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## Limbo: An Exploration of the Spaces Between

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Limbo: An Exploration of the Spaces Between

by

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Undergraduate honors thesis under the direction of

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Submitted to the LSU Honors College in partial fulfillment of  
the Upper Division Honors Program.

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& Agricultural and Mechanical College  
Baton Rouge, Louisiana



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## Introduction

Unlike many who have embarked on the process, when I began writing my honor's thesis, I did not have a structure or rigid framework to guide my works. The influences from which I drew, most of them modern female short story writers, were more of a cluster of writers I found intriguing than a finely-tuned, carefully chosen selection of modern scholarship. I knew that I was fascinated with writing magical realism and with exploring the space between reality and fantasy; at the time, I wasn't sure exactly why.

At the beginning of my writing process, I felt liberty tinkering with storylines and writing experiments that I once shied away from. This was for fear that their somewhat playful or overambitious storylines would be lost in what I perceived to be a writing culture where only the serious, hard-hitting fiction — the type that made you lean back and rethink your entire worldview — had any value at all. I knew I wanted to write magical realism, and to me, that meant I had a pass from worrying about the dense tangle of philosophy, political viewpoints, and sticky implications that any of my works might have. It was only once I was deep within the process that I eventually realized how much I had misunderstood the genre in its entirety.

Although I didn't realize it at the time, much of my high school experience was spent surrounded with the types of magical realist works that wholly defied my perception of the genre as lighthearted and carefree. Despite lacking a full context of their works, I hungrily digested works by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Yasunari Kawabata, Ben Okri, and other such pioneers of the genre. Their sophisticated blurring of the lines between reality, fantasy, and folklore delivered well-aimed perceptions and criticisms of their life experiences, whether political, personal, or social.

To a sixteen-year-old attempting to make a passing grade in high school, however, these works offered a well-needed respite from the highbrow classics that were so obviously intended to make students *think*. It wasn't until I began unpacking the way the genre operates that I realized how much thinking there is involved in fantastical or fabulous writing. Such works deliver a surface of fascinating and enchanting lyricism that gives way to a deeper commentary. However, the emotional or intellectual response does not always come immediately, but often trails a few hours or a few days behind, when the reader finds themselves pondering the oddity of the story and attempting to parse *why* it stuck in their brains for so long. It is the same reaction I often felt a handful of days after reading a particularly impactful story by one of the writers who influenced my thesis; the strongest story by Kelly Link or Aimee Bender would keep me up at night, not with a specific reaction of joy or anxiety, but with a restless desire to unpack a complex emotional reaction. I often had difficulty parsing these reactions, but I nevertheless found myself chasing them between the pages of the next story I got my hands on.

This duality is mirrored in the experience I had while writing my thesis. In chasing that free-spirited, surface-level fantasy writing I loved, I produced a number of stories based on premises that fascinated me or on topics that I was interested in exploring with no investigation of how they operated on a larger scale. It was often not until my second or third revision that I realized what kind of questions my stories were asking (which often did not occur to me until presented by my advisor) and how these questions, only revealed to me once I'd gotten them onto the page, were actually what was at the heart of my writing experience — not the fantastical scenarios in which they came to exist. In short, it was through the process of writing itself that I came to realize the duality of my own work, and the complexity, social commentary

and criticism that lay within them. It was during these moments, at the point of revision, that I realized the lynchpin of writing is not always going in with a specific message in mind, but finding the message within your works and dedicating yourself to teasing it out.

The largest recurring theme between the works in this collection is a fascination with the body and its mortality. This is not a theme that is uncommon in literature; it seems that from the beginning of time, writers have been using their works to explore the implications of death and the body. My works often deal with death directly, and as often indirectly — what unifies their discussion of death is in the ways that death and the body conflate with control. Whereas death is an inevitable force of life, it is often presented as optional, or avoidable, in these works. There is a questioning of how much the body can endure, physically, mentally, socially — before death becomes not inescapable, but a logical, desired end. The emergent continuum of the body, death, and control is what allowed me to feel comfortable including pieces which traversed the span of reality: the pieces move in degrees from full reality to complete absurdity, but each are in conversation with these similar questions.

Death is often affiliated with the genre of horror, a genre whose influences have also found their way into my writing. Although I believe it would be misleading to label any of the stories in this collection as horror, it would be impossible to go without acknowledging that there are a number of horror elements that make appearances throughout the works — namely, in relation with the body. The handful of unnerving or distasteful elements — the stringy clumps of a crushed bug, a malformed and mutated infant, a man coughing up black oil — merge with the discussion of death in an effort to distinguish the body from the life of a person, and to create

instances of the abject — to push the reader to a point aside from oneself in order to gain a unique vantage point through which to view the works.

If it has accomplished its goal, this collection will instill in each reader a different set of questions, a different shift in perspective. It will present a fascinating and complicated narrative under which runs an undercurrent of fascinating and complicated questions and implications.

And, like any successful magical or inter-genre collection, its value will lie in the space between the two.



## Viscera

The moment the car collides into the back of hers on the drive back to Sausalito, Anya's first thought is of the fetus.

Her windshield spiderwebs from left to right in front of her eyes, shattering into a lacework of shards that fleck her face and neck and shoulders with tiny streaks of red abrasion. Her body crumples, twists in ways she never knew was possible, and pain spreads through her chest and abdomen and limbs so completely, like a wave of hot liquid, that she hardly feels anything. She had no idea that sound could ever be so loud, that air could ever be so hot, that everything could ever move so quickly that it stopped moving at all.

But all she thinks of — all she can conjure in her mind through the haze and the speed and the wreckage — is the fetus.

The fetus was blooming inside of her, spreading and growing like an unkempt rosebush planted deep within the walls of her uterus. Some days, as she laid in bed, unable to sleep with the discomfort or nausea or insomnia of pregnancy, she was sure she could feel it growing. She could actually *feel* its cells splitting off from each other, doubling and quadrupling and telling one another who is the heart, who is the brain, who is the cuticles of the fingernails, bubbling in her womb like a classroom experiment, like a toxic waste spill. She would roll onto her left, her right, her back, and try to sleep, try to forget what it is her body was working so hard to grow despite her, in spite of her.

In the rare instance she managed to forget the freeloader, it always found a way to make

its presence known. It would twinge and jolt and cause her insides to seize up, like someone had inserted a hand mixer up inside of her and begun to scramble. It would prod and cramp and tense and ache and pull her from work, from eating, from conversations, with a sudden order to sink onto the bathroom floor where she would lie and stare at the ceiling and twirl loose edges of her fraying shower mat between her fingers until the feeling faded away. It was in these moments that she could picture it in there, red and fleshy and devious, exhibiting a petulant demand she'd never seen in the brattiest of children.

Madison still came by with soup and crackers and prenatal supplements at least once a week to remind her. When Anya stopped opening the door, she'd leave the tupperware on the doorstep with reheating instructions. "You're going to starve," she'd scrawled in big black letters one week when she'd had to stack one container on top of the previous week's meals. "You need to eat for two," she'd written, as though Anya had somehow forgotten the human being growing inside of her.

Anya made a careful point not to confuse Madison's care for her offspring with a care for the person who just happened to be waddling around with it inside of her.

Because the baby did not belong to Anya. It was not hers.

It was not hers but fully Madison's, and also maybe would somehow belong to Madison's new boyfriend or partner or whatever it was she called him, but it certainly did not belong to Anya at all.

Most days, Anya only survived by fantasizing about getting rid of the thing. Of shrugging her shoulders after the delivery and leaving it there under the lights of the neonatal unit like a gas station hot dog that no one wanted. She fantasized about jacking the thing up, about drinking and

smoking and dyeing her hair a different color every day, about hanging out in x-ray clinics and booking a trip to Chernobyl.

She'd deliver the thing, squirming and writhing, with empty eye sockets and ears on its feet and an arm jutting out of its face, kiss it on the forehead, and hand it straight off to its mother.

To Madison, whose weekly meals and texts, whose lengthy worried voicemails — *Haven't heard from you in a few days, A, just want to make sure you're hanging in there* — proved her readiness to take on the role of Heterosexual Mother Wife Partner, like they hadn't spent two years together, like this fetus was all on Earth that ever mattered, like it wasn't supposed to be theirs together.

To Madison, who, on the night she'd moved out, had told Anya, "We'll take it."

She'd left their apartment half-empty. One less laptop, one less pillow, one less toothbrush, one less indentation of a body in their bed.

She'd stood there in the doorway, a folded blanket in one hand, keys to her brimming car in the other. Despite herself, Anya felt that familiar warmth butterfly through her chest, the nervous excitement she used to feel each time she saw Madison — even as she slouched before her with her hair pulled into a loose bun and bags under her eyes and mascara from three days ago still clumping in her lashes. It was there, a heat rising in her cheeks that felt almost like a blush, that Anya realized being in love with someone who was leaving you was like having a crush on a stranger all over again.

"Off your hands," Madison added before Anya even realized what she was talking about. She shifted. "We — I just know you're going through a lot, and you shouldn't have to worry

about her on top of all of that.”

*Look, Madison had told Anya what felt like centuries ago, dumping an armful of brochures for different in vitro clinics onto their bed. If it's one of our eggs, and the other one carries it, it can still be both of ours. She'd taken Anya's hand in hers. Both of our experience.*

*And now it was, Hey, you know that thing you've got cooking up inside of you? Yeah, just drop it off whenever you're done.*

“I know you don't know Zach, but he's a good guy. I trust him,” she said.

“Okay,” Anya said.

“You can still visit,” Madison added, speaking so quickly it was almost unintelligible.

“I'd still like you to visit.”

“Okay,” Anya said.

Madison slid her hand into Anya's, startling her back into her body. She breathed out long and slow, closing her eyes and letting out a low hum like she was trying to clear her throat. When she opened her eyes again, they were glossy, slightly red. “I'm trying to make this as easy as possible for you,” she said.

She spoke as if there were a way to make it easy when there was something that you have loved and cherished and put all amounts of energy into, who has been so intimately *yours* for nine months — that you were expected to give away, watch grow up with an entirely new family, and never see or discuss or *think* about — as if it had never happened at all.

It wasn't hers, and no tally of the hours she'd spent poring over baby naming sites, trying and failing to crochet tiny-toed socks, waking up in the middle of the night for hunger and discomfort and pain and rolling over and swallowing it down because that's what mothers do,

would change that.

She lurched slightly toward Madison, caught off guard by a peculiar prodding she wasn't used to.

"Anya," Madison said with a layer of care in her voice so thick it bled into pity. She traced small circles into Anya's hand with her thumb.

"No," Anya said, pulling her hand back and stepping back into the apartment. "No," she said again. "The stupid thing is just kicking."

Meeting David Wright was supposed to help her decide.

They had chosen David Wright largely on the basis of his current employment status and lack of permanent record. In person, he was supposed to be so wonderful or so detestable that she'd be able to walk away from her encounter with him fully devoted to bringing a child to term or cutting a cluster of half-formed cells wholly out of her body.

She'd driven out three hours to David Wright's barbecue, which she'd learned about from David Wright's facebook page, which she'd meticulously tracked down through friends of friends of David Wright's friends, and shown up precisely late enough that the presence of a total stranger wouldn't draw too much attention. She was able to navigate milling guests, hands full of half-empty beers and plates of potato salad and chips, and hadn't even needed to use the stories she'd prepared. "Oh, David and I are old high school friends," and "I was in town and figured I'd come say hello." No one stopped her. No one asked.

She wasn't sure exactly what she expected to happen when she met him. That he'd be rich, handsome, famous, progressive, educated, and profoundly intelligent, and convince her that

the thing growing in her was worth seeing through. That he'd be grumpy, clammy, unattractive, rude, and poor, and convince her the world would be better off without it.

One way or another, whatever happened was supposed to give her peace about terminating it. Or give her peace about keeping it.

Or that, if she couldn't love its mother, maybe she could love its father. Maybe she could find in its father a reason to not have it cut out of her. Maybe he could give her one.

What ended up happening, though, was that David Wright was just a normal guy.

She knew it the moment she saw him, standing out in the mid afternoon sun in a t-shirt and jeans, with a beer and a pair of tongs in his hands, chatting with guests and flipping hamburgers. There was nothing demonic or angelic to be said about him. He was just a middle aged, mild tempered, moderately educated and moderately attractive man hosting a barbecue. He was exactly what his file had said.

The sun beats through the now-gaping window of her car and laps at her arms, which begin to ache with a dull heat. A soreness springs from deep in her bones and radiates outward. Outside of her car, the Pacific ripples and pools with raucous afternoon energy, capturing the light from the sun and tossing it off again in pockets of shimmering white that begin to blur around the edges.

