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### Stockholm: A Novel

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# STOCKHOLM: A NOVEL

Sydney Queen

A Senior Honors Thesis project submitted to the Honors Program  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

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**STOCKHOLM.**

*“Everything’s got a moral, if only you can find it.”*

– Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*

**part one: finding you (again)**

*“Because you can’t be as in love as we were and not have it invade your bone marrow. Our kind of love can go into remission, but it’s always waiting to return. Like the world’s sweetest cancer.”*

- Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl*

I.

The soft brown cushion in the waiting room, the smells of coffee and sterile air from oppressive white rooms, the warm glow of orange lamps on cherrywood sidetables, the canopy of chatter, glittering with formality and seriousness, good-news-or-bad-news?—they are a distant comfort, pieces of stories, millions of them sprinkled deliciously around this big concrete monument like shards of broken glass.

Yet all I can think is *not drugs. Oh, God, don’t let it be drugs.*

Sitting here waiting for my husband, I think that maybe I would be able to accept it if he were dying behind one of those plastic green curtains. At least that would be normal. Instead, he’s having our entire life together being crunched down into numbers and bottled up in pills. Psychological evaluation.

*Not drugs, not drugs, not drugs.*

The woman sitting next to me has a rounded belly like a snowcap peeking out from beneath her striped tube top. She's stroking it compulsively with one hand, up and down, up and down, up and down. The other hand holds a glossy magazine. Her fingers on that hand are so steady, it makes not staring impossible. My fingers are always so shaky, and James's move incessantly, pinching flowers, tapping his thighs, twirling noodles in chopsticks when he isn't hungry, twirling through my hair, running through his; stroking my face, touching his. What is it like, to be someone with steady hands? I want to ask her how she's not worried about the thing standing on her bladder that could get hit with a football or be assaulted with a piece of sushi and be gone. Poof. Obliteration.

Or at least I want to ask how she avoids comparing her rounded belly to the hard cavities in the abdomens of the girls in that magazine. Or if she is here in the psych ward for herself—if it is her or someone else who has agreed to die and be resurrected as Zoloft or Prozac.

"Miss?" Someone is touching my shoulder, a nurse, wearing vinyl scrubs that are loose, but not too loose for me to tell that her body is one that could be in the magazine. "You can go back in with him, if you'd like," she says. "They're finishing up."

I nod at her and brush past without saying anything. I feel the pregnant girl's eyes on me as I walk away.

*God*, I think, an absentminded prayer of sorts. *God, that's it*. There is going to be a little orange bottle with a yellow label that says **DO NOT CONSUME WITH GRAPEFRUIT** or something ridiculous like that, and that's going to be the end of the beautiful brain that's called James Esau.

Deep breath. Smile and survive. I have seen the weapons that these little capsules of brainpoison wield, but we will survive.

Inside the office, James is sitting on the exam table, kicking his legs like a child. His legs are too long for the effort, and his sneakers squeak against the floor. His attempt at being casual crinkles the sanitary paper. The doctor is bent over a metal countertop, skimming her notes and scrunching her nose. She pushes a wisp of salt-and-pepper hair behind her elflike ear and sighs before she stands up straight and looks at me. “Why don’t you sit down, Mrs. Esau,” she says.

I cross the room to James and lean against the table. His finger slips up my spine and he wraps his index finger in one of my curls. The doctor sighs again, her muddied brown eyes blinking at us with an expression that seems like she knows which one of us is going to die first but doesn't know how to begin the big reveal.

“Go ahead, doc,” James says. “Tell her I’m nuts. She can take it. She already knows.” He twirls my hair into a perfect ringlet around his finger, releases the curl, and repeats. Something tightens in my chest. I ball up my pockets in my fists. My nails nip at my thighs.

“We believe your husband has suffered from a manic break,” she says, looking back at her notes. I wonder if it took more than one person to come to this conclusion, or if she is using the royal-we like Queen Victoria. Does she get off on this, playing God, gathering up our little lives in her little pill bottles? “We are going to try starting him on chlorpromazine.”

“What’s that?” I ask.

“Antipsychotics,” James says.

I want to knock the clipboard out of the doctor's hands, but I don't because I'm busy worrying about the uncertainty in her diction—why *believe*? Why *try*? If she doesn't *know*, what good is she? Why don't we put all the possible diagnoses on a big Wheel of Fortune and spin it?

"I don't understand," I say.

"It's a very common phenomenon," she says, looking out the window. I follow her gaze. The big oak tree outside is bleeding crimson leaves into the wind. White light from a faintly clouded sun dances on the doctor's face as she adds, "Misperceptions of reality."

"Misperceptions of reality?" I spit it back at her. It doesn't even sound like proper English.

"When your husband cut off that boy's finger, was it not because he believed you were dead?"

"With good reason," I snap, swallowing a flash of shame that makes my stomach hide behind my spine. "He had just been told someone was gunned down in my office." I don't say, *you didn't see the blood, he didn't even see the blood, you didn't have to scrub the blood off of your wedding ring*. "Any decent husband, any decent person, would be worried." I don't say, *it was damn near close to being me. Things might be simpler if it had been me, but then who would scrub my wedding ring clean?*

"Perhaps, but most people don't express those worries by severing the appendages of the messenger. Is that true in your experience, Mrs. Esau?"

I almost say, *Are you this much of an asshole to all of your patients or just the ones who are here by court order?* But I don't, because I know what we look like to her, and I know I'm going to have to get used to it. She is looking at me the same way everyone looks at me since James's episode.

My husband was a big executive at a news corporation currently on the rise. Everyone used to remind me how James has a stressful job, but he always said my jobs are harder. He's the only one who would use that plurality—"jobs"—acknowledging my writing as an actual grown-up career. The day of the episode, an intern came into his office with a story that turned out to be untrue, but James didn't know that yet and neither did the intern, so when the intern said that a girl had been shot at the publishing house where I work (the job everyone acknowledges is for grown-ups), James pulled a knife out of his pocket and cut the intern's finger off. At least, that's the way James tells it. The officers on the scene said he "lost his shit and assaulted that poor kid," and my favorite news article claimed that he "severed his intern's chances of typing any reports anytime soon."

The intern sued for aggravated assault. On the advice of a lawyer that left us eating Ramen ever since, James pled guilty. The Class C felony he was charged with should have won him a five-year trip to the big house and a \$10,000 fine, but the judicial diversion he was granted let him off free. Free, that is, if he complied with a probation period of intermittent drug tests, staying in the country, not committing any more offenses, and psychological evaluation, the court would drop the charges and dismiss the case.

But as I sit here tapping my foot at this incompetent doctor, the woman assigned to take his perfect mind away, psychological evaluation even less like freedom than if I were talking to my husband over a wired phone through triple panes of glass.

James admitted afterwards that he didn't know how cutting off an intern's finger would have brought me back from the dead even if I had been shot. He was quite perplexed by the whole thing, he said, and he wanted to be horrified like everyone else.

On the ride home from the pharmacy, James taps his fingers on the glovebox. We have decided to treat ourselves to a dinner that is safe for human consumption. “To celebrate the twilight hours of my stay in Crazytown,” James says, “I think we should get Chinese.” He smiles like there are no antipsychotics in a little plastic bag in the backseat. When I don’t say anything he continues, “You love Chinese. In college, you ate General Tso’s every day.”

“In college I could afford to eat General Tso’s like, once a week,” I say to the steering wheel. “But now we are literally poorer than we were in college.”

We stop at a red light. There’s another oak tree here. Its highest branches lean over the road, making a semicircle of protective arms. “I want to go somewhere,” James insists. “Just this once. We’ll be okay. It doesn’t have to be Chinese; I could go for anything, anything at all. Your pick, Alice. C’mon, it’ll be a little adventure, just the way you like. Where do you want to go?” His hands tap out the beat to “I Walk the Line” on the seams of his jeans.

*Anywhere that serves whiskey* is on the tip of my tongue when my phone vibrates in the pocket of my sweater. James says something about no-texting-and-driving, and I punch his shoulder but a giggle makes its escape through my eyes and between my teeth and I tell him to shut up, we’re at a red light, and it’s an email. I open it, and suddenly my heart is being squeezed like a dirty rag. I close the email and then open it again, reread it twice, squinting at my name to be sure it’s actually for me. A car honks behind us. I toss my phone into James’s lap and squeeze my foot against the gas pedal. James asks if everything is okay; I tell him it’s nothing. A jagged line creases his forehead, but he only tells me to keep my eyes on the road. I glance in the rearview mirror at the little bag in the backseat like it’s a child that needs to be checked up on. Giving a shit would be the most selfish thing in the entire world right now.



The antipsychotics turn James gray, not just in his roots and the bags under his eyes but in the quiet that enshrouds him and infuses his old habits with a dull film, like a pot left in the sink overnight. Being out of work has allowed him to re-read all of those sad Russian books he loves so much. But instead of lecturing me on Raskolnikov's repressed humanity or how the train that kills Anna Karenina is actually just her passion, his head sinks into the pages, his eyes flinching back and forth, and his fingers, steady for the first time as long as I've known him, pinching each new page and turning it without thought or tremor. The hands that used to jitter across his thighs or pick at his lips or shudder through his hair or seek refuge in mine—now they sit patient on his knees, awaiting instruction.

Every day I leave him sitting there, sagging under a weighted blanket, and every day I come home to the same lump of blanket, the cup of water I've left him with emptied, and a different book held upright in his steady hands. Every day he puts the book down, kisses my cheek, asks for more frivolous details about my routine that never changes. On weekends, we watch TV on the couch and he wraps one arm around my shoulder while his other hand steadies the popcorn bowl. You might think this is all you want, but it isn't. It isn't close.

The morning is not gray at all. It is lavender blossoms and orange sherbet melting together in the sky. The envelope where I neatly printed my boss's name flaps and threatens to float into the breeze. My once-red PT Cruiser guides me through glossy skyscrapers and stone cathedrals and the steps and statues that pay homage to Athena or Dionysus, who ebb and flow among antebellum and faux-antebellum architecture and the bluescreen addicts of my generation to make up the living dead population of Nashville. Neither birdsong nor honking horns are yet loud enough to shout each other down. Glass and marble give way to graffitied brick and

tenacious stone. The monuments of the past are the scaffolding that hold up the traffic lights and honkytonks and radio stations, which will give way to the next most profitable ideas.

I grip my resignation letter tight as I step from the brightly decorated, many-windowed lobby into the dark elevator. I almost forgot that everyone here adorns their cubicles like they're dorm rooms. Their eyes slink over me from the edge of those cubicle walls, a position where they must think that they are subtle. There are half a dozen different colors of triangle banners, two dozen ironic pencil cups shaped like Hedwig or dinosaurs, and exactly one million postcards, maybe four or five of them from places that my coworkers have actually been. I can feel them shifting and swiveling in their cushiony desk chairs to get a better look at the psycho's wife, but I pretend to focus on placing myself gingerly in my chair, as if this requires intense concentration. There are three cards on my desk and an impressively thick layer of dust on my computer for a three-week absence.

Two of the cards say, "Sorry for Your Loss." Both are decorated with flowers and Bible verses. The other card bears the words "Get Well Soon" in green glitter across a picture of a kitten yawning into a surgical mask. I file them into the top drawer of my desk—where they rest alone because I dumped the former contents into my purse the day James was arrested, not knowing how long it would be before I would be able to come back for them—and tell myself that I can disappear into this desk again, into the stories I edit again, but I reach into my purse to check and make sure the letter is still there, to feel the paper that is beginning to signify relief.

I have not told James that I am leaving early to pick Nic and Sonja up from the airport. I have not told him that I agreed to a double date with them two weeks ago. There was never good timing. I don't know what makes him shut down and give me that grim smile that is not really a

smile at all. We used to finish each other's very breaths; now I think we must be running out of reasons to breathe.

It seems like we've done everything, yet we're not yet thirty. Like we have seen everything, yet we've never been out of the country or even all over this one. James wants to go to Russia someday to find all the places where Dostoevsky could have possibly graced a footprint, but he says we'll go when we have "more money and less regard for our lives." We are at least getting close to the latter.

I suppose I'll text him when the Neumans and I are on our way to their new rental home. I'll help them unload and then we will all go to the steak place that James loves to give our friends a fresh taste of their college town and shut up my husband's complaints. He can hardly tolerate surprises, but he can tolerate Nic much less.

In the seventh grade, Nic Neuman was the only popular boy at Carlton Middle who didn't want to take me to the Spring Fling dance. I took him as a challenge, but he was scandalously unaffected by my wiles. He was the local pastor's son, basketball star, and not-so-secret lover of Snoop Dogg, David Bowie, and all music that was distasteful to his father. But he was also both soft-spoken and obnoxiously friendly; he always had a twenty in his pocket in case he encountered someone less fortunate than him; and he sketched a lot of pictures of Jesus on the cross—sometimes with a rosary death grimace, sometimes climbing up the plank like a gallant hero, sometimes ripping His hands through the nails and extending them to the viewer with a lovely sad expression. Nic wore dog tags that were emblazoned with the brand "JESUS FREAK." When he politely refused to take me to the dance, we became best friends instead.

It was obvious throughout the years that Nic was disturbed by my lack of Christianity, but it never seemed to occur to him to find a godlier best friend. I followed him to college

because even then, part of him was still a mystery to me. That was where he fell in love with my roommate, Sonja, and where I acquired a boyfriend named James who squirmed under Nic's firm handshakes and innocent questions. Nic and Sonja dropped out of college to move to New York and plant a church. Their big word back then was "countercultural."

Nic preaches and Sonja sings. That's how it's been since college, when all she had was an acoustic guitar and vocal lessons, and all he had were his kind smiles. At first they were operating out of a Trader Joe's before the store opened on Sunday mornings, and they lived in an apartment filled with mismatched plastic lawn furniture. Five years later, the whole shebang is big enough to where they have their own megabuilding and now they're coming back to plant a second campus in Nashville.

A week ago I mentioned to James that the Neumans were moving back in town. He grunted, "Does that mean you want to start attending the sunrise service?"

I rolled my eyes. If either of us were going to get religious anytime soon, it would be James and his Alyosha-Karamazov-loving self. James muttered that he would not "get religious" if it were Nic's pastoring to which he'd be adhering and dumped the rest of his dinner down the garbage disposal. So you can see how it's been all bad timing for me to bring up the fact that we'll be having dinner with them.

Another person can know everything about you, more even than your husband knows, all of the major plot points that you have stepped over and into, as well as most of the minor ones, and they can still not know you. If anyone will ever know me truly, in my guts and in my soul, it's James with his handfuls of my hair. But Nic Neuman knows more about me than anyone. He knows the lowered pitch of my flirting voice—this is what he learned about me first, in the

seventh grade, when I wore a lot of denim skirts and Mary Janes with over-the-knee socks and he wore the same cross on the same rope that is still around his neck now, and a lot of flannels unbuttoned over Snoop Dogg shirts or faded tees from surf shops in Florida where he had only been once or never even visited at all—and he knows how I only drink orange juice when I have a cold and he knows every color my hair has been and the name of every boy I’ve kissed. Nic was with me when I went to the hospital for the wrist I broke at majorette practice in the ninth grade and he was with me the summer before college when I went back because my big sister Lorna jammed a palette knife in my thigh. I think he is the only person who has seen me really sob since my father died.

They walk out of the airport the same way they walked into it five years ago: his arm around her shoulders, her fingers tucked over his hip like she’s holding up his jeans, his neck craned down so he can rest his head on hers. Each of them has a suitcase, and Nic has a duffel over his shoulder, which he drops to squeeze the breath out of me as soon as I emerge from my car. Sonja wraps an arm around each of us. My hazard lights blink an impatient orange on our backs.

“Is this all you have?” I ask as I pop the trunk.

“Yep!” Nic says, dropping the duffel and opening the backseat door for his wife. “I call shotgun!” Turning back to me he adds, “We sold the rest.”

“And gave the money to the poor, so that you will receive your reward in Heaven?”

“Oh, my dear Writerbrain,” Nic sighs, rolling his eyes. “You never change.”

At the mention of my college nickname, memories of my younger self overtake me like a tidal wave, and they give me the same headache you get from inadvertently snorting saltwater.

When I was a freshman, I would lie in the extra-large-twin bed across from Sonja, staring at the cinderblock walls lit only by the muted glitter of starlight through the window. While she snored, I wondered how much boredom it takes to kill a person. I didn't get a good night of sleep in that dorm until I met James.

"You'd be surprised," I mutter under my breath.

Sonja smiles at me in the rearview mirror as we are pulling away, a galaxy of headlights, streetlamps, and runways glittering just behind her head. "How have you been?" The note of sympathy in her voice is unmistakable.

