

Slow Burn and Other Stories

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A Thesis
in
The Department
of
English Literature

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts (English) at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

April 2022

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CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY
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Abstract: *Slow Burn* by Camille Henkel

Slow Burn is a collection of stories in the genre of psychological horror and fantasy in which the world we inhabit is transformed through the characters' distorted perspectives. The line between reality and the supernatural becomes blurred, unearthing anxieties around family, identity and the sense of self. All stories gather protagonists thrown between two worlds, two realities and examine the clash between them. They stand on the edge of breakthroughs, which promise either positive outcomes or dire consequences.

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Slow Burn

Eloise never thought she would come to long for the stillness of night and the comforting blanket of darkness. It was midsummer, unbearably hot and humid. For long months on the edge of human civilization, the sun never sets. Instead, it burns and burns, rolling around the heavens in an oblique curve, reaching its peak at midday and grazing the horizon at midnight, over and over and over. Days melting into each other. Up in the sky, the sun nagged at her.

She knew people talked. That's all they did. When they were not working, they were playing cards and talking, talking, talking. They probably would have been drinking, but alcohol was scarce. Standing on the front steps of the house, her lips burned with unanswered questions. She shuffled her scrambled thoughts, wondering what people would say if they saw her standing there in her black clothes, pale like a ghost, looking out to the river. The old clock in the entrance ticked restlessly and she pondered uneasily on how time stopped for no one.

In urban areas down south, the house of Mr. Hargrave might have encountered dismissive looks, but here, where most prospectors slept in tents or shacks, it was grand. It stood near the river, nestled between the mountains covered by a deep, feral forest. The rich smell of evergreen filled the air. It was almost lovely, Eloise thought. If she closed her eyes, if she didn't think, or listen too closely, she really did come close to something—not quite happiness, no. Maybe something close to contentment. No, she thought. Contentment is too joyful. She pondered and reflected on her situation and concluded that she had tried. But looking up, the sight of the mountains towering over them all still frightened her. She wished for things to do, for theatre, balls, visits from her family and friends. Instead, she watched the mountains looming over the house and stared at the woods, dark and deep. Eloise chased a large black fly with the back of her hand, herding her wandering thoughts.

The house had windows and a fireplace to keep the large living room warm. It even had paintings on the wall, a gross extravagance. One showed her, sitting on a chair, smiling. Even in the painting, she looked uncertain, the corners of her lips barely twitching. All of it was the best a rich man could afford in these parts and that rich man was her husband. *Had been*, she corrected herself while wringing her hands, trying to rub away the weight of his hand on hers as he lay on

his dead bed. She recalled how, only hours ago he had insistently squeezed it to the point of hurting her. He held on so tight she feared he would crush the small bones of her fingers. It surprised her, how a man on the verge of death could hold so much strength.

Where is it? she had asked insistently. He had tried to say something, his mouth opening and closing like a fish, but not a word had crossed his lips.

She stared at the lake and at Beatrice, filling a bucket of water on the shore, attending to the many tasks that Eloise would have had to attend to, had she not been rich. The girl was a distant blood relation on her father's side—or so they said. She now watched as a red-faced woman walked towards Beatrice and started chatting with her. When the girl turned her attention from her task, Eloise was struck once more by how tall she was. Her mousy demeanour, the way she slouched and folded in on herself made her look shorter than she really was. The muddy dirt of the river stained the hem of her heavy skirts and sweat spotted the armpits of the shirt she had already outgrown, leaving her wrists and some of her forearms bare. The summer heat flooded the town with smothering humidity. Her frizzled hair framing her wide bright eyes, round and shiny like coins. Surely, they must be gossiping, the woman—what was her name again? Susan? Sally? Something starting with an “S”—as she leaned towards Beatrice, conspiratorial. From time to time, she turned in Eloise's direction, her eyes shifting in the blinding light. Susan or Sally now squeezed Beatrice's hand and waddled away. Beatrice turned to the house and briefly met Eloise's eyes, then quickly looked away. She must have guessed that Eloise knew, must have seen it written all over her face. How could she not? Eloise's ears were burning from all the gossip. She climbed the front steps and waved in the direction of Beatrice, who jumped and headed towards her with a spring in her step. Her eagerness to please tasted bittersweet. She had been like that one, Eloise thought.

“What is the news?” asked Eloise in a low voice.

“Everyone knows about Mr. Hargrave's passing,” said Beatrice, clutching the handle of her bucket.

“Yes, yes, of course. What else? What are they saying?”

““They say you're going to be a rich woman.””

Eloise's hands tightened into fists. Hargrave was, indeed, a rich man. He had combed through the river, high and low, looking for gold, and had found it. He had built his fortune out of sheer luck and determination, giving work to the prospectors of the town. They respected the man, she could tell. But you can respect someone without liking them.

“Is it true he doesn’t have any relatives?,” Beatrice asked, her soft voice implying the promise of riches. Eloise nodded while examining Beatrice’s bright youthful face and couldn’t speak out the words that buzzed inside her like a swarm of bees. *I don’t know where it is. I have nothing.*

Instead, Eloise asked, “Is there anything else?”

Beatrice glanced at Eloise and their eyes met. Eloise remembered walking out of the bedroom and shutting it quietly, leaving the body of her deceased husband behind. As his soul had left his body, she had felt a weight being lifted from her shoulder. Turning around, she had met Beatrice’s eyes, questioning.

“They said it was the gold,” said Beatrice

Eloise froze. Did she know, then?

“What about it?”

“They said that’s what killed him. What drove him mad.”

“Nonsense.”

Beatrice looked away, her cheeks flushed.

“I apologize, I shouldn’t have repeated this.”

Eloise cleared her throat and smoothed the wrinkles of her skirt.

“It doesn’t matter,” she answered, her last word trailing as if to add something.

Beatrice nodded, waiting expectantly.

“Thank you, Beatrice,” added Eloise, and the girl walked away to the back of the house. The earlier Hargrave was buried, the better. Her thoughts travelled to the inside of the house, down the corridor, past the strong wooden door to the inside of their bedroom, where the body lay. He should have been buried by now, not decaying on the bed, covered with a fresh white sheet. She tried to picture every nook and corner in the house where he could have hidden his fortune. It had to be inside.

“Where’s the priest? Why can’t we bury him now?” she’d demanded of one of Hargrave’s men in a cold voice.

Eloise’s temper was as changeable as the weather. As a child, she threw thundering temper tantrums. In time, a firm hand and a tight leash had taught her to manage these crises. No, not manage. Hold back. Walled up deep inside herself, the feelings still raged like a tempest in a bottle. Feelings she could never show. Passing clouds. They veiled her eyes and flushed her cheeks bright

red, but never a drop spilled. This would have made her difficult, and she, Eloise convinced herself, was not difficult. She had gracefully bowed to her parents' will to marry the man of their choice and there she was. Mr. Hargrave had presented himself well and wore fine clothes, although she didn't like the way he smiled or how he looked at her. Something about him had frightened her. Somehow, it still did.

He's rich, her mother had said.

He found gold, up north, her father had added. Real gold.

Their eyes had been bright with the possibilities as the thought of it unfurled a world of opportunities in their mind. Gold. After her engagement to Mr. Hargrave was announced, they received letters from everyone they knew, from close friends to distant relatives. A letter from Beatrice's mother had begged her to take her daughter in, to give her work. She could help with housework and keep Eloise company if needed; it would be the Christian thing to do. Suddenly, people who had ignored her all her life offered her all sorts of unwanted attention. They smelled it on her, the money, and flew around her family like a flock of scavengers drawn by rotten flesh.

"I'm sorry ma'am." Hargrave's employee crumpled his hat in his large hands, avoiding her eyes. What was he called? He had never talked to her directly before today; none of them ever had. She knew him only from a distance, knew his disheveled look.

"The priest'll be back first thing in the morning. A kid got stung by so many bees his whole body swelled up, horrible business."

Eloise flinched, annoyed by the man's answer.

"What am I to do then? Let him rot in the heat?"

"I'm sorry, ma'am," he repeated, shifting nervously from foot to foot. "It's only a few hours, no disrespect to Mr. Hargrave. He did me good, gave me work. Oh, and..." He scratched the messy scruff on his chin. Eloise noticed his nails were dirty. "I'm sorry for your loss."

Hargrave had been considered a proper suitor. The glitter of his fortune was a passport that opened every door. If her family's coffers had been full, she might have had another choice. She had a name, after all, proper and worthy. There had been a spark of madness in Hargrave's eyes: frightening, taunting. It took some time to piece it together. When she arrived at his household, he'd shown her a nugget of gold, small and shiny. She'd gazed into his eyes and knew. She'd seen it a hundred times in different faces. In the gaunt cheeks of passing prospectors. In the way their pupils dilated at the prospect of riches. In her own reflection when she gazed dreamily into still

water or in the small mirror of her vanity. In empty plates on a table, though Hargrave's plates were always full. Once, she'd walked into his office without his permission. He'd slapped her, hard. The impact still rang in her ears. Not a word had been uttered about this, but she understood he would never hesitate to hurt her if she got in his way. The thought chilled her to the bone. Eloise remembered hearing his heavy footsteps through the walls as he walked back and forth, back and forth in his office throughout the night, murmuring to himself words she couldn't make out. She'd lie awake in bed, hating how the floors creaked under his weight. How it creaked without it. Even now, in his absence, her shoulders tensed at the sound of it. When she stood still, she almost felt him standing behind her, breathing down her neck.

Eloise couldn't sleep. Sitting in the living room, her thoughts spun inside her head. She'd searched through every room she'd dared to walk into. The living room, the kitchen, the bedroom, even Beatrice's room while she was busy in the kitchen. Nothing. Not a coin, not even the slightest pebble. *Nothing*. Not a penny to her name. What would become of her? She had to be practical. There were only two rooms left. She glanced at the end of the corridor, at the closed bedroom door. She pricked up her ears, alerting her attention to any sound. The birds tweeted incessantly, as they did during this time of year. From where she stood, she could hear the faint ticking of the clock near the entrance. Eloise quickly looked over her shoulder, holding her breath as she did. The house, the walls. They seemed to be staring. It had never really been hers. She had settled here, but the furniture, everything, it was his. No matter how hard she tried, it rejected her. Eloise ran her hand along the wall, wishing it would whisper to her and tell her where to look. An incredible urge to tear the whole thing apart, plank by plank, surged through her.

She moved along the hallway and stopped at the bedroom door. But her courage failed her and she reached for handle of the office door instead. It opened reluctantly; every action felt like a transgression. But who would stop her now? She closed her eyes and crossed the threshold. When nothing happened, embarrassment flushed her cheeks. A frightened child, filled with superstition, that's what she was. She crossed the dimly lit room and sat at the massive desk. She caressed the arm rests of the chest like a queen on a throne. Or maybe she was playing grown up. Feeling out of place, she searched through the mess. She opened a drawer, then another and another. She opened them all, eviscerating them to find nothing more than papers, bobbles, and a small key that opened nothing. On the desk, she found a map of the area. She recognized his writing, the neat

cursive letters on the paper: “Yukon, 1897”. She ran her fingers across the elegant lines of the landscape, the little trees drawn to indicate the forest and the town of Dyea. This wasn’t a safe place for anyone, let alone a woman on her own. She closed her eyes, grateful for the presence of Beatrice in the house.

Why was it so hot and stuffy in here? she thought, unbuttoning the sleeves of her dress. She rose from the chair and walked to the small window of the office. She opened it wide. A warm breeze blew through her dark hair. The birds tweeted. The water washed up on the shore. The branches of the tall evergreen swayed in the wind. Surely, it was still early, too early for anything other than sleep. Yet, there she was, more awake than ever. She’d heard that animals like caribou had adapted to the endless daylight, staying active throughout the never-ending day, only napping sporadically. Maybe she’d become like them, part of the native fauna. Maybe that’s what had happened to Hargrave.

