

Spring 4-26-2011

Unspoken Moons

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Unspoken Moons

by Hunter Taylor

A collection of short stories
written, selected, and edited
for the USF Honors College thesis program
during the 2010-2011 academic year.

Approved April 26, 2011 by Rita Ciresi

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Caching Out

I looked over my shoulder as I trudged through the bushes. The suburbians sleeping in the houses on either side of me could have woken at any moment to find an intruder outside their windows. Snapping twigs and crunching leaves spoiled the silence, and I crouched low to hide in the darkness. The only light in the area shone from my GPS's dimmed screen, where a small arrow pointed ahead and a little to the right. I was 70 feet away from the coordinates.

At the base of the palm tree sitting in the median, I scooped piles of dirt to find the hidden container. About 15 feet up the trunk, a dead stem extended from the trunk, but the rest of the palm was smoothed over.

A perfect hiding spot, I thought

I ran and jumped up as high as I could, my arms and legs latching around the palm. My hand barely reached around the stem and grasped a cool, metal cube. When I picked it up, it rattled in my shaking hand.

Suddenly, I was blinded by pure halogen-white. The light threw my balance off, and I landed into a bush. My movement had triggered someone's floodlights.

When the light switched off, I pushed my back up against the palm tree and held the tin up to my eyes. Some of the cameo paint had been scratched off. My fingers pried at the lid, which separated from the container with a small pop. Inside was a small scroll and short pencil. I unrolled the paper.

The edges were browned and dirty, and listed on it were over a hundred names and dates. The first person to find the tin had signed the log over five years ago. I found some space on the back and wrote my own name.

My fingers rubbed a small bronze coin in pocket. On the face of it was a crown encapsulated by two conjoined hearts. On the back, *Pour la joie de vivre* was engraved around the edges.

I placed the coin in the tin, sealed it, and threw it back up the palm tree. With some luck, the cache would stay up there, hidden for the next person to find.

A week prior, I met Brian at our favorite sushi joint to celebrate our one-year anniversary. He was changing shirts in his car when I pulled up next to him.

“Stop stripping in public,” I said knocking on his window.

Inside, we ordered our usual—bagel, California, and spicy tuna rolls. Brian looked down at his phone, probably checking the news or an endless number of e-mails. Too many times before I made the mistake of asking him to put it down, but I didn’t feel like being called “high maintenance” in that moment. He probably would add, “We’re both men. Let’s act like it,” so I sat there, rubbing my thumb over the uneven teal mosaic tiles grouted into the tabletop.

When the waitress finally delivered the sushi, my eyes devoured a small slice of California. Between my teeth though, the roll tasted bitter, and the rice crunched in my teeth like writhing pill bugs.

“This doesn’t taste like it normally does,” I said.

“It’s fine,” Brian said, popping another into his mouth.

I waved down the waitress. “The sushi, it tastes, I dunno, a bit stale—”

“It’s delicious,” Brian said.

“Are you sure?” the waitress asked. “I can bring you back some fresh rolls.”

“We’re fine. Really,” Brian said.

She walked back to the kitchen.

“You know I hate returning food,” Brian said.

“This sushi is disgusting.”

“It tastes normal.”

“You eat it then,” I said.

I ordered a side salad, and he kept eating sushi. Eventually we laughed it off when an annoying kid about two tables over started running and tripped. Brian paid the check, and I wiped the bitterness off in a fold of my napkin.

He walked me to my car. “Are you following me home?” I asked. “We’re closer to my place, after all.”

“Don’t you have class in the morning?”

I sighed.

“I’ll get you this weekend, Rey,” he said. “Only a couple more days.”

We kissed goodbye, then drove away in opposite directions.

All the good parking spots next to the stairs were taken in the apartment complex garage, which forced me to park in a far corner. My car’s front bumper ground against the top of a concrete parking hump when I pulled into a spot too quickly. I got out of the car and crouched down to see how much paint had been scratched off.

From my low angle, I saw underneath an electric box bolted to the garage’s mildewed walls. A little black tin stuck to the bottom edge by magnets. I reached up and grabbed the container—a hide-a-key. However, instead of keys, it held a small pin that said, “I’m with stupid,” and a log of names.

The reverse of the log held a message that read:

Congratulations! You've found it—intentionally or not!

This container is a game piece in the global treasure hunt called GeoCaching.

These are the only rules:

If you take from the cache, you must put something of your own back in.

You must sign and date your visit in the logbook.

Visit the website below and share your story!

I had *found* something. On the surface, it was insignificant, but I saw something that only the smallest sliver of human eyes would ever get to see. Replacing the hide-a-key, I felt thrust into a secret order of brotherhood.

I walked back to my apartment and immediately pulled up the web page on my computer. I discovered an entire community—hundreds of thousands of people—dedicated to this hobby online. There was even an online log dedicated to the cache I just found. Someone named pathfinder92 wrote in it only two days ago, “Thanks for the hide. I left a trinket in there for next finder. Hehe.”

There were over a million caches hidden worldwide, and I had only found one. Ten more waited within a three-mile radius of my apartment. A search page listed coordinates to each hiding place. I only needed a GPS to find them.

I closed my laptop lid. Staring at the wall, I whispered, “I knew I was looking for something.”

“Remind me again why you just wasted \$200 on a GPS.”

“Brian, don’t be a dick,” I said, punching in coordinates to the device. “Can you just have fun for once?”

The GPS led us to a nearby park—an open field framed and segmented into squares by strips of brick. At midday, the park was largely empty, with only a couple runners and an old man walking his German shepherd.

“It’s so beautiful here,” I said. “I can’t believe I’ve lived here for three years and never been to this park. We should have a picnic here one day, babe.”

“Mm-hmm.” Brian was looking down at his phone poking his stubby fingers on the screen.

I rolled my eyes and checked the GPS. The little compass indicated the cache hid to the left about 300 feet—right about where the empty dog park was.

Brian turned his head after a shirtless runner trotted past us.

“Nice body...” Brian said.

“I’m right here, Brian.”

“What? Don’t you think he’s hot?”

“I don’t understand why you spend so much of our time together looking at other guys.”

Brian stopped walking and let out a low growl.

“That’s one of the reasons I like being gay—checking out other hot guys. Would you rather me cheat on you, or just look?”

The directions led me to where a signpost read, “If your dog poops, you scoop,” at the edge of a flowerbed.

“Is your geo-treasure a piece of dog shit?” Brian asked.

I looked around the back of the sign, but nothing was attached to it. There wasn’t anything in the nearby bushes either. I burrowed into the mulch.

“Help me out,” I said

“I don’t want to dig in the dirt. What if poop’s in there?”

I moved my hands towards the signpost and dug around the base. Beneath the mulch, I felt something hard. Relieved it wasn’t a mushy turd, I pulled out a small black film canister.

“Found it.”

I held the canister up to the sun. The old man and his dog seemed to be watching me from a distance. He had a smooth face behind thick, horn-rimmed glasses. His German shepherd sat motionless, its ears perked up past the man’s waist. The way they stared, they probably thought we were smuggling drugs. I quickly turned away and opened the canister.

“What’s inside?” Brian asked.

“There’s a cache log, a pencil stub,” I said, “and this little ring.”

The ring was made from cheap plastic, like it came from one of those 25-cent toy dispensers normally located outside the restrooms at a mall. It was coated in shiny silver paint and crowned with a blue heart-shaped gem.

“Will you marry me?” I said.

“Nice, Rey. Come on, let’s put it back now.”

I signed the log and placed the ring back. Then I pulled a bronze coin out of my pocket and dropped it in the canister.

“Is that from our trip to New Orleans?” Brian asked.

“A lot of people leave stuff behind. Last night, I found the Mardi Gras bag in the back of my closet and dug out the coins I caught in the parades. They’re kind of like real treasure.”

I put my hands in my pocket and thumbed another one of the coins. The rough contour of the conjoined hearts scraped against my skin.

“I still think this is pointless,” Brian said.

I searched for the next cache by myself.

This time, the coordinate pair led me to a parking garage in the business district. Suits were driving in and out of the security gate as I walked up in cut-offs and a tank top. I tried sneaking around to the back entrance of the garage, but a guard intercepted me. He grimaced at me through fish-eye spectacles, and every wrinkle on his face folded like cruller around his mouth.

“This is private property, kid,” he said. He sounded like a goblin from Lord of the Rings guarding his cavern.

I pointed to my yellow GPS and muttered, “Treasure hunting.”

“Are you one of those Geo-Crunchers? I’ve had plenty of people come by here lookin’, but no one’s ever found anything.”

“Do you mind if I look?”

“Eh, what the hell.”

The bottom floor of the garage was filled with glossy, high-end cars. I looked behind me, and the old guard was watching me.

I searched all five floors of the garage until I reached the deserted roof. Only rows of lampposts decorated the concrete flatland. My GPS pointed to the tallest one perched in the center.

There were small panels on each side of the light, but they wouldn’t budge from underneath tightened screws. I kicked the base of the lamp, knocking it off center. I squatted down and lifted up the plastic covering.

Underneath were giant bolts securing the post into the concrete and a flat, wooden box the size of a deck of cards. As I picked up the box, a car’s motor hummed behind me. The motor

belonged to one of those miniature “smart” cars, driven by the old man from the park with his massive German shepherd riding shotgun. The man wore a short-sleeve white oxford button-up and a blue and white striped bowtie. Up close, his face looked an intense degree of taut only obtained through several facelifts.

Both man and dog stared, but the dog’s ice-blue eyes caught my attention. The ground felt like it spun beneath me, but our eyes remained locked until he barked.

The man slammed the gas on his car, and the tires tore into the concrete leaving a sour cloud of rubber particles in the air. The loud squeal caused me to drop the cache. The wooden lid broke from its hinges, and the cache log, a pen, and a monocle spilled onto the ground.

I picked up the eyepiece, and the glass had a fresh crack extending to the center. The sun’s rays concentrated through to monocle and burned a spot on the crease where my two lips meet. I dropped it again in pain, and the glass shattered across an empty parking space.

I quickly signed the log and replaced the broken box before doing more damage. I left two coins behind this time. Downstairs, the guard stopped me again.

“Where’s your treasure?” he asked.

Walking out to the sidewalk, I said, “You’ll have to find it yourself, sir.”

A few nights later, while browsing the cache website for my next hunt, a message popped onto my screen: “New cache nearby.” The site said “dogcacherguy1937” hid the cache. I clicked on his profile. Starting on the day I found the cache at the park, dogcacherguy1937 logged a visit at every single location I went to within an hour after I had been there.

I picked up my phone and dialed Brian. He didn’t answer.

“Brian, something weird is going on,” I said to his voicemail. “I think someone’s been following me.”

After waiting 20 minutes for him to call me back, I decided to go find the cache. I knew it was meant for me.

