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AMIDST A BOTTLED WORD:

POETRY & PROSE

by

CARLOS PERALTA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Honors in the Major Program in
English in the College of Arts and Humanities and in
The Burnett Honors College at the University of Central
Florida Orlando, Florida

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Thesis Chair: Cecilia Rodríguez Milanés, D.A.

ABSTRACT

"Amidst a Bottled Word: Poetry and Prose" includes a variety of different themes, styles, and genre—many reflecting a cynical or ironic tone. This eclectic thesis reflects the wide-ranging interest of its creator. The stories within this collection are a thriller and a work of speculative fiction, the former supernatural and the latter near future or science fiction. In one story, "The Man Behind the Curtain," Val, the older of two young sisters, must protect herself and her sister while enduring a weekend visit to her estranged Grandparents' house, while signs of a mysterious man keep emerging throughout their stay. The futuristic story, "Life.exe," details a man overcoming his own personal dystopia by finding comfort within the arms of an inadvertently purchased robotic companion. Additionally, the poems within the collection deal with failed love, anxiety, isolation, and despair. Finally, the thesis also includes an essay, "The Schism Past Skin," expounding on race, ethnicity and how people make assumptions of others based on appearance.

DEDICATION

For my parents who support what I do.

For my brother, Alejandro, who's always inspiring to me write.

And for every person that's ever believed in me, even when I don't, your words have moved me.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project would not have been possible without the unwavering support of Cecilia Rodríguez Milanés, one of the greatest professors I've had the pleasure of learning from, as well as a great mentor. I can't express my thanks in words since I can't picture anyone else rereading countless revisions and still encouraging me past muddled prose. Sincerely, thank you.

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FAREWELL: ME, YOU–U.S.

I used to look forward to quiet
naps in your car every Tuesday
afternoon as we carpooled home.

You used to talk to me
about trivial things, fun things
you've learned throughout the day.

I remembered after just a few facts,
your voice lulled my eyes shut,
reclined my seat, eased my palpitations.

You were like a siren spewing
out hymns—my body the ships
you lured to crash on dream reefs.

How easily did I forget your cackled
smile when you said *Only female
mosquitos suck the blood of victims.*

You laid your chin on my nape,
after you fueled the car.
I napped; you whispered plans

I was not a part of into my ear.
So, I dumped you because my mind
was caked in anger, since the schism

you formed amid our skin broke me,
like a bisque doll from China. But you're
not going there, you've made it clear.

I'm not going to wait for you. I found
someone else, from Germany, where you're
going. Her name is Märzen.

Now I spend my afternoons fishing. Staring
down bottles for sunken ships, I sleep
aware you'll soon lure others to my reef.

LIFE.EXE

There's a metal bench just outside St. Enoch's Cathedral in Oregon, facing a marble statue. The statue of a saintly-woman holding an injured man wearing nothing but a drape over his parts. During winter nights like these, the snow blanketed the man in white, and he seemed at peace. The figure by our church was apparently a replica of a famous statue housed in the basilica that was made in the year 2025, and a decade later—it was the place I used to go to smoke at nights. Though, nowadays it lays enveloped in graffiti. But sitting here, inside the dark, most decrepit part of the church, my mind wandered.

I imagined myself on that bench now, my arm feeling icy cool as I brushed my forearm against the steel hand rail, but it was the good kind of cold. The type of uncaring chill which brittle bones and ate away at my nerves. I was remembering the day a young brown-haired woman wearing a yellow-scarf and dirt-brown heels, snuggled next to me, tossing my burly arm over her shoulders, while I sat there. It was Anna, my ex-wife. It was how she and I met. She lit a cigarette and said, "I'm into guys with red hair," as she cuddled up next to me on this freezing bench, she passed me the cigarette—

"Mason!" Father Rolo cleared his throat. "Mason, would you like to say something since you didn't last time? I'd love to hear from you. I think we all would." He smiled at me making hand gestures directing my eyes to the other people in the room with substance abuse problems like myself.

Father Rolo was the type of man who believed in second, if not third-second chances over his thirty years of being priest. I remembered once during one of these meetings, roughly a

month ago, a man—with a weird facial modification that rendered him twelve years old—attached an M-14 Spider organ harvesting device, to Father Rolo’s back which gripped all eight legs around his rib cage and gunned his kidney right out of him and into a tube. After the incident, Father Rolo was left with a scar that spiraled on his back. Instead of going to the police or the hospital, Father Rolo used an old nanite Band-Aid to close the wound and prayed for the wellbeing of the receiver.

Before Father Rolo said anything else, I raised my right hand, placed two fingers to my lips, closed my eyes and inhaled through my mouth. I felt the bitter-dry basement air chill my lungs. I held in the breath till sparks of fire throbbed away pounding at my skull, till I couldn’t remember I came here with Anna long ago and now it’s just me, till it felt hot. Slowly I lowered my hand, exhaled, and said, “Nah, not today, Father Rolo. Just... just not today.” Hearing gunshots a few blocks away, I slouched further down the black plastic chair until my back was at the rim of the chair, though I knew we were safe in the basement. Everyone else paid no attention to the screams of the city, continuing with their conversation.

“Ooooh, I’d like to say something,” said Lucy. “I promise I made progress.” She waved her right arm in the air frantically at poor Father Rolo, knowing no one liked hearing her talk. I specially didn’t, since was friends with Anna.

Father Rolo sighed and said, “Would anyone else like to share? Anyone?” His eyes intently averted away from Lucy who sat across from him, and over to Tristen who sat on his left side. “Tristen, you’ve been rather quiet this evening. Care to say a few words before I pass it over to Lucy, hmph?”

Tristen shook his head sideways and pulled up the turtleneck on his green sweater hiding both his ears and nose, peeking at us with his bright grayish-red eyes he had modified years back.

I wasn't surprised, really. He hardly ever spoke for a young guy in his early-twenties with a cybernetic lower jaw. When he did, it was because he'd gone off the bender and had done something wild. I believe the last time he'd given into his alcoholic waterboarding fetish; he traded away his liver to a black-market bartender for a shot of Mercurium—one of the most expensive and euphoric shots on earth. Though I've never done it myself, I've heard the shot is rumored to keep you in a heightened drunken state. Some have even gone as far and said, they've reached the door to Nirvana with just two shots but were unable to open it.

Father Rolo attempted to make another go at having me speak, I could tell. Before he called on me, I inspected the picture of Anna and me on our wedding day in my hand. The one in which we stared at each other with table full of empty tequila shots between us. I shy away from the photo and face the brass digital clock on the wall still pretending not to notice Father Rolo, I was almost out of there.

“Father Rolo! Pick me! I, like, have something I want to say,” said Lucy, knocking the plastic chair down on the floor as she shot up standing. “Pleeeaaassee!”

Lucy was resilient but naïve for someone in their forties, something her Dad's money has afforded her. She hardly works from what Anna used to say at their job in the hospital her Dad owns, and when she did it had to be filtered by others. But this wasn't the reason people disliked Lucy, no. It was because Lucy said some version of the same thing she said the week before. It was dull. It was repetitive. It was Lucy. She got drunk on having others pee on her, which wasn't

anything new for people with substance abuse problems. But she really loved getting peed on. She went to an EDM festival by the beach, once, got stung by a box jellyfish, once, got peed on—once—and immediately had an out of body experience. Lucy declared many times getting peed on gives her such a rush that meth couldn't even dream of delivering.

I tried telling her getting peed on does not cure jellyfish stings, but instead makes it worse, it releases more toxins from the stinger. I looked it up on my onyx-trimmed smart ring. “How ‘bout I pee on you while we do it,” she said to me. I’ve never spoken directly to her since, not if I could help it anyways.

Father Rolo nodded at Lucy to go ahead, and she bombarded the small basement with granite words that kamikazed my ear and anchored my intelligence as she went on.

“Oh boy, so I found this energy drink, err, well it’s actually life water but it acts like an energy drink, see... and it’s really good for your skin tone, kidneys, helps grow thicker hair, have higher chance of fertility...” She paused, glanced at Tristen and began again. “You know it’s said to help those with level two modifications and up, or whatever, live better lives.” Tristen had deactivated his eyes, as they were no longer glowing. “Anyways... it also makes you feel energized all day long, improves your eyesight, enhances motor functions, strengthens your libido, allows you to walk on water, although I haven’t tried that yet, I think I’ll try that tomorrow...” She gulped down the air around her. “Aaaaaannnd, like, the best part of the energy drink is that its main ingredient is concentrated sterile urine.”

My eyes-widened as I stared at Lucy. Her green hair, her discolored make-up, her... just her. “Idiot!” I blurted out.

They all faced me. Tristen, his eyes now fluorescent, Father Rolo with his arms folded, and Lucy, her face brimming with glee, all appeared dumbfounded by what I had just said.

“I’m such an idiot.” I placed both my hands on my head and glimpsed at the floor. “I can’t believe I forgot,” I said, not knowing what to say and being very vague as I did so.

“Mason, would you have something you want to tell us?” Said Father Rolo, now standing over me and with his right hand on my shoulder.

“Ooooh, I know. Would you like some of the Evian Grylls Life Water?” Said Lucy, now hovering over me as well but with a cold refreshing beverage of someone else’s piss in hand.

A cockroach missing its left antenna zoomed right in between my feet, fluttered its wings and landed on the clock.

“I gotta go,” I said packing my things. “I, uh, forgot I have an early morning inspection tomorrow. I’m the only mechanic on shift so I have to go.” I peered over to the side and nodded at my lie. “I have to check out an elevator for clearance.” I grabbed my black coat off the hanger on the wall and stormed off.

“Remember! The steps only work if you work them!” Father Rolo said at the top of his lungs.

While driving home, on a vacant street filled with the whooshing sound of battering snow against my blue Fiat and police sirens out in the distance, I was stopped by a red street light on Mercy Way and Destination Parkway. I glimpsed over my left side-window at a homeless man just two car lanes over crouched by the No U-Turn sign holding a piece of cardboard peering down at the yellow snow beneath him. He had on thick camo pants, a pair of white cross partially wrapped in shirts, and several layers of the same red and blue t-shirt on, which read

“Smith’s 64th Family Reunion 2027.” I’d seen him every night for the last couple weeks after group, and every time I did my eyes danced away from his. He sluggishly watched me veered my head away from him and unto the radiant billboard.

I gazed into the billboard waiting for the light to turn green. An advertisement for a better life was being displayed on the screen. “Tired of being ALONE?” The billboard showed a picture of a sad middle-aged man living in a duplex apartment, no kids or wife. “Tired of not MEETING society’s standards?” It then began to show the man with a frown alongside a couple who were smiling and waiting for Stork, Co. baby delivery. “Simply want to be the BEST version of “you” you can be?” The picture of the sad man got ripped in half by a more better version of himself. “Then give us a call at 1-800-ALIVENOW and be the BEST “you” you can be ALONE without having to MEET anyone else’s standards.”

“What a load of crap,” I said out loud, scratching my head and glancing back at the homeless man whom I’ve decided to call Earl, because he kind of looked like Uncle Earl from a film I saw as a child. And that’s when I noticed Earl had gotten up and almost made his way to my car door. My heart raced a little as I’ve been purposely ignoring this man for days, and now he was almost at my car door. That’s when I decided to call in the billboard number so that it appeared as though I was busy and did not want to be bothered.