Her eyes spring full of water. A dull ache begins to form at the back of her skull. Her car crumples from behind, sliding onto the highway, compressing around her, and the fetus is still there, still there, safe and unknowing, nestled in its home of organs and tissues.

David Wright was a warm, charming host — exactly the sort of man you'd expect to host a lazy afternoon California barbecue. He'd offered her a veggie burger when she'd told him she

was a vegetarian; he'd offered her a soda instead of beer when he glanced at her stomach. Even though he had no idea who she was or why she was standing in his backyard, belly pushing out against her sundress, he treated her like an old friend he hadn't seen in years.

Her car twists, about faces on the I-280 South. She begins to think it is over when it collides again with the mountainside, the pain pulsating through her body like a red wave that pulls her vision in and out of darkness. The car rocks back away from the mountainside, and air blossoms hard into her lungs.

Her very being aches, and everything is still and quiet. Nothing inside of her stirs.

The sound of a door slamming pierces into the stasis. Lifting her face to look up sends a line of sharp pain down her back. A twenty-something man in a button-down shirt is running toward her out of his own slightly crumpled car, his face flush red.

If blushing is a genetic trait, she thinks, this kid is going to blush a lot.

It'll blush the way Madison is always blushing, the way Madison would blush any time Anya touched her, even if it was just to steady herself when she needed balance. The way that when they had gone back to Madison's place after a night out and they were both giddy and trembling and unsteady and unsure, Madison had blushed until her face was cherry red and said, *Stay*. And Anya knew that she meant *stay for good*.

It'll blush the way David Wright, its father, blushed when Anya had blurted out why she'd come, that she was carrying his child. He'd blushed and said, "Oh, yeah?" like it was no big deal that she was walking around with half of his genetic code multiplying away inside of her.

Her tongue is thick and sandpapery against the back of her throat, the metallic tang of

blood pooling in her gums. Her arms weigh more than the entirety of the car, but she manages to unlock the door, and the twenty-something is opening it and there's blood trickling down his forehead, too, and he's saying, *We've got to get you to a hospital*, only there are patches of him missing where Anya's vision is fading in splotches of thick black.

David had blushed and glanced out into the crowd of meandering Californians, chattering about wine and the weather and the news and whatever it is carefree people chatter about, but Anya could follow his eyeline directly to a petite woman beaming in a small group, bouncing a half-asleep toddler on her knee. He'd blushed and blushed and said, "We thought for a while we weren't going to be able to have kids." He'd cleared his throat and blushed and said, "When Millie got pregnant with our first, we decided we didn't want anyone else to have to go through that like we did."

The fetus was there then, too, listening to him talk about it, and it was there now, in the car, within her. It is in there, clinging to her insides for dear life — Madison's fetus and David Wright's fetus.

It is there within her, incapable of knowing what is happening in the world outside of its home. It is there within her, having only ever known the inside of her body, the nutrients she gives it, the warmth she provides. It is there within her, and that's all it's ever been — within her.

She ask to tell the twenty-something whether he could please hurry, but she doesn't have the energy to open her mouth. She wants to ask him, could he please hurry, because she knows now that she doesn't care whose baby it is anyway. The twenty-something is far away from her, dialing into his phone, and she leans back into her seat because it is all she can do, and she focuses on the space just below her stomach, waiting to feel a twitch or a kick or a shudder, and



praying that by the time she gets to the hospital, there will be a decision left to make at all.

## Finite

There's something about the Apocalypse Cast that always puts Ro to sleep. She's not sure if it's the silky voice of the tight-bodied, snow-skinned lead anchor Amy-Grace Matherne, if it's the low, ominous undercurrent of background music, or if it's the cycle of the same facts over and over on loop — but as she dozes on the couch, she realizes that this would not be the first time she fell asleep on the eve of the end of the world.

Amy-Grace is standing in front of a map of the Earth, using a manicured hand to indicate which regions will see the effects of doomsday first. She gestures from country to country, the world's end neatly indicated by a small skull and crossbones at the capital of each nation.

“As you can see,” she says, her voice honeyed and upbeat, “this occurrence will spread in a counterclockwise, spiraling pattern — not unlike a hurricane.” She moves her hand in a circle across the map, and a trail of digital flame erupts in its wake. “The first effects will be seen in the region of the deity's religious origin, which is northern Scandinavia.” The screen shifts to a map of the United States. “Here in America,” she continues, “Apocalyptic activity will be experienced beginning on the east coast and progressing westward at a speed of roughly seven hundred miles per hour.”

Amy-Grace crosses the station back to her desk and shuffles a stack of papers meaningfully. “For those of you just tuning in, we are predicting a sixty-five percent chance of apocalyptic activity in the next one to six hours. As a reminder, federal guidelines recommend that any likelihood over fifty percent be regarded as a Better Safe Than Sorry situation. This means that for those of you with bunkers and stored supplies, now is the time to start making the proper preparations.”

Like any real estate with a hope of being sold in the last 20 years, Ro's apartment came equipped with a small everything-proof room about the size of a closet, supposedly able to withstand temperatures up to 200 degrees and winds over 300 miles per hour. When she first moved in, she'd stocked it with all of the essentials — nonperishable meals to last her weeks and batteries and clean drinking water. Each time the Cast comes on, she tells herself she'll restock, but inevitably forgets within a week. Through the open door, she can see there are at *least* another few jars of peanut butter left in her supply.

“And for those of you who don't,” Amy-Grace says, bearing the broad smile of calculated punchline delivery, “It's time to start making friends with those who do!”

Ro takes one of the jars of peanut butter from the bunker and settles back onto the couch with a spoon. This prediction feels somehow less inspired than those of the past. She can remember the early days, huddled in the basement of her childhood home, believing beyond belief that her mother's arms would protect her from the predictions of fireballs raining down from the heavens, of biblically sized floods, of plague and pestilence and mass destruction — and blinking into the sunlight the next morning when, seemingly against all odds, the world continued on.

From what she can gather, this apocalypse seems a little too easy; it's based in some conflation of a ritual date from Norse mythology, certain planets in retrograde, and a few other factors she can't remember. The Christian god isn't even involved, which means a significant lack of sky dragons and oceans turning to blood. This time, Ro learns as she dips her spoon back into the jar, it seems death will sweep through the lands swiftly: after sporadic, high-intensity

storms and upheavals of nature, the full and instantaneous vaporization of every human body will follow.

Ro's phone vibrates against her thigh, and she knows who is calling before even seeing her beaming mother's image on the screen.

"I'm indoors," she says by way of a hello. This always seems to be her mother's first question, as though the walls of her apartment building are enough to prevent the world from ending. "They sent us home from the office. Paid, this time."

Her mother sighs into her ear. "I wish you could be here," she says. "This one was so last minute. Do you think it's too late to drive?"

"That's a seven hour drive," Ro points out. "We could all be dust by then."

There's a pause from her mother's end. Ro knows she should have left this detail out. "Don't," she says quietly.

The Cast switches over to a station-funded commercial. *Don't go unprepared next Apocalypse season. We offer single and family layaway plans for our End Care program to ensure you and your loved ones are in good hands in the case of a worst case.*

Ro's mother is from a generation before the impending doom of humanity hung in the air every day like a faint scent your nose adjusts to over time. It still scares her. Having grown up with the Cast, with Amy-Grace and her equally blonde and chipper predecessors popping up on TV at least once or twice a year and forcing its viewers to sit in full confrontation of their own mortality, Ro finds it difficult to care.

"I'm just trying to make sure everyone is accounted for," her mother tells her, continuing to exhibit the stubborn belief that there was a simple way to circumvent the end of the world.

“Alyssa and Max are staying with us. Leah and Mallory are with your uncle in California. The triplets are there, too.”

The Cast changes over to a remote anchor who is standing inside a small pagan church a few blocks from Ro’s apartment. It seems every time the world is meant to end and doesn’t, a different following of witches or druids or priesthoods take credit for their rituals deterring an angry god from wiping out the earth, and a number of once-Christian churches have converted to general pagan places of worship as a result.

They play moments of b-roll from the ritual. A group of people, identities hidden by silken, hooded cloaks, stand in a circle before an altar. Smoke from incense swirls and ribbons around a statue of a deity, his alabaster wolf head fixed into a snarl and his human body fighting to break free from the chains that bind him to the wall.

The pagans move about like ghouls, pale hands poking out from their robes to sprinkle herbs and paint sigils in a thick, dark liquid on the ground. Ro finds herself entranced — maybe it is the Apocalypse Cast doziness, but something about the rhythm of their movements on the screen, of their low, murmuring chants, pulls her in.

One of the pagans moves to the center of the circle. She is smaller than the rest and moves so fluidly she appears to be floating. The group casts their faces down as though in reverence to a higher being.

“Ro?” her mother’s voice sounds in her ear.

The pagan in the middle of the circle raises her hands slowly and pulls her hood to her shoulders. Her face is striking, all sharp angles, a shock of hair as white as morning clouds stark

against her dark skin, greyish and chalky, as though she's been living underground for months. She looks like a creature from another dimension.

"I was saying, am I missing anyone?" her mother says in her ear.

"Lily," Ro says. A mouthful of peanut butter has turned to glue in her throat.

Her mother misses a beat. "I don't know where Lily is," she says. It is clear she's trying to temper defensiveness in her tone. "I haven't seen Lily in years."

"Yeah," Ro says, standing stiffly and looking around the room for jeans, for her shoes.

The hooded figures around turn in to face the creature-like woman in the center of the room. As Ro watches, she stretches her arms out to her sides — in beckoning, or submission, or martyrdom — tilts her head back to the sky, and releases a low howl from deep within her chest.

A shiver runs down Ro's neck.

"I haven't seen her either," she says, taking her keys off of the hook. "I'll talk to you tomorrow," she says, and ends the call before her mother can protest.

It takes Ro a half an hour to walk down to the church since public transport is out. There is no one on the streets. The air is thick with the brewing storm, the sky oppressively grey. The wind stirs the trees lining the street, raining leaves onto her head and shoulders. As she walks, she passes a truck crashed into the side of a building, though no one is in sight — likely the relics of an end times drinking binge.

She knows she has guessed the right location when she sees the Apocalypse Cast van parked outside, a splotch of cheerful orange popping against the grey streets, with Amy-Grace's smiling face plastered on the side. It isn't until she is at the foot of the church doors that she

realizes she's never stepped foot inside of a church in her life, let alone one of this nature. It is bigger than she realized it would be, darker. The sounds of chanting stir from the inside, low and mournful, and she hesitates before pulling the heavy, two-story door.

The church is frigid and dimly lit. The sweet musk of incense hangs in the air. The scene has changed since she turned off the TV in her apartment. Lily is lying on what appears to be an altar of white marble, pristine but for complex sigils scrawled at the head and the feet. Three strips of black fabric cover the breasts, waist, and eyes of her otherwise bare body. Blood courses through Ro's ears, and it sounds, for a moment, like she is hearing the low chanting of the pagans from a place submerged in a raging river.

A pair of Apocalypse Cast reporters sit in the last pew of the church, farthest back from the altar. A cameraman films the ritual, smoke from his cigarette lost in the hanging clouds of incense that still stir about the room.

Lily is frozen, placid as if in a slumber on the altar. The figures form in a line behind her. One produces something small and shimmering from within their robes, and passes it to the next figure, who passes it on, and it traverses down the line. When it reaches the middle, the figure raises it above their head.

It catches the low light of the candles and shines a glint into Ro's eye. She realizes they are holding a long, curved dagger.

Ro can feel a cold sweat forming at the back of her neck. She springs up to the TV crew, a nervous buzz of energy in her body making it nearly impossible to keep her voice hushed.

"Are you seeing this?" she says.

The anchor pivots sharply, looking alarmed and then annoyed. “This is a closed ceremony,” she hisses. “You’re not supposed to be here. *We’re* hardly supposed to be here.”

“They’re going to kill her,” Ro says. “She’s my sister. My half sister,” she says. She opens her mouth, hesitates, forces herself not to scream. “They’re going to *kill* her,” she says.

“You’re going to fuck the take,” the anchor barks quietly.

Ro pulls back, thrown off, and looks up to the altar. It happens so quickly that she nearly misses it. The figure brings the knife down, plunges it into Lily’s stomach. She reacts with one sharp convulsion — a shudder of life leaving the body.

Dark red spills from the blade, pooling at her stomach. It flows across her body, a red river that pours in streams of red down the sides of the marble beneath her.

After a few seconds, the cameraman drops his camera to his side. “Alright,” he says to the anchor. “I think we got what we need. Are you ready to head back?”

Ro feels her stomach knotting at their nonchalance. She considers calling 9-1-1, but knows their lines will be characteristically tied up as they tend to be on days like today, understaffed and virtually impotent.

