie Proulx's *Brokeback Mountain*, discussing how these authors reveal meaning in three sections: Protection and Trauma, Love and Fear, and Life and Death. Through these dichotomies I define my own perception of meaning and the passions of life.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'd like to thank my readers:

Professor Zachary Lazar, for mentoring me for four years. Thank you for all your wisdom and for teaching me yes, Emily, it's okay to write about horses.

Professor Thomas Beller, for saying "you're not even trying," and teaching me that good writing falls between narcissism and self-doubt.

Professor Jenny Mercein, one of the most loving people I know. You made me feel that my voice was worth hearing.

And my friends and family:

Liz and Richard Flury, my grandparents, who gave me the gift of the greatest education I could have imagined.

My parents, for so many things, but here I'll say – thank you for letting me get a degree in creative writing.

My friends who read my writing and told me I could do this: Renee Trepagnier, Nicholas Mueller, John Landry, Seth Williamson.

## CONTENTS

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Introduction.....	1
<i>Folklore</i> .....	9
<i>What's Past is Prologue</i> .....	29
<i>Push and Pull</i> .....	44
<i>Avoiding Cynicism and Other Unavoidable Feelings</i> .....	57
References.....	86

## INTRODUCTION

### Light and Dark: Finding Meaning in Opposites

A bright light shone directly in the eyes does no good; all it does is blind you. But take the light away from the eyes, shine it around in the darkness, and it illuminates. Without the darkness, what good is light? All we know of life is light and dark spaces. It's the juxtaposition of them that brings meaning. The borders of everything are defined by an opposite. For how can something be perceived if not by comparing it to its foil? Every coin has two sides. Light and dark. In *Folklore*, Helen struggles with love and guilt intertwined because of the intersection of opposites in herself and her father – Helen is a gay Catholic, her father is a kind bigot. But not every paradox is painful, as Helen and Jaime's relationship shows, and some are necessary. In the work of John Irving, Ruth Ware, Annie Proulx, John Green, and Kazuo Ishiguro light and dark cohabit in the juxtaposition of protection and trauma, love and fear, life and death.

## PROTECTION AND TRAUMA

Trauma is not a rare condition; I would say it's no more rare than a beating heart. Children can't be protected from it, but for those who love them, it's so tempting to try. In Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, Kathy reunites with her teachers from Hailsham, Madame and Miss Emily, who explains how she sheltered her students:

Whatever else, we at least saw to it that all of you in our care, you grew up in wonderful surroundings. And we saw to it too, after you left us, you

were kept away from the worst of those horrors. We were able to do that much for you at least. (238)

Miss Emily couldn't protect Kathy from trauma, but she shielded her as best she could while she was young. Ishiguro says in an interview with the Guardian:

Hailsham is like a physical manifestation of what we have to do to all children,' he says. 'It is a protected world. To some extent at least you have to shield children from what you know and drip-feed information to them. Sometimes that is kindly meant, and sometimes not.

When you become a parent, or a teacher, you turn into a manager of this whole system. You become the person controlling the bubble of innocence around a child, regulating it. All children have to be deceived if they are to grow up without trauma. (Adams)

In *What's Past is Prologue*, Jess' difficult relationship with her mother stems from the two-sided coin of love and control. Jess has felt throughout her life that her mother spends far more time controlling her than loving her, and now she's forcing Jess to change her life. It hurts, but so do stitches. Her mother prioritizes pushing Jess to what's best for her over making Jess feel loved. Love and control cannot coexist, as Wally explains in *The Cider House Rules*:

“And the thing about love . . . is that you can't force anyone. It's natural to want someone you love to do what you want, or what you think would be good for them, but you have to let everything happen to them . . . You can't protect people, kiddo,” Wally said. “All you can do is love them.” (Irving 569)

Trying to protect a child, or anyone you love, is a difficult balance. You want to defend them from the cruelty of the world, but you also want them to be well-adjusted. Children have to grow up at some point, and that requires painful realizations about humans and what they're capable of. Ruth Ware's *In a Dark, Dark Wood* states:

There is no gray when you're young. There's only goodies and baddies, right and wrong. The rules are very clear—a playground morality of ethical lines drawn out like a netball pitch, with clear fouls and penalties. (232)

When you grow up, and you see that humans play in the gray, that's when you get hurt. Trauma is often far more complicated than a punch in the face. It happens when you thought someone was good and they do something bad. It happens when your trust is violated, and when you realize not everyone's learned the same playground morality. Nora's past trauma of *In a Dark, Dark Wood* is betrayal from the boy she loved; when James got her pregnant and abandoned her, she aborted the baby and moved away. Ten years later, she is still haunted by the trauma. After his death, realizes she doesn't need to forgive James, she needs to forgive herself:

Now as I look back across ten years, I don't know. It's not that I absolve James for the thoughtless cruelty of that text, but . . . Perhaps I absolve myself. For the mistake I made in loving James. I realize how young we were – hardly more than children with the careless cruelty of childhood and the rigid black-and-white morality, too. (Ware 232)

In *Push and Pull* and *What's Past is Prologue*, Erin and Jess's past traumas poison their new lives, but they are beginning to accept that *better* is more



realistic than *perfect*. If they can forgive themselves and embrace the good that trauma brought into their lives, they will start to heal. Past pains may often be seeds for new blessings. Allowing those you love to experience trauma and then heal from it is essential to growth; through trauma comes strength, for *a gem cannot be polished without friction, nor a man perfected without trials*.

## LOVE AND FEAR

In *Avoiding Cynicism and Other Unavoidable Feelings*, Brandon struggles with this ugly good: when you care about someone, you open yourself up to hurt and fear. In *Looking for Alaska*, Miles notes “The Buddha said that suffering was caused by desire, we'd learned, and that the cessation of desire meant the cessation of suffering” (Green 208). Without desire, without love, you may lose the bad, but you will also lose the good. Love is the greatest thing in life, but also the most painful. In *The Cider House Rules*, it is Dr. Larch’s “view that there was no more safety to be found in love than there was to be found in a virus” (Irving 400). Perhaps more words have been written on love than any other subject in human history, and equally in worship and abhorrence. The deepest knowing of another person’s soul happens with love and sex; in *In a Dark, Dark Wood* Nora knows James this intimately, and after he leaves her and their baby, she choose to be alone for ten years. After the hurt of James’ betrayal, Nora would rather quit love altogether. This is one terrifying risk of love – that your lover will hurt you. A still greater risk is that you will lose your lover to death, and Nora experiences that pain too. Ware describes poignantly what it’s like for Nora to know James so intimately:

I knew him so that I could tell you every scar and mark on his body, the appendix slit to the right of his belly, the stitches from where he fell off his bike, the way his hair parted in three separate crowns, each swirling into the other.

I knew him by heart.

And he is gone. (Ware 200)

Losing the person you love to death when you know them more intimately than your own body is crushing, and it happens all the time. In *Looking for Alaska*, it happens to Miles, and his intimacy with Alaska redefines her death in the moment he finds out; he can't help but picture her body:

I could feel hands on my back as I hunched forward, but I could only see her lying naked on a metal table, a small trickle of blood falling out of her half-teardrop nose, her green eyes open, staring off into the distance, her mouth turned up just enough to suggest the idea of a smile, and she had felt so warm against me, her mouth soft and warm on mine. (Green 153)

Joy together, pain apart; they must both exist. And even greater fear than what Nora and Miles face in love: Jack and Ennis in *Brokeback Mountain*. Annie Proulx's heartbreaking depiction of love and the effects of its virus are heightened by homophobia. Even lying in post-coital bliss next to Jack, Ennis feel this fear: "We do that in the wrong place we'll be dead. There's no reins on this one. It scares the piss out of me" (Proulx 12). He's right, and Jack drowns in a puddle of his own blood on the side of the road for it. Love, fear. Homophobia makes that fear crippling.

## LIFE AND DEATH

The greatest fear in love is death. That the one you love will be torn from you in great pain and you will never get them back. But life and death are inseparable sides of the same coin, so humans have to find a way to live with both. Circumventing the espousal of life and death multiplies suffering, and authors have told that truth over and over – *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, *Never Let Me Go* – they all show the repercussions of cheating death. A common theme in fairy tails is *all magic comes at a cost*, but it's actually scientific: energy cannot be created or destroyed, so playing with the balance of good and bad will always create insidious ripples. When humans cheat death in *Never Let Me Go*, the very substance of the human soul comes into question. At Hailsham, Madame collected her students' art. It isn't until many years after leaving the school that Kathy finds out why, when they reunite: "We took away your art because we thought it would reveal your souls. Or to put it more finely, we did it to *prove you had souls at all*" (Ishiguro 238). By denying that humans clones have souls, this dystopian English society justifies exploitation and murder. To avoid these tragedies, humans must accept the inevitability of death. This is the greatest dichotomy of light and dark: life and death. In *The Cider House Rules*, Dr. Wilbur Larch plays God in an orphanage in St. Cloud's, Maine:

He was an obstetrician; he delivered babies into the world. His colleagues called this "the Lord's work." And he was an abortionist; he delivered mothers, too. His colleagues called this "the Devil's work," but it was *all* the Lord's work to Wilbur Larch. (Irving 66)

If life and death were tectonic plates, St. Cloud's would be the Great Rift Valley. One would think all that playing God is too much for a man, but Wilbur Larch lived to a ripe "ninety-something." Perhaps you so often find good with bad because humans are amazingly resilient creatures; terrible things can happen to us, and we still manage to find a way to survive. In *In a Dark, Dark Wood* Nora faces this ultimate ugly good. The ugliest thing on earth, death, still has a good:

Because what I realized, as I held his hand and he bled all over the floor, was that my anger, which I had thought was black and insuperable and would never fade, was already going, bleeding out over the floor along with James' life.

It has defined me for so long, my bitterness about what happened. And now it's gone – the bitterness is gone, but so is James, the only other person who knew.

There is lightness about that knowledge, but also a terrible weight.

(Ware 198)

She loses the love of her life, but she also loses her poisonous hate. Love, death; light, dark; we can handle both, because we have to. We accept the ugly good. And "we need never be hopeless, because we can never be irreparably broken" (Green 232).

The greatest pains and joys of life are married, no less than light and dark, and all the deepest passions of humans bring them both. In this short story collection, you will find four stories; there is a story about religion and sexuality, a story about trauma and family, a story about sex, and a story about love. These

are the lights and darks I know; these are the passions that separate life from death.

## *Folklore*

### **Then**

**T**he sky was just getting dusk-dark when four friends in a Camry bumped onto the camp's gravel road. The darkest part of the day, Helen's dad would say. Darker than darkness because there's shadows but no light. That's when you gotta lock up the dogs because if they run in the street, ain't nothing but the sleepy voice of Delilah and a good-looking sunset on the mind of the trucker barreling home in his Duly. That's when you see the creatures that aren't there but you don't see your kid riding his trike across the driveway.

Jamie's mom said it was when the veil between this world and the next was thinnest, but Jamie knew that was something she picked up from *Twilight*. She'd see her mom looking out the window at dusk and wonder if she was looking for Edward Cullen in the trees, waiting to sweep Marie up and out of a mundane life with a now ex-husband who thought she was too sentimental. Jamie's mom was the kind of girl who got called an "old soul" in college. The kind of girl who

loved the same things as her grandma. Jamie didn't think she'd consciously rejected that stuff, but she'd still ended up all hard rock and vodka sodas, rather than fresh-baked sourdough and lace. While Marie dreamed of opening a B&B in a white creaky-wood house with a garden, Jamie just wanted to live in an apartment without tiled counters. She was so tired of cleaning shit out of the grout.

*Helen would've made a much better daughter for her,* Jamie thought.

Jamie remembered her first time in Helen's bedroom, the bookshelf cluttered with scented candles and the bed with pastel-colored pillows and stuffed animals. Jamie had tossed a pink dragon on the floor so she could pull Helen onto the bed, but Helen stopped her tongue's feverish exploration of Jamie's lower lip to cry, "noo!" and retrieve the dragon. She'd fluffed it back up and placed it on the nightstand, and Jamie began to realize that Helen's softness was not just in her heart and her flesh but her taste too.

It was only thirty minutes from Fairhope, Alabama to Helen's dad's camp on Lauperouse Lake, but if she had to pee, she'd tell her dad and he'd stop at the Piggly Wiggly on the corner of Spanish Fort and Old Spanish Trail, because he wasn't in no rush.

It should've been about the same from Springhill, but the four friends had gone a few minutes out of their way to stop at Zaxby's for dinner – not five minutes from the Piggly Wiggly itself. It was there that Helen drank a 42-ounce Diet Coke, in preparation for the long night of drinking she was surely facing. Jack and Dan wanted to celebrate the end of fall semester, Jamie happily put down any drink placed in front of her, and Helen was never one to appear

prudish. After dinner she'd raced Dan to the car to call shotgun, because it only counted if you were touching paint. She didn't win, but she forgot to pee. So she sat in the back with her legs crossed tighter than a Baptist in a brothel, set on keeping her bladder sealed for the next 15 minutes so she didn't reinforce any inklings of female weakness that festered in Jack or Dan's brains.

