

7-2013

# The Aftertaste of Memories: Capturing the Cultural Zeitgeist in Fiction

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## Recommended Citation

Aravind, Arthi, "The Aftertaste of Memories: Capturing the Cultural Zeitgeist in Fiction" (2013). *Undergraduate Honors Theses*. Paper 600.

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The Aftertaste of Memories: Capturing the Cultural Zeitgeist in Fiction

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English from  
The College of William and Mary

by

Arthi Aravind

Accepted for                     Honors                      
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

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Williamsburg, VA

April 12, 2013

## 1

Dear S——,

I hope this letter finds you well in Prague! I just had to write to you because J—— broke up with me. Yeah, I thought we were going to work out our “problems” but apparently he just decided it would be easier to break up. I didn’t even know we had any problems but apparently he thought I was annoying, and had “fallen out of love” with me and UGH, it just hurts to hear that. It was as if he had been repressing it this whole time and only now decided to dump all this on me so I didn’t even have a chance to respond or change things.

As you can imagine, I am in great pain right now and I don’t really know what to do with myself. This literally just happened last night. I’m taking it one day at a time, but it’s hard because we had a lot of the same friends, though I have talked to them and they have all agreed that it is his loss. In fact, one of them said it’s “his funeral,” which I don’t quite understand but I appreciate the sentiment.

I just feel so terrible, though. I really wanted to enjoy this year, I mean we’re only three weeks in, but now I have to go through the entire year feeling like this? Unreal. And we had so many plans, like we were going to go to Montreal over spring break, and do acid together, and throw a birthday party for him...

Anyway, I’m going to cut this short since you’ve just arrived in Prague and I’m sure you’re very busy seeing lots of exciting new things and people. I just had to share this news. I’m going to miss you terribly but I hope you have an amazing semester.

With lots of love,

Olivia

## 2

I bought these black cigarettes because they matched my outfit. Pale wisps of smoke curled around my face as I sat on the steps of the English department, watching the people milling around me with immense disdain: I felt so miserable, yet it was a pleasant day, and all these cheerful girls were walking around in their sundresses. How dare they! It was like in that old song, “The End of the World.” How could the birds keep on singing and the world keep on spinning when I felt like this?

I stared out onto the quad until Keiko came and sat beside me. She dropped her backpack on the step below with a thud, and pulled out a cigarette of her own. I offered my lighter and she inhaled sharply.

“It’s going to be a rough semester,” she said.

“Tell me about it,” I replied with a smirk, tapping my cigarette on the step and thinking of the events that had just transpired this week. J—— and I hadn’t spoken since. “My class is full of fools.”

“Which one is that?”

“American Environmental Lit,” I said. “There are too many people who just like to hear themselves talk. They seem to have an opinion on everything and they want to contradict the prof on stupid, nitpicky things, instead of having a real discussion or god forbid, a debate.” I was in a misanthropic mood. I wanted to complain.

“That sucks.”

“What’d you just have?”

“My Physiology lecture. It looks like I might not even have to go to class, but the grading is just a midterm and a final.”

“Yikes,” I said. “Do you want to grab coffee?” I asked. Every moment I sat on these steps, I felt the coat of lead which covered me grow heavier and heavier, until I practically wanted to fall asleep on the step. Maybe coffee was what I needed.

“Sure, I have an hour to kill.”

Orange bricks paved our way to the coffee shop, and since the weather was good and there were free tables outside, we chose to plop our stuff down at an empty one. A blonde girl in a pale green polo shirt glanced at us, before quickly glancing away and resuming her conversation with her friends. I saw her eyes widen slightly. Fake, tittering laughter disguised her surprise. Given her reaction, I figured she was the girl who had stolen Keiko’s boyfriend last semester.

Keiko had noticed too. “Ugh,” she said, pulling out one of the metal chairs. My guess was right.

“It’s alright,” I said. “It’s the weekend, finally.” We sat down, watching people bike by. There was a hint of fall chill in the air, so I pulled my jacket around myself. The sun had warmed the table so I pressed my hands against it.

“Well, enough about my drama. How have you been?”

“Terrible. I watched *March of the Penguins* and I ended up crying.” Keiko blinked at me, so I explained. “All the penguins get together and have cute little penguin chicks, and they protect each other and take care of each other... It just made me feel so horribly lonely.”

“Gosh,” said Keiko, frowning at the table. “I’d never thought about it that way.”

“Yeah, it’s a actually a very depressing movie. I thought it would cheer me up but then there was a penguin couple who lost their egg, and that was what triggered me. And then Bridget walked in and saw me crying and it was so stupid.”

“Bridget seems like a bitch,” said Keiko.

“Yeah, I dunno. I mean, I didn’t really have anyone else to room with. But she has this boyfriend at another school she’s constantly visiting, so maybe I won’t really have to deal with her.” The housing system rarely worked out in anyone’s favor, so I was stuck with Bridget. We knew each other from high school, vaguely, but it was starting to look like we were just going to be roommates, and not friends. When she saw me crying, she gave me an awkward hug and promptly walked right out of the room.

“Well, you’re welcome to be me and Emma’s third roommate.”

“I appreciate it. We’ll have to have some girly nights, I can’t really deal with guys right now.”

Keiko nodded.

We spotted Wesley walk by so I hollered at him and waved. One of the pluses of sitting out here was that you always saw your friends pass by. The downside was that every boy who looked vaguely like J—— made my heart twitch unpleasantly. The imagined awkwardness of our hypothetical encounter was petrifying. But Wesley’s bright and handsome face pushed all negative thoughts out of my mind.

“Hey,” he said, pulling up a chair and slinging his backpack next to it. “How are you?”

“Alright,” I said, tapping my cigarette. “I’m pulling through, day by day.”

Wesley nodded and patted my hand. “Are you guys done for the day?”

“I just have a lab,” said Keiko.

“Sweet,” he said. “Let’s hang out and pregame before the party.”

Our friend Megan was an employee of the coffee shop, so we weren’t surprised to see her when she came out, wearing a coffee-stained apron. “How’s your third week been?” she asked.

“You’re keeping count?” replied Keiko. I knew I was counting, actually, since it was three weeks into the semester when I got dumped.

“Well, that means it’s been almost a month!” said Megan.

“Time flies,” I said lamely. The past few days had dragged like dripping sap.

“Well, I’m excited to finally see everyone at the party,” said Megan. Thankfully, J—— wasn’t in this social circle, so he wouldn’t be in attendance. The party would be a safe, J—— free zone.

“Cool!” said Wesley. “Is it a big thing, or a radio thing, or a Latitude thing, or what?”

“Probably smaller with radio people, though I dunno, it’s Sara’s party and she always invites these randos. It’s difficult to say.” The radio station and Latitude both attracted people who were interested in indie music, because the former used the latter as a venue for small shows. There was a lot of overlap between the two organizations, but they still had their distinct flavors. The nice thing about both is that they threw plenty of parties, but this was going to be the first big one of the year.

“As long as you don’t get a noise violation,” I said. It was a distinct possibility. I remembered last year’s “Underwater Latitudes” party, which culminated in Megan, wrapped in a blanket to cover her swimsuited self, drunkenly speaking with a police officer.

“Fuck the police,” said Wesley dryly.

## 3

The night began when the first wisp of smoke entered my lungs.

“It’s toasted,” as the Lucky Strike package said. But I didn’t get toasted, I got baked, because these were cigarettes with a little extra in them. The night itself became an alternate reality, self-indulgent and capricious.

The setting sun painted everything orange-gold as I walked over to Keiko and Emma’s. An unfamiliar anxiety had started to set in every evening around twilight, and friends were the only thing that distracted me from it. I had spent so many of my evenings with J—— that I felt adrift without him. I used to hang out with Keiko and Emma on the side, and only now starting spending more time with them, but I appreciated that they were being so welcoming. I honestly didn’t know what I’d do if I’d spent all my time only developing my relationship with J——. After two wrong turns, I eventually made my way to the right room. This place was going to take some getting used to. It was the nicest dorm on campus, with high ceilings, bright lighting, pale walls, and framed art that looked like it was chosen randomly from the ‘80s: a faux-50’s car graphic and a beach scene, both composed of muted colors and geometric shapes. These features made it look rather like a hospital, though.

Since I was early, it was just Emma and Keiko, sitting around with jugs and glasses of red wine. They had gotten into these recently because they were collecting the jugs for some sort of secret art project, probably for Emma’s sculpture class. So far, they had two, which was impressive, given that we’d only been in school for three weeks. They must have been drinking every day. The rest of the room was neat and smelled like air freshener. Brightly colored storage boxes in shades of magenta lined one wall, but the turquoise and emerald of their bedspreads dominated the room.

Some sort of reality show was playing on the TV. I never watch reality shows, so I wasn’t interested in watching until Keiko exclaimed, in utter disbelief, “Wait, he died?”

“Yeah, he died,” said Emma, also staring goggle-eyed at the screen.

“What are you watching?” I asked. People didn’t usually die in reality TV.

“It’s this show where it shows how people died in crazy, absurd ways,” said Keiko, turning to me.

“What do you mean? Are you watching snuff?” I asked, half-joking.

“I mean, I guess it is, but holy shit,” said Emma, who was still glued to the screen. “Like look, he just died, and that tractor...”

“That’s the most ridiculous way to die,” said Keiko in agreement. “Do you want some wine?”

“Sure,” I said, helping myself to the jug on their desk. They couldn’t have been watching snuff; there’s no way they’d actually show that on TV. It must have been reenactments of the scenes of death, which was still creepy.

“But like actually look, they’re playing it in slow motion now,” said Emma.

“Are you guys actually watching a show that shows people dying?”

“I mean yeah, that’s what I just said, isn’t it?” said Keiko.

“How can you even watch such a thing?” Why would anyone want to spend their time watching something so awful? I vaguely understood the popularity of funny videos of people having accidents, but even those seemed too cruel to me.

“It’s *fascinating*,” said Emma.

“How much wine have you had?”

“We’re on our first glass,” said Keiko. “I swear, this show is just that interesting.”

“I mean I’m sure it is, but you’re watching people die for entertainment? Doesn’t that concept bother you?”

“Yeah,” said Emma. She took a sip of her wine and knitted her brow, still focused on the show.

“Jeez,” I said. “What a world.” I knew they enjoyed reality TV, immersing themselves in the fictional world of people with strange illnesses, bizarre hobbies, and heartbreaking social problems, but that sort of stuff didn’t appeal to me. When I watched TV, it was for a good story to lose myself in, just like a book. I sat down on a bed and regarded my phone.

“What’s up tonight?” Colin had texted.

“Emma and Keiko are watching snuff,” I replied. “There’s wine.”

“Wow,” replied Colin instantly. “I guess I’ll be there.” I put my phone away and watched the show with an increasing sense of unease. I felt extremely strange watching it. The show’s host was interviewing an older woman with glasses and curly white hair, a typical grandma. Her eyes watered as she tried to summon the strength to string words together. Meanwhile the host watched her keenly, probably waiting to pounce on a soundbite. It made me feel ill and my heart hurt a little bit. It was a dystopian world outside the college bubble. I just wanted to relax with some wine, not get my heart wrenched.

Wesley walked in. “Are you watching that same damn show?” he asked.

“It’s fucking *fascinating*,” repeated Emma. She was still glued to the screen, which I glanced at: a man was falling out of a building to his death in slow motion. His arms flailed and a scarf billowed upwards.

“Olivia! You look nice,” Wesley said to me, breaking me out of my trance.

“Thanks,” I reply. I know I look good, but validation is always welcome. This week, I had surprised myself: most people’s self-esteem plummets after getting dumped, and they wonder why they’re not good enough. Instead, I found myself wondering if I was too good. It was a pleasant realization. I thought my eyes and lips were pretty nice, and I always made an effort to dress well. If I had to say so myself, I was a catch. I looked up at Wesley’s tall frame. “You look quite foxy yourself,” I tell Wesley. It’s true. He could be a male model, with his style and cheekbones.

“When are we going already?” he asked.

“Well, Colin said he’d be here soon,” I said. “This show is insane. It’s almost dystopian, how we’re just like, watching death for entertainment. We think of gladiators fighting as horrific, but then there’s this.”

“I don’t understand the appeal either,” said Wesley. “How have you been, by the way?”

“Well,” I said. “Well, not too well. Just okay well. The coat of lead grows thicker every day. I thought it would get easier.”

“I think it gets easier more on a weekly basis rather than a daily one,” he said. “Some days are better than others.”

“Well, I’m trying not to think about it too much,” I said with a sniff. I sipped my wine and pursed my lips.

“Of course,” he said. “I’m sure you’ll feel better being surrounded by people at the party. More distractions, maybe.”

By the time Colin came, they’d moved on to the next episode. “Are you guys still watching that show?” he asked.

“It’s just so good,” said Emma.

“When did you become so morbid?” asked Colin.

“It’s just so interesting,” said Emma, failing to answer his question.

“Yeah, so this party looks like it’ll actually be a lot of fun,” says Keiko to no one in particular. She starts reading a description of the party from her phone: “Drink and be merry at a celebration of Saturn and let his blessings pour upon you. We shall be celebrating ‘the best of days,’ as Catullus called them, in honor of the harvest god. Wine shall flow freely and slaves shall wait upon you as decreed by the King of the Saturnalia. Partake in this joyous festival for the ages. See you there.”

“Slaves?” I asked. It was an odd thing to include in a party description, and I honestly half expected Megan to give training hours to radio trainees by making them feed grapes to everyone. It sounded entirely plausible, and we were always in need of ways they could get their hours in.

“I mean you know how Megan is,” said Emma. “If she had the money I’m sure she’d have hired naked girls to feed people grapes or something equally ridiculous.”

“And her house is named the Ministry, like in *1984*,” added Wesley. “So it fits.”

“Ministry of Party? Miniparty?” I said. That didn’t sound threatening enough.

“I wonder if That Bitch is going to be there?” asks Keiko with a poisonous look.

“This is going to be one of the best parties of the year,” says Emma. “You’re not going to let That Bitch ruin it for you.”

“There isn’t room for two hot girls at one party,” she says, with a haughty sniff.

“Excuse me? We’re hot girls too, you know,” I exclaim, feigning offense. But I too would be upset if J—— suddenly started dating that generically attractive, blonde, pastel-adorned sorority girl. I didn’t want to judge her based on superficial qualities like that. Even though her type annoyed me, they were probably nice people for the most part. But I would judge her for consciously stealing another girl’s boyfriend.

“Let’s head out,” said Colin. “Party o’clock is here. The hour draws nigh.” He took my hands and pulled me up from the bed. Wesley was already at the door, turning the handle slowly

to make us all rush around to put our shoes and jackets on. Soon enough, we were out into the night.

## 4

I looked down at my phone's screen to check for texts instinctively, even though I hadn't contacted anyone; the glow was comforting and I clutched it like an amulet. The street behind us was pitch black like an abyss.

This was a shitty house: a warm yellow glow came from the windows, which were cross-hatched by vines and covered with tattered floral curtains. The chain link gate was rusted and covered in kudzu, and the lawn was not so much a lawn as it was an expanse of gravel with patches of grass. Chatter and a pulsing thump emanated from the walls. A couple of unfamiliar faces were outside smoking. I usually recognized the smokers outside parties so I felt off kilter already. Anxiety rose in my chest and I looked back at my friends for reassurance. They seemed apprehensive as well.

Inside, distorted music and human voices flooded our ears; I caught a whiff of cheap cigarettes and cheap beer and cheap vodka. It should have been nauseating but I was more concerned with why I felt uncomfortable. There was a dance party in the living room; I stepped two feet closer to it and felt the heat, as well as the bass, throbbing like a headache. There was something off about this. This party did not feel like the safe place I hoped it would be. The voices were high pitched and I caught snatches of unfamiliar words: rush? pledge? social chair? There were too many boat shoes and piqué polos. I saw in an instant what the problem was: there were way too many Greeks in this house.

I tried to brush past some guys playing beer pong in the living room. I'd never even seen the table being used in this way because the people I hang out with didn't usually play beer pong. I gingerly squeezed past a guy with a particularly sweaty shirt and found Megan in the kitchen, entertaining a bro. He smiled sweetly at me, and I was perplexed.

"You're as drunk as a skunk," Colin observed.

A wide grin slowly emerged on her face, showing off a set of perfect, white teeth. "How are you two lovely people?"

"I'm okay," I said, jittery. "But why don't I recognize a lot of the people here?"

"Oh, them? The bros? They're chill. Kasia bought six grams of molly and sold it to a bunch of people in Vivian's boyfriend's frat. It's funny to watch them, actually."

"Molly?" asked Colin. His eyes lit up, as if Molly was a girl he had a crush on. A spark of frisson went up my spine. I'd never done molly, but here it is...

"Oh yes, you can have some," Megan said, digging a hand into her purse. I felt a tap on my shoulder, which made me jump, and found Wesley and Keiko behind me.

"Why the hell are all these bros here," he asked.

"Six grams of molly, that's why," I said, incredulous. Less than twenty minutes into the party and it was taking a turn for the completely unexpected.

"Molly?" asked Keiko. She grinned. She wasn't usually one for drugs, but few people could turn down the allure of empathy and boundless joy in a capsule. "But Greeks means That Bitch'll be here," she added, frowning petulantly.

Now that I knew molly was in the equation, the behavior of the people around me made more sense. A brown tabby cat sat on the kitchen counter, surrounded by a bevy of sorority girls. They kept swatting each others' hands out of the way, fighting to pet the cat. I couldn't imagine the cat was that interesting, but what did I know. The cat was annoyed by the flurry of activity and attention around it. I was surprised that it was sticking around at all.

"This cat is so chill," chirped one of the girls, clutching a disposable camera.

"This cat," said another.

"I am really vibing with this cat right now," said the third. The cat twitched its tail in irritation and yawned.

They stared at the clearly perturbed cat for a minute until the girl with the camera took a photo of it and her two friends posed on either side. She started clicking frantically. The cat turned to me and we looked into each others' eyes. I imagined that we were sharing a meaningful look about the people around us.

"It's all out," she said.

"You just took twenty photos of a cat," said her friend.

"Fuck you," said the third.

"This fucking cat," said the first, and that's when I decided they aren't interesting anymore. The cat agreed, and jumped off the counter, disappearing from view. I turned back to my friends.

Keiko was glaring at me. Or rather, past me, at the girls. I looked back at them and realized who they were. "I told you, I kept saying she'd show up here and now here she is," she said.

"Don't get mad. They're so dumb that they took twenty photos of the cat." Keiko laughed.

"There's more dancing in the basement, if you'd like to go?" asked Megan. "The music down there is much better."

We descended the spiral staircase into darkness, finally broken by a rapidly flashing strobe and colored lights. There were only about half a dozen people here. I started to feel a lush, foamy wave of sensation wash over me and my heart felt light. I was floating on invisible clouds. I recognized the DJ from radio meetings; he smiled at me and I grinned back. Was my smile dopey already? Did he know? He let me plug my phone in and take over the music. I found it difficult to choose a song: they all seemed like they'd be perfect for the moment. But Rational Crystal, my favorite band, stood out, and I couldn't think of anything more enticing. I chose a song from their first EP, and when I touched the screen, I was taken to another level entirely.

