

SHORELINE

A photograph of a seagull standing on a sandy beach at sunset. The bird is in the lower center of the frame, facing left. The water is a deep blue with gentle waves lapping at the shore. The sky is a mix of soft pinks, oranges, and blues. The overall mood is serene and peaceful.

Rhode Island College | 2019

SHORELINE

2019

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Fifth annual writing contest prose winner

O Goddess

I have a secret. I've never told anyone before. I know if I did I would be punished for it but, that's not the real reason I don't tell anyone. Such a sweet secret is made even sweeter by the fact that it is mine, and nobody else's.

I pray to the goddess Diana.

She is my namesake, so how can it be so terrible? Of course, often people say about me when they think I'm not listening, or sometimes when they simply don't care that I am, "It's a shame she doesn't have a good Christian name." I think Diana is a name far lovelier than any plain Mary or Ruth. My mother named me it because she thought it was a strong name. I agree.

Diana is said to protect young, virgin girls. I'm all of those things. I think it's much more sensible to pray to a goddess who protects you than to one who wants to damn you to the fires of hell. That's what Reverend Kent says God wants, anyway. Reverend Clay is a lot younger and a lot kinder too. Cecily and Mary and many of the other girls giggle and whisper about him during class. They say they would like to be his wife.

I'm not like them. I *loathe* housework and needlepoint; I'd be an astoundingly dreadful wife. They say that Eve was made out of one of Adam's bones, or some sort of nonsense like that, and for that reason women are meant to serve men. I don't really know why that is perfectly believable, but a huntress goddess is a made-up story and sinful to even consider plausible. Truthfully, I'd rather run off into the forest and live with the wild animals than that. I'd like to remain a virgin my whole life, like Diana.

We weren't even supposed to know about the pagan gods and goddesses at all. It's not part of the curriculum our town council decided upon. Miss Blake taught us though, one day in class. Somehow, we ended up terribly off topic and it came to that- the most wonderful stories I had ever heard. If they spoke of those at church instead, perhaps I would not fall asleep so often. How wretched I am, and yet it is true! She spoke of a lightning wielding king of the heavens, and of a beautiful, lovely goddess who was created out of the foam of the ocean, but there was none that I adored so much as my Diana.

I miss Miss Blake. She was a significant upgrade from our previous teacher, but after she told us those stories, parents complained. We were too young, too impressionable to be exposed to myths, and without parents' permission no less. A town hall meeting was held, one of course I, nor any of my fellow schoolmates were permitted to participate in, just parents and officials who never walked foot in our classroom. They sent Miss Blake packing her bags. She went to the city after that. I wish I could go to the city. I've heard that they even have electricity there!

I cried a lot that day. I learned more with her in the two months she taught us than all year with that dastardly Mr. Wilkes, or any other teacher I've ever had! Even though Miss Blake left, the marvelous tales of Diana stayed with me.

I miraculously survived the rest of the school year without Miss Blake. Not without pains-- I was made to stand in front of the class after being caught doodling during Mr. Andrews' dreadful droning. Another time, when he shouted at me for talking out of turn after the second or third time that day, he rapped my wrist hard. There were other unjust chastisements I faced, but none of them mattered anymore.

The sun gleamed on our fields and the world around me bloomed with glorious, vibrant color and sweet smells. "Annabel!" I yelled on the first day of summer. "Come on! The violets are in full bloom-- we can play pretend and be wood sprites!"

"Diana, yelling across the house is not ladylike," my mother chided, barely looking up from her patchwork.

"Sorry Mother." I didn't mean it and I could tell that she could tell, but she didn't press me to sound more sincere. I think she's given up on me. I'm glad.

I ran up the stairs and knocked rapidly on Annabel's bedroom. Finally she answered the door. "What, Diana?"

"What are you waiting for? It's summer-- aren't you coming to play?" It was our tradition, to always spend the first day of summer running about outside, making up all sorts of wondrous games. When I was nine it rained, but even then we pretended to be sirens of the sea until our father got annoyed

The sun gleamed on
our fields and the
world around me
bloomed with
glorious, vibrant color
and sweet smells.

at us and dragged us, drenched and laughing, inside.

"I'm too old for such childish things," Annabel responded. "There are college applications to concern myself with now." Mother only went to finishing school, but recently she has expressed quite adamantly she wants Annabel and me to get a thorough education, with all the choices in the world at our fingertips.

"It's tradition," I protested. "Surely, college can wait a day."

"Surely," Annabel replied, picking up a basket on her bed. "But Lizzie and Victoria can't. I'm meeting them for tea." She paused for a moment. "Also, Lizzie says her Aunt Beatrice, the artist's model, told her that going out in the sun is awful for your complexion. Now, if you'll excuse me."

I pouted, and rushed off, storming down our stairs. "Pardon me, young lady, I mistook you for an elephant," my father said as I pushed past him and ran into the gardens.

*O Diana,
Most wondrous, benevolent, heavenly Diana,
Return my sister to me,
Exorcise whatever dreadfully dull spirit is inhabiting her body*

*O Diana,
Sister in name and in spirit!
I thank you deeply for your generosity
And hope to prove a worthy disciple to you*

*O goddess
Grant my prayers*

That afternoon I played by myself, weaving daisies into crowns and thinking up all the sorts of games I could play- and then testing them, playing both my role and Annabel's. It wasn't as amusing, but perhaps Annabel would change her mind tomorrow. What did Lizzie Bell's aunt know anyway? I liked the soft brown my skin turned in the sun, like sweet almonds, and the freckles that splayed my face, as if my epidermis contained an entire galaxy of its own, as if my body was covered in stars.

The sun set in a stunning and exquisite display of oranges, pinks,

and purples, and in its place, stars came. I spotted Orion. When it became too cold to stay outside, and too late for my parents to possibly approve, I went inside. My parents were already in bed. I climbed up our staircase and walked past Annabel's room. She was sitting at her desk, the gas lamp still on, writing something. I looked in for a moment. She didn't look up. I kept walking.

It was a week and a half later when there was a knock on our door. I had been grabbing an apple from the kitchen. My mother was occupied, baking a mulberry pie for after dinner.

"Diana, won't you get that?"

I nodded, biting into my apple as the juice ran down my chin, and answered the door. There stood Jacob Wentworth. It took all my restraint not to slam the door right in his face. Jacob Wentworth was without a doubt the most awful boy at our school. He was mean. One time I heard him say to Ruby that she ought to be sitting with the five year olds because she was so stupid. When we were outside, before classes would start, sometimes he lifted up girls' skirts up with the other boys, and laughed. I hated him, oh, I hated him. One time I put a rotten sandwich in the back of his desk during break, and a week later, he stank so bad nobody wanted to sit near him.

Annabel hated him too. Or she used to. But now, when she and the older girls sat outside during lunch break, they'd always be sitting with the boys. Because they were 'mature'. Because that's what adults did.

"What do you want?" I said, except I was chewing the apple, so it came out more like "Whaadoyoowan?"

"Is Annabel there?"

"Maybe."

"Who is at the door?" I heard Annabel say, coming down the stairs. She reached the door, smiling. "Jacob. Please, come in."

My mother, wondering what all the commotion was about, joined. "Jacob Wentworth- hello! Do come in, make yourself comfortable."

"Why, that's ever so kind- thank you Mrs. Morley."

My eyes rolled so hard I felt like they were going to fall out of my head. "Diana,"

She was sitting
at her desk, the gas
lamp still on, writing
something. I looked
in for a moment. She
didn't look up.

my mother said, “Why don’t you run along and play now?”

“Yes, Diana, run along,” Annabel said. I felt terribly betrayed, and it was worsened by a despicable look of victory on Jacob Wentworth’s face, a look apparently only I could see.

I glared long and hard before turning around and stomping outside.

In spite of the restraint I managed when he showed up at our door, I couldn’t manage it when they told me their special announcement. Annabel and my parents thought it would be best to tell me without Jacob there. That was a good decision on their part.

“You’re going to *marry him*? That miserable blackguard? That disgusting, despicable slime?”

Annabel simply rolled her eyes. “Oh Di, grow up. You don’t know what love is. You’ll learn someday.” I certainly *hoped* not.

“Diana,” my father said sternly, “Regardless of what you think of your sister’s betrothed-”

“He’s cruel and nasty! He does awful things!”

“You will respect your sister’s decision and treat him well. He’ll be your brother-in-law. You will show him the respect he deserves.”

“Great, because he happens to be terrible and deserves no respect, so I can show him that just fine.”

“Why can’t you just be happy for me?” Annabel exclaimed, and I realized then that she was crying. “You miserable little brat,” she murmured, a big, fat tear dripping from her face onto her soft cotton dress.

“Annabel-” She shook her head and ran upstairs.

*O Diana,
I seek your guidance now more than ever
I do not want to hurt my sister
That is the last thing I want*

*But there must be a way to stop this marriage
Annabel, my sweet sister Annabel,
She cannot marry such a vile boy
She just can’t*

Diana, I beseech you

*Please come to my aid
Oh! Please
I don't know what to do*

They set the date for early October. I stopped moping about so much--well, until school returned that is. I played my part in school, getting into minimal trouble, as September passed. The first few days of class, all the girls circled my sister like vultures, delighted by her engagement. The leaves began to change from their lovely verdant shades into the rich reds and oranges of autumn, but I could not enjoy them, knowing every day that passed, the dreaded date approached.

It was a crisp, late, September day when I heard Annabel crying in her room. I knocked on the door like she had demanded of me in the past few months. "Anna-" I called.

"Go away, Diana!" she cried.

I didn't want to, but the door was locked. Instead I went downstairs to where my mother was cooking a warm soup for the chill day. "Annabel's crying."

"What?"

"I heard her in her room. She's crying about something."

"Right, well, keep an eye on the soup. I'll go talk to her."

I nodded obediently and took the soup ladle from her plump hand. Then, when I heard she had entered Annabel's room, I crept up the stairs silently, avoiding the second to last stair, which creaked, and pressed my ear against Annabel's door.

"Annabel, I can't help you if you don't tell me what ever the matter is."

"It's Jacob!" she cried. "Alright-- it's Jacob."

"I thought you were--"

"He says he needs a proper wife to come home to! One who will be waiting for him, ready to care for his children! He doesn't want me to go to college."

"Annabel, you don't have to marry him, you know. Sixteen is not so

The leaves began to change from their lovely verdant shades into the rich reds and oranges of autumn, but I could not enjoy them, knowing every day that passed, the dreaded date approached.

old anymore--”

“But I love him!”

“Annabel.”

“I’m going to marry him.”

“I thought we were going to start a generation of educated women,” my mother said sadly. “You want that, Annabel, I know you do.”

“So what if I do? I want him more! What do you know of what’s good for me?”

“I married a man when I was young, without pursuing any further education, and did exactly what was expected for me. One might say, I know a great deal.”

“You don’t! I love him! We are going to get married, that’s it!”

There was silence for a moment. I heard my mother stand up, the bed squeaking as it was relieved of my mother’s additional weight. “If that’s what you want.”

“It is.”

I dashed down the stairs, trying to remain silent as I sped back to the kitchen and grabbed the soup ladle, pretending to have been stirring it. A minute later, my mother returned. She dismissed me, and then began to continue her cooking. I tried to make my way off, still processing the conversation I had heard, when my mother groaned. “Diana, you let the bottom of the pot burn.”

The day of the wedding finally came. Annabel had made Lizzie Bell her Maid of Honor. I didn’t mind. I didn’t want to be a part of it at all, if my parents would let me. The rest of the girls and I sat in Annabel’s bedroom, helping her get ready. After Mary and Lizzie wrapped her hair in an elaborate updo, the gauzy white veil was placed over her head.

She stood up and took a deep breath. “Well?” she asked. All the girls rushed to tell her she looked beautiful. She *did* look beautiful. But I didn’t say anything. While Mary told her Jacob was the luckiest boy in the world, her blue eyes caught mine. I stared back at her. She shook her head, and turned back to the group.

“It’s time, isn’t it?”

“I married a man when I was young, without pursuing any further education, and did exactly what was expected for me. One might say, I know a great deal.”

The processions played out as they were expected to. And finally, came the vows. I would not object. In spite of my thoughts on the matter, I would not ruin this day for my sister. I would not be an embarrassment to her, nor my family.

“I, Jacob Wentworth, vow to love you, Annabel Morley, as my wife, as the mother of my children and love of my life, till death till do us part.”

“I, Annabel Morley, I...” She glanced at the crowd. Her hands were shaking. “I- I can’t.” She ran off the platform. There were gasps, and I found myself unable to hide a great big smile. My mother, I saw, felt the same, though she concealed it better. I thought to myself,

*O Diana,
Thank you!*

Then, I ran after my sister.