“Thank you for calling BetterLife, my name’s Valerie. How may I be of assistance?” said the woman on the car speaker. She had a soft sexy French accent, which threw me off. Yet her voice was low, and it eased me up a bit.

I glared over at Earl who was making hand motions wanting to clean the snow off my windshield with one of his yellow stained t-shirts. I shook my head and indicated I was on the phone and said, "Oh, um, hey?"

"Would you be interested in receiving the BetterLife experience?" said Valerie.

"I'm uh... sorry. Could you repeat that? I'm currently multitasking at the moment," I said, my eyes visually glued to Earl's hand which were inches away from my windshield, and I was stuck at this God-forsaken red light.

"Would you like to try our new Model-E series? Or would you be interested in our traditional home system? We do have a special on the Model-E series right now. We can have you started on a Model-E series right away, we just need a voice authorization to begin."

I honked the horn at Earl, who began to move away from car shortly after and disappeared and said, "Yeah, you better!

"Okay, no problem. I'll have you set up with the Model-E series. Our phone records show a Mason B. Rockbell, staying in 423 Omalia Street. Is this correct?" said Valerie.

I blinked into my phone a little confused. "Wait, what? Model-E series? Set me up with—"

Cutting me off, she said, "You're all set, Mr. Rockbell. Your Model-E series will be delivered to the billing address on file. Our company does notify all buyers that all purchases are final after thirty days, and no purchase is acceptable for a refund before twelve days after purchase."

I quickly picked up the built-in wireless phone my Fiat came with. "There's been some type of mistake here. I didn't—"

“Please enjoy your BetterLife, Mr. Rockbell. Bye-now,” she said, right before hanging up.

I viciously dialed back the phone number, but I instantly received the error message: “We’re sorry the number you have dialed is no longer in service. Please hang-up and try again.” After a few more failed attempts, the light finally turned green and I sped off home.

#

I stared at the ceiling wall half asleep laid down on the couch, watching snowflakes enter my third-floor apartment through the balcony door, which I sometimes left a crack open on cool evenings like these. They quickly melted away on my skin when they landed, like fleeting gentle touches.

I strained my eyes and peered at the half-eaten box of anchovy pizza laying open on the coffee table, and the glass bottles of Heineken that lay scattered around the sofa. Looks like I must have dozed off on another fun filled Friday afternoon, I thought. I slowly sat upright on the couch, both hands on my knees. I squinted at the time on my smart ring, when suddenly a T.V. commercial caught my attention.

“Hi, I’m Edward Michael Grylls,” said the holographic projection coming off the television, “the creator and founder of Evian Grylls Life water.” A plastic bottle filled to the brim with what I assumed was urine flashed across the screen. “In one of my expeditions while tracking through the Mojave Desert, I found myself trapped under a layer of sand. Luckily for me I had on my Evian Grylls Life Water dispensing hat and was able to muster the strength to shrug off the mountain of sand on my back after taking three sips.” The hologram now projected some man pummeling mountains into sand with just a single punch.

“Fucking Lucy, I swear.” Tossing the gray quilted blanket covering me aside, I shuffled my way through a landfill of bottles on the floor and towards the remote, if only so I wouldn’t have to listen to any more of that.

There was someone knocking at my door. I left the living room and moved towards the door, not realizing I was only wearing my red boxer-briefs and a white t-shirt—I enthusiastically opened the door hoping it was Anna, but it wasn’t her. It was never her.

“You Mason Rockbell?” said a brawny man whose blue shirt read “Package2Go.”

“I am.” He was tall, maybe taller than me, and I’m six-feet four. “What’s this about? I didn’t order anything.” He ignored my questions and focused intently at my eyes.

“Can I have you sign here for your BetterLife package?” He raised his voice, it echoed out in the apartment hall way.

“BetterLife package? I didn’t order any…” I stopped mid-sentence remembering the call I made four days back. “I never authorized any purchase.”

“Look man, I’m just the delivery guy. Please sign here.” He sighed. “You’ll have to take it up with either your bank or BetterLife.” He passed me the papers which I signed and handed back. “Now, where do you want this crate?”

“I guess you can put it in that far right corner up against the wall,” I said, picking up the empty bottles on the floor and closing the pizza box.

“Oh? You’re married?” He lowered the crate up against the wall, attached an automated crowbar to the container, and continued talking.

“Well, I—” He cut me off before I had the chance to say I wasn’t. He looked at the wedding album laid out next to the pizza box, the smart ring I wore on my left ring finger and assumed I was married.

“Opening these crates usually takes a minute or two. Man, I’m glad you’re not one of those guys.” He’s mean demeanor was now gone, and he grinned. “You wouldn’t believe how many weirdos I deliver these crates to. And it’s always the same people too. Last week, I delivered one of these Model-E series to a morbidly obese man in a wheelchair. He had a blanket over him, it was cold that day. And as I leaned in to give him the papers to sign, I noticed he was jerking off with his left hand all while looking at me.”

I nearly laughed at him but acknowledged I was no better than the wheelchair bound man. I had opened the door in my boxer-briefs.

There was a beeping.

“Well, sounds like I’m done here. Simply hit the green button on the side there and it’ll pop open.” He made his way to the door. “Oh, and my man, put some pants on before answering the door.”

“Thanks for the package,” I said staring at the unlocked crate.

“Yeah, whatever,” he mumbled under his breath.

I pushed the button on the crate and watched as the foam peanuts scattered on the floor of my apartment, moments before they dissolved into a green vaporous hue which smelled of lilac. I was dumbfounded by the realness of the Model-E series. It was galaxies away from a simple manikin, but two steps from being life-like. The Model-E was female in gender, was bald, hard and cold to the touch as if its entire body was made from steel and had an instruction manual in a

Ziploc bag taped to its bare chest—something I swiftly tossed away after reading where the “On” button was. I opened its mouth and pressed the button located in the hard palate of the mouth. It was cold and dry like the inside of a ventilation shaft.

The Model-E’s eyes flashed on shortly before it said, “Hello! I’m Model-E series number 63417, but you can call me “E-series.”

“Yeah, sure, whatever.” I took the E-series by the hand, grabbed a bottle of lubricant and headed to the bedroom with it.

An hour later, I called BetterLife for falsely advertising a “better life” and to refund my money.

“Hello! Thank you for calling BetterLife customer service department. My name’s Valerie. How may I be of assistance?” she said.

Damn, does she work both in sales and customer service? I thought. After getting past her cute French accent, I said, “Yes, can I speak to a manager? I’ve received faulty product and would like a full refund.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, sir. So, I can notify my manager and expedite the process, can I please hear what the issue is with our product?”

My eyebrow arched, my eyes shifted side-to-side in search of a plausible excuse. “If you wouldn’t mind, I’d rather not repeat myself twice. It’s kind of a personal matter.

“Oh. Sure, thing. One moment while I connect you,” said Valerie. Through the phone, I imagined she rolled her eyes when she said, “Oh.” I began pacing around the apartment to keep busy.

“Hello, this is Jemaine, manager on duty. What seems to be the problem?” said a man with scruffy, rugged voice.

“Yes, I want a—” I said, getting cut off once more before the word “refund” parted my lips, Jemaine had already surmised what I was really calling about.

“You tried having sex with it, didn’t you?” he said, accusingly. I remained silent and didn’t answer back. “It wasn’t what you thought it would be. So now you want a refund. Did you even read the manual?” He spat in the background.

I hastily hung up the phone and turned it off. I searched the kitchen’s garbage cans and flicked two-day old Chinese food off the Ziploc bag as I pulled it out the trash. I dumped the contents of the Ziploc bag on the counter. Besides the three-hundred-page manual, inside the bag was also a data chip, no bigger than my thumb, labeled “Daemon: Personality Module (Alpha)” with a picture of a naked woman playing the harp with the bottom half of her body fading into ones and zeros.

I hastily inserted the chip in the data storage unit of the Model-E located on the back of the skull. I stood there waiting, analyzing the E-series for any change or indication that the software worked, but nothing happened.

“Are you in need of some of assistance?” It said, coldly examining my face. “My scans show that your stress levels are high. Would you like me to release the tension?”

“If only you could,” I said, forcing open its mouth but failing. “E-series, open your mouth so I can power you down.”

“Happy to be of service!” Its jaw lowered releasing a gust of frigid wind. I plunged my middle finger through its teeth and held down the power button till its eyes went black.

“Welp, that was a waste,” I said out loud, turning off the lights and getting ready for bed. As I walked through my apartment and around the E-series I realized I should have probably turned off the darn thing in the corner instead of the middle of the living room. At first, I attempted to move the blasted thing by lifting it, but it was too damn heavy. Then, I had the bright idea that maybe dragging it would work—and it did till it started burrowing a hole in my carpet. I sighed and turned it back on. I’ll have the stupid thing move itself out of the way, I thought. Except once I pressed the power button on, it didn’t flash on like it did last time.

The Model-E series began making all types of weird noises and modifications to itself. Its eyes glowed neon red, projecting a red netting that outlined the entire room. Its hard body excreted a lukewarm gelatinous substance that once it cooled was as soft and identical to the touch of human skin, most noticeably baby skin smooth. Afterwards, it tilted its head back facing upwards as black strands of hair sprouted from its head that reached the E-series lower back. A large loud “rizzzz” sound came from the E-series right before its chest started expanding and contracting as if it was breathing. Lastly, a rhythmic “da-dum, da-dum” could be heard once I placed my ear on its chest. As I gradually backed away from the E-series, I saw whatever was beating inside it was giving its pale hue some color and warmth. It was as if the Model-E series was a living, breathing, naked person in my living room.

After an astonishing thirty minutes, it stopped. The E-series eyes cycled between different color variants commencing with ocean-blue, mossy-green, smoky ash, garnet and finally fixating on chestnut brown.

“Hi! I’m Model-E series number 634... um, I think it’s one-seven.” It said, blankly staring at me and smiling. “But you can call me... you can call me...” The E-series glimpsed down at the carpet then at the ceiling fans. “You can call me Marie.”

“Yeah, sure, whatever.” I took the E-series, err, Marie by the hand, grabbed a bottle of lubricant and headed to the bedroom with it

#

The following morning was great. I woke up feeling refreshed, so I stood outside on balcony leaning on the wooden railing as I watched one of my neighbors pull weeds out of their grass during winter.

“Howdy neighbor!” I yelled at him, waving my left arm in the air. I gazed down. “That dude is seriously an idiot.” I pulled up my trunks. “Wouldn’t you agree, Marie?”

Marie rose up from the balcony floor still naked, wiping away at her mouth. “My records show that certain types of weeds develop and reproduce in the winter. What he’s doing isn’t efficient, in that way I agree, he is an ‘idiot.’”

“Boy, am I glad you’re pretty,” I said putting on a sweater and some running shorts. “Marie, would you mind putting some clothes on, by the way. I think there’s some of my ex-wife’s old clothes in the closet that might fit you.” I headed out the door.

I stopped to stretch and take a breather after running for six-miles. The lush faint smell of bitter cherry trees whisked my nose north, while the loud siren noises coming from the ambulances across the street jolted my feet.