And then she looks to the back of the church, where Lily is pushing herself up against the altar, pressing red handprints into the marble. One of the figures, still hooded, brings her a black robe, which she wraps around her body. Blood drips from her stomach, winding down her legs and onto the floor beneath her.

She turns to the altar, to the deity chained to the wall behind it, and sinks into a low bow, and then bows to the congregation, who return the gesture with near-robotic unison.

When Lily meets her eye, Ro nearly flinches.



Lily's face flashes with a glimmer of recognition, a glint of a muddled smile that drops again into expressionlessness. She murmurs to the figure beside her, and then turns sharply on her heel and vanishes from the room, leaving a trail of red footprints in her wake.

It occurs to her that she she misrecognized Lily — that she's just stumbled upon a ceremony featuring someone who just happens to look remarkably like her sister. She glances back to the exit of the church. The reporters are nowhere to be seen. A figure approaches her swiftly, and she feels herself stepping back to the doors, her muscles tense as though she may need to make a break for it.

“The anointed invites you back to her chambers,” he says, in a voice that is distinctly male. Ro is surprised at how normal, how human it sounds. He gestures with an extended arm to a small red door at the back end of the church. “Please,” he adds, somehow even more quietly, “Ensure that you are clean of spirit before you enter.”

It has begun to rain in earnest, a steady downpour of bullet-sized raindrops that manage to drench Ro from head to foot in the thirty-second walk from the church proper to the clergy house where the man directs her. She leaves the worshippers sitting in a circle, a low hum emitting from under their hoods that she can feel ringing in her chest as she pulls the door behind her.

The clergy house is a small space, just big enough to fit a twin sized bed and a desk. The ceiling and corners are spotted orange with water stains. Lily sits on the small bed, a puddle of water pooling in the fabric around her. The blood on her legs is mixed with water from the downpour and now trickles down around her feet, raining pink water on the ground. When Ro

steps inside, her sister beams up at her, exuding a vibrance so stark in contrast to what Ro just experienced that it almost gives her whiplash.

“Rowan,” she says brightly. “I’m so sorry about that.” She gestures back to the church with a dismissive wave of her hand. She acts so casually, so nonchalant that Ro feels she must be dreaming. “I didn’t want to break ritual. You know how it is.”

She stands, and Ro almost flinches before Lily wraps her in a tight hug, and then plops back onto the bed like a teenager ready for the best gossip of the slumber party. “What are you doing out here?”

“I saw you on TV,” Ro says. Lily gestures to the bed next to her, and Ro sits, feeling the hard springs of the mattress against her legs. “You were on the Cast.”

“I didn’t know you were living out here,” Lily says.

“Yeah,” says Ro, still feeling slightly out of sync from the uncanniness of the entire situation. “I’ve been out here for years. I — I didn’t know *you* were living out here.”

“Oh,” Lily says. “I’m just in town for this,” she says, as though mentioning a business conference.

She stands, letting the bed spring up in relief of her weight, and pulls a red t-shirt dress from a small bag on the desk. She unties her robe and pulls the dress over her head in one fluid motion, her body exposed for only a few beats before she pulls the dress down to her knees.

“How did it look?”

Ro is caught off guard by the question. “Um,” she says. “Real?”

A small smile of victory spreads across Lily’s face. She looks over her shoulder out of the window, where the rain on the glass casts the shadows of slowly pooling raindrops onto her

forehead and cheeks. “This is such a fun one,” she says. “I’ve been following them all for ages now, but this one is so much fun.” She swivels back to Ro. “How were they saying it was supposed to happen on the Cast?” And then, before Ro could think to reply, “Because they’re probably off. They always get it wrong. Anyway — it’s all flame.”

She lets out a low sigh, almost loving. “The entire world engulfed in flame. All of life turned to ash.”

She sits back down on the bed next to Ro, causing her to bounce her up a bit. “And then, once everything is dead, the *wolves* come out. They all survive,” she says. “And they reclaim the land. They gain sentience and become the dominant species on earth.”

Ro blinks at her, slightly concerned Lily will pass out from forgetting to breathe.

“I think that must include dogs, too, you know, domestic dogs? Since they were bred from wolves. They’re the descendants of wolves. So we all die, and then — and then there are pugs and chihuahuas running the world.” She leans back into the bed, a tranquil smile on her face. “The Earth returned to the children of Fenrir.”

In this light, her face relaxed and out of the cloak, Lily looks more her age. She is virtually unreconcilable with the woman who was sacrificed to a Norse god. She must be 18 by now, no more than 20, Ro realizes. She remembers her mother’s urgent voice in her ear, and finds herself wondering if Lily’s mother knows where she is.

“How long has it been, Ro?” Lily says, as if reading her mind. “I feel like the last time I saw you, I was ten.”

She is sure their father has no idea where either of them are.

A crack of thunder seems to shake the entire building, grumbling from the ground, through the walls, in Ro's stomach. She is hit with a sudden awareness of how displaced she is, how surreal the situation. The windows are so thin — the building must be at least a century old — ready to collapse under the right amount of pressure or force.

"I've got a king-sized bed," Ro says. "I've got a couch. I have one of those little bunker rooms," she says. "It can fit three people standing up." She glances at Lily, who is lying on her back, smiling sweetly, her arms crossed over her eyes. "What do you think?"

Lily doesn't look up at Ro, doesn't even pull her arms away from her eyes.

"Actually, Rowan," she says, "I think I'm supposed to die here."

Another crack of thunder rips through the air. The window is beginning to leak, water seeping into the pane, running down onto the desk and the carpet below.

"Ro," she says quietly. "I think that maybe you are, too."

The world won't end, Ro knows, statistically speaking. If this call for alarm is as false as the dozens and dozens of its predecessors, the world will wake tomorrow morning, slightly shaken but no worse for wear, and go about their business as usual, appreciating their lives a little more for a few days until the feeling fades. The world will not end, but that doesn't make this the safest place to endure a storm of this degree. But trying to get back to her apartment through this, she realizes, isn't necessarily an upgrade in safety.

"Plus," Lily says, popping back upright, "we have the entire place to ourselves." She gestures around the room as though it were a mansion. "The rest of the worshippers aren't supposed to interact with me anymore, since I'm ritualistically dead." She sounds strikingly like a teenager bragging of the key to her parents' liquor cabinet.

Ro glances across the alley, where she can just barely make out the curvature of the architecture of the church. “Do you think they’re okay in there?” she asks.

Lily looks at her inquisitively. “What do you mean?”

“I mean — I guess I thought the reason people did rituals like that was to be — you know — saved from the apocalypse.”

Lily shrugs, but her face hardens slightly, and she begins to resemble again the powerful woman Ro saw on the Cast. “Not for everyone,” she says, and even her tone has lost its girlish note. “You’d be surprised how often the inverse is true.”

“What do you mean?”

Lily gives her a look like she is being impossibly patient, incredibly generous with her time to explain something so trivial.

“For some people, death is something to strive for. To *achieve*. Bodily death, ego death, a break from the cycle of reincarnation. It varies.” She glances to the church, and then back to Ro. “In a lot of belief sets, dying, physically and spiritually — it’s a release.”

It isn’t until then that Ro realizes how small the slivers of their lives that overlap have been — how much her sister has truly become a stranger to her.

“You know so much about this,” she says, unable to keep it from sounding like an accusation.

“I’ve had a lot of time to learn,” Lily replies immediately.

“Does Dad know you’re here?” Ro asks, speaking quietly, maybe hoping Lily won’t hear. The word arrives on her lips slightly misformed, like she is momentarily slipping out of the English language.

Lily looks as confused for a moment, seemingly having forgotten she ever had a father. “I don’t think he’s known where I was in years. And I have no clue where he is, either,” she adds. “It is a mutual ignorance.”

“Yeah,” Ro says. And then, for lack of anything else to say, she says, “Yeah.”

The stirring wind and pelting rain add their voices to the conversation.

“Did you know that the Great Flood really happened?” Lily says suddenly. “Noah and everything.” She stands up and crosses the room, fiddles with the windows, pushing them down to make sure they are sealed as tightly as possible. She turns back to Ro. “It happened in Mesopotamia. It flooded for miles and miles around, and since that’s all people knew, they assumed it was the entire world. And you know what?” she says, giving one last forceful push. “It was a perfectly fair assumption.”

She comes back and sits on the bed, which has red stains where she was sitting earlier. “I didn’t even know I had siblings until I was eight years old, and that was only because I overheard the wrong argument.” She fixes Ro with a look, not quite expressive, but acutely intent. “In my world, you, your mom, your brother — you didn’t even exist until then.” She purses her lips and shrugs, as if the whole thing is just silly chatter. “It was a perfectly fair assumption.”

It seems absurd for a moment, and then Ro realizes that she is right. She can still remember the first day she and Lily ever met, one of the rare times her father came to visit. Ro had watched as Lily, who can’t have been much older than twelve at the time, quiet and shy in a way Ro can no longer wrap her head around, peered around their small apartment like it was an entirely new world. “I’m Lily,” she had told Ro for the tenth time once their parents had left

them to their own devices, too busy bickering to remember they were there. “We’re the same, but only half the same. Not all the way.”

The window shatters so suddenly that Ro, at first, thinks she has imagined it. Tiny shards of glass shoot into the room like snowflakes, accompanied by equally sized bullets of rain that hit Ro so hard that she can’t distinguish them from the fragments of the window.

Lily drops to the ground, baring her arms across her body to protect her face. She looks up at Ro in shock as if unsure whether Ro had seen the same thing. Blood begins to pour from the cuts that streak her arms. The bright red mixes with rainwater and swims in streaks down her skin. There is a deep cut across her cheek that stops mere millimeters from her eye.

Ro is frozen, unsure what to do — it is painful just to look at her sister. And then Lily’s face breaks into a smile from ear to ear. Ro follows her line of vision, putting a hand over her eyes to protect them from the wind and the rain, and sees that, across the alleyway, there is a small fire brimming on the roof of the church, whipping and fighting against the forces determined to extinguish it from existence.

For the first time, it occurs to Ro that the world very well might end.

They squeeze into the small bathroom to get out of the rain. It is mint green tiled and looks perfectly unchanged since the 1950s. They push towels against the bottom of the door to keep the water from leaking into the room, and although they layer as many as they can find in the cabinet under the sink, they are saturated almost immediately and begin to sweat water into the room. Lily sinks into the bathtub, resigned, crossing her legs and looking perfectly at home. The rain has cleaned her of most of her blood, but the cut on her cheek continues to seep.

Ro climbs into the bathtub across from her, and for a flash, she envisions doing this under entirely different circumstances. She envisions sitting across Lily in a full, warm bathtub, reading books and sipping wine and gossiping about family, school, work, their love lives —none of which, in reality, they have ever actually shared.

“How long have you been —” she asks instead, pausing to find the words. “You know — a believer?”

“Oh,” Lily laughs in a way that makes Ro feel moronic. She wipes her cheek with the back of her hand. Red streaks across her face and dribbles down her wrist. “I’m not,” she says. “Not really.”

Ro waits a beat. When it becomes clear she has no intentions to explain, she says, “How does a nonbeliever find themselves in a place like this?”

“I don’t know,” Lily says, flashing Ro a sly grin that belongs to the woman sacrificed on the Cast. “Why don’t you tell me?”

She closes her eyes and leans back against the wall as though the tub is filled with warm water. “I,” she says, pulling a deep breath in and letting it out through her nose, “Am the sacrifice.”

“Well,” Ro points out, a childish petulance in her voice. “Not completely.”

“Oh,” Lily says, touching a hand to her stomach as though just realizing she was not actually disemboweled. “No, not completely. But it’s part of the ritual, and they can’t *actually* kill anyone.”

She opens her eyes and stretches her hands out to Ro, palms face up. Ro hesitates and then takes Lily’s hands in hers.



She hadn't noticed the two scars running across the middle of both of her hands, slightly raised with tender pink tissue. Dark red lines run down the middle, making it clear that the cuts have been reopened multiple times.

"You name it," Lily says, "and I've sacrificed to it. *Been* sacrificed to it." She sounds suddenly tired, and closes her eyes again, her hands still in Ro's. "Fenrir is Norse. I've done Hellenic, Kemetic, Santeria — I've done Christian, even." She pulls her hands back into her lap, her scars out of view, the myriad tiny cuts the glass sliced into her arms back in sight. "I've given blood, drank blood, been burned, starved — you'd be surprised how many of these rituals call for things like that, and how few people are willing to play the role, even for their own saviors." She opens her eyes and reaches out her arm to Ro, revealing a darkish circle on the inside of her elbow. "That was really my blood, you know," she says.