The coordinates landed on the outskirts of the park where scattered trees slowly grew into a forest. I felt like a D-list horror movie actress whose only lines were terrified screams. The only defense I had was an industrial flashlight for bludgeoning.

When the GPS said I was only ten feet away, a faint patter echoed through the trees. The sound grew to a steed-like gallop, and the blue-eyed German shepherd leapt over a bush. I dropped my flashlight and covered my eyes, but the dog didn’t tear into me. He barked, then trotted ahead of me.

I picked up my flashlight and slowly followed in his wake. He sniffed out a tree and dug his paws into the ground below it. Dirt flew into the air as he ferociously dug into the earth.

Suddenly, a chunk of bronze metal pelted the side of my face and landed on the ground. It was my coin, and the dog was flipping more of them into the air.

“Looks like you found it.” The old man stepped out from behind a tree.

I shined the flashlight on his smooth face, and his branch-like fingers tried to block the light.

“You took all my coins,” I said.

“You gave them all away,” he said, stepping out my flashlight’s beam. He leaned down slowly and picked up a coin. “I placed that cache—the one near the dog park.”

He reached out and took my hand. I tried to pull back, but he had a tight grip on my wrist. His eyes, the same shade as the German shepherd, forced a gaze onto mine.

“I saw how he treated you,” he said.

He placed the coin in my palm and curled my fingers around it. Then he placed his own hand on top of my fist.

“*Garde la joie*,” he said.

When I got back to my apartment, Brian was pacing in front of my door.

“Where have you been?”

I clutched my fist around a coin.

“What if you were killed?”

I tossed him the coin. It spun in the air, blurring the image of the crowned hearts and the inscription. The coin hit Brian on the shoulder, and then clanged to the ground.

He picked up the coin, but didn’t take his eyes off me.

“Rey?”

I unlocked the door and looked at him while slowly backing into the apartment. Brian moved to follow me inside, but I closed the door in his face. The brass lock snapped into place, and the knob fidgeted from the other side. Behind my closed door, I imagine Brian looking at that coin, tracing the outline of the conjoined hearts on the back. Eventually he’d throw the coin into the street, leaving it for some bum with a shopping cart to find and add to his pile of nothing.

I sit at the kitchen table eating a grilled cheese sandwich when my dad flings open the screen door. He walks in with puffy lips full of tobacco and a huge fold of mail secured under his arm. There's so much that it looks like it's going to start slipping from his armpit. He always waits so long to check the mail. When I know he hasn't checked it for a while, I'll go out to the mailbox and get it even though he tells me I'm not supposed to. Once, there was a magazine wrapped in black plastic inside the mailbox. I thought it might be a present from Mom, so I unwrapped it. There were pictures of girls, pretty like my mom, except Mom always had clothes on. I just stood there with a really scary feeling inside me until my dad found me with the magazine and he rolled it up and beat me with it.

Dad walks up to the table and dumps the pile in front of me. He says, "I think you got something in there," as he points to the small hill of envelopes and coupon packs. He walks away and I see another black magazine hiding in his back pocket. I flip through the stacks until I find a magazine with a large, grey monitor on the cover and "Damien Hale" printed on the address label.

For my last birthday, Dad bought me a subscription to *Everything Computers* magazine. I don't really like to read, but he always tells me that I have a talent with computers, that I should keep learning about them because it would be useful. "Computers are the foo-ture, son," he says with his pleated red lips, getting ready to spit out some snuff. He always talks like that, but he never wants to buy a new computer for me. He tells me that the black and white Macintosh desktop he had since I was born is "perfectly good."

I finish my grilled cheese and walk up the stairs to my room. I shut the door behind me and climb into my bed with red trains printed all over the sheets. I lie down and flip through my computer magazine, looking at the pictures of monitors, accessories and software, skipping over any

words or articles. I get to page 86, and I see a picture for a story called “Could Your Computer Get a Virus?”

On the page, a doctor holds out the end of his stethoscope. He’s got a blue surgery cap on his head and one of those important white coats. A white surgery mask covers most of his face, but his brown eyes poke out, arched from under caterpillar eyebrows, like they could just start inching off his forehead. The hand holding the stethoscope has the sleeve of the coat pulled back, showing his bushy, black arm hairs. It makes me think of my Gramps and his furry arms. There was this bottle with an “xxx” label tattooed on Gramps’ arm, all the black ink faded and bled into his skin. He’d always reach out and pinch me and I’d try to get him to stop by digging my nails into the tattoo. He never realized how much he hurts me.

At the end of the stethoscope in the magazine, it isn’t a stethoscope; it’s an eye. It’s red, like the lipstick I would find in Mommy’s make-up drawer. The eye is wide open and stares at me. I don’t do anything except stare back for hours and hours. I just lie on my bed and watch that eye held by the hairy hand and arm.

My eyes close and I start to imagine the red eye burning past my eyelids. I feel the lower parts of me shift and when I open my eyes again, I’m in the backseat of my daddy’s car lying down. I see him in the front seat with his salt and pepper hair combed back and face shaved clean. He never shaves unless he has to go somewhere important.

“Where are we going, Daddy?”

“Shh... we’re almost there.”

He reaches for the dial on the radio and turns on some country music loud enough so he can’t hear me talk. I sit up in my seat and look out the window. Instead of seeing houses and pasture and cows, everything just blurs. It looks like the one time when I painted with Mom. She

gave me watercolors and I painted our house and me and Dad and Mom and Grammy and Gramps. I was almost done, but I dipped my brush into my water glass and knocked it over. Everything bled and smeared across the paper, except for Gramps. The water didn't fall on him, so he just stood there in orange because I don't have skin-colored paint.

The blurry window makes me feel weird and I can't look out it anymore. Every part of me feels alive, like electricity runs through me. I would say I feel happy, but I'm really scared at the same time. My underwear feels like it tightens around my waist. I want to take them off, but the car stops outside of a big white building.

Inside, Dad pulls me by my hand up to a nurse sitting at a tall rounded grey desk. She tells him to fill out some papers and I hear scribbles as the pen scrapes across the page. Dad turns to me and kneels down low so he's just as tall as me.

"Son, I'm only gonna be gone a few days, okay?" I nod my head, but I don't know why. "You better be good for the nice lady over there and the doctor." He gives me a slap on the back and walks out the way we came in, leaving me in the large grey room in front of a grey desk I can't even see over. The nurse has to stand up to see me trying to look up at her. She looks really old, like my Grammy. Her hair is curled up like a caramel cloud around her head. She smiles and her eyes glow warmly.

"Babydoll, let me take you to your room," she says and again I get dragged along by my hand. She leads me to a gargantuan steel door and pulls me into the room. The back wall is made of cement, but to the left and right the walls are made of glass. Both ways, I see a million empty rooms just like mine.

"Now go ahead and get dressed into your gown, hun," she says and closes the door as she leaves. I hear the lock click.

In the room there is only a bed with white sheets that feel like paper. My white gown is laid out, waiting for me to put it on. When I tie the back, I realize that my booty isn't covered and it starts getting cold. To my right, I see that not all the rooms are empty. The one next to me has another boy in it, except he's at least four years younger than me, maybe about five and a half years old. He's got blue eyes and short, blond hair like me, but his eyes are rubbed red where they should be white. Tears are dried all the way down his cheeks.

"What's your name?" I say as my fingers circle and touch some holes that are drilled into the glass.

He doesn't say anything, but more tears start rolling down the same stained paths.

"Why are you sad?" I say, but he just starts shaking.

I put my hands on the glass and plant my face in between them. I blow air so my cheeks blow up and I look like one of the suckerfish Mom would take me to see at the pet store. He stops crying and smiles just a little. I smile back.

"I'm Damien," I say. "I don't know where my dad went. He leaves me at Grammy and Gramps a lot since Mom had to go on vacation. I don't know where this place is. Did your daddy leave you here too?"

He nods.

"Do you like computers?" I don't wait for an answer. "They're lots of fun. My daddy says I'm really good at figuring them out when something's wrong. I never met a computer that could stump me."

Wait, that's not true though. I think. One time, I was on the computer at my school learning how to use the Internet. The librarian lady told me that I could find out anything I wanted

about almost everything. She said, “Just type it in that space right there,” right before she went to someone else’s computer to help them. I wanted to know more about me, so I typed in *boys.com*.

All of a sudden, lots of pictures popped up and took over the computer screen. There were men with bodies tan and muscular like the boxers my dad watched on TV, but naked and wet like they just went swimming. Some were just standing there; others were putting their mouth on the place Daddy said no one else should touch. I felt a scary feeling, like when I saw the black magazine. I started crying because I was afraid and then I heard the librarian scream because I guess she was scared too. I didn’t want to get beaten again.

“Anyways,” I say to the boy on the other side of the glass, “I want to be a…” I can’t remember what it’s called. “I wanna make computers when I grow up.”

He just looks at me, like he’s blank, but also like he doesn’t really care. Then the door opens and the nurse pops in her head.

“The doctor will see you now, babydoll,” she says.

I go to walk out the door and the boy throws himself up against the glass wall. He looks more scared than ever. His eyes are big and he cries again and starts to scream “No trust! No trust! No trust!” over and over again. His voice starts cracking and his fingernails scrape on the glass.

“No trust!”

Then the nurse pulls me out and shuts the door, muting the sound. She sits me down on a doctor’s table in another room and the doctor comes in. He reminds me of the picture in my magazine. He has the same mask over his face, the same caterpillar eyebrows and the same bushy arms.

“We’re just going to do a short examination today, Damien,” he says. He takes out his stethoscope and I scream, expecting to see an eye at the end, but it’s just cold, hard metal.

“Shh...” he says. “There’s nothing to be afraid of here.” He puts the stethoscope to my chest and does some other things I don’t really know were for. He pulls a cherry lollipop out of his white coat and gives it to me. “I think we’re done for today. Nurse, you can take the boy back to his room. Make sure nothing happens to him.” And then he leaves.

When the nurse drops me off in my room, she says, “Babydoll, it’s time for bed. Drink this, hon. It’ll help you sleep.”

She hands me a warm mug that smells like hot chocolate. I hold it and it feels good on my hands in the cold room. I drink it down and climb into my bed. The nurse turns off the lights and leaves. I look up at the ceiling and see that it is white with a zillion tiny bumps. I imagine the same ceiling at Grammy and Gramps’ house, except it was low enough that I could touch it when I stood on Gramps’ desk. I would rub the ceiling and the bumps would come off. I would rub the bumps and pretend that it was snowing until the flecks got in my eyes or Grammy came in and caught me. I knew it was wrong, but the snow reminded me of Mom. Daddy said when Mom left, she went somewhere cold so she could ski. I always wanted it to snow so maybe I could trick her into coming back.