Not like her dad. With him it was simple. If she had to pee, she had to pee. And he'd get a Coke and Slim Jim for it.

Helen was worried about her dad meeting Marie. Being here made her miss her dad. She'd see him when they got back from the camp, but it would be all hustle and bustle as the three of them prepared to fly to Seattle to spend Christmas with Marie. It still felt like a strange arrangement to Helen, and surely her dad too. But Marie had bought their tickets and Jamie had convinced her.

Jamie called her mom romantic when she was being nice, and out of touch with reality when she wasn't. Marie called herself spiritual. That's what worried Helen, not the head-in-the-clouds tendencies Jamie complained about. The problem was that Marie's spirituality led her to believe there were fairies in the garden, not that God existed. And for Helen's father, a man who believed in steak and fries and leaving the camp early on Sunday morning to make it to church, Marie would be the perfect sign that Jamie was leading his daughter to hell in a handbasket. She could picture it in cringingly sharp detail: her broad oak-of-a-man father putting on his good boots and holding his hat in both hands when he ducked through the doorway of Marie's doily-dusted home. "Good to meet you Ms. Cooper," he'd say, as Marie rushed over in little jean-shorts, brown curls piled up on her head and clipped hastily in place. "Just Marie!" she'd say, bustling



his boots off his feet because her house was as shoeless as every hobbit-hole in the Shire. He'd stop her before his socks came off, relieved of his boots in that bewildering first moment but much too southern-gentleman to let Marie see his bare feet. He wouldn't make it obvious, but Helen would catch him cutting longing glances to his boots, sitting at attention on Marie's embroidered shoe mat by the door. He would be uncomfortable all the way to dinner, where Marie would deposit a garden salad in front of him that really did come straight out her garden. Jamie would joke *I hope you washed the dirt off*, and after her dad suggested Marie say a prayer, Helen's predictive faculties failed. For whatever what kind of whimsical pagan prayer Marie would offer was beyond Helen's imagination, and she'd never seen a salad come within arm's length of her father. Rabbit food was certainly not in Tom Broussard's diet.

Unlike Jamie and Marie, Helen never had to take care of her dad, and she'd never told him what to do. Unlike Helen, Jamie thought Tom Broussard was a dying breed.

Helen didn't appreciate *dying* in the same sentence as her father's name, but she wasn't really bothered by Jamie's comments on Christians or on her dad broadening his horizons. She knew he was just the proper product of a good southern boy grown into a good single father. She didn't want to do any changing, and she knew nothing would change him if she did.

Her dad had sent her something a few days ago. A bishop's words – “one need not stand with BLM to stand for black lives.” She hoped he didn't say anything like that in front of Jamie. Her dad had some problematic opinions, yes. Helen didn't need anyone to tell her *that* when she was pretty sure her dad was

still waiting for her to bring home a boy. But he wasn't a hateful person. He believed in the sanctity of life, and that all people are created in God's image. He loved everyone. He told her all the time, "love like Jesus." But other stuff got in the way of that goodness in him. Like politics. Helen didn't like it, but she wasn't willing to ostracize her only parent by correcting him on right and wrong. She stuck with, "I don't agree with that."

One time when Jamie thought Helen was being too bossy she'd said "I *do* have a mom you know!" Before clamping her hand over her mouth. It was rare for Jamie to regret something she'd said. But saying that to your girlfriend with a dead mom was enough to make even Jamie repentant. Helen wished she could say that when Jamie commented on Helen's *goodness*, because it made her feel like Jamie was trying to be Helen's replacement mom. Helen hadn't known her mom for very long, since she'd died when Helen was six. But she was pretty sure she'd been better mom than Jamie.

Helen had met Jamie that fall semester at Springhill, and when it became clear she loved this girl, Jamie had to meet her dad, and not as Helen's best friend. So Helen took Jamie home for the weekend before the semester ended and told her dad "this is my girlfriend Jamie." Jamie looked her dad square in the eye, said "Nice to meet you Mr. Broussard," and shook his hand. Tom made Jamie sleep in the guest room, which was just fine with Helen. He was gruff but polite, and Helen was happy. She didn't think her dad would've treated a boyfriend any differently.

It wasn't until she and Jamie decided to move in together the following fall that he voiced strong disapproval. The possibility crossed Helen's mind that her

dad had only treated Jamie well because he didn't think they were serious, but that caused nothing but pain to consider. So Helen decided she had to sit down in front of her father and talk about something really difficult, which neither of them were good at. He told her that he loved her, but he was sad for her. He said that being gay would make her life harder, and that she wasn't going to have the same kind of beautiful family he did. She told him that Jamie made her happier than anyone on the entire planet, even though she knew that hurt his feelings. She told him that he shouldn't be sad for her any more than he should be sad that she was born with brown eyes. He said he was sad that she was born with brown eyes, because he wanted her to have her mom's blues. Then they both cried and hugged each other, and Helen went back to accepting. Better he be sad than angry. Better he be polite to Jamie than ignore her. And he had always let Helen have her own life. He would've been sad if she moved in with a boyfriend she wasn't married to, she told herself, and that's why he was sad that she moved in with Jamie.

Helen never told Jamie about that conversation, and Jamie went on thinking that Tom's close-mindedness was limited to the non-existence of all supernaturals except the trinity. Which was fine with Helen. If she wanted to hear more about her dad's shortcomings, she could probably just wait until after Christmas.

**Now**

"I have to pee," Helen says. "I call bathroom first."

Jack shakes his head so hard it vibrates the driver's seat in front of her. "I gotta take an absolutely massive shit in the next 40 seconds or it's poopie in the pants time."

Jamie sighs. "That's nice, Jack."

"I'll just pee in the woods," Helen says.

Jamie doesn't particularly want to wander into the woods with Helen when there is a nice cozy cabin waiting for them, but she doesn't want to go inside with poopie-pants Jack either. She can see it now, outlined against the lake, which is just barely bright enough with the sky's post-sunset glow to create a silhouette. The cabin is on stilts, with a balcony wrapped around the two sides she can see from the car. As much as Jamie despises the outdoors, the camp seems like a nice place to spend the weekend.

"My mom would like this place," Jamie comments.

Helen gives Dan the keys while Jack runs up the stairs and starts jiggling the doorhandle desperately, and the two girls enter the dark canopy of the forest through a deer trail.

"Too bad you didn't inherit her love of nature." Helen says.

"I might have inherited it, but she burned it out of me. At Christmas dinner the three of you can wax poetic about trees and I'll waterboard myself with red wine."

"At least that's one thing our parents can talk about."

"Until you dad follows trees to hunting."

Helen sighs. "They're just so *different*."

"But so are we," Jamie says.

Helen nods. "And we're devastatingly in love with each other."

Jamie rolls her eyes, but smiles. "Maybe they'll fall in love too, then. It'll be a fun new dimension to our relationship where everyone thinks it's incest because our parents get married before us."

Helen cringes at the thought. "Before us? I was under the impression marriage was off the table."

Jamie shrugs. "Yeah, the romantic flowers and churches and families charade is off the table. But we already live together. Maybe we'll end up in a civil union."

"Oh Jamie, *no*. Either we're committing to a domestic partnership or we're getting married. The right to gay marriage is ours for the taking and I don't want second rate. I want the real deal or not at all."

"Alright, don't get all Alice Paul on me."

"I prefer Phyllis Lyon."

"Okay, Phyllis, wanna be my date to our parent's wedding?"

"I hope that's never a question I have to answer."

"What, you don't want our parents to get along?"

"I don't want them to get along *that* well."

"What's the perfect scenario?"

"My dad compliments the house, the dinner, and comments on how happy we make each other. Your mom doesn't bring up fairies."

"Wow, not much to ask from my mom huh?"

"I think that's a lot to ask."

"When's the last time you heard her talk about fairies?"

“On Tuesday, when we were on the phone with her and she suggested I throw my orange peels in the garden so the fairies could use them to make clothes.”

“I like to think that was a joke.”

“Even if it was, my dad won’t get it.”

“Oh come on, he could use a little horizon broadening. Fairies and fishing are practically the same wheelhouse anyway.”

Helen understands why Jamie says those things. *Horizon broadening. Outside the bubble. Open-minded.* They are nice words, but they exist in a different world than her father. Jamie’s childhood in the Pacific Northwest was punctuated with convincing her mom that Bigfoot was *not* out there, and she shouldn’t go into the woods hunting for him while dad was at work. The fairies were an acceptable compromise because searching for them involved staying on the property.

Edward Cullen is just a pipe dream. Marie does draw a line between fantasy and reality, just much deeper into the enchanted forest than the vast majority of the population.

Jamie stops fast when Helen’s phone light winks out into deepening darkness.

“Ah – fuck.” Helen says.

“Your phone did not just die.”

“I told you in the car that I only had three percent.”

“That was like one minute ago! How could it be dead already?”

“The flashlight uses up the battery really fast. I knew it wouldn’t last long.”

“Well, now what? I’m *not* down to wander alone in the woods until dawn.”

“Alone? I’m right here.” Helen reaches out to feel Jamie, because it has darkened fast and she’s no longer sure where anything is.

“Yeah, sorry, but you don’t count. I’ve seen Blair Witch Project. You’d probably just throw away the map.”

“We don’t *have* a map.” Helen says. “My phone is dead.”

“It’s a metaphor. The point is in life-or-death situations, it’s human instinct to be selfish. Self-preservation.”

“Okay, you’re the one whose mind immediately went to self-preservation. We’re like 100 feet from the cabin. It’s definitely not life or death.”

“Yeah, we’re not 100 feet from the cabin. Do you see light through the trees? No? That’s because you made us walk for five minutes to find a *pah-riiivate* pee spot. It’s dark! I can’t even see the moon! Who’s gonna see you peeing?”

“I’m *sorry* that I’m a modest person. You know I can’t pee under stress. If you didn’t want to come this far you should’ve said something.”

“Well *you* should’ve said your phone was about to die!”

“I did! And anyway, at least I brought my phone. I don’t know why you’re complaining about my phone being dead when you left yours in the car.”

“First of all, I didn’t know you were gonna drag us through the woods for five minutes. And second, I *would’ve* brought my phone if I didn’t think *you* had it covered!”

“Hold on. Do you see that?” Helen grabs Jamie’s arm.

“What?”

“Right there. Behind that tree.”

“No?”

“Is that... is that foot?!”

“Are you trying to scare me?”

“No, I’m serious. Be quiet.”

“Where?”

“Right *there*.”

“I can’t fucking see where you’re pointing. It’s too dark.”

“Just look straight ahead. Behind that tree. Oh man, it’s moving.”

“Helen, stop. I don’t see anything.”

“I’m not kidding. There’s something –“

“Guys?” Dan’s voice rings from behind them.

“FUCK!” Helen clutches her chest.

“What the *fuck*, Dan?”

“Sorry. We thought you got lost.”

“What, is your phone dead too?” Jamie asks. “Where’s your flashlight?”

“Don’t need a flashlight with y’all yelling at each other.”

“We weren’t yelling.” Helen corrects him.

“Arguing, then.”

“We weren’t arguing,” Jamie says. “We were having a discussion.”

“Yeah, uh huh. Well, come inside. Jack’s calling blood oath.”

“Wait, I haven’t peed yet.”

“Oh my *god*.” Though she can’t see Jamie very well, Helen knows the sound of her smacking her forehead.



“You can pee in the house. Jack is done blowing up the bathroom.” Dan’s footsteps start back through the leaves.

“You know, if it was such an emergency that you couldn’t wait for Jack to finish in the bathroom, you would’ve peed by now.”

Dan’s footsteps pause when he realizes they weren’t following.

“You *know* Jack always takes massive shits. I thought it was gonna be way longer.”

“Didn’t y’all see him eat 30 hot wings?” Dan asks. “Those went right through him. I could hear them coming out of his ass like rocket fuel.”

“Okay, I’m not using that bathroom. Dan, you’re gonna have to go back and I’ll pee.”

“For fuck’s sake, Helen, did you forget that 30 seconds ago we were lost out here and you were seeing apparitions?”

“Do you have your phone, Dan? Shine your light behind that tree.”

“What tree?”

“*That* tree. The one I’m pointing to.”

“I can’t see where you’re pointing.”

“Shine the light, then!”

“I don’t want to blind you.”

“Just give me your phone.”

“Do you see anything?” Jamie asks.

“I don’t know. Maybe it wasn’t this tree.”

“*Or*, there was nothing there.”

“No, I saw a foot. Like a goat foot.”

“A hoof? Can you just pee?”

“If Dan leaves.”

“Yeah, I’m leaving. You can keep my phone. Just don’t get scared by a goat and drop it while you’re running away.”