Two women, one wearing an iceberg smile, the other a goblin’s grin, snuck up behind me. It was Anna and her annoying jogging buddy, Lucy. I groaned at seeing Lucy out of group

but became quickly preoccupied with Anna's radiant face covered in sweat in the glistening sun, she had an angelic presence to her. Her ponytail whooshed from side to side as she kept up her momentum. "What are you doing here, Mason?"

"What are you doing here, Anna?" I said, realizing how stupid it sounded the moment it came out, glancing at Lucy standing in Anna's shadow. "Not so fun being asked dumb questions, is it?" I kept up the façade if only to continue looking at her. She still looked as beautiful as ever, even covered in sweat. The beads of sweat glistened as awry rays of light kissed them. "What does it look like? I'm running." An echo of galloping steps headed towards us, yet I solely focused on Anna.

"Ooooh, maybe he's here to try out the Evian Grylls Life Water we talked about in group," said Lucy, she shoved her water bottle in my face. "Here try some."

"Not now, Lucy," said Anna shaking her head and pushing her back. "Mason, you know we both go for a run before our shift at the hospital. What do you really want?"

I fidgeted with the smart ring on my left ring finger. "I-I... I want you—"

Marie ran up to us interrupting me and said, "I'm glad I was finally able to catch up. You're fast. It was easy tracking your smart ring." Her hair was now shorter with hues of red in it. Her eye color had also changed from light-brown to jade green. "Your phone was ringing, and I didn't know when you'd come back, so I brought it.."

"Who is this, Mason?" Anna said. "Where'd you find her?"

"This is—" I said.

"Are those my lucky yoga pants?" Anna's voice cracked, her eyes widening with rage. "She's wearing my running shoes?" Her voice got louder. "You know I have weird feet, so why

is she even wearing my shoes? Unbelievable, and you told me you left all my stuff at Lucy's house." She shook her head at me in disgust.

"I can explain," I said, holding my hands in the air motioning for her not to leave.

"How 'bout you explain it to your oddball new girlfriend over there 'cause we're through." She pointed at Marie who was now staring at a barking dog tied to a bench on the corner of the hospital. "Lucy, let's go, we're going to be late for work." Anna turned her back to me and stormed off.

"Mason." Lucy said in a low-hush secret voice, attempting to get my attention. "Hey, let me know if you want to try out the life water—" Anna cut her off as she dragged Lucy by the ear.

"I swear, what kind of nurse are you, Lucy?" Anna rolled her eyes at me and left, yet again. "Really? Sometimes I wonder if you'd even have a job if your name wasn't on the building—"

"I bought it in bulk! Let me know if you want some!" Lucy yelled from other side of the street.

I marched over to Marie with my fist clenched tightly and my jaw tightening.

"I'm sorry I caused such a ruckus," she said, while the mocha colored pit bull barked at her. "I didn't mean to, I just thought the phone call might have been important." Without losing her fixed watch on the dog's blood shot eyes, she held the phone in my direction.

I stormed off towards Marie with the intention of dismantling her, but instead I grabbed the phone. "It's fine. I ran here on purpose knowing I'd run into her," I said, my voice weak as I

checked the call log on my phone. The dog hadn't paid any attention to me at all while I approached Marie. "I honestly don't even know what's wrong with me."

"You're still in love with her is all." Marie advanced towards the dog keeping a fixed eye on it as it continued barking, saliva gushing from the sides of its mouth.

"I mean, I know that, you're just not supposed to say that out loud." I remarked.

"Why not? It's true." She greeted the dog by lowering her hand at its feet. "Give me one second, Mason." The dog growled at her hand before sniffing it out. "It's okay, buddy. I know, I know." The Pitbull licked her hand and she was able to readjust its collar which was choking it. "Who was calling you? It seemed urgent, they called four times."

"It was nothing, just work," I said, placing my hand on Marie's head and ruffling it a bit. "Just people stuck in elevators again." I grinned. "Hey, let's go home." The dog barked as it wagged its tail, its reddened eyes returning to a light-brown color.

"Okay, let's go home." She faced me smiling.

"So, what's up with the hair?" I said, her changed appearance now sinking as we walked across the street.

"You like?" She scanned my face for any indications. "After cleaning the apartment, I had some time to kill. And I saw this picture of you with a pretty red-haired woman smiling when you were younger."

"Oh, really? Which one?"

"You're, maybe ten in it according to my data on child height, holding a small fish."

"Yeah, that's my Mom. She took me ice fishing." I smirked. "You might want to change the hair color though. You kind of look like her now. It's weird."

As Marie and I started walking back home and talking about the sensation of how it feels to feel, we heard a loud “bam” followed by the sound of squealing tires taking off. We both looked back, but Marie saw it faster than I did. The Pitbull was hit by a car and the lower half of its body was now etched into the pavement. Marie took off to be by its side and it sounded like the pistons inside an old formula race car going off.

By the time I got there Marie was already scanning the dog. She had casted the same red outline netting she’d done earlier with her eyes. “Is the dog going to be okay?” I said, knowing full well it was going to die but hoping Marie could do something. She quickly finished her scan and remained silent. “Well?” The dog whimpered in pain as it attempted to get up back with its front two legs, tilting its head to the side it stared at Marie.

“She’s not going to make it,” said Marie, placing the Pitbull’s head on her lap and gently rubbing up and down the middle of the dog’s head. “There’s nothing I can do in my current state.”

I sluggishly made my way over to Marie and placed my right hand on her shoulder. “It’s not your fault.” My hand instinctively jumped away from Marie who was burning up. “It’s not your fault.” I repeated while flicking my hand in the air.

Marie tilted her head, her eyes roaming up and down the dog. “You’re wrong. It is my fault.” The Pitbull continued whimpering as its tongue wagged on Marie’s yoga pants. “My scans showed old neck scars. I should have predicted the outcome of a possible impact, but I didn’t.”

“Old neck scars?” I scratched my head. “Possible outcome?”

“I loosened her collar and that’s how it escaped.’ The Pitbull tried moving once more, but the pain caused it to “Yip” awfully loud. “Shhh, it’s okay. I’m here.” The dog licked her hand. “It’s going to be okay, girl. I promise.” Marie brushed her fingers over the dog’s head and quickly punctured one precise pinky-sized hole in her skull.

Once we got home later that afternoon, Marie said, “I think there might be something wrong with me.” And then she began running a diagnostics test. “It’ll only take an hour or two,” she repeated even though I kept telling her things happen. She stood in the middle of my apartment once again, this time with a circular percent meter indicating how much longer the test will take in her eyes.

#

I was getting worried watching Marie run tests all Saturday afternoon that continued on till Sunday morning, the percentage had not changed from ninety-percent since last night, so I decided to call BetterLife.

“Thank you for calling BetterLife. All of our agents are currently busy assisting other customers. Your call is very important to us. If you are already a BetterLife customer, please press 1 and the next available agent will receive your call in the order it was received,” said the automated recording. This is some serious bullshit, I thought, after pressing one.

“Thank you for calling BetterLife. How may I be of assistance Mr. Rockbell?” said Valerie, recognizing her voice.

“Yeah, hi. Marie is... I mean, my Model-E series is acting up,” I said. While on the phone I paced up and down the apartment, at times making small circles around Marie.

“So, I can provide a more accurate description to the information technology representative, can I please I have the model number?”

I pushed aside Marie’s short rose-colored hair from the back of her neck and read off the model number. “Yeah, sure, it’s 63417.”

“Please hold, while I connect your call,” she said.

I was placed on hold for roughly twenty minutes before another familiar voice greeted me.

“BetterLife help desk, this is Jemaine, how may I be of assistance?” he said, and the thought of asking of whether or not this man was or at any point had been the manager on duty crossed my mind. But looking at Marie idle liked that, it all seemed irrelevant.

I said, “Yes, my Model-E series has been running a diagnostics test ever since it started overheating the other—”

He cleared his throat, interrupting me in the process. “Ahh, okay. No problem. Now, I do have to ask as it is company policy before continuing assistance. Have you read the manual that came with your Model-E series?”

“I-I... I don’t have time for this. No. I didn’t read that three-hundred-page manual,” I said. “No one does.”

“Look I’ll be honest with you, policy dictates we only help customers that have read the manual but seeing as though I only have ten more minutes till I go on my lunch break—I’ll help you out. I’ll make this my last call,” Jemaine said, talking as though he was sucking on a piece of hard candy. “Now tell me, when did your Model-E series start overheating?”

“Yesterday, I guess,” I said, spitting on the palm of my left hand, my right hand still holding the phone, and suspended it over Marie’s head. It took a mere three seconds to dry up and start burning my skin.

“So as a feature, all the Model-E series have built in cooling systems. Once it hits well over sixty degrees Fahrenheit, two built in pumps start sucking in air and exhaling to release some heat. It should look like breathing. The second feature starts circulating hot liquids inside the body to colder outer areas, after it has hit well over ninety degrees Fahrenheit. There should either be a loud or subtle “thump” resembling a heartbeat coming from its chest. Now, of these two which one is currently running?”

I screamed into the phone not understanding and said, “They’re both on. They’ve been on for a while now. Why hasn’t she cooled down by now?”

“Hmm... now when you say, “they’re both on and have been for a while,” do you mean that it’s been like that for more than ten hours?”

“Yes!” I said.

I heard him sighing in the background. “Oh... Did you by chance install the personality chip that came with the manual?” said Jemaine.

“Yes! Just tell me what’s wrong with my Model-E series.”

“When the company first started making the switch over from home systems to Model-E series, its major consumers were groomsman who were throwing bachelorette parties,” he said.

I paced faster through the apartment waiting for him to get to point, saying “Uh-huh” every now and then. It seemed like he was dragging this conversation on longer than it should have.

Jemaine continued, “However, its biggest complaint was that the E-series took too long to develop into actual human looking robots. And that’s when they created the “Daemon: Personality Module (Alpha).” A multitasking operating system that acted as a catalyst, running a background process parallel with the Model-E’s internal system, but not under the users’ direct control”.

“I don’t have time for this. What are you getting at?” I said.

“I only have two more minutes till my break, so let me finish. Rude. As I was saying, it worked great till the Model-E overheated essentially frying its processor and memory unit usually within three days,” said Jemaine.

Mason: Are you saying she... my Model-E is going to die?

Crunching on his hard candy, he said, “I’m saying the Alpha chip still has some side-effects, but you do have two options. Alternatively, you could interface the Model-E yourself if you have any level three modifications. Or I can send you a Beta patch within the next three days. It will essentially give back control to the Model-E of its cooling systems.”

“I don’t have any modification let alone a level three one. And what do you mean three days? It... she’ll be gone by tomorrow.”

Instantly, Jemaine said, “I guess maybe next time you’ll read the manual and not hang up on people, will you? Aaaaaand, it’s time for lunch break. Here at BetterLife we appreciate your service and would like to inform you that by using the “Daemon: Personality Module (Alpha)” you have waved your right to any and all refunds. Thank you for calling BetterLife, Bye-now.” He hung up the phone and I was left with the fact that there’s nothing I could do to fix what I have essentially caused.

