Lurch: Short Stories on Revolution

Elizabeth Marie Wallace

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorstheses

Recommended Citation
https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorstheses/543

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.
Lurch: Short Stories on Revolution

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

Elizabeth Marie Wallace

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

______________________________
Hermine Pinson, Director

______________________________
Nancy Gray, Chair of Examining Committee

______________________________
Chelsea Johnson

______________________________
Christopher Freiman

Williamsburg, VA
May 3, 2012
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revolutionary Letters</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Way</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t Tell</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heroes’ Day</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Confession</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ignite</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Roving and The Wild</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Victors</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whiteout</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Uprising</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lurch</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

Our time is a time of revolution. On June 20, 2009, Neda Agha-Soltan was killed during the Iranian election protests, sparking fury throughout an already unsettled Iran. Starting on the 25th of May, 2010, Greece was thrown into a still-unresolved series of bloody strikes and protests. On January 25, 2011, the Egyptian people gathered in the streets and squares to protest the 70-year rule of Hosni Mubarak. In the following months, Libya was thrust into civil war, uprisings sparked in Syria and Bahrain, and the people of Algeria, Jordan, Morocco, Oman, and Yemen would mark the spring with their protests. From the spirit of rebellion and the financial crisis, the global Occupy Movement was born in Spain, London, and New York on the 17th of September 2011 and stretches on indefinitely from Santiago to Zagreb to Tokyo.

On the first of these dates, I was lying on the couch. Texas heat beat the pavement outside. The windless, clear summer’s day replicated the day before it in its long, mundane flow. I watched television until I was sick of it, holed away in the darkest and coolest room of my mother’s house. I did not know the day of the week, or that people were protesting in Iran. I found that out by chance, while exploring the news channel on my Nintendo Wii. I was nineteen and my eyes were shut to the world beyond my daily routine of scrambled eggs, movies, swimming, and popular novels. I only wanted to find something entertaining.

Instead, I found the viral video of Neda’s death. It was horrible, swaying, falling, blood streaking, eyes rolling. She was a peaceful protester at a peaceful rally. Murder isn’t new, but it’s ugly to look at and even uglier to ignore. The stab of her death
shocked me into asking myself what I would have done—would I die for freedom?

Would I even march?

Revolution, I’ve discovered, mystifies me. How do radically different people find anything to unify for or against, especially now, in a world deconstructed and internet-accessible? How do they come to choose personal risk over safety and familiarity? And how does an actual uprising function?

Perhaps my confusion is a function of my generation. If that’s the case, I’ll admit: I’m not much of a revolutionary. I was born in May of 1990. The Berlin Wall had already fallen, the iron curtain lifted, and the red scare calmed by the time I took my first breath. To me, political and cultural revolutions seem to either never end or end badly. Look at North Korea, or the ongoing fight in America for human and political rights without reference to class, gender, race, or sexual preference. Despite this, we hear of revolt across the world and across any conceivable boundaries.

These short stories present an ongoing and incomplete attempt to comprehend the nature of revolution in its broadest context. Characters experience personal revelations in conjunction with, and often as the result of, their involvement with changing political, social, religious, or scientific landscapes. In this way, these stories explore revolution from the point of view of the singular unit, the revolutionary, in order to grasp the role of individual decisions and beliefs within greater movements.

The collection opens with revolution as it is commonly conceived, as political uprising. In “Revolutionary Letters,” the Abbasi brothers choose to clash against the Egyptian government to fight for their rights. As the collection unfolds, the revolutions move away from this political plot to revolution in its broader forms; for example, Mira
of “The Confession” searches for meaning in her teenage revolt, and Ben of “The Roving and the Wild” fights to be true to his ideal self, even as he is saddled with the responsibilities of adulthood. This expansion of revolution into its broader contexts culminates in the eponymous story, “Lurch,” in which Diana Wright faces the changing realities of her life on the backdrop of political unrest, scientific discovery, and the confusing and random cosmos.

Interspersed between these short stories, flash fiction provides a concentrated look into the decisions that cause revolution and the toll that those events take on revolutionaries. “The Way” reflects the emotional mindset of change, while the stories of Spirit, of which there are four, recount the damages and successes of a single character experiencing cyclical upheavals.

As Camus writes in The Rebel, “The rebel himself wants to be “all”—to identify himself completely with this good of which he has suddenly become aware and by which he wants to be personally recognized and acknowledged—or “nothing”; in other words, to be completely destroyed by the force that dominates him.” Revolution, as I understand it, destroys what was by enforcing what already is in the mind of the revolutionary; it is not simply change so much as it is a conscious overturning. This process, both in how we perceive it and how it affects us, is not fully captured in the political definition. Rather, we must expand our definition to understand it as a phenomenon that refracts through the individual into nearly every aspect of life, allowing for the possibility of both trauma and renewal.
Indeed, is it at all surprising that a society founded on the opposition of classes should culminate in brutal “contradiction,” the shock of body against body, as its final dénouement? Do not say that social movement excludes political movement. There is never a political movement which is not at the same time social.

Karl Marx

In order to combat evil, the rebel renounces good, because he considers himself innocent, and once again gives birth to evil.

Albert Camus

From this I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. Hamlet or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself.

Virginia Woolf
Dear Brother,

I was very surprised to receive your letter yesterday. Is it so bad that you cannot call? I will attempt to write in the way you said to, though I find it different. Are you sure you will know what I mean?

This is very unsettling. I do not fully understand what you’ve mixed yourself up in, which concerns me. Do you truly believe it will work? I do not know if it is right to trust these new friends of yours as though they are family. Do not get yourself involved in a bad set of people, for that would bring us great dishonor. Can you remember our visit with our cousins two years ago? That is our family. Please do not forget this. Your university friends also have such families that they must consider. You must be sure that this is best.

I will do as you say and not tell mother. Father knows. He read the letter before me, because he always reads my incoming mail. I think he is afraid I am cavorting with women, though he knows I am not engaged. I tried to stop him, but he pulled the letter

______________________________

1 Translator: Dr. Roger Krinn of Chicago, IL, USA, International Red Crescent, Alexandria, Egypt. The following collection of letters was found in the coat pocket of the identified body of Hassan Abbasi on 9 February 2011, in Alexandria, Egypt. Cause of death appears to be a gunshot wound in his chest. Abbasi’s death occurred three days before the stepping down of former Egyptian leader Hosni Mubarak. Abbasi also had the following items on his person: one leather wallet with identification card, one cellular phone, and one rag.

2 مُخْطَلَف may colloquially mean “strange” or “weird”

3 Literally: “coming out with a female date.” This translator enjoys poetic license and begs pardon for any roughness in translation.
from my hand and read it in front of me. He did not speak before giving it to me. It is so angering that he treats me like I am a child, though I am about to finish school. When I pass my exams, he will have to stop acting in such a way.

I want to visit you at the university but not until things are safer. Father trusts me less than you. I know I can write this to you, because he will not read your mail, but you must not make mention of it again to me. I do not wish to quarrel with father, but truly he trusts me less. Perhaps you spoiled him when you went to your university. He has yet to recover from the rumor of your cavorting with that woman. He still thinks I am the wayward son who was lost in the parade on Moulid An-Nabi, but has ten years meant nothing? He forgets that you were the one who ate all of our halawet el-moulid\(^4\), and became ill for two days. Your advantage of 13 months is such luck. I have pondered working a job to show him my manliness, but I am also very concerned that I pass my exams.

You are becoming involved in things that are concerning to me. I have heard of much violence related to these people you are with. How can this end but unluckily? Be careful. I will write when I can, though I believe father disapproves. I will do my best to assure him.

Omar

16 January 2011

Dear Brother,

\(^4\) Halawet el-moulid are sweets traditionally eaten on Moulid An-Nabi, the festival celebrating Mohammed’s birthday. They come in a large variety, often in trays. Some are really wonderful treats, but consuming many at once could have only been a revolting experience.
It makes me nervous that you want me to be more discreet in what I write you from my last letter. I will do my very best for you, but I am worried about this. I am strong and can do what must be done if you need me. You say that father and mother need me more, but we continue to fight about silly tensions and my studies. Remember that I will be there if you need me, because I am your brother. As you fought off the older boys when we were small, I will stand beside you now. Father speaks of you as his clever son, because of your high marks in your studies, but I am improving my marks. Perhaps you can be very clever and I can be very masculine. Don’t laugh, Hassan. I’m serious. I am making myself stronger and maybe stronger than you.

About those things you wrote to me I will now speak carefully. You need not worry about father’s disapproval. He does not speak ill of you, though he is concerned with the consequences of these actions. He and Uncle spoke yesterday of the matter. Uncle believes that your actions are futile, and we will have to wait until the man dies. He will not step down, Uncle thinks. He says the man is old besides and that you are wasting your time and making useless troubles.\(^5\) Father has not told mother, because of her weak health. It is best for now that she does not know.

I read what you sent to me. I am beginning to understand you. As you said in your letter, these issues must be corrected, and it is our efforts that will change them. Still, do you truly think that this time is the best?\(^6\) Many already agree with you, but in the news there is unrest everywhere and few solutions. My classmate Ahmed has stopped going to school, and there has been talk of the schools shutting down. I hear that

\(^{5}\) The man in question is Hosni Mubarak, Egypt’s president of 30 years, who finally stepped down from his post on 11 February 2011, as a direct result of Egyptian protests.

\(^{6}\) Omar’s code translates essentially to vagueness. *lit.* “I read it. I may understand. As you wrote, we must act. Now?”
Ahmed is finding a way to Cairo. I am concerned that my exams will be affected if this trouble goes on for too long. But, as you wrote, these are not issues to be ignored.

Omar
20 January 2011

Brother,

Mother knows. As expected, she has not taken the news well, and has been in bed for a full day. Father says she is praying. It’s dark and I cannot sleep because of the noise. Father paces in the kitchen, clicking his lighter though you know he stopped smoking. The floor creaks under him and mother’s voice hums through the wall. It is as though the house itself is concerned for you, which makes it very difficult to sleep. If I do not pass my exams, it will be your fault.

Your queries in the last letter have forced me to think. I am still not sure of much of what you told me, but I can see that you have reason. I began to listen to the radio as you suggested, and there is much going on that I was unaware of before now.\(^7\) I am losing interest in school, though the term will end soon. It is as you said, there are matters more important than school. But I hope you will allow me to join you. You could not be angry with me if I did, because I would be standing beside you. I swear in Allah’s name that this is true. The more you speak the more you have reason, except about us here. Here I am useless.

\(^7\) lit. “Not sure of all. [there is(?)] Reason. Radio, as you said, much happens daily.” Egyptian media, including radio, began slipping from government control in this period. These effects were most notably seen in newspapers, which Omar likely read as well. Additionally, starting around 12 February, protesters called for reforms to be announced on radio, a demand yet to be fully realized.
Please be careful. Ahmed has not been heard of in many days. I do not want our family to become as his. Between classes I hear whispers of his mother having fits and refusing to speak to the family. She is not unlike our mother, now. These days, you do not feel as close as you are. Write soon.

Omar

24 January

My Brother,

Your last letter helped ease mother’s fears, but she still prays all night. She no longer stays in the bedroom, and has begun to cook again. Father and I hope to never eat carry-away again, we are so sick of it.

I am sleeping better, and still studying, yes, though my teachers know I wish to stop. Mother’s happiness has made father more at ease, and we have not been fighting so much. I suspect he’s noticed how strong I am getting, but does not say anything to me about it. He knows that I have been staying out late after school with others like us. We talk about what we are hearing and sometimes read the papers together. We are still students, and we are ready to act when we know how we are needed. Some of the others are attending the protests with you here in Alexandria, and some have even gone to Cairo. I would as well, if not for your warnings. Father and I have spent the week together listening to rumors and news. It is all very exciting.

The news is full of nothing but the upcoming event. I don’t understand why you insist on being so discreet in these letters. Everyone is involved and everyone knows.
Tomorrow will be a day for all Egypt to remember.\textsuperscript{8} I have sent the items you asked for, though what you will do with them I cannot imagine.\textsuperscript{9} I only had difficulty finding and sending the last item. I asked the messenger of tomorrow’s plans, and I believe you to be sound in your actions. Have you seen the video as well?\textsuperscript{10} It inspires me to action. I hope to join you. It is only for the cause\textsuperscript{11} of mother and father that I remain at home.

The people in the city have disrupted much of our life here. Our country is becoming madness, though, as you said, this has been the case before. I believe in what you are doing, and even Uncle who does not think you will succeed thinks you are justified, though he may refuse to say it. I believe he prays for you, too. Be safe.

Allah’s Mercy and Blessings,

Omar

29 January

Brother,

I’m going mad not joining you. All that we do here is in agitation—at home, in the streets, as we sleep. I hope you are safe. Please tell me more about what the event was like. Did you hear of the lawyers on 27 January? They flooded the streets here. As of yesterday, I have seen the military in the streets.

\textsuperscript{8} 25 January was the first day of the protests that shook the country.

\textsuperscript{9} A search of Hassan’s body did not reveal what items he had asked for. Food seems a likely option, but if food, one must wonder with Omar what the point of Hassan’s discretion is. According to the camp nearby, first-aid and medicines would have been a common request. Hassan may have been a sentimental man, asking for something meaningful instead of useful. The facts are lost to history.

\textsuperscript{10} One must speculate to which video Omar here refers. While several videos have become viral in the past month, many in reference to the current unrest, it seems likely that he had access to viral video calling for protests on 25 January. In any case, the videos of these protests and the calls to action have been important not only in the national community but also in the international media.

\textsuperscript{11} Or, \textit{at the bidding of}
I hope this letter finds you. I hope that this continues at such a rate. Though you are so close, father will not let me visit you myself. I believe he knows that I would not return until after this ends. The group of us at school has become much larger. We are discussing protection against the police. I am looking for better eye protection, but do not own chemistry goggles.

The phones are out and the internet no longer functions, as I’m sure you have noticed. There are so many people in the streets that a cloud of dust hangs over the city from their footsteps. I am sure you are experiencing this as well. What did you think of last night’s speech? I am not sure. Do you think they are being truthful? I believe the cause must still continue.

You have told me previously but I cannot agree about mother needing me here. She cooks still and now sits with father and I as we listen to the evening radio. She noticed what I took to give you, so I told her the truth. She did not reprimand me as I expected.

Father is aged considerably. His hair is grayer and his eyes are dark and bruised. All day he watches the television reports, because the unions have gone on strike and there is no work to be done. I am much the same except I am now making better marks. Uncle has come nearly every day with news. Uncle is marching with you, though you

---

12 On 27 January, the Egyptian government shut down the internet for the entire country, in a backlash move against social media (Twitter, Facebook) which had allowed protesters to unite and plan.
13 On 28 January, Mubarak announced plans to reform the government and fired his cabinet. However, he did not include plans to give up his power.
14 In the margin, a drawing of a bearded grandfather figure with an arrow pointing here. If it is any real likeness, then Omar's father resembles Abraham Lincoln, stern-browed and imposing.
may not know it. He says that he remembers the days before things were as they are, and he hopes to remember the days after as well. I showed him your letter where you said that we could not excuse that man. He and I have tried to get foreign newspapers online but the computers down the street are not working well. Of late, he has given you much praise for being part of this.

Stay clear of the police, brother. News of Ahmed finally came to us. He’s the one I told you about, who went to Cairo, do you recall? He is staying with a cousin in the city. A policeman clubbed his collarbone. Until the bone heals he cannot come home. His family is rejoicing at the news, but I am unsure if they are happier of his safeness or that he is injured and unable to move. I am proud that he is my friend. He sent me a letter too. He says that Cairo is amazing. The movement will really work, he says. He feels at one with the people he marched with. I cannot imagine feeling that way about strangers. Perhaps this is why you speak of your university friends as you do.

How are your cuts from Jan 25th? The press is calling this by so many names already. Send me a photo when you can, once cell phones work again.

Father has just announced news of a curfew in Cairo. How angering! I hope you plan to stay out longer here as a result. 15

Omar

3 February

Brother,


15 Crossed out: Be safe.
Your letter was a great relief to us all. Mother continues prayers through the night and I am becoming used to the sound. Uncle is going to the larger protests with the union. He is scared from yesterday, which was so violent. Do not have anything to do with those who are causing needless violence everywhere—did you hear about Carrefour?\(^\text{16}\) There were instances between the police and Uncle’s union, but he took cover when it became bad. I am proud of him, and you should be too.

Father has stopped watching television. He says he is tired of watching and not doing. We are online again, and I have shown Father the tweets from your group. We are all coming into the streets to join you, mother, father, uncle, and I. Mother has created signs for us all to carry. It is a matter of family honor\(^\text{17}\) that we stand up at this time, father says.

I know you will not want us to go together into the danger. You think that you are protecting us. But, brother, Egypt is all danger, and it is cowardly for us to lock ourselves into our homes. Like you have told me, we cannot wait for time to fix our country. Confrontation will be unpleasant, but I am prepared to take all the items you have mentioned such that we are prepared. Please do not be angry with me that I am going against your advising. You have also told me to believe I am more clever than father thinks me. I will listen to you telling me that and not the other things you have told me. Be uplifted, not angered.

\(^\text{16}\) The much-publicized raid and burning of the supermarket Carrefour in Alexandria on 3 February. The International Red Crescent reported several minor injuries as a result, of which, on a personal note, I myself was involved in the stitching of several minor lacerations, including one touching case of a pregnant woman with a large facial gash.

\(^\text{17}\) صوت أباني، شرف, is used to emphasize “honor, sincerity, and integrity,” to make a strong statement about Omar’s father’s opinion.
We will all be with you, so you must be especially sure to stay safe. I look forward to your next letter. *Ya’aburnee.* ¹⁸

Down with Mubarak!