Wind rushed inside the room, like a great inhale. Papers shuffled on the desk. Wood creaked. Eloise closed her eyes, savouring the smell of pines and heat, the musk of the outdoors. A strange pulse, very soft, echoed in the house. For a moment, she swore someone was inside the room. An organic, living thing. The wind had stilled, as if waiting. Despite the rising temperature, goosebumps sprang up all over her bare arms. Eloise opened her eyes and slowly turned around, scanning the room. Nothing. She placed her hands on the walls. The wood groaned under the pressure, like a reluctant beast. She froze. What if someone had heard her? Ever so slowly, she placed her ear against the wall, trying to locate the soft pulse. Was it in the other room? It seemed everywhere and nowhere all at once. Had Beatrice figured out the gold was tucked somewhere in there? Did she know something she didn’t? Eloise left the office, measuring her steps.

Shadows grew longer and darker. Every corner cast in darkness contrasted vividly with the bright sunlight outside, far down the hall. Eloise swallowed with difficulty, feeling uneasy. Her awareness of the sound intensified. Every rise and fall of the air seemed to come both from inside, but also outside the room. She stretched her hand out to the door of the bedroom. Was she trembling? She seized the doorknob. For a brief moment, she thought the cold metal was wet, then realized the moisture came from her sweaty palm. Quiet, quiet. Slowly, Eloise turned the doorknob. She tried to ignore the beads of cold sweat running down her back. The mechanism clicked and she pushed the door open. The floor creaked. She stilled. A soft breeze blew on her neck, like an exhale.

“Eloise?”

Eloise jumped back, her hand clutching her chest. In the corridor, Beatrice gave a little scream of surprise, her round eyes still heavy with sleep. She lowered her gaze while gripping the fabric of her night gown. In her other hand was a candle, burning bright. Why they still needed to light candles in the house with the sun shining outside, was beyond Eloise.

“I’m so sorry, I heard something, and I thought you—,” Beatrice mumbled.

“It’s fine,” Eloise said sharply. She quickly scanned the dark hall before muttering to herself, “I’m fine.”

A silence floated between them as Eloise stilled herself. The pulse was gone. Beatrice cleared her throat, her small voice casting the shadows away.

“Do you need anything?”

Eloise sensed she secretly hoped Eloise would refuse her offer and send her back to bed, away from the room and the corpse. Beatrice instinctively leaned towards her room, as if ready to sprint at any given opportunity.

“I could use some tea,” Eloise said. “I don’t think I’ll manage to go back to sleep tonight.”

She watched as Beatrice forced a tight smile and nodded, then quickly turned around, leaving the room.

“Do you mind if I—” Eloise stopped, hesitating. She stared at the door. She must have imagined it.

Beatrice turned around, her frizzy hair a halo around her head.

“Yes?”

“Do you mind if I join you?”

“In the kitchen?”

Eloise thought she saw something like amusement in her expression.

“Of course,” added Beatrice.

As they walked past the living room to the back of the house, Eloise glanced at the paintings on the wall. Their eyes seemed to follow her as she moved away, her own eyes reflected in her portrait. Next to it was Hargrave’s painting, his face stern. The kitchen’s heat assaulted her as soon as she stepped in. Beatrice headed straight for the stove. After placing the candle on a counter, she stirred the fire’s embers with a poker, then added a log to coax the flames back to life. Eloise sat at the small table, next to a window fringed with delicate curtains yellowed by smoke and cooking

grease. What a waste, she thought. A mouse ran between Beatrice's feet and scurried along a wall. Eloise grimaced at the sight of the rodent. Unfazed, Beatrice filled a kettle and placed it on the stove. The same faint, repetitive noise came to Eloise's attention. A pulse.

"Do you hear that?" she asked.

"Hear what?" Beatrice turned around, frowning.

"That noise. Did you move the clock?" Beatrice pricked up her ears.

"No, of course not. I know you like it far from the bedroom."

"Did anyone move it?"

"I don't think so."

"You don't think so."

She watched as Beatrice fidgeted nervously with a rag. The repetitive sound kept on pulsing. Louder. When she looked down, Eloise realized her fists were tightly closed, her nails carving little half-moons in her palms. She wanted it to be the clock.

"I can go look if it's still there," said Beatrice, tentatively.

"I would like that very much."

Beatrice nodded quickly and left the kitchen. How had she not heard this before? It would have kept her awake all night. On the stove, the kettle whistled. Eloise got up from her seat and walked around the kitchen, looking for anything that might make that sound. By the time Beatrice came back, the kettle was whistling furiously. She removed it from the heat, as she stared at Eloise searching the room.

"The clock hasn't moved," she said.

"Then what is it?"

It didn't come from the kitchen. The sound increased. It throbbed inside her head, became unbearable. Pulsing, pulsing. Eloise froze, then ran down the corridor. She heard Beatrice's footsteps behind hers as she followed, holding the candle.

"What is it?" she asked.

Eloise burst into the bedroom. Frantically, she looked around. Her breath hitched in her throat. A dusty darkness hovered over the room, pierced only by the light filtering through the pale lace curtains. Her husband's body rested on the made bed, the sheet neatly tucked on the sides. A pristine white cloth covered him. Eloise quickly glanced behind her. She caught Beatrice's

frightened look and walked towards the bed. It seemed to her the constant pulsing came from him. From her dead husband.

With shaking hands, she pulled at the linen covering the body. She uncovered the head and stared at the pale skin stretched tautly on Hargrave's face. His eyes were closed. He appeared exactly as she remembered him. In this heat, she'd feared seeing him bloated and disfigured. She'd imagined a thousand gruesome visions, all seared inside her brain. But he was the same. She reached out for him, carefully ran her fingers through his salt and pepper hair. The contact caused pinpricks to the tip of her fingers.

"It's here, I can hear it, but—"

"But what?" whispered Beatrice.

It was coming from him. Eloise could swear it was.

With his eyes closed, Eloise imagined him asleep. No, not asleep. He had always stirred restlessly in his slumber. She grabbed the linen to pull it back and stopped. His chest appeared to rise and fall, as if breathing. She couldn't take her eyes off it. Rising and falling, rising and falling. A cold sensation crept up her spine. She felt the breath tickling the back of her neck. The off-putting sensation of his body rising up to hers. Him, the house. Both watching her.

"Eloise, what's happening?" Beatrice's voice cut through Eloise's fright and the girl grasped her arm, pulling her back. When Eloise looked at the body again, it had settled once more into its rigidity. Yet, the pulse persisted, beating again and again.

"Just listen, it's here. I think that's it."

"What is it?"

Eloise crouched on the ground and looked under the bed. Her eyes only met consuming emptiness, yet her body felt it. It wasn't him. It was *under* him. On all fours, Eloise crawled across the rough wooden boards of the room. Splinters piercing through her clothes and her skin. Of course. Under the floor. *The bastard*, she thought, as if her mind wasn't her own. Now fully awake, Beatrice placed the candle on the nightstand. Eloise pressed her ear against a plank and listened intently. A pulsing, the echo of her heart, her own and no one else's. It ran through her blood, sending pinpricks up to the roots of her hair. She crawled out from under the bed.

"We need to move it."

"The bed?"

"Do you want to be rich, Beatrice?"

Beatrice's eyes widened and she hesitated, but only briefly. The bed was a massive piece of furniture. The women laboured, pushing and shoving it to the side of the room. They moved the nightstand as well, revealing the floor underneath. When they did, Eloise dropped to her knees and pushed at the boards. The wood complained. She gripped it with her nails and pulled as hard as she could.

"Please stop, you're hurting yourself," shouted Beatrice.

Beatrice tried to pull her away, wrapping her arms around her waist. Eloise pushed back, causing Beatrice to stumble and fall. Eloise looked at her broken nails, blood pooling at the tip of her fingers. She had to be smart about this.

"Bring me something sharp and sturdy."

"What?"

"It's right under here. His fortune. I need something to remove the plank."

Beatrice got up and ran out of the room. Eloise listened to her heavy footsteps as she ran across the corridor. The floor still creaked and groaned long after she had left. Beatrice came back holding the poker from the kitchen. She handed it to Eloise, who planted the tip where two floorboards met. She used her weight to force it up.

"Help me," she asked Beatrice. The girl added her weight, and the wood started to give with a low, plaintive whine. The board snapped dryly, like the sound of bones breaking. Eloise threw it to the side and knelt in front of the gap in the floor. The pulsing sound grew louder than before, raw and naked. She plunged her arms in the hole until her hands touched dry dirt. She fumbled blindly, fearless of rodents and insects. Her mind directed on a single, ultimate goal. Her fingers wrapped around the dusty edges of a small box and she knew she had found it. She seized the box, lifting it out of the gap in the floor. It was made of red varnished wood with a small lock at the front. Next to her, Beatrice watched, mesmerized.

"What's in it?" she asked. "Is this it?"

Eloise opened her mouth, then closed it, not knowing the answer herself. The same question burned inside her. When she went to open it, the small lock resisted her.

"To hell with this," she grunted, mimicking her late husband's expression. Eloise contemplated giving in to the furious urge to throw the box against the wall. Or smash it open with the poker. *No*. She suddenly remembered the small key in the drawer of the desk. She rose to her feet, ran to the office. She grabbed it in her moist, trembling hand. When she looked down on it,

she realized what she'd mistaken for sweat was a thick, red sap oozing from the box. She then ran back to the bedroom.

"Open it," urged Beatrice when Eloise froze.

Yes, Eloise thought. She had every right to. She wiped her hand on her dress, leaving a smudge of red on the wrinkled fabric. Kneeling on the ground next to Beatrice, their heads bent close together, like two little girls sharing secrets. She pushed the key in the lock, turned it until she heard, through the deafening sound of the heartbeat, a click. Beatrice gasped and held her breath as Eloise opened the box.

"That's it," she said. It had been calling to her all along. Not her heart, but his: rough, shiny, glittering, nuggets of gold. A fortune. Enough to buy this whole goddamn town, had she wanted to. The town and more so. Beatrice's eyes brightened, reflecting the eerie light coming from the precious metal. Eloise recognized that emptiness in her gaze. Had it always been there? The hungry void that would always demand more? She felt Hargrave's shadow stretch behind her, long and dark. The soft breath. Why was he always watching? She clutched the box closer, the sap dripping down her forearm.

"You don't need all of it," said Beatrice, her voice a hushed whisper.

She was right. Eloise didn't need it all. Or did she? No. What she wanted was for the pulsing to stop. She wanted to drop the box back in the hole where she'd found it, but it was now too late. She was caught, red-handed. It struck her that if she accepted the gold, there would be a price to pay. She might never be able to get rid of him. What if he always followed her as a result? She would never be alone.

"I only need one, just the smallest one," said Beatrice. "I won't tell anyone."

It was tempting. A small pebble. She could tuck it in her pocket and be off with it. Beatrice could support her family with it, marry whoever she wanted— or no one, if she desired. Eloise swallowed with difficulty and pressed the box against her chest.

"Eloise, I *need* it," pleaded Beatrice, a razor's edge in her voice.

The ooze seeping through the fabric to Eloise's skin made her want to throw up.

"I can't, Beatrice. I'm sorry."

Beatrice's face changed, now twisted with rage.

"You don't know what it's like to have nothing," whispered Beatrice.

Gentle, mild-mannered Beatrice, clumsy and soft-spoken, screamed. The shrill sound pierced Eloise's ears, cut her like a blade. The girl pounced on her. The box slipped out of her hands and flew against the wall, scattering the nuggets on the floor. Already, Beatrice was reaching for them. Eloise rolled over. She grabbed her by the waist and pulled her back with all the strength left in her arms. The women stumbled backwards, and Eloise crashed into the nightstand. The impact toppled the candle on to the bed. Famished, the flames quickly consumed the linen, licking the edges of Hargrave's body.

