

ONCE WE MEET

A Novel

By Kaylee Blackwood

『行逢りば兄弟』 – *Once we meet, we are brothers and sisters.*

Once We Meet

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You feel like you could cry, but you won't do it. It sits right behind your eyes, no tears—just a passive feeling of *oh*. You could force it out, maybe; keep thinking, running metaphorical fingers along the seam stitching *i hate him* and *i hate myself* together, but then you would be crying in a library; something you'll never do.

Crying isn't something you ever do.

But this still happens often enough if you let your mind drift, vision devolving to register only edgeless shapes you could probably still recognize if you tried—a computer, a pencil holder, a bookshelf behind it all, a constant readiness to give yourself over to heady emotions, but a learned restraint keeping you from doing so.

You're studying after school—for an hour, no more, no less. He'll pick you up at three-forty, like he always does. Three-forty, but he expects you in the parking lot by three thirty-five. He'll know if you're not there. Like he always does. It's been fifteen minutes of sitting in Langley's library already, and you only have twenty more before you have to pack up to go stand outside. It's a routine you know well; waiting.

(And obeying.)

Push it out, you think hard, and it's like forgetting. Another routine you know well. You close your eyes momentarily, fingers resting against the janky, lettered keys of the library computer—a white and boxy thing that runs slower than you do on a good day—clearing your mind until there's nothing but white space around the 'you' standing within it. That white space stretches for miles and miles until it's able to swallow you whole, hiding you from anyone who would ever come looking, a last line of defense for the pieces of you intended for no one else to touch. If Occlumency was a real thing, you've mastered it—except: your wall is distance. When your eyelashes flutter upward, you remember nothing beyond what you need to do, the way it should be.

The PowerPoint slide in front of you has only three words in the title box—all you've managed: *Atomic Scientist Trials*. The whole presentation is on Oppenheimer, and you didn't intend to take the project this far, but once you started reading about him and his role in the Cold War, it was no easily-condensable thing. Now, you're on slide fifteen of what was supposed to be a ten-slide project. You have no idea how you're going to break this down when you're not even halfway through the rubric. You spend your remaining twenty minutes trying to figure that out—end up with nothing, no choice but to leave it. There's no computer at home, but thankfully it's due Wednesday, next week, so you have nine days to get it together.

The book you've been using for information, by Jessica Wang, discusses Oppenheimer sparsely and probably contains much more than your teacher even really wants you to know, but you check it out anyway because what *is* in there is interesting enough that you want to continue reading it tonight before bed. It's been a while since some history topic has encapsulated you, probably at least three months, back when you absorbed everything that you could find on the Black Panther Party. You've been in a rut, mostly in part due to the busyness that comes with the

end of summer and settling into a new grade; it's only your second year being in high school, but you still can't get used to it. That's not only due to the workload.

But you feel like you have time this week to leave your lamp on for a little bit before bed and lose yourself in the lives of others who you will never meet, never speak to. There's just *something* about knowing that things happen (have happened, will happen) and that life goes on, whether it sucks or not. That's why the last piece of fiction you've willingly read was Harry Potter—it's not the same. Just not.

The hallways are empty as you wind through them towards the side entrance that leads to the parking lot. Other than those already locked in classrooms for club meetings, nobody else ever sticks around. Nobody wants to be in school longer than they have to; nobody but you. Maybe you would even join a club, if Tommy would ever let you. But you run on his time, not yours.

The small number of cars left in the lot blind you in their refusal to absorb the sun's visible heat, and you already feel the coarse curls at your nape sticking to your skin. The scrunchie that usually adorns your wrist disappeared last night somewhere in your room, so you can't catch your hair up the way you wish to. You already feel it frizzing up in the ninety-degree weather that still stubbornly clings to your town despite the trees shedding everywhere, their leaves disintegrating under your feet, brittle from the boiling air, as you stand in the best spot for your brother to see you. Maybe the gravity-defying, pigheadedness of frizzing will give your neck the relief it needs. Though it's not common, your hair has never been scared to take the form of a ball, your curls turning airy and nonexistent.

(Kaa-chan was always baffled by it. Dad would just laugh.)

Your brother doesn't give it time to rise much, though, because exactly five minutes after you make it outside (three thirty-five, *always*), Tommy's screeching through the narrow gap in the ragged chain-linked fence lining Langley's perimeter. Despite that gap having sharp, spindly pieces of fence grasping into it, scraping the school buses that pass through it every day, the air hazing with bright-yellow snow, Tommy is a master of flying through it at no less than sixty miles an hour without a scratch.

You can tell already that he's looking at you.

You can't see his eyes, never do from this angle, this distance, but you just know. The way the end of all the hairs on your body come to life, the way your blood cells turn to cockroaches in a hoarder's home, the way your eardrums start to sing like church bells—it's unmistakable. It's not so much the sensation of his eyes on you as much as the intent behind them; it's like you can feel every thought he's ever had about you with just a glance.

Tommy rolls the car up so close to the curb that the tires on the passenger side nearly touch your feet, and, with that, the sensation stops. He never looks at you when you can see him. It's too much to wish that he wouldn't even when you can't.

He's staring ahead, the skin on the outsides of his eyes crinkling like brown leather. His fingers, nails bitten and browned by car oil, pick at his fraying steering-wheel cover. "Hurry *up*, Rie."

He says it as if you've kept him waiting. Every time. He makes your name sound like someone else's.

You make sure no leaves stick to the bottom of your shoe when you slither into the backseat, no reason for him to act pissy later. Maybe he will anyway; never really up to you.

The minute you shut the door—not slamming—he’s off, engine growling low like a beast as he pushes it from resting to nearly jetting across the dry, dusty tar within the span of a second, giving you no time to get your seatbelt on. Your fingernails dig into the tawny undersides of the vinyl seat-covering, and you ignore the jump in your heartbeat. You’re used to this, should be.

Should be.

By the time you click the belt into the socket by your hip, you can no longer see your school in the glass behind you. Now it’s just trees all around until you’re home—the worst part. Maybe if Professor Snape *had* taught you Occlumency, if he was real, he would’ve tried to convince you to use a forest as your mental wall instead of miles of nothingness. But there isn’t a single thing comforting about not being able to see outward from where you’ve hidden yourself. You feel especially caged in with a barricade of trees on either side of the road, the blur of them whizzing by a solid wall that has your saliva thickening on your tongue.

There’s nowhere that feels safe to look but forward, but Tommy makes it impossible. He never puts on the radio, so you can’t disguise the shift of your eyes, a sound he’s attuned to like a hawk hunting. Looking at him is almost worse than him looking at you. You close your eyes for the rest of the trip. *Push it out.*

Seven miles can feel endless, but only if you let it. Your house appears like a long log in a swamp, a peeling, pale-yellow ranch-style hob of a place. The yard is years-unkept, and you can see the gnats buzzing above the tall weeds even from a couple yards down the street. The abrupt shift from middle-of-nowhere to suburban-rural territory always jars you, and you’re almost surprised to see the other houses in your neighborhood, just like you were the first time you and Tommy moved here. Your neighbors keep up with their lawns better than you two do, but not by much. You’re glad that you don’t stand out.

Tommy's hands yank the gearshift in the jerky movements they're wont to do, making your body jolt forward and your seatbelt snap taut against your breastbone. You wait as he grabs his workbag (*Dad's workbag*) from the passenger seat and shoves out of the car, getting out yourself once he's halfway up the walkway. He doesn't look back, but you hear the car's locks click behind you once you're out.

The Cold War book weighs your back down a bit on the way to the door, reigniting your eagerness to crack into it more. It won't be until long into the night because you have to clean the kitchen today and take out all the trash in the house. You'll probably also clean the windows if you have time, because the sun has made them all crust over with a dusty film, distinct brown circles in places on the glass like cigarette burns. Even if the outside of the house looks rough, you still have to take care of the inside—make it as spotless as possible. Just the more for Tommy to have nothing to say about *anything*.

You trade your sneakers by the door next to Tommy's for house slippers; no shoes inside, never. Tommy's already gone, taking a nap before his third-shift job. He'll be up when he needs to eat, so you only have a couple hours to get your cleaning done before starting dinner.

"*Tadaima*," you whisper quietly, staring after his closed-bedroom door. *I'm home*.

There's no answer to wait for.

Your bedroom is the one place he doesn't come into, so it's not as upkept as the rest of the house. The walls are bare because your landlord puts it in the lease every year, despite the four years he's had to do it, that any damage to the white-painted sheetrock uniform throughout the house will be billed for. You've been meticulous to make sure he never has to make-do on that promise. The rest of the room belays that trend—a small, colorful array of haircare products lining your brown dresser, a desk-top sprawled with returned homework assignments you don't

know what to do with, an unmade bed, comforter slipping to the floor. Some old pictures taped to the windowpane.

You pull the library book from your bag before letting it clunk to the floor, no worries that Tommy will hear because he's most likely already fallen asleep, and set it on your nightstand, for later, next to your lamp.

Next to a framed photo of two people, a man and a woman.

They're relatively the same height, the man's buzzed head pressed against the pin-straight, black tresses of the Japanese beauty he hugs to his chest. Her pale skin flushes at her cheeks and neck-base, her lips stretched wide like blooming rose petals, a perfect complement to the goofy grin on the man's face, his teeth shining especially white against his mahogany pigmentation. You touch the tips of two of your fingers to each of their smiles.

"Tadaima."

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The saucepan of browned chicken and potatoes steams when you open the lid to smell it after turning the burner off, the rice already done and waiting in the pot next to it. You've boiled some broccoli to go along with it, because Tommy likes colors to vary in his food and you like the soft mushiness boiling gives. You make sure the rest of the kitchen is gleaming how it was before you started cooking and, once satisfied, share yourself a plate. Tucking a bottle of water from the fridge into your armpit, shivering at the sudden cold, you pass by your brother's room, knocking on it as quickly but as noticeably as possible before going to lock yourself away.

You figure out how to prop your book up to stand by itself on the desk, its spine pressed against the wall, your stapler keeping the pages from fluttering loose, far away from your plate. There's homework for your other classes to be done, but you allow yourself to get lost in the

book anyway, the government harassment of atomic scientists sweeping you away. You only resurface when your plate is near-empty, and, from the chilled mushiness of your last bite, you can tell it's been a while. You can hear the shower running from down the hall, so you should probably bring your plate to the kitchen and clean up for the night.

Tommy's left his plate messy in the sink, gravy splattered against the curved metallic rims, a cup and three spoons just as messy to match. You wonder if he does it on purpose, sometimes. You fight with the sink to get everything washed; the pipe is tough to push up, as if it needs to be greased, and the water doesn't get as warm when there's someone bathing or the toilet's just been flushed, so your fingers are pruny and shivering when you wipe them off on your pants.

On the table, the mail from today looks like it's been thrown haphazardly. You're the only one who opens any of it, and therefore it falls on you to keep track of what's important. The only ones that stand out are the letter red-lined with the DMV logo above the rectangular, plastic window displaying Tommy's name, and the scratchy-beige envelope chicken-scratched with yours. The latter is tucked into your pocket to throw into the box at the bottom of your closet floor later, where it will remain unopened just like the rest.

The DMV has noticed that the car insurance has been cancelled, too many late payments stacked together like dominoes, and the letter is an issue of warning. The skin on your lip flakes as your teeth chew into it. You wonder if any of your neighbors might have any odd jobs that they need done.

You shoveled driveways and walkways last winter, but snow won't be falling for a long time, if it even does. The family three doors down just had a baby—four months ago, you think? Maybe more? Around the beginning of summer, you happened to spot them bringing the baby

home while wheeling the trash to the curb, seen the woman's pregnant belly a few times before that. They have at least two other kids, still young. Maybe they need help. You don't know anything about kids, but you can learn, doesn't hurt to ask. Tommy's only kept quiet about you not working, not contributing, because you're not sixteen yet, but you know, you just *know*, the minute you are...

His eyes say everything.

You won't let him see this, or see you. You'll knock on their door tomorrow after school, dress as nice as you can, smile. If they don't need a babysitter, then you'll ask if they need other help. New parents have it hard, you can clean or help with meals. Just *something*.

You do the rest of your homework while you make a script in your head, stringing together what to say that will endear them to you most. *Hi (Please pay me)! I'm Rieko, my brother and I live a few houses over (Please pay me). My brother works long hours, so I'm by myself most of the time (Please). I've been looking for something to do after-school, so I was wondering if you guys needed a babysitter. You wouldn't need to pay me much; I'm only looking for pocket change and company (I'm desperate)! Here's our number, call and let me know!*

So many exclamations will take a lot of your energy, but you're geared up to do it—have to be. You pencil in the answer for the last question on your algebra worksheet, putting away all your homework to start getting ready for bed. The words cycle through your brain like a bike, plastering themselves to the sides of your skull so they'll be impossible to forget.

You grab your towel, the fuzzy cloth still a little damp under your fingers from washing your hair yesterday, and head to shower. *Hi! I'm Rieko, my brother and I live...*

The script flies out of your head the minute the door opens, eyelids jumping back into your head. You've never realized that the woman was familiar, would be familiar. You've never seen her up close, and it catches you off guard. She's a teacher, or she was, still is? Could still be, but she's been pregnant, or *was* pregnant, multiple times—she has a *family*, and she used to call you *little flower* before you moved away.

You think, *it's not her, can't be, she would never remember me, never recognize me* and you open your mouth to say, "Hi, I'm—"

"*Rieko?*"

She would. She does.

You don't know what to say. In a time when you ran home to hugs, in a time after, when you *didn't*, she was there—for both. At least when she could. Before you left all the memories behind, the home that used to feel like love; she was *there*. Mrs. Hosseini.

It's like she sees what you don't say, can't say, and she smiles. It looks like—like *rain* has come, like she's turned her face up to feel it drop onto her nose, onto the curve of her forehead, after a long season of drought. If there was anyone more beautiful than *Kaa-chan* (which there isn't, never has been) it would be her. In the after, she made you feel like you could. That's it; just that you *could*.

The last time you cried was when you had to leave her; leave everything you knew behind for places you didn't.

She's still smiling, even as you start to notice the chains of darkness in the skin under her lower lash-line, notice the twitch in her fingers against the shift of the dress over her stomach. There's gray mixed in the wispy, russet-colored fly-aways haloing her temples, long-fallen from

the loose pile of them on top of her head. She slumps lightly against the doorway, a breath huffing right out of her, her eyes closing as she shakes her head. “My little *flower*.”

Something threatens to claw out of you. *Push it out.*

Her eyes open. “I never thought I’d see you again. What are you doing here? How *are* you?”

You still haven’t said a word, *thought* one that could explain the coincidence this is, explain that it looks like you found her even though you were never looking. You don’t want to stand on her doorstep, mouth gaping and blubbering soundlessly, but you don’t like surprises, don’t know what to do with this one. “I’m...fine. Yes. Good. I live—over there.” You point vaguely in the direction of your house, not wanting her to know the yard that looks like *that* belongs to you. “I wasn’t...I didn’t...”