“Ha-ha. But yeah, thanks.”

“And can y’all hurry? Jack refuses to do shots without you.”

“Ey, that’s my best buddy!” Helen says gleefully.

“Just because you and Jack were the only ones wack enough to actually use blood in the blood oath doesn’t make y’all cool.” Jamie says.

“I don’t know, it kinda does.”

“Just go, Dan!”

“Alright, bye.”

Jamie waits until Dan’s footsteps crunch out of ear shot and says, “I’m surprised Dan didn’t make a comment about us fucking out here.”

“Pretty sure he knows you wouldn’t have sex in the woods.”

“What! Not true.”

“Oh? Okay, right now.”

“Not fair – we’re supposed to go back for shots and you just saw Satan spying on us. But a different time I would.”

“Until you prove that to me I will stick to my guns.”

“Well, maybe I wouldn’t hate the woods so much if I didn’t spend my childhood worrying that my mom would wander into them.”

“You could create new, good memories in the woods, but instead you use your mom as an excuse to get out of woods sex.”

“Jesus Mary and Joseph, can you just pee?”

“You’re the one who keeps distracting me.”

“I’m shutting up.”

Helen squats next to a tree, missing the *bwaaaa* of frogs she hears during summer visits to the camp. “I can’t pee when it’s this silent.”

“What, should I sing a song?”

“Sing *As The Deer Panteth for the Water.*”

“Yeah, that’s not happening. You can choose between *Happy Birthday* and Hannah Montana.”

“I want a Jesus song.”

“I don’t consent.”

“To Jesus?”

“Yes.”

“Well when we get attacked by goat-Satan I’m not giving you my crucifix.”

“You’re seeing things because you read too much Revelation. I knew that bible study was a mistake.”

“I just want to know what’s gonna happen to you at the apocalypse. And you always think bible study is a mistake.”

“I thought you had your heart set on converting me before then.”

“Gotta be prepared for all eventualities.”

“Well since you’re a child of God, Satan is gonna get you first.”

“No, God will defend me.”

“No, Satan will take you as an insult to God.”

“Satan preys on the weak.”

“Well damn, cause I can squat 20 pounds more than you.”

“The weak in *faith*, Jamie.”

“Okay I thought we were joshing. I’m not ready for the conversion talk.”

“Then sing my song and we can go take shots.”

“Fucking hell. Fine, what song?”

“How about *Earth and All Stars*.”

“That brings back good memories. You were practicing that one all week when we first moved in together.”

“Sounds like your worst nightmare.”

“No, you have a beautiful voice. It made our house feel alive. After living alone for three years even Jesus songs made me feel warm inside.”

“That’s pretty sweet, Jamie. Might write that one down.”

“Hey – you’re peeing!”

“Shut up. You might make it shy again.”

“*Loud rushing planets, sing to the Lo-or-or-ord a new song!*”

“Better.”

“*OH VICTORY! LOUD SHOUTING ARMIES!*”

“Okay, I’m good. Don’t mock me.”

“I’m not mocking you. I like it when you sing like that.”

“I don’t sing like that.”

“Yes you do. I call it your opera voice.”

“I’m in a chamber choir. There’s no opera.”

“*Ohhkay* miss chamber choir. Let’s go back.”

“You don’t want to look for Satan?”

“Not with you around. He’d snatch you up.”

“Uh huh. You probably scared him off anyway.”

“Was my singing that bad?”

“No, but joyful noise repels evil.”

“What if the person singing it is a heathen?”

“I don’t know. I think it still counts. I can ask my priest.”

“Once again, joking.”

“I know, but I still take you seriously in case once day you are.”

“Why didn’t you just find a Christian girlfriend instead of toiling the impossible path of converting me?”

“Well, there aren’t that many Christian lesbians. Besides, I want you. God is calling me to your conversion.”

“Yuck, Helen. Don’t say cheesy shit like that.”

“Why? I let you call me your fallen angel.”

“UGH! In the *bedroom*. While we’re *fucking*. It’s so different. And anyway. *Joking*. Please don’t just say that out of nowhere again. I’m putting that in banned phrases.”

“Aw Jamie, don’t. It makes me feel sexy when you say that.”

“That’s kind of messed up.”

“That’s mean.”

“Sorry. It’s just you’re the good one. I don’t want to corrupt you.”

“I’m not that good. I’m a person too. It’s not fair to hold me to higher standards.”

“This feels like the argument we had last week.”

“Which one?”

“When you were like, I’m going to a church dinner. And I was like, shouldn’t they be giving that food to someone else.”

“Okay, yeah, that’s because it’s the same argument. Christians need to eat, and Christians need to get turned on.”

“I know, I know. You’re just supposed to be... better.”

“So are you.”

“Okay.”

The cabin lights are glowing on Jamie’s face when she speaks again. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“For being unfair. I know you’re just a person. I’m just proud of what a good person you are, and I don’t want to mess that up.”

“Thanks.”

The cabin door opens and they can see Dan’s silhouette on the balcony.

“Hey, are y’all coming?”

“Yes, Dan.” Jamie calls. “We’re coming. We’re trying to have a moment.”

“Sorry. Jack just keeps asking if Helen’s breaking the blood oath.”

“She’s not breaking it. It’s the only thing that makes her cool.”

Helen swats her. “Oh fuck off, Jamie. But yeah, I’m not breaking it.”

“Also, I told them about your goat and now Jack has a scary story to tell.”

“Is it about Satan?”

“Ummm, no.”

“Okay, we’re coming.” Helen says.

Jamie grabs her hand. “Made up?”

“Yes. Now can we go inside and take shots?”

“Yes. I’m done with the woods.”

“So, no woods sex?”

“Yeah, maybe not. Don’t want Satan watching.”

“He’d probably high five you for corrupting me.”

“*Helen.*”

“Sorry. Too soon.”

“Eh, it was funny.”

“I know, that’s why I said it. By the way, Satan isn’t a goat in Revelation. He’s a dragon.”

“Then why is he a goat man in like every scary movie?”

“I don’t know. He was never a goat in the bible.”

### **Later**

Helen will be pushing drunk already when truth or dare starts. Her first shot is easy; gross, but diluted by the thrill of the blood-oath, by the little bit of bad-ass she feels when it hits her throat. The next two are momentum; the four of them sit on the carpet with a half-empty Svedka bottle that started its consumption back at Springhill, and each time the conversation lulls, someone says, “shot?” and they all down another ounce.

She’ll want to slow down, because they only just got there and she doesn’t like being that drunk anyway – she always does something embarrassing.

Tonight it will be to tell Jack *if they’re both single at 30, they get married*. The

next morning she realizes *that's something you say when you're 12, Helen. 30 is seven years away, and you're gay*. And she remembers the look on Jack's face, who wasn't nearly as drunk as she is, and sobriety will tell her he was uncomfortable. And Jack doesn't get uncomfortable. She'll bury her face in the pillow, movie-style, and groan. She'll remember throughout the day embarrassing things that took place in the kitchen, on the porch, while she was holding that Tractor Supply mug, full of a mixed drink poured with far too heavy a hand.

She'll wish she quit drinking hard liquor after three shots, but she'll know by now she'd do the same thing again. It's the reason she made the blood oath, the reason she never said no to shots. Once upon a time it was subconscious. Four years into college she's realized she's overcompensating. The same way Jamie takes up extra space because she's used to being the only woman in an engineering class, Helen wants to be the *cool Christian girl*. Helen wants to say yes when her drunk friends ask her to sing selections from chamber choir. She knows they just want to make fun of her, but being a cool Catholic means she can laugh along with them. Helen swears like it's in her saliva, because she doesn't want anyone thinking she's *holier than thou*. Helen loves Disney movies, pastel colors, and cartoons made for children. But she feels safest in ripped black jeans and platform Doc Martens. *You can be both*, she wants to say. You can be cool and Catholic. When Robin Rice made fun of her on the playground in first grade, saying *Helen is in love with Jesus!* Helen didn't know why she cried. She did love Jesus, what was so wrong with that? But now she didn't cry. She said *fuck yeah, I do!* right back, and played a part. Played the girl who does it all. Didn't tell Jamie



the reason it took her so long to get her finger inside Helen. Didn't tell her the thoughts running through her head were making her vagina lock up defensively. Helen knew she wasn't supposed to get fingered. And she *definitely* wasn't supposed to get fingered by a girl. Jamie thought she might have vaginismus. Helen was pretty sure she just had Catholic guilt.

## *What's Past is Prologue*

I know there's a jump in front of us, but it's too dark to see where. Leo's stride quickens, and suddenly, I can see the outline of the jump. I sit back and pull hard, trying to stop; we are coming in way too fast. But it's too close, I can't do anything. Leo launches himself desperately off the ground, scrambling to get his footing with his back feet. I know he can't make it. His left leg clears the edge of the table, and all I can do is grab mane. I feel the jarring thud of his right leg as it hooks on the jump, and the sound of hoof scraping wood.

I jerk awake, my breath dragging in and out of my throat in ragged gasps. I lift my hand to block the light piercing through the window, and my fingers are shaking.

My neck is wet with sweat, my hair plastered uncomfortably to my skin. The sun beats in like a heat lamp.

The perfect time of day at home is around nine AM, when the sun fills the living room up to the brim with light. I love to lay out on the cowhide rug in the

sunlight, which annoys Helen, because “why do we have furniture if you’re not going to use it?”

But I fell asleep, and by eleven, the sun has climbed above the neighbor’s roof and burns into the house with ferocity, slicking me with sweat while I dream unhappy dreams. Helen is, not shockingly, at work. There is one box still in the living room, waiting for me to pack the last of my things.

Helen comes home for lunch at 11:45 exactly, just like always, and I’m still lying on the floor. That’s a mistake. “Jessica!” She has her keys in her hand and her Louboutins on and she’s already yelling at me. “What have you been doing all day? I’m doing you a favor shipping these boxes once you’re gone, so actually pack them. I swear to God I’m not going to do for you if you leave it like this.”

“I know, I’m doing it.”

“Get up.” She says. “Stop lying on the floor. I’m not working my ass off for you to lie around like a spoiled cat all day.” My last day at work was three days ago and Helen is not letting that go. Her work ethic is her religion, and she’s constantly going around evangelizing with fire and brimstone. I got her a “Work Hard or Burn in Hell” shirt for her birthday last year, but instead of getting mad, she loved it, and usually wears it on casual Friday with 400-dollar jeans and heels just an inch lower than usual.

“Can you not walk in here yelling at me?” I dig my nails into my palm, keeping my voice even. My mom will always yell louder than me. I’m not in the mood to egg her on. “It’s only noon. I have the whole day to finish packing.”

“So you’re just gonna leave it all for when I get home tonight? Our last night together?” Her voice is quiet now, a feeler searching for a shred of guilt to latch onto.

“If want to spend time with me, maybe you can take the half day off work. We can go for a walk in the park. Get our nails done. Whatever you want.”

She steps out of her shoes and walks into the kitchen. “You know I can’t do that.”

“You literally can. What is the point of being the boss if you can’t even spend the day with your daughter when you’re about to ship her across the country?”

“I am *not* shipping you,” she says tightly. “Don’t act like it’s some kind of abuse.”

“Okay, you’re kicking me out.”

“Oh, Jess. Come on. It’s not normal for you to live with your mom at 22. You work at a ramen shop. If that’s the future you see for yourself, fine. But I won’t be a part of it.”

Helen framed the whole thing like it was my choice to stay or go, as long as I moved out. If I could afford a place in Uptown New Orleans or a car then yeah, I would keep working at Nomiya. It’s fine with me. I can even swallow living with Helen if I can just keep doing what I’m doing. Besides, it doesn’t feel like the frowned upon “living with your mom” that Helen claims it is. Helen is barely my mom. We’re only nineteen years apart and she’s more like an annoying roommate who thinks she’s better than you. I mean, she doesn’t even let me call her mom. It makes her feel too old.

Helen sighs. “Look, I know you think everything is fine. I know you don’t think moving back to Colorado is the ideal next step in your life. But you need an intervention. Living with me made sense when you were recovering, but now it’s time to be recovered. Go back to your life. Ignite some passion.”

“Go back to my life.” I say flatly.

Helen starts doing kitchen things, and annoyance prickles across my forearms. She doesn’t care. She doesn’t think about me the way she thinks about herself. Something about our nineteen-year age difference makes me less of a person.

*Plink, plink-plink.* Her three ice cubes hit the glass. Only three, ever. The hiss of the cap being unscrewed from the raspberry iced tea. *Glug, glug,* crackling ice. The fridge opens again. I sit up and stare out the window at crows in the trees.

Helen hand is cold from her drink when she touches my shoulder. I look down at her hand, so different than mine. Square-round, evenly filed nails. Bubble bath gel manicure. Long enough to be feminine, but never enough to be inconvenient. One ring, her mother’s. An emerald and two diamonds on a silver band, worn on her right middle finger. Always the same.