"Oh," I say, "it could be so much worse. It could all be so much worse."

"How has James been recovering?" she asks. "That whole thing must have been as traumatizing for him as for anybody." Sonja, a member of an innumerable yet close-knit family and a former psych minor, loves to give the benefit of the doubt. She would never accuse your husband of being a deranged psychopath no matter how many fingers he severs.

"He's been quiet," I say. "Just reading a lot and not saying a lot. But he's okay. I'm just thankful that he's with me and not in prison."

"That lawyer was a miracle," Nic agreed.

A twenty-seven-thousand dollar miracle, I think but do not say.

"And how about you?" Sonja pushes.

"I'm okay." I almost take the wrong ramp out of the airport and curse as I cut off a honking BMW to swerve onto the right one. Both Neumans' eyes look like boiled eggs. They instinctively reach around the passenger seat to grasp each other's hands, but neither opens their mouth to vent their fear or to chastise me.

“C’mon, Alice,” Sonja says after she has a moment to adjust, as if the conversation has not been interrupted. “It’s us. How are you—really, really?”

“Really, really, I’m doing pretty well,” I lie. “This whole nightmare has honestly ended happily for me. I’m getting to spend more time with my favorite person in the world.”

James calls me when I’m rolling out of the driveway of the Neuman’s new home, a modest two-bedroom sample of suburbia with walls colored like coffee samples—dirty vanilla, deep mocha, almond, glossy caramel. He took the same amount of time to notice my text that it took Sonja and I to hang up her whole wardrobe. The irritated “Alice,” he breathes into the phone sounds like he’s barely awake.

“Hi, honey. You’re on speaker with Nic and Sonja.”

“Hey, James!” the Neumans croon simultaneously.

“Hey, Sonja,” James says. “Nic.”

“Are you getting ready to go to dinner?” I ask.

“Yeah, about that.” He heaves two melodramatic huffs that crackle into a screech on my car’s speakers. “Where are we going?”

“I was thinking of Old Hickory.”

His next sigh is cut short. “In Opryland?”

“The Opryland Hotel!” Nic squeals. “Wow, déjà vu. What a Nashville spot. I haven’t thought about that place in ages.”

“It’s so romantic,” Sonja agrees. “I used to wish I could afford to stay there, just for one night, with one of those balcony rooms that overlooks all the plants and the lights and the waterfalls. I wish it were Christmas right now—it’d be even better.”

Nic shakes his head. “I don’t think I’d want to be the kind of person who can afford to waste that kind of money. A nice dinner is one thing, but you can walk around and see all that same stuff without a balcony.”

“That’s my good Calvinist husband,” Sonja laughs.

“But can we afford a nice dinner?” James grumbles. I consider running into the apartment ahead of Nic and Sonja to strangle him. If he can’t feel what I feel, if he can’t feel the lights and the sound and the way the air pressure changes when hundreds of other lives are playing out all around us, then he could at least have some pride and not want the Neumans to know we are broke from the lawyers, especially if I’m about to announce my decision to resign.

“I’ll tell you what, James,” Nic says. “Since you two are kindly welcoming us back to Nashville, dinner will be my treat this time. Clearly our girls are bent on going.”

Background noise crackles through my car speakers.

“James?” Nic repeats after a moment. “Jim? Did we lose you?”

I know better. I can feel my husband’s pride floundering—at least he feels it for something. “Yeah,” he sighs after another long pause. “I guess that’ll be good.” After another tortured silence he adds, “Thank you.”

“Not at all,” Nic says. “I feel blessed we can still all be friends, after all these years.”

“Yes!” Sonja bobs her head and leans forward to pat my elbow. “We should thank you guys for letting us tag along.”



James mutters under his breath. I catch the phrase “perhaps better than we are” at the end, half dripping with sarcasm, half chanted, as if he’s trying to hype himself up. I can’t help but roll my eyes. It’s perhaps the millionth time I’ve heard him quote Dostoevsky, especially with all this extra time he has had to re-read lately.

“What did you say, Jim?” Nic asks.

I too have read *The Brothers Karamazov*, but only twice, like a regular literary person. I’ve heard James quote Alyosha enough, however, that I can do it, too. “I think he said, *‘Let us remember how good it was once here, when we were all together, united by a good and kind feeling which made us... perhaps better than we are.’*”

We emerge from beneath the cold, violet sky into the hotel two-by-two like we are entering the ark, Nic and Sonja plowing ahead while James and I trail them, each couple holding hands like teenagers. As soon as the amber light of the lobby warms the tip of my nose, memories swirl like a sudden flash of fever. The twinkling lights, dancing alone in the dark ballroom, the poolhouse with the drugged-out teenagers, the time James showed me how to break into a hotel room.

Side-by-side now, the four of us drift through the purplish blue light that floats out of the bar where James learned I was five years younger than him. We pass the sleek gift shops where he once stole an eleven-dollar bag of spicy chickpeas (whether he was truly motivated by outrage at overpricing or just wanted to show me that he could, I never asked) but paid for both of us to have a coffee. We amble through the thicket of palm trees splattered with fairy lights, and up to a grandiose white mansion seated on the crest of a bubbling waterfall. An orange glow reaches out

of the restaurant and stretches up to the top of the greenhouse-ceiling, bathing us in a creamy haze.

Inside, a waiter with his white collar buttoned up over his whole throat seats us in cushiony yellow chairs. Our circular table is dressed with a cloth that dangles over my knees, pushed up against a window that overlooks the greenhouse wonderland. Now that we are in the golden light, it seems only natural. The ethereal orange quality has given way to what seems to be our regular skin and hair and clothes. In the window, the rest of the greenhouse is lathered with an otherworldly blue that wasn't there when we were in it.

James lays his napkin in his lap and rests his hands on his knees and asks the Neumans about their church. Nic goes on and on about his mission to reach each individual heart and how he's so blessed to have such a great worship team—at which point Sonja rolls her eyes and blushes because for most of their time in New York, she *was* the worship team—and how he had a lighting guy that made their sad spot in the back of the Trader Joe's look like a kaleidoscope.

“It's a shame you guys never got to come out and see it,” Sonja says. “I almost liked the Trader Joe's better than when we got the big building.”

“But the big auditorium opened up more opportunities for God to move in the lives of more people who never would have fit in the Trader Joe's,” Nic insists, running his index finger absentmindedly over his wife's hand on the table without breaking eye contact with James.

“It sounds like you've been quite successful,” James says. He smiles, but his tongue appears before his teeth so that for a moment, his mouth looks like a peach opening up to reveal a dark pit. He never would have engaged in this line of conversation the last time the Neumans were in our lives, except to challenge them to an informal battle of wits. James grew up in a conservative evangelical household with a mother who is still bitter that he married a woman who has never

been baptized in a Southern baptist church, and there is a Bible on our bookshelf with a creased spine and silvery pages that are beginning to fall out, but the concept of churches as businesses that have to consider expansion and allocation of funds disturbs him. I've sampled about a dozen of them with him. We attend a service every few months when his repressed conscience grows teeth again.

Nic winces, and Sonja flips her hand over to clasp his. "Success is a dirty word," she says. "We've only been vessels for the love of Christ."

I wait to feel every coil in James's body tense up, but he still seems perfectly at ease. "That's lovely," says my husband's voice, commandeering my husband's lips, though I am not quite convinced it is my husband. "I'm thrilled for the both of you. It seems you've found your calling."

If this were a cartoon, my jaw would have clattered against the table, but I hold myself together. This is the same man whom Nic tried to dissuade me from dating five years ago because he was afraid he would lure me into blood orgies. Now they're both celebrating Nic's ecclesiastical career.

"I have to say, I was a little nervous about having dinner with you," Nic says. He pours three more glasses of the wine he ordered for the table, for himself and for Sonja and for me.

James sips his water, a much better pairing with chlorpromazine. "What do you mean?"

"Well, I suppose it's all in the past—our little tiffs way back when. Maybe you don't even remember. But I was worried you might think we were starting a megachurch or something."

My husband smiles and lays a steady hand on my knee. I realize then that I have been bouncing it. Somehow it's much more difficult to be the calm half of this marriage when he's

giving me competition. “That was kid stuff, Nic. Just as you say—all in the past. I’ve had a happy marriage to steady me since then.”

Steady him? Me, steadying him? This can’t possibly be my James, the one who took me to a masquerade gala and listened to me make jokes about who would be the easiest kill, the one who walked with me through the unfinished part of my mother’s house in Carlton where my father’s blood stains the concrete, the one who sat in the passenger seat while I flew down the Interstate at four A.M. going ninety in the wrong direction, just to see if I could survive it. He has a right to say a lot of shit about me, but steady is not part of it.

James recommends the filet mignon. All four of us order it, even though I am not a fan of eating anything I have to see first. But it is just as well because there are no foods I feel like I can stomach when my husband is complimenting their “gospel-centered” mission and calling me steady. Churchtalk doesn’t bother me; it never bothered me in Nic. But I will never have to be Nic’s wife and suffer the scrutiny of all of my positively un-gospel-centered behavior. Occasional guilt that I can easily trace back to James’s legalistic upbringing is one thing. Church services are some of the most entertaining arenas in which to observe human behavior. They make great writing material. I could go once a week, happily. I’d love to attend one of Nic and Sonja’s to see my old friends’ spin on the Jesus show. But a genuine emotional investment leads to a nuclear family and scheduled sex for the singular purpose of procreation and scrubbing all non-mediocre literature from the bookshelves, even if your wife is the one who wrote it.

“You okay, Writerbrain?” Nic’s voice plucks me out of my spiral. I slam a lid on the rage that has come to a boil in my brain. “You look like you went somewhere else.”

A hint of James—my James—flares on my husband’s face at the fact that it was Nic, not him, that caught my wide eyes and chewed-up lip. His mouth disappears into a hard thin line.

“I’m fine,” I say. I squeeze James’s hand. “Sorry. Lost in thought about my book.”

“Your book!” Sonja squeals, her face alighting as if I’d just helped her remember something she had been straining to recall. “I’ve been dying to talk to you about your book”

“Really?” My knife clinks against my plate uselessly. James reaches over to help me cut a piece of the steak, but I push his hand gently away. “You’ve read it?”

“Three times,” she gushes. “And I noticed something new every time. It’s fantastic, Alice. Definitely your best yet.”

“You-you’ve read them all?” I can’t believe that she doesn’t fear being scoured by holy fire, mentioning books that must seem like filthy trash to her pastor husband.

“Well, of course she has,” Nic chimes in. “We both have. You sent us copies of the first three—did you think I was just going to put your words on a shelf? We waited weeks for this one—”

“And when I couldn’t stand it anymore, I went and bought my own copy,” Sonja interjects.

“And she’s been hogging it ever since,” Nic says.

My heart crashes into my ribcage like an unexpected red light. Surely she went to the bookstore before they began to print those five little words on the cover. If James learns what I learned from the email in the car the day we picked up his antipsychotics—if he learned it from Sonja (or worse, Nic) instead of me—we might see a side of him that even I don’t know. The one who severed the intern’s finger. Pills or no pills.

I am calculating every possible way to insert the revelation casually before the Neumans can when Sonja lays her fork and knife gingerly on her empty plate. She rests her chin on her fists

and stares dreamily at the empty space just past my ear. “There’s nothing better than coming home on a quiet Sunday afternoon and curling up with the latest volume from Alice Adelaide.”

I allow myself to exhale. They don’t know. I have to tell James myself, and soon. He may not get out much anymore, but he could still oversee a text from my agent or pick up the phone when my sister calls or decide he wants to get back on Facebook.

“I couldn’t agree more,” James says, putting down his silverware on his cleaned plate too. He bumps my shoulder with his. “Nothing like a quiet Sunday afternoon with Alice *Esau*.” He has always cringed at the books being published under my maiden name, dissatisfied with the logic that alliteration sounds better. Before we were married he called me Addy, short for Adelaide, almost always, because he wanted to give me a name that was only his to use. He uses it rarely now.

I can’t imagine anyone spending a quiet Sunday afternoon with anything I’ve written. On my own fan page I’ve become notorious for killing off the most beloved character in the least anticipated and—in the latest volume—bloodiest way. My shock at the Neuman’s enjoyment of the novels and fear of James discovering my secret all simmers into a sticky clump of suspicion. Have any of them even read the books? James and I have talked about them at length, but I guess it’s possible that he pulls everything I told him in the last conversation as data for the next.

I smile my thanks at their compliments. I’d be insane if I followed my doubts into questioning my friends aloud. I thank the Neumans when Nic picks up the check and again when we drop them off at their home. I watch James watching them meander into their new cozy, boring home, arm-in-arm. One of his steady hands rests on the window lock, like he is resisting the urge to press his palm to the glass. They return to their quiet Sunday afternoons and he will return to

wherever he left off in whichever volume of Dostoevsky he's re-reading now, slipping into another world to forget the unsteadiness of his wife.

## II.

“Your total is \$107.13,” says the cashier, her bubblegum popping on the last syllable and deflating onto a wrinkled chin. “Thank you for shopping at SafeMart.” She blows a wisp of silver bangs out of her glassy eyes.

“Thank you,” James reciprocates, nodding at her. His lower lip jerks down and it looks like a strange smile, but I know it’s not. His hand stretches to take a plastic bag from her extended fingers, but it spasms toward his chest and the bag clatters to the floor. The cashier laughs good-naturedly as all three of us bend down to pick up the apples rolling tauntingly past the register. James and I are muttering half-assed apologies.

She waves her hand dismissively. “It’s no problem.” She smiles with chapped lips. Looking back at James, she says, “D’you need help carrying these to the car, or can your daughter handle it?”

“D-daughter?” James stammers. His elbow unlocks and the fruits he held are dancing away from us again. No one moves this time.

“Daughter?” I echo.

She frowns at me, pointedly but not even for a moment—like I’m a piece of furniture that’s not her taste, but she’ll sit in it if she’s tired enough.

I swallow hard, scooping up the apples James dropped and picking up the bag. “I’m his wife,” I say.

“She’s only five years younger than me,” James adds, his bass voice cracking like a child. His nose wrinkles at the cashier.



“Oh—no. I’m sorry. Sorry, son.” She grasps her lower back as she creaks back into a standing position. Her voice is a whisper of the boisterous southern drawl it had been before.

“We’ve got the groceries. Thank you for your help.” I shrug away from his arm, gather up four bags on each of my own, and elbow him toward the door. Haunted eyes burn into me as we pass through the automatic doors, but I can’t look back at him. I know I wouldn’t see anything but blank horror. His old analytical cogs that would have found ironic humor in this are no longer turning behind his beryl irises. “Do you think I have a beer gut? Is that it?”

“Well, I don’t suppose anyone knows that it’s a chlorpromazine gut,” I grumble.

Can you see into our future now? Can you see the antipsychotics ripping our apartment off of the fifth floor, crumbling all the rooms around it? But it survives, metamorphoses: stretches and spawns afghans and identical coffee cups and little wooden signs with cherrypicked Bible verses. It crowns itself with a white picket fence, adorned with flowerbeds that bear magnolias as jewels. Yet somehow it is all gray, the same color as the bags under my husband’s eyes. Can you see the offspring, gray too, all generated by that house? They giggle as they run after the apples that their father can never hold onto in the grocery store. Can you see them falling asleep on his gray chest where my head used to rest and listen to his heart, before it was so steady? They dream of the day their gray mother will smile, never having known her when she was still airing in color, never knowing how they are the gray clots in her blood that suffocate her from the inside.

“James?” I say when we are unloading the groceries, buckling my lips into my mouth but not quite biting them. They feel hot and swollen.

“Yes, sweetheart?” He reaches around me to put a carton of milk in the refrigerator. His arm brushes my waist as he leans down to get to the lower shelf.

“I made the Bestsellers’ list,” I blurt out, though that’s miles away from what I was thinking. The day I got that email about the list changed everything, but it had nothing to do with the culmination of my dreams.

He drops a dozen eggs, and something yellow splashes onto his foot. He doesn’t acknowledge it. The ends of his mouth go up in slow motion, an uncharacteristic incredulity. But this smile is real. “When did you find out?”

“It was probably about two months ago.” I think I’m saved by the fact that I’m laughing at him.

“Two months ago?” he says, and he’s laughing, too. “How have you been on the Bestsellers’ list for two months and I haven’t known?”

“You haven’t been reading the paper lately,” I say meekly, lacing my fingers together, not saying *you haven’t been reading much of anything that was not originally written in Russian*. “All the times I said I was getting coffee with my sister... they were book signings.” I try to smile, try to care as much as I always thought I would before the list was reality. Try to believe that my husband cares at all, that he has read my words at all.