Though a part of me wanted to stay, wait for Marie to reboot. I thought it would be best if I left for my Sunday night group meeting at church. I walked around the apartment turning off the light in the kitchen and the one in my room, before turning off the one in the living room. I stole one last glance at Marie before putting on a thick black overcoat and heading out the door.

Just as I was about to turn the ignition of my Fiat, she came out of nowhere and said, “Don’t forget a beanie it’s going to get quite cold later tonight.” Marie held an old black Pac-Man beanie I had in her hand.

Not even thinking, I said, “Marie, would you like to come with me?”

“Sure,” she said, smiling so wide I could see the gum of her teeth. “Let me change clothes.”

On the drive to the church I was stopped once again at Mercy Way and Destination Parkway. I quickly inspected the No U-Turn sign for Earl and his crazy antics, but he wasn’t there. Instead, there was a bouquet of wilting dandelions and memorial banner tied to the sign. Distracting myself, I peered over at Marie and said, “Did you find out anything from your test?”

“No, they all came back positive,” she said, as bits of her gelatinous skin melted away from her lower jaw and onto the car’s pleather seat.

“Oh,” I said, remembering that the personally chip ran not under her direct control. “Here put this on.” I grabbed a white scarf from the backseat and handed it to her. Then I lowered the car window and raised the air conditioning to high.

As we reached the church, I decided to take Marie over to the statue. I saw from the short ride over here, she didn’t have much longer. Patches of her hair had gotten glued to the car seat,

the lower half of her jaw that was covered by the white scarf was purely metallic now. I sat on the metal bench and padded the right side of my overcoat with a quilted blanket I kept in my car.

I tapped on the bench. “Marie, come have a seat.”

“The Pietà is quite beautiful, isn’t it?” She said, laying her head on my shoulder not knowing she was furnacing a heat wave that was melted the snow around her. Her eyes flickered on and off.

I winced in pain as the heat slowly pierced the layers of clothing I had on, broiling my right arm. I looked over at Marie and said, “Yeah, it is.”

Tristen walked over to us and said, “You guys don’t look so hot.” He was wearing the exact the same outfit he wore last week, except he had a large camping backpack on.

I noticed his modified eyes weren’t glowing like they normally did. “You got a new a modification or something, Tristen?”

He continued walking. “Or something.”

And that was when it hit me. Tristen had level three modifications on his left arm, he could save Marie. I folded the quilt into the shape of a pillow and laid her head down on it.

Father Rolo could be heard in the distance yelling, “The meeting is about to start.”

Rushing over to Tristen, I said, “I need your help! Please, help me save Marie. You’re the only who can.” After inspecting his face up close, it seemed like he went off on one of his benders again—something was off about him.

By the time Tristen had agreed to help and we stood hovering Marie, who was on standby resting on the bench, a huge pool of her skin had melted away beneath the metal bench. The

intense heat had caused small spontaneous flames, charring her clothes and leaving behind small holes all over them.

“Here you might need this,” said Tristen, handing me a sparkling-fluorescent vial of what looked like translucent cream-colored syrup. “Drink it. Looking at her state, it’s going to be awhile.”

“Is this Mercurium?” I took a few sips.

Tristen watched me eagerly as I took a few more sips. “It is.”

“Isn’t this stuff crazy expensive?” I said, gulping it all down.

“Don’t worry about it, I’ve just recently hit the jackpot.” He placed his backpack on the bench, a couple inches away from Marie’s legs, and began perusing through it. “Give me a sec, while I find the right adapter chord.” For a moment, his face fluttered.

The Mercurium kicked in fast and I could no longer feel or move my legs, even though I was standing. A large gust of frigid wind blew me forward and I fell, kneeling in front of Marie. Tristen glimpsed over at me and said, “I’ll only be a few more seconds.”

“Are you almost...” I said, before I could no longer move my tongue or feel my face. I was paralyzed.

“Ahh, it seems like the Saturn’s Ring I gave you has finally spread all over,” said Tristen, pulling out an M-14 Spider out his backpack. “By the way, Mercurium is grayish in color. What kind of alcoholic doesn’t know that? Oh, well.” He attached the M-14 Spider to my chest, on top of my heart. “And to think I was just going to take a liver this time from the old priest.” He deactivated his facial modification distorting his face to someone I’ve never seen before.

This is how I'm going to die, I thought. I closed my eyes as I heard my bones being crushed while the M-14 tightened around my body—I didn't feel any of it. Two loud "Pops" originated from my back and I assumed that was it, I was dead. I opened my eyes to see Marie cradling me in her arms, attempting to remove the M-14 Spider from my chest. I smelt my skin charring, sizzling like bacon in her arms. I blinked. I squinted. I stared knowing that I was being cooked alive, soon my heart would be shot into a tube. Mere seconds later, Marie's head caught fire, and she powered down, her eyes fading. Inches away from death, I wasn't alone. I gazed over at the statue and thought, "Pietà, huh?" I tried smiling, but nothing came of it.

THE SCHISM PAST SKIN

I'm often a prisoner of awkward conversations in elevators; as a cross between a porter and concierge, it's a job hazard I have built a tolerance for. I've learned to hold my tongue several times. However, one thing that upsets me the most is when I'm asked, "Where are you from?"

It's an irritating question, since most often other people can't tell where I'm from by my skin color alone. During one of my exploits as a porter, for example; I rode the elevator with a Canadian guest who asked me, "Where are you from?" I answered back in an uninterested monotone voice, "Dominican Republic." To which he replied, "Yeah, my wife is from Argentina." I was dumbfounded by his response, even as he kept talking about his wife. One of the main reasons that question irks me is because I stop being me, but simply just another Hispanic or person of color.

Additionally, quite often Hispanics are packaged together as one, as that guest did in the example earlier. In that case, it was good experience for the guest as he got to speak about his wife although I couldn't care less. Yet, bundling a person who speaks a different language, in my case Spanish, or who looks a certain way, into one monolithic group is not always productive. Before I was a porter/concierge, I worked valet. Having said that, one of the reasons I don't hate the question "where are you from?" is because I'd rather someone ask me than assume. For instance, during one of my shifts working valet a guest blatantly said, "I don't want him [me] parking my car." I don't know why I asked, but I said, "Why not?" She said, "I've had a bad experience with your people before, no offense." Back then I wondered what people she referred

to, because I never told her I was Dominican. I just looked a certain way and was lumped in as “another.”

I find it hard to expand on who I am, another reason why the question “where are you from?” irks me. I was born in Puerto Rico, chanting “*Yo soy Boricua, pa’que tu lo sepas!*” till I moved to the States at the age of five. Born in Puerto Rico, raised in the States, but having Dominican Republic heritage from both sides—I’m never too sure how to respond to that question, really. At the same time, I know people born here but who are not of color who get asked that question as well. Yet, when I’m asked that and answer “here” the follow up question usually is, “where are your parents from?” This leads to a sense of “forced alienation,” because even though you’re from here, you still aren’t. And this often reminds me of a conversation I had with an entomologist, while her husband checked the hotel bed for bugs. At the time I had left my nametag at home and was wearing one that read “Ben,” so when she asked me “where are you from?” I said, “south” as vaguely as possible. In return she commented on my pronunciation on the word “neither,” and that I must have stayed up north at some point. It was in this moment of ambiguity that I felt like me, and not just “another” lump, a number to be aggregated. I’d rather remain a puzzling zero, a number whose values have yet to be imposed upon. Because even though zero holds no value, it’s still a number. It’s simply a number that cannot be added, or “amassed.”

As I mentioned earlier, people who don’t know me commonly try to categorize me, label me into a group I’m not. I found this happens in nature as well. From simply looking at Antarctica, the southernmost continent covered entirely by snow, most people wouldn’t know that it is classified as a desert. A place surrounded by water, although captured in ice, is labeled a

desert because of its low yearly precipitation. Often times, I feel like Antarctica, misrepresented by looks alone—particularly due to the color of my skin.

From time to time, I'll get called black because of the complexion of my skin. And even though I've never taken much notice of it, I was caught off guard just a few weeks ago when someone did. While at work, the argument of whether or not Ninja, a famous white youtuber, was given a pass to say the word "Nigga" whilst rapping arose. That's when, shortly after a brief discussion, Nuru, an African American coworker, said to me, "You're Dominican, right?" I nodded, yes. "*You* can say that." I was in utter disbelief since this "privilege" had not always been the case with me, though I did relish in the idea that I had to the ability to do so and smiled.

Most often, when learning a new language, the first thing many people told me was that learning curse words were the easiest. As someone whose parents worked non-stop when I was eight, I was misinformed, mainly by MTV television, at the usage of the word "Nigga" as a form of greeting to a black person. Because I lacked the correct "words to speak," I, using this word loosely, "greeted" a fellow elementary classmate with such a word. This led to some confusion when the teacher overheard, came over, pulled me aside and scolded me for using such language, instead of receiving back the hearty "Sup" as portrayed in television by other people with my skin tone. This left me confused, since no one said why I shouldn't say it; not my teacher, not the girl I said it to, certainly not my overworked parents. Why it was bad to say it, and how it could rub people the wrong way—something I learned much later in history class later in middle school.

Although I'm normally mislabeled as something other than who I am, such as last week when I was told I look Moroccan, essentially blending away from Latino—I've never felt like

I'm a "failure" to my parents unless I hide who I really am. For instance, I witnessed an incident at work as a tourist began speaking Spanish to Chris, one of my coworkers—who's Dominican, "looks the part" as well and also speaks Spanish—for a solid two minutes when he responded back to her with, "I don't understand," as he did not want to be bothered. So, flashing back to my high school Spanish teacher who called me "Americanized" for sleeping through her class with my American pronunciation of the Spanish language all I have to say is, "*Nunca olvidaré de donde vengo.*" Which is to say, I will never be too "American" even if I can camouflage myself or pass as one.

As noted earlier, my parents worked non-stop to provide for my brother and I, when I was younger. This meant that I often felt neglected, frequently seeking guidance on day to day interactions from television, most notably my dry banter. With that said, at the age of twenty-one, during a coffee run with my boss, Carrie, who's white—the barista asked her, "how would you would you like your coffee?" I was a tad annoyed when all she did was point at me and answered, "his color," because my skin tone was not a color palette on a coffee wheel that read: "Pumpkin spice, Caramel macchiato, Carlos frappe." Considering I'm more than just shade of coffee, as I carry an ocean of information and history within my blood—although encapsulated under skin, I retaliated. I asked the barista, feeling a bit insulted, to add milk to my coffee and pointed at her, "her color." Because, hey, sometimes I'm like Antarctica, cold and isolated.

HOW TO WRITE GOOD POETRY

Rip off the band-aid
you call personal space.
Pick at the hardened scab
till it bleeds and drips
down on paper.

Guys are cereus
in an ocean of roses,
so grate the skin roughly
for girls have an edge
on you.

The brighter the blood
the closer it comes
from the heart, so paint
the canvas blushed.
Make sure not to filter

your strokes,
like a moment captured
on camera—*Smile*;
knowing I stated good
poetry, not great.

Great poetry requires quarts
not pints and it's usually
taken not given. So rest
assured when baptized *gay*
for writing poetry,

you haven't lost much.
Poetry is a sacrifice, a gravel
road scarcely driven. Few
ride their hearts through razor
blades, and even fewer gash
themselves for others.