Her eyes glimmer, the way they always have. It’s what you liked about her in first grade. She made you think of stars, of lying in the grass in your backyard, little body pressed against your dad’s long one, arm slung over his warm belly as you both gazed at the night sky, his low, deep voice rumbling against your cheek as he told you the story of Callisto and Arcas, mother and child turned to constellations in the sky. “It’s *wonderful* to see you again.”

A chasm tries to rip open inside you, wishes and wants bubbling within the endless pit like angry lava, yearning to erupt and spill through your throat, out your lips and down your chin, curdling in the air like smoke you’ll never be able to pull back. *I want to go back, to before, with you. With them. I don’t want to be alone anymore. I wish you could take me back.* Instead, you say, “I’m surprised you...you—that you recognized me, Mrs. Hosseini. I wouldn’t...I mean, I didn’t know you were so close. To us. Or here, at all.”

“*Of course*, I recognize you, Rieko. My sweet little flower—”

Her words send heat flaring up your neck, and you have to scratch at your collarbone from the sting of it. *I'm still hers.*

“I didn’t know you were this close, either! This is the *best* coincidence,” she chuckles low, sweet and tired. “We only just moved here last year—had to get a bigger house when I got pregnant, *again*. Do you want to come in, love?”

How can you ask her for a job, for anything, when she talks to you like *this*? Like...you mean something to her, have always meant something to her, even after nearly a decade apart. You almost wish you had never left the house to come here, maybe started preparing a longer dinner instead, a stew, beef and potatoes, or *oden*, like...like you used to have, often, even though it will never be as good as—

Just. *Something* that isn’t *this*.

And yet, “Yes...I do.” You have to keep going. Like always. “I will.”

Mrs. Hosseini beams, moving from the middle of her doorway. “Come in, come! My husband isn’t home right now, it’s just me and the kids.” She locks the door behind you once you step in, pausing only just long enough for you to pull off your shoes, which you do before she even opens her mouth to ask, then she’s already heading passed her living room and into her kitchen, and you’re scrambling not to be left behind. “*Luckily*, they’re all mostly on the same nap schedule right now, even the baby. It makes life so much—oh, *jeez*.”

Your hands jerk outwards, uselessly hanging in the air behind her as she trips harmlessly over a toy in the kitchen doorway.

“Watch your step, love—there’s never a day I’m not tripping over toys in here.” She blows a piece of hair out of her face before brushing it away spastically, throwing the toy into a plastic bin behind her. There seems to be one in every corner. Her house is laid out similarly to

yours, except that it has more than one floor. There are stairs leading up from the kitchen, hidden inside an alcove, which you find odd, a plastic gate installed at the foot of them.

The sink is full, dominated by a rainbow of plastic plates and capless clear bottles, the dish drainer sitting next to it containing solely the matching latex nipple covers. There's a pitcher of water, or at least some kind of liquid, some inches away from the drainer, with even more covers inside. The stove has a pot on every burner, mismatched lids haphazardly thrown on top of them, a grease-stained kettle on the counter adjacent, looking like it's been pushed off to the side, unneeded. Mrs. Hosseini ushers you to sit at the large island in the middle of the kitchen, another way her house differs from yours.

“Sorry about the mess. I made dinner early, and then I had to put the kids down, so I haven't had any time to clean up.”

This would be your segue, your cue to return to script, to say what you need to—to do what you came here for, find your balance. Instead, you sit in the tall island chair, surprisingly comfortable, and say nothing.

She goes to stand in front of the stove, banging around in the pots, stirring the contents inside despite none of the burners being on. The sloppy bun on her head slips even lower with her movement, and the air fills with a new waft of heavy spices and starch. Maybe it's your age, or the time that's passed, but she seems much smaller than you remember, much shorter, much heavier, much less free. But at the same time, you think, as she turns around to grin at you, *she's the same. She's still happy.*

With me.

“You’re still as quiet as I remember, darling.” She ladles out some of whatever she was stirring, possibly some kind of curry, humming and licking her lips as she tastes it. “Always quiet, so much going on inside that little brain. Too much, I’d say. Are you hungry, love?”

You’re not, not at all—if anything, your stomach is unsettled, and nausea coils distantly in the back of your mouth. But she’s looking at you with that glimmer in her eyes, easily mistaken for an unshed sheen of tears, and you still can’t say no, at least not so simply. “...I could eat.” You’ve never had her cooking before. “Or, well, I didn’t mean to...you don’t have to feed me, or anything. I’m the one—I, you know, *surprised* you. Showing up. Here.”

She giggles, high-pitched and girlish, grabbing a bowl from a cabinet overhead, shaking cooked rice into it before spooning the thick, curry-like dish overtop. “You sure did. Of all the places I’d expect to see your beautiful little face again,” she places the bowl in front of you, ceramic clanking against the granite countertop, and sits at the island as well, holding her chin in her palm as she gives you the entirety of her attention. Her eyes are like the sky, and they’re piercing, “it wouldn’t be in Florida.”

You don’t know what’s in front of you, but it smells divine—like food that belongs in a home, even if that home isn’t yours. Even so, you take a hesitant bite, nerves still making your stomach disagreeable, not wanting to, never wanting to, offend Mrs. Hosseini in any way.

It’s quiet for a few minutes as you eat, slowly, and you know she’s watching you the entire time. Like with Tommy, the feeling crawls against the surface of your skin, but it doesn’t rub you raw the same way, doesn’t aim to shred you to the bone the same way. You can’t see it, but you hear a clock ticking in the house somewhere, *tickticktick*, reminding you that, eventually, you’ll have to say something, something, ask her if she needs help, with anything, at all, *I’ve*

been looking for something to do after-school, so I was wondering if you guys needed a babysitter.

Or something. Something.

You wouldn't need to pay me much; I'm only looking for pocket change and company!

You're desperate.

But it's impossible, at least for now, because you know her, *knew* her. This woman taught you how to subtract single digit numbers from each other. She showed you how to make a turkey with just your hand, a pencil, and a sheet of paper. She helped you write blocky, crooked letters on large-lined horizontal pieces of parchment. She held your hand in the hospital, her own hand so big, so safe, it engulfed yours whole, while you dazed at the white ceiling and wondered how you would live in a world where your parents no longer existed.

So, despite what you should, *need to*, do, you sit with her in the quiet of the evening and enjoy the taste of a home.

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By the time the kids have woken up from their nap, you've only just barely gotten ready to speak. It starts with one shrill cry jolting through the room, sharp and loud despite its vertical distance, before two more chorus right after. Mrs. Hosseini shoots up from her seat, her hair tumbling down her back as her hair-tie droops into nowhere, and exhales shakily despite the smile never leaving her face.

“Help yourself to seconds if you like, honey, I'll be right back.” She smooths her hands down the length of her dress and quickly disappears upstairs. You're suddenly left alone with the chaos of her kitchen, so loud in comparison to the white, shiny, blankness of yours. The walls are a bright amber, somehow not clashing with the colorful dishcloths, placemats, and touches of *i have a baby!* sprinkled about. The white cabinets lining the walls are no doubt filled with more beautiful, intricate plate-ware like the one now-empty in front of you. You have the urge to get up and run your fingers along the crown molding throughout her house, exploring more of the ways she's flourished in the time you didn't know her, but there's a *clack* and rush of air from behind your back that has you tensing up and sitting stock-still instead.

A man's voice echoes through the house, booming in a way that speaks of someone who only knows how to be loud. The language is one you don't understand, but the tone is warm enough that it reminds you of bounding into a house you no longer know, tiny hand gripping a rough-palmed, brown one you can no longer find, screaming *tadaima!* for ears that can no longer hear it.

A faint *okaerinasai!* tingles in your temples and you have to scratch feverishly at your skin to hear Mrs. Hosseini instead, the right *her*, yelling, "Welcome home!" from upstairs, over the sound of the high-pitched whimpering harmonizing with her.

Who you can assume is Mr. Hosseini tumbles into the kitchen behind you, and you've only just swiveled halfway to observe him as he exclaims, "oh!"

His skin is dark. Not as dark as Tommy's, or yours, but more like caramelized sugar in most of the places you can see, with hair as thick as hay sprawling long from behind his ears and up on his chest from the open collar of his dress-shirt. You immediately want to dislike him, the Hosseini that made her *Mrs.*, but the cheesy smile that appears on his face at the sight of you says that won't be possible.

"Now I don't remember having four kids! Could've swore I counted three when I left this morning." Mr. Hosseini's grin ticks up on one side, and his teeth click as if he's only just stopped himself from laughing at his own joke. "Who're you, li'l lady?"

You don't hesitate to tell him, but your voice remains small. "Rieko...I live a few houses down."

He's placing his satchel down on the island top. "Oh! Oh! I've seen you, I've seen you. You live with your dad, no?"

"No..." Your head shakes. "Brother."

He pauses on his way to the stove. “It’s just you? And him?”

“Just us.” There’s no more room for that line of conversation in your voice, and Mr. Hosseini changes the subject accordingly.

A bowl has found its way into his hands and he makes no haste in scooping some curry into it. The *are you hungry? did you get some of the korma?* before he decides to keep it for himself lets you know what the dish is without having to ask. He brings the rim of the bowl to his mouth and takes a quick swallow in front of the stove before sputtering at the temperature. His mutters of *hot! hot!* make you almost wonder if he actually lives here.

“So,” he says with his tongue slightly poked out to rest on top of his bottom lip, looking like it was too big to sit inside his mouth. “What brings ya’ to my kitchen?”

It’s easier now that Mrs. Hosseini isn’t in the room. You don’t know this man, aren’t scared of him in the least bit—if anything, unimpressed—so it isn’t hard to suddenly find the words that have been resting at the bottom of the endless expanse of your mind. “I was...I noticed that you just had a baby. Not *you*, of course you didn’t have—*your wife*. Her. I saw she had the baby, and I thought you might want help around the house—if you wanted to hire someone—me, I mean.”

He stares at you for long enough that any semblance of calm you had starts to disintegrate, and your throat tingles with the need to reclaim everything you’ve just said—said *poorly*. But his face explodes and he’s falling over his own words. “What a damn coincidence! Neda was *just, just* saying she might post somethin’ on the board at the library about some help. Y’all talk about this already?”

You stutter out that you didn’t get to mention it yet, not telling him how you’ve been butter-tongued and stupefied into saying too much while saying nothing at all.

“Cool, she’ll definitely be overjoyed to hear that. How ‘bout me and you work out the details right now, and we’ll bring her in when she comes back down from dealing with the monsters?”

You can’t believe it was this easy. It’s been over half an hour of you struggling to get the words out with Mrs. Hosseini, and her husband shows up to pull it out of you in less than ten minutes. When Mrs. Hosseini comes back down the stairs—more ruffled than you last saw her, her face more *lined* than when you last saw her, a baby now latched onto her hip—the defiant, healthy flush on her face makes you feel warm, and you wonder if, all along, it’s just been her. Just her.

You’ve wanted to ask him this for ages, but Tommy doesn’t let you get close often. Not unless Daddy’s around. When Daddy’s around, Tommy will play with you and he’ll let you touch the stickers on his Hot Wheels trucks, even add some of the new ones you got from school. Mrs. Hosseini gives stickers every Friday, and you like to save them up before deciding where to use them. It’s a big decision. Last time, you and Kaa-chan put three butterfly stickers you’d been collecting for a month onto the mailbox for Flutterfly’s ceremony. Daddy called it a ‘proper solemn affair.’

Tommy’s sitting on the front walkway while Daddy washes his car by the curb. There’s water running down the street from where the hose in your father’s hand is gushing over the car like a geyser. He looks like a fireman. Especially with the sun backlighting him like that—you have to squint to even really see him in the glaring rays, and his silhouette looks funny, like it belongs on the front of a cereal box. Tommy’s got his favorite robot in his hand, the one with the arm missing. It looks like he’s playing pretend, with his Hot Wheels encircling him like it’s reading time. Sometimes, when he lets you play, you bring one of your dolls out to pretend the

robot and her are superhero siblings who save the city every day. But Tommy doesn't like that game.

You sit on the bottom porch step. That's not too close, yet.

"Tommy." His name comes out like you've got pie stuck in your back teeth, been flicking at it with the tip of your tongue for hours to no avail. "Do you have trouble talking, too?"

He looks up at you because he has to, but it still takes him a second. Maybe more. Maybe three whole seconds. "What?"

"Like when you're at school, and someone nice starts talkin' to you, and your tongue feels all big in your mouth and you start to talk funny? Like—like you can't start but you can't stop? Like that?"

You can tell he has no idea what you mean, wants to say something mean, but you both know Daddy has sharp ears and can look like he's a trillion miles away even when he's listening. "That's 'cause you talk with your head down. Stop doing that and you'll stop talkin' funny."

But even when you have your head up, stuff doesn't come out right. That's why you keep it down, so your face doesn't look stupid, too, when your words already do. Tommy's lying, lying, lying because he's the one who told you it looked stupid in the first place.

But Daddy's listening, so you just say, "Okay," like you always do.

—

Playing with Azar and Cas is surprisingly easy. They're young, not quite babies but still tiny and soft, somehow perfectly polite, and so eager to play. You haven't been around kids since *you* were a kid, so you're surprised by everything they do now that you're not looking at them through an equal lens. You thought it would be mediating fights and picking up thrown

toys. It's only your first time watching them, a day after you and the Hosseinis worked out all the details, but it's nothing like that so far.

"Rie," Azar begins. He's older by a year and does most of the talking for both him and his little brother. Cas just likes to listen and move in silence. They both take after their Dad, sporting full, healthy heads of slick, dark hair, and baby-soft coconut-shell skin. "Hide and seek after blocks?"

"Uh...we gotta ask your mama." You know she's trying to get some housework in now that she doesn't have to keep an eye on three whole kids, so you say, "In ten minutes, okay?"

They both nod to that, so easy. You wonder if you were this easy. If Tommy was this easy, before you. You observe the two of them, always playing together even when they're playing separately, and wonder what makes them so different. Brother and brother.

You feel like you only remember your childhood in vivid bursts instead of a linear stream of memory. One second you were six, and the next you were twelve, and then you were back to six. Most often, it's six—the age that everything became different, so it's the one you stick to when you're sleeping.

Ten minutes later, when Mrs. Hosseini passes through the doorframe, peeking in to see if things are still peaceful, it's not hide and seek you ask her about. Somehow, the inside of your mouth flips and contorts, your gums becoming your tongue and your tongue becoming your gums, and what comes out is, "Do you like having kids?"

You don't know where that came from, and your eyes widen with the drop of your bottom lip. Mrs. Hosseini looks taken aback for a second, a second which you die a little on the inside, but her lips quirk up in the corners and she takes your inanity in stride. "I *love* having kids. I would have every kid, if that was possible."

It's such a *her* answer, her with her soft hands—bigger than yours always, enveloping them, shaking with you when you didn't know if you'd ever stop—yet it's not the one you wanted to hear. There's an itch on the insides of your elbows, and it spreads the more you throw the answer around in your head. *I would have every kid.*

“What about—what—if one of those kids, every kid, what if one of them hated you?”