The beat was electric and sticky and voluptuous all at once. The notes were needles to the heart of pure pleasure. I immediately melted into my favorite song, taking a seat on the table and nuzzling up against the speaker, which was soft like Velcro and pulsed with the bass. Time stopped and I could feel the music permeate me down to my bones, which vibrated with every thump. I found it difficult to mentally climb out of the thickness of the music, but I did, and I wondered if my friends were enjoying this song as much as I was. It was simply the loveliest thing that I had ever heard, and it was imbued with sentimental value: my friend showed it to me

the last semester of high school, and we had it on repeat all through the summer. The pounding beat and melancholy synth melody brought a deep, sexy energy to the cavernous space. When I opened my eyes, I saw my friends dancing awkwardly in front of me. I smiled at their silliness.

When the song reached its end, I returned to my phone to pick something else. The silence between songs, which only took less than a second, felt like a skipped heartbeat, but I pressed play quickly and felt like I could take a breath again. I could have sat there for all eternity. When I looked up again, there were more Greeks on the dance floor: three guys and a girl. They came down from the stairs timidly, looking around in the darkness. The girl clung to the arm of one of the guys, rubbing her cheek against his sleeve. They seemed confused and reluctant to join us, but they did eventually, because no one can resist the allure of Rational Crystal. Some of them seemed to get into the beat and swayed around, which given the fact that they were rolling, probably wasn't too difficult.

It seemed that I now had something of an audience. However, after attempting to dance for a bit, the bros appeared confused. They whispered to each other and a few turned around and headed back up the stairs. I frowned when I realized my audience was leaving just as quickly as they arrived. I looked at Colin and he shrugged.

"Do you think we should leave?" he asked.

"Umm," I said, indecisive. I really loved sitting there and playing music for people, but if my friends left, then I wouldn't have an audience. On the other hand, I really didn't want to go back to the weirdness that is upstairs. The basement was like a cool cave where I could enjoy my favorite music on these awesome, fuzzy, DJ-quality speakers.

"I'll just go see what Wesley thinks," he said.

One of the lone bros who decided to stay approached me and I felt myself withdraw. "You're the queen of this party now, you know. You're in charge." Queen? In charge? Man, I was just trying to play some good songs. Why couldn't he just leave me alone and go dance with that girl he had with him?

"Uh huh," I answered, staring at my phone and desperately scrolling for the next song. I peered at him through my hair curtain. He wasn't very attractive and leered at me creepily. I wished he would go away because a sense of anxiety was creeping into my all-encompassing bliss, but I didn't want to be rude.

"You get to pick the music, so make it good, alright?" he said, finally smiling. I wished he would shut up. As if I wouldn't play good music.

"Mm," I said, peering even more closely at my phone. He said something but I couldn't hear him. I didn't really care. I don't like getting hit on. I willed him to go away silently.

"Can I make a request?" he asked, and I groan inside. If it wasn't going to be Rational Crystal, I wasn't interested. Finally, I deigned to look up at him with a glare. He didn't seem pleased, because his face became disgusted and I continued to leer back at him. He wandered off, back up the stairs, and I noticed that the other Greeks had left the dance floor. I felt more content.

Thankfully, Colin returned and reported that Wesley wanted to leave. "I think Keiko and Emma are getting bored. They were going to go to that place that Blake is housesitting for." I

perked up at this suggestion; I didn't know we had a different place to go to. I didn't want to sleep just yet.

"Isn't that a professor's house?" asked Keiko, materializing near us. She did seem eager to leave; I could feel her nervous energy. She wanted to go somewhere new. What time was it, even? My phone said it was 1:46 in the morning but that didn't mean a whole lot to me just then.

"Yes, it's for one of his advisors, or something, I don't know. Apparently they've got a ton of wine," said Colin.

"Let's go find Wesley then," I said, finally feeling as if I was exercising responsibility simply by standing up.

We found him getting hit on by a guy *and* a girl in the kitchen. He seemed to be taking it in stride and enjoying the attention, leaning against the counter, relaxed. A tall, thin girl in a red satin dress touched his arm and I saw him instinctively pull back. She was wasting her time. A guy in a blazer and shorts smiled at him, standing a little too close. His grimace showed that he was becoming uncomfortable. I strode over, assumed the expression of a jealous girlfriend—knitted brow and all—and said, "We were thinking of heading out now." The red satin girl frowned but he squeezed my shoulder and I could tell he was pleased to be rescued. When we were out of the kitchen, I burst into giggles, pleased with my deception.

Emma and Blake were waiting outside, smoking. Emma was leaning against Blake's shoulder, burying her face into his arm between puffs. I guessed that she was tired, but I still felt extraordinarily pleasant. Walking was pleasant. Walking in circles was pleasant. I bummed a cigarette off Blake and smoked it so fast that I was pretty much eating it. The aftertaste of the song rolled around in my head.

"I'll drive," said Emma. I was practically skipping, still feeling the energy from the music and the drug, which was in full force. When we saw the station wagon, I realized it would be a tight squeeze. Before I could even ask, Emma put some music on. It wasn't what I would have chosen, but I could vibe with it.

Emma and Colin had some sort of conversation which I couldn't follow; everyone else was quiet, probably just enjoying the music. I melted into the side of the car, considered opening the window, decided everyone would yell at me for making it cold, tried putting my head on Colin's shoulder, found it uncomfortable, leaned against the window, shrank back because it was cold, tucked my hands into my pockets, patted my pocket to check that I had my phone, patted my other pocket to check for my keys, considered saying something to the group because no one else was talking, considered texting someone who wasn't with us (anyone), wondered what J— would think if he saw me now, considered taking a photo, considered changing the station, looked out the window, saw the trees whizzing by, felt all philosophical about how my semester was going excellently so far, considered telling everyone in the car that I loved them, considered texting S—, decided that would be construed as a drunk text, remembered she's out of the country anyway, and before we knew it, we were at the professor's house. We climbed out of the car, and I stretched my legs. When I looked up, I noticed that it's a clear night and I could see hundreds of stars.

It was so quiet inside the house that I could hear the humming of the appliances. It looked like a showroom home, but then I realized that it was a house that a real family lives in, and not a group of college students. The kitchen counter lacked mysterious stains, the coffee table had a neat stack of *New Yorker* magazines, and the living room was dominated by a cabinet with an enormous TV screen. I picked up one of the magazines and flipped through it idly, though my brain was buzzing far too much to pay attention to an article. I amused myself with the cartoons.

We gathered on the leather couches in the living room, savoring the warmth. I pulled a blanket over my feet. I spotted the TV remote, but decided against breaking the silence. There was a bar in the hallway and it seemed to be well-stocked. It even had a beer tap.

“It’s as if Professor Riley was asking us to throw a party here,” said Emma.

“Well,” I said, peering at a ceramic elephant in the cabinet. “I wouldn’t say that.” A cocktail party or dinner party, sure, but certainly not a party like the one we were just at.

“I mean, he did say I could have friends over. He’s so chill,” replied Blake.

I still felt floaty and pleasant; it definitely hadn’t worn off yet. I realized that I was getting too warm, so I unwrapped myself. Colin and Wesley sat down on either side of me.

“You all should drink some water,” said Emma, bringing us a couple of glasses. She poured herself some wine and sat on an armchair.

We sat in silence for a few minutes, without music, I realized, but I was alright with that. I felt peaceful, just enjoying the sense of feeling my friends all around me. There is certainly something to being in the presence of someone, that is utterly irreplaceable, and it felt excellent to be in this cool, quiet, clean living room, rather than the mess that was the party. There was no humidity from sweaty bodies or bad dance music here. The silence seemed like it lasted an hour. I could only hear the occasional car driving by on the main street, outside the subdivision, as well as the hum of the appliances.

“I’m going to head to bed,” said Emma. “I’m ready to pass out.” She started up the stairs and Blake followed her.

“Do you want a smoke before heading in?” Colin asked me. I nodded.

It’s chilly, but we huddled together and smoked silently. The professor’s yard was huge and fenced off. Azalea bushes ringed the perimeter, and a hammock was stretched between two trees. It looked like the kind of yard that wanted dogs or small children running around it, but judging by the condition of the house, there weren’t any.

My senses were still sharp and vivid, in contrast to my thoughts, which were becoming foggier with exhaustion. The moon was so bright that my dilated pupils could see a halo around it. The grass was already wet with dew, and I spotted a rabbit staring at us from under a shrub.

When we went inside, Wesley and Keiko were absent, so I made my way towards one of the bedrooms. It looked comfortable enough, and I plopped down, stripping my shoes and socks and jeans off and burrowing into the abundant covers.

My head was buzzing with energy still. But I felt my body protest, and I struggled to hold on to consciousness. I closed my eyes and was instantly greeted with intricate, multicolored

patterns of geometric shapes which twisted about in kaleidoscopic permutations, and I watched them as if they were a movie. I tried to make sense of it all but before I knew it, I was asleep.

## 5

I woke up the next morning in a glow. I felt like the same dim sunlight shining on my face was instead radiating more powerfully from inside me. I smiled, feeling as if bluebirds would appear at the window at any moment.

No one else was in the room. I rolled out, my clothes rumped, and checked my face with my phone. My hair and makeup looked alright, surprisingly. I was presentable. I smoothed out my clothes, and sniffed—someone was making coffee.

In the living room, Emma was setting out coffee mugs and Wesley had turned the TV on. “You want some?” asked Emma, holding a mug. I nodded, and went to sit next to Wesley and Keiko. They were watching the news. I glanced at the screen and saw an explosion. Shades of tan indicated military vehicles and deserts. They were so far away, somewhere else, so removed, as if we were just watching a movie.

“Why did I turn this on,” he said. “This is depressing. The opposite of last night.” I agreed. I was not in the mood to leave the bubble of my experience to view the horrors of the outside world.

I took the remote and pressed some numbers at random. A woman selling crystal jewelry appeared on the screen, and I thought of the crystals in the caps we ate last night. “There,” I said. “Was it your first time rolling, by the way?”

“No. You?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“I thought you’d done all this shit before.”

“No, I haven’t really done much at all. J—— and I were going to but we never got around to it.” I smiled inwardly. Now that I knew what it was like, I’m glad I did it with this group of friends and not him. It seemed like the kind of experience that was so intense and loving that you shouldn’t do it with someone who was going to break up with you.

“Well,” said Wesley. “Congrats.”

“Thanks,” I said, uncertain that a congrats was in order, exactly.

Emma appeared with my coffee. “Careful, it’s hot,” she said. There’s milk and sugar on the table.”

“So organized,” I said, taking the mug carefully. “Thanks.”

The woman on the TV had moved on to selling a set of cutting knives. “I could use a set of cutting knives,” said Wesley.

“Do you even have a kitchen?” I asked.

“Who’s psyched for New York, by the way?” said Colin. I perked up, remembering the trip we had planned next month for the annual college radio music festival. We got a \$2500 budget so we could attend all these panels and film screenings. But the school had only three people in mind with that figure. We instead chose to stretch the budget so we could accommodate a dozen radio members, and to do this we had to forgo the \$300 panel passes. So really, it was just an excuse for us to skip a few classes in order to enjoy the city.

“I’ve got a bunch of things I want to see,” said Keiko. “Faultlines is playing!” How lucky for her, I thought. That was her favorite band. Unfortunately, Rational Crystal was in New York the week before we would be, so I would miss them yet again.

“I’m excited for that show,” I said. “It’s at a hotel so it should be swanky as hell.”

“I just can’t believe I get to see Faultines for free,” said Keiko.

There was a silence as we finished our coffees. The lady on TV had moved on to selling some sort of juicer, which purportedly had an HD juicing screen. I wasn’t sure why a juicer needed a screen, much less one in high definition. As I kept watching though, I realized that she was talking about a mesh screen, not a TV screen.

“I guess we should head back to campus soon,” said Emma.

“Yeah,” I said, agreeing vaguely. I wanted this experience to last as long as possible, but we had to re-enter the real world at some point.

## 6

Rational Crystal's debut EP, *Illustrations*, is like nothing I've heard before. I've been familiar with 8-bit and chiptune music for a while now, but it's always been a niche genre. *Illustrations* synthesizes this sound with harsh analog synths, making it something ready for the dance floor... of your favorite dark, grimy basement.

In my senior year of high school, I was merely a budding music snob. I moved from obscure trance, techno, and metal to the burgeoning "indie" music scene, a member of which was the fledgeling duo Rational Crystal. They released an EP during my second semester under the name Nightmare Broadcast which saw moderate success. When I found it though, I treasured it and it quickly became the soundtrack to my senior year and the summer after that. Endless drives with the windows down and house parties that all blur together: Rational Crystal's persistent beat was there. I flipped when I saw that they had come back after a long hiatus, changed their name, and starting making music again.

Out of the five songs, "Failure Vein" and "Dreamcloud" are among the best, the latter having been released as a single last month. Their complex rhythms are more intuitive and interesting for dancing, rather than that monotonous four on the floor beat which pervades clubs. "Hunab" is too abrasive to be useful for dancing, but shows off Rational Crystal's roots in a way that is more accessible to more listeners. "Motor Oil" is a solid tribute to the trance genre, whose influence can be seen in the lush, foamy synths of Rational Crystal's style, and "Halcyon" has an emotional depth which isn't often seen in fast-paced dance music. All five songs are an absolute treat for any electronica fan or anyone who just wants to dance. Rational Crystal has an album due next year, and you can be sure that I will be among the first to download it.

## 7

Driving into New York City was a luxuriously drawn-out experience. You could see the skyline from such a distance that it was almost like flying in and the buildings were like miniature versions of themselves. I remembered the last time I went to New York, I actually thought that it looked smaller than I remembered, but that was before I entered the cavernous streets and was inundated on all sides by lights and sounds and people. I was with my parents and I was driving. It was my first experience driving in a city, so of course my first city just had to be New York. Bicyclists swerved in front of me and herds of pedestrians crowded the streets. It was simultaneously frustrating and exhilarating.

It was Wednesday morning and I was missing one of my literature classes. The city had a curious effect on me. I felt alive. My breaths were deep and full and my movements were fluid and buoyant. Some people might feel more relaxed when they sit still in a bucolic setting and meditate, but for me, it was looking down and seeing the sparkling concrete sidewalks or the overwhelming expanse of gray colors, with flecks of color like confetti from storefronts, people, vendors, and vehicles. This was my element.

I stepped off the bus and onto the pavement. I breathed the cold air in and felt like a fish breathing in water. I'd loved the city since I was a child, since my family always came for the obligatory trips to see the Statue of Liberty and whatnot, but this was the first time I was here to experience it as an adult. I was excited for nights of barhopping and staying out late. I wanted to experience the parallel universe available to me now, overlaid on the city of tourist stuff.

My heart pounded as we made our way down the street towards the subway station, and even though my bag was heavy and exhausting to carry, I descended the steps into the station with delighted energy. The musty smell of the trains and tracks greeted my nose, and after lugging my bag through the turnstile, I stopped at the platform with the others. Even though we were tired and didn't talk much, the people around us must have picked up on our energy, as we attracted some sideways glances. When the train arrived, I jumped in and wrinkled my nose at the smell of air conditioning. Before I could even sit down, we had departed.

## 8

There are some songs that make me feel dissociated, in a good way. They make me think of the future, and the world, and other expansive possibilities which don't cross my mind on a regular basis. Like my current reality doesn't really exist and if I wanted to, I could wake up in a fantasy: to be plunged into a city where the broad black streets glitter with street lights and stars and vast canyons of stone and steel form a labyrinth in which a whole world is contained behind a single door. This feeling usually has nothing to do with how profound the song is; it's most often some sort of rolling, electronic beat that rouses my vision of sipping on a drink which sparkles with the lighting in the venue, leaving lipstick marks on the rim of the iced glass, and feeling positively euphoric from being in the company of my friends in such a special place.

The really nice thing about the particular song I was thinking of was that it was playing in a swanky bar in Brooklyn, rather than a dilapidated single family home in a suburban college town. I had picked out my clothes carefully, changing twice before heading out. The funny thing about these bars in Brooklyn was that they didn't seem to care; I was old enough but some of the others weren't, and they were all sipping on margaritas as well.

"Where to next?" said Keiko. She glanced down at her phone. "I have this listing of parties and events and stuff I could go to." We were all itching with excitement for the possibilities.

"What was that one you mentioned earlier?" asked Wesley, and I could already see his brain working, figuring out what subway lines we'd take to get out of there.

"It's this interactive art show or something" she said. "Lots of installation pieces, stuff like that. It looks like it's in a warehouse in a sketchy neighborhood."

"Perfect," I said. "Sketchy neighborhoods are just our thing." Truth be told, I was a little nervous. It was exciting to be an adult in the city, but the dark streets were foreboding. What was out there? Muggers? Rapists? Cops?

"It doesn't cost anything either," said Keiko.

"Let's go, then," said Wesley.

We downed the rest of our drinks and left the vibrant little world of the bar, re-entering the bleak streets. Lone figures wandered past and a cop car drove by. The cop called to us and I glanced at him, but Wesley kept walking, after throwing me a warning glance. What kind of a city was this where you ignored policemen when they approached you?

The subway station was deserted, save for a prone homeless man. We were all quiet, looking at the moon and a bridge in the distance, when the train rushed in front of us. The people on the train weren't young club-hoppers or sharply dressed professionals. I wondered where they were going at this hour and why.

After switching lines, we hopped off the train. "Now what," asked Wesley to Keiko, who held her phone out in front of her like she was trying to detect something.

"Mm, we go down this street," she said, walking to the intersection.

"How would we even find this place without a phone," Emma mused.

“Call a cab?” I suggested.

“It’s too close,” said Keiko. “It’s only three blocks away.”

We spotted the warehouse easily by the only sign of life: the flashing red and green lights from the second floor, fuzzed out by grimy windows, and the group of smokers standing outside.

“These people are so attractive,” said Wesley.

I regarded the fine features and carefully composed outfits of the smokers.

“I wish I could be so put together,” said Emma.

“I don’t think they’re put together,” I said. “I think they just have a lot of great clothes so no matter what they pick, they look good.”

“Don’t underestimate yourself,” said Keiko. “I wish I could have half of your wardrobe.”

“Me?” I said. “You’re the one with the nice clothes. And Emma. You’re way ahead of me.”

“Nuh uh,” said Emma.

“Okay, can we all just trade clothes then? Why have we never done this?” said Keiko.

“Jeez,” said Wesley loudly and sarcastically. “Girls.”

“You’re not one to talk though,” I said. “All three of us wish we were guys just so we could dress like you.” Emma nodded.

“Fair enough,” he replied.

Inside, there was a dance floor with plenty of colorful lights, the ones we saw outside. A sign indicated that the art was upstairs, so we decided to head there. After pushing past a throng of people gathered around a series of tables which looked like they belonged to nonprofits, we entered the elevator. It was a freight elevator, so it opened horizontally, and I felt like I was walking into the mouth of a whale. Someone had hung at least a hundred pink glowsticks from the ceiling at varying lengths. The effect was like frozen, luminescent rain.

Even though there was a DJ on the first floor, the second floor was much louder. It was almost set up like a house, with corridors leading into smaller rooms. There were more people up here than were on the dance floor, and the sound wasn’t quite music. I couldn’t discern a beat.

