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## Something I Don't Know: Stories About Being Human

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*SOMETHING I DON'T KNOW:*  
STORIES ABOUT BEING HUMAN

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
English

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by  
Robert Andrew Welborn  
May 2019

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Accepted by:  
Keith Lee Morris, Committee Chair  
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## Abstract

This thesis consists of two components: one critical and one creative. The critical component traces the differing approaches in which contemporary fiction successfully reflects the human experience, particularly concerning the breakdown of relationships. By focusing on the realism of Amy Hempel and speculative fiction of Kristen Roupenian and Karen Russell, I examine the multiple ways in which short fiction can achieve that goal. The creative—and primary—component consists of a collection of short stories, entitled *Something I Don't Know*. These stories are my effort to explore the same truths as the aforementioned authors, while employing the various methods discussed.

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## Introduction

In an interview with *Missouri Review*, Amy Hempel discusses her first collection of short stories, *Reasons to Live*—a collection born from life experiences in her twenties, most of which she documented in journals that she kept. Moving from “accident to accident” as she so honestly admits, formed the foundation of her debut collection; about the stories, she declares they “came from all of that turmoil. It’s no secret that pain teaches. It makes you think, ‘How can I get myself through this? And this. And this.’” (Sapp). But perhaps more accurately, it’s how her short stories—any short stories, for that matter—reflect what it means to feel, to be human, to be real. Some might argue that any piece of fiction should accomplish this feat. Isn’t that why we even bother reading short stories? Of course, we read for pleasure and entertainment, an escape from the humdrum repetitiveness of everyday life. But short stories, the most poignant short stories, put everyday life under a magnifying lens. They show us who we are, especially when our relationships with those closest to us begin to break down. Hempel, for one, goes about this task with brutal honesty, taking a minimal and realistic approach. Every line, every phrase, and even every single word reflect real life and those hardships. And yet, Hempel’s approach is just one of several ways in which this can be achieved in contemporary fiction.

Moving beyond—perhaps even well beyond, in a sense—the realism of Hempel, speculative fiction seeks the same outcome, albeit in a different manner. A broad category, it encompasses elements from genres such as science fiction, fantasy, and even horror; and while rooted in the unreal, it maintains the same end goal: to show real

emotion and feeling in our most trying moments. Whether it's dark spells, reanimated bodies, or malicious birthday wishes come true, each move attempts to ruminate on these instances. Recent trends have seen an emergence of women writers in the realm of speculative fiction. Much like Hempel before them, they try to illuminate an honest and real experience. In this essay, I examine both approaches, tracing the differences between Hempel's minimalist realism and the speculative worlds of Kristen Roupenian and Karen Russell in an effort to achieve the same result: to speculate on what it means to be unequivocally human in our darkest times.

## Friendship & Sadness In Amy Hempel

I left out some of her anger at me. I was convicting myself. I wanted to be the one who had failed, who had done things wrong, not my dying friend. I didn't want her to appear to be the bitch that she sometimes was, because I wanted to really convict the narrator, myself; it made a better story.

-Amy Hempel, *Missouri Review*

When the narrator (who Hempel says is herself) in “In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson is Buried” first attempts to explore how she handled the relationship with her terminally ill best friend, she recalls a story about a man who was literally scared to death: he injured his arm in a car accident and the sight of his own bone took the ultimate toll. She equates that moment with her own fear, having not “dared to look any closer. But now [she's] doing it—and hoping that [she] will live through it” (Hempel 41). It's a difficult situation, but one that the narrator, and perhaps Hempel herself, must feel she should confront. This is, after all, her dying best friend, so shouldn't she visit more often? The answer is more complex than we may think. Who's to say there is even a right—or wrong, for that matter—answer? Hempel uses these numerous, brief details to explore that complexity and the many ways any one of us might react to such difficult circumstances.

Let's consider a moment towards the end. Again, the narrator acknowledges her fear: she enrolls in a “fear of flying” class, declaring that her biggest fear is that she'll finish the course and still be afraid. But she must do it. She must come to terms with the friendship. She must convict herself. As she's leaving the hospital, she says she feels

“weak and small and afraid” (Hempel 48). But Hempel adds in one final declaration: “Also exhilarated” (48). This small detail adds another layer to the moment. It’s an unexpected admission, yet totally honest. Yes, she is sad and heartbroken, but she is also relieved. She is the one who will live, the one who will “stop in Malibu for sangria...shimmer with lust, buzz with heat, vibrate with life, and stay up all night” (Hempel 49).

However, it is Hempel’s use of a story involving a chimp using sign language that proves most revealing. The extended metaphor begins in the first section: a chimp learns sign language and subsequently lies about making a mess on a desk. The narrator’s friend immediately describes the tale as a parable; the narrator says there is more heartbreak to the story, but the section ends with her friend scratching at her mask, invoking the image of the chimp. Immediately, the two are linked. Throughout the story, Hempel returns to this anecdote, as well as other seemingly random and possibly made-up details, to highlight the relationship between the two women. The narrator is full of mixed emotions, going from sadness to guilt, from fearful to regretful. She experiences the full range on her journey, examining her own failures when her friend needed her most. And yet at the end, she is still human, someone who is “fluent now in the language of grief” (Hempel 51).

## Anger & Desire in Kristen Roupenian

Roupenian represents a transition between Hempel and other authors in this discussion, going back and forth between traditional storytelling and speculative fiction. Her debut collection is aptly titled *You Know You Want This*. But you might not want it for obvious reasons. Roupenian delivers stories that pinpoint our deepest, darkest secrets, desires, fears, and failures. She knows you want it because you want to know who you really are. Take “Sardines” for example, in which a recently separated Marla hosts a birthday party for her daughter, Tilly, at her adulterous ex-husband’s house—without a doubt, a complicated situation. Then there’s “The Incident”: another mother has slapped Tilly and “Marla, who has never struck her daughter, nor even considered such a thing, had clapped a hand across her mouth to suppress a snicker” (“Sardines” 28). Like Hempel’s narrator, this is an unexpected reaction, but all too real. Marla’s recent struggles reveal themselves in this simple gesture. She has caught her husband sleeping with a younger woman and another mother has assaulted her daughter—perhaps laughter is the only reaction in such a situation. As Marla notes: “something *unnatural* is going on” (“Sardines” 31). But it’s actually far from that. In fact, it’s only *natural*.

Both Marla and Tilly have been wronged, and both want revenge. While Marla’s plan involves a prank against her ex-husband and his new lover, Tilly’s plan takes a more sinister turn. After blowing out her birthday candles, she giddily describes the moment to Marla:

“I think you’ll like what I wished for, Mama.” Tilly sucks the frosting off her fingers, wriggles happily and adds, “I wished for something *mean*.” (“Sardines” 36)

And why shouldn't she have? Any anger she and Marla must feel can only be deemed a natural response, as is the desire for retaliation. But the full extent of Tilly's wish isn't revealed until the closing moments: all the guests at her birthday party are huddled together playing a game when the unthinkable begins to happen. Tilly and Marla watch as the women and children begin to morph into one, giant, monstrous blob. The hideous creation "writhes and shrieks and flails in agony instead of leaving the people it's supposed to love and care for all alone" ("Sardines" 43). Tilly beholds the scene with a glow in her eyes, enthralled with what she's done. Through this supernatural scene, Roupenian captures the brutal anger of a scorned friend. Rather than have her characters scream in anger, for example, Roupenian takes the opportunity to imagine what the physical manifestation of that desire for revenge might look like. It's monstrous and glorious all at once.

But what are the ramifications of fulfilling your desires? Marla and Tilly exact their revenge, but the story promptly ends. Roupenian delves into this question in another entry, "Scarred." Here, the narrator, a single woman, finds in her library a spell book and uses it to conjure whatever her heart desires. In her case: an attractive, naked man who may or may not be Scottish. Initially shocked, she quickly grows to care for the man, although he remains trapped in her basement—a detail that takes on more meaning as the story goes on. However, the allure of the spell book proves more powerful than the man. The narrator tries more and more spells, in the process achieving wealth, strength, and intelligence. But each comes with a heavy price: each spell requires she take something from the man. Sometimes it's only his tears; other times it's his blood. She must

physically harm him to get what she wants. By the end, their relationship is a shell of what it was; she has grown powerful and independent while the man has withered away. Nonetheless, the narrator still admits caring for the man, but she is unable to reconcile the relationship with all of her desires. Is the breakdown of the (admittedly odd) relationship and physical harm worth the toll it takes on both? The ultimate price is revealed at the end; just as the narrator declares she will care and nurture the man once all the spells are complete, she realizes she must kill him in order to finish. Again, Roupenian elects to have her character laugh: “I could have cried, but instead, I laughed. I laughed and laughed and laughed” (179). She realizes the absurdity of the situation and what she has ultimately done. There is nothing she can do but laugh because she has put herself in this position. Going after everything she wants has cost her everything. As Roupenian notes at this most telling moment, the narrator learns “you can’t have everything your heart desires, because what would be the moral in that?” (179).

## Love & Loss in Karen Russell

A secret the world had kept for two thousand years and been unable to keep for two seconds longer. The bog had confessed her.

-Karen Russell, "Bog Girl: A Romance"

Fifteen-year-old Cillian Eddowis is having a rough time: his parents have divorced, he's having to do manual labor to help earn money, and he's a loner at school. But then he meets the Bog Girl. When he first sees her preserved body, black noose still intact around her neck, the reaction is instantaneous: he falls in love. As he takes her to prom later, he tries to explain to a fellow student that "you will want to give the person every molecule of your life" (Russell 86). In fact, he becomes hopelessly devoted to the Bog Girl; the young man is no match for the onslaught of first love, the rush of intense feeling that many know so well. In some strange way, the Bog Girl completes Cillian. He is more assured, confident, and even no longer stutters. He becomes popular at school, the teenage girls "starving to be loved like this" (Russell 81). Discovering the Bog Girl—and his newfound love for her—has turned Cillian into a new person. He embraces life like never before. Through their bizarre relationship, Russell has crafted a strange, bewildering illustration of the wonders of finding love and what that can do for a person. Cillian can finally know true happiness. Or can he? Let's remember this is an unreal story written for the real world.

Just as all is going well for Cillian, Russell makes an unexpected move: the Bog Girl finally awakens. In a scene that seamlessly blends humor and horror, the Bog Girl claws for Cillian in his bed. He screams for his mother; the Bog Girl screams—in a Patti

Labelle-like voice, mind you—because he is screaming. Russell describes the agonizing moment:

*Heartbreak* is the universal diagnosis for the pain that accompanies the end of love.

But this was an unusual breakup, in that Cillian’s mind shattered first. The fantasy that had protected him began to fall away. (91)

In an instant, Cillian’s world is overturned as the joy shifts to fear and heartbreak. The reanimated corpse shatters Cillian’s newly formed persona; gone is the confidence and in its place, longing and uncertainty. He has projected all his desires—the perfect, ideal companion—onto the Bog Girl only to find out she is not who he thought she was. In an interview with *The New Yorker*, Russell explains this unexpected (or perhaps, expected in some sense) move:

I’ll bet we’ve all had some version of this experience—a familiar person becomes a stranger, in real time. What’s scariest to me about this story is also maybe what’s most exhilarating—that moment when our theories about another person (or another epoch, another culture) collapse and we are suddenly at sea again. Then we have to redraw our maps of what is possible...(Davidson)

Bog Girl or not, the moment Russell references reveals that sudden shock, the sudden loss—an all-too real moment experienced by so many. Cillian will have to regroup and recover. He will have to suffer, but as Russell says, he can show us “what is possible” (Davidson).