Omar

9 February 2011

Brother,

Forgive me for sending this message late. Give mother my apologies. How was the protest? Are there any injuries? I am not angered, and you have reason in what you’ve said. I only hope you are careful and safe. I could not stand it if what I have said leads you wayward. I cannot imagine mother with a protest sign, but I am proud of father and his decision. I must confess that I hoped to see you at the square, but truly there are too many people. We have planned a large protest for the next few days. They are finally becoming more responsive to us, and I think this could be a great day. I am close to the square and finally in the true center of the events. The smell is unpleasant but I do not mind. Compared to other unpleasant things, it is nothing. You have not mentioned your strength in some time. Do you still believe I am less strong than you? I am very tan now, and have lost more weight, but I am not worried. When we meet again we will have to see who is stronger.

My cuts are healing, and the items you sent were especially useful. I am prepared for the gases of the military. The violence is increasing as you say, but have faith that we

¹⁸ Literally, this phrase means, “You bury me.” It is used to express a feeling of intense love, such that the speaker would not want to endure living beyond the person to whom they’re speaking.
will succeed. The constitutional drafting is a ruse that we will not accept. We won’t rest until Mubarak steps down completely. I think the day will be very soon, perhaps by the end of the week. I dream of coming home to you and father and mother, and eating as much kebda\(^{19}\) as mother can cook. That will be our celebration meal, I have decided. I can taste it already.

Kareem has been detained, so this letter will come to you through another. I do not know who will be willing to travel such distances and through the police, but surely there will be someone. Our morale is very high, despite this setback. All of Egypt will remember this week just as they have remembered 25 January. For that, this unpleasantness is nothing. Please assure mother I will be especially careful. She is aware as I am that tomorrow may bring disaster and success. This truth you must know as well. For you, brother, and for all of Egypt, I must stand, whatever may occur.

\textit{Ya’aburnee.}

Hassan

\(^{19}\) An Alexandrian dish made of cow liver.
The Way

“Yes,” I said, when they sat me in one of their wooden chairs, where my feet dangled above the floor. They unfolded their dusty map, unearthed the old compass so I couldn’t get lost. “Do you understand?” they asked, because it was all very new to me.

“Yes,” I said, even when my feet grew to the ground and their insistence annoyed me. The snaking roads on paper reflected the curves of their wrinkles, trustworthy, artistic, unsightly. “Can you remember the way?” they asked, though the way seemed straight and clear.

“Yes,” I said, as I packed my bag with clean underwear and an extra toothbrush. Their eyes glimmered with inescapable joy as I stood before the door. Pride can make beautiful ugly old things. “Are you sure you’re ready?” they asked, which I didn’t appreciate much at the time.

“Yes,” I say, now to myself, as the foothills change into white desert. The road disintegrates, slipping into the earth through arid cracks jagging beneath me. I pull out my map. “Which way shall I go?” I ask.
Kate reread the printout in the dim light of her bunk.

“I’m afraid,” Chelsea had written. “With everything that’s going on in the news—with the war and everything, I’m afraid for you.” The letter went on, more of the same, with no news of home outside of the same feelings that Chelsea had begun with. Kate flipped the page over and pressed her face into the pillow, focusing on the pressure on her eyelids.

What could she say to that? Kate remembered the last tour, Kate’s first, when she hadn’t known Chelsea. It had been easier then, fending off the worries of her parents and friends. She’d been afraid, too. She messaged her family whenever she could, hinting at the danger she’d soon be in.

Then, the sleepless nights leading to her first mission had left her drained and horrified. She had to parachute in the beginning. That was the real problem: heights. Dismantling or detonating explosives in a safe place, that part was fine. It was the falling, jolting nightmares that got to her. In dreams, everything went wrong: the helicopter failed, the parachute wasn’t strapped on, it didn’t deploy, below her rocks jagged and spiked. Nights were cold sweats of fear, and day the heat of work. In sunlight she reminded herself of her training, even though everywhere she stood on the aircraft carrier seemed to be in the way. Parachutes rarely failed, she said again and again, to herself and her family.
The first mission went fine, though afterward she shook with what she couldn’t identify as exhilaration or terror. That night she held her arms and legs, reminding herself that she was all there, in one piece. Eventually she didn’t need to remind herself.

Kate rolled over on her bunk. If she didn’t write soon, Chelsea would worry more.

“Don’t be afraid, it will be okay,” she would email her. No, what if it wasn’t okay? No point in hiding from the truth. Her job was dangerous, simply put. Kate and Chelsea both recognized that.

She couldn’t tell the truth, that she wasn’t afraid. She’d tried that recently, but the words came out all wrong. Chelsea couldn’t imagine a lack of fear as anything but a total numbness, madness, even devil-may-care disregard. Their fight over Skype, Kate in Spanish port and Chelsea in their San Francisco apartment, made Kate feel worse than Chelsea’s worry already did. It wasn’t numbness, and it wasn’t a death wish, Kate had repeated. Really. It was a good thing, not always being afraid. Like being free.

“Stay strong for me.” That was it—a little cheesy, maybe, but it would do the trick. A standard answer for a standard worry, and nothing anyone would flag. She folded Chelsea’s letter and shoved it in her pillowcase. That was the best she could do.

Kate rewrote the letter in her imagination.

*Dear Kate,* it started. *You remember Dana, don’t you? You wouldn’t believe the news—she’s finally made it in the art world. Critics everywhere are talking about it. A raving review was included. Jack, Brian, and I went together. You would have loved it. She hung old Polaroids from racks in these crazy shapes, which almost made it look three-dimensional. Dana’s flown out to New York to talk with galleries there. Too cool.*
Next, she’d talk about news from work, maybe about the anchors sleeping with Sam, the producer. Wait, nobody really wanted to sleep with Sam, Kate realized. Well, it was the third part that really mattered, anyway, the instructions. *Tell me about your last mission.* *Take pictures on board if you can. Trace your hand and mail it to me, and I’ll send you mine. That way we’ll always have each other’s hands to hold. We’ll go through all of it together.* *Ten more months. All my love, Chelsea.*

A perfect letter, Kate thought. It would get flagged immediately.

Now, she ought to sleep. No drills called her, for once, and, seeing as it was still early, her roommates were out. She focused on the shadows of her white sheets and the far-off noises in the aircraft carrier. The constant lapping of the water usually escaped her notice, but in the still and empty space of her quarters she followed it until falling asleep.

She woke up hungry. Had she just been dreaming? Something about crawling through tunnels too narrow. No, she had been underwater, scuba diving. She stretched her spine and yawned. By her watch, a mere three hours had passed since falling asleep.

Her sleep cycles were getting confused again, she realized, gathering the energy to roust herself from bed. It’d been too many days below deck. She wondered when she’d last seen the sun. Worse, it’d been too many days between missions. Over a week ago, she’d returned from the expedition in Anatolia, where they’d removed an underwater obstruction.

There was no point in trying to sleep more now, anyway. She slid from her top bunk and hurried to the petty officer’s mess for dinner, which was nearly over. She’d likely be getting scraps. But, food was food.
In the mess, Wilkes motioned for her to come over. He was also an EOD tech, part of her mobile unit. She waited for her food and went to his table, where four others sat in conversation. Of them, she only recognized Chaplain Unger, a friendly-to-everyone kind of guy who Wilkes often sat with.

“Novak, ya heard the news?” Wilkes said in his jolly, Midwestern way.

“What news?” she replied.

“It’s been all over the news. Don’tchya watch TV?”

“What’s the news?” she asked.

The other woman at the table, an aircrewman, answered for Wilkes. “They’re talking about repealing Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.”

“Is that news? They’ve been talking about that for months.” Kate pulled out the pocket-sized hand sanitizer that she carried with her everywhere.

“Right, but it’s actually going to happen. Everyone says it’s actually going to happen. Word is, it passed through the House today.”

Wilkes chimed in, “There’s mixed feelings about the whole thing, y’know. Some people want to do something about it—“

“But there’s plenty of studies that say it’ll be fine. If they want to ask or tell, let them, I say. It really shouldn’t be a problem,” Chaplain Unger said.

The aircrewman echoed, “I just hope there’s no trouble over it.”

“That’s the thing. You just know there will be,” Wilkes said. “Not that I’m saying there’s anything wrong with it, I just don’t want trouble. What do you think, Novak? There’s gonna be trouble, won’t there?”
“Don’t know, don’t care,” Kate answered, still rubbing the hand sanitizer into her hands. She stopped herself and picked up her fork. “There isn’t anything we can do about it. If there’s trouble, then we’ll work through it. If there’s not, then there’s not.”

“I just don’t want trouble,” the aircrewman repeated.

“Mind you, I’m for it,” Wilkes announced. “We’ve discharged too many good Sailors, and we need what we can get.”

“What we need is good Sailors, and no problems,” said the last man at the table, who Kate didn’t know. “It’d help if those good Sailors followed the good book, or at least tried to. You know there will be trouble if they’re in the forces. We don’t have time to deal with them, and we have enough people as it is. Good that they want to serve, but why change the system we already have? Thanks but no thanks. We’ve got enough on our plate.”

Wilkes hemmed and hawed. “But don’t you think we’ve lost a good few Sailors? Remember Parker?”

Parker was one of those guys everyone remembered. Even those who never knew Parker remembered him. He was a powerfully thick man, half-Comanche, and strong as any of them, if not stronger. As a pilot, his track record still hadn’t been beaten. Half the stories about him were probably made up, but were told anyway. Once he’d swum five miles to shore while dragging a rescue, when his helicopter was shot down. They said he flew a plane like it was a part of him, and his bravery was unrivalled. The very best they had. Then one day he announces he’s gay and without a second thought, poof. Discharged.
“Parker’s an exception to the rule. Fact is, it’s a bad plan. We ought to keep it as it is: we don’t mess with them, and they don’t mess with us. Everything goes on smoothly. They just don’t have any business dragging that into the Navy.”

“They’re already in the Navy. They’re on this ship,” the chaplain said, looking at Kate. She saw it, but pretended she didn’t, wiping ketchup on her napkin. No way she was getting involved with anything like that, or with anything that that could mean. She wouldn’t even think about it; it was not a possibility. “They’re just forced to hide it until someone pulls it out of them. And the people pulling it out aren’t getting discharged, are they? It’s an imbalanced system, and an unfair one for the many Sailors affected by it.”

Wilkes laughed, “So! Has the chaplain secrets to divulge? Not that I’m asking, of course.”

The chaplain frowned, though the aircrewman and the man laughed. Kate chewed her food.

“Joking, joking, good Chaplain Unger. Just having a little fun. You have to admit you left yourself wide open!”

“Lord, I suppose there’s trouble already,” muttered the aircrewman, before taking a swig of her soda.

Kate inhaled the rest of her food. This conversation had already gone where she didn’t want it to go. She finished and made to leave.

“Running off already, Novak?” Wilkes asked.

“Yeah, I’m headed to the theater. Haven’t been having luck with sleeping much. Haven’t been above deck in a while, either. It’s messing with me.”
“We’ve all been there. But what you should be doing is watching the news. Big things are happening, trust me. The repeal will be through the other lawmakers by the end of the month. Maybe even by Christmas.”

“I’ll think about it,” she said neutrally. It didn’t matter what they thought or what they said. Either policies changed or they did not, and those decisions were out of her hands. It didn’t change her feelings, and it definitely didn’t change her. It only affected how things were phrased and seen. They could not touch her beyond that.

Surprising, though, that Chelsea hadn’t even hinted at it in her letter. Chelsea always had strong opinions on news like that, and, as a reporter, was always one of the first to break the news to Kate. Not to mention Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell was one of the things Chelsea objected to most about Kate’s being in the military, as if her service was a kind of complicit agreement with the policy.

Kate wandered towards the theater, lost interest in the movie when she found out that District 9 was playing, and went back to her quarters. The last thing she needed was to start dreaming of aliens; she could hardly function on this little sleep as it was. In times like this, the carrier became less of a ship and more of a purgatory, where she couldn’t do what she knew she needed to do. Then again, in times like this, she wasn’t sure what she needed to do. Sleep, that was it. If she didn’t sleep more often, her performance would start diving.

When she entered, one of her roommates lay fully clothed on her bunk in her working uniform, boots and everything, with one arm over her face. Their tiny room housed four women, bunks and all, which meant that when not literally above each other, sleeping in their bunks, they felt the physical intrusion of others at all times. They
bumped into each other and their things were always in the way. At least, Kate’s roommates’ things were always in the way. Kate constantly was aware of her things, and of making sure they were in their correct places. She joked that cleanliness made her saner.

“Long time no see,” Kate said when she entered, shuffling around the feet hanging off of Whitehouse’s bunk. “You asleep?”

“Novak?” Whitehouse moved her arm, revealing red eyes and blotchy skin. Kate’s heart sank. This screamed of dangerous territory. She fought the urge to up and leave—Whitehouse was a friend, after all.

“Rough day?” she asked. Kate put her wallet and letters into the locker at the end of the bunk beds.

Whitehouse wiped tears from her eyes and sniffed. “Rough day,” she answered, her voice low and gravelly.

“Anything I can do?”

“No, I don’t think there’s anything anyone can do.”

Kate chuffed off her boots and took a deep breath, concentrating on acting natural. “There might be something. Do you want to talk about it?”

Whitehouse waved a limp arm. “I had a talk with the superiors. They’ve been holding an email to deliver in person.” Her voice strained.

Kate sat on Renton’s bunk, across from Whitehouse. If she lay down, she realized, it would be almost like two people in a king, distance-wise. She pushed herself back on the bed, until her back hit the wall. “Bad news?”
“It’s my husband. He wants to—he wants a divorce.” The tears came back with her saying it.

“Oh my God, I’m so sorry,” Kate said. It sounded insincere, the way she said it. She fell silent. Whitehouse’s fluttering breath filled the room.

“I had no idea. Absolutely no idea.”

Kate looked at her shoes. Everything she could think to say sounded stupid, inconsequential. She scooted back towards Whitehouse to hold out her hand. Whitehouse took it with a squeeze.

“I don’t know what to do. Apparently it’s been coming for a while—he met somebody last year—she’s some account manager or something—how they met I don’t really know. I just, I don’t know anymore. I had no idea, not about—any—of—this—” Whitehouse gathered her pillow and mashed her face into it.

“No, no, I’m sorry. Is there no chance he’ll change his mind? People work these things out.”

“He doesn’t want to fix it—he wants to marry her!”

Kate swore under her breath and rubbed Whitehouse’s hand. You don’t want to be married to an ass who’d do that to you, she thought, though she also thought it better not to say so. To have that dropped on you, though, and when you’re on tour—what are you supposed to do with that? “You just found out?”

Whitehouse gathered herself. “They just told me. Said I should talk to a lawyer. I don’t have any idea what to do. I never thought this could happen. He always emails me, and he sounds so interested in what I have to say. There were no signs or hints.”

“I’m so sorry.”
“I mean, I know it was hard on him. I haven’t been around much, obviously. But we were so—so—happy,” she coughed and the tears welled again.

“Hey, hey, okay, let it out, just let it out.” Kate remembered the girlfriend she’d had before Chelsea, Maria, who’d dropped her the second she said the word “Navy.” They had only started dating three months before, though, so Kate had bounced back quickly. But if it were now—with Chelsea—if she had just been blindsided like that—she didn’t want to think about how hard it would be to put herself back together.

Whitehouse cried in the suffocating, heartbroken way, sobs that wracked her whole chest. At some point the tightness in Kate’s chest squeezed harder and she also cried, big, mutinying tears that she couldn’t hold in. They sat just like that, connected by their hands, Kate leaning forward and Whitehouse on her side, deflated and crumpled, until their tears ran out, and Whitehouse’s breathing caught up with itself.

In a rush of panic, Kate realized she was still rubbing Whitehouse’s hand with her own. The movement was a natural comfort to Kate, but she stopped it immediately. She could not stop the tears, though, which kept coming though Whitehouse’s had subsided into sniffs. Kate swiped at her eyes and glared at her traitorous hands. They glared back, red, dry, and cracking. When had that happened?

“You have ever been married?” Whitehouse eventually asked.

“No, never.”

“Good. It’s not worth it. You pour yourself into another person and they just rip out your heart for some—some slutbag, I don’t know. I’ve never met her.” Whitehouse pushed herself up to sitting, so that their knees were inches apart. “When you love
someone, though, it really seems worth it. I love him, dammit, I love him so much. I can’t believe he would do this to me. We’ve been married seven years!”

“Seven years is a long time,” Kate sniffed. Longer, even, than she’d known Chelsea. She had to pull herself together. She swiped at her face and tried to calm her breathing.

“A long time. You know, I’ve never even seriously dated anyone else. And now I’m getting divorced? I can’t even imagine—”

“Listen, any kind of breaking up hurts, and that’s only natural. You’ll get through it, even if it’s terrible. I know you will, because you’re strong and wonderful. You’ll make it through.”

“You’ve had some really bad breakups?”

“One or two. Nobody was happy in the end. One of my exes blindsided me, too, the second I joined the Navy. Just dropped me like a log.” This was not the conversation she wanted to be having, she knew she was close to the edge. As long as she spoke generally, she could keep her job, she reminded herself, rubbing her arms. Those were the rules, and the comfort was in knowing them. Kate hadn’t yet lost that control.

“The important thing is that I got through them, and you can get through this,” she added.

Whitehouse pushed herself up to sitting. “Just because you went into the service? He just snapped it off?”

“The important thing is that it wasn’t the right person. It wasn’t easy, I won’t lie, but it will get better. I’m okay now, and you will be too. I honestly think so.”
“Thank you.” She rubbed her face again. “Ugh, my head is killing me. I’m disgusting. Sorry to have put this on you. You probably have a shift in the morning.”

“I don’t mind, really. You should get some water and sleep. Maybe take a shower—it’ll make you feel better. In the morning, you can deal with the rest.”

“Yeah, they said they’d walk me through it. I never thought I’d have to do this.”

“Take on what you can for now. Small steps. Clean yourself up and get some rest. I promise a shower will make you feel better, if only a little.”

“Right, right. You’re absolutely right. I ought to shower. They said they’d help me out with the rest later. Thank you.”

“Don’t worry about it, really.”

Whitehouse went to the showers. Now, she could finally go to bed. Kate got ready and laid on her bunk, again. She pushed her puffy eyes into the pillow. Like before she was restless. She tapped her hand against the mattress, unable to sit still. Today was close; she had to be more careful tomorrow. She needed to get hold of herself and of everything, before it slipped away. It took one slip. Just one slip. She rolled to her side.