"Anyway, I'm glad to hear it at least looked real," Lily adds. "It's been a goal of mine to get on the Cast for years. Any screentime I can take away from that diva Amy-Grace is a win for me."

The Cast right now seems worlds away, holed up as they are in this tiny bathroom without even a window to the outside world.

Lily pauses, cocks her head slightly at Ro. She then reaches across and pulls a tiny sliver of glass from where it is lodged in the flesh just beside her chin. The tenderness of it makes Ro hold her breath.

"Fenrir has a following," she says, again diving from topic to topic with a childlike fluidity. "He might actually be able to pull it off."

"I thought you didn't believe," Ro says, feeling, for some reason, short of breath.

“Well,” Lily says, speaking so quietly it is almost engulfed by the sound of the roaring storm. “I’m just trying to play my cards right.”

Ro is rendered speechless from the sheer, simple logic of it all.

Lily is still holding the shard of glass. It gleams red. “You think I’m crazy,” she says. It is not an accusation, and she does not give Ro the opportunity to defend herself.

“To me, it’s crazy that people can go about their days — their work, their school, their *life* — knowing that this is bound to happen one day — and to not do anything about it at all.”

“We don’t have any proof it will actually happen,” Ro points out.

“It’s bound to happen one day,” Lily repeats, her voice firm and low. And then she slackens and breathes out.

“My first time,” she says, a near-whisper that Ro nearly has to hold her breath to hear over the storm outside. “It was money. I needed the money,” she says. “I could hardly feed myself. I was sleeping in shelters and in my mom’s old car. They said they would pay well.” She closes her eyes and leans back against the tile of the bath. Ro feels heat bristle on her back, as though the fire from outside were burning its way against her. She pictures Lily, fifteen, sixteen years old, stumbling around God knows where it is you make relationships like the one she is describing.

“They stripped me down and submerged me in water up to my neck,” she says. “Perfectly warm — exactly my body temperature, so I felt like I was just ... floating. And then —” She runs a thumbnail from her elbow to her wrist along a faint scar that Ro hadn’t seen earlier.

“They knew what they were doing,” she says after a moment of letting Ro stare. “How to keep me *only* just alive. Or they didn’t, and it just worked out.”

The rain becomes so loud that Ro can hardly hear her own thoughts. She thinks for a moment that she can hear sirens blaring in the distance, and then suddenly, like an animal being put down, the sound yelps to a halt.

“I could feel the life leaving me,” Lily says. “My temperature dropping. There I am, entirely exposed — the first time I was naked in front of anyone other than my own mother — and I’m surrounded by absolute strangers who are singing these hymns in Latin, this statue of some goat creature standing at my feet, like he was watching. Everything got so cold and so slow and so, so far away. And — then I saw it.”

Ro pauses, waiting for Lily to go on. When it’s clear she has no plans to, she prods: “Saw what?”

Lily shrugs. “I don’t know,” she says, as though it’s the most obvious thing. “The end.”

“Lily,” Ro says, and Lily looks up at her expectantly.

And then her face snaps into something else. “Ro,” she says, “Freeze.”

Ro complies, freezing instinctually, and Lily points behind her. She turns slowly. She isn’t sure what she’s expecting, but her mind imposes a demon, a snake, a howling wolf. Instead, she sees on the hot water knob, a small, alien-faced bug.

“Ew,” she says, her voice just more than a breath. “Grasshopper.”

“No,” Lily corrects once again. “Locust.”

Ro starts as Lily moves more quickly than she can register, stretching her leg across Ro’s chest and, with one sharp movement, smashing the locust against the tile of the wall with her bare foot. Ro feels her body tremble as Lily twists her foot once sharply against the wall, and

then pulls it back, a mess of guts and limbs and antennae falling from the bottom of her foot and the wall in dark, stringy clumps.

The winds roar outside so loudly that it sounds as though a train is coming. Ro starts as she registers that thought. “Tornado,” she says. She realizes there is nothing to be done of it — there is nowhere near enough they can go that is safer than where they are now. Instead, she says again, “Tornado.”

Lily springs to her feet, ignoring the mutilated bug on the underside of her foot. Ro follows, thinking that maybe she knows of a better place to wait out the storm. The sound of the train is growing louder and louder, closer and closer.

“We have to go outside,” she says.

There is something spreading across her face that Ro can’t quite identify.

“We have to bear witness,” she says.

Ro grabs her by her wrist, by her shoulder, does what she can to restrain her, for the first time aware of the half decade she has on her sister. “You’re being irrational,” she says, finding herself nearly yelling to stay above the sound of the tornado. “You’re going to die.”

Lily struggles, and Ro wedges herself between her sister and the door, pushing her back, deflecting hands and nails. “It’s just a bad storm, Lily, and it’s going to kill you. You said yourself you don’t believe,” she says, finding herself shouting.

For a moment, Ro considers letting her leave, considers how accountable she will be for her half-sister’s safety in the face of such determination.

“It’s a storm, Lily,” Ro says. “It’s just a storm.”

But she realizes that she isn't so sure. Perhaps it is the opposite. Perhaps Lily is right, and Amy-Grace Matherne is right, and all of the predictions across all of time are right — imprecise, but right. Maybe it was bound to happen.

Ro slackens, and Lily forces her way past her. Ro watches her push through the door into the disarray of the clergy house, where the world is spinning and screaming at them with water and wind.

“It’s going to happen, Ro,” Lily responds, and although her voice is equally elevated, although she has displayed all the brute force of a caged animal, she sounds rational, composed. “It’s going to happen whether you believe in it or not.”

And then her face falls, disappointment crossing it like a dark cloud. Feeling exhaustion in every cell of her body, Ro turns to follow her gaze.

The sky is calming outside, the sounds of the wind and rain lowering. With all the weight of a flake of dust caught in the wind, the stormclouds move on the current of air away from them. The sky lightens, like a cloth is being moved from a bald light bulb. Ro’s ears begin to ring as they adjust to the lack of noise.

“Uncanny,” Ro hears herself say. The storm is pulled from the sky, a face unveiled. The rain reduces to a patter. She sees, for what seems like the first time in a lifetime, the sun shining through patches in the clouds.

Lily is frozen before the window.

“It was just a storm,” she says. She fills her lungs with air, holds it for almost longer than seems possible, and releases.

“Don’t you see?” she says. “There was nothing to be worried about.”

“The world didn’t end,” Ro says.

“It didn’t,” Lily agrees. “At least, not ours.”

Her spine is straight, her body poised with the grace and dignity of the woman Ro saw on the Cast what feels like years ago. There is a calmness on her face, a statuesque composure, and she looks like she has seen enough that she could be ten years Ro’s senior.

She runs her hands through her hair, straightening it back, and streaking the stark white with a line of dark red blood. She casts a smile over her shoulder at Ro, something comforting, somehow both virginal and matronly at the same time.

“We’ll just have to try harder next time,” she says.

And, pulling her cloak over her shoulders, she walks back to the church, where tiny tongues of flame still persist against the rain and the wind.

## Landing

Leigh watches as her husband drops from the open sky, safely nested within the remaining compartment of the mission shuttle, and catapults toward the surface of the Earth. The shuttle is nothing more than a tiny blot of red, no larger than a bird, and then it is the size of a car, and then it is the size of an army tank. Worry blooms beneath her skin as she watches, sweat beading on her forehead. Then two parachutes burst from the sides of the shuttle, and its speed is cut short, now meandering to the surface like a dandelion seed caught by an errant wind.

The shuttle splashes into the ocean, disappearing beneath the waves and bobbing back to the surface. The applause from the viewing dock is deafening, but it sounds to Leigh as if it comes from a distance, her hearing clouded by the blood rushing in her ears.

She had envisioned it differently. When she thought of this day, she pictured something monumental, something that would put the very motion of the Earth to a stop. The shuttle would collide down to the surface of the Earth, into an expansive, empty field under an open sky. When it touched down, it would flatten every blade of grass for miles around. It would break the sound barrier. Every creature for miles around would stop to behold it. A hatch would open, and Isaac would come pouring out, bolting across the desecration of man's pioneering thirst for exploration to embrace her.

Instead, the shuttle is quietly deposited into the open ocean. The sky does not open. The waters do not stir. Not even the applause, still thundering from every direction, is enough to stir its own current of air.

She struggles to maintain her view of the recovery mission through the gaps between the broad shoulders of the few privileged chief engineers and directors who have been selected to

witness the process. She could squeeze past them to the front of the dock, press her stomach against the rail of the carrier until she is as close as possible to Isaac. But she knows her presence is inarguably nonessential, and she fears that if she draws too much attention to herself, someone will realize she is here and ask her to leave.

The shuttle, bright red and awkward, rocks against the waves of the ocean. The recovery mission is devastatingly simple. A helicopter propellor cuts a rhythm into the air and drops a Navy swimmer into the ocean beside the craft. The swimmer helps the three astronauts into a raft previously stored in a panel of the shuttle. She lifts herself as high as the tips of her toes will bring her, but there is nothing she can do to distinguish Isaac from his crewmates, equally clad as they are in dark green biological isolation garments. They could be a troupe of creatures resurfacing from the bottom of the ocean.

The raft approaches the bottom of the carrier and fades out of Leigh's line of sight. She can feel the carrier vibrate slightly as the hatch closes beneath them, and, just like that — the smallest of splashes in the massive ocean — it is over.

Another outburst of applause swells on the ship. The crowd shifts around her as the viewers — some of them, she knows, more important than she could possibly comprehend — clap one another on the back, embrace, take off their glasses to wipe tears from their eyes. Leigh steps to the back of the carrier, holding her face in her hands until the people, the sky, the ocean all disappear. She fills her lungs with air to the point that she is sure they will burst and holds it in.

It's over. He's home.



It is days before they allow her to see him, and when they do, her first look at him is through the small window of the metallic quarantine dome. When she walks into the warehouse where they are keeping him, she can see the men jostling within the dome and Isaac emerging, pressing his hands up against the pane of glass that separates him from the outside world.

He grins at her like he's about to break his face smiling. She grins back. Salty tears curl in and out of her dimples and catch between her lips. For a few moments, they just stand there, grinning at one another like children.

Before her looms a chromium, single-stand microphone — the kind they use in radio booths. They installed it so the astronauts could receive President Nixon. She had cut the picture out of the paper the day before — the crew crowding around the window and beaming out at him as he crooned over the microphone, saying to them whatever it is a President could say to the first men to walk on the moon. Something about that picture — of his being the first voice in their ears as they landed on the moon, of his being the first face they saw back on Earth — made her chest burn with a childlike jealousy.

She wants to tell him how much she missed him. She wants to tell him how the past four days were the longest of her life. She wants to tell him how she was sure that he would die out there. But the high ceilings of the warehouse, the sight of his crewmates stretching out in the quarantine behind him, makes her feel exposed. “You look the same,” she says instead. “I don’t know why — I guess I expected you to look different.”

Isaac’s face tilts in a subdued confusion, but he does not voice it. “You look the same, too,” he tells her. The speaker makes his voice sound static and mechanical, but she can still hear the bemused smile in his tone.

“What’s it like in there?” she asks.

He glances over his shoulder as if to remind himself of where he is. “Well,” he says, a boyish grin on his face. “It’s not too bad, except for the ants.”

She matches his expression, stepping closer to the microphone and lowering her voice. “Ants?”

He looks thinner since she left, a thought she knows is irrational after less than a week. Still, she longs to get him home and get an actual meal into him, one that hasn’t been flash frozen or dehydrated.

“Whatever it is they don’t want us bringing back,” he says, “I sure hope it’s bigger than ants.”

She visits him as often as she can, standing at the window as he eats and reads and reclines in the mobile home-like space she imagines must be Eden after spending four days in a cramped shuttle. When she comes, he stands in front of the pane and tells her of the horrible food and complains about the headaches of protocol keeping them apart. But she prefers the moments before he realizes she is there, when he is lazing around, so much energy and excitement finally in his past. She soaks up his existence returned to her, so real and so out of reach.

She arrives on the last day of quarantine to find the space brimming with reporters. She’d woken early to fix her hair, a new lavender cage dress hugging her body, unable to sleep with the excitement of holding her husband. Instead, she spots Isaac at the front of the room in his NASA-issued blue jumpsuit, finding herself once more peering through the shoulders of a crowded space. Men wave handheld recorders, desperate to capitalize on history as it unfolds.

It's a few hours before one of the administrators finally shoos the journalists from the room, reminding them of the myriad upcoming press conferences. Leigh watches as they slowly disperse, finally clearing her view of her husband, who is talking with his crewmates like three buddies at a football game.

When he catches her eye, he looks almost surprised that she is there waiting. They meet in the center of the room and he kisses her on the forehead. She is drained, her feet blistered from hours in heels, and she realizes how she must look. The gesture is tender, so chaste she almost could almost have missed it. "Hi," he says.