Fifth annual writing contest poetry winner

Impromptu Burial

We've never spoken about the night
at the cemetery, or about much really.
We had driven to your boy's grave
unexpectedly. I blinked dryly at the
dirt-crib where maggots and beetles
sang lullabies to your friend and my
stranger. Joint in rotation.
On cue,
rain misted over the bizarre huddle of us.
The speckled drops on your right cheek
mimicking tattooed tears. You stared
down, paying respects or avoiding the
freshly cemented cells between us.
Another drag and a stiff chuckle buried
our unspoken condolences.
Our brown hands twitched for each other
like baby fingers looking for something
to curl into.
You feel my invisible tug for attention.
Your eyes subtly twinge—I'm the ghost
of something you thought was gone.
My body, once a fruitful negotiation,
up for frenzy-fucks, is now overridden
with new-born wounds of a rotting womb.
My eyes are the words that don't meet
my lips but penetrate through silent, glid-
ing blinks. But could you hear the jerking
in my stomach? Its demand for attention?
The bantam bundle of bravery scraping
up my throat, crawling on all fours,
attempting escape through a scream?
I swallowed it like warm formula—
unnatural, but necessary. Your head hung
down again, grieving at the wrong grave.

My inside-me was kicking inside me
and you felt bad for your friend.
Left palm in the pocket of my hoodie,
kissing our bleeding belly-seed,
right hand holding the healing joint
temporarily medicating the muddled
mourning of this impromptu burial.
Lips so puckered, you'd think I was
kissing a child to its permanent sleep.

Fifth annual writing contest artwork winner



Untitled

JULIANA CAMPELLONE

Field of Roses

The room was bare. The white walls, white ceiling, white floor all smooth and seamlessly blending together. When in the room, one could easily become lost in a void of bright nothingness. The cool metal of the chair pressed harshly into her lower back and shoulders. Stiffness had become a constant state for the girl, as her time out of the chair was quite limited. Frigid air blew in from unseen vents all around. The hair on her arms raised as goosebumps formed over her skin and her breasts turned into pebbles beneath the pale gray shirt. No pants were provided to the sallow girl. She had only been given the oversized shirt and matching cotton briefs to cover her delicate frame.

She kept her head lowered, looking at the tops of her scarred hands which lay carefully placed on her equally scarred thighs. Her raven, curly hair fell down her back and over her shoulders, the frizzy, unkempt locks providing a partial curtain which shielded her light eyes from the bright white. The only sounds in the room came from her own breath, and from the broken vent hidden somewhere in the blanket of white. A small clicking occurred every three seconds from that invisible vent which she could tell was located somewhere to her left. Each click resonating clearly in her ear, causing an almost itchy uneasiness as the vibrations traveled through her canal and into her ear drum.

She could never scratch the itch. Her hands must remain flat on her thighs. She must not move.

The girl had made a game out of studying her scars. The ones on the tops of her hands were more raised than the ones on her upper legs. She liked to imagine that each long, straight white bump was a snowy hill stretched out across a vast landscape. The freezing air around her became the result of snow falling in this beautiful game and not the product of sterile, unfeeling wall machinery. She would pretend that these slippery slopes were the playground of endless children. That was worth the pain of receiving those sharp whips across her frail skin, wasn't it? She was providing hours of endless entertainment for those much younger and much more innocent than herself. She could watch them giggle and dance, jump and scream with delight as they played over the hills. Their young lives unaltered by anything but the cold air and falling snow. Surely their joy was worth that sting, followed by that bright red against the white.

The scars on her thighs were not white. They were shades of pink,

deep red, and purple. They were not neat lines cutting across her skin horizontally like the ones on her hands. They were scattered fireworks bursting out from small points of contact where the tips of the flogger had split the skin like tissue paper, blood and flesh erupting through. Her little game ensured these blossoms were not a scary memory.

Instead they were late blooming roses, some a lighter pink, others a beautiful, classic red.

Instead they were late blooming roses, some a lighter pink, others a beautiful, classic red. She could see the summer morning dew that rested peacefully on the petals, waiting to lazily slide down the femininely curving frames of the roses. She imagined laying in a field of these roses, herself. The golden warmth from above would calm the raised hairs on her arms into a relaxed, soft fuzz. During her fantasy, the stale air of the room would be overpowered by the sickly sweet perfume of the roses. She would run her fingers along the petals, feeling how smooth and velvety each one was in contrast to the actual roughness of her scars.

It had been 5,122 clicks of the vent. 15,366 seconds, 256.1 minutes, and 4.26 hours since the last Severance. The longest she had ever been left to Ponder in the white was 7,512 clicks, 22,536 seconds, 375.6 minutes, and 6.26 hours. She had learned that keeping time and playing soft games helped to numb her for the vivid reality of the pain that would occur after her Pondering was completed.

There was nothing she could do about the pain. The Severance would always come without hesitation, without mercy. It always started with the lights. They would suddenly go out. The abrupt and complete darkness both swallowing and contrasting the brightness from moments before. The air vents stopped clicking and the warmth that quickly seeped into the room was an unwelcome heaviness. She would remain still. No movement was allowed. She would close her eyes so tight that they would crinkle deeply in the corners. She desperately wanted the hot shade to go away. The black meant pain. It meant blood and sweat and muffled cries into the darkness.

The new silence would be broken with the creaking of a door. She could never seem to lock down the location of the door within the room. Some days the sound of it opening would come from in front of her. Other days the noise would come from the sides or the back. But when the lights were blindingly shining, there were never any seams or raised outlines that

would indicate a door. The result would always be the same though, no matter where the Holder seemed to enter from.

The room would become an endless black hole, swallowing the entirety of the limited world the girl existed in. She would hear a door open and there would be no sound of footsteps. She would remain still, hands on her thighs, and eyes clenched shut. The Holder would end up directly in front of her, stepping on her toes with his heavy steel-toed boots as, he came to a stop. He would then begin praying.

“Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Your loving kindness; according to the multitude of Your tender mercies, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.” His voice always reminded the girl of a thick, slimy syrup; rich in sound but sticky and disgusting when it touched her skin. The drawl he spoke with melted and fused with the sticky hotness of the air in the room, making the girl feel dirty, making her feel violated.

“Bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.” She would reply, lifting her left hand up and out. She would expose it to the dark silhouette in front of her. *Crack!* Went the crop across her hand, stinging and beginning to swell instantly. She squeezed her eyes shut even more as she winced in pain.

“For I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against You, You only, I have sinned, and done this evil in Your sight. That You may be found just when You speak, and blameless when You judge.” The Holder would sometimes lean his weight forward between verses, crushing the girl’s toes under his boots. When the Holder did indulge in this part of punishment, bruises would often appear under the girl’s toenails, which would sometimes split under the immense force.

“Bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.” She would again reply, this time raising her right hand to be whipped.

“Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me. Behold, You desire truth in the inward parts, and in the hidden part You will make me to know wisdom.”

She would repeat the words again with each new phrase of the Holder’s prayer. Each repetition would be the catalyst for a fresh crack of the crop against her damaged skin.

Eventually, the pain blended together and the status of her hands was measured by how much blood leaked through her fingers and onto her thighs. She tried as best as possible not to allow blood to get on her shirt or

briefs. The Holder would punish her more if she stained the garments. The fresher marks on her thighs were the result of her staining the gray briefs last menstrual cycle. Her womanhood was something the Holder felt he needed to whip out of her. He hated her curves and so he hid them with the baggy shirt. He hated the very process that defined her as a woman, and so he beat her for it. Any blood on her clothes reminded him of her cycle, and so he beat her for it.

By the time all eight sections of the Holder's prayer had been completed, her hands would be split in many places, blood caking her thighs and underneath her fingernails. Sweat soaked her back and face, occasionally dripping onto the raw skin, burning the raw, exposed flesh with its saltiness. Tears streamed down her face as well, carving silent streams through the grime on her cheeks. She knew better than to scream or cry out. Her only job was to repeat the words, and take her Severance quietly.

The Holder would complete his prayer and then grow silent for a few moments. He would remove his feet from crushing the girl's toes and bend down to crouch on the same level as her. The Holder would wrap his hand around the back of her sticky neck, pull her face closer to his, and place his forehead against hers. His young hands were smooth against her hot skin. They were the hands of a rich boy; The only use they ever saw came from holding a whip or a crop. He breathed in deeply through his nose and out through his mouth. The breath was deliberate, controlled, just like everything else in the Holder's world. His hot breath would be blown out into the girl's face. The overwhelming smell of mint almost blocked out his bodily smell of fire and lemon floor polish. She used to love his smell. It used to mean safety and security. It meant love and home. Now the Holder's scent just made her stomach coil into knots and made her head dizzy.

“How you tempt me, my dearest child. The power of your sin is so strong that it pulls me in each time I come to visit. How you tempt me and cause such heaviness to weigh on my heart. You sweet, sinful thing. Any chance I had of entering into our Lord's kingdom died when you caused me to indulge. Now any chance I have of entering that Blessed Land comes from my ownership of you. You are my damnation and my only hope, sweet thing.” He would take in another deep breath and exhale into the girl's face once more.

The breath
was deliberate,
controlled, just like
everything else in the
Holder's world.

The Holder would then leave the room, somehow always from a different place than he entered. The lights remained off and the vents would whir back to life. The air from the vents would not be the same air from before the Severance began. The air was hotter, sweeter smelling, and much more toxic. With each inhale the girl's throat would become slightly more burnt and raw. Her head would start to spin and her heart would begin pounding at an alarming rate. She would fight to stay conscious for as long as possible, resisting the pain in her lungs and windpipe, while trying to gasp for some oxygen that she was desperate to find hidden in the sweet air. When she finally felt herself beginning to slip into the even darker void of unconsciousness, she made sure to keep her hands carefully placed on her thighs. She would keep her head down as she began to slump forward. When she finally fell fully asleep, she would hazily drift away, staring at her thighs and dreaming she was falling into the field of roses.

To The Self

Younger self, look at me.
See how I smile.
See how laughter bubbles out of me when I hear a joke
And I do not try to suffocate the sound.
See how my eyes shine with a fire
You haven't felt since before he came along.
See how when I walk
My spine is straight,
My shoulders back, arms at my sides.
See how I walk.
See how I occupy all the space my body needs
Instead of struggling to make myself smaller
To make a hateful boy smile at me.

Younger self, give me your hands.
Feel how steady mine are.
Feel how they have learned not to tremble-
Like an earthquake every time fear or doubt rises in me.
Feel the softness they are still capable of
Even after all they have been through.
Feel how they are still cold,
Just like yours.

Younger self, take these pens.
Take them in your cold hands
And unleash all that is trapped in your mind.

Take control of your pain.
Take words back as your own
Since he used so many against you
To tear you down,
To tear you apart.

Your pen is not poison.
It is the only cure you will ever find
From the poisonous thoughts in your mind.

Younger self, walk with me.
See all the beauty that I have seen.
Taste all the delicious foods I have tasted.
Laugh at all the jokes I have heard.
Give all the affection I have given-
The affection that you wish someone had given to you.
Write all the words that I have written.

Younger self, free yourself.
You thought you would never smile again
After all he did to you,
After he left you high and dry with nothing and no one.

Trust me when I say that you were wrong.



Untitled
CARRIE CAZEALT

Target

Your loved ones are never safe, Hallis. That's why Xant went missing two years ago, because of some pig-headed mercenary leader putting him under a protection warrant.

That's the main thought running through my head as I make it to my apartment complex in Noxburgh. There was still no sign of Xant after all this time, having searched for him ever since he was taken back at our old complex in the illuminated city of Lexarus. From what intel I could find out on my own, there was more to the story that I still needed to piece together, and being an assassin for hire wasn't an easy thing to hide either once people recognize your face enough.

Xant was a very close friend of mine, though he knew nothing of my late night activities of looking at leads given to me on potential targets in my room. Just me in my darkened room, pouring over the data on my holo-screen until the early hours of the morning until he would have to jar me awake when he found me passed out at my desk rather than passed out in my bed.

Even currently in this present time, I missed him. Missed the curved smile on his face and his unusual orange eyes and his horrific mess of dark brown hair every single time he walked out of his room in the morning before he would have to comb it out into a more neatened state. Xant and I would joke about his hair all the time and how he needed to let it grow out so it wouldn't be as if he was electrocuted by the nearest electrical socket.

I missed Xant's laugh, but most of all, I missed our late night talks about our childhood memories, still holding onto the old rabbit stuffed animal he showed me one time that was precious to him. He told me how he had this precious memento since he was three, always holding onto it when he was having a bad day or if he needed extra comfort. How I teased him at first about it until he playfully punched me in the arm, a slight pout on his face until I apologized.

I stir myself out of the my thoughts as I check my watch by the time I make it to my apartment door. Late, just as usual. I remember when it was late when I made it home to Xant and my old apartment, after having told Xant that my boss at the office had additional paperwork that needed to be completed. When I did make it back that night, I found a busted open door, shattered glass, the signs of a struggle, and a letter with a crudely painted insignia painted on my balcony door. The insignia of the Corsairs that raided the place and took Xant away and the letter stating it was a protection warrant.

Just like that, gone. No signs of where my best friend was taken to and two years with a trail of his whereabouts long since grown cold from leads I was able to acquire from various informants that I work for. Having to face anguish of losing a person I cared about and blaming myself for not being careful enough when I was hurrying home one time and not paying attention to the routes that I took.

How I should have just told him the truth on who I was, and not what he knew me to be. Allowing things to deteriorate so fast to where he was taken, not giving a chance to explain myself over the takeout I was bringing home for the both of us that night.