## Conclusion

Hempel, Roupenian, and Russell are just a few women amongst the many writers trying to make sense of the world we live in. With the tools at their disposal and their varied approaches, they show us a harsh truth about ourselves—maybe not who we strive to be, but who we are in reality. We're not perfect, no matter how hard we may try. And according to these women, that's just fine; it is that recognition of that fact that sets these works apart. How easy is it to lose sight of oneself in the battleground that comprises the current political and socio-economical landscape? Too easily, perhaps. But these battles—how we navigate through our toughest, darkest moments—are what ultimately define us. Without them, who would we be? These women—whether they're reliving a friend's final days in the hospital, conjuring mysterious monsters out of thin air, or dancing with two thousand-year-old corpses at a high school dance—know what it means to be human in our current world. But they show us we don't necessarily have to inhabit that world to know that meaning. Rooted in realism or speculation, Hempel, Roupenian, and Russell show us the different ways we can not only see what is possible, but what is undeniably true.

## One Kiss!

When I walked out on stage, I went straight up to Ellen Degeneres and planted the biggest, sloppiest kiss on her lips that her studio audience had ever seen. Everyone watched in shock, a collective gasp eventually escaping their mouths.

I pulled away and a wide-eyed Ellen turned to the crowd. She looked down at her body, and after taking a few seconds to register the transaction that just occurred, she said: “Well, looks like nothing happened.”

“That’s because you didn’t want it to,” I said.

“Right. I always forget that!”

We sat down and I grabbed the coffee she had waiting for me. Or not her, I guess—I mean, it’s Ellen after all—but rather her assistants. God knows she has enough. And they get the coffee right every time. My fourth time on her show and the coffee is right every damn time. “I have to tell you, Ellen,” I said. “I’m always impressed with your coffee.”

“I think you’ve been here enough that we should know what you like by now,” Ellen said, before pointing to someone off stage. “Although I have to give credit to Sammy over there. I swear I don’t even know what I order from Starbucks, but he takes care of it every time.”

I saw the camera pointed at me turn to where Ellen was pointing. A freckle-faced kid in a headset gave a thumbs up. The crowd laughed.

“I mean, mine never gets my order right,” I said, bringing them back to me. “Just this morning, it happened again.” I turned around and glanced towards Christine. Her arms were crossed. “Never fails, Ellen, never fails.”

“At least the coffee is good now. Anyway, let’s get to it. How long has it been since we’ve seen you? A few months?”

I nodded. “Yeah, things have been getting crazier and crazier. Visiting a lot of different cities. Even Paris just last week.”

On the screen behind us, a picture appeared. Me and Christine, playing tug-of-war with a baguette.

“Now it must be nice for Christine to know she can eat all the bread she wants and then just give you a kiss,” Ellen said. “Mwah! Poof! Don’t even need to exercise.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Really works wonders for us.” Of course, I wanted to add that Christine would actually have to kiss me first. But this is *The Ellen Show*. Can’t talk like that. Lots of people watching. Might be bad for business.

And business was great, at least from a money standpoint. KissMiss was definitely paying the bills and then some. Different venues in different cities every other week. Conferences, meet and greets, TV appearances. I was booked for months. The people lined up just to get one moment with me. One kiss and you’ll miss the pounds.

Christine had been the first. At Starbucks no less. We were going over wedding plans. She was stressed about money, so I leaned and kissed her. When I opened my eyes, she had transformed. Don’t get me wrong—I didn’t think Christine was overweight, but

we weren't in college anymore. She'd been trying, but nothing worked. Until that instant. We didn't know what had happened.

The barista had noticed. She dropped the blender of crushed ice and espresso. "What. The. Fuck?" She pulled her phone out and started recording. "Did anybody else see that? Did you? Did you?"

Just like that I was an internet sensation. I was the woman who kissed her fiancée and she suddenly lost forty-two pounds. It took awhile to figure out—honestly, we still didn't really understand—lots of trial and error. But we finally realized it only worked if the person really was serious about the change. Once we knew that, I never looked back. One person after another. I loved it. I was changing lives. Literally changing them. It didn't matter what toll it took on me. To everybody, I was the answer. Or almost everybody.

But now I was sitting with Ellen for the fourth time. "Ok, now," she said. "I'm sure you're tired with all the travel and work."

I knew she was right. "Oh, I'm fine. Just part of the job," I said, clasping my hands together. "Now, tell me you've got more willing participants."

The audience clapped and Ellen smiled. "I knew you'd want some. Let's get everyone out here. One kiss, right?"

"You know it, Ellen!" I stood up as a line of people were brought in.

The crowd started cheering when I took what they had to give me. One after another, they changed. Men. Women. Everyone that wanted to change, I helped them. Right before our eyes. Fifty-three pounds. Thirty-one pounds. Seventy-seven pounds.

One kiss!

One kiss!

One kiss!

After the last transformation, I turned to look for Christine. She had already walked away.

\*

In my dressing room, I collapsed in my chair, staring at myself in the mirror. I could see the sweat glistening on my forehead. I touched my cheek. They didn't feel as full anymore. My eyes too. Not even Ellen's best make-up artist could completely hide the dark circles. She had been right: I was exhausted.

I couldn't really remember when I first noticed either. Maybe about six months ago. Right before Christine moved into one of the guest rooms. Felt like I'd lived a hundred lifetimes since.

I rubbed my temple. How many people was that just now? Fifteen? Twenty? I stood up and looked for some Advil on the counter. I knew there was some, but where was it? When I couldn't find any, I knocked everything onto the floor. Water bottles. Coffee mugs. Flowers in a vase.

"Seriously, Mika?" Christine asked.

I turned to see her at the dressing room door. Her arms were still crossed.

"Where's the fucking Advil?" I asked. "I need it."

"I don't know." Christine threw her arms up. "I'll get you some."

"Like you get me coffee? How hard is to have Advil in the room?"

Christine ran her hands through her hair. “You’re right, Mika. I guess I’m a pretty bad assistant.”

I laughed. I wasn’t sure why. My head throbbed. “Assistant. Agent. Manager.” Whatever she wanted to call it.

“Any other things I’m not good at it? Pretty sure I wear many hats.”

I started to feel nauseous. “It’s simple shit, Christine.” I clutched at my stomach. Not now. I didn’t want this to happen now.

“Mika?”

“It’s happening,” I said. When I first started, I took everything. Nothing ever happened after I kissed someone. But recently, I’d feel sick soon after.

Christine came over and put her hands on my shoulders. She helped me to the bathroom. I knelt in front of the toilet and started vomiting. It had gotten worse and worse. This red mass would produce itself out of my mouth. More and more each time. I didn’t know what it was. Bile. Blood. Some awful liquid that my body couldn’t contain. But this time was different.

“Oh my God,” Christine said. She had been rubbing my back.

Strands of hair hung from my mouth. I coughed and coughed, until I forced it out of me. A tangled wad of black hair. And then we saw the rest—mixed in were fingernails.

I pushed myself away from the toilet, knocking Christine backwards. After a few seconds, we turned to each other. We were wide-eyed, trying to understand. But you can never truly understand what you’re capable of producing.

“Christine?” I was still trying to catch my breath.

“What?” she asked.

“Can you get me some water, please?” I wiped my mouth. “And that fucking Advil.”

\*

After I showered and changed clothes, Christine and I made our way to our car. Neither one of us had said anything about what had happened in the dressing room.

Outside, a crowd had gathered. One woman even held a sign: “Give Me One Kiss!”

I started to walk over to her. “Hold on a minute, Christine.” Had to keep up the customer satisfaction.

But Christine had other ideas. She grabbed my hand. “Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

I pulled away. “Of course I’m sure.” I walked over to the woman. “Just one, right?” The crowd cheered.

In the car, Christine kept her hands glued to the steering wheel. Finally, she broke the silence. “What are you doing, Mika?” she asked.

“What do you mean?” I was leaning back in my seat.

“You know what I mean.” Her grip tightened. “Kissing that last woman after...” Her voice trailed off.

“What did you want me to do? Ignore her?”

“Yes. Or just wave or something. Say you can’t.”

“Why would I do that?” We stopped at a red light. Outside, people walked up and down the Los Angeles streets. They carried designer purses and shopping bags, expensive

sunglasses perched firmly on their faces. “It was just one more,” I said to the crowd. “No harm in that.”

The light changed. A woman with long blonde hair and white heels tried to cross in front of us. Christine honked the horn at her. The woman didn’t even notice. “Bitch. Everyone out here is exactly the same.” She accelerated. “And no harm? I’m sorry, but did you see what I saw in the dressing room back there?”

“I’m fine,” I said. “Really, I am.”

“You’re not, Mika. Even Ellen noticed something.”

“We’ve been traveling. Jet-lagged, that’s all.”

Christine laughed. “Right. That’s what made you throw up. It’s getting worse. There were—there were things in it this time.”

We passed by this new bar. Sip! Exclamation point and everything because you were supposed to sip enthusiastically I guessed. On the outside terrace, I could see a group of people seated at a table. They were laughing, carrying on, not a care. Their glasses glistened in the sunlight, shimmering with excitement. A young woman brought her drink to her lips. She swallowed the amber liquid in one gulp.

“You don’t know where those things came from,” I said.

“I think I can guess,” Christine said.

“So what?” I asked as we started to make our way out of the city. There was a billboard overlooking the road, and it had my picture on it. My lips were puckered. KissMiss. #onekiss. “Do you think people will think I look tired like Ellen did?”

Christine sighed. Didn't she understand what I was doing? My face was right there, watching everyone. Everyone was looking at me. So didn't she appreciate what I was taking from everyone? What I was giving to everyone? To her? We were here because I brought us here. And I had to keep going.

In our driveway, Christine turned the car off. "I've been thinking," she said. "This place—this thing—it's becoming too much."

I unbuckled my seatbelt. "How can you say that?"

"It's true. I want you to stop."

I started to get out of the car. "No way." Outside, I stumbled and had to lean against the car.

Christine rushed to help me. "See," she said. "This is what I'm talking about. You can't even walk inside you're so tired."

We walked into the living room, her arms around me. She told me to rest. Lay on the couch for a bit. She went to the kitchen and returned with a glass of wine. One side of our living room was all glass so we could look out and see the houses and city below us. Christine stood there, silently slipping from her glass.

The sun was setting. In the light, I could see her perfectly. She looked older, tired. But still beautiful. No matter how she changed, she was still beautiful.

"Christine?" I asked.

"Do you remember what we'd do when we first met? Back in South Carolina?" She sipped.

"I mean," I said. "We did lots of stuff."

She placed a hand on the window. “Don’t you remember how we’d just ride around in my Jeep with the top off? It was so warm and we’d just whip down all the back roads.”

“Not exactly a whole lot to do back there except drink and smoke and drive.”

“But we had each other.” She looked down. “You remember that deer we saw that night? I think it was in April. When it had finally gotten warm enough to leave the top down at night. I remember it being so clear.”

I knew the night she was talking about. We hadn’t known each other for more than a month, but by then we already knew we’d end up together. We were driving along this old country highway about eleven o’clock. Britney Spears was blaring from the speakers. God, we were young and dumb.

Our brights were on as we rounded a corner and that’s when we saw it—a deer laying in the middle of the road. Only it wasn’t dead. It’s head was up, looking right at us. I can remember the glint in its eyes. Christine—or maybe it was me, I can’t remember who was driving that night—slammed on the brakes.

“We sat there, staring at each other,” Christine said. She didn’t take her eyes off the L.A. sunset.

We got out of the Jeep to check on the deer. Neither one of us really knew what to do. We assumed it had been hit by another car. Waiting there to die.

“There’s a knife in the glove compartment,” Christine said. Her father had given it to her when she was a small girl. For some reason, he thought she’d become a hunter. But Christine wasn’t like that.

I went and retrieved the knife. The throat, she told me. Make it quick. Just one quick motion. The blade kisses the neck and then it's over.

I remember telling her I'd never done that before. Killed something.

"Not yet," she said.

I knelt by the deer. It took a deep breath. I looked at the knife. I told Christine I didn't think I could do it.