His big green eyes flash and he wraps his hands around my waist and lifts me into the air. For a brief moment, we are a two-person carousel. I wish this was the real thing I wanted to say to him.

He puts me down and I lean into him. “I want you to stop taking the antipsychs,” I murmur into his shirt, but it comes out all wrong. I’m still kind of giggling from spinning and he’s still smiling with that grin that isn’t his.

“What?” he says, and the smile falls. He leans back to get a better look at my face, his eyes widening as he searches mine and finds that I said what he thought I said. He digs his nails into his palms and his knuckles turn white. He narrows his eyes at me as if to say he’s sure he hasn’t heard me right. He steps back onto the eggs, and they squish beneath his heel. He doesn’t notice them this time, either.

I repeat what I said, but I’m not laughing this time. This time the mucus is breeding in my throat, a thick angry mass that taunts me with the power it has to turn my voice into an abhorrent nasally sound.

“That’s what you want, huh?” he murmurs, his voice as low and as even as it is when he tells me he loves me. The insults hidden in his breathy growl are like sweet nothings. “What about our life? What about your friends? I couldn’t spend an hour with Nic and Sonja without these meds,” he says, running his hands through his generous tuft of midnight hair, his emerald eyes wide. His fingers twitch, and for a moment his hands are locked there, like he’s trying to keep his head from rolling off. I can see it, splattered on the floor. I can see everything I loved being stomped on.

“You don’t like me like this?” he snaps. “This is for you, Alice.” He spits my name out like a pill that gets stuck behind your teeth after a big gulp of water, damp and used and bitter. He says this is for me but I am thinking it’s for her. The not-Alice, the steady one. The one that he has clearly created in a peaceful haze of chlorpromazine. The one who wants quiet Sunday afternoons. “You want to drag me out to the Opryland hotel; didn’t you want me to be good for them? But

when we're alone you want me to be the monster you get off on, some sort of personal freak show? Come one, come all! No, wait, it's just the one."

Tears threaten to break rank with my eyes because he's right and because I can't take my eyes off his hair. He's running his shaking fingers through it again. We are just another statistic lost to monotony, just another regular couple. I hate him. I hate him for his newborn sanity that brought us here.

I am so in love with him, it hurts.

I watch him see that hurt, watch his eyes soften briefly at my fingers, trembling inches away from the comfort of tangling in his hair, and then snatched back into my own, wrapping curl around curl around fingernail around knuckle around—it snaps off in my hand. "I didn't want you to be good for them," I say. "I didn't. I don't."

"Really?" he scoffs, his nostrils flaring, veins in his arms tensing. In the harsh daylight assaulting us through the window, it seems like they're almost glowing purple. "You wanted me to go in there and, what? Cut off Nic's hand? Tell me what you wanted me to do, Alice." He waits with expectant eyebrows.

I am waiting for me too, expecting my bestselling brain to be capable of articulating her desires to her own husband. I want him to be crazy for me, no one else, but I don't want it to disappear if we go to dinner. I want him to have some pride, enough to be good, but only barely so. I want him to contain it, but I want him to struggle a little, for me. For love. I want to feel him simmer. I want to tell him this—I ache to tell him this—but I don't have the words yet.

"And what about my probation?" he asks the silence when he realizes I'm not going to fill it. "They'll test me. I'll go to prison."

“I don’t want to lose you,” I say stupidly, a snot bubble popping out of my nose. I want to seep into the egg whites on the tile and let him step on me, get it over with. He waits patiently for the inevitable *but*, leaning against the counter and raising dark eyebrows that betray quizzicality but not impatience. “We could trick them.” I sound like a bad actress in a poorly written dystopian flick.

“How?” he scoffs, but there’s hope in the way his brows are tugged downward again. There’s hope in the fact that he’s asking me at all, that he’s entertaining my absurdity. There must be hope. I can taste it; it tastes like blood, metallic as it rolls hot and thick over my tongue. But his eyes are telling me not to be ridiculous.

“I-I... I don’t know, James.” I squeeze my eyes shut. I wish I hadn’t said anything. I can’t tell him that I’ve already thought of the risks, of course I’ve thought of the risks, but I don’t care. I’ve already lost him. I want him back. It would be so easy to throw myself into his arms now. He would hold me, I know he would, no matter how angry he is.

Yet there’s that inevitable *but* to consider.

“I’m right, aren’t I?” he says. “You don’t like me like this. You don’t care about the consequences.” It sounds almost like he’s trying to comfort me, but I see something else flickering in his eyes. It’s something that I haven’t seen since the day we met.

“Yes,” I say, letting my confirmation float up between us like a lonely dust mote. Explanation would be the same as a lie, just all wrapped up in big words and worthless apologies. He’s right, and he would be right still even if I try to explain how much I am in love with him and his hands in his hair or not.

He nods. I look down and realize his hands are shaking, too, twittering by his sides like something caged, tapping against his thighs like he's waiting to be released, like a song I can't hear. I wonder what it sounds like. Is it sweet? Does it remind him of me? For the first time, I allow myself to consider what I've always been afraid of: maybe whatever goes on beneath that beautiful hair has absolutely nothing to do with me. I can see now that it's too late to take back my confession that was the absolute truth seconds ago.

*You understand me*, he had said the day we met.

And I do. He said I was the only one that saw him as human. I was the only one that looked at him without the taint of fear in my eyes.

## III.

He's gone back into our bedroom now. I know him well enough to know he would never freeze me out, never send me to the couch. That's the scary thing about James—even if he were going to divorce me tomorrow, he would love me tonight.

I sleep on the couch anyway. I would be an intruder in our bed.

I lie here, letting the blue flickers of the TV wash over my body. I stare at the ceiling, remembering my sister Lorna's eyes when she first met James, the narrow damming of two iris-shaped seas every time she looked over at us and found that his fingers were always in my hair or tracing the blue in my wrist or the creases of my palm or digging into the space above my collarbone, if he was really nervous. I remember even earlier than that, when Nic tried to exchange pleasantries with James only to meet limp handshakes and blank stares.

But I also remember last year, the last time I tried to bring work people into this apartment. I remember my husband being charming and making my boss laugh so hard she had to flee to the bathroom. And then I remember my husband knocking a glass out of her husband's hands because he didn't like the way he was looking at me. It has been inconvenient to be married to a man who can turn into a lifelike Halloween decoration without notice in two seconds flat.

But, oh, how I want him to scare *me*.

In the morning, the TV is still on, because James knows I can't stand silence. He's in the kitchen, chopping up peppers. I blink away the blurred vision of the revived dreamer, rub the sleep out of my eyes, say nothing about the way a weapon in his hands is a shock to my spine, jolting

my chest with electricity. He should always have a weapon in his hands; it's better that way. No one else gets that, not even him.

My hands feel too smooth. I cross my arms on the back of the couch and lay my chin on my too-soft fists. I feel my leg trying to shake so I sit on my knees to hold it down. His jaw slacks all the way to the left; his hair is knotted all on the opposite side so that it looks like he has a lopsided mohawk which only he could sport and still maintain complete seriousness. He glances up at me with eyes so indifferent I feel the blood draining down to my toes and through the floor. I do wish he would yell at me.

“Good morning, babe.” His monotone voice grates me like razor rash, like concrete tearing bare skin.

“Morning,” I mumble, my teeth grinding against each other and making me wince.

“Do you want an omelet?”

“Do we have to pretend food is the best topic of conversation right now?”

“Oh, I'm sorry. You're right. Breakfast is for civilized people. What I meant was, would you like to go house-hunting today?”

“House hunting?” We moved into this apartment nearly two years ago, when we were freshly honeymooned. James had just received the promotion to Executive, and I was still putting citrus oils behind my ears every morning so that he would wake up wanting to kiss me without knowing why.

“Yeah, weren't you saying you wanted a house with a basement?” The ticks he makes against the cutting board fall steady, like the second hand of a grandfather clock.

“Was I?” I yawn.



“Yeah,” he echoes, “we were going to get a house with a basement. That way, I can dig a hole in the floor, chain you to the bottom of it, and send down lotion in a basket. Because that’s the kind of thing you’re telling me you’re into, right?”

“James,” I say. I wrap the blanket I was using around my shoulders and tip-toe across the kitchen. The hand with the knife is close enough now for either of us to make one irrevocable move: strike or disarm. But making a move would be nothing compared to the tension that pools on the floor in the space between our feet, a tangible pressure that keeps us from coming any closer or staying any farther away from each other. “I just want things to be the way they used to be.”

His breath swells slow, like something thick has leaked into the air, but he doesn’t otherwise acknowledge that I’ve approached him. Every labored exhale is measured by another tick on the cutting board. The peppers smell sweet even though I know they’re not. “No really, baby, I get it.” His voice cracks, and he glances up at me between chops. His glance makes me think of a detective interrogating a criminal who he already has hard evidence to indict. An innocent slice of green pepper takes a pathetic flight onto the hardwood. “You wanna spice things up and sweetheart, I hear you. I don’t want to end up in marriage counseling either.”

“I didn’t say anything about marriage counseling.” I sway in and out of the delicate balance between us, stepping toward him and then backing up again. The truth is, I could eat his anger; I could survive on that alone for days. At least it’s alive and red and it cannot be swallowed up by a stack of books he reads alone.

“Oh, no, honey. I heard you loud and clear. I can see that I wasn’t being attentive to your needs, and I apologize. From now on, our house will always be home to handcuffs, blindfolds, creepy Jason masks, and—what are those gag-things with the weights in the middle? Whatever they’re called, we’re getting some.”

I look down at my hands and murmur, “This isn’t a joke.” The modest diamond on my wedding ring twinkles in the yellow lights of our apartment like Starry Night. My mind is being stretched and wound into Van Gogh’s swirls of sky. And it’s cracking like dried paint.

James settles the knife on the cutting board, slow and soundless. Gentle and tortuous movements. He swings his hip around the counter and closes the gap between us. He clutches my waist and slips to the floor, onto his knees. He looks up at me with eyes that are emeralds, shattered. “I’ve been good to you, haven’t I?” he murmurs, reaching up to tilt my chin with his finger. His eyes flash back and forth to try and read both of mine.

For a minute I think maybe his thoughts have increased again. I want him to talk to me like he used to, to ask me about my worst fears like he used to. I want him to kiss me like I am a question he does not know how to answer.

I kiss him now, hoping he won’t feel the chill of my tears against his sullen cheeks, hoping saltwater doesn’t drain into our mouths, trying to remember what it was I’d said I was afraid of, wondering if I still am.

## IV.

All the plants have turned to sticks. They reach up toward the sky, helpless children soliciting the attention of a Father who is indifferent or poor, turning out His pockets as an apology: He is all out of warmth. All three of Tennessee's other seasons feel like Carlton's summers to me, but in the muted half-winter of Nashville we close all the windows and break out our puffy coats. Since I quit the publishing house, James and I have donned these rarely in the past few weeks, only for the sake of a few book festivals and one promo event at a floundering but timelessly charming local bookstore.

James has quickly come to love these. Ever since he has learned of my book hitting the list, he has made a career out of being my waterboy. He snaps pictures and directs autograph lines and answers booksellers and influencers before I can open my mouth. He beams like an idiot the whole time, except in the moments when his eye catches the book and he sees "Alice Adelaide." I can see in the rearrangement of muscles and veins in his face that he is worried I have found a microcosm where I am not Mrs. Esau—where he has no claim on me.

His father calls every night now. Each evening he reminds James how much fun he had the summer before college working on the Esau Construction Services crew. My husband will fill the phone with *yeah Dads, uh-huhs*, and *I sure do remember thats*. "From the ground up—I sure do remember," he will say. "Uh-huh, I appreciate it." That's the part where he usually turns to me and mimes being strangled.

"Maybe you should take him up on that," I say one night after he says goodbye to his father. His thumb is still stuck in the copy of *Notes from the Underground* that he was reading when he answered the phone.

He sighs and digs between the couch cushions for his bookmark. “Why does the husband of the next Agatha Christie need to be working strange hours diluted by dirt and beer?”

“Agatha Christie?” I snort. “Is that who I am?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Don’t *uh-huh* me,” I laugh, hurling a throw pillow at him. “I’m not your dad.”

He dodges the missile with Dostoevsky. “You sound a lot like him right now.” I catch a glimpse of a nervous smirk before his face disappears behind the book.

“Oh, do I?” I reach over him to collect the pillow, but he snatches my arm and pulls me into his lap. The little novella drops to the floor soundlessly. “So,” he murmurs, planting a kiss on my jaw, “where are we going tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow?” I echo, brushing his hair back from his forehead. “Who said anything about tomorrow?”

“You laid out your pencil skirt. And I saw you put those dangly earrings on top of your jewelry box.”

“Oh for the sake of all that is good in the world, please tell me I am not that predictable.”

“Okay. You’re not that predictable.” He threads his fingers in the ends of my hair. I peck the tip of his nose. He grins, but tilts his head back. “So, where are we going tomorrow?”

“I am going to what will probably be the last festival we will see until there is another book to advertise. You don’t have to come with me if you don’t want to.” I do not say, writers don’t need waterboys. I do not say, I don’t like the look on your face when you see my maiden name on the book.

“If you don’t think I want to be there for the last hurrah, you’re crazy.”

“Well, no one’s doubting that,” I say, running a fingernail along the back of his neck. “I am a little crazy.”

“Don’t call my girl crazy,” he whispers. “Just crazy for me?”

“Sure.”

James kisses my lips, behind my ear, my neck, but all I feel is pangs of hunger. I am starving to death, thinking this is not enough, this is not enough, this is not enough.

The carpet at this event is a muted, linty black, the lights painfully fluorescent. It’s in a warehouse at a strip mall just off the Interstate, but it looks like a classroom with low funding. High-rise desks have been swapped for white plastic tables. A faint humming noise vibrates off of the walls. The windows are small squares that hug the tall ceiling and don’t seem to let any light in. Only a handful of other writers have arrived before us, clearly the ones with the set-ups that are the most involved. One of them, a young girl with curled dark hair and fierce red lipstick who sports a skirt patterned after the carpet of The Overlook Hotel from *The Shining*, is stacking metal poles surrounding her books, probably on which to hang the red-and-yellow striped canvas that she has draped over her shoulder. A glossy sign announces **CIRQUE** in bold letters.

A table away from her, a guy in a tux weighs down black balloons around his books, the spines of which I recognize immediately. He is Dathan Beriah, the other “dark” Nashville-area writer whose recent bestseller was published around the same time as mine. That is where our similarities end. His books are glorified versions of the *Final Destination* movies. Brutality for

brutality's sake. My orange-haired and fiery-spirited agent, Dinah, has playfully referred to him as my competition. But the man doesn't know how to use blood as a metaphor.

But writers are entrepreneurs whether they like it or not, as Dinah also likes to remind me. And entrepreneurs have to charm one another if they want a shot at using the heads of other entrepreneurs as step-ladders. I've found that the rule is not exclusive to entrepreneurs really. It's extended to the whole human race.

We drop off my duffle bags next to Dathan. I don't doubt that I've been placed next to him on the basis of our "similarities." He glares at us just as you would expect someone whose climactic scene in his latest book involves a girl being impaled by a giant drill to glare. "Cool balloons," I say, smiling sweetly and smoothing my skirt. I extend my hand. "I'm Alice Adelaide."

He shakes my hand with a silk white glove. "Pleasure," he grumbles.

I kind of expect James to jump between us and say "Alice *Esau*," but he doesn't move. I glance back at my husband and find him to be eerily peaceful, his steady hands against his sides with a neutral expression fixed on his steady wife. He takes my gaze as a nudge and steps forward with his hand extended too. "I'm James," he says, not at all in a voice you'd expect someone who severed an intern's finger to use. "Alice's husband." He sounds more like a middle-aged dad running a garage sale—sunny yet curt. "It's nice to meet you."

Dathan's eyes roam over my cashmere sweater and James's ill-fitting button-down and his chlorpromazine gut. We don't look like a household that would produce Nashville's other up-and-coming "dark" novels. I can tell from the way his gray irises sink that he has cast some judgment on us. Reaching an unspoken conclusion, he shrugs and turns back to arranging blood-

red enamel pins in neat rows at the front of his table. They read “GET YOURS” in a gooey font, referring to the motto of his most recent antagonist.

James seems to have already forgotten him, as he is already stacking my books on our table. I’ve liked the cover since I first saw it—it’s a minimalistic drawing against a black background, depicting the profile of a woman clutching a fistful of flowers and if you look closely, the stems are knives. A red line drips from her little pink knuckles, but her narrow crimson smile is undisturbed. My publisher sent me laptop stickers of the subtly bloody bouquet, which are much more tasteful but much less likely to draw attention than Dathan’s pins. It only takes us about five minutes to set up, because all we brought for decorations are fake flower arrangements we picked up from Hobby Lobby on the way to the last festival. They didn’t seem out of place then, but next to Dathan it looks like I’m running a Disney Princess booth.

