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Forty Thousand Dollars: Short Stories

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the dark academia society

We had always been a “we,” Dorothy, Althea, Gretchen, Clementine and me, Blanche. We lived on the same street, we’d always been in the same class, and we were pretty much all of the things best friends are supposed to be. Intense, in love with each other, sometimes cruel, but always a unit. Even our siblings couldn’t form a bond with us as close as the one we’d knit together. It was the flexible, family kind that meant we could fight and bicker and die for one another.

When we were young, like really young, around five, someone had called us The American Girls. If you lined us up, we did look like the dolls came to life for a made for TV movie. Althea the redhead, Dorothy, who was black, two blondes: Gretchen and Clementine, and a Latina one (me). We were almost playfully diverse, but clung to each other because despite our differences, we had the most important thing in common: us.

There had been a few people who had shown interest in joining our group. Like Colette, who shared our love of Harry Potter when we were going through that phase but she decided we were “too intense” and didn’t like it when we sorted her into Slytherin. But to be fair, she also told us she wanted to try out for cheerleading, and that kind of blatant popularity power grab was so, very, Slytherin.

Our high school, Wasatch Union, was certainly no Hogwarts. It was ugly seventies red brick, with fluorescent lighting in the classrooms and halls. All the tile in the bathrooms was a sickly green color and the windows had long been painted shut to discourage smoking in the bathrooms. Every period before the bell rang our principal gleefully blasted the William Tell Overture to create a sense of urgency to get us to class on time. At first it was terrifying, anxiety inducing as hundreds of teenagers scrambled around to the familiar tune. Then we all got used to

it and tuned it out completely. Our teachers may have at least attempted to make it educational, throw some psychology into a lesson to dissect the William Tell experiment, but most of them fit into one of three categories: too old, too tired, or too jealous. The third kind was the worst — adults reliving their own high school glory days while hating that we were enjoying ours.

Glory days. AP classes, college admissions being so competitive that it took superhuman effort to set yourself apart, the pressures of maintaining a Snapchat streak ... none of our teachers had to deal with that. I always found it easier not to engage. Let them run their little rat race.

I didn't mean to be The Reader of my friends, it was just that we couldn't afford the Disney Channel and then HBO as we grew up and the library was free, so books became the thing I got into and then got good at. I read fiction, from classics to horror to YA to contemporary literary shit that my mom's friends loved. I read way before anyone was bookstagramming, or anything.

The librarian Mrs. Thomas really liked me, she always thought I was so impressive with my Matilda-style stacks of books when I was tiny and how I had continued to come and visit her and talk to her and take her recommendations. It was August, and when I arrived for my weekly visit, she was beaming at me.

“Blanche, I have been remiss!” she shouted. Mrs. Thomas was not a believer in the whispering-in-the-library rule. “You're going to be thinking about college soon, and I haven't given you nearly enough campus novel recommendations. This one is the best.”

The cover was uninteresting, just black and old-paper yellow. I flipped it open to the first line.

“The snow in the mountains was melting and Bunny had been dead for several weeks before we came to understand the gravity of our situation,” I read out loud to Mrs. Thomas.

“They give away the plot on the first page?”

She smiled at me.

“You’ll see!”

I’d never cared much for murder mysteries, but I took it home with the promise of giving it a fair chance. What had intrigued me the most about the opening was the word “we.”

Devotion rang through the entire story. None of the Classics students ever betrayed each other, not even Richard who was new to the group and maybe didn’t fit in as well. The whole time I read, I kept thinking of my own friends. What would we do if one of us made a terrible mistake? How would we treat each other? I knew the truth: we could use a little lesson in loyalty.

I went next door to Althea’s the second I finished, book still in hand. When she opened the door in short shorts, she was eating a popsicle that had turned her mouth a little blue. Her red hair was in a sloppy bun that wiggled whenever she moved her head.

“Thea, stop whatever you’re doing and read this,” I thrust the book at her. She indicated her popsicle.

“Sticky hands,” she wiggled her fingers at me. “You read it to me.”

Her tone didn’t surprise me — it was one I’d heard for years — but I rolled my eyes anyway. She raised her eyebrows and shook her chin at me.

“Come on, you obviously want someone else to be in on this thing with you,” she said, and waved her popsicle into her house like one of those lights at the airport. “Enter, and oblige.”

She was right, as usual. So I followed her to her couch, where she sat and slurped on her popsicle while I started the book.

“The snow in the mountains was melting...”

Pretty soon, Althea had a blue-tinged stick still between her sugary fingers, held at attention so we didn't make a mess of her mother's prized leather couches. I was reading, and she was swooning. There was no other word for it. After the passage where Richard meets all the Classics Clique, the one where they finally interact, she flopped backward on the couch.

“They sound so cool, just chic and posh and smart, right?” she demanded, interrupting me for the first time. The popsicle stick was still pinched between the fingers of the arm she had thrown dramatically over the side of the couch.

“Oh yeah,” I nodded, glad she was enjoying it. “Impossibly cool.”

She reached for her phone, shimmying it out of the tiny pocket it had been precariously stuffed in.

“What the fuck, Thea. Too sticky to read to yourself, but not too sticky for your phone?”

She shrugged. “You can't wipe off a book.”

She typed out a text and hit send with a flourish.

My own phone lit up. It was to our group text. It said “Blanche just saved our junior year,” in Althea's over-excited all caps.

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Dorothy's parents had a big garage that they had long since abandoned in order to let us take it over—it was our clubhouse, and although we'd spent hours in there in the past it had been years since we'd made it a priority.

After we'd all read *The Secret History* — on our phones, tablets, physical books, and audio book, since we all learned differently — we recommitted. We gathered one Saturday afternoon in grungy clothes, carrying buckets of soapy water and brooms to clean out the

vestiges of our previous obsessions. Out went the screen printing kit, the boy band posters, Sculpey clay, a huge pile of magazines.

Once it was bare, we started from scratch redecorating in our new style. Over the large door that was meant for a car, we hung an enormous tapestry we'd found at an estate sale that depicted a forest full of mythical creatures. It looked vaguely medieval, and covered the entire wall. In front of the tapestry we placed several low bookshelves, many clothbound and a few leather bound books we had been collecting, and various vintage lamps on top of the shelves. Our furniture was shabby enough already to fit the motif — a large squishy red couch and two yellow floral armchairs were pushed to the center of the room on top of a huge, cheap rug we bought online. We built a faux mantle, and put twenty or so pillar candles in the spot where a fire would be. The windows got heavy blackout curtains so we could maintain the soft glow of lamplight and candles. Clementine found a record player in her attic, and Dorothy organized her easel and paint supplies in one corner. Our out of tune piano was adorned with several busts of famous classical musicians. Everywhere was covered with vases of flowers.

The atmosphere felt out of time, something between romanticism and the 1970s, a conglomeration of the efforts of five girls with one aim: to live beautifully. Working on the space had made us obsessed with it, and each other. We were constantly adjusting and adding to it. Old paintings went up on the walls. We texted photo inspirations to each other any time we saw something that might make the garage even more perfect. It was a haven for us, away from the fluorescent lights of our school and the incessant meaningless chatter of our classmates. What did they know of beauty?

I felt it was unjust — just deeply unfair — that we had to go to public school, with classes so big we disappeared into them and teachers who didn't understand our desire for true

knowledge. Dressing for gym did not fit into my old-fashioned ideal, and having plastic red balls thrown at us in the name of “athleticism” *certainly* didn’t. I had always longed to find love and connection with my peers, but since I really never had I was enjoying how our new game was othering us. Just like the book. Just like I’d always felt — but now there was a group of us. None of my friends made any time for our regular high school activities. We studied, we listened to music, we discussed philosophy. We were a we.

Dorothy and I had World Civ together, which was perfect since we were newly obsessed with Ancient Greek and Roman history, literature and philosophy, and one day she turned to me and winked before raising her hand and asking “Isn’t it a rather Greek idea that beauty is also, and sorry if this is a reach, terror?”

Some of the boys at the back booed. They were dressed in ties because for some fucking reason the football team was required to “dress up” on game days, even though it didn’t make them any less idiotic or obnoxious.

“Dottie’s being pretentious again,” Kai Lauti shouted. “Miss Graves, make her stop, she’s damaging my ego.”

Miss Graves was twenty-four and still thought the attention from guys like Kai was flattering even though he was a dumb overgrown child. She giggled and shushed everyone.

“She just blew off my comment, did you see that?” Dorothy said as we gathered our things to walk to our next class. She was wearing a wide red plaid skirt and black stockings, with a white shirt that had a big black bow around the neck. Her shoes were Oxford style, but platform. A simple black leather watch was around her wrist, and freshly clear-coated nails gripped the stack of books she’d covered to disguise their garish designs of the school-issued textbooks we all carried. She looked polished, wise, and beautiful.

“I know, and you were making a good point. I don’t think she even cares about the Classics,” I agreed, nodding so much that the huge bow I had in my half-up ponytail wiggled. My own ensemble that day consisted of wide-legged brown trousers with suspenders, and a loose-fitting white top with lace details. My secondhand prairie boots pinched a little, but they looked so good I tried not to worry about it. “Plus, Kai calling you Dottie was totally out of line. You haven’t been Dottie since the fourth grade.”

“Clem loves him, you know,” Dorothy said.

We rolled our eyes, but we didn’t know what else to do. It was easier to avoid the people we went to school with, so we began eating lunch only at each others’ houses. We brown bagged, calculating that if we couldn’t have luxurious, fancily cooked three course meals, it fit the rules better to bring something that felt like it belonged in another time.

On one such day we found ourselves at Althea’s, around her parents' gorgeous oak table with the curtains drawn back to let the September sun soak the scene. We were discussing how glad we felt that Dark Academia had entered our lives.

“It’s like a ... fall day,” Gretchen, who wasn’t terribly imaginative, said.

“Whispers of a winter breeze, but a hot cup of cider and a new pashmina to guard against it,” Clementine, who was a little better at this game, replied.

“It feels ancient, older than a forest and just as unknowable,” Dorothy, the poetic, contributed.

“It just seems timeless, and so accessible to us. It was there all along, you know? Waiting for us. Just ... waiting,” I said.

We all looked at Althea, whose turn it was to speak. She always had the last word, and what she said was:

“I have been doing some research online, and I found this great list of rules for living the Dark Academia lifestyle.”

We begged her to tell us the rules then, probably because we were desperate to be more sophisticated but also just for something to do that fell outside the usual purview of options for anyone our age.

The rules were as followed:

1. Actually study.

There were no guidelines about what you had to study, so we dove into what already interested us - Dorothy had her art, I had always been interested in literature, Althea liked politics and social studies. We spent a lot more time with books and notebooks than we had before, which made Gretchen declare she wanted to be a historian while Clementine insisted on the theatrical arts. Nobody felt like they could double up on any subject, like we were creating a heist team where everyone had to round out the group as a whole.

2. Dress the part.

Muted colors, bows, delicate gold jewelry, plaid or houndstooth. Once Clementine found out there would be shopping and outfits involved, she was considerably more on board, though she griped about being told what to do by anyone, even the abstract internet rules of an aesthetic.

3. Care about The Classics.

It didn't matter which discipline, whether literature or painting, music or philosophy. Only things from the distant past were essential. We bought volumes of Aristotle and Freud, multiple copies of Proust like that was ever going to make sense to us, piles and piles of books. We scoured the town for old Bethoven, Tchaikovsky, Mozart, and Vivaldi records. Reproduction prints of Impressionists and Romantics were hung in spray-painted frames.

4. Buck technology to live truly beautifully.

This included drinking tea from china cups, reading by candlelight, writing by hand, brooding, contemplating, scheming and of course being in a secret and exclusive group. But it also meant digital was the death of culture, so we started pressuring each other to stay offline more and more. My iPhone 5, always a source of shame, joined my friends' newer models in a basket we all tossed them in whenever we were together.

We started the Dark Academia Society.

Our dedication was not always appreciated. Our English teacher, Mrs. Jacobsen, asked us to stop turning in papers handwritten in blotchy ink. We bought a typewriter online, which seemed to be a good middle ground. We kept our ink pots and straight pens on our desks anyway, for note taking (and passing). As much as we yearned for an older mentor to guide our thirst for knowledge, none of our teachers seemed to care much at all. Clementine said “that’s public school for ya,” and we all agreed.

It was Althea who found the trunk of her grandfather’s old clothes in her parents’ attic: lots of wool jackets and thick sweaters that were small enough for us to wear because her grandpa had, apparently, been quite tiny. But certainly he had had expensive taste, and we all started sharing his Brooks Brothers jackets to pair with our thrifted woolen skirts. The pieces quickly lost their attic smell and took on the scents of our various perfumes and deodorants, though we all agreed we wished the clothes would smell more like old books.

One piece in particular, a now-vintage Hermes scarf whose counterparts were going on eBay for over \$1,000, became our treasured favorite. It was brighter than the rest of our somber wardrobe, and provided a pop of color around the neck, head, or at the end of a long French braid. We each got to have it in turns, brainstorming new ways to showcase the beautiful silk

square. The bright blue backdrop was covered in little depictions of people wearing bright, feathered outfits and headdresses.

“Is this problematic,” Gretchen said flatly when we found it, “or can we please, please please keep it and wear it.”

“They’re kachinas,” Althea said. “Magic spirits. They’re Native American.”

We had long ago stopped asking Althea how she knew something. Her memory was ridiculous, and her appetite for facts was insatiable. She knew a little about a lot, and we had accepted it.

“Was your grandpa ...” I trailed off, scared to say the wrong thing.

“White,” Althea said. “Definitely white, and obviously rich. I think if we just roll it up, though,” she said, doing so, “the colors are still beautiful and we don’t have to worry about being offensive.”

They all looked at Dorothy and me, even though we’d told them not to use us as the source of truth when it came to all things race. I waited for her cue. She rolled her eyes.

“I mean, I’m going to fucking wear it, so you guys make your own decisions.”

We breathed a collective sigh of relief, and set up a plan for trading the scarf between us fairly.

It was always a balancing act for the five of us: fairness. Dorothy was a rich only child, while my four younger siblings made my family’s money stretch thin. Althea had never even kissed anyone, while Gretchen held the school record for most boys kissed in a single night (14). Things like this couldn’t be looked at too closely, or they’d make cracks into fissures, then canyons between us. Our group worked the best when it was just us, closing the curtains against the rest of the world.

We all asked for pearls for our birthdays. Turning sixteen and wearing vintage men's clothes most of the time made it seem appropriate to ask for a timeless and expensive gift that would last us for a long, long time.

Gretchen's were pink, because she was girly. Althea's were black, because she wasn't. The rest of the Crowd got white, and wore them to school as a mark of not only womanhood, but class. On my birthday I opened a set that came in a velvet box that only had some of the gold lettering still on the front.

It's vintage, my mother explained. The pearls had belonged to an aunt and she'd made a special request of the family to pass them to me.

My friends were breathless with jealousy. How come I had gotten the truly old, heirloom jewelry. Me, of all of us. But I knew it was because my parents couldn't afford pearls, and had been smart enough to figure out a way for me to be included.

We were eating cake in the barn, sitting in our reclaimed furniture in our vintage clothes, listening to Puccini.

"Okay, open our gift," Althea said, handing over a big box. "We all pooled for it so don't be greedy and ask for four individual things."

I reached out for the box, grinning around at my friends. I knew whatever was inside would be perfect. Slipping my fingers under the lid of the box, I revealed a floaty, pale blue fold of fabric. Pulling it out and up, it seemed to cascade from my hands forever, an endless waterfall of layers and layers of thin, gauzy dress.

"Oh," I breathed. "Oh, oh!"

It was a truly beautiful dress, icy but not cold. I stood and held it up to me, the vintage style with its long sleeves and floor length skirt reminding all of us of a goddess. The color against my long black hair gave my skin a translucence that glowed silver. My eyes welled up.

“It’s perfect, thank you guys,” I held the dress clutched in one hand as I hugged them each in turn, still holding it as I sat back down. I pet it a little, stroking a sleeve.

“I have a plan now to find all of us a perfect dress like that and hold a very elaborate, fancy party,” Dorothy said. “I guess since Blanche’s new jewelry and dress are the most perfect, they’ll be the gold standard for the rest of us.”

They all turned to me with a smile, but there were daggers in their eyes. It was then that I suddenly remembered that in Dark Academia, someone dies.

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One morning, a month or so after we’d started buying and wearing vintage thirties and forties earth-toned outfits, Gretchen and Clementine came to school wearing nothing from our shared closet. Their skirts were mini, their tops were cropped. Sure, they were plaid and dark green and brown, but they looked so different from us.

“We decided to put our own spin on it,” Clementine shrugged when she saw our three jaws dropped. “I wanted to buy some new clothes, and Inside Girl had a whole Dark Academia section!”

Like it was a special gift or something. They looked like trash.

“You look like trash,” Althea said. “I don’t think this is in keeping with the spirit of the aesthetic.”

I felt my heart speed up. It wasn’t a good idea for Althea to imply that Clementine was somehow out of line. She bucked at being told what to do.

“Watch it on that one,” Dorothy stopped them, thank god. “Or you’re gonna have to kick me out of the group. No black girls in Dark Academia. We agree we were doing this our own way.”

It was like a cue, setting up a scene we’d rehearsed a hundred times.

“It’s really too bad that the whole thing is so white-centric,” Gretchen said sympathetically, reaching out to touch Dorothy’s arm. “I’m glad we are holding it accountable by like, posting pictures of you in these great DA outfits and stuff.”

“And wow, the gay panic,” I chimed in. “I mean, homophobic much?”

They all nodded.

“So eurocentric,” Clementine shook her head sadly. “I don’t even know who fucking decided what was important to know or not, but the Western canon is all just a little problematic.”

Althea still pouted. We all waited. In the pause, I envied Clementine’s breezy looking synthetic plaid skirt, and sweated in the hot October sun while wearing the 100% wool one that was mine.

“Looks comfy,” I told my friends, when it looked like Althea wasn’t going to speak.

Althea, Dorothy and I had agreed that our social media would only reflect our commitment to the pursuit of knowledge, and things that fit into the Dark Academia rulebook. Books with coffee rings on the page we’d set our mug on to save our place. Flickering candlelight in front of a rain-streaked window. Stacks and stacks of books. White busts or statues. Ivy covered buildings that we hoped would one day be our surroundings.