Try. It's dying anyway. Just try. One move.

And suddenly the deer jumped up and ran away. We didn't know if it had actually been hurt or not.

"Do you remember?" she asked again.

"Of course," I said. I watched her silhouette move against the sunlight in the window.

She finished her glass of wine. "Will you kiss me?"

"Yes." I'll take it. But only if you want it. Only if you want to give it all to me.

Our lips touched and in that moment, I knew she did.

## The Wolf

Margot was a wolf. Not just *a* wolf, but *the* wolf. At Howling Hills Haunted House and Woods, she was the only one allowed to dress up as a werewolf. It wasn't a rule from management. It was Margot's rule and everyone knew it. If someone didn't, they found out quickly.

Like that bitch, Angelina. Margot couldn't believe management had hired that no-talent hack. These hills were *her* territory. So Margot knew what she had to do when Angelina walked into the trailer they used as a dressing room for the first time a few weeks ago. Margot had been sitting next to Jason Voorhees, who just so happened to actually be named Jason under his white hockey mask. He was twirling a plastic machete in one hand, a cherry slushee in the other. Margot saw a furry, prosthetic snout sticking out of Angelina's duffel bag.

See, Margot had earned this werewolf gig—at least, that's what Margot called it, just for a little while longer—when she was just a freshman in high school. Now, as a senior looking at acting schools, she was the alpha wolf in charge at Howling Hills. Angelina was just a junior, and Margot had seen her work in their school's production of *Little Shop of Horrors*. Margot had been the evil plant, belting out show stopping tunes as she wreaked havoc. Mrs. Wilson—God bless her, she tried to be a good director, but Margot didn't know how she kept her fucking job—had cast Angelina and this new kid, Spencer, as the main couple trying to save the world. The crowd had cheered when they killed Margot's plant, but she knew they were cheering because of her. Even as she lay

there covered in oversized leaves, Margot knew she was the star. Angelina and Spencer's performance hinged on her. And she had nailed it. Like she always did.

No, Angelina could never be a wolf like Margot. So now, Margot told her so.

"I'm the only wolf around here," Margot said, grabbing a pair of scissors. She pulled out Angelina's mask and cut it to shreds.

Angelina's jaw dropped. "What's the matter with you?" she asked.

"You heard me," Margot said.

Angelina looked to Jason, but he continued to drink his slushee, the straw jutting through one of the holes in his hockey mask.

Margot smiled and dropped the pieces of the ruined mask on the ground.

Angelina stormed out of the trailer, and Margot sat next to Jason and pulled out her phone. She had a text from her older sister. *Can't wait for you to meet Greg! You'll love him!* She took a deep breath and looked in the mirror, tongue pressed firmly against the inside of her cheek. "Sister is bringing the fiancée home in a few weeks. Isn't that just great?" She put in a yellow contact. When Jason didn't say anything, she turned to him.

"You're missing one." He was still slurping his slushee.

Margot rolled her eyes—one dull blue, the other bright yellow—before looking back at the mirror. "I hooked up with Spencer again last night," Margot said. "Probably going to do the same after we finish tonight."

Jason kept slurping.

"You know, one of the ghosts." Margot pointed out the window towards the haunted house. She could see broken windows in the moonlight. "On the second floor."

“Oh, right. Spencer. Spencer the ghost.” Jason nodded. “Any good?” he asked.

“I’m always good,” Margot said.

\*

Later that night, Margot walked across the field to the haunted house. The entrance always excited her. It was a giant wolf’s head, the snout extending out to act as a tunnel that led to the front door. The mouth opened wide, giant teeth hanging down, blood dripping down from a few. But Margot liked the front teeth the best. They were the sharpest and always had blood glistening in the moonlight. You couldn’t enter without getting drops on your face.

Margot wore a black dress that dropped down to her feet. A white fur coat covered her shoulders, the train so long it drug along the ground behind her. She had ripped holes in it and splashed red paint all over—the blood of her many victims. But her nails were the best part, long and sharp and painted bright yellow, claws ready to rip the throat out of her next victim.

A little girl ran up to Margot. She growled and flashed her nails.

The little girl gasped. “Can I take a picture with you?”

“Make it quick,” Margot said. She knelt down and grabbed the girl’s cheeks. Her nails started to dig into the girl’s skin.

“Hey,” the little girl said as her mom’s camera flashed. “That hurts.”

“Good,” Margot said.

She entered the haunted house and walked up the creaking stairs. A flashing red light greeted her as she turned down the hallway. Cobwebs and bones littered the floor.

She could hear screams from the far room and a group of kids ran out of the door. Margot howled in their faces. One of them started to cry. When Margot entered the room, a bloody white sheet sat on a bed. It slowly turned towards her. “Boo,” it said.

“Take that off,” Margot said.

“I can’t,” it said. “I don’t have a shirt on.”

“That’s your problem.”

The sheet lifted up to reveal Spencer. Splatters of red paint covered his face and chest. Margot could see his cross necklace. He always wore that thing and she didn’t fucking know why. Every time the red lights flashed, she caught a glimpse of it—like a heartbeat. She reached out to it, rubbing it between her fingers.

“Your parents aren’t home tonight, right?” she asked.

He nodded.

“Good. We’re going back to your place after.”

“Okay. Why was Angelina upset earlier?”

Margot let go of the cross necklace and turned to leave. “Why the fuck should I care?”

When they got off work, Margot drove them to Spencer’s house. He was younger than her and didn’t have his own car yet. But that didn’t bother Margot. In fact, it turned her on even more. She was the one in control.

In his bedroom, she climbed on top of him and saw his green eyes widen. He still wore his necklace. That didn’t bother her either. For that moment, he worshipped her. When he shuddered and finished, she leaned forward and grabbed the cross again.

“Wow,” he said. “You’re the best.”

“I know,” Margot said. She lay down next to him, the cross still in her hand.

“I feel bad now,” he said.

Margot sat up. “Excuse me?”

“About Angelina.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“Why not? We’re all friends.”

Margot laughed and placed her nails against Spencer’s chest. She scratched him and stood up.

“Ouch,” he said.

“I’m leaving.” When Margot got home, the living room light was still on. Her mother was asleep on the couch. A half-empty bottle of Riesling and wineglass sat on the side table. *Carrie* played on the television. Margot loved that movie—the original, not that God awful remake. It was near the end. Sissy Spacek, drenched in blood, had already returned home. She was arguing with her mother. Margot knew what was next. That house was about to burn to the ground.

Margot covered her mother with a blanket and turned the television off.

“What are you wearing?” Her mother had woken up.

Margot rolled her eyes. “My costume.”

Her mother laughed. “Sorry. I don’t mean to laugh.” She grabbed the wine bottle and took a swig.

“I’m going to bed,” Margot said. She headed for the stairs.

“Your sister called,” her mother said. “Don’t forget she’s coming for a visit when she finishes her residency. Bringing Greg with her too!” She laughed some more.

“I heard,” Margot said.

“It’s not too late for you to think about doing something like that, you know.”

“Like what? Sleeping with your advisor?”

“I meant with your time.”

Margot growled as she slammed her bedroom door shut.

\*

The day before Halloween, Margot worked one of the ticket booths when Howling Hills Haunted House and Woods opened for the evening. This time, she wore a lab coat—straight from her sister’s closet—stained with dirt and red. A terrible experiment gone wrong. That was her story tonight. Her hair was teased as high as it could go, filling the booth and surrounding her mask. Her nails were as sharp as ever, looking for victims.

A victim like Angelina. She was across the way, working the other ticket booth. She was wearing some ridiculous wig and her face was painted white. In her mouth was a set of sharp fangs. Margot assumed she was supposed to be a vampire, but who could tell in that awful costume? Margot wouldn’t be caught dead in that fucking costume.

The sun was still out when the first customer approached Margot. Howling Hills Haunted House and Woods never saw customers this early in the evening, but here was some woman dressed in a red sweatsuit that had obviously been sitting in the back of a closet for a decade. What’s the point of going to a haunted house while it’s still light out? Margot squinted her eyes at the woman.

“Hi,” the woman said. “One ticket, please.”

“It’s still light outside,” Margot said.

“I know. Haunted houses aren’t really my thing.”

There was something familiar about this woman, but Margot couldn’t quite put her finger on it. “Then why are you here?” Margot asked.

“Oh, I’m just testing it out for my one of my boys. My oldest is a teenager—works here, as a matter of fact—but my youngest will be twelve tomorrow. I wanted to see if it’d be too much for him to handle.” Her emerald eyes widened as she talked about her boys.

“Why don’t you just ask your other son then?” Margot couldn’t understand what this woman was doing.

But Margot just knew she had seen this woman before. Where though? And her son worked there? Must not do a good job. Otherwise Margot would know who he was. And surely she’d remember this frumpy, sweatsuit-donning, middle-aged housewife staring with wide eyes. Margot saw a silver necklace around the woman’s neck. But it hung too low for Margot to see what was actually on it, hidden behind a zipper that was pulled up way too far. Margot saw a bead of sweat slide down between the woman’s breasts and thought how God awful it must be to be that woman in her hideously faded-red ‘90s sweatsuit.

“Honey, are you alright?” the woman asked. “You look like you’ve seen something terrifying.”

“If only you knew,” Margot said. How could the woman not? “What’s on your necklace?” Margot raised an eyebrow behind her wolf mask. She had to know every detail, every single painstakingly horrifying detail, every gloriously disgusting detail.

“Oh, this?” The woman pulled it out of her jacket. A simple, diamond-studded cross glistened in the fading light. Spencer—that was it. This had to be Spencer’s mom. Margot wondered if she knew about her and Spencer.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” the woman asked. She held it between her fingers and Margot studied the way she caressed it, memorizing the way her fingers moved. Margot might need that one day.

You never know, Margot might play that role one day. She might be in her mid-30s, but the makeup crew would have to work extra hard to age her, maybe even apply a prosthetic nose. Yes, Margot would still look like a 25-year old, but she could do it, she could play the jaded housewife. Margot was that good.

“My husband got it for me a few years ago,” the woman said. “I don’t think I’ve hardly ever taken it off since.”

“Interesting,” Margot said. Her breathing quickened and the mask only amplified the sound. She was almost growling, snarling. Anybody that walked up would hear her and tremble. Margot pounced. “Even when you guys fuck?” She could tell her that Spencer still wore it. But no, that might be too much. Margot needed this.

The woman recoiled. “Excuse me?”

Yes, this was it, just the reaction Margot needed to see—the recognition of defeat and exasperation in the woman’s face. Because Margot knew the woman was lying. She

never took that necklace off because she'd never let something so sacred, so precious stick to her sweaty body in bed. And Margot knew this woman hadn't been fucked in years. Just look at her. She couldn't fool Margot.

Years from now, when Margot might play this role, she'd really have to fake that. Because everybody would still want her. She'd remember this moment when she'd say her lines and she'd be the best worn-out, ragged housewife ever, one who clutched that cross necklace, even when her husband (played by some shit actor—Margot was sure of that) beat her because, my God, the Lord would still pull her through. Margot might even win an Oscar, and when she'd get up on stage, in front of the whole world, she wouldn't thank God. No, she'd thank this woman, for this moment right now.

The woman opened her mouth to speak, but Jason appeared from behind the ticket booth. He was sipping a pumpkin spice frappuccino through his mask this evening.

“Boo,” he said.

Margot rolled her eyes as the woman jumped back. Plastic machete in one hand and fucking frappuccino in the other. This was all it took to frighten people these days.

“I think I need to go to the other booth,” the woman said. She clutched her necklace in her hand as she walked towards Angelina's booth.

Margot made eye contact with Angelina, whose plastic fangs jutted out over her bottom lip.

“Wow,” Jason said. “I must be pretty scary.” He slurped from his straw.

“I'm pretty sure Jason doesn't ever open his fucking mouth,” Margot said.