“Everything looks great,” James says, planting a kiss on my hairline. “I saw a Starbucks on my way in; I assume you need coffee as much as I do? Hazelnut latte with two extra shots?”

“Wish I had someone who had my coffee order memorized,” Dathan sighs, apparently to himself, but making no effort to prevent us from hearing him.

My husband throws him a disgustingly wholesome smile. “You want anything from Starbucks, man? My treat.”

“Really? I didn’t mean—”

“I insist. A friend of Alice’s is a friend of mine.”

His eyes flicker to me for a split second as if to ask if we are friends, but he looks back at James with another shrug and says, “I could go for a caramel frappuccino.”

“You got it!” James says, turning on his heel.

Dathan's face contorts into what is probably a smile for him before he wipes his nose with his sleeve and pops his collar. He settles into the cold metal chair behind his table and stares at nothing, or maybe at the *Cirque* girl; it's hard to tell.

I watch the door where James exited, unable to shake that pleasant voice and unperturbed smile out of my mind. I can't tell whether that is what's giving me a headache, or the fact that the warehouse smells like nailpolish remover. I drop my purse behind my table and dig through it to produce a broken-spined, dog-eared copy of Dathan's book, *Opened Scars*. "I saw that you would be here," I say, approaching his table and sitting on the edge. Balloons brush my shoulder. Those silver eyes widen and drop, watching my pale pink pumps. "So I brought my copy for you to sign, if you don't mind."

"You... wow, you've really read it," he says. He tugs off his gloves to reveal dry pink hands with fingernails painted the same color as his pins. He flips through the book, noting that I've written in the margins and spilled coffee on it once or twice. Dinah recommends that I always pay careful attention to Dathan's books.

He uncaps one of his red pens and scrawls on the title page. He's definitely writing more than the manufactured half-sentence to which we must typically limit ourselves. I look back at the door, waiting for my husband. My foot taps the floor before I can stop it.

"You're shaking the table," Dathan mutters.

I fold my hands and plant them on my stubborn knee. "Sorry. You've done this so many more times than I have, you must not get nervous anymore."



“Honestly, I never get nervous at these things,” he says, handing the book back. “I don’t care too much what people think of these books. They’re all formulaic, I’m sure you can tell. I’m just doing this until I make enough money to write what I actually love.”

“You could’ve fooled me. Looks like you’re pretty dedicated,” I say, holding up one of his pins and twisting my face into my best scary expression.

He actually laughs, or at least makes a choking sound that I think is a laugh.

I glance over my shoulder; James is still nowhere in sight. I feel my leg beginning to shake again, so I cross it over the other one. “What do you actually love then?”

“Lyric poetry,” he says, staring at my legs.

“Oh yeah? How did you make the jump from lyric poetry to horror?”

“Uhh... well, I didn’t want to write romance or YA, and I discovered I’m pretty good at coming up with ways people could die. Turns out there’s, um, there’s a crowd for that.” He swallows. His gaze doesn’t move.

“You are definitely good at coming up with ways people can die,” I say, looking over my shoulder. Still no James. I don’t allow my feet to touch the floor so that they cannot quiver.

“I hate to admit that I haven’t read your most recent book,” he says, taking a shaky gulp of air, “though I’m told I should watch out for you.”

“I don’t think you need to watch out. I’m more psychological and you’re more...”

“Gory?” he choke-laughs.

“Gory, yeah,” I twirl a curl with my index finger. “You’re good at it, though.”

“Why, thank y—oh, husband,” he stammers. “I mean, James. Thank you, James.”

I follow his eyes over my shoulder, where James stands with a drink carrier. He looks back and forth between Dathan's gaze and my body on the table, but says nothing. He hands Dathan his drink and I hop off to plant myself in my chair.

"Nice talking with you!" Dathan says. "Don't forget your book."

James watches me take the book back and observes Dathan re-adjusting his gloves. "Did you have fun getting to know the competition?" my husband mutters under his breath, plucking our drinks from the carrier.

"Yeah," I breathe. I wish I could check his pulse, see if I've found the way to make his heart go wild for me again. His face is stone, but at least that pleasant nonsense is gone. "Turns out he's a nice guy. Just doing this so he can write poetry."

"Great," James says. He swipes a metal chair that's still leaning against the wall and sets it up next to mine.

The room fills up with the other writers and a few vendors with merch for the bigger names. Teens with colorful hair and jean jackets and backpacks covered in patches and pins swarm Dathan's table. This festival, with its cartoony advertisements and plethora of YA authors, seems geared toward that crowd. Most of them shuffle past my pastel flowers, but a couple kids with nervous giggles and Harley Quinn pigtails buy books. My fans are mostly moms who are a few years older than me and coming to grips with the fact that they are never going to use their college degrees. I settle down in my forged smile and wait for this parade to end.

"This is pathetic," James says, opening his mouth for something other than coffee ingestion for the first time in an hour.

“Yeah,” I say, watching the muscles in his face, waiting for his eyes to flicker over to Dathan, waiting for a flame of jealousy, waiting to see if my husband feels anything or if he is just a desolate vessel for chlorpromazine. “No one’s buying the books.”

“No, not them,” James hisses, sitting up straight and tilting his head to meet my eyes. “You! You’ve given up. Your book is great, Alice. It’s important. People should read it. You should be working the crowd, but you’re letting them ‘Get Theirs’ and walk away.”

“Work the crowd? Honey, this is a book festival, not Disney World. And I haven’t seen a non-author in here that looks like they’re old enough to vote. They probably have twenty bucks to their name, and they’re spending it on Dathan. I don’t want to embarrass myself.”

“Fine. If you’re embarrassed of your book that you worked on for, like, forever, I’m not going to be. Just watch.” He scoots his chair back and leans forward over the table. “Hey, kid!” he beckons a guy in a We Came As Romans hoodie that’s about to swerve our table. “Wanna read a bloody book that you’ll actually remember?”

The teen frowns, scanning the table. “This isn’t a romance book?”

“No, dude. This is a quality piece of literature about a young woman who becomes an assassin to feed her family. Doesn’t that sound more interesting than people getting impaled?”

He shrugs and flips one of the books over. He stares at it for a few seconds before he points to the price and says, “Fifteen bucks?”

“That’s right, my man. We take Venmo.” James leans back in his chair again, propping his feet up on the table. He winks at me.

Two other teenagers, one of which wears their bangs so low you can't tell if they have eyes, approach this one, giddily pointing to their new copies of *Opened Scars*. "Check out this one," he says, waving my book in their faces. "It's got an assassin."

Bangs swipes a copy off the top of the stack and seems to look up at me. "Sweet. It's like Black Widow?"

"Kind of," I say, maintaining my smile. It's not really anything like Black Widow, except for the assassin thing. "It's about a woman who learns how to kill in order to feed her family after a corrupt government has left them starving. But she kind of spirals from there."

"She goes crazy?"

"Yep."

"Lit. I'll take two. He can't afford one." The kid jams a thumb back at the silent friend.

James wiggles his eyebrows at me as the kids walk away. Soon the line from Dathan's table is funneling into mine, and James jumps up to direct the crowd. Being kids, most of them brush right past him without hearing what he is saying, but they're bookish kids, so they're naturally orderly. I wait for his nostrils to flare or his jaw to set or for some sign that he feels ignored, but he just keeps smiling even as they disregard them. One kid, a little too hyped up from the gore at Dathan's table, tries to touch my hand. I wait for James to jump in and smack his hand away, or finger the pocket where he kept the knife for so many years. I remember all the times in college when Nic would touch my shoulder or side hug me, and James's hand would be in his pocket, clutching the knife. But he watches the kid reach, watches me snatch my hand back, and just raises his eyebrows at me. Those pills have sucked James Esau out of this body, leaving behind a vessel of which I know every muscle and bone and birthmark. Bone of my

bone, flesh of my flesh—it says nothing about the mind. I am married to a patient, kind-hearted, charismatic, complete stranger.

We sell out before the festival is over. Dathan brought double the amount of books I did, so he is still selling to a dwindling line of kids when we are sweeping the flowers into a tote bag. “It was nice to meet you!” he calls over their heads.

“Nice to meet you too!” James replies with that stupid smile. And he actually waves. With the same hand that severed the finger of some poor intern who never even looked at me.

At home, James drops his coat on the floor and takes two strides straight to the kitchen. He fills a pot with water and puts it on the stove. No conversation must be had to determine we are eating Ramen for dinner; three coffees came off of our credit card today. Since the trial, eating has been a routine nuisance to silence the voices of our stomachs.

I open the tote bag above the garbage and let the flowers fall. James asks if I might have wanted to keep those for sentimental reasons. I tell him that I don’t get sentimental for stupid things like that. I wait to see if he’ll make a snide remark about how I might feel sentimental about my conversation with Dathan, but he just pours chicken powder into the pot.

I retreat to the bedroom and drop my purse on my nightstand. Alone, I pull out Dathan’s book and read what he wrote for me. *You’ve got a lot of guts to sell a thriller in pink heels. And I know a thing or two about guts. Let me know if you ever want to talk books or talk blood.* A phone number is scrawled beneath his signature. I can’t help but laugh out loud. Maybe James is just smart enough to know I’d never waste my time on a clown like this, husband or no husband. Still, I don’t think it’s too much to ask for him to squirm a little.

We slurp up our dinner over the evening news like a couple of retired people who have forgotten what it's like to touch each other. While I wash our bowls, James turns off the TV and pulls out *Notes from the Underground*. I ask if he has that book memorized by now, but he says that there are always new things to discover in Dostoevsky. I dry my hands and cross the room to him, folding my arms on the back of the couch, watching him turn pages. His eyes don't even flicker away from Fyodor.

I ask him if there aren't new things to discover in his wife's books, and he looks up with an exasperated smile, his thumb holding his place. "Didn't I just haggle some teenagers into buying my wife's book? Would I do that if I didn't love it?" I suggest that maybe he loves that it's paying for him to sit on the couch and read other books all day.

He rolls his eyes and opens the book again. He pats my arm with his free hand. "You're stressed from the festival, my darling. I understand. A hot bath might do you some good."

I tell him that I don't need a hot bath. I need a husband who gives a damn.

He sits up straight, placing his bookmark in the novella. He folds his hands in his lap. His eyes smother me in their green grip, but those hands are steady, steady stranger's hands. "What haven't I done for you, Alice? What have you asked of me that I haven't given you? Do you want me to get a job? I can call my father up if that would really make you happy. But I would think—"

"That wasn't my point, James. The point is that all you do is sit here, when I'm right next to you, living and breathing—"

“I would think that you would recognize that I provided for you for four years, not counting how you bummed in my house nearly the whole time we were dating. And how I lost—”

“I *bummed* in your house? *I* bummed? You could have told me to go home anytime. But you burst into tears whenever I left, like a little—”

“And how I lost my job because of how deeply I care for you.”

I turn and run back into our room, ripping open the drawer in his nightstand so hard it unhinges. Pens and vitamins and old receipts litter the floor, but I snatch the object for which I was searching. In the living room, James hasn't moved on the couch, but he watches me with those wild smothering eyes as I fly at him, switching the old pocketknife open. “You didn't lose your job because of how deeply you care for me,” I say, running its spine along his knuckles, too softly to pierce his hand even if I were using the serrated edge. My heart is a paddle ball in the hands of a maniac. His hands are corpse-still. “If you did, the pills wouldn't be able to take your love away.” I flip the knife around and graze his fingers with the serrated edge, still too gentle to cut.

We are locked in this position for seconds that tick by like days, watching each other's hands. At a distance too far away for the knife to be visible, we might look like happy lovers. Content with the other's touch even with the couch between us, enchanted with every small detail of each other's bodies.

“Addy,” he whispers at last. The nickname lifts up nails I hadn't realized were pinning my heart down. If it slaps at my ribcage any faster, I think I will die. He slides his hand, so slowly at first I think I am imagining the movement, out from under the knife. A bright red scratch appears on the back of his hand, but there is no blood. He takes my cheek in his palm and

thumbs my jawline like he is measuring it. His thumb caresses my lips. “Why don’t you come sit with me? It’ll be just how it was before.”

“It won’t be,” I say. My chest screams come closer, come close, close, close. “It won’t be how it was before without this.” I flip the knife and curl his other fingers around the hilt. “Ask me what I’m afraid of.” I move his hand on my mouth down to my throat, where he can feel my heart asking him, too.

“Alice—”

“No.” My eyes burn. I snatch the wrist of the hand that holds the knife and he drops it on the other side of the couch. I pull this hand to my neck too, squeezing both of his hands with both of my hands until I can hear the blood sloshing around in my head and there are stars floating around the living room. My heart screams closerclosercloser. “Call me Addy again,” I squeak. The stars burn out into black spots, licking away the edges of my vision.

He rips his hands away and jumps off the couch, bending down to collect the knife and close it. The blackness pops into dizzy stars again. He pockets the knife and settles back on the couch again, flipping *Notes from the Underground* to where he left off. “Why don’t you see to that bath?” he says. “I think it’ll do you a world of good.”

My skin prunes beneath the evanescent bubbles while I read the first twenty pages of *The Beautiful and Damned* for the umpteenth time. It’s not Fitzgerald’s fault. You wouldn’t be able to read for very long if your husband spent more time with his books than with you, either. Every few pages, my free hand flies up to my neck against my will, feeling the red spots where his



fingers were. He had to mean it. I couldn't have bruised my own throat with his hands. At least for a second, he had to mean it.

I can hear him in the living room, uh-huhing into his phone. We agreed while I drew the bathwater that he would call his father and accept the construction job. This was his takeaway from our argument. This is the terrible anticlimax of compromise, the thing that is supposed to hold marriages together. I set Fitzgerald on the edge of the tub and sink beneath the water, unwilling to hear another "uh-huh" for the rest of my life.

I feel the bruises again, like an orphan clutching the only thing left in the world that belongs to them. I remember the glint in James's eyes the day we met. And the glint of the knife, too. A shiver snaps at my spine, and I realize the bath has gone cold. Rising above the surface feels heavy, like something is lying beneath me in the water with strong arms and no intention of letting me go. James thinks that this conversation is over. He thinks that he will get this job and he will forget what it felt like to hold my life in his hands. And that's fine. Let him forget. He can't see what's coming. As the water circles the drain, I can see months and years dripping away with it.

V.

He had to mean it. The morning after James dropped me off in front of my dorm for the first time, I turned to watch him driving away in my car and disappear into the mystic silver light of the first autumn morning that bore the first crimson leaf to crunch under my boots that year, his hands clenching and unclenching on my steering wheel, facing straight ahead, not checking his rearview mirror for my profile. I could still feel his whisper reverberating around my ears. *I'm only letting you go because I know you're going to come back.* He had to mean it. I felt the emptiness in my pocket where my car keys should have resided, and walked into the empty lobby of my dorm hall, hoping for two good hours of sleep.

Despite the way that morning and the night before seemed to take place on the doorstep of an extramundane otherworld, it was as if I had only stayed up all night reading. The day still dripped into the same monotonous routine. When her alarm didn't wake me up, Sonja picked up my battered copy of *Oliver Twist* and tossed it at my shape under my comforter. Earlier in the semester, my roommate had been gentler, but she had learned that brute force was the only way I would make it to my 8 A.M. class on Charles Dickens. And if I didn't make it to Dickens, she didn't get to walk with me and wave at my inevitably early best friend, Nic.

*"Buenos días, mi rayita del sol,"* Sonja, a seasoned morning person, greeted me as she had every morning for the past month. She said it was how her grandmother told her good morning, but it had a sarcastic lilt when she used it with me. But when I opened my eyes every morning that semester, my first sight would be of Sonja's already-dressed back, leaning over the coffeemaker we balanced on the cardboard box it came in. My second sight was her whirling around to put my steaming thermos on my desk. She picked up her projectile and set it on my

backpack. She ripped off my blanket. “Let’s go, Writerbrain!” She clapped her hands in front of my face. “Dream’s over! You’re gonna be late!”

There was a knock at our door, but our neighbor Callie from the dormroom across the hall didn’t wait for permission to enter. “Good morning, ladies,” she chirped. “I brought hair ties.” She sat down on my feet and patted my thigh. “Up, up, up! You wouldn’t want to keep Sonja from her facetime with her unrequited love!”

“Shut up, Cal,” Sonja said, but her girlish laugh gave her away.

I groaned at both of them and rolled into a seated position, kicking Callie off of my bed. The coffee burned my tongue as always, but I needed it before I could be pleasant to either of them.