She doesn't expect that follow up, already turning her heels to head back into the kitchen. She pauses halfway and you're staring at her side profile, a bit bulky in her muumuu, flowy and delicate still. You wonder what she's thinking about when she answers. “My flower. I would still love having kids. Even if one of them hated me.”

She's gone before you can ask another question, the other question, a hum under her breath that turns into a tinkling, high-pitched belt the further she gets—but you wouldn't ask this one even if you could. It's one you don't need to know the answer to and don't think you'll ever want.

Where does that love go when you die?

If you could stay for dinner, you would. Two highchairs fit hectically around the thin, wooden table in the small dining room, but they still look like they couldn't belong anywhere else. Mr. Hosseini has the baby in his lap when you're packing up to leave, holding a bottle to its lips while his wife puts the food on the table. It looks so good, so much better than the leftovers waiting in your fridge from the dumplings you made yesterday. But you can't stay. Not in this life.

“You want something to take with you, hon'? For the road? I know the road's just a three-minute walk, but—” She doesn't even finish, already packing away some of the meal she's

cooked for her family in a plastic container for you, as if you had said yes. Maybe you would have—should have, but you're so used to saying no, *no thank you, i can't* that you're glad she didn't wait. The plastic is warm in your palms as she gently gives it to you, her lips stretching, the deep brown ring surrounding the tan middle of them turning into a cooler ash. You gotta blink not to fixate on it.

The air outside is cool, and your ears still ring from the boys' harmonious *buh-bye!*, little fingers opening and closing against nothing, as if they were reaching for you. Despite the light breeze, the humidity still licks at your neck, leaving wet stripes down your skin while you glance up at the sky. The stars are faint against the blue-black spread, but you still search them out, finding the ones you know, easy, like warm fingers tapping against your temples, guiding you just where to look.

The money in your hands feels good. You didn't expect to be paid right away, it's still only been one night, you've done nothing, but Mrs. Hosseini had pulled her wallet out at the door anyway. It feels good, but you didn't like that—wished she'd done something else instead, like reached for your hand, or begged for you to come back inside, maybe. That's drastic, though; begging. You're not strong enough *not* to agree even if she'd just asked.

But, nevertheless, the money already feels like helping, like mattering. You don't know whether you should tell Tommy or hide it from him. Not necessarily about the Hosseinis, about *her*, but just enough to show him that you're not some air-headed kid, knowing nothing about the real world, drifting on borrowed time and in borrowed spaces. A part of you, though, wants to hold the crispy, green paper between your fingertips for a bit longer—*yours, you did that, without him*. Not needing him.

He takes the choice away from you rapidly, though.

“Where the *hell* have you been?”

You’re ambushed on the front threshold before you can even fully step into the house. It’s dark out, only faint yellow lights protruding from residential windows guiding your way down the block, so you’d assumed Tommy would be gone by now. From his uniform, you can tell you caught him right when he was about to leave. Unlucky for you.

“What?” Off-guard. “I was—I was just down there.” You point, the porchlight spotlighting the faint trembling of your knuckle. “Down the street—”

“You ain’t think to ask me first if you could leave the house? The hell are you wandering around for, like a dumbass?”

Like a dumbass—for not telling him. But you were scared he wouldn’t let you do it, tell you that you weren’t good for anything but staying in the house, staying hidden, staying miserable. Maybe you were doing this as much for yourself as you were for him. But you can’t tell him that.

“I have money! For—I saw the bills, so I got a...job—b-babysitting. Not much, but—” You pull the cash from your back pocket, keeping it folded so it looks like more than it actually is, thrusting it out just short of his heaving chest. It’s his, anyway. It was never yours.

Tommy grabs it from your hands, rough and haphazard, but fingertips still never touching you. The doorway is the frame to his portrait, and there’s nowhere for you to go around it as he counts the cash right in front of you. Sweat’s collecting under your armpits, and the damp hairs snag onto the fabric of your shirt as your palms come up to clutch at your elbows. You’re trying not to breathe, he’s too close, would feel it, and it’s stuck in your chest like an anchor that won’t drop.

He tsks. “This isn’t shit.” But he pockets it and slams passed you, forcing you to shove against one side of the doorway for him to get out and head to his car. You know that he won’t say anything about this anymore. The anchor drops.

You close the door, reveling in the silence of a house without him in it.

The thought of the dumplings skim over your forebrain, but you can still feel the warmth of the Tupperware sitting in the bag against your back. It takes no thought at all to pass by the fridge, grab a fork from the dish drainer, and head straight upstairs to your room. The food steams warm onto your cheeks when you take the plastic cover off at your desk. It’s quiet as you dig in, rice coating your teeth, the trees rustling outside, shaking against the outer panels of the house. It’s good. It’s really, really good.

—

“Don’t call me that!”

You’re peeking from the bathroom doorway. You just used the toilet all on your own, got excited and wanted to tell Mama that you flushed and washed your hands and everything, but Tommy’s yell stopped you in your tracks. You flatten your hands on your head to hide your hair, don’t want it to be seen in the hallway—gotta be sneaky. Tommy’s on the couch in the living room, his head just falling into your line of vision. His teeth are curled up and out, like a dog. You can’t see her, but you can tell Kaa-chan’s in front of him. If it’s not you, it’s her.

“Tommy-chan—”

“I don’t want to talk to you! Leave me alone!” His voice cracks against the weight of the last word. If he’d ever let you hug him, maybe he would feel better. Hugs always make things better.

You're contemplating how much of your dolls he would destroy if you tried it when a heavy hand joins both of yours on top of your head. Your neck drops back, wayyy far, to see Daddy looking down at you. The smile on his face doesn't scrunch his nose like it usually does.

"What are you doing, baby?"

"Hidin'."

"You're a sneaky little thing, miss ma'am."

You nod seriously, to which he nods back at you with the same seriousness.

"But," he continues. "Now's not the time for sneaky little things to be sneaking. Go play."

You know that means Daddy was sneaking, just like you; heard everything, like he always does. Maybe he'll do something about it this time. Mama gets sad whenever Tommy yells at her like that, she hates it. Daddy hates it, too. But by the look in his eye, the same one he has whenever he comes back home from working with all the cars at the big, dirty shop you've only been to twice, you don't think he will.



Fridays used to taste like pizza. As much as you loved *Kaa-chan*'s homecooked traditional Japanese meals or Daddy's taste of his Southern upbringing, you salivated for takeout on Fridays. Neither of your parents ever wanted to start their weekend out slaving over a hot set of pots, so most of the time they'd order out, something easy, unhealthy, and delicious. Sometimes, rarely, they'd order Chinese, and your face would have to be scrubbed for bits of pork fried rice and egg roll, *so messy*, *Rie-chan*, or sandwiches from the deli by the shop your dad worked at. But most of the time, Friday was the day for a big, greasy, cheesy, gooey pizza from Martian Matty's, a New York-style pizzeria deep in the heart of the nearby city, miles away from home.

Daddy would pack you up in the backseat, just the two of you, to pick up your family's order—one large half-cheese, half-meat lover's and a small crispy chicken, spinach, and red onion pie. You didn't know how your mother could stomach a pizza with such random toppings, but every time the four of you sat down around the coffee table with your individual plates, hers always just suddenly looked so much more appetizing than ever and you couldn't help but ask for a bite. You never liked it, *blegh*, but it tasted like *Kaa-chan* chuckling and calling you

ridiculous, squeaking your nose between her slender fingertips before you scurried back to your own plate; like Daddy's brows furrowing together as he shuffled through the DVDs he rented, mumbling to himself over which to pop into the dusty player on top of the TV, like Tommy rolling his eyes at you all like he didn't want to be there, would never want to be there, but staying regardless.

It tasted like Friday.

You haven't had pizza in years, not outside of school cafeteria cardboard and you've long stopped attempting to eat that. Now Fridays taste like crackers and fruit at the back of your study hall, taste like the dinner you'll have to cook after going to the Hosseinis for your second shift of the week—won't be cheesy or greasy at all, something easy, bland, and filling enough for Tommy to have nothing to comment on, nothing to do but eat in the silence of his room, alone and away from you.

Study hall is only on your schedule twice a week, so you take this time to get ahead of some homework. You're answering discussion questions on *Fahrenheit 451*, doing your best because English isn't really your subject—analyzing themes and character motives often flies over your head, don't know why the differences between Clarisse and Mildred are significant, what Montag's actions mean. It takes you the whole last hour of class to work through the questions, underlining the meaningful sentences of the book unevenly with your pencil, eraser too rubbed out to fix it, cracker crumbs lining the crease of the page binding, but you're able to finish the worksheet later in the library before Tommy picks you up.

He drops you at home instead of the Hosseinis after the stifling ride because you haven't told him where you've been babysitting, and you wait until he's speeding away for his early evening shift before you start your trek down the street. The grey sidewalk under your shoes is

dry and the grass parallel to it is dying, pointed tips an ugly, yellowing color that looks brittle and ashen. Wind worms its way into the microscopic holes dotting the cotton of your thin cardigan and pulls the short hairs on your skin to attention. It blows your wayward curls around your face and coarse strands get caught in the chapped skin peeling from your lip, smarting as it pulls too taut off your mouth when you try to separate the two. Above you, the sky is nearly one blank canvas, stealing any of the warmth Florida usually carries throughout the day. You're glad when you step onto the Hosseinis' porch because you don't have an umbrella tucked away in your bag and don't know when the rain will begin to paint the evening.

Mrs. Hosseini's smile is bright when she opens the door for you. It makes the chill in your body evaporate immediately. Your eyes drift over her shoulder and you can see the boys running around in the living room, chasing each other in a game they've clearly made up involving the Styrofoam pool worms flailing around in their stubby arms. The Hosseinis don't have a pool.

With a closer look, you can tell Mrs. Hosseini's been run haggard by them. Still, she ignores the mild chaos going on behind her and ushers you in cheerfully. "The TV was on today, for once, and they watched some *show* with—Azar, *be careful!*—with swords," she says by way of explanation, carelessly waving her hand in the direction of her kids as you both make your way to the kitchen. "The baby's sleeping upstairs, *somehow*—I think she's gotten used to the noise by now." A sigh huffs out of her, seeming to shake her whole body and blowing some loose hair from in front of her eyes. "How was school, honey?"

"It...was fine." Your fingers curl into the thick upper pocket of your jeans. Talking to her makes you jittery, like you've downed a whole 2-liter bottle of soda and are in the midst of guzzling another. Her eyes never leave you while she waits to know how you've been in the last

twenty-four hours since she's seen you, and it makes your skin feel like it's peeling apart. "Classes are—they're slowing down so...I'm...it's fine."

The mild crow's feet by her lashes deepen. There's no indication that she sees the bumbling idiot you feel like. "That's good to hear. It's been a *long* time since I was in high school, so I don't know if it's gotten better or worse for you kids now."

Worse, you want to say, but instead say nothing. She seems to hear it anyway and flutters her lids before she strides off towards the sink, once again teeming with miscellaneous cookware and plates. Her shoulders visibly slump at the sight of it, and it propels you into action.

"I'm—here." *Now*. "Why don't—why don't you...sleep...too?" You wince as your tongue fumbles the words. "With the baby?"

She gets what you're saying regardless and blinks as if the thought never occurred to her. With a babysitter to watch Azar and Cas, and the baby down for a nap, there's no reason for her not to indulge in one as well, get some of the much-needed rest she's been missing for who knows how many months now. That's what she's paying you for, after all—or at least what you offered in the first place. To not just babysit, but to clean, to give her back some semblance of the organization she's probably needed for a long time.

Mrs. Hosseini turns to look at you in a way that sets your upper chest ablaze. You're glad your skin isn't light enough for that to be visible. "You are the most darling little flower."

You wonder if you should pick some for her, make an arrangement from the pretty wildflowers growing behind Langley at the edge of the trees, a blooming bundle of frostweed, giant ironweed, and silky golden aster, wrapped tightly together with the fragile red string currently tying the fate of your life to hers.

“I’ll set an alarm for an hour, yeah? Maybe a little more?” She wipes her hands down her front, even though there’s nothing on them to clear away. It’s something she seems to do often, a tick if anything. She does it one more time before sending you a secret smile. “I won’t leave you to those little monsters for too long.”

You nod at her absently, distracted by your regret at sending her away. The two of you could have washed the dishes together, maybe—you could have made her laugh, watched the way her nose often wrinkles at the very center.

But that’s not why you’re here. She rubs the space between your shoulder blades before bypassing the child gate at the base of the stairs, disappearing up them and leaving you to deal with the two little boys giggling and shrieking at each other behind you.

—

Being stern is not your strong suit. The person who is most stern with you is the one person you never want to emulate—so you don’t know how to do it without *becoming* him. You’ll default to that because it’s all you’ve known, for so long now. But Azar is getting antsy, wants to go outside despite the fact that he’s not allowed; he went outside earlier. You know that because he and Cas regaled you with the whole story three different times in the last hour and a half you’ve been here. You enjoyed being outside once upon a time, so you understand the need, the drastic urgency to press your bare foot-bottom into the dirt and tickle your toes with the unruly grass, lift your palms to the sky and grab at the faraway universe you’ll never see. But he wants to chase the butterflies, and you’re trying to figure out how to tell him *no*. No matter how you explain that the weather seems like it’s going to get bad soon, that his parents wouldn’t want him out without them, that Cas doesn’t *want* to go outside (that *you* don’t want to go outside,

don't want to chase butterflies, not ever), he's being too stubborn to listen, possibly on the verge of throwing a tantrum.

You don't know if you can handle a tantrum.

To your luck, though, Mr. Hosseini starts coming in through the front door just as Azar's eyes begin to grow a wet sheen.

"Daddy!" he screams, charging towards his father like a bull, flinging himself into the air once he's a mere three toddler-steps away, and trusting the waiting arms to catch him.

"Daddy!" you scream, thick shards of glass whipping above your brow, a sharp pressure squeezing the fragile bones of your chest inward, world turning upside down, inside out, never to be righted again—

"Agh!" Mr. Hosseini scrunches up his face as if Azar is the heaviest thing he's held all week, despite the fact that the opposite is more likely to be true. "Easy there, boulder!"

"Let's go *outside*, Daddy! Let's see the butterflies!"

"Oh...the butterflies, huh? Outside?" The sound of Mr. Hosseini's fingernails scratching at his own scalp reaches throughout the room. "Um—how 'bout we watch butterflies on the TV instead? I'll go see where your *Mâmân* is so she can watch 'em with us."

Azar's little, dark brows furrow, knowing somehow that he's not getting what he wants but still being enamored by the thought of butterflies anyway. You understand. *You do*. You wish you could show him what it's like, having a beautiful piece of nature, usually so unattainable, resting in the small center of your palms, wings at an utter still, fuzzy body tickling your skin, trusting that the hands that hold it won't snap closed and snuff it's light out despite how easy it would be. It is the image behind every wish you've ever made, the luck of such a moment irreplaceable.

But Azar doesn't deserve the after. No one does.

Cas tugs on his brother's sleeve from where he's joined him, hugging their father's thick legs. "Wanna see the butterflies on TV," he says, voice as soft and lost as a cloud, but his words still make you flinch. That seems to be all Azar needs to agree to sit in front of the television and watch *Animal Planet* with his brother, pool worms resting at their feet where they sprawl on the carpet.