Wesley peeked into the room on our left, and I followed him. Several people were gathered around a circular platform on which there was an instrument like a six-sided toy piano. There was a person on each side, mashing away at the keys. The resulting din was the primary source of noise up here, it seemed.

“This music is terrible,” said Keiko.

“It isn’t even actually music,” said Emma.

We moved on to the next room, in which there was an enormous dinner table-sized tray with multicolored marbles in it. Upon closer inspection, the table appeared to be a light box, and the marbles were all illuminated from behind. An instrument like a projector arm hung over the table, and I could see the pattern of marbles projected onto the wall. Several people were playing with the marbles and creating kaleidoscopic effects which were then projected. They seemed a little too into the colors and shapes.

“Okay, everyone here is definitely on something,” said Wesley, vocalizing my thoughts.

I shrugged, thinking of how much I drank at the bar. “We are too, I guess.”

“Not like they are though,” said Wesley, motioning to a couple of girls. Their movements were slow and they rolled their hands over the marbles. Their eyes were wide and their mouths hung open. They appeared to be absolutely delighted by the marbles, gazing goggle-eyed at them as if they contained the secrets of the universe. “Marbles are not that exciting,” Wesley concluded.

“Maybe they are,” I said, picking up some marbles myself. They were warm from the light and it was pleasing to press my hands into the pile. But while this exhibit was pretty, I had to agree with Wesley.

“I’ll have what they’re having,” said Keiko, still looking at the girls, who hadn’t moved an inch. One of the girls picked up a marble and cradled it in her hands as if it was a tiny baby animal.

“I’ll definitely have what they’re having,” I said, and we moved to the next room to see what else was going on in here.

There was a sharp breeze here, and I realized that there was a balcony. I wasn’t sure why there was a balcony at a warehouse, but I decided to step out onto it. There was no one else here. I stepped close to the edge and peered out over it; the warehouse wasn’t a tall building, but it had a beautiful view over the river. I could see the distant lights of Manhattan and I remembered where I was. It felt damn good to be in a city. But I felt a pang when I thought of J——. He too loved cities and he would have enjoyed this experience as much as I did. But would he really? He wouldn’t like all the smokers, he wouldn’t like grimy warehouses with weird non-music and people on drugs, he wouldn’t like the pretentiousness of the crowd here. It was all foreign to me as well, but I felt like I belonged. It was somewhere I could be that wasn’t his turf. A cold breeze blew through me suddenly, and I found myself wishing he was there to be solid and comforting.

As it turned out, Emma showed up, having found the balcony too. “It’s fucking cold,” she said, standing closely next to me. I welcomed her warmth.

“I was thinking, I’m a little sad I’m not having this experience with J——,” I said. “He might have enjoyed this.”

“Really?” said Emma, skeptical. She was my only friend who had met him before we broke up. “He doesn’t strike me as the type who’d fit in here. Seemed like too much of a normie.”

“Eh, underneath it all he’d like this, I think. It’s a moot point, though.”

“It’s a big world out there. There’s a lot of cool people. I mean, before I came to college, I didn’t think I’d meet so many cool people, but I did.”

“You’re right,” I said. “I’m glad I met you guys.”

Emma snuggled closer to me and we continued to watch the lights. I looked down and observed that the group of smokers had grown. I wondered how many of them were from out of town.

“Do you want to go in and find the others?” asked Emma.

I nodded, and she looped her arm in mine. We left the balcony to re-enter the surreal world of sensory overstimulation.



## 9

The golden street lights shed a warm glow on the scene which lay before me. Rows of lanterns and a full moon added to the illumination. It felt unreal. What was the word? Derealization. I just didn't feel like this was a place that existed in the real world; it was as if I was on a movie set with dozens of extras. We walked towards the line of people gathered at the door of the hotel, and I was disappointed to find that it stretched around the block. As I noticed all the women in their party dresses and heels, I immediately regretted wearing a sweater. At least I would be warmer than most of the people here: if the line was long, we were going to be outside for a while.

"So, who's playing here again?" asked Colin.

"It's a couple of DJs I like, plus Faultlines," I said. Faultlines's recent album had been reviewed positively, thought I was more excited for the DJs.

"I adore Faultlines," said Keiko. "That album was so sick. And the lead singer is super hot!"

"Indeed," I said. "But they're also J——'s favorite band."

"Eesh," said Keiko, with a grimace. "Well, now you can think of them as *my* favorite band."

I smiled at her, but we were soon distracted by the slow forward movement of the line. The buzz of energy was incredibly distracting; everyone was so eager to get into this show. I knew the band was pretty popular, but it still surprised me.

I felt a tap on my shoulder and heard Emma's voice in my ear. "The people behind us are legitimately talking about the Hamptons."

"What?" I whispered back. "You're kidding. That's like, not even a real place."

"She literally just said that her mom was still at their house there or something."

"Why are they even at this show? They're not like, alt kids..."

"I'm also confused," said Emma, looking over the attire of the other people in line again. Now I noticed that I was also the only one wearing jeans. The only woman, at least. Keiko and Emma had worn dresses.

Finally, we could see the door. The line was long, but it had only taken us twenty minutes to move this far. It was almost 11, so we'd be in soon enough. When we turned the corner, we stepped on to a red carpet, and I was even more disappointed that I chose the sweater. But when I made it to the door, the guy in the suit asked me if I had RSVP'ed, and I said yes, in the most satisfied tone I had ever heard from myself. How lovely to be on a guest list for a swanky hotel in the Meatpacking District. Of course, RSVP'ing was free, and didn't really mean anything since this was an event for the festival, and therefore not particularly exclusive, but I was going to milk this for all it was worth.

He stamped my wrist with the logo of the hotel bar, and we were shuffled into the corridor inside, which was dim but decorated with a mural of Keith Haring-ish neon dancing people. A blacklight intensified the effect. I couldn't see much of the people around me, but I

caught the glinting of diamonds (were they real?) and shiny satin dresses. The men wore blazers and khakis. Their shoes were impeccable. The corridor ended in a large elevator, and I expected that we'd be in the basement, as shows usually were. But the numbers on the elevator just kept going up.

3...

7...

12...

15...

16...

17...

18...

19... and the door opened, into what will I will always remember as one of the most magnificent sights of my entire life. My jaw dropped.

You know those iridescent, glittery photos professional photographers take of city skylines so people can use them as their computer desktop backgrounds? The ones so detailed you can see every single light in every window of every building, and the reflection on the water is like a purple-orange aurora? That's what I saw, from these enormous windows. The lights of Jersey City, in hallucinatory clarity.

And all at once, I was assaulted by sounds and smells. The smell of heat and perfume and alcohol, and the pounding club beat. The chatter of hundreds of excited voices, like a colony of seabirds. I was getting adrenaline-fueled simply by standing here.

Keiko had immediately run up to the windows and I followed her.

"I have no words," she said, and neither did I. How crisp, I thought. How incredibly clear. All I could think about was how picture perfect it looked. We walked along the window and pressed our noses to the glass. I didn't care if I looked like a child or a tourist just then. The glass was cold and I looked down at the river; we were so high up. I had the bizarre feeling that I was in an aquarium and I wanted to take in the exotic sight before me with child-like wonder.

Wesley and Colin found us. "Do you want to get drinks?" asked Wesley. "It looks like it'll take a while, so we might as well do it now."

"Good idea," I said, though I was loathe to tear myself away from that magical view.

The drink menu was strange. I'd never seen just elaborate drinks like these with such weird names. And they were all \$14 each. But since it was free to get in here, I figured I could pay for a drink, even if it was enormously overpriced. I ended up ordering something called "Le Bicycleette" which had champagne and elderflower liqueur in it. It was delicious.

"It would be really cool if there was a smoking section on the roof," said Emma.

"I feel like I'm tripping," I said. "This is unreal." The DJ started playing one of my favorite songs of his. I wanted to cry.

The only obnoxious thing about this beautiful place was that it was extremely crowded with young, hip people of all stripes, and I was starting to get overheated. I was starting to feel dissatisfied with the experience, which was disappointing, considering that it was still also

blowing my mind. We tried to find a place where we could gather and finish our drinks while enjoying the music. Wesley and Keiko went to go put the empty glasses back on the bar. It didn't take us long to realize that the area we were in actually wasn't very big, and I stopped by the windows again to take a breath and feel cooler and less claustrophobic.

When Wesley and Keiko returned, they were jittery with excitement. "Guys," said Wesley. "There's stairs. That go up."

We immediately followed them behind a curtain, into a quieter area where the bathrooms were, and a set of stairs surrounded by some sort of abstract red-tinted mural. There was a door, and when we opened it, my face was blasted with cold air.

We were on the roof deck. I took a deep breath of air and felt my lungs expand with hyperactive excitement. The party was continuing here. Speakers brought the music up, and fashionable young people stood around holding drinks, just how they looked like they would in magazines and TV shows about rich people. There were glass barriers preventing people from falling, but I could see Manhattan laid out through them. I could see whole sections of the city, as if I was in a helicopter. Every building was distinct.

"So you know how I was wishing that there was a roof, and a smoking section," said Emma. She was watching some people smoking cigarettes.

"I didn't bring cigarettes," said Wesley.

"Nor did I," said Colin.

I froze and patted my the pocket of my jeans. Yes, it was there.

"Guys," I said. "I brought my spliffs." Wesley looked at me as if I had just announced that Faultlines had personally invited us backstage.

We found a more or less discreet corner and sat on an enormous water couch and passed the spliffs around, not even caring about the smell because what, were we going to get arrested up here? I rested my head on the glass and looked at the buildings, wondering if I could recognize them. As it turned out, the Empire State Building was right there. I inhaled from the spliff, continuing to look at the building, decked out in red, white, and blue for something or other.

When we finished, we walked around the roof some more, though Keiko and Emma disappeared downstairs when Faultlines announced their presence.

"I'm getting the munchies," said Colin. "What a place to get the munchies."

"Maybe you could get another drink?" I asked. But I knew I didn't feel like going back into the hot, loud downstairs just yet.

"I'm not sure I want to spend the money."

We continued walking around, enjoying the view and the cold air, until we found a kiosk. I wondered what it was until I noticed a warm, buttery scent emanating from its direction. There was a short line, and I realized what it was.

"Crepes," said Wesley. "There's a crepe shop. What the hell."

"And gelato too," I added.

Of course, we were starving, having eaten dinner hours ago, so within twenty minutes, we had fresh crepes, mine with dulce de leche and strawberries. For some reason, there were beds to the right of the crepe shop, so we lay down on them. The view from the beds was of all of Lower Manhattan. I could see the new World Trade Center marking the spot.

“Isn’t that called the Freedom Tower?” asked Colin.

“I hope not,” said Wesley. “That’s an incredibly jingoistic name.”

I took a photo on my phone. Emma and Keiko returned and found us lying on the beds.

“Crepes? Beds? What will this place deliver next?” asked Emma, incredulous.

“I have no idea,” I said. “How was Faultlines?”

“They were great,” said Keiko. “I got to give the lead singer a hug.” She blushed.

“We should probably head out,” said Wesley. “It’s nearly 3, and I’m exhausted. I can’t believe we’ve been here that long.” Thankfully, everyone agreed. It seemed like we had had enough of this experience. It was starting to become overwhelming, being here for so long. I felt lucky that I was able to come here at all. The crowd hadn’t thinned at all, it seemed like, so we had to push past sweatier, drunker people to make our way out.

On the train ride back, I thought about J—— and how jealous he’d be if he knew I was here. I hadn’t even thought about him the whole time; it was as if the sensory stimulation had obliterated any thoughts of him. And I probably wouldn’t have even gone on this trip if he hadn’t broken up with me, because I wouldn’t be hanging out with these people. A wave of satisfaction mixed with fatigue rose up in me, so I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, sighed, and smiled to myself.

## 10

“Damn,” I said.

“What happened?” asked Megan. We were at the Latitude and she was trying her hardest to write a five page paper by midnight. She had four hours. Warm ambient light cast a golden glow over the quiet coffee shop, which just had a handful of people working quietly on their laptops. Their headphones and intense stares indicated that they were working hard, or at least attempting to.

“Rational Crystal is going to be in Richmond on Wednesday night,” I said. “But I have an exam at 9 am on Thursday.”

Megan looked up. “Wow,” she said.

“This is literally the second time Rational Crystal has come near me and I haven’t been able to see them. I mean, you know they’re my favorite band, right?”

“This is the tour before the album release though,” said Megan. “They’re not releasing it until like, March, so they’ll definitely have another tour after that.”

“I hope you’re right,” I said, my frustration growing. Normally, I would have gone to the show anyway, but I had to study. I had slacked off way too much in this class already.

“I’m pretty sure,” said Megan. “Don’t worry too much about it.”

The bell on the door jingled and Wesley strode in, disrupting the students on their laptops. A few threw him disgruntled glares, which he didn’t notice. He sat down next to us, peering over my shoulder. “Rational Crystal, hmm?”

“I can’t go to this damned show because of an exam,” I said. My voice must have sounded very irritated because I received some disgruntled glares as well.

“But won’t they tour again after the album drop?”

“That’s what I said,” said Megan, who didn’t look up from her computer.

“It’s just so near yet so far,” I said.

“I know what’ll cheer you guys up,” said Wesley. “Let’s get stoned and go to Copper Coop. I’ve been wanting to go all semester.”

The idea interested me. I was getting pretty hungry. “I’m down.”

“I have to write this paper!” cried Megan, finally looking up to see that the surrounding people were getting irritated with her as well. “Jesus, this isn’t a library, she said, looking around. Since she worked here, she probably had some degree of authority. She turned back to us. “But you guys should go, and bring me back something good. I’ll still be here.”

“We’ll try,” said Wesley. I packed up my stuff and followed him out.

Copper Coop is a buffet restaurant where you can pay fifteen dollars to try dozens of dishes, which are set out in stations, like a dining hall. That’s why it’s really nice to go in a certain state of mind. “Copper Coop stoned,” I texted Colin. “Suck it, munchies.”

In my baked state, I was delighted by the panoply of food options spread out in front of me but I started to feel strange as I sat down with my plate, which was piled high with mashed

potatoes, chocolate covered strawberries, and fried chicken. An excellent combination. But maybe it was the bright lights, or the different kind of people here. I started to feel strange. “Wesley,” I said. “I feel like I’m in... a metaphor.”

“A metaphor? For what?” he said, between mouthfuls of beef stew. “This stew is great, by the way.”

“A metaphor for American consumerism,” I said. I speared a piece of beef from his plate with my fork.

“A lot of things are a metaphor for consumerism,” he said.

“But look at all these people,” I said, watching a middle school girls’ soccer team sit down at a table with their plates. “This is normal for them.”

“Uh, Copper Coop is normal for me too,” said Wesley. “Perhaps you don’t have one in the People’s Republic of Northern Virginia, but my family goes at least a few times a year.”

“Really?” I said, fascinated. “This is literally the second time I’ve been, ever.”

“Damn,” he said. “Well, it’s not really that special.”

“What do you mean? It’s fantastic. Where else can you try fifty different foods for less than fifteen dollars?”

“I guess, when you put it that way... But it’s not good food.”

“Still, I said. Isn’t that what consumerism is about, anyway? Providing many different products, disguising the lack of quality with the illusion of choice?”

“Huh, said Wesley.

“I mean, we basically live in Brave New World. I was talking about this with Colin recently. People use so many prescription drugs to chill themselves out because they can’t deal with life on a day to day basis. Big budget movies as well as news channels are basically propaganda in order to focus attention away from real issues and maintain the status quo. We are sedated and distracted.” I frowned, feeling like a revolutionary giving a speech.

“That’s heavy,” said Wesley thoughtfully over the last of his stew. “You sound kinda stoned though.”

I felt a pang of irritation. “I didn’t just come up with this now,” I said. “I’ve been thinking about it for a long time. I think our world is also comparable to *1984*. We’re constantly at war with an imaginary enemy and there’s a huge population of people who are distracted and entertained... Just like the proles. It’s so true.”

“No no,” said Wesley. “I think you’re mostly right. I mean, they wrote those books for a reason. I just feel like it might be something of a stretch.”

“Well duh, we don’t live in a totalitarian state,” I said. “I don’t think the world will ever truly be like that. There are just too many uncanny similarities.”

“Hm,” was all Wesley said. “I guess I should re-read those books.”

“I re-read them at different stages of my life and I get something new from them every time,” I said. I stuffed my mouth full of mashed potatoes. Was there cheese in them? Sour cream, maybe? Damn, they were good.

I was quickly distracted by a TV in the corner because I swear, I heard my name coming from it. The channel chosen was a news channel, which I thought was a strange choice for a family restaurant. Who wants to watch the news while they've gone out to eat? I couldn't tell what the anchor and his guests were saying, but it really sounded like my name.

"Olivia's constitution needs serious revision—"

"Olivia needs aid immediately—"

"The crisis in Olivia—"

A crisis in Olivia? Was there a crisis going on in Olivia? I sat for a moment to think about it. It had been a couple months since the break up and I think I was doing well. I hadn't even gone and looked at pictures of J—— online, I hadn't contacted him, I hadn't stalked him, or tried to find out what he was doing. The lead coat was still there, but I felt slightly less dead with every passing week. I really liked the people I was hanging out with now; they seemed genuinely kind, which was something I valued in my friends, and they certainly liked to have adventures. Perhaps there wasn't a crisis in Olivia after all. But then why was the anchor going on about it?

"Are they talking about me?" I asked Wesley. The anchor continued staring straight at me from the screen. It was unnerving. I felt like he was talking to me.

"No, they're talking about Libya," said Wesley, through a mouthful of sweet potatoes.

"Libya!" I said, a little too loudly. "I thought they kept saying Olivia. That makes so much more sense." I looked back at the screen; the anchors had moved on to a different topic entirely.

"I think I'm going to go for another plate," said Wesley. He got up and left. Meanwhile, I was struggling with the last of my fried chicken. The chocolate from the strawberries had melted on to it and the result was not good. Whatever, I thought. I'll go for another plate as well.

When we returned, there was a silence as we both dug in to the new array of food before us. It was getting to be a bit late, so there were only a handful of older couples left in the restaurant. I wondered what they thought of us.

My phone rang; the buzz on the table and the ringtone were startling and I batted at it like a cat with a toy in an effort to get it to shut up. I noted an unfamiliar number on the screen. It was an 888 number so I ignored it, but was surprised when, a moment later, a voicemail had been left. "Should I look at it?" I asked, looking to Wesley for guidance. He shrugged.

I picked up the phone and listened. "Congratulations! You're the lucky grand prize winner of a trip to Mars!"

"Excuse me?" I said, forgetting that it was a message. "What?"

"—trip to Mars is an exciting excursion to the red planet. Experience the exotic sounds of space and sands of a different world. Our travel services will handle all arrangements and accommodations, and a representative will be contacting you shortly about your—"

"What?" I exclaimed again.

"Your eyes are huge," said Wesley. "Is everything okay?"

"I won a trip to Mars," I said.

“What? Let me see that,” said Wesley, with a grin. “No way.” But I gave him the phone, and when he finished listening to the message, he blinked at it. “It couldn’t have been Mars,” he said. “We must have misheard it.”

“It was Mars, I tell you. The lady kept saying Mars.”

“We’ll get Megan to look at it,” said Wesley.