Her life is an iron cage of consistency. I can see why she wants to dump me out of it. That’s just not me. My birth, in fact, was the greatest inconsistency. My hands are not like hers. Since I’ve stopped doing horse things one of my great pleasures is long stiletto nails, something I could never have before. I wear six heavy silver and black rings. The thumb ring is studded with a fat eye-shaped moonstone. Another is ring of rhinestones that remind me of dragon eggs, and

another a thick silver band of crisscrossing stripes. Helen hates them. She hates the whole combination, claims I look like a hippie witch. I love the way they clink together when I move my fingers.

I like the drama of all these things, but I also like how they distract from the jagged scar that creeps all along my hand and arm.

Helen gave me a high-end scar gel to deal with it, but I think the problem is bigger than that. I don't think an expensive cream will cut it. I don't know if she doesn't even look, or if she knows it can't be fixed so easily but chooses to tell herself otherwise.

I shrug off her hand. "You want me out of your life. Fine. I'm going." I grab the packaging tape and seal the last box, then toss the tape onto the couch.

Helen steps gracefully out of my way as I push past her into the kitchen. "I'm not trying to push you away, Jessica. I'm trying to push you to better things."

I open the fridge and stare blankly inside. "What makes you think this will be better?"

Helen picks up the tape and brings it into the kitchen to put away. "I've watched you grow up for twenty years with horses. I know that's what you need. I'm trying to help you see that."

"Trying to force me to see that," I mutter. I don't know if she doesn't hear it or doesn't acknowledge it. "That was before."

"Don't you think that's a little bit dramatic? That you're giving up a life-long commitment too soon?"

I slam the fridge shut, the bottles in the door rattling. "I don't think it's dramatic."

Helen doesn't blink. Her drink is still clutched in her hand, beads of sweat dripping down the glass. But not her. Not a drop of sweat. Not a sign of distress. Cool, calm, detached. She takes a sip of tea, then quietly: "You could start riding again, Jess."

I walk out of the kitchen.

She always pushed me to ride. Then to ride more, then to ride better.

I don't think I can.

Wetlands slides by quickly under the plane. My life slides away from me 10,000 feet out of reach. I look at my phone. The text I got right before we took off still sits unopened on the screen. *See you soon* 😊.

The summer before high school my mom let me take a break from eventing and stay with Uncle Dan. He bought me Leo, a horse I could teach tricks to, ride bareback, barrel race, all the things Helen thought were a waste of time. And he could jump anything I put in front of him if I worked hard enough. So the next summer I went back to Evergreen to event in Area IX with Leo. Being away from my mom's pressure that summer was good. Leo and I won, and I relaxed, and I won by larger margins. When I turned sixteen I told my mom I wanted to move to Evergreen, and she made it happen. Leo and I moved up faster, I fit more shows in, I was better without her. Way better. I proved it, and I proved it more. I showed her how I didn't want her any more than she wanted me. I showed her how good I was without her. And then when everything went bad, and I went back to her. Because where else could I go?

I miss Uncle Dan. Of course I do. But I don't fit into his world anymore. Horses have become a part of the past that I cherish and love, but I can't go back to way it was when it was good. I don't want to rebuild that part of my life when it will never be the same. It will never be good, I will never be good, the way I was in the past. I want to pretend everything I did in the first 19 years of my life is immortalized in a locked up glass case that can't be touched. I will pretend my 20<sup>th</sup> birthday was a day of celebration where I decided horses was the past, and I never ruined it. I decided, let me quit while I'm ahead. I decided, I'm at the top and there's nowhere to go but down.

I lay my head back and close my eyes. When I open them again, the bright white peaks of the Denver Airport are below the plane.

Uncle Dan is waiting for me outside security. He crushes me against his chest and I let him. "*Hi*," he says, in that certain way when he hasn't seen you in a while. The emphasis on the *huh*, rather than the *aye*. "I'm glad you're here."

The ride from the Denver airport to Evergreen is long, and Uncle Dan obeys the speed limit. My head bumps against the glass of the truck's window as I watch the Colorado landscape speed by in smudgy green streaks. The mountains stay put.

"So what's up?" Uncle Dan says.

I look at him, but he keeps his eyes on the road. "Um."

"Helen said you guys fought before you left."

"I didn't think that's worth writing home about."

"Well, it's not a good way to say goodbye."

"Does she care? She just wanted me to leave."



“It’s not like that, Jessi. She wants you to come here, but it doesn’t mean she’s glad you’re leaving.”

“That’s pretty much impossible to believe. If she didn’t want me living with her at sixteen then she doesn’t want me when I’m 22.”

He rolls his eyes. “You *asked* to move here when you were sixteen.”

“Ok, yes. But I’m making a point. She let her only kid move a thousand miles away.”

“Horse-crazy girl wants to live on her uncle’s ranch in Colorado – she’d be cruel to say no. Even though, yes, it meant saying goodbye to her only daughter. You wish she’d said no?”

“No. Well, no. I don’t think so. I just wish she’d put up more of a fight.”

“Like her mom did when she got pregnant and wanted to move to New Orleans? She wouldn’t do that to you Jessi. She gave up Evergreen for you, and she gave you up for Evergreen.”

“It’s wasn’t some big sacrifice when she moved to New Orleans. She couldn’t wait to leave Evergreen. She’s told me enough times how she’s never going back.”

Uncle Dan sighs. “I wish you weren’t so convinced she’s the bad guy. My sister is strong and selfless and I don’t think you appreciate that.”

“She’s strong.” I say, and turn my whole body to look out my window.

Maybe Uncle Dan’s version of my mom used to exist. A version that was like me, riding up the levels of eventing with dreams of Rolex on the horizon. Until she got pregnant in an RV at Spring Gulch Horse Trials. Couldn’t afford a hotel, tired of sleeping in the backseat of her pickup, she went to bed with a

competitor but no condom. Maybe she used up all her selflessness in the next few years getting a good job and raising me. And if I was going to take away her chance to be a big eventer, I damn well better pick up the torch. She worked every day until I was ten and she'd made enough money to send me straight into the circuit. Ten years old, travelling every weekend to horse shows. No more riding for fun, Jessica. You have to ride right.

"Hungry, Jessi?" Uncle Dan can't leave me alone forever.

I want to say, *I'm okay, Uncle Dan. I had that snack box on the plane*, but he already asked me if I needed any food and I know he hasn't forgotten my answer. He just wants to get me talking again. "I could eat, if you want to."

"Oh good," he says, "let's stop at Arby's."

I thump my head against the seat. "I am grateful that Helen made sacrifices for me. But I wish she didn't. I hate being the reason she quit riding. Grandma would've taken care of me. She could've stayed here."

"You're right, she couldn't wait to leave Evergreen. But she wanted to live in Tryon, or Ocala, places with international eventing. Not go get a business degree at University of New Orleans. And your Grandma always wanted her to quit eventing. Helen *had* to pick the most dangerous way to ride horses, she'd say. Fought Helen every week to give up showing and just ride on the farm."

"I get it, I ruined her life."

"No. Of course not. Sometimes unexpected things happen. Would Helen have thrown herself so hard into eventing if our mom hadn't fought it? I don't know. Everyone has pressures that push their life. Good, bad, it doesn't really matter. You get what you get and go from there."

“If she didn’t pressure me so hard to win, maybe I would have scratched that day. Wouldn’t have had that fall.”

Uncle Dan eases the truck’s old frame to a stop. The signal clicks erratically, close to burning out. He turns into the Arby’s. “Sometimes unexpected things happen, and you have to go from there. Take what you get, and make something new.”

“I did, already. And Helen said no, that’s not good enough.”

“You’re not done yet, Jessi.”

“It feels like I’m going backwards.”

“Is that so bad?”

“I don’t think I can do any better.”

“Then just do it different.”

And then we’re at the Arby’s window, and Uncle Dan’s ordering two roast beef sandwiches with special sauce.

When we get home, I go into my room. It’s the same, really. Slept in by guests who came and went but didn’t touch the things I left. The last time I was here is almost two years ago now. After the accident I’d thought obsessively about everything I’d done wrong. I laid awake in this bed at night with tears on my face listening to my thoughts play a podcast about how stupid and selfish I was and how I didn’t deserve to go near a horse again.

Then, I made a decision. I told Uncle Dan I wanted to live with my mom. That being around the barn was too much. He protested. What about Leo? I couldn’t ride for a long time anyway, and even though Leo hadn’t been seriously

hurt, he needed time off. He protested, I reassured, he agreed. He bought me a plane ticket.

Everything I owned that wasn't horse-related fit in my suitcase.

I pull the ribbons down from the wall in my bedroom and pack them into a cardboard box for the attic. They don't hurt like they used to; instead they are disappointing reminders of better memories and past achievements.

*It doesn't matter now*, Helen would say. *The best time to plant a tree was ten years ago. The second-best time is right now.* Every time she uses that line it reminds me how different we are. She pulls inspiration out of her ass and lives by it. I don't want to be like her, necessarily. I *can't* be like her.

I wish Helen hadn't quit riding when I was born. And if going to better, I can't quit either.

I watch Leo out in the pasture, tearing up careful mouthfuls of grass, swishing his tail occasionally to slap away a fly. He doesn't mind the past, not when there's grass to be eaten.

Tears burn behind my eyes and my chest tightens and tightens until I let them fall. Leo's summer coat is beautiful gold in the sun. His dark mane is longer than it's even been since I got him. He looks like a cow horse with it long like that. I *missed* him. I missed him a lot.

Without the ribbons on the wall, it's like I'm fourteen, my new horse is in the pasture, and I've got the whole summer to forget about showing. I change into clothes from the dresser and go outside.

When I get close, Leo lifts his head and watches me approach. I rub his face. "Hi buddy," I tell him. "Hi buddy, I missed you." I almost forgot how he

feels, the firmness of his forehead under my hand as he pushes into me. I wrap my arms around his neck for a long moment and smell *horse smell*. Wonderful, irreplicable. Then I put on his halter and lead him to the barn.

Damn, it's hot. Sweat runs all the way from my bra to my boots as I do the mindless parts of getting ready to ride. Brush, pick, comb. Pad, saddle, girth. Helmet, gloves, bridle.

Then, the intensity of my anxiety is back with a vengeance. I'm hyperaware of everything around me. The pimply texture of the reins through the worn spots of my gloves; the soft *shup, shup* of my boots brushing together as I walk; the thick taste of hot air wrapping around my tongue; the salty scent of sweat stinging my nostrils.

I sit down on a tack box at the end of the barn. Leo pushes his nose against me and starts licking sweat off my arm.

The last time I got on him felt a lot like today. Hot as hell.

"He's tired," Uncle Dan had said in the warmup field. "Can y'all make it through the course?"

It was hot, and Leo had paced in his stall until his golden coat sweated down to muddy brown. Our warmup was okay, but Leo felt off. Every turn I was holding him together, pushing my spur into his side so he'd balance enough not to slip in the grass. *Maybe I should scratch*, I thought, but we were in a competitive position. If cross-country went well, we'd place high enough to qualify, and this was the last qualifying event of the season. Dressage and stadium had gone well. I didn't want two days of showing – a whole season – to go to waste.

I'd checked my equipment one last time and went to the starting box.

He'd busted out of the gate with a load of nervous energy, and my worries faded for a while. Four jumps in, we'd found a groove, but I could tell Leo was pulling from an empty tank. Galloping toward jump eight, I was putting my leg on, and we weren't going forward. I drove with my seat, spurred him into the approach. I had a nagging whisper in my head, pull up. But we'd schooled this jump a bunch of times. Pound, pound, pound. We'd make it. Leo jumped, one tired leg dangling a little too low. It hooked on the rolltop, and his back end went over the front.

It was a quick moment of horrified anticipation. All I could do was wait until we hit the ground. My air vest inflated as the lanyard detached, the ground slammed the air out of my chest, and a thousand pounds of horse-flesh came down on me.

I was trying to stand up, but the jump judge kept telling me to lie still. I could hear someone shouting "loose horse!" through her walkie talkie. The inflated air vest felt like a trap and I was trying to figure out if that was why I couldn't move or if there was something wrong with me. "Is Leo okay?" I tried to ask. I couldn't catch my breath. "Can someone catch him?"

"The EMTs are coming, honey. The EMTs are coming."

"My horse, where is he? Is he okay?"

"Just wait one more minute. They're on their way."

Leo's done licking my arm now and pulls toward the grass just outside the barn. I stand up and tug the reins to get his attention again. *It's like jumping into*

*a cold pool, I think. Getting out of bed at 5 am. Taking a shot, giving blood, losing your virginity.*

I kick the mounting block closer to Leo and let it happen like tacking up, things I've done a thousand times, even though fear has a hand gripping my throat and my gut. Step, step, wiggle my foot into the stirrup, grab some mane and the reins in my left hand, and swing my leg over.