Fishing for my keys and finding the right one that I needed, I open the door in order to enter the darkness within until I press a button on my holo watch, the lights dimming to a soft, comfortable level. I start to saunter to my room until I stop, hearing the sound of a rattling cup come from the other room that led to my kitchen. Carefully, I place my duffel bag onto the ground while quietly pulling the pistol out of the hilt at my side. Once I was sure that I loaded my weapon, I make my way over to where the noise came from, the grip on my pistol tightening when I hear a glass smash onto the floor next. When I enter the kitchen however, I look around for a moment, my eyes landing on the shards that sparkled several feet away.

I gasp when a sudden hand lands on me, crying out in pain when I feel an electrical current course through my system and my whole entire vision going dark.

That's odd. . .maybe the wind? But then again. . .the windows in here are-

I gasp when a sudden hand lands on me, crying out in pain when I feel an electrical current course through my system and my whole entire vision going dark.



It feels like hours before I wake, a groan escaping my lips as I sluggishly try to move only to stiffen when I find my limbs unable to function. When I do manage to shrug the disorientation off, I grit my teeth in anger when I find my wrists completely restrained and looking down, my ankles are tied to the chair that I'm imprisoned in. Looking around the

room, I realize I'm in my office in my apartment, in front of a table that was moved from the wall and into the center, the lamp that was once on my desk in the center of the table. Everything else is dimmed into the shadows, and it left an unsettling feeling in my stomach, even as I try to tug myself free. I wince in pain, not realizing how deathly tight these bindings were, and I curse under my breath as I question how I ended up in this situation in the first place without any prior knowledge of someone sneaking into my apartment without any traces of breaking and entering.

"You always were ridiculous, keeping old memories like this Hallis Lucia Haybern. . ."

Someone tosses Xant's dog-eared stuffed rabbit into a corner, my expression turning cold when I recognize the coal haired man coming around to my side of the table, suddenly materializing from the shadows as if he was a dark entity himself. There's an icy look in his dark emerald eyes that gleamed at the disappointment that I was, and I could feel the ropes chafing my wrists as I inevitably struggled again against the binds that held me, anger the only thing that kept me fighting.

Sybil, the leader of the Corsairs, was the one that decided to intrude into my apartment of all people.

"What does it matter to you Corsair Leader?! It was Xant's until. . .until you took him away two years ago!" I snarl, spitting at Sybil's face. "You mercenaries have no backbone. Just a bunch of thugs who-"

The sting of a sudden slap across my face cuts me off on what I'm about to say, and I glare at him in outrage from the forcefulness as he pulls out a white envelope, slamming it down in front of me on the mahogany surface of the table.

"Instead of being a bitch and spitting those insults at me Miss Haybern, why don't you read this instead? I came here for a reason you hotheaded ingrate. Before you decide to spit those insults at me, I came here with a purpose rather than starting a fight." Sybil snarls lowly, reaching over to slowly untie one of my wrists. "I will untie *one hand*, so you can read it. After you read it, you will shut up and listen to what I have to say. You will not make any sudden moves. You will not try to escape. Otherwise I will stop you. Got it?"

I look at him warily for a moment before I slowly nod in answer, Sybil continuing to undo the binds on my right wrist. After my wrist is freed, I flex it experimentally, wincing from the soreness as I carefully reach for the envelope on the table. I try to shake the paper out of the envelope,

only to have Sybil help me retrieve it instead when I find myself having trouble in getting it. I give him a dirty glare before opening the paper in my free hand with my thumb, my eyes widening when I recognize the familiar scrawl of handwriting immediately that I feel my chest knot.

Hallis, You may think I'm dead, but I'm not

I had to hide, and honestly they didn't give me any choice. The Corsairs chose to keep me under their protection, even though it seemed like they took me away when in all reality, they did not. There's another group, however, that has me targeted and are trying to kill me for the sting of betrayal that I have given them. I was a valuable asset to them, and when I walked away, especially from their leader, who, in truth, is an ex-boyfriend of mine, they didn't take kindly to what they saw as an act of going rogue. The Corsairs may not have seemed like good people at first, but rest assured that they are.

Please don't worry Hal. The Corsairs are people you can trust. But whatever you do, don't get mixed into anything that involves the Phantom Brotherhood.

It takes some time to process the letter, reading it over and over again until finally I slam it down onto the table, glaring at the Corsair leader across from me. Sybil leans against the closest wall, arms crossed as he waits for me to say something, his expression softening however when he sees the anguish that begins to spread across my own features. It felt like my heart was being ripped out, knowing there was something else going on behind the scenes that I never caught on to before. Never knew that information such as what was written in the letter was the thing that Xant could have been looking at, his expression turning stressed out on some days where he had to have a cup of gin next to him in order to make things more tolerable in his own state of mind. I bow my head, doing my best to hide the tears that began to sting at my eyes.

I guess that made two of us when it came to hiding things from one another.

When I hear Sybil's footsteps approach me, my fists grip tightly on the arms of the chair I sat in, and I hear his footsteps stop on my right side.

"I remember the protection warrant that I found in my apartment in Lexarus that you left behind." I say softly, gritting my teeth

It takes some time to process the letter, reading it over and over again until finally I slam it down onto the table, glaring at the Corsair leader across from me.

as I let out a sharp breath.

“I had to do it. As the leader of the Corsairs, it is my solemn duty to protect the informants that help me, as well as help others that I have helped before.” Sybil sighs, the same time I look up at him coldly. “The Phantom Brotherhood was a mercenary group that Xant got pulled into by his boyfriend before he found out that his own boyfriend actually ran this group of cold blooded killers. Xant actually faced a lot of abuse as far as I can remember, the man he was with forcing Xant to do his dirty work in finding important targets to kill and raid. This was before I met you and needed your help on an assignment that needed discretion at the time. Thusly, when I found out the leader was aiming to kill Xant, I had to take him away so nothing would happen to him.”

I nod in answer and Sybil goes to gently untie my other wrist before kneeling down to undo the bindings on my ankles as well. I can feel my thoughts darken as I process all of the information that is given to me, standing up once I am freed from my imprisonment. I look over to Sybil, rubbing one of my sore wrists as I walk over to my desk in order to grab my holo watch off of it after spotting it earlier before Sybil made himself known to me.

“Why does the Phantom Brotherhood sound familiar? I feel like it’s a name I should know.” I ask him, crossing my arms.

“Because you should know them Hallis. If I recall correctly, from what I heard about your activities by one of my men, I was told that you were hunting the leader of this particular group a long time ago until he fell into the shadows, giving up on finding this notorious target when every lead on him turned into nothing but a wild goose chase. Does Argent ring a bell perhaps in order to jog your memory?” Sybil answers, mirroring my stance. “He was the one that was in search of Xant and when he abandoned the Phantom Brotherhood the time you were looking for the leader himself.”

“Wait. . .Argent? Now it’s all coming back to me. You have my attention.”



It takes hours for Sybil to explain everything on the leads that he found in regards to Argent. How he slipped up several months back and revealed his position in Lexarus. How there was more to the story than I initially thought in regards to Xant being apart of the Phantom

Brotherhood before he defected and chose to leave the mercenary life behind.

How, shockingly, I discovered that Argent and Xant's very close relationship, turned so violent and abusive to where Xant didn't have a choice but to leave a life that gave him nothing but torment and despair. Something that I never would have thought behind the cheerful man I knew my best friend to be and how caring and compassionate he was towards others. Especially myself when I first got to know him after meeting him in one of my favorite coffee shops in Lexarus.

"Focus. Did you get all that?"

I snap out of my thoughts when Sybil waves a hand in front of my face. After discussing what else he found out in regards to the information that he collected on Argent, and confirming that he was still in Lexarus, the both of us knew we had to get ourselves packing and returning to the city I just left only several days ago if we were to have a chance in catching him. I look down at the equipment splayed out on the floor before I nod in response at last, placing a dagger in a sheath before making sure all of the rounds for my pistol were loaded and ready to go.

"Yes. I heard everything. So what's the plan in this case?" I ask, standing up from my spot on the floor. "I want to make sure that everything is set in stone when it comes to this Sybil."

"I came up with a plan in dragging Argent out of hiding so that way we can get rid of him and force his Brotherhood to flee. Had some time to think about it before I came after you." Sybil answers, making sure his own equipment is up to spec on a nearby countertop covered in various ammo rounds next to a pistol, as well as his dual blades that gleamed under the dim light.

"Is it what I think it is?"

"Depends on what you think."

"You're going to use Xant as bait, aren't you? If that is going to be the case, I want to be the one that stays by his side and protects him."

"I figured you were going to say that, given that you haven't seen him in such a long time. However, that isn't a part of the plan Hal." Sybil says, his tone stern as he goes to put his blades away into the sheath at his side. "I know that you would end up chasing Argent away the moment he lays eyes on you, which is why I'm the one that will be guarding him while you wait for my signal in order to go in for the kill."

I shake my head, crossing my arms as I glare at the Corsair leader.

“That’s ridiculous. I’m not that reckless.”

I look back down one more time at the items in front of me, before reaching to take a silver lighter, one that Xant gave to me a long time ago on my birthday. The one that I loved the most amongst the collection he had in his room, and the only lighter that had a dragon on the face of it. On top of that, it was a heavy duty metal lighter, not one of those pathetic plastic ones that most people use in order to grab themselves a quick smoke before tossing it in the trash once the fluid was gone. He also showed me something special about this lighter, and one click of a button behind it revealed the hidden switchblade feature of it that left a smile on my face.

To think this lighter was the one that nearly set the apartment on fire if the both of us didn’t act fast enough to put the flames out before things could get bad.

“Well, I don’t want to take that chance. Just wait to do your part when I motion for you to Hal. That’s all you have to do.” Sybil sighs, distracting me from my thoughts yet again when his voice pierces through them. “Orders are orders. You know this all too well when it comes to working with others. . .”

I roll my eyes before I begrudgingly nod, beginning to put my equipment together in their pouches and holsters. “Yeah, yeah. Orders.” I mumble. “The one thing that keeps people committed to the goal while also causing restrictions to the people one cares about.”

A silence begins to descend between the both of us, the sounds of clicking equipment and shuffling, the sound bouncing off the walls in the room we were in. I heave a sigh, which causes Sybil to look over his shoulder at me as he sees me lean my back against the couch I sat in front of.

“Sybil. Are you sure this plan is even going to work?” I ask him, my expression changing to one of uncertainty. “What if Argent tries something funny?”

Sybil gives a shrug, putting the remainder of the ammunition he had out on the table into the last empty pouch that sat on the countertop, looking back at me with a neutral mask. “To be honest? I don’t know exactly how this will play out.” He answers. “Though we shouldn’t think of the “what-ifs” at

He also showed me something special about this lighter, and one click of a button behind it revealed the hidden switchblade feature of it that left a smile on my face.

the moment. We're running late as it is and I want us to be in position soon. We need to head into Lexarus now if we are to get the job done."



Playing the waiting game is like waiting for the train to arrive to its destination as I remain on a nearby rooftop, my tactical eyepiece over my right eye as I carefully watch Sybil escort Xant down a busy street, all the while replaying the plan that he was explaining to me on the ride into the city.

To lure the Brotherhood leader out of hiding, we were to use the person of interest that they have targeted as a type of bait, while keeping a simple and stereotypical walking path in order to get them to follow. As Sybil stated, I would keep a good pace from the rooftops while waiting for his signal to ambush Argent when the time was right. While I make my way over to the next roof in order to keep pace with the duo several feet below me with just one large step due to how close the buildings were together, I remain vigilant on where to keep my options open on where I can climb down with ease, and places where I would have to use my gravity boots in order to ease my way off of the rooftop and onto the ground.

The best part of the brightly lit city of Lexarus however, was how low the rooftops were, most of the buildings standing either two or three stories tall. This made it easier as well as quicker for myself to just simply climb down one side of a building without the need of the gravity boots, let alone having to worry about moving down several flights of stairs that would waste time.

Then there was the final part of the plan. Going in for the kill, which would be my job to accomplish while Sybil is keeping Argent busy. I already began to think about the various ways that I would tear the man apart, finally fulfilling one of the bounties that I was assigned a very long time ago by an old mercenary friend of mine that long since moved away, only to find out that they were later captured, tortured, and then killed by one of Argent's men after the information they gave was passed onto me. Maybe, I would torment Argent the same way he tortured that old friend of mine. Or perhaps I would make it quick and painless in order to just get it over with.

As I make my way over to the next roof, the sound of shouting and gunfire catches my attention and I look back down to the streets to see

everything beginning to fall into place. As passersby begin to scatter the streets, I zoom in on the familiar bluish-gray hair and silver eyes pursuing the two other men who were weaving through the crowds that at some points it began to make me lose track of their location. When I manage to find the two of them again, they begin to head towards the other side of town, and I grit my teeth in anger when the plan begins to fall apart.

“Sybil, what the hell are you doing? I thought that you were supposed to lead him into the coming alley near my location!” I snap after activating my earpiece.

I get no answer, and I shake my head and begin to climb down the side of the building I stood on before pulling up the tracking system for Sybil’s holo-watch in order to keep an eye on his location in the crowd. I then start to weave through various clusters as the gunshots continued, hearing the ricocheting bullets grow closer.

Sybil really left me no choice now. I was doing things my way.