A hard tap on the glass makes me sit up in my bed. The other boy stands there, tapping, wanting me to come over to him. I get up and walk over to the glass. I can barely see anything with the lights turned out, but I squint and see him with his palm pressed up to the wall.

“What are you doin’?” I say.

“Did you trust?” He looks deep into my eyes.

“Nothing happened. Why do you think the doc is so bad anyways?”

Before he answers, he looks like he's gonna cry again. He leans on the glass and slides down it until he's sitting on the ground, his back facing me. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a red lollipop covered in lint and boogers.

Right then, the door to my room opens. I turn around and see a man that looks like he came from *boys.com*. He walks up to me and grabs my arm, yanks me away from the glass. I look back at my friend, but he isn't there anymore. There are just rows and rows of beds and open doors. There are a million big men dragging me through the frames.

The man pulls me down the dark, grey hallway and into the same room as before, but now the doctor is already there when we get inside. He still wears the same white mask. He points to the doctor's table and the man picks me up and lays me down on it. I feel scared, like I should run away, but I just lie there, watching.

The doctor takes his fingers and sticks them in the man's mouth, back and forth, in and out. Both of them start making noises and I hear the doctor say, "Ohhh..." The man goes to take the doctor's mask off, but the doctor pushes the man away. Instead, the doctor walks up to me and leans down to my ear.

"Do you love me, Damien?" he says quietly.

I can't say anything. I'm so scared.

"Damien, do you want another lollipop?"

"Y-y-yuh-yes," I say. I don't know why. I don't want it, but I think I have to.

"Good," he says and he rips off my nightgown.

It's so cold, cold like snow, in this room and I curl up on the table. I don't want them to see me naked. Daddy said no one should see me naked, but the doctor loves me, right? He wouldn't hurt me. Then the doctor unbuttons his white coat and takes it off. Underneath it, he's naked, too.

He has hair everywhere, on his chest and belly, and I wonder why I don't have any hair except for on my head. I see his bushy arms and on the left one he has a tattoo of a bottle wrapped in an "xxx" label.

The other man takes my arms and stretches me back out on the table. I want to fight back but he pins me down really hard. The doctor comes up to me and puts his hand over my belly button.

"Do you trust me, Damien?"

He moves his hand lower down my front and I try not to cry.

"Do you trust me?"

His hand slides lower and lower. I try to squirm away, but then he touches me down there. I close my eyes and with all my strength, I pull my arms away from the man and sit up. I swing punches at the doctor and my screams burst from my mouth:

"Gramps, no!"

My punches don't hit anything though. When I open my eyes, I'm sitting up on my bed at home, still holding my computer magazine. The eye from the stethoscope and the doctor both continue to stare at me. I want to wrap it up in black plastic and never see it again. I throw the magazine across the room and realize my pants are wet. I think maybe I peed myself, but when I unzip my pants, it looks like I blew my nose in my underwear. It smells like sweat, and when I touch it, it makes my fingers sticky.

Confessions from a Tanning Booth

I step into the hexagon-shaped chamber and pull the door closed behind me. My feet step over the little footprints that indicate the middle of the floor. The booth appears darker than it really is because I'm wearing tanning goggles. It's like looking through a sheer blue scarf at night. While inside a box. I feel like I'm in a torture chamber and there should be spikes and broken glass coming out of the walls. Except instead of spikes, there are large UV bulbs. And instead of coming out all bloody and dead, I'll leave the booth fabulously tan. Then everyone will tell me how good I look and wish they were as tan as me. I love it when people notice how tan I am.

I push the black button and the pale blue lights turn on with a loud thump. A fan on the ceiling of the booth rattles into motion and creates a wind tunnel. My skin crisps under the UV rays. Even though it's harsh, the light wraps around me like a security blanket. I adjust the goggles and little bits of light slip in and black out my vision. The light burns my eyes like I've been staring into the sun for hours. I close them so it will stop.

I stand there. I sway back and forth. I tan.

The wait is always the worst part of tanning. I wish someone would invent some sort of UV lightning bolt that could zap and tan me instantly. But since I don't have that, I usually just count. If I count, I don't have to think. I don't have to think about Gabe and everything I gave up for him.

I don't have to think about the fact that I haven't taken a shit in six days and the laxatives I took aren't working. If I can't shit, I can't have sex. And, after a week like this, I really need to get laid.

Ugh, I don't want to think anymore. For the next seven minutes, I refuse to feel.

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven...

"Eight," I say. "My appointment was supposed to be at eight. It's already almost nine. I have places to be."

"Sir, please sit back down," the receptionist says. "We're a little behind today. Let me go check to see where the doctor is."

She looks at me through the glass window. There are rows of filing cabinets lined up behind her. She's wearing the ugliest frayed sweater the most faded shade of pink I've ever seen. It looks like it came from a knitting horror movie, and her grey granny afro looks equally tattered. I'm sure, underneath the desk, she's wearing some form of hideous diabetic shoes.

"Whatever," I say. While you're at it, you might want to give your sweater back to the clawing cat you stole it from, I add in my head and sit back down.

Eventually, a nurse wearing lavender scrubs and tapping her clipboard enters the waiting room. She calls out, "Mr. Sommerfield."

"Here," I say. "Does Dr. Rick realize how late he is?"

"Umm..."

"I've been waiting *forty-eight* minutes."

Forty-nine, fifty, fifty-one, fifty-two, fifty-three...

“Fifty-four dollars,” Gabe says. “I’ve never seen anyone spend that much on freaking vampire magazines. This craze is getting hella out of hand.”

“Yeah, I don’t get it either. I mean, pale people are so ugly.” I blow smoke from my curled lip and tap my cigarette to ash it into a skull-shaped tray.

“Uh, sure,” he says. “But it bothers me that the people who are obsessed with this shit are so dumb. I get attitude all the time from little teenage girls at the register. What ever happened to classics like *Catcher in the Rye*? We haven’t sold a copy of that in months. I thought people who actually read were supposed to be more intelligent.”

Catcher in the Rye used to be my favorite book. Suddenly, I realize I can’t remember the main character’s name. Eh, I used to be stupid then anyways.

He gets up and refills his sweet tea and vodka. A newspaper sits on his leopard-spotted coffee table. I notice it’s not printed in English. The characters just look like random symbols that don’t make any sense.

“Is this a Russian newspaper? You should read it to me.”

“Sure. It’s filled with propaganda and shit. I think the Russians of St. Pete want to take over. You want a refill, too?”

I raise my glass and he takes it into the kitchen.

We’ve known each other for about two years now, and I’ve always had this *thing* for Gabe ever since I found out we both could name all 150 Pokémon. Whenever I come visit him, we usually play video games together or I watch him smoke weed. But when Gabe’s boyfriend Stan broke up with him a few months ago, I became nervous around him.

If I was once restrained inside a box, I was now peeking through an open flap.

His ex was exactly the type Gabe normally falls for, the type in the *Boys Gone Wild* commercials filled with muscles and tattoos that come on late at night. I know the type I need to be if I'm going to take Stan's place. Fun. Flirty. Gay.

Physically, there's nothing significant about Gabe. From the dirty white v-neck he wears all the time to his shaved head, he's completely bland. But I'm drawn to him. Every time I see his lips, surrounded by his auburn beard, I want to kiss them. When he smiles, he has dimples on both sides of his cheeks even though only half his mouth moves.

I realized that if I wanted him, I couldn't be me—the friendly Noah. I needed to be Noah Gone Wild. Since then, I've been patient. Bit by bit, every part of me has transformed. It started with tanning and working out and progressed into shoving chemicals and synthetics into my body. I've never looked so good. I know Gabe thinks so, too.

But nothing has happened between us, yet. I figure he'll make the move when he's ready, but so many times I've just wanted to take him by his shirt and slam him against the wall. I'd pin him there and bite his lip before we'd sink to the floor, mouths pressed together.

"So, uh, anything new going on?" I say.

"Well, I just found out my friend Olivia's best friend just died in a car accident. I'm a little worried about Olivia. She won't talk about it and acts like everything is ok."

"Don't normal people act that way?"

"Yeah, but I know she's hurt. She's keeping it bottled inside. If she keeps that up, she's eventually not going to be able to hold it in, and all of her emotions are going to come out at one of the most inconvenient and unfortunate moments."

"Well, she might be waiting for the *right* moment."

"And when would the right moment be?"

We stare at each other with not much else to say. Gabe pours more vodka into my glass. He hands it to me and sits down next to me. Instead of looking at me, he watches the ice cubes float in his drink.

I think I'm boring him. Do I have anything interesting to talk about? Maybe celebrities? The news? Should I act intelligent? Maybe I should try being myself.

I pick up the TV remote from the coffee table.

"Hey, what was the gay channel you were talking about the other day?"

"LOGO," he says. "It's channel one sixty-four."

One sixty-five, one sixty-six, one sixty-seven, one sixty-eight, one sixty-nine...

"One seventy cc's should be good," Dr. Rick says. "Let's see how they should look on your chest."

He purposely flexes his biceps as he holds up the clear silicone-filled sacs. He has hard and dominating muscles, but he also has the balding head of a rapist. He makes sure I'm taken care of, though.

The implants hang firmly between Dr. Rick's fingers and I imagine how they'll look underneath my skin.

"Do you think they'll be big enough?" I say. "I really want my pecs to bulge out my shirt."

I take the implants from Dr. Rick and model them in the mirror propped against the wall. I imagine that my hands are Gabe's hands. He squeezes my chest and asks me how I have such a perfect body. I tell him I just go to the gym occasionally, and then he throws me onto his bed. He tells me he loves me. And he loves me.

“Oh!” I drop the implants. They bounce like dying fish on the floor.

“Noah,” Dr. Rick says. “Come sit next to me. We need to talk about your implants.”

“Is there something wrong with them?”

He puts his hand on my leg. “You’re young. About 25, right?”

“Twenty-two.”

“Yes, hmm... Well you should consider the reasons you want these implants. Are they the right reasons?”

I think of Gabe’s hands rubbing my chest. “Yes. Definitely.”

“Okay, now that we’ve had that talk, we need to discuss payment.”

“Oh.”

He rubs my bare back. “I don’t know if I’ll be able to convince the insurance company that these are medically necessary like I did with the Botox. I mean, telling them you were experiencing excessive perspiration and needed your underarm glands injected wasn’t a far stretch. They would never know where it actually went. But pectoral implants? Maybe you’ll have to remind me again why I’m doing all this for you.”

He pins me down on the examination table and sticks his tongue between my lips. I lie there paralyzed and let him clean the inside of my mouth. When he reaches to take off my pants though, I push him off of me.

“Wait,” I say. “I can’t have sex with you this time.”

“What do you mean? You do want those implants, don’t you?” He keeps holding me down on the table. If I didn’t have a legit excuse, he would do it anyways. I can see it in his receding hairline.