Leo walks forward without a cue, and my hips move with him. It feels right.

When I was fourteen, I would ride Leo through all the fields to the back of the property. I taught him how to position himself perfectly so that I could open and close them without getting off. When we got to the last field, where there was no chance Uncle Dan would see me, we'd jump the fence. I wasn't thinking then about what a good eventer Leo would make. I just thought it'd be really cool to jump a four-foot fence.

We walk through the gate into the field, where buttercups are choking out the grass all over the place. They're pretty, and they grow quick, but the horses don't want to eat them. The grass takes a long time to grow, but by June, the pastures will be thick and green again.

Leo's hind end doesn't swing out far enough as I shut the gate, and it bounces off his side. I reposition him, grab the gate, and try again. He's still got it, mostly.

When I asked my mom the last time she got on a horse, and she told me she couldn't remember. "Probably when I was first pregnant," she'd said. "Before

I found out I'd go into the field and do gallop sets. But I stopped after I found out. I didn't want to hurt the baby."

*Me, I'd thought. She didn't want to hurt me.*

I try to picture her here, the grass cut close for riding. Maybe she came out on the tractor and cut it herself, and checked for holes. She didn't know it would be her last ride, just warmed up and checked her watch, then let her horse run. Let the ground pull past with each stride like it was running the opposite direction. Felt the weightless moment between each stride, when four feet are off the ground at once.



## *Push and Pull*

**April 26, 2019**

**E**rin jumped as the tires crossed onto the shoulder with a deafening rumble and righted her car back into her lane. She drained the last of her 32 oz Diet Coke and turned down the music. If blasting air conditioning and *Panic! At the Disco* on a full stomach of cold Diet Coke wasn't enough to keep her awake, she was pretty much fucked. Usually Ty didn't work this late, but with horses you never had sure hours. Even though she was exhausted, she wouldn't say that picking him up on her way home from work bothered her. She just couldn't help thinking, *he's a guy – what's so unsafe about biking home in the dark?* It's not like he would get snatched.

Erin parked her car at the front of the barn because it had rained last night, and she knew the road around back would be scored with deep ruts of mud that would suck at her barely off-road rated car. If no one drove around back

when it was wet, those ruts wouldn't be there. But that wasn't how the world worked.

She walked through the barn, peeking down aisles to see if she could spot Ty with the hose doing last minute bucket top-offs, or the wheelbarrow waiting in the aisle as he scooped the inevitable punishment poop – the hot, stinking shit the horse unloads in the clean shavings as soon as you finish dumping the wheelbarrow.

She found Ty staring out at the pasture, watching the floodlight's ghostly white glow dance on the grass. The horses were grazing on the edge of the floodlight's range, and the light picked up their movements – tails swished, a few feet stomped at flies.

Erin wanted to stare lovingly at how the sharp edges of Ty's face caught the light, think how lucky she was, sneak up and kiss him softly, let him know her tender feelings. She *wanted* to want that. Instead she just felt annoyed. Why was he sitting out here, brooding in the humid breeze? No, brooding wasn't right. Ty never brooded. If he was thinking anything at all, it was probably *ah, another great day on the farm.*

Maybe he sensed someone watching him, or the grass stopped being entertaining, but he stood up, stretched his back in that way that pops his sternum, and turned back to Erin. His face did the thing it does when you see someone you love. Erin thought her face did it too, but she didn't know if it was anything more than muscle memory.

“Hey babe.” She couldn't remember when he last called her Erin. She didn't know how her name sounded coming off his tongue. “You done?”

“Yeah. I made the feed in the back barn and checked the waters again, so we’re good.”

He caught her hand and pulled her into a hug, all pleasure and familiarity. *All, three years and I still can’t believe you’re mine.* “It’s such a nice night. Hear the frogs?”

Of course she hear them. They screamed like this after it rained. A cacophony of croaking that she’d never once found pleasant.

He hopped in the passenger side of the Volvo and Erin wished he would come open her door for her. She pictured Kristen and her boyfriend – the game they played where he raced to open her door for her and she raced to get in the car before he could. But Ty and Erin could never have that. He didn’t do it, and she wished he was more exciting. If he did do it, she’d be annoyed at him for trying too hard. She’d probably ask “do you really think my wrists are that weak?”

Kristen was fun. She smiled a lot, had the most endearing sense of self-deprecating humor. And Erin couldn’t bite back her bitterness when all her boyfriend was doing was existing.

Ty sang along to a song Erin liked on the way home, cutting her a glance with a grin when she took her eyes off the road. After a minute, he turned the radio down. “What’s up?” he asked.

She should’ve returned the grin. “Long day,” She offered, and a yawn conveniently surfaced.

“Bedtime soon,” he said simply. He hummed softly until ads came on, then he clicked to a talk show for the rest of the drive.

Ty let her shower first, while he sautéed bell peppers to serve with leftover sausage. Erin pressed the showerhead to her clit for a minute, but she couldn't get her mind to focus on anything except the cold tile she leaned against. She tried thinking about Ty, but it just felt weird, so she turned off the water. When she came out of the bathroom, Ty had poured two glasses of 2-buck-Chuck and made her a plate.

"Go ahead and eat before it gets cold," he told her. "I'll be quick."

He was quick, back to the living room before she finished her wine. To his credit, he wasn't masturbating in the shower.

Erin washed the pan he cooked in while he packed their dishes in the dishwasher. She felt the nightly spike of annoyance when Ty brushed his teeth for 45 seconds and then wiped his mouth on the hand towel.

"You're supposed to brush for 3 minutes," She said as she climbed into her side of the bed.

"I know." Ty's hands groped for her body and pulled her closer. "I can't figure out why you do it for six," he teased. His lips found hers in the darkness, needy and wet. She kissed him back a few times before she pulled away.

"Do you always want this?"

"Hmm?"

"Do you always want sex?"

His hands softened, falling away, losing their enthusiasm. "Uh.... Yeah, I guess."

"And you always enjoy it?"

“Yeah, I enjoy our sex.” His voice had a sharpness to it that she rarely heard.

“Do you think I always do?”

“Erin, what?” She felt him shifting on the mattress. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, does it seem like I’m having a good time?”

“Yeah, you usually sound like you’re having a pretty good time. I mean, a couple times you’ve gone weird and it’s like having sex with a wall, but then we always stop.”

She chuckled. “Yeah.” She’d never faked any of her sex sounds, but maybe she’d encouraged them a little. Fanned them. She certainly didn’t hold any of them back.

“Do you not like having sex with me?”

A huff of breath came out of her. Not fake, but encouraged. Half a laugh, a breath of *don’t be ridiculous*.

“Well?” He didn’t accept that as an answer, she supposed.

“Of course I like it.” She rolled over and let her cheek hang off the mattress. Tears were burning behind her eyes and she tried not to let them crack her voice. “I just don’t know if I like sex.”

“How is that not the same thing?”

“I don’t know.” She said. “I just think maybe there’s something wrong with me. You always want sex and I’m always the one who has to say no. I feel like I always need an excuse. Like I’m too tired, or I just washed the sheets, or my stomach hurts. And they aren’t lies, but why I can’t just say I don’t want to? Then you’d get offended.”

“Can you not say *always* like that?” Ty’s voice lacked its characteristic softness. “And yeah, I’m 24 years old and I’m attracted to you. I pretty much always want sex.”

“Well why don’t I?” She asked, and her voice cracked as unshed tears pushed on her throat. She let the tears fall down her cheeks to the floor.

“I don’t know.” He said. “You used to. Maybe you don’t find me attractive anymore.”

“I just wanted to make you happy,” She said. “I didn’t want to ruin it for you by saying I wasn’t having a good time.”

He took so long to answer that she almost turned over to try and see his face, but then he spoke, a twist of dark humor in his tone. “Well now I’m thinking of every time we had sex and whether you were just pretending to like it.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Erin protested, and the tears were pressing on her whole body now, turning into sobs that she managed to keep silent with great pain to her chest.

The mattress shifted and she felt Ty’s hand against her back. “You have apocalypse brain,” he said gently. “I think you’re just upset right now, and you’ll probably feel better in the morning.”

She pulled her knees to her chest and let her body shake while she cried. She knew Ty felt like that fixed it – she just had to cry it out.

He tucked his arms around her and she was swamped with guilt. That she ignored him when he sang to her in the car, that she didn’t thank him for making dinner, that she wasn’t as excited about sex as she should be.

She cried until she was tired and her brain was quiet. Her eyes were heavy and Ty's breathing was even. Ty needed to hold her, and she needed to cry. It worked.

In the morning, Erin watched the dust swirling in the stripes of light coming through the gaps in the blinds, more dust than the average room should have. Ty was breathing like a wood saw, and his fingers twitched next to her face. She rolled over to look at him, which woke him up.

"Good morning," he said softly. "How'd you sleep?"

"You slept great."

"How do you know?"

"Because I didn't."

"Sorry."

"You're very loud."

"I'm not usually. I think I'm sick."

"I think that's my fault. Probably passed my cold to you."

"So we're even."

"I guess so."

Ty climbed over her to get out of bed. "I'm gonna make breakfast. You should try to sleep."

Erin stared at the wall. She listened to the birds for a while, and then drifted to sleep.

Ty kissed her on the forehead and woke her.

"I had a dream," she said, and Ty sat on the bed. "You smell good."

“What was it?”

“You died.”

“That’s not good. Should I interpret that?”

“No.” She stretched her arms. “It’s Friday.”

“That’s good, right?”

“Yep. What should we do tonight?”

“There’s a jazz show tonight. Couple of my buddies are going. We could go hang out, have a few drinks.”

“Alcohol is expensive.” Erin looked past him, at the window.

“Yeah, it is. We could watch a movie. That’s free.”

“And no jazz show?”

“I could just go for a few hours. I’ll probably be pretty tired anyway.”

“Do you have to go?”

“Well, I told them I would. I thought it would be fun to go have a few drinks.”

“You don’t have fun with me at home?”

“Of course I do.”

“And that’s not enough?”

“I see you all the time.” Ty reached for her, but she climbed out of bed.

“Yeah, you do.” Erin put on her slippers. “I have to go get ready.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I have stuff to do.”

“Okay.”

Erin clutched the bathroom door handle. “Ty?”



“Yeah?”

“Are you gonna get drunk tonight?”

“Yeah?”

“Then I don’t wanna see you after.”

“Really, Erin? Why are you being like this?”

“I’m not *being like this*.” She said. “I don’t like it when you come home drunk. I just want to hang out.” She opened the door.

“I’m just trying to have some fun, Erin. You know that.”

“Because I’m no fun.”

“I didn’t say that. And it’s not true.”

“Erin—” Ty stood up as the bathroom door shut. He watched the dust swirl in the sunlight.

Erin sat on the toilet and scrolled through TikTok. “So I was tryna think of like,” a girl says, “of the word for like, when someone’s too nice to you in a relationship so you stop liking them for some reason, and I ended up writing this song and it’s called push and pull.”

Erin sighed and leaned back, banging the back of her head on the wall in frustration. *I suck*, she thought.

“You okay?” She heard Ty’s voice outside the bathroom door. He was still standing outside.

“Yeah,” she said.

She typed a comment on the post. *The word is immaturity*.

She flushed the toilet and left the bathroom. “Ty?” she said, and he called out from the kitchen.

At the stove, Ty flipped his omelet, and a few onions fell into the burner.

“I’m sorry,” Erin said.

Ty turned, smiled. “Thank you,” he said, and then pointed to the table.

“Have some bacon.”

Erin sat down and took a piece. It wasn’t crispy how she liked it, but it still tasted good.

**April 26, 2015**

Erin didn’t want to have sex with Paul tonight, she didn’t want to have sex with Paul, and she didn’t want to have sex at all. But it was their one-year anniversary, and she agreed a few weeks ago that she wanted to lose her virginity that night. Now she had to call him and tell him she was having second thoughts.

“You don’t wanna give that gift to someone you love?” He asked.

“No.”

“No as in you don’t wanna give the gift?”

“No as in no, I don’t wanna have sex.”

“I want to love you on a sexual level because it’s the deepest love,” he said.

“I want to do it for you, not me. Giving my body as a gift. It’s a big part of why I’m dating you.”

She tried not to roll my eyes, even though he couldn’t see her. “I’m just letting you know, I don’t want sex.”

“You haven’t had any sexual experience or pleasure so it’s an intimidating topic. Especially on the female end because it’s a lot more invasive. I think you should reevaluate because no sex isn’t healthy. Sometimes both parties are busy

or just don't want it at the time, but if you're gonna say no forever I think that's a selfish move."

She pushed a breath through her nose and waited a second to calm down. "That's why I'm telling you now. I really wouldn't describe it as selfish... but okay. Whatever."

"It's like hey, God gave us this gift to strengthen our bond and you want to blockade that."