That seemed like a diplomatic solution, so I went back to my food. After polishing off this plate as well, I couldn’t take any more, and I cursed my small stomach. I patted it and winced at how full I felt. I was ready to fall asleep in my seat.

“I too have a food baby,” said Wesley.

I grimaced. “That’s phrase makes me so uncomfortable. I don’t like the images it puts in my head.”

“Me neither!” Wesley said, laughing. “Ready to leave?”

“Yeah,” I said, still cringing at the idea of a baby made of food. Would it be like a burrito, perhaps? Warm, soft-skinned, and heavy? “I’m about to pass out.”

## 11

“Smashing pumpkins!” I cried in delight. Emma, Keiko, and I were gathered at the Latitude, with Megan flitting in and out. It was a slow day so she had plenty of time to chat.

“Yep,” she said. “I told Thomas to go steal some pumpkins from the candle factory so we can spray paint them gold and then smash them at midnight.”

“That’s awesome,” I said, already looking forward to the prospect of watching drunk people destroy things.

“What are you guys going to wear?”

“I’m going to be a sex kitten,” said Keiko, and Emma laughed. The sex kitten seemed appropriate for Keiko: she didn’t play up her sex appeal, but managed to cultivate a coy and flirty aura. I was a little jealous, but not too jealous. I wasn’t interested in receiving male attention for a while.

“I can’t decide between a Freudian slip or a flapper myself,” said Emma. “I’m just shopping my wardrobe for ideas.”

“I’m not sure either. I want to dress up as a character from that show about classy people in the ‘60’s,” said Megan. “I have a lot of nice dresses but—oh!” She got up to tend to a customer who was irately looking around for someone to make him coffee.

“Blake is doing something dumb with some bros,” said Emma, disdain mixing with sadness. “I wanted to do a couples’ costume but he had already made plans.”

“Sad,” said Keiko. “Where is Blake anyway?”

“I dunno,” said Emma. “He’s been a little elusive recently.”

“Huh,” said Keiko. “I mean, has he been communicating?”

“He responds to my texts but he doesn’t seem to initiate them.” I shivered when I heard this and knitted my brow. It sounded too familiar. Were Emma and Blake going to break up? No, no. They weren’t me and J——. They’d been together for so incredibly long. I was sure they’d work it out.

“Colin said he’s probably just not going to wear a costume,” said Keiko.

“Too cool for costumes, is he,” Emma said. “Wait until they don’t let him in.”

“People who didn’t dress up should pay a cover charge,” said Keiko.

“Ha,” I said. We all knew no one would show up if there was a cover charge. There was a silence as we finished the last sips of our coffees.

“I have to go to class,” said Emma.

“Same,” I said, not at all enthusiastic to attend my lecture. I had skipped it this week already though, so I had to go. Some notes would be better than no notes.

“Can I borrow your wool coat?” I texted Wesley, on my way out. I had something good in mind and all the details were coming together.

There was a drizzle that started as I drove back from Wesley’s apartment. It was so light that I couldn’t decide whether or not to turn on my windshield wipers, so I settled on the lowest

setting. Between swipes, the view from the windshield took on a shimmery, hallucinatory quality. Lights were refracted through millions of flecks of water.

When I got back to my room, I took off the coat and took out a stash of bright orange pill bottles I had been collecting from friends. I had carefully removed the labels because I didn't want to get myself, or anyone who had given me the bottles, in trouble. I then regarded the bag of groceries I had retrieved earlier, which contained oregano, powdered sugar, plastic wrap, and empty gel capsules.

I spent the next half hour making small bags of powdered sugar and filling capsules with the stuff. The oregano I balled up with a bit of glue and put in plastic bags and bottles. I also had some pieces of cardstock which I had perforated with a pin into tiny squares. With safety pins and duct tape, I attached the bags and bottles and papers to the inside of the coat in neat rows. I put the coat on and regarded my mirror.

I pulled one side of the coat open and smiled to myself. For Halloween, I was going as a drug dealer.

Keiko had argued that it was a risky costume idea, but all I had on me was spices and sugar. I was confident that it wouldn't be a problem. Hopefully this party wouldn't be too big either; I didn't want random people thinking I was actually a drug dealer.

I walked to the party by myself. It wasn't at Megan's, which is what I had been expecting. The venue was a different house; I didn't know the owners well, but they were members of our general social circle. This meant that there was a vague possibility of J——'s presence, but I felt like I could handle him now. If anything, I'd be in costume so maybe he wouldn't recognize me. Maybe I could borrow a mask or something. But no! Hiding was the wrong solution. I'd be fine. The house was just a few doors down from the Latitude, and had an enormous magnolia tree on the lawn; smokers perched in the low-hanging branches, which would have had the distinctive musky blossoms had it been spring. A few familiar faces waved at me from amid the leathery leaves, and I felt a little more at ease.

The flash from a disposable camera greeted me from the side of the house, and I found my friends gathered there already. Emma hung despondently on Blake's arm, dressed as a 1920's flapper, while Keiko had cat ears and tight black clothes. She blended into the darkness. I wasn't sure what Wesley was dressed as, for he was wearing an elaborate nineteenth century outfit with a green carnation in his lapel. Colin, as we had predicted, wasn't dressed up. I wasn't sure what Megan was either, but she looked gorgeous in a long silk dress.

"So who all are here?" I asked.

"Not too many; I mean, it's early," said Megan. She took a puff of a cigarette from a cigarette holder.

"Any cool costumes?"

"There's a bunch; people were pretty into this. At least, Tori is going around putting glitter on everyone's faces," she replied.

"She got me," said Colin with fake solemnity. Indeed, the area around his eyes was bright with silver sparkles.

“Got me too,” said Wesley.

“Who are you supposed to be?” I asked.

“Oscar Wilde, of course,” he said. “And what are you?”

I realized that they wouldn’t be able to tell since it looked like I was just wearing Wesley’s coat. I opened the right side and all the things I had stuck to it rattled.

“Wow,” said Megan.

“That’s sick,” said Keiko.

“So you’re a drug dealer?” said Colin.

“Awesome, thanks,” I said. “I wasn’t sure if people would get it.”

“No, it’s great,” said Colin. “Just make sure you don’t show the po po.”

I looked in the window, wondering if I could spot anyone familiar. Keiko followed my gaze. “It’s getting cold,” she said. She wasn’t smoking, so she went inside with me.

We found a lot of people gathered around the drinks in the kitchen, of course, and some sort of strange dance music was playing in the dining room, with thick, minimalistic beats. The people in the dining room were dancing to it in an appropriately bizarre manner. I decided to move on. I didn’t feel like dancing with this enormous coat which was my entire costume. In fact, I was starting to get a bit hot. Wearing a wool coat indoors was a terrible idea.

“Are you ever just kind of bored of parties?” asked Keiko, distracting me from my dilemma.

“What do you mean?” I replied.

“I mean this is kind of fun because people are dressed up, but the people are all the same and I see the same stuff at every party, you know. Like getting drunk is fun, but hangovers aren’t, and the guys seem to get less cute every year...” I was surprised by this sentiment coming from Keiko. She had always seemed to me like the consummate party girl, fearlessly knocking back shots and finding the most attractive guys to get with. It was strange to think that underneath all that, she was dissatisfied.

“I get it,” I said. “I feel the same way. I wonder if the natural course of college is just to get bored of partying.” To be fair, I wasn’t naturally a partier myself, being more partial to smaller gatherings with people I actually knew, but a party was always good for a change of pace. I just wasn’t sure I liked going to them every weekend.

“But then there’s that,” said Keiko, motioning to a girl dressed as Gonzo from the Muppets. She had a cute maroon blazer and pants and blue make-up. She was laughing wildly by herself and I thought she was just really drunk until I noticed her companion, a girl dressed as Kermit the frog, who had been previously obscured by the wings of a fairy.

Kasia found us and walked over; she had the wings that we had spotted. “I’m the green fairy,” she said, clutching a bottle of absinthe.

“Cute!” said Wesley, who had found us. I jumped at hearing his voice.

“And you must be... Oscar Wilde?” she continued. I opened my coat. “And a drug dealer! How delightful!” I knew Kasia would appreciate the idea and I smiled. Her good mood was infectious and the knot of anxiety which had been building in my stomach starting to dissolve. I

hadn't even realized it was there until now. J—— wouldn't be here; he'd never bother to dress up.

My smile faded when a guy in an oversized navy sweater sidled up to us. "You guys like trees?" he asked me, specifically.

"Trees?" repeated Keiko.

"You guys got trees? You got trees?" he asked me again.

"What?" I said.

"Trees, dude."

"No, we don't have trees," said Wesley.

"Word," said the guy, moving on.

"Damn it, I knew people would think I was a real drug dealer."

"I think he's just really fucked up," said Kasia, watching the guy harass another group of people. "I mean, you didn't show him the inside of your jacket."

"I hope so," I said, feeling slightly more paranoid. There were a lot of people I didn't really know here and I didn't want more people to bother me. I felt my phone buzz.

"We're thinking of going to the graveyard," Colin had texted. "Not feeling this party."

"Definitely down," I replied. The graveyard! That would be an awesome place to visit on Halloween weekend. Hopefully there wouldn't be too many police there, but if we managed to sneak in, it would be a Halloween to remember. I bid farewell to Kasia and dashed outside, eager to remove myself from the warm interior.

The graveyard was spookier than I expected. There was a chill in the air and I pulled the coat closer around me. Something about the place was just weird, as graveyards always are: maybe it was knowing you were surrounded by all these dead bodies under you. The knot of anxiety started to return. Was I really that afraid of the dark? Rows of gravestones surrounded us in an expansive field. We could see pretty clearly because the moon shone down from a cloudless sky and every stone was illuminated with pearlescent white light.

"I need to pee," said Emma. "But we're in a graveyard."

"Fuck that, I'm going behind this tree," said Keiko.

"The spirits will be offended," said Emma.

"My bladder is already offended," said Keiko. She marched off. Emma hesitated, then followed her.

"So, Emma and I thought it would be a good idea to bring candles," said Wesley, pulling a box of long, golden tapers from Emma's purse.

"Wow," I said. He started passing them around with a lighter and we each took one and lit it. We gathered around the particularly gravestone we had stopped at and I tried to read it with the light from my candle. I could make out very few faint letters which seemed to spell out the name "Johnson" or something similar, as well as the date 1893. An unusual motif of a coiled serpent was at the top.

Keiko started playing a song from her phone. It sounded very familiar, but I couldn't put my finger on it. The tinny beat from the phone speakers broke clearly through the oppressive

silence and sounded eerie. I shivered. As I wracked my brain trying to remember what that damn song was, a feeling started to come over me.

Of course. It was a song from that Rational Crystal EP, back when they were known as Nightmare Broadcast. It was a song from high school, but it was playing here, with my college friends. It was an anachronism. I sat down next to the gravestone and pushed my candle into the grass so it would stand up in its own. I looked down into the flame and focused on the song. We were driving down Pennsylvania Avenue in D.C. and it was midnight. I had just graduated and was going to go to college in a couple months. It was a cool summer night, the windows were down, and we were driving towards the Capitol, which was lit up beautifully as it always is. We blasted the music and felt like stereotypical obnoxious teenagers, but we were being obnoxious on this one particularly famous street. A street that, in the daytime, was critically important. The most powerful street in the world, really. How utterly absurd that this was the backdrop of my teenage debauchery. I felt free. I felt good. I felt like I was leaving somewhere and arriving somewhere else simultaneously. It was exhilarating.

“Olivia?” called Emma. “Tryna stare your candle down?”

I blinked at her. “Umm,” I said, laughing. “It’s so relaxing to look at. The flame is beautiful.” She nodded, but didn’t seem convinced.

“I think I’m getting creeped out,” said Keiko.

“Already?” said Wesley. “We’ve been here for like, twenty minutes.”

“I mean, it’s a graveyard, it’s Halloween, it’s creepy,” said Keiko. She frowned. “Maybe you pissed off the spirits,” said Colin. I think I was the only one who caught his pun as no one laughed.

Keiko went and stood closer to Wesley and he put his arm around her. “Alright,” said Wesley. “My candle is getting a bit short anyway.”

After watching some of the other candles burn down more, we finally started getting up to leave. I felt safe with the group, but I did keep looking around, half-expecting to see a shadowy figure trailing us. Keiko’s paranoia had rubbed off.

Presently, we came to the car and I blew my candle out. As we piled in, I remembered the gold pumpkins and how I missed out on seeing them getting smashed. But I didn’t mind too much. It didn’t seem important.

# 12

After months of false starts, Rational Crystal has dropped a single and track list for their much anticipated debut album, *Acid Test*. “Conferral” is a short, exciting glimpse at what will be an elaboration upon Rational Crystal’s unique techniques. Like in “Failure Vein,” the triple beat and percussion provide energy for dancing, while the thick synths balance their punchiness. “Conferral” represents the least edgy end of Rational Crystal’s style, but given that they’re already edgy overall, we should have more to mull over when the LP is finally released.

## *Acid Test* (Flux Records)

1. “Sorrow”
2. “Conferral”
3. “Chrome Eyes”
4. “Tendons”
5. “Suburban Control”
6. “Dreamspell”
7. “Paper Dust”
8. “Negative Bones”
9. “Tetra”

## 13

The nice thing about spliffs is that you can smoke them anywhere. We were smoking them outside the house that this show was at, already a little drunk (or in the case of Wesley and Keiko, a lot drunk) and getting psyched. There was a punk show and someone had graciously agreed to lend their living room. Not quite my type of music, but Wesley and Keiko really wanted to go (even though they're not punks either). It was nice to be in Richmond for an evening, regardless.

Inside, we found that the band members themselves are mingling with the crowd. They looked as if they were twice our age, though that could have been the effect of the unkempt hair and years of smoking cigarettes. Bright, bold tattoos and enormous piercings were everywhere. Were those one inch gauges? Were that girl's cheeks pierced? It was an unfamiliar gathering of Real People and I felt distinctly out of place, though my studded belt helped me fit in, a little bit. But not really.

Wesley was already chatting some people up, with Keiko by his side, but it looked like the band was getting ready to start anyway, so I found Colin and the others, who were raiding the alcohol on the kitchen counter. I grabbed a beer for myself.

I found a spot off to the side next to Keiko, after dodging a whiff of a strange sweaty smell that briefly made me want to vomit, considered asking her if she wants to be closer to the center of the crowd, but then found my thoughts drowned out by the crackles and pops of the sound check. I instinctively checked my phone. Nothing new.

Without warning, the band launched into their first song, which was deafening in the tiny living room. The drum beats hit my ears like bullets. I decided to stick out this song and then see how I felt, and the next few minutes became more and more bearable. My ears didn't feel like they were stuffed with cotton yet.

The frontman mumbled some unintelligible words into the microphone, a couple of people chuckled, and the second song began. I didn't feel like dancing but I swayed with the beat, and when I glanced over and saw some burly guys throwing each other around, I realized that no one was dancing in the conventional sense anyway. I went back to enjoying the music, which was so distorted by the volume that it was little more than a faintly melodic roar. It passed through my entire body like a gale through a tree and I tried to resist until it ended abruptly, which I deduced was a hallmark of the genre.

"Thank you all for—" was all that I caught of the singer's next words, because the drummer thumped his bass drum several times. The next song started up, high energy again, and I felt like leaving the crowd because in the brief silence the heat became obvious to me and now I couldn't stand it. Everyone was wearing black which I didn't think helped. The smell was unbearable.

I wandered along, trying to find Colin. He was the type to take to the mosh pit, and I lost him in the chaos of the first song. He wasn't in the kitchen so I expected he was still in the crowd.

The smell and humidity and the beer in my stomach conspired to make me want to vomit again so as I pushed past various sticky bodies, I tried to visualize the smell and taste of crisp winter air. I checked my phone again. They should have finished their set already. I found Colin back in the living room. He was talking to one of the band members, the drummer if I recalled correctly. Colin played the drums too, so they must have been talking about drummer things.

Colin seemed to be unscathed, which was a relief. As soon as the drummer left, Wesley and Keiko found us, but I saw that there was a third person. Keiko found a friend. I recognized him vaguely. Keiko must have noted my look because she said, "This is David, he used to be one of Megan's roommates." I nodded and smiled and introduced myself. We shook hands. He was a big guy, taller than Wesley, and more muscular. I didn't think he was that great-looking, though I supposed many people would disagree.

Colin put a hand on my shoulder and we went to the kitchen again, where the light was on and there was more room, since most of the alcohol was gone. "Do you feel like leaving?" he asked. We were staying at Wesley's brother's place, and it would be easy to hail a cab from here.

"Leaving, yes, but not going to sleep," I said. I did want to leave. Being around so many people always made me crave fresh air.

"I'll text Wesley," he said, and I thought to check my text messages, but when I looked up from my phone, a large, grimy man was in front of us. I looked down again and was startled by the sight of his hand. There was something wrong with it. The fingers towards one end seemed to taper away and there was a bulge on his palm and I looked back at his face because I was disgusted. I felt a little bad so I tried to compose my expression.

I didn't catch the guy's name, but he started to tell us about his hand. "When I was young, I went to the zoo, and I fell in the alligator pit. And then this alligator started chewing on my hand and it was too late."

"That doesn't sound true," said Colin, which startled me because I was prepared to believe the story. It sounded implausible but I'd never seen anything quite like this hand.

"You're right, it's not," said the man. "What actually happened is that my parents punished me one day by hitting my hand with a sledge hammer. We went to the doctor afterwards, but it was too late."

"I hope that's not true," said Colin with a cheerful half-smile. I really just wanted to get away from this man and his hand but Colin seemed to be humoring him and I didn't know why. He usually wasn't one to talk to strangers.

"It isn't," said the man. "Go ahead and touch my hand."

Colin poked at the man's palm, and we saw that it was actually full of something, like blood or pus. I didn't want to think about it so I looked back at the man's face.

"What actually happened," he said, "Is that my parents ran over my hand with a lawn mower when I was two. It was an accident."

"That's not true," said Colin. "They must feel awful."

"It is true. That's the real story of why my hand is like this."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Colin replied. "I'm going to go smoke a cig now."

“Me too,” I squeaked, following Colin, away from the ridiculous, deformed hand. I wasn’t even sure his last story was true. It straddled the edge of plausibility.

“Was that even real,” I asked Colin, still uncertain of what exactly I had just witnessed.

“Yes, that was very real. The story though, I don’t know,” said Colin. He checked his phone. “Wesley just texted me.”

“What about Keiko?”

“Um, didn’t you see she was with whatsisface?”

“Oh,” I said, feeling oblivious. “But we need Keiko to drive us.”

“We can just get a cab; it’s only five dollars for each of us.”

“But Keiko needs to drive us back to campus tomorrow. I hope her phone is charged,” I said. “It’s kind of irresponsible of her.” I started to feel irritated. If she was the one driving, why did she have to go off with that guy? We were in a different city. And wasn’t she drunk? Was she going to leave her car here? Was David going to drive it? What the hell?

“Not if she wakes up on time tomorrow,” said Colin. He didn’t seem concerned. I didn’t understand how he could be so nonchalant.

“What if she doesn’t though?”

“She has to leave the city some time. I’m sure we’ll find her.”