"Let me go!" Beatrice shouted, but Eloise kept pulling her back towards the door.

"I can put it out, I know I can!"

"No!"

Let it burn.

The thought, though familiar, surprised her. She grabbed it and turned it around in her mind, examining all the facets like those of a precious gem. A tempest stormed inside her, cracking the walls holding it in. The feeling was electrifying. With renewed strength, she dragged the writhing Beatrice, as she shouted and screamed, down the hall.

Let it burn.

She wanted to watch the flames consume the canvas of the paintings, devour every wood plank, every piece of furniture, and that damned clock ticking, always ticking, in the background. The smoke billowed through the corridor, thick and dark. Both women emerged from the house, coughing, stained with soot. Eloise's cheek burned where Beatrice had scratched her in the midst of her madness. She realized at once she was trembling like a leaf. Once outside, Beatrice went limp and fell to her knees, seemingly back to her old self. Tears streamed down her cheeks. She stared at the fire in disbelief and covered her mouth in horror.

Already, Eloise could hear people shouting in the distance, racing towards the flames. She was out. Out and she would never go back in. A weight lifted off her shoulders. Surely, he was gone too. Closing her eyes, she felt her heart beating. Her heart and no one else's, beating, beating outside of herself. It pulsed and echoed from within the woods, dark and deep. The thick smoke rose towards the sky. The raging fire burning bright, the flames licking and devouring everything that ever was and ever would be on this remote plot of land. Eloise basked in the orange glow, vibrant like a setting sun, and for the first time in a long time, she smiled.

Something Like Smoke

The wind picked up, whistling angrily outside the walls of the cabin. Caleb wished he could see how much snow had fallen since they'd arrived, their clothes soaked and their limbs stiff with cold, but the cabin had no windows. He shivered and rubbed his hands together, wondering if they'd manage to get out in the morning. He felt something damp on his arm and clumsily rolled his sleeve up with frozen fingers. He looked at the rough bandaging on his arm in the dim light of a few candles and a lantern. His painful wound radiated heat, the type that comes with chills. Kneeling on the ground, Walter was starting a fire in the wood stove, frowning deeply. Next to Caleb, Joe looked up from his bag, rummaging for food. Shadows found shelter in his sallow cheeks, in the nooks of his angular face. He looked brittle and frail.

"You alright, son?" asked the old man.

Caleb grunted. "I think I'm bleeding."

Joe unceremoniously tugged on Caleb's shirt and pulled his arm towards him, squeezing a yelp out of the young man. Joe squinted and examined the bandage that he prodded with his fingers.

"Stop that!" shouted Caleb.

"Hey, what are you two doing?" groaned Walter, his massive figure appeared hulking in the cramped space.

"He tells me he might be bleeding, I'm just checking." Joe loosened the bandage on Caleb's arm. "Now, stop screaming, you big baby, or you'll piss off Walter."

"I'm right here," said Walter.

"Yeah, I can see that. How's the fire going?"

"Gimme a moment... There it is." Inside the stove, flames crackled and licked the wood logs. Joe uncovered the deep cut running across Caleb's bicep and forearm. The swollen edges of the oozing wound were an angry red.

"It got you good," said Joe. "But it's a clean cut, you're alright for now. You'll probably need stitches, we'll see when we get to the camp tomorrow."

Caleb could still see it in crisp details: the falling tree, a man screaming (is that him?), a branch whipping through the air as he stumbled back, biting through his flesh. The bright red blood blooming on the snow like a grim flower. He couldn't close his eyes without seeing it.

“It’ll be a rough night, son, a rough night,” concluded Joe as he tightened the bandage. Caleb grimaced, but remained quiet.

At these words, Walter got up, his large form casting a long shadow in the room. He sat next to the two men and his chair groaned under his weight.

“About that.” He cleared his throat and thoughtfully scratched his unruly beard. “We have enough wood for the night—I’ll cut some more in the morning for whoever comes here next. We take turns sleeping and stoke the fire. Death is out there. Can’t let it in.”

They all knew the risks. On a night like this, the cold seeped between the seams of the walls, through every crack. They could fall asleep and never wake.

“You feed the fire, you stay alive. Got it. No need to sound so grim, Walter,” said Joe, rummaging through his bag.

“You hear me, boy?” Walter asked Caleb, who looked at him with glassy eyes. The tree, the man, the screams. The wind blowing in the branches of the trees, laughing.

“Uh-huh,” he answered.

“It’s not a pretty sight,” said Walter, as if reading his mind. “But it’s not your fault, you know.”

“Happens all the time,” added Joe.

“You’ve told me,” muttered Caleb.

“Cause it’s true. The worst is over,” said Walter, patting Caleb’s back. “Tomorrow we’ll be at another camp. We’ll get work there and you can get stitched up, right, kid?”

Despite his scepticism and his level-headedness, Walter was jittering a bit too much, conveying his uneasiness, and his voice sounded strained. Caleb nodded, staring at the stove.

“If I didn’t know you better, Walt, I’d say you’ve caught the fear,” said Joe, smirking.

“I’m being careful,” answered Walter. “I’m not ready to be food for worms, yet. Not like those who stayed behind.”

“Those stubborn bastards,” grumbled Joe. “I’ll save a prayer for them.”

“Very generous of you.”

“I’m a generous guy. You give me ingredients and I turn it into a feast. *Voilà.*” He pulled out salted meats and stale bread from his bag, handed some to his companions. “Like a goddamn fairy tale, eh? What do you say, son?” said Joe, elbowing Caleb.

“Uh-huh,” answered Caleb.

“Not very chatty, are you?”

“Leave him alone, he’s been through a lot,” said Walter.

“Yeah, yeah. Am I bothering you, kid?”

“What? No, not at all,” said Caleb, flustered. Small beads of sweat pearly on his forehead as he chewed a mouthful of food, rolling it in his mouth. The cabin was now stuffy and warm and smelled of sweat, wet wool and the smoky fumes of the wood burning in the stove. His taut skin, battered by the cold and wind, began to thaw. A dull ache throbbed in his arm, leaching his energy and leaving him feverish and groggy.

They should have left earlier.

At first, it was little things, barely perceptible. An acrid smell in the air. Something like smoke, thick and bitter. In their lumberjack camp, sleep didn’t come easy, and when it did, it was populated with strange figures and nightmarish visions. Caleb couldn’t recall them upon waking, but the worn-out faces of the men in the group answered his unspoken questions. Just a little longer. Just a couple months more. It was hard work, but the pay was good, the food too. Joe truly worked magic.

Maybe they should have left when some of the lumberjacks stopped working, saying they’d fell trees whose sap splashed out red— deep, deep red. Caleb had been told that trees were chopped in the winter because the sap isn’t flowing, which made it easier. Some people laughed. Others looked at the lumberjacks with skepticism. That day, the camp lost many workers. Yet, he had stayed. Walter and Joe had decided so. They’d taken him under their wing. They were experienced, grounded. If they weren’t afraid, why should he be?

“Strange things, superstitious people,” Joe had said. “Happens all the time.”

Standing in the middle of the camp, Caleb could see the tree stumps sticking out of the earth and snow like severed limbs. When the wind blew through the branches of the treetops, he heard them whisper and chatter. The rumour brushed against his skin like a northern wind. The cold bit his cheeks. The silence that followed was bludgeoning.

He wasn’t that green, he had chopped trees before, but never ones this tall, this massive. Just looking up at the white pine stretching up to the sky made him dizzy. When he rubbed the coarse bark with the palm of his hand, it even seemed to sing. It pulsed with life. The swaying of the branches of the pine made a rustling sound that travelled to the nearby trees like a shiver.

“Caleb, you’re dreaming. Get on with it,” Walter called to him.

Caleb shrugged it off and got to work. One swing, two swings. His muscles burned with effort, sweat shone on his skin, the heat of his body contrasting vividly with the frigid cold. His breath clouded in plumes of vapour. The impact of the axe on the wood vibrated through his joints. He squeezed a wedge in the deep cut in the tree trunk and kept working with the other men.

What happened next was a blur. He remembered the wedge. It was there for a reason, so the tree would fall in a certain direction. Limit the damage. There were men shouting. There was one screaming, but all that noise didn't start before first, an abyssal silence: the kind before a predator pounces on its prey. The same ominous silence that had filled him with an odd sense of dread some time before. All he could say with absolute certainty was that the tree had fallen off course in ways that defied logic. As if to crush someone on purpose. And the worst was that the man was still alive, his legs pinned under the weight of the massive pine tree. He screamed and he screamed, the sound still resonating in his mind. Caleb had been too stunned to do anything. He'd barely avoided a similar fate, holding his bleeding arm against his chest after a branch had sliced through his flesh. Others had seen it. Surely, he wasn't crazy. But if it wasn't the tree, then it was him. His fault. He wasn't sure which was worse. The branches swayed in the wind, chattering. How could the sky be so blue? Walter had helped him up. Caleb had tried to look for the man under the tree trunk, but by the time he'd gotten up, he wasn't there anymore. Yet, the shape of his body remained, stamped in the blood-stained snow. He learned through Joe that part of the group had left already with the wounded man—or what was left of him, apparently there was a surgeon in the neighbouring camp. After talking to one another, Walter and Joe had decided to leave too. Caleb followed. Clouds gathered in the sky, dark and heavy. Soon, a snowstorm raged, spewing mountains of snow on their paths. They'd seen the night crash around them, felt the spying eyes of the forest at dusk, forcing them to retreat to a hunting cabin, the halfway point between two camps.

“Stop scratching,” said Walter, whacking Caleb's good arm. “You'll make it worse.”

“It's itchy,” complained Caleb, stopping nonetheless.

“That's a good sign, means it's healing,” said Joe.

“What are you talking about, the wound is fresh as can be. Let's hope it's not getting infected,” added Walter.

“Thank you for being so reassuring.”

“I'm being realistic, Joe.”

“And I’m being optimistic. I want the same things as you: leave this godforsaken place behind and get work somewhere else,” Joe said, turning to Caleb. “You don’t look so good, son.”

Caleb didn’t feel so good. He fought to stay awake for, every time he closed his eyes, he pictured the same scene in his foggy mind.

“How about you go lie down, eh? We’ll keep watch and wake you if we need you,” said Joe.

“Go get some rest,” added Walter.

Caleb nodded slowly and stumbled to a cot in a corner of the cabin. When he lay down, the world turned to the side. The soft light of the lantern and candles shone gold and then burned red through his lids. The images came back to him, hitching his tense shoulders up to his ears. He inhaled shakily and focused on the sounds surrounding him. Now that he was close to the walls, he heard it more loudly, the wind whistling and howling incessantly outside, the flurries of snow hitting the cabin. A cold draft leaked through the rough walls, slithering its way to him. Caleb listened to the low rumble of Walter and Joe’s voices as they quietly chatted. They were so close, but their words escaped him as his mind slipped like feet in mud on a rainy day. He placed his hand on his wound—why was it so itchy? He rubbed it, then scratched carefully. A little harder. An acrid smell irritated Caleb’s nose. Something like smoke, thick and bitter. The bandages were too tight around his arm—why had Joe tied it so tightly? Caleb rolled on his back and unfastened it. The fabric unravelled, revealing his mangled flesh, red and inflamed. He frowned as he examined it in the low light. Something at the base of the wound was irritating his skin, it made him want to scratch it raw or peel it like a raw fruit. He carefully pressed his fingers on both sides of the cut and winced. He ought to leave it alone and wrap it, get some sleep. He ought to think about other things—not the accident, not the man in the snow. He clenched his teeth and stuck his fingers inside the wound. He didn’t know what he was looking for until he touched something sharp inside his arm. Something foreign. His vision blurred. He wanted to get it out. He had to get it out. He pinched the edge of the thing residing inside him and pulled with his trembling hand. It slowly emerged from his wound, covered in blood: a thin pine branch covered in tiny needles. It uncoiled like a snake as it came out of him. Black dots constellated his vision. He thought he heard a scream. Chairs scraped the floor, followed by the stomping of feet. He felt Joe and Walter’s presence before he saw them.