Mr. Hosseini grins big at you. "Get comfortable, too, li'l lady, 'cuz you're watchin' the butterflies with us."

"Yes, yes!" Azar cheers before Cas asks you to come sit with him. You don't want to watch the butterflies, but you settle down on the carpet still, awkwardly tugging Cas from where he sits on the floor to rest in the triangle of your crossed legs. This prompts Azar to make a whine filled with envy before he's scrambling onto your lap as well, shoving his wet (wet?) little hand into your neck, pushing your jaw up uncomfortably as he steps hard onto your thigh. You take it back—he is *definitely* the heaviest thing you've held all week.

Mr. and Mrs. Hosseini are coming around the corner of the kitchen doorway together when he finally gets settled, stubby legs kicking happily as he sits comfortably (*for him, you think*) next to his brother. Mrs. Hosseini's face is sleep-swollen, and she has the baby cradled almost into her armpit with just one arm, her other loosely stretched out to grip her husband's elbow. There doesn't seem to be a reason for the connection, other than to be close.

They're talking as they get nearer to you all. "Wanna order pizza today, babe? You've been cooking all week." He takes her hand and holds it between both of his own, cradling it like something he never wants to let go. You feel like looking away, so you do, turning back to the

bright viridescent plants flashing on the screen in front of you. Vibrant monarchs drift lazily around them like pollen in the air.

She leans her head on his shoulder briefly, closing her tired eyes with a smile. She smooths the scant, downy hair poking out from the baby's head. "That sounds amazing right now. Rieko, you *have* to stay for dinner if we order pizza, my flower."

Her addressing you is unexpected, making you jump minutely at the attention. Your arms snake out to wrap around the boys currently making your thighs fall asleep, legs tingling to a degree that will soon become painful. Dinner is something you've never planned to join them in, knowing you have a recurring responsibility to the kitchen in your own house.

But. It's *Friday*.

You're agreeing before you even have time to think of why you shouldn't.

Mrs. Hosseini seems incredibly pleased. She sits down on the sofa adjacent to the one at your back, adjusting her daughter to be sitting up more in her lap. She waves a lazy hand up at her husband. "Baby, can you get the menu from the kitchen? The one for Tony's, though."

"You didn't like Mama Rita's last time?"

"*No*. Their crust is *way* too thin—"

"Okay, okay, okay," he says before grumbling as he walks away to get the menu, "but *I* liked it, though."

Mrs. Hosseini rolls her eyes, ignoring him. "Rie, what kind of pizza do you want, honey? We'll order..." she trails off, distracted momentarily when the baby starts to make little *ah, ah, ah!* noises in her arms. She smiles down at her daughter, nose wrinkling as she leans down to press their foreheads together for a moment. Fingernails the size and color of petals reach up to

scratch lightly at her cheeks. It's hard to look away from the redness they leave. "We'll order you anything you want."

The thought is tempting, having your own plain cheese slices to enjoy just like you used to, so, so long ago. But...you can't. The request will never fix itself to leave your lips. It's enough that they'll let you be here at all. "No—I'll have whatever—whatever you have."

"You sure?" After you nod, she grabs the menu and house phone Mr. Hosseini has brought for her, folding the glossy leaflet open in front of her face. "I'm kind of feeling mushrooms, bell peppers, and beef. Closest thing I can get to a good Persian pizza. Those toppings bother you, sweetie?" You shake your head. "If anything, you can have a bit of the boys' pizza—they don't like all the icky toppings." She winks at you, like she knows everything you've never said, and the bridge of your nose heats up.

She's ordering everything for Mr. Hosseini to pick up, and he comes back into the living room dressed in more casual clothes than his earlier work outfit. He shoves his wallet in his back pocket. "Since ya' wanted to go outside so bad, you wanna come with Daddy to get the food, boys?"

Azar cheers before the question even finishes leaving his mouth, causing him to laugh.

"You coming, too, li'l lady?" You startle. "It's good to get outta the house sometimes, even just for a drive into town."

A glance over at Mrs. Hosseini reveals only an encouraging smile and deft fingers tickling her daughter's belly, and the boys' only offering is to scream your name over and over, nearly deafening you, so you seem to have no choice. You don't think it's a hard one, really.

Tommy's the only person who has driven you anywhere in the last four years of the two of you living alone. You didn't know that this would matter until Mr. Hosseini presses on the gas in his SUV and your heart nearly skitters up into your trachea. He drives nothing like your brother, very clearly a parent aware of the two car-seats strapped down behind him, yet you're still gripping at the seat underneath your thighs tightly. You've never realized how close sitting in the passenger seat puts you to the driver. You're not sure where to place your arms when you force yourself to relax so that they're not touching the one Mr. Hosseini has lying loosely on the middle console compartment separating your seats. The radio is playing bubbly children's music, a song the boys clearly recognize because they begin to sing tonelessly along with it. Mr. Hosseini joins them, his clear voice catching every word with dramatic lilt.

It's rare for you to go into town unless Tommy's dropping you off at Save A Lot to buy groceries, so you soak in the buildings whizzing by, eyeing the display windows for clothes and interesting ornaments you'll most likely never get the chance to buy—not until you're on your own, at least. The rain still hasn't started yet, so people are still walking along the main road, heavy shopping bags held up by their elbow creases or ice cream leaking down their wrists despite the chill skating the streets. Even with Azar loudly singing about friendship and good behavior from behind, you can still hear some of their laughter riding the wind through the thin glass of the car window.

Tony's doesn't seem to be too far because it isn't long before Mr. Hosseini pulls into the small, alley-like parking lot next to a janky, bricked, three-story building. The wide-glass windows on the bottom-most floor are decorated intensely with neon lights, and laminate delicious-looking pictures of Italian cuisine.

“Here, Rieko.” Mr. Hosseini suddenly drops a couple twenties into your resting, open hand after parking a few spaces away from a dumpster. There’re at least five other cars in the small lot. “Can ya’ pick the order up for me? I’ll stay out here with the kids.”

The request catches you off guard, not really having expected to be needed other than to be forgettable company. “*Huh?*”

He leans between your seats, dropping to a whisper to say, “It’s a bit sneaky of me, but the monsters gon’ wanna come if I get out the car—I might’a, *might’a*, asked you to come partly so we could avoid that bit. I hope that wasn’t rude of me.”

You lightly curl your fingers over the crisp bills in your hand, taking a few seconds to stare at them before shaking your head. “S’not rude.”

Mr. Hosseini smiles widely. “A lifesaver, you are.”

Inside Tony’s, it’s much warmer than outside, so much so that your neck instantly feels damp against your cardigan. It smells amazing; the strong hint of cheese, tomatoes, and carbs being mixed in various concoctions behind the employee-only door travels straight to your stomach, making it tingle uncomfortably in your abdomen with hunger. People are scattered about, clearly waiting for their orders—a bald, white man dressed in leather from head to toe, a woman with a little girl clinging to her jeans, another woman in a pantsuit, staring unblinkingly at her watch. There’s not any visible line, but you’re still hesitant to approach the blindingly-red counter, behind which a couple teens and an old, grey-haired lady bustle, answering phones and lining brown paper bags and boxes with red trim up on the countertop, checking receipts and calling out names to the expectant customers in the room.

The bald man moves toward the counter as his name is called before you manage to try to signal someone that you need assistance, pulling out his wallet to pay for the weighty, black,

polythene bag a boy in a red visor hands him. Bouncing on your toes, you're quick to scurry up to the register area when he finally departs, catching the attention of the boy who just finished helping him. Before you can speak, however, the boy's eyes light up in—recognition?

“Hey!” he exclaims. “You're in my US History class.”

There's no recognition on your part. You don't know him, don't really recall ever seeing him in that class, but then again, you're not one for holding your head up and paying attention to the world, to the people, around you, especially not in a place like school. It would be hard for you to name even five of your classmates, more so if you've never been forced to work with them for a group assignment or something just as socially stressful.

“S-sorry,” you swallow. “I don't—remember your name. I have—”

“It's Tommy! You're Rieko, right? Am I saying it right?”

Of course. *Of course* that's his name. Everywhere you go, *everywhere*, he's there. The reminder of him makes you wonder, despite yourself, what he's doing right now, wonder if he's hungry—if he's thinking about the fact that it's Friday. If he ever thinks about it anymore.

“Yeah. Yes, you—you said it right.” He didn't, actually, but you don't have time, don't want to make time, either, to correct him. “I have an order for—”

“Pickup, right? Is it under your name? 'Cuz I don't see it here, if it is. I would've definitely noticed yours in the queue.”

Shaking your head, the money crinkles further into your hand as you tell him the actual name on the order.

“Ahh. Yeah, I see. Hold on, let me get it together for you.”

He tells you the price before he walks away, giving you the chance to count the right amount of bills, and when he comes back with two boxes of pizza, you're quick to hand him the

money. As he's clicking the register and putting together the change, he makes uncomfortable small talk, ignoring the mental signals you're sending him as persuasion to actually *not* do so. "How's your project been coming? Mine's been a *bitch* to put together. I was planning to cram in time to work on it this weekend."

It's almost like he's taking his time counting the small bills he needs to give you. You shrug, simultaneously fighting off the urge to fidget as well as answering his question. "S'okay. Almost done with it."

"You need any help on it?"

Why would you? He just admitted to struggling; don't know why he would offer to help with yours if he couldn't handle his own. "Um. Not—not really, no."

His eyes are strangely bright as he peers at you, something you don't like, feel wary of. It seems like he wants to say more, maybe offer to help with your project again unnecessarily, or something, but the grey-haired woman barks at him to hurry up, that they have more customers to take care of, before he can, causing him to flinch. You're glad—there's already one Tommy in your life, one who, even with all his shortcomings, says your name right every single time he's able to stomach saying it at all.

With disappointment, the boy hands you the change for Mr. Hosseini. "I'll see you in class, maybe?"

"Maybe," is all you force out before grabbing the pizza boxes and exiting Tony's with haste. Mr. Hosseini's car is still running, white smoke visibly pattering from the muffler, and you can't wait to shove back into that warmth.

"Look who's back, boys!" Mr. Hosseini's exclamation makes his kids squeal in the back like baby pigs, and you flush. "*And she's brought the leprechaun's gold. Man, I'm hungry.*"

That hunger seems to spur him to make it back as soon as he can, and, even without speeding, he pulls in front of the house in what seems like a blink. The sky is much more shadowed now, and a few weak drizzles hit the windshield before you can all leave the car. After helping get the boys out of their car-seats—something you try not to pay too close attention to, try not to stir images you have to *push out*—before the rain can really start, you, Azar, and Cas shakily carry the pizzas up into the house at their insistence.

Mrs. Hosseini greets you all cheerily before wasting no time in moving to the dining room. You can tell everyone is deathly hungry, wants to dig in as soon as possible. Mr. Hosseini takes over in assisting the giggling boys to bring the boxes to the dining table, and you walk behind them slowly to watch the procession.

(“Daddy, I can carry it! I can—I can carry it!”

A low chuckle; a tousle of the braid Kaa-chan took all morning do in your hair. “Yeah? Think you’re strong enough, miss ma’am?”)

You hover hesitantly in the doorway once they’re all surrounding the table, Mrs. Hosseini settling in one of the chairs with her baby, whose name you should probably learn soon. When she catches sight of you while her husband is getting his wormy sons into their highchairs, she quickly waves her hand to beckon you forward. She mouths, *Come over here, silly.*

“Can I help?” you ask before you do, already sensing awkwardness in the arms swinging at your sides with nothing to contribute, feeling more and more that you’re overstaying your welcome. Still, at Mr. Hosseini’s cue, the two of you set up paper plates on the table, and you take it upon yourself to fix water in two sippy cups for Azar and Cas.

The boys are now telling their mother about the trip to Tony’s, full of the expected embellishments of a child’s memory. She listens closely while also watching Mr. Hosseini lift

the lids of the flat boxes, releasing a fresh wave of that intoxicating, savory smell into the room, and a hodgepodge of emotions inside you.

“*Ohhh man,*” he moans at the scent, “This is gonna be *so* good. Here, boys. Stop talking *Mâmân*’s ear off and take your plates. What do ya’ say?”

“Thank you,” the boys chorus after their father places a small slice in front of them each, which they immediately start smooshing against their faces, questionably making it to their mouths.

“The kids are only going to eat that one slice, Rie,” Mrs. Hosseini says. She takes the plate Mr. Hosseini puts together for her with two, loaded, make-shift Persian slices laid on top of each other, after which her husband finally starts preparing his own food. The baby is grasping outward from her lap with tiny, open palms, as if she wants to catch any wayward cuts of green pepper that may fall near her. “Feel free to take as much as you want.”

You’re agitated, for some reason, thinking about reaching out for the plain slices sitting a mere foot from your placemat. Once upon a time, you wouldn’t have hesitated. Pizza, on a Friday, surrounded by the noise of a family chattering and eating together—a situation you’ve been locked out of for nearly ten years, but still know like the back of your own hand. Pulling a slice from the box, it’s hard, for a moment, to feel rooted in the here and now.

The bottom of the pizza is freckled under your fingers where the leftover flour baked onto the crust, the little of it that remains loose dusting onto the pads of each digit. The cheese on top is steaming in front of your eyes like dry ice, and the warmth wiggles against your upper lip. It’s not from Martian Matty’s, isn’t as thin, isn’t as wide enough to fold, doesn’t nearly fall from your grip as easily as when your hands were the size of your brother’s slivers of pepperoni. Taking as big a bite as you can into that first triangle point, eyes squeezed tightly shut, the grease

is the first thing on your tongue from the yielding dough before the stringy mozzarella bursts under your teeth, releasing the garlicky sauce coated from beneath it to burn the tip of your tongue. It goes down your throat harsh in your surprise, and the corners of your eyes prickle.

It hurts. Yet still, you're taking another bite, and another, and another.

And another.

—

The sky must sense that you don't want to leave, might never want to leave if you were ever given the chance to stay, because it's pouring when you open the door.

"Oh, *jeez*, do you need an umbrella, Rie? I didn't know it was going to be this bad out—"

"No, no," you interrupt, eyes darting from the wet concrete waiting for you, slick and cold, and back to Mrs. Hosseini standing in the doorway, the warm light from the living room haloing her so you can barely make out the expression on her face. You imagine it anyway and tuck it close inside your ribcage. "I—I have one."

Don't know why you're lying, don't want to be, but you have to go, *go*, or your feet will guide you back into that house, dig the soles of your shoes into the patterned rug by the door, and never move from that spot again.

You don't belong here. Even after tonight, after the way spending dinner with this family cradled you like a nest, it's a fact you were never able to forget. No amount of eating pizza together could change that.

You feel her gaze narrow as it stays fixed upon you, and wonder if she'll call you on your dishonesty, but she nods instead. "Okay, my love. Give a call when you get home, yeah? I know it's a short trip, but I wanna know when you make it back." At your affirmation, she smiles. "I'll see you soon, sweetheart."