“I haven’t taken a shit in four days.”

“How the fuck are you that constipated? What have you been doing to yourself?”

“I don’t know.”

He squints his eyes. “You look a lot tanner since the last time I saw you. How often do you go tanning?”

“Every day. Sometimes twice a day if I feel sad.”

“Damn.” He scratches his forehead. “UV light dehydrates the body. Your body has dehydrated to the point that your excretory system isn’t functioning.”

“I just feel a little pressure right here.” I poke right underneath my bellybutton. “That’s not bad, right?”

“You need to take laxatives. Go buy some and then we’ll see about those implants you want. Make an appointment for this Thursday at three-fifteen.”

Three sixteen, three seventeen, three eighteen, three nineteen, three twenty...

Three twenty-one, three twenty-two, three twenty-three—

“What are you doing?” Gabe says. “You look completely zoned out.”

“Oh sorry. Sometimes I just get anxious, so I start counting inside my head.”

“Are you anxious about something?”

I put out my cigarette and scratch the side of my nose. My fingers smell like burnt popcorn kernels. I pleat my lips, quickly shrug and sink back into the black leather couch.

Gabe gets up and removes a large piece of glassware from underneath his leopard table.

“You want a bong hit?” He holds up a glass cylinder. It’s about a foot tall with black and blue swirls blown into the glass. The cylinder ends with a wide base that looks like a flattened spittoon.

“Uh, I don’t know if that’s a good idea,” I say. “My system doesn’t take weed very well.”

I never smoke weed. Never. It makes me feel like a zombie.

“What if it was just a modest hit?” Gabe pours water into the base and fills the cylinder with ice cubes. He smiles and I can see his dimples underneath his beard.

“Okay, but you’ll have to show me how. I’ve never done this before.”

He kneels across from me at the table. I watch him place bud into a glass pipe connected to the cylinder.

“This is what you do,” he says. “Put your lips on top of the bong. When you start to pull, I’ll light the bowl and the chamber will fill with smoke. After a couple seconds, I’ll take out the bowl and you’ll suck in all the smoke until the bong is empty. Got it?”

“Uh, alright.” I wipe my sweaty palms on my shorts and grab the bong with both my hands. I place my lips on it and inhale.

“Come on, suck,” Gabe says.

I breathe in deeper and the water from the bong starts bubbling. Gabe lights the weed and the smoke travels up the cylinder and into my mouth.

I scoot back into my seat after the hit. I hold my chest because it burns.

“Hold it in for at least seven seconds,” he says.

One, two, three, four, five, si—

I cough, hard and loud. Pain spits all across my abdomen. I haven’t taken a shit in five days. I’ve taken laxatives to replace lunch and dinner today and my colon still isn’t budging.

“I couldn’t hold it in,” I say. I choke on my words and start coughing again.

“Take it easy, stoner.” Gabe laughs. “That kind of lung capacity comes from experience.”

We both sink into separate sides of the couch. As the weed hits me, my mind feels like a vortex causing the universe to collapse into my head. I feel like a black hole that eventually must reverse. The room starts shaking and my end of the couch lifts into the air. I slide across the leather until I bump into Gabe.

“Umm, are you okay? You look a little washed out,” he says.

I press my finger against his lips and straddle him. When I lean in to kiss him, he pushes me off of him and back onto the couch. He stands over me.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

He spins around and around, sucked into the vortex.

“I’m everything you ever wanted,” I say.

“You’re burnt orange, if you haven’t realized.” He floats to the closet and pulls out a blanket. “I’m sorry,” he says. “I shouldn’t have said that. You’re probably just fucked up. You need to go to bed.” He throws the blanket at me and it covers my head like I’m a ghost.

“Why don’t you love me?” I say. I can’t see his face through the blanket.

“Do you remember everything you used to be? Compare that with who you are now.”

“Your blanket smells like chocolate cows.”

He sighs and turns off the lights, and I hear him climb the stairs to his room. In the dark, I listen and hope that Gabe comes back.

I hear nothing except the whirring of my brain.

“But I’m perfect now,” I say.

One, two, three, twelve, nine hundred seven, four hundred sixteen...

Four seventeen, four eighteen, four nineteen, four twenty.

Four twenty-one? How many seconds are in seven minutes?

The booth still shines. My skin feels crispy and the fan roars above me.

I press the red OFF button, but nothing happens. I try to push open the booth door, but it won't budge. I beat the wire cage that covers the UV lights. Nothing.

"I don't want to be tan anymore," I shout. The noise from the fan and radiating bulbs drown out my voice.

I shake the wire cage with every bit of strength I have. My eyes close tight and I try to rip the cage from the tanning booth's walls. I will not die this shade of orange.

Like a bolt of lightning striking me, the booth sends a shock through my hands. A red grid pattern burns into my palms and the scent of burnt skin fills the booth.

I remember everything in an instant. I remember Bulbasaur is the first Pokémon. I remember my natural hair color. I remember I love reading vampire stories.

Then, everything stops. The lights turn off. The fan stops spinning. A small trail of thick, chunky fluid runs down the back of my leg like warm oatmeal glides down an open throat. The door cracks open and pale light slips in. I can't hold it in anymore.

Will I Ever

I was running out of options. For the past three hours, we'd been sitting on Ryan's living-room floor chugging beer and playing "Never Have I Ever." The booze had punched gaping holes in any sort of personal information filter I possessed. I already had revealed that I had never tasted ketchup, snorted coke, or seen a girl naked. I couldn't think of anything else, so I said, "Never have I ever come standing up."

Before I said that, we were all laughing together. But now, after trying to outdo everyone, they laugh at me. Even my boyfriend Damon laughs, though he sounds like someone choking on mouthwash after trying to gargle.

Directly across from me, Ryan gets up on his knees and slams his hands down on his hideous lion-leg coffee table.

"Never?" Ryan says. "You've seriously never gotten off standing up?"

A single arching brow frames his left eye. He stares at me, and my finger traces the rim of my beer.

I realized my just-shared secret years ago when--per my masturbatory ritual--I lay down on the floor of my tub-shower combo, its cold porcelain stinging my back. From that angle I would see

all my leftover brown hairs clinging to the tub walls where the water rarely hit. The beige porcelain would warm against my body, and I would close my eyes. Just like that.

But that night I had just watched a porno online. It exhibited some generic frat boy in the shower. He was jerking off under the water, but he stood with a wide stance with one arm behind his back like he was in the military.

“I should try that,” I thought.

So I stood up in shower with the hot water hitting my back. I closed my eyes and concentrated. I thought of the guy in the video and mimicked his motions. Slowly my arm got tired, and I switched from my right to my left. Still nothing. When my left arm tired, I switched back to the right and made my arm sprint like a marathoner in his last hundred yards. Except I fell flat right before the finish line, and my swollen arm lay limp at my side.

“Shut up,” I say to Ryan. “I bet I’m not the only one.”

I look at our group, circled around the coffee table. All the guys drink from their red cups, a gesture that signals they finished their race. A couple of girls drink, too. I didn’t know girls could do it standing up, but girls aren’t exactly my forte either.

“I guess you were right, Trace,” Ryan says to me. “You’re not the only one, but a couple of my girls have two legs up on you.”

He high-fives some girl wearing a long t-shirt as a dress and heavy eyeliner that makes her look like she’s constantly squinting. She’s totally the dirty type.

“Uh, so who’s next?” I say.

The squinty-eyed girl snickers.

I hide behind my beer cup, tilting it back until my vision is restricted to the foam sloshing against the cup’s walls.

Damon appears to have stopped his choked laugh, but now he just stares at his half-empty beer. He's probably sifting through memories of sex and trying to recall what position I was in when I came. It's one of those things nobody ever notices until it gets mentioned. Then Damon slowly turns his head towards me and puts his hand on my knee underneath the table. He whispers, "We'll work on it, baby," into my ear. It feels like he's sitting me down to give me a masturbation intervention.

"So..." Ryan says. "Never have I ever come while doing a handstand and eating pancakes."

Everyone cracks up, and it feels good to have the collective drunken attention diverted.

When the party ends, Damon and I say goodbye to everyone and get into my old black Escort. I hand Damon the keys because he's the lesser of two drunks. As he drives, he taps his thick fingers on the steering wheel.

"Is this my fault?" he finally asks.

"What are you talking about?"

"Am I not doing it right?"

"Babe, it has nothing to do with you. I shouldn't have said anything."

He tries to say something else, but I shush him. We both laugh.

"Let me see those lips," he says in the playfully demanding voice I've heard many times before.

I look at him and make the shushing noise again. He smiles and watches my lips as they protrude.

"So cute."

I turn up the radio, and some sad country song about being drunk and alone plays. The drunken part I definitely can identify with, but I reach over and grab one of Damon's hands. It feels like I'm holding a large bear paw.

I think back to when Damon asked me out on our first date about eight months ago. We met online, and I feared his judgment when we saw each other outside of a screen for the first time. I remember riding the escalator up to the mall's cineplex. Masses of people waited in line for tickets and sat around in the lobby. Damon was the one with the bright guava T-shirt. We were both excited and unsure, and it almost feels like nothing has changed since that day.

We finally get to my apartment, and I can't wait to crash into my bed. When I strip down to my green bikini briefs, though, Damon stops me from lying down.

"Don't get in bed," he says. "I want you to try."

"Try what?"

He starts kissing my neck and slowly works his way down to my chest, then belly button. My head falls backwards, and my eyes shut. He leaves a faint trail of saliva down my body, and the whirling ceiling fan turns each kiss into a cool nip.

I grab onto one of his shoulders.

"I don't want to."

He doesn't stop though.

"I can't do it. Please, baby. Stop."

Down on his knees now, he tries to put me in his mouth. My legs tremble slightly. I push on his chest and take a step back.

"Why can't I do it, babe?" he asked.

“I’m... just too drunk right now.”

Damon gets up and walks to the bathroom.

I follow and watch him pull his toothbrush out of my medicine cabinet. He brushes hard and fast with a taut forearm. Blue foam bubbles from his lips and drips down his chin. He spits the foam into the sink, and there are rusty swirls in the droplets. His gums outline themselves with a thin strip of blood.

I move to retrieve my toothbrush, but my hand hits one of the shelves. A small bottle drops down into the sink, sounding like a baby’s rattle.

Damon picks up the orange tube, and blue spittle drips off of it. He tries to read the bottle, but the label is torn off.

“What are these pills for?”

I’m too drunk to lie or make up an excuse, so I shake my head with my eyes wide open. I take the bottle from him and replace it in the cabinet. I don’t tell him why I have them or why the doctor gave them to me. The medicine-cabinet door swings around, and its magnet clasps connect and click shut.

“I’m really tired,” I say. “Let’s go to bed.”