Erin wondered if it would be easier to force him off her later than spend an hour arguing when she knew he wouldn't listen. "Nevermind," she said. "We can talk about it when you get home."

"Erin, please explain what you are feeling. Frankly this is a big topic, and if we aren't on the same page it's not a good thing."

She hated it when he talked like that. Like they were having a debate. *Does he even have emotions? Is this just science for him? Trial and error until he reaches the right combination of words that will unlock my legs?* "No."

"Do you still hold your stance?"

"I can't explain this to you. You think I'm trying to be a blockade and I'm being selfish when I'm just trying to be honest."

"I think you might have a hormone imbalance and need to see a doctor."

"I think we should break up," Erin said. A vacuum of warring fear and relief opened up in her chest and all the air sucked right out of her.

"What? What is wrong with you?" The attack in his words smacked some breath back into her. He didn't sound so clinical anymore.

"I just feel like I am dragging you down and I want to give you an out."

“I don’t need your schemes to get me out. I’ll leave if I want to leave on my own.”

“We want different things,” she said. “That’s not a recipe for a good relationship. I feel like a burden and I want to give you a chance to get out and find someone normal, who wants to have sex.”

“How about instead of not saying what you mean, you say ‘Paul, I feel like I’m a sexual burden to you, is that true?’ and then give me time to answer instead of freaking me the fuck out and making me wonder why you want to break up after I did nothing. I’m only good to you, even if I’m a little blunt sometimes.”

“I know,” she said. “I love you. And I need you. You’re all I have. Honestly I just wanted to give you the opportunity.”

“What made this come up all of a sudden?” A spasm of relief passed painfully from Erin’s chest to back. He sounded... not calm, but less wound up. Unwinding, at least.

She closed her eyes, probing the emptiness inside herself and feeling nothing, anywhere. “I think I’m having a mental breakdown. To be honest you should probably ignore like everything I’ve said today because I’m not thinking reasonably.”

“Okay,” he said. “I’m sorry you’re not feeling well. But we’re gonna have a great night tonight, okay?”

“Okay.” Erin said. She hung up, but her heart didn’t stop pounding. She stood up from the kitchen table and walked to the fridge, her fingers brushing the note Paul had left a few days ago. *I appreciate you looking over my mess up the other day. I really thought it would change things and I’m thrilled things*

*haven't changed. It still lingers in my mind every day and I'm disgusted because I hurt you. You are the best and my favorite girl. Signed with two hearts.*

They'd been cuddling when Erin asked him to stop rubbing his dick on her and he shoved her off the couch. A few days later, he pushed up her shorts, sliding his hands over her hips. His hand paused over the bruise blossoming on her left hip. "I feel like I respect you a lot and would never intentionally hurt you," he started.

She didn't really want to talk about it. "It's doesn't matter," Erin said. "I'm fine."

Later in the week, he left the note.

Erin turned around to take her phone off the table and called her brother.

"Hey," she said. "Can I come stay with you? Paul and I broke up."

"One sec," her brother said. "I'll call you back."

Erin looked at her watch. Paul would be home in two hours.

Her phone rang, and she answered. "I'm on a camping trip right now," her brother said, "but my friend Ty has the spare key and he's gonna go over to let you in."

"Okay, thank you." Erin said.

"Love you," her brother said. "Bye."

"Love you, bye." She said, and went to get her suitcase out of the closet.

She put her important things and a suitcase full of clothes in the back of her car, and started driving to Houston.

## *Avoiding Cynicism and Other Unavoidable Feelings*

### **Tuesday**

**T**hey want to send me away from the school, I can tell. Every time I meet with Principal Matthison she looks even more tired. She doesn't want me in her office, but I haven't had any motivation to stop getting myself sent there. She just keeps passing me off to Todd Jones, where I answer his questions truthfully and definitely waste his time because there is nothing wrong with me. I don't know anything beyond one semester of elective Psych and the time I've spent with Todd Jones but it seems to me the guys on the other side of my fist need to be in his office much more than me.

I don't want to leave DW. I love the brick walkways, marked with cracks and names and history. I love the sasanqua trees that bloom pink and white in the fall and hold their waxy green leaves when everything else is brown. I love the two-tiered fountain in the center of the courtyard, painted blue on the inside, that

gets someone sent to detention after they jump in it at the end of every spring semester. I love chicken sandwich day in the dining hall, and the shitty ice cream sandwiches they serve on the last Friday of every month. I love the smell of the lemon cleaner they use in the dorm bathrooms. I love how my whole floor crams in the common room to watch every LSU game during football season. I don't want to lose it, but I can't help the fights. There's so many assholes at this school it seems inevitable I get in a fight every other week.

It's usually the same group of guys I get into it with: John Schutz's group of blonde idiots who all bleached their hair on a dare. They do whatever the hell they want and seem immune to disciplinary repercussions. I guess it's some combination of the fact that Schutz's dad single-handedly funded the new gym, and that people are too scared of their psycho shit to say anything. And even if they weren't scared, we've all seen *Fist Fight* too many times. Snitches get stitches, or at least get called a pussy for the rest of high school.

Maybe I'm immune to disciplinary repercussions too, since I haven't gotten kicked out of school despite being the common denominator in all these fights. All that's got me is mandatory weekly sessions with Todd Jones. Maybe it's because of my good grades, but I personally feel that if I wasn't so smart I would have to spend more time studying and less time getting in trouble.

I think they only kick kids out of DW for actual crimes, like drug stuff. They're a pretty forgiving school, maybe because you have to be when you're in charge of 500 boys who don't have to go home to their parents at night.

By now, in early senior year, I've had some violent encounter with every guy in Schutz's group except one. Alec Williams. I keep waiting for him to do

something terrible like seems compulsory for his friends, but he doesn't. He's so *okay*. He hangs out with eight other guys I'd deem bottom 50% IQ-wise and put on a government watch-list, but he doesn't fit in quite right. When they set Patrick Austin's backpack on fire, Alec was in the gym shooting hoops. When they were doing donuts in the parking lot and hit George Langlois's painstakingly-restored '73 Challenger, Alec had slept late. When they broke into my car and poured milk under my carpets, Alec was sick in bed.

It bothers me. I think I know the order of the world, but Alec is an outlier.

The basement hallway of Denwittie Academy has become very familiar to me. I sit on this creaky wooden bench every week getting iced out before my therapy sessions. Principal Matthison calls them "guidance" sessions, but I prefer to be straightforward.

Todd Jones resides in a small room between BL1 and BL2. I think his office used to be a closet, because I can't imagine any other reason to put a room between two consecutively numbered basement labs. The first time I came to his office, I thought – hoped – he would have one of those posters with the kitten that says *HANG IN THERE*. Unfortunately for my cynicism, Todd Jones has converted the closet into a relatively professional office. He has a suede loveseat against the right wall, which his desk faces. The left wall displays various framed certifications that allow him to have this job. He may be in a basement closet, but he needs a purposeful display of credibility. The average high school kid getting sent to the "guidance counselor" of an all-boys boarding school probably thinks Todd Jones is a quack. *Look at all my qualifications*, his office says. *Look, I'm your friend, but professionally.*



Jones isn't so bad. He has one of those upright watercoolers – Kentwood, too, brand name – just inside the door, and he always offers me a drink. He uses real glasses, like he's letting you know you're worth a trip to the dishwasher rather than the trash can.

I read a book before about the psychology of persuasion. There were some tricks to get someone to say yes, and Jones' glass of water hits the nail right on the head of two of them: offer the person something free and they will feel a need to repay you; get the person to say yes to a small thing and you set them up to say a bigger yes later on.

The point is, I've got Todd Jones' number.

“Come on in, Brandon,” Jones says from the door, having made me sit outside for the compulsory three and a half minutes. Maybe if I'd finished the psychology of persuasion book, I'd know why he does that, too. Since Jones is not so bad, I accept the water and answer his questions, like always.

Today, Jones is concerned that I don't have any friends. He brings that up more than the fighting. I tell him I like to be the unbiased third party. I don't tell him that I think no one would be interested in my friendship if I tried. I've got the reputation to scare them off – the big violent guy who came from public school.

“There's no one you're interested in being friends with? Or who's interested in being friends with you?”

I shrug like it doesn't bother me, because it doesn't really. “I guess I look intimidating.” I know I do. Six feet, built big; broad across the chest, thick neck, black curly hair. It doesn't help me make friends, but it helps get an edge in a fight.

“Do you think it could be your reputation?”

I know Jones thinks that’s why I don’t have friends. But we dance around the topic, per usual. He figured out quickly that I wasn’t going to volunteer any information about the fights. Like I said, we all stick to the snitching rules, even though I’m not scared of Schutz.

“Some people think I’m a drug dealer.” I’m Colombian, and since most of the guys here went to private school their whole lives, they combine that with public school and I’m an easy target for drug dealer jokes.

“What about the ones who don’t think that?” I’m glad he doesn’t say *are you?* or *not that reputation*, but I wish he’d stop pushing this friend thing. Honestly, I’ve got enough on my plate with all my enemies.

“A lot of people are stupid.” I know it’s a really dickish thing to say, but I’m hoping it directs the conversation to narcissism instead of friendship.

“Maybe you just don’t know them very well,” Jones says. “Denwittie isn’t an easy school, and many students make good grades.”

It’s not a question, so I don’t answer. Of course he breaks the question-response-law to defend the school. It’s probably in his contract.

I don’t hate people who are stupid. I know they can’t control that. That’s not the kind of stuff I get in fights about. Wanna get in a fight with me? Put out your cigarette on someone’s hoodie. Call a kid a faggot because his pants are tight. I’ve thrown punches over less.

“Brandon, do you feel good about yourself?”

The question surprises me, and I meet Jones’ eyes for once. He looks steadily at me across the desk, hands folded, but not in a creepy way. “Um, yes?”

“Could you expand on that?”

I almost crack a smile. “Um, yes, I feel good about myself.”

“What makes you feel that way?”

“I get good grades. I make choices that I feel are right.” I look away from him. Almost say, *satisfied?* but don’t want to exceed my asshole quota.

“You’ve talked about feeling justified before. Is that the same as making choices you feel are right?”

“I guess.” We’re circling the *what are all these fights about* conversation, and I wonder if Matthison is begging Jones to get some facts so she knows who to kick out of the school. Out the window, some guys are kicking a soccer ball on the quad during free period. I could be doing that too, if I didn’t have to give up two a week for this.

“How do you know your version of right is the best one?”

It would be so easy to say, *my version doesn’t involve hate crimes*, but I’m better than that. I don’t need an easy out. Instead I say, “It’s what I’ve got,” because I need more time to think.

“If you can’t be sure,” Jones says, “should you really be the enactor of justice?”

“I’m not enacting global justice or anything,” I say. “I’m just doing what I think is right.”

“The administration strongly disagrees with your version of right. To them, violence is never right.”

“Aren’t you a part of the administration?”

Jones sighs. “Do you think Brock feels justified?”

I guess we're really doing this today. I got in a fight with Brock last week because he put my gym clothes in the toilet. I'm not saying that fight was about universal justice, but I was pretty angry.

"I don't know, I don't really talk to him."

"Maybe you should talk to him, Brandon."

"No, thank you. I don't like him."

Jones almost breaks character. He blinks one second too long and his chin dimples like he's trying not to smile. Then he takes a sip of his water. "I think most of these fights could be avoided if you talked more," he says, recovering his hands-folded demeanor. "Could you talk to Brock about your disagreement?"

My brain runs with that idea. Me and Brock, sitting crossed-legged on the quad, a safe distance apart. Would Jones be there? No, he wants me to develop independent conflict-resolution skills. "Mr. Miller," I'd say, "could you please refrain from touching my belongings?" Brock would say "sure," and then Schutz would do it the next time. Pointless.

"It wouldn't change anything," I say.

"How do you know that if you haven't tried?"

"It wouldn't." I repeat, knowing he'll change tactics.

"What about someone else besides Brock? Someone else you disagree with?"

It makes me think of Alec. I do want to talk to him. I'm so *curious*. Probably unhealthily so.

I've started watching Alec all the time. Whether he pays attention in class, what he eats for lunch, when he goes to the gym, which conversations he

participates in. I can't figure it out. He seems *good*. He doesn't have the same *fuck you and your mom* attitude as the rest of his friends.

But his *friends*. By that insuperable difference, yes, I disagreed with Alec. I was in fundamental disagreement about the humanity of three dudes he seemed partial to.

"Brandon?" Jones prompts. "Is there anyone?"

"Yeah," I say. "I can think of someone."

### **Thursday**

Alec always walks the same route from Physics to Lunch, so on Thursday I detour to run into him. He's walking across the quad, wearing a navy DW sweatshirt with his hands jammed in the pocket and the hood pulled up against the November wind. I have to walk fast to catch him. Skinny and 6'3, his body seems mostly made of legs. I'm surprised he could find khakis that went all the way down to his Chucks.