Clementine and Gretchen, on the other hand, had joined TikTok.

They'd made a shared account, DarkAcademiaBetches and started using sounds that said "ay yo, Dark Academia check" to make videos of the stuff the rest of us were doing. Dorothy's incredible handwriting, Althea's vintage watch collection, my leather-bound books.

"Henry Winter would never have had a cell phone," Althea muttered to me once.

"Well," I said. "He's dead."

It didn't really surprise anyone when Althea announced that she had convinced her parents to install a rotary phone in her bedroom, and would no longer be indulging in "the frivolity of cell phones." She also, although I think only I noticed, stopped sharing the kachina scarf with the rest of us.

I watched the DarkAcademiaBetches TikToks before bed, scrolling on my phone furtively as though Althea were going to burst in and tell me I wasn't honoring the true core of DA. Clem and Gretchen showed off their (incorrect) Dark Academia styles in OOTD posts, chose classical music to accompany Virgin-Suicides-Sofia-Coppola inspired scenes of the two of them in the grass, or arm in arm laughing. They looked so happy, but that felt wrong. Shouldn't they feel like I did? Not whole without everyone in the group? And totally committed to the thing we'd all chosen. The we. I felt them slipping away, and it made me anxious. Heart racing, palms sweaty, I texted Althea.

I am worried C and G are kinda taking advantage re: their content that is actually ours // it's not even DA in the first place.

If I believed for a second that she was actually not using her phone anymore, I would've been shocked when she replied immediately. But I knew.

I HAVE BEEN THINKING THE SAME THING. What should we do?!

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True to her word, Dorothy had been planning a huge back-to-school ball for the five of us. We had debated over inviting outsiders, as Althea put it — or as Clementine did: dates. Eager to stem the endless tirades from both of them, I pointed out that a group of people who hadn't been as immersed in Dark Academia for months like us might show up and ruin the aesthetic.

“That’s the dumbest, Blanche,” Clementine replied. “We can explain it to them. We can pick their clothes, even. Come on, we haven’t done anything with boys in a thousand years. I’m tired of reading.”

“I don’t have anyone to take,” Althea sniffed, trying to make it about the struggles of being a lesbian in an intolerant town.

“Take me!” I said brightly. “I’ll even put out.”

I have no idea what made me say that, especially in those terms. I just said the one thing that would’ve stopped the fighting. The most shocking thing always made everyone pause.

Everyone laughed, and Althea reached out to hold my hand.

“Okay, okay.”

The night of the ball, it was clear that Dorothy had spent some time — and likely a lot of her parents’ money — perfecting our garage clubhouse.

She had a real, actual gramophone in the corner playing classical records. There were starry fairy lights dotting the entire ceiling, and she’d laid out a temporary dance floor. On a table, there were several huge vases of jewel-toned flowers, presiding over a spread of charcuterie boards and tiny desserts. There were champagne glasses, in which she poured actual champagne.

“My mom bought it,” she said. “It’s authorized.”

We gulped it excitedly, the bubbles heightening our nerves and the alcohol making us giggly. Clementine brought Kai Lauti, which Dorothy admitted made sense because even if he was a moron he looked incredible in a suit. Gretchen's date was Josh Sundry, another football player who wasn't really grasping the theme. He kept making jokes about the Mafia for some reason. Dorothy had a longtime standing date agreement with her best friend from the town over, whose name was, impossibly, Harold Fortineau Beauchamp The Fourth. We were thrilled about how on-theme it was for this old-money-named guest, even if he did go by the boring nickname of Harry.

The best part was the dresses, the incredible, unique pieces that we were all wearing.

My blue one was on display, paired with the birthday pearls that nobody was talking about anymore. Althea's was blood red, with a simple top and an enormous, poofy tulle skirt. Clementine had a gold beaded number, while Gretchen sported a drop-waist mauve dress with a swingy skirt, and Dorothy swanned in a green silk patterned after Kiera Knightley's dress in *Atonement*.

We all admired ourselves and each other in the various gilt mirrors we had collected in the garage. True to my prediction, the boys didn't quite get what the big deal was. But we didn't care. The champagne, the candles, and the gowns were making us all completely giddy. Clementine went to the phonograph to choose an upbeat record, and we all took turns with each other attempting the Viennese waltz, knowing only the basics and being unaccustomed to floor-length skirts.

"Okay, I was going to wait till the end," Dorothy said after we'd danced for a while. "But I'm too excited. I made the girls a party favor."

The paintings were oval-shaped, each featuring one of us girls staring straight out of the frame. They were similar poses, yet the expressions were all our own. We were each wearing our ball gowns.

I gasped, similar reactions rippling through the group as they opened theirs.

“I know you guys have been really into reading and writing but I have been, you know, painting a lot,” she explained as we remarked on the quality and likeness of each one. “It’s been really fun to study painting. Maybe not a traditional kind of academia”

We clamored to tell her how acceptable it was to choose her own path, be her own best version of whatever it was we were actually doing. And with Dorothy, her talent, the gifts she had made us, we meant it.

Then Gretchen pulled out her phone, taking detail shots all around the garage of flickering flames and a spinning record. Althea was watching her, the expression on her face not unlike the one on her painting, haughty and disinterested.

“Clem!” Gretchen called. “Come get in a couple shots!”

Dorothy, Althea and I watched Gretchen take a video of Clementine twirling and looking away from the camera dreamily. When it came her turn, Gretchen picked up a candle and seductively winked at the phone.

“Will you take some of both of us?” Clementine reached for Kai. “Just for a few seconds.”

Dorothy, her eyes fixed on Althea even as she spoke to Clementine, spoke a little loudly when she said “Wouldn’t you like some of all of us?”

“Welllllll,” Clementine said, looking at Gretchen to back her up, “it wouldn’t really make sense for our followers to suddenly see you guys, you know? We’re kind of the reason

people are coming to the page. Like maybe we need to do a proper introduction first and then you guys could totally be in some videos!”

“Yeah!” Gretchen’s agreement was overly bright, absurdly cheerful in this very seriously curated space. “Yeah,” she tried again, this time a little closer to normal.

“Oh, please, carry on without me,” Althea sniffed. “I honestly don’t understand the appeal at all.”

Everyone looked around, nobody at one another. The record stopped, spinning pointlessly and plunging us into silence.

“Okay I demand some Mozart,” I rushed over. “Josh, can you help me over here?”

Harry and Josh both rushed over, desperate to have something to do.

Dorothy laughed at their eagerness, and the tension snapped. I breathed a deep sigh into the corner where nobody could see.

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After the ball, I was summoned to Althea’s house along with Dorothy to “deal with this.”

Althea was slamming cupboards, slamming the kettle on the stove, slamming mismatched China teacups we’d been collecting for months onto their saucers on her family’s dining room table. She angrily poured the milk, splashing it in small translucent drops on the dark wood.

“So Clementine clearly doesn’t give a fuck about all the work we’ve been doing here,” she said after pouring us each a scalding cup of Earl Grey. “I heard she told someone at school it’s ‘just an aesthetic?’ That’s the most basic shit I’ve ever heard.”

“Listen, you didn’t hear this from me, but Gretchen told me that Clementine said the only reason she’s even still doing it is for the TikToks. She gets tons of DMs from like, eboys who see

her in a short skirt and want her,” Dorothy said, stirring three sugar cubes into her tea. Althea didn’t ask what eboys were, but neither did I, which is how I knew that all three of us had secretly been on TikTok.

“I think we need to do a ritual,” Althea said in response. The rest she spoke all in one rushed breath: “It’s just time for us to pick a side on this whole thing and it has become pretty clear that there are some members of our group who are very in, and some who are too scared to commit and I think if we did something that really bonded us all in secrecy and a bit of magic it would be easier for everyone to know where their loyalties lie.”

Dorothy looked caught between snickering and just a wide-eyed stare, making her look like she needed to sneeze. I felt myself shift involuntarily in my chair, like I was readying for a quick getaway.

Althea’s phone appeared.

“I don’t even know what the point of this is?” She pulled up a video from DarkAcademiaBetches with the title “Dark Academia Statuary” that was only a few hours old. Clementine and Gretchen appeared, eyes big and mugging for the camera, while pointing at text that popped up while Moonlight Sonata played.

“We love all the Greek and Roman statues you guys include in your DA aesthetic posts,” it said in little bubbles. “So we decided to be some.”

It then cut to the familiar “Spring” section of Vivaldi’s Four Seasons while Clementine and Gretchen took turns imitating poses of famous statues, all while draped in very, very little white fabric. It looked like they’d been planning ahead for this, as they were both a little bronzed in places that wouldn’t normally see the late-October sun.

They panned up and down each other's bodies, with soulful looks into the camera. We watched it three times in a loop, stunned.

"Fuck," was all Dorothy could say. "I've never seen that much of either of their skin. I mean, no slut shaming but ..."

We all yearned to slut shame.

"What, I ask again, is the point?" Althea spoke very slowly and stared straight at me.

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Althea didn't come to school for a whole week. None of us could reach her, since she'd gone back to being off her phone. Dorothy and I spoke in whispers about her mention of a ritual. What if she did something crazy? Who were we supposed to tell, and how.

"We think our friend might do a spell to get two of our other friends less attention from boys on the internet," Dorothy tested, as if saying it to an authority.

"Not just the internet," I reminded her. Clementine had made it official with Kai. "Also the real world where we have to fucking live every day."

"What happened to the escape? Even my parents have been wondering why we haven't been over to the garage lately. I miss just hanging out and being beautiful together," Dorothy said.

But we hadn't been together in days. Sitting on the lawn outside the school, it was just Dorothy and I. Gretchen and Clementine were eating with Kai and the rest of the football team, failing to even offer us a place at the table. I felt stretched, like my loyalties didn't know where to go and had tried to be everywhere at once. It was leaving a growing hole inside me.

Just then, Althea's bright red Audi A4 came screeching into the parking lot. She honked at a clump of freshman who barely got out of the way in time, and, spotting us, pulled right up onto the lawn. Dorothy screamed.

"What the fuck, Thea," I shouted. "There are laws you know."

Althea got out of the car, looking like something out of a haunted house. She was wearing a stained, oversized Harvard sweatshirt and her hair was so wild it looked like she'd done it on purpose. I had never seen her eyes so wide and bright.

"Where is that fucking bitch," she said. "Where is Clementine."

We were both too startled to do anything except stand there and stare dumbly.

"Clementine!" Althea screamed. Like she could just summon her from somewhere. And, weirdly, probably because it was Althea and that was just who she was, Clementine did appear, with Gretchen in tow.

"Jesus, Thea," Gretchen said under her breath. "You look like shit."

Althea glared at her.

"This ends now. You've been using our hard work for months. Filming while we're studying, wearing stuff that we thrifted ..."

She was breathing hard.

"I happen to know," she hissed, "that you never even read *The Secret History*, Gretchen. She has been lying about it to all of us for months, can you believe that?"

I had a feeling that wasn't really what was creating Althea's meltdown though. The door of her car was still open, the engine still running, and she ducked into it and pulled out the Hermes scarf. It had a hole in it. Burned by a cigarette, it looked like.

"Do you understand what you've done?" she screeched at Clementine and Gretchen.

Dorothy and I were shocked into a response, seeing our beautiful silk scarf so damaged. It felt personal to see such the rarest and brightest part of our collection being the most ruined. Sure we'd had some spills and a couple of tears, but this couldn't be fixed.

Gretchen looked at Clementine with huge eyes, and promptly burst into tears. She sobbed through her words.

"It was an accident and we tried to put it out but it happened so fast we didn't know what to do!"

Clementine was steely-eyed though, and looked back at Althea like she was about to pounce on her.

"It was a mistake," Clem said loudly enough for the gathering crowd to hear. "We meant to tell you. We forgot. Sorry we're not all perfect like you, Althie."

The nickname put Althea over the edge, and she let out a primal howl.

"The scarf! The kachinas!"

None of us knew what to do. We were rooted to our places as Althea screamed again. It was drowned out by the sound of a siren, though, and everybody turned to look as a fire truck zoomed past the school.

"I did the ritual," Althea turned to me, her face ashen. "I summoned them. The spirits. They can control anything. I asked them to make these two pay."

She pointed at Gretchen and Clementine, who had moved closer together. At Althea's accusatory, outstretched hand, they grabbed each other. Nobody else knew what to do.

"I made these," she continued. Althea's eyes were burning, so bright they might have been full of tears, but the heat coming off of her wasn't the crying kind. She reached into her car and pulled out some bright dolls covered in feathers.

“Althie,” I tried the nickname too, my voice sounding stuck in my throat. “I mean, it’s a scarf.”

“And that *is* appropriation, if you are trying to use someone else’s religious beliefs to what — rain down hellfire on Clementine because she dresses more Clueless than Dead Poets Society?” Dorothy chimed in. “Come on.”

“But now the scarf is ruined. The ritual. It’s ruined. They’re angry at all of us.”

Dorothy’s phone rang, and rang, and rang. She finally picked up, walking a ways away from the chaos on the front lawn.

“What, mom?” I hear her say in an irritated tone. Then she yelled too. “No, no, no!”

*

Dorothy’s garage had burned to the ground. Where our ball gowns were hanging on a rack so we could admire them even when it wasn’t appropriate to be dressed in them. Pages and pages and pages of poetry and attempted novels, annotated primary sources printed from the library, notebooks and novels and tomes on growing herbs.

The fire department’s investigation basically resulted in a shrug.

“So a combination of oil painting, old electrical wiring of lamps nobody thought to check out first, and just an absolute shit ton of candles,” said the fire chief in summary. “I guess that explains that.”

Dorothy’s parents had good insurance, but they were so mad. Dorothy was forbidden to talk to any of us, and while at first we found it agonizing it quickly became the norm. She spent all her time with Harry. The rest of us weren’t punished, but we’d lost our clubhouse. Althea had her license suspended at her parents’ request, and even though I could legally drive too I didn’t have a car. Gretchen and Clementine spent more and more time with the older boys who could

drive them to lunch and to away games. Althea started a new medication, and got really into cognitive behavior therapy. Her healing started to become all of our healing, as she just couldn't help but draw people toward her. But the rest of us realized we were sick of her dictating our every move. Even I, facing being completely alone, couldn't take one more discussion of reframing thoughts.

We stopped sharing clothes. Jeans came back into our wardrobes. The hair bows fell away. I saw Althea in a bright green puffer jacket at school one day as she leaned on Louise Tucker's locker, and that's when I knew it was over. We'd crumbled in the face of adversity. We were a bad we.

I spent more and more time at the library, which was a real thrill for Mrs. Thomas. It felt wrong, though. Fiction had lost its sparkle after I'd tasted really living inside its cozy little nest. I knew I could control as many elements of my life as possible to create the life I really wanted. There was no real reason that everyone didn't do this. Just fear. A lack of imagination. Not enough strength in their will. For the first time in my life, I asked Mrs. Thomas about some of the other sections of the library. Poisonous plants. The history of spellcasting and magical people in North America. Rituals performed in other cultures.

And they worked. I got high grades on sloppily done school papers. Found money on the sidewalk. For every small-time intention I put to the test with a spell, I found success. Call it magic, call it The Secret, the Law of Attraction, whatever. I'd never been so focused.

*

"I'm so glad to see you girls are still sharing interests," Mrs. Thomas said one day when I was sitting next to a stack of books. "Those kinds of friendships are so rare, you know."

I looked up from my volume called Ritual and Spell: The Intention of Casting. “Sorry, what do you mean?” I asked her.

“Oh, your friend Althea, she was reading up on all of this stuff too. I assumed it was for school, but she told me she was just broadening her spiritual horizons. She’s always been so smart.”

“Can you tell me all the books she has checked out? She tried to make me a list, but couldn’t remember all of them,” I thought quickly, surprising myself.

A quick search gave us a long list, but I picked one of the twenty or so titles right away. “Native American Spirituals,” I said, bringing a hand up to my forehead like ‘duh.’ “She couldn’t remember the exact name, but said that one was really interesting.”

We found the book and Mrs. Thomas, understanding how personal knowledge can be, left me to leaf through it alone. There was a page missing. I grabbed my phone immediately.

I know it’s been a minute but I found the book you used. I believe you. And I think we should do it again. Do you still have the page?

I was very damp now, my heart thudding as I started mentally backpedaling, regretting being transparent with her. Hoping Althea wouldn’t shoot back something about changing my thoughts so I could alter my behavior. Superstitiously, I crossed my fingers. She replied:

What would we use it for?

I hesitated for a second. To get our friends back together. To keep things how they’d always been. To love each other again. I typed, hesitated for a second, then hit send.

To get whatever we want.

disordered eating

Breakfast

The night before our Nutcracker auditions, Julianne stayed overnight. Her mom was picking us up after the auditions ended, but mine was dropping us off, and my mom didn't want to worry about driving to Julianne's house at seven in the morning on a Saturday and honking for Julianne to come out and waking up the neighbors.

"I'll be managing my anxiety," Mom said when she presented this plan to me last week after ballet, "and you girls will get to have a slumber party!"

I wasn't even very good friends with Julianne. She went to a different school, but she was in my ballet class. A few of us had been practicing for these auditions and twittering about the possibilities of dancing on stage in between exercises, to the annoyance of our teachers. Dancers were meant to be seen, not heard, they told us.

Mom got up early and made a breakfast that looked like Christmas morning. Cinnamon rolls, scrambled eggs, bacon, juice, and water. It was all laid out on a red checkered tablecloth, the table set with multiple forks at each plate like a fancy restaurant.

"Drink plenty of water, you need to hydrate," Mom reminded us, watching us eye the tableful of food while bouncing a bit on the balls of her feet.

"I might just have a piece of toast," Julianne said. "I feel a little nervous, and if I eat too much it upsets my stomach."

I suddenly felt like I was in the middle of something. I watched my mom's eyes narrow a little bit.

"You'll need your strength to dance, though."

Like we were going to an all-day workshop intensive in New York City, instead of the local community ballet theater's open-to-the-public auditions for kids.

Mom looked expectant, and I knew the food would be delicious. So I ate a little bit of everything, and it sank to the bottom of my stomach and sat there like a stone—alongside the uncomfortable roiling I felt that I chalked up to butterflies, nerves, just like Julianne had said it would. I felt like I had honored my mother. But when we got out of the car and safely into the studio, Julianne leaned over to me and said, “Obviously your mom doesn't understand a dancer diet.”