“I heard you come in late last night,” Callie said, crawling back up on my bed and sitting cross-legged behind me while I yawned and stretched. She parted my hair with a brush she produced from her sweatpants’ pocket. This had become a morning routine with Callie and me: whoever had the latest night braided the other one’s hair. She interrupted her rendition of Bob Dylan’s “Orange Juice Blues” that she was humming under her breath to ask, “Writing the next Great American Novel, I presume?”

“Mmm, something like that,” I grumbled, thinking of James’s cold fingers and the colder blade of his knife, metamorphosing into a kaleidoscopic range of colors as I twirled it under the Christmas lights that gave his emerald eyes a raging red glow.

Once Callie finished, we were sporting identical pairs of French braids. I stood up to change clothes, and realized only then that I had slunk into bed still wearing James’s flannel over my thin button-down and jeans. I exchanged my outfit for a sweater and a pair of leggings, but I

tied his jacket around my waist. The three of us rode the elevator together, Callie split for her Psych class while Sonja and I trudged straight ahead to the Humanities building, where Nic bid both of us a cordial “Goodmorning” and although she looked perfectly cool on the outside, I knew Sonja was melting all the way to Intro to Songwriting. Everything was exactly how it had been the day before, but I felt my empty pockets again to be sure the enigmatic boy and his pocketknife had not been a dream. *I’m only letting you go because I know you’re going to come back.*

*I know you know I’m going to come back,* I had told him.

By lunch, it felt impossible that less than eight hours before, I sat on the couch with a strange boy in a so-called house—although it was actually more comparable to a storage shed than a house—drinking a whole pot of coffee, petting his greyhound, and asking if he had ever hurt anyone.

Now I sat by the window, soaking in the yellow afternoon light with my kindhearted, sleepy friends, wondering how I had ever spent an entire day with them before without going braindead from a lack of stimulation. I watched Nic squat in his chair, his feet curled around the edge so that his body would have been in the fetal position if he wasn’t making wild, lively gestures and smiling his pastormile that extended to his eyes, which seemed always to be the same exact shade of blue as a swimming pool on a disgustingly hot Southern day. I loved him best when he was like this, so excitable that he lost all control and consciousness of his own body. But with James fresh on my mind, I still wondered how I had spent almost six years living a story in which Nic was the other primary character.

“In Psych today we took a personality test,” Callie said.

“Do you ever do anything legitimate in that class?” Nic asked. “Last week, didn’t you do a coloring book?”

“We did a paint-by-number at the end of class,” she corrected him, “in order to buffer our brains for the rest of the day. We always have a five-minute buffer at the end. The rest of the class is all about the parts of the brain and mental illness, so the professor tries to lighten things. Anyway, we took a ‘Who Are You In Harry Potter’ quiz and I’m Luna Lovegood. I wasn’t surprised.”

“Yeah,” Nic said, tapping out some indiscernible rhythm on his jeans. “That fits. You’re probably the wisest, strangest, spaciest person I know.”

“I think that was supposed to be an insult, but I’m taking it as a compliment.” She smiled into the glorified Ramen that she stirred around her bowl. “Who do you guys think you’d be?”

“Hmm,” Nic said. He stroked his chin for effect. “I’m widening the parameters to encompass all of cinematic history. I think I’d be Hazel Motes from *Wise Blood*, and Alice—”

“Oh, I’ve had Writerbrain picked out since I met her,” Callie said, gleaming. She bit the inky end of her pen, since the other side was tipped with a pink fuzzy ball. She wasn’t writing anything; she didn’t even have any paper out. I think she saw a girl carry around a fuzzy pen on TV once, and she thought it was cool. It definitely did not look cool as a buffer bites of soup noodles. “She’s Natalie Portman from that one movie.” She nudged Sonja across the table, who had yawned and proceeded to play with her grandmother’s cross necklace dangling between her collarbones and stare right through us. “Right, Sonja? Back me up on this one—Alice is Natalie Portman from that one movie.”

“What one movie?” Nic laughed, and the motion bobbed him up and down on top of his heels. “*V for Vendetta? Star Wars? Thor? Black Swan?*”

“No, no, no, no. The one where she’s really interesting but does basically nothing.”

“Gee, thanks,” I interjected.

“Oh, Alice, you’re still here,” Callie said wryly. “I thought you stared out the window so long that you disappeared into it.”

“I think I know what movie you’re talking about. You’re right, she doesn’t do anything,” Sonja laughed. “But isn’t she a compulsive liar? And kind of dramatic?”

“*Garden State!*” Nic roared with laughter. “I can see how you see it, but no, that’s not our Al. She’s more like, let me think—”

“Is anyone sitting here?” A stack of books thudded onto the empty space at the end of our table.

I choked on a mouthful of rice. Callie jumped up and started to slam her fist on my back, but I waved her away. He had changed into a different shirt, an over-washed black sweatshirt that read “Get A Life” in peeling red letters, but he was still wearing the same jeans as he had the night before, betrayed by the splotch of coffee that I had spilled. It was the impossible boy with his pocketknife in the middle of my cafeteria.

Swaths of sunlight streaming through the window striped his face, revealing dark circles and streaks of oil. He smiled at us with his full teeth, an expression I hadn’t seen from him yet. It was a slow-blooming grin, a crinkling of his eyes that infected his whole face. Even with his unwashed face and mussed hair, I thought that maybe he could use that smile just as well as a knife and he could get a girl to do anything he wants.

Nic immediately transformed into a pastor on a Sunday morning. “Hey, man!” he greeted James warmly, as if he had always—or ever—been a part of our group. “Take a seat.”

James thanked him, and balanced a plate of fries and half a turkey sandwich on top of his books. If I hadn’t seen such tortured shades overcome his face last night, I would think that this guy had a sunny disposition.

Once I was able to swallow my rice, I said, “Guys, this is my new friend James.” All morning I had rehearsed many possibilities in my head of the origin story I would give my friends when they met him, but I thought I would have more information to fill in the gaps when that day came. I didn’t know whether he was even a student here, or what he did for a living, or his last name. “James, this is Nic, Sonja, and Callie.”

He nodded at each of them, shaking Nic’s hand when he extended it.

“Any friend of Al’s is a friend of ours,” Sonja chirped.

“We were just discussing which movie character each of us might be,” Nic said. “I think I’m Hazel from *Wise Blood*—”

“—and Writerbrain here is whatever Natalie Portman’s character from *Garden State* is called; we can’t remember,” Callie interrupted. “But we amend that she is not a compulsive liar.”

“Writerbrain?” James said.

“Yeah, that’s what they call me because my brain is swirling with absinthe, fried by nicotine and caffeine,” I said, lolling my head around and rolling my eyes back.

“Shut up,” Sonja said. “No, it isn’t. Well, the caffeine part is true. Maybe you are a compulsive liar after all.” She turned to James to add, “We call her Writerbrain because she’s a freaking genius, so don’t let her fool you into thinking anything otherwise.”

“You’re a writer?” James gulped through a mouthful of turkey sandwich.

“You must be a really new friend,” Callie said. “Alice has been in college for two seconds and her writing has already won awards.”

“One award,” I corrected her. “But yeah, I guess I’m campus-famous.”

“Who do you think you would be, James?” Nic asks. “Any film character ever?”

James didn’t blink. “I’d like to say Alexei Karamazov from the 1958 adaptation of *The Brothers K.*, but I have to admit I’m probably more of an Ivan.”

Nic and Sonja just stared, but Callie smiled with her baby blue therapist’s eyes. Putting her psych major into practice on real human beings was her favorite pastime. “A Russian lit man, are you, James?” she mused. She reached for the first book in his stack, careful not to unbalance his plate from the top of the tower. “*Demons* by Fyodor Dostoevsky. Just some light reading, huh?”

James snickered. “I don’t do very much light reading.”

“You make quite a pair with our Writerbrain then,” Callie said, winking at me. She held up his plate with one hand and slid the rest of the books out, turning the spines to face her. “Let’s have a speed date with James, shall we?” she said. “*The Idiot*, *Dostoevsky: The Miraculous Years*—I’m sensing a theme here. Is this for a project? Don’t answer until I’m done—*Anna Karenina*—so it’s not just Dostoevsky; is it a project on all sad Russian books?—Shh, don’t answer—No it’s not, because you don’t have *War and Peace*. Finally, we have *Russian for Beginners* and two titles I can’t read because they are actually in Russian.”

“Those are just *Demons* and *The Idiot* again,” James said.



“So what did we learn from our speed date with James, Callie?” I asked, breathing a sigh of relief. Whether it was their kind hearts or their sleep deprivation, my friends didn’t seem to think anything of a stranger intruding on our lunch unannounced and uninvited.

“We learned that either he’s a great student, or there’s actually someone else at this school who is more intense than you,” Callie said, scraping her last noodles out of the bottom of her bowl.

Everyone looks at James for the verdict, and he smirked for a long moment to leave us in suspense. Finally he admits, “Both are wrong. I don’t go to this school. I graduated from here last semester, but they still let me use the library because I worked there all four years and I still pick up some shifts sometimes. I was on my way there today to return these books, but I thought I’d first stop by and say hi to my... new friend...”

“So there may not be anyone as intense as Alice in this school,” Callie said. “You’re off on a technicality. Still, two of you in the same city is disturbing enough. If you’re not already hooking up, you should be.”

“Callie!” Sonja gasped.

“What? They should. Just because you two can settle for making googly eyes at each other until the Lord wills you to be wed doesn’t mean the rest of us should.” She stood up and started collecting our empty dishes while Sonja gave her a death stare and Nic turned red from his ears to his collarbones.

“She was just poking fun,” Nic placated Sonja in his soft-spoken-pastor-Intelligentsia voice that was the main reason why we couldn’t go anywhere without some girl in plastic glasses and a Simply Southern t-shirt falling half in love with him.

(And those girls were probably the same reason Sonja was pretending she wasn't half in love with him. She paired print dresses with combat boots and wrote songs about the height and depth of the love of Christ. Although I knew these things were much more Nic's speed, she seemed to lose something tangible every time Nic gave those girls his pastormile.)

"But," Callie continued, skidding back to the table and swinging her cheetah-print backpack onto her shoulders, "I'm pretty sure that Writerbrain and Fyodor here don't need my advice because Alice has already been dreamy all morning, and she did the walk of shame at five A.M." She wiggled her eyebrows at me.

"Callie, that's none of our business," Sonja hissed.

A look overcame Nic that I knew well. His eyebrows knitted so far in that they almost welded together, and his eyes darted back and forth like he was reading something on the floor under the table. He sucked in his cheeks until he looked like he had a drug problem. It was the look he got when I infringed upon the Ten Commandments, but he knew that if he lectured me, I was less likely to ever go to church. The paradox seemed to stress him out so much that sometimes I thought it would be better for his mental health if I stopped hanging out with him completely. But this was the twilight of the time in my life where I didn't really do many things that were wrong enough to cause this reaction in him, because I didn't do many things, period. Callie was right: I was Natalie Portman in that one movie.

James followed us out of the cafeteria with one arm thrown over my shoulders, while the other clutched the stack of books. He lifted his hand to wave goodbye to the woman scanning student IDs at the entrance.

"Don't be a stranger, Esau!" she called after him.

“Not as long as you’re around, Katty!” he said. He tucked the books under his arm while he produced his sunglasses from his pocket, unfolding the arms with his teeth and sliding them over his ears. All this without letting go of me.

At the exit, Nic held his hand out for James to shake, but seeing his hands were full he extracted the offer and clapped him on the shoulder instead. “Good to meet you, Jim.” He nodded at the rest of us and said, “Ladies, I look forward to the same time, same place on Monday. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do this weekend.”

“I assume that doesn’t apply to me,” I said.

“I wouldn’t expect any less.” He winked at me, laughing in his good-natured way. He glanced at James, who had become corpse-still. Catching something in his expression that he must have interpreted as confusion, Nic added, “Alice and I have been friends since we were kids, so I’m quite used to her not listening to anything I say.”

“Yes, my stubbornness is my cutest quality,” I said. I looked up at James, expecting some sort of rebuttal or affirmation, but he was still staring at Nic—at least he seemed to be, but it was impossible to be sure when his eyes were shielded by the glasses. His stillness made it seem like he was glitched or glued to Nic somehow, so that he couldn’t move until he did. Once he waved goodbye and jogged off to his next class, James finally looked down at me again. He squeezed my shoulder. His hand slipped down to my hips, and he brushed his fingers against his flannel, still tied around my waist. His grin was wide and sideways.

“And what are your plans this weekend that include doing something Nic wouldn’t do?” he asked.

“We’re going to a party tonight where there may or may not be illicit substances,” Callie piped up. “My friend is dropping his first poetry album. You should come! If you’re not too cool

for a college cafeteria, you're not too cool for a college party. The same people threw another house party when one of my other friends got cast in the first play this semester. Writerbrain and I managed to stay away from everything but weed at that one—right, Alice?”

“Yeah,” I said. I tried and failed to imagine James getting stoned or passing up a blunt. I thought that if a boy laughed at girls' worst fears, he probably was the type to have smoked something in college, at the very least. But I couldn't see it one way or the other. I tapped my head against his shoulder. “You should come.”

“It starts at eight,” Callie said. “I'll send the address to Al and she can forward it to you.”

James raised his eyebrows at Sonja. “What about you?”

“Oh.” She bit her lip. “I'm not really an illicit substances person either.”

“Come on,” I said. “We'll watch out for each other.”

“Yeah, come on!” Callie squealed. “Now we have a *guy*. Worst comes to worse, he'll hit them over the head with *The Brothers Karamazov*.”

“I didn't bring that one.” He glanced at his stack to be sure.

“I'm a psychology major,” Callie said proudly. “I can read your mind. And I see...” She tapped her temples and rolled her eyes into the back of the head. “Two copies on your bookshelf, both heavily annotated.”

His mouth slid into that twisted smile again. “You got me.”

“See, Sonja?” She hooked her arm in Sonja's. She was practically bouncing. “Now you have to come along. Don't let James waste the perfect weapon.”

Callie's friend lived less than two miles away, so we elected to walk. It was half-past seven, and the sky was buzzing with neon pink, scarred in a few places by shocks of bloodred. The rosy light beamed down sickly shades onto our skin.

James went home to shower when I had to leave for my afternoon obligatory statistics class, but not before he came up to our dorm and analyzed my bookshelf and taught Sonja how to play the chorus of "Personal Jesus" on her acoustic guitar. But I could see the same boy that delivered such tormented monologues the night before in the twittering of his fingers against his jeans or against his flannel around my waist. And I could see that same boy in the way he kept looking at me like he needed me to throw him a life raft. He didn't seem to need me to say anything or make any move to rescue him. He would give me that look and, as if it recharged some internal battery, he would babble on about how I can't actually say I like Fitzgerald when *Gatsby* is the only one of his books on my shelf. "Don't talk to me about it until you've read *The Beautiful and Damned*," he insisted. He kept throwing up his hands and talking fast with that sideways grin.

"Stop checking your phone," Callie groaned now. "Desperate is not a good look on you, Writerbrain. He said he's coming; he's going to be there. So chill. You're a strong, independent woman."

"Don't worry—you're not alone," Sonja said. She tucked one of my stray hairs back into my braid. "Ever since Nic gave me his number, I go kind of crazy on the inside when I don't hear from him for a while. But James really seems to like you. I'm sure he'll be there."

"You two are throwing off my party mojo." Callie produced a body spray from the little black purse strapped across her chest by a gold chain, and she doused herself in a fruity scent.

"Does your party mojo have the aroma of a Jolly Rancher?" I asked.

“As a matter of fact, it does. Strong women smell like blue raspberry.”

The night was black and stale by the time we arrived at the party. The house was a red slab of brick with a tin roof that slanted into a skylight in the middle. Through closed blinds I watched a light dissolve into different colors at a nearly imperceptible speed.

Inside, Callie introduced us to a dozen people as her roommates, even though we technically lived across the hall. Her real roommate spent most of her time at her parents’ house and when she was in Callie’s room, she was always studying with the overhead light and multiple lamps turned on. On those nights Callie sometimes slept on our floor, wrapped up in her weighted blanket. Everyone greeted us with smiles and fist bumps. Most of them were adorned with crystals around their necks or flowers in their hair.

The man of the hour, the one releasing the poetry album, was a freckled kid whose head sprouted a mess of curls the color of wheat bread. A girl in a striped crop top plugged in a microphone and was already introducing him when a hand appeared on the small of my back. When I looked up at him, James greeted me with a kiss and then held up a case of beer and a hardback edition of *The Brothers Karamazov*.