If she asked for them, they might give her a sleep aid. Maybe she wouldn’t need it. In the meantime, she flicked on the small television set in their room.

Flipping through the few channels, she saw that Wilkes was right. The repeal would likely go through before the end of the year. On FOX they were talking about the lame-duck Congress, while on CNN and MSNBC political commentators were tracking the records of various politicians regarding the issue. She shut her eyes and listened.

“Would John McCain do what he said he would do all along on Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell? You recall that just a few years ago McCain pledged that once the military came out in
favor of repealing the policy, he would also support repealing it,” insisted Rachel Maddow.

In free-fall, the wind rushing through her hair, water below, looming larger and she sped forward, down, spinning. Thirty yards above the surface: I’m going to die. Ten yards. Zero. She jumped awake, nearly bumping her head on the low ceiling.

The lights were still on, and the broadcast had switched to commercial break. I’m okay, I’m okay, I’m okay, she repeated, fear rushing through her. Only a few minutes had passed.

She got up and adjusted her uniform, putting back on her boots. Whitehouse opened the door.

“You headed out already?” she asked.

“In search of a computer. I remembered an email I need to send.”

“Family?”

“Yeah,” Kate said. “News for someone very important to me.” She left the TV on. Whitehouse probably already knew, she realized as she walked down the hall. The dots were all there to connect. Fine. What else was there to do about it? Kate continued down the hall, feeling warm but invisible, like the only person in the whole world.
Heroes’ Day

The Seventh Heroes’ Day celebration paraded down the biggest street of their flat, corn-growing town north of the capitol. Some people called the town Hope and others called it Agricultural Area 27. Spirit’s mother wore her best dress, which was dark blue. The two of them stood in the first row of the sidelines even though they came late to the parade, because Spirit couldn’t see from the back. People parted when Spirit’s mother wanted it.

Spirit poked his head out to see down the parade route, where the soldiers were marching their way. He couldn’t wait to see the soldiers. The grownups had come out to see the newly released technology from the capitol. The commonality had seized the intelligencia’s secret technology during the Great Uprising, and released some of it every year. This year was hoverfloats, magnet cores, and solar holograms. Spirit’s mother stayed silent while the townies chatted and the music swelled.

As the hoverfloats passed, trumpets started playing Spirit’s mother’s favorite song, “Our Spirit, Indomitable,” which Spirit was named after. She always hummed it while painting. A cannon shot pink and blue strips of paper into the air. Spirit grabbed one and held it up for her to see.

She was crying. The tears fell from one side of her face, the side they’d thrown acid on when she defended the commonality’s contraband library. They gave her a medal because she had saved two copies of The Ideals and The Worker and The Whole during that losing battle. The rest—books, pamphlets, Spirit’s father and the platoon—all burned.
The music trailed down the road, and a cheer arose as the new group approached. On the street, two hundred hologram soldiers silently marched past. They carried the new weapons, stun gels and electrolaunchers. Through their shadow bodies, the opposite crowd was tinged a digitized white, like ghosts.

“Momma, did we win the war?” Spirit asked, backing into her.

“Yes, the commonality won the Great Uprising,” she said.

“Then why did you get hurt?”

“Well, that’s what happens in war.”

“Does it always happen that way?”

“Yes, it always happens that way,” she said. She stroked his hair with her unscarred hand. She never touched him with the scarred half of her body.

A second platoon of soldiers followed. This time they were real, with plasma rifles slung over their shoulders. Spirit hugged his mother’s leg. He shut his eyes tight and sang the chorus to “Our Spirit, Indomitable.”

“Our spirit indomitable, secure, and free,
The fight we’ll fight, we’ll win, you’ll see All for the commonality!”

Like that, the song was hers, but it was his, too. He dreamt that the soldiers kept walking straight through the town and out into the country, all the way to the coast and down into the water. Everyone followed them away, but he and his mother went home. They opened the windows and doors to let in the fresh night air and went to sleep, warm under their quilts.
The Confession

“Bless me Father, for I have sinned,” began Mira, kneeling in the dark wood booth. The kneeler creaked under her as she droned the practiced words. “It has been however many days since the last time the class was brought here since my last confession. Maybe three months.

“Anyway, my sins. I guess I haven’t been honoring my father and mother much, but they aren’t really living up to the honor, so I can’t do much about that. I’ve lied, for sure. I’ve cheated, stolen, been greedy, disrespectful, proud, the whole lot, and who knows how many times.” Mira worried the edge of the paper that one of the history teachers, Mrs. Whitney, had handed her. The Act of Contrition was printed on it. The priest didn’t say anything.

“And, well, I’ve said the Lord’s name in vain at least three times today. I curse a lot, too, but I don’t really think that’s a sin. Other than that, I don’t know. Unclean thoughts, I guess. You could say I have a thing for Mr. Leppert, and he’s married, which breaks at least one commandment.” After a pause she muttered, “But, I can’t really help what I think.”

After an uncomfortable moment of silence, Mira sped through the last words. “Right, for these and all my sins, I ask forgiveness of you, Father.”

The priest responded from behind the screen to her left. Through the network of wood she could see Father Montgomery, who taught theological history. He was a younger priest, exceptionally tall and surprisingly quiet—St. Anselm’s ghost, the students called him. Though not St. Anselm Academy’s main priest, Father Montgomery was
often seen floating through campus, stopping at the stone archways to stare off, usually at the sky or down the hill, away from the monastery. A million rumors circulated about the meaning of his space-cadet behavior. Most, included Mira, figured it was just the gloom of being a priest. Especially a priest at an all-girl’s academy.

“Say the Act of Contrition, and one decade of the Rosary. During your prayers, focus on that which you have done, and why you are sorry for your sins. The Sorrowful Mysteries will do. For what you’ve stolen and those you’ve hurt, you must apologize and set things right. Pray for the strength do to so.”

Mira left the booth to do her penance, but when she knelt at the foot of the statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe, surrounded by votives, she focused only on the uncomfortable pressure on her knees. Several other students were kneeling by her, muttering prayers. Mira stayed quiet, inspecting her nails. She was tired and the stone church was too cold. After a few minutes of kneeling, her best friend pulled down the kneeler next to her.

“How’d it go?” Ari whispered.

“Fine. A waste of time. I thought he was going to say something because I didn’t sound sorry enough, but it was fine. You confess to anything good?”

“No. I thought about it though. Like, what if I said I’d had an abortion, huh? I’d like to see the look on Father James’s face then!”

Mira clapped a hand over her mouth to keep from laughing. “Well, why didn’t you?”

“I dunno, just—lying in confession? Would you do it?”
Mira shrugged. “Yeah, I mean, what’s going to happen? Anyway, I didn’t say anything about the alcohol I took from my mom. Which, you know, is kind of like lying.”

“Yeah, but that’s different. The other would be—I don’t know—intentionally mean. Father James is a good person.”

The teacher shushed them as she walked past. They picked up after a brief silence, no quieter than before.

“I had Father Montgomery. He creeps me out,” Mira said.

“Yeah? I like his voice.”

Mira playfully shoved Ari in the shoulder. “Someone’s got the hots for the ghost?”

“What—no! I mean, even if I did, he’s a priest—and he’s like, 29 or something!”

Mrs. Whitney paced behind them and they grinned at each other.

“So anyway—like I said, I finally took some stuff. It’s hidden in my closet.” Mira said.

Ari fiddled with the beads of a rosary. Her fingers moved from bead to bead too quickly to even look like she was praying. They’d talked about taking something—anything—and trying it together, but Ari never got up the nerve to go through with it. They’d both had sips of wine before, but that hardly counted. “Really?” Ari asked.

“Yeah. Go slower with the beads, dude. They’re not blind.” Then she dropped her voice and leaned in. “Wine and Maker’s Mark, which is whisky, I think. Tonight, Jefferson Park?”

“Definitely, but after ten. I have to play babysitter for my brother tonight.”
“Skip.”

“No way. Paul’s eight. He’ll hurt himself.”

Mrs. Whitney stuck her head between them. “Shh. Don’t make me tell you again. Either pray or wait for the rest of the class in the pews.”

Ari didn’t miss a beat. “Mrs. Whitney, may I go to the nurse’s office? I think I’m getting sick.”

“Go ahead,” she said, probably just to get rid of her.

“And I should go with her, to make sure she’s okay,” Mira followed.

Mrs. Whitney sighed. “Go, go,” she said with a wave. The two scuttled out of the church. Ari reached for the holy water automatically, but Mira, behind her, stopped herself.

The pair walked around campus in circles, passing the nurse’s office twice without a second glance. They went through Rose Courtyard, where the monks kept the largest collection of roses in the state of Pennsylvania, or so the school claimed. Ari stopped and pulled a white bud close.

“It doesn’t smell like anything,” she said, disappointed.

Mira smelled a sweet pink rose. “This one’s good.” She ripped it off the bush and took it with her. As they strolled, the flower disintegrated. Petals broke off and fluttered behind her. She tossed the wilting stem to the sidewalk.

“Hey, I just remembered. Let’s go to the black box. I have something to show you.”

“Sure. What is it?”

“Not telling. But you’ll like it.”
Ari led Mira back to the same room where they met. At the end of their first semester of high school, now over a year ago, they had been paired together in Mr. Norge’s Theater I class. For the midterm project, Mr. Norge assigned them the tea scene from “The Importance of Being Ernest.”

Ari had taken her role as Cecily very seriously and constantly told Mira to work harder on “becoming Gwendolen.” As if she could become a prissy Victorian woman just like that. That was back when Mira only hung out with the volleyball team, and Ari was one of those drifters she didn’t pay attention to.

“Mira, we have to perform this in front of the class. It’s not just learning your lines. You have to try to embody Gwendolen, like Mr. Norge says. Move like her. Speak like her. You’re not even trying,” Ari complained as they practiced during lunch.

It was pretentious and nerdy how much Ari cared. Mira didn’t want people to get the wrong idea—she wasn’t a theater kid, like most of the girls in her class. She was just taking it for the fine arts credit. At the same time, though, Mira felt bad—she really wasn’t trying, and she didn’t want to let Ari down. Ari was so sincere about the whole thing, after all. So she tried harder, and they did well.

After that, Mira went back to eating lunch with the volleyball girls. For weeks they talked about the same things: boys, drama on the team, class—rinse and repeat. For the first time since joining them, Mira didn’t feel like a part of anything cool. She was just bored.

Near the end of the semester, she ran into Ari after school. Mira went to the school office to call her mother because her father had forgotten to pick her up. She walked into the room, where Ari was filing behind the desk.
“Ouch, detention? How’d you get that?” Mira asked.

“Unnatural hair color, see?” She took down her wavy blonde hair, brushing out the layered violet streaks. “I got an infraction every day this week for it. Stupid, right?”

“But why haven’t you dyed it back? They’re going to keep giving you infractions!”

“What’s the worst they can do? Nobody gets suspended for hair dye—they know as well as us that it’s a stupid rule. It shouldn’t matter to them what my hair color is.”

“Sixteen infractions is suspension. It doesn’t matter what they’re for.”

“Well, I like my hair like this, and it’s my decision. They can deal with it. So, are you in for detention, too?”

“No, I just need to make a call. My dad forgot to pick me up.”

“Don’t you live in my neighborhood? My dad can drive you home, if you can wait until my detention’s over. I have 30 minutes left.”

Mira perked. “That would be perfect, thank you!” That way she wouldn’t have to call her mother, and she wouldn’t have to hear, again, how much of a deadbeat her father was. As if Mira didn’t know. As if she could change it.

Ari and Mira talked that day. Actually about things, interesting things, different things. About music and theater and lying. That’s what Ari said: she’d dyed her hair because it was the kind of person she was, and if she hadn’t, she’d be lying to everyone. They should have appreciated her dyed hair—it was a sign of honesty.

Mira wasn’t so sure about “being herself.” How could you be anyone else? Was it like acting? Embodying a character that looked like you but wasn’t? And if that was it,
did that make all of her volleyball friends fake? Sure, she’d tried to fit in—that’s what everybody did. At least, all the people she knew.

But then there was Ari—she did stuff that she knew people wouldn’t like her for. Like how intense she was about the play, or when she talked about how much she liked reading. Mira started to notice Ari in class—she answered questions like a teacher’s pet, but just because she knew the answers. She didn’t go beyond that; it wasn’t like she was trying to get Mr. Norge to like her. It was just her, take it or leave it. Mira didn’t know what to do with it, but she ate the next few lunches at Ari’s table. The volleyball girls didn’t really care; she was just another fast serve to them.

They circled back through the rose garden and down to the theater department. The black box theater was stuffed with props for the mainstage production. Ari pulled out a bright yellow, twenties-style dress, and tossed a black boa at Mira. “Check it out. It took me all week—I just finished it last night. And on the back, look at the beading.”

Ari flipped it around, showing the black beaded fringe on the back. “M+A” was embroidered on the back.

“M plus A? That’s seriously so cool! It must have taken forever. Is this for Guys and Dolls?”

“Yeah, this dress is for Rachel Adkin’s character, Adelaide. She’s kind of a showgirl. It probably would fit you if you wanted to try it on.”

Mira fiddled with the zipper when the bell for the next class rang. “Crap, the bell.”

“Want to cut?”
“Can’t. Algebra quiz. And it would just break my parents’ hearts if I didn’t keep my grades up, you know.” The joke fell flat, but Mira shrugged it off. They both knew that Mira really did care about her grades, and made good ones. It was stupid of her to say otherwise, Mira could feel that. Well, whatever.

“See you tonight!” Mira called over her shoulder.

Algebra was cut short by the PA system calling her to the front office. There were twenty minutes left in the class, but she packed up her backpack and slung it over her shoulder before leaving.

Alone in the hallway, Mira strolled without any hurry. She liked moments like these, when it was quiet enough for her to think and nobody tried to interrupt. She could breathe easier when nobody was watching. With one hand trailing along the lockers lining the wall, Mira wondered about all the little scuff marks and knicks throughout the school. Empty places where nobody noticed that things were missing. If you could connect all the absent things, how big would the hole be? It’d be big, she bet. Bigger than anyone would guess. Maybe it could swallow the school and their whole town. Everything would disappear into the great big emptiness, and the rest of the world would go on, not realizing that it wasn’t there anymore.

She turned into the Rose Gallery, a covered walkway on one side of the Courtyard that led to the administrative buildings. She stumbled out of her thoughts and onto Father Montgomery, who had stopped by one of the intricate stone archways and was gazing at the clouds.

“Oh—Sorry Father,” Mira said. “I wasn’t really paying attention—“
“Yes, I was just thinking on Saint Faith, you know.” Father Montgomery had the unsettling habit of starting conversations in the middle, as if they’d already been speaking for five minutes.

“Really? Well, I’m on my way to the office—“

“They say she was beautiful but a holy woman, as well. When she was brought before the pagan emperor, she refused to give up her faith. So the emperor cooked her alive. She was truly unattached to this world.”

Mira edged away. “How…interesting… she was very…committed…”

Father Montgomery’s watery eyes seemed to look through her. She noticed the severity of his black robe against his pale skin, and suddenly felt very small next to him. “Yes, she knew what she believed in and stood up for those beliefs. We all ought to strive for that.”

Mira nodded, though she had no idea what he was talking about. Is this because of her confession? Crap, what had she told him? She backed away from him. “Right, absolutely. Thank you, Father. But, I really need to go to the office. I’m sure they’re wondering where I am. Have a good day!” She sped away, only glancing over her shoulder as she made the corner of the gallery. Father Montgomery had hardly moved, still leaning against a pillar and staring off at the sky.

She arrived at the office slightly winded from her rush. Her mother sat on a couch, reading on her Kindle. She wore a gray business suit cut to the tee, as usual. Mira’s mother had probably just finished a client meeting; as one of the more ruthless lawyers in the Philadelphia area, her mother’s afternoons were usually too full to warrant
a casual visit with her daughter. Mira automatically swiped at her hair and unraveled her sleeves before catching her mother’s attention.

“Hi Mira. I’ve come to talk to you about this weekend. As you know, mother is sick. Her condition worsened today and I’m driving up to visit her in the hospital. I was planning on bringing you along, but I’ve been informed you have a test next week. Is this the case?”

“Yeah, in history.”

“There was no point in my coming here, then. You’ll need to find a ride home. I expect you’ll behave yourself?”

“Of course. I can catch a ride with Ari’s parents, probably.”

“Good. There are plenty of leftovers in the freezer.” She held out 40 dollars.

“Here, you can order some pizza. Call me if you need me, honey. And be sure to study. But I can’t stay and chat, or I’ll be stuck in rush hour. I’m not sure when I’ll be back, so call if you need anything. Your father will be around, I’m sure, but you’d better call me instead.”

Mira nodded. The divorce papers had been served two months ago, and her father disappeared soon after that. He usually didn’t answer his phone when she called, but she didn’t mind. It’s not like they got along, anyway.

With that, her mother stood and smoothed her skirt. She kissed Mira on the cheek and left. Mira thought about how weird it was that when her mother said, ‘your father,’ she’d first thought of Father Montgomery. He was probably still standing where she’d left him.
She took a deep breath, unfolding her arms. She had tensed without realizing it.
No, this would be good. Better than good, this was an opportunity waiting to be taken.
She’d need to tell Ari as soon as possible.

The bell announced the end of the period. Mira shuffled to her last class of the
day, chemistry. She tried to focus on her titration lab, but her mind wouldn’t stay put.
First she thought of her confession, then of the night ahead of her, then of the perfect cut
of her mother’s suit, until suddenly she thought of Father Montgomery in the Rose
Gallery, and Saint Faith.