We were already in our pink tights and black leotards, buns severe and hairsprayed. The layer of sweatpants and a comfy flannel shirt that I'd worn into the studio, along with my dirty pink Converse, into the studio, had given me a false sense of security about my breakfast choices.

Taking the clothes off, I knew my stomach looked round. Like the little girls, the pre-ballet toddlers and their round tummies with little sticks for arms and legs. I didn't want to feel like a pre-ballet baby, not when I was finally tall enough to audition for the coveted role of Party Girl.

The shorter girls were Buffoons and the taller ones were Soldiers, but the perfectly-in-between girls got to put their hair in ringlets and wear dresses with lacy pantaloons underneath to revel with Clara and her magical uncle at the Christmas party.

I longed to be a Party Girl, and spend the entire holiday season performing for my neighborhood of semi-cultured suburban Christmas enthusiasts. I hoped especially for a pink dress, and that I wouldn't have to dance with any boys.

Julianne had already taken off her street clothes, and she looked the same as always—her slim, Party-Girl-height-frame ready to dance thanks to her toast breakfast. I tried to suck in my cinnamon roll belly, but it was hard to disguise in my tight black leotard. I looked around at the other girls, and it seemed they too had all decided on toast. I tugged at the fabric, trying to stretch the leotard out, but it snapped right back into place. I hoped nobody would notice.

“I’m so nervous,” another girl, Gina Marie, told me in a whisper. “I feel like I have bats in my stomach.”

All through the barre warmup I concentrated on my own tummy, not free of Gina Marie’s bats, exactly, but certainly more full of breakfast than any flying creatures. My toes weren’t as pointed as they could have been. My kicks weren’t as high. We moved to the center to learn choreography and I realized I was two steps behind everyone else.

In a studio made mostly of mirrors, surrounded by other dancers, I started to feel a little dizzy. There was a horrible moment after some turns where I wondered if I was about to throw up all over the wood floors of the studio. The woman teaching us the dance seemed like the type who would disapprove of such a human action, since she kept telling us to behave like ladies. I wasn’t all the way sure, but I didn’t think ladies ate a giant breakfast before their Nutcracker auditions, either.

Before I could stop it, I felt the saliva pooling in my mouth. Hands outstretched, I ran through the other girls to the bathroom as fast as I could, and I lost my entire breakfast into the toilet bowl. One of the moms who was checking in dancers when we arrived knocked on the door and offered me some water and a mint.

I called my mom to come pick me up, after all, rendering the whole sleepover useless. We eventually agreed that I could quit ballet after such a humiliation, and she signed me up for the cake decorating class she was taking with the neighborhood ladies.

Julianne got the part of Party Girl. And the next year, when I knew the other girls were going to auditions for *The Nutcracker*, I was too tall to be a Party Girl anyway.

Lunch

The end of the summer was my favorite time of the year. It meant we were going back to school again. That the horrible lonely days of air conditioning and popsicles and a stack of novels on the porch were over. My friends had all agreed to meet at the Onion Days carnival, our big reunion after the separation of family vacations and summer camps.

Everyone seemed to have grown up over the summer. They had all figured out that perfect low-rise-jeans and slightly cropped shirt combo that meant they had two inches of summer tanned skin showing. I was cautiously hiding my own pale stomach with an unfashionably long tee shirt that said, "Books are our friends."

Elena was the tannest and the blondest of us all now. Her t-shirt didn't say anything except the name of the store where she'd purchased it for what my mom called "an exorbitant amount of moolah." We all circled around her in the parking lot, slightly less tan, blonde, and belly-shirted by degrees, as if we were creating a gradient spiral. The Fibonacci sequence of teenage girls.

We made a plan, democratically so there wouldn't end up being fallout like the year before (we still hadn't made up with Gina Marie for causing factions last year with her suggestion that we "split up"). Rides, food, games, rides again. Nobody wanted to get sick from

the fair food on the Tilt-A-Whirl and stumble off it like a drunk uncle and vomit in the bushes. Those were the mistakes of yesteryear, when we were mere children.

The rides were always the same. They were greasy, clunky, scary in that a bolt might fly off, destroy the ride, and kill us. We loved that possibility, because it was too absurd to be real. It was fun to pair off in different duos to ride the rides with each other, to see how the summer had changed our relationships.

When it came time for food, I had worked up an appetite from all the adrenaline. There were so many delicious possibilities in the hall of food trailers. Popcorn, corn dogs, funnel cake, fried Oreos, cotton candy, slushies, churros. We decided to start with Sno-Cones as an appetizer. Tiger's Blood was my flavor of choice, but when it came Elena's turn she just ordered ice. No syrup.

"That stuff is just sugar," she said with a shrug. We knew that. That was the point of a Sno-Cone. But she had ordered last, and none of us could re-do ours now. Jenny wanted popcorn but asked for it plain. I had wanted fried Oreos until the Sno-Cone, now I couldn't figure out how to make that any healthier. I settled for a large diet soda, which was met with a nod of approval by Elena.

We moved as a group through the trailers, floating food ideas with a question mark at the end, waiting for approval from everyone else. Then we took our sad fair food to a table, and Elena pulled a little notebook out of her purse. She noted her ice-only treat.

"I started writing down everything I ate this summer, and it's amazing, just keeping track of it has really encouraged me to watch what I eat. I feel great."

Petra asked her where she got the notebook. Louise wanted to know if she'd lost weight. I drank my disgusting diet soda in tiny sips and daydreamed about Oreos.

We finished lunch in less than ten minutes, because nobody had eaten much. Petra's unsalted pretzel was virtually untouched, and I was tempted to ask her for it, since my stomach was grumbling.

But Elena clapped her hands together and suggested we go to the bathroom to check our makeup before going to play games. I laughed a little at the mention of makeup, but she wasn't joking. We were all sweaty and slimy from the rides and the nibbles of food we'd eaten. Nobody was carrying anything bigger than a mini backpack and I was pretty sure nobody had brought a bag of cosmetics. I had a Chapstick in my pocket, but that was it.

And the mirrors in the park's bathroom were basically a reversed tin pan.

Who knows how we looked when we approached the game alley, with the chaos of bells and yells overwhelming us. I knew I would spend all my money at the shooting gallery, where I stood a chance to win for real, and Jenny opted to stay as my cheerleader. The second we were alone, she leaned close to whisper in my ear.

"I'm going to get some real food now that those skinny bitches are gone. Do you want anything?"

"I want everything," I said.

We gorged on a funnel cake, two pretzels with cheese, cotton candy and one of those big lemonades that comes in a boot for some reason. We giggled conspiratorially at our enjoyment of the once-a-year feast.

When we met back up with the group, Elena was gone. Louise regaled us in great detail with the epic romance between Elena and the carny who was running the balloon popping game. He was apparently a hottie with a body, who ignored all the kids trying to play the game in order to coach Elena to a big win. Then he took his break and went on the Ferris Wheel with her. We

all whipped around to stare at the slowly turning romance machine, waiting till Elena's blonde hair came into sight alongside a guy that made us all weak at the knees. He had his arm around her, and we all knew it was because of the flavorless Sno-Cone because starvation is beauty.

Dinner

I had splurged on a professional conference for the first time since opening my own business, and I was feeling a little shaky. Traveling alone, being in my own hotel room, making small talk and networking over mixers ... none of this came naturally to me. I had to keep reminding myself that owning a bakery was my dream, that I deserved to be among these people, and learn from them, and that I could do this.

Standing by the silverware, holding my moderately full plate, I scoped out the ballroom where we were eating our catered dinner. I had developed eagle eyes for this type of thing — I spotted a table featuring only salads, water, and since I didn't see any sugar or cream, black coffee. Everyone seated there had bright manicures punctuated by glittering minimalist jewelry on their hands, ears and throats. They were probably talking about whatever article had been popular on The Cut that day, or discussing their therapists, and I couldn't handle that level of performance after a long day of putting on a show.

Another table was laden with plates that seemed to be a family style effort. The people at that table were making a lot of noise, and most of the chairs were full. They seemed like the kind of people who looked forward to seeing each other at the annual conference, but only then. The nearest table was discussing politics over dessert, and I caught a few angry outbursts that made me step away from them in case their fervor was contagious.

Finally, someone I'd seen in the branding workshop earlier in the day came up next to me. She touched my elbow.

“Do you want to sit together?”

I recognized her as the snarky girl sitting next to me who had kept a hilarious running commentary going under her breath as the presenter had advocated for the use of the girl boss hashtag.

“Oh god, yes.”

She lifted her plate by way of a wave and said her name was Rachel. I felt instantly bonded to her.

We found a place near the back with a couple of other women. We introduced ourselves. Then, immediately:

“I had the smallest lunch,” Liza from Wisconsin, who owned a cheese store, explained, waving at her three plates of pasta, salad and a miniature slice of pizza.

“I actually went to yoga this morning, would you believe it?” This was Helen, who was older, and ran a general store, as she took a huge bite of garlic bread.

I had a bit of veggie lasagne and a salad. It was flopped all over the plate after a fight with the spatula, smearing sauce into the brightly green, crisp spinach.

“I'm literally just eating lettuce so I can have a slice of pie,” I laughed. We all laughed. The ritual of explaining our meals had been completed. Unspoken, but expected, it had to be the first thing we did — like a religious family blessing their meal.

Each of us owned a small business selling products we believed in, created ourselves, and sold and marketed to relatively few, but enthusiastic customers. Liza had an old, grouchy supplier who refused to let his son take over even though he was well past retirement age.

Helen's staff was a revolving door of unreliable teenagers. Rachel, my workshop friend, told a story about hiring a graphic designer who was 22, talented, and suddenly disappeared without doing a trace of work. I told them about a customer who asked for "Happy Birthday Asshole" on a pink cake, which turned out to be for his boss. I got a call, since my sticker was on the bakery box.

The five day gathering went a lot better after that initial dinner. We spent every meal together for the rest of the conference, justifying our food choices off the buffet and abusing our jobs. Rachel gave the tutorial on email newsletters in the big ballroom on the third day, and we sat in the front row to cheer her on.

I posed for a number of cheesy Instagrams, though not cheesy enough to be labeled #girlboss, and felt at once feminist but also un beholden to that ideal. I joined Liza on the hotel treadmills one day, and we were practically bursting to explain our exercise to the other women when we sat down to cheesy pasta later that night.

It felt like summer camp, or how I imagined summer camp feeling when I had watched *The Parent Trap*. They ate Oreos smeared with peanut butter in that movie, and I made a note to make a peanut butter Oreo cake upon my return. Maybe I'd call it "Camp Confection." Maybe not.

Over soups, salads and sandwiches on their last night, we had started to share plates and dishes like the group I saw at the beginning. We were a conference clique now. Then Helen laughed to herself, prompting us all to demand she share whatever was amusing.

"This is what my son calls 'girl food,'" she laughed. "He was just complaining to me about how he wants to spend lunchtime with a girl he thinks is cute, but she always wants salads

and sandwiches. I'm a man! He told me. I need substance in my meals! Like I'm feeding him rare steak every night or something. I have no idea where he got it from."

But we all knew. Even among these peddlers of food and delight, we were all conscious of our intake. We were afraid. I thought sadly of the girl her son had a crush on. Maybe she preferred rare steak, too. But how would she ever be able to explain that appetite to her girlfriends?

Dessert

It was sheer bad luck that I was in my hometown visiting my parents on the day of Louise's baby shower. I was going to send a belated gift and card once I got back to my apartment in LA, a few hours away, but then Petra spotted me at the grocery store with my mom while we were stocking up on baking supplies. She cornered me and reiterated the invitation.

So I went.

My best friend Kay, who was running the bakery while I was gone, herself a talented pastry chef, called them "girl functions." The somewhat dumb things we did only as women where we'd get together and eat finger foods on tiny plates and play embarrassing games and watch someone open gifts. Where we'd feel pressure to buy a new dress or at least a pair of earrings to look like we were up on the latest fashion trends, even at our age.

"I'm so glad you came," Petra squealed when I entered. "I know you'll actually appreciate this spread."

I knew what she meant. But in the present company, I was reminded of a horrible incident at the senior breakfast where I ate a muffin in front of Petra, Elena, and Gina Marie, and Elena had dubbed me the Queen of Pastries. I bet she wished I'd named the bakery that. Come to think of it, I kind of wished I had. The nickname no longer stung.

I put four pieces of cantaloupe on the small clear plastic plate Petra had thrust at me and smiled at her.

“I’m on a diet,” I lied.

“Good for you!”

Louise was huge. She had blown up to the size of a balloon, the Violet Beauregarde of pregnant women. She had three small plates surrounding her, loaded with orange rolls from Shirley’s Bakery, and a mountain of yogurt and fruit, and enough mini quiche to accuse her of absolutely hoarding them.

“I am, of course, eating for two,” she’d say, rubbing her stomach with one hand while shoving fruit into the other with an overloaded plastic fork.

She said it so many times I was tempted to innocently ask her to explain what she meant.

Everyone assured her she looked fantastic. She was glowing. Body positivity was in.

I went back in the kitchen when Petra wasn’t looking, to get some actual food — I wasn’t passing on an orange roll and I hadn’t been on a diet since my freshman year of college when we all agreed to eat nothing but Chaco Tacos for 48 hours — and hovered around some of my old friends’ moms, eavesdropping.

“She has really let herself go.”

“There’s no other word for it: she’s fat.”

“I’d never let Elena eat like that if she were to get pregnant.”

“I know, it’s bad, but I can’t resist these rolls.”

They hadn’t aged gracefully, these moms who had driven us to the mall and football games so many times. They were all squeezed into their sixties like it was their old prom dress - things bunching and poking out in the wrong places. Lots of hair dye, some definite Botox. I

thought of my own mother, not invited to this function, and her wispy gray hair and oversized sweater collection. She looked fabulous at 62. These women made me sad.

I ate slowly and furtively. One of them — my old pal Jenny’s mom, who looked alright on closer inspection — dramatically spotted me, making me feel cornered and caught.

“What on earth have you been up to?”

“Why don’t you come around more?”

“Have you abandoned us for the coast? I heard you were on the coast these days.”

I continued to chew, knowing they didn’t necessarily want answers. They just wanted to descend upon me and rattle me around a little.

Elena stepped into the kitchen in three-inch wedges, her blonde hair the exact same shade it had been at graduation. She looked at me like I had risen from the dead.

“Pastry Queen!”

If this had been even three years earlier, the comment would’ve made my stomach drop and my blood rise to color my cheeks. I would’ve been mortified, and quiet. Today, I said:

“The shop is actually called The Sweet Tooth, but I’m so flattered you remembered that I own my own bakery!”

The moms stared. Elena smiled without teeth. She knew she had no power.

“I would’ve catered for Louise if I had known,” I said, reaching for a delicious orange roll, my mouth watering. I took a huge bite. It was just as good as I remembered. But I knew Shirley would let me drag her name for the sake of a little revenge. “These old Shirley’s rolls just aren’t what they used to be, are they?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Elena’s eyes narrowed and crinkled as she held her phony smile.

“You *own* The Sweet Tooth?” Jenny’s mom shrieked.

“But you’re so thin!”

“I buy your cake pops every time I drive north, they are absolutely addictive. I can’t believe I haven’t seen you in the store!”

“Well,” I grinned. “I have a few locations now. Just really trying to fatten up the whole region, honestly.”

We all laughed, like that wasn’t everyone in the room’s *ultimate* worst nightmare.

My phone rang, like it had been cued up in a staged version of this moment of my life. It was Kay. I excused myself, explaining that it was work. Everyone looked impressed, except Elena, who looked hungry.

“Hey! Just spitballing here,” I told Kay, standing on the front porch of Louise’s two-story brick home. “But do we need a peanut butter Oreo cake? And should I try to get the best local baker down here to give me her recipe for orange rolls?”

I still had the roll in my hand, and took another heavenly bite. I remembered some meme I had seen that said something about skinny tasting better than food and grimaced. I wondered if I should move to France, where you could choose to both eat food and have friends who wouldn’t shame you over it.

I posed that idea to Kay also, and she said she’d join me.

“Can we change our tagline?” I said by way of the final word. “The Sweet Tooth: Tastes better than skinny feels.”

go to hell, sophia summers

“One of the smartest men in the world is Frank Ames. He has an IQ of 172. However, because he could not get along with teachers and students, he never achieved anything with his brilliance. He didn’t graduate from high school, and now works at a gas station.”

Up on the stage, Sophia Summers was sparkling in black jeans and a bright blue sweater. Her eyes, the same shade as her sweater, were wide and earnest. She had red lipstick on her friendly smile. She was dressed in comfortable tennis shoes so she could easily move around the space, a methodical pacing that made the audience more relaxed. She wore her long dark hair in a low ponytail to signal that this wasn’t a formal situation.

“The problem with being a gifted kid is that everyone is always telling you how different you are. How much better you are than your peers. So you assume that’s always going to be the case, subscribing to the notion that you “intimidate” the teenagers you go to school with. Convincing yourself that you’re low on friends because they are unsure how to match your wit.”

The audience, full of K-12 educators who had hired her to speak at their conference, was giggling at her self-deprecating jokes. She grinned.

“Of course none of this is true, and the fact is that everyone dislikes you because your honesty is brutal and your wit is acidic and they *know* you think they’re inferior. They’re not as dumb as you thought they were. You’re the problem. And when you realize that, you have some decisions to make.”

Sophia stopped moving. She planted herself in the center of the stage, and looked at the audience. She made eye contact with a few people, letting the silence work for her.

“Learning how to adjust socially was something I didn’t learn ‘til my early twenties, and that’s why I started this course. I want to help gifted students learn how to be smart but not

superior, because as many of you in this room already know, social skills will get you everywhere.”

She did an exaggerated bow through the applause as the spotlight shut off, and she stepped into the wings off the stage. Waiting for her was her business partner Connor, in a smart, skinny suit of navy blue wool, punching his thumbs into the screen of his iPhone.

“Awesome job, as always,” he said without looking up.

She grinned and took out her own phone to check for messages. Her 3 o’clock appointment had been confirmed: an assessor from the nonprofit agency she was hoping to partner with would be conducting an interview to see if they were a good fit. Sophia continued to smile. She was ready.