“He’s bleeding again,” he heard Joe say.

Caleb abruptly sat up on the bed and his head spun. He tried to get up, but Walter grabbed his shoulders and kept him in place while he struggled to set himself free.

“Settle down, you’ll hurt yourself,” said Walter, his voice strained with the effort. He sounded so tired.

“It was... it was there, under my skin. I pulled it out,” said Caleb.

“What?”

“He scratched it. What a mess,” groaned Joe. “Now, you listen, son. You’re gonna come here, I’ll dress your wound properly and you’re gonna stop messing with it, you hear me?”

“There was a branch, I pulled the tip and it came out of me I swear, I saw it, I—”

“Get up, you’re shivering. Come close to the stove,” said Walter, guiding him to his previous seat. Caleb sat down, shaken, but docile.

“He’s feverish,” whispered Joe to Walter after pressing his hand on Caleb’s sweaty forehead.

Soon enough, Joe had dressed his wounds and Caleb looked at the bandage, neatly wrapped around his arm. Should he—he couldn’t stop wondering if there was more of the tree inside him. Maybe if he—for a brief moment, he felt outside himself, outside his flesh that hardly seemed to belong to him. He moved his hands, opened and closed them into fists. What if—he thought he felt something writhe under his skin. His panic rose, swelling like a high tide under a full moon. Only briefly. It stopped as quickly as it began, decreased and pooled away. How strange. What if he told—? The acrid smell again. Something like smoke.

“We need to sleep,” said Joe, mostly to Walter.

“You go to bed,” answered Walter.

“What about you?”

“And what, leave him alone to stand guard? In his state?” He shook his head. “You sleep, I’ll wake you up if anything comes up.”

Joe didn’t insist, nor did he complain. He lay on the cot and minutes later, Caleb heard him snoring.

“You can go back to sleep if you want,” said Walter.

“I don’t think I can,” said Caleb.

The fire crackled inside the stove. Outside, the wind howled. The storm was still raging. Walter stoked the flames and shot him a glance.

“It’s not your fault, you know,” repeated Walter.

Caleb shook his head. “Do you think he’ll live?”

There was a moment of silence. Caleb wrung his hands, making sure he could still feel them, that they were still his. He should tell him...He shivered.

“Don’t worry about it,” answered Walter. Caleb examined his face, trying to figure out if he was lying or not, though his own thoughts were too blurry to reason clearly.

Walter grew quiet and still. Silence settled in. Walter’s eyes closed halfway, then fully, then shot open once more. He struggled for a moment. Exhaustion had drawn dark circles under his eyes from many sleepless nights. He lowered his head, his chin resting on his chest. His eyes closed. His breath came slow and steady.

Caleb looked at him in the low light and the weight of responsibility dropped on his shoulders. He had to keep everyone safe, he had to keep everyone warm. Winter was a wolf at their door, scratching and howling and he was cold. Unbearably so. He wrapped his arms around himself, his wound burning, but the rest of him shivering. He grabbed a log and threw it in the wood stove. He couldn’t let the fire die. Whenever he blinked, images flashed: the forest, the snow, the man crushed by the tree. Caleb saw his contorted face and his eyes rolling backwards in his skull, his flattened legs, the blood contrasting vividly with the whiteness of the fresh snow. He added wood to feed the fire.

Trees don’t have will of their own. They don’t fall where they want. They don’t crush and injure people on purpose, slash them open, plant seeds that unfurl into branches. Yet if they didn’t, it meant only one thing: it was all his fault. He grabbed another log. He’d never been so cold in his entire life.

He could hear Joe snoring loudly behind him. Walter breathed quietly next to him, so very quietly for such a large man. He added the last log to the stove and looked at the empty space where the pile had been, stunned. He knew there should have been more, but the information travelled slowly inside him like thick sap in a tree in winter. There was nothing left to burn. The cabin now oozed with warmth and Caleb stopped shivering. In the morning, he thought, in the morning, everything would be better.

Pictures Don't Lie

The blurry image sharpened as I adjusted the focus of my camera lens.

Clic.

So this was downtown: two intersecting streets with small shops, a grocery store, a bar. There was a church with colourful stained glass, its steeple stretching towards the sky. I stood still for a moment, taking it in. There was something peaceful about it.

Clic.

The late afternoon light basked the town in this golden glow that announced the shift of summer into fall. Everything appears prettier in that light. I thought it was too early, but already, the leaves were turning. I spotted patches of red and yellow here and there, brushed across the trees. I couldn't help thinking of my mother and how she would have liked it. She enjoyed fall the most, the crunch of dead leaves under her feet.

Clic.

Houses painted in shades of brown, all slightly faded, sprouted alongside the road like mushrooms. I got a close-up of paint peeling off a wall.

Clic.

I looked at the picture on the screen of the camera, satisfied with the results. I wasn't sure what I had imagined the place would look like. I'd hoped to find it charming at least, like the quaint pictures on a postcard. Instead, everything appeared old and beaten down—compelling in photos, but not in real life. The low-rise buildings were unremarkable. I imagined tumbleweeds rolling down the road. What would my mother have thought of me being in her hometown? I created different scenarios in my head. In some, she was pleased, in others, she was angry or disappointed. I picked a scab on my arm and blood oozed on my skin. I wiped it off swiftly. I hoped she'd approved of my decision: having failed her was the worst possible outcome.

It's funny how something as loud as grief becomes so quiet. I remembered the constant noise buzzing in my mind. It took away my sleep, my inspiration, my will to do anything, really. I didn't pick up my camera for months when it happened, not even once. The thought of taking a picture seemed too big a commitment. With time, the noise subsided, playing in the background

like music at a grocery store. If I didn't think of it or kept myself busy, it remained as such. But who am I kidding? It stained my hands like a blotch of ink. No matter how hard I tried to wash it away, I simply ended up spreading the stain all over my skin. Sometimes, I feared people might see it written all over me, that the feeling breathed through every gesture, coloured every memory. It slithered in every picture, old and new. When I found the photographs hidden in a box under my mother's bed, I felt a pull. A tug. Something like that. I never knew what it was like to have a family. It had always been my mom and I, making our way through the world. Now she was gone and I wanted more. I wanted people that felt the same way I did.

The few people walking down the main street gave me curious looks, as if they were trying to remember where they'd seen me before. Part of me wanted to photograph them, but I didn't dare ask. I pretended I knew where I was heading, which wasn't very difficult considering how little there was to see. I picked the diner up the road. The façade was painted white, but the bottom was greying. The large windows reflected the sunlight and blinded me. I grabbed my camera.

Clic.

A bell jingled when I pushed the door open and stepped on the crooked checkered floor. Cracked red vinyl covered the stools facing the counter and the benches of the booths, where customers ate greasy meals and looked out the windows or chatted. I sat down at the counter, listening to the faint conversations, the upbeat song playing from a dusty jukebox and the clank of pots and pans coming from the kitchen. I dropped my backpack on the floor next to me and carefully placed my camera in front of me. When I looked up, I saw a waitress standing behind the counter. She was about my age, her dark hair tied back into a ponytail. Her eyes were bright green and catlike, which I mostly noticed because she was staring at me. She squinted, beaming with contained excitement.

“You're a fresh new face,” she said.

“Just visiting.”

“Just visiting,” she repeated thoughtfully, and she smiled as if I'd told a funny joke. She tapped her fingers on the counter at the rhythm of the music. Her fingernails were badly chewed.

“Where from?” she asked.

“Montreal.”

“Mmm. I wish I could go.”

“Why don't you?”

She shrugged lazily.

“People rarely leave. No one ever comes. It’s just how it is.” She paused. “You’re kind of a rarity, actually.”

“That explains the curious glances.”

“By tomorrow, you’ll be the talk of the town.” She placed a glossy menu in front of me. “So, what can I get you...?”

“Will.”

“Will,” she repeated. “I’m Lily.”

I looked at the serving hatch joining the kitchen to the dining room and how the metal outlines seemed to frame Lily. The sunlight coming from the windows reflected on the smooth surface of the tables, casting an eerie brightness on the waitress. I loved these kinds of details. She shone like a bright beacon in the low light of the establishment. My mind sparked and my fingers hungrily wrapped around my camera.

“It might be a weird thing to ask, but can I take a picture of you?”

She tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear and cocked an eyebrow.

“A picture of me?” she said in a lower voice and I couldn’t tell if she was embarrassed or mocking me. I even thought I saw a faint blush on her cheek, but it could have been the heat.

“The composition is perfect.”

“Should I pose or something?”

“Just pretend like you’re working and I’m not here.”

She lowered her gaze and grabbed a few clean cups that she stiffly lined up on the counter, the handles sticking out like the ridges of a spine. I snapped a few shots. Everything about the image seemed right. Right after, I flipped through the pictures. I had managed to catch the glare, but it overexposed the image and blurred Lily’s features in a bright light. When I looked up, the moment had passed. The light was gone. Lily peeked over the counter. I wanted to photograph her over and over again until I got it right.

“So... Can I get you something? I can come back if you want,” she said a moment later.

“No, it’s good. I’m sorry.” I snapped out of it and placed my camera on the counter, then quickly looked at the menu. *Pick something. Anything.*

“I’ll get a coffee, please,” I finally said. “And thanks for indulging me.”

“I hope you like them. Anything to eat?”

Lily gave me an expectant look. She always seemed to be expecting, waiting for more than what she asked for. I wished I'd caught her expression in one of the pictures. I shook my head and she walked away to pour some coffee in one of the mugs, which she handed to me. Lily walked up to a couple sitting in a booth and took their order, chewing on the cap of a blue pen that would suffer the same fate as her fingernails. Eventually, she came back and grabbed a towel to clean the counter. With her eyes half closed, I could see the contrast of her dark eyelashes coated with mascara against her pale cheeks, the black make-up speckling her eyelids.

“Actually,” I said, “I have a question.”

She looked up. Expecting. Waiting.

“Uh-huh?”

“I’m looking for the Girard family. Do you know them?”

“Yeah, of course. Who are you looking for?”

I didn’t even know their names. I took the picture out of my pocket and unfolded it, exposing the image of a young girl with long blond hair flanked by a couple. The man was tall and broad-shouldered, his face stern. The woman was smiling, but her lips were pinched, as if she was holding on to a secret. The creased photo was grainy, the colours muted. If I were to turn it over, I knew he would read “Mom and Dad” and the name of the town written in blue ink in his mother’s cursive. *St-Antoine-sur-le-lac*. A deep, longing ache shot through me at the thought of it. Reluctantly, I put the picture on the counter. Lily studied the image for a moment.

“I’m pretty sure that’s Margaret and Robert. Where did you get that picture?”

“They’re my grandparents.”

“No shit. And the girl in the middle?”

“My mom.”

“Is she with you?”

I shifted uncomfortably on his seat, the vinyl creaking under my weight.

“She passed away.”

“Oh.” She pushed the picture towards me. “Fuck. I’m sorry.”

She crumpled the towel in her hands and bit her lower lip then turned around and looked at the clock on the wall.

“Listen, my shift ends in an hour. If you want, I can drive you to their place.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah.”

The longest hand of the clock ticked away with each passing second. I fidgeted with the folded corners of the picture. I blinked as the light above me flickered. Behind the counter, Lily untied her apron. I looked around me. Outside, the sun was low in the sky and most of the customers had left. I got up, feeling slightly disoriented.