\*

The next night—Halloween—Margot looked sharp, fierce even. Her claws were the sharpest they've ever been because this was it, this was her swan song at Howling Hills Haunted House and Woods. Halloween of senior year. A year from now she'd be in school perfecting her already perfect skills. Or who knew? Maybe she'd already have her first leading role and critics would be hailing her as the next big thing.

Tonight, though, she was already in the leading role, in the prime spot right between the ticket booths, greeting all her frightened victims. She was the first monster they'd see. Kids would start crying and their parents would gasp. In that spot, Margot *was* Howling Hills Haunted House and Woods. She was the alpha at the front of her pack. The moon was straight overhead, and Margot arched her back, looking upward. She let out the loudest howl she could muster. When she finished, she looked out to the incoming victims. Standing in front of Margot was the woman—Spencer's mother—from the day before, this time in a blue sweatsuit and her young son at her side. He stared at Margot with wide eyes.

“Wow,” he said. “This is going to be so cool.”

“Cool?” Margot asked. “You'll be begging for mercy by the time I'm through with you.” She snarled.

He looked up at his mother. “Will I?”

Margot noticed his voice wasn't even quivering. She didn't like that—not one bit. But she could deal with it. She'd just turn up the theatrics. Maybe even grab him by his arm, threaten to drag him away and tear him from limb from limb. It was against the rules

to touch the customers, but rules were meant to be broken, right? If it meant a better performance, then she had to do it.

“Come on, Danny,” his mother said. She grabbed his hand. “That might be Spencer over there talking to that scary vampire.”

Margot turned to see Angelina. She was in the ticket booth again, filing her nails to sharp black points. Even all the way over here, Margot could see Angelina’s makeup was smudged. She smirked under her mask. This lady was right. That fuck-up would scare anybody.

Next to the booth was Spencer, waving his arms sheet-covered arms around. Margot could hear his attempt at wailing. God, he could do better.

“You think they’re scary?” Margot asked.

“Vampires can come out every night, you know,” Danny said. “Can’t you only come out when it’s a full moon?”

Margot looked up. The moon hung perfectly overhead. Her breathing intensified and she felt the warmth rising in her face. What the fuck did this kid know? How could a stupid vampire be scarier than a vicious wolf? How could someone actually think Angelina was scarier?

“You’re—you’re wrong,” Margot said.

Danny just continued to blink at Margot. “You don’t really sound like a wolf,” he said.

Margot huffed. What would he do if she howled right here in his face? What if she latched her claws onto his neck and ripped his throat out, leaving poor little Danny to

choke on his own blood? He couldn't deny that she was a wolf then, right? She clenched her fists, her sharp nails digging into her skin.

"Hey," Jason said. Margot hadn't even heard him walk up. He had his machete in one hand, iced latte in the other. He lifted the machete, pretending like he was about to attack.

"Oh my goodness!" Spencer and Danny's mother clutched at her chest. "You—you really get me every time."

Jason shrugged. "It's my job," he said between sips.

"Let's go see your brother," their mother said.

Margot watched them walk away, standing quietly with Jason. She could hear him sipping his latte through the straw. "So you're the scary one," she said.

"Apparently," Jason said. He sipped some more, and Margot could hear every drop traveling up the straw into his mouth.

At the ticket booth, Margot saw Angelina talking with Spencer and his family. They were all laughing. He had his phone out and the four were huddled together for a selfie. Margot couldn't believe what she was seeing. She was standing right here and Spencer was chatting with Angelina? And laughing? And worst of all, breaking fucking character? She could still hear Jason drinking his latte, every single sip, every single breath he took in between sips. She couldn't even hear customers walking in. He just kept sipping and sipping and sipping.

"Why are you being so loud?" Margot knocked the latte out of Jason's hand.

"What's the matter with you?" Jason asked.

“What’s the matter with *me*? What’s the matter with *you*? You’re sipping is driving me crazy. You’re being too loud.”

Jason just stared at Margot. “So what?”

“Jason isn’t loud,” Margot said. “And he doesn’t drink lattes. Why can’t everyone just do what they’re supposed to? They’re over there laughing and talking. Kids aren’t getting scared.”

“We’re actors,” Jason said. “In a haunted attraction. What do you expect?”

“Exactly. Everyone needs to act like they need—” Margot was suddenly aware that customers were watching her. She snapped back into character. She couldn’t break. Never. She was stronger than that. She tilted her head back and howled as loud as she could while everybody watched. When she dropped her head, she no longer saw Angelina, Spencer, or his family. A killer clown had taken their place at the ticket booth.

\*

Margot stared at herself in the mirror on her break about an hour later. This was supposed to be her night. Halloween at Howling Hills. Her *final* Halloween at Howling Hills. The Oscar-winning performance. But that Danny. That fucking Danny. Brushing her aside like she was some sideshow extra. No one—not a single person—ever treated her like that when she was in character.

And Spencer. Just who did he think he was? Walking around with B-list Angelina. Really? That *Twilight*-looking reject was the sideshow extra. What was wrong with that fucking family? That 90’s-sweatsuit-wearing, Bible-thumping mother must’ve dropped both of those kids on their heads when they were little. More than once. Clearly.

Margot started to grit her teeth under her mask. She couldn't let this deter her. Not now. She looked in to the yellow eyes looking back at her in the mirror. Get your shit together. Sharpen your claws. Sink your fangs into the next person that you see. You're the wolf. You're the—

The door burst open. It was the killer clown from the ticket booth. "Hurry," he said. "Some kid's gone missing apparently." He ran out.

Margot growled. Of course some kid went missing.

Outside, customers and workers were running around, crazier than usual. The killer clown was interrogating a group of teenage girls. A witch and a blood-soaked zombie were checking the bathrooms.

Kid probably just got scared and went to hide somewhere, Margot thought. Although that meant someone had to do their job. And not only that, but they had to be good at it.

Spencer and Danny's mother ran up to Margot as she was walking around. "Have you seen him?" their mother asked. "Have you seen Danny?" Her necklace glistened in the moonlight.

Margot sighed. "Your son's the one who's missing?"

"Yes, yes." She spoke quickly. "And Spencer? Have you seen him? He went off with that girl from *Twilight* earlier."

Margot laughed. But then she realized the mother was being serious. She meant the *Twilight* comment, but she didn't care. She'd say anything to get her point across in this moment.

“I guess they’re looking for him. I just don’t know.” Their mother walked away, still talking. Commitment, Margot thought, now that’s true commitment. No faking.

Margot watched her go up to Jason, who had refilled his iced latte cup. The mother grabbed his shoulders. She shook and shook him. Margot saw the coffee spill out of Jason’s cup. The mother moved on to the next person. Jason kept staring at his empty cup.

Across the field, Margot could see the giant wolf’s head of the haunted house. The teeth gave off a strange glow this time of night. Margot thought how it looked all the more terrifying with everyone running around. The wolf was on the prowl. The wolf smelled blood. When she noticed nobody going inside, Margot said fuck it—that haunted house was her favorite place at Howling Hills. She could at least go look there.

Margot was greeted by the familiar drops of blood as she walked into the wolf’s mouth at the entrance. Inside, she surveyed the dimly lit living room. A slashed portrait—claw marks she could’ve made herself—hung above the fireplace. All across the wall were family portraits, the glass of their frames cracked and spattered with blood. Margot noticed they looked like real pictures—real families even. Maybe they were donated by the workers. She was disappointed she’d never really noticed before. That was a nice touch.

Something made a noise in the room above. Margot made her way for the staircase. Alright, Danny, let’s get this over with. With each step, she added to her hero’s speech. It was nothing really. Step. She knew there were all sorts of weird hiding places in the haunted house. Step. He was scared at first, sitting there crying. Step. But she comforted

him. Step. She rubbed his shoulders. You can get a caramel apple. Step. It's alright, your mother is worried sick. Step. Your mother will be so happy to see you. Step. Make sure to smile big for the camera. Step.

Margot opened the bedroom door. "Danny? Are you in here? Everyone's looking for you."

But Margot didn't find Danny.

Instead, there was a ghost sitting on the bed. Four legs stuck out from under the blood-splattered sheet.

"Oh," Spencer said from underneath. "Hey, Margot."

"What the fuck are y'all doing?" Margot asked.

"Y'all? It's just me."

Margot saw the sheet wriggle. "I can see four feet, you idiot."

"I told you this wouldn't work." Angelina appeared as she tore the sheet away.

"Seriously?" Margot's muscles tensed.

"What's the big deal?" Spencer asked.

"You guys are just up here fucking around?" Margot took a step closer towards them. "What about—"

"What about what?" Spencer stood up. "Us? You and me? We hooked up like three times."

"That's not what I was going to say." Margot was surprised that Spencer was standing his ground.

“It’s not like we were dating. We were just getting what we wanted. Come on, you knew that.”

“It’s nothing serious,” Angelina said. “We’re all just having a good time.”

“A good time? I’m the best time,” Margot said. She pointed a yellow nail at Spencer. She knew they weren’t dating, that they really were just having a good time. But that didn’t matter. *She* was supposed to say that to *him*. Nobody was supposed to choose someone else when they could choose Margot. “You said I was the best time.”

“I knew that’s what you wanted to hear,” he said.

What she wanted to hear? What the fuck did that even mean? She was supposed to be in control. But she hadn’t realized she just might be getting used too.

“Danny in here?” Jason asked from the bedroom door.

Margot jumped.

“Sorry,” Jason said. “Didn’t mean to scare you.” He waved with his machete.

“You didn’t,” Margot said. “I don’t think.” She wasn’t quite sure at the moment. Halloween wasn’t going as planned.

“What’d you say about Danny?” Spencer asked.

Jason stepped around Margot. “Your brother’s missing. Is he in here?”

“What? We’ve been in here.” Spencer glared at Margot. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I—I came up here looking for him,” she said.

“Jesus, why didn’t you say so?” He ran out of the room, yelling as he made his way downstairs. Nobody ever does what they’re supposed to around here! Nobody!

“Didn’t you have an iced latte earlier?” Angelina asked.

Jason raised his machete. “I don’t want to talk about it,” he said. He turned to leave.

Angelina got up to follow, but she stopped at Margot’s side. “You know Spencer’s kind of a dumbass, right? Not to mention a major player. I thought everybody knew that.”

Margot hadn’t known actually. Dumb, sure. But player? She guessed she had been too focused on other things—things in her control.

“Anyway,” Angelina said. “Your costume looks good tonight.” She put her fake vampire fangs back in and walked away.

Margot sat down on the bed. What a performance, she thought. What a mess of a final show. Mind-blowing performances, really. And not in the good way. Danny wasn’t scared but ran away. His mother actually tried to look for him. Jason finished a drink. Spencer didn’t really worship Margot. Angelina offered a compliment.

And right in the middle of it all—Margot, sitting right there on a tattered bed. She hadn’t seen any of it coming. She hadn’t been in control after all. She even broke character. Not exactly a career-defining performance. She reached to her mask when she heard a voice from behind: “Is it safe to come out?”

From a closet in the corner emerged Danny.

“How long have you been in there?” Margot asked.

“A while,” he said, rubbing his eyes.

“Were you asleep or something?”

“No. Just thought I’d try to jump out and scare somebody.”

“What all did you see?” Margot thought of Spencer and Angelina.

Danny's eyes widened. "You don't want to know. Some scary stuff."

Margot laughed. "I bet." She looked at Danny as he sat on the bed next to her. He stared right back, the flashing red lights illuminating his eyes. "I think your mother's looking for you," she said.

"Probably." He just kept staring.

Margot wasn't sure what to make of this kid. She told him any other eleven-year-old—no, sorry, twelve, happy birthday, kid—would be shaking, crying even. Practically begging for mommy. But here Danny sat at Howling Hills with Margot the biggest, baddest wolf.

Or she was at the start of the night.