After some time of navigating through the scattered groups of civilians, I look back down at my own watch before looking back up and seeing Argent follow two retreating forms as they head down an abandoned street. Carefully, I continue to follow at a safe distance as I watch Argent load another round into the assault rifle in his possession, and I keep my own pistol drawn and at the ready to seize my opportunity when it presents itself. When the Brotherhood leader begins to shoot again, I hear a cry and when I recognize who it came from, I could feel my chest tighten as I peer around the corner of a building.

“I think that’s enough running don’t you think? Your right ankle doesn’t look so well there Xant. Shame.”

From my line of sight, I can see Xant on the ground while Sybil remains guarding him, his own expression cold. I have to resist joining their side, my gaze turning back to the man that eluded me for years. When he goes to take a step forward, I carefully shuffle one step myself in order to prepare myself for the one thing I wanted to end.

“Piss off. Why do you sound so sore Argent?” Xant says, watching him glare at his old companion hatefully as Sybil goes to draw his own weapon. “Don’t like how I left you behind with nothing right?”

I then start to weave through various clusters as the gunshots continued, hearing the ricocheting bullets grow closer.

“You know you should never have left. You should have given in to me a long time ago. But instead, you chose not to. But now, I can finally get what I want if you come quietly.” Argent sneers. “You were set for life in the Brotherhood, and you chose to throw it away.”

“I chose to leave an abusive asshole behind. I would rather die than give you anything.” Xant says, raising his head up defiantly.

While the conversation is going on, I begin to maneuver around the corner, raising the pistol in order to train it on Argent’s head. I take several quiet steps forward, my breathing slow and controlled as my heartbeat pounds in my ears from concentration. With my free hand, I feel for the lighter, grabbing it tightly before I carefully pull it off of its spot on my belt.

I knew exactly how I wanted this to end.

“Hah. You’re adorable you know that?” Argent grins, raising his rifle to point it at Xant. “Thinking what I did to you was so painful when you don’t know what true pain is. . .yet. I’m giving you one last chance Xant. Come quietly. If you don’t. . .there will be severe consequences. Nobody escapes the Phantom Brotherhood without facing what they have done.”

I take several
quiet steps forward,
my breathing slow
and controlled
as my heartbeat
pounds in my ears
from concentration.

“Then allow me to have you face what you have done Argent. No crimes go unpunished.”

The words are out of my mouth before I can stop myself, Xant and Sybil looking at me in shock the same time Argent turns around.

“Hal?” Xant asks in horror, the same time I charge at my surprise enemy with the switchblade in my hands. . .



“Why did you do it?”

Xant crosses his arms, or from what I can see from my view, refusing to look at his face to see the accusatory glance that would get me to bend. To have those orange globes he has pierce into my soul where I would forget the words that are currently churning in my head. To snort at the leather vest that I knew he was wearing, the one his grandfather passed

down to him. . .

“Well? I’m waiting for an answer. I told you not to get involved didn’t I?”

I remain where I am, turning the silver lighter in my hands over and over, the once cool metal starting to turn warm from my touch. A slow sigh escapes my lips, before I finally decide that the silence was enough. That Xant wouldn’t stop harassing me until he knew.

“I did it for you, and I did it because it’s my job. I’m an assassin Xant, which has been something that I have been keeping from you for a very long time.” I explain, still looking down at the lighter, before I grip it tightly in the palm of my hand. “Argent. . .he hurt you according to records that I managed to look into once I completed the bounty that he had on his head. The whole story aside from what I found out and from what Sybil told me. I have been after the leader of the Phantom Brotherhood for a very long time, and from the amount of things that he was accountable for. . .how could I not kill him after everything he kept running and hiding away from?”

I glance up enough to see Xant’s mouth opening to say something, but I raise my empty hand to stop him so I could continue.

“Before you even judge my actions, it was just in the end when it comes to my line of work Xant. I was only doing what was right for you so you would stay safe and so that way you don’t have to stay in hiding all the damn time. You always did worry about me jumping into danger like this, but you should know that both of our jobs are important to one another and that we both need to watch the other’s back.”

I walk up to him, taking one of his hands and placing the lighter into one of his empty palms before closing his fingers over it. When I glance back into his eyes, my expression remains neutral, while Xant’s eyes reflected sadness.

“Do you respect me now that we know the truth about each other?”

Becky's¹ Pencil Anecdote:

I was looking for my blue pencil.
I lost it in the middle
of doing homework,
taking notes on a reading to be specific.
The reading was about
the ubiquitous anachronism
*that is the U.S. prison system.*²

...

Hours went by and finally
I had found the pencil.
It was right in front of me and
it turns out the pencil was red,
not blue.
How silly, I thought,
how stupid to have believed
that the pencil was blue.
Then I began to feel impressed
with the incessant deceit
that was my mind. I had convinced myself
this pencil was so blue that it made the
real one seemingly invisible.

1 Becky with the good hair
2 modern day slavery



Girl
KIANA SILVA

A Curiosity at the Disco

He's got a hunched back and a toe for a thumb,
And a face that only his mama could love;
His teeth are a hue that might suggest wealth,
(they're not really gold, just signs of bad health).
He isn't quite ancient, but older than most,
And his dance moves are whiter than King George's ghost;
He's got a bowl cut and wears bell-bottom jeans,
And his laugh is a mix of a neigh and a sneeze.
And though his list of shortcomings is great,
Through riches or witchcraft, he's got a hot date.
They say that love's blind, and he's proof that that's true:
I suppose freaks of nature need to get laid, too.

Escape

Sophia waited for her eyes to adjust before creeping down the long corridors. As the eldest daughter of Henry Chapel, the Lord of this castle, she was free to wander the grounds whenever she wanted. Tonight, she wore her darkest clothes and carried as little as possible.

Tonight, she had to be unseen.

The servants knew Sophia often snuck into the library at night and no one would think it strange to see her, but she couldn't trust anyone. The only person who knew what she was up to was her brother. He was the one person she could trust. She also needed someone who could throw off the inevitable search party and buy her time to get out of their father's territory, and eventually the kingdom. Their father would have tapestries with her portrait scattered across villages with a reward written out for her safe return. Anyone would betray her, which was why she had to get as far away as she could as quickly as possible.

Sophia kept her back to the wall and listened carefully as she approached each corner. She knew this castle like the back of her hand and spent weeks studying the guards' schedule and patterns of the servants' routine. While most of the guards and staff liked her, if any of them even suspected what she was up to, they'd report to her father. They feared him far more than they liked his children.

He'd never admit to it, but Sophia knew that her father arranged her engagement to Lord Temple because Temple was wealthy and would make a valuable ally. Temple was a good man, but Sophia's heart was already spoken for. She had two younger sisters, both shallow enough to be content marrying Temple. Her father had promised Temple one of his daughters, it didn't have to be Sophia.

Soon Sophia found herself hiding by the Griffin statue. The statue covered the secret passage. It was also near the kitchen entrance, where she could hear a few servants chatting. Sophia's heart raced, something wasn't right. At this hour all the servants were in bed. Then again, there had been a feast tonight in celebration to her arranged marriage with Temple.

You fool, of course, some of them would be up late finishing cleaning up.

What was she going to do now? Moving the statue would be loud enough to draw attention from the kitchen.

Suddenly, as though someone had been listening to her, a loud crash came from the kitchen. Perhaps some of them weren't as sober as she assumed. Not wasting a second, Sophia moved the statue and slipped into

the passage, closing the door behind her.

At the end of the passage, Sophia found the peasant boy clothes she had planted. Once she changed, she buried her dress outside and made her way to the inn across the town. There she found a loaded cart waiting.

“About time, run into any trouble?”

“None at all,” Sophia replied, embracing Evelyn.

She leaned in and kissed her. Even though they were standing in the cold, dark streets, Sophia never felt safer and more at home with anyone than with Evelyn. She would trade her castle to live in a hole if it meant sharing a life with her.

“Come on, we better go.”

The two women climbed into the wagon. Sophia snuggling close to Evelyn as she drove into the night.

Passengers

The man across the aisle from me on the bus home was in the same spot
On the bus that brought me downtown this morning.
I can tell from the tattoo beside his left eye,
A tear stain even the gentlest hand couldn't wipe away.
He's silent except for the music blaring through his headphones,
Loud enough for me to hear but not to make out.

This morning, though, there was silence.
We were frozen, facing the remnants of a car.
We didn't know at the time that it had hit a sanitation truck,
Only that there was no front left,
The roof folded like a failed attempt at a paper airplane.
The man trapped inside looked ready to fly, all right.
His arm kept reaching, reaching toward the responders.
That was the only way I could tell he was alive.

Minutes dragged for us, trapped behind the fire truck
But we didn't know at the time
That first responders spent forty-five minutes freeing that man
From the crumpled piece of paper that once was a car,
That could have been his plane ticket to his next life in the sky.

This passenger and I sit only feet apart
Glance at each other and then away,
Back to our own spaces,
Our own worlds, our own days.
There is so much we could say
About what we saw,
About our days.

But it is simple enough to know that we both had a day
When we started it wondering if a man would live to see tomorrow.



Over the Alps
KATARINA DULUDE

Cross-Border

Day Four:

5:04 a.m.

The car door slammed. Lindy watched as her little brother stumbled towards the run-down convenience store, taking a deep breath. It was hard to keep calm with the barrel of a gun pressed to her temple, even if there wasn't a chance in hell of it being fired. She tried to pay attention to her surroundings in an attempt to ignore her situation.

The place was called Bob's Mini Mart and boy, did it live up to its unimpressive name. The white paint was chipping, though considering their state, calling the walls white would be quite an exaggeration. The shop was entirely visible through the massive windows which displayed advertisements for sales from two years ago and events around town from two decades ago. Even from the car, Lindy could see the dust on the shelves that were only half stocked. There was only one employee present, a pale, balding man hunched over the cash register with a dull expression.

Devon's hands shook as he pulled the door open. He glanced back at her, and she forced her scowl into what she hoped was an encouraging smile. He rolled his eyes. So much for that.

"That kid's going to ruin everything," Pat muttered.

Lindy bit her lip. "Shut up." He had a point. Devon loved to ask questions and it was getting terribly inconvenient. But he cooperated, and as long as Lindy was present he would continue to do so.

Devon approached the cashier slowly, shoving his hands in his jeans so he could hide the fact they were shaking. Lindy strained her ears to listen to the conversation inside, but she couldn't very well hear through walls. She watched as the cashier's eyes widened and mouth fell open. He was supposed to open up the drawer, give Devon the money, and then they would hit the highway and switch cars tomorrow. The cashier came out from behind the counter.

"What's he doing?" Patrick demanded, his voice shaking. Lindy eyed the gun and noticed that he had turned the safety off.

"Maybe he needs a key or something," Lindy assured him. Her hands tightened into fists. Maybe the odds of him killing her weren't as low as she thought.

"Then where's the signal?" Devon was supposed to let them know everything was going to plan with a thumbs up. However, the boy's hands remained firmly in his pockets.

“Maybe he forgot.” Sweat ran down her back. Pat glared at her and his eyebrows furrowed. She shrunk under his gaze. “You need to relax,” she whispered.

Pat shook his head. “There’s some panic button or some shit! It’s over! We fucked up!”

Lindy screamed and jerked away from the gun, using her hands to shield her head. Her eyes were squeezed shut but she didn’t need to see to know that her impulsive boyfriend had been pushed over the edge. She waited for the loud *crack* to end her life, but it never came. Instead the ignition roared to life and the wheels screeched as the vehicle lurched backwards. “What the *hell* are you doing?”

It was too late. They were already back on the road and they’d left her helpless little brother behind. Since this whole thing started Lindy had managed to keep it together but this was the final straw. Sobs wracked her body and tears streamed down her face. Devon was gone and there was no getting him back.

“You need to relax,” Patrick said softly. On top of everything else, now he was mocking her.

She punched him in the shoulder.

Hard. “I hate you! Fuck you!”

He smirked, “Gladly.”

Before:

Lindy spent pretty much every lunch period sitting with Pat and his friends. Before she could, however Miranda blocked her path.

“I haven’t seen you in awhile.”

“Oh. . .” Lindy looked away. “I’m sorry. I’ve been busy.”

“Well, are you busy now?” she asked.

Lindy shrugged. “I guess not.” She glanced longingly at Pat’s table. Their eyes met. The connection between them was magnetic. She felt as though she were being dragged in his direction. However, she was literally being dragged in the opposite direction. Miranda led her to the opposite side of the cafeteria.

“Where is everyone?” Lindy wondered, an eyebrow raised at the empty table.

Miranda shrugged. “It’s just us today,” she said a little bit too quickly. Lindy suddenly got the feeling that her friends had been talking about her.

Since this whole thing started Lindy had managed to keep it together but this was the final straw.

“What is this about?” Lindy asked as she chewed on her lip. She already knew the answer. It was an intervention.

“You know, you really should stay away from Pat,” she said.

Lindy folded her arms over her chest. “Why?” she snapped. She wouldn’t have even met Pat if it weren’t for Miranda.

“Well. . . I know you like him. And uh. . .” she shrunk underneath Lindy’s glare. “Brandon says he’s not safe. He’s not a good boyfriend.” She paused and then it all came spilling out. “All of the girls he’s been with well. . . it hasn’t ended well. He’s a lot older than us and. . . you don’t spend time with us anymore!”

Lindy rolled her eyes. “I’m spending time with you right now.”