What was that all about, anyway? He probably meant something by it. After this
morning’s confession, he was probably telling her she wasn’t faithful or committed
enough. Committed to what? To school? What does it matter if I’m committed to
school? It doesn’t, isn’t that true? Isn’t that the big secret? School and rules don’t
matter. The right lawyer can get you off of anything. And if it gets really bad, you can
just disappear. Leave behind nothing but empty spaces on the bookcase and empty
drawers, maybe a phone number to give the illusion that you once cared more about the
people you’re leaving than the jeans and gin you’re taking with you. Nobody wants to
admit it, but people do whatever they want, and none of it matters, no matter what the
priests tell us.

By the end of the period, her clear flask had changed to a bright pink. Her
teacher glanced over Mira’s shoulder and chided her for dropping the titration fluid too
quickly into the solution. “You have to be gentle,” she said. “With phenolphthalein,
you’re looking for a pale pink, not fuchsia.”
She held up the fuchsia vial to the light and shook it lightly. The color deepened.

Mira sloshed the liquid into the sink.

Mira rushed out of class at the sound of the last bell. A dull ache began to settle at the base of her skull, and she looked forward to a Friday afternoon nap. She needed to be at her 100% for tonight. With her mother gone, the house would be silent and empty. It would just be Mira, her mother’s fish tank full of guppies, and the fading daylight.

She found Ari in the carpool line. Mira told her the news—an empty house for who knows how long. They could do anything.

“Like what?”

“I don’t know, throw a party?”

“Yeah, but who would you invite? Everyone? That doesn’t really sound that fun.”

“Gena Anderson threw a party last year and people said it was fun.”

“Yeah, the people we don’t like. I’d rather just hang out.”

“But think about it! I know where the alcohol is, and I can make sure to hide anything breakable. I don’t think I want to invite the volleyball team. That would be awkward, you know? Everyone would talk about it—we could throw the party of the year!”

“I don’t know man. I guess I just don’t really care about—crap, my dad’s here. Let’s talk about it tonight. You still want to meet at the park?”

“Sure. I like it better there.”

They made small talk with Ari’s dad on the short ride home. “Later,” Mira called out when they pulled up to her house. Ari gave her a conspiratorial nod.
That night she got everything ready. She checked the bottles in her backpack twice to make sure they were secure. She then shed her uniform plaid skirt for skinny jeans, tamed her hair, and switched shirts a couple of times. Maybe she was overthinking it, she told herself. It’s not like it mattered. But, if she’s going to be doing something cool, she ought to look the part. Dark eyeshadow would help. Something different than normal.

Jefferson Park was a short bike ride away, conveniently between Mira’s and Ari’s houses. Mira zipped on a hoodie before biking into the cool spring night. The contents of her backpack clinked against each other as she turned down the hill that led to the park. Ari’s bike was already there, leaned against a tree on the edge of the soccer field.

Ari had stretched out on top of a picnic table with her hands behind her head.

Mira dumped her bike and jogged up to the table. “Hey, sorry I’m a little late,” she said, checking her phone for the time.

“Mmm? No worries. I’ve only been here a little while.”

“Good.” Mira pulled the bottles out of her backpack. “Crap. I didn’t bring cups.”

“It’s cool, we can make do. So, any news?” Ari examined the top of the Chardonnay that Mira had taken. “Twist off, nice.”

“Hey, I thought it’d be easier to deal with.”

“No, it’s good. I don’t know how to use a corkscrew.” She opened the bottle and took a swig. “Urgh. It’s sour,” she muttered, making a face.

“Oh, I had an idea earlier. For the party. Everyone from St. Anselm always hangs out with Redeemer boys, right? Boring. So let’s not invite Redeemer anyone. We’ll invite the Episcopalians. St. Edward’s meets St. Anselm.”
“We’re throwing a party?”

“Did you hit your head or something? We talked about it after school.”

Ari chugged down more wine. “We didn’t really talk about it. I mean. Parties aren’t really my thing.”

“Come on, Ari, it’ll be fun.” Mira started on the whisky. Her initial swig left her with a cough. “It doesn’t even taste like anything—it just burns. Here, try.”

Ari put up her hands. “I don’t know. You’re not really selling it.”

“Just give it a shot.”

Ari grabbed the bottle and sniffed. “Well, it doesn’t smell bad.”

“Do it.”

Ari shut her eyes and lifted the bottle. “God. People like this?”

Mira grabbed the whisky back. “Yeah. I kind of like it.” She drank as much as she could in one gulp, then repeated it in another gulp. It leaked down the side of her mouth and on to her shirt. She wiped it away with the back of her hand. “See? Good. Anyway, it doesn’t matter if you like it, right? You just have to drink it. Here, have some more.” The heat hit the pit of her stomach and flushed in her ears and cheeks.

Ari fell back on the picnic table without taking the bottle. Mira followed her eyes to the stars, which were easily visible in the darkness of the field. They sat in silence for awhile, Mira drinking occasionally. Ari sighed, “I don’t want throw a party. You can if you want, but I probably won’t come.”

“What, why?”

“I already told you. I’m not interested.”

“What do you mean? It’ll be great. A big party for everyone.”
Ari sat back up, “I’m going home,” she said.

“Seriously? We just got here. I don’t get why you’re being like this.”

“Why I’m being like this? What about you? You want to invite a bunch of stupid girls who aren’t nice or interesting or even cool to some stupid party just so people will talk about it and think you’re more like them. You’re not even friends with most of them. And St. Edward’s? Do you even know a single guy from St. Edward’s? This is such—such a huge waste of my time.”

Ari stood up quickly, then wavered before catching herself. Mira stood also. Dizziness rushed to her head. She grabbed the edge the of the picnic table.

“Wh—what are you talking about? It’d be more than just us but what’s so bad about that? I think we ought to hang out with new people sometimes.” Her words were hard to say, and her eyes wouldn’t focus on Ari. How much whisky had she drunk? Maybe it was a lot. It didn’t seem like a lot. “Why can’t you just be cool?”

Ari scoffed. “I don’t care about being cool. You didn’t used to, either. Isn’t that the whole point? Little shit and other people’s opinions don’t matter. That’s what I thought you and I believed in. But this is all you care about now—looking tough, wasting time. What’s with the eyeshadow? Who are you trying to impress? Now look at you. You’re fucking drunk. I know your parents are getting a divorce, or whatever, but this is bullshit.”

“Woah, hey. Woah. Back off. Don’t bring them into this. That isn’t any of your business. This is about you being too afraid to have fun.”

“Fun? You call this fun? Well enjoy yourself. I’m out of here.”
Ari marched to her bike. Mira held up the whisky bottle to see how much she’d drunk. It didn’t seem like a ton. There was at least half of the bottle left. The wine was still full. Mira sat back down and listened to the whizz of Ari’s bike fade into the distance. The wind rustled in the trees.

She took another swig of whisky and frowned. It really was awful, and she didn’t like it at all. She shoved her hands in her pockets, and watched the shadows of the treetops until she had to pee so badly she couldn’t think of anything else.

The closest bathroom was the nasty concrete building on the edge of the field. She left all of her things and ran toward it. Her heart beat heavily and she moved both too fast and too slow. When she finally made it, she had to hug the walls into the building.

Maybe she should just vomit, and get rid of the alcohol. Did it work that way? The dizziness was less pronounced now. Maybe she’d be fine. She made it to the bathroom just as she thought she’d burst. Afterwards she returned into the cool spring night and leaned against the concrete bathroom’s wall. It smelled like faded, dirty water and bleach. She hiccupped.

Ari was such a jerk. About the party. Maybe she was right, about having fun. Mira had been feeling good. Now she could barely walk, and the table seemed miles away. But she didn’t care what Ari thought. She didn’t care what anyone thought. Her mother would notice the alcohol, and that was fine. She didn’t care about any of it or anyone. She got to the table. Screw all of them.
With that she lifted the whisky to her lips for another swig. The swallow stayed in her mouth, burned her tonsils. She gagged and spat the whisky onto the grass. Other liquid came up and she vomited over the edge of the picnic table.

Her eyes teared up from the pain. She swiped at them with her hands, coating her wrist in sparkling black eyeshadow. Now she’d probably smeared everything. What a wreck. Ari was pissed off and gone. Mira heaved again.

She was empty and spinning and crying. It doesn’t matter, it doesn’t matter, she told herself. Mira crumpled onto the table with her burning face against the wood.

Ari wasn’t supposed to leave, not like that. Mira rolled the screwcap of the wine around in her palm. Everyone else could go, but Ari couldn’t. Mira threw the cap off the table. She rolled to her side.

I did this, she thought. Her eyes were heavy and her shoulders and chest and legs ached, and she was so, so tired. I’m tired of fighting, she thought. Her eyes drifted shut. Maybe that wasn’t it. It was running. She didn’t want to run anymore.

The air smelled sweetly of cut grass and roses. Her phone beeped with the turning of the hour. Somewhere the breaks of an old bike faintly squeaked. It would be a new day soon.
From the window ledge of his studio in the capitol, Spirit watched the state’s first burning. It started in Region 12, in hungry flames that sprayed orange ash against the night sky. Spirit hurried to capture it with charcoal on paper, committing the colors to memory.

“Has it already started?” Paz asked from the bed, where she’d nodded off while reading. “Do you need me to turn on the lights?”

“No, leave them off. I have to get the shadows right. They’re just beginning.”

Paz cursed to herself and muttered a prayer. With the window open, waves of heat beat against Spirit’s skin, though the flames did not spread beyond Region 13. A strange, low rumble shook the city, just as The General had warned in the projection on their activity chips. The leaders were passing off the burning as a test of the new wave-based fire containment system. Praising it, even.

“They’ll kill all of them,” Paz said.

“They already have.”

Spirit put aside his sketch, noticing the stillness of the streets, as if the darkened apartments held their breath behind the latched shutters. His mother would never have stood for this, not after all she gave to the cause. And if this was how the military dealt with the protests in Region 12 and 13, then what? They, all of them, were lost. They had lost absolutely.

“We can’t go on with this. We have to fight them,” insisted Paz.
“Fight them?” He held up his arm, where the scar from the mandated activity chip installation still cut red across his dark skin. “I tried fighting The Protection Council on getting this thing in my arm, and look how that turned out.” He scoffed. “‘All for the commonality,’ they said. Look, this is what they do to the people that fight.”

“You might have given up, but I will fight them.”

“You’ll die.”

Paz padded over to him and pulled the sketch from his hands. She squinted at it, then compared to the neighborhood beneath them.

“You’re going to paint this?”

“Yes.”

“Then you’ll die with me.”
“It won’t do a thing, you know,” the cashier at The Home Depot informed Ben.

“I—you mean—“ he grabbed the ice scraper off the cashier’s counter, despite being in the middle of paying for it. Did he mean it was defective? The cashier—Gregory, according to his nametag—shook his head, his wrinkled jowls swinging with the motion.

“No, this.” Gregory gestured to Ben’s credit card, which featured a polar bear underneath the World Wildlife Fund’s symbol. “Saving the pandas and the whales and all that garbage. Darwin’s going to win out, given time. You just can’t stop nature, as they say.”

Ah, Ben thought. Here we go again. “Maybe that’s so,” Ben said simply, diplomatically. He had plenty of experience in the art of taking criticism. Working for the WWF led to that.

“Take it from me. You’re young. Don’t waste your time on what can’t be helped. Focus on your life instead, and on the people that need you.”

Ben grunted in response. Since when had Home Depot become a counseling center? He directed his attention to the cash register’s printer. Come on, he thought. Print. Print faster.

“Especially with scientists these days and the whole green fad. It’s all money for people up at the top. No more than money moving hands. Trust me.”

“I’ll keep it in mind,” Ben responded, unenthused. Fighting wasn’t productive, Ben knew, though he imagined it. He could take down this old fart. Crush him
underneath food webs and carbon footprint facts. And, if it came to it, Ben was basically a lumberjack of a man. He could always just punch the guy in the face.

No, he would refrain, as always. Ben took a deep breath and drummed his fingers against his jeans pocket. It was the right thing to do. Anyway, this man would never see the light. No matter what.

“Bag?”

“No, I’ll carry it, thanks.” Ben hurried away without turning back. The electric doors greeted him with cutting wind. He shoved his hands in his pockets.

“What a total jerk,” he told Olivia when she got off of work. “Completely grating. I mean, he clearly knew I didn’t agree with him. Why would he even bring it up?”

Olivia listened from the kitchen, where she was baking pie to take to tomorrow’s Christmas dinner with Ben’s parents. Tomorrow they’d make the drive three hours north of DC, up to Villanova, Pennsylvania. The apple peeler punctuated her conversation with its quick schik. “Wait, schik schik, how did he know you didn’t agree, schik?”

“I used the company credit card. With the polar bears. That’s what got him going.”

“How, shik shik shik. What were you there for?” She finished peeling and began cutting the apples into slices.

“Just an ice scraper. Once my reassignment comes through, I’ll be driving up north enough that I’ll need it. Point is, though, that register guy—Gary, or whatever—was beyond help.”
Olivia walked behind his seat on the couch and handed him an apple slice. “Poor Benny,” she teased, “Scary man at the store said mean things to you.”

He took the slice and made a face. She went on, “But, seriously, maybe you should have said something, you know? You could have been the light in his darkness, or something.”

Ben chewed the apple and shrugged. “Maybe that was the best thing to do, but he didn’t seem very receptive. Anyway, who knew it’d be such a fight to buy a freakin’ ice scraper?”

She squeezed his shoulders. “You’re awfully tense. Is it the Christmas thing?”

“No, no, I’m okay. Work’s a little hectic with the whole reassignment. I’m probably just tired.” Though, maybe he was stressed about the Christmas thing. His parents meant well, but were, well, difficult.

As far as he could tell, they had the tolerance for learning only one fact each time he visited him. Two years ago it was just that he was dating Olivia, “that sweet Italian girl,” as his mother still referred to her. Last year, they seemed to grasp that she was actually American—half Italian, but born and raised in Chicago. This year, who knew what would get through. The vegetarian thing? That had been a five-year struggle. Or maybe he’d convince them to do something really crazy—say, start recycling.

That would be an uphill battle, Ben knew. You had to pick and choose what to fight for and when, otherwise you’d get grated down. He’d seen it a hundred times at work, especially in the older set. People who’d fought so hard that they just lost their fire. Sometimes you’d see them haunting the offices, moping over papers, gazing out the
Sometimes they just quit entirely; moved out to suburbia, worked for big business, bought minivans. You had to be careful about that.

“Well, don’t you worry about me at your parents’. I’ll be fine. Speaking of your reassignment, though—just to be clear—Paul said it’s just a change of project, nothing else, right?”

“Yeah, I’ll be switching to Department of Marine Agriculture stuff. It’s hectic, but the right thing, I think. There’ll be travel between here and New York, and some trips down to Florida to work with the fisheries there. Everything else is the same, though.”

“Ok, so you’re not getting a raise,” Olivia said, though he didn’t like the way she said it. It wasn’t the first time she’d asked about his salary.

“Oh! I almost forgot. Could you look at the router? I tried plugging and unplugging it, but it still isn’t working.”

Ben checked the router, which sat in the corner beneath the big window. One orange light blinked on the front, and the other lights didn’t turn on. He knew no more about technology than the next person, though Olivia seemed to think he had some kind of ability to fix things. He unplugged it and counted to ten.

At four, Ben had the uncanny feeling something was watching him. Five, something outside, in the photinia bushes obscuring the empty lot across the street. Six, something hypnotic, roving, dark, wild. The streetlamp’s glow reflected off the waxy leaves, revealing nothing. Light rain spat on the window.

“Is it working?”
Ben couldn’t remember where he’d stopped counting. He waited a moment before plugging it in. One by one, the lights came on, some green, some yellow. “Go ahead and try it,” he said, with a last glance over his shoulder.

Olivia bent over her laptop in the kitchen, which she’d been using to read the pie recipe. “Nope. Same error message.”

“Huh. I’ll have to call the cable people. Anyway, I’m hungry. Let’s eat. Roasted butternut squash?”

“I need the oven for the pie.”

“Right, then—“ he went to examine the fridge. “Vegetable stew?”

“Sounds good.”

They sat down to their dinner while the pie baked. Ben sipped a glass of wine, and Olivia drank milk in order to cut the spice.

“This afternoon was the Henkels-Williamson wedding,” Olivia said. “You would have thought it was pretty cheesy. Red and white roses, horse drawn carriage, the works. They made it Christmas themed, so all the bridesmaids wore long, red dresses and the groomsmen had these white suits with dark green ties.”

“Oh God.”

“Yeah, it was bad. They made up for it with the cake, though. It was just absolutely gorgeous, exactly what I want. Four tiers, raspberry white chocolate. They sent the assistants home early, or I would have just stayed to stare at it. And now the happy couple is off to sunny St. Vincent.”

For a while Ben didn’t say anything. He ate and listened to the rain, which now fell hard against the pavement. Quietly he said, “So that’s what you want, also?”
“Ew, no. I’d never have such a cheesy wedding.” She laughed. Ben wasn’t amused. “Come on, baby, we’ve talked about this. Getting married isn’t in the cards right now, and that’s fine. I’m an assistant wedding planner. I look at wedding cakes. Maybe not for any time soon, or ever, but I can’t not look at them any less than you can not look at—I don’t know—farming practices. It’s Christmas Eve. Let’s not worry about that right now.”

“You’re right, you’re right. I’m sorry, I’m in a bad mood. If I take a shower, I’ll feel better.”

Ben let the hot water wash over him. It’s okay, he told himself, we all have those days. In the morning things would be different. Probably. Hopefully. They dodged these conversations all the time, though. She’d pronounce a new wedding invitation design beautiful, but in this possessive way, like she’d hoarded it in a shoebox underneath their bed. Like there was a timer ticking backwards, every second nearing them to the inevitable wedding, the inevitable honeymoon, and everything after that—sealed, wrapped, and tied.

Like their last fight. Calm down, she had said. Nothing about her job had to bleed over into their life together if they didn’t want for it to. Was that true? Wasn’t it part of who you were? Hey, she’d said, what’s the big aversion to marriage, anyway? They both knew better than to buy into the media hype. That’s what you do, isn’t it? Divide the truth from the bullshit, in your job. Stop worrying so much, Ben, Benny, baby. You’re jumping the gun.