I stifle my laugh and kiss him again. He passes the beer off to an eager-looking guy in round glasses and cargo pants, but not before taking two and popping off the lids with his pocketknife.

The wheat-haired poet steps up onto the “stage”—which is really just a floral rug, tattered at the edges. It clearly doesn’t abide with the sleek black decorations and colored lights of the house on a typical day. He reads nearly the entire album to us while a guy plays the keyboard behind him. Two or three of the poems are good. My favorite one catalogued a plethora of verbs: Wheat-Hair shook out his locks and asked all of us, “*why are we always submitting or*

*overpowering, toppling and tearing up, undermining, overexposing, gaslighting, adoring a little too much...*”

By the time he was finished, everyone except Sonja was half-drunk. Callie and I had been playing a drinking game where we filled a plastic cup with straight vodka and the first one to identify every time he used the word “chaos” made the other one take a shot, chugging until he paused or until he said “uncertain.” I had gotten lucky—almost every time I had to drink, he said “uncertain.” Callie had to go through a lot of stanzas, so Sonja was supporting her with an arm threaded around her ribcage.

Someone turned off all the lights except the colorful LED strips and put on a playlist that was mostly Twenty One Pilots. A few people left, while the poet and his accompaniment settled into the couch, surrounded by a crowd of friends that curled up next to them and spilled onto the floor. A few people went into a backroom at the promise of foosball. I didn’t know whether or not that was a euphemism.

Sonja and I dragged Callie into the kitchen, each of us taking an arm, to feed her the buffalo dip and chocolate-chip cookies. James leaned against the doorframe and made jokes about beating away potential suitors with Dostoevsky.

“Sue-tailors?” Callie slurred. “Let me at ‘em. If Al gets to have a tall, dark, and... hand... sun... I should, too!”

“I’m surprised you’re such a lightweight, Cal,” Sonja said. She filled a cup with tap water and held it to Callie’s lips.

“I’m not,” she bubbled, and took a long gulp. “I pre-gamed with the bottle of rum in my sock drawer. And Al got all the uncertain.”

Once Sonja got Callie propped up in a chair, James and I bet each other on whether there was a real foosball table in the back of the house (I took the negative stance). He left Sonja with Dostoevsky to protect the two of them, and we slipped through the back door to investigate. We followed the sound of laughter down a flight of stairs and into the basement, where a couple girls in denim skirts were holding cupped hands out to a guy in a Predators jersey. He gave one of them a green pill, and a pink to the other one. They took the drugs and then each took a sip of one of James's beers to chase it. Behind them, the girl in the crop top who introduced the poet was playing foosball with a shirtless guy whose jeans only covered half of his boxers.

"Cough it up—hey, what's your last name?" James whispered.

"Cough what up? We didn't actually set the terms of our bet," I said. "And what does my last name have to do with anything?"

"It just would've been a good moment to use it," he said. "Like—cough it up, Jones. Only whatever your name is."

"Adelaide."

"Cough it up then, Addy." He held out his flat palm and wiggled his eyebrows.

"Addy?"

"Yeah—I bet no one else calls you Addy, do they?"

"No."

"Then I will." He winked. His green eyes were almost black in the dim violet light of the basement. A neon-clad dart board seemed to be the only source of illumination. "Now cough it up."

"Cough what up?" I giggled. "We didn't bet anything."



He slipped his fingers into the loops of my braid and tilted my head back. He leaned down and his lips clashed with mine. Your first kiss with the right person is supposed to feel like fireworks. What a dull image—loud beauty that only exists for an instant and then turns to smoke. I didn't feel fireworks. I felt like he had caught my heart in his fist and squeezed. He didn't stop kissing me even when someone else in the basement whistled at us. When they started to clap, he finally lifted his head. "I think we're even now," he murmured, too low for anyone else to hear.

"Did you guys come to join us, or did you think you were alone?" the girl in the crop top asked. She was sitting on the edge of the foosball table now, spinning one of the rods absentmindedly so that the little plastic men *think-thunk-thunked* against the fake grass.

James smiled at her. His leering smirk was the antithesis of Nic's pastormile, but it seemed to have the same effect. The girl's smile turned sheepish and she looked down at the skewered soccer players she was twirling. "Oh, we were—" he started.

"We came to join you," I interjected.

Preds Jersey grinned at me. "That's great, little friend," he said. He crossed the room to us, and James slipped his arm around my waist. He held out a handful of the vibrant capsules. "Pick a color, any color."

"Actually, I was the one that needed a pick-me-up," James said. He reached over me and plucked a yellow tablet. "Thank you." He washed it down with a gulp of beer.

"Sure thing—you were the beer man, weren't you? Any beer man is a friend of mine."

"Have you ever done this before?" I whispered when the guy turned his back.

"Well, I knew you probably hadn't so I"—he hiccuped—"saved you."

"I think I had it under control, thank you," I hissed.

“But now they won’t mind if I do this,” he murmured, kissing me again.

Within half an hour, James couldn’t let go of me. Even when we emerged into the living room, he outlined each of my ribs with his fingertips as we climbed the stairs.

“Whoa,” Sonja said, doing a double take to get a better look at James. She and Callie were situated in front of a game of CandyLand at the coffeetable with a couple other people, though no one seemed to be following any discernible rules. “What’s up with your eyes, dude?”

I looked up at James. His pupils had whittled down to pinpricks in a sea of green, and he was looking back and forth rapidly. Noticing my gaze, he grinned in an unnatural way that was very different from his twisted grin earlier. “You’re the most beautiful one out of all of them,” he whispered, his heavy breath in my ear electrifying my blood. He wrapped his arms around my waist and rested his head on mine.

Callie turned around and burst into a fit of giggles when she saw his face. She was sitting upright on her own now, but now she seemed to have even more energy than came to her naturally. “Who gave him Molly?”

His hands moved up my torso, dragging my sweater with them. I wrestled out of his grasp, but he smiled dumb all the same. I couldn’t decide whether I wished I was the one who had taken the pill. By the look of James, I’d be having much more fun but I’d look like an idiot.

“Should we walk him home?” Sonja asked, avoiding eye contact with him. “How long is this gonna last?”

“I think I’m in love with you,” James said into my hair. “We should get married. Then I’d never hurt anyone ever again.”

Sonja and Callie exchanged looks. “I don’t think we should take him home yet,” Callie said. “Molly can be like truth serum. I think we should interrogate him.”

My blood drained out of my hands and feet. My head burned. I didn't know much about ecstasy, but I knew that it made people too trusting. If James revealed how we'd met the night before, my friends would call the cops.

"How many girls have you slept with before Alice?" Callie asked.

"This is not what I was trying to tell you with my eyes, Cal," Sonja sighed. "I just want the record to state that."

James giggled. He hiccupped. He held his fingers up as if he was counting and then said, "Zero."

"What?" Callie cried. "There's no way you're a virgin. You're tall and you have great skin and honestly—the bod of a Greek god. And you just said you didn't want to hurt anyone else. You give off serious player vibes, bro."

I snorted. Back then, long before his chlorpromazine gut, James's broad shoulders seemed more prominent, and he had good biceps. Probably not Greek god biceps, but close enough to one when you're still coming down from being drunk.

"Sex isn't everything," James said, gulping the last of his beer. He dropped the bottle on the floor.

I tensed, waiting for him to say, *Fear is everything*, or something like that. But he didn't.

"Look at that," Sonja said. "A boy with a brain in his head rather than his pants. Can we take him home now?"

Callie ignored her. "So what did you do with Alice last night?" She raised her eyebrows, tried to make eye contact with him, but his eyes wouldn't rest on her or anything long enough.

"Why did she come home at five this morning?"

"We should really take them both home," Sonja interjected. "Al, you must be exhausted."

“Yes,” I said, jumping on the life raft. “I’m beat. I was thinking about leaving soon.”

“In a minute,” Callie said. “James, answer the question please.”

“She didn’t want to go home,” he said with a dreamy expression that I think was supposed to be directed at me.

“We were having a really good conversation,” I said, thinking of ice and pavement and steel and anything to keep my face from blushing. I tried to remember anything except the moment last night when I started to take my shirt off and James said, *No, I didn’t bring you here for that.*

“No offense, Writerbrain, but I wasn’t talking to you. Why didn’t Alice want to go home, James?”

He started to whistle along to “Guns for Hands” that was blaring over the speaker. When the song ended, he apparently remembered her and said, “She liked it. She’s different.” He wrapped his arms around my shoulders and nuzzled his face into my neck. I squirmed, but he squeezed me tighter.

“Liked what?”

My chest was going to explode. I was sure of it. It wouldn’t matter whether James confessed to them because I was going to be sludge on the floor soon.

“Liked what?” he echoed in a bad imitation of Callie’s bubbly voice. He released his death grip on me to reach into his pocket and produce the knife as an answer. He switched open the blade and held it out for her to see.

“Shit,” Callie gasped. She looked back and forth between James and me.

This was it. He was going to tell them how we met and they were going to have him arrested and my adventure would be over. Her eyes rested on him for a long time, a graver look

overcoming her face than any I'd seen from her before. Sonja stared at the knife, working her jaw back and forth. Finally, Callie said, "Whatever. I'm not going to kink shame." Her voice was low and quiet and didn't match her words at all. She smiled with her mouth but not her eyes. "I knew you couldn't be a virgin."

"Can we please go home?" Sonja said. She was still looking at the empty space where James's hand had held the knife, though he had pocketed it and was tracing my collarbones. I didn't try to stop him this time.

"Yeah, I've got a stomach ache," Callie said. "Why did you guys let me have vodka and junk food?"

"Because you were about to eat carpet," Sonja grumbled. "Where did you leave your purse?"

I let myself exhale. They thought we were a little crazy, but they had no idea. They would forget about this, surely. I had to make sure they forgot about this. I was going to have to take more care in the future. If we were going to pretend to be in a normal relationship, I was going to have to keep them from asking so many questions. And keep my "boyfriend" away from Molly.

## VI.

Ever since James got this new job, he has been coming home later every night. For his two years as a journalist, he was home at 6:03 on the dot every day. Now it's become 6:15. 6:45, 7:30, 8:30. Of course, he reminds me, building a home has a much less predictable timeline than running the news. At this rate, it'll be a steady fall to midnight. I want to ask him how much they can be doing after November's early nightfall, but I guess I'm waiting for the right moment to pick a fight. Or maybe I'm full of shit and I don't really want to pick a fight.

One morning before he woke up I dumped the chlorpromazine into the garbage disposal. I watched it turn to orange dust and then to nothing. Later that day, he screwed open the empty bottle and dumped air into his flat palm. Our eyes locked across the kitchen. His were wide with a question; mine narrowed into a dare. My hand fluttered up to the traces of his fingers on my neck. It had become a reflex. His head bowed in defeat.

My James would have crossed the kitchen in one stride and demanded to know what I'd done. This empty vessel—Gray James, I've been calling him in my head—has at least been malleable. I think he saw this coming since he left these bruises on my throat. "This is going to be your mess, Alice," he murmured.

"Addy," I corrected.

He ignored me. "You're going to be the one who has to clean up after me, Alice."

Now he's been off of them for a couple of weeks, and the only major change is that every night he has come home later. At least the construction job has him doing something other than reading the same damn books on an endless loop.

The bruises on my neck, my only signs of life, turned black and then brownish purple and then faded into weak pink streaks before evaporating. Now the only thing that keeps me from looking like a corpse is my restless leg, bouncing against the hardwood. I am waiting to see my husband reclaim his body again.

The night he comes home with blood on his collar, I am all fire. I am all coiled muscles begging to spring; my bones all turn into toes and teeth, curling and grinding; my blood evaporates into steam. The silence of anticipation feels like fever, like pink skin and pressure and heat. My body is spoiling at the kitchen table with a margarita I made out of some sludge in a plastic jug that looked like toxic waste.

He turns his key slowly, creaks the door, unlaces his shoes, places them gently by the front door. I realize that he must expect me to be asleep. It's not even nine. His phone must be dead; he must think it's later. A thin green flannel shirt that he hasn't worn since he was twenty-three is unbuttoned almost down to his nipples, a bright splash of red by his collarbones.

My heart cannot pound any faster, so it freezes. There's not enough blood to have come out of someone's jugular, and the angle isn't right for it to be his own. Still, it's blood. It's some sort of trouble that Gray James never would have found himself in. I stand up and then sit down again. He still doesn't see me. He drops his backpack on the floor, and his hands begin to twitter against his pockets. I want to throw my arms around his neck. I could run my tongue along his chest beneath the bloodstain. I could weep. My James has returned from the long, weary war against antipsychotics.

His eyes catch mine, and my heart freezes again. He does not wear the relief of a soldier who is home at long last. He wears shame, like a dog whose paws are wet with its own piss. I stand up again. Step toward him. "Hi, honey."

He falls toward me. His jeans are caked up to his knees in red clay. The gray light above the table flickers. Even the room knows something's wrong. He drops to his knees beside my chair and runs a cold, dusty thumb over my cheek. His eyes are big like dreamers' but they are empty too.

I try again. "What's wrong?"

"It's just been so long," he says, like we're mid-conversation.

"A long day? Do you want me to make you a drink?" I sweep a thin layer of dirt out of his hair with a tenderness that is so naturally written into the way my body moves toward his that it's in my fingers before it's in my mind.

He leans into the grain of my caress like a cat for a moment before he jumps up, kicking out the chair across from me and collapsing into it. "Today? Oh, no. A drink would be nice."

I'm already up and swirling whiskey and bitters into a glass. "Tell me what's on your mind," I say in my sweetest wifey voice, tapping the bottom of the sugar jar to get the last bits.

I'm losing my grip on him already. He's staring at my open computer on the couch across the room, the cursor on an empty word document blinking at us in bored white judgement. His hands are limp at his sides. I sigh, close my eyes, try to expel all the nasty thoughts in my head. I'm not going to lose him again; I just got him back. I glance at the bloodstain again and it seems to whisper to me: *I am someone else. He belongs to me.*

I haven't calculated for this possibility. My James returning, but not for me. I glare at the blood. Grit my teeth. I have something that she, whoever she is, lacks. He's bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh. Blood of my blood.



I set the glass in front of him and he turns back to the table, holding the glass up to the light and watching the grains of sugar swirl. “I’ve been thinking about this recurring dream I had when I was a kid,” I say, settling back into my chair and wrapping the blanket draped over it around my shoulders. Shiver for good measure. Whining about my father always gets his attention. I bet he doesn’t even know who her father is. “It was always right before report cards.” I look out the long windows that line the front of our living room, framed by cold metal which almost hurts to touch. I count the cars that pass, count the men who come outside to smoke. I want to look like this is hard to say. I’m telling the truth, but it’ll matter to James more than it does to me. “My class would all get in line in front of my teacher, who would sit in front of this big glass wall. I would be the last one. Every kid in front of me would get up there and the teacher would tell them they got an A, and they would skip happily offstage, out of my mind. Then I would go up, and it would just be me and the teacher left, and she would get this very sad look on her face before she’d tell me I got a B. Then fire would ignite behind the glass wall, and the word ‘hell’ would be painted on it in big, bloody letters.”

I have his attention now. In our reflection on the window, the back of his head looks cold and indifferent, like interrogators on TV. I am blurry and far away. But his eyes are finally on me, even as he takes a big gulp of his drink. “I was supposed to jump in,” I say. “But I always woke up before I did.”

“How long did this go on?” He takes another sip without taking his eyes off of mine. The blood on his collar looks darker than it did when he came in. Is it just the light?

I shrug. “I don’t remember when it started. It stopped after Dad.”

“Was he that hard on you, my darling?” He squeezes my knee.

I make my straw do a pirouette around my glass. “He was like everybody’s dad, I guess. I barely remember. Just wanted me to do well. I’m sure he wanted me to go to college and get a good job and all that, just like I did.”

“Something had to be really bad to give you those nightmares.” He takes the last swig of his drink and scoots his chair around so that our legs are almost touching. It takes everything I have to look him in the eyes and not in the collar. He plucks the glass out of my hands and sets it on the table, then grabs me by my waist and pulls me into his lap. I can smell the blood on him stronger than I can smell the whiskey on his breath.

I lean into the crook of his arm, and he pulls up my legs so that he’s carrying me wedding-style in the chair. I mumble into his blood-smelling shirt, telling him how I wanted to be the perfect daughter, how my parents just never really liked each other, how ashamed I felt when my dad died. He protests that it wasn’t my fault, and I know that I have him where I want him. I twist out of his grasp and down the rest of my drink so that I can wash our glasses.

“It’s been dark for hours. I’ve been worried.” I snatch up our cups and turn away from him, toward the kitchen. I switch on the water and wait for it to heat up.