*

At 2:59, Sophia was back in the tiny shared office she and Connor had set up in a co-working space they rented by the month. She was sitting cross-legged on the small couch by the window, her hair taken out of its pony and loose around her shoulders. Casual, casual, casual. She opened her mouth to say “come in,” but without waiting for a reply, a sleek woman swept through the doorway and walked halfway into the room.

“Sophia?” she asked with authority. “Is now still a good time?”

Sophia felt her eyes widen and her mouth drop open for the split second before she trained them into a welcoming expression.

“Of course, I am all ready for you. Please, sit down,” Sophia untangled her limbs and stood, smoothing her black jeans. “Have a seat. Can I offer you a drink?”

“No, thank you,” the woman said. “If you don’t mind, I’d rather get straight to it.”

She sat, not on the couch where Sophia had indicated with a wave of her hand but in a stiff-backed chair facing the couch. Sophia sat back down.

“All business! You would get along with Connor, Ms. ...” Sophia waited for her to introduce herself.

“Andrews,” the woman supplied, and adjusted her already perfect posture. She pulled out a notebook and pen from her structured black leather purse. Her white shirt was crisp and her short bob looked freshly trimmed. She was wearing a pencil skirt, and Sophia squirmed just thinking of the uncomfortable hip-hugging style on her own body.

“So Miss Summers, your organization makes an effort to integrate social education into school curriculum, including etiquette, how to solve playground squabbles, effective communication, and even a bit of sensitivity training.”

Sophia nodded.

“How do you feel you personally rank in all of these elements of social knowledge?”

“Well,” Sophia said, surprised by the question but ready to weave an answer. “I don’t claim to be an expert in anything. My efforts come from my personal experiences growing up with a lot of outside influences telling me what I was and, as a result, how other people perceived me. My main goal is to get people to be introspective and find their own path for making friends.”

“Who or what were those influences?”

“Sorry?”

“Who was telling you what you were?”

“Oh! Everybody. My parents and grandparents told me I was smart. Teachers told me I was smart, but mean. There was a lot of negativity surrounding my personality, and a lot of it

stemmed from the fact that I was a gifted kid who had a lot of opportunities to be praised for how superior I was.”

“So you have a superiority complex.”

“I hesitate to answer that either way, since I think it can be very telling. I know I used to, and it’s something I am working on. I definitely think I am better at some things than other people are. As are you, as is everyone.”

There was a long pause.

“You really don’t remember me, do you?” Ms. Andrews said.

Sophia started. Was she supposed to be recognizing this sleek stranger? Not meeting her for the very first time?

“I’m so sorry, I guess not,” Sophia said slowly. “Remind me?”

“My maiden name is Gilbert. Cassidy Gilbert?” Ms. Cassidy Gilbert Andrews lifted her eyebrow as if to say ‘how about now?’

Sophia’s mind ran through a Rolodex of over thirty years of friends and acquaintances, across five states and two universities.

“Of course you don’t, I should have known,” Cassidy said. “I grew up next door to your best friend Kate. She was *my* best friend until you moved in.”

This was not going well. Cassidy Gilbert, Sophia remembered with a wince, had not been especially smart, or popular in their social circle. They’d tried that trick where you put her hand in warm water to make her pee at a sleepover. And it had worked.

“Cassidy!” Sophia made the final y last as long as she felt she possibly could. Should she hug this woman? She looked as though she would reject anything that might muss her. “How fun to reconnect.”

“Mm hmm,” Cassidy said, making a note in her notebook. “You seem pretty self-aware. Is that part of this?”

“Being able to recognize you have a flaw is the first step toward changing it.”

“Well you’re full of those, from what I can remember. Do you know you once asked me my three favorite authors and then wouldn’t let me sit with you at lunch because I only had two and you said they were for babies?”

“Oh, Cassidy,” Sophia said. “I’m truly sorry. I apologize for my hurtful behavior and language. I was so young, and really mixed up about some things.”

“And now you’re going around acting like you can tell everyone else how to act.”

Sophia groaned internally. How could Cassidy be holding on to a twenty-year grudge? And how come it had to come up now, getting in the way of her continued success. She tried to deflect.

“Again, the program is not clinical. It’s to help guide thinking and behavior. One of the reasons I was so excited to partner with your organization is because of the great work you guys are already doing in education with ...”

Cassidy held up a hand.

“I’m just going to stop you. This is not going to work out. I really just came here to say one thing to you and that is: go to *hell*, Sophia Summers.”

Sophia’s mouth and eyes returned to their round, wide expression as Cassidy gathered her things haphazardly and left as quickly as she had arrived.

*

Connor found her in the same room an hour later, flat on her back on the couch, a bottle of apple juice resting on her stomach. She was staring up at the ceiling, tapping her fingers on the bottle and singing to herself.

“Nobody likes me, everybody hates me, I guess I’ll go eat worms.”

“I knew it,” Connor said under his breath. He swept into the chair last occupied by one Cassidy Gilbert Andrews. “I knew I should have stayed in the room. She seemed like a cold, calculating bitch.”

“She went to elementary school with me.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah.”

“She asked me if I’ve used the steps outlined in the program to make a million friends and become the most popular person in the world.”

“Oh, no.”

“Am I a fraud? I wrote all this and give kids these tips but I have, like, skeletons in my closet. I was a genuinely mean person!”

Connor nodded, although she was still talking to the ceiling.

“But I’m better now. I’m kind, I’m generous, I remember birthdays. I don’t tell people when their bangs are ugly anymore. I. Have. Learned. My. Lessons.”

She sat up, clutching the bottle of juice.

“I’m not saying I’m perfect, because that would be ridiculous! But I finally don’t feel as flawed as everybody said I was. I know what makes me happy. I *am* happy.”

“So you aren’t winning adult prom queen,” Connor rolled his eyes. “Who cares?”

“I don’t know, the thousands, and hopefully millions of people who are counting on me to teach their kids to communicate well and not bully and not gossip and all the stuff I did and had done to me when I was a kid.”

“So we’re probably not getting that grant?”

“Yeah don’t count on it.”

*

Grant or no, Connor insisted they take a luxuriously long late lunch to celebrate a great presentation. Sophia grabbed her coat and practically ran out the door.

“Can we go to that place around the corner? The waiter always flirts with me.”

“Honestly, I think he’s flirting with me,” Connor said from behind her. “He always gives me free drinks.”

“He always gives *me* free drinks!” Sophia insisted.

“I think it’s nice you always assume people are interested in you.”

“People are always interested, probably.”

“Solving the mystery of your single-ness.”

“Now now, we both know I’m too busy for a boyfriend. Plus I’m always with you. Nobody would ever approach me when I come in with the best-dressed man in the room.”

“I always figure they assume I’m your gay sidekick.”

“Well you’re neither.”

Inside the small restaurant, the pair of them were seated opposite each other. Neither glanced at a menu, and Connor ordered for both of them.

“A mango black tea lemonade for the lady, and I’ll have a coffee. Black.”

The waiter, who had not flirted with either of them, nodded and set off to make their drinks, returning quickly with both.

“Sometimes I think I should change my name and try to hide from my past self,” Sophia sighed, stabbing at the ice in her glass with her straw.

Connor looked at her seriously.

“The reason you are the person you are right now is because of your past self. Don’t discount her. I happen to know you like that kid a lot.”

Sophia stuck her tongue out at him.

“I know, I’m my biggest fan.”

“I’m your second biggest.”

“Awwww. Connor, you old softie,” she said, reaching across the table in an attempt to pinch his cheek. He swatted her away.

“Don’t make me regret telling you this,” Connor spoke slowly, measuring his words. “But I have grown very fond of you over the past year.”

Sophia’s face changed. She willed herself not to joke, and ruin this rare emotional reveal from her business partner.

“At first, when you pitched the idea, I just thought it was a worthy cause. And yes, I thought you would benefit from it too ... but we’ve managed to do a lot of good. I’ve seen it in the lives of the kids we teach.”

He paused to take a sip of his coffee.

“And I’ve seen you translate your passion and your take-no-prisoners attitude to something worthwhile. I think you’re pretty great. And that’s why I stayed on with this project,” he finished, slumping back like the effort had exhausted him.

She wasn't looking at him, but was rooting around in her purse, knocking it from its perch on the back of her chair. Finally, she extracted a peacock blue notebook. Clicking the pen in her other hand, she started scribbling.

“What on earth are you doing?” Connor exclaimed.

“I'm capturing this moment.”

“You're writing down what I said?”

“Of course.”

“Why?”

She finished with a flourish, and clicked her pen.

“A few years ago I started writing down whenever someone gave me a genuine compliment. Not like ‘cute shoes,’ or ‘great hair,’ but the real kind of heartfelt praise that I kind of ... don't hear that much. Then when I'm feeling less than my best I have a book of nice things to read.”

“That's actually kind of brilliant.”

“Because of negativity bias, you know?”

“Can I ask what the first entry is?”

She blushed.

“You can ask,” Sophia teased. “But you have to read it silently to yourself while I cringe in the background.”

“Deal,” Connor held out his hand.

He looked at the page, which contained a typed and printed email.

I think you are a very intelligent person. I can connect with you on deeper levels than I can other people. You have taught me a lot - I like that you are so emotional, and I like that you are opinionated, and I like that you have a dominant personality. Your force of will and aspirations are other reasons I like you. You know what you want a lot of the

time and you aren't afraid to go for it. That inspires me. I have a lot of things I want to do in life and I feel like too many people are not very motivated, or do not think themselves capable of anything great. I want to surround myself with people who inspire me, make me think and challenge me in some way. You are smart and motivated and have a great personality. I like you the way you are. I want you to be confident, powerful, smart, emotional and even bitchy sometimes. Because those are the things I love about you.

It was signed "your friend, Connor."

Connor looked at Sophia.

"I don't remember writing that."

"Maybe you were overtaken by a kind, effusive demon."

"It's entirely possible."

He paused. Sophia felt her insides squirm. The note said the word "love," after all. She shouldn't have shared it. She wanted to snatch the notebook back and throw it into the ocean.

"Why don't you make these complement journals a part of the program?" Connor suggested.

"Really?" Sophia was taken aback. "I figured that was just me trying to cope ... but you're right, it's very validating. Goes along with a lot of what we teach."

As if on cue, the waiter returned, and they felt obliged to order two salads.

Sophia looked down, playing with the hem of her sweater.

"Actually," she said, "I don't think I want to make the journals part of the program."

"Why not," Connor was surprised.

"I just feel like so much of myself is already attached to this program. It's all straight from my emotional struggles ... I'd like to keep one thing to myself."

"Yes," he agreed, "I think you're right in wanting to keep that to yourself. I'm glad I could make it into the notebook at all."

They shared a look, realizing that something had changed for the better.

con artist

When the security guard at the door motioned for her to wave her wrist in front of the sensor, Grace Grayson's heartbeat sped up. What if she somehow had a faulty band? Or the one they mailed was a prank of some sort to embarrass her?

But her wristband made the console beep, the light turned green, and a nearby volunteer in a neon tee shirt ushered her into the Salt Lake Fan Experience. She let out the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding, in a subtle, steady stream of hot air.

Of course the wristband worked — she was there on official business for The Tribune, reporting from a place all her coworkers had begged to avoid. She knew her editor, Jane, saw this assignment as a punishment, and Grace had let her think that she agreed with some eyerolls and a couple of “kill me” pantomimes to coworkers whenever Jane was in sight.

For some reason, even though her job had always challenged her natural anxiety — journalists had to be ready to deal with brand-new experiences every day, and talk to strangers, and be assertive and professional — she loved it. As the resident pop culture expert, she was seen as “lowbrow,” and was able to fly under the radar of Jane's fine arts nose, to write about stuff she really cared about. The whole paper was always shocked when her stories about TV and movies got clicks. But Grace knew what people were interested in.

Even though it was early in the day, the crowds at FanX were already milling around. Recognizing each other's cosplay, preparing to sit next to each other during panels and laugh at the same jokes, standing at an artist's booth with jaws dropped. Sitting anywhere they could find — usually the ground. People were smiling, laughing, jumping up and down with delight. Opportunities like this came rarely, so everyone wanted to be sure they maximized their personal

experience — and they'd managed to collectively agree to work together to that end. Even if people were tired or hungry, there was an unmatched feeling of joy. Nobody was bickering.

Grace Grayson felt it too. She was a self-identified fangirl, a lover of shows about magic, movies about ambitious technology, books about vampires and any combination of those three. She had even been named for a comic book character — her mom was a big fan of the laundry-sponsored Starchie series you could buy at the supermarket checkout and was thrilled when she married a Grayson. Although Grace had little in common with cartoon-Grace, starting with the fact that real-Grace's dad was black, everyone always made the connection. Lots of people called her Grace-Grays, the nickname of the character in the comics. And she loved it. But today, Grace was there to work, so she was trying to keep her squeals and hand claps to a minimum.

Grace had agonized over her outfit for so long that her roommate had closed and locked their bedroom door and drowned her out by playing the Harry Potter score. She had finally chosen what she thought was a good look — floral trousers with a simple Wonder logo tee and a solid blazer. She wore her hair natural, its curls bouncing around her face. Still colorful, still professional, still fangirl and most importantly — still Grace.

All of this concerted effort to appear together was being foiled thanks to her coworker-slash-sidekick for the day, Irrfan Patel. He had chosen to go the opposite route in his attire, and was decked out in a full-on Pillars of Creation costume. He was dressed as a Star Sentinel, the all-black suit sprinkled with bright badges and other honors. She watched him come through security with an expression that betrayed his own fear that he wouldn't be allowed in. When he discovered there would be no incident, he bounded over with a huge grin on his face and his camera raised.

“I am a proud South Asian man,” Irrfan said, “but you are welcome to call me by the white boy name of Jimmy Olsen as we embark on this journalistic assignment together. Lois.”

He bowed to her, then snapped a photo of the soft pretzel line.

She grinned at him. He may have been a spaz, but she was glad for his company so she had something to distract her from counting down the seconds until 2:15. Because at 2:15, she had an interview with Augusta Geraldine Sparks.

“Do you think she will want to talk about Alpha 12, or Pillars of Creation at all?” Irrfan had babbled on their car ride. “Do you think she would prefer to discuss her work on stage? I mean I love Pillars of Creation, obviously, but sometimes actors get annoyed when you pigeonhole them. That’s their whole thing — versatility — and I wouldn’t want to call her out on anything.”

“Where’s your journalistic integrity, Patel? I’ll ask her whatever suits the story. We’re not there to make her feel comfortable. We’re not her friends.”

But Grace did want to be her friend. She wanted them to have an instant bond and laugh at each other’s jokes and exchange personal contact information. She held all her favorite TV shows in high esteem, but Pillars of Creation was particularly important. Alpha-12 had been, in many ways, Grace’s best friend as an awkward teen. Her character was logical and never got anxious about things like comic cons and inspired Grace to follow suit.

Irfan turned to her after snapping a few more photos of some volunteers and what looked to Grace like just a picture of a blank brick wall, his grin still shining. She had the thought that she had no idea if he was a good photographer or not.

“You ready?”

They were surging with energy. Comics conventions, comic cons, or just cons for the initiated, had grown in not only popularity but also mainstream acceptance, and the place was getting crowded with people who wanted to find fellow fans to freak out with about the things they loved. Grace and Irrfan roamed around for an hour or so, asking patrons and artists for quotes and taking pictures to accompany them. When they felt good about the volume for their on-the-scene piece, they still had time to kill before the next assignment, and agreed to meet up again in an hour.

This was not Grace's first convention. She knew the parlance, the tricks, the floor map of the building that had rooms like 2202A and 2202B and 2202C listed on the schedule. (A was across the hall from B, and C was further down but obscured by a large divider that you just had to walk around. Many patrons were foiled by the divider.) She knew to bring hand sanitizer, and to expect a certain staleness in the air that came with a bunch of nerds of all shapes and sizes and commitment levels to hygiene milling around in close quarters. She also knew that the non-celebrity guests — vendors who were talented and creative artists in every medium — could be found on “the floor.”

Grace wandered the floor for a few minutes among the sword replicas and cleverly drawn cartoons, appreciating the ingenuity and talent on display in the artist's alley. Then she saw it.

Running over, unable to remind herself about professionalism, she approached the brightly colored painting with such wide eyes that she felt a bit crazed. She clasped her hands together and sighed. It was perfect, and she had to have it.

The poster-sized painting featured Alpha 12 in her heyday — thick red hair, black bodysuit lined with neon lights which lit up in different colors according to her feelings. The painting depicted her in pink lights, which meant a rare emotional connection was being made.

In her arms was the handsome Captain Gold, helmet off, looking at her like she was the only woman in the world. It looked like they were about to kiss.

“I always wanted them to get together,” a disembodied voice said from behind the table.

Grace looked for the source, and the artist peeked out from behind her work. She was sleek and polished in a tank top Grace would’ve been freezing in.

“Me too!” she said. “I have written ... so much fanfic about them. This is just ... wow. You are so talented!”

The artist introduced herself as Sam, and gave her a card. She also leaned in to let Grace know she sold prints of the painting, and she’d give her a discount if she wanted one.

“A reward for enthusiasm,” Sam said.

“I have so many crushes right now,” Grace said in return, and felt her cheeks get hot. But she grinned. “On this painting, on you, on the con.”

Then she leaned in, herself.

“I’m interviewing Augusta Geraldine Sparks for the paper,” she said. “I have ten minutes with her this afternoon. I’ve been trying not to act like a fan all day so this is a good outlet before I have to be professional.”

Sam was laughing. She said she was honored to be the subject of the gushing, when really they owed it all to Gus. Grace grinned at her familiar use of the actress’ nickname.

“I knew this was where the action would be,” Grace said. “Sure the celebrities are fun, but I always have the best time in and among the creators. In fact, could I talk to you for the article? It might give you some good exposure.”

Sam’s face lit up and she reached across her table and grabbed Grace’s hand.

“That would be excellent. I am local, or local-ish, so people knowing who I am around here is a big part of my goal today.”

Grace was about to make an official interview appointment when Irrfan came careening into her, sweaty and panting. Sam let go of her hand, looking bewildered that she had been holding it in the first place. Grace saw a blush rise on her face, too, and felt better.

“Missed it!” Irrfan was wheezing. “Took forever ... to find you.”

Grace introduced Sam to her partner, and Sam rustled around to find a bottle of water under her table, handing it to the grateful Irrfan. He took a couple of gulps, then an exaggerated super-deep breath and steadied himself.