"How was the moon?" she asks him.

"Well, you know." He puts an arm over her shoulder. Her feet begin to hurt slightly less. "It was big, and round, and made of cheese."

Her celebrity finally begins to fade once he is back safe. It seemed to peak just before the launch, during which at least once a day someone would stop her around the city, in her garden, running errands. They would stop and tell her, "You're Isaac Auckland's wife," as though she weren't aware. She would smile with all of her teeth, trying to imitate the expression they captured in her photograph in *Time*, the one they reprinted in the local papers, with her standing behind Isaac in a clunky space suit that made him so far from her touch. After what felt like hours of being preened by the makeup artists and hair stylists, it was surprising that anyone recognized how she actually looked.

"We're all so proud of him here, you know," they would say. "First man on the moon!" they would say. "Makes Sputnik look like a toy train in comparison."

She would thank them, and then they would thank her, and then they would stand and look at her for a few more beats, during which she could see in their eyes their slow realization that she was, in fact, just an ordinary housewife, just like them, just like their wives.

Her husband is Lazarus reborn. He is the prodigal son returned. She lies in bed next to him at night, so awake as he sleeps for what seems like hours and hours, catching up from the days he missed. She is convinced this is some sort of imposter here to take his place, that there is no way he could have possibly made it back in one piece, that the odds were stacked too high against him.

She continues to find him in the moments he does not realize she is looking. While he shuffles through the fridge, his teenager's appetite renewed. While he stands on the back porch, his hands on his hips, glancing around the back yard as if thinking of all the housekeeping he needs to catch up on from his month of absence. The domesticity they return to feels distant, uncannily familiar, although she knows so much has changed from the days that she sat up late with him as he poured over his exams and papers with a determination that she worried was misguidedly hopeful, dangerously ambitious. Now, he looks to her like a spectre, like something her mind has conjured, and sometimes she reaches out to make sure that below his image there is truly flesh and muscle and blood and veins and bone.

Isaac is perfectly well until, suddenly, he is not.

A week after he is released from quarantine, she wakes not to the sound of the him retching, but to the smell. It is sour and acrid, like something has crawled under her bed long ago and died. It burns the insides of her nostrils.

She fights the fog of sleep and helps him to the toilet. As she slowly awakens, Isaac empties more from his stomach than she ever knew one man could possibly contain. The veins in his neck bulge as he coughs, his face a deep, angry red. She puts his arm around her shoulder quickly when it becomes clear he is on the verge of passing out face first into the toilet.

She helps him back into bed, bringing him water and raising the blankets up to his chest. He looks at her through half-lidded eyes for a few beats, and then slips back into an exhausted sleep.

He is bedridden for the next few days. If anything, she's sure, it is a flu. Something about seeing him like that, his eyes nearly swollen shut with fever, an occasional moan of discomfort droning low from his chest without his even realizing, she finds bizarrely comforting. As if she needed this scrap of humanity to confirm to her that he is still normal despite the press, the attention, the space travel. That he is still her husband.

By the end of the third day, she worries that she is wrong. He is so feverish she can hardly touch him, and he can't seem to keep down anything heavier than saltine crackers and orange juice. It is though his body is rejecting something inside of him, trying to push or burn it out of his system.

She thinks he is asleep when she reaches for the phone by his bedstand. He stirs, winces as he pushes himself somewhat upright. "What are you doing?"

She thumbs at the business card in her hand. "I just think the physicians should know. At NASA," she says. "I think they'd like to come out and make sure you're — you know, alright."

He laughs, but it comes out more like a cough, wet and sodden. “It’s just a bug, Leigh,” he says. “It’s nothing they need to spend their time with.”

Leigh hesitates, trying to decipher whether this is bravado or something else. “I just think they’d like to know, in case it’s anything that might be related to — you know, the trip.”

He shakes his head, though it is hard to digest his sternness when he is as clammy and red as he is. “It’s nothing, Leigh,” he says. “Trust me on this.”

Maybe it is his tone of voice, his expression, or the fact that, despite her worry, she recognizes that it is not her illness, not her administrators, not her experience.

She hesitates, but puts the phone back on the receiver.

She spends most of her time sitting on the bed with him, making sure she is available if he needs anything. She is stretched across his chest, trying to let the steady rhythm of his breathing lull her to sleep, to make up for the nights she’s spent stirring awake every hour to make sure he is alright.

“You really shouldn’t,” he tells her a few minutes later. She hadn’t even realized he’d awoken. “It might be contagious.”

She can feel his chest rising and falling slowly under her arms, a feverish warmth radiating from him like he has two buzzing nuclear reactors where his lungs should be. “I know,” she says. He reaches down and strokes her hair, and she wishes that all of her wishing would manifest in some palpable, healing effect.

She is half asleep again when he jolts upright, twisting over the side of the bed to vomit into the bedpan. He coughs and breathes heavily, his entire torso shuddering, and then leans over

to vomit once more, his retching punctuated by groans of discomfort and spitting coughs that break Leigh's heart.

She stands to help him, and then pauses, a cool towel an inch above his drenched neck.

What is coming from her husband's mouth is an entirely different substance from what is in the bedpan. It drains from his mouth and nose in a steady, endless flow, a dark gray color that looks anything but biological. What's coming from her husband's mouth like a river undammed is a steady stream of a substance that, if she knew no better — by its color and the sound it makes hitting the liquid below — she would identify as gravel.

She blinks hard in case her eyes are out of focus, in case she's caught whatever he has and is hallucinating. But she is positive she isn't. As she watches, Isaac vomits a chalky, dry, stream of dusty, tiny rocks that disappear below the surface of the liquid in the bedpan.

She dozes off on the couch in front of the television. A stocky, white-haired man is speaking to an anchor about the landing. Samples of moon sediment have been shipped to laboratories all over the nation, he is saying. His tie is slightly askew. We hope that this will bring us closer to understanding not only our cosmic surroundings better, but also our own Earth.

The anchor asks what all of the reporters have been asking to tie up every interview. Aside from beating the Russians, it is the number one reason Americans have been interested in the moon landing to begin with. So, what does this mean for life in space? he asks. He pronounces Life In Space as though it were an established field of study.

The scientist deflates, shifts in his seat. As was indicated by our preliminary orbiters' visual reports, he says, there were no definitive signs reported by our astronauts or our equipment that indicate the presence of life on the moon.

But there were no definitive signs recorded by them that *disprove* the possibility, the anchor points out.

Leigh dozes in and out of the interview, determined to stay awake to listen for sounds of Isaac getting sick again. When she lets herself slip into sleep, she sees images of gravel and grit churning inside of her husband's body, of rock sediment forming and deteriorating within his stomach lining. He vomits moon dust and tiny meteorites, and then begins to vomit screws, metal planes, his throat and mouth contorting around the pieces of a shuttle that splash one by one into the contents of his bedpan below.

She wakes and moves back into her bedroom, sheer exhaustion preventing her from keeping her distance from Isaac, whose possible contagion she is suddenly acutely aware of. Something keeps her wavering outside of the door for a moment, a dread she cannot place.

Isaac is not in the bed. Leigh panics instinctually, envisioning him hunched over the toilet without her help, or having passed out on the cold ceramic of the bathroom floor from exhaustion. Then she sees him standing by the open window, slumped to one side, like he only has enough life in him to keep half of his body upright.

She crosses the room slowly, the way she would approach a skittish animal in the wild. His eyes are glassily focused on something out of the window, and though they do not move, he seems intent, alert, like there is something out there to be found that is just out of view. She stops



inching toward him, for some reason she can't explain, afraid of what he might do if she startles him.

“Isaac,” she says. “*Isaac.*”

His entire body jolts as if undergoing an electrical current, and he turns to her, nearly toppling into her. He looks so confused that she almost pities him.

They stand there for a moment, staring at one another like the first day in the quarantine. She sees in his eyes the same lack of recognition she feels for him, a stranger she has never seen in her life. The room feels still, like they are both moving through space and air without affecting any of their surroundings, and she thinks maybe she is still asleep. He breaks his gaze and turns to climb back into the bed wordlessly. She glances over her shoulders. It is a clear night, and the sky is dusted with what could be hundreds of stars, all of different size and luminosity twinkling because of the atmosphere or twinkling simply because her eyes won't focus. The moon hangs full and bright above them, bathing the ground below in a sheen of white a slick, glossy film.

When she wakes the next morning, she can hear the shower running. The room is spotless, the cups of water and bedpan is put away, and fresh air stirs the curtains as it winds in through the open window. Isaac steps into the room, a towel around his waist. His skin is glowing, a healthy red from the heat of the shower. The bags under his eyes are gone.

“You're looking at me like there's a monster eating my head,” he informs her, toweling his face off and then disappearing into the closet.

“You look so much better,” she says, sitting up in bed, aware from his cleanness and health how flushed and out of sorts she feels.

“I told you it was just a bug,” he says. He emerges from the closet in black pants, buttoning a white shirt up to his neck. “I’ve been so off my sleep pattern that it probably weakened my immunity. Changes in air pressure and stress levels doesn’t help. That’s all it is, Leigh,” he adds, firmly.

He holds a black tie out to her, and she instinctively stands to help him tie it. “Where are you going?”

“*We*,” he says. “That fundraiser I told you about. All the bigshots will be there, the press and everyone.”

Leigh looks at her watch and realizes that she has managed to sleep until four in the afternoon. Isaac smiles at her sheepishly. “I wanted you to be able to catch up,” he says. “We’ve still got about an hour until we need to leave,” he adds, as if that is anywhere near enough time for her to get presentable.

“Are you sure you’re well enough?” Leigh says, tightening his tie. Isaac puts his hands around hers against his throat.

“I’m fine,” he says. And then he is off again, digging through the closet for his dress shoes. “I really need you to come with me to this one.”

She watches him darting around, looking for any signs of residual illness, anything that would justify the dread she feels swimming in her stomach. “I just don’t want you to push yourself,” she says.

He steps back into the closet and reappears with the same purple dress she wore to pick him up from the quarantine. “I’m fine,” he says again. “And even if I wasn’t, we need to show face at this one.” He pauses, brushing a hand in the air with exasperation. He hands her the dress.

“It’s the political part of all of this that I hate. It’s hard to explain — It’s almost like I have to campaign to be on the next mission.”

Leigh freezes, the dress suddenly weighing a thousand pounds in her hands. “You want to go — back?”

Isaac retrieves his coat and pulls his arms into it. “It probably won’t be for several, several years, but if I keep my name circulating, I think I have a good chance.”

He looks up at Leigh and slows when he sees the expression on her face — she isn’t even sure what she must look like now. He stares at her, bemused. “Yeah, Leigh,” he says, pausing to cough into the crook of his arm. “Of course I want to go back.”

“He thinks he’s the new Elvis,” The mission commander’s wife, Annie, says. Leigh thought the hype of it all would fade when the mission returned, but she soon came to realize more and more the enormity of what Isaac and his crew’s responsibilities signified. He has become one of the nation’s three posterboys, proof to Congress and the commies that America is still in the lead of the space race.

Annie is two glasses of champagne ahead of her, her pointy-heeled foot bobbing rapidly as they watch her suited husband Scott shake hands with some politician or another. Leigh has come to realize this is what the responsibilities of an astronaut’s wife amount to: posing for pictures and watching.

“I saw him put a pen in his pocket before he came here, and I tell you, Leigh — he won’t admit it, but it was just in case the opportunity arises to sign autographs.”

“Well, NASA did train them to be prepared for every situation,” Leigh points out. “You never know when you’ll be confronted with a group of starry-eyed teenagers.”

She feels Isaac kiss her on the cheek before she even sees him. He puts his hand on hers and sits next to her. She hates the way that every time he makes a moment for her at these events, she feels warmed, for some reason, as if his speaking to her is a huge honor to squeeze into his busy schedule, a colossal sacrifice of his time.

“Almost over, ladies. I promise,” he says. Leigh offers him her glass of champagne and he downs a mouthful, glances over his shoulder theatrically, and downs another, winking.

“Good food, at least,” Scott says distractedly as he sinks into the chair next to Isaac. “Are you two enjoying yourselves?”

Isaac turns his back to the table and coughs again, this time more violently. It comes with a coarse, scratching sound that hurts Leigh’s throat just to hear.

“Alright there?” Scott asks. Isaac resurfaces, swallows hard, and nods. His face is slightly red, his eyes watery.

“You don’t look so well,” Annie adds, her voice almost accusatory.

“I’m fine,” Isaac insists with a stubbornness that makes Leigh want to hit him. She can’t help feeling angry with herself that she let him come out in the first place.