Now, she wasn't so sure.

"I mean," Danny said. "What's there to be scared about?"

Margot thought this might be a good chance. She could pounce. Claws out, she jumped up, crouched down in front of Danny, giving her most ferocious growl. Yes, that was it. Award-winning. Forget about an American werewolf in London. Here was a werewolf. Here she was—Margot the wolf.

But Danny didn't budge.

Instead, he smiled. "It's not real." He touched the prosthetic snout. "It's just a mask."

## Like She Knew She Wouldn't Be Here Forever

I've learned that when Pete calls you into his office, you're getting two things: a shot of cheap tequila and a slap on the ass. You're always offered the shot when you walk in. It's what comes next that's uncertain. If you're a dancer, maybe you're getting more stage time. If you're behind the bar, maybe you're getting to work the later shift. Of course, it could be bad news. Go in, shot, and honey, you just aren't bringing in the cash anymore or Sid, the other guys can handle the doors. It's time for you to move on, but here's a slap on the ass to let you know we're still friends. And that's how it goes at S and G's Spirits and Girls. Shot, congratulations, shot. Or shot, you're fired, slap.

So, when Pete called me to his office one night in early June and didn't offer me the tequila, something was happening. There was already a girl—a new girl, one I hadn't seen before—sitting in there, and she didn't have a shot glass either. Something was definitely off, and it wasn't the fact that our air was on the fritz and she was still wearing a sweater in June in Belton. Some girls come in for an interview in December and their tops are off before any introductions. But not this one.

“Sid, this is Lila. She's going to be with us for the summer,” Pete said. He had a newspaper in his hand. The front page showed a story about some woman claiming to have seen a bear in her backyard. “Did you see this? Bears? In fucking Belton? Do I need bear traps? Anyway, I was just telling her that you're our resident doorman. I'd like you to take her on a little tour of the place.”

Lila smiled up at me, pushing strawberry blonde hair that was more strawberry than blonde behind her ears. She was pale, with freckles and green eyes. I knew right away

there wasn't a barbed wire tattoo around her arm or an American flag thong hanging out of her jeans. She reminded me of my wife, Michelle, when I first met her. Same complexion, same smile that was slightly off-center for her face. In fact, I'd met Michelle here twenty-seven years ago when she danced for one summer. I was just a lowly busboy then.

She held out her hand to me. "It's nice to see you again, Mr. McDugan."

"Again?" I asked, stopping mid-shake.

"Oh, I'm sorry." She covered her mouth and a hint of red showed on her cheeks.

"Aren't you Rebecca's father? She's a few years older than me, but I think we met once. Back when we were at BHP."

"Right," I said. But, I really didn't remember her. Rebecca didn't bring too many friends back to our house when she was here. And when she did, they didn't stay long. Usually just to get things for Rebecca to stay somewhere else that night.

"I think it's so great she's out in California," Lila said. "She's really making it."

"Yes. I guess she is," I said.

"I hope I can do something like—"

"Okay, why don't we let Sid show you where the changing rooms are," Pete said.

He opened the door for Lila to leave. She smiled as she walked by, but she didn't get a slap.

I tried to follow, but Pete put a hand to my chest. He leaned his head around the corner. He turned back, holding a finger in the air. "We got us a winner with this one, Sid."

“We got something, that’s for sure.”

“A winner, that’s what we got.” Pete turned his finger to me, then back up. “I know winners. She’s a winner. Now, get out of here.”

No slap.

\*

I watched Lila dance for the first time later that night. I’ve got this stool by the front door that lets me get a good view of the stage. The air conditioning at S and G’s has been shit for as long as I can remember, always breaking, so the front door is always open during the summer. If we ever had a line—we don’t—I wouldn’t even have to let you in to see the girls.

Normally, Pete wants the new girls to do their first dance with some of the other girls. Make them feel comfortable, like it’s natural. You know, just a couple of friends dancing around in a bar, having a good time. And would you look at that, you made some money doing it, too.

But tonight was different. Lila took the stage by herself, moving to “Empty Bottles, Empty Hearts”—the sad country song everyone knows, where your baby done left you. Even took the dog and now you’re drunk, remembering all those bullshit times you thought were happy memories. Well, they weren’t, and it only took you 27 empty bottles to realize she was just yanking you along.

Not Lila. She wasn’t doing that to anybody with this show. She moved slowly. None of that quick, bouncy shit the other girls did. Lila was graceful. Her hips swayed

back and forth, matching the beat of the song. Her lithe figure commanded the stage. We all watched, not cheering or whistling. Nothing except the music in the background.

It was exhilarating watching her move. My heart beat faster than it had in years, like it might explode out of my chest and land on Lila's stage.

When she was done, money seemed to appear out of nowhere on the stage. I hadn't even noticed the men putting it up there. She collected it with a smile and walked off stage.

I knew right away Pete was right. Lila was a winner.

\*

There was a note on the counter from Michelle when I got home around two in the morning: "Figured you wouldn't want any more casserole. Wouldn't keep 'til you got back anyways. Rebecca called. Not coming 'til July now."

I ate some straight out of the dish, not even bothering to heat it up. It wasn't as good as earlier in the evening, but it was just easier to eat it cold.

Michelle used to leave dinner in the oven. Back then, I was only working at S and G's every other night, getting off at midnight. The extra money was good for us. Trust me, working at a drug store in downtown Belton doesn't exactly provide for your kid's college education. Luckily, Rebecca was a go-getter. She didn't need much help to leave. And when she did, I started working every night, for longer hours. It was even more money. Michelle didn't like it, but S and G's had just become part of the routine by then.

These casseroles went cold about that time. I scraped some pieces of chicken and carrot along the dish, dragging them in a figure eight. I took my phone out and dialed Rebecca. She might still be awake on the west coast.

She answered: “Dad? What are you doing up so late?”

“Just got home from work. Saw you had called,” I said.

“Right. Work.”

I could almost see her eyes rolling from across the country. “Yeah, it was a pretty good day at the club.”

“Don’t call it that.”

“There’s this new girl—Lila. She says she knows you. Little younger than you.”

“Doesn’t sound familiar. Maybe if I saw her, I’d recognize her.” She yawned.

“Yeah, you should. Looks just like your mother.”

“Dad, that’s messed up. Why are you still working at that place? It’s a dump.”

She wasn’t wrong, but that didn’t matter. Extra work and extra money never hurt anyone. S and G’s was a Belton monument, and I was part of it.

“You’re still coming later this summer, right?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said. “Can’t wait.”

\*

People really took to Lila over the next few weeks. It must’ve been the way she moved, because she never took all of her clothes off. Nearly a month of dancing and her top had always stayed on.

“Look at her, Sid,” Pete said to me one night. “Any other girl, and I’d’ve fired her by now. If you’re not showing your ass, then take it somewhere else. But it doesn’t matter with Lila. She’s pulling in more money than our veterans. She’s got it, Sid.”

I watched her pick up the money thrown on stage. She mouthed a quick thank you to everyone. “What exactly is it?” I asked Pete.

He patted me on the back. “Don’t know. Don’t really care.”

\*

One night a few weeks later, there wasn’t a line at the door, so I headed to the break room. It was empty, but still stunk of sweat and secondhand smoke. There’s a door in the corner, leading out back. We cut out comic strips and taped them to the door. I noticed a new one—Garfield taking a nap, just lying there on his back. You couldn’t even see his face. His owner, Jon, had on a sweatsuit, trying to get Garfield to workout. But he was having none of that. Garfield said that nap was working out just fine for him. Not one of his finer moments, but someone liked it.

I propped open the door with a chair. Anything to try and clear the air.

“Hey, Sid,” a voice said from outside. It was Lila, sitting on the hood of her dad’s truck. She liked to drive it. She had put on a flannel shirt. It was completely buttoned.

“Oh, hey, Lila,” I said. “I didn’t see you there.”

“Sorry. Hope I didn’t scare you. Taking a break?” She tapped her hand on the hood next to where she was sitting.

“Yeah. Looks like you had another great night.” I took a seat.

“Thank you.” She gave the same response every time you said something about her performance. She never agreed or tried to argue with it. Just a simple thanks. I didn’t even know if she liked to dance or not. I’d talked to her almost every night since she started working, and I still didn’t know. Every girl that’s come through S and G’s either loves it or hates it. There’s no in-between. The ones that love it laugh and giggle when they’re done with a show. They smile while they count their money. Easy money, that’s all they see. And then there’s the ones that hate it, like Veronica. She only works a few nights a week, but I’ve seen her throw up after a few performances and pray to God, begging for forgiveness. But she still takes the paycheck, and she still comes back. She’s a smart girl, I think. Pretty, too. She just chose to stay.

With Lila, though, I couldn’t tell. She was good at it, that’s for sure. But liking it? I guess that was a conversation for another night.

“I found something the other day I think you might like, Sid,” Lila said. “About a ten minute walk through the woods, there’s this field. Something there you should see.”

“What is it?” I asked.

She shook her head. “Can’t tell.” She said I had to see it to believe it. “Why don’t you ask Pete if you can cut out early? It’s such a clear night.”

“I don’t know about that,” I said. “Pete, he doesn’t like changing up the routine.”

“Just try, Sid.” She smiled. “Can’t hurt, can it?”

\*

When I told Pete I wanted to leave early, he laughed and gave me a get-the-hell-outta-here response. I told him I was serious, and when he realized I wasn't joking, I got a wave and a whatever. I knew he didn't like it and neither did I.

But now, I was walking down some dirt path with Lila, not really worrying about Pete. The path was right behind S and G's.

"I saw it one afternoon when I was picking up my check," Lila was telling me. "If I hadn't been here in the daylight, I don't think I would've noticed it. Shouldn't be too much farther."

We came to the end of the path and I could see a large clearing. There was a tall box in the middle of the field, almost like a refrigerator. Lila pointed to it.

"That's what we came to see?" I asked.

She nodded and we kept walking towards it. As we got closer, I saw it wasn't a refrigerator. Not exactly, anyway. Even in the moonlight, it was impossible to mistake the red and white design of a Coca-Cola label. We were standing at a vending machine, right in the middle of a field.

"So?" Lila asked.

"It's a vending machine," I said. "In the middle of nowhere."

"It's not nowhere." She placed her hand on it. "It's somewhere. Everywhere is somewhere, Sid."

"I guess. Why'd you bring me here?"

She shrugged. "Thought it might be something you'd like."

"Really?"

“Yeah. I mean, look at the label. That’s an older Coke label, right?”

She was right. This was an old machine.

Lila continued: “You seem like you’re into antiques and those kinds of things.”

“I do?” I wasn’t at all. She had missed the mark on that one. Placed a bet on the wrong spouse. “Michelle’s the one, always rummaging through thrift stores and antique shops.”

“Michelle? Is that your wife’s name?”

“Yeah. You didn’t know that?”

She shook her head. “I don’t think you’ve mentioned her name since I started work. I’ve always known you as the McDugans.”

Lila must’ve been wrong. I didn’t see how I couldn’t have said Michelle’s name at some point. We stood in silence for a few minutes, examining the vending machine. It looked to be in perfect condition. No noticeable dents or marks in the moonlight. I broke the silence: “I wonder how it got here? Maybe in that awful storm we had last year. I’ve never seen such strong wind. You hear stories like that, you know? China cabinets carried miles by a tornado and not a single piece is chipped.”

“No, I don’t think so,” Lila said. “The label, remember? It’s an older design. Even the way the buttons are. I don’t think someone in town would’ve been using it.”

“So, you think someone put it here?”

“Maybe, but I bet there used to be a building here and it was inside. Now, this is all that’s left.”

“I’ve been here my whole life. I don’t remember anything out here.” I began to wonder if this was how Lila was—imagining elaborate stories for ordinary objects and people. Maybe that’s why she danced the way she did. Maybe she was so busy creating stories for men in the audience that she wasn’t even thinking about dancing, like it was just her nature.