“Only because I forced you!” Miranda slapped the table, her eyes full of rage. “We’ve been friends since kindergarten and now you’re ditching me for some boy!” Lindy resisted the urge to point out the irony. Miranda never had trouble getting boyfriends. Her flouncy blonde hair and innocent blue eyes had attracted the entire male population to her back in middle school. Now there was a lot more competition. Yet Lindy was the one who was in a relationship now. Miranda was just jealous, she was sure of it.

Lindy balled her fists but forced herself to remain calm. “So this is about you, then?”

“No. It’s about you, bailing on all of your friends for a complete douchebag.”

“He’s not a douchebag!” She took a deep breath. “This conversation is over.”

“It’s not!”

“It is,” she insisted. Lindy stalked over to Pat’s table and didn’t look behind her. Brandon furrowed his eyebrows. Clearly, he expected Miranda to keep her occupied. Lindy resisted the urge to smack him. She sidled next to Pat.

“Nice of you to join us,” he said with a smirk.

Lindy flipped her hair flirtatiously. “Sorry. I was just distracted. It wasn’t anything important.”

“You sure?” he asked. “You look upset.”

Lindy forced a smile. “Soon enough Miranda will realize she’s wrong about you.”

“So that’s what it’s about.” Pat glanced over at Brandon. Perhaps, she was not the only one to receive an intervention. “Don’t worry,” he squeezed her hand. “No one can come between us.”

Day Two:

“We’re going to have to steal,” Pat said, lowering his voice. They were sitting in a diner, eating food they had no intention of paying for. The place was old, just like everywhere they’d stopped so far. The leather was peeling off the seats of their booth, the menus looked like they hadn’t been updated since 1962, and the waitresses were on roller skates. Lindy kicked him under the table. This was hardly the time or place to mention that fact, no matter how true it might be.

Devon’s eyes widened. “Isn’t that wrong?” he asked loudly.

“Let’s talk about it in the car,” she said and ruffled his dark brown curls.

Devon scowled; clearly this wasn’t good enough for him. He was almost done eating anyways, and they’d been there for longer than she would have liked. “Do you need to go to the bathroom before we leave?” He nodded and scurried off to do so.

“That kid is going to screw us over,” Pat said, as soon as he was out of earshot.

Lindy glared at him. “Actually, I’m pretty sure that was you.”

Pat turned bright red. “It’s too late for that now. We need to focus on the future.”

Lindy stood up. “I’m going to wait for Devon. I’ll meet you at the car.” She left a crumpled-up dollar bill on the table. It was all that she had.

Pat rolled his eyes. “This conversation isn’t over.” As far as she was concerned, it most certainly was.

Lindy strapped Devon into the backseat and considered taking the seat next to him before reluctantly going to her place in the shotgun seat. “Stealing isn’t always wrong, Devon,” she explained, as Pat started up the car.

“That doesn’t sound right,” Devon disagreed. Pat clenched the wheel and eyed Lindy as if to say, *I told you so*.

“It is,” she continued. “Sometimes people don’t have any choice. That doesn’t make them bad. And as long as we pay them back, it’ll be okay.”

Devon frowned. “We don’t have any choice? Mama always had money. I miss her.” The boy sniffled.

Lindy took a deep breath. “Don’t worry about Mama, Devon. You’re going to help us get some money. Okay?”

“What do you mean?” Pat interrupted, raising an eyebrow.

“Who can say no to a kid? Especially during a *hostage situation*.”

Lindy smirked. With her plan, surely, she could prove Devon was a valuable asset and obtain much needed resources at the same time, all while eliminating the possibility of a body count.

“What do you mean?” Pat repeated. “You want *him* to do the robbery?” He directed a dirty look at Devon, who glared back defiantly.

“Why not?”

“And I’m going to take a hostage?”

Lindy shook her head. “*The hostage is me.*”

Before:

Lindy turned up the volume on her headphones. Her parents were arguing again, or perhaps more accurately her mother was being screamed at and probably beaten. She tried to focus on Algebra. It was a lot more productive than worrying about something that would never change. The numbers seemed as though they were sliding off the page as her eyes drifted shut. She shut off her music and rested her head on her desk. The fighting had stopped.

Lindy would surely have fallen asleep if it weren’t for the rapping on her window. She started into a sitting position and stared outside. “Patrick, what are you doing!” she hissed as she forced it open. Her father had taken out the screens once the weather started to turn cold. She shivered as the wind blew her hair back.

He had climbed the tree closest to her room. He lounged on top of a branch that surely wouldn’t hold his weight for long. “I came to get you.” He grinned. “You weren’t texting me back.”

“I was doing homework!”

“Pssh.” Pat waved his hand dismissively. “I didn’t realize that the freshman were assigned sleeping for homework.”

Lindy giggled. “I was *trying* to do homework.”

“Well stop trying and come hang out with me,” he pleaded. “Just copy off someone tomorrow. Now get outside already.”

Her eyes widened. “It’s freezing!”

Pat opened his mouth to argue but

“You want *him* to do the robbery?” He directed a dirty look at Devon, who glared back defiantly.

“Why not?”

“And I’m going to take a hostage?”

Lindy shook her head. “*The hostage is me.*”

before he could, the branch on which he had been perched snapped off of the tree. He yelped as he toppled toward the ground. Lindy thrust herself out the window, making a wild grab for his hand, but she was too slow.

“Are you okay?” she called softly, praying her parents wouldn’t hear. He gave her a thumbs up and slowly got to his feet.

Once he finished checking his body for injuries he spread his arms wide. “Jump!”

Lindy raised an eyebrow. “Are you *nuts*?”

“Mildly. Now come on.”

She considered arguing further but, it was a fight she wouldn’t win. She would hardly describe Pat as persuasive but he was unbelievably talented at wearing people down. Lindy climbed on top of her desk and cautiously stepped out onto the ledge.

She swallowed. It wasn’t a far drop. Pat had been fine so even if he didn’t catch her she would be too. Hopefully. That didn’t stop her from shaking with fear. “I can’t,” she called down to him.

“Don’t you trust me?”

Lindy shook her head. “Not really.”

“Please.” Lindy sighed. She closed her eyes. Then she jumped.

Lindy’s heart pounded as she went airborne. She was aloft for less than a second, but adrenaline filled her entire body. She resisted the urge to laugh and she soon found herself safe in her boyfriend’s arms.

“My car isn’t too far from here,” Pat said. “I brought you a surprise.”

They made their way down the block and when Pat noticed how much she was shivering he wrapped his jacket around her. Pat’s car was a piece of crap. Even in the dark, she could still see the rust that covered practically every inch. The entire bumper was caved in from when Pat had backed into a tree. Of course, he hadn’t left it running, so it was just as cold inside as out.

“This better be one hell of a surprise,” Lindy muttered, rubbing her hands together.

He nodded. “It’s good shit.” Lindy raised an eyebrow as he opened the glove compartment, from which he removed a large bottle and two wine glasses. “Have you ever drunk before?”

“Don’t you trust me?”

Lindy shook her head.

“Not really.”

“Please.”

Lindy sighed. She closed her eyes. Then she jumped.

Lindy shook her head slowly. "I don't know about this," she said. "We could get in a lot of trouble."

Pat shook his head. "Don't worry about it. It'll be fun." He poured out. . . whatever the clear liquid was. Vodka maybe? He shoved the glass in her hand. "Trust me."

"I have school tomorrow!" she protested.

"Fine." She could practically feel the disappointment radiating off him. Suddenly, she realized what she had done. He brought her a present. He thought he could make her happy. Instead, she'd rejected it.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. Lindy hesitated for a few seconds before finally forcing herself to take a sip. It took everything she had not to spit it out right in front of him. When she finally forced the liquid down, she contorted her mouth into a smile. "It's good."

Pat laughed. "It is, but clearly you don't think so." He took a long drink. "I shouldn't have gotten something so hard. I'm sorry."

Lindy shook her head. "It's good," she insisted, forcing down some more.

"That's my girl." She spent an hour or two with Pat before finally calling it a night. Luckily, she found the front door unlocked. She was able to sneak upstairs undetected. Her stomach churned and her whole body felt heavy. She only drank a little bit but it was enough to do the trick.

She entered the bathroom, intending to wash her face, but ended up puking instead. Lovely. There was a knock on the door. "Are you sick?"

Lindy flushed the toilet and forced a smile before opening the door. "I'm fine. Go to bed, Devon," she said. The younger boy wrapped his arms around her waist. She was grateful for the hug. "I'm fine," she repeated.

"You're not." Stupid kid was too smart for his own good.

She ruffled his hair. "It's time for bed."

"Will you tuck me in?" he asked. Normally this would be a mother's job, but theirs was usually too busy trying to please their father. More often than not, this duty had fallen to Lindy.

"Of course." She kissed her brother goodnight as she pulled the sheets up to his chin. "Have sweet dreams."

"You too."

Day Four:

9:32 p.m.

"You're not still mad at me, are you?" Pat asked, as he pulled over.

There was a shitty motel a few miles down the road where they could spend the night. Since they had robbed a convenience store early that morning, they could actually afford to.

Lindy shrugged. "What difference does it make to you?"

"We're stuck together now. We're going to have to learn how to get along."

She raised an eyebrow. "You're not going to bail on me the second you get scared?"

He reached over to squeeze her hand, but she yanked it away. Pat sighed. "I'm sorry." She couldn't help but wonder if he'd left Devon behind on purpose.

"Don't touch me," she muttered.

"Don't be like that," he said, pulling her closer to him. He knew she craved physical intimacy, yet he only liked to use it to manipulate her.

She shoved him off. "*Don't.*" She would have been in a better mood now that they had money but he loved to push past her boundaries. It was a relief when they finally arrived at the motel.

"I'm taking a shower," she said after he had checked them in and they arrived at their room. She needed space away from him.

"I'll join you."

"You most certainly will not," she scolded. "Don't want to drive down my worth, do you?" She slammed the bathroom door in his face.

The water was cold but it felt good to get the grime off her skin. She could have stayed in there for hours but after about twenty minutes Pat was knocking on the door. "Save some water for me wouldja?"

With that, Lindy reluctantly turned off the water. She ran a brush through her long dark hair. When she looked in the mirror she noticed dark circles lingered under her chocolate colored eyes. Her skin was far paler than usual. Life on the road did not suit her.

It felt nice to pull on a pair of pajamas and wrap herself up in a fluffy bathrobe. For just a moment she felt safe. Then she abandoned the bathroom and that all changed. She found Pat on his phone.

"You idiot!" she exclaimed. "Do you want the cops to track us down?"

"It was only for a few minutes," he said. "Besides, I found us a client."

That's when she saw it. He'd placed the wallet on the bed when she left to shower. She would recognize it anywhere.

“You had this!” she exclaimed snatching it up. “You had this the whole time and you didn’t say anything?” She was right up in his face; her heart was pounding and heat flushed to her face. Once again she was reminded of who she was dealing with. Lindy quickly backed away. “Why didn’t you say anything?” she repeated in a whisper.

Pat shook his head. “It’s too late now, ain’t it, Sweetheart?”

Before:

“I’m home!” Lindy announced as she stepped inside her house.

The living room was crammed. They had not yet been able to upgrade to a flat screen TV, though Lindy didn’t see the point, considering how few channels they got anyway. The puffy blue couch was far too big for the room and it did not match at all with the hideous pink carpet but her father had found it on the side of the road and the old one had been destroyed by the cat. He wouldn’t be home until much later. For now, things were quiet.

“We’re in the kitchen,” her mother called.

“We?” Devon wouldn’t be home from school for another hour.

She peeked curiously into the next room, and found Miranda seated at their kitchen table.

“What are you doing here?” Lindy demanded, crossing her arms. She and Miranda hadn’t talked much since their fight back in October. She’d missed her but she wasn’t about to admit it.

“Don’t be rude, Linda,” her mother chided. “Join us.”

Lindy reluctantly plopped down next to her mother. “What’s going on?” she asked.

“Miranda was just telling me something interesting. Would you like some hot chocolate?” Her mother took a sip from a mug that likely contained tea. “There’s still some water left over.”

“I’ll pass,” Lindy replied, glaring at Miranda and waiting for an explanation.

“Why don’t you tell me a bit about your boyfriend?”

Lindy eyed both of them. There was no point in denying it. Quite frankly, she wasn’t sure why she’d kept it to herself. Usually she and her

It felt nice to pull on a pair of pajamas and wrap herself up in a fluffy bathrobe. For just a moment she felt safe. Then she abandoned the bathroom and that all changed.

mom told each other everything. “What do you want to know?”

Her mother raised an eyebrow. “Miranda seems to be concerned about-”

“Pat’s great. He’s really handsome and super caring. We’ve been together since the beginning of the school year. You really don’t need to worry.”

Miranda opened her mouth to disagree, but Lindy cut her off. “Miranda doesn’t know anything about Pat. We haven’t been talking.”

Miranda stood abruptly. “And who’s fault is that?”

“Hmm. . . let me think. If memory serves me correctly it was most definitely yours.”

“I was just trying to help you!”

“Girls, calm down,” her mother said. She turned to Miranda. “How about I take you home for now?” Miranda nodded and wiped her eyes as Lindy rolled hers. How could she have been best friends with someone so sensitive?