I turn off the light, and we both shuffle our feet on the carpet, groping for the bed in the dark.

“Thanks for inviting me to your party,” I say to Ryan. “I’m sorry I made an ass of myself.”

He leans over the food court table with a wide, goofy smile, like he has an orange slice behind his teeth. He moves his feet under the table and bumps my shopping bags, full from a day of retail therapy.

“Do you honestly think anyone remembers or even cares?” he says. “I never even noticed that about you when we were dating.”

I look down at my plate of mall Chinese food that I had stopped eating because the grease made my chest hurt. Little chunks of rejected bourbon chicken float in the thick brown sauce, some of them chewed a little and spit back out because they felt like rubber bands between my teeth. I swirl my rice in the goop, then look up at Ryan again.

“Damon won’t leave me alone now,” I say.

“Does he even know we dated?” Ryan asks.

“That shouldn’t matter.”

“Why are you holding back from him?”

Ryan picks up his massive pepperoni-stuffed stromboli. He sinks his teeth into it and orange grease splatters down onto his plate.

“Waffs stuffing you?” he says through a mouthful of bread and cheese.

I think of Damon, his spiky black hair, broad shoulders, smooth face and cute smile. I always think he looks sexy, especially when he hasn’t shaved for a couple of days. He’s seven years older than me, and that’s been an issue for everyone except me. When he drives me around, I always find lone gray hairs glittering in the sunlight even though he dyes his hair. I never tell him because then he’d fix it, attempting to disguise the fact that he’s thirty. But I want him just the way he is.

“I don’t know,” I say. “I’m totally attracted to Damon. It’s not him. I don’t know what it could be. I didn’t realize I had a problem until your party. That night, Damon tried to get me to do it, and he’s been trying ever since.”

“Well, ‘a’ minus ‘b’ equals ‘c,’” Ryan says.

“What?”

“If Damon isn’t part of the problem, then you’re the problem. Duh.”

Now I see why Ryan failed calculus three semesters in a row.

“I don’t understand how it’s a problem,” I say.

“You have to take *charge*, man. It’s like what I just learned in my science class about variables and controls. Right now, you’re the variable because you’re up and you’re down and you’re everywhere, especially since your accident—“

“This has nothing to do with that,” I say. I start to pick up my bags.

“Trace,” he says, but I just stand up. “Trace. Traaaaaace. Tracey...”

“What?”

“All I’m saying is that you can’t be the variable; you need to be the control. Because when you’re the control, you’re *in* control.”

“Ryan, I think you’re going to fail that science class.”

We laugh.

“I do need to go, though,” I say. “I have to get to Damon’s because we’re going to one of his friend’s houses tonight.”

I give Ryan a hug. He’s clueless, but he gives the best non-advice.

He walks away towards the exit, slowly, because of his stiff left leg. His knee won’t bend, and he always hobbles on it like a peg leg. As I watch, it feels like a stone has lodged in my throat, and it’s hard to swallow the sight of him. I turn away quickly.

I parked at the other end of the mall, so I have to walk past all the countless shops again. Grit from the floor crunches underneath my flip-flops as I walk. I always forget how disgustingly dirty this mall is until I’m in it, although it works as a quick fix for my need to spend money.

I start to notice all the stores I never pay attention to. Most of them have generic or stupid names like “Fashionista” or “Trendy Gurlz” with a z. One of the stores is a men’s big and tall warehouse. I go in out of curiosity. Large bins are stacked along thin aisles. It looks like an oversized person hoarded clothes for years. I find it hard to move in between the rows of bins, and I chuckle as the many gorilla-framed men sidestep down the aisles, bumping into countless piles of T-shirts I could probably use as tents.

When I get to the end of an aisle, a clerk stands over me. He’s about a foot taller than me and blocks me from getting any further. His hands are folded behind his back. His chest puffs up, and the muscles look rock-hard. His nametag sticks out, which says “Jeoffery” and has a thin line of rainbow colors along the bottom edge.

“We don’t carry twink size here,” he says and points to my extra-small tee. “Run along.”

I find my way out of the maze of bins and don’t even look at any more shop fronts. Sticky with embarrassment, I try to get out of the mall as quickly as possible. When I make it onto the asphalt parking lot, I laugh at myself.

I find my Escort after pressing the panic button, and remember what Ryan said to me today.

“Control.” The word slips off my tongue.

I start the car, and the engine hums. My hands slowly grip the steering wheel at the proper “10 and 2 o’clock” positions. The wheel feels electric under my sweating palms.

After Damon’s friend’s house party, he and I drive back to my apartment. From all the rounds of beer and secondhand smoke, I smell like a bar’s ashtray.

“Babe, I’m going to take a shower,” I say.

“Okay,” he says. “I’ll follow you in there. I need to poop first.”

“That’s gross. I don’t want to smell that.”

“But I gotta, babe.”

In the shower, I lather some shampoo and wash my hair. I hear Damon shuffle into the bathroom, and the plastic toilet lid clanks open.

“No peeking,” he says.

“Never,” I say, smiling behind the curtain.

I wait a few minutes and think, This is going to be good. I jerk back the curtain and scream, “Boo.” Stool-flavored air blasts my face.

“Hey,” Damon yells, his face torn between laughter and discomfort.

I only get a split-second view before I pull the curtain closed again, but I see Damon differently. Sitting there naked, he looks like the most vulnerable of creatures, like a cat caught in a downpour.

After he flushes, he pulls the curtain back and gets in the shower. The toilet smell slowly dissipates in the steam.

“You little jerk,” he says and smiles.

He gives me a hug from behind and starts kissing my neck. I close my eyes, and he rubs my body with the bar of lavender-scented soap. Before I know it, he’s on his knees. I realize what he’s trying to do, but this time I go with it.

“Do it,” he says.

I stroke myself, starting slow but gaining speed. Then, suddenly, the big-and-tall clothing man pops into my head. Control. Then Ryan’s orange-peel smile. Control. Then wet cats. Control. My arm starts tiring. I grab onto the rail on the shower wall.

Keep going, I think. Keep going.

I close my eyes and try to imagine a porn scene, any porn scene, that will get me through, but my legs start shaking. I look down at Damon and he looks bored, like he's waiting for the train to come. My legs tremble so badly that I can't stand up anymore. I have to stop.

"I can't," I say through heavy breaths.

I get out of the shower and wrap myself in a towel. My reflection stares through the medicine cabinet's mirror, and I imagine the pill bottle inside. The cabinet door swings open. A creamsicle-orange pill drops into my open palm, and it tastes bitter going down.

I look behind me. Damon stands in shower, naked and wet. Droplets of water cluster on his chest hair stubble.

Probably shouldn't have done that, I think.

Damon follows me into the bedroom, and I lie down on the bed facing away from him.

"What did you just take?" he says.

I only have about fifteen minutes before the chemicals take effect. Damon flips me on my back so he can look in my eyes.

"I was giving him a ride home after we visited our families one holiday," I say.

I go through the scene in my head. It was right after Thanksgiving two years ago. It had been raining that day, and the roads were wet. I drove my dad's truck up the interstate on-ramp with Ryan in the passenger seat. As I turned the steering wheel with the road's curve, my tires hit a shallow puddle. The tail end of the truck hydroplaned, and the vehicle spun around and off the ramp. I remember screaming "Oh, shit" as I futilely slammed the brakes. The truck began rolling down the hill. Ryan's side collided with the ground first as we rolled. We were upside down, and the roof dented in. My hands were locked onto the wheel. My side window shattered, slinging glass and mud into the truck.

Then we stopped. The truck was right side up. Ryan's legs were trapped between his seat and the crunched dashboard. I saw something splattered across the windshield, but I couldn't tell if it was blood or mud. My door was stuck, so I crawled through the empty window frame. I was in the bottom of a ditch. The rain drizzled on me, and I looked up at the road. Water spewed off my lips as I screamed, giving a jagged shape to the sound.

"I lost control," I say. "I could have killed him."

I look at Damon. He touches my arm, but... silence. He waits. And it feels like a flood pounding down on my stomach, filling up my limbs. My waterlogged organs bloat underneath my skin, and my body feels so heavy. The flood fills up to my head and slams into the backs of my eyes. None of the water escapes, though. It just rages behind my eyes, which feel like portholes on a sinking ship.

The Dialogue of Porn

As I fumble with the keys to my apartment door, all I can think about is what happened last night. Some guy I met at a party invited me over to watch a movie, but he didn't mention what kind of movie. When we sat down on the couch, he looked at me from the corner and pressed play. Loud shrieks echoed from the TV where a guy on all fours took it from behind doggie-style. He proceeded to take my dick out of pants, at which point I covered my crotch and bolted towards the door. I should have known he didn't *really* want to watch *Free Willy*.

Okay, maybe I didn't have the most innocent intentions either. But I thought we'd just make out a little, and I'd tease him royally before refusing to have sex with him. I've never even been all the way. After my last relationship, sex just seems like an awkward act. Know I *could* get a guy in bed is much more thrilling than actually doing it, and something in me refuses to take the next step.

"I'll never get laid..." I mumble and kick the door open.

Grocery bags weigh down my arms and I swing them onto the faux-granite laminate countertop. My roommate Neal sits on the couch in the living room talking to a couple guys. Before I recognize who they are, a jar of pickles rolls out of a bag and crashes onto the floor.

"*Shit*, Neal," I say. "I dropped your pickles."

The smell of the pickle juice activates my gag reflex, so I hold my breath while I clean up the pale-green liquid with a rag.

“Don’t throw away my pickles,” Neal says and jumps from his seat.

He grabs a whole pickle soaked in juice and dirt and glass, rinses it off, and starts eating it.

“That’s disgusting,” I say.

Neal flips his blonde, shaggy hair out of his eyes and takes another huge bite out of the pickle.

“Ifs soo groood,” he says and swallows. Whenever he talks, he speaks in a southern accent with a gay twang. “Alban, Derek, you want a pickle?”

My throat closes when I hear Derek’s name. The pickle-soaked rag drops to the floor with a wet slap. Why is my ex here?

“Bitch, you know I don’t eat off the floor,” Alban says.

I peek over the edge of the countertop and see him wearing a pink-and-lime-green argyle scarf and a white tee. Alban looks at Neal like he’s watching a murder.

Derek rises from his seat and walks toward the pickles. He walks stiffly with his arms out like he’s a bodybuilder or an ape. He shifts the grayish-blue baseball cap on his head. I know he wears it so no one can see his receding hairline.

He wore that hat the last time I saw him. We were sitting on the concrete steps outside his apartment. He tilted the hat’s brim to cover his jet-black eyes and the tip of his crooked bird-beak nose.

The only part of his face I could see was his lips. Plump pieces of flesh coated in shimmering lip balm told me how hard this was. They told me I was great, but they had met someone else.