James reaches for a tie to loosen, realizes it’s not there. A little wounded sound like the beginning of “I” comes out of his mouth, but he just swallows and starts picking lint off of the blanket.

I drop his favorite glass into the sink, the one with the stupid logo that he got at some conference while I laid in a hotel room watching the channel where the hotel brags about itself. I can feel my control slipping. The shatter isn’t satisfying like it is in movies.

James stands up and then sits down again, his lips tight and his nostrils flaring. I look back up at him with one eyebrow raised. *What? Did that make you mad? A dare.*

“You’ve been coming home late a lot lately,” I say.

James keeps picking lint off the blanket like I don’t exist. I pick up an orange from the fruit bowl on the counter and hurl it at him. He dodges it, and it corkscrews into the living room and takes out a lampshade. The lightbulb flickers and dies on the floor.

“Alice,” he says, standing up with his hands in his hair. “Stop it. I just went to get a couple beers with some guys after we were done at the site.” He lifts his hands in mock-surrender, topped by a fake smile.

I narrow my eyes at him, leaning toward him over the counter. “They’re cool with you already?” At his last job, James had a circle of women that surrounded him in the break room where he heated up his frozen lasagna every day, but it was months before the men warmed up to him. And that was before he cut someone’s finger off.

“Yep. I’m reinstated into society.” His eyes are the ones begging the dare now.

I swing my hip around the corner and creep over to his chair, bending down to kiss the top of his dusty head. “Is it dangerous?” I whisper as I press my lips against his cheek. “Did they give you a difficult job?”

“Hmm?” My sudden change throws him again, but he threads a hand into my hair, that involuntary tenderness.

I kiss the spot between his jaw and his ear, feel the catch in his breath. “Did you hurt yourself working on that big house?”

“No, sweetheart, I’m okay,” he says, holding my head against his neck as I run my lips over his jaw, his throat, and his collarbones, my cheek hovering next to the metallic smell that screams red in the corner of my eye.

“And while you were getting beers,” I whisper into his pulse throbbing beneath his skin, “you... cut yourself shaving?”

Finally, we can look at the bloody elephant in the room. James is clearly seeing it for the first time: his eyes widen, and then he squints them a little too much in his best *Oh, that?* laughter, which is not that good. Mostly he sounds like he’s choking on a cactus. “I guess I spilled my drink.”

I lean back as if I too am shocked, as if I too am noticing the stain for the first time. “You had a red drink?”

“Everyone was having one.”

“Everyone was having a fruity red drink?”

“It was a protest of gender roles,” James says without skipping a beat. “My father has hired really progressive guys this time around.”

I stand up straight and step back toward the counter. “Let me smell it.”

He rolls his eyes. “Honey, are you listening to yourself?”

I reach for another orange, shrieking, “Don’t act like I’m the crazy one here, honey!” This one James swats and sends spiraling into an ugly ceramic vase that his mom bought us last Christmas. We look at each other and for a moment we’re not fighting, for just a moment we’re having a moment of silence for the ugliest piece of decoration known to man. I almost smile at my husband, almost let go and laugh, almost crawl into his lap again, but then I’m staring at the

stain on his collar and remember the miles between us. “Let me smell it,” I say again. “If I smell strawberries, I’ll admit I’m being crazy and we’ll have a good laugh.” Of course, I’ve smelled it already, and I know we won’t.

James stands up and shoves the chair into the table. He strides across the kitchen because he can’t resist, because going to bed would be such a dull alternative. He chooses me because he always does, because I’m the ticking time bomb that gives him the chance to be the cool guy in sunglasses that presses the red button.

My husband stands so close to me that my nose brushes his collar. It’s like burying my face in a jar of pennies. I grab a fistful of his shirt. “Tell me where you were.” I mean to yell, but it comes out as a squeak.

He wraps his fist around my fist, uncurling my fingers one by one until all that’s left of my grip is a wrinkle on his shirt. “I was out,” he says, “with boys from work.”

I jerk my hand out of his and push past him out of the kitchen. He grabs my wrist as I yank on my jacket. “Where are you going?”

“Maybe I’ll go find out if it was really hell on the other side of the wall,” I say. “That would be better than this.” He lets go of my wrist and lets me slam the front door. I can feel the space between us drying into concrete, like this hard blossom of finger-bruises on my wrist. If I try to bulldoze through it with my heart on my sleeve, I’m just going to get road rash to the chest. So I run into the cold winter wind that whips our noses through the open door. I run into the embrace of the night, knowing full well that its neon arms may burn.

I don’t know where to go, so I walk around the block five times under the purple Nashville night, caressing the cold metal of every streetlamp I pass, but I can’t erase the feeling

of his hair yielding under my fingers, his cheek leaning into my touch. Every car seems to be slowing down next to me. On the local news this morning they were interviewing the family of a college student who was gunned down for her Coach purse on the street that runs parallel to this one. This is one of the neighborhoods haunted by the whispers of gentrification, so there are some faded brick houses with green metal pavilions for carports and empty strollers in their yards, but there are also a few old houses that have been power-washed, endowed with insulated garages, and decorated with tasteful foliage that stands out against the wild ivy creeping up the sides of the unedited homes. Soon there will be buyers with even more money than these antique-collectors. Then the bourgeoisie lovers of all things quaint will be overshadowed by people in North Face jackets zipped all the way up to their chins who want the older houses. There are already a couple of grassy lots across the street bearing nothing but advertisements for Esau Construction Services.

All of this leans into the violet glow of the city, which at this hour knows it is not ruled by the North Facers. The regime of the night is the laughter of the teens and the younger twentysomethings which echoes down the streets, the coup d'état of the kids in university sweatshirts; the beat-up, overly tinted sedans blaring anachronistic tunes; the raggedy yet exclusive invitation-only campfires singing smoke through the woods. Here the North Facers are the vassals, who only dare to slink out of their pillared homes in neon vests designed to make peace with the sedans. In the morning, they will be crowned again, but at night they are outnumbered by the streetlights and the deer and the unspoken threat of guns.

“Good evening,” a man in a corduroy jacket offers the moment our elbows touch in passing sidewalk fashion.

I smile at him, flashing just enough teeth to be charming, not enough to be predatory. My hair is pulled back in a head-cheerleader-ponytail and the collar of my soft pink blouse peaks over the top of my peacoat. I rub my lips together and find that there are some oily remnants of rosy lipstick tracing my mouth. I must look like a naïve college student who still believes that because Nashville holds no real dangers. I still look young enough to be a starry-eyed eighteen-year-old, the way I was when I met James. That always does it. Is there a man out there who doesn't love a damsel in distress?

“Hello,” I say. “I’m sorry to bother you, but I think I may be a little bit lost. Do you know this area well?”

“Born and raised,” he said with a kind turn of his lips. His faded ballcap boasts of a visit to the Grand Ole Opry. “Where you trying to go?”

Against the backdrop of Nashville’s purple throat, maybe my blouse looks cheap. Maybe the lint on my coat and the chap on my lips is more visible than the blushing whole of me. If I want this to be interesting, I’m going to have to choose a persona fast. Where would a damsel be trying to go on a windy, unfriendly night like this one? “I thought I was walking to Broadway,” I say. “My friends were going to meet me there.”

“You’re a bit far from Broadway, dearie,” he says.

“Yes, sir. I think I made a wrong turn...”

His eyes seem to swallow and regurgitate my body in two full, slow swings. “You should call an Uber,” he says. “It’s too far for a little girl to walk.”

“Phone’s dead,” I say. “Could I borrow yours?”

He reaches into his worn tan pocket and reproduces a Razor flip phone from a decade ago and waves it in front of my face. “Can’t get you an Uber, but it can call your friends.”

I curb my impatient smile and try to make it look prim. “Don’t know their numbers.” I do my best to still sound sweet through gritted teeth. I lean toward him and serendipitously, he smells like eucalyptus and chai and only vaguely of cigarettes. I wish James could see how easy it is for my body to curve toward another body. Maybe then my husband would bring me with him wherever he wanders alone; maybe he would put the knife in my hand like he did when we were still new and still made each other feel the heart-stop suddenness of finally being wide awake. “Could you walk with me?” I whisper to the stranger. “I think that would make me feel so much better.”

But the corduroy man pockets his flip phone and coughs coffee spittle on my cheeks. His features darken and though he does not quite frown, his disappointment feels cold and paternal. “If you’re looking for company,” he says, jabbing his thumb at the asphalt stretching out over his shoulder “there are always plenty of slags haunting the convenience store at the top of the hill.”

A chill snaps my spine straight before a red heat floods my face and my fingers. Bald rejection from a man who looks sad and lonely and like he hasn’t seen a girl who looks like me up close in twenty years simmers something to a boil in my stomach. I could spit on him if I lacked just another ounce of class. Instead, I thank him and trudge up the hill in the direction that he pointed, nails piercing my palms like ten knives are growing in my fingers.

The streetlights flicker. The darkness has yellow eyes. Crickets everywhere are screaming for their lives. Come and get me, muggers and rapists. I dare you. Be warned: I’ll ruin all of your plans and fall in love with you.



It's not even two hours before I can sense my husband's presence. I don't know where James is or how long he has been watching me, but I know he's here. You breathe the same air as somebody for long enough, you stop knowing how to breathe without them. The inhale is easier when you're taking from their exhale. Even the boring married people know this, though most of them seem to spend a lot of years running from it. I can see why someone may have a one-night stand and return to their marriage bed before morning—certainly if their spouse has anything in common with Gray James—but I can't bear the thought of a long-term affair. Once you find someone whose very oxygen matches yours, there's no sane reason to leave.

Which means I have to move fast. Before he sees me, before I settle back into the rhythm of his breath. I reach out to the shelves of the convenience store, running my hand along bags of chips and trail mix, plastic-wrapped oatmeal pies, cheap neon earbuds, little packets of Advil. I wouldn't buy any of these things even if I'd thought to bring my wallet with me, but there is something about the idea of leaving with one of them in my pocket, of glancing over my shoulder at the piqued suspicion of the cashier, my heart stomping on my ribs the way it did when my face was inches from the blood on my husband's shirt.

The cashier, a middle-aged blond woman in a red polo and Christmas-themed Mickey ears, is engrossed in a game on her phone which involves her repeatedly tapping it with her forefinger until a chorus of tiny voices cheers, "YOU DID IT!" I snatch one of the silvery squares of pills in my fist and stuff my hand in my pocket. As I turn to leave, there's a warm, familiar pressure on the backs of my knuckles. I know it's James's hands reaching into my coat to find mine before I turn to find my husband's scowl, lingering just above my brow. A hoodie bearing the logo of a football team he doesn't follow is pulled over the stained shirt. His fingers slip under my fingers, wrestling for grip on the pills.

I tell him to leave me alone. I don't tell him that he's my oxygen. He rips the package out of my hand and hangs it back up on the aisle, muttering, "It's good to see you too, sweetheart."

I turn back to the aisle with the knockoff phone accessories and swipe a bright green car adapter. Then we begin this sort of dance where I lean into the next aisle back just a couple seconds before he does. He sways back and forth, trying to guess my next move, failing to fall into my rhythm. Both of us pause every few seconds to glance back at the cashier, who is just tap, tap, tapping.

We keep this up until I am backed up against the translucent door that cages the beer and the heart-stopping energy drinks, and James nearly pounces. I can't help but laugh at him. "Give it to me," he murmurs, grabbing the handle on the other side of me as if he's going to get a Red Bull behind my back. "I'll put it away for you."

"I don't want to put it away," I whisper, a giggle hopping in-between my words. Over his shoulder I can see the cashier finally raising her eyebrows at us. I twist my face into the best imitation of a frightened Bambi I have.

James reaches into my pocket again. "Don't make a scene, Alice." His voice is so low that only I would be able to distinguish it from a growl.

"What if I want to make a scene?" I whine. "What if I want them to see? What if I want to get caught?" I try to pluck his fingers off of the adapter, but his hand swallows mine.

"Why would you want to get caught?" He rips the adapter out of my hand, leaving my palm tingling. "You'd be arrested."

"Maybe I want to go through what my poor husband has been through."

I watched something flit across his eyes before he sighed, let go of the handle, and leaned back. “Come on,” he said. “We’re going to buy something so we don’t look crazy. And then I’m going to take you home.”

He buys me a case of beer to take the edge off. He thinks he is playing into my wild side. The cashier glares at him and keeps eyebrowing me like she’s waiting for me to cry out for help, which I consider but decide will end in more paperwork than adventure. My hand slips into James’s hand though I do not tell it to move.

The door to the convenience store dings, and my gorgeous, obnoxious, suffocating husband strolls with me through the pumps. He cracks open one of the bottles, the cardboard container hanging from his thumb, and offers me a swig. I think about smashing it over his head and running, but I take a drink instead.

Growing up in Basically Nowhere, Oregon meant that when I had boyfriends, we were forced to spend half of our “dates” walking aimlessly down the aisles of bookstores and groceries. When their conversation wasn’t interesting enough, I would slip away from them and skitter down other aisles until they lost track of me. If they didn’t chase me, I knew it was just a matter of time before we drifted apart. If they were willing to brave the tampon aisle or pull out a few life-sized Barbie dolls to find me, I knew we had a chance. I wonder what James would do if I went somewhere where he wouldn’t know to look.

My body, once more without consulting me, plops down on the sidewalk and settles in for a good sulk. “If we start to hate each other, do you think we’d get a divorce or a second bedroom?” My knee begins to bounce, my sneaker convulsing on the sidewalk. I don’t bother to get it under control. Let him see that he’s hurting me.

“We’re not going to hate each other.” He scrambles down to my level and snatches my hands. “We’re different, Addy. I know we are.” Lots of bookstore boys gave me these same lines, and they wouldn’t even wander a couple aisles over to save us. His eyes shift back and forth between mine like he is reading them. There is a nasty, patient smile smudged across his face when he stands again, offering me his hand. I know there is nothing different about us.

But I stand up with my husband and follow him home, feeling my lips and my fingertips and my heart freeze over and crystallize. My lungs are heavy with snow, and I think maybe my chest will explode, or maybe it will congeal and I will turn into a glacier, stone cold and silent as I drift out to sea.

*Outline of the Remainder of the Novel***part two: with you**

*“Ибо тайна бытия человеческого не в том, чтобы только жить, а в том, для чего жить. Без твердого представления себе, для чего ему жить, человек не согласится жить и скорей истребит себя, чем останется на земле, хотя бы кругом его всё были хлебы.”*

- Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*

Brooding over the fact that her husband had left her out of his mysterious bloody adventure, Alice resolves to follow James the next time he leaves. He unwittingly leads her to a makeshift graveyard in the middle of the woods, where he compulsively digs up piles of bones. This triggers another flashback.

Alice finally reveals the way that they met: one night she sat down in the front seat of her car only to be met with a knife at her neck and a voice that growled, “Drive.” He directed her to a dingy little house hiding in the back of a gentrified neighborhood. At first he was angry, and Alice learned that he had kidnapped other girls before her, but he insisted that he “let them go.” Desperate to keep the spirit of uncertainty alive after a night trapped in James’s house, Alice is intoxicated by his danger but she believes that she will be able to have more time with her kidnapper if no one knows they need to look for her. Alice proposes a compromise: he can drive her back to her dorm hall, and keep her car as collateral. They can pose as a regular girlfriend and boyfriend so that no one finds them out. He assures her that he is only letting her go because he knows she will come back.

Back in the present, Alice emerges from her hiding spot with a gun in her hand. She persuades him to tell her the truth about the bodies: these are the girls that James kidnapped

before her. She is his sole survivor. She rages at the knowledge that he kept this secret from her, but it becomes worse when she looks in the last grave and recognizes Callie's bandana. This triggers another flashback of her college years, this time of the night that Callie disappeared. In the present, she demands to know why James killed her friend and let her and Nic and Sonja believe that they would never find out where Callie went. He insists that Callie was going to come between them, but won't give her a better explanation.

It almost seems as if Alice has surrendered her power to James when he convinces her to give him the gun. Alice, however, is in no mood for surrender. She goes back to his graveyard the next day and destroys the bones of his victims. She fills the prescription for his antipsychotics and crushes them into his food. When the gray James once again does nothing to satisfy her, she grows bored again, and she reveals to James that she has been slipping him the antipsychotics, expecting him to kill her in a rage. When he does not respond as she predicted, she begs him to kill her, but he refuses. On a desperate hunch, Alice accuses James of continuing to kill. He confesses, and she demands that he takes her with him from now on. She implores him to give up his remorse for his murders, which he has clearly been harboring whenever he is not filled with rage.