Go ahead, cover the garnet droplets,
they're shit and you're done.
Mask your scars with a band-aid,

and before you ask—it's good.
You're somebody's type.

THE MAN BEHIND THE CURTAIN

It rained that summer night by the house next to the cemetery. I remembered anxiously counting the number of swipes the wipers made across the windshield of the old red Camry my Mom used to drive, while I waited. I don't think the wiper blades had ever been changed since the car was first bought decades ago, leaving clear white streaks upon every swipe. Out in the distance, my Dad, dressed in an all-black suit raised one hand in front of his eyes averting the blinding gaze of the headlights before waving at us—me and my younger-sister, Paps. Paps' red hair cascaded down my legs as her head nestled on my lap. We were still in the car a few feet from the porch of a neglected, strange but familiar house, like something from a picture. Exerting my eyes through the harsh grating rain, I saw the silhouette of several tombstones off in the wide span behind the house. I held Paps closer to me.

Not too long after, Dad knocked on the door and an old man with glasses opened, shook my Father's hand, and began glancing at us. In her sleep, Paps kicked the door causing a loud thump. She slept throughout the whole car ride with her caged pet hamster, Calliope, by her side who was also asleep on a mountain of pellets. The long ride up the mountain made her weary, as did the warm air from the car heater that caressed back the chilled winds seeping inside the car. A tree branch smacked the left side passenger door, startling me and causing my book to tumble between the armrest and the side of the seat. As I dug past dropped coins and leftover takeout menus, I heard a bang on my door. My Dad stood outside, overshadowing the car with an umbrella in his right-hand as he opened the door with the other.

“Hey, Val, help me get the things out of the car,” he said, moving things aside so that he could pick up Paps. “You girls will only be staying here for a couple days.” He paused, taking a moment to consider what he said. “It’ll just be two days, I did promise.” He reassured himself. “I just can’t bring myself to bring you girls to the cemetery, not yet. Your sister’s only five and you—”

“Yeah, fine, whatever.” I wrapped up my long brown hair, tucked it in a beanie and headed for the trunk of the car, as chunks of rain battered away at my jacket like hail. “I just don’t understand why we couldn’t stay with Grandpa Joe and Grandpapa Rafi?” I slammed my suitcase on the muddy ground and stared at him. “They love us there.”

“Valerie, we’ve already talked about this,” he said picking up Paps with one arm and lounging her on his shoulder. “My parents are away on vacation for their anniversary and your Mom’s—” He stood quiet, not saying one word. His eyes widened, phasing out and drifting gently downwards towards the floor like a feather pulled by gravity.

“Dad,” I said, grabbing hold of his hand. It was like this sometimes, after Mom passed away. Somedays he was okay, and at other times he’d cease to be himself. Normally it would only take him a second to come back to his senses, however, though Mom’s been gone three years now, around this time of the year it becomes crippling for him. I yanked at his arm and said, “It’s okay, we don’t have to go.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. What was I, um…” Still a bit out of it, we walked together towards the door getting pelted by rain, whilst the old man stood vigilant from the porch of the house grasping something in his left hand. “You know, he could help,” I said under my breath, dragging my suitcase through the soaked muddy grass. Dad simply ignored me.

When we reached the steps of the porch covered in weird black rocks, he said, “Valerie, this is your Grandfather, Frank.” Dad nodded his head to the side telling me to greet him. “He’s quite the busy person, you see.” He winced pulling back a bit. “He doesn’t like leaving the house, if can’t help it. So, you girls behave while I’m gone, and make sure to look after your sister.”

I slid closer to the cover of the house trying to avoid the rain, feeling around the mush of my shoes with my toes. “What kind of person doesn’t leave the house.” I thought.

“Hey there little one, how old might you be?” He extended his hand. “I’m your Mom’s Father, but you can call me Fran, err, Walter.” He scratched his head with his right hand, holding a block of wood in the other. “Yes, just Walter.” He looked at my Dad then back at me. “Your Grandmother finds it hard callin’ me Frank, so let’s not confuse her.”

“Eleven,” I said, raising myself on my tippy-toes and glaring my brown eyes at him. “Okay, ‘just Walter,’ Why does she call you Walter?”

He came closer to me as the sound of roaring thunder echoed in the background and said, “Aren’t you a tall little-lady, aren’t you?” He smiled, several of his blackened teeth showing.

I took several steps towards him, we were face-to-face. “What’s that for?” I said, now pointing at the object in his hand. “You making something?”

Walter pulled out a small wooden winged horse from his leather jacket and said, “I carve things out of wood. Not much else to do around here. The horse is actually for your sister.”

“Oh, did you make me one?” I said, baffled at the craftsmanship of the wooded wings with silver radiant tips.

“Why I was just working on it, you see? Your Father said he wouldn’t be here for another hour.” He said sneering, placing the horse back in his pocket and changing the topic. “Say, you want to see something truly amazing?”

Dad seemed confused by the suggestion, as my mouth gaped open in curiosity. “Can a snail sleep for years?” I said. “I read a lot.”

“I don’t know ‘bout all that but see this.” Walter rolled up his jeans displaying a wooden leg from the knee down.

“Did you lose your leg in a war?” I said, and he stared back at me giving me nothing.

“Your Grandpa was an antiques dealer before he retired,” said Dad, nudging me on the shoulder with his lips tightened. “No wars here.” He chuckled at Walter.

Walter waved at my Dad signaling no harm done and gawked at me. “You ask a lot of questions, don’t you?” He said, laughing-heavily. “Boy, do you have your mother’s spunk.”

I smiled and said, “I want to be a writer like her someday. I’ve read all of her works at least three times now.” Dad placed his arm around me.

Before he abruptly stopped laughing, I saw tears coming out of Walter’s eyes. Once he did, he quickly peeked over his right shoulder and mumbled something. From where I stood, tipped-toed and all, there was no one there, so I looked up at Dad who also seemed perplexed. Seconds later, he told us to hastily come in and set our things by the stair case.

Walter pulled my Dad aside a couple of feet so that I didn’t listen in on their conversation, but his voice carried throughout the seemingly unfurnished house; both voices did. At first, I tried not to listen in and take in the house I would be staying in for the next day or so, yet I noticed Walter only had one chair even though he had a couple of tables from where I was.

There was the wooden coffee table in the kitchen, along with the glass table in the dining room, besides that a handful of bookshelves with hardly any books on them. After inspecting the ordinary empty house, I couldn't help but eavesdrop on what they were saying.

In a low, clear distinct voice at the foot of the stairs, Walter said, "How much do they know about their Grandmother?" His hand stroking his red beard with a furrowed brow on his face.

"Nothing at all, that I know of," said my Dad, fidgeting with his left ring finger as he always did when he was nervous.

"Okay. I'll tell them tomorrow." His eyes diverted at me and I rapidly gazed elsewhere, then he headed in my direction. "Your Father's going to get you girls ready for bed, I've already prepared the upstairs room. Try and get some sleep, it's going to be an early morning for all of us." Walter tousled my hair and went up the creaky stairs. He stopped mid-way and said to my Dad, "Wilmer, make yourself comfortable. I'll lock the door after you leave. Goodnight." And he disappeared through one of the three doors upstairs.

"Thanks again, Walter. I really appreciate you doing this," Dad said with his voice raised. "Come on peanut, you need to get some sleep. You've been up since six this morning."

I didn't notice when, but my hand had clutched onto his wet jacket sleeve tight by itself.

He knelt in front of me, meeting me at eye level. "Aww, I'll be here Sunday morning bright and early to pick you girls up." He moved Paps onto his other shoulder, she was now sucking on her thumb. "You girls are the most important people in the world to me. I'd never leave you girls."

“Then why are you leaving?” I yelled, my eyes fuzzy. “Mom... Mom never left us.” I gasped. “She... she—she was always—”

He leaned in, wiped away at my face with the tail-end of his shirt, and kissed my forehead. “Yeah. Your Mom was pretty great, wasn’t she?” I was too tired to fight, to ask why he had to go alone year after year, so he picked me up and carried me upstairs where he changed us out of our damp clothes and put us to sleep.

My eyes felt heavy as if there were anvils weighing them down. I think I mumbled, “Goodnight, Dad,” right before I dozed off.

#

According to my watch, around four o’clock, the window above my bed blew open allowing water to gather at the edge of the sill which then softly pivoted off and onto my forehead waking me up. A puddle of water had gathered on my pillow when a large gust of chilled wind tongued my ear purple.

I immediately got off the bed to close the window, tossed my damp pillow on the floor, pushed the wheeled-bed frame to the side of the room closer to Paps’ bed and away from the drops. That’s when, while standing, with what little moon light crept through dark clouds that night, I noticed that Calliope’s cage was opened. As I got closer to it, I touched the metal bars that were bent most likely from the heavy luggage that was placed on top of it earlier. Realizing Paps would freak out if she found an empty cage, I hastily searched around the room for the rodent with no luck. A part of me wanted to wake up Paps but she looked so peaceful cocooned in blankets that I couldn’t. Having heard a noise downstairs—I grabbed the flashlight by the nightstand, a bag of ziplocked hamster pellets and quietly made my way downstairs.

As soon as I began searching the living room, a large clang, the familiar sound of eating utensils smacking against each other, emanated from the kitchen. I rushed over there to find a large white rat with bright garnet eyes scurrying through a hole to a door that I assumed led to the basement. Out of nowhere, Calliope's orange and white colored fur zoomed past my light as the pink ribbon waltzed on its head, chasing after the rat.

"Oh no, you don't," I yelled, leaping in front of the hole. I made myself appear bigger, but it still made a mad dash at me. Thinking on my feet, I tossed some hamster pellets on the floor to slow him down. However, and I had never seen Calliope do anything but eat and nap, it was catching the pellets mid-air whilst still running. Finally, when it seemed it had won, I shoved the flashlight into the hole creating a loud thud and small cracks in the wood. Now defeated, Calliope laid on the floor panting waiting to be picked up, once I did grab the stuffed fur-ball—it bit my finger lightly and then threw up the pellets all over my hand. "This is why I sometimes pray you choke on a pellet," I said staring at its eyes.

Before I could cage Calliope back up again, Walter was there with lantern in hand.

"Oh, I was just on my—" I said, shortly before he cut me off and shined an old-school gas lantern.

"You shouldn't be down here," he said, looking around and waving the lantern everywhere.

"What's that smell?" I said, coming closer to the lit lantern which smelled awful. "Is something burning?"

"You shouldn't be down here," he repeated, now checking that the door was locked and remained unopened. They were.

“Is that the door to the basement?” I said, trying to keep Calliope still.

“You shouldn’t be down here.” His voice now raised after seeing the flashlight on the wall. He pulled out the flashlight and handed it to me. “This door remains closed. Always.” He turned the knob making sure it was locked, then went outside to sit on the porch chair.

“Goodnight, Walter.” I said at the foot of the stairs towards the screen door. I stood there for a minute watching him rock back-and-forth and heard him barely audibly say “It’s not time yet,” to himself under moonlit night carving away at the wood block.