Colin’s answer made sense so I didn’t have a response, but I was still worried. Would Keiko be okay? Where was David staying, anyway? I decided to just go with the flow and trust that Colin and Wesley had everything figured out.

The cab ride was cosy and I was in the middle. I snuggled close to the boys because I was so cold. The driver hadn’t even put the heat on.

It was a short drive to Wesley’s brother’s house, and since it was only 11 pm, we found that there was still a party going on. There were about a dozen and a half people in the living room, and some sort of insane bass rattled my flesh. My eyes widened when I saw lines of white powder on the coffee table. A trio of swan-like girls, all blonde, sat on the couch in front of it and they seemed to think it was amusing to all do lines simultaneously. When they were done they sniffled and clutched at their noses like they had the worst cold. But when I looked around, everyone seemed to be sniffing. Sneezes punctuated the laughter and chatter.

“What the fuck,” said Colin, echoing my own thoughts.

“Are you throwing some sort of coke party, Morgan?” Wesley asked his brother, who was just as beautiful and blonde and well-dressed. But unlike Wesley, Morgan looked at me with a certain look, not unfriendly, but with a slight hint of a predatory leer. I didn’t know whether it was because he was coked up or because he found me attractive. I chose to believe that it was both.

“Of course not,” said Morgan. “I don’t throw ‘coke parties.’ But I do have a gram for you and your friends if you want it.”

Wesley looked at us. We were exhausted, and even though we didn’t want to turn down free drugs, we really just wanted to chill out—the very opposite of what was going on. “I think we’ll pass,” said Wesley. “Thanks though.”

“More for everyone!” shrieked a girl standing next to Morgan, who took the gram from his hand and went to the kitchen. I started to feel sniffly from just being around all these people.

“This just looks like a coke party to me,” said Colin, and Wesley nods.

“A typical weekend at Morgan’s,” he said.

We went upstairs, to the guest bedroom. The thump of the party oozed through the floorboards. Wesley went to the bathroom. I sighed with exhaustion, and took my shoes off. Even though I had been feeling energetic earlier, the extreme activity going on downstairs put into contrast just how tired I really was. The intensity and loudness of that show had been exhausting.

“There’s board games up here for some reason,” said Colin.

I perked up. “Do they have Settlers?”

Colin paused, looking at the shelf. “Yes!”

I was relieved. “But we don’t have a fourth.” Keiko would have been the fourth, had she chosen to come back with us. I felt irked again at how she had just ditched us. She was probably in bed with David. The thought made me grimace. I didn’t want to judge her for sleeping around; I mean, I considered myself a sex-positive feminist and whatnot. But the idea of anyone doing that squicked me out.

“What are you guys doing?” asked Wesley, returning from the bathroom. He noticed the board game Colin was holding. “We don’t have four people for Settlers.”

“Just realized that,” said Colin.

“Let’s just have a smoke instead,” said Wesley. “It’s early, but I feel like I want to sleep.”

“Me too,” said Colin.

“Me three,” I said. “Good thing I brought some.”

## 14

There's always that fleeting feeling of panic when you wake up and you realize that you're somewhere else. Wesley was on my left in bed, and Colin was on my right, at the window, looking out over an unfamiliar city.

That was right. We were in Richmond. The punk concert. The guy with the hand. The cocaine.

"So Keiko isn't answering her phone," said Wesley.

I felt a pang of irritation. If Keiko was the kind of person who was okay with coming to a city and sleeping with some guy, then she wasn't really the kind of person you could count on for a ride. I hoped she was alright though; I mean, David was Megan's roommate so he was alright, but I couldn't help but hope that he treated her well and that she was nothing short of comfortable. I felt like an anxious mother hen.

It was 11 am on a Saturday morning. I had a lecture to go to. I didn't know why I just remembered that.

"Oh, shit," I said. "I have a thing at noon. For class."

Wesley and Colin seemed to have all their stuff. "Get dressed, then," said Wesley.

"But we need to find Keiko," I said.

I put my shoes on and grabbed my phone, patting my pockets to make sure I had everything. We went down the stairs and Morgan was in the living room. He looked immaculate, as if he was ready to go to work, and was drinking coffee and watching cable news. *The New York Times* was open on his laptop.

"Thanks for letting us stay here, Morgan," said Wesley.

"No problem," said Morgan. "Any time." He had a cheerful smile, rather like Wesley's, which wasn't at all like the sharpened, wolfish grin I saw last night.

Wesley went to the kitchen and started making coffee. As soon as the smell wafted over to me I felt my stomach rumble and squeeze painfully. "Have a banana," Wesley said, motioning over to a fruit bowl.

I took one and eat it gratefully. I could see traces of white powder on the kitchen counter of all places and remembered just how surreal this place was last night.

"So Keiko just woke up," said Wesley, looking up from his phone. Thank goodness, I thought. She was alive.

"I'm going to miss this thing," I said. "Eff."

"Well, you can go for a little bit," said Wesley. "I guess she'll be here in twenty minutes? Turns out she's not that far away."

We joined Morgan in the living room. His pleasant expression had given way to a knitted brow as he glared at the television. An old dude in a suit is grumbling about something. Whatever. I was in a good mood and I didn't want to ruin it.

Wesley sat down with a cup of coffee. Somehow, his hair was perfectly coiffed and his clothes were still smooth and unblemished. He matched his brother and I marveled at the similarity. “So, this David,” said Wesley. “Do you know him?”

“Oh, Dad,” said Colin. “Don’t worry about Keiko. I’m sure she can pick them well.”

“I mean, he lived with Megan and Kasia last year so he must be a decent guy,” I said. I wasn’t convinced, though. I wasn’t sure whether Keiko’s judgement was sound or not.

“Didn’t care for his face,” said Wesley. “Not angular enough.”

“Angular faces are the best faces,” Morgan chimed in. “I would know, since I have one myself.”

We heard a car pull up outside, tires crunching on a patch of gravel. Wesley reached over and gave Morgan a hug, and we file out, bidding him thank you and farewell. Keiko had an uncommonly cheerful expression on her face. As soon as the doors were closed, she started to chirp about David: “Guys, guys, guys, why did I never notice David before. He’s so incredibly sweet.”

“Alright, alright, storytime once we hit the highway,” said Wesley gently. “Olivia has a thing at noon.”

“Oh, shit!” said Keiko. “I’m so sorry!”

“It’s okay,” I said, resigned. “I only remembered it an hour ago so it’s not your fault.”

Keiko turned the radio on to some local Top 40 station and we proceeded in silence, as she focused on zipping around people and through lights until we saw the electric blue and red highway signs. The road was clear and we would make good time. I would still be late, though.

“So, this David,” said Wesley, and I could tell that he wants to grill her about her experience. Colin and I slouched in the back seat. I wanted to listen, but I missed most of the conversation because of the music.

“You do realize, that just because guys tell you you’re pretty doesn’t mean they’re particularly sweet,” said Wesley.

“He is though. He was acting all relationship-like, holding my hand, and stroking my hair,” countered Keiko. When I heard this, I was concerned. Was David a charmer? Was he deceptive? I didn’t know how much one could trust a guy who became too sweet too fast, but then, I also didn’t understand how Keiko could be charmed so easily.

“But guys will do anything. I would know, you know.”

“I probably won’t see him again since he’s studying abroad next semester, so it’s a moot point.”

The highway was empty and bleak. The bright winter sunlight burned my eyes. I wanted to sleep, but I kept fidgeting because I was too uncomfortable. I was glad I ate something to stave off any nausea. I would probably just take a nap; I didn’t care about this lecture. Who would schedule a lecture for noon on a Saturday, anyway?

Presently, I could see the signs signaling that we were near campus, and I fantasized about sinking into the covers and going to sleep. But as we got closer, Keiko suggested brunch.

“Yes!” I said, a little too loudly, startling everyone. “Fuck this lecture.”

“Is that what it was, a lecture?” asked Colin.

“Who schedules lectures for noon on a Saturday?” said Wesley.

“Professor Posen, that’s who,” I grumbled.

“Isn’t Professor Posen dating Professor Riley?” asked Keiko.

“Isn’t Professor Riley married?” asked Colin.

“You can still be dating someone if you’re married,” said Keiko. She started giggling and we all laughed.

“Professor Riley wouldn’t do that,” I said. “He’s such a sweet old man.”

“I was joking,” said Keiko, though I knew she would have liked to believe it.

We chose one of the many pancake places which passed us, and I felt immediately uncomfortable. Families with toddlers and grandparents surrounded us, four hungover college students, still dressed in punky party clothes from last night, with disheveled hair and smeared makeup. My studded belt had absolutely no place there. I spotted a mother shooting us a disapproving look. Walking through the rows to our table was even more uncomfortable; I felt like a black wraith in a brightly-colored, pastel world.

Twenty minutes later, and I felt much better. “Pancakes are the best hangover cure,” I said cheerfully. With immense gratefulness, I dug in.

“I prefer Belgian waffles myself,” said Wesley.

I checked my phone. “Wait a minute,” I said. “This email says the lecture was canceled because the speaker’s flight was delayed.”

“Sweet!” said Keiko. “Now you can enjoy your pancakes, guilt-free.”

“Thank god,” I said.

## 15

I got a text from Emma before class which made me worried. “Blake hasn’t been as affectionate lately. Don’t know what’s up.” I knew instantly what was up because it was what happened to me. He stopped being so affectionate, physically and verbally, and I felt a little disconnected. I didn’t recognize it for what it was at the time, but now I sensed doom looming ahead for Emma and Blake. I couldn’t curse them by pointing this out. The clarity was unnerving though; I felt as if I had to take action but couldn’t.

I chose to reply neutrally. “Weird. I guess you should bring it up.”

“Getting guys to talk about feelings is like pulling teeth,” she replied instantly. She was right. It was a shame that guys weren’t socialized to be as emotive or expressive as girls.

The text slipped my mind through class, but the lecture was dry and my attention was drawn to Emma’s chat statuses instead. She had posted a series of oblique song lyrics which hinted at her growing anxiety.

If that wasn’t representative of her feelings, I didn’t know what was. I could imagine the growing feeling of dread creeping into her heart, and I felt for her.

I checked my phone. “I texted him and said we needed to talk,” said Emma. She was being so vocal today, with the texts and the statuses. A sure sign of impending doom.

I texted Keiko instead. “Have you heard from Emma?” Hopefully, as her roommate, she would be able to provide some insight.

Then I replied to Emma. “Ah, ‘the talk.’ Let me know how it goes. I’m free tonight if you want to meet up.” I put my phone away and tried to pay attention to the last few minutes of the lecture.

A student was speaking. “I just feel like... We’re on the edge of a precipice,” she said. “Technology has accelerated to the point where we’ve even created hypothetical quantum computers.” What the hell was she talking about? She sounded like another one of those pretentious asses who just liked to hear their own voice. I wasn’t even sure how quantum computers were relevant to British literature.

“Perhaps we’re walking to the precipice,” said the professor. “We’re not about to jump off it yet. Many of these technologies aren’t fully functional.”

“But I don’t think we’ll jump off it,” said the student. “We’ll always be at that point, feeling as if we’re looking into a valley full of dazzling possibilities.”

“Well, that’s a lovely way of putting it,” said the Professor, smiling. A kind of fake smile, I thought, perhaps to appease this ridiculous student. She looked at her watch as I glanced at my screen. Two minutes over. “I’ll see you all next week.”

The mad rush to pack notebooks and computers into backpacks began, and I hesitated, taking a moment to see if Keiko or Emma had replied in the short space of a few minutes. They hadn’t.

I was one of the last people to exit the classroom, and I held the door open for a plain girl burdened with a backpack that looked as if it held several textbooks. She wheezed out a thank you, with a strained smile. I returned it and left the building.

## 16

“To be perfectly honest with you, I’m kind of scared of this party,” I said, surveying the description.

“What do you mean,” asked Keiko, peering over my shoulder. “You’re not excited about a kissing booth, date auction, and the fact that you have to be sing—”

She trailed off when I shot her a look. Emma sat in the corner with Wesley, curled up on her bed, and gazing despondently at her laptop screen. She and Blake’s rough patch had grown into an endless supply of complaints.

“He smokes so much fucking weed,” she said to Wesley. “Like I can’t even hold conversations with him. He and his bros just get stupid and play video games or some shit.”

Wesley nodded. “It sounds like he’s not meeting your needs anymore,” he said calmly.

“He doesn’t even want to hook up,” she said. “What the hell. I thought weed is supposed to make you horny.”

I thought it was pretty clear that they were going to break up. But when, and how, was the question. Ever since she had texted me about the problem initially, I had received a barrage of updates, which were mostly repetitive but upsetting. Blake hadn’t responded. Blake hadn’t said ‘I love you.’ Blake hadn’t kissed her goodbye. Blake blew off ‘the talk’ to hang out with his friends. “You’ll be alright,” I said to Emma, handing her a cup of juice. “This party should be chill, and we’re here for you.”

“Ha,” said Emma. “This is going to be the party. This is it.”

We all sat in uncomfortable silence.

Emma stared down at her cup. “There’s no alcohol in here. It’s just juice.”

“No, there’s like, a shot,” I said. “I mixed it myself.”

Emma grumbled and looked around the room for the handle of vodka we’d been passing around, which Wesley had thoughtfully hidden behind a stack of books. “Here,” I said, pouring some water from my cup into hers. The clear liquid didn’t fool her.

“Olivia, you don’t do shots,” she said.

“You don’t need anymore,” said Wesley, plucking the cup from her hand. “There’ll be plenty at the party, anyhow.”

“Ugh, fine,” said Emma. It was strange to see her like this, when she was usually the one in control of the situation. Without her to guide us, the group had some uncomfortable vibes. No one was sure how to proceed.

“I’ll drive,” I said. “We can take Emma’s car.”

“I still find it weird that bros come to our parties because of Blake,” said Keiko.

“Well after tonight, maybe not anymore,” I said ominously. I had never gotten to know Blake well, and he was quiet because he was usually stoned. But he hung out with us often enough that he was a presence, and it would be weird if we never saw him again.

“The awkwardness is palpable,” I texted Colin. He had gone home for the weekend and I really wished he was here to diffuse the tension emanating from drunk Emma. I also found him comforting to have around, like a Golden Retriever or something.

Wesley slid into the backseat after Emma, curling his arm protectively around her. Keiko rode shotgun. “I don’t know what music to play,” she said.

“Er,” I said, reversing the car out of the space. “Anything. Just put anything on.”

I wanted to get this party over with, so I could make my rounds and be seen, and then leave. I was really getting tired of the parties. The same people and the same awful alcohol. I didn’t like to get drunk, so I didn’t like hanging out with drunk people. Hanging out with friends was fun, but you couldn’t have meaningful conversations with them when they were so inebriated. On top of that, the night on the hotel roof in New York blew all of this away. Emma would need emotional support if the break up did occur, but she had Wesley and Keiko for that, for now. However, I was the only one who could drive, and so I was saddled with the task of driving to this party that none of us seemed excited to go to.

“Why are we going to this party again,” asked Keiko, reading my mind. “What does Black Valentine’s Day even mean?”

“I mean, it’s at Megan’s house, and it’s a theme party so I guess it’s cooler than usual,” I said.

“I don’t really care for the theme myself,” said Wesley. “Why would you want to celebrate being sad? It’s just a pity party is what it is.”

“Who knows. Maybe people like to be in touch with their emotions?” said Keiko.

“Why, though,” said Wesley, skeptical.

“Well, we’re here,” I said, parking the car.

When Megan opened the door, she was predictably drunk and delighted to see us. “Keiko and Olivia, you foxy bitches! We’ll be auctioning you off later.”

Keiko said yes and I said no at the same time. “Have you seen Blake?” asked Wesley.

“I haven’t,” replied Megan, concerned. She was aware of the developing situation. “He might have gone ‘round the back.”

Wesley and Emma went to find him, and I pulled my phone out of my pocket. “That sucks. How’s the party?” Colin had replied. I looked around, feeling guilty for my sense of relief that Wesley was taking care of Emma, but there was nothing I could do to help now anyway. It was best to at least make some attempt to enjoy the party while I could. “It’s chill, I just want a chill night, but I have to make an appearance here,” I replied to Colin.

Keiko and I found Kasia in the living room. I didn’t know her very well but she always appeared to be on something. Her icy blue eyes were constantly black, pupils freakishly dilated. Megan claimed that she was the smartest person she knew, though. Apparently last summer she had interned with the State Department, but I found that hard to believe. Didn’t they drug test?

“So there’s a guy selling party favors in my kitchen?” she said with a laugh.

“Didn’t you want to buy some acid?” Keiko asked me.

“Yeah dude, just go talk to Vivian’s boyfriend. I think that’s who it is. Who knows,” said Kasia.

“Word,” I said. “How’s the party been?”

“It’s weird seeing so many randos in your house,” she said. “Strangers are selling drugs in the same kitchen where I made breakfast this morning. Do you want to see the decor?”

There was some red light emanating from the back of the house, so we followed her there. The music was slower, and people were talking and sitting down on couches. Kasia motioned to the far wall, on which there were a number of black construction papers. Words had been scrawled on them in white chalk. Particularly vitriolic words, from the looks of it. I cringed.

“You fucked my best friend after you fucked me, fuck you, asshole.”

“I gave you everything and you gave me nothing in return.”

“Stomp on my heart, why don’t you, go fuck yourself.”

There were worse ones, but I blocked them from my memory. I didn’t feel that much animosity towards J——. He hadn’t cheated on me or abused me or anything. Kasia led us away from the hateful messages, to a table on which there were some cupcakes, assorted hard candies including ring pops, and a cake decorated with the cover of *Unknown Pleasures*. I grabbed a cupcake to fend off my hunger. Keiko helped herself to the abundant mixers and liquors.

Megan, the perfect party host, materialized to recruit us for the date auction. “But what does it entail?” I asked, reluctant to be roped into something I couldn’t handle. I swiftly envisioned the scruffy guy behind Megan pulling out a hundred dollar bill to bid on me. He must have noticed me staring because he threw me a suspicious glance and I returned my attention to Megan. “Like, can anyone bid on me? What’s the auction even for?”

“You’re asking too many questions,” she said. “You’re not drunk enough. Keiko, come with me,” she said, taking Keiko’s hand and leading her away.

“I’ll take you to Vivian’s boyfriend,” said Kasia. I followed her into the kitchen, which was empty, probably because the lighting was as mood-killingly bright. A crustpunk with dozens of shiny studs on his black denim jacket and an impressively large ammo belt stood next to Vivian, who was speaking with some bright eyed, young-looking girls.

She perked up when she saw me. “Olivia!” she exclaimed. “Help me tell these freshmen how awesome radio is.” The drunk freshmen turned to me. I could feel their appraising gaze and was glad that I had worn my leather jacket tonight.

“Uh, you guys should definitely all be DJs,” I said, completely unsure of what to say to convince them. “It’s very cool,” I added lamely.

Vivian started on some sort of spiel which caught the attention of the freshmen—“and there are lots of cute boys!”—but her boyfriend had turned to me.

“I hear you’re tryna meet Lucy,” he said with a predatory grin. I disliked him instantly. He didn’t look like he went here. “She came down from Richmond hoping to meet some cool people.”

I couldn’t stand his stupid personification of the drug, so I was blunt. “Alright, how much is it? And how strong is this shit?”