“Well, however it got here,” she said. “Someone else knows. Look at the grass. It’s cut and there’s no weeds.”

She was right. The clearing was in good shape.

“It’s like it’s stuck here,” Lila said. “Everything around it is changing, and it’s still here. It could probably be put to good use if it was moved. Whoever takes care of the field is just leaving it stuck out here.”

“You don’t know that,” I said. “I’m sure there’s a perfectly fine reason for leaving it here.”

“Maybe. Just doesn’t seem right.”

I didn’t see why she seemed to care so much about the vending machine. It was strange, sure, but nothing to get worked up about. If it stayed out here, what was the big deal? There wasn’t any reason to press the issue, and besides, it was late. There was probably a cold casserole with my name on it. We walked back to S and G’s. Pete was sitting on the hood of Lila’s truck, his arms crossed. He said: “So, this is what you do when you wanna leave early, huh?”

“What are you talking about?” I asked. Lila was looking down at her feet.

“Come on, Sid. The two of you, off in the woods. Had yourselves a nice little fuck, didn’t you?”

“Pete, you’ve got it all wrong,” I said. That was against the rules and I’d never jeopardize my gig at S and G’s.

“I don’t want to hear it. You’re fired, Sid.”

“No, Pete. Come on! I need this job!” I’d been at S and G’s longer than anyone. I couldn’t leave now.

Lila put her hand on Pete’s chest. “It’s my fault, Pete,” she said. “I asked Sid to go on a walk. That’s it.”

Pete’s eyes narrowed. “Right. I’m supposed to believe some whore like you. You’re lucky you’re the best damn girl I’ve got.”

“Don’t talk to her like that,” I said.

“I can talk to her however I want,” he said. “Now, get the fuck out of here.” He walked inside.

“Sid,” Lila said. “I’m sorry. I’ll talk to him. I promise.”

“Will you?” If anyone could convince Pete, Lila could. I knew she could.

\*

“Mom seems to like having you back around at night,” Rebecca said. She had come home for her annual visit. “Don’t you think?”

“Oh,” I said. “I guess.” We were sitting at a table next to the window in Smith’s. The owners had added a small cafe a few years ago. I didn’t think it was a smart idea. The place was fine like it was.

“She is. I can tell,” she said.

I swirled the coffee in my cup with the stirrer. “You know, I don’t know why I’m still drinking coffee in the afternoons. It’s not like I have to go into work.”

“What?” Rebecca asked.

“I don’t have to go to S and G’s tonight.”

“Yeah, I know.” She continued without missing a beat. “Robert’s really sorry he couldn’t come this time.” She didn’t say she was sorry, though. I’ve always wondered if Rebecca didn’t want him to come visit. I’d only met him once. You could feel the reverberations from the culture shock as soon as he entered the town limits.

“I’m sure he is,” I said.

“You know, he’s very busy getting started with the new firm and everything. He’s really working hard to start a new life for us.”

“A new life?”

“Well, not really new. You know what I mean.”

“Sure, a life that doesn’t involve here.”

“Dad, I think you’re reading too much into this.”

“A life that’s all yours, huh?”

She laughed, pushing her hair behind her ears. She was wearing diamond earrings.

“Yeah, one that’s all mine. Whose else would it be?”

“You can have a life here,” I said.

“Really? One where I married a high school dropout that works two jobs for a kid he doesn’t even know exists?”

I knew what she meant. “I did that for you.”

“You’re right. Let me thank you for the one plane ticket you bought when I first left for school,” she said, shaking her head. Her lower jaw was jutting out.

“See, I needed that extra job.”

“What? That’s all I ever needed—one ticket. I didn’t even need your money to get into school. I did it on my own.”

“I know that.”

“Then why didn’t you stop? Tell me. Why keep working at that shithole?” She was staring right at me, a hard, unwavering gaze.

“I was just trying to make a better life.”

“Then, why didn’t you take the promotion here?”

I had been offered a promotion at Smith’s during Rebecca’s senior year of high school. General manager, that’s what it was. Pretty good increase in pay, but a little longer workday. That meant I had to quit S and G’s, but I had the routine down, you know? I knew how everything went. I just knew. My eyes returned to hers. “How did you know about that?”

“Mom told me when it first happened. I wasn’t supposed to say anything. Keep the pressure off you or some nonsense like that.”

“Thanks,” I said, eyeing my coffee. “I know I don’t ever say it, but I really appreciate it.”

“Of course, you do,” she said. “It’s only natural for you to appreciate it. But, what about me? What do I have to appreciate?”

She stood up and took some money out of her purse.

I reached out to stop her, but she dropped a hundred dollar bill on the table before we touched. “No,” she started. “Just a token of my appreciation.”

\*

When I finished at Smith’s later that day, I didn’t go home. Instead, I went straight to S and G’s. The girls wouldn’t be dancing yet, but I’d just camp out at the bar. I couldn’t stomach going home to Michelle and whatever concoction was slowly drying out in the oven.

I took a seat at the end of the bar. Pete came out of his office and walked over when he saw me. “Damn, Sid,” he said. “Figured you’d be here at some point, but not this soon.” He walked behind the bar and fixed himself a shot. “You want one?” he asked. “Course, you’ve got to pay for it now.” He laughed.

“No,” I said. Not tonight. I just needed to sit. And watch. I needed to watch everyone. I didn’t know why. “Lila’s dancing tonight, isn’t she?” I needed to watch her. Remember who I was, who I could’ve been.

“You know she is,” Pete said. “Don’t act like you don’t know her schedule. See her while you can.”

I nodded. Right, she was leaving. Of course she was. How could I not remember? Just another thing added to the list of things I’ve forgotten. “Maybe I will have that shot. Just one.”

Guys kept filing in and out throughout the evening while I sat in the same seat. When Lila finally went on stage, the music started and she began to dance. I knew then

why everybody loved watching her dance and how she could win this crowd over. Pete had said she was a winner. He didn't know why, but now I did. She danced like she knew she wouldn't be here forever.

“Dad?”

I turned to see Rebecca standing in the middle of S and G's. “What are you doing here?” I asked.

“What are *you* doing here?” she asked. “Mom was worried when you didn't go home after you finished at Smith's.”

“Oh, right.” The music stopped and Lila walked offstage. She was folding up the cash she had collected onstage. “That's the girl I was telling you about,” I said.

“What?” Rebecca asked.

“You know. The one you went to school with.”

She sighed. “Yeah, she looks familiar I guess. Now let's go home.”

“Wait, wait,” I said. I waved Lila over. “Let me introduce you to her.”

“I don't want to meet her. I want to leave.” She paused before adding: “I want you to leave with me.” She held her hand out.

I knew I should take it. Grab on and walk right out the door with her. Leave this—what did she call it—this shithole. I took her hand as Lila walked up. “Pretty good crowd tonight, Sid,” she said. “You leaving already?”

“Why? Do you need me to stay for something?”

“Oh, no,” she said. “I'm good. Just going to take a break for the next set.”

I let go of Rebecca's hand. "Sorry, I should've said this earlier," I said. "Rebecca, this is Lila. I think you went to school together, right?" I felt Rebecca's stare cutting right through me.

"Right," Lila said. "History class, I think."

"Sounds right," Rebecca said. She spoke quickly. I knew she didn't want to talk.

"Looks like you're doing great," Lila said.

"You too." Rebecca glanced at the wad of cash in Lila's hand.

"Oh, yeah. Good haul tonight. Just a few more days like this and I'm out of here." I began to wonder if she really thought S and G's was a shithole too.

"Good, that's good. Glad to see some people come to their senses around here."

Rebecca shot a glance at me. "I think it's time for us to go."

"Okay," I said. "You danced great tonight, Lila." I didn't have to look at Rebecca to know she rolled her eyes.

"Thanks, Sid," Lila said. "Have a good night."

We turned for the door. Just as I was walking through the exit, Lila called out from behind us. She came running up. "Sid, I forgot to tell you. I talked to Pete about getting your job back, you know. I don't think it worked. But I tried. I really did."

"Thank God," Rebecca said. "Now, come on." She walked out towards her car. I saw her glance back to see if I was coming—not once, but twice.

"It's okay," I said.

"Sorry, Sid," Lila said. I knew she meant it. She patted me on the shoulder and walked away.

I watched Lila head into the break room and wondered if that might be the last time I saw her. She wouldn't be here forever and she didn't need to be.

I was still standing in the doorway. I turned towards Rebecca. She was standing at her car, the door open. From that distance, in the fading light, I couldn't make out all her features. But she looked younger. The way she stood, the way the lights shone down on her reminded me of when she was younger. She was beautiful. She didn't belong here, and she was right about that.

And then I realized she thought the same way as Lila. Rebecca had known she wouldn't be here forever, but I hadn't known that. I needed to. I knew I needed to. I took a deep breath and started walking towards her.

## Stars

Her breath caused a small circle of condensation to form on the hotel window. She pressed her finger to the moist glass, dotting it five times. She slid her fingers along the glass until the image was complete—a star looking out over the lights of downtown.<sup>[L]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>

She wished the night sky was more visible against the backdrop of buildings. There seemed to be fewer stars in big cities, and she had always liked starry skies as a girl. Looking up, she thought back to one night. She remembered climbing out of her bedroom window to escape the sounds of raised voices. The walls were just thick enough to muffle them, but she had heard. Just like she had heard the sound of a slap to the face. But she had known how to escape. She had walked to the middle of their backyard and lain down in uncut grass. She remembered seeing a falling star that night. It was the only one she had ever seen. She was only seven then—too young to know she should have made a wish, but old enough to know what she would have wished for. If only she had known, perhaps she would have wished to be lifted up, right to that falling star, and she could grab on, hold on, to that fiery, burning mass and radiate with life. But she didn't. Instead, she fell asleep, right there in the backyard. She remembered the morning after, too, when her father found her.

<sup>[L]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub> But now, after so many long years, cars seemed to slowly move along the roads, their headlights shimmering against the night-tinted pavement. Not too long ago, she would have been part of that early morning crowd, bouncing from bar to bar with friends, singing on the sidewalk, holding onto streetlights and swinging freely around them in

circles, free from responsibility, free from expectation. But she wasn't the type to stay free for too long.

She had done it, she had. She had been free. Away from that home and in school. But then a phone call and a sick mother. Her father had been the one to tell her. He had been the one to push her away. And then he had pulled her back.

[SEP] She thought how some things don't change. But also how ordinary those headlights now seemed from such a height. She placed her hand to the side of the fading star and felt the vibrations of the street sounds through the glass. They were faint, but still there.[SEP]

She sighed.

[SEP] Sheets rustled on the bed behind her, and she turned to see that he had awakened.[SEP]

“Don't you ever sleep?” he asked.

[SEP] She was unsure of how to answer and decided to speak honestly: “Didn't seem right to just go to sleep after tonight.”

[SEP] He turned over, reached for his phone, and, after seeing there were no messages, rested his head in the palm of his hand, propping up on one elbow. He looked at her.

“And why is that?” he asked.

[SEP] She could just make out his reflection in the glass, could feel him examining her. She clutched her robe tightly. “This is the last time,” she said. “It has to be.”

He turned on his back, his hands behind his head. “You really think so?”

She knew what he was doing. A test, that's what it was. He always got his way, and she knew that, too. But she didn't feel like falling asleep in the backyard anymore.

She looked upwards again. The city lights drowned out most of the view, but she knew something was up there. She could make out just a few stars. They were hiding. But they were there.

“Won't you come back to bed?” he asked. He smoothed out the sheets to his side and lightly tapped his hand against the pillow.

[ ]  
[SEP] She smiled: “The view is just...” She couldn't finish. She wasn't sure about the view anymore. It wasn't the one she had always loved, but it had worked for awhile. And now she just wanted to sleep.