“Ready?” asked Lily.

“What are they like?” I asked. “Margaret and Robert?”

“They’re fine.”

“Fine?”

“Let’s say you have to pick your battles. Come on, let’s go. And don’t forget your stuff.”

I patted my pants, looking for my wallet.

“What did you lose again?” said my mother.

I kept losing things, small or big. I lost my pencils, my notebooks. Later, I lost my keys and got into our apartment through the living room window, spraining my wrist. I lost my passport once and numerous documents. I couldn’t find clothes, a missing sock or my favourite t-shirt. She found everything and anything. She would walk past gardens in the neighbourhood and steal a few flowers: begonias, peonies, lily of the valley. The ones that stuck outside the fences. I’d walk away, embarrassed.

“Mom, come on. They’re not yours,” I remember saying.

“I know, but if I don’t pick them, who will? They’ll just wilt and go to waste.”

In the diner, I shoved my hands in the pockets of my jacket and seized my wallet, sighing with relief. I took it out, but Lily pushed it away with her hand.

“Don’t worry about it, it’s on the house,” she said, then added after lowering her voice, “Just don’t mention it to the owners. They’re greedy bastards.”

The cool air blew in from the open windows of the car. The sun was low, casting a burning halo in the dark sky. I heard the chirping of crickets, the night setting in. In the horizon, low shadows stretched out to a vast field, all the way to the outskirts of a dense forest. I held my breath and clenched the grab handle, knuckles white, as Lily pressed her foot on the accelerator, the car speeding on the countryside road. I’ve never liked speed. It made my whole body seize with something like an overwhelming vertigo. A terrible nausea. After my mother died in a car accident,

I couldn't get into a vehicle for weeks. I kept imagining what had happened, building a visual narrative with the details I'd been given. The images flashed one after the other like snapshots.

Clic.

The car crashing in a tree.

Clic.

My mother flying through the windshield.

Clic.

Her lying bloody on the ground or on the hood of the car like a broken doll.

Clic.

Close up on her limbs resting at an odd angle.

I guess I shouldn't think about that sort of thing, but I did. (I still do). I was told she died instantly, as if it was a great relief. But that was months ago. Almost a year. The thought shook me. Lily shot me a quick glance. "Are you going to be sick?"

I was sinking in my seat, waiting for the sensation to pass. "I'm fine."

"You're livid," she said, then added, "please tell me if you're going to be sick, I don't want puke all over my car."

I looked at the empty bottles, discarded clothing and pieces of paper littering the floor of the messy vehicle. I believed I even spotted a Tupperware of old, moldy food. I didn't think I could make it much worse.

"It's just... can you slow down?"

"Oh. Yeah, sorry."

Eventually, she stopped her vehicle in a large driveway, next to a grey pickup truck. I shook my leg nervously. The sun was somehow still setting, casting its low light across the anonymous white paneled house.

"Will you be OK?" she asked.

"Mhm," I answered while staring at the front door.

"I can wait if you want."

"I think I'm good," I said and gave her a lopsided smile. "Thank you. Really."

She opened the glove compartment of the car, revealing a scrunched-up mess of papers. She grabbed one, took a pen and scribbled something on it before handing it to me.

"If you need anything."

I frowned and tried to discern the writing in the growing darkness. It was her name and her phone number.

She wished me luck and just like that, she was gone. I was alone again, standing in front of the house of strangers in the middle of nowhere. I gingerly walked along the pick-up truck and towards the door, the only thing separating me from whatever was left of my family. Getting information from my mother was like pulling teeth.

“Trust me, you’re better off without them.” I felt her arms around me in a tight hug. I tried to hold on to it, but in a moment, it was gone.

The thought of having to inform my grandparents of the passing of their daughter triggered a wave of nausea through my body. I felt the picture in my pocket, the cutting corners of the folded paper. There was a gap between me and my grandparents that I didn’t know how to fill. I didn’t know if I could jump that far, but I would try. I took a shaky breath in and knocked on the door. I heard a quiet shuffle and a dog barked, startling me. Heavy footsteps followed and the door opened, leaving way to an older man, his broad shoulders filling the doorway. He liked his photograph. He had the same stern face, though now creased and wrinkled with age. There was an off-putting severity to him that intimidated me. The man, Robert Girard, looked me up and down. As he did, his eyes remained dull and unblinking.

“Yes?” he asked in a low, gravelly voice.

I swallowed with difficulty.

“Your daughter, Helen. I’m her son.”

He studied me once more and I thought he saw a spark of recognition on his face. In the house, a light brassy voice called out, “Who is it?”

“Helen, you say.” He rubbed his chin with his large hand.

“Robert, is it him?” asked Margaret Girard. She popped behind him, a frail little woman that reminded me of a bird. Not knowing where to look or what to do with myself, I stared down. She wore pink and orange knitted slippers.

“Apparently,” answered Robert. “Helen’s son.”

Margaret’s eyes widened. She squeezed next to her husband to take a good look at me.

“We were wondering when you would show up here. I kept doubting, but Robert never did, didn’t you, dear?”

I blinked.

“Wait, what —”

“Are you going to stand here all night?” she said unceremoniously. “Come on in, dear.”

Robert moved out of the way. I felt the weight of his gaze upon me. As soon as he came in, a large, old dog with a chestnut coat headed in his direction.

“That’s Zoo. Don’t worry about him, he’s all bark and no bite,” said Margaret.

I slowly stretched out my hand towards the dog, who sniffed it gently while wagging his tail. Satisfied, the animal turned around and flopped on the ground, the same colour as his shiny coat.

“Come on, darling. Sit down, sit down,” said Margaret, guiding me to a brown leather couch.

Stunned, I sat down and looked around me. The kitchen and the living space were one large room mostly made of wood. The smell of firewood filled the place, as well as something peppery. The TV was on, playing the news. Robert sat down in an armchair facing the couch. He pressed the mute button on the remote control, then crossed his large hands over his bulging belly, and stared expectantly at me. Margaret took her place next to me. Margaret took place next to me. She was so light I barely felt the couch shift under her weight.

“What’s your name, dear?”

“Will.”

“Lovely, lovely. And you’re Helen’s son, is that right? We’ve been expecting you for a while.”

“What? How?”

“We assumed you’d come by sooner or later. And to say you had to wait for Helen to die to visit us. You could’ve come earlier. Did she keep you from coming? She was always stubborn, poor darling.”

Her words were followed by a heavy silence. In front of me, the images kept shifting on the TV, the blue light bright against Margaret’s face. She kept smiling. Robert’s face barely moved. I had imagined all sorts of scenarios. I had expected sadness, anger, maybe resentment. More than that, I had stepped into this house, convinced I would have to announce terrible news to my grandparents. Relief briefly flooded through me. I glanced at Margaret and Robert, hoping to catch

a glimpse of shared grief or understanding. Unsettled by their lack of reaction, I took the picture out of my pocket.

“I found these in her things,” I said.

I unzipped the front pocket of my backpack and took out a handful of photographs of my mother, some of her when she was younger, others that dated back a couple years. I remembered when I took them, though the memory felt incredibly distant. Camera defaults obscured some parts of the older pictures, which deeply irritated me.

“I thought you might want to see these. Or to know what happened, though you seem to know already. I don’t know what I was thinking, I’m sorry,” I mumbled. “I shouldn’t have come,” I added.

I felt my face flush, the burning heat on my cheeks and forehead. Robert shifted forward.

“You have to understand,” he said gravely, “we haven’t seen or heard of Helen in years. But we only had one child. We kept track.”

“But you did well coming here, darling, didn’t he, Robert? You did good.”

I didn’t understand how she could speak so cheerfully. I thought maybe they were too proud to express how they really felt in front of a complete stranger, related or not. I swallowed with difficulty as I attempted to find my feelings mirrored somewhere on their faces, anything he could hold on to. As if sensing my internal turmoil, Margaret patted my hand. She looked at my wrist.

“It’s a nice watch you got there. Your dad’s?”

“Actually, yes, it was.” I steadied my breath, still flustered. “Did you ever meet him?”

“Just once, very briefly.”

I wanted to ask her more questions, but something about her demeanour told me not to. Was it her eyes? The stiffness of her neck? It might have been all of it or nothing at all. The conversation died down and I wondered whether I should stay or go. Slowly, I gathered the pictures and put them back in my backpack, then cleared his throat.

“I should probably go,” I said tentatively.

“At this time of night? Nonsense. That was it Lily’s car outside?”

I nodded and opened my mouth, but she cut me off.

“She’s a bit nosy, that one. Always in everybody’s business.”

“I mean, she was —”

“History repeating itself.” She shook her head. “You can sleep here tonight. Yes, yes, I insist, don’t give me that look. There’s a spare room with your name on it. You stay here as long as you need. You’re our grandson after all, isn’t that right, Robert?”

Robert grunted in approval. Margaret got up and showed me around the house, pushing open the door to a blue bathroom decorated with tacky seashells and then to a bedroom. I took stock of the furniture: a twin bed, a nightstand, a small mirror on a wall, a dresser and a closet door in a corner. The yellow walls were barren and washed out, as if the colour’s vibrancy had been sucked out of it.

“It used to be her room,” said Margaret, as if whispering a secret. I remembered the look she had on the family picture: her smile, her lips tightened, as if holding on to some confidential information. That’s who she was, I figured. Faces don’t lie. Pictures don’t lie. For a moment, we both smiled.

When she left, I closed the door behind me, still adapting to the room and the surreal feeling of the whole day. I dropped my backpack next to the bed, took out my camera and snapped a few pictures of the room until my hungry curiosity started to gnaw at me. I opened the drawers of the dresser, hoping to find something that might have belonged to my mom. As I did, all I found were musty smelling bed sheets and some orange and maroon blankets. I closed the drawers and headed to the closet, filled with winter clothes and shoes. The nightstand was empty. I kneeled on the floor and looked under the bed for some boxes, but nothing. I wondered if they’d thrown everything away or if my mother had packed all her belongings before she left. I sat on the bed, holding on to the pictures. If my mother had lived here, most traces of her had wiped out away as if she’d never existed in this space.

I woke up with a start and for a brief moment, didn’t know where I was. I sat up in bed, my mind thick with sleep, my senses overwhelmed with the novelty of the space: the foreign smell of the bedsheets, the garish sunlight coming through the window, the distant sound of a radio. This wasn’t my bed. My heart skipped a beat and my memories of the previous night came flooding back. I was sleeping in my mother’s bed. I massaged my temples, feeling the insidious pressure of a headache lurking in.

Later, I walked in the kitchen, where Margaret and Robert were eating breakfast. I quietly joined them, thanking them once again for hosting me overnight. I smiled awkwardly. I’ve always

loathed small talk, but questions like “why did my mother hate you?” and “what happened to all her stuff?” didn’t strike me as ideal breakfast conversation starters.

“Aren’t you hungry, Will?” asked Margaret.

“Yeah, just tired.”

I forced myself to take a bite.

“Do you miss her?” I asked tentatively.

Robert turned his large head towards me. Margaret leaned towards me and placed her wilted hand on my cheek. I wasn’t expecting her to touch me and my first instinct was to move back. I stood still and stared back at her, somehow moved by her gesture.

“You look like her,” she said. “You have her eyes, her nose.”

She removed her hand from my face and placed it on her lap.

“You also look like him, your worthless father. The little rat came out of nowhere. No one ever comes here, you know, it’s just us. He took our daughter with him and they left together.”

I stared at her, speechless.

“Excuse me?” I managed to say.

“She was a deceitful little witch, Helen. She always knew when to seize an opportunity.”

“That’s what the conflict was? She left this place and you couldn’t take it?”

“No one ever leaves this place,” said Robert in a calm, even voice.

“This is ridiculous. You say that, but my parents left.”