When I'm close enough, I call, "hey, Alec," and he glances over his shoulder, as if expecting just to wave and move on. He stops when he sees me, surprise lining his forehead.

"Yeah, what's up?" He follows me when I keep walking.

"Brock told me you got fucked by that last AP Gov test." I immediately regret the obvious lie. Alec probably knows I wouldn't talk to Brock unless the only other option was having a hot poker up my ass. I clear my throat. "I just wanted to let you know I tutor. Trying to make an extra buck so I can go to that

Pretty Lights show in New Orleans next month.” Another lie, but at least this one might make me seem cool.

Alec is still staring at me with a mix of confusion and apprehension. I figure that’s fair since I’ve thrown punches with every single one of his friends. “Uh, thanks. I think I’m good though, I just didn’t grind for that test. The new Smash came out the day before, ya know?”

I do, actually. Fucking fantastic game. “Oh yeah, I pre-ordered, dude. Been hyped since E3.”

A grin breaks Alec’s frown. “And you still studied? That’s some impressive self-control.”

I shrug. “Not really. AP Gov’s just my thing, I guess.”

“Well hey, I can’t help out with Pretty Lights, but if you want to play Smash I’ve got a dope setup in my room. 50-inch TV and GameCube controllers. My roommate goes to his girlfriend’s house in Baker every weekend if you wanna come over.”

“Shit, 50-inch? I’m there.”

Alec nods, settled now into a relaxed smile. “Cool. I’ll send you a text.”

“Oh, here.” I pull out my phone and hand it to him.

He gives it back right before we reach the dining hall. “Later.”

I have to jog to get to gym on time.

## **Friday**

On Friday, I sit next to Alec in British Lit. Harper Lambert, whose seat I'm in, takes one look and moves to the other side of classroom. I don't *want* to scare him. I've never seen him do anything shitty.

Alec looks less surprised this time. Less suspicious. "Hey Brandon. What's up dude?"

I nod. "Not much. You still down for Smash this weekend?"

"Oh yeah, for sure. You can come over tonight if you want. Andrew leaves right after classes." Andrew Witter's his roommate. Weird dude.

"Cool. I'm ready for some real competition."

Alec looks up at the ceiling, his cheeks red. "Nah, don't get your hopes up. I'm not that good."

I shrug. "All good."

"Oh by the way—" Alec leans over to grab something from his backpack and I notice for the first time that his hair is naturally blonde, not the gross bleached blonde of the other guys. It's just long enough to curl at the edges around his ears and neck. He hands me a few papers stapled together. His AP Gov essay. He looks at the pages in my hands, his fingers prodding his neck. "I know I said I was good, but I actually need to do really well on this paper. That last test screwed my grade." He looks at me. "I'll pay, of course."

I blink slowly and shake my head. "Nah, it's cool. You're having me over."

"What about Pretty Lights?" His expression wrinkles at the corners of his eyes, his lips, between his eyebrows.

I stare at him for a second, surprised he remembered that. Then sigh. “I’m not even going to Pretty Lights.”

He lifts his chin slightly sideways. “What?”

“Not going. Wasn’t ever going.”

Jacobsen taps her marker on the whiteboard. “Alec, Brandon. Class is starting.”

He looks forward, shaking his head slightly.

I don’t see Alec again the rest of the day, but at 6:40 he texts me, *come thru*. I know where his room is, a few floors down.

I knock, and he swings the door open a second later. He’s eating a taco, the lettuce spilling out the end in a waterfall of shredded E.coli risk. He’s wearing a blue *My Neighbor Totoro* shirt that’s in danger of some beef stains. “I gad ‘aco Bell,” he says, and some taco shell spills from between his lips.

“Sweet.” I nod and step into his room. I’m not gonna turn down Alec’s food, no way. Despite what I’ve read on the internet about Taco Bell.

He shoves the other half of the taco in his mouth and sits violently on the futon shoved under his lofted bed. His bed is unmade and has a pile of clothes on one end. He has a Skyward Sword poster over his desk and The Periodic Table of Middle-Earth over his bed.

“Yo, want some Artic Mouthwash?” He grins at me, and I wonder if he has people over often. Does he hang out with anyone other than Schutz’s group? Not that I’ve noticed.

“Huh?” It sounds like a terrible band.

“Oh man, it’s good shit. Mountain Dew and Maui? You had it?”



Since I don't have friends, I don't really drink. "Nope. Never even heard of it."

"Ohh." Alec goes over to the mini-fridge, rubbing his hands together. "Let's go. You want some, yeah?"

Why not. "Sure dude, sounds good."

He waves his hand at me as he pulls a solo cup from a plastic bag on his dresser. "Grab some tacos." The Taco Bell bag is sitting on the desk in the small space not consumed by the TV.

Four tacos and two drinks later, Alec is making me kill myself every time we start a game of Smash, to give him a leg up. He's good, but I'm better. I resist the urge to B-up as Ike sails gracefully of the stage, his cape flapping.

When I respawn I knock Kirby off the stage and then camp on the edge and forward smash him off the platform until he dies. Alec screams.

"Wanna break?"

Alec moans and throws his controller on the bed, and I pause the game. After a minute, he looks sideways at me. "I've been wondering about the whole Pretty Lights thing. What's up with that?"

I lean back, propping my hands behind my head. "I don't actually care about that show. Or tutoring you in AP Gov." I look at him. "Not that I won't help you. Just, I don't need money."

Alec takes a gulp of his drink. "Then what was all that about?"

I shrug. "Needed something to talk to you about."

"What? Why?"

Shrug. "I just wanted to talk to you."

Alec stares at me. “You’re not...” Looks away. “You’re not saying..?”

I see how he could make that conclusion. “Oh dude no, not what I meant.”

“Cause if you are,” he rolls his neck. “It’s chill.”

“Not what I was saying.” I backtrack. “Honestly, right? I was trying to figure you out. Why you hang with Schutz and them. It’s been bothering me. Like I’m missing something. What’s your big secret, yeah?”

Alec stares at the screen, his face green in the TV light.

“What are you, like, the secret arsonist?” I grin. “You make their bombs or something?”

Alec laughs softly. “Ha ha. I’m not really into that stuff.”

I snort. “Isn’t that all they’re into? Bullying?”

He picks at his knee, shrugs. “Sports.”

“Sports.” Right, like they’re the only ones. The only friends a guy who likes sports could choose here. “It’s fine, dude.” I stop looking at Alec. “I was just curious. But you’re cool. I’m glad we’re hanging out.”

“You’ve got your thing too, right?” I look back over, and meet his eyes.

“My thing?”

“Yeah. You beat the shit out of people who act like assholes, right?”

“Is that how *you* see it? I wouldn’t have thought.”

“Why, cause usually it’s my ‘friends’?” He makes air quotes with his fingers.

“I mean, yeah. But also, yeah that’s what I do. My thing.”

Alec laughs. “They’re not my friends. They’re insurance.”

I don’t know what he means. “Insurance?”

He looks over at me, almost rolling his eyes. “You decked Carter, right? When he called Ritchie a fag?”

I lift my chin defensively. “Yeah. He...” I don’t wanna say he deserved it. It’s a cliché.

“I’m gay.” Alec stares at me dead in the eyes as he speaks. “I hang out with them so people don’t fuck with me.”

I feel my eyebrows crease and try to undo it. “Okay.”

“I hate them. They hate me. But John’s dad and my dad work together. We’ve known each other our whole lives. He can’t do anything to me. Not if I – his words – can be gay without being gay.”

I close my eyes for a moment. Then look at him. “Sorry, what?”

Alec smiles, without his eyes. “He knows I can’t not be gay. But he expects me to pretend.”

“And you do?”

He stares at the ceiling. His leg is twitching. “131 days. 131 days left in this hell-hole.”

I stand up, walking to the door and back. I’m so angry, but I don’t want to scare Alec. That’s all I can do. Scare people. I stop in front of the futon. “You don’t have to.”

“Be gay?” He smiles a little, for real.

“Hang out with them.”

He laughs. “I have no friends. Like Ritchie.”

I rub my cheek. “Yeah, me neither. But people don’t fuck with me.”

Alec raises his eyebrows.

“Much.”

He nods. “Well. We’re hanging out.”

“Schutz. He hates me.”

“Yeah. It’s probably some violation of our unspoken terms.”

I frown. “And?”

“Oh well.” He twists to grab his controller. “Now it’s my turn to fuck you in the ass in Smash.”

“Noted.” I unpause the game.

## **Saturday**

When I wake up at seven am on Saturday I almost fall out of bed reaching for my water. My mouth tastes like I licked cleaning products off the cafeteria floor and feels drier than West Carroll parish. I drain the cup and then stare longingly at the sink across my dorm room. So far away.

I lay there for a few minutes but I’m too thirsty to fall back to sleep. I fling back the comforter and stumble to the sink. I down another cup and then refill it.

Laying in bed, I text Alec. *You poisoned me.*

*No*, he responds a minute later. *I poisoned both of us.*

I mute my phone so it doesn’t wake up my roommate and then respond.

*Why do you drink that?*

A: I don’t actually. I found it online and I thought it would be cool

B: You suck

A: I know. But at least we’re both liars

B: How am I a liar?

A: Blah blah pretty lights blah blah

B: Ok

A: Wanna go to the gym

B: It's 7 am

A: I want to shoot hoops

B: Ok. I'll meet you at your room

A: K

Alec looks more comfortable on the court than I've ever seen him. I rebound for him as he moves around the 3-point line, sinking most of his shots.

I tell him how I think it's unfair what Shutz and them do. That everyone's scared of them except me, so I feel responsible for justice. He makes fun of me a little, but I don't really mind.

Over and over, I throw him the ball at the top of the key. He dribbles once, pulls up at the elbow, and drains it.

He's wearing a Rockets jersey, and I'm surprised by his muscle. When he reaches up to push the ball through the net on a layup, I see the tone of his arms. Not skin and bones. He grabs the rebound and says, "one more."

He dribbles, takes two steps, palms the ball, leaps, and slams it through the net.

The ball bounces a few times, and he wipes a hand across his face. "I'm good," he says, and flicks the sweat onto the court. "Let's go to the caf."

## **Monday**

On Monday, Alec and I go to Highland Road Park. We climb the tree that hangs over the dry creek. “John thinks we’re together,” he says, and it takes me a second to remember that he means Schutz.

“He heard that we hung out over the weekend. It’s what happens if you come out,” he says. “Everyone thinks you’ll take any dick. Anything you get. You’re automatically into every human of your gender.

“The whole school,” he says. “That means I wanna fuck the whole school.”

“Let’s get Taco Bell.” I say. “130 days.”

## **Tuesday**

On Tuesday, I’ve barely come to class when I get called to Matthison’s office. No one is surprised except me. I can’t think of what I did wrong since last time I met with Jones. In fact, I feel it may be the first time I’ve done what he considers right.

When I walk in, a pin of apprehension pricks my chest. Todd Jones is there. In her office, with her. Both of them at the same time.

Every time I’ve been to Jones’ office, no matter what I’ve done, he’s had the same bland expression of unbiased professionalism. His pinched expression sets my heart pounding. I look at Matthison. I’m used to disappointment. But today, her face is stormy.

“Alec Williams,” she says. My ears ring. “Several students have reported you bullying him, Brandon. They say you made homophobic comments and physically harassed Alec.”

Schutz. Schutz and them.

“Brandon,” Jones says, “we just want to know what happened.”

“Were you with Alec on Monday after school?” Matthison asks.

“Yes,” I say. “At the park.”

“And what were you doing?”

“Nothing, really. We talked. Climbed a tree.”

“Did Alec come out to you?”

My head is still spinning. I don’t know where these questions lead, but I can’t shake the feeling that there’s more than my alleged homophobia on the line.

“Uh, yeah. He did.”

“And how did you react?”

I stare at her. I don’t even know what to say.

“Did you hurt him, Brandon?” Matthison asks.

“What?” I say.

“Maybe you didn’t mean to hurt him. But this is very serious. Alec is in the hospital.”

My heart is beating in my ears, louder than her voice. The hospital. Alec. Schutz. Homophobic.

“His leg is broken, Brandon. It’s bad. But we’re all lucky it’s not much worse. And you left him? If the other students weren’t there, at the park... who knows how long he’d have lain there.”

Todd Jones leans forward. “Brandon, if you could just tell me what happened—”

Matthison's eyes flare as she stands up. "I have tolerated a lot in the past, Brandon." She says. "I will *not* tolerate homophobia. You pushed him out of a tree? Because of his sexuality? What made you want to do that, Brandon?"

My brain can't keep up. Words spin around each other, unable to form a picture. What happened to Alec. Why he is in the hospital.

I look at Jones. "What did Alec say?" I ask.

His face pinches tighter. "He says he fell. That it was an accident."

"He's afraid." Matthison says sharply. "Brandon, can you explain yourself?"