“You don’t understand what it’s like being me,” he said. “Dating for me is like being rich and going to the mall. I can pick out, try on and buy anything I want. All I have to do is point my finger.”

Those words sat in my stomach like an ulcer, but I just stared at the crosshatch stitching on his hat where his eyes should have been—

“Hey, handsome. Are we baking cookies tonight?” Derek says, pulling a tube of cookie dough from a bag.

Derek moves to give me a hug, but I turn away and walk to the living room to sit next to Alban.

Our cheap brown couch creaks as my tailbone collides into it. It’s all wood frame and no cushion.

“I have to say, I just lo-o-ove your furniture,” Alban says. “I mean, the lush maple shade of your couch doesn’t clash at all with the black tables. And the comfort of the seating is almost heavenly.”

He rocks side to side on the couch so it starts to squeak again.

“It’s furnished student housing,” I say. “We’re not even allowed to paint the walls.”

I turn back to Alban. “So what are you guys doing here?”

“Well…” Alban says while making a hair-flipping hand motion, even though he doesn’t have any hair to flip. “I haven’t seen you since my ho-bag best friend dumped you, and you moved here. I miss you. And I brought wine!”

He reaches into his Louis Vuitton handbag and pulls out a few bottles. It’s same drugstore wine we always drink—three for ten bucks.

“Did I mention you’re looking fabulously emaciated today?” he says.

I lean in and speak softly into Alban's ear. "Why would you bring him here?"

"Let's talk about something else," Alban says, suddenly standing up and hoisting a bottle into the air. "Derek, get out some wine glasses!"

We drink in the living room, sitting and talking. The couch feels like a squished subway car with me sitting between Alban and Derek. I'm jealous of Neal, alone in his armchair. The wine tastes like acid, but the more I drink, the more my throat goes numb. I drink enough to feel comfortable with Derek touching his knee to the side of my leg. I try to pace myself with the wine, but tonight I feel thirsty.

Alban tells us stories like the queen of gossip he is. He talks with his hands, waving them in big circles, making flipping and smacking motions with them. To show us how annoyed he is by people, he rolls his eyes into the back of his head. He even makes a groan that sounds like he's being sexually abused.

"...so then this drunk-ass homo, whom I just met, gives me a hug and tells me, 'You're the nicest gay person I've ever met.' I was so-o-o offended that I immediately got a slice of pizza and ate it in front of a homeless person."

We all laugh loudly, and I notice my lips are numb. More importantly, my glass was also empty.

"Speaking of offensive..." Alban says, "I was messaging this guy on *adam4adam* the other night—"

"What's that?" I ask.

"What? *adam*?" Alban gasps, while Neal and Derek look at each other.

"You're such a virgin," Alban says, flipping his hand.

Neal mouths the words “wet excite” to me through a cupped hand—that, or “web site.” I’m horrible at reading lips.

“Anyways, so I was messaging this guy on *adam*, and eventually we decided to meet-up. When he gets to my place, he wants to start talking to me. Ew. I shushed him and told him, ‘I don’t want to get to know you. I don’t want to know your name. You get in, then you get out. It’s my way or the highway.’” Alban raises an eyebrow and shrugs his shoulders.

Derek and Neal laugh, but I don’t get. I decide to get up and put my wine glass in the sink.

“So when are you losing your virginity?” Alban asks me. “You’ve been clutching onto that like an old lady holds her purse.”

“I don’t know,” I say. “I’m kind of hesitant after dating a whore like Derek.”

Alban gasps and covers his mouth.

“My hand’s been doing wonders for me lately,” I say. “It’ll never wake up in the morning and tell me it doesn’t love me anymore. It won’t give me any diseases either.”

“I don’t have a disease.” Derek looks blank as he pulls a crumpled sheet of loose-leaf paper out of his back pocket and unfolds it.

“You’re sure about that?” I say.

I can’t believe he’s lying to me. To *me*.

He stares at his wrinkled paper. “I’m a good person.”

“What is that?” I ask.

Alban laughs and points at Derek. “Derek is using the ‘Secret’ now. It’s some new-age positive-thinking voodoo shit that was on Oprah, and he thinks writing down all his life goals will magically make everything turn out for him.”

“Let me see that,” I say and snatch the list from Derek’s hands.

I read the first few items:

I am thankful for my wonderful life. In the future, I will...

- 1) Be a millionaire.
- 2) Get him back.
- 3) Have a dog that doesn't shit all over the floor.
- 4) Have control over my herpes outbreaks.
- 5) Finish my nursing degree.
- 6) Be the type of person that people look to for inspiration and advice.

The list goes on for another twenty-five items, but Derek grabs it from me before I can finish. His black eyes soften into a delicate grey.

"You're still an asshole," I say.

"Anyways," Alban says. "Let's talk about something else. Does anyone want to smoke?"

"Oh my God, let's," Neal says. "I think I have some in my room."

"You know how much I love pot," Alban says. "I don't even want to breathe oxygen anymore."

I cover my forehead with my hand and close my eyes. I feel warm.

"I think I'm just gonna head to bed," I say. "You guys have fun though."

I say goodnight and go to my room. I take off my shirt and realize Derek's hat is still on my head. I throw it in my closet and it lands next to my laundry bag. I'm not giving it back anytime soon.

My full-length mirror reflects my body. My hair, my body, my acne—it's all cut, shaped up, and cleared out. But that's only to distract me from the sores that creep up every now and then. The small open wounds around my genitalia burn through my flesh and confidence.

“Because of him, no one will ever want to have sex with you,” I whisper.

I grab both sides of the mirror and look into my own eyes.

The night I almost lost my virginity enters my mind. Derek and I made out in bed after a great date. I thought I was falling in love with him. We were having a good time, and we took off each other’s clothes. I didn’t object to being naked with him, but then he started dry-humping me.

He asked me if I was ready, ready for the next step.

I wanted to be ready. I wanted to let go. But then I realized that this would change me. I always thought of myself as “the virgin.” With him, I would become something else. I panicked. It didn’t feel right. I told him no and wrapped myself in a blanket. I didn’t think it was a big deal. But the next day, he broke up with me.

For a while, I wanted him back. Then, one day in the shower, I felt the bumps. I prayed that they were zits, but they weren’t. They were the sores. They sprouted from my skin and itched like crazy. I constantly scratched them until I noticed the pus and blood mixture underneath my fingernails—

“What are you doing?” Neal says as he pokes his head into my room. “Are you okay?”

I release the mirror and turn to face Neal.

“Tonight has been so awkward.”

“What is it, Jayson?”

Pause.

“Derek gave me herpes.”

“I thought you didn’t have sex with him.”

I look down at the hard matted carpet. “I didn’t.”

Neal must think I’m going to cry because he pulls me into his arms and squeezes me tight.

“I feel like I stepped into a gay porn,” Derek says, walking into the room. He looks my shirtless body up and down.

“Don’t even bother putting that on your Oprah list,” I say.

“I’ll be back to attract you later tonight,” Derek says, winking.

“I’ll be sure to lock my door then,” I say.

“Neal, could I talk to Jayson alone?”

Neal doesn’t want to leave me, but I nod him away.

“What do you want?” I say.

He grabs my hips and leans in to kiss me. I slap him hard.

“That was a pussy hit,” he says.

“You need to leave.”

He steps into the door’s frame. “You know I’m not going to stop trying, right?”

I shut the door, lock it, and collapse into bed.

I can’t sleep because of the noise going on in the living room. Derek and the others’ mumblings vibrate through the wall, but nothing is discernable. I imagine them passing around Neal’s glass bowl, blowing smoke and coughing. They laugh until their mouths dry out and taste like dead skin. Maybe the smelly haze in the living room will grow so thick that their red eyes won’t be able to see anything anymore. Maybe the only things they’ll be able to sense are each other’s blind touch and sexual punch lines.

The next morning, I walk into an vacant kitchen that smells like pot and chocolate. Two baking trays, each with empty rows of round shadows cooked onto them, sit on the counter. Next to them, I see a note with a couple of cookies. I pick up the note.

Hey handsome,

We made the cookies you bought last night, so I saved you some.

I really have changed.

-Derek

I set the note down and pick up both cookies, oozing with melted chocolate chips. They smell delicious and would be perfect with a tall, cold glass of milk for breakfast. Instead, I lift the lid to the trashcan and throw the cookies into the garbage.

An Unspoken Moon

“Don’t hug me like that,” my mom says.

I take a step back, but she pulls me in for another hug, this time making sure that my head rests on her left shoulder.

“Heart to heart,” she says. “That way we pass on good energy, and our livers face away from each other so we don’t pass any toxins.”

“I’ll try to remember that.” I give her a kiss on the cheek.

I give my dad a hug goodbye, already forgetting which way we’re supposed to embrace.

“Drive safe, son,” he says. His eyes, framed by crow’s feet, look ready to roll back into sleep.

I climb into my tiny blue Focus and back out of the driveway. My parents wait just outside the garage door, waving at me. Mom wears black harem pants and a canvas top. A black ankh hangs on her necklace with silver vines crawling up the chain. My dad runs his fingers through the only

grey patch in his jet-black hair. He stands about six inches over my mother, and there's space in between them where I could fit. We often posed like that in pictures—shortest to tallest.

I lift a hand and wave back before putting the car in drive and pressing the gas pedal. Once they're out of sight, I coax my car over the 30 mph speed limit. My dad always told me to drive five under in the neighborhood, but I want to get out as quickly as I can. My parents' house is a weekend trap, and I bought this car so I could leave whenever I wanted.

Out on the main road, Sarasota's suburban communities blur as I pass them. It seems like they're all named "Summerfield Meadows," but the second word keeps changing. Garden. Springs. Ridge. Fields.

The median is perfectly manicured in a distinct ornamental pattern: bush, palm tree, bigger bush, palm tree, biggest bush, street light, repeat, repeat, repeat. The pattern stops right before the on-ramp to the interstate. I steer my car onto I-75 and I'm Tampa-bound.

"Thank God that's over," I tell the windshield.

Last Friday I had pulled in our driveway and parked. Our house looked like every other one on the street, just a mile long of tan paint, except my mom hung a dream catcher on the front door. When I walked inside, I didn't see anyone. The TV was on, but no one was sitting on the couch watching. I thought my parents would be waiting for me—they knew I was coming.

Then I heard my mom's shrill voice from the back room. I set my bag down and walked through the dark house towards the master bedroom. Navigating the halls was instinctual. My shoes tapped on the tile as I sidestepped down a hallway. Double doors to the bedroom were outlined in shadows brought by lamplight from inside.

My mother sat on the king-sized bed with a heating pad behind her back and my dad across the room in the vanity chair.

“How could you throw out my things like they’re trash?” My mom clutched an ankh made from black rock. She twirled the charm with her fingers like she was getting ready to throw it.