Annie glances at Leigh, who is frozen, somehow undressed, like Isaac’s illness is a sign of some shortcoming for which she is to blame. Then she stands next to Isaac and gestures for him to follow. “Let’s go get you some water,” she says, and Isaac follows her to the refreshments table, his face still buried in the crook of his arm, his lungs emptying loudly. A few people sitting

at the next table glance up at him as he walks past, alarmed, and then turn back to their cohorts with renewed vigor when they realize who it is that is clearly so unwell.

It isn't until she turns back to her table that Leigh realizes Scott has leaned toward her conspiratorially. "How long has he had that cough?" he murmurs to her.

Leigh is almost taken aback, suddenly aware that it may be the first time Scott has ever directly addressed her. "I don't know," she says. A confession dances on the tip of her tongue. My husband has been unwell. This isn't new. It's been days. But some instinct of loyalty forces out, "I guess I haven't noticed."

Scott nods, calculating. "I'm sure it's nothing," he says, "but if it gets worse — or gets funny, you know — you should probably bring him in."

Leigh stares at him, unable to add up exactly what he's saying.

"He'll be too proud to do it himself, but the physicians back at NASA will want to run some more tests to make sure there aren't some effects of space travel we didn't account for before the next mission."

That phrase again — *the next mission*.

"If it *gets funny*," she blurts out, "Will that affect his — candidacy for future launches?"

Scott shakes his head side to side in a way that somehow still tells her yes.

"It's not something anyone really wants to hear the answer to," he says. It is the diplomatic response of a well-appointed mission commander. "NASA has to put the success of the missions first. It can't be personal, especially when it comes to risking someone's health. And anyway," he adds, waving slightly. "That's so long from now. It's too long of a road to look down."

Scott stops and tilts his head slightly, staring at Leigh as if he's looking through her. She feels the need to walk away, to hole up in a bathroom stall and not be seen for a few minutes.

"It's nothing to get worked up about," he says. She knows he is trying to be reassuring. "You have to understand. This is all new. It's something we've never done." She knows his *we* to be collective, like he's speaking for all of mankind, like he's speaking for everyone who has ever lived and who ever would. "There's just no way to predict how humans are going to react."

Annie reappears behind Scott, snapping her out of her trance. "Leigh, sweetie," she says, a concern on her face that raises Leigh's heart rate. "I think Isaac needs you."

She finds Isaac sitting on a bench behind the event hall. The windows shines a soft glow onto his back, his shadow cast long and thin onto the ground, a third witness to the conversation. He turns to see her and then immediately breaks into another fit of coughing. She sits on the bench beside him. Despite being the middle of the summer, there is a slight chill in the air, a misplaced breeze that tickles the hair on her neck.

"We should go if you need to," she says.

"I'm fine," he says immediately, like he was waiting for her to ask so he could push back. His voice is thick and low, and she can hear that it is painful for him to even speak. "It's really nothing."

He's taken his jacket off, loosened his tie, rolled up his sleeves. She can see the discomfort in his face. It is this stubbornness, she knows, that has always been where she found him. Nights when she was half-supporting him in grad school where she would get home from work and find him having fallen asleep on his textbooks, pushing himself so hard she almost

wanted to ask him to stop — but she knew she couldn't impose on this fixation of his, this hungry drive to digest more and more of the theory and mechanics and engineering that she never dreamed would culminate the way it had.

Isaac leans back, looking up to the sky once more. Clumps of rapidly-moving clouds form a down blanket through whose perforations small circles of starlight shine. Isaac glances at her and then back at the sky, as if to make sure that she was seeing the same night he was, as if monitoring her reaction.

It is the look he gives to her occasionally when he gets caught up trying to explain theory to her — gravity and the space-time and the estimates of how many galaxies there are besides their own of just how *big* everything is — an expectant look, like he is waiting for her to catch the feverish thrill he feels running through his own body. It is the look he gave to her when he walked into their small apartment and dropped his books on the couch and put his hands on his hips and asked, in a way that was more declaration than question, “Hey, Leigh — how do you feel about Houston?”

But the expression fades, and he looks back to the sky, and then bursts into another coughing fit, turning away from her as he does.

When she speaks, it is a whisper, as though she is embarrassed that even he can hear her question. She has felt it too silly to ask a man as important as her husband, though it has been dancing on her tongue for what feels like millennia — such an irreverently youthful question, something the wife of an astronaut and a scientist wouldn't deign to ask.

“What was it like out there?”

Her voice is so low that the night breeze almost swallows it. For a few moments, he doesn't react. She begins to think maybe he truly didn't hear her.

"It's not so easy to explain," he says, finally. "It's not easy to process."

"Try," she says.

His shoulders slouch, but she can see it is a gesture of relief: he has been waiting for her to ask. He has been waiting to speak about it.

"I thought that once we got out there, you know, we would feel like the conquistadors. We'd look out at the *entirety* of the visible universe — everything we could see for miles around, every single star and planet in the night sky and every single galaxy spinning in the distance —" He stretches a hand out as if trying to gesture the breadth of which he spoke. "And feel like the apex. Like this — this *instrument* through which all of mankind's technological accomplishments were finally coming to a peak."

She realizes that at some point she has begun to hold her breath, as if reminding him of her presence next to him might snap him from his trance, might take an opportunity from her she may never get back. She pictures him in his spacesuit, compressed and contained like another lab specimen, any exposure to the outside world a risk of spoilation. She can see him, gazing around at the expanse at all the stars and the celestial bodies near and far, and *impossibly* far, and all of the infinite emptiness between them.

He goes so long without saying anything she thinks maybe that is all he had to say, or that maybe he regrets speaking to begin with. When he speaks again, his voice wavers with something flat and hollow, an emotion she can't recognize on his lips.

"I don't know if you can understand it, Leigh," he says. "I felt so incredibly small."



It is a *wonder* in his voice, a starry-eyed, childlike wonder than she has never heard from him before in her life.

Something bubbles deep inside of her below her stomach that she fears may be envy.

“You won’t be able to go back,” she says without meaning to. “If you’re not well.” She finds her voice much louder than she means it to be, and Isaac looks at her like she has startled him out of some spell. “That’s why you didn’t want me to call.”

“Yeah,” he says. “Maybe.”

“So it’s worth it for you,” she says. She is unsure if her voice sounds as cold as she thinks it does, until he glances at her, looking like a young child admonished. “It’s worth it for you to risk everything you have, everyone you *know* to this.” She pauses, tempers her voice.

“Everything we have.”

He leans into his arm, coughing so loudly she can nearly hear the clumps of phlegm loosening from within his lungs. This time, she feels no compulsion to reach for him. When he stops, he settles and leans back onto his arms.

She keeps her eyes fixed on the sky. The moon pokes out between the clouds, nothing more than a fingernail sliver of white light.

“I feel like I was made for this,” he says suddenly. His voice is low gravel, sore from a cracked and abused throat. “If I die for this, it makes sense, if it was all I was ever meant to do.” She sees his hand twitch upward slightly, like he is going to reach for her and then rethinks it.

“All I was ever meant to be.”

And then he does take her hand, warm and clammy against hers.

“Does that make sense?” he asks, his voice inflecting up at the end in desperation.

But the truth is, she can't sympathize. The truth is, she can't see things through his eyes — the mystical, overwhelming knowledge he tries so often to impart upon her. The truth is, she would have been perfectly happy if they had never moved to Houston, if they had grown old in their college town like they had always talked about, like she had always wanted, spending every second of every day of her life with him, and never having to worry if one day she would wake up and find that he was gone.

She isn't sure exactly what he sees when he looks at the sky. But when she looks, all she sees is an emptiness waiting to swallow up anyone prideful enough to think they could ever leave an impression on it.

When she looks at the sky, all she sees is stars.

"Everything alright out here?" Scott asks, appearing in the door. "They're looking for you inside — the French ambassador is here to shake hands." He cringes when he hears Isaac coughing again, and produces a handkerchief from his front pocket.

"We might have to head out for the night," Leigh says, putting a hand on Isaac's back.

He shakes his head as he coughs into the handkerchief. "I'll be fine," he says, standing. "Really, it's nothing."

Just like that, the moment is gone. Her vulnerable, wonder-struck husband is replaced with Isaac Auckland, astronaut, third man on the moon.

He rolls his sleeves back down. Leigh takes the handkerchief from him so he can straighten his tie. He turns to her with a peculiar, apologetic smile, as though he is trying to disperse the heaviness that lingers in the air between them.

"You ready Leigh?" he asks.

The handkerchief is stained with a splotch of something dark, a liquid that slowly spreads to fill the fibers of the surrounding fabric.

“Sure,” she says, standing. “Of course.”

She follows him toward the event hall, eyeing the handkerchief. The liquid stains the skin of her fingertips, darkness coiling into her prints. For a moment, it looks to her to be black as oil, the black of night spilling into her hands. She balls the cloth up into her hand and follows him into the building. It may have just been a trick of the light.

## Fatigue

The first time you die, it's at your own hands.

The storm comes from nowhere on the drive back from your parents' place in Jersey. The rain and wind whip around the car, your vision reduced to a streak of red taillights, a distorted haze of static shadows and movement. The barrelling thunder wakes Mallory from the half sleep she was curled into in the passenger seat.

"That wasn't the worst," she says unceremoniously, pretending, as she always does, that she wasn't fast asleep less than a minute ago.

"It was short," you say in agreement.

"You had fun," she says. She seems to be a second away from sticking her tongue out at you. "You're just mad Dad beat you at gin."

You snort. "That man has been cheating at cards for so long I think he just lives with cards up his sleeve."

You have made a pact with one another to start visiting your parents more often. They live so close. There's no excuse not to. It's the only time you see Mallory, although she only lives one borough over.

"I think stuff like that is good for him," Mallory says. She gazes out the window, speaking to you from the back of her head. "He seems so spacey lately. I just hope there's nothing, you know. Starting with him."

You get away with rolling your eyes since she isn't looking. "It's not like they're a thousand, Mal," you say. "We can't spend all the time worrying about them getting old."

Mallory turns to you, her lips pursed into a half-grimace. "I know," she says. "You're

right.”

You turn the windshield wipers up. They jerk back and forth so rapidly that you almost feel it tugging you left and right, too.

“Let’s get coffee sometime this week,” she says, just like she always says.

“Definitely,” you say, just like you always say. “When works for you?” you ask her.

After a beat, you glance over and see that she is curled up again, eyes closed, breathing so softly you can hardly hear it over the downpour.

You die extremely quickly.

You lose control of the car so suddenly it takes you a moment to realize what has happened. You can’t remember if you’re supposed to turn the wheel into the direction of the spin or away from it, but it doesn’t matter because it starts to flip before you can even move your hands.

You taste the pain before you feel it, the sharpness of copper blood blooming in the back of your throat, the warmth of it spilling from your stomach and into your nose and your mouth. It takes what seems like ages for the car to stop spinning, gravity shifting from above you to below you so rapidly you can’t even tell whether you’re right side up. There are hands everywhere, Mallory’s hair whipping around her face and tickling the side of your cheek, and you are magnetized to the steering wheel, then to the console, then to the roof of the car as the world turns over and over outside.

You lose consciousness within moments. In the smallest of mercies, you will forget all of this. You won’t remember a thing.

You wake up in the hospital the next day. It is too much all at once, too loud and too bright. The smell of antiseptic stings your nose. Your mother is standing at your side, looming over you, her spine curled like the hook of a wire hanger. Her eyes are red and her face is spotted where splotches of emotion have banded together and begun to burn brightly just beneath her skin. You don't know how you look, but you have a good idea that it isn't particularly handsome. Regardless, she lets out a sound somewhere between a chuckle and a sob.

"Max," she says. "Your heart rate," she says. "It dropped so much. We thought you were dead. They thought you were dead. They asked your dad and I, they asked if you were an organ donor." She laughs, and a small bubble of snot inflates and pops in her left nostril. "They were ready to hack you apart and give all your bits to other people," she says. This doesn't sound like exactly how science works, but you nod. Pain shoots from your neck down your back and spreads across your shoulders.

"I'm alive," you remind her breathily. "It's gonna be fine. I'm here."

"I know," she says. She laughs and wipes the back of her hand across both of her eyes. A thin wisp of black mascara streaks from one eye to the other. She takes your hand in hers. It feels frigid to the touch, but you realize it could be your skin against hers that's so cold.

Something in her face makes you remember another through your haze — your memory so far away it's like reaching through sand to access it. Another face beside you, flipping over and over and over like clothes tossing in a too-full dryer.

"Mal," you say. "Where's Mallory?"

Your mother manages roughly three seconds of composure before her face contorts. "Your dad is with her," she says. She puts her hand on her chest and takes a deep breath in.