I picture Alec, planting one sure foot and then the other as he crossed the court, the ball flicking from hand to hand like a yoyo. The ripple of his shoulder as slammed the ball into the basket. Not one misstep.

He didn't fall.

So I say nothing.

## **Wednesday**

On Wednesday, I want to walk around campus one last time. The sasanqua petals are falling. A pink carpet on the bricks. It's the only beautiful thing left on campus.

My phone vibrates. Alec, finally. *The basketball season, man. The only thing at this school worth shit, and I'm missing the whole damn thing. My senior year. That's the worst part.*

The fountain is off. It's too early for anyone but me and the names on the bricks. I can't read them beneath the petals.



I feel tight all over as I look at Alec's text. *Are you going home?* I ask.

A: No. My parents live in Florida. I talked to them on the phone, and they said by the time they got here I'd be out of the hospital. It's easier for me to go back to the dorm anyway. I won't miss so much school

B: Does that bother you?

A: I'm glad they're not coming. It would just be awkward. My mom was freaking out but my dad just said "don't worry son, we have good insurance."

B: Did anyone tell them what happened?

A: It doesn't seem like it. I guess Matthison didn't want to say anything until she knows for sure what happened. They just knew I broke my leg at the park and I was in the hospital.

B: Are you gonna tell them?

A: Hell no. My dad works with Mr. Schutz and it would just give my mom crippling anxiety. She'd probably fly out here. It's better to just leave it as an accident in their eyes.

B: So you're not gonna tell anyone?

A: I'm telling you aren't I?

B: I still don't know what happened.

A: Are you still allowed on campus? Can you come to my dorm

B: Yeah. I think they're holding off on the consequences until they found out what really happened. They just said something about staying away from Alec Williams with threat of extremely serious consequences

A: More serious than the consequences of what they already think you've done?

B: I like to think I'm not condemned yet

When I get to his room, the door's cracked open with the deadbolt, so I just go in. Alec's sitting on the futon with his back to me. The room's been rearranged. His bed is unlofted and pushed against the wall behind his desk. The chair won't pull out now, but I guess he won't be sitting there for a while anyway.

I let go of the door and it bangs against the deadbolt.

Alec turns his head quickly. "Oh, hey. Uh, can you shut the door? I was just already up and figured I'd leave it open since you were coming, and I'm..." he trails off. "You know."

I shut the door and then walk into his room, feeling awkward. I don't know where to sit. He's leaning against the armrest of the futon with one leg, covered in white plaster, stretched on a pillow, and the other bent with his foot on the ground.

"Sorry I'm taking the whole couch," he says softly. He seems nervous. "You can sit on my bed if you want."

"Ok, thanks," I say, and I do.

"So..." he says after a moment. "Tough week."

"I'm sorry," I start, and he sighs like he expected it.

"Don't, it has nothing to do with you. You weren't even there."

"But if I hadn't—"

"You don't know what happened." He interrupts sharply.

"I know." I make myself look at him. Just normal Alec. Wearing gym shorts instead of his usual khakis, and the t-shirt sold at Fall Fest. Looking tired, maybe a bit annoyed, but just Alec. His hair looks good. "You could tell me."

He pushes his knuckles into his chin and stares into space. “Yeah. Well, John texted me about playing some football. So I went back to the park after Taco Bell and we threw the ball around for a while. Played some two v two. Then John starts acting dumb, trying to get the ball stuck in a tree. So he does, and then won’t go get it. So Carter’s like ‘fuck you man, I’m not leaving my ball,’ and starts climbing up this tree to get it.” He grabs his cup off the floor and takes a sip, then stares past me and blinks like he’s trying to remember.

“So Carter’s up in the branches somewhere, and he yells for me to come up, cause like, ‘you have long arms’ or something. And I just started climbing up to where he was. Then I was standing on the branch right below him, and I said something stupid like *the ball’s right here dude, you missed it*, and then he kicked me in the chest. I fell backward but I managed to grab a branch, not good enough to hang on, but I got my legs underneath me so I didn’t land on my back. So, that’s good.”

He waits for a moment, maybe for me to agree, but I don’t say anything.

“But I just lay there like, half my brain thinking *at least I’m not paralyzed cause that fucking hurts* and the other half my brain like pure panic about what else they were gonna do to me. But they left. And I guess that’s when they called Matthison and said they found me here and they saw you push me or whatever.”

My hands feel shaky. It’s just so perfect. In Matthison’s eyes, I’ve attacked every one of Alec’s friends except him, and never been punished. So of course I go for Alec next, and I go for him hard.

“You still there, dude?” he says, after a minute of silence passes.

“Yeah.”

“Cool. What are you thinking,” he says, but his voice breaks off at the end like he’s trying to keep it steady and fails.

“I’m trying not to right now.”

“Why?”

“I don’t think I like where the train of thought goes.”

“What are you gonna do?”

Instead of looking at him I stare at the Middle-Earth poster, awkwardly high above the futon now that his bed is gone. “Are there any fat elves?”

“Hey, don’t change the subject.” He says. “No, but don’t change the subject.”

“I don’t know. I don’t know what I’m gonna do.”

“Just let me tell Matthison.”

“No! No. You’re not doing that,”

“What are they gonna do?” He gestures at himself. “They’ve already done it.”

“I don’t want to know. I don’t want to think about it. You’re not snitching.”

“You’re not getting expelled! This is the stupidest conversation I’ve ever had. How can you talk so much about justice and all that but you’re getting expelled for something you didn’t do! You’re leaving me here. I finally have a real friend, and you’re leaving me.”

I press my face into his pillow and yell, “FUCK!”

I lay there a while until I hear Alec grunting uncomfortably as he shifts positions. I roll onto my back and throw the pillow to him. “Here.”

He puts it under between his back and the armrest. "I'm gonna get fucking bed sores."

I sit up, leaning on the wall his bed's been pushed against.

"Brandon," he says, waiting until I look at him. "Your thing."

"What?"

"Your thing," he says again.

It takes me another moment before I realize what he means. *You beat the shit out of people who act like assholes, right?*

"Alec..." I say. "I can't anymore."

"What? Why not?"

"It's different now."

"Why?"

"It's different."

"Why?"

"It's not just milk and gym clothes."

"Because they broke my leg."

"Yes, dammit! That's why! Because of me! Because I've been messing with them for three years with no real consequences and the moment I start to give a shit, the moment I care about something besides fucking with the assholes who fuck with everyone else, I ruin that too!"

He looks at me with wide eyes, and I realize I'm standing. Chest heaving, standing next to the bed, fists clenched. *I'm finally doing it, I think. Scaring him.*

"It's not because of you," he says firmly.

"Huh?" I sit down on the bed again.

“Seriously, it’s not. I’m the one who broke the agreement. And I told you, they hate me. The opportunity arose to punish me and pin it on you, which punishes me. It was a perfect storm and you’re caught in it. But it’s not because of you.”

“It’s not *not* because of me.” I say.

He laughs. “God, Brandon. You always have to be all up in it, don’t you?”

*I don’t scare him*, I think. *He might think I’m ridiculous, but I don’t scare him*. I guess it’s a tough competition when’s he’s comparing me to the likes of Schutz and them. My chest swells. I think I feel just a little bit happy.

“Yeah,” I say. “I kinda always do.”

Alec pushes himself off the couch, wincing, and hops over to the sink to refill his cup.

I want to help him, but I know he’d be pissed, so I stay where I am. “You know what?”

He leans against the counter with one hand, gulping down water. Swallows, and says, “what?”

“I would drink Artic Mouthwash right now.”

He laughs, whole body. My smile feels foreign. Unused. But good.

“Me too,” he says. “If I wasn’t on opioids.”

“Are you gonna lose a scholarship?”

He rubs his face, which has the shadow of blonde stubble. I guess shaving isn’t a current priority. “Nah. Not likely. I wasn’t good enough.”

I’m not sure if he’s lying because I never went to any basketball games. “You’re not?”

“I mean, I’m good. I want to play college ball, if I still can after all this. But I’m not the best on the team, and Denwittie isn’t really the type of school that gets scouts.”

“Oh,” I say. “I guess that’s... good?”

“In a way, yes. If you look at it from that one exact specific angle, yes it’s good. That I’m mediocre at basketball and can’t play basketball the rest of high school.”

“Sorry.”

“Just joking.”

“You know, the rest of high school is only 128 days.”

“Not so bad.”

“At least you’re still in high school.”

“Dammit, Brandon, I can’t let you do this.”

“I know.”

“What are you gonna do?”

“You couldn’t just let me help you, could you?”

He cracks a smile. “Nah, dude. No way.”

“But if you snitch, they’ll just do something worse to you.”

“What if you tell Matthison?”

“I don’t think she would believe me.” I say bitterly. “I’m the one in therapy.”

“But you could try,” he says. “If they don’t believe you, at least Schutz will go after you, and what’s the worst he could do?”

I stare at him for a long second. He's deep in thought for a moment before he glances over. "What?"

"*This* is the worst thing he's ever done, Alec. This is bad. The whole thing is so risky."

His face twists like he's sick to his stomach. "I'm trying to redirect my attention. *This* is not so bad, okay? I have to tell myself that or I will start spiraling down a deep hole I won't get out of."

I look away. "Okay."

"I'm sure you're struggling with your whole justice complex and some crippling guilt, but I just need you to ignore that, okay?"

"I don't think Todd Jones would agree."

He sighs deeply. "Don't even get me started on that. I've become you and it's not even my fault. I got weekly Todd Jones sessions too, but in my *room*, on account of my leg being broken. Fuckin at-home therapy, dude. They think I have PTSD or something."

"Do you?"

He frowns, and I think he's debating the truth or a lie. "Well," he finally says. "If I fall asleep I dream about it. Carter's foot slamming into my chest. Falling, grabbing at branches, and the sound of my body hitting the ground. Being so scared I couldn't see. And then John standing over me with eyes like a rabid dog. Spitting in my face. 'Keep your mouth shut, faggot,' he said. And they all left. I thought I was going to lay there the whole night."

"Oh my *god*." I say. "Fuck." I stand again, and walk to the door, leaning my head against it. "Fuck," I say quietly.



“I didn’t say that to make you feel more guilty, I swear. Sorry,” he says.

I look at him, and my whole face feels hot. My stomach churns like I’m gonna start dry heaving. “It’s not guilt, Alec. I’m upset. And I’m pissed. I’m pissed as *fuck*.”

## **Thursday**

I’m in the basement again, but this time it’s different. The bench creaks when I breathe. The three minutes feel infinite. My mouth is so dry that I can’t even swallow down the bad taste in my throat. This time, I won’t take Todd Jones’ glass of water because I’m playing his game. I’ll take it because I need it. This time, I need him.

I look down at the letter Alec gave me. It was the biggest risk I’d let him take. His side of the story. No chance I’d let him be seen in Matthison’s office. But he wouldn’t let me do this by myself, so I promised I’d give Jones the letter.

My sweat has soaked from my palms through the paper, so I can see the reverse of Alec’s blue-ink writing. I set the letter down and wipe my hands on my pants. Two damp streaks darken the khaki, and I try to swallow again. I try to find the anger I felt yesterday, that I’ve felt for years, but all I feel is fear. I’ve never had so much to lose. I’ve never cared so much before. Fuck universal justice. This is about Alec.

The door opens. “Come on in, Brandon,” Jones says.

I hold the letter out. He stares at it for a moment. What does he think it is? My confession? Maybe he’s dissuaded by the sweat stains.

But he takes it. I have my small yes. *Keep your mouth shut, faggot*, my brain says. “I made a friend,” I start.

Jones points to the loveseat, so I go and sit down. He fills a glass and hands it to me, and I drink the whole thing. He fills it again. Then he sits, not at his desk, but next to me.

“Brandon,” he says quietly, “all I’ve ever wanted is the truth. If you tell it to me, I *promise* I won’t let you down.”

I don’t know if I can believe him, but he’s my only option. All I have is my therapist and my friend. “I made a friend,” I begin again, “and I would never hurt him. But Schutz and Carter and Brock would – did. And I’m afraid telling the truth will get him hurt again.”

“I promise,” he says again, “whoever did this to Alec will be expelled. Everyone who did this. If you tell the truth, you don’t have to be afraid.”

“Okay,” I say, and then I tell the truth.

## REFERENCES

- Adams, Tim. "For Me, England Is a Mythical Place'." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 20 Feb. 2005, [www.theguardian.com/books/2005/feb/20/fiction.kazuoishiguro](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/feb/20/fiction.kazuoishiguro).
- Green, John. *Looking for Alaska*. Penguin Group, 2015.
- Irving, John. *The Cider House Rules*. Epub ed., HarpersCollins, 2012.
- Ishiguro, Kazuo. *Never Let Me Go*. Vintage Books, 2006.
- Proulx, Annie. *Brokeback Mountain*. Scribner, 2005.
- Ware, Ruth. *In a Dark, Dark Wood*. Scout Press, 2015.