I took a shoelace from one of Paps’ shoes, after all it was her dumb pet, and roped together the hole in the cage. And just in case the little pellet puffer tried biting the lace, I pressed the cage up against the wall with the hole against a brick wall. By the time I was done, I tossed myself on my bed only to hit something laying underneath the sheets. It was a drenched purple composition book that I’ve never seen before. And could have sworn wasn’t there before, though I was really tired in all honesty. Out of curiosity I quickly flipped through the first few pages, but the ink had bled through and smudged most of it, making it unreadable. There were only a handful of pages that were legible, and the heading for those pages read “The Man Behind the Curtain.”

I quickly grabbed the flashlight, which flickered on and off before dimming out a bit. The first two pages were about a man with yellow eyes, which read:

June 2, 1995

I saw him last night again, hidden behind the curtain. Dad doesn’t believe me that he’s real, says I have an overactive imagination. But I see him, standing there in the corner of my

room. Today he stood by the heel of my bed watching me sleep. His bright yellow eyes like burning dandelions, his serrated teeth and viscous red lips...

The following lines as well as the next few entries were heavily water-damage, but from what I could read it said:

June 6, 1995

My Dad told me not to be afraid of it, to look it in the eye and I'll see he's not real. Last night, I did just that. Except he waved at me with a glistened smile on his face when I did. I couldn't get over those yellow crow-like eyes as he told me to come to him with his elongated finger and opened the window. I hid under the covers too afraid to yell, too scared to admit he is real. Moments passed, and I heard nothing but stillness of the night, I peeked through a hole in the sheets and saw nothing. After a few seconds, I told myself to be brave, so I got up to close the window and there laid a wooden devil statue with painted yellow eyes.

The sound of footsteps and creaky floorboard yanked me away from the story. It was Walter making his way up the stairs and towards our room. I quickly hid the purple journal under my bed and pretended to be asleep. Once he came, the room was filled with the burning smell of kerosene from his lantern. He slowly moved my bed to where it was, not too long after I fell asleep.

#

The next day I woke up to Paps' laughter downstairs; the sound of her voice reminded me of home and not here. Still in my pajamas, I rushed out of the room and rocketed down the stairs where Paps was playing with Calliope and her new wooden horse on the kitchen table with a

bowl of oatmeal in front of her. I hugged Paps from behind who greeted me with a loud, “Mornin’, Peanut!” and then I rubbed Calliope’s small furry head.

“Good morning, Paps,” I said kissing her head.

Walter who was sitting on top of a flipped-over bucket by the corner cabinets, slid it over to me and said, “Before you girls meet your Grandmother I need to tell you something.” He advised I sit by pointing at the bucket.

“What’s wrong with Grandma?” I said, trying to find the most comfortable way to sit on a bucket.

“Grandpa, is Grandma gonna be okay?” said Paps putting down her horse.

“Your Grandmother will be just fine, as long you girls leave her be,” said Walter clearing his throat. “Please call me Walter, Paps.” He grinned.

“Okay, Grandpa,” said Paps.

Walter sighed and continued once more. “Your Grandma has Alzheimer’s... just means she has trouble remembering stuff, ‘kay?” He gathered closer to us by the table. “Last year she took a very nasty fall and nearly cracked her head—”

I cleared my throat and shifted my eyes at Paps and then back at Walter. “She’s only five, you know.”

“Your Grandmother had a bad boo-boo.” He continued with a slight grin on his face. “Her mind is stuck in the past.”

“Did you kiss the boo-boo, Grandpa?” said Paps, her hazel eyes now widened with worry.

“Your Grandmother is gonna be alright. She’s a strong one,” he said, now at the kitchen sink and getting some tap water. “Doctor says forming a pattern helps. So, she wakes up every mornin’ to the same routine, so she doesn’t worsen. Okay?” said Walter, patting Paps on the head.

“Okay, Grandpa,” Paps said, kicking her feet up in the air from her high-chair sitting Calliope on the horse. “Calliope will keep Grandma safe, I know she will.”

“Now listen up, this is important. She has her crazy episodes, so just leaver her be. It’s just her brain working itself out. The doctor says your Grandmother suffers from a rare condition called chrono-displacement, without going too much into detail it makes her believe she’s still the same twenty-four-year-old hospice caretaker who worked for my Father—”

As Walter finished his last word, a large bronze-skinned woman wearing an apron with grey crisp dreadlocks and a smile that seemed all too familiar to that of moms walked through the beaded curtains of the kitchen.

“Oh, sorry Mista Walters.” She waved at us and Paps and I waved back, still a bit puzzled as to who Walters and only remembering it was Frank till later. “Didn’t know you had company visiting today. Had I known, I woulda prepared somethin’ special for today’s dinner, especially for these two-lovely girls.” She cleaned her hands off her yellow polka dotted apron and extended her hand toward me. Walter stood silently sipping on his water. “Hey there, I’m Amilda. Most people call me Milly,” she winked, “except Mista Walters there.”

“Milda, these two here are Valerie and Paps,” said Walter. “They’ll be staying with us for the night while their Dad takes care a few things.”

“Mista Walters!” She exclaimed, “You didn’t tell me young master Frank had kids, let alone these beautiful babies.” Milly gazed at us scanning every freckle on Paps’ face, every unruly strand of hair on my curly head. “You got some color on you, looks good,” she said pinching my cheeks. “And ain’t you the sweetest thing this side of Louisiana.” She leaned in within whispering distance of Paps and said, “Save this for later, if not Mista Walters will get mad.” She snuck a lollipop in her pocket as Walter pretended not to see what was going on.

“Thanks, Grandma,” said Paps, hugging her tightly.

In a harmonious instant Walter said, “Remember what I told you girls,” and Milly added, “I’m flattered, but I’m no one’s Grandma, baby girl.”

I laughed awkwardly and said, “She calls many people Grandma.” I rested my arm over Paps’ shoulder. “It’s just something she does, no need to take her seriously.”

Walter tugged at a piece of string on top of the refrigerator tied to a brass key. With that key he opened the basement door and said, “I’ve got some work I gotta do. Milda, will you make sure the girls shower and help you around the house, if you need the extra hands. Don’t disturb me while I’m working.” He slammed the door shut, rattling the windows.

“Now, baby girl? I gotta ask... what kind of girl name is Paps?” said Milly, a bit taken back. “I’ve heard some names back in my day, but Paps...”

Giggling like a hyena, Paps said, “My real name’s not Paps.”

“When she was a baby, Mom was cooking something she saw on tv when Paps waddled her way into the spice rack and covered herself in Paprika,” I said. “Mom looks down and says, ‘Mikayla, what have you done? You’ve got Paprika everywhere.’ Paps faces up and says, ‘Paps.’”

Milly's head started spinning as if it were in a blender. "Did you say Mikayla?" She massaged the left side of her head, while cradling her right arm. "Why does she..." Milly grabbed a jar of what seemed like salt from the bottom pantry and bolted outside not saying a word. I kept Paps away from the windows as I watched Milly salt the edges of the house.

"C'mon, Paps," I said, "Let's get you cleaned up," I said, acknowledging Milly wasn't going to.

#

Knowing that Paps was going to play with Calliope more than she was going to bathe, I decided to read the rest of the notebook squatted just outside the bathroom door. By now, a handful of pages had stuck together dry like wet cement.

June 8, 1995

Someone knocked on my door late last night, three loud thumps. I thought it was Dad, but he never came in. And just as I'm about to go to sleep after convincing myself it might have just been the pipes, the door to my room opened by itself. Once again, thinking it was Dad making his late-night checkups, I waited for him to peek his head in and make sure I was asleep.

"Calliope! No, stop it," said Paps from within the bathroom.

"Everything okay in there, Paps?" I said, slightly opening the door.

The sound of splashing water spilling from the tub could be heard from the outside, Paps said, "Yeah. Calliope's just being a butt."

I giggled. "If you make a mess, you're cleaning it up," I said loudly and continued reading.

Dad never came. I cocooned myself in a blanket, repeating over and over in my head “it’s not real.” It took me an hour before I knew nothing was coming for me, or it would have done so by now. The creaky floorboards kissed my ears awake all night like contorted balloons on the brink of popping. The noise was driving me insane, so I hastily jumped off the bed to shut the door. When I got there, I saw it, a pair of yellow-eyes at the foot of the stairs looking up at me. I banged the door shut locking it behind me and blanketed myself tightly. “It’s all in my head,” I said silently to myself. When from what I think was the closet, I heard a loud balloon pop.

I stopped and listened for Paps, whose water splashing had gone silent.

“Aaah,” yelled Paps frantically.

It wasn’t too long after Paps screamed that I thought I heard her say “Yellow-eyes.” I rushed in thinking something bad had happened to her or Calliope, only to find her standing on the edge of the tub.

“Peanut, Calliope pooped in the tub,” said Paps pouting.

Three little brown pellets floated in the water while Calliope backstroked its way across towards where the shower drain was like nothing occurred.

“Let’s get you dressed up,” I said, wrapping a towel around Paps. “You too, pooper.” I plucked out Calliope off the water only to get bit by the little devil. “This is why I don’t like you.” I stared at its face. “Your ribbon makes you look stupid, by the way,” I whispered in its ear.

#

Later that afternoon outside by the porch steps, while Paps and Calliope played on the kitchen floor, I entertained myself by talking to Milly who was pushing water to the sides of the

walkway with a broom. Although most of what she did confused me, like the numerous times since I've been here that she's salted the perimeters of the house as part of her pattern, she had an interesting thing to say about "us working class," I assumed she forgot I was only eleven. She said working is like fire, we do it to keep the flame alive, but too much and we burn ourselves, too little and we fizzle out. Yet, there's only so much wood to burn in the world, at least that's what I gathered before she lit a cigarette and told me not to tell Mista Walters about her smoking who was upstairs napping.

"Peanut!" said Paps, from within the house with too much excitement.

I stared at Milly, whose earthly demeanor resembled that of a gentle breeze brushing through trees.

Still holding a cigarette between two of her fingers, Milly said, "Go on child, I'll be in a moment." She took one being puff that sucked the air out of my lungs, so I left.

As I sluggishly made my way to the kitchen, I saw Paps sprawled across the kitchen floor facing the basement door with Calliope nowhere in sight.

"Yes, Paps?" I said, my eyes tunneled at the floor. "You called?"

"Look, look." She repeated, pointing at the basement door which was now opened.

"Um, Paps..." I said, worried she might have done something she shouldn't. "Did you—"

"Shhh." Paps placed a finger on mouth. "Watch."

It didn't take long before Calliope, inside a hamster ball, was launched rapidly from the dark basement room.

“Did you see it, Peanut?” Paps said, tugging at my shirt. “Did you see?”

“I…” I paused, troubled by what it just happened. “Paps?” I said, moving her to the side. “Is Walter in there will the lights off?”

“No, silly,” She said laughing. “He’s upstairs.”

“How did you … how did the ball launch like that?” I said.

“Here, let me show you.” She picked up the hamster ball and headed towards the door, as Calliope frantically ran in the opposite direction causing the ball to rotate in Paps’ hands.

“I can’t believe I’m saying this, but maybe Calliope doesn’t like going into the dark,” I said softly, a part of me was too eager to feed my curiosity. “I know I wouldn’t want to go down there.” I mumbled.