Call me flower one more time, you say. So I can hear it in my dreams, you say.

“Goodnight,” you say.

You think she’s going to watch you leave, umbrella nowhere in sight, call you back and berate you for tricking her, but behind her, in the house, as you turn away, there’s a, “*Mâmân,*” being urgently shouted, catching her attention and making her close the door to get back to her family with one last smile your way, leaving you out in the dark, in the cold.

You don’t belong here.

You’re running before you know it, *running*, the slap of your shoes against the sidewalk a rhythm beating in time with the pulse in your skull, water splashing at your ankles with each downward stroke of your knees, sending petrichor puffing up into your nostrils, thighs burning but never letting up because you can’t stop *running*. Your hair is heavy, draping down your back and clinging to your nape like a giant leech. The foil covering the plate held to your body scrapes against your breastbone, and it’s sharp even through a T-shirt and cardigan. The underside of the sturdy paper dish is warm, even as the dampness of your fingers starts to seep through it.

The smell of the leftovers still wafts up into your face as your house gets closer, no light shining through the windows even though Tommy’s car is parked out front, has most likely been for a while. It’s like you’re wading up the walkway when you reach, finally slow down, slogging through cattails and moss as murky water clings to your thighs, heavy, pushing at the front of your hips so you have to trudge forward, *forward*, to where you *do* belong.

You fumble with your keys at the door, arms full and fingers too slippery to have a firm hold on them. It takes a minute to get them into the lock and twisted, and that minute is all Tommy needs to be waiting right in the unlit entryway like a shadow when you swing the door open. The fright at his sudden appearance causes a shiver to wrack through your body, shaking

droplets from your shoulder blades and down onto the mat sitting at the inside base of the front doorway. From this week, it seems like this doorway is becoming the only place in this house he's willing to meet you. His coke-bottle eyes stare straight at you from underneath heavy, brown eyelids, head tilted back slightly.

You're nearly frozen still where you stand, barely noticing the door swinging shut behind you, toeing off your shoes out of absent habit more than anything. You don't know why he's come to check the door at the sound of your keys clinking through it, why he's bothered. Don't know why he's *looking at you*.

It's like he can't help himself when he asks, not why you're home so late, not if you're cold, not if you're okay, but "What is *that*?"

His scruff-darkened chin points to the plate in your hand, rainwater dripping off the jagged edges of the aluminum and tapping onto the nails of your toes. Your fingers crumple it slightly when they tighten, heartbeat digging rabidly at the base on your throat.

It's Friday, you want to say, *it's you and me, at home, faces coated in grease, and tongues lined with melting cheese*. Your wrists shake as you thrust the plate forward, pushing it closer to him than to you. "Pizza."

It's not meat-lovers, sits at the back of your mouth, *but it's the closest you'll have gotten in a long time*.

Tommy stares down at it for a moment, his face empty of any emotion, the way it always is with anyone but especially with you, before his upper lip curls into something ugly. He knows what day it is. His voice is caustic when he spits, "I don't want that *shit*."

It's like your ribs are trying to shutter closed, shield the cavity in your chest from the knife-edge of his words reaching though the gaps. This is expected, *expectedexpectedexpected*,

but bracing yourself against it still has no avail. There was no point in ever wondering what he was doing today, wondering if he was hungry.

“You never stop doing *useless shit*.” He shakes his head as if he’s baffled, disappointed, but you know he’s not. He could never be; unlike you, he carries no expectations. Only a familiarity and knowledge of you he wishes he didn’t have, and nothing else within him, about you, except...

Except...

He’s walking away, back into the darkness of the hallway, towards his bedroom, where it swallows him whole and leaves you alone, staring at the empty living room before you. Water drips from you like a mop, pooling around your bare feet as the plate hangs limply by your side. You hear it as the leftover pizza plops from within, dropping into the wetness covering the wood floors with a small splash. It hits your ankles. A dot of tomato sauce sits at the top rim of your socks, and the red stain is one you know will never come out.

Rain pounds against the windows, like a band of drummers in an empty parade, crying and marching, shells and metal casings slamming against their heaving chests, tears hitting the bouncing drumskin and thinning out under the *boom* of their mallets, lost as they move forward, and on and on, pounding and marching, *on and on*. It’s all you can hear inside the house.

Just the rain.

—

The box in your closet sits exactly where you always leave it. Your skin feels tight from where it’s still drying, hair nowhere close to lightening up the same way. You don’t remember getting here, like you’re drifting on your back in the middle of the ocean, waves lapping at your cheeks like a kiss, staring at the dimensionless sky spread above you. There’s bleach lining under

your nails from cleaning the pizza off the floor. Tommy's words echo through your brain. *You never stop doing useless shit.*

Push it out. Push it out. You bite down hard until the quiver in your lip ceases, releasing a shuddering exhale afterward. Crying isn't something you *ever do*.

The unopened envelopes are crimped and haphazardly thrown around inside the box when you open it. The topmost one is the only one stitched open at the upper edge, letter inside having more creases than the rest of the papers, worn from being crumpled and resmoothed so many times since Monday. You pull it out to read again, try to imagine that it's the first time instead of the millionth, try to recall any of your original frustration, desperation, *anger*, anything except thinking about ways things could be—could have been—different. The pictures on the window frame can't help but catch your eye when lightning strikes in your peripheral, briefly illuminating the dark imprints they make against the powerful, white flash, as the words filter through your brain in a wavering voice you haven't heard in years.

Rieko,

This would be so much easier if I could call. We don't even have your number. I just want to know you're alright. Not knowing how the two of you are doing, or if these letters are even reaching you, worries your Grandpa and I sick.

He's not getting any better. He's been holding on for so long just to see the two of you one last time. It's been hard.

Have you thought about our offer?

Write back. Please.

All my love,

Grandma.

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You don't really like when Gramma and Grampa come over. It's not often, because they live all the way in Georgia, and you don't, but every couple of months they come to see you and Tommy so they don't miss how big you both keep getting.

It's not that you don't like your grandparents. They're just old, and sometimes a little smelly. Well, you like how Gramma smells. She has a nice, lady smell. Grampa just smells old, a bit musty and like a tire when it spins too fast.

But Grampa's voice is always loud when he comes over, booming throughout the small house like a car horn, so you can hear him even if you cover your ears and stand outside to get away from it. He has a thick, southern drawl that grates at your brain. Daddy's is more subtle, like his mama's. Gramma and Grampa were born in different parts of the south, Daddy's explained, and he spent more time with Gramma when he was little like you. Grampa's always yelling at you to speak clearer when you try and talk to him, too, even though Gramma tells him to hush up. It makes you wanna never speak again, sometimes. But, still, you like when he talks about way, way, way back when he was young, marching on highways and doing sit-ins. You

don't need to talk to listen to his cool stories about his history; that's the only way you can be around him.

Gramma always braids your hair when she comes over. Kaa-chan can't do it as well as she does. She has a hard time with your hair, it's too thick and your curls easily get tangled. Gramma doesn't care when your scalp gets tender, and easily ignores your whines when she pulls too tight. She says her own mama did it the same way. By this time, it's gotten easier to ignore how much it hurts. Kaa-chan always becomes hard to find when your grandparents are in the house, so she isn't in the living room while Gramma fixes your hair into cornrows. Grampa has Tommy and Daddy on the porch, doing guy stuff probably. The rat-tail of the comb soothes some of the itchy spots in your head where Gramma uses it, and your head lolls a little bit when the sleepiness kicks in.

"Gramma, I don't, I don't think Tommy likes me." You didn't mean to tell her that, but you feel so warm in her lap, her breasts a large, pillowy cocoon behind the side of your head she's not braiding.

Her fingers stop for a second before she continues, smoothing one of them down a line of your scalp to moisturize it with castor oil, a cooling, viscous coating. "Don't say no nonsense like that. Your brother loves you like crazy."

Liar, you want to call her. Nobody will say the truth to you, like you're stupid. Like you can't see what they see just because you're little. But you don't have to be big to know when someone doesn't like you. Or love you. It's a feeling that scrapes across your skin, leaves it tender and stinging, like a pointed end of a comb, so you have to notice it.

You want to tell her more, tell her about your butterfly, and your toys that have turned up broken and slaughtered, and the way he flies across the room like a jet-plane when your mother steps close, body jittering like a livewire.

But “Hush up, now,” she says, trailing the tip of the skinny comb to make a new part in your head. So, you do.

—

“Hey. You.” A voice you’ve never heard before—it makes you blink from the daze you’ve fallen into in front of the library computer where you’re trying to cut down the Oppenheimer PowerPoint, head tilting back to gawk at the girl standing behind you. “You wanna go get drunk?”

There’s gum popping in her mouth, an assortment of necklaces sparkling against her crow-feather skin, and a huge bag on her back that looks like it should be making her do an inverted bow. Her facial features are all angles, sharp and shadowed in a way that’s immediately intimidating. A raw spot sits on her chin, most likely from a picked scab.

“What?” jerks out of your lips before you can stop it, ask a more important question like if she’s even looking at you, *talking* to you.

“I asked if you wanna get blacked out behind the school.” She blows a pink bubble before bursting it with her teeth, dragging the sticky carcass back onto her tongue. Her finger flicks lazily towards her back. “I got a Jack Daniels in my bag.”

The thought that she’s crazy can’t help but canter through your mind. Get drunk? At *school*? You fumble out, “Why’re you asking...me?”

“Cuz you look like you could use it. Yeah or no?” She sounds bored; indifferent.

It's three-fifteen. Tommy will be here for you in twenty-five minutes—expecting you to be waiting, always waiting to do exactly what you're told. At the thought of him, a crack splits in your general inclination to reticence, to meekness, and for a second, a cloud of ash unfurls inside you, billowing out bitter and untamed. This entire weekend has been spent avoiding him after Friday, forcing yourself to be smaller whenever he was in the room, because he will always need to make himself bigger to compensate with the misfortune of needing to ignore your presence, your existence. You're *tired* of indifference towards you—this girl's, *Tommy's*; sick of this routine, of *waiting* and *obeying*. You've never been drunk, never so much as touched alcohol, let alone *whiskey*, but now you want to, *need* to, to choke on something that'll replace the suffocating grip of the world you're drifting through.

“Okay. Yeah. *Yes.*” You hurry to pack up your things, shove them hastily into your bag, suddenly wanting this more than anything, easily forgetting that the presentation you're working on is due in two days.

She spins on her heel without acknowledging your words, leading you through the empty hallways and pushing out the double doors leading to the back of Langley. The sun is high in the sky overhead, and you bring your hand up to shield your eyes momentarily so they can adjust. Despite the warmth it provides, it's colder today than expected and a shiver wracks through you as it creeps up your arms, molding to your body like a second skin. It bathes the girl's in a bronze glow, and the shift of it is hypnotizing.

As you follow her to the soccer field, to the shaded underneath of the bare bleachers, where she plops down on a plot of exposed earth, dropping her bag off her back into the sparse grass with a *whomph* in the same movement, you realize you don't know her name.

She gives it before you can even ask. “I’m Dafina. Don’t call me any nicknames.” She reaches to unzip her bag, smoothly pulling out the angular glass bottle sloshing with amber liquid, must notice the way you eye it when she states, “Ya’ looking at it like you ain’t seen this before.”

You receive a nod when you don’t answer, as if you’ve proved a theory she had correct.

“Have the first sip, then. Are you gonna be weird about drinking straight from the bottle?”

“Why would I be...” You hate this word, don’t want it associated with you. “*Weird?*”

A chuckle slips from her hazel lips. “Most people wouldn’t like sharing spit with a stranger, much less another *girl*—if that ain’t what they’re into.”

Her words are oddly tinged, but you reach to snatch the bottle out of her hands anyway and feel set aflame when you struggle to twist off the sturdy cap. It leaves ridged imprints on the sides of your fingers when you finally use enough force to twist it open, the freed stench of the alcohol inside aiming straight for your eyes, harshly tickling the film over your pupils. There’s no stopping the face you make—it’s too rancid. Dafina’s smile is sharkish and amused, reigniting your ire. Throwing away hesitation, you grab the squared bottom of the bottle for a firmer grip as you toss your head back and *guzzle*.

That first swallow nearly comes right back up as it sears directly into all the veins throughout your body. You’re gagging, mucus building inside your nose and waiting for the cue to drip down along with the tears sitting at the rim of your eyelids. Any chill hugging your skin has fled.

Dafina is cackling unabashedly now, dark lips spreading to reveal milk-white teeth and a deeply pink tongue. It makes you clench your own teeth so hard that it causes a sharp pain in

your jaw, and you go full-throttle for another gulp, making her stare at you wide-eyed and wide-smiled. “Look at you,” is all she says.

Yeah, you think. Look at me.

Your gut is on fire by now, aggravated by the heavy acidic assault it’s receiving, and the serrated edges of Dafina’s body haze momentarily. The grass is poking at your ankles incessantly and you can barely feel it. Your bottom lip sucks into your mouth; head shakes as if that’ll clear it from the burn. It’s *God-awful*. You don’t know why people choose to do this. Yet, here you are now, one of those people choosing to do this. What keeps you going is that Tommy will hate this—have a reason to, for once.

Dafina finally reaches out to stop the rise of the bottle. “Jeez, lemme get some before you finish the whole shit. You’re makin’ me wonder how old you are, drinking this shit straight like that.”

You notice there’s more to her accent than the vague indicator that she’s from the South, a twinge of something that says she’s from elsewhere as well, or at least was raised with the culture of elsewhere—like you. It feels like you can’t swallow, like your saliva is crystallizing, so the answer takes a second to come, more warped than normal. “F-fifteen.”

The glass rim pauses briefly before kissing her lips. Her brows slant together as her throat bobs, shoulders inching upward at an elegant angle. When the bottle lowers, heavy glass resting in the diamond of her lap, her eyes bore into you as she swallows the last of the alcohol in her mouth. There’s a muddle building in your head and you can’t seem to break the connection of your gazes. “Not much younger than me, actually—just turned seventeen. I been seein’ you at the library this year, though.” She finally looks away, down to pick at a hangnail on her pinky. “Wondered what you were about.”

There's silence between the two of you as you continue to drink, catching each other's eyes occasionally as the bottle gets emptier and emptier. You feel less steady where you sit, like the earth is moving in your peripheral and you can't see it no matter how much you try to get it in the center of your vision.

"Why'd you—wonder 'bout me?" It's harder to speak now, words slurring and slipping on the thickness of your gums, but you haven't forgotten the last thing she said, didn't know how to ask after it without the courage of the Jack Daniels riling you up.

Dafina's not unaffected either, her resulting giggle nearly throwing her forward. You can see the top middle of her head when it bows, and you want to run your finger along the tight, kinky coils blooming across her scalp. Instead of answering, she scoots forward, no doubt coating the back of her jeans with the dirt she drags them across. With a blink, her face is suddenly all you can see, her warm breath caressing the tip of your nose, curling across the upper parts of your cheeks and wrapping over the backs of your ears. You could count her lashes one by one. Her eyes are like burning coal, intense and toxic. That sharkish grin comes back.

"Guess."