Well, you are jumping the gun, Ben told himself. She’s just talking about her work, and there’s nothing wrong with that. You have to be more understanding. You
love her, after all. When you’re together, you’re happy. That’s what really matters.

Nothing else was decided, and that was okay.

That night he curled next to her in their bed. She smelled like baked apples and cinnamon. “I’m sorry,” he said into the darkness of the room. She molded into him, and, in her hot breath on his shoulder, he knew he was forgiven.

On Christmas morning, Ben woke up later than usual, to an empty bed. In the haze between sleeping and waking, he felt the horror of her gone forever. Olivia wasn’t a morning person. She never woke up earlier than him. He tossed himself from bed and into the living room, where he found her casually reading on their couch.

“Merry Christmas, baby,” she said sleepily. “There’s oatmeal on the stove if you want it.”

“Merry Christmas. You’re up early.” He spooned a bowl for himself, found himself waking with each bite. She flipped to the next page. “What are you reading?”

“A Christmas Carol. It’s an old family tradition. We always read it to the kids.”

“Right. You’ve mentioned that.” Ben rubbed his eyes. “I guess we should get ready.”

Ben got dressed and packed the car. The bulky presents for his parents required two trips, during which Olivia dressed. Ben had carefully arranged the gifts in the trunk of his Honda Civic Hybrid, when he heard a low, rumbling bass flood the cold garage. It was almost too low to hear—rather, it vibrated in his chest and ached in his throat. It seemed to surround him from all sides; he froze, unable to pinpoint its source.

On confused instinct, Ben got in the car and locked the doors. He turned on the engine ran the heat, trying to quell his goosebumps.
He rested his head against the seat and listened to “I’m Dreaming of a White Christmas,” with his eyes shut. It was too early in the morning to think. Whatever just happened, he could blame it on the morning, probably. Jitters about having to go talk himself up to his family.

Knocks on the passenger window caught his attention. Olivia, holding the pie, motioned for him to unlock the doors. She climbed inside and buckled up. “Ooh, thanks for warming up the car. We almost forgot the pie.” Ben smiled, relieved he didn’t have to explain himself.

“No problem. You’re all set?”

“Yeah, I locked up. Let’s head out.”

The drive was only interrupted by a short stop for gas and coffee outside of Baltimore. Ben watched the tank while Olivia picked things up inside. Around 3, they pulled up to the long driveway of his parent’s house. The wide and flat street stood white with snow in the shade of tall oaks.

Ben’s dad met them in the driveway with big hugs.

“There they are! We were starting to worry, but come on in, don’t stand in the cold. Your mom’s fluttering around the kitchen, and Elise is off somewhere. Let’s have a drink, shall we?”

The Christmas dinner followed the usual pattern. The family convened in the living room, hot toddies in hand. Elise, Ben’s younger sister, emerged from upstairs to read on the couch, while their dad shook the presents Ben brought. He and his father discussed Allen Iverson and the fate of the 76ers while Olivia teased Elise out of her book. Ben felt himself calming down with his father’s familiar basketball chatter.
Dinner was served at 5:30. Elise, excited that after one semester at Syracuse University she was now allowed to drink wine, opened a bottle and poured for the table. After his dad cut the ham (“No, dad, please go ahead,” begged Ben) the conversation turned to Olivia and Ben.

“So,” it began, strangely like an interview, “how long have you been dating now?”

“It’ll be two years, four months in just a couple of days,” Olivia answered without hesitation.

“How’s the new apartment?” asked Elise. “I’ve been looking into grad school down in the area. Georgetown has a public policy program.”

“Grad school? Already?”

“It’s never too early to start looking,” Elise said simply. Ben always was amazed that this serious, decisive girl came from his same gene pool.

“The apartment’s wonderful,” bubbled Olivia. “We’re just about settled in, though it could use a little more color. It’s all wood floors and black and white. I’ve been looking into some different furniture.”

“Really?” asked Ben. “What have you found?”

“Oh, you know. Couches, tables. The couch has seen better days, don’t you think?”

Ben shoved a spoonful of mashed potatoes in his mouth because he didn’t think so, and he didn’t want to get into it at dinner. He liked that couch. It was black pleather. He’d had it since the day he moved into college, eight years ago.

“Oh come on, Benny. There’s a rip in the cushion.”
“Well, if I come for a visit, maybe I can stay with you guys,” Elise said.

“Sure, we’d love to have you,” answered Olivia.

“I’d love to come see it too,” his mother announced. “And how’s work going?”

“It’s good. I’m about to be reassigned to work with the Department of Agriculture on marine conservation. We’re working with fisheries to make sure the reefs down in Florida are protected.”

“Cool—do you have to move or anything?” asked Elise.

“No, but there’ll be some travel if everything works out.”

“And is this a promotion, or…?” his father asked, leaning forward.

“No, it’s just a reassignment. A change of project, really.”

“And you’ve been working for your wildlife thing for what, two years?”

“Two and half, yeah.”

“That’s a while to be in the same position.”

“I like my position.”

Olivia poked at her potatoes. “Well,” she said, “there’s still time for a promotion, if you keep working as hard as you have.”

Ben put down his fork. Seriously? He asked himself. Seriously, Olivia? He tried to stay calm. Took a long sip of wine. His sister—God bless that girl—stepped into the conversation.

“Well I think it’s great what Ben’s doing. But it’s Christmas. Who wants to be talking about work? Come on, let’s have some pie. Dad, if you’ll help me out? Now?”
The two of them disappeared, Elise loudly proclaiming that apple pie beat pecan any day of the week. Ben excused himself to use the restroom. Instead he grabbed a coat and slipped out the back door.

He was slow-burn furious. It took him awhile to notice it building up, to realize it was there, but there it was, and he couldn’t ignore it. He hoped the snow outside would cool him down. It couldn’t. It wasn’t his parents. They meant well, he knew, even if it came out in all of the wrong ways. They expected a lot because they cared, and he knew that. He wouldn’t try to change that about them.

It was Olivia. That smug look in her eye, like she owned him. Again. Like she saw his faults and was just biding her time, counting down until she could alter each of them to create what she wanted out of him. Like carefully hammering the staves of a tent into place, until she could make him into the structure she wanted. She hadn’t been like that before. She used to like his job, and it didn’t matter if he was an intern or the CEO. She liked their apartment. She liked him, now, not some future version of himself, who would marry her with raspberry white chocolate wedding cake, and have beautiful cutlery and children and a bigger salary. Now he was just a body in progress, a to-be, someday to fulfill the void of what she wanted, what she needed.

Ben reached into his pocket and searched for a cigarette, before he realized he’d quit a year ago, at Olivia’s quiet insistence. That’s how she always did it, too. Insidiously. And it wasn’t just her he was furious at. She may have led him there, but, worse, he let her. Him. He changed for her. And who was he becoming? Someone he didn’t know anymore, someone who was okay with all of it. God, what he’d give for a
cigarette. Of course, there was nothing in the coat. He kicked the piled up snow by the sidewalk. It burst into a shimmering cloud in the moonlight.

Two glowing orbs, beyond the silver cloud, caught his attention. They bobbed toward him, growing larger and then skirting to his right, staying in shadow. A motion-detectector light switched on when they neared the garage.

The bobcat exuded a restless power, its light green eyes shifting from Ben to the lights, then back to Ben. It stood in flicking, feral sureness—triangular ears up and forward, gray-brown fur on end. Snow clung to its underside.

Ben’s heart took off at a hundred miles an hour. It was incredible, its body tensed, front paws together and ready to spring. It defied the winter, Ben’s presence, the suburbia where they stood. Their eyes connected, for how long he did not know.

“Ben, are you out here?” Olivia called from the back door. Ben turned to answer her. The second he turned back, there was nothing.

“Ben? What are you doing?”

Without a word, he returned inside. He wasn’t dealing with this anymore. As he passed her she became one with the ivy clinging to the wall.

Ben sat down to dessert with his family. His sister, glassy-eyed from wine and the spiked hot chocolate, happily wolfed down the apple pie Olivia brought. His father offered him another drink, which he declined. He had to drive back to DC tonight, and didn’t want to risk any trouble.

His dad leaned forward in his chair. “Listen, Ben, we’re proud of you. We’re so glad you could come up for Christmas.”
“When will we get to see you again?” His mother asked. “If you’re driving to New York, we’re right on the way. You could stop in for dinner.”

“Yeah, I’ll stop by once in a while.” And he would not ask permission.

With that, he made his parents’ Christmas. They finished their food and opened presents. Olivia had fallen quiet before dessert and stayed that way until they hugged his family goodbye and buckled their seatbelts.

“What the fuck was that about?” she asked. Ben reversed from the driveway and shifted into drive.

“I should ask you the same question. What the fuck, Olivia? Christmas dinner is when you decide to go Stepford-wife on me? And the apartment isn’t good enough all of a sudden?”

“Oh, you want to fight about that? Your pitted out college couch? You’re not going to mention the way you’ve just ignored me for hours? Screw your couch.”

“Screw my couch? I like that couch. It doesn’t go crazy at the drop of a hat!”

“So I’m the crazy one? Who was the one standing out in the snow tonight? What was that about, anyway?”

“It’s about me not knowing who you are anymore! What happened to the girl I met at the Cherry Blossom Festival? We cared about the same things. We liked our apartment. Since when did everything stop being good enough?”

“Since I grew up! You can’t keep an empty, black-and-white apartment for the rest of your life! I can’t believe you’re being such a child about this—as if I somehow I’m doing the wrong thing by thinking about your future!”
“The future doesn’t have to be this cookie-cutter 1950s bullshit you’ve convinced yourself of, where you have play housewife and I go off to work. And there’s another thing! Since when was my job not good enough, huh? I’m doing what I think is right. What I care about.”

“I don’t care if you want to fight for the environment, but you should like that I have high hopes for you—why is it so hard to understand that you’re better than a junior account manager at a company that only pays 33k? Do you ever even consider that they’re underselling you? That you deserve a promotion? Stop thinking about what’s the right thing for the environment for half a second and consider what the right thing is for us!”

“Oh, you want to talk about jobs? What about you, Miss Wedding-planner? Have you figured out what dress you’re wearing yet? Have you picked out the cake and invitations? Here’s a newsflash: we aren’t getting married. Try factoring that into your plans sometime.”

Ben switched to the left lane of the highway and pushed down on the pedal. Snow crystals shone on the windshield in the intermittent streetlight. The speedometer spiked and Ben felt bubbling heat in his tensed muscles. End it, part of him said. Why stop now? What’s even left to hold on to?

Olivia had shut down. She leaned against the window with her arms crossed, jaw clenched. He focused on passing cars and pushed the speed limit. She muttered something Ben couldn’t hear.

“What?” he barked.
“I said, I’m pregnant.” He met her eyes, fierce in the darkness. She waited for him to speak, but he couldn’t form the words. He didn’t understand. Olivia was on the pill. His throat was thick and he felt small like a child lost somewhere tall and unfamiliar. There was no way she could be pregnant.

Quietly, she continued. “I’ve been late for a while. I started getting sick in the mornings, so I took a test.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure.” She fished into her bag. “I bought another test at the gas station on our way up. I didn’t know when to tell you. It’s positive.”

The words sunk in as he drove. Pregnant. With a baby.

“I want to keep it,” she said, defensively.

He grabbed her hand in silence. He should know the right thing to say, but he didn’t. At first he didn’t know anything at all, except that he was scared.

“I want to be there with you,” he said.

And then, “But having this baby doesn’t mean we have to change everything. I want to be there for you. As me. And you, as yourself. That’s the only way we can do this.”

She squeezed his hand back.

From the shoulder, a lurking shadow leaped across the road, narrowly avoiding the car. Ben swerved and recovered.

“What was that?” Olivia asked, gripping the dashboard.

At the edge of the woods, a short, rounded tail flicked before stalking into the night. Ben watched it in the rearview mirror. “Something roving and wild,” he said.
The Victors

The chirping in his ears called Spear from his dream of Paz. He lay in the grass, watching her pick long-stemmed red flowers from the water’s edge. Summer sun glinted off her hair, which was warm when she lay next to him. Her mouth moved, but he only heard chirping. What was she saying? Spirit? I’m Spirit. No, wait. Not anymore. No, I don’t want to wake up.

The chirping continued. He rolled over, knowing he couldn’t hold on anymore. Paz was dead. He curled on his side, feeling the regular rise and fall of his breathing against the blankets of the cot. When he opened his eyes, his activity chip projection illuminated his arm with red letters. He jolted up and rubbed his eyes to read:

CENTRAL COMMAND TAKEN IN SIEGE AT CAPITOL CIVIL COMPLEX. THE OLIGARCHY IS OVER. LONG LIVE PEACE! –COMMANDER FAIRBORNE.

Spear pulled on his clothes and hurried out of his room, down the hall to the Uprising’s Communications Center. In the small space of hologram screens and printers, the whole unit shouted and drank wine from assorted dishware.

“Spear,” Val called. The unit started calling him that when Fairborne called his famous paintings “Spears of truth into the lies of the commonality.” “Spear, we’ve done it! We’ve won!”

“We’ve won,” Spear croaked, as Val hugged him.

“Someone get this man some wine!” Val shouted. He clapped him on the back while a full glass was passed toward them. “Come on, man. It’s not the time to be glum. Though I’m sure you’ll miss those long nights with me, won’t you? Honest, I hope I never make another poster in my life.”
Spear put the glass to his lips and let the wine wash down, warm and wet and tannin-dry. He nodded, then more forcefully. “Sorry, not fully awake.” He downed the glass. Val laughed as Spear wrinkled his burning nose.

“Awake now?”

“We’ve won. We’ve really won.”

“Don’t sound so shocked. Good always prevails!” Val raised his mug. “To Good! To Peace!”

“To Peace!” cheered the group. Spirit raised his glass, but he choked on the words. “A Paz,” he said. Then, to himself: forever.

They all streamed into the streets that night, singing, cheering, and drinking. The moon sank and the sun rose, and Spirit marched to the Capitol building with Val at his side. He tried not to think about the dawn, and when he drank enough of wine, he didn’t.
Whiteout

On the fifteenth anniversary of her husband’s death, Georgia Crowley huddled near the radiator, her afghan doing little to help the cold that settled into her bones. Her plans to visit her husband’s grave were cancelled when the snow hit Bowling Green two days ago. It rolled in from the northeast, shutting down New England before coming into Kentucky and dumping two feet since it started. The shrieking wind didn’t show any signs of letting up.

Georgia marked her page of The Murder of Roger Ackroyd. She leaned back in the chair and rested her eyes. Lord, if this cold wouldn’t leave her. She had already turned the thermostat up; those old pipes were doing their best.

Georgia’s cat jumped onto her lap from the back of the chair and extended its claws. The cat picked at the afghan and mewled.

“Clara, darling, we are in a mess,” Georgia said, opening her eyes.

The cat curled into her lap, rubbing its white head against Georgia’s pale, white hand.

“I’m upset about it, too. We ought to be visiting William. He’ll be cold out there tonight. You remember William. I know you were hardly a kitten, but he’s the one who brought you home. He just went straight down to the pound and picked you up, when you were just a young thing. Doctor’s orders, though sorry to say you didn’t have the cure for cancer. Of course, you remember.” Georgia poked the cat on the paw.
Clara, a fat cat, overtook Georgia’s lap in one stretch. Georgia rested back in her chair and dozed until the grandfather clock in the front hall chimed three. On waking, she checked the window for any sign that the snow would let up—there were none—before scooting Clara off of her.

“Time for lunch, dear. Hop up.”

Georgia’s appetite had been very small for a long time now. Her son, who really ought to have called this morning, had been very concerned about it when he found out. He came up from Albuquerque just to make sure she was taking her medicine and going to the doctor and eating. Fool boy, as if she didn’t know—as if she didn’t see herself doing it. She knew what it took to sustain life, come hell, high water, or a three-day blizzard. She raised that boy through the daily worry of a father off fighting for Johnson in the godforsaken jungle. At barely twenty, she weaned Peter in William’s big empty house outside of Louisville, and now he worried—he worried—she wasn’t eating right. Her body might be going, but her mind certainly was not. Georgia marched into the kitchen, popped open the tray holding her pills for the day, and spread pimiento cheese on a slice of white bread. Clara trailed behind.

Georgia sat down to her meal at the breakfast table. She planned to watch the Game Show Network over lunch, but when she flicked on the television, it flashed only a moment before the power in the house zapped off. The carbon monoxide monitors beeped shrilly from the living room, and the digital clocks on the oven fell dark. Only the pendulum of the grandfather clock continued its regular, clicking swing.
For a moment, Georgia sat in the dark, hovering over her sandwich. “This can’t be good,” she said to herself. The wind howled around the house. Georgia walked carefully to the window, making sure that Clara wasn’t crowding around her feet. The last thing she needed was to trip up on the poor cat.

If the power is out, Peter can’t call today, she thought. William wouldn’t be happy about that. A son ought to visit and call his mother often, even if he has his hands full with teenage twins from hell. Kiernan and Caleigh. That’s what you get when go off and marry into some Irish Catholic family, leaving your roots behind. Those kids didn’t show an ounce of proper, southern Crowley in them, and less even her Bledsoe County, Tennessee, Lafayette stock. Peter probably didn’t call because he didn’t want to pass on more bad news about them. Their schools putting them into suspension again. Yes, that must be it. Peter shielding her. He was always trying to do that.

Georgia resolved to call him once the power came back, and to read her Agatha Christie until then. Once the snow cleared up, she’d visit William. Of course, she’d send the Good Lord a few prayers in his direction beforehand. Surely this wind and snow can’t go on much longer. It’s unnatural to have such a snow in this part of Kentucky.

She lit the long white candles from the crystal candelabra that was her father’s mother’s, bought for the white and blue wedding that still hung in the collective memory of Cold Spring, Tennessee. Perhaps that was now over a century ago. That’s the way things went. Those stories ought to keep going down in the
family, but who knows what those twins would absorb. Of course, Peter knew those stories, as was right.