“It’s in five minutes. The Augusta panel.”

“What?!” Grace shrieked, her voice hitting its highest possible pitch.

Irrfan explained that the updated schedule was on the con’s clunky app, and the printed one was subject to change, which had happened today.

Grace swore magnificently, and Sam raised an impressed eyebrow. Grace frantically checked her email, hoping she hadn’t missed anything that might mean their interview was rescheduled too, but the only thing there was the confirmation from “Gus’s” people.

“Well you still have time to prep for that,” Sam said. She was a part of this now, and all three of them reassured each other it was all fine and good and nothing cataclysmic would come from this minor oversight. “You know her career, you didn’t even *need* to sit in on the panel for a recap.”

“I know, I just thought ...” Grace started to say, but cut herself off. Was she being too familiar with this beautiful artist she just met? “I guess I wanted to get my bearings by being in

the same room with her before I had to do the interview, and converse with her in a professional and sane manner.”

“Is this going to be a problem?” Irrfan said, folding his arms over his costume. “I don’t want to be embarrassed. Or embarrassed for you. Pillars of Creation is my favorite show and I really don’t want to let it down.”

She assured him she was perfectly capable, biting her tongue about his fanboy getup, then checked her watch and quickly excused them both, with a promise to Sam to swing back by for the interview and to make a purchase. Sam’s gaze lingered on her eyes, a soft smile accompanying the sparkle in her expression.

“You better come back,” was all Sam said.

Yanking Irrfan behind her while he protested, Grace screeched to a halt in front of the main doors of the big hall, flashing her press pass and forcing Irrfan to do the same, and the frazzled volunteer asked them to wait.

“There might still be press seats available, but the panel is just about to start,” they said disdainfully.

Grace rolled her eyes at the volunteer’s back.

“This is kind of exciting. I thought we’d be more prepared, though,” Irrfan said.

Grace pointed at the backpack on her shoulders.

“Two phone chargers, a backup recorder, a notebook, six pens, my iPad, notecards with pre-written questions,” she rattled off. “How much more prepared do you want me to be?”

He shook his phone with the schedule still open in her face.

“This prepared,” he said with a laugh.

She had to laugh back.

“This is a big deal for me, you know,” he told her while they waited to be let in. “Calvin is the regular A&E photographer, but his sister is getting married this weekend. He was so mad at her for scheduling it this weekend. I was so happy I sent her a gift off her registry.”

“You did not,” Grace was astonished.

He shrugged, refusing to confirm or deny.

“My favorite show growing up was Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles,” Irrfan said. “It was one of the only shows that didn’t have ten white teenagers in it. Nobody looked like me, but nobody looked like anyone. At least, I don’t know any humanoid turtles.”

Grace nodded. She knew this problem well.

“All the good pop culture journalists, like April from the Turtles, are white. I got lucky because in the nineties they always had a token black girl. The Craft, The Spice Girls ... even Pillars of Creation has Selene. But then, if I didn’t like the character, I had to identify with her.”

He asked her why she had continued to be a fangirl, then.

Grace considered.

She wasn’t exactly popular, and she’d spent enough of her childhood (okay, and teen, and young adult) years at home with her friends in books, movies and TV shows. She had spent her tweenhood discovering things that were new for her, and embarrassing her friends. They would say it was her parents’ fault for naming her after a comic. It didn’t matter that Star Trek, Spider-Man and The Lord of the Rings had been out long before their time, were beloved by many, and starting to make their way into the conversation of the average-everyday-person. They associated it only with Grace. The more she clung to it, the more they distanced themselves from her, because nerds weren’t cool.

She was 14 when Pillars of Creation ended its run. So when she downloaded an episode from BearShare, it was already entering into its cult classic phase. Grace was alone again, not invited to any parties (and actually uninvited from one), no costume, no candy. Her dad offered to watch something scary with her, and her mom said she'd make caramel popcorn, but she told them she was going to spend some time with her "real friends," and retreated.

When it finally booted up, she knew right away, from the opening scene, that the show was going to be up her alley. It was funny, serious, had a diverse cast of characters whose relationships she was prepared to get way too invested in. She downloaded four more episodes and watched as her slow internet connection struggled to comply with her demands.

Augusta Geraldine Sparks as Alpha 12 made her first appearance in episode five - "The Rift" - and nothing had prepared Grace for it. No chatrooms, no grainy screengrabs, no amount of other people assuring her she would love A-12 more than anyone else on the show or possibly in the universe.

Alpha-12 had a grand entrance, saved the day, threw some quips around and generally created an environment that seemed to gravitate toward her. She got to have sizzling sexual tension with Captain Gold, but also Yarina, the ship's cook. As a cyborg, obviously, she didn't have impulses or a desire to be in a relationship. But as an actress, Augusta Geraldine Sparks seemed to have chemistry with everyone.

"Living in reality means there are limitations. But living in fandoms means everything is possible. The good guys always win. Alpha-12 and Captain Gold? Together, no race conversation about a black man and a white woman," Grace told Irrfan, startling as she articulated why their relationship meant so much to her. They mirrored her parents. It felt too

personal a revelation, so she rushed on, though she felt herself blush for the second time that day. “None with Yarina either. Just a beautiful Japanese woman and a white uh, cyborg.”

Irfan nodded as the volunteer returned, a finger over their lips, and waved them into the hall.

They sat quickly, Irrfan looking around and taking in the sights of the packed room, lined with chairs . But Grace could only see one thing. Red hair, casual outfit, easy posture in the tall director’s chair, holding the microphone like a practiced veteran. She felt her breath catch. She was in the same room as Alpha-motherfucking-12. She felt her previous embarrassment give way to a new kind of nervousness. Because Augusta Geraldine Sparks was a notorious anti-fan capital H Hater. Grace knew that in their one-on-one conversation she wouldn’t be labeled a “fan,” but a fellow professional. Here, though, in the convention hall, all bets were off.

Augusta was grinning, her eyes sparkly like a benevolent fairy godmother. She looked into the audience with affection, a practiced comfortable grin on her face as the bumbling local moderator asked her inane questions about her short, cult-favorite career.

Pillars of Creation was a sci-fi classic, but it hadn’t done much for its cast. Neither had its sister show, a fantasy series called The Mysteries of Udolpho, that ran on the same network at the same time. For some reason, though the shows had a huge following and vocal online fanbase, neither one had survived network merging in the early 2000s, and their stars had disappeared largely from the acting scene.

What they had done, for Grace, was give her something to blog about, whetting her appetite for entertainment journalism before she ever put it together that her hobby could become her job.

Augusta seemed practiced at this type of thing. Appearing at cons was probably her main job. And Grace got to be a part of it. The big screens switched to a sizzle reel of Augusta's career - mostly as Alpha 12, but a couple guest spots on Supernatural and a memorable turn on the Vampire Diaries spinoff's spinoff. Grace had seen every performance, obviously. Gus was a great actress, and a beautiful woman. Celebrity crushes were, however, supposed to stay dreams. Not become people you have to interview. Grace forced herself to rein in her pining.

Audience questions were next, and Grace pitied the fans who had to line up and hope to ask their question, a brief interaction that would have to suffice as their one-on-one with Augusta. A nervous young man approached the microphone in cosplay as Captain Gold — Grace nudged Irrfan — and shakily asked what it was like to shoot a certain scene that was the culmination of an emotional arc for Alpha 12.

On the big screen, Grace watched Augusta's face flicker with something. Disgust was the first word that came to mind. It was a flash, maybe imagined, but it took her aback. She wondered if anybody else had noticed, and was tempted to whisper to Irrfan, but didn't want to miss a moment. It was probably nothing.

A young girl wearing Augusta's face on her tee shirt went up to the mic and asked if she had heard any of the rumors about Augusta being cast in the new Wonder movie, in the coveted role of Commander Callisto.

Grace and Irrfan knew about these rumors, obviously. They were swirling around Tumblr and Reddit and there were plenty of opinions about the possibility of Alpha 12 stepping into another iconic sci-fi role. Was she too old? Was she too inexperienced, since she hadn't worked that steadily for ten years? Did it matter? Augusta Geraldine Sparks, in a Wonder movie. Grace

suddenly became very aware of the shirt she had chosen for the interview, wondering if she had time to go buy something else and change.

That's when she realized it had been silent for an uncomfortable amount of time. Augusta's smile looked frozen on her face. The moderator was holding the microphone close to her mouth, which opened and closed a few times as she attempted to fill the silence. There was a faint pop as her lips smacked, which filled the silence, but turned it even more uncomfortable.

Grace looked around to see how anyone else was reacting. It seemed like the room had switched into slow motion, or she had suddenly gotten super-speed powers. A guy a few rows over had a chip halfway to his mouth, and had stopped attempting to eat it. Some people with their phones up, recording the panel, had dropped them slightly so they were only capturing the backs of the audience's heads while their actual eyes bored into Augusta. Grace imagined a fly beating its wings somewhere in the room, visibly slowed down while they all waited to hear about this casting rumor. She had a weird instinct to reach out and take Irrfan's hand, but didn't do it.

None of them could have anticipated Augusta's reaction. She started to cry. In the same otherworldly slow motion, a tear rolled down her cheek, followed by another and then another. She sniffed into the microphone, and the noise seemed to break the spell of the room.

"I'm sorry," she shook her head. "I'm so sorry. It's just ... that role was something my sister really wanted me to get. And it reminds me of her."

Grace dug into her bag to check her notes. Augusta Geraldine Sparks was, as everybody knew, a twin. Her sister looked just like her, but more natural — gray hair and a notable lack of botox. She had been Augusta's publicist slash assistant slash agent at various stages in her career until she'd died of cancer only four months ago. Four months, that's what Grace had in her notes.

As in: don't bring it up. But Irrfan and Grace didn't know the Commander Callisto rumors would technically count as "bringing it up."

They all watched, horrified, as the moderator motioned for someone backstage to bring out some tissues. The fan at the microphone looked like she wanted to melt into a puddle and be absorbed into the floor. Grace wasn't great at estimating numbers, but there were at least 700 people in that room all holding their breath.

Irrfan was frantically Googling, and held his phone between himself and Grace so they could both read.

This big movie, part of the monolith Wonder franchise, would cement Augusta's place in the fandom universe. According to a recent interview, she had hesitated to take the meetings or go to the auditions, but her sister had pushed her to explore the possibility and, to quote: "invest in her future as an actor."

The character of Commander Callisto was tough, strong, inspiring. She also had a twin sister, Amalthea, who commanded forces of evil. They were bitter rivals. It seemed too cosmic that the character would also be a twin, and her sister had often wittily cited this connection as lifelong research for the part. In the interview, anything positive about Callisto came from Augusta's sister, while Augusta herself seemed very interested in taking a once-in-a-lifetime role that would become the reboot her career needed.

"It would be amazing to be part of another beloved science fiction story. The Wonder universe is so detailed and contains such depth of character - I am honored my name is even being rumored."

Grace and Irrfan shared a look. It was a diplomatic non-answer. It was also a lie.

Half the reason Augusta hadn't been in a big role for a long time was her vocal disdain for fan culture and the types of people she had been slumming it to entertain. She had only started appearing at cons lately as a move to rehabilitate her image, and it had kind of worked. She said she hadn't understood the true emotional connection her fans felt. She apologized, said she wanted to learn.

Grace made a mental note of all of this, to bring it up gently, and watched the moderator try to get things back on track with some more silly audience questions, none of which made Augusta cry. The panel ended with a fizzle, and left Grace sitting in her seat feeling unable to move.

"Grace," Irrfan said from a distance, and Grace looked up to see him at the end of the aisle. "We have to get up to the green room."

They had strict instructions to approach the interview space with caution and stealth. The email Grace had gotten said three times, in bold letters, not to tell anyone else the location of the holding space.

"Will it be green?" Irrfan said as they waded through cosplayers and backpacks.

Grace shook her head, but she actually didn't know. Maybe it would be green.

Her palms were sweating by the time she walked into the small interview space, and she heard her voice squeak a little when she introduced herself. Grace Grayson, The Tribune. She knew her tongue was about to let loose and gush about her connection to Alpha-12, when she felt a small squeeze of her hand.

It was Irrfan, who shook his head a little and held out his other hand to Augusta Geraldine Sparks, in his stupid Star Sentinal costume. She stood and took it, and they chit chatted while she posed.

“Big, big fan,” he said. “I’m Grace’s photographer and couldn’t resist totally fanboying over you today!”

Grace felt like kissing him. She took the moment as Irrfan got a few simple portraits of Augusta to set up her things at the tiny table between herself and her idol.

It’s such a pleasure to meet you, Grace said when Augusta sat back down. A pleasure was an understatement, but she couldn’t pack Alpha-12’s impact into a ten-minute interview so she ought not to try.

Augusta flashed Grace a huge, crinkly-nosed smile that hit her eyes in a way that instantly made her comfortable. Whether she was a great actress or genuinely looking forward to their conversation suddenly became irrelevant in the creases of that smile.

Grace mentally slapped herself. Focus, Grace-Grays. She knew she was shaking a little, and determined not to let it show. She only had ten minutes.

Irrfan politely excused himself, he wasn’t really invited to the interview, and went to stand outside. Grace internally promised to buy him something gaudy and expensive from the artists downstairs, and started her interview.

Her first five questions were a look into the past — all about Pillars of Creation. Grace pulled Augusta’s answers apart like taffy in her mind as the actress spoke. Would the angle be that a washed-up actress was on the circuit to celebrate her glory days?

Augusta seemed very comfortable, sitting in her crappy plastic folding chair with one leg thrown over the other, her light sweater giving her a barrier against the convention center’s incessant air conditioning. Her hair was down, her jewelry was simple. She was effortless in her appearance and her conversation alike. Grace realized she was being drawn in by a very

experienced professional who had talked to hundreds like her over the course of decades, but she couldn't help feeling like she was making a new friend, exactly as she'd dreamed.

Augusta's phone suddenly buzzed, an un-subtle vibration against the plastic table. It was sitting face up, and a text notification appeared with a preview. It buzzed again, then again and again. It was positively roaring by the time she apologetically picked it up to silence it. Grace watched her eyes scan the messages, her jaw drop a little, and then she put the phone back down. Still face up, and this time closer to Grace's recorder than it had been before, the temptation was too great.

So she looked.

“Congrats, Captain Callisto!”

“You're officially a Wonder woman now, Gus.”

“Thanks for signing this morning, all docs are in order. Drinks when you're back from the slog!”

And on and on.

Grace faltered, her pen that had been frantically scribbling as she listened, drawing a fat line off into the rest of her notes. She looked at the paper, at her questions that now seemed a lot less pressing. Looked up at Augusta, who was staring at her.

Augusta scrambled for her phone, accidentally hitting the Siri button. It shouted in its toneless robotic voice.

“Text from Ken Forsythe wow we did it baby you're the next Callisto and Wonder will be the next phase of your career I knew you could do it and those nerds will lose their minds once they find out.”

The volume was up so loud they probably heard it outside the green room, but the thing that had certainly captured the message was Grace's audio recorder, sitting half an inch from the phone.

It all happened in an instant, but it felt like an hour while Grace decided what to do.

The next question she had written down said "do you still talk to your costars from Pillars of Creation," but what she said instead was:

"Can you confirm that you will be playing Captain Callisto in the next Wonder movie?"

They looked at each other. Augusta's eyes were no longer sparkling, and her lips were not parted to reveal those fantastic teeth. She was calculating, doing visible math behind her eyes. Grace waited, and realized she wasn't shaking anymore.

"I'm sure you can imagine I have a team of people waiting to make this announcement officially," Augusta said. "I guess that was off the record. Sorry. Let's call that a moment between friends?"

Grace remembered Irrfan's admonishment in the car. Grace Grayson and Augusta Geraldine Sparks were not friends. Alpha-12? Maybe. But she didn't know this woman.

"Let's talk about it in the hypothetical," Grace said as if talking to a child. "Since we're at a comics convention and all. What are you a fan of?"

"Well," Augusta said. She spoke slowly too, like she was really considering. Weighing her options. "I have to admit, I wouldn't have been aware of the property if the movies hadn't been so successful. You know, when I was growing up we had a lot stricter social expectations - about what you were supposed to do. That's why you get movies like High School Musical - written by someone who grew up in the eighties when it really was a big deal to sing in musicals and play sports. I mean, nowadays, who cares? I have a neighbor who is in high school. She is

constantly telling me how fake that movie is, and things like Mean Girls. Your generation is much nicer ...”

She was rambling, and nervous, and dropping titles of very odd movies into this conversation. Grace kept her face blank, taking notes and trying not to giggle. Who was the actress now?

“My sister, she was a comic book fan. She loved all this stuff — and she would be so jealous to be in your position. Attending a convention like this, being among other fans, talking to people she admired. I guess in some ways she has always influenced my choices. Alpha-12 was a leap for me, someone who didn’t grow up on sci-fi and was a little more concerned with Shakespeare and Mamet and Chekhov and Beckett ... I thought to be a serious actress you had a certain canon to respect. But I got to do serious acting on Pillars.”

She continued talking, spinning the story around and into a childhood summer where she made fun of her sister’s Wonder comics and action figures, and lived with the regret of her cruelty every day.

“I was initially only motivated to try for the part thanks to her,” Augusta said, her voice becoming higher pitched and a little strained. “But now, I feel my own connection to it. I guess that’s the power of fandom - it can create new fans even out of people who had counted themselves out a long time ago.”

Grace had to hand it to her. That was smooth as silk. She watched some more tears fall from Augusta’s mascaraed eyes, the same as before in the panel. Maybe Gus really was emotional about her sister, but Grace wasn’t about to lose her scoop. Their time was almost up.

“Do you want a picture with me?” Augusta held out both hands to Grace. “I feel like we really bonded in here.”

It was the actress's final attempt. They took a selfie on Grace's phone, but Auguata's was tucked safely into her purse, presumably on silent. The secret was locked away.

They exchanged niceties, and Grace took the time to pack up her stuff, then left the room stiffly as she attempted to stop herself from dashing off as fast as she possibly could. But when she saw Irrfan waiting outside, she grabbed him again and pulled him toward the press room with a shout.

"I have to hurry!"

He ran after her as she explained. "Email Jane immediately and tell her I have the scoop of the century. I will send her all my notes and recordings."