“She’s — well, she’s alive.”

They tell you that your recovery is unprecedented. It is almost impossible to believe, they tell you, considering the condition you were in upon admission. They want to hold you for a few more days to make sure you continue to recover properly, but you’re allowed to visit Mallory in the ICU.

She still looks just like she does when she is sleeping. It’s as if from the moment she dozed beside you until now, she’s just been taking an exceptionally long nap. There are dark circles under her eyes, and tubes wind from her nose, from her arms, from under her sheets into drips and boxes and machines whose hums and beeps give them their their own presence in the room. Your father snores in one of the chairs lining the wall. A daytime talk show rerun plays on the TV. Her bedside table is nearly overflowing with flowers and cards. You know she would hate this, hate all of the attention and the fuss.

“I’ve been reading to her,” your father says, appearing behind you.

He has a thick book in his hands, and you don’t have to look closely to know that it’s the bible. You think listening to the bible might be just enough to wake her up — an undeniable urge to roll her eyes.

“They say she might be able to hear.” He puts the bible into your hands. “Probably not, though,” he adds softly.

“What do you mean?”

Your father looks tired, like he’s been sleeping in that chair for days — which he may have been for all you know — and somehow as lucid as he’s seemed in months. “I mean, she’s

probably gone. That's what they're saying, without really saying it. That she's probably not even there anymore."

You put your hand on hers, pull her blanket up to her chest. Something about her face, her skin so pale and her hair pushed back and away from her eyes, makes her look like a teenager again.

"You don't look so well," your father tells you. "You probably shouldn't be up and about so much."

"No," you tell him, not looking away from your sister. "I feel fine."

They discharge you from the hospital after a week. Your mother lets you know that their home is open to you, that your bedroom is still free, if you don't want to be alone. You think about sleeping in your childhood bed, the one you shared with Mallory for years before they converted the office into a second bedroom, before you thank her and turn her down.

You squeeze into the narrow entry corridor of your Astoria apartment and rifle through your keyring to check the small brass mailbox on the first floor. The box is brimming with envelopes. They're all addressed to someone who isn't you, although you have the same first name. Max. You slide your fingers under one of the seals, and then decide your curiosity is not worth the hassle.

When you open the door to your apartment, everything feels kind of the same, but mostly different. You feel as if you are in the wrong place, like you've accidentally opened the room down the hall from your own. You go to hang up your jacket and realize that the hooks on your door have fallen to the ground.



You catch sight of yourself in the bathroom mirror for the first time since you died. You look horrible. You realize you never called work to tell them you were in the hospital. You've probably already been fired. You think maybe the accident made the news and your boss has tried to call you to let you know she wishes you well and that your job will still be waiting when you get back. But you know that isn't happening. You stretch out on your mattress, a plume of dust erupting from it, and fall into a deep sleep.

The second time you die, it's not your fault at all. It could happen to anyone, but it happens to you.

It's a kid in the convenience store next to your apartment. He can't be more than fifteen, with freckles dusted across his nose and stringy red hair that touches his shoulders. His hands shake as he holds the gun up to Ty, who's owned the place as long as you've lived there. Ty, who bums cigarettes from you on his break and frenches you Little Debbies when he can tell you're having a particularly shit day.

You're just coming back from making yourself visit Mallory again. You make yourself visit Mallory as much as you can stand. You sit next to her and hold her clammy hand or put on sitcoms and make fun of them aloud the way you always used to when you were kids, the lights off in your room and the volume on the TV as low as possible so your parents wouldn't know you were still awake. Only this time it's just you talking and just her listening, if she can hear anything at all.

It's exhausting every time you go, and this time when you get back, you just want to get out of your apartment for a bit, out of your head, away from your phone that is constantly

updating the number of missed calls from your mother. You just want some candy, and you can't believe your luck. You're halfway to the back of the store before you even realize what's going on.

You figure he doesn't meant to shoot you. It's just one of those instinctive things. You don't take it personally. You can see the fear in his eyes as he pulls the trigger, the gun pointed at your chest, and then all you can feel is the sensation of the bones of your ribcage shattering into a million shards.

The kid shoots Ty, too. Only, Ty stays dead.

You don't.

You wake what could have been minutes or hours or days later. The kid is gone. You are drenched in your own blood. It's freezing cold and your shirt clings to your chest. You are sore and stiff as a board, but otherwise, quite alive. You can see clumps of Ty's hair, red with blood, stuck on the wall behind the register. The sun is beginning to shine through the windows of the store. You leave before anyone walks in and calls the police. You manage to make it all the way upstairs before vomiting into your kitchen sink.

You are positive that you are going crazy. You can hardly stand to be in your apartment anymore. It's like everything has been slightly altered, rearranged, as if someone came in and moved everything you own one inch to the left.

All of your food is half eaten, stale, gone, like you've been waking up in the middle of the night to eat and then forgetting it in the morning. You lose time, lose entire days, spending whole nights wandering around the city, sitting on stoops or in parks or watching the tourists

fumble around, glued to the maps on their phones, just so you don't have to return home or let your thoughts catch you. You don't know what to do with yourself, with this body that doesn't work right.

Your mailbox is so full of letters that you can hardly open it. When you pull them all out, it feels like you are holding a brick. They are all different shapes and sizes and all look at least somewhat official. You close your box and lock it, and are wondering whether you should talk to your landlord when you realize someone is peering over your shoulder.

She is short, small, wearing a hoodie two sizes too big that reaches nearly to her knees, which are pointed inward like tree knobs. She's got a mop of curly black hair that frizzes just past her ears. She stares at you for a beat, and you stare back. "What are you doing with my mail, man?"

You look down at the stack of mail, which, you suspect, is at least partly yours. "Your name is Max?"

"Yeah," she says impatiently. "Max. Maxine." She takes the stack from your hands and begins to page through it. You stop her about three quarters when the last name that must be hers, Garcia, becomes yours, Drew, and take your share.

"Must be some kind of mix up," you say to her, but she's already turned on her heel and is walking out the door, headphones plugged into her ears.

The third time you die, you are testing a theory.

Getting shot in the chest makes it hard to ignore the pattern. Either your theory holds, or you have to consider the possibility that you've lost your mind.

Wind whips your hair around your face as you climb over the banister of the George Washington bridge. You used to walk all the way out here on your lunch break from work just to get away from the monotony of the office, just to remind yourself that there are people and places that continue to exist even as you spend an entire day staring at your computer screen. You can smell the river below, dark as asphalt and churning like a witch's brew in the night.

It occurs to you that if it works, you die and stay dead. You're aware that it may have some small effect on your parents, who, right now, as you stretch however many hundreds of feet above the hard, cold river, are probably sitting around the hospital bed of your sister, still and smooth and somehow, in her current state, closer to you than she is to them.

You are just trying to right the universe, you tell yourself. To put your status where it should be.

You take two deep lungfuls of air and jump. The last thing you see is the black of the night sky, the sharp lights of the city skyline, upside down and burning like stars.

You wake up on the river bank. Gull cries sound off like urgent calls in the distance. You can hear the footfall of joggers on the concrete behind you. You feel like you've been hit by a truck, but you are nonetheless unmitigably alive. You stand, shake the excess water from your hair, and head to the subway station.

Whenever you sleep, you sleep for at least twenty hours, regardless of how many alarms you set. So you stop sleeping altogether.

The longer you are awake, the more the world fades around you, the more time begins to

slow. You begin to feel like you are moving further and further into yourself, like there are layers and layers of distance crystallizing between you and the reality around you. You arrive places without consciously deciding to go. You're not even sure if the calendar hanging in your kitchen is open to the right month anymore.

You find yourself sitting by Mallory's bed more and more. You go in the middle of the night so that you don't run into your parents. Each time you go, she looks as though she has moved slightly — her hand angled slightly out or a tuft of hair falling in her face — as though she has been waking up when no one is there, yawning, rolling her shoulders back, and settling down for another stretch of hibernation.

You hardly recognize your apartment anymore. You can't place your finger on what it is, but something about the space feels wrong, even more wrong than it has for days, like taking a shower without pulling the curtain closed.

You don't decide to try again until you are peering into your medicine pantry for something to alleviate the headache you've been nursing for what seems like days. The pantry seems more sparse than it has been, but you find a bottle of high dosage sleeping pills an old girlfriend must have left ages ago. You chase the thirty remaining pills with a few gulps of scotch and lay down on your bed, which feels lumpy, like it has been molded to fit the shape of someone else's body. You stare at the ceiling until the pain starts to grow in your gut and spread to your limbs and everything begins to fade.

You wake to the sound of someone screaming.

It reaches you through layers and layers of sleep until you finally feel yourself come back

into your body bit by bit. When you finally open your eyes, there is a girl standing at the foot of your bed screaming, her dark mess of hair nearly covering her eyes.

You jerk upright and then realize you haven't moved an inch. Your body is paralyzed, still half asleep.

She stops screaming and you manage to push yourself up onto an elbow. You realize where you recognize the hair from. She is the girl from the mailroom, the girl whose letters have been clogging up your box. She looks much bigger from this angle, taller, or longer.

"What the hell are you doing here?" she asks. Her tone is so acrid that you feel immediately chastised, as though you are at fault somehow for lying in your own bed.

"I live here," you manage, your words slow and far apart.

She slackens, her face relaxing five years off of her age. Far from the fury she showed a moment ago, she now eyes you as if you're her annoying older brother. She drops down to sit at the foot of your bed.

She has been staying here for weeks, she tells you. You can't find the energy to speak, so you listen. The landlord is a friend of hers, she tells you, which she eventually explains means that she keeps him in supply of high strength opiates at a competitive rate, and sleeps with him occasionally. In exchange, he's set her up in this apartment, in your apartment, until he gets a new tenant.

"How have I never seen you?" you ask.

"I have other places to crash, too," she says vaguely, almost defensively. "Every night I've been here, it's been empty."

With how infrequently you've been here, it's not impossible.

“He just gave you my apartment?” you say. “He gave you a key?”

“He said he hasn’t gotten rent in ages.”

It’s a fair statement. You’re not entirely sure if it’s been weeks or months since you’ve even seen him.

“He says he saw on the news that you died in a car crash. Or that someone who looked like you died in a car crash.”

At some point in your life, you would fight her on this. She is a strange woman squatting in your apartment. But right now, you just don’t have the energy, so you tell her, “Yeah.” You tell her, “Maybe I did.”

This seems to intrigue her.. “What do you mean?”

“Well,” you say, “I think I was dead when you came in.”

“Oh,” she says. “That sounds wrong.”

So you tell her what you mean.

When you finish speaking, she looks at you for a long time.

And then she says, “That’s not so strange.”

You stare at her for a moment, sitting on your bed as comfortably as childhood friends catching up. You look for a trace of a smile on her face, of some hint of humor, but you see nothing.

“I think something like this happened to my grandfather. He was sick — cancer or something, I think. I was too young to really know. Anyway, he kept dying over and over again. He’d flatline and get all stiff and we’d cry and then the next day he’d be alive and wide awake in

his bed again.”

“What did you do?” you ask.

She fixes you with a face that almost makes you flinch. “We buried him,” she says.

“What else could we do? The medical bills were astronomical. He’s probably still down there, dying from suffocation, or dying from old age, or dying from both over and over and over.” Her eyes grow slightly glassy, and her gaze wanders over your shoulder, like she’s speaking to someone who’s standing right behind you. “That’s gotta be rough.”

You stare at her for a moment, unable to get a read on her — if she’s being sardonic or serious or trying to be funny — though, if that’s the case, she’s certainly mastered the art of deadpan. She looks everywhere but your eyes.

“You just made that all up.”

She finally meets your eye. “Yeah,” she says.

And then she says: “So, you’re trying to die?”

You almost miss the question in its abruptness. “I’m not entirely sure,” you tell her. You think it is the truth. “I might just want to make sure I’m able to.”

“That makes no sense,” she says. She says it like you’re the biggest moron she’s ever met. “If you find out you’re able to, then you’re dead.”

“Yeah,” you grant her. “But I think maybe I’m supposed to be.”

“Yeah,” she says back. She gazes into space, pensive, and then stands. You find her lack of questions refreshing: unlike the questions buzzing in your head, she takes everything at face value, accepts it for how she sees it. “Yeah,” she says, “I totally get that.”



Max doesn't show any intention to move out of your apartment. It doesn't really bother you. It seems to belong to her more than you now anyway, and her presence gives you an excuse to not visit Mallory, to not force yourself to go there and sit with her and come back feeling deader every time. As you try to sleep in the armchair in front of your TV, you glance at the way her small body in your bed seems to fit into all the grooves that felt so uncomfortable against your back.