“I thought it was just a rock,” my dad said. “I went through all the garbage to get it back.”

“Hey, guys,” I said.

Then I slowly backed out of the room after no one answered. Why did I even bother?

I went to my old room. In the dark I groped where pillows should have been, but there was nothing. I turned on the ceiling light, and my jaw dropped. The room used to be covered in posters I had hung on my purple walls, but my parents took them down and repainted the walls a dark tan. My old bed was gone, replaced by a large, cherry wood cabinet. The room felt like the empty space inside a spare tire.

I lay down on the scratchy carpet. As much as I hated coming home, I always thought I’d have a place there that was mine. I used to play music to drown out muffled yells coming through the walls. This room was my refuge and temple. Every night I would pull my bed sheets over my head and pray for two things: for God to make me straight and for my parents to get a divorce.

I knew my dad would eventually come see me. He usually vented to me after he argued with my mom. One time I went to the refrigerator in the garage to get a soda and found him there. He was leaning on the worktable he built in the corner, staring PVC pipe parts. When he saw me, he started complaining about my mom and the furniture. Evidently, when he got home from work, the couch was turned away from the TV. He turned it back around so he could watch golf, and my mom went off when she saw he had moved it.

“She started yelling about chi and fung-shooey,” he said. “I don’t know how much longer I can stand this.”

My hand got numb as I held my can of cold soda and listened to him for over half an hour.

I figured this time he would come into my room, see me on the floor, and say something like, “We’ve been so good lately. I don’t know why she always acts like this when you come home.”

But he didn’t. He came to my room and stood in the doorway. “Why are you lying on the ground?” he said.

I looked up at the ceiling fan, the only thing kept the same since I moved out.

“You got rid of my bed,” I said. “Why did you guys even make me come home?”

Then my dad smiled. He walked to the cabinet and pulled it open.

“We bought a Murphy bed to replace it,” he said while pulling down the bed from the cabinet. “Go say hi to Mom while I get you set up. She’s getting dinner ready.”

The kitchen smelled like melted cheese and cooked onions. My mom stood over our black stovetop stirring a large pewter pot. She had to be cooking shrimp etouffee—it was the only recipe she bothered learning from my Cajun grandparents. She always whipped the dish up in bulk, and then froze it so she wouldn’t have to cook for the next two weeks. I was lucky I got it fresh.

“Hey, darlin’,” my mom said, pulling me in for a hug. “It’s so good to see you.”

“Should I set the table?” I asked

“No, we’re going to eat in front of the TV. I practiced my dance today, and now my back is killing me.”

“Have your pains been getting any better?”

“I went to a new doctor this week.” She rubbed her shoulder. “He thinks my spinal cord is losing its natural curve. That’s why I get pains all over. I might have to get surgery.”

“I think I’m going to lie on the couch for a bit. Will you finish stirring this?”

While she lay down, I served our family plates of etouffee, and we watched TV. I used to hate watching TV with my parents. It wasn’t the shows we watched—I loved every season of “Survivor.” But sometimes my dad would see a gay contestant and say, “They shouldn’t let fags on TV,” and I would cringe in my seat. But that was before I told them.

They cornered me the day after I wore eyeliner to my high school prom. I was content with never saying anything, but they made me sit with them at the kitchen table.

“Why would you wear make-up?” my mom asked. “Who are you hanging out with? Are they influencing you to do this?”

I tried to explain the punk look was in. Then she asked me the one question, hoping for the answer “no,” but not believing any other answer besides “yes.” I didn’t say either answer—I just nodded slowly. She cried as she told me she was sending me to therapy. Then she blamed it on my dad. It was his fault because he didn’t give me male companionship as I grew up. After she left to go cry in her bedroom, my dad slammed his fist on the table. He didn’t understand. How could I not love a woman’s body? Had I ever felt a woman’s breasts before? Had I ever felt a wet pussy?

I remained silent for the next two months.

During that period, my mom would make me sit with her in front of the TV every day for morning devotion. She would wake me up and tell me to get my Bible. We watched an old lady with a locust voice on the Christian channel. The lady’s vocal cords hummed as she read verses, like wings buzzing violently with each throaty rasp.

This was my mother’s remedy until one evening when she got in a fight with my dad. He had hung a small wind gauge in our back yard, and my mother complained that it obstructed her view of nature. Dad didn’t want to take it down. Eventually, Mom grabbed me by the wrist and we

stormed out of the house. We drove around Sarasota, through the neighborhoods, the empty streets, and the palm trees. She parked the car at a local playground and finally spoke to me.

“I’d rather you be gay than an asshole like your father.”

I reached over to her seat and took her hand. Our fingers laced together, and I squeezed gently.

The next morning she didn’t wake me up for devotion, or the morning after that. Or ever again. But she did sign up for belly dancing classes. She told my dad and me she had always wanted to do it, but her parents said it was indecent. To make my mother happy, my dad renovated one of the rooms into a dance studio.

My mom would be in that room practicing with a coin belt on, jingling and clanking for hours. Her tribal drums CD would pound through the walls while I lay on the couch, reading and listening. She would come out drenched in sweat and demanding water and food. She couldn’t get it herself because her back was giving out. It had been worn down from a surgery she had years ago, and it hurt her all the time—except when she danced.

A disposal of her religion accompanied her dancing. Instead of opening her Bible every morning, she would swing her hips. She would want me to watch her perform a routine sometimes. I would clap when she was done, but only because she was genuinely happy for the first time as long as I can remember.

When she finished dancing, she would watch TV. She took an interest in programs about ancient cultures or biographies about dead philosophers. Her favorite channel was National Geographic because it always played shows about Egypt. And then she would regurgitate all the information she learned—to me of course.

Once, at six in the morning, she ambushed me while I tried to eat breakfast before school.

“The Egyptians had this belief,” she said.

The sun wasn’t even up, and I was trying to eat my corn flakes with my eyes closed.

“They believed that words held the power of creation. If you spoke something, you would bring that thought and that energy into existence.”

I spooned at my corn flakes. The smallest slivers of space opened in between my eyelids.

“We were born to create. You were born to create. You’re a god, of sorts.”

“Mom, I hate the morning,” I said with a mouthful of cereal.

“I need to go lay back down. My shoulder’s killing me.”

Those pains only seemed to get worse over the years. We stopped having dinner at the table, much like this Friday night, because the table chairs were too rigid for her back. We watched “Survivor,” and the gay castaways were now her favorite. Even my dad started to like them. Every time one came on, she would say, “You can tell he’s the most enlightened person on the island.”

The next day of my weekend visit my mom challenged me to a game of backgammon. This was our sole tradition, and it usually meant that she needed to talk to me. She always played with the brown pieces, and I, white. I could tell by her eyes she wanted to beat me.

She crowed with delight when a dice toss won her the first turn. From then on, my mom was ruthless. She captured any lone piece I left uncovered. I whispered into my dice for double sixes to save me.

“Mom, where’s Dad?”

“He’s out in his man cave. He’s putting something together for me.”

“What happened last night?” I said, counting out spaces.

“Lucas, I love your dad,” she said. “Sometimes though, he just doesn’t get me. I know he tries really hard, but...”

She picked up her dice and rattled them in her hand. She rolled a one and a two.

“If your dad and I ever separated, I don’t think I could ever date a man again. I could see myself with a woman, someone who’s really on my level. I feel like girls just understand each other emotionally. You’re lucky in that way. I think that’s why it’s called gay—because you’re actually happy.”

I clenched my jaw as to not let it drop. Did I turn my Mom gay, or at least bi? Was I responsible for all the fights?

“Not all gay people are as perfect as you think, Mom.”

“Nobody’s perfect. I just think they’re more aware of emotions and energy and... well, everything.”

She picked up her dice to roll again.

“Whoa! It’s my turn, Mom.”

“You’re taking too long. Get it together.”

I rolled a five and two and decided to move one piece all seven spaces.

“So how is your boyfriend, sweetheart?” she asked while I counted. “When is he coming to see me again? I really want him to come out to dinner with us tonight. My parents will be there.”

“He has to work tonight,” I said. “And Gram and Poppy don’t even know about me.”

My mother rolled her dice—double threes. She decided to move two pieces together so they wouldn’t be left uncovered.

“They might know now,” she said. “Your turn, sweetie.”

“What?”

“I said it was your turn. You need to pay attention.”

“How could you tell them? Mom, you promised me I could tell them on my own terms.”

“Well, sweetie, I just thought it would bring more positive energy to the world. I don’t think they’ve ever known a gay person. I want them to know what wonderful people gays are. If they knew you, someone with such strong character, were gay, I think they’d be enlightened. I just wanted to open their eyes.”

“I’m not going to dinner,” I said, shoving my face into my palms.

“Of course you are. Your grandparents won’t do anything, and if they do, your dad and I will have your back.”

“What did they say when you told them?”

She paused and looked down at the backgammon board.

“I don’t recall them saying anything. I think they changed the subject.”

“Hey, gang,” my dad said as he walked into the room. “I just finished this.”

He held out a silver chain with my mom’s black ankh hanging from it. He walked towards us, and the necklace swung back and forth like a grandfather clock’s pendulum counting down time. My mom pulled back her hair and he clasped it around her neck.

“Do you know what this is?” she asked me.

I saw in the background my dad walk to the kitchen and pour a Jack and coke.

“The Egyptians believed the ankh was the key to eternal life,” she said, touching the pendant. “I ordered this online because it’s made from black moonstone. It’s supposed to bring the wearer positive energy and balance the masculine and feminine auras. I read that—”

“Can I play the winner?” my dad said pointing at the backgammon board.

“I think that’s gonna be Mom. She’s killing me.”

“No, you play your dad,” she said. “I get to play him all the time.”

“I need to start getting ready for this stupid dinner.”

“Aren’t you looking forward to seeing your grandparents?” Dad said.

“Mom told them I was gay.”

He looked down at his drink and swirled its contents.

I walked to the guest room and shut myself inside. It was just the Murphy bed and me. I lay down on it and wondered if it could flip up into itself like in the cartoons I watched as a boy. The mattress was much more comfortable than my old bed. It felt like a cloud.

Then I sprung up from the bed in panic. I had remembered everything I used to store underneath my old bed—favorite books, old journals, childhood arts and crafts. Where was it all? I didn’t have an underneath my bed anymore.

I looked around my room and found it all stored in boxes on the top shelf of my closet. My old clothes must have been boxed as well because only belly dancing outfits hung on the racks. There were bras, belts, and pants in every color. Almost everything had gold or silver coins sewn into it. I touched one of the coins and saw that the image was of a man with an elephant head was pressed into it. Knowing my mom, the figure was probably some sort of god that balanced karma or alleviated menstrual pains. I closed the closet door and took a nap.