“Ten bucks a pop, and you’ll need two, probably,” he said.

“Twelve then. A hundred and twenty.” We exchanged our pieces of paper as discreetly as we could. While talking to the guy, I had moved five feet away from Vivian and the freshmen, and when I turned back to them, the freshmen were blinking at me with wide eyes. I felt dirty, but how I felt matched the overall vibe of the party. There was so much negative energy here. “Yeah! You guys should join radio!” I said, before thanking the crustpunk and dashing off to find the others. “Yo, I scored acid,” I texted Colin.

I found Wesley in the dining room, minus Emma. “They’re talking in a corner in the backyard,” he said grimly.

“Damn,” I said, not sure how else to respond. “On the bright side, we have acid now.”

“Sweet!” said Wesley. “Good job. Let’s go see how Keiko is faring at the date auction.”

“Are they raising money for anything in particular?” I asked. Wesley shrugged.

Keiko was hanging on the arm of a familiar guy. “David won me,” she said cheerfully. The two left the room. I groaned inwardly. I wasn’t happy to see her with David again, but this is what she wanted, after all. I had a bad vibe about him based on what she told Wesley. And now that I had gotten a better look at him, I didn’t think he was good-looking at all. He appeared kind of generic.

“At least someone’s going to leave this party happy,” I said.

“Don’t forget, you just bought acid,” said Wesley.

Megan instantly approached him. “You saucy boy, can I auction you off?”

“Did you just quote Shakespeare?” I asked. Neither heard me because Megan was pulling on Wesley’s arm and he was resisting, with genuine alarm.

“Okay, fine, jeez,” she said, grumbling, and leaving to find someone else to recruit.

“Were there a lot of other people in the backyard?” I asked Wesley.

“Some,” he said. “Fancy a smoke?”

We pushed past drunk, humid bodies to the back door. “FUCK YES,” Colin had texted back.

Wesley and I perched on the stairs and observed the familiar people scattered around the backyard. He pulled out his pack of cigarettes.

“Oh, you have cloves,” I commented.

“Yeah, you tryna bum one?” he asked, offering the pack to me.

“Nah, I have to re-up,” I said, pulling out a carefully made spliff. “Thanks, though.”

Wesley lit my spliff and we listened to the crackling of his cigarette. He elegantly exhaled a perfect stream of smoke upwards. “I don’t see them,” I said.

“Me neither.”

We sat in silence, puffing away for a couple more minutes, but then I patted Wesley’s shoulder. “They’re sitting down near the tree,” I whispered.

He narrowed his eyes. “It’s so fucking dark,” he said.

“That’s usually what night is like,” I said. Wesley shoved me playfully in response.

The pair was sitting closely, having what appeared to be an intense conversation. In the dim light, Emma's cheeks sparkled with tears.

"Yikes," said Wesley.

"I dunno," I said. "This isn't going to be good."

"We just have to wait it out."

I didn't really want to wait; I was getting tired and I'd seen all the people I wanted to see. The party wasn't particularly engaging despite the decor, and I was interested in taking a hot shower back at my suite. I idly checked my phone. "Tryna go home but I have to drive these dear drunkards back," I texted Colin.

He replied immediately. "You're a good friend."

"Is that sarcasm?"

"No. Wish you were here. This wedding was ridiculous."

"Wait. You were at a wedding?"

"Yeah, they wanted to have it on V-Day. Barf."

"Sounds grody. Wish you were here too. Waiting for the shitshow to start."

I waited two minutes but he didn't reply so I put my phone in my pocket. My spliff was dwindling, now only tobacco.

"Let's go back inside," said Wesley, still watching the doomed couple.

As soon as we entered the kitchen, Kasia walked up to me, planted a gentle peck on my lips, then a smack on Wesley's lips, and took a sandwich board off, with much difficulty. I blinked at her, freshly baked. I don't think a girl had ever kissed me before. Granted, this was just a peck on the lips, but could I now claim that I had kissed a girl? "This is the kissing booth," Kasia said. "You have to kiss ten people and then give it to the tenth person. You're my tenth person," she added, referring to Wesley.

"I see," I said, looking around the kitchen. I was glad it was Wesley and not me, as I didn't want to kiss any of the people present. Kasia was alright: I knew her and she was pretty. I had no desire to get close to any of these other drunk people. What if they slobbered on me? Or tried to use tongue? I shuddered.

"Alright," said Wesley. "I think I can do this."

"I'll come with you," I said, wanting to see what Wesley would get himself into.

But first he turned around, took my face in his hands, and gave me a very sweet, gentle kiss on the lips. I felt myself blush and I blinked even more, partially because my contacts were drying out. I don't think I'd ever kissed a gay dude before, either. I wasn't expecting to have so many new experiences so suddenly in one night. Maybe this party was worthwhile after all.

He grinned at me, saying "That was easy." My eyes widened. He turned to Kasia and kissed her too, with tongue, it seemed like. I continued to blink at them. I really wish I had eye drops on me, but I never wanted to seem like a stereotypical stoner.

"Let's see who else I can kiss," said Wesley, leading me away from the kitchen.

"Good luck!" said Kasia.

We found a friend of Wesley's, who also happened to be friends with Blake. His boat shoes and expensive windbreaker were a giveaway. He eyed the sandwich board. "Kissing booth?"

"I have to kiss ten people," he said with a suggestive raised eyebrow.

"I see," said the bro, nursing a red plastic cup. "How's that going?"

"Well," said Wesley. "You can be number three." He leaned forward and pecked the guy's lips.

"Oh," said the bro, who to my surprise, smiled bashfully and turned a lovely shade of rose pink.

"Going very well indeed," said Wesley.

"Good luck, I guess?" said the bro.

"Thanks!" said Wesley, taking my arm and leading me into the next room. "I never thought he was totally straight," said Wesley. "There's no way. I can tell."

"Seemed a bit pleased with your attention," I added. Definitely a bit more pleased than one would expect.

As we were looking around for potential people for Wesley to kiss, Emma found me. She was strangely content. "You guys can leave if you want," she said. "I can get a ride back."

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"Yeah, I'll be alright."

But she was incredibly drunk. She was drunker than I'd ever seen her before. I was alarmed by this turn of events, but given what had transpired, her inebriation wasn't entirely surprising. I knew she liked to be in control, and now she had lost control of her relationship. "You're really drunk, Emma. Are you absolutely sure?"

"It's Megan's house, I can crash here if I need to." I looked at her. "No, I won't go home with Blake."

"I'm not sure I believe you," I said. Her shifty eyes and petulant tone hinted that she was lying directly. Also, she was drunk, and I wasn't, and she was a mediocre liar when she was drunk.

"We didn't break up. We're just taking a break."

"And that includes hooking up?"

"Um," said Emma. Her eyes watered.

I sighed and put an arm around her, pulling her close. I had never before noticed that she was significantly shorter than me. "I'll drop you off at home and you can sleep it off. I am using your car after all."

"No, you can keep it for now," she said, her voice quivering.

"Really though, you should come with us. Please," I said. I didn't know how to convince her; logic wouldn't work. I looked around for someone to help me. Wesley had disappeared.

"You're not my mom, you know," said Emma. "I'm going to do what I want and you can't stop me." She pulled away from me, and looked around for him.

“No, I suppose I can’t,” I said. I could only imagine that she would regret it in the morning—I knew I would—but it would be hers to regret. Clean breaks helped one process a break up better and this would just make things messier. I fleetingly considered dragging her to the car, but in her drunkenness she would put up a fight. I tugged at her arm experimentally and she instantly resisted. “Last chance,” I said.

“BLAKE?!” she yelled. She didn’t seem sad anymore, just angry.

I felt a twinge of disgust. “Alright then,” I said. “Goodnight, Emma. Call me if you need anything.”

She looked back at me, her expression a mixture of many emotions. She looked like she was going to burst into tears and collapse to the floor or lunge at me in rage. Feeling a burst of affection, I hugged her, and to my surprise, she hugged me back. “Remember, we love you,” I said, burying my face in her soft, silky hair. She didn’t say anything in reply, but we pulled away, and she went to look for Blake. I went to find Wesley, hoping he was finished with the kissing booth. I wanted to leave.

Thankfully, he was waiting for me outside. “Emma’s not coming with us,” I said.

“Uh oh,” he said.

“I dunno, it was weird,” I said. “She didn’t want to come with us and now she’s going to go home with Blake and it’s going to be weird and whatever, let’s leave.”

“Right,” said Wesley. We got into the car, which was extremely cold, and went back to campus, making superficial observations about the people at the party. The people had seemed suitably miserable, until they got drunk, at which point they dismissed all emotions in a nihilistic stupor and partied like there was no tomorrow. It was a unique progression.

I dropped Wesley off at his apartment, and parked Emma’s car somewhere near my dorm. I fingered the tabs of acid in my pocket, musing that they would just seem like a scrap of paper to the untrained eye. Bridget was gone again—to her boyfriend’s, probably—so I stripped off my clothes and curled up in bed, eager to forget the uncomfortable note that the night ended on. I checked my phone again. “Shitshow?” Colin had asked.

“Yup, it’s going to be weird tomorrow morning,” I replied, before tucking the phone under my pillow. “Gonna crash now. Goodnight.”

## 17

The next day I saw Keiko for lunch at the Latitude.

“So did Emma come back?” I asked.

“When I left, she was passed out in her bed. I’m not sure when she got back though,” said Keiko.

“Well, it’s good that she got back at all,” I said. I took a bite of my sandwich.

Keiko sipped thoughtfully on her soda. “Blake doesn’t live that far away,” she said, stirring the straw around. “She’s always been able to take care of herself.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “She’ll be alright.”

“Have you talked to your ex at all?” asked Keiko.

“No, we haven’t spoken one bit.”

“That’s impressive,” said Keiko.

“And I never see him around either,” I said. “It’s really lucky.”

“Definitely,” she agreed. “I mean, how would you ever even get over him if you did?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I feel as if I’ve moved on, though. If I saw him, I’d be okay with saying hi.”

“That’s fantastic,” said Keiko. “Any other guys on your radar? There are a lot of cute guys around, if you look.”

“I think you find it easier to find guys attractive than I do,” I said.

“That’s true,” she said. “I’ve never heard you make comments about guys.”

“I don’t really find many attractive. Especially here. They don’t even know how to dress themselves.”

“But that doesn’t matter, after a certain point,” said Keiko, laughing.

I chuckled. “If they can’t dress well, then I simply can’t be attracted,” I said. “And anyway, nice muscles are a dime a dozen so I don’t find them very appealing. Style is so much rarer.”

“Suit yourself.”

Our attention turned to a familiar face approaching us. It was Emma. She looked neat enough but her hair was in a messy bun and she didn’t have any makeup on.

“Hey,” I said. “How are you?”

“I’ve been better,” she said, taking a seat at our table.

“Have some water,” I said, pushing my cup towards her.

She took it gratefully. “So I woke up in Blake’s bed and I feel weird,” she said.

“I’ve been there,” said Keiko.

“I think we’ve actually broken up. I took some stuff I left in his room,” she said, patting her purse. “It’s over.”

“I know, it’s surreal. You feel like the ground has been pulled out from under you,” I said.

“Yes!” said Emma.

“And you have this weird anxiety when you think about it too much,” I continued.

“That’s exactly it,” she said. “That’s how I feel. Anxiety. I don’t usually get it.”

“It’s the loss of stability. You have to focus on what else is stable in your life, like your friendships with us.” I gave her a dopey smile.

She returned it. “Thanks,” she said. “I don’t know what I would do without you.”

“Sisterhood and all, you know,” said Keiko. She slurped at the remainder of her drink.

“Just don’t contact him though,” I said. “Minimal contact is best. I really think that’s what helped me these past few months.”

“The thought of that scares me,” she said.

“I know,” I agreed. “Let’s not think about it. Do you guys want to drink wine and watch some shows?” I asked.

“Word,” said Emma. “Sounds nice.”

We got our stuff and headed back to their room.

## 18

“I think we need to set a goal,” says Wesley, looking at all of us assembled on the couch.

“A goal?” asks Keiko, eyes wide open.

“I mean, we need to decide what we’re going to do next, so we don’t sit inside my room all day.”

When he says this, I look around some more and observe how fantastic the room really is: Wesley lucked out and his roommate is studying abroad this semester, so he has an apartment that is completely his. He’s decorated it with various artifacts and finds that he gathers while perusing antique stores and flea markets. On the table next to me are a pile of pulp fiction novels and old *LIFE* magazines, while a vintage map of some minor African country graces his wall. The mood of the room was vintage, due to all this decor. I felt a bit like I was in a past decade, if I ignored the laptop sitting on the coffee table. It was a perfect setting in which to trip.

Suddenly it occurs to me: “Didn’t we decide to leave for the forest soon?”

Wesley appears confused. “Oh right. I suppose we can do that.”

“Just chill out and look at these magazines,” says Megan, whom we’ve invited to join us today. She hands the one she’s reading to Wesley.

“That’s right, just chill out,” says Emma, smugly perched on a kitchen chair, and puffing smoke from a wooden pipe, which is probably Wesley’s.

“As long as we don’t just sit here forever,” says Wesley, but he is soon lost in the magazine.

“We should also eat soon,” I say, not feeling hungry at all. “I mean it’s going to be dinner time soon. It’s nearly six.” I think about pizza, which is what we had decided on getting earlier. The heat and grease and tang of tomato sauce doesn’t really sound appealing now, even though it would be exactly what I desired at any other time.

I stare even harder at my phone and start to wonder what “six” really means in relation to dinner, and become vaguely aware of a feeling in my stomach. It doesn’t make any sense to me how this feeling could be related to a series of numbers on the screen of my phone. The phone itself seems to be like a brilliant light in the room, simply because it’s my connection to the outside world. I scroll through my text messages and wonder if texting Colin would be a good idea. It was too bad he couldn’t join us. I look at the time again and it hasn’t moved a minute and I wonder how I got so much thinking done in less than a minute.

“Olivia?” Keiko’s voice cuts through my thoughts and I look up at her, feeling as if I am shedding several layers of weight.

“What?” I say.

“You should look at this interview.” I look at the page but the words look more like little caterpillars than words and I find the portrait of the interviewee (some minor ‘70s politician) more compelling. Every hair on his chin and head is outlined in fine detail.

“Cool,” I say vaguely. What I’m really interested in is the map on the wall. I glance back at it and I find it delightful. The lines which mark the borders pulse with energy and swirl with

many colors, in different combinations. I stare at it for what seems like half an hour but is really probably just two minutes.

“Hey guys,” said Emma, who was holding a bag of something. “I found these in the kitchen.” She had a slightly maniacal smile on her face, which was off-putting, but Wesley caught the bag when she threw it and his eyes lit up.

“Marshmallows?” he said. “Awesome.” He opened the bag and started to distribute them among us. I caught one and squeezed it experimentally. It was very pleasant to play with. I looked around at what everyone else was doing with their marshmallows.

Wesley had started to eat his, and Keiko had done the same. Marshmallows were for eating after all, right? However, Megan had started to roll hers around on her face. The white marshmallow powder started getting all over her. “Marshmallows are clearly made for this,” she said. “Look, it fits in perfectly on my eye socket.”

“No, you’ve got to eat them. Duh,” said Wesley, who was difficult to understand as his mouth was stuffed with the things. Keiko was merely nibbling on hers, but her fingers were constantly getting stuck in the sticky inside.

“Guys, look at this,” she said. She had started to roll hers around in her hands, and it began to disintegrate and coat her in a sticky goop. She didn’t stop, but instead started to spread it around as if it was lotion.

“That looks sinful,” said Megan. “Utterly decadent.” She laughed.

“And what a waste,” said Wesley, who seemed to be having difficulty eating his marshmallows.

“But it feels so good,” said Keiko, continuing to rub the goopy substance between her fingers. It started to creep down to her wrists. She became more and more delighted by the phenomenon and burst into a fit of giggles. The pure joy on her face reminded me of a child playing, and I couldn’t help but smile at how adorable she was. We were all like children, entirely absorbed in playing with the marshmallows, enjoying the sensory experience.

I looked at my marshmallow and started to squish it. The skin broke and the stickiness inside got me. I squeezed harder and slowly felt the marshmallow break into a new form between my hands.

“Olivia!” cried Megan. “You mustn’t!”

I ignored her and continued to squeeze. The stickiness attached to every surface it touched and my hands started to become covered. “It does feel pretty good,” I said, uncertain. There was no turning back. I glanced at my phone on the table; I couldn’t touch it now. I felt a weird pang of anxiety over this. Was I really that attached to my phone?

Keiko took one of my hands in hers and started to roll the goop around. My marshmallow swiftly disintegrated and became a part of hers, and we rubbed our hands together. “I will not be party to this abomination,” said Megan haughtily, continuing to gently roll hers around in her hands. But her pompous words made her laugh eventually at the spectacle that was going on in front of her.

“When are we going outside?” said Wesley, distracted. He looked at the windows and I did too but since it had become darker the windows simply appeared as if there was nothing outside. It was as if Wesley’s apartment was the only thing that existed in the world.

“I don’t know, but I am really into this,” said Keiko. Her hands and mine were connected. The marshmallows made for an oddly sensual experience in our hands.

Wesley continued to watch us. “Alright, maybe I’ll just put one hand in. Marshmallow goop is still edible; they use it for s’mores after all.” He contributed the rest of our marshmallow to our hands and joined in the fray. Emma started cracking up.

“My god,” said Megan. “This is terrible. I will not have anything to do with you sinners.” She picked up a piece of paper and some paints, continuing to gently squeeze the marshmallow she was still holding. I watched her start to doodle different colors on the paper. I could imagine that it looked lovely to her, with all the paint strokes wiggling and colors shifting.

“What is sin, anyway,” I said to no one. Megan was absorbed in working on her painting. Odd, how physically pleasurable experiences were all written off as sinful. Something about this felt Bacchanalian, and I remembered the party from the beginning of the year. Gosh, that was so long ago. It felt like a lifetime had passed since that. I wondered how I had come to this point, doing this specific activity with these specific people. It was much, much better than if I had done it with J——. Life turned out how you least expected it sometimes.

“Now I want to go outside,” I said. But I was stuck. I was completely merged into the mess of marshmallow and hands. It felt like receiving a massage, and the marshmallows continued to coat every surface of our palms and fingers. We were getting taken in, and all smeared into one entity. As I continued focusing on what was going on before me, an odd contentment spread over me. I felt as if kneading the marshmallows was important, and I found a sort of peace in continuing to do it, sort of like the zen moments one can find in daily activities, like washing the dishes or walking to class.

“You have to wash your hands if you want to leave,” said Wesley. He had since put his other hand in as well.

“I don’t want to stop,” said Keiko. “Don’t leave, Olivia.”

“I want to check my phone,” I said.

“No you don’t,” said Wesley. “This is not an experience meant for the world of technology.”

“What are you talking about?” I said. “Google Glass would be perfect for this. Absolutely perfect. This is exactly the kind of experience you’d want to put on your application.”

“Right, because Google is going to give thousand dollar products to people on acid,” said Wesley.

At this point, Emma was rolling around on the floor in laughter. I hoped that she hadn’t simply fallen off her chair.

“Guys,” I said. “This experience has been great. But I think I am going to have to wash my hands. I don’t want to spend the whole trip in this marshmallow orgy and I think washing my hands is going to feel fantastic.”