You don't realize you've dozed off until you wake up. It's to the sound of the apartment door opening, a slit of light across the floor. Max steps inside. She drops a bag onto the floor and takes off her jacket and sits on your bed. Or her bed.

"Alright," she says. "I've got the whole afternoon free. You ready to get started?"

Max has some ideas she thinks may help. But first, she tells you, you have to show her.

"I'm a busy girl," she tells you. "I can't have you just yanking me around on some stupid joke or something."

"What do you want, then?"

She pauses, but you can tell it's just for show. She's thought about this. "I'll try and kill you."

"What if it works?" you ask, even though you know it won't. "Then you'll be a murderer."

"If it works," she says, "Then you're welcome."

You lay down on your misshapen mattress. She makes sure that the door is locked, and

then she straddles your chest. “Okay,” she says. “Are you ready?”

You nod, and she puts one hand around your neck, and then clasps the other on top of it. Her skin is cold and clammy. She pushes down softly at first, like she’s afraid to use too much force, and then harder and harder until you can feel the vessels in your neck compressing, the blood swimming in your ears. You struggle instinctively. Gasping, desperate sounds come out of your mouth without your consent, and it occurs to you how intimate this is, death at someone else’s hands.

The sounds get louder and then get softer, and then your lungs forget what it was like to have oxygen to begin with, and your vision fades.

You sit up some time later. Max slouches in your armchair by the open window, one of your towels wrapped around her body and the afternoon light gleaning off of her dark eyes as she stares at you.

“Wow,” she says. “Took you long enough.”

Max makes killing you her full time occupation, maybe in return for your letting her stay in your apartment. You imagine this fits well into the schedule of someone whose normal gig involves pushing opiates and amphetamines. She takes one of your posters off the wall, flips it over, and starts making a list of all the ways that you’ve died. Car accident, drowning, blood loss, overdose, strangulation.

Max tries her very best. When cutting your throat doesn’t work, she crams you full of pharmaceuticals until you are on the verge of death, and then she puts a bullet between your eyes. Both times, you wake up fully alive and intact, and Max frowns at you.

“Well, that one was expensive,” she says neutrally after the last attempt. “I could have made two hundred if I’d sold those pills instead.”

“How long have I been out?” you ask her. It hurts to move at all, and your head aches worse than it ever has in your life. You look blankly at the blood coating your bathroom tiles and tub and sink.

“Three months,” she says solemnly.

You stare at her in alarm.

And then she says, “Or three days.” She shrugs and stands up.

“Wait,” you say, “Which one is it?”

She shrugs again. “How should I know?”

“There’s not really much left to try,” Max tells you, looking at the slanted scrawl of her list. Two of your pencils are criss-crossed behind her head, holding her short hair in a bun. “I think the biggest category we can’t access is sickness, like terminal sickness, like if you died from cancer or something. But even I don’t know how to kill someone like that.”

“Book a day in a tanning bed?” you suggest. She ignores you.

“The only other thing is some kind of death where your body ends up in a zillion different places, so maybe you couldn’t heal or whatever. Like if you stepped on a landmine. That way you wouldn’t have anything to come back to.” She speaks with the knowledgeable ease of someone discussing their masters research. “But then you’d be dead or you wouldn’t, and I’d be in jail.”

She looks up suddenly from her list, and you think she’s figured it out. And then she says,

“Hey, this place sucks. Do you want to buy me some food?”

You make it all the way to Central Park. The sky is overcast and the tops of skyscrapers disappear into the dense clouds above. You feel like you can hear everything happening in the entire city. You buy Max a two dollar pretzel and sit on a bench outside the park.

“Maybe some kind of way if we cut your head off,” Max is saying. “Like, with a chainsaw or something.”

“Yeah,” you say. You suddenly feel exhausted. You watch as tourists take pictures of the brick walkways and the trees and the blades of grass, like they’re different here from the way they are everywhere else.

“Or if we can get you into one of the exhibits at the zoo, we can maybe get something to eat you. I think they have snow leopards. Or bears.

“Hey.” She throws a chunk of pretzel at you. “Get your head in the game.”

“Sorry,” you say. “This is just starting to feel a little pointless.”

She licks tiny chunks of seasalt off of her fingers. “Yeah,” she allows. “Maybe it is.” She throws a crumb at a pigeon, hitting it squarely in the beak, and then another. Suddenly there are half a dozen pigeons scrambling for offerings. She tears off chunk after chunk of bread and the pigeons multiply, coming out of nowhere.

“Do you want to go see your sister?”

Your breath catches. For a moment you think you misheard. “What do you mean?”

She shrugs, almost defensive. “Your sister. In the hospital. Your half-dead sister. I thought it might cheer you up. Or give you some motivation, or something.” She wipes her hands on her shorts. “Just a thought.”

“How did you know about my sister?”

She looks inquisitive. “Max. You told me about her.”

You have no recollection of this, and at first you bristle slightly, as though from indignance that Max would have the audacity to peer into your mind and snatch out something as personal as this. And then you remember that you really don’t remember a lot lately.

“Come on,” she says. “Let’s just go.”

You haven’t been to the hospital in what feels like ages. It’s brighter, noisier than you remember, and your head throbs with all of the stimulation. People glance at you as you walk down the hall, and you realize how the two of you must look — you, unshaven, bags under your eyes, your body riddled with the strange bruises and scars — and Max, who looks like she could have just walked out of a homeless shelter.

You know exactly where the ICU is. Something about being here makes you want to call your parents, to see how they are holding up. For all you know, from the missed calls wracking up on your phone, Mallory has woken up and you just don’t know it.

You slow as a woman walks down the hall whose features — her olive skin and long dark hair and lanky frame — resemble your sister’s. And then you walk into something hard.

Max is standing in the doorway of your sister’s room.

“Hey,” she says. Her voice is soft and slow, with a tenderness you’ve never heard from her. “Hey.”

“What?” you ask. You try to push past her, and although she is small, your sluggishness makes you easy to overpower. “What is it?”

“Um.” Max scratches at her hair, making it stand up at the back. “So,” she says, “Bed’s empty.”

Everything feels very slow.

You pull your phone from your pocket. You have six voicemails from your mother from today alone, and two from your father. There is another from a number you don’t recognize, which may have been the hospital, or a funeral home, or anything on Earth.

“Okay,” you say.

Max stares at you. There is a peculiar emotion on her face that you eventually recognize as worry. “Okay?”

“Yeah,” you say. “Okay.” You try to peer past her to the bed, but she blocks your way.

“Let’s go,” she says. “Let’s go. I know something we haven’t tried.”

You follow her from the room without a question.

Max’s parents live on 70th and York. She hasn’t been here in ages, she tells you. Maybe even years. But aside from the strange look the doorman gives her before he recognizes her, you wouldn’t be able to tell.

“Hey, Alex,” she says to him. “Just paying a visit. Catching up.”

When the doors to the elevator open, a small gaggle of middle-aged, wealthy-looking locals stroll out in the relaxed, unharried way only that demographic can manage. Behind them, a short, caramel-skinned woman looks up, and then stalls. It is a moment before you realize that Max has frozen beside you. She looks annoyed, like she’s doing some kind of complicated math in her head. As they study one another, the elevator doors begin to close. The woman jerks her

hand out in front of her until the doors pause, reconsider, and begin to lumber forward again.

“I thought you guys were in Guatemala,” Max says, finally. “Until next month.”

“Change of plans,” the woman says. “Your father’s deal went through early. What are you doing here?”

“Just visiting,” Max says with no conviction.

“Why don’t you come up?” the woman asks cautiously. She looks at Max. She looks at you.

“Yeah,” you say. “Sure,” you say, to fill the silence.

Max’s parents live in the penthouse. Their apartment could devour the small Jersey home you were raised in.

Max wanders around the apartment like she’s never seen it. You look at her, wearing the same oversized coat she’s been in all day that was clearly meant for a man, the way she’s always rattling when she walks like she’s never rid of carrying around pill bottles, her springy hair untended, the holes in her shoes. And then you glance at her mother, with combed hair and a well-fitted, expensive-looking blouse, pouring coffee for three.

“Your father will be back soon,” she says. You stand behind Max, across the counter from this woman who stares at the coffee as she adds milk and sugar without asking like she’s brewing tiny potions in each cup. “He’s just visiting with Ernie.”

“We aren’t staying long,” Max says from across the room. “We’ve got things to do.”

“You always do,” her mother says, with a smile that isn’t in her voice. She brings the coffee to a small table in front of a white couch and sits down. You imagine her spilling it,

staining a deep brown all over the her hands, the white couch, the white rug underneath. You sit across from her in a small white chair. Max stands behind you.

When her mother speaks, her tone is controlled, as though it sounds exactly the way she wants it to sound: casual, non-combative. “So, what were you and your friend going to do while you’re here?” she asks.

“His name’s Max,” Max says, as though you aren’t there.

Her mother looks to you, a polite smile on her face, like she thinks she’s being pranked. “Hi, Max,” she says. “Nice to meet you.”

“Anyway,” Max says before you can respond, “I was going to take him up to the roof.”

Her mother’s face falls. She stands up from the couch slowly. You feel far away, like you’re watching the events unfold on a television show.

There is a tension growing, but you can’t decipher its source. A heavy silence hangs between them for a few beats. Then her mother seems to uncoil. “Is that supposed to be funny?” she says.

“It’s not supposed to be funny,” Max says. “It’s *not* funny.”

You feel like the two are sharing some sort of joke, the punchline of which has gone over your head.

“Maxine,” her mother says slowly.

Max takes a step toward the door, as if the utterance of her name has summoned her into action. “Anyway, that’s where we’re going.” She looks at you expectantly. You stand.

“Is this why you came here?” her mother asks. “To put this in my face?”

“No,” Max tells her. She walks toward the door with such urgency you think she may



leave you there if you don't act fast enough. You spring up to follow. "We came here to go to the roof."

You are slightly underwhelmed by the view. You have seen the view from the top of the Empire State building when you were younger, back when coming into the city was still a special treat from your parents on warm spring Sunday mornings. Your father would give you and Mallory each a quarter for the standing binoculars, and you'd take turns peering through them into the lives of the people of the city, the ants spilling out of its every orifice, until the time ran out and a black plate snapped over the lens. From on top of Max's parents' apartment, you can see the backs of other buildings, a maze of fire escapes, a small church, the haze of clouds hanging in the sky.

Max has her hands stuffed into the pocket of her jacket. She stands right by the ledge of the rooftop and peers over to the ground below. There is a small space between this building and the next, so far down you can hardly see. Grey asphalt, a dumpster, something that might be a bike.

"You're gonna shatter," she tells you, expressionless. "You're gonna splash."

"You think it'll work?" you ask.

She doesn't respond.

You think for a moment that maybe it will work this time. That maybe she is right, and you will shatter like a china doll into so many millions of fragments that whatever it is keeping you here will be extinguished, won't be able to piece you back together.

"That really sucks about your sister," Max says suddenly.

She glances up at you for a split second, and then away again.

“Yeah,” she says. “I’m sorry. That really fucking sucks.”

What if you do die? you think. Then what? You win?

“I know it’ll work,” Max says. She’s looking at you now, your eyes fixed to the bottom of the drop. “My brother jumped off of here about five years ago,” Max says beside you. “It worked for him.”

She keeps peering over the edge.

“We’d come up here and drink and hang out sometimes, so we thought maybe it was an accident. That he got drunk and fell. But then the autopsy came back, and it turned out he was stone cold sober.” She shrugs. “He always seemed fine. Not like the kind of person to do that.” She speaks like she’s recounting the plot of a particularly boring movie to you. “My folks took it hard,” she says. “I moved out.”

“That’s why your mom was so upset,” you say.

Max shrugs. “Yeah, I guess.” She takes her hands out of her pockets and gestures vaguely with them. “Yeah, I mean, of course that’s why.” She repockets them and looks back over the edge.

You have no idea what on earth to say. “Were you close?”

She fixes him with a look. “It obviously didn’t matter.”

She puts one foot on the ledge and pulls herself bodily up with impressive control. She reaches a hand out to you, and at first you think she needs help balancing — but then you realize she is offering a hand to help you up. You take her hand and the two of you hold one another’s gaze. There is a breeze up here. The wind curls through your own hair and rustles hers. The sun

is just beginning to set behind her, casting a yellowish outline around her shoulders and face.

You stand next to her and feel taller, sturdier than you have for weeks — months — however long it's been — older in this moment than you feel you'll ever be.

You are stricken with a clarity of mind that you've been without for so long that you can almost feel it like a cool breeze.

“Alright,” Max says to you. There is something foreign in her tone, and at first you think it is annoyance. And then you realize what it is.

She sounds tired.

“You ready?” she says.

You take her by the hand and, together, you jump.