Miranda only lived about ten minutes away, so it wasn’t long before her mother returned. Lindy hadn’t moved from her chair. Her mom took a seat across from her.

“I would like to meet him. I’m sure your father would too.”

“You’re telling Dad?” Lindy asked, trying to keep the panic out of her voice. She and her father weren’t close. It was one thing for her mom to know but she really didn’t want anything to do with her father.

“Why don’t you invite him over for dinner?”

“Mom-”

“What’s the problem? You said he was nice, didn’t you?”

Lindy shrugged. “I guess.”

Day One:

Lindy stared at the open road, her expression blank. She still couldn’t quite believe what had happened. Pat seemed relatively unaffected, almost enjoying this new opportunity to travel. He’d never left New Hampshire before.

“What are we going to do?” she whispered, glancing behind her to make sure Devon was fast asleep. It was only a matter of time before this car got recognized. They had no money and nowhere to go. She and Pat were going to go to jail and Devon would end up living with family or in foster care. There was no escaping their fate now that they had fled. She never

should have listened to him. She hadn't done anything wrong. He'd dragged her down with him. She just wasn't quite sure why. It'd probably be a lot easier to make it across the country without having to worry about her, or her baby brother.

"It'll probably take five days for us to get to the border, since I'll have to sleep and all. It'd be nice if you could drive."

Lindy rolled her eyes. "Then what?"

"It can't be nearly as hard getting out as it is to get in. And loads of people get in." He shrugged. "It'll be fine."

Lindy stared at her boyfriend, wide-eyed. "Are you *nuts*?" she sputtered. "Fine, let's say we can get across the border. How the fuck are we going to *eat*? We have no money. And no way to get any."

"Well I can sell my stash and uh. . ." His face flushed, and he averted his eyes.

Lindy felt like there were rocks in her stomach. Whatever he wanted her to do, she knew she was not going to like it. "What's *that* supposed to mean?"

Pat sighed. "Lots of people do it, you know? It's not as uncommon as you think. My Dad used to hire 'em all the time and—"

"Pat, what the hell are you talking about?" Lindy interrupted.

He rolled his eyes, "Do I have to spell it out for you? God, you're so immature."

Lindy blushed. "Just tell me."

"I mean I guess there's a few options. Stripping would probably be the safest but we could make more money if—"

"Are you insane?" she demanded. He wanted her to be a *stripper*? Or worse, a prostitute. This couldn't be real.

"Well if it comes to that. . . I promise I'll keep you safe."

"What, so you're a pimp now?" Now she understood why he'd dragged her into all of this. Lindy inhaled slowly. She wanted to cry but she needed to be strong for her brother. "Fine."

"Well it's what you wanted, right?" he asked.

She clenched her fists. "I wanted to have sex with *you*, dumbass!" Luckily Devon was a heavy sleeper. That was one thing she didn't want an eight-year-old to overhear her talking about.

There was
no escaping their
fate now that they
had fled. She never
should have listened
to him. She hadn't
done anything
wrong. He'd
dragged her
down with him.

“Just pretend it’s me then.” Lindy refused to dignify that with a response. She turned onto her side and closed her eyes. “You *are* a virgin, right?” She resisted the urge to hit him. He knew that she was. “Why?” “We can charge more.”

The shallow wound just underneath her chest stung. She wished she had never met Patrick.

Before Everything:

Lindy couldn’t decide what to do with her hair. Two braids would seem too young, a pony tail didn’t really suit her, and leaving it down would just annoy her. She glared at her reflection. She needed to make a good impression. This was her first day of high school.

She glanced at her phone. She only had a few minutes. She quickly weaved her hair into a side braid and decided it would do. She wished she could wear makeup but, her father had forbidden it until she turned sixteen. Miranda said she didn’t need it. Lindy didn’t believe her.

A loud horn blared outside of her house. The bus was here. She snatched up her bag, sprinted down the stairs, and out the door. She was unlucky enough to find Miranda was already sitting with someone. All of the seats within her general vicinity were taken as well. Reluctantly, she sat near the only other person she knew. Miranda’s brother, Brandon.

“Wow, Lindy,” he said. “You’re finally on the big kid bus.”

Lindy rolled her eyes. “And you’re still on it,” she replied sarcastically. “Who’s that sitting with you?” She stared at the boy who was on the window side of Brandon’s seat. His dark hair was parted to one side. She could practically get lost in his ocean colored eyes. Lindy felt her face flush as his gaze fell upon her.

“That’s Pat,” Brandon said.

Pat shrugged. “My truck broke down so here I am.”

Lindy smiled. “You can drive? That’s cool.”

Pat winked. “I can do a lot of things.”

Lindy laughed shyly, and Brandon rolled his eyes. “Dude, she’s like thirteen.”

“She won’t be thirteen forever.”

“You *are* a virgin, right?”
She resisted the urge to hit him. He knew that she was.
“Why?” “We can charge more.”

Day Zero:

Lindy and Patrick had been dating for nearly six months before Miranda ratted on her. Now he'd get to meet the parents. She wasn't looking forward to it. She couldn't care less what her father thought but she had a feeling her mother wouldn't be too impressed. On the surface, he was handsome and charming, but she would be able to see right through that.

When he arrived Lindy's father was the one to open the door. Patrick shook his hand eagerly, his blue eyes looking directly into her father's brown ones. He leaned in closer than was typical of a handshake, but the entry way was certainly small. He presented her mother with flowers. Lindy smiled. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad after all.

They all sat down for dinner. "Why don't you tell us a bit about yourself, Patrick?" her mother asked.

"Well, I want to be a mechanic. I'm planning on going to tech school next fall. After graduation."

"You're a senior?" her dad asked. "Isn't that a bit of an age gap?"

"Girls mature faster, Dad," Lindy said. The other freshman were far too childish for her to date.

He was clearly about to argue but her mother could tell this was a delicate situation. "Well, have the two of you discussed how it'll impact your situation once Patrick does graduate?" she asked. "You'll be in very different places in life."

Lindy hadn't thought about it. Did it even matter? It's not like she and Pat were going to get married. This was just for fun and they hadn't even been together for that long. Then again, it was already February. Graduation was only a few months away. They only had a few months left; then once summer was over their relationship would fall apart.

Pat, however, had thought about it apparently. Not only that but he seemed to have a very different opinion about it than Lindy did. "The school I'm looking at isn't too far from here."

"You shouldn't stay here if you don't want to," Lindy said quietly, staring at her food so she wouldn't have to look at anyone else.

"What do you mean?" Pat asked.

"It's just that-"

"Can I talk to you for a moment, sweetie?" her mom asked.

Lindy shrugged. "I guess so." Pat glared at her. Clearly he wasn't pleased to be left alone with her father. Her mom led her to the bathroom, shut the door behind them, and locked it. "Lovely spot," Lindy commented.

Her mother ignored this. “Do you really like this boy, Linda?”

Lindy took a step back, almost running into the counter. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I don’t want you to make the same mistakes as I did.”

“Pat’s never hit me before,” Lindy said defensively. “I’ll never be like you.” She wished she could take it back as she said it.

Her mother sighed. But she didn’t appear to be offended. “There are other ways to hurt someone.”

Lindy opened her mouth, not entirely sure of what to say next but she never got a chance. The conversation was interrupted by shouting coming from the kitchen. Lindy rushed out of the bathroom just as her father was abruptly standing.

“You little shit!” he spat, pointing a fat finger at Patrick. “You took my wallet, didn’t you?”

“No, sir. I would ne-”

“Don’t you lie to me in my house!” he exclaimed, knocking over his chair as he stalked over to the counter.

“Dad! Calm down!” Lindy protested.

“Stay out of this, Linda. You will not be seeing this boy anymore.”

“Dad!” Lindy choked back on her tears.

“Everyone needs to sit back down,” her mother said. But now, Pat was standing too, slowly backing towards the door.

Lindy had no idea what her father was thinking. Perhaps he was too enraged to be thinking clearly. He snatched a long knife, off of the counter and charged forwards. Lindy jumped in front of her boyfriend. Pat would never steal anything. She was sure of it. Her dad, would never stab anyone either.

Lindy screamed as the knife pierced her skin. The cut was shallow, just below her rib.

“No!” her mother shouted, leaping to her feet. Her father was too enraged to be thinking clearly any longer. He lunged towards her mom with the knife in hand. Before anyone could move he was on top of her. Lindy didn’t realize she was screaming until her throat started to hurt. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Patrick dash outside.

“Stop it!” Lindy sobbed as she fell to her knees. “Daddy please!”

Patrick returned and in his hand he had a gun. She saw a bright flash and her ears were ringing; they were ringing so much. The noise caused her younger brother to get out of bed and start running down the stairs.

“Devon, stay out of here!” Lindy shouted and her brother froze in his tracks, the violent scene just out of sight.

“We need to go,” Patrick said. “We’ll be blamed for this.” He tugged on her arm as she dialed 9-1-1. He snatched the phone out of her hand; he threw it at the ground as hard as he could. “We’ll be blamed,” he repeated. He pulled her through the kitchen and the living room, towards the front door.

“Devon, are you coming?” she whispered. Lindy couldn’t leave him behind to discover the horrid carnage in the kitchen. She couldn’t leave him with no one to take care of him, no family left.

“Just leave him. He’ll be better off this way,” Pat said.

Lindy shook her head. “Come on, it’s time to go.” Devon happily trotted after them oblivious to the slaughter that had occurred in the other room.

Day Five:

The sedan pulled up in front of *The Lexington Resort*. It didn’t surprise Lindy that prostitutes might congregate there. The building towered over her, though it was much wider than it was tall. “You’ll do great babe,” Pat told her. “I know you will.”

Lindy rolled her eyes. “You wish you knew.” She gripped the car door as she stepped out. She’d never worn heels before. Walking in them was not a talent of hers. She tugged on the hem of the bright red dress Pat had given her to wear, desperate to cover more of her legs. A man whistled at her as she walked by. She flinched and tried to ignore him. This would all be over soon.

The lobby was breathtaking. The furniture was much more opulent than anything she had ever seen. She gaped at a large crystal chandelier that would surely crush her, if it were to fall. The people were all dressed up, the men in suits, the women in fancy dresses. All of them were older. Lindy felt out of place.

She was supposed to take a seat on one of the plush lounge chairs and wait for her client to approach her. She had no intention of doing so. She almost tripped on her way to the front desk. “Excuse me, could you please call me a car?” The receptionist nodded, though she looked skeptical.

Patrick
returned and in
his hand he had
a gun. She saw a
bright flash and her
ears were ringing;
they were ringing
so much.

Clearly, there weren't a lot of high school students staying at this place.

It wasn't long before the vehicle arrived. The car ride was silent. The whole time her heart was pounding. How long would it be before Pat realized something was wrong? What would he do? She was sure if he caught her, she'd be dead.

It was only about twenty minutes before the car finally shuddered to a stop. She thanked the driver and handed him a twenty. She was lucky enough to get her hands on it, after she found the wallet. "Keep the change," she said. It wasn't like it was her money.

She hesitated outside the front door. *Was she making the right choice?* It wasn't long before that passed. Lindy couldn't keep living like this. She walked to the front desk and tried to smile at the woman seated behind it. "Is there anything I can help you with?"

Lindy nodded even though every instinct she had was telling her to run. "I'd like to report a crime."

Untitled

I found your underwear a month later at the end of my bed,
intertwined with my sheet and some socks.

I remember you yelling at me the next morning,
when we couldn't find them.

now,

I realize that it was never really my fault,
because I never asked you to take your pants off.
(you never asked me)



Peace
KATARINA DULUDE

Sin

Inès prepared for bed. Her room was a small one, not too much larger than a servant's quarters, but it was hers and hers alone. There was even a tiny light bulb that illuminated her otherwise dark quarters. Yes, Inès should be grateful. Not many French women, especially as young as her, were employed as teachers in such good conditions.

Most of her students had returned home for the holidays. Inès was an orphan, and this school served as her only place of lodging for the moment. She wasn't alone in this. The majority of the staff, teachers and servants, remained here during the holidays.

She loosened her hair when there was a knock at the door. She flinched. At the door was Nancy, a red-headed maidservant, holding a tray of tea. Inès found herself irate, but beyond that, dreading. "Yes, Nancy-- what is it?"

"Mr. Rumford insists you bring his tea."

In spite of the futility, Inès responded "Did you tell him that you are the individual who is supposed to serve him when he desires that."

Nancy glared at her. "He prefers you do it."

I am here to teach the students French, not cater to the headmaster's every whim, Inès thought. She didn't say so. She had said so before. It made no difference. Inès supposed she couldn't resent Nancy, who was only a messenger, but Nancy seemed to have no issue in resenting her. "Just give me the tray," Inès said. Nancy did, still glaring as she spun on her heel in the opposite direction.

Mr. Richard Rumford, headmaster of the institution at which Inès taught and decider as to whether Inès kept her employment or not, had a bedroom much larger than Inès', or any of the other professors. It was at the end of the hall, and Inès had become more familiar with it than she had ever desired to. Walking slowly, Inès reached the door and knocked.

"Come in."

Inès did, carrying the tray, trying to remain steady though she found herself shaking. Mr. Rumford noticed. He stood up suddenly. Panic came over Inès, her hands loosening, and the tray she was holding collapsed to the floor. Broken pieces of china were everywhere.