With a source of light, she was able to take care of the carbon monoxide detectors, which she had to entirely dismantle to stop their loud, shrill beeping. Georgia had just settled in her chair when a heavy pounding came from her back door. She started.

“Mrs. Crowley? Mrs. Crowley?” a call broke through the shrill wind. “Mrs. Crowley? Are you home?”

“Coming, dear, coming!” She couldn’t believe someone was out in this weather. Some poor soul must be in true desperation. She rushed through the darkness to the door.

The door took some finagling to open, as now over a foot, if not over two feet, of snow blocked its path. Georgia hurled herself against the door with all her might to get it to budge. When it jammed a quarter of the way open, the man outside quickly slid into her house.

“Mrs. Crowley, good evening, what a snow we are having,” said Charlie Chun, who rented out the converted garage apartment on the property. He spoke with a thick Chinese accent, and everything he said had a strange intonation, such that to Georgia’s ear it ran together as a mutter. Snow encrusted his black scarf and hat, and he wore a bright orange nylon jacket over wet jeans.

“I am sorry to impose on your home,” he said, bending forward funny-like before straightening himself out. “I have had a catastrophe. The roof has fallen.”

“Oh my God, are you hurt?”\"
“No, I am okay. The roof fell near me, but I avoided it. The house is bad. This is very much snow.”

“Well, please make yourself at home. I’m so sorry to hear about this—of course you’ll stay in the extra bedroom until the snow clears up and you can work things out with Mr. Wells. I’ve told him our roof needs work for a year now, and now you’re in this mess. Well, we’ll pray that my roof stays all together. Thank God you’re safe, though.” As she spoke, Georgia had ushered Charlie into the sitting room. Clara, who lounged on the couch, hissed and dashed into the back room immediately.

“Ignore Clara, she’s skittish around strangers. She just can’t stand to be inside at night, though I won’t let her out in the snow. Please, make yourself at home.”

“Thank you, you are very kind.”

“I’m sure you must be frozen to the bone. Come, build us a fire. I have several logs next to the fireplace. I’ll make us some tea to warm you up, and there’s a blanket on the back of the couch if you’d like it.”

“Thank you very much.”

Georgia fell back into the kitchen. She put on a pot of water, thankful that her stoves were gas powered. She lit a match in order to get the fire going. A person didn’t know how much they used electricity until it was lost, she supposed. That’s the way of people, for sure. Always appreciating things too late.

At least she had the sweet Chinese man to talk with, though the news of his roof made her nervous for her own. That Mr. Wells had allowed the roofs to be in
such a condition was an absolute sin. And Charlie would be tough for conversation, with that accent. It could be worse, of course. His English now was smoother than she remembered it when they first met, at the end of the summer. When he moved in she made him her famous cream of chicken casserole as a warming present. Charlie had taken the dish from her in a flurry of astonished, incomprehensible English while his brother rested inside.

That brother was sick, she recalled. In some big to-do, ambulances had come and taken him away. After that, Georgia only saw Charlie around their house. “Yes, it probably got him too,” she said to William. “Who knows. Those sicknesses are trying to get us all.”

While the water heated, she brought Charlie matches. She found him precisely stacking logs into the grate.

“Here you are, if you don’t mind lighting the fire for us. God knows, my knees aren’t what they used to be. By the time I’ve lit it, the snow will’ve already melted!” She laughed. He didn’t crack a smile, just sat there in gloom. What in the world was she going to talk to him about?

“The meteorologists have predicted little improvement for the next two days. We must conserve the wood and the heat. It is possible that we will not have power for some time,” Charlie said after lighting the kindling. The warm glow reddened his face. Charlie was a tall, lanky man, with a round face, and a flat, wide nose. In the firelight, shadows cut deep underneath his eyes. Gazing into the fire like that, he looked profoundly sad.
“I sure hope they’re wrong,” Georgia said. If it didn’t let up for two more days, it might be a week before she’d be safe driving to the cemetery. And what flowers could she buy William if all the stores have shut down?

Charlie sneezed. Georgia blessed him automatically.

“I’m not sure how much of a help I can be in these troubled times, Mr. Chun,” she said, gently as she could. “But I will pray for you and your family. Until then, we mustn’t dwell on our misfortunes. Come, tell me more about yourself—where do you work?”

“I work in engineering with the General Motors plant.”

“Ah yes, I used to drive a Malibu myself. Good cars. And there’s a factory inside town, isn’t there?”

Charlie finished poking the fire and sat across from her on the couch. Between the doilies and afghans, he looked pretty stiff, the poor man.

“Yes, it is one of our major assembly plants. We make all of the Corvettes.”

“Corvettes? What a riot! But I haven’t seen you driving one—I’m kidding, Charlie dear. How are you liking it there?”

He looked embarrassed. “In honesty, I find it monotonous. I am thinking of quitting and moving.” He fiddled with the matchbook still in his hands.

“Moving! Just when we’ve come to get acquainted? But you’ll return to China, to see your family, won’t you?”

Charlie rubbed his eyes and sneezed again. “My family lives now in San Diego. I may move to California.” He looked into the fire. “My brother, you
remember, lived here with me. He was sick with cancer, so he lived with me. But he has died in October, and now I am unwilling to live here.”

“I sure am sorry to hear it. But, well, at least he got the best care he could get by coming here to Kentucky. I’m sure having you here must have been a great comfort to him, and that our doctors did their best.”

“I am not understanding your meaning.”

“Oh, I only mean that—well, that your brother was lucky to get such good care by coming to America.”

“No, the Western medicine killed him. It put poison into his blood.”

“You mean he had chemotherapy for his cancer?”

“Yes, it killed him. I told him I did not trust this therapy, but he insisted. He believed very much in the West, but the doctors told him they could not help. It is something of Chun Song that I will not understand. But there is something that I know: he came to Kentucky to die with me because I am his brother. He did not come for the medicine.” Charlie sat up erect and white-knuckled.

“I see,” said Georgia with some surprise. “Well, I’m sure he’s in a better place now, and at peace with the Father. I’ll keep him and your family in my prayers.”

“That is good. Chun Song was a good man. He taught children mathematics.”

Both of them jumped when the teapot started shrieking in the other room. Georgia let is scream for a moment, then clapped her hands together in decision.

“Tea’s ready, dear. How do you take it?”

“I prefer it black, thank you.”
She pushed herself up and hurried to the kettle, which now let out a piercing whistle. “Impatient thing,” she muttered to herself, moving it off the burner. She opened up the cabinet with the nicer china to pull out matching tea sets. How pleasant that she actually got to use them for once. She stirred sugar into her teacup.

Poor Charlie—she hoped she hadn’t upset him. But what a silly thing to blame the chemotherapy! If it was cancer, there’s not much to be done but make peace and pass on. Surely he knew that. The doctors did their best. And what a sad soul, all alone in a country that wasn’t his, with a family far away that didn’t visit, all while he’s here, trying to hang on to old memories.

Georgia placed saucers on the tray and the cups in their saucers. Carefully, she carried them to the living room and placed the tray on the coffee table. The sun was setting, and in the dark she thought for a moment that he looked just like her son, when he was sixteen and brokenhearted but obstinate in silence about what bothered him. Charlie had the same folded-arm defensiveness covering his heartache.

Charlie sneezed again, nearly spilling his tea. Georgia blessed him again.

“Do you also have other animals living with you?”

“No, it’s only Miss Clara and I. My son, Peter, he must be ‘round about your age, if maybe a little older—he moved down to Albuquerque with his wife some years ago. They have twins, Kiernan and Caleigh, now in their teens. My husband passed on now fifteen years ago, you know. To the day. I must admit, I sure am glad
for company at a time like this. Especially with this blizzard. Clara can be a real handful during bad weather.”

“I have an allergy to cats.”

“Oh, poor thing, I bet I have some medicine around here. If not, I can get you a nice glass of milk—milk always stops the sneezing.”

“I have not heard of that as a cure.”

“Trust me, it’s an old remedy. It works just as long as you’re drinking the milk. The problem is that you have to keep drinking quite a lot of it. Here. Take that candle and go into the bathroom. There’s some allergy medicine behind the mirror. I’ll get you a glass of milk.”

As she poured the milk, the wind reached a whistling pitch. This was decidedly out of the regular. The shutters outside slammed against the house. “Sure if it isn’t whistling up the dead out there,” she mused.

Again, they convened in the sitting room. Georgia blew on her tea; Charlie took the allergy medicine, though he seemed to eye it suspiciously. All this moving back and forth was exhausting her. They both drank their tea.

“Clara gets jumpy around strangers, but I’m sure she’ll show up. Do you like cats, Mr. Chun? I know the allergy must be a bother.”

“Yes, other than the allergy, I like them very much. Cats can be easily surprised. I had a cat when I was young, but I only played with it sometimes. If I touched it too much, it made me sick.”

“A cat when you were young? How lovely! What was its name?”

“It didn’t have one.”
“But, whatever did you call it by?”

“I called it ‘cat.’”

“Really?”

“Yes, in actuality.”

Lord in Heaven, Mrs. Crowley thought, smiling to herself. If she didn’t live by the most humorless man in creation. Well, at least he liked cats.

“Tell me about when you were young. You lived in China?”

“Yes, in a small village in the countryside. It is not far from Shanghai. My parents were administrative officials for the government.”

“And what’s it like at home?”

“Yes...well, there is a large hill there, and you can see all the city below. It is very beautiful. I remember one Spring Festival night, my father took my brother there with me. You can see all the firecrackers in the town from there. I also have a sister, Chun Ju, who works with flowers. There is a joke—“he paused here to make sure Mrs. Crowley was still listening. She’d perked at the idea of him telling a joke. ”I am unsure of how it will translate. My sister has a name of a flower. I do not know how you call it, but it is very popular in China. You can make it into sweet tea.

Father says mother drank so much of tea that my sister smelled of the flowers when she was born. Now she works with them. If mother had not drunk so much tea, sister Ju would have grown up to be the leader of China.”

Georgia laughed politely. “Do you ever visit?”

“Not in a long time. I wish that I could. My family now lives in California. My sister wants to grow her own flowers someday, but now she arranges them.”
"She’ll get there, if God has it in His plan," she said confidently.

The fire needed another log, and the way the wind gusted through the chimney made Mrs. Crowley wrap up in her afghan. Charlie sipped his tea, caught her looking at the fire, and stood to put the log on. He crouched down to poke the wood through the grate.

“What do you mean, if God has it in His plan?” he asked, louder than he’d been all night. When she didn’t answer immediately, he followed with, “forgive me, I do not wish to be rude. It is an expression I do not understand, but am told often.”

“No, not at all! It means that God has a plan for everyone, and that he’ll be with you through even the hardest of times. That’s how God works. In the end, things will turn out for the best.”

“Chun Song explained it to me like that. He said, ‘God made us for a reason. We all have a purpose because of Him.’ But it is unfamiliar to think so. My family we are—how do you say it? Not believers.”

Georgia bit back the word “heathen.” She was in with the times enough to know better than answering with what her mother had ingrained in her. “Atheists?”

Charlie stood from the hearth and returned to the couch. “Yes, atheists. I was raised this way, but have been less sure. Chun Song became a Christian. He said I would understand when I started to die.”

“Well, I’m a Methodist, born and raised. If you have any questions, I don’t mind helping. In times like these, it’s a definite relief to pray.”

“I tried to pray to Chun Song when he died, but I did not hear anything back. I do not understand how there could be such a plan that would kill my brother with
cancer. He was 44 years of age. This is far too young. It has been a few months, and now my house is broken. Perhaps this is because I do not believe in God.”

“Well, I don’t think God punishes people like that. There’s a verse—‘now I see in a mirror dimly,’ I believe it goes—‘but then face to face.’ It means we don’t understand the plan we have until we die. Trials and tribulations may face all of our lives, but the point is that in those hard times, well, you can lean on Him to walk with you. But we all have hard times, even devout believers. My husband died at 66, which is rather young as well. Today I wanted to visit his grave—he died on January 12th, fifteen years ago—but this snow is keeping me from him. Perhaps God is trying to lead you somewhere by these hard times. We can’t see or understand His plan from our point of view.”

“So then, you simply must trust that He has a plan?”

“Yes, I trust he has a plan.” Though what it was she couldn’t say. Of course, she didn’t need to say—that was the point. It was God’s business. Even a quiet widow in Bowling Green had a way in the world, though it might not be easy. It hadn’t been easy. What had she been allowed to keep through it all? Not her husband or her son, not even her friends. She had herself and her cat, and soon she’d lose that. That was the day she was waiting around for, now—the day God would take her back to Himself. Who would be left to put the flowers on her grave?

“My heat in my house functioned very little for two days before the roof fell. But I had just bought these jackets for more warmth, just before it snowed. If it is part of a plan, that plan must be extraordinary. And my brother—you are right that he was not meaningless in death. He was important to many people. He helped
many.” Charlie looked down, his floppy hair obscuring his face. “Maybe this is what he saw, being close to death. Maybe his trust in this God was right.”

“I believe that your brother is still with us, just like my husband still is with me.” That’s right, she reminded herself. It only felt like she had lost everything, but she had to believe that she hadn’t. That’s what faith was about. Wasn’t it?

“I hope that you will pray for him for me.”

“I will, Mr. Chun, but I hope you will learn to pray as well.”

“Me? No, I cannot pray. I am not a believer.”

“If you wanted to, you could become a believer. God loves us all, and will forgive us for anything we may have done before against us, so long as we ask. He will accept you, if you wanted to be accepted.”

“I do want that, though the ideas sound unfamiliar to me. I want to find out what Chun Song believed and why. That is why I tried to pray to him, but it did not work. I do not know how to pray.”

“Well, you can’t pray to a person directly—or at least, you’re not supposed to. You have to pray to God Himself. I can tell you that it isn’t a bit hard. It’s like talking. You can do it any time and in any language. Just say it, either aloud or to yourself. You might thank Him for what He’s done for you, or ask Him for help, anything you want.” She found herself echoing what she’d told her students in Vacation Bible School, back when she taught it every summer. Her pastor had talked about a moment like this—the chance to add to God’s flock—but she never expected it to come in this way. “The basic idea is to be honest with Him, and He will be there for you.”
“I can say anything I like?”

“Anything at all. Don’t hold back—there’s no hiding from Him anyway. Give it a try if you like. I’ll pray with you.”

She bowed her head in silence, and so did he. Oh Lordy, she thought, what have I gotten myself into? She herself didn’t know what to say to God just then, so she listened to the crackle of the fire and the howl of wind instead. This had been an eventful night indeed. William, what am I going to do about all of this? She hazarded a peek at Mr. Chun, only to find him still sitting, head bowed, with all the seriousness of a monk. With a twinge of guilt, she worried she was teaching him wrong. No, she had taught countless children the same thing: God loved them. That was the important thing, and the details never mattered so much as that.

She let herself think of other things, like whether she’d locked the door after Charlie came in. When she looked back up, Charlie had finished praying. He seemed to be waiting for her to look at him.

“Mrs. Crowley, I have asked many questions. I do not know if they will be answered, but I feel some relief. Are you sure He’ll hear me?”

“Yes, He listens to everyone. He doesn’t always answer questions directly, though. He works in mysterious ways.”

“It is good that He hears them. I think I would like to ask you more questions on what you believe. You must teach me everything, so that I may understand what it means.”
“I’d love to Mr. Chun, absolutely. I’d just like a moment to find Clara. Then, I’ll explain all I know. She’s probably just being a scaredy-cat in my room, but it’s not like her to stay missing for so long.”

“Could I assist you at all?”

“Sure, if you would carry a candle, I could use the light.”

“Yes.” He grabbed the tall white candle in the brass holder while she gathered their cups on to the tea tray.

“She’s most likely in the bedroom or kitchen. If you’ll follow me first to the kitchen, I’ll put these down.”

They moved into the kitchen, but the cat was nowhere to be seen. “She’s a Persian. Bright white, with long hair,” Mrs. Crowley explained. They walked down the hall to her bedroom, and she had Charlie look under the bed for her. No Clara. She wasn’t underneath the wardrobe or her chairs, the couches or the piano. Clara was nowhere to be found.

“Is it possible that your cat is outside?”

“There’s a cat door, yes, but I locked it when it started to get this cold. Let’s look in the laundry room. She has to be around here.”

They overturned the house looking for Clara. Finally, she double-checked the cat door, only to find it unlocked.

“Lord Almighty, I thought it was locked up! That cat’s run off into the snow!” she cried. She marched straight to her closet to wrap up in her warmest coat. She would bring that cat back from its own stupidity. Charlie followed at her heels with the candle.
Mrs. Crowley didn’t own skiwear like Charlie. Instead she pulled on her full-length mink from the closet, and the warmest shoes and gloves she had. Once ready, she marched to the front door and pushed it open through the snow that had already accumulated on the front steps.

“Clara,” she shouted, standing in the crack of the door. Charlie loomed behind her. She trudged into the powder, which was loosely packed under her knees. The wind blew thick snowflakes diagonally, and power was off on the whole street. No cars drove on their cul-de-sac. She trudged forward into her yard. It was no longer distinguishable from the rest of the street—all of it had become one swirling, empty mess.

“Clara? Clara?” she called into it, but the snow swallowed up everything into whiteness. Mrs. Crowley waited, and the wind blew, but the cat did not come. She kept on standing there, snow stuck to her shoulders and face, without the words to say anything but her cat’s name.

Her swallow stuck in her throat, and her eyes were dry from the wind. She shut them and breathed deep. The cat was gone, she knew. She stopped calling and stood limp-armed in the night.

Charlie ran halfway into the lawn. “Mrs. Crowley, I cannot locate the cat. Let’s return to the house. It is likely inside. It is not safe to be outdoors in the snow.”

“Yes, Charlie, I’ll come inside soon,” she said, recalled to awareness by his voice. She made no motion to move, but instead put out her hand, palm facing upward, to catch the snow. The flakes melted in her glove; she felt herself, her own
skin and hair, bending in the powerful wind. She turned her wrist, letting the drops run across the palm and down to the ground.

“Mrs. Crowley, we must return!” Charlie insisted.