“Ew, an orgy?” said Keiko.

“Why did you use that word? I don’t want to think about that. I’m not into this anymore,” said Wesley.

The mood was killed. “I guess we’re all washing our hands then,” I said.

“We can go outside!” said Wesley. “I’ve been waiting for so long.”

“And by so long, you mean twenty minutes,” said Emma, checking her phone.

After an equally sensuous experience of running my hands under hot water and sweet-smelling soap and feeling the marshmallow goop slough off, we managed to regroup and put our shoes on. It was difficult, but before we knew it, were outside. The fresh air filled my lungs and the scent of spring made it feel like the first breath of life.

“The forest,” said Wesley. “We must go to the forest.”

“I hope we don’t run into J——,” I said. “That would make me feel weird.”

“Well, you’ll have me,” said Emma. “I would feel weird if we ran into Blake.”

I looped my arm through hers. “Okay, you’re going to be my buddy then.” She smiled at me. I’d never noticed her eyes before, but they were beautiful: pale green with orange centers.

A breeze tousled my hair. It made me realize how stuffy the apartment was getting. Wesley started purposefully walking in the direction of what I believed to be the forest. The walk was full of marvelous things: bird song that sounded like the purest golden melody from the lips of the gods, writhing, iridescent moss with intricate details of life captured in it, butterflies that fluttered like petals in the breeze, wayward in their wanderings just like our band of explorers. I’m fairly certain that it took us twice as long to get to the forest because we kept getting distracted. I felt a true sense of oneness and community from the forest, as if I could sense what my high school biology teacher meant by an ecosystem. Everything I saw had its place. I also felt like I had a place in the forest, like I was meant to be here and wasn’t an interloper. It was comforting. It was that same oneness that came from the marshmallows, where we were all literally connected and stuck together doing the same monotonous activity.

I felt like I could take another deep breath when I got to the lake because it was just so beautiful. It was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen. There was a clearing where the forest met the lake and I looked up to see that sky looked like it was close enough to touch, as if it were a mirror that I could press my nose up to. The sky was clear with just a few cottony clouds, and they dissipated into fractals as the sunlight filtered through them. A few vultures floated above us like kites, and they left paths that looked like contrails.

None of us said anything until Keiko broke the silence. “This is gorgeous.”

“Will I ever see anything so lovely in my life?” asked Wesley.

I chose to walk over to the dock, closer to the lake. The water was still so I dipped my hand in it, causing unnaturally wiggly ripples to form, which broke up the reflection of my face into hundreds of parts. As the ripples faded away, my face reformed in the stillness and I looked into my eyes and I smiled, because I was beautiful. As the smile spread across my face, I could see it light up from within, causing me to smile even more. Is this what J—— had broken up with? He seemed so insignificant now, and my concerns seemed so petty. It seemed like I was a

part of the lake, which was simply showing myself to me. And the lake was a part of the forest, and everything was one.

I think I understood.

“Olivia?” called Wesley. His voice sounded far away, as if I was submerged at the bottom of the lake. In order to break away to look at him, I had to gather myself up and reconstruct myself, just like the lake had reconstructed the image of my face.

“Yes?” I said, turning back to look at him. He was such a beautiful person that I couldn’t help but beam at him. Of course, he was just a good-looking person, but he was really beautiful, inside and out.

“Did you just have a revelation in the depths of the lake?” he asked.

“I think so,” I said. “I’ll have to unpack it later.” I stood up and he put his arm around me. The sun had started to set and it was chilly, so I pressed myself closer to him. We all watched the sun set together. The colors would have been gorgeous anyway, but under the influence they shifted marvelously along the whole spectrum of the rainbow, and the patterns the clouds made with the sun’s rays were unearthly. As the sky became darker, the layers of tree branches appeared multiplied and more geometric than they would have been normally. When the sun was gone, we walked back along the trail, listening to the crooning of sleepy birds and crickets chirping. Every street light glowed more than normal, lighting our way. The sky was a dozen shades of blue and purple.

Wesley’s apartment was warm. Emma went and put a jazz record on and we all snuggled on the couch.

“Pizza,” I said.

“Yes,” said Keiko.

We sat in silence for a couple of minutes. Wesley threw Emma a winning grin. “Okay okay, I’ll do it for you,” she said. We didn’t feel quite up to the complexity of the Internet just then.

# 19

After their impressive *Illustrations* EP, Rational Crystal has finally dropped a highly anticipated LP called *Acid Test*. It's on the longer end with a total time of 57 minutes, unusual for an electronic band that does more dance stuff, but it's a worthwhile listen. The band only released one single, "Conferral" (which is the second song on the album), but it accrued so much hype that this album will most likely be a success. Rational Crystal had already received high acclaim for the EP it dropped last semester, and releasing the LP so soon after allows them to use the same powerful momentum.

The album starts out with a bang, literally. Gunshots punctuate the first few seconds of "Sorrow," whose fast pace and booming bass synths start the dance party that this album blossoms into. "Conferral"'s beat seamlessly continues the drive; because all of the songs flow into each other as if they were in a mix, you could put this record on for nonstop dancing. If your guests aren't already hyped up by recognizing the hit "Conferral," they'll get there with "Chrome Eyes," which doesn't let up the energy. In this track, one can find rolling synths reminiscent of classic '90s trance tracks; the ethereal female vocals contribute to this effect. "Tendons" is similar, with a beautiful melody and an even faster pace at 140 bpm.

"Suburban Control" is like the "drop" of the album. The much slower pace and shuffling rhythm gives the dancers at your hypothetical party a break to contemplate and relax, without getting overheated. The dreamy synths and vocals are like something from the jazz or lounge genres, which is completely unexpected; most of Rational Crystal is characterized by harshness and abrasion, not the elegance of this track. It's not an unwelcome surprise though; yet again, Rational Crystal makes it clear that one of their goals is defying categorization.

"Dreamspell" and "Paper Dust" slowly build the momentum up again. To be honest, neither are particularly memorable (though "Dreamspell"'s hilarious lyrics are certainly attention-getting), but they make a perfect block between the energy of the first half of the album and the epic finale of the ending. Complex rhythms and more of the trancey synths, punctuated by chiptune bleeps and bloops, make sure that these are still tracks which anyone would find unique. This combination of techniques hasn't been pioneered by anyone else.

Finally, "Negative Bones"'s powerful build-up (which takes over a minute) revs up the crowd again, with a simple four to the floor beat and "Tetra" finishes the album in an orchestral way, with an extended ending. The unique nature of this album, with its seamless traditions, is perfect for lovers of electronic music who are used to listening to DJ mixes. It's clear that Rational Crystal themselves are familiar with many different sub-genres of electronic music, many of which they blend seamlessly into their own style. The album is an absolute treat for people who also consider themselves knowledgeable, and anyone who doesn't know electronic music but just likes it will appreciate the variety and talent. Rational Crystal is a standout new artist, and I can't wait to see them at their concert in a couple of months.

## 20

“Biddy down!” yelled Megan. “Biddy down!” The rest of the car erupted into a fit of giggles, and the poor girl in question gave us a dirty look, as she attempted to unruffle herself from the embarrassing act of tripping on the sidewalk and face planting. She couldn’t have heard us, but she did see us all staring at her. She was wearing some sort of beautiful green party dress; I couldn’t tell what she was dressed up as, but she immediately latched on to the arm of an equally well-dressed guy who helped her up. I noted with another chuckle that he too couldn’t resist smiling at her misfortune.

It should be noted that this was before noon on a Saturday and this girl was most certainly drunk. Why? Because of one of the biggest events on campus every spring, in which this one sorority set up a mini golf course all over campus and drunk groups of students participated to help raise money for charity. The tradition involved dressing up in costumes as a group, for example, as a set of characters from a TV show, though many of the costumes became even more elaborate than that. It was all also an excellent excuse to day drink, which made the night slow as everyone was too exhausted to party properly.

None of us wanted to participate this year. We were burned out from last year, when we all decided to bail after our tee time and drive to Virginia Beach. Never mind that it was mid-March and blustery and freezing. Keiko and I both threw up on the side of the road and passed out in the car, just in time to wake up to the miserable sight of a beach town emerging from the winter months. We all walked around on the beach and got grains in our teeth; if we opened our mouths at all, we’d get dusted with sand. Somehow we managed to huddle in a circle near the water and pass spliffs around. I remember trying to go into the water, which was an absolutely horrible idea. There is nothing quite like the ocean to remind you of how tiny you are—it sounds cliché, but as someone who doesn’t see the ocean very often, it’s always jarring to see it in person—and the incredible, numbing cold of the water is another blow to remind you that really, you’re nothing in the face of nature. It can be difficult to remember on campus, where our only taste of the natural world comes in the form of moss and squirrels.

This year was not going to be like that. Spring came earlier and the weather was significantly less depressing. The event itself was also in April this time, and this weekend happened to be the weekend of the Pride Festival in D.C. We decided to skip out on the lack of parties by going there instead. I was excited to be going back to my favorite city. As we got closer and I could see the skyline, I remembered the last time I fell in love with this place: last summer, when I had wandered about in a thunderstorm after exploring some museums by myself. I was so in awe of the beauty and grandeur of the white neoclassical architecture, set against the roiling, stormy gray sky, that I walked around for two hours, watching commuters head home on the Metro, listening to the sound of thunder and black sedans rolling down the slick streets, and gazing upon the marvelous chateaux tiled dome of one of the museums. I walked through a raindrop-covered garden behind the magnificent brick Smithsonian Castle, past the perennially hectic Verizon Center in Penn Quarter, and even the J. Edgar Hoover F.B.I.

building, whose brutalist concrete form looked incredibly imposing in the rain. I knew then, even more than I did before, that I loved being in a city, with the freedom to go wherever I wanted. I could have done anything there. Tonight, the Pride Festival afforded the same sense of adventure and uncertainty.

We made it to our hotel alright; it was just one room in a fancy downtown place. Wesley's confidence made it easy to pull off sticking six people in one room. We still had time to relax before party o'clock, and we all crashed on the beds and flipped through cable TV channels lazily.

As we continued loafing around, I checked my phone and realized that we had missed the parade. I wasn't too disappointed by this, as we were really looking forward to the nightlife, but we decided that it was getting too late and we should go out to see what was going on in the area around the parade route.

To my surprise, Dupont Circle was, a hub of activity. It resembled a music festival. Topless men and women splashed about in the fountain, posing for photos with people who were wearing gothy clothes: baggy black pants with chains and mesh shirts. I bet they were hot, and that's why they were in the fountain. A couple on a bench kissed passionately, as if they were in an intensely romantic movie. I wondered if they were rolling. A group of raver kids who obviously *were* rolling swung lights on strings in mesmerizing patterns. I caught the distinct and strong scent of someone smoking a joint, which was surprising because there were two cop cars parked near the circle.

"What is this place?" asked Keiko.

"I have never seen downtown D.C. looking like Bonnaroo threw up on it," said Emma.

"This is awesome," I added.

We continued to survey the spectacle in a mild state of shock until Emma brought up the point that we had several hours to kill before party o'clock. We needed to pregame, after all.

"You know, Everclear is legal here," said Emma. "We could get a bottle and just like... Buy drinks and mix them." My eyes lit up and I saw that everyone else's did too.

"Emma, you're a genius," said Keiko.

Half an hour later, we were sitting in a circle on the grass of Dupont Circle, discreetly pouring the clear and potent liquid into our McDonald's sodas. The cop cars sat a hundred feet away from us, but they clearly had better things to be focusing on. But to be safe, we poured the rest of the alcohol into a water bottle.

For the most part, we enjoyed the cool evening breeze starting to set in and watched the activity around us. As the party started to wind down, we saw more pleasant scenes, such as the lesbian couple and their child playing in the park. Really how it should be, I thought. For one weekend, this circle was a safe space. A small, fluffy dog came and sat in the empty spot in our circle. We saw its owner talking to someone several feet away, and welcomed the little guy into our group. As the hour of debauchery drew nearer, we became drunker and more restless.

"I'm getting thirsty," I said.

"Do you want some water?" asked Colin, waving the innocuous water bottle at me.

“No, definitely not that water, in any case.”

“It’s nine, so maybe we can start heading to a bar anyway,” said Wesley. “I don’t know what’s around here, though.”

“There’s probably a bunch of gay bars around here,” I volunteered, thankful that I had brushed on my D.C. nightlife knowledge before the trip. “Or, we could make the twenty minute walk up to Adams Morgan, where Greeks go to party after college.”

“No thank you,” said Keiko.

“There’s also some cool rooftop bars down this one street,” I continued. “We could just start walking in that direction.”

The group decided this was a good idea, so we found ourselves at a promising looking place called The Lake. Icicle lights decorated the roof deck, and a cheerful server showed us to a table for us. Keiko, Wesley, and Colin ordered drinks; I was too full to need more. I didn’t want to sit, so I went and leaned over the railing which overlooked the street. A cool, crisp breeze blew over my face and I closed my eyes, simply enjoying the scent of the spring night.

Below me, revelers chattered to their companions, stumbling along to whatever oasis of inebriation they were off to next. A particular group caught my eye. Four men, who might or might not have been gay, walked in a line, their arms looped around each others’ shoulders. As I continued to watch them from my hawk-like perch, the one on the end gave the one next to him a kiss on the cheek. The man on the other end was distracted by a new bar they came across, and so the line disintegrated. But the original couple started falling all over each other with affection. While the other two scoped out the bar and checked things on their phones, the couple began to kiss. One of the guys took his lover’s face in his hands and even though they seemed to be incredibly drunk and in a rather unromantic setting, the image was as perfect as it was in a movie. I swear, I could even hear the strains of a jazz band from the restaurant next door.

To my surprise, there were tears in my eyes. I sniffed and dabbed at my face with my sweater, and blinked so I could continue to watch the goings-on in the street. The foursome had re-organized and entered the bar they had stopped in front of. I felt an arm around me; it was Emma. I turned to her. “I was just watching this couple, and they were so sweet,” I said. “Every expression of love...”

Emma squeezed my shoulder. “I know,” she said. “I just can’t get over how Blake isn’t here. Like, he should be here. He’s one of the group, you know?”

“I understand,” I said. It was certainly odd that he wasn’t here, since we were so used to him being around. “But you know, now that I’m several months out, I feel so much better. It feels so good to be here, looking at all these people I don’t know, and enjoying a night out on the town, whatever that means. I don’t have to worry about J——. You’ll start to realize that the void in your heart becomes full of other things. Like a garden. The big rose bush was uprooted because it was dying but now you can plant other things.”

“Olivia, that’s beautiful,” said Emma, with a tinge of surprise.

“And the other things you plant are your relationships with us and the experiences you have as an individual. The soil in the garden is just as rich as it was before, and other bigger, more beautiful things can grow in its place.”

Emma blinked; her eyes were watering. “You’re so right,” she said. “You’re absolutely right.”

I wasn’t ready to stop pontificating though, now that the analogy had picked up steam. “When J—— broke up with me, I felt the same emptiness. But since I started hanging out with you guys more, and discovering all the cool people in radio and stuff, my garden has become so much richer, and it’d be a wonderful place to plant another relationship when the time comes.”

“You’re cool, you know that?” said Emma. She seemed to be astonished by my little speech. “You’re so great.”

“I try,” I said, snuggling closer to her. I playfully bumped my hips against hers. “Shall we sit back down with the others?”

We went and joined them at the table.

“Alright, so I guess we’re going to hit up this party now,” said Keiko.

“What’s this party again?” asked Colin brightly. He was in a good mood, having been hit on by several guys. He was cute, and I would have been surprised if he hadn’t gotten any attention.

“Queerocalypse?” I said. I was the one who had found it, with my diligent Internet research.

“That sounds sick,” said Keiko.

“They promised go-go dancers and a woman on stilts, so I have high expectations,” I said.

The venue was a beautiful old theater. Ushers opened the huge glass door for us as we entered, and the elegantly decorated lobby had rose bouquets and a magnificent chandelier. It was a strange place to be throwing a party, through the people in costumes and strange clothing from the daytime didn’t look too out of place. Instead, they looked like models at a photo shoot.

The main space with the stage was completely packed, and we carefully made our way down to the dance floor. The theater’s high ceiling helped cool the place down, at least, but I still had to squeeze past plenty of people. At least, I thought, I could be a little less worried about being groped in this crowd, though I was still wary. We finally found a small space in the throng of people, and made our own circle.

“There’s the stilts,” said Colin, motioning to a lady behind Wesley. Indeed, she towered over everyone, and seemed to be wearing baggy, silken clown clothes in shades of red and blue. A balloon headdress raised her height at least two more feet, and I couldn’t tell what it was shaped like exactly, until she turned around and it was obvious that it was a train. I wasn’t sure why she had a train headdress but I was even more shocked to see that she was carrying what appeared to be a heavily sedated white ferret.

“Guys, she has a ferret,” I said, trying to draw everyone’s attention to this phenomenon. She waved the ferret above the crowd, occasionally bringing it down for people to pet.

“I don’t know if this is good for a ferret,” said Keiko, frowning. I knew she wouldn’t approve. The ferret didn’t seem to be putting up any resistance, but as she came closer to us, I realized that I definitely wanted to pet it. We waved our hands and she brought it over, and we gently stroked its fur, wondering at how it was getting along. It definitely looked high; I couldn’t imagine a sober ferret putting up with this.

“That was strange,” said Wesley when she left. The crowd had shifted slightly, and we found ourselves closer to the left wall of the theatre. There were cut outs like VIP boxes or miniature stages on this floor and I stood on my tip-toes to see what was in them. As soon as one strange thing left, I had found another: here were the go-go dancers, as promised.

I continued to watch them, too distracted to tell the others. They were simply naked, muscular men wearing animal masks and colored briefs. I blinked, wondering if this was like watching a stripper. Is that what go-go dancers were? I wasn’t sure. It wasn’t something I had ever had the opportunity to think about.

The men were simply dancing, but then they started to dance with each other in extremely sexual poses. One of the men started rubbing his masked face in the other guy’s crotch and I felt squicked out so I looked away. “Guys,” I said, trying to make sure the image wouldn’t get burned into my memory. “I found the go-go dancers.”

Keiko immediately started giggling and looked over. “I didn’t think that was actually going to be a thing.”

“Me neither,” I said, focusing on the artist on the main stage. The dancers had been a bit much and I needed something more neutral to watch. But the artist was equally bizarre and I couldn’t see well with all the tall people in my way. I decided to just look around and watch people. The vast majority of the crowd was attractive, young, gay white men. I saw some brown faces, but they were strangely rare. The disparity was puzzling and I wondered if there was something about this little slice of culture that I didn’t know about.

“Hey, asshole,” said Keiko. A drunk man had started to get too close to her, and like a little wildcat, Keiko had gone on the defensive. Wesley put his arm around her and drew her into our circle, and we all gave the offending guy glares. He leered at us and disappeared into the crowd. “I thought I wouldn’t have to deal with that here,” said Keiko, appearing irritated but not upset.

“It’s too bad,” I said. “As women, we have to always be wary, even in settings like this.” I thought I sounded like a mom, but it was true.

“I have to say, even as a gay dude here, you have to be careful,” said Wesley. “People think it’s okay to just grab your ass.”