In a matter of seconds, Paps forcefully rolled the ball down the basement stairs listening to every thud and creek it made on its journey down, till a loud thwomp echoed upstairs.

“Paps? Is Calliope gonna be okay?” I said, before firmly getting a finger placed over my mouth again.

Seconds quickly turned to minutes, before I knew it five minutes had passed since Paps tossed Calliope down the basement.

With finger tightly pressed against my lips, I managed to say, “How long does this take?”

Paps seemed so sure that I didn’t notice when she lowered her hand or grabbed mine instead. “He’s coming back, right Peanut?” Her eyes now watery and big, like kitten eyes with widening pupils and slit irises centered on me. “Mom gave her to me.” She cried.

I wanted to yell, to tell Paps off for tossing Calliope in the first place, to walk away and forget I was here. But her hand clasped firmly against mine, and it dawned on me it’s always

been the three us as far as I can remember having Paps around. Almost instinctively, I let go of Paps, bolted up the stairs to grab the flashlight and then proceeded to make my way down the basement stairs with her.

I told Paps to hug the wall with her back as we descended the stairs since it was too dark to see, even with a flashlight.

“I’m scared, Peanut,” said Paps sobbing.

“It’ll be fine,” I said, shaking the lantern causing the light to flicker. “Help me look for the light-switch.”

The bottom of the basement was unnaturally humid that drops of water splashed from corners of the room. From a distance, I could hear a consistent thwacking sound which resonated like the rapid snapping of a rubber band. I quickly illuminated the dark recess of the room from the foot of the stairs, it was a pitch-black square room. The right-side wall, in front of the stairs, was decorated with huge pieces of broken wooden furniture: chairs, tables, wooden couch frames. It was like a wooden landfill. I shined the light straight ahead to see a work bench with lots of tools, but most notably the light switch on the wall just off to the side of it.

“I don’t like it down here,” said Paps, sniffing all over my shirt. “I hope Calliope is okay.”

I massaged Paps shoulder like Mom used to do to me and told her, “Stay here, I’ll be right back,” but Paps shook her head no and held on tighter. “Fine.”

It took us only a few seconds to reach the other side scurrying like we did. And when we turned on the light, we were momentarily surprised by the detailed angel figure hanging by a

wire from the ceiling hovering over a box at the center of the room. She had beautiful oaky hair and bright jade eyes, kind of like Paps.

“She’s pretty,” said Paps, letting go of my hand.

“She is,” I said directly at Paps who was enthralled by the floating angel.

“Her arms aren’t attached,” She held up a pair of delicate wooden arm. “She looks familiar, like from a photo? Right, Val?”

“Hmm...” My eyes widened. “She kinda looks like Mom.” I paused for a second. “A little bit like you, too.” I kissed Paps on her head again, even though she didn’t like it the second time.

After I told Paps to take her hands off the table because it was wet and covered in damp and dry salt, as were most things in and out of the house thanks to Milly. I saw that the wooden box on the table said “Mikayla” nicely written in cursive. I didn’t know why but I felt sad reading Paps’ name on the box. She had gone off to check out a couple of opened boxes to the left side of the room in search of Calliope, and I just stood there, bitter.

“Peanut, look!” Paps said, holding a pair of puppets. “Dolls.”

I don’t know why but Paps’ voice irritated me. “I didn’t even want to be here,” I uttered under my breath. The blaring snaps echoing in the room made it difficult to focus as it became louder, throbbing away at me. “Things would be different at Grandpapa Rafi’s and Grandpa Joe’s House. They love us there.”

“They’re so pretty,” said Paps, her voice adding to the beats pelting my head.

“I didn’t want to come here,” I said a little louder trying to overcome the snapping roaring in my ears. “They treat me better there.”

“This one looks like you, Peanut,” said Paps oblivious of the sound. She held a doll with bewildered curly hair and a lavender stained dress.

“I didn’t want to be here!” I said echoing the basement.

“Peanut, I’m scared,” Paps’ eyes shifted once more into a helpless kitten’s. “We need to find Calliope.” She began rubbing her earlobes.

“You’re always scared,” I said, running midway up the stairs without her. I stared down at the floor boards, trying really hard not to look back. I knew if I glanced back even once, I’d give in. “She always gets what she wants,” I mumbled. “It’s not fair.”

“Peanut,” she said again sobbing. “I’m scared.”

“It’s not fair,” I repeated. As I placed my head down on my shoulder, and my ear faced the floor, it became apparent that the snapping was coming from underneath the stairs.

“Val... Valerie?” She sniffled.

“You hear that, Paps?” I said fully alert, but Paps continued crying.

“Val, please.” She rubbed away at her teary eyes.

“Shhh, Paps. I just need a moment,” I said taking out the flashlight from my pocket.

“Please!” She wailed louder, and as she did the snapping became sedated.

I ran back down the stairs and covered Paps’ mouth with my hand. “Be quiet a minute, will you?” Not too long after I said that, that I heard Walter yelling “Girls?” from upstairs.

And as I motioned the flashlight sluggishly beneath the staircase, my left-hand trembling and Paps’ snot dripping on the other, Calliope launched at us still inside the ball from the dark recesses underneath the stairs. The hamster ball had amassed several scratches and bite marks in

the brief time Paps had forcefully tossed it down the basement, so I wasn't too surprised that the ball broke apart right at our feet a few seconds after impacting the ground.

"What could have done this?" I said, inspecting the ball that seemed as though a dog was chewing on it for weeks.

Calliope, almost instantly and in a panic, frantically climbed up Paps' pant all the way to her shoulder and hid in her hair, causing them to flutter like the wings of a hummingbird.

Paps squealed vibrantly when Calliope rushed up her leg and then attempted to pet it. "You okay, Calliope?" She said, but Calliope nestled itself deeper within her hair for hand to reach.

"He's terrified," I said, focusing my attention from which he came standing in front of Paps.

"She," said Paps. The snapping had turned into a ferocious cacophony of hissing sounds from beneath the stairs.

"A pink bow doesn't make ..." I stopped, thinking about what was hidden inside the dark that might be coming after us next. "Paps, we can talk about this later." I flipped the flashlight on and a blaring squeak provoked me to tremble forcing me to drop the flashlight. The lit flashlight spun on the ground rapidly lighting, if only briefly, the source of the squeak. Although it was hard to see while the light went in and out of focus beneath the stairs, I began to get a better picture of what it was that was coming for us. The first time the flashlight spun I saw a few pairs of bright yellow eyes like from the journal I read. "Burning dandelions," I said, still not really believing my own eyes. Second time it spun, an auditorium of teeth engulfed the dark recesses.

I reached for the flashlight, but the rows of teeth came closer. “What are you?” I said softly, squinting and straining my eyes to see.

Paps, who peaked over my shoulder, got an eye full of teeth and screamed at the top of her lungs. Calliope raced down her body to the floor going through my legs, faced the mountain of teeth and squealed so loudly his whiskers momentarily took the form of a lion’s mane in my mind.

“Girls?” Walter said, “You down there?”

“Frank!” I screamed, watching the flashlight lose momentum as it spins slowed down. Once it came to a complete stop and shining beneath the stairs, it was clear that the bleacher of teeth came from spiked white-furred crazed rats. When the light wasn’t directly on their eyes, they were bright-red.

Now that I could see them, I just stood there waiting for Frank, waiting for them to go away—to leave us alone. It was like looking into a sea of blood with white-water rapids. Calliope was planted firmly on the ground whiskers raised high, teeth bared, tail snapping on the floor.

There was one massively large rat in particular, front and center, which appeared to be sizing up all three of us. The way it moved its head from side to side angling at which way it should pounce us from, when a drop water dripped from the ceiling onto its eye eliciting a twitch. It scratched out its left eye right out of its socket.

“Frank!” I yelled again.

It wasn't too long after that Frank came sprinting down the stairs leaping over sets of steps at a time. While my attention was solely engrossed on this one-eyed menace, I couldn't help but glance over at Frank's moans of pain when he landed on his fake leg.

Frank noticing the swarm of beady-eyed rats in front of us, placed all of his weight on his wooden prosthetic leg causing cracks and splinters in the wood, and kicked the rat sizing us up hard enough for me to hear bone cracking before impacting the wall, disappearing into the dark.

"Cover your mouth, girls!" He said, as he scraped off handfuls of salt off the table and started pelting them and Calliope in a storm of salt before they even got a chance to move.

"Frank," I said pausing. "Walter, what are you doing?" I shielded Paps from the white dust.

"Killing them," he said.

"With salt?" I said, a bit confused.

"Salt?" He said, hitting away at the rats. "No, this isn't salt. It's rat poison."

"Rat poison?" I said, looking down at Calliope who was now desperately rubbing away at its eyes. I smacked whatever was left of the rat poison from Waters' hand to the floor. We watched as the dust settled and the swarm of rats scatter hazily back into the dark recesses of the basement. However, I had to stand there and watch Paps stare at Calliope walk around blindly hitting things before passing out on top of the poison.

"You girls okay?" Walter said, inspecting us. "They didn't hurt you, did they?"

I ignored Walter and knelt beside Calliope, picking him up and dusting all the poison off of him. "Calliope, open your eyes." I blew into his eyes as I watched Calliope's rapid heartbeat

dwindle off. “C’mon, you butt—just, just open your eyes... I need you to open your eyes.” A tear rolled down my cheek and caressed the back of my hand. “I—I can’t lose you.”

“Peanut?” Paps said hoarsely, her eyes garnet red from all the crying I caused her earlier and all the screaming she just endured. Eyes that sought welcoming news where there was none. “Is Calliope gonna be okay?” She wiped away at her runny nose. “She’s gonna be fine, right?”

“Paps?” I said, brushing off my tears. “Paps? I need—”

“She’s gonna be okay. We’ll go home tomorrow, and we’ll all be home tomorrow.” Paps began hyperventilating and rubbing her earlobe. “It’s gonna be us four, like always.”

“Paps?” I stood up holding Calliope in my hand, his breathing shallow. “He, um... she doesn’t have long, Mikayla.” Taking Paps’ hand in mine, I placed Calliope gently in her palms. “I... I think she should spent her last days with someone who loved her more than anything, even when she was a butt.”

Paps shook her head. “No. No,” She said sternly. “This is your fault. You left me alone and—and you never liked Calliope.” Her eyes spaced out on the basement floor. “You don’t... She just needs to be surrounded by things that love her, you’ll see.” Paps bolted upstairs with Calliope coveted in her hands.

“Paps!” I cried, racing after her only to be grabbed by Walter midway up the stairs.

“What’s this?” He said, oblivious that he might have killed off a closer family member than him.

“Let go! I have to make sure she’s okay.” I forcefully shook my arm.

“Not until you tell me what’s going on?” He held on tighter with greater determination.

“No! This is your fault,” I said, kicking his prosthetic leg. The force from the kick caused Walter to lose his footing on the staircase, and he proceeded to fall down several stairs. However, on his tumble downwards his prosthetic leg got stuck in the opening of the staircase and forcefully snapped in half because of sheer force from his descent. I waited to make sure he was okay, and once I saw him laughing and yelling for Milda on the basement floor I chased after Paps.