He chuckled, told her that this wasn't even one of the better views, as if she cared. There were bigger cities, taller hotels, and higher rooms, closer to the night sky she was looking at. He told her she could see them eventually. “But that's up to you.”

[ ]  
[SEP] She turned to him. He was sitting now, and she wondered if he would stand and meet her at the window. The city lights were dim enough to only allow her to see his outline. But the whites of his eyes glimmered.

[ ]  
[SEP] And his ring, too. The simple gold band seemed to twinkle on the nightstand, a bright spot in the dimly lit room.

[ ]  
[SEP] “Don't forget to put that back on.” She pointed to the ring, suddenly aware that the light only allowed him to fully see her. To her, he was just a dark mass filling the bed.[ ]  
[SEP]

“Never until the morning,” he said.

“Maybe you should go ahead,” she said. She knew he wouldn't like that.

She leaned closer to the window, breathing on the spot of her previous touches. A faint image of her star appeared.

[L]  
[SEP] “What are you doing?” he asked.

[L]  
[SEP] She heard him flip over two glasses on the nightstand and pour two drinks. He always liked to keep the scotch ready. She decided not to answer him, but responded with her own question: “Why do we make a wish when we see falling stars?”

[L]  
[SEP] He sighed and began sliding the tip of his finger around in circles on the sheets.[L]  
[SEP]

“Did you hear me?” she asked. Her eyes looked up into the dark sky.

[L]  
[SEP] He took a sip of his drink. “Can’t say I’ve ever thought of something quite like that.”

[L]  
[SEP] “Can you think about it now?” She squinted, searching the night air. “Doesn't it seem strange to wish as something is falling?”

[L]  
[SEP] “Did you see one?” He stared at her, and she gazed out the window.

[L]  
[SEP] She closed her eyes. “No.”

[L]  
[SEP] He laughed, quietly, and finished his drink. “Have you ever seen one?” he asked.

She thought for a moment, wondering if she should tell him about that night.

“Once,” she said. She rubbed her arms, remembering.

He didn’t seem to listen.

She heard him grab the pack of cigarettes that sat next to the glasses. She could see a faint reflection of a flicker of flame that erupted from the lighter. She reached out, pressing her fingers to the reflection. It felt warm, but she knew that couldn’t be.

He said: “I don't think it's actually stars anyway. Seems like I've read somewhere it's actually rocks or debris.” He stood up, grabbed the second drink, and walked towards her. “Why does it even matter?”[L]  
[SEP]

“Just seems wrong that something good should come out of that moment,” she said.

“Maybe it's the world's way of evening itself out.” He smiled to himself.

She didn't agree. She didn't think the world worked like that anymore. In the window, she could see the end of the cigarette light up with each breath he took. In and out, in and out, it glowed a deep orange against the darkness of the world outside. The smell of cigarette smoke filled her nose, and she remembered how much she hated that smell, how it reminded her of her father's cracked ashtray that always seemed to be filled. She breathed it in and it burned.

“Think about it this way,” he said, handing her the glass. “I've never waited on falling stars to make wishes. If I wished for something, I went and got it. Or tried to, at least. Someway, somehow.”

She took a sip and looked at the street life below. People moving about in their own lives, their own existence. She imagined they were living, surviving, striving. Once, she had told herself she was doing the same. The scotch burned her throat, and soon she could feel the heat in her stomach. It warmed her, radiating from within, a warmth she had not felt in so long.

“You can make a wish whenever you want,” he said, and he lay down. “Right now, if you want.”

She finished her drink and placed her forehead against the glass. Her breathing repeatedly made the star appear, like the beating of her heart. If the glass wasn't there, she would step forward. But she wouldn't fall. The warmth would carry her up, rising

into the sky, through the clouds, higher and higher. Maybe she would fall then, but it wouldn't matter. She would erupt in the atmosphere, burning and glowing against the night sky. She closed her eyes and remained quiet.

[ ]  
[SEP] He slowly sighed. "Make that wish yet?"

[ ]  
[SEP] She pulled away from the glass and wiped away the star she had drawn. She could still feel the warmth. She whispered: "Yes."

## Good Boy

Evan's face is pale in the sunlight. He plays high school tennis. Number four position even though he is only a freshman. Big match, this one. Cross-town rivals. Adolescent hometown pride on the line.

I adjust my neon yellow hat before patting him on the back. "Relax," I say. "You got this."

"What if I let the team down?" he asks. He looks over at the older boys on the team. "They'll laugh."

"Don't worry about what they do," I say. "Just remember what we've been working on."

"Right." He exhales. "Balance. Must stay balanced."

"Not just on your swings." I tap the side of my head. "Balance here too, young grasshopper."

He smiles and looks at me. "Did you know grasshoppers actually have ears? Not on their head though." He pats his stomach and laughs. "They hear through their abdomen."

I hear a shake in his voice. I tell him to keep going. Tell me something else I don't know.

So he does. Grasshoppers are older than dinosaurs. They don't really jump. They actually catapult. "It's how their knees work," he says. The largest swarm ever was 1,800 miles long. "And the bright ones," he says. "Those are the ones you have to worry about. They eat toxic plants and keep the toxins in their body. It's for protection. Their colors are a warning."

The opposing team arrives as he finishes.

Evan plays a senior almost twice his size. Plays him close too. The senior doesn't like that. You're just a fucking freshman. He says this out loud, looking directly across the net at Evan. A fucking kid, that's what you are.

His mother and I sit on the bleachers watching Evan. "He can handle this," she says to no one.

The sun beats down on us. Our hands burn if they remain on the bleachers for too long. His mother constantly wipes sweat from her brow.

I play a game. Every time the senior says fuck, I take a sip from my Yeti. Double IPA hidden in there. I clap too. The senior doesn't like that either.

"You know Evan thinks you're just the greatest guy," his mother says to me. "Really. More than a coach. You're like the big brother he never had. He'll hate it when you transfer next year."

I take a sip. I tell her I know. "Have you told him I'm leaving?" I ask.

"Not yet," she says. "I thought you'd like to."

His teammates gather around the fence in front of us. They're seniors and they've won already. But Evan has to keep playing. The other boys look at their phones. They point and laugh. One has a picture of a girl he is showing to the others. Another talks about a party this weekend. Evan misses a shot and yells. The boys laugh.

I remember standing there when I was on this team. Some of these boys were just starting out then. Me and the other seniors, we'd give the new boys so much shit. But never too much. All good fun. That's what we'd say. I'd laugh too. Even made a kid cry

once. Sam. That was his name. I laughed when he lost a match one time. He cried when I laughed. We made it up to him by taking him to a party. He hooked up with a girl on the team. Christine. That was her name. A junior. He got so drunk he pissed himself before falling down the stairs. I laughed then too. I've never told Evan this. Never. He doesn't need to know.

We watch as Evan loses the match. He breaks his racquet in half on the hot asphalt.

His mother looks down. Red faced. I can't tell if she is upset or embarrassed.

I'm exhilarated though. "Do you mind if I handle this?" I ask his mother.

"I think he'd appreciate that," she says. "You're a good guy."

I know. I take another sip.

Evan's face is buried in his hands. "See. They're laughing."

"That's because they're idiots," I say. They're boys. Just fucking boys.

"I just can't do it," he says.

I sit next to him. "Sure you can. I know it. Now tell me something I don't know."

He looks up to the sky and smiles. "Crows are really smart. Did you know that?"

I shake my head.

"They are," he says. "I've watched them. They'll sit in trees at stop signs and drop walnuts down and wait on cars. They can't crack the shells so they let the cars do it for them."

"Is that a metaphor, Evan? You're a tough nut to crack."

He laughs.

“So you remember how I told you about that uncle of mine who has this huge farm out in the middle of nowhere?” I ask him.

He nods.

“Well, a new litter of pigs was born last summer,” I say. “Ten little pigs. But there was this tiny, tiny runt. He didn’t even look like the others. Black spots. Didn’t make any noise either. No oinks or anything.” I oink at Evan. When he looks at me, I push the tip of my nose back.

“What happened?” he asks.

“My uncle tried to take care of it, but it would never come to him. Instead, it kept fighting to get closer to its mother so it could nurse. All its brothers and sisters kept trying to push him away, but he’d never let my uncle help him get closer. He’d push and push and now he’s one of the biggest pigs in the litter. Oinks and all.”

“Now that’s a metaphor.”

“No. It’s the truth.”

\*

A week later, I sit courtside with Evan. We’ve hit once a week for the last two years, right after I graduated high school. Lessons. Drills. Practice matches. Sometimes we just sit and talk. Life advice. That’s what he calls it.

I think back to that first camp he came to. I was working at our club for the summer.

Evan had just moved to town. Didn't know anybody. He lumbered onto the courts. A regular goofball. Anyone could see that. His shoelaces were untied and he tripped. Fell face first into the asphalt. The other kids laughed.

"You ok?" I asked, helping him up.

"Yeah," he said. "That one inch step up will really get you."

"Right," I said. "Shoelaces too."

He looked down. "It's a possibility."

A wasp landed on his shoulder. I brushed it away.

"Thanks," he said. "Did you know a zebra's stripes actually repel bugs? It's for horseflies. Bigger stripes do a better job." He waved another wasp away from his face.

"I didn't know that," I said.

"Well," he said. "It's true. Do you know anything cool? Tell me something I don't know."

Of course I knew something. "Did you know a tiger's stripes don't just show up on its fur? They go all the way down to its skin. Even if you shaved off all its fur, it'd still have stripes showing. You'd still know it was a tiger."

"I mean, it's still a pretty big cat, so odds are it's a tiger."

I took a sip from my Yeti. I knew right then I liked Evan. Smart mouth and all.

Now, today he is on one knee on the clay court. He drags his fingers along the crushed gravel. Numbers, designs—even words—appear at his fingertips. Evan. Wuz. Here.

"So what do you think?" he asks.

“You have very nice handwriting, Evan,” I say.

He looks up, his mouth half open. “Thank you, but that’s not what I meant.”

“I know,” I say.

He had been telling me about some girl at school. She came to his match last week supposedly. Cheered so loud. Absolutely gushed when he broke his racquet. That’s what the older boys on the team told him.

“They gave you her number?” I ask.

“Yeah,” he said. “They said she really wants me to text her.”

“But she hasn’t talked to you?”

“Well, no. They said she really liked watching me move.”

I take a sip from my Yeti. Hazy IPA in there this time. “Watching you move?” I ask.

“I know, right?” He sniffs. “Do you smell something weird.”

“No. What does it smell like?”

He shrugs.

“And what’s her name again?”

“Katie,” he says. “No, Kate. Maybe Catherine?”

“Shit, Evan. You don’t even know this mystery girl’s name?” I sip.

“No, but I’ve got her number.”

“From those assholes. Not her.”

“But they showed me a picture and she’s so cute.”

“A picture? You’ve never even seen her?”

“I mean I’m just a freshman. She’s a senior. They keep us pretty separated in school.”

“I know. I went there.”

Evan looks up and waves two fingers in my face. “Two years ago, grandpa.”

I slap his hand away. “Don’t be rude.”

“I’m joking.” He rolls his eyes.

I know he is. He jokes around but never means it.

“Just be careful, Evan,” I say. “You’re the new kid. So just be careful.”

“Why?” he asks.

I take a sip. “I know how boys like that are.”

“How?”

I sigh. “I just do.” I watch Evan. He watches the ants. I remember the last home match of my high school career. Senior day. Big crowd and everything. I won the deciding match. Afterward, a woman came up to me. Sam’s mother. She walked right up, finger pointed firmly at my face. Then she pointed at the other seniors. What was wrong with us? First we made her son cry. Then we take him to a party. He’s fifteen. Didn’t we know that? What was wrong with us? Sam was a good boy. And we weren’t. Everybody just thought we were so fucking great. Well, we weren’t. That’s what she told us. Right there in front of everyone. They all watched.