He pulled his phone out of a cleverly disguised pocket in his Star Sentinel costume and followed her instructions.

Sitting down, she simply dumped her backpack onto the table and found her tablet. She could type quickly on the touchscreen keyboard, but not as quickly as she wanted.

"Jane said she can hold print space if you file in 20 minutes," Irrfan read off of his phone. "Is it print worthy?"

"It's a whole magazine worthy," Grace assured him. "This will be no trailer react or listicle about the best shows to watch about horses, let me tell you."

All the years Grace had spent working in news prepared her to be quick, but she had to be one hundred percent accurate and extremely thorough in putting together this story. After downing two cans of Coke and inhaling a packet of peanut butter M&Ms, it was done. She sent it to Jane, then turned her tablet toward Irrfan. "You deserve to be the next person to know."

He scanned, shouted, and several other journalists looked over. Grace and Irrfan waved, then put their heads together.

“This is massive,” he said. “We have to push it.”

The story went live at 4:22 pm, Mountain Standard Time. The headline read: Augusta Geraldine Sparks suits up for Wonder; Fangirl at heart. It was an incredibly positive piece, putting the actress in the position of an interesting subject who just happened to get an important piece of news in the middle of an interview in a flyover state with a young reporter.

They sat back to admire themselves for a moment, Irrfan’s beautiful portrait of Augusta accompanying Grace’s piece. He was talented, after all. They watched as the news spread through the press room, creating yelps and shouts similar to Irrfan’s reaction.

“Let’s go watch it catch fire,” Irrfan said, and they went back out into the crowd.

It was like an episode of Gossip Girl. Someone’s phone would ding, and they’d show it to their friends. People would react. It would happen in another pocket. The buzz became a frantic thrum as people started celebrating. The news had broken at their little con. In their little paper.

They wandered through, invisible to the crowd even though they were the reason for all the hubbub. Without meaning to, they found themselves back at Sam’s booth.

The poster of Alpha-12 and Captain Gold was gone.

“Oh hi,” Grace said to Sam, casually leaning on the table.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” Sam said breathlessly. “Something insane happened.”

She held out her phone. On the screen was a photo of Sam, the poster, and Augusta Geraldine Sparks herself.

Grace screamed out loud.

“Grace,” Sam said. “She signed it.”

Sam pulled the poster out from behind her table.

In gold letters, it said To Grace: A formidable force to be reckoned with. With love,
Augusta Geraldine Sparks aka Alpha-12.

mud season

When Eden Jacobson was young, too young to be making big life decisions and too young to understand how far-reaching the consequences of those decisions would be, she got married.

*

The wedding was a joyous occasion, blessed by God and everyone who attended, all smiles for their righteous decision to marry in the temple. Her husband, James Sanders was twenty-six when they met, still finishing his undergrad at BYU because he'd been serving the Lord for two years (in Louisiana, where he'd learned how to make gumbo). Now he had a freshly printed business degree and was going to join his father in the family business - running a chain of charming (never quaint) bed and breakfast inns dotting the eastern seaboard. He proposed, graduated, and moved with Eden cross country to his hometown. They'd met and married quickly, very in love and also trying to obey their religion's strict rules about what they could and couldn't do together before marriage. It was a relief not to have to stop him every time they started to do anything other than kissing, anymore. Now, Eden planned to take classes online to finish her degree in family studies, which was a degree in virtually nothing at all. At twenty, she felt like she had plenty of time to figure things out.

All of their wedding presents had been sent to their new home - the one she hadn't seen yet - and she spent the first two weeks unpacking some of her own treasures, like old hardcover editions of the Little House on the Prairie series and a t-shirt quilt with all her high school teams and activities on it, sewn together by her mom. But mostly she unpacked the untouched potential of her new life. Glistening sharp knives, glowing ceramic dishes. A little cow-shaped thing that

she learned was meant for heating up the very special all-important locally harvested maple syrup she was now expected to be loyal to.

In the course of dating and marrying Jim, Eden found that she never exactly missed the big group of friends she'd had before they met. Although they threw many themed parties and spent late nights staying up talking about boys, their bond was always surface level. She'd lost her true best friend, and when her college roommates also all started getting married and moving on, they rarely kept in touch. It was just how things were. From one phase to another. And she had always prided herself on being adaptable. Easygoing. It was part of the reason her husband had been drawn to her, rather than any of her more uptight roommates.

One thing Eden did miss, however, was the desert. She was accustomed to an all-consuming wind sweeping through every inch of what she could see and touch, stirring up dust and making the sagebrush bow. She knew how to style her hair to get a windswept look and not to wear too loose of a skirt, lest she risk a "Marilyn moment" at the outdoor mall, revealing her modest underpants.

But here, in Vermont, her hair was a ball of frizz and nothing she wore seemed to matter since it was always under a raincoat.

"We just didn't really have much 'weather' other than hot, dry, wind in the desert," she said to everyone who asked her how she was adjusting to her brand-new home in New England.

She said it to her new husband, Jim, more than anyone.

"Have you noticed my hair is a mess, but my nails have grown almost twice as long?"

No, he hadn't noticed.

Some days she felt gloomy about it, all the humidity and the rain and the wetness, while on other days it felt wild and promising. But she tried not to let her moods be reflected in her outward countenance. She was choosing joy.

*

It was Wednesday, the day she traditionally went into town, to shop at the little market that never had everything she needed. She had been hunting through recipe blogs, trying new things, reading the personal stories that took up the bulk of the posts, finding herself riveted and invested in these strangers' journeys to the perfect frittata. Tonight she planned to create some form of chicken parm, a magical dish according to the blog, one that proved you loved whoever you made it for ... providing the market came through.

“How about that rain, eh?” asked the man at the checkout, an old man who she assumed owned the store. He always wore plaid, which appeared to be the official Vermont state uniform.

“Well, it’s not what I’m used to,” Eden said, an ellipsis hanging at the end of her words because today she was mad at the incessant downpour. But she said it brightly since that’s how she had been taught to interact with strangers. “I’m from the desert,” she confided. “We just didn’t really have much ‘weather’ other than hot, dry, wind in the desert.”

“Then you don’t know about Mud Season?” he asked. She shook her head. “Oh you’re in for it. All this rain, all the dirt roads ... everything becomes a swampy, soggy mess. You can’t walk, can’t drive, it just turns to mud. Mud, mud, mud.”

She felt the goosebumps on her arms rising, and she knew her eyes had widened without her telling them to. But the way the old man said it sounded like it was a great horror marching slowly toward them and there was nothing they could do about it. Furthermore, he seemed delighted to tell her the bad news.

She heard echoes of his warning all the while she cooked dinner before her husband came home from his new job. Mud. Mud. Mud.

*

It didn't really surprise her that nobody else had warned her about what seemed like a dangerous and impending situation. They were going to the same ward as Jim's parents, the one he'd grown up in, and although she was definitely there every week she got the feeling that people were looking right past her. Or through her. When she met the Relief Society President, the woman shook her hand and said "oh I've heard all about you." And it seemed she had, because she never asked Eden a thing about herself. Some old friends of Jim's insisted he join the ward basketball team, and he was called to the Young Men's presidency, which took up a lot of her time. Eden herself had been asked to join the Activities Committee, then quickly learned that the ward never had activities.

"Nobody comes," the leader told her. "We're just keep-to-ourselves people here."

After dinner, she searched online for "best boots for mud." Almost every list had expensive Hunter rubber boots at the top, and she started to fall in love with them. She'd never owned a pair of rain boots. When would she need rain boots in the desert?

But she wasn't in the desert anymore.

Driving to the Shoe Shack to pick out her boots, she was struck once again by the trees. In the summer, there were thousands of bold, green leaves. In hues of emerald and brassy green-yellow, and everything in between, the many trees were so foreign to her, she was never totally sure if they felt comforting or suffocating. She couldn't see through them, couldn't see past them, and there they always were, waving at her with their rich show of life. Now, the trees were sentinels on the outskirts of everything. Bare and craggy, looking sharp and permanently

frowning in the incessant downpour of rain. She shuddered a little, imagining them trying to stop her if she attempted to run.

But run from what?

Mud. Mud. Mud.

A bright yellow pair of boots caught her eye, but she knew she didn't want to evoke the thought of children jumping in puddles whenever someone saw her. She needs something more adult. Thinking of the constant green of the summer leaves, she selected a green set of Hunter boots, holding them like two babies stacked on top of one another.

The boots were heavy, heavier than she expected, and comically floppy with the tall, thin rubber jiggling in her hand. She thought of Jell-O. Which reminded her of home. She rarely let herself consider home, not in a way that was fully formed. Just some shapes, maybe a smell or a feeling. She was a Vermonter now, and preparing for stay-at-home motherhood by making their home and building their community.

Standing in the store holding the boot babies, she was distracted by a flash of curly black hair near the sock rack. Fumbling with the shoes as her fingers went slack, she drew in her breath. Of course that wasn't her sister. Her sister was dead. The girl with the hair was simply restocking socks.

If she didn't think about home often, she absolutely never thought about Sariah. Her younger sister had died in a car wreck because she got in a car with a boy who had been drinking alcohol, and he ran them into another car when he tried to beat a red light. The intersection had been blocked off for days, and Eden couldn't bring herself to drive past it. She hadn't gone to the funeral, either. It wasn't necessary to mourn the dead when you knew that on the other side of the Veil they were living with Jesus Christ.

She had been determined to move on when Sariah died. Get married to Jim, move back East, learn to be a wife and eventually mother. Those were the steps, and she was getting good at checking off each part of that list. Her sister, it had been decided within the family, would probably still be alive if she had been more obedient. Even if she hadn't been drinking (and nobody knew for sure), she knew to avoid the appearance of evil.

And she did love Jim. Right? What was love, even? A question she hadn't asked or answered of herself before declaring it in front of her 14 closest friends and family in the temple sealing room. Then laughing and dancing with 200 more people at their open house reception. Love was commitment and a three tiered cake. It was a Williams Sonoma registry, and sparkling apple cider in champagne flutes, and dancing to the Twilight soundtrack.

It was also a new pair of green Hunter rain boots. She hugged them to herself and reconsidered again if she was ready for motherhood. Checking out, she saw the sales clerk who she had mistaken for her sister. They looked nothing alike.

She drove home with the boots sitting in their open box on the seat next to her. She kept glancing at them in their seat and breaking into a grin. It wasn't really time for them, but now she felt prepared. The warnings of the man at the grocery store lost their power. She forgot about the woman with Sariah's hair.

And still the rain pounded on.

*

It was a few days after her shopping trip when she suddenly realized she had spent almost \$200 on the boots that didn't belong to her, but to *them*. She approached Jim timidly and told him about the man at the market.

“And he said everything turns to mud, and I realized I didn’t have the right shoes for that at all. So I made kind of an impulse purchase,” Eden told Jim. She showed him the boots, and he laughed, and then she told him the price.

He scowled.

“I really thought you were above all that kind of stuff,” he said.

Eden wasn’t sure what he meant—was she supposed to be above wearing weather-appropriate boots, shopping for brand names, or spending money—she decided not to ask him.

The boots went in the back of her closet, dinner was served, and Jim offered to help with the dishes.

*

Not long after her confession to Jim about the Hunter boots, the dirt roads around their house started to transform. She watched, fascinated, as the driveway to their little cottage went from a solid entity to a sea of wetness and squelching, endless mud. She pulled out the boots, staring at them appreciatively for a long time before starting to pick the perfect outfit for their debut.

She settled on a dress, navy blue with pink and orange flowers, the boots the exact shade of the leaves on the fabric. Navy tights and a pink sweater completed the main layer, then she stacked a dark blue rain slicker on top of it. There was a cheery yellow umbrella near the door, and she grabbed it as she went out.

Two steps out the door, she realized she had nowhere to go. But she looked so cute, and her boots were begging to be tested in the fresh mud of the season, so she decided just to take a walk down the little path into the woods behind their small house.

She never would have anticipated the feeling that met her feet. It was like the quicksand she'd been scared of as a child, holding her till she sunk. She slowly pulled one foot up, making a squelching sound that made her giggle, flexing her foot hard to hang onto the boot. Then the other one. If she walked quickly enough she could stay on the surface of it, creating prints that she entered the woods, absently wondering if this was really the best way for her to be spending her time. But her online classes didn't start for a month, and she hadn't made any social commitments for weeks, and the house was more than clean.

The rain felt like a friend once she was standing out in it. The pleasant little plip plops of the drops on her yellow umbrella were comforting - cozy, even. And the trees she had been so unsure of seemed to be less intimidating up close, with their ever-present tips now visible, unlike when they zoomed past her car windows. And the little path was friendly enough. It wound through the thick layer of soggy leaves on the ground, meandering through the trees like it didn't know where it wanted to go either. It was perfect for a walk.

The further Eden got, the density of the trees meant it became darker and darker - she almost wished she had a flashlight. Her steps made no sound in the soggy underfoot until she splashed unknowingly into a rather large puddle of standing water. Annoyed that she hadn't gotten to enjoy a proper stomp in it, she made to step backwards and try again, but was surprised to find that her foot slid right out of her right boot, which was firmly planted in the invisible sludge beneath the puddle's surface.

She swayed on her left foot, the right one dangling precariously. She tried sliding it back in the boot and lifting it out with her foot, but the strain hurt. Leaning down, she pulled on the boot with both hands, but not quite hard enough to dislodge it because she was afraid the recoil of the boot would send her toppling over onto her bum. Plus she had to hold the umbrella.

The water was nearly sloshing up and over the lip of her boot, threatening to drown her foot in its own container. She couldn't balance on one foot forever. So she stepped carefully, sinking into the muck, feeling it coagulate around the rubber, constricting the opening a little. She wiggled one foot, then the other. She tried to step. Some of the water trickled into her shoe, wetting the sock all the way down. Then she knew the truth. She was well and truly stuck in over eight inches of thick, black mud.

She looked around. Would she remember where she had left the boots if she brought reinforcements back to rescue them? Jim could pry them out of the deep mud with a shovel, even if he did think the boots were ridiculous.

She looked down at her feet, then burst into tears.

Slowly extracting one foot and then the other one, she walked backwards a few steps in the cold, squishy mud. She stared at her green Hunter boots. She resisted the urge to say goodbye to them out loud, angrily wiping her tears away.

Then she turned and walked back to her house, slipping and crying all the way there. She made a mental plan - she would take off her ruined tights and throw them away. She would run a hot bath, make a cup of (herbal) tea, and try not to think about her boots. Out there in the woods. Alone. Filling up with rain.

*

She debated telling Jim, taking him to the place where her purchase was being slowly claimed by the elements, and every time she tried, she'd open her mouth and no sound would come out.

Weeks passed. Habits were formed. Mud Season gave way to a vibrant spring. The newlyweds became simply weds, and made a home together.

*

A year later, Eden made a Shepherd's Pie for dinner and tidied up the house, which needed no tidying.

Eden and Jim had never had a conversation about the division of labor. But it was established by *The Family: A Proclamation To The World*, that he was the breadwinner and she was the caregiver. And he usually said thank you, which was a generational difference from their fathers.

"Thanks for that meal," Jim said later that night, patting his stomach. "I'm stuffed."

She said he was welcome. Then: "I cannot believe it's raining again."

"It'll be over soon," he said. "It's like any season. Feels too long until it's the next one, then you miss it. The sun comes out, dries it all up, and you'll be missing the rain."

"I am really trying, but if I don't see the sun soon I'm afraid I might go a little nuts."

"Well you should probably stop complaining. You love it here in the spring - the real spring, when everything is growing," Jim said. "It'll only be a few more weeks. And all this mud will be springing up with grasses and wildflowers and you'll wonder why you've been so whiny."

She didn't think she'd been whining. She made a note not to complain about the rain anymore.

That night, she had a dream she was in the desert, the hot sun beaming down on her with its wide grin. There was wind ruffling her hair, and she could see for miles to the hazy mountains in the distance. She was warm, and dry, and all alone. She shouted into the distance, but not for her husband. She called the name of her sister, Sariah. When she looked down, she was wearing the green Hunter boots.

*

She suspected Sariah had come to her in a dream to tell her something, just like all those Book of Mormon stories she'd taken to heart. She wasn't sure what her sister wanted her to know, but she knew it required her retrieving those boots.

Finding them was going to be tricky, since she had given them up last year and never let herself think about retracing her steps to rescue them. They were her mistake, and she had to live with that every day. The wasted money. The foolish optimism.

And now it was raining again - Eden had made it into her first whole year with Jim, living in Vermont, with no privacy among the trees. They were always present, listening, tapping your window as a reminder that they were there. Sometimes they brushed her arms or hair when she walked by, which felt condescending. "We've trapped you here as our pets" the trees were taunting her. We are taller than you. There are hundreds of us.

Lying in bed, heart still pounding from her desert dream, she considered getting up and pulling on some clothes to look for the boots now. It wasn't a good idea, but it seemed impossible to continue to lie there and stew in the dark.

Getting up, she quickly grabbed a mish-mash of clothes, nothing matching or coordinated. She'd learned long ago that no one in Vermont cared what she looked like. Including her, now. She ended up grabbing a pair of leggings with two different socks, a BYU sweatshirt she believed belonged to Jim, and a rain jacket of unknown origin that gave her pause as she tried to identify it. She snagged her yellow umbrella on the way out.

In the darkness of the woods, her heavy flashlight giving her a weak sense of direction, she started to speak out loud. Not that way, she told herself, it was more over here. She searched for quite a while. It gave her time to think about Sariah. Jim, probably following Eden's lead,

never mentioned her. They hadn't really known each other when she died, since Eden was at college and Sariah was still at home. Sariah was just a teenage girl to Jim. Any old teenage girl. A girl who foolishly got into a car with a boy who she knew had been sinning. The only thing Jim had ever said about Sariah was that he was glad he got the good sister. Eden had agreed with him. But thinking back on it, that was a horrible thing to say.

They meant to move West together, or at least that's what they'd said as kids. To live near the beach, across the desert in the warm California sunshine that felt familiar enough to be comforting but foreign enough to be exciting. They'd be waitresses to the stars, and go to comedy shows, and go thrift shopping for exotic, layered SoCal fashion finds. Eden hadn't thought about any of this in very much detail since she'd met Jim. She'd forgotten her plans with Sariah because her plans had changed. She was checking off her boxes with her returned missionary, her righteous young husband and his sparkling future.