“They did.” Margaret smiled. “But everything that leaves comes back eventually.”

I had expected to encounter some tensions, but this was... petty.

“Do you know what happens when people forget you?” she asked.

“I don’t know, you move on. Seriously, I can’t believe you didn’t speak for *years* because my mom chose another life.”

“No, Will. You’re thrown in the lost and found of life. You fade away until you become a shadow of yourself, until there’s nothing left of you.”

I froze for a moment, not knowing what to respond and even less how to interpret her words. Goosebumps pricked my skin.

“How long have you been lost, darling?”

“I should go,” I said.

“You’re just like them,” Margaret said with a sigh. “Selfish. You follow every impulse you feel. It’s not good for you, darling.”

“Thank you for having me,” I mumbled.

I stood up abruptly and my chair tumbled on the ground with a loud thud. The sound startled me, as if it wasn’t a logical consequence of my action.

“You don’t have to be alone,” said Margaret in a sweet voice.

“I have to go,” I managed to answer.

I went straight for the door and walked out, then down the road without thinking. My heart thumped in my chest and I didn’t notice my hands were shaking until I stopped. When I did, I realized I’d left my bag and my camera back in the house and sighed. I heard my mother’s voice in my head, teasing me. *You would forget your own head if it wasn’t attached to your body.* The sound of her laughter echoed in my ears.

I would have to go back later. I rummaged through the pockets of my vest and took stock of what I had: my phone, my wallet, a 35 mm point and shoot camera and a crumpled piece of paper. When I unfolded it, I smiled. It was Lily’s number.

“I used to come here with friends when I was a teen,” said Lily after we’d laid our towels on a pier. She had picked me up on the side of the road. Luckily for me, it was her day off and when she told me she was going to the lake, I decided to tag along just to get away. From where we stood, I saw a group of teenagers scattered on a small pebble beach by the water. Everything felt incredibly still and stale, as if the whole world was holding its breath. The smooth lake reflected the sunlight and I had to squint my eyes to see anything. I discerned the silhouettes of the teenagers and heard their shouts, but I couldn’t make out their faces. However, he felt their eyes on them, staring.

“We would smoke and drink—” she continued while pulling a few hairs caught in the top knot of her bikini.

“Cause that’s all there is to do here.”

She gave me a curious look.

“How do you know that?”

“My mom used to say that.”

The exact same words. That was pretty much all she shared about her upbringing, that and the conviction that she had made the right choice by leaving this place.

“Figures,” said Lily. “She grew up here after all, right?”

I told her what had happened that night and the months that had followed.

“What was she doing out at that ungodly hour?” she asked.

“She was a nurse. Her shifts were all messed up sometimes.”

“What about your dad?”

“He left when I was younger.”

I was ten when one afternoon, my father had left to meet up with some friends and never returned. He only had his wallet and his keys in his pockets, nothing else. Not even the silver watch I now wore, one I rarely removed. Lily stared at me, but didn’t say anything. I knew that look too well. The word Margaret had used to describe Lily flashed in my mind. *Nosy*.

“Oh no. No. Don’t look at me like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like I’m some sad guy—”

“I’m not, but—”

“Like I’m someone to be pitied, because I don’t want to—”

“But Will, you gotta admit that’s some sad shit—“

“I fucking hate it. I’d rather people be mad at me or shout or, I don’t know, shake me.”

We both stood still and silence built up between us. In the distance, I heard the teenagers laughing and shouting, the sound reverberating on the surface of the water. After a moment, I heard her shift on her towel.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

I nodded to acknowledge her apology, but didn’t look at her.

“Do you want me to shake you?” she added, and I heard a smile in her voice.

“I think I’ll pass, but thanks for offering,” I said.

When I turned towards her, I couldn’t help but smile too.

“So,” she said while shoving a hand in her bag. “I know you don’t smoke cigarettes, but what about weed?”

“If you’re going to tempt me, I guess I can’t say no.”

We lit the joint Lily offered and shared it. A woolly numbness between my eyebrows softened my thoughts.

“What about your parents?” I asked.

“They’re the owners of the restaurant.”

“Wait, they’re the greedy bastards?”

She laughed. I took my camera out and cranked the wheel. I snapped a picture of the lake, then one of her.

“Gimme that,” she said, snatching the camera from my hands. “It’s my turn, now.”

She photographed me and I looked away. I preferred being on the other side of the lens.

“Will?” she asked.

“Yeah?”

Sitting on her towel, she looked straight at me. Expecting. Waiting.

“We should leave together,” she said with conviction.

“Leave the town?”

“Today is good. Promise you’ll wait for me?”

“Of course.” It surprised me she wanted to leave, but the thought of Lily coming with me offered me a warm sense of safety.

Lily nodded and then lay back down on her towel, seemingly satisfied by my answer. Time passed. The sun had moved in the sky, bright and warm. We were both lying on our towels, our eyes half closed. I didn’t have sunglasses so when I did close my eyes, all I saw was a bright red light. Eventually, my stomach growled.

“I packed a sandwich,” she said, her voice distant. “We can split it if you want. It’s probably not really good, but it’ll fill you up.”

“Is that what you tell your customers?”

She gasped, looking both offended and amused.

“I guess I’ll just eat it by myself and let you starve. Your loss.”

I propped myself up on my elbow and looked around me. The teenagers had quieted down. Once again, the unsettling feeling of staleness hit me. The leaves of the trees barely moved. It felt like looking at a picture. I took my camera on the towel and photographed the landscape. At the end of the pier, the lake stretched far out, smooth and still. I wiped the beads of sweat from my brow. The lake looked like a mirror reflecting the sky.

“Can I jump from the pier?” I asked. “Is it deep enough?”

“Uh-huh,” she answered while chewing a bite of a half sandwich. The other half remained in the plastic bag, untouched. She covered her mouth with her hand. “The water’s cold as balls, though,” she added.

I removed my shirt, folded it and carefully placed my watch on top. I took one step and then ran on the pier. Before I plunged, I heard Lily’s laughter. A moment later, the water surrounded me and swallowed every sound. I opened my eyes. The sunlight pierced through the dark water, giving it a faint green hue.

I swam to the surface and took a deep breath. I quickly looked around me to see where I was. Everywhere, the colours were faded, washed out like an old picture. The sun was low in the horizon, colouring the sky into shades of orange and pink. With it, the temperature had dropped. The lake was still and dark like an unblinking eye. The teenagers had left the now empty beach. I didn’t understand how much time had passed. I climbed back on the pier and when my hand brushed the back of the camera, a strange heat emanated from it. I opened the presser, making sure to shade the inside from the light. As I did so, the smell of burned plastic filled my nostrils. The film had completely melted.

Lily and I drove back to the Girard house in silence. She parked the car in the driveway and told me she would wait outside.

I walked in the house. The door creaked when I opened it and I clenched my jaws. I heard the television playing in the living room. Margaret turned her head towards me.

“I knew he’d come back around. Didn’t I say so, Robert?”

Robert grunted in approval while nodding gravely.

“I’m just here to take my bag and I’ll be out of your hair.”

“So eager to leave,” she said. “You can still stay here. We all found each other in the end, didn’t we? What are you looking for outside?”

“Nothing. I forgot my camera here earlier.”

“And you’ll cling on to memories. Oh, honey. Who will remember you?”

The words echoed in my mind. I quickly walked to the bedroom to grab my bag. Inside, I took the pictures on the nightstand and froze. I flipped through them over and over again. The faces were blurred out. All of them. I thought about my camera, about the pictures I’d taken the day

before and didn't dare to look at them. My heart thumped in my chest and pulsed in my ears. I shoved the pictures in my bag and rushed through the corridor towards the living room, heading straight for the door. Robert and Margaret were still sitting in front of the television, but I couldn't see their faces. They had been wiped out, scrubbed clean. Zoo stepped towards me and started barking. As if a strong wind had blown from inside the house, the front door slammed open.

"You can still change your mind, Will," said Margaret, her voice cutting through the uproar.

A distant whistling noise started drilling through my eardrums, ever so faintly. It seemed to grow louder and louder growing from uncomfortable to unbearable, a monstrous howling coming from nowhere. I wanted to scream. I bolted out of the house and Lily's car was gone and nowhere to be seen. The wind rushed against me, threatening to wipe me. The shadows of night shrouded the world around me with a thick veil of darkness. The stars barely blinked in the sky, snuffed out. There was only one way out, down the road, or was it one way in? I ran blindly towards the town, the pull tugging from every direction. Every time I passed by a house, the door opened wide and I felt eyes looking at me everywhere from blurred out faces and the howling, the howling.

When I reached downtown, a silhouette stood in the middle of the road. Expecting. Waiting. I saw her face exactly as I remembered from earlier that night, which both relieved and terrified me.

"Where are you going?" asked Lily.

Where had she been? What was happening? Questions piled up inside me, threatening to choke me.

"I'm leaving this fucking town."

"Take me with you," she said urgently, reaching out to me. I stepped back.

"Get away from me!"

"You promised."

I ignored her and kept running. Sweat drenched my back and my temperature constantly shifted between deadly cold and burning heat. Whenever I stopped, Lily was still there, staring. Expecting. Waiting.

"You won't find your way out," she said.

I looked around. She was right. I'd been running in circles over and over again.

"Then we're both screwed," I muttered.

"We're not, just take me with you. I can show you the way out. Will, look at me."

A tug, a pull. I was tired of resisting. Our eyes met and when she held out her hand, I instantly grabbed it. The contact of her skin on mine burnt with an unspoken promise and a flicker of doubt echoed through me. Suddenly she was leading and pulling me towards the road opening wide in front of us and I couldn't do anything but follow and the road seemed long and never-ending, stretching through the night and beyond and I wanted to believe the howling would stop and that if she turned towards me, I would see her face and her features and her bright green eyes and that we would be leaving everything behind and never, ever coming back.

Another Version

I

The first warm breeze of spring wafted through the half-opened window. The world glowed red behind my closed eyelids. I wanted to talk about the winter, how long it had lasted. I wanted to find certainty in the coming of better days. Slowly, I opened my eyes, savouring the present. The apartment was empty, aside from piles of boxes scattered here and there and some few pieces of furniture we'd found the courage to put together—like the bed.

Lying on the couch, I pushed a box with the tip of my toes. I thought about asking you where you were the other day. My head was resting on your thighs as you scrolled on your phone. In that light, you looked like a Pre-Raphaelite painting, all angles and full of magic.

“What’s in there?” I asked.

You looked up, barely. “Uh, dunno. Probably books or something.”

I remembered you coming in late, alcohol on your breath. Not that it was unusual. When the shows end, you sometimes grabbed a drink with the cast.

A foreign smell clung to your skin. That was unusual. But it was ancient history, wasn't it? We'd moved on. Clean slate. You promised me you wouldn't do it again. I believed you. When we came in with the first boxes, our footsteps echoed in the living room. The ceilings' dizzying heights dazzled me. We didn't have enough furniture to fill the space, that's the first thing I thought. How were we going to fill the space? When I went into the bathroom and turned the light on, the light bulb shattered.

“I think the place is haunted,” I said.

“What?” You finally took your eyes off your phone and cocked an eyebrow.

“You know, with the lightbulb.”

“Shit like that happens all the time.”

“And that door right there?”

“Did you ask the landlord about it?”

“Yeah, he says the door was condemned when they restructured the house.”

The door was simple. It was made of varnished wood with a round metal doorknob. We had tried to open it, but it was locked. When we moved in yesterday, I had leaned forward, peeking

through the keyhole. Nothing. Darkness. You said it was probably the result of poor planning. There was nothing special about it. And yet, I couldn't take my eyes off it.

"It's an old house, sure, but it's been split into so many apartments and taken apart and pieced back together with duct tape—like every apartment in this city. Trust me, there's no soul left in it," you said. You dropped your phone on the couch and it bounced on a pillow.