There's no time to try, though, because she's kissing you, noses smooshed together at the bridge, lips pillow-soft and booze-flavored against yours.

Your head spins, the scent of her earthy perfume from the peach fuzz on her upper lip overwhelming in your nostrils; there's nothing to do but grab onto her shoulders for stability, her bones undulating under your palms. Sweat trickles along the fluttering veins in your temples.

When did you close your eyes?

Dafina's hands slip into your hair, cradle the back of your head and tilt it back at the nape so she can press closer, the two middle fingernails on each of her hands scratching slowly, soothing.

She towers over you slightly, raising onto her knees and smothering you in the feeling of her moving mouth. The jewelry on her neck clatters against the upward point of your chin. You don't know what to do, don't know—you've never done this before, never thought to want to. You're afraid to touch her, despite her brazen foray into your hair, tugging and twirling the strands, gripping the roots, as she swallows every breath you have to give her. When she pulls away to look down at you, searching your face for something that brings the grin back to her own when she finds it, you can tell you'll never get the chance again.

The certainty of that settles in that hollow space in your ribs and it feels like you're standing in that white expanse inside your mind, seeing miles and miles of proof that you're alone—always alone. She hasn't even asked for your name. Unlike her, you don't have the confidence to give it anyway.

When she sits back, you let her, arms falling limply to your sides from where they'd been hovering in the air. She reaches over back to you, and for one second you think she's going to settle back into your space and kiss you again (*please, you think, please, please, please*), but she grabs the Jack Daniels somehow sitting upright down at your hip, pulling away to uncork it and take a deep drink. For the first time, she screws up her face at the taste, swishing the liquid in her mouth as if that'll dilute it before it drops down her throat.

Out of nowhere, confidently, she says, "Don't let this place eat you whole."

That isn't the first thing you'd expect someone to say after kissing you, but she's staring at you, eyes lidded with something heavy and heady. One of her hands still rests flat on the earth,

nearby yours. *This place?* You're unsure if she means Langley, or elsewhere—somewhere bigger, somewhere worse.

“Why?” It feels like you should be whispering. She's still so close to you, can still smell her on your lips. You haven't been this—*felt this*—close to anyone in such a long, long time.

“*Why?*” She finally glances away from you, dropping back to sit on her heels, looking instead through the open slots in the bleacher seats and out toward the much-cloudier sky. She tsks. “It'll never be worth it. It won't even be full after. Might as well let something else get you.”

—

It's so easy to forget life outside of being drunk with Dafina exists that, when the two of you stumble toward the parking lot, sky orange and pink with the dawning nighttime darkness, silent except for the occasional giggle while you try not to trip over rocks and leaves, you're stopped dumb in your tracks by Tommy's car still waiting out there for you. It sits in an uppermost space, pointed straight at the school so that the headlights illuminate your unsteady bodies rounding from the side of Langley. They blind you and you can't see your brother inside, but, still, your stomach slops right out of your body and onto the dry ground.

He's supposed to be at work.

“That your ride?” Dafina asks, indolent—doesn't seem to care about the answer when she continues, “I don't live far so I'ma walk.” She gives you one last wicked grin. “Lemme know if you wanna do this again.”

You've been with her for hours. She didn't kiss you again after that first time, and the two of you had polished off the rest of the Jack Daniels in mostly silence. She still never attempted to find out your name. You're not sure if she already knows it, maybe didn't need to

ask at all like the boy from Tony's, but the only reason you don't feel worse, feel like never attempting human interaction again, is the fact that it was harder and harder to be focused, be grounded to this planet, the drunker you got. And now, any hurt from the way this day turned out with her, from her seemingly easily waned interest in you and your company, is squashed by how much you suddenly don't want her to leave. You know that you're in for—for—you can't even think what. But he's pissed. Tommy's *pissed*, that's what you're certain of, and you don't want to face it. It's crawling along your face, his stare—gets worse when Dafina starts to walk away without turning back after you fail to express any of your thoughts to her (never would have anyway, because you never do), heading to slip through and disappear at the gap in the gates.

Now it's just you and a single car in Langley's empty parking lot. Frozen tendrils clench around your wildly thumping heart. Nothing inside of you says to approach it, approach him—*run away, run away, grow wings, fly up into space, and turn into a star*. But the drunken haze you're in is convincing. It can't be that bad, can't be.

Even so, you're not in a hurry to get to the car, need to go slow to pretend that putting one foot in front of the other isn't incredibly difficult right now. The world is swaying, and you want to join its dance—eyelids, and arms, heavy and loose. It's important to keep it together, though, keep aware. You've never been in this situation before, don't know what you'll have to deal with once you open that car door. Roiling nausea is starting to replace the muzzy giddiness from just thirty minutes ago.

Your brother has never hit you before. Never once, not even as kids. For the first time, shoulder blades quivering with every step forward across the asphalt, you're terrified he will. That's not something either of you would be able to come back from.

When you make it to the car, you don't try to look at him through the window—don't want to see the expression on his face. Pulling the handle on the back door with two careful fingers, the click of the lock still bounces across the parking lot like a shuttlecock, hitting the meagerly-leafed trees lining behind the fence, shaking more leaves from their branches onto the ground. Slinking into the back seat, you're once again making yourself as small as possible.

He doesn't speak when you're settled in and gently pulling on your seatbelt. Somehow, this makes it worse. He doesn't grip the gear shift to rocket off as he normally would, just sits still in the driver's seat, staring forward through the windshield at Langley as if he's watching the afterimages of teenagers bustling about outside. The radio isn't on, of course. You wonder if he can smell the booze on your breath.

Five years ago, when you were ten and he was seventeen—and the two of you were living in the empty Rutgers' house after the Marsh family could no longer foster you, which was long after your grandfather had gotten sick and Gramma couldn't handle taking care of her suffering husband as well as two kids—there was a lot of time spent like this. Together, quiet, air between you icier than ever—no longer forced to associate by your parents, but forced still, orphaned by the same moment, the same shed blood. The Rutger couple didn't foster any other kids besides the two of you, and they were only in it for the money. They made sure you and Tommy had substantial meals, and clothes on your back, but kept the rest of the stipend for themselves, leaving you to occupy yourself in that lonely house with only your brother, and his cold anger, slowly building over the years, for company. In this car, now, it's just you—drunk as you are—him, and that same cold, not-quite-dead anger.

“What,” he starts, quiet and low, still staring straight forward as if his gaze is stuck on one single point, “the *fuck* is wrong with you?”

A gasp sticks in your throat, not quite managing to make its way out of your lips. The cheek facing the passenger seat bloats toward you, like he's smiling. You know he's not.

He doesn't continue, waiting for whatever answer you'll come up with, but there isn't one. Every word in your brain is scrambled, spread far across the stretch of your mind with no hope of finding each other to produce anything but word vomit. Or actual vomit. It's been so long since your first sip of the Jack Daniels that it's beginning to feel rotten inside your stomach, wish it was anywhere else but mingling with the other acids churning there. You gag with your mouth closed, scared for a second it will all actually come up on the vinyl seating under you, but manage to swallow it back, where it drops like iron.

What *is* wrong with you? It's a question you ask every day, *have* been asking every day for as long as he's put it in your head. Your silence only makes him angrier, and he starts vibrating like a growling dog. "I asked you a goddamn question, Rieko. Why the hell're you in *my* car, stinking like shit, after the bullshit you just pulled?"

There's *something* to say somewhere—you know there is. Why can't you find it? Maybe it's up in the stars that aren't yet in the sky, where Daddy always said it would be. A place to look and find answers, find your way home when you were lost, if you ever were lost.

You're lost.

Every crumb of defiance that lined and moved your bones when you went with Dafina to the soccer field is dissipating.

Tommy snarls, finally whipping his head around so fast you hear the snick in his neck, see the way his face is contorted like a monster, a real monster, not the ones the Hosseinis compare their kids to with fondness—one that's not afraid to pillage, and murder, with no

remorse. It's like you can't breathe under the pressure of his beastly glower, like it's sucking the gravity from the space of the car, aiming to crush you down into nothing.

"What were you trying to do?"

Isn't that the question? What *were* you trying to do? To show him you weren't just a pet he could train into submission and obedience? That you could get back at him for making you feel so dirty, so wrong for being born into this world and making him live with you in it? That you'll do *useless shit*, on purpose, all the damn time, if that's what he wants? Maybe—maybe—that you won't always be waiting?

"What? What is it? You want me to lose my damn job? The job payin' for you to eat, and sleep in your fucking bed, and come to this fucking school every fucking day? That what you want, swaying in here like a drunken asshole? That what it is?"

I wanted to ruin you. The thought comes swift, and there's no locking it away, have to bite your lip so hard it bleeds to not actually say it. There's no question if you meant it. You do. That's what the stars would spell out if you looked up and they were there. It's all you think about, sometimes, all you *can* think about in that maddeningly quiet house, with no one to listen but the dead people in the pictures taped to your window. Ways to ruin him, to make him feel as low and as sick of himself as you do. To make him feel as *useless*, in life, as you do.

"I swear I don't fucking like you."

As unloved as you do.

Screw you, you want to have the guts to say. Here you are, listening to him spit every word that comes into his mind at you, bar the ones he really wants to say, and you can't even fight back with the bare minimum, can only sit here, face and neck as hot as lava, trying to

control the tremor in your limbs. *Of course* he wasn't going hit you. Not physically. You almost wish he would.

"I should fucking *kill* you!"

"So *do it!*" you scream, cords in your throat tearing, palms slapping your thigh so hard it stings, the sound slamming against the back windshield, surprising the both of you.

It rings in the following silence, rippling like a water current, and leaving the roaring quiet after it's done to stretch like an abyss. You look at each other with wide eyes, realizing you've both said things you can't ever take back.

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Gramma's letter rests gently between your fingers as you sit at your desk, schoolwork shoved to the side, forgotten. Your nails against the crinkled paper have been bitten raw. Their number hasn't changed. You know it hasn't. She wouldn't have had time to do something like that while taking care of Grampa, while knowing you'd have no other way of contacting her if she did. You read the words over and over. *Have you thought about our offer?*

You have. You have. An infinite amount of times, but especially in the moment you were blowing watery, acrid chunks into the toilet after giving your brother permission to hurt you.

Tommy was betrayed when she'd had to give you both up to the state. Living with your grandparents had been hard; they were old, not in a place anymore to really take care of two young kids, but they were familiar, and they tried, even while in mourning, just like you. At first, when Gramma kept calling the Marsh house to check on you, he'd refuse to talk to her, wrench away from the phone with metal-clad stomps, dodging the other kids scurrying out of his way—and you, barely a double-digit age, had to attempt to be reassuring and happy at her wavering, crackling voice in the receiver. But when her calls became fewer and far between, it was easier

to be like Tommy, resentful and miserable. Grampa didn't ask to get sick, but you didn't ask for your parents to die either.

Now, though. You think about the last phone call from her, before Tommy had been able to get custody of you and use his savings to move far, far away from the Rutgers, the Marshs, and any home that didn't have your family in it.

"Tommy's gon' be eighteen, soon, sweetheart. You know what that mean?"

You shook your head even though she couldn't see you. "No, Gramma, I don't."

"That means you'll be the only one who'll need a guardian, muffin. You can come stay here with me and Grampa, now, if you'd like. Just you."

For a second, leaving the Rutgers behind, leaving *Tommy* behind, had been tempting—you could hear the sounds of chains unshackling, hitting the floor with deadweight. But the more you considered it, the more a sick feeling settled in your stomach. All your life, your brother had been there, even if he'd been lurking in a corner, watching with eyes that made you shudder. To leave him? Was that to be free, or to be lost?

At the time, it felt like being an unhitched train car, unable to go forward or backwards on the tracks. Now, you don't know.

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Kaa-chan asks you why you're crying. You're not crying, actually, barely have four tears on your face, but she's already kneeling next to you, the taut skin over her bones bare against the hard floorboards. You can see a flush creeping up her thigh from the strain, but she shows nothing on her face but focus on your small body. "Tell Mama what's wrong, Rie-chan."

You can't. Tommy's in the doorway behind her, watching the both of you with a face as blank as new paper despite having none of the whiteness of it. You don't know when he did it, or

how, but you know he did. And he's standing there, waiting for you to do as he wants, expects—to get him in trouble with Kaa-chan, so he can curl his lip at you (and her) like he wants to all the time.

He's always watching. This morning, in the backyard with your Mama, chasing radiant blue butterflies to keep in the jars waiting at the weeds behind your feet, you knew he was there. Maybe Kaa-chan did, too, but she's long given up on asking him to join you both in playing. He just stays in the house and peeks out the window in his room with a gaze you could feel even if you were planets apart.

You had caught the prettiest butterfly of them all, and Kaa-chan helped you put it in your jar, and poke holes in the cloth covering so it would be able to breathe. When holding the glass up to the early sunlight, your wrist shaking from the weight of it, it almost seemed like its wings were sparkling. You named it Flutterfly.

"Now that's the best name I've ever heard," Mama had said, swinging you up against her hip, the jar pressed between your chest and hers. "Except for yours, of course."

You giggled. "Kaa-chan." That's all you had to say. Kaa-chan.

Now, Flutterfly's gone, jar nowhere to be found despite you having already looked throughout every crevice in the house you could think of. You've even looked in Daddy's socks, stinky as they were, just in case Flutterfly had escaped and been attracted to the strong smell, or even to his loud scores echoing through the hallways.

You're not really crying, but you want to, because Tommy's in the doorway, waiting, and you just know you'll never see Flutterfly again.

Your mother sees you're not going to speak, at least not now, maybe not ever, so she wraps her arms around you, bony but warm, and all you have to say is, "Kaa-chan."

You're not really crying, but your hand throbs like a heartbeat and the pink mangle at the top on your middle finger is already starting to pool like mad. The screwdriver scratches the veiny top of your bare foot as it falls from your previously tight grip, but you barely feel it. *God*, you should've known this would happen—fixing has never been your strong point. But the squeak in the topmost back-porch stair has been bothersome for no less than an entire year, and as the only one who comes out here, you're the only one to notice, thought the perfect time to finally fix it would be when you desperately need a reason not to be locked in the house with Tommy. This will always be what you fall to when you want to prove yourself—cleaning, and cooking, and fixing.

Inside, on your way to *fix yourself* at least, you're crossing his path before you can stop the movement of your body and pick a new destination that doesn't require him to catch wind of, and remember, the scent of your blood.

You would ignore the fragile flesh at the tip of your newly nail-less finger getting its first taste of air's sting, and crying red down your arm at the searing coolness of it, just to never brush shoulders with him—to never give him the chance to turn you into a bug under his foot again: small, ugly, and helpless. Yesterday has shown you how things will stand for as long as the two of you are together, and it's better for everyone when you accept that—stay complaisant to it.

You're too slow, though, always too slow, always, always, always—never seeing what's right in front of you, never shouting out the warning fast enough to prevent the white-hot crash (*“LOOK OUT!”*), *shrill scream lodged in your throat, a windstorm of glass exploding from behind and piercing into exposed shoulder blades, wrist snapping forward as an eddy of metal, leather, and pain slam from all directions*—and the world (*blinding, colorless*) lags to match.