She knew her footing, wearing a pair of old sneakers that were soaked through and stained with mud already. She'd learned to trip lightly over the sickly squelching mud, not to leave an impression or force her presence on its finicky surface. The trees grabbed at her, but she swatted them back. And finally, she spotted her green Hunter boots.

They were cracked from the hot summer, faded from the dappled sunlight through the trees, full of sticks and weighed down with water. One of them had a small chunk taken out of the top, and it looked like teeth had been responsible for that. They were a mess, but she suspected that with a scrubbing, they would still keep her feet dry in the rain.

Bucking logic, she pulled both boots and upended them, splashing their contents onto the already soggy forest floor. She pulled her soaking tennis shoes off, and slid into the boots. They

were strangely dry and comfortable, even though a moment ago she'd seen them full of water and sludge.

A branch snapped in the distance.

“Squirrel,” Eden said out loud. “It’s a squirrel.”

But a figure was moving toward her. She knew at once that it was Sariah, answering her call from the dream. She looked the same as Eden remembered her - long curly hair, dressed mostly in black. A wrist full of bracelets.

The trees waved in the rainy wind, but their howling was drowned out by the sounds of splashing raindrops. Eden didn't know what to say, how to apologize for ignoring her sister's memory. How to apologize for ignoring herself. She felt no fear, only guilt. There, standing in the mud, in the rain, in the boots, she felt more at home than she had in a long time.

“I miss you,” said the shape of her sister. The shimmering thing that both was and was not Sariah didn't change its expression, or make a gesture. It simply spoke in a deadened voice. “Come back to me, Eden.”

The shape moved toward her, its features clearer and clearer. Sariah reached out and hugged Eden, and when she embraced her, Eden felt the warmth, dryness, and comfort rise from her feet in the boots to the top of her head.

She hugged her sister back, a flood of regret and wasted potential following the comfort and warmth. How could she have let herself get so far from her sister? Her truest self. Someone who never told her she was silly, or wrong. She squeezed her sister, or whatever it was that night in the woods, and resolved: she would go back. She would go home.

And she did.

the reign of daisy jane

It was 6:35 when Daisy Jane Watson's alarm went off. She groaned. A junior this year, she had worked so hard not to have class before noon, but Katherine, her roommate, committed to the Bishop's challenge of a weekly early-morning temple visit. And she'd convinced Daisy to join her.

"It will start your whole day off right," their Bishop said. "You'll notice such a difference in your interactions with your fellow man."

He always said your fellow man, instead of people.

Katherine was already up, shuffling around in the bathroom. Daisy joined her, bleary and frazzled, in a simple dress and flats. Both very pale, they shared makeup and clothes easily although Katherine was blonde and Daisy had a mass of curly red hair. They both had blue eyes. They also both had the middle name Jane, which they'd always considered a sign that they'd be very best friends forever.

Katherine's bag was packed, leaning by the stairs full of folded white underwear, a little plastic holder containing her temple recommend, and a pair of slippers her grandma had given her for the express purpose of padding around the temple's outdated wall-to-wall carpet in reverence. Daisy brushed her teeth. Braided her hair. She crammed handfuls of things into her backpack while Katherine went over the checklist.

"White panties, white bra, white scrunchie, other underwear - panties and bra, temple recommend, hairbrush, makeup bag" she ticked off. Daisy let her roommate dictate, barely awake and happy to take orders.

In the car both girls cracked open a can of Diet Coke with Lime, desperate for the caffeine without the sugar crash. Daisy had never been much for soda, but in college you

couldn't survive without a boost. She appreciated Katherine, the lifelong DC addict, showing her the ropes. And it was going to be a really, really long day.

The temple was full of people, but then it always was. If it was open, it was packed full of missionaries in training, old couples from the area, and a billion BYU and UVSC students who were all committed to living their faith. They all had boring, predictable haircuts. Two piercings only for the girls, no tattoos in the bunch. It wasn't strictly a place to be checking people out, but since it was Provo, everywhere was fair game to consider the dating prospects.

Daisy was unimpressed.

The girls sat in the little chapel waiting room, a mini sacrament meeting about to start. Hymns, prayers, a short talk, it was church on a Saturday morning. When the structured part was over, they were instructed to wait "with a manner befitting this sacred space" until their group was called up.

Stealing a glance at Katherine, Daisy saw a glowing girl who was taking in the same sights as Daisy in an obviously different way. Her eyes were wide and bright, and she looked like she might, at any moment, sing a little tune and call some bluebirds to her side.

Then Katherine reached into the pocket of her floral scripture bag, snugly zipped around the bulk of her quad combination Bible, Book of Mormon, Doctrine & Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price, and pulled out a folded, worn stack of pages on which she had printed a Devotional speech from a few years ago titled "Your Refined Heavenly Home." There were highlights and scribbles throughout the whole thing. Daisy continued to watch out of the corner of her eye as her roommate poured over the words she had clearly read many times before.

The guilt that washed over her was followed by such intense self hatred she felt herself rock backward a little bit when it hit her. She felt bathed in failure. Her scriptures were at home.

Her favorite talk ... didn't exist. She looked up and around, knowing how distracted she would appear to the rest of the room.

Many of them were her peers. They had their heads bowed. Some had their eyes closed. This time of silence and reflection was meant to be healing. Refreshing. Rejuvenating.

Daisy felt her skin start to prickle. Her left foot started jiggling. She hoped she wasn't wiggling the bench. She wound circles around her own thumbs, chasing one with the other as if doing a spell to make the clock tick faster. Her shoe had a scuff on it, and she actively stopped herself from licking a thumb to try to rub it off.

Katherine was still reading.

Daisy considered her split ends. She wondered which of the three boys sitting in front of her was the tallest. She stared at a painting of a glowy, floaty Jesus above the pulpit. An old woman in white came to peer in at the group, but left without saying anything.

Daisy thought about their show tonight, a high-pressure Battle of the Bands that brought the entirety of the Provo Scene out to vote for their chosen favorite. They were ready, probably, but part of the reason she was even here this morning was to get a little extra boost of blessings. She raised her eyes heavenward and said a quick mental prayer.

“Dear Heavenly Father, please bless that tonight we will be in sync, confident, and happy. Bless that we can beat the pants off of every other band. Oh and thank you for this lovely morning. InthenameofJesusChrist,amen.”

She rushed the ending like she always did, then actively, physically pushed thoughts of their impending show out of her mind. She and Katherine had agreed that their music goals would never detract from the core of their lives—the Church.

Finally, they were summoned, and the boys went to the left while the girls to the right. The thirty or so young women who had gotten up to perform the baptism rite for those who had already moved on to the next life walked quietly to the counter where more temple volunteers handed them a very clean-smelling pile of stiff white fabric and a key on a huge safety pin.

“Put these on, don’t wear your own underwear, you can deposit them all back in the bin when you’re finished. One towel per person.”

Daisy nodded, already planning to keep her own bra and panties on, and realized she had already committed, a mere half second after being told not to, to use as many towels as she could find.

What was it, she wondered as she shuffled along in the line, that made her rankle so much at being told what to do? She hated it as much as she hated waiting, and being quiet.

Her query was interrupted as she walked into the locker room, which had erupted with the sound of sixty college girls changing and gossiping and drying their hair. The previous group had already gone, and would be in and out before 8 am. Daisy shuddered, thinking about her alarm going off any earlier.

She hated her Bishop.

“Look, two together,” Katherine pointed, then practically sprinted to the empty changing rooms that held three lockers apiece.

Daisy ran after her, bumping a couple girls in the process. They all laughed. It was the temple. Everything was okay. Inside the dressing room, she was confronted with the one-piece, threadbare cotton onesie that served as the underwear meant to layer beneath her white jumpsuit. Everything smelled of bleach. She balled up the underwear and stuffed it in the locker with her things.

Still in her own underwear, the stiff white one-piece suit in place, key pinned to the zipper, she scrunchied her hair with the standard issue white hair tie provided by the temple volunteers and took a deep breath. She genuinely dreaded this process, even though she knew it was for her own good.

The carpet was scratchy and the tile was freezing as she, Daisy Jane Watson, stepped on her tiptoes to sit on one of the benches flanking the large baptismal font. She looked around. It was always a bit awesome to see the oversized hot tub on the backs of twelve carved white oxen. The chlorine smell in the white marble room was overwhelming, and she blinked a few times as her eyes started to combat the toxic chemical. If she cried, she could just say she was feeling the Spirit.

There was more silent sitting. Daisy counted her toes. She observed the chipped blue polish on the tips of each one. She remembered a Young Women's leader telling them to take off nail polish before going into the temple. She felt better for leaving it on. It made the summering guilt and anger in the bottom of her stomach surge.

In Daisy's mind, only children did baptisms for the dead. Once you were an adult, married or had gone on a mission, you never had to go through this process again. So Daisy was, surely, nearly out of the woods. Most of her 18-year-old friends were already done with their days of baptisms, the hassle of being wet and feeling weird a fond memory. Here she was, 21, still a baby.

It was her turn to be baptized. She stood up and tightened her scrunchie. A deep breath accompanied her first step up the cold, smooth steps to the font. She had the distinct impression that everyone was watching her ascend. Turning toward the warm, teal water, she saw the grinning face of a stranger. The man waved her in.

The water made the air inside her jumpsuit create a balloon effect, the pants expanding in protest of their imminent soaking. She moved slowly, clutching the hand rail. The man reached for her. She gave him a winning smile to prove she was okay with all of this, then grabbed on to him to steady herself as she slipped the rest of the way into the font.

“You’re alright,” the man said.

There was a temple worker sitting behind a splash guard, reading names on cards. He would say something like “Sarah Jones” and then the man Daisy held onto would lift his arm up and say a prayer, then dunk her.

Seven times she got pushed under the water, on behalf of her ancestors who had come before. The stranger asked if she’d like to plug her nose, so she said yes. She was sputtering. Water was trickling down her face between baptisms. She felt acutely aware of how wet her white clothing was, despite its hearty fabric and many layers.

Finally, they thanked her and shooed her out of the water. A smiling woman was waiting with a towel as Daisy pulled her sodden canvas jumpsuit, with her in it, up the stairs and into the view of everyone else again. She felt so many eyes on her, and grabbed the towel to add yet another layer of propriety to the situation. Her body was a sacred secret, especially here. She thought of the stranger in the font catching a glimpse of her butt as she dripped quarts of water on the rubber bath mat she was now standing on.

Rushing as much as her heavy wet clothes would allow, she made for one of the seventies-style showers in the women’s locker room, to strip off the limp onesie and her own wet, chlorine-y undergarments. Those she wrapped in a second towel, a secret to the temple workers. She took a short shower, using the hand pump standard issue soap and simply rinsing

her hair. It felt vaguely like she was showering at someone else's grandma's house, and she wanted to get her clothes back on as soon as possible.

A towel wrapped around her and another on her hair (that's four, she thought with a wicked grin), she tiptoed again from the showers to her locker, where she breathed a sigh of relief when she opened the metal door and saw her own clothes.

Dressed, reunited with Katherine, they put on a bit of makeup and combed their wet hair. They didn't have anyone to impress, much, and skipped the blow dry.

Stepping outside again, they looked at each other, able to speak freely.

"Well I think that was just the right thing to start the day," Daisy said in a bright tone that sounded false even to her. "I saw that talk you were reading! What was it?"

Katherine, unable to admit how fake Daisy sounded, gasped with delight, her whole person making an upward motion as her eyebrows raised, her cheekbones lifted with a smile and even her shoulders shot up to meet her ears. Daisy hadn't ever seen a person whose body reacted so emotionally as Katherine's. It was a bit of a game for Daisy to see if she could induce a big exclamation from her roommate.

"It's the best talk ever, because it's all about art," she explained. "Choosing good art to enrich your life, instead of garbage that brings you down."

Standing outside the temple, sporting their drowned rat hairdos, she started rummaging for the printout. Daisy suddenly understood the classical music she often heard wafting from Katherine's room. Her framed prints of Monet and Degas.

"Here," she thrust the stapled, marked papers at Daisy. "I can print another one."

"Oh gosh," Daisy said, "Are you sure? This has all of your notes and favorite parts highlighted and stuff, it's clearly important to you."

“You’re important to me too!” Katherine said, and gave Daisy a hug.

Daisy realized that Katherine had actually enjoyed her temple experience, and although they were pressed up against each other in a warm embrace, felt very very far away from her.

“You coming back to the apartment, or are you going to Topher’s before The Velvet?”

Katherine pointed at her wet hair.

“I wouldn’t go like this,” she said, like it was obvious. “But no. He prefers to spend the day of a performance doing his own thing, to get in the right headspace.”

Daisy nodded, like this made any sense at all. Performing was for other people, and being around them more prepared her for the rush of being stared at while doing live art. It took the pressure off. Now that she was free from the temple, she let all her nerves and anticipation eke back in. It made her feel a hundred times more alive than the temple had.

That evening, the four members of Reign of Jane went early to The Velvet, to prepare in their various ways for the Battle of the Bands. The Fall BOB at the popular small music venue in Provo was the highlight of the season. It was always held on the night of the Homecoming football game, almost as a test of loyalty. And it was always absolutely packed with people who were hoping to say they had seen or talked to a famous band in college. The reputation of The Velvet’s success as a launchpad for bands like Dreaming of Dragons was an open secret, and musicians and groupie-types alike flocked to The Velvet, hoping to get even a sliver of the pie.

No exception, Daisy found herself walking around in the ballroom with her head down. She wanted to get a sense of their chances. And in the ceaseless din of voices, she found a sense of comfort. Sure, everyone was shouting over the thumping top 40 that The Velvet pumped in through its elite sound system between local band sets, but they were shouting happily.

A haze hung over the crowd, left over from the previous act and their gimmicky choice to create atmosphere through a fog machine instead of great music. Daisy rolled her eyes. The band—Luminous Fern—had been fine, but only in the sense that fine meant better than terrible. Perfectly average Luminous Fern. And she was next up.

She moved slowly through the pressing bodies, catching snatches of conversation.

“Reign of Jane ...”

“Reign of Jane”

“... rain of Jane?”

She wanted to give everyone with her name in their mouth a knowing look. That was her, she was the one they all came to see. But her intention was to remain incognito.

The outfit she was wearing now was a disguise. A graphic tee from somewhere at the mall, skinny jeans, marginally scuffed Converse that Daisy could rarely bring herself to wear because they were so uncomfortable. She was dressed like everyone around her, except the clip of blue hair she’d added to her own for a little bit of controversy.

They were clustered and grouped — this wasn’t a place to come to meet people unless you were really trying to get onstage. Mostly it was a good place to be seen, especially on a night like tonight. The football stadium was packed with twenty times the number of fans, but the Velvet was the place to be. Daisy recognized a guy from her biology class, and a clump from her French class who waved excitedly at her. Nervous butterflies flapped in her stomach, but she didn’t try to dismiss them. They were part of the fun.

The fog machine had left a sharp scent in the air that hung around the Axe body spray and Vera Wang Princess in the crowd. Daisy knew the sweaty anticipation would go full tilt by

the end of the night, but appreciated the cohort's attempt to avoid being the cause of the biting scent of a bunch of kids letting loose after a long week.

As loose as they dared. They still had to attend church tomorrow.

She continued winding and weaving through people, making her way to the curtain that led to backstage. She had no badge, no wristband, no indicator of her access to the area. But the guy at the curtain looked at her and nodded. She was *in* simply by being Daisy Jane Watson.

And she felt right at home.

"Ready to rock, Watts?" Eric found her immediately, grabbing her elbow like she was meant to steady him.

She looked at him, dressed in a tee shirt that said "I'm the drummer," his curly hair brushed off his forehead in a way that looked thoughtless but she suspected he practiced in the mirror. His skinny jeans pointed down toward a pair of checkered slip-on Vans. He looked the way he usually did, except for the nerves that were making him bounce up and down on the balls of his feet.

Katherine and her boyfriend Topher were sitting on a green leather couch that was covered all over the back and arms in signatures. Anyone who played at the Velvet signed the couch, and they'd been timid enough on their first night to choose a small corner and sign without much of a flourish. Daisy always looked at it with regret.

Topher's arm around Katherine, both of them in their agreed upon black-and-white ensembles, looked cooler to Daisy than she had ever seen them. Katherine had found a vintage sixties-hippie white dress, all flowing with lace and bell sleeves. Her blonde hair was in loose waves, and she had black prairie boots half laced up on both feet. Topher was dressed like he was going to church, except his clothes were a bit too tight, his tie a bit too skinny, his socks a

checkered pattern exactly like Eric's shoes. Topher's dark blond hair was perfectly coiffed in a product-heavy, very tall style that only he could pull off.

Topher and Katherine were talking to each other, foreheads close, and Daisy realized she could stare at them for minutes straight before garnering their attention. They stared at each other, murmuring low, while Eric bounced around her. Topher was a serious guy with a ready smile, and anytime he looked at Katherine he seemed to be right in that balance—happy, ready to commit, planning on the future for the two of them. Daisy always felt like knowing Topher as an individual was just out of her reach. Their connection was Katherine, and if it came to it Katherine would choose her romance over her roommate. Not that it would. But Daisy knew better than to try to upset the balance of things.

The two of them continued to quietly pump each other up. They both had a genuine fear of crowds, and in many ways hated being performers. Topher insisted on wearing sunglasses on stage to give him an out for having a bit of a lifeless stage presence. "An air of mystery," Katherine called it. She herself, though one of the singers in the band, hung back so their formation was always a diamond with Daisy at the front.

Eric tapped Daisy's shoulder.

"You better change!" he said. "Nobody wants to go onstage with that."

He pointed at her outfit, the one that looked like everyone else in the building. They looked at each other for a moment, then burst out laughing. Of course Daisy wasn't like the rest of them. She finally looked away from Katherine and Topher.

Changing quickly, she zipped herself up and changed her hair and makeup to match the rest of the band. Daisy's look was a different kind of vintage - a minidress that was colorblocked

in black and white, with platform shoes and a scarf for a headband. Her eyeliner was so intense she felt her lids closing under its weight.

It was finally time. They walked out together, paused before the curtain, then lined up - Daisy first. She looked at her shoes as she took the stage, three small steps separating her from the general public on the floor.

Standing up on the small platform, only inches from the crowd (fans?) felt nonetheless like they had been elevated to a new status. It was a matter of fact, now, that they were accepted as being above the rest of the room.