“Because you were on the team?” Evan asks.

“You know I was,” I say. But I’ve never told him what happened.

He sits for a minute. I wonder if he's heard from the other boys on the team about me. He asks: "What would you do then? About texting?"

I sip again. "I'd tell those boys to fuck off. Then talk to a girl in person first."

"You know I can't say that." He's turned his attention to an ant hill.

"I know," I say. "You're a good boy, Evan."

His nose inches away from the entrance to the ant hill. But he doesn't disturb them. Instead, his eyes dart back and forth, taking in the synchronized movement of the ants as they enter and exit. He watches them so carefully. "There you go, boys," he says. "That's some good boys."

\*

The high school tennis season ends a few weeks later. They win a state championship. But I don't go.

Evan wins the deciding match. His mother tells me about it after. "You would've been so proud," she says. "He was playing this kid that was so big. Mean as a snake too."

I think about how snakes can still bite after they've died. A decapitated snake's head will still inject venom. Usually it's more than normal. Enough to kill a person. But I keep this to myself.

"He was so happy," she says. "When he won, he cheered so loud. Right at his team. And they cheered back. They even picked him up on their shoulders. You would've loved it. You know how hard it's been for him being the new kid. You know how boys can be. But I think deep down they really are good boys."

Snakes also have super flexible jaws. Maybe the most flexible. This lets them eat prey that's bigger. Maybe even twice their size. But it also makes it that much easier to eat smaller animals. Ones they can capture easily. They swallow them whole without any difficulty.

I bet Evan knows this.

\*

A few weeks pass. Evan and I don't play tennis. This is the longest break we've had since we met. One Friday night, I go to the movies. *It*. Evan is at the counter buying two tubs of popcorn. He's there to watch the same movie. His mother thinks he's watching the live-action remake of *The Lion King*. The tennis team boys bought him a ticket.

"Isn't that cool?" he asks. He puts extra butter on the popcorn.

"Why are you buying so much popcorn?" I ask.

"The guys said they'd get me a ticket if I bought all the snacks," he says.

"Did you actually pay for your ticket too?"

He grins and nods. He doesn't realize he's the only one that's lost money. The guys have been much nicer. He tells me they've been practicing with him. Ever since he won the state championship. "You know," he says. "The match you didn't come to."

I run a hand through my hair. "I know. I'm sorry."

"Oh, it's okay." He shrugs. "Guess what? Did you know that in 1924 a labrador retriever got sent to jail for killing the governor's cat. It was up north somewhere. Had a mugshot and everything."

"Too bad it wasn't a pug," I say.

He takes a second before laughing. “So it could be a pug shot? That’s a good one.” He looks around. “Here. Hold this.” He forces a tub of popcorn into my hands and reaches into his pocket. He pulls out a clear mini bottle. Vodka. “Look.”

“Where’d you get that?” I ask.

“The team.” His eyes widen. He raises it to his mouth.

“Evan,” I say. “Give me that.” I snatch it from his lips.

“Hey!”

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“I’m just trying to have fun. They all do it.”

I put it in my pocket. Nobody sees. I ask him what he was going to do. Sip on it during the previews?

“I was going to drink it when the movie started and the lights went down,” he says. “We all were.”

“I think I’ll hold onto it,” I say. “I told you to be careful, Evan.”

He grabs the popcorn. “I’ve got to take this to the team.”

Inside the theatre, I sit in the back row. Evan and the tennis team boys sit in the middle. Pennywise dances on screen. Evan jumps. A small gasp comes from his mouth. The tennis team boys laugh. They throw popcorn.

“Stop,” Evan says. He knocks popcorn out of his hair. Then he shakes his head. Brushes his hair to the side.

“Don’t be scared, Evan,” the boys say. The one next to Evan jumps at him. His hands are claws. Evan cowers.

I stand and walk towards them. They're just fucking dumb boys.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" I ask.

The audience murmurs, tells me to sit down. But I can't. Not yet.

Evan tries to pull me towards the exit.

I lean towards the tallest boy. Even the smell of processed butter can't cover up his teenage stench. "You know I go to school with your big sister, right?"

"Yeah," he says. "So?"

"When we were home for break and you were at some tournament for the weekend, guess whose bed we fucked in?"

He just stares at me. "What happened to you?" he asks.

His friends are wide-eyed. One even laughs.

I smile and turn towards Evan. He is already gone.

I find him sitting on the curb outside.

"Why'd you do that?" he asks.

"Because those boys are dicks," I say. "You need to stand up for yourself."

"They didn't really mean it. They're my friends."

"Are they?"

"I think so."

"Boys like that are the ones you have to watch out for."

"But you were one of them."

"Yeah." I nod. "I was."

He sits in silence. His face rests in his hands.

I sigh. I pull the mini bottle from my pocket. I roll it back and forth between my fingers. I drink it. It burns my throat. “It’s like wolves in the wild,” I say. “There are packs and they have leaders. But you know how they pick the next leader?”

“Vote?” He smirks.

“No, smartass.” I pat him on the back. “The successor walks up and howls right in everyone’s face. Doesn’t matter how small he is. He just howls his fucking head off.”

“Are you sure that’s how it works?”

“Of course. I watch documentaries.”

He smiles, reassured.

I smile, but my heart races from the lie I’ve just told. Evan doesn’t need to know that the poor wolf would never survive. He would be picked apart, limb by limb.

But Evan doesn’t need to know. Because we’re not wolves.

\*

The next week, Evan texts me: *Hey sorry but I can't hit today*

I respond: *No problem. Maybe next week*

*Yeah maybe. If I'm not hitting with the team*

*Of course. Do what you gotta do*

*I will*

I pause before asking: *Everything ok?*

A few minutes pass by. My phone stays silent.

He says: *So you know those puffer fish? They're a delicacy in Japan. But chefs have to be trained to cook them. If you eat too much or the wrong part, you could die*

I respond: *Now that's a metaphor*

\*

I only see Evan a few times over the next few weeks. He's kept practicing with his team. I've been busy packing, readying to leave by the end of the summer.

But then Evan texts me one Saturday night: *I ned hlp*

He's at a party. I know something is wrong *because* he's at a party. When he sends me the address, I recognize it. One of the older boys on the tennis team.

When I pull up, cars are parked in the grass and the dull thumping of music comes from inside. When I walk in the front door, no one notices. Empty Miller Lite cans and Svedka bottles line the counter. Someone has even built a pyramid of beer cans on the living room table. Boys and girls run up and down the stairs.

At the top, leaning over the railing, is the boy I talked to in the theatre. He points at me. "Hey everyone," he says. "That guy fucked my sister."

The boys and girls cheer. He claps.

"See if you remember this in the morning," I say. "I lied. I wouldn't go near your skanky sister. It was actually your mom."

The boys and girls cheer even louder. I cringe because I enjoy that they've actually liked the joke.

I find Evan on the back porch. He's leaning over the edge, vomiting. He finishes and wipes his mouth. When he sees me, he runs over and throws his arm around my shoulder.

"Hey, dude," he says. "How'd you know I was here?"

“You’re the one who texted me,” I say.

He laughs. “Oh, yeah. I forgot.”

“Jesus, Evan. You’re wasted.”

“First time for everything. I haven't even had that much. Isn't this an awesome place?” He spreads his arms and spins around, stopping with his back to me. He starts to fall backwards and I catch him.

“Why don't we sit down over here,” I say, dragging him to some lawn chairs.

“I knew you'd catch me,” he says. “I trusted you.” He laughs some more, but it sounds different this time. There is something else in his voice. It's sad. I didn't know Evan could be sad.

“Let me take you home, Evan,” I say. “I'll take you to my house so you can sober up. You can tell your mom you're staying here.”

“No way.” He shakes his head. A little too violently because he leans over and vomits some more. “These are my friends.”

“You didn't even like these people a few months ago. You were scared of them. They made fun of you.”

“That's not true. I just didn't really know them.”

“I don't think they're good for you.”

“Sure they are. Do you remember Katie?”

“The girl those boys wanted you to text?”

“Yeah. She's here and her name's Catherine.”

I rub my hands through my hair. “Well,” I say. “That's good to know.”

“Yeah, I know,” he says. “She took me upstairs and she kissed me. And I kissed her. And then she put her hand in places. But I made her keep her hand on the outside of my clothes.” He wags his finger at me. “Because I’m a good boy.”

“I know you are, Evan. Let’s leave.”

“No. But you can please get me another drink. I like that vodka stuff.”

I stand up and reach my hand out towards him. “I think you’ve had enough. Now let’s leave. This isn’t the place for you.”

He slaps my hand away. “How would you know? You don’t know anything.”

I kneel. I grab him by the shoulders. “Sure, I do. I know I’ve got to get you out of here. Why don’t you tell me something I *really* don’t know, ok?”

He stares right at me. His eyes shine brightly in the moonlight. “I know what you did on this team and I know you’ve been lying to me,” he says. “And you don’t know that.” He presses his finger into my chest.

“About what?” I ask. “Tell me, Evan. Tell me what I’ve been lying about.”

He starts breathing harder and harder. “You’re just like them,” he says.

I shake my head. “Not anymore.”

“Yes, you are. And now you’re leaving.”

“I’m just transferring to another school, Evan.”

“Why are you leaving me?”

My head drops. “I just have to,” I say. “But Evan, I’m never leaving you. You’ll always have me as your friend.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” He sniffs. “Tell me something I don’t know. Please.”

I hear him say this. I know he's still in there. The Evan I know. That's something I know.

"Okay," I say. "Koalas have fingerprints that are so similar to humans, detectives can mistake them. Caused a shit show in Australia last year."

He laughs. "I bet. What else? Anything else."

So I keep going. If a drop of alcohol touches a scorpion, it'll sting itself to death. A doctor invented some device to tell a dog's mood by its wagging tail. Turns out they've been lying to us all these years. In World War II, we trained bats to drop bombs. But we got it wrong. Bats don't follow directions like we do. They dropped the bombs on their trainers.

"Oh," he says. "That's good."

"How about this? Did you know that when butterflies are about to break out of their chrysalis, their brains process the colors of their surroundings? That's how their wings turn out. Whatever they're thinking, that's what color their wings are."

"I don't believe you," he says. His eyes glisten.

"Why not?" I ask. "The biggest butterfly in the world, a Queen Alexandria or something like that, had wings that were a foot in diameter. You think the colors of those were random? Fuck no, they were by choice. Look it up. They were beautiful."

"Whether that's true or not," he says. "You're still lying."

I nod and look down. "I know," I say. "I know I'm lying to you, Evan. Their colors are just how they are. They have no say in them. I lied."

“Then stop,” he says. “Just stop.” Tears form in his eyes. I watch as one drops down his cheek. It hangs off the edge before finally falling. I think about what’s in that tear. I imagine there’s a world in there, an entire world, mixed in with all the atoms. Evan and I don’t know. There could be anything in there. We’ll never know. I think how the entire world shatters as it hits the ground. It explodes. And Evan doesn’t even realize it. Not yet.

“Ok,” I say to him. “I won’t lie to you anymore. Do you remember the uncle I told you about? The one with the runt?”

He wipes his nose. “Of course,” he says. “The one that survived.”

“He didn’t live,” I say.

His body slackens. “What do you mean?” he asks.

“I mean he died, Evan,” I say. “My uncle found him the morning after he was born. He was buried underneath his mom and brothers and sisters. They were sleeping and he was dead underneath.”

“That’s not true.”

I nod. “It is.” And I’m sorry I’ve told him the truth. But I’ve told him.

His face crumples. “Please,” he says. “Another drink.”

I stand up. Evan’s face has returned to his hands. His head moves up and down as he cries. Inside the house, boys and girls are dancing. They shimmer with sweat. Alive for the night.

At the counter, I grab two empty cups. I look into them. Into me. I open a bottle.

Because Evan is a good boy. And I am too.

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