In another flashback to being nineteen, Alice remembers contemplating something drastic when she finds a gun hidden in James's house. It is unloaded, so the dazed heroine buys ammunition for it. As the only person that knows that the gun is now loaded, she feels like she has restored her sense of power over James. It has given her the confidence to push him into more dangerous crimes. He is her psychopathic pet, but she's the one with the real weapon.

The series of flashbacks continues: Alice carries the gun almost everywhere she goes in a hollowed out copy of *Crime and Punishment*, replacing it in James's hiding spot when he isn't

looking. When James proposes to her, she feels confident that she has manipulated him to do so. She has him wrapped around her finger; she has the gun; she is really the one proposing here. In the early years of their marriage, James seems convinced that she is prepared to have a semi-normal domestic life with him. Her occasional desire to mug someone or impersonate a drug dealer is just a reckless strain that will die out as they grow old together. When she grows tired of her games, he will have the dutiful wife that he worked so hard to find.

In the present, Alice becomes pregnant. James won't allow her to abort the baby, and bans her from his murder sprees again. He swears off of killing altogether, but the police and the public are growing interested in the string of murders already committed. Although they don't seem to have any evidence that implicates the Esaus as the murderers, James insists that they go on the run. Alice welcomes the change. When James catches Alice trying to abort the baby by her own crude methods, he keeps her locked in a hotel bathroom with no objects that could be used as weapons. James is eventually arrested, and Alice falls at the feet of the law enforcement officers, pleading Stockholm syndrome, thanking them for rescuing her after years of captivity.

**part three: without you**

*“Deep calls to deep*

*in the roar of Your waterfalls;*

*all Your waves and breakers*

*have swept over me.”*

- Psalm 42:7

Alice’s lawyer seeks for her to be tried soon, quietly, and separately from James. Deemed not responsible for their crimes, Alice is institutionalized, but soon released. James awaits his own trial from a jail cell. Desperate for some semblance of control, Alice shacks up with her old friends Nic and Sonja. She hopes that she can find a new adventure by undermining the status quo of their church. Despite her attempts to subtly torment the congregation, however, Alice is severely disappointed that these people are not as easy to control as the others she has manipulated in the past. When she treats them poorly, they forgive her.

In more episodes from the past, Alice remembers growing bored and violently lonely as James’s wife. The gun lives in its drawer. It has been a long time since they have been exciting. When James’s new boss invites James and Alice to his house for dinner, Alice aims to push their lives back into the unknown. She pretends to innocently flirt with the boss, in front of James and the boss’s wife, until the tension in the room is so suffocating that the boss excuses himself. Alice takes the opportunity to catch him alone, allow him to make a move on her, and get caught. When James flies into a rage, Alice slips back into the skin of the dutiful wife: she calms him down, apologizes on his behalf, and manages to get both of them out of the house. After that, however, the tension follows James to work, and becomes so severe that he has the psychotic



break and cuts off his coworker's finger. The only way he avoids jail time is through court-mandated psychological evaluation, where he is prescribed the antipsychotics that started it all.

Present-day Alice is agitated by the grace given to her by Nic's flock. When she is called upon to testify in James's trial, she is overcome by this frustration in a way she does not understand. She directs her anger at a painting of a crucified Christ that she remembers from Nic's church, horrified at the idea of a victim choosing to suffer for his killers. In a fit of this frustration, she suddenly cannot contain her story, despite the consequences. She tells the tale of her relationship with James as she truly sees it: she is not a victim. She is the puppeteer.

The stunned courtroom is adjourned for a few hours. An overeager reporter, whose green eyes remind Alice of the younger James, pulls her aside against her will. When she refuses to answer his questions, he grows impatient and begins to threaten her. She smiles and asks, "What is your worst fear?" It is the pivotal question that James asked her so long ago. She thinks that perhaps she has begun to understand grace.

### Age Them with Grace: Crafting *Stockholm*

One thing has been consistent throughout the process of writing *Stockholm*: I want to disturb you. My goal is to intentionally subvert your expectations and replace any image you may have of a traditional marriage with something nastier. In short, I want to trick you. That is why my narrator-protagonist Alice breaks the fourth wall, as I have just done, and speaks to you directly. There are a smattering of other instances where I set out to make you uncomfortable as well, both in plot and in form. Perhaps it seems as if I am sadistic or worse, a sanctimonious young writer who never had an outlet through which to vent her dark side, until now. If this is the case, I am as guilty of philistinism as the self-righteous sects of Christianity who would condemn the content of my novel outright. If it is not, which I must believe it is not, I have acted in the spirit of Flannery O'Connor and presented "violence [that] is never an end in itself. It is the extreme situation that best reveals what we are essentially" (O'Connor 113). Like O'Connor, I believe that literary violence, if crafted correctly, exposes the truth.

### **Switchblades and Switchback Time**

The beginning, middle, and ending of a story do not always occur in chronological order. Maintaining aesthetics, prolonging mystery, or creating empathy may require a nonlinear representation of the events of a novel's plot. It is thus that a writer may find herself employing switchback time. In Joan Silber's book *The Art of Time in Fiction: As Long As It Takes*, she defines switchback time as "a zigzag movement back and forth among time frames, the method of a fiction that alternates different 'eras'" (Silber 45). She likens this structural method to "the deliberate swing of a mountain road that carries us this way and that when a straight line can't do it" (45). A chronological presentation of events may be the most direct way to convey the story,

just as it would take less time to drive to the peak following one diagonal line, but gravity might rip the mountaineer off of the cliffs. Likewise, the lackluster nature of a straightforward story that is a switchback tale at heart may cause the reader to fall away from it.

It is more essential that the character is transformed from the opening chapter to the final scene than it is to see the progression of the events that transform them in the arbitrary (when it comes to fiction) order of history. Dara Marks's screenplay guidebook, *Inside Story: The Power of the Transformational Arc*, describes the traditional three-act plot structure within the terms of the "transformational arc of the character" (Marks 29). The transformational arc insists on character as the vehicle of story: "the line of action tracks the protagonist's engagement in external conflict, [while] the transformational arc tracks the protagonist's internal struggle to rise to meet that external challenge by overcoming internal barriers" (29). Namely, the protagonist "succeeds or fails" in a process of changing internally but also "within the context of the conflict," and that conflict must elucidate "the writer's point of view" through some theme (29). This concept applies to novels just as well. If the transformation of character is to be satisfying to the reader, however, it must "provide... largeness, to give the material not only its cultural frame but also its legitimate depth" (Silber 53). In this sense it is no matter whether switchback time "makes a story more complicated" because "an added line of event can really clarify and expand what a story is about" (53). Sometimes the past must stand alongside the present if the audience is to understand why the present matters.

It was in my hazy, early conceptions of this novel that I was forced to realize I was dealing in two timelines. In his instructional little book *Writing Tools: 55 Essential Tools for Every Writer*, Roy Peter Clark encourages writers to "plant the seeds for [the] ending early in the novel" (Clark 189). Two of the earliest clear images of my protagonist and her husband were the

moment when James kidnaps Alice, and a detective interrogating her for her involvement in James's murders. The chronological beginning and end. As I wrote, the detective scene was eventually replaced by a court scene, but I wrote the kidnapping scene over and over again. In some drafts, it was long enough to strangle the reader, whereas in others it was short enough that they might miss it happening at all. After much time letting it sit and more importantly, after receiving some gracious advice, I realized that although the moment of the kidnapping was the chronological beginning and directly correlated to the aftermath of their mutual crimes at the end, James rising up in Alice's backseat and holding a knife to her throat is not the way that my story begins.

There was a detail in the middle of the linear version of events that stood out almost as strongly as the kidnapping scene, which does not even appear in the first hundred pages of the book anymore. Now it opens on Alice's nervousness that James is being prescribed antipsychotics, because this is the exact opposite of the relief that a wife might be expected to feel. Her anxiety over an event that should be a comfort to her sweeps the reader into her internal conflict immediately. If I did what I hope to have done, it leaves readers asking what must have happened to this woman to make her prefer chaos over closure. Marks writes that "action alone" (such as a kidnapper holding a knife to the protagonist's throat) "carries no intrinsic value" (Marks 31). Further, the "meaning and significance" only emerge "when given a specific context" (31). If that kidnapper is the protagonist's husband, whose quirks and fears and desires we are already beginning to understand, the action carries weight.

In order to achieve this tension between the past and the present, I originally structured my story around two parallel timelines, distinguished by chapters entitled "*then*" and those labeled "*now*." I set up two of Dara Marks's transformational arcs, one for the kidnapping and

the five years following it, and the other for the next five years, beginning with the antipsychotics episode. Once again, it took some very gracious advice for me to realize that this structure did not illuminate the connection between the desires of Alice from *then* and her desires *now*. The older Alice was driving the story, despite the fact that younger Alice had more exciting adventures in the external plot. Nearly all of the “explanatory interruptions of narrative action,” were gleaned from the older Alice (Clark 175). Roy Peter Clark refers to these interruptions as “the broken line,” in which the narrator “stops the story to tell us about the story, but then returns to the story” (175). This technique can become trite if it is overused or handled without care, but breaking the narrative line can also be “a versatile story form” which “reveal[s] the higher meaning of the story” (178). In my case, Alice’s internal monologue was essential for building her character. It was easy for me to immerse myself too heavily in that monologue and lose action almost completely, but when I was able to avoid that vice, I believe these moments are the ones where she is the most clearly human and even empathetic for the reader.

Once again, I reorganized the structure of the story. In the current version, the first section of the novel is heavily immersed in the older Alice’s plight against her sedated husband who is becoming increasingly boring to her. There is only one instance of switchback time in the first hundred pages, but these will increase as the novel progresses. The initial chapters hint at the kidnapping, especially in making frequent references to James’s knife. I was careful not to “violate the principle of Chekhov’s Gun,” against which Clark cautions writers (Clark 145). Chekhov’s Gun refers to the Anton Chekhov quote: “One must not put a loaded rifle on the stage if no one is thinking of firing it” (145). Every time I referred to the knife, I wanted to nudge the reader toward the scene where it first appeared on Alice’s neck and began her life with her

husband, but I do not intend to push them there until almost halfway through the novel. Through switchback time, what was once the opening scene has become a revelation.

### **Telling the Truth**

The more I wrote this novel, and frankly the more deeply I got to know Alice, the more I became concerned about the darkness of its content. I feared that I was committing some great moral offense just by taking these scenes out of my brain and transmitting them into a readable medium, let alone actually imploring anyone to read them. In his essay “Sex, Death and Christian Fiction,” Simon Morden describes his relationship with one of his protagonists: “he was his own man, and I knew him intimately... In the same way that you know your friends... in the same way that God knows you” (Morden). I felt everything that Alice felt and since she displays clear warning signs of sociopathic tendencies, I considered backspacing the novel and writing something happier, for the sake of my own spiritual health and that of any unfortunate individual who may read my book.

Thankfully, Alice and James were not that easy for me to abandon. There was some cord that was deeply intertwined in both of them that was rooted in my own soul as well. My bond with these characters can be at least partially accounted for by trauma theory. Charles M. Anderson and Marian M. MacCurdy advocate for the health and social benefits of trauma writing in the introduction to their anthology, *Writing and Healing: Toward an Informed Practice*. They describe the transformation of the writer “to a more fluid, more narratively able, more socially integrated self” (Anderson and MacCurdy 7). This metamorphosis occurs when “the very process of writing and rewriting [personal traumatic experiences] invites [writers] to tell their stories, to listen to what their stories tell them, to hear and to be heard by others engaged in

similar work,” and most importantly to “support... the healing those stories make possible” (7). Although Anderson and MacCurdy are describing the process of the trauma-infused personal essay, I believe that as I use my personal trauma to inform my characters’ experiences, the same catharsis can happen in writing fiction. More importantly, I believe that through fiction, the same healing may be extended to others.

I am not saying that I have ever considered violence the way that my characters do, nor do I hope that any future readers have done so. Alice and James’s traumatic backgrounds, which I have navigated through that intimate relationship which Morden described, inform their violent present selves in an irrevocable way. O’Connor writes that “violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace” (O’Connor 112). The violence in my novel is the extremity to which my characters must be pushed before they can heal. It is that from which they must heal, however, that I believe will inform an essential connection with readers, creating empathy and the possibility of healing. For instance, Anderson and MacCurdy describe a situation in which some “parents do not attempt to view their children’s worlds empathetically” and as such the “children must defer to their parents’ view of reality, suppressing their lived experiences in the process” (Anderson and MacCurdy 5). This is true of both Alice and James’s childhoods. The process of healing cannot occur by spontaneous generation; rather, “[i]t is when we are overloaded with past and present trauma that we are motivated to take on the difficult work of healing” (5). In the spirit of O’Connor, it must be extremity that positions people for healing and grace. Writing violence allows me to pry open the lid on that healing. I believe that through the extremity of Alice and James’s misadventures, in light of their traumas that are revealed later in the novel, the

opportunity for empathy is opened up. I hope to one day give at least one reader hope for their own moment of grace.

There is a reason why Stephen King says that “books are a uniquely portable magic” (King 104). There is a reason why so many people keep books in their purses or coat-pockets or backseats. Books can be transferable safe havens. King calls it an act of telepathy, a “meeting of the minds” between writer and reader that transcends time and distance (King 106). Books are a unique site of this empathy. This is a medium through which I believe I have been called to display the grace of Christ the best I can. And true grace implies an ugly history. Morden defends “Flannery O’Connor’s aesthetic,” which entails the following:

[W]e [Christian writers] are called on not to rule anything out, not take on God’s duties, not to apologise for God or avoid the ways of man. We are, in fact, to look sin full in the face and not flinch... [O’Connor] acknowledges the danger to the reader, but she does at least trust the reader. (Morden)

Many Christian writers feel that it is their duty to water down their fiction to what Morden refers to as a “fantasy reality” where there is no sex, violence, swearing, or drinking (Morden). For a long time I felt guilty for not engaging in this fantasy reality. I thought I was doing a disservice to God somehow by writing characters who were as vile as I am, and their faults even more visible and far less socially acceptable than my own.

It was Flannery O’Connor who gave me my breath of relief. In a letter where she admonishes her friend who aspires to be a Catholic writer, she writes:

You say, ‘It follows that the sound Catholic fiction writer must write about the faith as though anyone who questioned it would obviously be utterly foolish and irrelevant... perhaps even a little insane.’ What the Catholic fiction writer must realize is that those



who question it are not insane at all, they are not utterly foolish and irrelevant, they are for the most part acting according to their lights. (O'Connor 290)

My protagonist does not believe in God. Her husband is so traumatized from his religious upbringing that he feels he cannot approach God, and runs as far away from Him as he can. The church as an institution fails them both on multiple occasions. But they are much more real than any static Christianized character who is always faithfully repulsed by sin. Morden insists that in crafting character it is essential that they are realistic: "We imitate God the Creator, and I don't believe God treats us like chess pieces... Just as I do what I don't want to do, and don't do what I ought, so do they" (Morden). There is no hope for healing if the only ones who receive it don't actually need it. Jesus says, "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mark 2:17 ESV). I will not dare to do any differently.

### **Time and Grace**

Perhaps you are thinking that my personal faith has nothing to do with the craft. It was necessary, however, at every stage of structuring the time, character, and language of the novel. Clark notes that much of "the work of writers is to grasp a sense of our mission and purpose" and to write successfully requires "some invisible next step," a mission statement which "covers the content and the form of the story" (Clark 195-6). He insists that "[m]ission statements can bring into focus... an emerging body of work" (198). Similarly, Marks emphasizes the necessity of a theme in every story, which she also refers to as a "mission statement" that "pulls the story into clearer focus" (Marks 81). She continues that this theme must "become tangible," and "for that to happen, it has to take on qualities that can be expressed physically in both plot and character" (82). In other words, the mission of the writer must be felt concretely in the story. My mission is

to convey grace—grace for the truly rotten, violent, the people capable of carrying out the unthinkable acts that frighten us when they materialize in our own minds.

This grace is necessary in the way that I structure the novel’s chronology, as explicated above. It is necessary in the balance of how often the inklings of Alice and James’s trauma trickle into the forefront of the plot. It is necessary in every detail I choose to include or strike. Perhaps it will be years before I am able to rewrite this novel enough times to convey the simplicity of grace. Yet let me be clear. I do not intend to fall into the category of what Morden denounces as “message-driven fiction,” which is in short “bad fiction” (Morden). Message-driven fiction violates the genuineness that is vital for my writing: “[b]ecause my characters live independently in my imagination, it becomes foolish, if not futile, to deliberately cram in a message” (Morden). That is why it is essential for my theme not to be the only element in the novel, but to be the thing that brings it into focus. Each element that becomes more accessible and empathetic for a reader is for me a deeper dive into the boundless pool of grace.

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