With no introduction, no pause, no time to acknowledge or be intimidated by the audience, they started. A long note from Katherine on the guitar, then Eric and Daisy joined at the same time. They figured starting with a cover was a good call, and White Lies seemed like the obvious choice, considering. What were Mormons more into than a good old fashioned harmless fib? Things like “I really care about the girls I’m assigned to visit teach” and “I actually have like, zero interest in ever even *trying* alcohol” were repeated so often they started to sound true.

“I love the feeling when we lift off ...” Daisy growled into the microphone. And they did appear to lift off. The song, “Death,” was simple, but it soared in a way that made all of them shine as musicians. Harmonies, a keyboard solo, and a fear of death *never* expressed by a bunch of kids who clung to their afterlife beliefs. Daisy and Eric especially had argued for the song choice, even though the other two had said it was “dark.”

Daisy finally registered their audience right before the bridge. They were dancing like maniacs, and singing along. Stepping up to the mic again, she looked sideways at Katherine for

them to sing to each other, their energy mounting as they harmonized, “that’s why everything’s gotta be love or death.” It felt true. And right.

She looked around at Toper and Eric, getting a big grin from Eric that made her face break into one too. Topher sent her a decisive nod. They had drawn in even the people at the back who came to the Velvet only by force and spent their time being put upon and gossiping nearest the door. For other bands, these people tapped their toes, but this time they were full on dancing. Whether or not they felt the lyrics, they understood that the song had a strange depth that they weren’t used to exploring.

The song ended with a strong downbeat by all four members of the band. Daisy grabbed the mic, the appointed frontman and audience liaison.

“Hell-lo, Pro-vo,” she sang. They all cheered. Daisy had never really understood the tradition of a band acknowledging the location, and the location going absolutely wild for it. But she complied with tradition. This was, after all, their big gig. Play nice. “We are Reign of Jane ...” more cheers interrupted her spiel. “So named,” she paused and repeated it while the cheers died down. “So named for the two fine women you see before you - Jane, and Jane. We are so excited to be at The Velvet. Joining us are Topher and Eric, our honorary Janes. It’s so great to see all of you!”

And that was all she said before they launched into Three Times Three, their first original song of the set. She felt a column of nerves rise to her scalp. Losing the audience in the second song would not impress the notoriously prickly proprietor of The Velvet, but Eric had argued and pontificated on the value of people understanding them outside of imitation.

“Do you want to do impressions for the rest of your life, or play original characters?” he framed it to the rest.

They all analyzed the success of various SNL performers who fell in either category for almost 40 minutes before making the connection clear. Original, authentic, iconic.

But in practice, onstage, it was still making her nervous as Daisy peered out at the crowd to perceive the slightest shift in their interest. Was that guy yawning? No. He was singing every word.

She focused on him, her fingers moving with muscle memory through the progression of the verse that Katherine was singing. She had a minute to check out, her part was simple. So she left the stage, floating around in an ocular treasure hunt for information she could report back to the rest of the band.

The ability to multitask, and the guts to observe the audience's reaction to their performance, also came with the territory of frontman. Katherine, usually the picture of control and the one among them who always stayed calm, squealed that she couldn't handle it.

"I'll freak out, I'll make a fudging mistake!" she screeched. "You do it, Daisy."

It was never clear to Daisy why she felt so much responsibility for the rest of them. She wasn't the oldest, the tallest, the richest, the prettiest, or the most talented. But maybe that was it. She didn't belong with them at all, being completely average except for her above-average ambition and willingness to work. She had the skills a billion other jazz band girls at BYU had — playing the bass, singing on pitch, understanding her body well enough to move it in an appealing but not aggressively sexual way while onstage. There were at least five girls in her music classes who could replace her in *Reign of Jane* in an instant, regardless of their middle names. They'd even fit into her dress. She was one in a sea of many.

But tonight, the sea was below her, literally, and she was bestowing them with the gift of her music. And they loved it. She watched a tiny mosh pit of five overexcited boys erupt as they

banged into each other and tried to keep it tight. Another group was jumping as high as they could. For being music lovers, the scenesters in Provo were sure terrible dancers. A self-conscious group of girls was daring each other to let loose, slowly unfolding their arms and enjoying the music with their whole bodies instead of timid feet..

It was a truly judgement-free zone, something you couldn't commodify in Provo, Utah. Sure there was a social hierarchy, but there was also the fact that you could just come to the place for some ear shattering, pretty good music, to dance and figure out how to reach the exalted and rare status of pure joy.

Daisy came back to the moment, back to the song and her own body and the fact that she could feel this much power while inflicting her peers with this much unbridled emotional happiness.

She wasn't a stranger to experiences manifesting themselves physically within her body. That was the Spirit, she knew, giving her that burning in her chest and the little sparks and chills in her fingers and head. It was at that moment that she realized that God wanted her to be here. He had chosen to allow her, and the rest of Reign of Jane, to share their talents with this audience. It was by his hand that any of them had even come together, she realized. She was grateful for their decision to go to the temple.

Their set, six songs, ended far too quickly. It was clear that everybody wanted to continue, from the band to the crowd. They played one encore, then another one, and even after that Daisy felt herself rooted to her spot on the stage. She felt the feeling of power and euphoria already slipping, regretting it before it occurred.

“Leave them wanting more,” Eric whispered in Daisy’s ear from behind her.

She turned to look up at him, their eyes met, and she heard a couple of whoops from the crowd. Katherine and Topher were already heading offstage, hand in hand, their relationship well established. (And, according to some music blogs, either very celebrated or much maligned due to extreme jealousy.) Eric and Daisy lingered, but didn't touch. She could tell there was tension, but it was coming from the crowd, not from either of them.

She gave him a slow smile, then turned and winked at the people watching them. She didn't plan it, or even understand how it was happening, but she turned, lifted a cheek, and literally actually winked. They went wild, shouting and cheering and stomping their feet.

Eric shook his head at her with a grin, and left the stage, Daisy reluctantly following.

The green room was buzzing with chatter and excitement and the sugar rush that a giant cookie platter had provided everyone in the small backstage area. All three members of Luminous Fern were sitting down, looking intimidating with asymmetrical haircuts and piercings, a very low-energy bunch. Mike K rushed up to them, followed by his wife Jennifer French. The two of them didn't match in any conventional way—Mike was a Black rapper and singer who seemed to exclusively own and wear pastel floral patterns. Jennifer had dark hair, all black clothing, and black fingernails that were chipped from playing the guitar in her own solo act as a singer-songwriter.

“You're gonna win and I'm not even jealous,” Mike shouted. “They love you so much you're like, regulars. Staples. The four queens of Reign of Jane have officially made their mark.”

“Oh my gosh,” Daisy shouted back. “You are way too nice!”

He gave Daisy a huge hug, which Jennifer joined. They were comrades in arms, here at the Velvet. She felt a surge of affection for the two of them, who she considered both immensely talented and very fun.

“You guys need to record an album and make some merch. People are clamoring out there. I heard a girl say ‘if I can’t listen to that song about candy every day for the rest of my life I will shrivel up and die.’” Jennifer laughed at the direct quote. “That is some serious passion.”

“Wow,” Daisy said. “I guess we just thought we were the ones having the best time out there. But maybe it was more ... mutual.”

“Simultaneous orgasm,” Mike K assured them with a nod.

Topher flinched, and Daisy watched a blush color Katherine’s face. Neither of them had spoken, and they appeared rooted to their spots, holding hands for support.

“I hope you guys are coming to the afterparty,” Jennifer looked at all of them in turn, with a nod. “It’s usually pretty low key but I think with these guys...”

She trailed off, indicating the three Ferns sitting behind them.

“Well, let’s just say that things might get a little out of hand.”

Daisy wondered what she meant, sizing up the three dullards sitting in the corner. It was surprising to expect a wild party, especially considering that Jennifer was a popular youth fireside speaker and she and Mike had toured the west coast performing in church and at mutual activities. Out of hand for a BYU party was blacklights and glow sticks, in her experience, with people drinking just a little but too much Mountain Dew and using it as an excuse to act totally crazy and pretend it was somehow fueled by their intake.

Eric looked at Daisy, trying to signal her to consider accepting the invitation. They had both discussed their deep curiosity at what really went on in the Provo music scene.

“Oh that’s such a nice offer,” Katherine said finally. “But we are actually having our own little gathering!”

She and Topher waved and went off together. Daisy and Eric shrugged and followed.

Disney Dessert Night was usually reserved for Sundays, the most social day of the week. Since the sabbath was sacred, the day meant that nobody was doing homework or working at their part-time jobs, and everybody was eager to spend as much time together as possible. Daisy often felt like a society lady on Sunday—there were appearances to make and parties to attend and sometimes it became your turn to host. She had joked about making calling cards, and came home one day to a box of crisp white letterpress cards that said “Daisy Jane Watson - Rock Star” on them in brilliant green ink. Katherine’s were blue. Katherine was that kind of person. Make a joke, get a gift. Throw out a comment, find that your brainstorm has become a reality.

And when Katherine had moved their traditional monthly DDN to tonight, to create what she called “a safe space to celebrate our fun night at The Velvet,” Daisy knew it was less of a request than a requirement. Even Eric had agreed to attend, and he rarely spent much social time with the rest of the band.

Still in their stage clothes, they piled into Topher’s car. Their roommate Lindsay had agreed to start letting people in before they got there, and when they arrived—a little smudged and sweaty—there were already guests milling around with their treats in hand, making small talk and new connections. When people started noticing that they’d entered the room, it got a bit quieter in the kitchen-living-room-combo.

“Well?” asked Lindsay, who had left right after their set to start laying out cups and plates.

“We won!” Daisy shouted. “We actually won.”

The cheers were deafening, and every time a new batch of people entered the party they repeated the performance, celebrating and celebrating and celebrating their win over brownies and ice cream.

“Okay Daisy Chain,” Eric sidled up to her, holding only a cup of water. “Gimme the tour.”

Daisy grinned. Eric was an insatiable gossip, and he knew how to appeal to that side of Daisy in a way that nobody else could.

“Well,” Daisy tried to subtly point out the two redheads hovering by the water pitchers. “Those are my second cousins, they’re twins and their names are unfortunately Jarret and Merrit.”

“No,” Eric breathed. “What? That’s horrible. But I do see the resemblance.”

He patted Daisy’s curly red hair fondly.

“I’ll call you Carrot, so you fit in,” he said with a laugh that meant he’d surprised even himself.

“If you call me Carrot, I’ll kill you.”

“Fair.”

“Fair-ret,” Eric laughed again. Daisy longed to hit him with something. Instead she decided to distract him.

“Okay, do you see the guy with like ... the striped polo and a short haircut?” Daisy looked around the room—that described half the boys they’d invited. “Over by the sink. He’s talking to those three girls.”

Eric nodded.

“That’s Colton. He was, up until about six days ago, dating Lindsay,” Daisy scanned the room for her, and nudged Eric to look at the tiny girl with a pixie cut who had greeted them. “It made no sense. You can see Linz, she’s so cool and a painter and smart and incredibly fun. Colton is ...”

“A basic Zoob,” Eric finished. “Which appeals to those three bottle blondes over there I guess.”

“And the worst part is, he broke up with her, because he thought he could do better,” Daisy said. “Can you imagine?”

“Wait, he said that to her?”

“To her face. Her perfect little fairy face.”

“I hate him.”

“Yeah, we all do, but he’d already been invited when they broke up so we didn’t know what to do. I didn’t really think he would *come*,” Daisy said. “But I guess he’s on the rebound looking for someone who better fits his image of the ideal eternal companion.”

Eric burst out laughing, loudly, and a couple people looked over at them. He grinned at the affronted partygoers and waggled his fingers.

“I think I’ve scandalized your guests. Too much fun.”

“Blah,” Daisy said. “Ice cream? Brownie?”

They walked over to the dessert table where Katherine was playing gracious hostess with perfect manners, Topher dutifully pouring red Solo cups full of water and lining them up on the counter to be guzzled in an attempt to counteract the sugar.

“Oh my lanta,” Katherine said in an exaggerated drawl. “Is Eric eating sugar?”

“Yeah, he is, and you will say nothing more about it,” Eric said, taking a giant bite that made his teeth look missing in patches. He grinned, realizing the chocolate had given him a hillbilly smile, then repeated what he’d said with a drawl to match Katherine’s. Topher laughed while pouring, spilling a thin stream of water all over the table.

The four of them, so in sync onstage, rarely had shared moments like this, and Daisy relished it. She took extra stock of the warm feeling in her stomach—the Spirit again?—and committed to her memory the idea of the four of them as friends, not just fellow musicians.

Although it was also Daisy’s house, it was really Topher and Katherine’s party, so she let them serve her up a warm gooey brownie and a heap of ice cream, and went with Eric in search of a comfortable place to eat it. They ended up perched on the stairs that lined up perfectly with the front door—the official welcoming committee for all of their guests. They ate slowly, the brownie and ice cream merging into a delicious soup of chocolate and cream. They laughed a lot. Daisy started to forget they had invited other people.

Eric was her “type.” He was unusually tall, very skinny, pale, had dark curly hair, and a passion for one very specific and niche thing. He was the Dream Man Daisy had been waiting for and he was slowly becoming one of her best friends. She thought maybe with time and patience she would have deeper, different feelings for him. But they just never came.

After some time, Katherine moved in front of the TV.

“Hi everyone!” she beamed. “Thanks for coming. We are going to start the movie now, if you want to find somewhere to sit. There’s plenty more ice cream in the freezer, if you want seconds you can help yourself. The brownies have been devoured entirely, but I think that was to be expected because they were delicious.”

A couple people clapped. Daisy and Eric shared a look, embarrassed that the guests were willing to be that enthusiastic about some brownies clearly made from a box.

The two of them claimed the window seat, far enough from the TV that they could chatter during the cartoon movie made for children. Topher waved Katherine over once she was done with her speech and the Muses had started telling the story of Hercules, and she settled in next to him in the center of the room, on the couch.

“Daisy is the frontman of the band, but Katherine is the frontman of the apartment,” Eric whispered to Daisy. “She’s quite uh, commanding, no?”

Daisy giggled. “Yeah, she loves to be in charge. I don’t care.”

“You’re a liar, Daisy Jane Watson,” Eric touched her hair for the second time that night. It seemed like a romantic gesture, and Daisy waited for some butterflies, but nothing happened. In fact the only thing she felt was annoyance, that someone would assume they knew everything about her.

She looked back at Katherine, and found her rebellious streak rising to the surface. She actually was pretty tired of Katherine telling her what to do. But, just like at the temple, she found it in her to push those thoughts down. For good measure, she pushed Eric, too.

They grinned at each other. Daisy refused to give it a second thought. At this moment, things were good.

homecoming

In the headlight-bathed haze of her old neighborhood, Kelly felt acute regret at failing to put her hometown in the rearview for good. Full Moon by The Black Ghosts was playing softly, and she had rolled down her window, letting the midwinter breeze keep her awake enough to drive.

It was a perfectly normal neighborhood by most standards: houses with lawns, some had fences. Streetlights and porch lights and motion lights—so many lights it looked like day. Everyone Kelly knew invariably steered small talk at parties in the direction of “where do you live” in order to brag about their address. And people would say “I’m so jealous,” or “oh wow, you lucky duck.” But they always knew; the Country Club logo emblazoned on their polo shirts and that specific shade of blonde that came from an upscale local salon gave it away.

It was an accident that Kelly’s family lived there. A fluke purchase, made in a prosperous time when her dad was working at a job he’d held on to for five years. They moved in, and he was let go in a massive layoff six months later. There was nothing to do but hunker down and pay the mortgage, even though they couldn’t afford anything else. Their church bought them groceries.

In her rearview, she saw a single headlight. It approached quickly, catching up to her and beaming into her car, refracting on the glass. Then it pulled up beside her, the sharp grumble of a motorcycle’s engine blaring into her car, into her ears. The stoplight ahead turned yellow, then red.

She blinked, looking over at the bike and its rider, but all she saw was a helmet on top of a black clad body. The music clicked over to the next song on the Twilight soundtrack she’d

found in the car she drove as a teen. Her parents had kept it, and kept her room the way it looked when she lived there last. Like they knew she would fail and come back.

The guy on the motorcycle waved, and Kelly realized this could be someone she knew. They could see her, but she couldn't see them. She longed, as her emo music played, to flip them off and drive off. Fuck you, fuck your neighborhood, fuck your money. Fuck.

Instead, she waved back.

“Wanna race?” the motorcyclist's voice shouted over the engine.

It had been years since Kelly had been reckless in a car, not after her friends—nobody from the neighborhood—had died in that crash. They were kids, and they learned about street racing too young. When they died, people weren't sad. They clucked about “probably drinking” and “not from around here” even though they lived fifty blocks west.

But Kelly had felt the grip of hopelessness these last months, and found the only way to shake it off was to alter the chemistry of her body. She'd been getting creative—drugs, exercise, alcohol, dangerous scenarios.

She turned and nodded at the cyclist, who nodded back, then turned and faced forward. Kelly let out a long breath, positioning her hands on the steering wheel. Why was she racing this top-of-the-line bike in her Mazda 626, down a suburban street, she couldn't say.

She floored it the second the light changed, feeling the back of the car start to fishtail as it failed to gain traction. The motorcycle and its rider had already shot forward, and she followed with a loud, involuntary whoop. Her tires squealed—they were smoking just a little—and she felt her heart racing, the adrenaline coursing through her body, making her a little lightheaded. She grinned so hard her face hurt. It felt incredible to do something she used to be good at, feel it coming back to her.

They blew past stop signs, making it to the next light up ahead. The rule was you had to cross even if it was red. It glared green, but as they approached, it flipped to yellow. Kelly's heart felt like it wanted to bail before taking the risk of running a red light. But her brain reminded her of the odds of something going badly at this time of night, and her foot obeyed.

She slowed down on the other side of the light, realizing she hadn't even paid attention to who crossed first, just as it turned red. She slowed, a little sweaty, and laughed. The motorcyclist lifted his visor at her, and grinning back at her was someone she hadn't seen since graduation. He still looked young, a sprinkle of freckles still dotting his nose.

Kelly knew it wasn't really him. But as he waved and sped off into the night, she couldn't be sure if he just faded into the distance or disappeared altogether.