Her eyes adjusted to the white-black night. They lingered on the shadow of a looming telephone pole before she suddenly turned on her heel. She returned to the house and slaked off her coat. Charlie had lit her other candles and was kneeling by the fire, putting on another log.

“My condolences about your lost cat,” Charlie said. “Surely God will take care of it, like he takes care of me and my sister.”

“Yes,” Mrs. Crowley croaked. The tips of her ears burned as they regained feeling in the warmth.

“I believe it will come back,” Charlie said.

She pulled her heaviest blanket from the back of the couch and wrapped herself in it to stop the shaking. It seemed to come from the core of her chest and it would not stop, even when the fire had returned feeling to her arms and legs.

“I hope the snow stops falling soon,” he said.

“Yes.”

“Would this be a time to pray? To ensure safety for the cat.”

“Yes, let’s pray,” Georgia said.

Charlie spoke in reverent, incomprehensible syllables that must have been Chinese. Georgia put together her hands in her lap. Blue veins trailed above the worn folds of her skin. She curled them into fists to flatten out the wrinkles, which only emphasized the veins.
Charlie continued praying in a songlike cadence. Georgia inched towards the fire, searching for its heat. Flames consumed the logs inside. She closed her eyes to pray, but the fire’s afterimage seared white onto her vision. crowding out her words.
In the autumn before the revolution, Spear drank nightly at the Unit 68 Bar. With the winter came whispers of unrest, again, in the fields to the north and the hills to the west. Val spoke of little else.

“These food shortages aren’t good. You know how it is. They’re looking for someone to blame.”

“Well, they protested last year, and the year before that. We’re still here.”

“Never like this, though. Don’t you think we need to do something? Another harmony initiative?”

Spear wiped the condensation from his glass. “My orders haven’t changed. We’re still campaigning for pure loyalty in expression.”

“Well, I think they will. Give it a day or two, and you’ll be in the thick of redesign. It will be like the beginning all over again. Six years of work, poof, gone.”

Val was right. The riots spread to the capitol as Spear received emergency imperatives from Central. In his Media Lab studio, he worked in the old-fashioned style, with ink. He plastered the wall with possibilities—happy schoolchildren, technology helping farmers, workers enjoying the fruits of their labor. The air hung thick with their stink. At midnight, a week after Val’s warning, Spirit scanned and printed the final series. They came for him before the ink had dried.

Spear jumped from his work when they kicked down the door. A flashbang exploded next to him. In the ringing aftermath, hands grabbed and pushed. His sight returned as the girl tied him to a chair. Fluttering scraps of paper fell into her
dark hair. A boy joined her. Their skin was young, scarred, furious as the reflections in their eyes.

Spear had seen those eyes before and felt those same hands on his shoulders. They had stroked his hair and led him down the street. They had melted into him on crisp white sheets during the summertime. Now they ripped down his posters and smashed the lamps, the printers, the hard-drives. The boy fired a single shot through each of Spear’s hands, rendering them useless. They asked no questions. They did not look at him. When they left him, bleeding and tied in the ruin of their wake, Spear faced the wall where his work once hung. All that remained were empty spaces, a shade more vivid than the empty walls.
Armageddon began with breakfast. These things often do. Technically, Diana Wright first woke up, showered, and dressed for work. A woman of simple but regular tastes, she believed a good breakfast was the key to a good day. So, like many days before it, she began by sipping a glass of juice over a half-eaten bowl of cereal, enjoying her view of the other high-rise towers in the city. That’s when the parrot crashed into her apartment window.

The parrot was, unmistakably, a parrot. Yellow underneath, with nearly teal wings, and a big black beak. The window dented from the force of its collision, glass cracks spreading outward like a spiderweb. The bird ricocheted off her window, before tumbling half a story. Somehow it righted itself and glided sixteen floors down, to street level.

Diana stood, stunned. For a moment, she dumbly held her glass, not knowing what to do. Living in New York had exposed her to her fair share of strange things, but nothing quite like this. Sure, she had heard of rats so dirty that they became stuck together. She’d once listened to her crazy neighbor’s opinions on what really happened during World War II, and on more than one occasion she’d been proposed to by a stranger—once, in fact, by a Halloween party pirate. But even then, his costume lacked the drama of the vividly-plumed bird which she thought she had just seen slam into her window. She pressed her hand to the evidence of the impact, but could only think: what the hell was that?

She looked for it again, just for proof, but it’d disappeared by the time she pushed her face to the window. On gut instinct, she rushed to the hall, jamming the down-
elevator button. If what she thought had just happened had actually happened, then the parrot needed her. Maybe. Anyway, she felt compelled to at least look for it. It had chosen her window, and that was that.

Inside the elevator, she punched the door-close button as quickly as she could. An older man rode down with her.

“It’s already started,” he said solemnly.

She peered over her shoulder at him, alarmed. “Yeah, we’ll sign the paperwork this afternoon. It’ll be quite a victory,” he continued, giving her a nod. His teeth flashed in an unnaturally white grin. Ah, she thought, spotting his Bluetooth headset. What a creepy guy, though. His light grey sweatsuit clashed with the heavy gold chain around his neck, and his cologne smelled strong and sweet. She stared at their gold-washed reflections in the polished elevator doors, willing them to open. Her ears burned from his watching her, toilet-bowl teeth grinning all the while. Eight more floors. He mumbled on in agreement.

“The change will be good for us,” were the last words Diana caught before the doors slid open. She escaped into the street without looking back.

Though still too early for the true work rush, there were plenty of dark-coated pedestrians bustling through the streets. She stood on the sidewalk as they passed. There were no birds, parrots or otherwise, to be seen.

Suddenly she felt very foolish. She hadn’t even grabbed a coat, and the early spring chill raised the hair on her arms. And what would she do if she did find the parrot? Her building was strictly no pets allowed, and there was work to get to. Too
stubborn to give up, though, she crossed her arms and walked the block, hunting for the bird.

Finding nothing, Diana reentered her building and sheepishly waved to the guard who she’d rushed past moments before.

“Forget something?” he asked.

She laughed and made her way to the elevator, only to turn back halfway. “Sorry, did you see a parrot in the street?” she asked.

“A parrot?”

“Yeah, a big blue and yellow one. It hit my window.”

“It hit your window?”

“Yes, on the sixteenth floor.”

“The sixteenth floor?” He sounded just like the bird she was looking for. Worse, he clearly thought she’d been drinking. She flushed. As if a grown woman on a wild parrot-chase wasn’t bad enough. Now her conversational skills had gone straight down the drain.

“Right, it surprised me, too. I guess you should just, y’know, keep an eye out.” Oh God, what was she even saying anymore? It was just some bird, there’s no reason to get so flustered, she told herself. Get it together.

The ding of the arriving elevator cued her exit. She scuttled away, wishing there was a reset button for the day. Maybe she should call in sick for work and sleep until tomorrow morning. But, bizarre as the day was, that wasn’t really an option. Work didn’t stop just because of life’s little interruptions—hadn’t her mother told her something like that? Yes, a hundred times, when Diana tried to skip violin practice to play outside. Her
mother shook the words into her. Work was work, and everyone had work to do. That was the most important thing, doing your work. It’s the only thing I chose to do, her mother said. All the rest simply happened. Work is the only thing that could make you important. After that, she practiced until her fingers ached and she became first chair in the school orchestra.

Diana returned to her apartment, trying to pass by the cracked window without dwelling on it. The daily routine would have to be expedited. She rushed past the half-drunk juice on the table.

Since she could remember, Diana hadn’t been late for work. Already, she was at least ten minutes behind schedule. At least all of her clothes matched—that was the advantage of her all-black closet. Think, she told her reflection as she quickly brushed her teeth. Today you need to finish reviewing the latest MRIs of Patient J. Then you can add to your analysis of his progression, but you’ll need to consult with the guys across the hall before making any conclusions. During lunch you need to swing by the bank. Don’t forget to bring that check with you. As her calendar and to-do lists started to take shape again, she could feel herself calming down. She spat, grabbed her coat and bag, and rushed off to the lab.

The Migraine Research Institute sat on the third floor of a building few people ever looked at enough to evaluate. Diana certainly didn’t look up at the building much; because she’d never perfected the art of staring through strangers, she’d learned to walk by looking down, navigating her way through crowds of shoes. Her watch showed her just about eight minutes late, but she delayed before entering. To make up for lost time, she’d half-walked, half-run through the streets, and looked a mess for it. She swiped her
windblown hair behind her ear and tried to catch her breath. There were only so many 
embarrassing conversations she liked to have per day, and the guard-parrot incident had 
met that quota.

Chase Adley, her research assistant, greeted her as she entered. He held a 
clipboard that he read while walking down the hall, a feat Diana was continually 
impressed by.

“Good, you’re here. Patient S just called. She says she’s felt this one coming on 
for a full day, and that the auras have just begun. She’s on her way now.”

Patient S was one of the roughly twenty case studies in progress in their division 
of the lab. They referred to each case by a letter or number, which helped when 
researchers did double-blind studies. It didn’t much affect the goings-on of Diana’s 
department, but they kept to the tradition, which, as Chase had put it, “at least made the 
work sound cooler.”

Diana never minded it, but Chase occasionally grated against the repetition of 
their work. It had the lofty aspiration of discovering some root cause of chronic 
migraines—an end that led to the minutia of tracking every move of their case study 
participants. Various researchers examined diet, DNA, and drug effects, amongst other 
factors. Diana and Chase specialized in brain imagery, noting the different stages and 
types of attacks. It was the kind of meticulous work that could take a decade to mean 
much of anything. But Diana was—and had been—in it for the long haul. Recently, her 
team had narrowed their efforts to the aura stage, which takes place before the onset of 
acute head pain. Diana had taken note of everything from flashes of light and strange, 
gravelly spots of darkness in the visual field to numbness of one side of the body. They
were an inconsistent, elusive phenomenon that she daily sought in the minor wrinkles and shadows of MRI and CT printouts.

“Have you pulled her file?” Diana asked Chase, shouldering off her coat.

“Exactly what I’m on my way to do.”

Chase continued down the hall as Diana jiggled her key in the lock of her office door. She dropped her bag next to the chair and glanced at the desk calendar for other appointments. This is how things work, she reminded herself, decidedly putting the parrot incident out of her mind. They happen according to plans and schedules and science and universal laws. The unexplainable is really just the unexplained, and it was her job to prove that fact.

Chase appeared in her doorframe a moment later. “You should take a look at this file,” he said, handing it out to her. “It doesn’t make sense.”

“You mean something’s missing?”

“Take a look.”

She snatched the file from him and rifled through the pages. “It looks like any other file.”

“No, look at the log dates and her prescriptions. She’s only been to us twice before.” Diana flipped to the first page, which listed when S’s case began and the details of her subsequent visits. On the first visit she described all the symptoms of classic migraines. Hers normally took place in the morning and lasted up to 28 hours—though one lasted nearly three days. Nausea often accompanied her head pain, and she had difficulty keeping her medication down during her attacks. Totally normal, for a migraine sufferer.
Attached to the first page was a medical and prescription history. She’d met with a neurologist before switching to a head pain specialist. Her dosages had steadily risen and she’d switched between all the major medications—Relpax, Frova, Maxalt—until she sought more experimental treatments. She agreed to participate in the diet study across the hall, and had been mostly in contact with them, sending weekly journals of all she’d eaten and the times of any migraines. These were copied in her file, along with some tentative analysis.

“Yogurt acts as a trigger for her,” she read. “That’s interesting.”

“Keep reading.”

The second log showed that she’d come in once before for imaging, two weeks ago. She’d described hearing a screeching noise, followed by an image that appeared like pinkish gravel, which expanded across her field of vision. Then there was a note at the bottom of the page.

“She’s off all her medications.”

“That, and her PET scan doesn’t resemble a normal migraine sufferer. Activity is concentrated in the visual cortex, but hasn’t proliferated anywhere else.”

“This was taken during the height of her attack?”

“One hour in.”

“And do we have bloodwork?”

“No. Should I schedule her for some?”

“Yeah. I’ll flag her file. We’ll pay extra attention, but there’s probably a simple explanation. Likely our error.”
Chase’s face fell slightly. It was a common expression for him, but only because he always had his hopes up, even for the smallest things.

“Don’t give me that face, Adley. It’s too early in the morning to be disappointed. Anyway, she’ll be here soon. Is the room ready for her?” she asked.

Chase left to make sure it was. Diana scanned the file again. Patient S, huh. 19 years old. Five foot eight. 124 pounds. That’s a bit thin, isn’t it? Well, they’d have to see.

She killed time before S arrived by checking her email. When the front desk paged to tell her S was there, she grabbed the file and set out for the examination room.

She and Chase walked in simultaneously, carrying S’s file and a clipboard.

“Good morning,” S called. She sat on a green examination table, legs dangling. The lights were off in the room, except a small lamp in the corner. She wore large, dark sunglasses even in the darkness of the room and hunched her shoulders forward, as if bracing for something. The researchers migrated towards the light, while S turned away from it.

“So, could you begin by describing your symptoms to us?” Diana said quietly. She’d noted that the file described sensitivity to sound as well as light.

“I woke up feeling weak and sort of fuzzy. Like, heavy and drained. It’s not full blown yet, but I can tell it will be bad. It hurts here—” she pointed between her eyes, just underneath the center of her eyebrows. “—and it’s getting worse.”

Chase scratched notes onto the clipboard. “The pain, is it constant, throbbing?”

“It’s sort of pulsing. It hurts behind both eyes.”

“Have you experienced an aura of any sort?” he asked.
“Yes, while my mother drove here, I began seeing light flashes. They’re white, with sort of pink edges.”

“Do they fill your whole visual field, or are they just spots?”

“Spots, I guess. At first they were pretty small, just to the left of wherever I’m looking, but they’ve gotten bigger.”

“And how often are you seeing these flashes?” Diana chimed in.

“Constantly. Sometimes I blink and they’ll go away, but they keep coming back.”

“Alright, we’d really like to get an MRI of those flashes. Does that sound good?”

“That’s why I’m here.”

“Good. Dr. Adley will get the equipment ready for you. I just have a few more questions in the meantime, and we’ll get those pictures taken.” Chase stepped out of the room. Diana took the clipboard from him.

“I was looking over your file and noticed you’re off all medications, is that right?”

“Yes.”

“Even Relpax? It seemed to show that Relpax worked well for you.”

“If you can call that working. I was sick and tired of the side-effects—queasiness, spinning, feeling heavy and totally zapped. It’s like dying. I’d rather be in pain, honestly.”

“It makes you feel like you’re dying?”

“Yeah, like not feeling anything at all. I mean, it takes the pain away, sure. But at what cost? It sucks. If I have to stop whatever I’m doing and rest anyway, what’s the
point? It only really helps me sleep, y’know? I still can’t go to school or do much of anything with myself.”

“But your pain is enough that it makes you nauseated?”

“Dr. Wright, you have to understand that I have been on these medications for over five years. They’re not treating the problem, just changing it. At least the pain is real. I know it’s a little unconventional, but I’d rather stay off these drugs unless I really need them. I have some Relpax for when it’s so bad I can’t sleep. But most of the time, I’m toughing it out. That’s my decision.”

Diana noted this, but didn’t really understand. Real or not, pain was pain. “Right. Well, it’s your decision, though I would recommend trying to contain your symptoms as best you can. Those are all the questions I have for you for now, so sit tight and I’ll be right back.”

Despite her otherwise strange tendencies, Patient S proved to be a model patient while on the machine. She barely twitched on the bed, instead lying still with shut eyes and pursed lips. They darkened the room for her, and watched the procedure through the window of the attached room. Once they began, Chase jumped back on his earlier suspicions. Diana explained S’s opinion, shooting down three of his self-proclaimed “groundbreaking possibilities.”

“She’s not having an abnormal reaction to the medication, she just doesn’t like the side-effects. She thinks it makes more problems than it’s worth.”

“I suppose that makes sense, if you can handle the pain. But that doesn’t explain the strange scan from last time. Don’t you think it’s suspicious? Do you think it could be psychosomatic?”
“No. All her symptoms are otherwise exactly in line with migraines. Think about it—she’s in way too much pain.”

“Well, what if her headaches are different somehow? After all, we lump all of these different symptoms together as migraines—I mean, sure, the head pain seems similar, but auras vary, and sometimes don’t even exist—what if that signifies real differences?”

Diana turned away from him. “Stop. You’re getting ahead of yourself.”

Chase wrote something onto the clipboard but didn’t respond. She felt guilty—she didn’t intend to shut him down so harshly, or be so irritated. Luckily Chase dropped the subject. He probably knew her too well to push her. They’d worked together for years, after all. He really was a good research assistant, even if sometimes he acted like a child instead of a scientist. She just wanted to acquire the data. Once they had it all, they could draw conclusions. Jumping ahead was for people like her mother, kneeling between pews on Sunday. Not for the lab.

“A guy can hope,” he said quietly, diverting his gaze to the computer screen. Images of S’s brain at different layers appeared between the periodic clicks of the machine.

The whole procedure lasted a little less than an hour, roughly the entire length of the aural stage. With any luck, they had mapped all changes in activity successfully. Diana went to help S up when she noticed the pain the girl was in. Though she managed to stay still in the machine, each minute that she sat up she became shakier. The earlier hunch of her shoulders grew until she was crumpled, her movements slow. This girl was
so young, Diana realized. Nineteen years old, standing with the labored movement of a
woman four times her age.

“We’re all finished. Do you think you’ll be alright? We do have some medication
on hand—“

“I’ll manage. I just need to go home. My mother’s here?”

“Right.” Diana took her down the hall, the girl wearing a determined face
throughout.

Chase dealt with S’s images while Diana returned to the work at her desk. They’d
seen several patients earlier in the week whose results hadn’t been given any attention, so
Diana sat down to slog through the pile. Patient J sat on the top of the list—his images
were now a week old. She soon became absorbed in the details of MRIs, which occupied
her well into lunchtime.

Hungry, she rounded the corner into Chase’s office, a room equally cramped and
dark as her own. Somehow, though, it was messier than even her office—instead of
Diana’s tenuously stacked work piles, Chase had spread out documents in a thin layer
over everything, including the floor. He sat lost in his work, unaware of her.