The Roman-Persian wars happen and end in the time it takes your top and bottom lashes to slot together. You watch the bursting blooms of roses behind your eyelids for the duration of the Ghana Empire before you're able to pull them up again and see the distance between your feet and his, somehow no closer than it was thousands of years ago, at the very beginning of you and him.

Tommy's back to not looking at you, but your brother is as intensely aware of you as you are of him. He's made you both into the same side of a magnet and you wonder if the repelling force between your two bodies will send you flying off away from him like a telekinetic dismissal, tearing through the walls like a bullet, and if he'll watch in boredom—undoubtedly unmoved. He smells like sawdust, like houses being torn down, cranes slamming into windows and drywall, wood supports caving in and shavings ballooning into the air, riding the swirling currents like dandelion seeds. You make a wish every time he's near. This time the wish slings through your brain too fast to grasp even as your ears ring against the sudden sluggishness of this minute passing, but it's the same as always and you don't need to see it to know exactly what it is.

You think, *this was a mistake—all of it*. Bringing him pizza on Friday to remind him of what used to be, drinking yesterday to get back him, trying to fix the squeaky stair on the back porch by yourself today as if that'll erase all your blunders from this past week. Placing the first aid kit in the bathroom, moving into this house with Tommy instead of back with your grandparents, like they finally wanted, like they still want. Being born. He hates you.

And like sensing that thought, your body flares up in a way that is familiar and unfamiliar all at the same time—*NO*. You thought, after yesterday, this would never happen again. Only bad things happen when it does.

He's looking—at you, into you, he *hates you*—

And you can't help reacting to the sharp zing rocketing through your chest at his gaze, pupils catching his as you're suddenly close enough to hear his breath whistle through his nose, steady, strong. There's a warmth radiating off his body that you can feel even through the thick layer of his underclothes and protective blue coveralls, and it belays the coldness that always sits at the back of his tongue, just for you. The whites of his eyes are laced with shiny, red webs of sleeplessness, and they remind you of Daddy's eyes. Steady, strong. Overworked.

You make it that way.

His brown lips part from their perpetual pout, another thing that reminds you of your father, but the voice that comes out is unmistakably Tommy's, in both its blunt content and menacing tone. "*Move.*"

The rapid slowing of time stops. Just stops. Nothing moves—not the blood creeping down over your elbow, not the bag previously swaying on his shoulder, nothing. It's you and him, like the very beginning, and the very end you still have yet to see.

What he said yesterday curls around your skull like a skunk, a ticking timebomb of poison, reminiscent of a thought you've already had on your own before, rare but not rare enough that you can't still pretend it doesn't happen as often as it does.

He wants to kill me.

It's not something you've ever really believed before, not *really*, even when the thought's made your body run cold like a tundra. But. There's no one way to tell, maybe no *real* way to tell—you're inflating his already-negative feelings and making it drastic, deadly, he can't really have meant what he said—but it's easy, so easy, when he looks at you as if he's one step away from being there, of wishing you gone enough to wish you *gone*.

Like a butterfly in a closet.

Mrs. Hosseini is changing her baby on the carpet. You don't know why she's doing this on the floor today instead of the changing table that's most likely in the nursery. Maybe she's sensed that you want it, want to be near someone, near a parent, a *mother* even if they're not yours. Or maybe it's not about you—you haven't crossed her mind at all. Maybe this week has been a disaster for everyone, and the only way to bypass the bad energy is to do something different, something you normally would never do, like get drunk out of your mind even though you're underage, or change your baby on the floor.

Maybe it's just because she wants to.

But she lays a white blanket with caricatures of sheep out flat over the colorful rug fibers, gets onto her knees, and gently rests her bawling baby down like a mined diamond. Azar and Cas are sitting by the child's head, watching the process intently even while complaining about how noisy and stinky everything is. They're not wrong.

You can't focus on anything else but the operation unfolding in front of you, can barely stand to blink to break the mindless trance you're in—*have* been in since your brother left you and went to work, even while you helped Mrs. Hosseini wash the dishes and tidy the downstairs earlier when the kids were all napping. She hums now while pulling the diaper off, unphased by the mild chaos of the situation even as the baby begins to hiccup from her own sobs, unleashing a foul scent into the air along with a fresh set of squeals from the boys. A laugh escapes her as she quickly wipes everything away from the baby's bottom, locking the wet wipes into the soiled diaper and wrapping it all up to be discarded. She reaches into the bulky bag behind her, rustling for the tools she'll need to finish off the job.

The baby begins to quiet down as if realizing she's no longer filthy, mewling with interest as her mother spreads cream over her skin before beginning to seal it with a new diaper. The wrap of it reminds you of the heavy bandaging around your finger, and you start to pick at the already-lifting edges of the adhesive. Tiny hands reach towards Azar and Cas once they catch the baby's attention, and they each move to grab one in delight, pressing as many of their barely-bigger fingers into the baby's palms as they can.

Cas giggles unexpectedly. "You so stinky, Suri."

The sight makes your stomach twist. With a jolt, you realize this is the first time you've heard her name. Actually, this is the first time you've really been close to the baby at all. You've paid attention to her peripherally for as long as you could bear, but nothing more. Still, you should've asked, didn't mean to be rude, to ignore the child on purpose. But now—you can't. It was easier when you didn't have to think about her. She was just the new baby, the one taking up most of Mrs. Hosseini's time—the reason you were here at all, lightening the load she'd created. Now, looking at her wriggling form and listening to the boys childishy reprimanding her to *sit still for Mâmân*, you can't see anything else but Azar and Cas' little sister.

Up until this moment, it was simple to focus on the thoughtless routine of a dirty diaper being replaced, but now the sanctuary of that has disappeared as if it was never there in the first place. When you were that little, what did—what did Tommy think? Did he *ever* think?

Your mouth opens before you can stop it. "If it smells bad," everyone's eyes shoot to you, making you flush hot. "Why—why not go play?" *Do something, away from this? Away from her?*

It takes a minute for the boys to realize the question is for them, not the only other non-child in the room. Mrs. Hosseini's brows have raised, but she seems amused more than anything—relieved. This is the first time you've spoken since you arrived.

Azar's tone is indignant, even though his chest puffs like a peacock at having your attention. He shakes his head as if you've missed something big. Maybe you have. Maybe you always do. "We can't play if Suri's cryin'. Big brothers gotta be big brothers even when i's stinky."

The words shake through you, threatening to dislodge the nails that have already begun to screw loose, holding tight everything you've ever had to *push out*.

Even when it's stinky. He says it like it's so easy.

And yet.

—

You're throwing your shoes on by the front door, Tommy already halfway to his car, still avoiding your presence as much as possible, when it dawns that you've forgotten entirely about your project. It's Wednesday morning and your presentation on Oppenheimer and the Cold War is unfinished, still a long roll of PowerPoint slides and not enough brevity.

In the last ten hours, all that's been on your mind is what would happen if you picked up the phone. Still, even if that hadn't sidetracked you, the Hosseinis have swallowed you whole this entire past week, and Dafina was the final distracting cincher. Everything else has been thrown to the side. There's not even any time to panic, because you can hear the car starting and you've already run out of chances to try Tommy's nerves after the way this week started out. Maybe you really should've taken up the offer for help from the Tony's-Tommy when you had the opportunity.

When you're speeding down the road—the tapping, *tapping*, of Tommy's fingers against the wheel cover a minute-hand inside your skull—you try to calculate how much time you'll have before first period to grab a computer in the library and finish the presentation. It's a better time-passer than paying attention to the tense hush inside the car.

You're probably going to have to just cut, add little, if anything—*oh*. The bookbag against your back feels very light; there's only a Ziplock bag of grapes and a Trix yogurt for when you skip lunch as usual—school food makes you nauseous and you always wait to eat until dinner, already used to the airy and light-headed feeling of being empty and *hungry* for most of the school day. You forgot the Jessica Wang book.

Tap, tap. It's probably due today, too, maybe even over-due. You hate the thought of that, *hate that*. You're always in the library, always make it a point to respect the place that shelters you weekly, daily. There's never been an overdue borrow on your slip. You feel harried, knowing that you've marred your perfect record, trying to be bigger than you are, to move beyond where you actually belong.

His fingers are still tapping, *tap, tap*, you can hear his nails scraping the stitching on the roundest part of the steering, jagged edges catching the fraying, white strings sticking haphazardly from the tough leather. *Taptaptap*. You think he's getting faster with it, or maybe you feel like he is because you can see the vein protruding at the side of his temple like an ant trail, and the trees are that solid wall you hate. He's hasn't stopped being furious. You knew that; he's not the type to sit and talk himself down once wound up. Instead, it only grows worse and worse, like a bomb on a timer, or water heading to boil. Still, could he slow down?

“Can he slow down?” Daddy sounds annoyed, his teeth kissing. *“He's all the way up my ass.”*

At the sound of your giggle, Kaa-chan throws him a look. You like when he says bad words, because it's so rare that he does it around you. It's funny when he forgets to be careful.

"Sorry," he says, reaching over the gearshift and grabbing Mama's hand. He pulls at the skin over her knuckle lightly. "Just tired. Yesterday was a really long day."

She pats his wrist before flicking at it playfully. "I know, Reggie. Daijoubu. Just don't drive too fast, we'll still get there in time." She turns to the backseat, sending a wink towards your car seat. "Right, Rie-chan?"

"Hai, Mama! Daddy, don't drive fast. Drive nice!"

He's laughing with you. You're all laughing. "Okay, baby. That's how we're doing it today. Driving nice."

Tommy's not driving nice. Never does, but this is different. He's so *angry*—he's been angry for days, but it's been since he was born, really. He's pissed off in a way that makes you uneasy, makes you want to scratch until the dryness caused by the feverish heat seething off him flakes away. You think you've gotten to him, really gotten to him. He would probably spit on you if he could. But he doesn't, because your veins carry the same blood, whatever that might mean to him. At the end of the day, you and him are the same—orphans, lonely, *ugly*. He's just turned deeper into the bitter little boy your *Kaa-chan* tried to love, while you've become nothing.

This mood can't entirely be because of you. Maybe his boss at work yelled at him again. It's usually because he messes something up in one of the cars and it turns into bigger job than it was when they started on it. It's rare, but it happens. You only know because Tommy will go outside to the backyard, as he never does, just to throw a baseball at the big tree lining the grass' end, where the valley slopes down like a gutter. He somehow never manages to lose the ball down to the foresty abyss, marks the bark dead-on every time, slamming a deep, uneven crevice

into the cypress and grunting more curses than Daddy ever knew. This time, it would most likely be because you made him late on Monday, ridiculously late, throwing off the rest of his entire week.

Or maybe it's not that. The landlord could have raised the rent again—sometimes he does that, probably thinking he'll weed the two of you out, find better tenants—ones that'll pay the bills on time and clean up the yard. But Tommy likes it here, for some reason; maybe because it's the only place you now know, the only place that he can say is *his*, has been his for years, and he's not eager to give that familiarity up. Maybe. So, when that happens, he gets mean, gets mad, but never packs the two of you up and leaves. Just works harder, and longer, and stays. You don't know what he plans for the future, if he'll disappear when you turn eighteen, free to never see you again, released from the shackles that bind the two of you together. But for now, he stays in the hollow of the log drifting on the swamp, hating.

But really, you know it's none of that. Those are excuses you're trying to tell yourself to divert from the truth, the only thing that could get him like this. Nothing makes him froth at the mouth like you. He just hates *you*.

The car is careening—you blink, thinking it's a dizzy spell, you're so *hungry*. You realize, you haven't really been eating these last few days, too simultaneously high- and low-strung. But no. You don't know why you notice how deep his thumbs press into the wheel, but it's all you can see when he jerks the car to the side, the trunk swinging the opposite way.

The wheels screech (*"Richard!" Kaa-chan screeches, her left arm releasing her hold on Daddy's hand to fling into the back seat for you, your tiny fingers never reaching hers*) as they drag unexpectedly from the smooth surface of the dry tar, the solid-yellow line stretching for miles and miles in a direction you're no longer headed in, bumping over onto dirt and mulch,

spraying both into the air like a sprinkler. You're still going sixty, no, it feels like *ninety* (feels like twenty), the force trying to throw your body into the left-hand door. But the seatbelt slams you backward into the seat instead, tearing a scream from the throat it wraps taut around and bruises. (*Their bodies bruise right before you, skin bursting as metal jams into them from all sides, glass exploding against your eyes, scratching your temples, you don't know if that's Mama's hair in your mouth or yours, if it's her blood in your mouth or yours, don't know what you're seeing, but you scream, and scream*). The hood of the car concaves as it blows through that solid wall of wood, brush, and bramble, and all you can see through your unwillingly wide eyes is Tommy, face blank, *blank*, as he flies through the front windshield. Leaving you.

You're nowhere, and everywhere at once, scattered like leaves, or ashes, across miles; across that empty stretch of whiteness in your head. The memories scatter with you.

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It's the wetness crawling down your cheeks that makes you start pulling the pieces back into one again. *You're not really crying.* Opening your eyes, the world is filtered scarlet, and you have to blink three, *onetwothree*, times before hints of green and orange start to peek through.

You're late for school. It *feels* like you are, that distinct sensation of not being where you're supposed to—like tearing from your bed thirty minutes after you wanted to, knowing an alarm didn't go off when it should've. The bookbag is still against your back, and it's leaking—your grapes. Maybe the yogurt. Both. Your head, too; leaking. It's not tears, but blood, that's crawling down your face—can't tell where exactly the skin broke—like a bug, a spider hanging from a single strand connecting to the canopy above you, or maybe the sky beyond it, still the wrong color. A world full of wrong.

You're not at school, but instead lying sprawled against hard, wet dirt and corpses of grapes; somehow not one yourself, despite being here because you were wanted dead.

He wanted you dead.

That's all you can think, his face as you last saw it pressing against the insides of your retina. No pain, no fear, nothing. He wanted you *dead*. He'd meant it. You hadn't really believed that.

A blistering pain begins to build at the sides of your neck. Where is he? You should look, maybe, because you can't hear anything except the powerlines laced in your eardrums. But that would require being able to lift limbs that feel sown to the earth.

He wanted you dead.

Maybe you should stay here until you are.

The spider drops suddenly, the strand popping like it's been cut, and it falls into your open mouth. The frantic scrambling of spindly legs on your tongue is what jerks you up, and you throw yourself onto your hands and knees to heave up the acid burning through your esophagus. Your retches open your ears to even newer sounds—birds cawing, leaves crunching, a car horn blaring non-stop. You don't know how you missed it.

About forty feet away, Tommy's car lies on its side, nearly unrecognizable from its original form except for the color. It's nothing but a smoking, noisy hunk of metal and melting glass, and you can't believe you're not still inside of it, bent and broken just the same. Tommy is nowhere to be seen.

A sour wetness dribbles from the inside of your lip onto the ground. Is this what you're meant for? This is the second time, the *second time*, you've escaped an impossible collision, a reach from Death himself. You can't help but wonder if he's trying to reclaim a wayward child, and you keep slipping through his grasp somehow. Is this what you're meant for?