Later, we met my grandparents at Ruby Tuesday, and they already were waiting for us at a table. They gave me huge hugs when I walked up.

“How come you haven’t come ter see us?” Poppy said. He grabbed the scruff of my neck and shook me. It felt like he’d given me an Indian rug burn.

“I’ve just had a lot of stuff going on with work and school,” I said.

He sat down. His eyebrow hairs had grown down half his face, and his wrinkles slouched his mouth into a grimace.

My grandma caught me off guard when her pursed lips covered in glossy apple lipstick collided into my face.

“Oh, sweetheart. It’s so good to see you,” she said while rubbing me down my torso and stomach. “My lands! You feel so skinny. Spin around and let’s see how much weight you’ve lost.”

She tells me that every time I see her, so I don’t know if she thinks I’m chubby or if I’m actually becoming ever-emaciated. I stepped back after we hugged and took in her light pink tracksuit encrusted with sequins and rhinestones.

I busied myself with the menu. My leg bounced underneath the table as I imagined the kinds of things my grandparents would say.

What if Mom brings it up? I thought.

When the waitress came, I ordered a blueberry martini.

“A double, please,” I said.

My mother looked at me with pinched brown eyes. My grandparents were Baptist and hardly ever drank. Once when we all went to Sam’s Club, my grandpa tried one of the wine samples. He was slurring his speech within ten minutes.

“I’m not driving. I just want a treat.”

My grandma laughed, exposing her graveyard teeth behind her red lips.

“Just let him have a treat,” she said. Gram always gave me what I wanted.

“I think I’ll get a drink, too,” my dad said. “A Jack and coke.”

When my drink came, I licked off some of the sugar crystals stuck to the rim.

“So, Mom,” my mother said. “Are you still teaching Sunday school at the church?”

“Of course. I just talked to my third graders about the creation story. They just loved—“

“Lucas,” my grandfather said. “Tell me againer where yer going ter school.”

“In Tampa. It’s the University of South Florida,” I said, slightly startled.

“South Florid-er, eh?” he said. “Did you know Eddie’s going ter Louisian-er Tech? That’s where I graduated.”

Eddie, my cousin, is my grandfather’s pride. Eddie was named after his father, who was named after our grandfather. While my family moved across many states, Eddie’s family lived near my grandparents in Louisiana. Then when Gram and Poppy decided to retire in Sarasota, Eddie and his parents moved into their old house. Poppy has made sure that Eddie follows the same paths he took growing up—college, then the Army, then taking over Poppy’s car dealership. Eddie’s also straight—always a plus.

“When do you graduate?” Poppy said.

“This fall. And I might be getting a promotion to—“

“Eddie’ll graduate in April. Did you know that?”

“No,” I said. I took a sip of my martini, wanting to add, “Eddie’s also been in school for six years. It’s about time.”

“Once he done with school, he going to Iraq to be a war hero just like me.” My grandfather leaned back in his chair, arms crossed. His eyebrows rose almost to his hairline while he gave me a wide-eyed stare.

“No, offense, Edward,” my dad said, “but I don’t think we want to hear about Eddie all night. Lucas has a lot of stuff going on, and we’re very proud of him.”

“Well I was asking him quest-erns.” Poppy shook his head and all the sagging skin hanging off his face jiggled.

I saw my mom whispering at my dad. She looked angry.

“Edward, let’s go get a salad,” my grandmother said.

Gram, Poppy, and my mom excused themselves from the table and left me and my dad alone. We were the only ones who didn’t order the salad bar.

My dad gave me a half smile from across the table. That small movement creased lines all up his cheekbone and along the edge of his eye.

I smiled back and raised my martini. We clinked our glasses together and took a nice, long drink. I choked a little because of how strong mine was.

The waitress delivered our entrées about the time everyone was done at the salad bar. The chicken alfredo I ordered sounded a lot better before I had to deal with my grandfather. The plate looked like it was sitting under a warming for the thirty minutes. The cheese sauce had dried to the pasta, and an eyelash was pasted on the rim of the plate.

I looked over at my grandfather. He was smacking on a large pile of cottage cheese. His mouth opened and closed while he chewed on it. Between bites, a thin white mixture of saliva and mashed curds coated his lips and dripped a little from the corner of his mouth. I turned toward my mom, and she had the same cottage gook on her lips.

“I’m going to use the restroom,” I said.

When I stood in front of the urinal, I couldn’t pee. I just stared at the cream colored tile, which had some sticky goo smeared across it with dirt matted on top. The smear could have been either glue or snot. I stepped back and flushed the toilet even though I couldn’t go. I washed my hands, but barely felt the warm water as it rushed between my fingers.

I exited the bathroom and ran into my grandmother on her way to the ladies room. She smiled at me, and I gave her a half grin. When I started to walk back to our table, she grabbed my hand. I turned and saw her staring with eyes like blue fire.

“You know we love you no matter what, even if you were a murderer.”

She let go and walked into the restroom.

My mom wanted to go dance with the Sunday drum circle on Siesta Key beach, but I wasn't thrilled about going to the beach in December. Since she makes most of the decisions at our house, my dad packed the car for her. He'll jump over anything involving my mom dancing in skimpy attire.

When we got to the beach, the drum circle had already begun. My feet dragged in the pale white sand as I carried my mother's equipment. The cool grit clustered around my sweaty toes.

The sun was largely hidden behind layers of clouds that looked like lines of cake frosting. I set up three folding chairs around the circle. The ocean breeze breathed past me, and I wrapped my black cardigan tighter around me.

Six drummers—a few nerdy white guys, some dude with a mohawk, a middle-aged lanky woman, and a man who might have been plucked from Jamaica—banged away on conga drums on the opposite end. The instruments looked almost too tall for me to see over. Their tribal beats inspired some of the observers to dance around in the middle. Some were children, playing with hula-hoops or rods with colored ribbon flowing from the tips. One dark woman had deep red dreads that bounced around her head, making her look like a sorceress. She danced near the drummers, shaking her coin skirt and the bloated belly that hung past her waist. Another man wearing a baseball hat convulsed his body in some awkward fusion of interpretive dance and karate.

My mom sat bundled in a large military green coat. Suddenly, she stood up and dropped the coat in her chair. Underneath it, she wore only a bra top covered in a red-and-black zebra-stripe print. My dad handed her two small batons with red feathers sticking out of each of the ends. Then she marched through the outer circle and joined the other dancers.

I watched her fingers and wrists propel the batons into motion. She spun them quickly, making faint red circles in the air. Occasionally, she would throw one high above her and spin her body around as it came back down. She didn't drop the batons once. Her flat belly rolled as if the drum beats sent shockwaves through her. I was enamored with how the breeze pushed her hair back. She had an intense focus on her face. I felt like I was seeing her for the first time. Her small hips shimmied back and forth and seduced a few photographers to capture the sight. Even my dad was running around the circle, trying to get shots from different angles. He enjoyed showing her off.

Then my mom looked through the crowd and smiled at me. I smiled back.

As she continued her dance, I noticed a group of women talking right behind me. I never looked back to see who they were, but I think I heard three different voices.

"A bra?" said one voice. I imagined her as a dumb blonde. "Is she really wearing a bra out here?"

"That's definitely a bra," said a second voice, sounding like a blonde who dyed her hair black. "I'm pretty sure I saw that same one at Victoria's Secret last week."

"I've always wanted to learn to belly dance," said the third, nasally voice.

"She looks like a slutty housewife."

"That's because she's a skinny bitch with huge tits. I can totally tell those things aren't real."

"She's very pretty, though."

"I wonder how she hasn't fallen over under the weight of those things."

“She looks like a show dog with that vacant smile on her face. Spinning those sticks must be the only thing she knows how to do.”

“That bra is kind of cute. Should I get one?”

“She’s probably ancient. She can’t even dance to the beat.”

I squeezed the water bottle in my hand. A stream of profanities wired through my nervous system but stopped at my lips. I felt my breathing getting heavier as my anger grew. I was on the edge of turning around to yell and wave my middle finger, but I didn’t. I remembered her whispering into Dad’s ear at Ruby Tuesday’s after he defended me, and I chose to remain silent. A few minutes later, they were talking about the man in the baseball cap’s dancing.

After the sunset, the clouds began to dissipate in the sky and the beach scene grew cold. My mom kept dancing. The darkness inspired her to put down her batons and retrieve a large, single staff. She pressed a button on it and the entire thing lit up like a fluorescent bulb.

The staff whirled around in great sweeping motions, giving the illusion it was huge white disk. In the air, the disk looked like it was broken up into small pie wedges. My mom flickered in and out of sight with the staff’s revolving light, and I shivered as the night grew even colder.

When the drums began to die down, my mother handed the staff to my dad and walked over to me.

“You were great, Mom,” I said.

“Oh, thanks. My shoulder and back are killing me. I need to lie down.”

I folded up our chair while my dad packed up my mother’s things. I struggled picking up all three chairs, and my mom rubbed her shoulder. My mom and dad walked to the car ahead of me as I slunk through the sand under the weight of the chairs.

After the beach, I packed my things to go back to Tampa. All my clothes lay strewn about on the guest bed. I stuffed my T-shirts and V-necks into my bag and swung it onto my shoulder.

I picked up the edge of the Murphy bed and pushed it back into the cabinet. The doors closed, and the room had a gaping space in the middle again. Before turning off the light and leaning, I looked back at my old room that appeared like I had never been there at all.

The car ride back to Tampa seemed longer than usual, and I'm relieved when I lay down in my own un-Murphyed bed.

As my eyes close, my cell phone rings and buzzes on my night stand. The screen displays my mother's picture, and I press the silence button. A few minutes later she calls again. I pick it up this time.

"Did you make it home okay, sweetie? Have you seen the moon tonight?"

"Well, I was just about to go to sleep."

"The moon is so gorgeous tonight. It's so big and full. When you were little, you asked me if the crescent moon was God's thumbnail."

"Yeah, I remember that."

"Did you look at the moon yet?" she asks.

I groan as I get up to walk to my window.

"You don't have to if you don't want to," she said. "I just thought you would enjoy it."

"Just a sec, Mom." I walk to my window and raise the blinds. "There's nothing outside my window."

"Well, you're going to have to go outside to find anything worth looking at."

I roll my eyes and lean my head back. My feet slip into a pair of flip-flops, and I leave through the front door and walk down the building's hallway. It opens up to a small patch of land with a quiet pond.

“Do you see it yet?” she asks.

I look up into the sky. All I see is black. The longer I look up, the more my eyes adjust to the darkness. A couple of stars appear and flicker dimly. I don't see the moon, though—until I look down.

“Yeah, Mom, I see it. It's beautiful.”

The moon's reflection glints off the pond's surface. Small waves from a fish distort the round white shape. The broken light flickers in the water like white fire.