From my viewpoint, I admired the mouldings decorating the walls, right where they met the ceilings. The floors were old and oddly angled, the cracks between the wood slats so large dust gathered in between. I disagreed. There was plenty of soul left in it. The apartment had an odd shape, like it had been divided in a greedy divorce. But really, the thing it reminded me of the most was a piece of Tetris, the "S" shaped one no one liked.

"I don't know, it's just a feeling," I said, giving in.

You ran your hand through my hair. "You have a lot of imagination. Don't get me wrong, I like that about you. Just don't let it scare you, right?"

"That didn't sound patronizing at all."

"It wasn't."

"Sure."

The silence sharpened between us. Outside, the traffic intensified. The sound of honking and whirring motors perturbed the white noise of the street. I hoped it would be quieter at night.

"Do you really have to go?" I finally asked, and I hated that I did. By that point, you felt miles away. My question brought you back and I sensed your whole body tense through the back of my head.

"Are you serious? You're still upset about that?"

I sat up. "I'm not upset, I'm saying it's not a convenient time."

"Yeah, well life is not convenient. I don't get a lot of opportunities for film. Theatre's great and all, but it hardly pays the bills."

"I know, I get that, but we just moved."

"It's one week, Clara. One week. We've been apart longer than that. What's wrong with you?"

Jealousy. A bitter taste hiding on the back of my tongue like a secret.

"You're right, it's just—"

"You're acting up again."

“I’m sorry.”

“Yeah. I gotta pack my things and I don’t know where half my stuff is. It’s such a fucking mess.”

You shook your head and got up, heading towards the bedroom.

Jealousy will make you do terrible things and pretend it’s love. The space in the living room stretched out in front of me. From here, the only sign of you was the shuffle coming from the bedroom. I looked at the door, which felt closer than the rest.

II

That evening, you grabbed your heavy backpack and swung it over your shoulder. I stood at the entrance next to you, shifting my weight from one foot to another.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “About earlier. I hope you have fun, OK?”

A smile stretched on your lips, sharp. There was nothing soft about you, there had never been. I loved to watch you act. You played roles, but you always brought something of yourself. I’d seen so many versions of you. In the morning, my heart always leaped out before my arms could reach you. Your body warm with sleep, your eyes veiled with dreams on the verge of being blinked away. There were so many things that made you lovable. The shared glances, your slicing smiles, even your jagged edges. You said my words were my greatest weapons, and I like to think it’s true, but they fail me sometimes. More than sometimes.

You took a step towards me and softly rubbed my arms.

“I know the timing sucks. On the upside, though, you have the whole place to yourself. You can arrange it the way you like,” you said.

“Ha, sure. Let me do all the unpacking.”

And I know we’ve been arguing a lot. About finances, about small habits, about us. About your job, about mine, about us. About our friends, about our goals, about us. Always the same things. I couldn’t help but think you weren’t listening. Sometimes, I got so angry the words escaped me. I had adopted English, a language that lived like a stranger in my mouth. When I watched a video of me, the odd ways my tongue and lips moved to accommodate it fascinated me. I tripped. I stumbled and even fell down the many traps of “r” and “th”. That made you laugh.

“Say that one more time?” you’d ask.

It’s in those moments that I hated you the most.

“I’ll build some furniture when I come back. You can take some time to read and write,” you said apologetically.

“I’ll do that.”

“I’ll make it up to you.”

You kissed me and left. They say when one door closes, another one opens.

III

The first time the door opened was on a Tuesday, which is usually an unremarkable day. It lacks Monday’s nerves, Wednesday’s optimism or Thursday’s anticipation as it leans towards Friday and the weekend. Tuesday is cold and, well, unremarkable.

In bed, I stared at my computer resting on my lap. The text cursor blinked on the blank page of a document. I wrote a few sentences, deleted them. Wrote again, then switched to another project.

I was caught between longing for you and resenting you. The bed was too large, the room too empty and the walls too high. The traffic had settled. A cool wind blew in from the cracked window. Under the blankets, I shivered. A small scratching sound coming from outside the bedroom bothered me. It had been going on and off, as if trying to get my attention. I hoped it wasn’t a mouse. We’d had some at our previous apartment. I remembered setting the trap and hearing it trigger in the night. In the morning, I had to get rid of the mouse’s body, because you didn’t want to touch it. It was so small. Its back snapped, it lay stiffly on the trap, its soft fur a blueish grey. I took our purple dish gloves to release it into a garbage bag, which I tossed in a can on the corner of a street. Just like that. A life extinguished and thrown away. I didn’t look forward to repeating the process.

I examined the messy room: the half-gutted boxes scattered across the floor, the lamp sitting on the naked nightstand, the white walls like eyes wide open. It stood on the verge of something, either a beginning or an end, filled with possibilities, version upon version of ourselves contained in a box. Outside the bedroom, the scratching resumed.

“Ugh, for fuck’s sake,” I grunted. I closed my computer and got out of bed, wrapping my arms around my body to shield it from the cold. I walked outside of the room, then came back and

put my slippers on—just in case. The thought of a mouse touching my naked skin made me want to scream. In the living room, I considered how I would have to tell you once more that we might have little unwanted friends.

“Hey, just wanted to let you know they followed us to our new place, no biggies,” I whispered as I quietly walked around the living room, searching the floor for any movement, any confirmation of my suspicions. As usual, I was left to fix the problem. Why did I always forgive you everything? I turned around, coming face to face with the door. The scratching came from the other side. Of course it did. I approached it slowly, then kicked the bottom of the door and a loud thud echoed in the empty room. Silence followed when the sound finally died out. I perked up my ears, waiting. Waiting. And then...

I jumped out of my skin when the same kicking sound came from the other side. I pressed my hand on my heart, which was beating wildly. My imagination spun, constructing the worst scenarios and most terrifying possibilities. I remembered you saying, “Don’t let it scare you”. You were right. The house had been split up and sliced apart. The door probably led to the neighbouring apartment. I pressed my ear against the wood.

Nothing.

I knocked on it gently, my knuckles hitting the hard surface in a rhythmic beat. The same motif repeated from the other side. I smiled. I’d go say hi to the neighbour tomorrow and we’d laugh about it—after I apologized for the ruckus.

Then, the soft click of a door unlocking.

My smile vanished. This wasn’t funny anymore.

“Who’s there?”

No answer. I grabbed a small, folded table leaning against a box, placing it against my chest like a shield. When I turned the doorknob, it gave in. Maybe I should have been wiser. More prepared. Maybe this wasn’t the smartest thing to do, but despite the uncertainty, the unknown and the fear rushing through me, the truth is I *wanted* to know. Curiosity prickled on the back of my neck. The door was an invitation.

IV

It wasn’t what I imagined.

Standing in the doorway, I contemplated a corridor stretching out in front of me. Dark wood panels covered the lower half of the walls and old washed out, yellow wallpaper decorated the top part. I took a step in and examined the pattern. Flowers of some sort. And at the end of the hall? Another door. A voice came through from behind the shut door, one that sounded familiar. I padded my way towards it, the folded table clenched close to my chest, ready for anything. As I leaned in, it dawned on me that the voice sounded like *you*.

“Jamie? Is that you?”

I heard footsteps, then nothing. The silence settled in once more.

“OK, whoever this is, stop fucking with me.”

I opened the door and daylight flooded through the hall, blinding me. I blinked, my vision slowly adapting to the sudden brightness. So, there *was* an apartment on the other side. The living room looked exactly like ours, every detail; there was even the grey mark on the wall next to the door, from when we’d brought the couch in during the move. Our own apartment mirrored and perfectly replicated. The world seemed to tilt. Barely, but enough to feel it with my whole body. This didn’t make sense. I laughed, the sound jarring and dry like a snapping twig.

Your hair was like when I first met you. I remembered how it brushed your jaw every time you moved your head. I softened at the sight of you.

“Jamie?”

“Still in your pyjamas? Do you know what time it is?”

It was your voice. It was you, but it couldn’t be, standing at the entrance of the kitchen like a vision.

“What? But you...”

My voice trailed, the last word dragging into oblivion. You smiled that knowing smile, the one that whispered *I know something that you don’t*. As you moved closer, I was baffled by the resemblance—because this couldn’t be you. Even your smell was the same, the earthiness of your skin, the sweet note of your perfume. You reached out and touched my arm, the light brush of your fingers, electric. I dropped the table on the floor.

I blinked and the room shifted. Or I shifted. I was no longer standing, but sitting at the living room table across from you, staring deep into your eyes. You tilted your head to the side, your chin resting on the heel of your hand. I felt your foot against mine from under the table. A plate of food sat in front of me, of half-eaten fruit, eggs and toast. I didn’t remember eating anything. Yours was

untouched. I looked at the window and the light was so bright I couldn't see outside, filled with the infinity of a July afternoon. I could've stared at it forever.

"Well look who's distracted now," you said. "It's been a while, hasn't it? You and me. Really together."

And it had. I hardly remembered the weight of your full presence, the heaviness of your dedicated attention. It pinned me like a butterfly on a board.

"You're right. It's nice," I managed to say. I imagined my words lingering in the thick air, moving through molasses. The boxes sat on the floor, unpacked. I wanted to gut them open, see what was inside.

"I don't understand, did you cut your hair?" I asked instead.

"Do you like it?"

I smiled. "I do." This *was* nice. Surely, it was a dream, honey sweet on the tip of my tongue. I got up and you followed me with your gaze, heavy and sharp. I headed towards a box, the one you told me probably contained books. I needed to see something tangible, something real. I had to confirm this wasn't simply the fruit of my imagination—my untrustworthy, wild imagination. I tore the duct tape and freed the cardboard edges of the box. If I grabbed a book, I would flip it open to the last page. I know it revolted you, how I always read the last page of a book before I even started it.

"What's the point?" you'd say. "It spoils the whole thing."

"Not at all, it's about the *journey*. How they get there, why the characters do what they do. Knowing the ending doesn't ruin anything."

You weren't convinced, but you let it go. I didn't want to reveal that I needed to know the ending. Not even a full page, a single line would do. Sometimes, I even read the plots of movies before watching them or else I felt anxious during the whole screening. It's ridiculous, I know. We have control over so little in our lives and this is one way I seize it.

Before I could do anything, you wrapped your arms around my waist, pulling me up. You kissed me on the neck and that same electric touch whirred through me.

"Let it go," you said. "You don't need to worry about anything."

But I did.

V

I've had a taste of something new.

I've visited you twice already, the scenario repeating itself. Is it cheating if it was another version of you? I daydreamed about it, baffled and amazed by the sheer bizarreness of the situation. After some time through the door, I'd blink and find myself back here, in our apartment—the real one. I'd try to open it again, hungry and impatient, but it would be locked once more. I would have to try again later.

Throughout the day, I walked with a spring in my step. My smile was contagious. My friends assumed the move had gone well and that we were settling in nicely, in a blissful domesticity. Weren't we just a perfect couple, you and I?

"How are things?" you asked on the phone, your voice cutting through the sound of music and conversations. "What have you been up to?"

I proceeded to tell you about my days, when I heard laughter in the background and the sound of your voice trailing off.

"Jamie? Are you listening?"

"Oh yeah, yeah. Sorry, I'll have to call you back, OK?"

"Sure."

You hung up.

VI

I hungered for more.

Instead of lying restlessly in bed, I sat in the living room. I paced through the apartment, the floorboard creaking under my feet. I flipped through pages of books, my eyes skirting over words without reading them. Through all of this, my eyes kept flicking towards the door, ears perked, waiting for a sign of life or the light clicking of a door unlocking.