"Clumsy, clumsy, Miss Chastain." Inès began breathing more and more rapidly. She wanted to leave, so very much did, but she found herself frozen. "Come now," Mr. Rumford said. "I won't punish you. Come here." Inès stared at him, knowing full well what would happen if she did. "I said *come*."

“I’m a teacher. I’m not meant to serve you.”

He smiled, and Inès saw no light in his eyes. “Come now, little Inès. Don’t be foolish. You’re docile. Weak.” He grabbed her, pulling her against his chest. Underneath her skirts, she could feel him. “But not a fool.” His hand stroked her inner thigh. “Don’t pretend you don’t know why I chose you, a half-educated farm girl, and not some fat old matron.”

He gripped her tighter. “You did break a very nice piece of a set,” he said. “That will need to be paid for somehow.” He pushed her down, onto the floor. She felt his body over her, heavy, lumbering, suffocating. She felt as though she couldn’t breathe. She couldn’t breathe. A piece of china, a big sharp one, lay near her hand. If only she could reach. He smiled, his breath hot and putrid on her face. Just a little further. She grabbed it tightly. It cut her hand, but she didn’t notice as she pulled her arm up, and it reached his neck.

Blood hit her face, covering half of it. His blood. It was all over her. She felt as though she would vomit. She climbed out from under the dense mass that weighed on her. Then she ran.

She had to get the blood off. She could feel him seeping into her pores. She had to get it off. She didn’t think of anything, not that the water running might be heard, not what she would do with her blood stained nightgown after this. She just needed to get him off of her body.

She rinsed all the blood off. Gone, down the drain, away from her. She realized, in horror, she did not have anything to change into, only her damp, stained, night gown. She could put it back on. That would be the smart thing. The moonlight shown on her pale breasts, and she made her decision. Quickly and silently, she ran to her room. She put on a fresh gown, tossing the dirty one in a corner, she would figure out what to do with it tomorrow, and climbed into her bed. She wrapped the covers around her, as if all the evils in the world would not be able to reach her under her covers.

She tried to fall asleep, couldn’t, and kept trying, when suddenly there was another knock at the door. She pretended to be asleep. Her door creaked open. Inès’ heart pounded, and though it was dark, she wished she had gotten rid of that cursed nightgown sooner.

“Miss Chastain?” a soft, lilting voice called. Inès knew that voice. Alison Kemper. She was a prodigal child and adored by all, especially Inès.

He gripped her tighter. “You did break a very nice piece of a set,” he said. “That will need to be paid for somehow.”

“Alison, what are you doing out of bed?” Inès chastised, though her heart was not in it.

“Are you okay?” Alison said, ignoring her question.

Inès sighed and smiled. “I’m okay,” she lied.

Alison crawled onto her bed, and into Inès’ lap. “Will you brush my hair? My momma always used to brush my hair.” Inès ran her fingers through Alison’s soft blonde hair. She started to cry. “Why are you crying?”

“I’m not.” Inès wiped her eyes. “I’m not.”

Hours later, they heard fireworks. The world had reached 1910.

It was Nancy who discovered the body. An ear-piercing scream jarred the sleeping inhabitants of Becket Preparatory School awake. Some of the teachers, out of morbid curiosity, couldn’t help peeking in at his body. Inès did not. She overheard Mrs. Wells, the maths teacher, say snidely to Mr. Cross “Of course she’s not going to look. She’d faint on sight.”

The police were called using the one phone in the building, in Mr. Rumford’s office downstairs. His bedroom was declared a crime scene. On the first day of a new decade, a murder had taken place. What they didn’t know was that it was actually the night before, though they would soon learn that as well. Inès’ heart pounded in her chest, so much and so fast she felt as though it might burst. The chief of police decided he would interview every staff member.

The pounding in her chest worsened. All the staff waited in the lobby, as the chief took them one by one into a classroom to speak with them. The few children that had stayed for the holidays were to remain in their bedrooms, with another officer supervising at all times until they reached the bottom of this.

They were to interview the servants first, then the teachers. Inès waited anxiously, speaking to nobody and staring at the ground. Nancy was called in. She could feel the girl’s green eyes linger over her before she walked in. It was several minutes before she came back out, her chest puffed and chin jutting out with pride. She smiled at Inès.

Inès kept her eyes trained on the floor waited. One by one, her peers were called in. Finally she heard “Miss Inès Chastain?”

Lifting her head, Inès tentatively, slowly walked into the classroom. The chief had to be about thirty by her estimate, with a kind face. “You can take a seat right there,” he said, gesturing to one of the desks. Feeling a bit

silly, she did as he requested. “My name is Chief Burns.” She nodded, silent. “Right, well, Miss Chastain, can you tell me a bit about Mr. Rumford?”

She nodded tentatively. “Well, I didn’t know him very well. I teach the students French. I do not have much cause to speak to the headmaster often.”

“Nancy O’Connolly informed us that he had you bring him tea last night. That he often requests this of you.”

Beat. Breath. Beat. Breath. She could tell him the truth. Surely a man like him, a good man, would take pity on her, wouldn’t he? She remembered an article the teachers had been reading in the local paper, of a woman who was charged and to be executed for killing her husband, a man who reportedly beat her. No, Inès could put no faith in her government’s institutions. They were not built for people like her. “Well, that is true from time to time. I never really understood why, but... he liked to look at me...” She swallowed.

“The same Miss O’Connolly also says you are the last person to have seen Richard Rumford alive.” Her breath caught. “We found a tea set in the bedroom. We suspect it was the murder weapon... Miss Chastain, he was stabbed in the neck, right in the jugular.”

“You mean?” Inès’ hazel eyes rolled back, and she slumped in her chair. All went dark.

“Miss Chastain? Miss Chastain?” Hazily, she opened her eyes, and saw his dark brown ones, staring at her face, his eyebrows furrowed with concern. She couldn’t remember a time somebody had looked at her that way. “Miss Chastain, are you alright?”

Her breaths were heavy and ragged.

He helped her sit up and she began to cry. “It’s just so awful. It’s just all so awful.” The chief offered her a handkerchief and told her that would be all for now.

The police were to continue gathering evidence. Inès found herself less fearful though. Perhaps they would discover her dark secret. Perhaps. But she would never feel that man’s body over her, crushing her, ever again. She was not allowed to return to her quarters, none of the teachers were, nor leave the building until the investigation was complete. She, avoiding the other teachers, went to her classroom. There, basic conjugations were listed

“Well, that is true from time to time. I never really understood why, but... he liked to look at me...”

in chalk in perfect cursive. Would this be the last time she would see them?

The door creaked open. A girl with perfect blonde tendrils and innocent blue eyes walked in. “Hi Miss Chastain,” Alison said cheerfully.

Could they have been keeping the children in the dark? They must have been. “Alison, you’re supposed to be in your room.” Though she recognized the irony in it, she added “It’s not safe.”

“I wanted to see you,” the little girl replied softly.

Inès couldn’t hide a smile. “Very well. It’s good to see you too.”

“Can we conjugate together?”

“Conjugate?” Inès repeated, almost incredulously, though she could never use such a tone with Alison.

“Yes.”

“Fine. What word would you like to conjugate?”

“*Mourir*.”

“*Mourir*?” Inès asked. “Why would you pick that of all words?” The little girl shrugged. “Very well, the *je* form is...”

“*Meurs*.”

“The *tu* form is...”

“*Meurs*.”

“The *il* and *elle* form is...”

“*Meurt*.”

“The *nous* form is-” Inès cut herself off, hearing loud, hysterical shrieking.

“No, it wasn’t me! It was that bitch! That French whore! Let go of me! Listen to me, it wasn’t me, it was that awful c---! You can’t arrest me, you can’t!” Inès ran out into the hall and saw Nancy, handcuffed and being dragged by two police officers. Inès wanted to shout stop, that they had the wrong girl, but she stood frozen, just as weak as she had felt before all of this. Nancy saw her, her eyes filled with hate. She spit at her. Inès didn’t even wipe her face; she was too shocked by the events unfolding before her.

“You disgusting whore! You’ll go to Hell for this, I swear you will!” She was being dragged further and further away, but her shouting didn’t subside, only became less and less loud until it was no longer audible at all. Everyone stared at Inès. She shrunk into herself.

Later Inès prepared for bed. There was a knock at the door. Alison entered, without Inès granting her permission. “They found the murder weapon in her pockets. And a nightgown stained with blood under her bed.”

Inès did not understand. “But... how could they?” Realization dawned on her. She stared at the child in her room with horror.

“They were going to arrest you,” Alison said simply. “Don’t tell me you believed that officer, the one with the nice face. They knew it was you. I heard them talking about it.”

“But... she didn’t do anything... and you...”

“You’re lucky too. I didn’t know there was arsenic in your nightstand. You would’ve been doomed for sure.”

Inès felt sick.

Dear God, what have I done?



Untitled
JULIANA CAMPellone

Sweet Autumn

I feel its soft caress
Cool air, but warmth in my chest
Embrace me
In your sweet touch

Wrap me up
As if I should fly away
Should only
I shut my eyes

Sweet Autumn
Of vivid crimsons
And vibrant orange
A joyous time

It is said "beware the Autumn folk"
But how can this be so?
Summer was lovely,
However hot

But Autumn has something
That summer does not
In this place
This in between

Seen and unseen
Where stands
On one side, one world
On the other, the next

Life and death
Touch fingers
And as winter approaches
Cold and relentless

In me
The feeling still lingers
Of magical, glorious Autumn

Crowns

My scalp felt like fire as I sat squirming in the chair. I loved the results of a relaxer but hated the process. The magical elixir transformed my curls, and all of a sudden, I had long soft hair. My hair journey has been one of wins and losses. More losses than wins. The loss of inches and edges to the loss of appreciation for my natural curls. I actually did not know I had curls! I never even had the chance to see them for myself.

I don't remember the first time I got a relaxer or the experience. I asked my Mom and she said I got one at 5 years old. She said I grabbed my favorite stuffed animal and sat down as she did my hair. I had so much hair, sometimes it seemed like too much hair. She Combed through the jungle of strands that loved to mingle and tangle into each other. My Mom didn't even use a wide toothed comb. She loved those combs with many teeth that would break after just one comb through. This is where the tears would come. These moments justified the use of the relaxer.

There are two types of relaxers, lye and no-lye. They both do the same thing but have different strengths. Typically, people with curls who want bone straight hair, relax their curls so they lay straight with no frizz. Lye relaxers consist of Sodium Hydroxide and no lye relaxers have potassium hydroxide. Relaxers for children such as, Just for Me are no-lye relaxers. I imagine that a child's scalp is sensitive, so this makes sense. I started off with no-lye relaxers and moved to lye relaxers that can literally cause chemical burns to the scalp. I had a few chemical burns here and there. While I admired how sleek and soft my hair was, I could feel crusty patches of skin on my scalp.

My fridge holds photos from every picture day in Elementary School. Not a nap in sight. My hair was laid, and my edges were ever so present. My Mom had this mini obsession with appearance. It wasn't a problem or anything, but I remember being the best dressed kid at Day Care. Teachers would always assume it was my birthday. I had the prettiest paisley dresses and "church shoes" but I never went to church. My Mom would say to me, "cleanliness is next to Godliness." I would roll my eyes and just agree. The night before every picture day my Mom would get the metal hot comb and place it on the stove. I watched as the smoke signaled that it was ready to be used. I sat terribly still in fear that I would get burned by its scorching hot teeth. My shoulders would hunch over to prevent any burns to my scalp. This device was a staple in most Black homes. Straighteners

were probably too expensive, and the next best thing was the hot comb. This comb relaxed my hair with heat instead of harmful chemicals.

I remember the Just for Me commercials coming on TV. The little brown girls smiling and dancing to the music. Swaying their relaxed tresses and posing. I remember the creamy white lotion as it seeped into every kink and curl and altered the way I looked. I can imagine that it also played a part on how I acted or carried myself. Relaxed hair prompted me to be more gentle and graceful so my hair wouldn't get messed up. This also altered the way I viewed myself. I had major hang time (long hair) in Elementary School. Chemically altered strands cascaded down my back and swayed as I walked around the house. But of course, my Mom always put my hair up in some type of braided style. Colorful hair ties and beads that clanked when I moved. All the brown girls in school had beads and fun colorful hair accessories. No one really had their hair in a fro. Children who did were most likely made fun of or left out. This is where I became aware of what was acceptable and what was not. Fros were not acceptable, braids were acceptable.

Cornrows are an ancient African hairstyle, so they have been around for centuries. Depending on the region of Africa, Men and Women both wore the style. Noble men such as Kings and warriors wore cornrows as well. This style can be traced back to the early Nineteenth Century in Ethiopia. Braids are not just a hair style in some African regions, it is a culture. The types of braid patterns can even identify tribes of people and where they come from. Any type of Braid style is a part of culture that was carried from generation to generation. Now, braids are seen to be a protective style but it was more of an identity for some people.