Diana cleared her throat, startling him to attention. “Yo—hey—what’s up?” he
asked.

“Lunchtime. I’m headed to Angelo’s for the usual. Interested?”

“You know,” he said, ignoring her question, “I’ve been checking out today’s
MRI.”

Great, Diana thought. What crack theory have you already managed to come up
with?
“She described flashes of light, so I pulled two other cases just like that. Patients R and L. Both females, both young, and—check out this bloodwork—both with abnormally low blood sugar.”

“Have you compared their MRIs?”

“Exactly what I’m doing. I know it’s too early to tell, but I think I might be on to something. Hey, don’t frown like that. This is exciting stuff.”

“I’m not frowning, I’m thinking.”

“Anyway, we’re starting to collect enough data to see trends. I have a good feeling about this. Try to believe me.” Chase’s optimism was too sincere for Diana to argue with. While those traits made him no doubt very attractive, his energy made the ten years between them feel like fifty. After a pause he added, “I already ate, though. Knock on Gene’s door. He’ll probably go with you.”

She left his office, wondering if she had been more like him at twenty-eight. She couldn’t remember herself back then. The facts came to mind—the other apartment where she’d lived, her grinding work at the hospital, her loud neighbors. But what she was like, she couldn’t really say. Was that normal, to forget the feelings of things? Back then she’d been busy, that much was for sure. Well, there was no use worrying about it. She shook it off on the way to old Gene’s office in the pharmacology lab.

“Dr. Wright,” Gene said formally. “To what do I owe the pleasure?” For as long as she’d worked there, Gene had been the lab’s endearing elder. He seemed to relish the post, always referring to people by their last names, often with a well-practiced adjustment of his glasses. She suspected he did that part on purpose, consciously playing up his likeness to Miracle on 34th Street’s Kris Kringle.
“I’m headed to Angelo’s for lunch. Adley said you hadn’t eaten?”

“That’s right. Give me a moment, and I’ll be there.” He finished writing a note and pushed himself to standing with some effort.

The two of them treaded the familiar path to Diana’s daily lunch spot. It must have rained earlier, Diana realized, watching the wet pavement beneath her.

“Either the roast beef or turkey and Swiss. That’s what you normally get, isn’t it?” It was. Turkey and Swiss was her standard sandwich, to which she migrated at midday, every day.

“I hope this whole mess doesn’t keep up,” Gene said in the street. “It’s unnerving. The police really are blanketing everything.”

“What do you mean—?” Diana asked, raising her head. An eerie order had fallen over New York. At a far intersection, several policemen had gathered. Each of them wore heavy armor and carried a clear shield. Riot gear, she realized. Foot traffic streamed past them at a distance; even those waiting for the traffic signal to change stood apart, angled away from the cops.

“Gene, what’s going on?” A flash of bright movement in her peripheral stopped her in her tracks. It sounded like the flapping of wings. She spun, heart pounding. Had that been—?

“You haven’t heard? The anti-corruption protests are getting huge. It’s all over the news.”

“Oh, thank God. I thought it might be terrorists.”

“Not quite, but it’s getting really big. Just this morning they were saying today was expected to be the largest yet. They’re worried about clashes with the police.”
“Where is it?”

“Wall Street.”

“Isn’t it pretty far for the police to be hanging out here?”

Just as she spoke, a youngish woman emerged from the subway nearby. Diana noticed her because of her incredible paleness and impossibly red hair. Teal and yellow feathers adorned the clip in the woman’s hair, which hung long over her leather jacket. Under one arm she carried a placard, and in the other, a cigarette. She was a presence on the street, crashing past the two researchers, close enough to see the rearing horse tattooed on the side of her neck. Diana met her eyes—they were dark, assured, unsympathetic. She looked ready to kill.

Diana buried her hands in her pockets. She’d never seen anyone like her before, and she didn’t want to stick around to see what else the woman might get up to. No, this whole thing gave her the creeps. She needed to walk. “We’d better get going,” she announced. “I’d like to go to the bank after lunch.”

Nearly every lamppost on the street had the same red and white poster pasted on it, featuring the state Capitol and a long, stylized shadow that took on the shape of a monster. “RESIST” block lettering read in the corner. The buildings themselves, also—how many times had she passed them? And how tall they were, how their reaching pushed upon her! Clouds hung heavily in the distance, threatening rain—had it been that way this morning? The sidewalk population seemed to have thinned to half its size. Though, on second thought, she couldn’t really guess at how many people were normally out walking. It had never bothered her before.
“Are there fewer people out today than normal?” she asked Gene, who’d been chattering on about the protests.

“Hard to say—maybe so. It is late for lunch.”

Of course. It was nearly two. No reason to get unsettled. That’s exactly what being superstitious will get you. She knew better than that; she was a scientist. A researcher. She checked the facts before she jumped ahead.

“Then again, it gives off a bad feeling when the city’s like this, don’t you think? I’m afraid it’ll get bigger and nastier before it’s over. That’s the way politics go, in my experience.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that rarely does anything happen at the medium size. Like this—more people will have to come first. Anyway, you can’t change these people’s minds by marching around with a slogan above your head. The best you can do is to back them into a corner. Set them thinking. They’ll change their minds, and come out as totally different people—that’s how you really win. The important part’s for them to think it’s their idea.”

“Do you think it’s really going to be big?”

“There’s enough support, I think. If it lasts—which I think is likely—then someone will get hurt. And when that happens, the protestors will win. Not that I want people to get hurt!” He added defensively

“You seem to know a lot about it.”

“Well, I’ve had my fair share of marching. Vietnam wasn’t popular, even down at Furman.”
“Furman? In South Carolina?”

“Yes ma’am. I spent my undergraduate years dodging the war. But those protests weren’t so different from these. People were getting sick and tired of being told what to do by out-of-touch politicians. Congress and Business didn’t get out of bed with each other until people started getting hurt. Kids were dying, out there and at home. It was all or nothing back then, not like this Occupy stuff. They’re too muddled for anyone to end up pleased anytime soon.” He laughed, “Of course, that’s just the predictions of an old scientist. Knowing my luck it’ll be all over tomorrow.”

Diana laughed with him, but felt a coldness climbing her spine. Fear. The world was speeding past, dragging her behind, both ignoring her and refusing to leave her alone. Like the dead-man’s drop of the rollercoaster, or a too-sudden descent in a plane, the pit of her stomach lifted while her body sank. How had she missed all of this, and why now? Why was everything changing so suddenly?

The familiar warmth of Angelo’s couldn’t return Diana to ease. She sought comfort in her usual order. Above Gene’s head, a muted TV kept switching between a salt-and-pepper newscaster and shots of the protestor’s camp in Zuccotti Park. “Tensions Rise,” the headline read.

“You seem tired. Are you feeling well?” Gene asked.

“Oh, yes, I’m fine. Today has been a little crazy, but I’m okay.” At every change of the camera on TV, she found her attention wander. She was probably coming off as totally out of it.

“Well, flu season will be on us soon. You ought to take care of yourself, or you’ll get sick. Sometimes even the best researchers have to take vacation, sometimes.”
“That would be nice, but I wouldn’t know what to do with myself on vacation right now. There’re too many things I need to do here instead. Actually—I should have mentioned earlier—I really need to run to the bank before returning to the lab, so I might have to run in a couple of minutes. I’m sorry I didn’t mention it earlier.”

“Don’t be silly, I don’t mind. But do try to remember: all this stress can’t be good for you. I don’t like to see you looking so tired.”

“Thank you, Gene. I’ll try to relax, really, just as soon as I get some of this stuff out of the way.” Diana wolfed down half of her sandwich and took the rest to-go. She left her money on the table and hurried away, embarrassed. Just how tired did she look? She glanced in her reflection on a storefront. Shadows cut underneath her eyes, and her skin was pale. She really ought to get more sun.

There was no time for being self-conscious. The bank. She just had to focus and get to the bank. It wasn’t too far of a walk, if she hurried. As she passed through side streets and crosswalks, she felt that the clouds were rolling behind her, chasing her in tandem with the shadows.

Stop it. She was being ridiculous, letting herself even think such silly things. The only unsettling thing about this neighborhood was that she hadn’t been paying attention to it until now. There was nothing to be surprised about or scared of, and there weren’t many people around to worry about. It was the way to her bank, and that was that. This kind of ridiculousness was where being irrational got you.

Shit, she realized, nearly at the bank. The check was still in her apartment, on the dresser. With the whole parrot thing—which was today, just this morning, though it felt like ages ago—she’d walked right out and left it in the stack of mail. Crap. Now when
would she deposit her paycheck? Rent would be coming up soon—well, there wasn’t much she could do. She’d have to make time. For now, the only option was to go back to work.

She retraced her steps, annoyed. There’d be some time tomorrow, if she played it right, though it would be out of the way. Tomorrow, things would go back to normal, she hoped. Bad days happened, but they had to end. Like Gene said. Maybe the protests would die out by tomorrow too, and then there really would be nothing to worry about.

She typed out a memo on her phone to remind herself of the change in schedule. Her attention lost on the phone’s tiny keys, she practically tripped over the man sitting on the sidewalk. He sat back against an empty storefront, childlike engulfed by the solid black sleeping bag.

The mug filled with coins by his side marked the man as a beggar, but he stood out to Diana as striking, in a ghostly way. The mahogany of his skin contrasted the pale blue of his blind eyes. Sweat dotted his forehead, despite the cold temperatures. He mumbled to himself in a rhythmic incoherence, as resigned and desperate as the rosaries her mother prayed before her father’s funeral. He turned towards her, though she was sure he couldn’t see.

“Money for food, money for food, God bless you, you, you, you. America, oh hunger, America, money for food, money for food, money for food.” He groped for his mug, and, finding it, shook the coins inside.

Diana dropped her extra change in the mug. As she did so, his thin hand wrapped around her ankle. He stopped his mantra mid-word. “The hunger will eat through us, yes,” he shook the mug with his other hand. “Full and empty, empty and full. Polly
always wants a cracker, yes. God bless you, America. It’s the hunger that comes, the money for food, and isn’t it exhausting?” He released her, now squawking with laughter, rocking back and forth in the impenetrably black sleeping bag.

Diana had never run so far on sheer gut instinct. The skin of her arms contracted. Her heart pounded. She was halfway back to Angelo’s before she slowed. She could practically feel the adrenaline rushing through her—classic fight or flight, she reminded herself. With her hands on her hips, she sucked in the humid air. Be rational, she told herself. He just wanted more money. There was no need to overthink.

But that man, gaunt and hopeless as he was, stuck in her head. She could still feel his hand wrapping around her ankle, and his eyes. She could have sworn that he made eye contact. That he spoke to her, specifically, and meant it.

She had to get to the lab. Her office, her files, the daily routine of taking and comparing images—they could save her. She hurried through the people—the writhing people who were everywhere, suffocatingly everywhere—past Angelo’s and straight to the lab.

She slammed the door of her office and leaned against it. Good Lord, this was all so absurd! Her imagination gone totally wild. She laughed, shakily navigating her way to the chair. She’d half expected her office to quit existing earlier, the way she was panicking, and for what? The ramblings of a beggar, and the surprise of the protests. Clearly, she needed to pay politics some more attention, but it wasn’t a big deal. No reason at all to get so worked up. She straightened the nearest pile of files and woke up her computer.
Her stomach rumbled. That’s right, she remembered, she’d only eaten half of her lunch. Now, where did she put the other half of her sandwich? She rifled through her purse, then searched her desk. It wasn’t there. She definitely left the restaurant with it, which meant—the night-black man’s thin hand flashed across her mind. She must have dropped it when she ran away from him. And here she was, just like he said, once again hungry. Is that what he’d meant? That we always get hungry again? What did that even mean?

“Hey,” Chase said from her now-open door. She practically jumped out her skin, letting out a short shriek before cutting herself off. “Somebody’s jumpy. Too much caffeine?”

“God, Chase. Knock, will you?”

“Uh, yeah, I did knock. You were just off in your own head, as usual. Anyway, like I said earlier, I think you should take a look at Patient S and the others. There’s something going on here. It could be big, actually big.”

Diana didn’t want anything big, not right now. She wanted tiny, minuscule. She wanted to note that there were no abnormalities to report, go home, make a big dinner, and take a long, hot bath. Maybe she’d practice violin before passing out. Something to make up for the day.

She hesitated to take the files, but Chase cut her off.

“Look, I know for some reason you’re terrified of finding any useful information here, but these are real people experiencing real pain. You’ve seen it as much as I have, for heaven’s sake!” He dropped the files on her desk. “Try to use your imagination for
once and consider the possibility that this lab has a point outside of giving you something to do every day. Then take a look at these.‘ Without another word he turned and left.

Diana stared at the open door as if betrayed. Chase had never really fought with her before, and she didn’t know what to do about it. He’d never even been impatient or harsh—he was an optimist, respectful, intelligent, and hard working. Now he’d transformed into this different person. It was totally out of line. They may work as equals, but she was technically his superior, and the personal attacks were—well, she stopped herself. Well, they weren’t totally unfounded. She’d just wished for small news instead of big news, hadn’t she?

But it was all understandable. Migraines, this lab—it all acted as a wall against her finding anything. Their progress, if you could call it that, measured in micrometers. At first, she’d come because she wanted to discover something. Fresh out of UMass, she was sure that she could take on anything, and migraines were the next great adventure. Back then, she constantly imagined the moment when she’d spot something big.

Fine, she thought. I will try. But I’m not expecting anything.

She opened the first of the three files he’d left and glanced through it. It was Patient S’s, which she’d flipped through earlier. The girl who insisted on staying in pain. Beneath that was Patient R, and Patient L, young females with light-flash auras. R had been coming in for years. L was from the southwest, but moved to New York in hopes that their lab would find something. Diana remembered L—she was a grave girl, who looked to them with a kind of intensity that made Diana nervous. R was quite the opposite. Chatty, sweet, with intense but irregular migraines. But for all their
differences, their basics stood out as identically abnormal. Low blood sugar. Self-reported as high-strung. Near the edge of being underweight.

She pulled up their MRIs on her computer, overlaying the images to see similar areas of activity. The more she looked, the more these patients had in common with each other that they didn’t have in common with other migraine sufferers. That is, until the actual onset of the head pain. Then, their MRIs resembled other sufferers exactly.

“No way,” she whispered, looking over the images again.

This was evidence—tenuous evidence, but evidence still—of a major separation between certain aural migraines and non-aural ones. The bloodwork and images pinpointed a single region of the brain and a certain set of chemical conditions, different from the norm. Chase was right. Probably right. Obviously they needed to do more tests and get more evidence; but given this comparison, the only rational conclusion could be that this warranted more investigation. That Chase had stumbled onto something very big.

Diana clapped shut the file, decided. She came to this lab because she wanted something. It didn’t matter how tired she was of the MRIs and the PET scans, dammit, she still wanted it. Whatever it took. There was an answer behind all this data, and she would find it.

She rushed to Chase’s office. His hand rested on the phone, and he wore an uncharacteristically absent look.

“Chase, I need to talk to you.”

“Patient S is dead.”

“I—What? From her migraines?”
“No, she was trampled.”

“Trampled?”

“Her mother says that she’d been working with the protesters since going on medical leave from college. Today they marched on City Hall. She must have pushed through the pain, and all without medication.”

“Jesus,” she said, her hand going to cover her mouth. “How awful.” S was so young. Diana tried to remember her from earlier in the morning, between the shadows of the examining room. Her face behind the sunglasses was sweet, but her forehead wrinkled in pain. Diana imagined S at a protest, waving a banner with that red-haired woman she’d seen in the street.

“Her name was Maggie Zeigler. The whole thing’s hard to believe, I know, but it’s all over the news.”

“I can believe it.”

“You can?”

She could. S—Maggie—would have been strong. Even then, shaking on the MRI table, that girl burned with something intense and real. She would have rejected City Hall’s politics like the poison of her medications. Diana saw it all: the police, the chaos, the pushing and falling. Now Maggie lay tinged with a horrid paleness, the yellow-green of death.

“Is that her file?” Chase asked, bitterly.

“Yes—I came to—“

“To tell me that it’s nothing conclusive? I know. It’s not conclusive. It’s never conclusive.”
“No, Chase, listen to me for a second—”

“I’m acting out of line, I know. Fire me if you want. I’m jumping ahead. I’m not being rational. Fine. I know. I’m sick of it.” His voice strained. He slammed his hands on the desk and stood. Diana blocked the doorway.

“No—you’re right, okay? I came to say that I looked at the file. You’re right.”

“I’m, what?”

“You’re right. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I’ve been awful. These files, like you said, clearly point to something. We can’t ignore that.”

“So—“

“We’re changing the project. I was wrong not to do it before. Like you said, this is too real to ignore.”

“Seriously?”

“These migraines are likely a separate phenomena, I think we can say. I’m going to report and change this project’s direction.”

Had Chase been holding anything, he might have dropped it. “You are?”

“Yes. I want you to start searching our database for any similar cases to S, R, and L. And see if there’re any other studies with similar results.”

For a moment they just stared at each other. Diana grinned.

“Don’t just stare at me, get back to work!”

Diana finished her day writing reports. She almost couldn’t believe that she was cancelling their current project, but at the same time, she was amazed she hadn’t done so earlier. The evidence had been there all along, and all along she’d resisted it. She was throwing herself into the unknown. It terrified her. At the same time, though, joy kept
welling up in her, like she could burst into laughter. A different kind of migraine! A different project! How on earth had she waited for so long? They were finally going to do real research, with real results, actually going to discover something big.

When she got home, Diana turned on the news—something she hadn’t done in a long time. NY Anti-Corruption Protests Turn Bloody, the headline of Maggie’s story read. Political commentators predicted the future of the protests from the studio. “Things are about to change in New York,” one of them said.

Diana looked out her window for some sign of that, but the nighttime lights of the apartment building across the street revealed nothing. She was sipping a mug of tea at her dining table when she saw it.

Her window wasn’t broken.