“Gross,” I said, feeling suddenly disappointed with the place. Now that I thought about it, I had never been clubbing for real and this is probably what it was like. The New York hotel experience was club-like, but resembled a concert more, I thought. The alcoholic energy here fueled a sexual undertone just like at a club, which I could detect and wasn’t entirely comfortable with.

“I don’t think I want to really be here anymore,” said Keiko. So she was upset.

“I’m down to leave,” I said. “I always get overheated in places like this.”

We made our way out, pushing past a crowd that seemed to have grown more dense while we were in it, and were in the cool spring night again, which was what I had wanted. Again, a ball of anxiety had grown and made me jittery, which I hadn’t noticed until now. Being outside had helped kill it. We walked around and found a dive bar which seemed less packed. The quiet music made it seem like a good place to cool down, so we didn’t have to end the night so quickly.

After a nightcap for everyone, we got back to our room and I threw myself onto the bed. Partying in D.C. was not quite the same as New York; people here were a bit more conservative in their entertainment habits and went to bed earlier. But you could still have a good time, as we had.

It had been so long since J—— had broken up with me that I hadn’t thought about him much tonight, but now I did, wondering if he would enjoy this or not. I thought he would have, but I think the flamboyance of some of the people would have put him off. He was a supporter of gay marriage like any good liberal, but now that I thought about it, he didn’t have any friends who were gay, and I couldn’t help but think that some of his bro friends wouldn’t share similar views. I shuddered. This group was so much better; Colin provided a good contrast as a straight guy who didn’t mind getting hit on by other guys. J—— would definitely have freaked out if that had happened to him.

I’d done pretty well for myself, I thought. I had found a nice niche in this school full of bland and uninteresting people, and still hadn’t talked to J——. Maybe it would be time to reach out soon. I now only thought of him infrequently, and much of the ugly bitterness and resentment had faded. It had been like a burden I was carrying and was unaware of; now that it was gone, I felt lighter. In its space, I had the love I felt for my friends, which had grown over time just like in the garden I told Emma about. She was curled up with Wesley on the other bed, and was laughing madly at something on his phone. Wesley looked up and caught my eye; I smiled at him. I had gotten through this alright, and she would too.

## 21

I had always thought Megan would make a great cool aunt because of her generosity, strange sense of humor, and odd taste in jewelry. She would be the kind who didn't have kids of her own, but spoiled her nieces and nephews in a wholesome way, with ice cream for breakfast and nature walks with scraped knees. Perhaps she would have too many cacti, or own a chinchilla as a pet. She and Kasia were graduating, and so I felt free to imagine strange lives for them once they exited the undergraduate bubble. We were gathered in a hot tub at Megan's graduation party, at a resort a drive away from campus, drinking champagne and laughing with a lightheartedness which hid our sadness.

Megan was staring intently at her champagne glass, which I realized she was trying to float in the hot tub. I wasn't sure if it was a good, or plausible idea. She apparently decided it wouldn't work, as she lifted the cup and downer the remainder.

"Hey Kasia," she started, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. "Remember that time we almost got kicked out of school?"

"Of course I remember," said Kasia, her pale blue eyes sparkling with remembered debauchery.

"Excuse me," I said. "You guys are fantastic students. I can't imagine you getting kicked out of school, much less getting in trouble for anything."

"It's because we broke into the Williamsburg Weekly's office," said Kasia.

"We were dicking around in the station late at night because we thought it would be a fun place to go when we were drunk," said Megan. "And then the stupid Williamsburg Weekly's offices were right across from it, you know."

"Right," I said, unfazed by her criticism of the newspaper. Their coverage was mediocre and they never wrote flatteringly about the radio station. "But aren't the doors locked?"

"Well, the thing is, they had forgotten to lock it or something. So we went inside," said Megan. "And we just caused mischief. I used their computers to play music and we just sat around. Nothing too crazy."

"Except that we were also drinking Très Fou," said Kasia. "That shit messes you up. The caffeine and the taurine and the guanine and whatever. So we ended up getting a pizza, and when we left to go get it, we locked all our stuff in there. The door just shut. Megan's backpack, my coat, my shoes, even. We were so fucked."

"We looked up how to pick a lock, but we couldn't do it," continued Megan, after sipping her champagne. "So after a couple hours of flipping out, we managed to figure out that you could kick the grate on the door in. So that's exactly what we did, and Kasia slithered in with her skinny body and unlocked it."

"But then wasn't the grate messed up?" I asked. Kasia did indeed look capable of crawling through a grate, but I couldn't have imagined that it was fun.

"It was pretty messed up. We managed to patch it together," said Megan.

"And I assume no one ever found out... Or else we'd have heard of it," I said.

“Right,” said Megan. “But I had this weird magnetic pull towards the place for the next week or so. I guess you really are drawn to the scene of the crime.”

“I don’t think you would have gotten kicked out, though,” I said. “I mean, it’s pretty bad but it’s not like you stole or vandalized anything.”

“Actually, I did steal something,” said Kasia. “I stole an award that that Sevens Society gave to the Williamsburg Weekly. It was a plaque with the names of every Williamsburg Weekly member who had been distinguished yearly for exemplifying ideals and traditions and blah blah. I think that by having an adventure we more than exemplified certain ideals and traditions.” She smiled.

“I would agree,” I said. I wished that I’d broken into something. It would have to go on my to do list for next year. “I’m pretty jealous of you guys,” I said. “You have this impetus to go out and actually do these things. I’m constantly afraid of getting caught.”

“Well, the thing is, you have to realize that it probably doesn’t matter if you get caught,” started Kasia. She looked at me with those pale eyes, which I noticed now weren’t dilated at all. This was Kasia as she was normally, and she looked different. It was like when you’re used to seeing someone wearing make-up every day, and then one day they don’t, and they don’t quite look like themselves.

“Kasia and I were goody two-shoes in high school,” continued Megan. “We didn’t drink until after we graduated, because we were so afraid of getting caught. I never even skipped a single class until senior year, and even then, I felt this thrill of badassery.” She poured more champagne into her glass, then looked at it for a moment, hesitating. “I wish I’d done a bit more in high school. There was a lot I could have gotten away with.”

“I understand,” I said. “I was a goody two-shoes too. I think a lot of us in this group are, weirdly enough.” I knew my little group of friends were similar. We had all spent so much time studying in high school so we could even get into this school in the first place, that we had missed out on opportunities for debauchery. It was probably for the best, but it made more sense now, why that drive down Pennsylvania Avenue with the Rational Crystal song had felt so liberating. “It makes me feel a lot better,” I added.

We heard a knock on the door; the handle turned and Keiko, Wesley, Colin, and Emma entered. Megan grinned. “Hey! You guys can change in the bedroom on the right,” she yelled. We heard the thump of their bags on the floor and Keiko muttering something about privacy loudly, but then dissolving into giggles.

They joined us in the hot tub, which I was shocked to see fit up to eight people. “I’m glad you guys could all come,” said Megan, leaning over to hug Emma, who was next to her.

“We were just talking about what goody two-shoes we all were in high school,” said Kasia, pouring cups of champagne for the new guests.

“God, I was such a judgy little bitch,” said Keiko, in a fake exasperated tone. “I was against premarital sex, and drugs, and community colleges...” I chuckled. I knew we could all relate.

“I was too,” said Kasia. “But then I didn’t get into this school, or any other one that I had applied to, so I had to go to one and transfer two years later.” She sniffed. “It was a humbling experience.”

“Ha!” said Emma. “Well, I can’t believe you guys are graduating and next year, we’ll be the seniors.”

“I’m not going to ask you what you guys are doing after graduation,” said Colin.

“Oh, you can ask,” said Megan. “But only because we’ve got it figured out. We’re both moving to New York this summer; we’ve already been looking at brownstones in Brooklyn. Kasia has a job with a non-profit lined up that starts in August, and well, I’ll find something.” She smiled.

“It’s something to do with a women’s shelter,” said Kasia. “I can’t recall right now.”

“That’s wonderful!” I said. “I can only hope I’ll find an actual job where I can help people.” Truth be told, I hadn’t give much thought to what I wanted to do; non-profits sounded appealing enough. None of our majors, except Keiko’s pre-vet, provided a clear path towards a career. It was freeing but the uncertainty was a little frightening.

“Hmph,” said Keiko. “I’m not sure I want to think about the future. Vet school is my future. Hopefully.”

I leaned back with my glass of champagne and listened to the conversation continue. I hadn’t thought about my future at all because I was going out with J——. Something about being in a relationship made me a little more mindful, so I was always focused on the present. But it didn’t seem like the healthy kind of meditative mindfulness. I wasn’t sure whether J—— was going to be in my future or not, so I preferred not to think about it. But in retrospect, I think I had just assumed that he’d be with me forever. Why end a good relationship? Turns out there were more reasons than I could fathom.

“Yeah, I’m just hoping we get some chill radio freshmen next semester,” Wesley was saying. “The ones this year were alright, but I’m a little tired of the apathy.”

“I can’t stand apathy,” said Megan. “Apathetic people don’t get anything done. There are way too many of them here.”

“Slacktivists,” said Kasia. “People who want to give off the impression that they care deeply when in fact they’re mildly interested.”

I sighed. J—— was one of those. But here I was. I’d moved on to better things.

“I’m getting hot,” said Megan. “Do you guys want to play kings?” A new burst of energy following this suggestion, and we carefully clambered out of the tub, drying off and making our way to the living room of the suit. Topsy from champagne, I curled up on the couch and snuggled under a fleece throw.

Kasia had thoughtfully brought new champagne to the table. Unfortunately, no one could find a deck of cards. “Back to the hot tub?” said Wesley.

“You can go,” said Megan. “We’ve been in there for a while.”

Wesley and Keiko went to the hot tub. I hadn't noticed that there was music playing while I was in the hot tub due to the noise of the jets and our conversation. I found the soft, lo-fi guitars and gentle female vocals soothing now, and the hot tub had been soporific.

"Hey Olivia," said Wesley. He was looking at his phone. "Rational Crystal is going to be in Richmond next month." I blinked at him, and he looked up. "Twenty-five dollars. You should do it."

"We should all do it," said Keiko. "I heard their concerts are like dance parties."

"What if we rolled," said Colin.

"What if the lead singer poured whiskey into my mouth! Vivian swears that she did that," said Wesley.

All of these comments were making me restless. "Guys, we're all going," I said. "We must go. I've been waiting since high school to see them live, back when they went as Nightmare Broadcast. They've come so close so many times, but I've missed them every single time." I saw Megan nod, as she remembered how upset I was last time they came through. I had the odd feeling that I had given a real speech, with conviction.

"Done and done," said Wesley. "While you were pontificating, I bought my ticket."

Megan had her laptop, so she retrieved it and passed it around. We could have waited, but Rational Crystal was so hyped up that it would be foolish to wait longer than necessary to get tickets. We didn't know how long they'd been on sale already. I'd die if I didn't get one.

But eventually I did and I wasn't tired anymore. I was incredibly hyped up. "Well, that was quick," I said, surprised and pleased that my friends were as into seeing Rational Crystal as I was.

"I wouldn't miss this for the world," said Keiko. "They're supposed to be amazing live."

"What if I got to make out with the lead singer, on stage," mused Emma.

"What if we did coke," said Keiko.

"I wouldn't recommend doing coke at a show," said Kasia. "You can't do lines in a mosh pit."

"Fair point," said Wesley.

They continued to discuss the merits of various amphetamines while I looked down at my phone, looking at images of the new album cover. It was a beautiful, pixelated masterpiece, created by some sort of low brow artist. This concert was going to be all I could think about for the next month. I couldn't wait.

## 22

“I am living the dream,” I texted S——. She had come back from Prague so I could text her now. And I was pretty damn happy I could, because I wanted to text the same thing to everyone in my contacts list. I copy-and-pasted the text into several other fields: friends from high school who I talk to a couple times a semester, other radio people who would be jealous, and the handful of friends who I loved to impress by telling stories to. Megan had been right; Rational Crystal toured after the album drop and here I was, at their show.

They hadn’t taken the stage yet. The anticipation had been built to a maddening crescendo, and you could feel the audience going crazier with every second that the lead singer’s slender form didn’t grace the stage. After half a dozen false starts, the crowd was freaking out. Some people were even starting to become irritated. They had taken half an hour so far, which was absurdly long.

But finally, we heard the strains of something familiar... It sounded like “Sorrow.” So perhaps they were just going to play the whole album through? I stood on my tip toes and peered at the stage, hoping to catch a glimpse of the duo through the thick fog. Flashing nights confused my vision further, and only when some of the main lights were cut could I see the silhouette of two distinct people on stage. They were finally here, for real.

All at once, the song started playing and the crowd started dancing and I nearly fell onto Wesley, who I thought would be a good person to stand next to. Being a small person in a crowd this dense and crazy was frightening, and I knew there’d be a mosh pit, given the craziness of the music. There was an ebb and flow in the movements of the crowd, who seemed to dance as one. The song flowed seamlessly into the next one, with some beats I didn’t recognize. The live remixing was sick, and when the crowd realized it was their hit single, they went even crazier than I thought they would. I was amazed. This was what every concert experience should be like. This was what being alive was about.

During the breakdown, the lead singer threw herself into the crowd, which caused a massive ripple. I held on to Wesley’s arm briefly. The singer was far away, so she probably wouldn’t come in our direction. I wouldn’t be helpful anyway, being shorter than the people around me. The breakdown was totally unfamiliar; were those some Nightmare Broadcast samples? I was more than impressed. This was only their first LP but they knew how to perform.

I checked my phone; S—— had texted me back: “What’s the dream? You have so many.” What an odd observation, I thought. I guess I did have a lot of dreams. As I continued to watch the singer, who had made her way back to the stage, I tried to list them all:

There was the dream of rolling at Rational Crystal. That was happening right now.

There was the dream of getting over J—— and becoming happy again. That had mostly happened; I had a little work to do, but given my progress over the past year, I’d be totally over it soon enough.

There was the dream of finding new friends. That had happened marvelously; I had a wonderful, tightly-knit group now, and the other radio and Latitude people I met at parties were

pretty cool and nice. It was like being in a sorority except we all actually liked each other and didn't have to pay to be members. Sure, there was drama; you'll get drama whenever you put a bunch of humans together. But it seemed like people handled their problems like adults. There was the dream of finding happiness after graduation. I hadn't thought about it much until Megan's party, but now I had some idea. I too, wanted the Brooklyn brownstone. So many people there worked in a dingy coffee shop and slept on a mattress on someone's floor, but I knew Megan and Kasia were more responsible than that, and I'd want to follow in their footsteps. New York would be nice. But then there was San Francisco, and Seattle, and Austin, and even Richmond...

There were all the dreams I had for my friends. I told Emma this, once. I told her about the future I envisioned for her, as a great mom (she would be an amazing mom, I knew, with her kindness and instinct to look out for others). Her husband would be a hot financial advisor and they would live in a swanky apartment in the Mission District of San Francisco (I wasn't sure why she was so partial to it, but I later learned she was born there originally). She wanted a dog so I threw a Bichon Frise into the fantasy as well. It made her feel better while she still mourned her relationship with Blake, and she had remarked that I had an odd talent for spinning these fantasies for people. I didn't think of it as a talent. I just liked to think about these things. I guess I did have a lot of dreams, but I never saw that as a particularly unique quality. If there was anything, I learned from this year, it was that I lived for the future, more so than other people. I had planned to attend this concert for so long and looked forward to it since forever, so much so that I felt like I was *in* the future right now. But now, I had found myself thinking about what was next. I was always looking forward to the next thing.

I looked to my left and saw Wesley, I put my head on his arm to ground myself, and he patted my head. The music had become a little less busy, so the crowd had relaxed some. I knew this reprieve was short-lived though.

I felt someone patting my shoulder. It was Emma. "Do you want to go to the bathroom?" she said. It was difficult to tell what she was saying, but I took her arm and we both found a labyrinthine way out of the crowd. The bathroom wasn't crowded, thankfully.

"Whew," said Emma. "I was getting overwhelmed."

"Me too," I said. "I'm glad you suggested leaving."

"Yeah, I mean, this is awesome, but the movement of the crowd is too much. I feel like what I would really want right now is to sit, maybe even upstairs."

I was suddenly aware of the pain in my lower back from standing so much, so sitting sounded like a great idea. I started to feel a bit heavy; maybe it was the heat. We got cups of water from the bar and made our way up the stairs. There were plenty of empty chairs up here, and the view was amazing. We tried to spot our friends, but it was difficult.

"I was doing a lot of thinking in the pit," I said. "I was going a bit too much into my own head."

"In a bad way?" said Emma, knitting her brows with concern.

"Nah. I was just thinking about like, the future, and all that's happened this year. A sort of reflection."

She chuckled. “Introspecting in the Rational Crystal pit,” she said. “Who would have thought. I think you probably think more than a lot of people, though.”

“Nuh uh,” I said. “I’m sure most people think about like, their lives and what’s going to happen to them.”

“You’d be surprised. A lot of people don’t have a lot of foresight.”

“Hm.”

We continued watching the performance. They had played the entire new album through, with lots of remixing and interspersed songs from the EP. I wasn’t expecting a performance like a DJ set, but it was welcome. The continuous energy was exactly what I wanted right now.

“I think Rational Crystal will be the soundtrack of my college years,” I said. “Their music has just punctuated my time here, especially this year. I wrote three articles about them for the station’s magazine.”

“I can see that,” said Emma. “That’s how Keiko feels about Faultlines. I don’t have a band like that, though.”

“It’s odd to recognize. I’m going to end up showing my kids this music and I’ll remember this and it’ll be strange. Time will fly.”

“You really do think a lot,” said Emma. “Especially about the future.”

“Is that bad?”

“No, it’s good. Just try to remain present when you need to.”

Rational Crystal’s set was over, so people started chanting for an encore. I wasn’t sure if they were going to get one, since I thought I’d heard every song. I had started to feel calm, almost like I wanted to go to sleep, oddly enough, and started to zone out. But I had to hold on for the last song, which they started on immediately. A guitar riff starting playing, which wasn’t something typical to Rational Crystal songs.

“Emma, this sounds familiar,” I said. I had the name on the tip of my tongue. It wasn’t a Rational Crystal song; they were clearly covering something.

“It’s Royal Duke,” she said. “Remember them? Remember that Brit rock explosion back in like, early high school?”

My heart swelled. “My god,” I said. “I was obsessed with Royal Duke. I haven’t heard this song in years.”

“Me too,” said Emma.

The reality of what was happening crashed over me like a wave. I was left shocked. “Emma,” I started, still in awe as the guitar riffs grew more chaotic. “My favorite band is covering my other favorite band. What is going on in the world?”

I put my hands to my mouth and wanted to scream and shout and cry. Everyone had to know what was happening, that this marvelous phenomenon was occurring. What were the odds?

“Your dream is coming true,” said Emma. “You can come up with the best fantasy, but when your dreams come true, reality blows your mind.”

“Just like the hotel in New York,” I said, wondering why Emma wasn’t also freaking out. “We had no expectations, and then they were shattered anyway.”

She smiled and looked right at me. “Exactly.”

The song was over. I dashed up to the railing and when the crowd roared, I alternately screamed and laughed until my throat and sides hurt. The future was simply too good to be true.