When it did, I lunged towards it, flung it open and let the darkness of the corridor swallow me whole. The door behind me shut and I slowed down as relief flooded through me. The hall seemed to stretch out in front of me, longer than I remembered. I quickened my pace. Had the other door always been so far? A soft glow emanated from it, like a light at the end of a tunnel. I finally reached it and entered.

Things had changed. The first thing I noticed was the lighting, then the overwhelming sound of ticking emanating from clocks, clocks everywhere and of all sorts. Against the walls, on furniture. Through the window, the sky was the colour of a deep, fresh bruise—dark blue and purple at the edges. You were nowhere in sight.

“Jamie?” My voice barely rose over the sound of the clocks. I thought about unplugging the electronic ones or removing the batteries, but when I grabbed one, its surface was smooth. I even considered smashing some on the ground, just to make them stop. I looked through the kitchen, the bedroom and couldn’t find a soul.

Where were you?

When I came back to the living room, I was shaking like a leaf. I took hold of the doorknob and turned it to find it locked. I repeated the same movement with growing panic, my movements jerky and aggressive. A clock rang, the shrill sound cutting through the din of the innumerable devices in the small space, and I jumped with a renewed fright. A door opened, but not the one I was struggling with, the *entrance*. From a door that appeared to lead to nowhere, a person walked in, someone I didn’t know, and when they did, the ringing clock stopped altogether. The person walked in, oblivious of my existence. As hard as I tried, I couldn’t pin down their shifting features; they slipped out of my mind like water off a duck’s back.

This wasn’t real.

Another clock rang, and another and another, and people walked in, the clocks all stopping one by one with every guest. The sound of growing conversations crashed over the space, swallowing that of the dying clocks.

“What’s happening?” I pushed through the crowd, struggling to find a familiar face, but they were all the same—anonymous and forgettable. “Someone, answer me, please!”

My elbows came into contact with the nameless bodies of the crowd filling the rooms of the apartment. I felt as if I was choking. Far in the distance, your face beamed among the others like a beacon in the night. Your hair had changed, longer. People moved around you like a school of fish shifting around a shark. High with hope, I fought my way towards you, the distance growing with every step. You were deep in conversation with someone, laughing, stroking their arm and leaning towards them as if sharing a secret. I screamed your name, but the voices swallowed it as they were swallowing me.

“I don’t love you,” I heard you say, though your eyes were averting mine.

Anymore, I wanted to add. You don't love me *anymore*.

Because you had loved me, that I know. I thought you still did.

I didn't want to think about it.

I didn't want to let the words sink in, but they did, slowly, painfully like hot iron pressed on naked skin and it hurt, it hurt, it hurt. A searing sensation rose inside my chest until I couldn't breathe. I dropped on my knees, coughing as the blind crowd moved around me. My lungs burned as I heaved, pieces of embers clawing up my throat and falling on the floor, scattering fiery sparks on the floor.

I blinked and it all vanished.

VII

If you slow down time, you may find that it quickens incredibly quickly afterwards. Were we always playing on borrowed time, you and I? I didn't want to go back, or think about any of this. I'd seen enough. I locked myself in my bedroom for a full day, barely going out. I couldn't stand the sight of the door. I was afraid it would make me want to go back. My chest ached and my lungs burned, victims of a phantom pain. The couple of times I walked by it, I sped up, closing my eyes. Like a child, I thought whatever was in there wouldn't see me if I couldn't see them. Wishful thinking. I heard it scratching, breathing and growling throughout the nights, like an angry beast trying to find its way in.

VIII

"Are you sure you're OK? You sound weird," you said on the phone. Sitting on the couch in the living room, I couldn't take my eyes from the spidering veins on the wall around the door. They pulsed like a living thing. Whatever festered inside had found a way to seep in through my side of existence. This was not good. I wrapped my arms around my shins, holding my folded legs against my chest.

"Uh-huh," I answered. "All good."

Some people love the thrill and the shivers of horror. I didn't, but I was getting acquainted with it. Slowly. Maybe it was seeping through me too. We knew each other's faces, I had brushed its skin a few times. It sang to me like a siren, beckoning.

"Are you listening?" you asked.

“Yeah, sorry.”

“I’m coming back tomorrow, remember?”

“I know.”

“Did you unpack some stuff?”

“Not much. I’ve been kind of busy.”

“OK, well... I’ll see you tomorrow night, then?”

“Yeah, see ya.”

“Love you.”

The words bit.

“Love you too,” I answered.

I hung up.

IX

When I opened the door, the corridor stretched out in front of me, growing longer and longer. The walls were warped and a strip of wallpaper had curled, peeling off with a sticky sound. Voices echoed down the hall, whispering murmurs. “Love you too,” they said. I thought I heard something like pity in their tone, but it was wiped from my mind before I could investigate it. I might have been reading too much into it. I walked as one walks into a cold pond of water: I anticipated the overwhelming coldness on my skin. I anticipated losing my footing, the emptiness under me, the loss of control. The familiar whirring of anxiety vibrated in the back of my neck, the whispers of the disembodied voices echoing in my mind. My heart started beating faster.

Close your eyes, I thought. *Close your eyes and keep going*. Maybe this time, maybe this time I would get it right. The corridor was long, long, long and getting longer. I thought I would never reach the end. There was a muffled thump as I walked straight into the door. I fumbled for the doorknob, opened it. Inside, the whispers died down. A moist heat assaulted me. I stopped, jarred by the change in temperature. When I looked, the apartment was hardly recognizable.

The few plants we managed to keep alive had overgrown and taken hold of everything, stretching up to the ceiling. They even swallowed the windows, from which a bleak light peeked through, casting an ominous atmosphere in the living room. I looked at the wall, fascinated. When I brought my hand towards the plant, a leaf curled towards my finger, painted light and dark green like an aquarelle. It looked inquisitive, curious. Like you. A purple flower bloomed at my touch,

then folded into itself and died. The leaves quivered like the wings of a hundred butterflies. I carefully crossed the living room, padding my way to the kitchen where I could hear rushing water. I thought I would see you there, but the room was empty. Water poured from the faucet, filling the sink and spilling all over the floor in a great pool. I hurried to it, soaking my socks. I turned the faucet handles one way, and when that didn't work, the other way. The water kept flowing, unbothered by my efforts. I felt numb. I looked around and walked back to the living room and there you were. Sitting on the couch, how did I not see you? Your hair was long, longer than I'd ever seen. It covered part of your face, cascading over your shoulders and chest. The plants occupied the wall behind you too, flowers blooming and dying at a dizzying speed. You looked dangerous.

You, who wielded your body like a knife, your thin limbs whistling through the air like daggers, you, made of unbreakable angles, your smile sharp like a jagged edge. I had spent my life taking careful steps so as to never get hurt, to never trip. I was so busy staring at the ground that I didn't think about how people had thousands of ways of making me bleed. The very sight of you could draw blood.

As if to answer my thoughts, a coppery smell filled the air, bitter on the tongue.

You beckoned me, as you often did, with your arms outstretched. You frightened me.

One moment, I was there.

I blinked.

The next, I was lying on the couch, my head on your lap.

"You took your time," you said. Your voice was low, like a soft purr. You stroked my hair and I closed my eyes.

"I wanted to see you again," I answered just as quietly.

You said nothing for a time. Around us, the plants shivered, swayed by an imaginary wind. The water poured and poured, a constant white noise in the background. I wished the air wasn't so sticky. Already, my clothes stuck onto my moist skin and a film of sweat beaded on my forehead.

"Are you going to hurt me?" I asked.

A moment passed. Your fingers ran through my hair, electric.

"Do you want the truth?" you asked.

I thought about it briefly. "No."

You chuckled. Then, you leaned your luminous face towards me—or what looked like you, warped and strange. I couldn't see you, but I felt it, your uneasy proximity.

“Then no,” you said. “I won't hurt you.”

Your long hair tumbled around my head like a curtain, the dark locks of our manes mingling.

“Open your eyes,” you said.

You made me nervous. I didn't want to look. You placed both hands on my cheeks, the touch of your skin on mine burning and incandescent. I opened my eyes, peeking at first, then wide, wide open. You smiled, your lips slightly parted as if to kiss and moved in closer, closer, closer. Until you were only inches away from me. What big eyes you have. Fringed with thick, luscious lashes. Speckled with stars. Warm and salty tears rolled from your cheeks and dripped on mine, black and thick like tar. I wished you'd stop crying. I stared at your soft lips. What big teeth you have. Sharp and pointy. Too big to fit such a small mouth. My skin crawled with the sense of imminent danger and yet, like a deer in the headlights, I couldn't move. Fascinated. You opened your mouth and bit my nose, cutting through skin, cartilage. I tried to breathe time and time again, but only managed to choke in a gargle of blood, holding on to dear life. You bit again and again.

“Open your eyes,” I heard you say, your disembodied voice through the wet, chewing sound.

When I did, I was standing against the wall of plants as they tickled my back. I stepped back, my damp socks splashing the spilled water on the floor.

I blinked.

The sounds of the clocks ticking in utter chaos, the crowd moving closer and closer.

I blinked.

The bruised colour of the sky through the window, edging between deep blue and a luscious shade of purple.

I blinked.

The blinding light of the summer afternoon sun. The warmth of sleep clinging to your body.

I blinked.

X

In the empty apartment. The night had settled. The dim light of the streetlamps stretched out in the dark space. Once again, the door was closed. For a moment, all I could do was gasp for air with my back against the wall. Then, I carefully touched my face, the curve of my cheeks, the straight bone of my nose. My eyes burned, as if I'd stared at the sun for too long.

I paced through the apartment, feeling both in and out of myself. The wood floor creaked underneath my feet. I placed my hand on the rough eggshell surface of the wall, feeling its texture under my fingers. When I stopped in front of the door, I hesitated. I was painfully aware of you coming back soon. I imagined facing you once more, every other version of yourself more monstrous, unsure of who you really were. I didn't know if I could speak. Use my weapons or let them fall. Close my eyes. Multiple possibilities whooshed through my mind, but I didn't know which one was the true ending. There was no last page, no written manuscript. What if I spoke? In one version, you welcomed me with open arms, understanding. (Wishful thinking.) In another, you vanished. In between, there were alternative realities in which you were angry, some in which you loved me, others in which you shrugged unapologetically. There were so many versions of you. I'd only experienced a few. Sometimes, you were unfazed. Sometimes, you were amused. *You know so little*, you'd say, patting my hand in a condescending way. (And you would be right). In some versions, I hated you, in others, I loved you. Sometimes, all I wanted was to hug you, then push you away and never look back. I gasped for air, my head spinning from all these overwhelming possibilities. I had no control whatsoever. Tricky, fleeting control. The more I tried to hold on to it, the farther it seemed to be, running through my fingers like many grains of salt. I wanted to flee. I needed to escape. I reached for the doorknob, filled with dread and expectations.

Except I didn't. I couldn't see it, couldn't touch it. It was as if it had sunk into the door. I couldn't reach you. A tight, tangled bundle of contradicting emotions wrestled inside me. The absence. Your absence, the absence of the doorknob, of anything rational. Nothing made sense. The apartment was empty, desperately empty. Outside, I heard a car drive by. The footsteps of the upstairs neighbours. The bedroom, desolate. The living room and the kitchen, an open tomb. My blood pulsed in my ears. I spotted some of your things, sinking back into reality: a jacket folded on a chair, your half-unpacked boxes, your vinyl, mostly scratched and unplayable. A single cactus stood on the windowsill. In the low light of the streetlamps, its silhouette looked dangerous—no, not dangerous. Prickly. Here I was, braced for a fight, but there was no one here to fight against

but myself. I pressed my back against the door and let myself slide to the floor. I had taken a step in an unknown direction and now my feet were hovering close to an abyss. I didn't know what to do. There were so many different versions of ourselves to explore. If I could only have one more chance.

I heard footsteps outside, getting nearer and nearer, and wondered what version of you would step in.