#

By the time I made it up the stairs and into the room we were sleeping in, Paps had locked herself and Calliope in the bathroom. The running faucet water muffled the walls, which made it difficult to discern that Paps had Calliope’s metal cage in there with her. With my ear on the door, I could barely make out the metal screeching of the bars clanging together.

Knocking on the door, I said, “Paps? Please open up.”

“Go away,” she said.

“I’m... I’m sorry Paps.” I sunk down to the floor. “I shouldn’t have left you. Or Calliope.” I leaned my head against the door causing a thump.

“You—you,” said Paps hyperventilating, struggling to grasp air.

“Paps, just listen to my voice.” I wiggled the door knob. “Focus on me and breathe.”

“Peanut, she’s not gonna make it, is she?” I felt her sit on the other side of the door.

“She.” I paused, not knowing what to say. “Calliope... sisters,” I said, my voice breaking, “are like fire.” A pair of keys jangled in the background, but I concentrated on what I wanted to

say and ignored it. “We burn bright when we’re together and fizzle out when we’re alone. Yet, there’s only so much wood in the world.”

“Wood?” She said sobbing.

A small chuckle escaped me. “I know it sounds kind of dumb, but all we can do is keep her fire alive inside of us, even when it hurts.”

“Couldn’t have said it better myself,” said Milly, now standing over me and placing her hand over my right shoulder. “Mista Walters told me what happened to your pet—”

“She’s family,” I yelled, shrugging her off me. “She’s not just a pet.”

“I misspoke. Sorry.” Milly took out a few sets of keys from her pocket, the cause of the commotion earlier, and unlocked the bathroom door with one of them. “Maybe I can help?” Jumping to my feet, I turned the knob and slowly pushed the door open enough for me to squeeze through, the door slamming behind me. Upon hastily scanning the bathroom floor, aside from the cage in the sink and Paps sprawled on the floor with Calliope wet in her hand, everything seemed rather tamed.

“I thought giving her a shower would help her,” Paps said. “Then when she didn’t get better, I thought she’d feel better surrounded by things she loved.” She stared up at me.

“I guess that explains the cage.” I sprawled right next to Paps on the floor.

Girls, I’m coming in,” said Milly, cautiously pushing the door open and entering. “Now, I know Mista Walters isn’t exactly the greatest person to be around, I should know. We ain’t got no furniture half the time.” She extended her arm over to Paps. “I can help.”

Hesitantly and out of desperation, Paps said, “Okay.” She handed over Calliope over to Milly.

“You know I got bit by one of those albino rats you girls saw in the basement,” Milly nodded at us, “which is why it’s normally closed.” Her eye brow raised at me. “The next day Mista Walters fumigated the basement and all sorts of dying rodents popped out foaming out the mouth.” She gathered some of the white rat poison off of Calliope’s wet fur and rubbed it between her fingers. “It was the most inhumane thing I’ve ever seen.” She smelled the poison in her fingers. “I told myself I never wanted to see that again.” Milly licked the poison of her fingers.

“Aren’t you—” I said.

“I done switched the rat poison for flour and salt since then,” Milly said, handing Calliope back over to Paps. “She’s gonna be fine. Might just be a tad-bit tired is all, after protecting you girls.” She pulled us gently off the floor by our hands. “Now far as I know, no one’s ever died from flour and salt, lest Mista Walters cooking.” She smiled. “You girls keep this poison thing a secret, Mista Walters just wants to protect us. He just doesn’t go ‘bout it in the right sense.”

“Thank,s Grandma,” Paps and I said hugging her, even if she didn’t know who she was to us.

“You girls are sweet,” she said. “Now go on and wash up, get ready for dinner. I’ll make sure to have something for Calliope made.”

#

Later that evening during dinner, since Milly had forgotten where she placed the buckets, essentially our chairs, the four of us ate on the floor by the stairs. Paps and Calliope ate most of

the jambalaya and flung the rest at each other, while Milly and I watched comfortably from the stairs, her empty plate on her lap and mine next to journal I planned on reading afterward.

“I, uh ...” Frank said, rolling to us in an old dusty wheelchair. His missing leg was covered by a thick black and white quilt. He took a deep breath, slowly exhaling and continued, “I wanted to protect—” He stopped.

From the corner of my right eye, I saw Milly madly shaking her head no at him.

“Well, I came here to say.” He cleared his voice, straightening himself in the chair. “I’m sorry,” he said, staring me directly in the eyes. He pushed the quilt aside from his lap, revealing a wooden box—the one from the basement—though it was hard to make sure from where I was. “After I fell down the stairs ...” He choked up a bit. “I couldn’t help but laugh.” We all observed him in confusing. “You girls remind me so much of your mother.” He quickly glanced over at Paps, jambalaya now running down her cheek. “Paps looks so much like her—”

“And?” I said defensively, remembering the box had “Mikayla” written on it.

He tilted his head upward, facing the ceiling. “I, I don’t know. I felt like she was here.”

I glared at him, preparing to walk away.

“You girls see this scar here?” Walter pointed at a large cut above his right shoulder. “Or this one?” He lifted his shirt showing us an old gash. “No, I didn’t get them in a war,” he said, facing me again. “I got them from your mother.”

Our faces were painted in shock, we didn’t know what to take from what he just said, so we sat there idle—except by now the spoon on my bowl was tightly gripped in my hand like a knife.

“I had just come from work. Your mother might have been thirteen at the time, close to your age I believe.” He nodded at me. “When I overheard her telling her mother,” he made eye contact with Milly, “she had a crush with the neighbor’s boy, Michael Wang, by our old house. Boy, she didn’t like it when I teased her about being Mrs. Wang.” He chuckled. “She nudged me to the side, and I guess I was laughing so I hard I fell and caught my shoulder on a rusty nail on the way down.”

Milly and I laughed when Paps said, “What’s a wang?” and Walter’s face flushed.

“Never mind that,” he said, handing me the wooden box which now had my name written on top of Paps, as well as Calliope’s name off to the side. “I laughed when I fell down the stairs because I couldn’t help but think your mother would have kicked me as well.” He smiled. “Val, you are... both of you make it hard not thinking about her.”

“Thanks?” I said, as Paps squeezed in between Milly and I on the stairs.

“Open it,” she said. “We wanna know what’s inside.” She petted Calliope hanging on her shirt.

I pressed a button on the side and the top flung open. Steadily a circular base holding up a wooden angel embracing a girl and a baby in the form of hug rose up.

“Peanut, it’s the angel from earlier,” said Paps, “You see it?”

Upon further inspecting it, I noticed that the girl was reading a book to the baby on her lap while it played with a baby hamster. “Is-is this us?” I said.

He nodded. “I wanted to get it done before you got here yesterday, but you see...” He scratched his head. “Even after taking the furniture apart, I didn’t have the piece I needed to

make it rise. Wasn't till I broke my prosthetic leg that I decided to take one of its aluminum bolts."

Not knowing what to say, I hugged Frank. "Can I call you Grandpa?" I said.

"Ahh, don't get mushy on me," he protested softly. "I see you found one of your Mom's dream journal." He remarked the purple composition book next to the plate.

"Dream journal?" My mouth gaped open in bewilderment. "It's all just nightmares."

"Those are the later entries, after her mother got bit by a rat," he said. "She began having nightmares about a yellow-eyed man who'd visit her room at night. Probably just the rats tormenting her at night, I kept telling her. Since she ate in her room all the time while she read books."

"These girls' Grandmother was also bit by one of them albino rats?" said Milly. "What are the odds?" She fanned herself with her hand.

"How'd you get it from the attic?" He said, peeking over at Milly who shook her finger.

"I don't know. It was just on my bed before I fell asleep yesterday."

"It must've been Wilmer then," Frank said, a bit baffled.

"Does she eventually stop seeing him?" I said. "The rest of the of journal got water damaged." I showed him the pages that were crinkled and stuck together.

"How unfortunate," he said. A few seconds later, his eyes lit up. "Wait a second. You won't have to miss a certain caped crusader." He grinned and turned his wheelchair towards the kitchen. "Meet me in living room in a few minutes. I'll play out the later entries for you girls like I did for your mother, the one in which she triumphs over the yellow-eyed man."

Frank set up a marionette theater with the puppets from downstairs.

“Peanut, look!” said Paps. “It’s the dolls from earlier. You see them?”

“Yes.” I kissed Paps on the head. “Yes, I do.” She leaned against me on the living room floor, our back against the wall.

Frank went on to show us a play about a well-groomed business man who gets in way over his head and is forced to tell his wife and daughter they might have to sleep on the floor. An all-black puppet with yellow-eyes showed him mercy and gave the man some business, for him to provide for his family. The yellow-eyed man slowly took control of the man by taking over his strings, essentially controlling him. Now a hollow image of himself, the business man now did whatever the man with yellow-eyes told him. His daughter, the wise-clever fox that she was after seeing the yellow-eyed man, laid out a trap for him. During the day she wrote about her fears and worries she had dreamt about on her desk for the man to read. He fed on her sense of helplessness. And she waited for the yellow-eyed man to sneak into her room and offer a helping hand in the break of night to ease her nightmares. The daughter, pretending to be sleep, lulled the man towards her, and when the moment was right—she sprung upon him with her blanket tied around her neck like a super hero. The man, confused and paralyzed stood still, as she jumped on his back and liberated her Father’s strings from the yellow-eyed man. However, she wasn’t done with him just yet. She undid her cape and trapped the man with it, denouncing the man to forever live trapped in the darkness of her basement for his deeds. The curtain closed and reopened, showing the man and his daughter bowing to the crowd. Frank let out a violently loud sneeze dropping both puppets on the floor. “Sorry, these haven’t been used in a while.” He smirked.

We clapped and cheered, as Paps said, “More, more!”

#

Like he promised, Dad was there bright and early the next the day before the sun was even up. By the time I woke up, all of our belongings had been taken to the car or laid out on the counter for us to wear after showering that morning.

“Val? Paps?” Dad said, pulling our covers away. “Let’s go. Rise and get to it.” Before I could react, I found myself in the car with Paps’ snoring echoing inside the car, a small semblance of a goodbye hug from Milly, and the last thing I remembered reading half-asleep was Dad’s shirt which said ‘Hug me because I can’t hug you’ with the picture of a t-rex extending its arms.

As we began to drive away from the house, I turned around in my seat and saw Frank and Milly waving goodbye at us parting the curtain windows to see us.

“How come we never visit Mom’s parents?” I said, still facing them.

Driving the car, Dad said, “I don’t know. There usually very reclusive people.”

“When can we visit them again?”

“Don’t know.” He looked at me in the rear-view mirror. “I’m glad you liked it.”

The sun had now breached the windows of the house, and as Frank let go of the curtain, the shining light of the sun illuminated just his right eye vibrant yellow.

CLOUDBURST

Don't look away,
like the ostrich head deep
in dirt. As if you couldn't see
the droplets of rain on your glasses.
The ones that dripped down
at bare feet. Don't forget
the sparks of light just out of reach,
like the fireworks you shot in the air.
Someday you'll learn to look up
and not at your bright screen,
and you'll remember: take
the pink umbrella from your truck,
take caution, take notice of yourself.
Despair has its own calms,
like a gasp of air under an ocean.
Your eyes are wet but the sun's still out.

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