The memories of my Mom braiding my hair connected me to her. I realize the love and concentration it took just to keep me still so that I can be presented to the world. My Mom had magical hands. She used to cornrow my hair in fascinating patterns. Sometimes it looked like a maze on my scalp. Going to school with new hairstyles always made me feel cool (even though I wasn't). Nobody had my hairstyles, it was like I was famous. The other little girls huddled around me admiring my hair. Towards the end of the week the fascination was over, and I was old news. It was nice while it lasted. Hair has always been an important part of my life, thanks to Mom. She would say to me, "your hair is your beauty." Sometimes if my sister and I didn't meet her beauty standards, she would make us stay home. She didn't

want a couple of bums following her around the store.

As I grew, my hair evolved as well. I moved from cornrows to box braids. After watching *Poetic Justice*, a movie from the 90's I convinced my Mom to let me get some. I did not realize how long this process would take. Box braids can take up to 8 hours depending on the size of the braids. The first time I had them installed I spent the whole day at this woman's house. My butt was on fire and so sore. I instantly regretted ever wanting the braids. I actually had to go back the next morning to finish. I was exhausted, but when I looked in the mirror and I saw my long *Poetic Justice* braids, I forgot how sore I was. All I could think about was how cool I would look at school. Middle school was a different world from Elementary. Everyone was worried about themselves and most importantly dating. Girls did what they needed to do to get the guy, and guys just existed.

After every braid hairstyle I would get a touch up at the salon for a relaxer. The more I relaxed the more I started to see my hair getting shorter and thinning. The other girls had full healthy hair that seemed to dance as they walked. My hair was always in a ponytail and sometimes I would leave it down. I entered this stage of my life where I wanted to do my own hair. The thing was, I didn't know what I was doing. I had no idea how to take care of my hair so it all just went downhill from there. "Your hair is your beauty" I would hear this in my head constantly while trying to figure it all out. Sometimes I wondered, if my hair is my beauty then, it needed to be perfect. I wanted to be beautiful, but I just didn't want my Mom doing my hair anymore. She knew how to create magic, but that gene was not passed down to me. My Mom didn't teach me anything about hair. She just did it. There were many things my Mom did but never taught me.

Instead of dealing with my hair I just did single braids (which are also called box braids) often. This caused my edges to fall out. In today's world of ethnic hair, edges are essential. They are also called baby hairs. They are usually gelled down using fingers and a comb. It is safe to say that it is an art form. Swirls of hair along the hairline looked like a piece of abstract art. If you had edges then great but if you didn't, it was noticeable. There are countless videos on YouTube teaching people on how to deal with their edges. It gives the hairstyle a more

She knew how
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polished look. Some girls aren't as blessed, like me for instance. Typically, in the African culture most women don't have edges due to the constant braids. African hairstylists would grab on to those baby hairs and pull them into submission and as time goes by, they break off. I can recall a time, where I actually saw one of the braids that was attached to my head, on the floor. I was heartbroken as I felt the smooth bald spot where my hair used to be. That was the last time I stepped foot in that hair salon.

High School came around and I stuck to my relaxers. Always had my hair in a ponytail and at this point I didn't care as much. My Mom didn't say much since I was a lot older and cared less about her opinion. My style changed from best dressed to bum of the year. It was almost obvious when my Mom stopped dressing me and doing my hair. Soon her standards were no longer mine and I had none. I can say the lack of cares I had was a reflection of how I saw myself. I never saw my hair in its natural state and not many people were natural anyway. I felt stuck to relaxers and honestly didn't like how thin my hair looked. I played the comparison game often and felt like beauty was out of my reach. So, I stopped trying.

I made a few new friends in High School and one in particular (who is still my best friend today) had such a confidence I wished I had. Her hair was also worn in its natural state which was almost unheard of back then. Her short curly fro was revolutionary at the time. It was as if she was defying all societal standards of beauty and creating her own. I saw first hand how empowering it was, but even though I admired her, I was not sold on it. Honestly, I had never seen my natural hair and when I did, it was treated as bad. That side of me was seen as unkept and not beautiful. To me a relaxer meant beautiful and in the back of my mind I was scared of how I would look natural. No matter how dangerous the chemicals were, I didn't care. My fear of the unknown was greater than my desire for healthier hair.

The natural hair movement was birthed in the 2000's as women embraced their natural afro- textured hair. The movement was picking up and many African American women were hopping unto the wave. I saw the movement as a trend that will pass over time. Trends come and go people will get tired of it and move on to the next big thing. The movement picked up momentum in major ways to the point it affected the

Her short curly fro was revolutionary at the time. It was as if she was defying all societal standards of beauty and creating her own.

sales of relaxers. This new phenomenon also started some important conversations in the black community. One conversation that seemed to come up even in today's culture was the acceptance of afro-textured hair in corporate spaces. People were realizing that they were experiencing discrimination because of their hair. This brings me back to what is accepted and what is not. I picked up on this same pattern in Elementary School. Nothing had really changed.

I was so inspired by the movement that I started to watch YouTube videos on natural hair. I was fascinated with how they achieved curly fros through twists and braids. I started to want to look like them. Comparison has a way of making us look crazy. One minute we want to look like this person then the next we switch to something else. Comparing ourselves is probably the most unproductive thing we can do with our lives. The more I watched, the more I wanted to cut all of my hair off and start fresh. I was in college getting my associates degree and I decided that there was no better time than that moment. I went over my best friend's house and she got her scissors and cut off the relaxed strands of hair. This process was called the big chop where women just cut their rat tails off and allowed their curls to flourish. I had two types of textures on my head, relaxed and natural. There is a drastic difference between the two, the ends almost look like rat tails. I was so excited as I watched the rat tails fall and saw my hair in its natural state. My friends praised my curls and saw the beauty in what was once deemed as unacceptable. I stared at my reflection and was pleased to meet this new me. The only thing was my Mom was not in the country when I made this decision. She was in Africa taking care of family business. Unsure of my Mother's reaction I embraced this new look anyway.

I quickly realized that making this decision based on someone else's experience was a bad call. I hated my natural hair. It didn't curl the way I wanted it, my hair was super dry and so hard to manage. YouTubers made it look so easy. I felt trapped because I was not pleased with the relaxed me, and at that moment I was disappointed in the curly me. I tried to reinvent myself, but I was not loving the results. My Mom came home from her trip excited to see my sister and I. When I walked out of the bathroom to show her what I had done she just stared at me. Her blank stare was an indication that she was not on board. I could hear her say, "Your hair is your beauty, it's all gone." I imagined that she would greet me with excitement and tell me that I was beautiful, and my curls were just as beautiful. She didn't.

I felt bamboozled by this natural hair movement. Just like those

Just for Me commercials, women with natural hair seemed happier. I thought making this move would make me happier. I came to terms with the fact that my hair was in the state that it was in and tried anyway. Hair product companies tried to stay with the wave and released creams and gels for the natural hair girl. All kinds of oils and sprays hit the market and they were flying off the shelves. The natural life got more confusing as products came out. Ethnic hair sections in the stores no longer just had relaxers but it started to have products that catered to natural hair. It was as if our identity was being transformed from relaxers to curly conscious. These products costed too much money, I couldn't afford any of it. H2O was the only thing I used in my hair, but water was not enough. I learned more about hair textures and I soon realized that my hair texture was more on the kinky side. I also saw that there weren't many YouTube videos on my hair texture.

In the natural hair world, there are different textures from type 1 to type 4. Within those numbers are categories. These categories represent different hair textures, mine is 4C. This category has the tightest curls and often the driest of them all. Most of the women I admired had 4A or lower. These textures seemed to be more accepted than mine. I struggled with that reality. This natural movement was supposed to uplift and encourage every woman who has natural hair. Instead it glorified the looser curls and inadvertently shunned the nappy curl patterns. I felt defeated and tired of trying to find identity in my hair. I started to feel as though there may not be any beauty in my hair. My Mom didn't say much but when she did, it was a reminder that what I had was not acceptable. I wore my hair in a puff for years, ignoring my 4C hair altogether.

The word nappy was derived from the cotton plant. The small cotton ball inside the plant was called a nap. Nappy hair textures resembled the same texture as the nap in the cotton plant. Therefore, explains why the term nappy was the description of afro-textured hair. Soon the terms good and bad hair developed in the African American community. Nappy hair was considered bad hair and looser curls were considered good hair. I have heard people use these terms when referring to children. "Oh, your daughter has good hair." I could never really remember anyone saying I had "good hair." My hair was only "good" when it was relaxed. I considered my hair to be a part of me so, if my hair wasn't "good" then, I wasn't good. That made logical sense to me at the time. No matter where I tried to find acceptance, I just could not find it.

For 3 years I went back and forth between braids and the infamous

puff. I didn't know how to tame my fro, my Mom didn't either. She never learned how to take care of my hair in its natural state. She went to what was easier at the time. After talking to my Mom about hair one day, I found out she used to get relaxers as well. My Mom never came in contact with her curls for long. She could only do for me what was done for her as a child. European beauty standards were just as prevalent in Africa as it was in America. Relaxers were everywhere and the idea of embracing our roots was nowhere to be found. I found it hard accepting myself in a society where every day there was a new beauty trend. I couldn't keep up anymore, so I started learning how to take care of my hair. I mastered the twist out and flat twist which are still the only two things I could confidently do with my hair. I challenged myself to become ok with my hair and in due time the love will come. I can't totally say that I love my hair today, but I do see the beauty in every curl.

Looking back at old school photos of me I saw the evolution of myself. I saw how my hair changed overtime and just how perfect my hair always looked when Mom did it. I wish I knew then what I know now about hair. It's more than just hair for me it is a part of my identity. There is a sense of belonging and pride. Most say that going natural is like coming back to our roots. Cutting off my hair was like homecoming, except I was unfamiliar with this new place. My Mom was unfamiliar with it as well and she still chooses to keep her distance. I find that most African Mothers do not understand the natural hair movement. They are more comfortable with relaxed hair and maybe it is because nappy hair is not widely accepted. Mothers just want their children to be accepted in the world. My Mom had gotten over it all but there could be this underlying fear that I was misrepresenting her and myself.

There was a like hate relationship I had with my hair. The 2-hour twist outs that didn't work out the next day and the ones that did were part of the process. One of the things the natural hair community did was, it was not afraid of difference. Our differences don't have to divide us. Sometimes differences create ranks and labels that we don't need. That comes with perception and opinion. My hair type at the time had to be learned on many levels. There was no blueprint on how my hair needed to be treated, it was all trial and error. To be honest, it still all feels like trial and error. My relationship with

I can't totally say that I love my hair today, but I do see the beauty in every curl.

my hair is healthier but I still want to cut it all off most days.

My niece is only 5 years old and I could already see how hair was shaping her identity. We never use the terms good hair and bad hair around her, but she is already making those connections. Her obsession with Frozen had her wanting hair like Elsa's. I could see the sadness in her eyes when she realized her hair couldn't do that right now. I reassured her that her hair was beautiful and that she needed to see that. Over time she gradually worked through it and she loves her little braids. I bought books with characters that looked like her just to reinforce that her hair is amazing. It was in those moments where she could see herself that I realized that representation matters. It matters for any culture or ethnicity.

The natural hair movement did more than just defy European standards. It provided representation for others to see that natural hair is acceptable and beautiful. That curls spark conversations on acceptance and beauty in our society. There has to be something that happens in our brains when we see ourselves in new ways. It's as if a light bulb goes off and we are able to dream beyond where we are. Women with natural hair refer to their hair as a crown. Crowns usually sit tall and declares someone's status to the world. There are different types of crowns made of gold with diamonds, rubies, and other gem stones. The crown represents power, victory, glory and honor. To see what was considered as not good in this light is empowering. What a beautiful way of looking at my rambunctious head of curls. They are unpredictable and they take up space and that's ok.

Masquerade

As I applied the foundation it felt more
like a mask than makeup. My eyes pop as
I draw on eyeliner, My cheeks gain more
color, And my lips will never be this red
again.

I hide my hair in a bald cap before
putting on a stranger's hair.

I shed my clothes for foreign ones.
Jeans replaced by a skirt, Sweater
for a blouse, Heels in place of my
sneakers.

The only thing left of me are
my undergarments hidden
under the new clothes.

In the mirror, I don't see me.
I see the character that I'm
bringing to life.

But the character still hasn't taken over.
If you look into my eyes, you can still see
me under the exterior shell.

I speak with the cast backstage, also in costume. We
can hear the noise of the crowd on the other side of
the curtain. Each voice causing the noise to a
crescendo, adding to the incoherent chatter.

I speak to silence my nerves.
I drink water to hydrate, but not too much-
climbing in costume once is hard enough.

I'm ready too early, there's

nothing more to do.

When the curtain rises, the house goes dark. The stage lights up. That's when I fade away. You can no longer see me in my eyes. I say words that would never come out of my mouth.

Only when I retreat into the darkness does the real me make her way back to the surface. I let myself relax for just a moment, to take in everything around me.

Soon I hear the music cue and I step back into the light.



Untitled

CARRIE CAZEAULT

“It looks like a demon”

Blacks were cursed
with supernatural powers
that transform normal objects
into weapons,
morphing their entire bodies
into Threats:
skittles into bullets
sticks into crowbars
an iPhone to a Gun.

Their powers paint their eyes
blacker than their dirt-skin.
The way they lurk past
my uniform casts a shadow
over my own self-esteem.
When they breathe, they bark.
When they plead, they screech
in tones of terror.
When they move, they attack.

I don't shoot at black people,
I shoot at targets.



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