The spider is flailing in the syrupy pool of your vomit, reaching upward for a chance at air but not quite able to get out of the quicksand made with the mud underneath it. You watch it die slowly. Is *that* what you were *meant for*?

You skitter away backward on your hands and feet like a crab, like an *insect*, far away from the honking car and the dying spider, tripping slightly over a knobbed root tangling with the earth, desperately looking around for a way out. The sun peeks through the stripped trees as if it wants to see the spectacle you make. The air smells much damper locked in the slight density of the forest, as if it's kept droplets of Friday's rain hostage for the lizards no doubt rustling in its underbrush.

You realize the car barreled down a slope, and you can't see the road over the briar-patch raised along it. It would probably make sense to go try and find it anyway, crawl up the foliage-covered hill, see if you can flag down a car for help even though not many people drive down that roadway. You can't be that far, but you blacked out, don't know for how long, so you're not sure. At the reminder, a sonic boom sets off in your skull, gouging at your temples and nearly bringing you to your knees for a moment. The sun turns from inquisitive to menacing; painful.

It's doubtful that you could make it up that slope, not on your own, not hurting like this. There's a tremor in the next breath you take. Sweat streams from your pores and your forehead is caked tight with blood. Your hand reaches up to wrap around your throat as if it's cracking into pieces you need to hold together. There's no choice but to find Tommy, even if the only thing waiting will be his empty body. It's difficult to imagine anyone surviving that kind of expulsion, at that speed. Then again, here you are.

Finding him. From there, you can figure out the next move to make, will at least know where you stand. With him.

He can't have been thrown far. That's what's in mind as you begin to stagger forward through the brush, aiming in a random direction that looks like it could've been disturbed by the crash—it's hard to tell when the fallen logs and broken, browning bramble look perfectly natural under the light spraying from the awning of the pines looming overhead. You stumble into bark, splinters piercing the flesh of your cheeks, and your palms, too, when they grab on for balance. For a moment, you keep your face pressed into the rough, biting wood. You could throw up again.

Keep moving, a mantra whispered under your breath to push you on, to not focus on the reality of what just happened. Eyes feeling ready to dislodge from their sockets, you dart them back and forth to look for the figure of your brother. It's hard, you've never had to do this before—look for him. He was always just there.

Now—are you free, or are you lost?

It feels like you've been walking forever, but also for no time at all, when you catch sight of what looks like a pale shirt-sleeve, marred by umber-colored muck, resting at the base of a tree about twenty feet ahead of you. It's the same shade as the polo Tommy was wearing this morning.

You rush forward shakily, knocking your ankle on a large, moss-covered rock. It smarts, but you pay it no attention as the body of your brother comes into view, sprawled on the ground. You take a breath, scared to find out if he can no longer do the same. Not getting any closer, you gawp, eyes flittering over his chest in search for movement. For a heartbeat, nothing happens, but you don't even have time to discern what to *feel* if he's really—before his belly bulges upward, making you lurch backward to pin your spine to a tree.

He's still alive. *He's still alive.*

Instead of relief, the only thing reverberating through your head are the words that were almost the very last he said to you. *I should fucking kill you.*

Knowing that he was serious in a way you never knew to expect, you can only come up with one plan now that you've found him here, alive and breathing.

Maybe you should wait until he isn't.

—

"Daddy?"

"Yes?"

"Did you love Tommy's mommy?"

His chest stops moving under your head for a heartbeat. Not his, though, because you can hear it thrumming against your ear. Thumpthumpthump. Sometimes, you lay on his chest just because you wanna hear it. The girls at school agreed that daddies have the best heartbeats. Daddy's hand comes up to press your wild curls down more neatly under his chin. "Now what's gone and conjured a question like that in your pretty little head?"

"You s-said those stars are a mama and her son. Tommy had a...had a mommy before I had a mommy. Did you love each other?"

"I—"

"Did she love him? Where's she now?"

The cicadas stuck to the trees are shaking the air, crying somewhere in the distance.

"That's—that's complicated, baby."

You wait patiently for him to continue, and his chest heaves with the sigh he lets out.

"Of course I loved her. But I...I hurt her. A lot."

Daddy hurt someone? Your daddy? "You hit her?"

“No! Never, baby, Jesus. I just...there’s ways to hurt the people you love without touching ‘em.”

You wonder if Tommy loves you, and if that’s the reason he’s so good at it.

“Remember the story? Like Zeus betrayed Callisto, I betrayed Tommy’s mom.”

“Why?”

“Well...that’s grown-up business, which little minis like you,” he starts to tickle your belly through your dress and your squeals light up the night air, “have no place in.” As you’re catching your breath, he says, “But I would never hit a woman, baby. You can trust that. And don’t let no man ever hit you, neither.”

You giggle at the tone of his voice, but he shakes your shoulder gently to bring your attention back to him.

“You hear me?”

“Yes, Daddy. I hear you.”

—

When you approach Tommy, the first thing you notice is the blood. It’s seeping into the earth, moistening the mulch and coating the chips of wood and browning leaves speckling the ground, making a carmine mud mixture next to where he lies flat on his back. The smell is nauseating, like the underbelly of a roach you’ve just split open under your feet, the fear that it’ll stitch itself back together right before your eyes tickling the back of your neck and tugging bile from your gut. A gag pulls from you, and, when your throat gurgles, you fight not to let any more acidity burst through your lips to join the sickening mixture below you. The stub where his arm used to be is laid over the entire mess like the dock of a lake. *God.*

For a second, you sway unsteadily, gaping at him. You don't know what to do. What should you *do*? He's not dead, that's one thing you *do* know, but that's only for now—with that kind of wound, laid out like that, he can't have much longer.

And wouldn't that be justice? If in his endeavor to kill you, he ends up being the only casualty, untethering his own fragile hold on Earth, running straight into Death's grasp just as you slip from it.

Still: there's one problem. *You're* here.

His life is currently in your hands, fingers grasping his shoulders as Death tries to drag him away, off to whichever Hell he probably belongs. He could die, he could *really die*, but you have the chance, as small as it is, to prevent that just by having found him here.

Should you take it?

Dropping to your knees beside his unmoving body, the smell gets more intense—you're choking on it. His eyelashes don't even flutter. He's so *still*. The car isn't honking anymore, can't hear it in the distance; nothing but woodland silence surrounds you.

Your bookbag falls from your shoulders and to the ground. Slowly, you grab the sleeves of your cardigan at the wrists and pull it off. It's dirty, streaks of blackening soil painted across the mildly-torn fabric. Even so, it would be enough to wrap around his arm, or what used to be his arm, a barrier for the bleeding. You ball it up, wedge it against your stomach in a hug.

Should you take it? One last chance to get back at him? Should you leave him here to die?

Above you, a butterfly trails aimlessly through the pines, tiny orange wings beating a slow, steady rhythm.

You're running. It seems like you're always running.

Your vision is coated black at the edges, blurry, so all you can see is forward. It's impossible to remember where you came from. It hadn't seemed like you walked far to find him, but the car is nowhere in sight, no smoke or sound to lead you to it. It must be mid-morning at the latest, *if* that much time has managed to pass, but the sun is long gone anyway, replaced by a smattering of dark, sinister clouds slowly merging together.

Can't pay attention to that—it can't help you right now. You need to find the road, find where the land starts to slope up so you can climb, get the hell away from here, find your way to the world where Tommy will no longer exist. The scrapes and cuts appearing on your now-bare arms are hard to notice when that's all you can think about.

Tommy will be gone. It's something that's only ever happened in your dreams.

The first thing you'll do after getting help, getting to a hospital, is call your Gramma. She'll take you in with open arms. You'll hug her, and Grampa, and apologize for ever being angry, ever letting Tommy's actions convince you he knew something you didn't. He didn't know shit, *has never known shit* except how to be awful, and hateful, and ugly. You let him turn you into that, too, for much longer than it should've gone on.

You'll say goodbye to Mrs. Hosseini, and her family that you wanted to love, transfer schools, never think about that moment with Dafina again, and become a version of yourself you've never had the chance to be. Not with him looming over your every thought, every desire for something that would make you not feel so trapped in a world too big and too empty for someone as small, insignificant, as you.

But. *But*. The thought snaps around your skull like a rubber band. You—running now. Is that not awful? And hateful?

And ugly?

You slow down, the walls of your lungs and throat grated by the cold air. Even with all the wildlife and nature in your wavering vision, the world around you is empty, miles of nothing, and no one. Can you really leave him there, lying cold and lifeless next to a pale blue cardigan that could've given him even just a few more minutes? Just because you think you can be happy?

He would never second guess it, in this situation. He wouldn't even have looked for you, not even to put you to rest, like your parents would want him to, content to leave your soul wandering these trees, crying out for help, for the rest of eternity.

But you just admitted that he doesn't know shit. Has never known shit. Why are you doing what he would?

“*Gah!*” Grabbing at the tangled hair on your head, your wrists jerk with enough force to rip it out. Why can't it be easy? How does he do it? How does he press in with his thumbs to deepen his grip, and jerk the wheel? Instead, it's like cutting down a PowerPoint when you've gone over the limit and still aren't finished—like asking a pretty girl if she would kiss you one more time so you won't forget the taste of her bottom lip. Like asking your brother if he would love you, for just once in his goddamn life.

Crouching down, leaning forward to slam your forehead into the dirt, a memory jams loose at the force. It's in your mind's eye: Tommy's head bowed, hair slightly bushy, definitely long-overdue for a trim from the barber on East Main Street, sitting on the couch as your dad stood over him like an oak, face screwed in exhaustion and disappointment. *I've left you to this for too damn long. I don't know when this'll stick in your damn head, Tristian Thomas. That little girl is your family. Ain't nothing in this entire world matter more'n that. I don't wanna see 'nother tear on her face put there by you, and I mean it. You hear me?*

Your brother was so still, he could have been under Medusa's gaze. You can't remember if he ever answered.

—

When you come back to him, he looks—peaceful. Despite the grime layering the skin of his face, his eyes eerily motionless behind his closed lids, he looks as if this is the rest he's been waiting for—dreamless and free. He didn't notice you were gone. And as you stare at his face, a drizzle beginning to patter against your shoulders, against your scalp, you start to get angry.

It's an anger like you've never felt before, lava rolling down a rocky slope, molting the veins inside your body as they pulse with the anticipation of eruption. Your arm moves on its own, and the back of your hand strikes him in the jaw, flaring a white pain across your knuckles as his head jerks lifelessly upward at an uncomfortable angle. A gasp shudders through you, eyes widening nearly beyond their limit, and you seize your hand back to your chest as if to prevent him from snatching it and breaking the fingers you dared to touch him with. The stubble on his chin leaves a burn across your ring and middle fingers.

You wait, and wait, but nothing happens. He doesn't so much as twitch.

"I should let you die," you whisper, breath quivering. He doesn't say anything. Your voice is louder when, "I should let you *die*."

You're crawling closer before you realize it, scrambling onto your knees and falling onto your palms above him. Rain stabs at your nape as you bend over him, hair dragging itself off your shoulders as it gets heavier, hanging down at each side of your face to curtain you, and him, away from everything. Water runs from the roots of your strands and down onto your temples, wetting your face so thickly that it takes you a long time to realize you're crying. *Sobbing*.

Droplets fall onto his face, so much like your father's, *so much*, that your heart squeezes to the point you think it'll stop.

No matter how hard you try, have tried, and tried, and tried—this will never be a face you can hate.

“Did—” Thunder rumbles the sky some miles away. “Have you *ever* loved me?”

He doesn't say anything, not one word, and nothing will ever hurt more than this.

—

“Tommy.” *Your lower lips tremble where they rest atop your knees, arms holding your bent legs tightly to your chest. The two of you are sitting in the grass, the dampness of it from last night's rain seeping into your bottoms. Gnats play near the hairs on your knuckles. “What d'you do when things—things hurt? Like hurt really big?”*

He's probably wondering why you're talking to him at all. But you don't know where to go sometimes, when you want the answers only a big brother can give. You're still learning, somehow, that it's not the same for you as it is for the other kids in your class, who talk about their big siblings like strangers they'd never get tired of meeting.

You want to be like them, though. You're not a daughter anymore, will never be one again, and just want to be a little sister, so, so bad.

It's not nice at school, where people think you're weird when you talk, and weird when you don't, and it's not nice in the Marsh house, where they have too many kids, who also don't have parents—maybe have never had parents, not like you—to really pay attention to two more. At night, when the back of your eyelids play that one day like a movie on a broken reel while you lay in a room that will never be yours, you can't help but wish Tommy weren't so far away.

You're not expecting him to answer you, not at all, but maybe he's feeling it, too, in this vampiric house, sucking you slowly of anything and everything that was ever familiar. He doesn't bother looking at you, hasn't for a long time, when he says, "I push it out. Then it can't hurt me no more."

—

It's too late now to wonder if you should just do it, live in that world where he isn't looking over your soul like a guardian demon, because you're already digging your hands into the thick muscle of his shoulders, burying your chipped nails deep into the fabric of his filthy shirt for a firm hold. The bandage that had covered your injured finger is long gone, and the raw skin where your nail used to be is pulling apart like ground meat against the dirt grains and pebbles his shirt releases to scrape at it.

It's grueling, pulling his body through the forest toward the sloping earth, now oozing mud as the rain pours steady.

The mangled stump on his left side is bleeding through the torn wrap of your cardigan holding it shut, but you don't care because he's going to live. He doesn't even stir at your violent heaves of his body, hauling him upward once you reach the hill with all the strength you have left in your sore limbs, in your dirt-lined knees, but you don't care because he's going to *live*. There was never any other option for him as soon as his fate was in your hands. You'll never be like him. Not with her watching.

It feels like you're slogging through sludge, but floating on air, and you're going to drag him through the swamp because he isn't leaving you, *you*, to the mess he created, alone. In this world, in this life, you've met all the people you'll ever love. *Kaa-chan. Dad. The Hosseinis.* He'll never be one of them.

Never, because he didn't try, never tried. But he's hasn't met all of his—the people he'll love. Not even close. And he's going to. *He's going to.* For some reason, you want him to. To love. To live. He'll live, he'll live, *he'll live.*

Tommy's head bangs and scrapes against the rocks as you yank him up the thick incline of packed dirt, slow because you have one arm buried up to the bicep in rough, wet mulch and one wrapped around his neck, elbow digging into his protruding sternum, pulling and pulling and pulling. It's you and him, at the end you still have yet to see. Brother and sister.

There's no stars in the sky, it's too early still, but when you look up for a brief moment, rain beating onto your face, you feel like you can see them, connecting the dots to make the shape of a person you could never forget, even without the image of butterflies dancing around the air where she tries to catch them for you.

Once we meet, you start to tell her, always tell her (the right *her*)—because Tommy would never listen, never want to and never will, even after all this—seeing the top of the ravine, in one instant so far and in another so close, and beyond, to the rest of the stars, to Callisto and Arcas blinking at you in wonder. Pulling and pulling and pulling.

Brother and sister.

I hope you'll tell me to live, too.