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Try Again

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TRY AGAIN

by

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B.A. University of Central Florida, 2019

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in the Department of English in the College of Arts and Humanities at the University of Central Florida Orlando, Florida

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ABSTRACT

In my thesis collection, *Try Again*, I aimed to explore the consequences of choice. Through four short stories and one novella, I focused on close relationships between two focus characters and how both large and inconsequential choices can shape futures. In the novella, *Try Again*, I practiced game writing and learned how to shape a character when perhaps the largest signifier of character—choice—is left in the hands of the reader, rather than the author. The construction of this thesis and its stories developed my abilities to find high tension in lower stakes.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

1: THE APARTMENT ................................................................................................................................. 1
2: THEIR DAD’S WEDDING ..................................................................................................................... 24
3: FOUR LEGS .......................................................................................................................................... 35
4: HARD TO GET ...................................................................................................................................... 58
5: TRY AGAIN .......................................................................................................................................... 81
READING LIST ........................................................................................................................................ 135
At the beginning of November, in the middle of the day, my husband of nine months leaves me. He can’t even wait until dinner. Can’t take me to the Cheesecake Factory, maybe let me order a glass of wine. Can’t make it through the holidays, can’t make it through the afternoon.

“You know it, too,” he says. We married young, grew up, grew apart. No scandal, just two people whose lives aren’t going in the same direction. Those are his words. He’s always been better with words.

I want to say that I can change myself. I can walk in his direction, at his pace. I can peel off this skin and grow a new one. But I swallow and nod. “Yeah,” I tell him. “You’re right.”

He’s the one who used the word *separated* first. He’s the one who used the words *we have to meet* when he called two weeks after the split. I want to say that this isn’t what we are, that even at our worst, when we’d fight in supermarket aisles or drive-thru lanes or the dining room, we never talked to each other like this, like colleagues who don’t even like each other. But I say yes, and he picks the time and place.

I’ve been staying at my parents’ house, using words he coined to explain the situation to them. My mom lets me borrow her Lexus for the trip into town. The day after his call, we greet each other on the sidewalk outside the Dunkin’ Donuts. “How are you?” I ask.

“Fine,” he says. “Thank you for meeting.”

Aaron looks a little messy—tired eyes, a quarter-sized spot of hair on his neck he must’ve missed while shaving—but also, surprisingly, like himself. Straight dark hair. Light brown Clark boots. The faintest cigarette smell on his coat. I don’t know what I expected.
“Did anything interesting happen at work?” I ask. There are two people ahead of us in line.

“It was work.”

We order separately, then sit at a table in the back corner. We have assets—the legal word for things—and they must be divvied: the bedside table filled with polaroid ruins from his photographer phase, the old curling wand I begged my mom to buy from a kiosk at the Prudential Center, the tacky *Laughlin, Established in 2017* doormat his Aunt Harriett sent us in lieu of anything on the registry.

The final asset is the apartment, a two-bedroom brownstone by the university. The apartment’s the kind of place that creaks when you breathe. It smells like old wood and whatever leftovers the downstairs neighbor heated up for dinner. There are three months left on the lease.

“We can find a subletter,” I say, playing with my straw and listening for the noise of it scraping against my lid.

“That’s against the lease.”

“How would anyone know?”

“I don’t want to cheat the system,” he says. “Could you stop that?”

It takes me a moment to realize he means the straw. He used to think it was charming, or at least bearable. “I’d like to stay near the bar if I can,” I say.

“Do you plan on staying there much longer?”

“No,” I say. When people ask what I do, I tell them I’m an artist. Little watercolor portraits and pottery. Bartending is just for money, and just for now. I know he doesn’t like it.
“So do you want the apartment?”

“By myself?” I ask. “No, I can’t afford that.”

“I can’t either.”

We both know we can’t. We still share a bank account.

“How’s it been at your parents’?”

I sip my drink. “That isn’t long-term.”

“Okay,” he says. “What if we split it?”

“The apartment?”

“I take it Monday through Friday,” he says, “and you can have it on the weekends.”

“That leaves me with less time,” I say.

“Yeah, but it’s the weekend.”

I resist the urge to pull on my straw. I’m not the sort who compared sandwich halves with her sister, but I wonder if now is the time to put my foot down. “I want Thursday nights.”

He opens his mouth, closes it. He says, “I can do that.”

I momentarily forget this is not a game I’ve just won, and I smile. This isn’t deciding what to eat for dinner. I also forget—momentarily—that it is inappropriate to put my hand on top of his, just because it is there. I catch myself reaching and pull back. He doesn’t notice.

“Where will you go on the weekends?” I ask.

“I’ll figure it out,” he says, like it’s classified. “I can move my clothes into the guest bedroom.”

“You don’t need to do that.”
Aaron shakes his head while scratching behind his ear, a small, familiar motion that he could’ve easily made when we were seventeen, across a lunch table. I want to ask for a sip of his drink. Inappropriate. I want to as if he remembers how he wore the same Clarks he’s wearing today on our first date. Inappropriate. I want to touch my fingertips to the place he forgot to shave. Inappropriate. He says, “It’s not a big deal. The mattress in the guest is nicer, actually, if you’d like it.”

“No—I mean, I don’t want you to do that.”

“Yeah, well.” He makes a hopeless hand gesture—what can you do? He shifts in his seat. “Not everything’s about what we want right now, Katie.” He still calls me that. Katie. I don’t know how to revoke his rights to it, or why I don’t want to.

Once, sometime between moving in together and getting married, we were painting the bedroom wall a light green color that Aaron called “baby puke.” The color was nicer than that, baby puke, but he liked saying it. It made him snicker and made me think about what a cute kid Aaron probably made, those bright eyes. And maybe we’d have a kid one day, but we were kids ourselves, fresh out of high school and learning the things you learn when you leave the roost. How to get a money order. Which appliances use the most electricity. How to get out of bed in the morning when it’s cold out and someone you love has their hand up your shirt.

Aaron had taken the paint and written my name in large brushstrokes, ones that became his whole body like a sacred dance. Katie in baby puke green. I asked him why he did that, and he said, “We’re painting over it anyway,” and, “I love your name,” as if there weren’t a dozen other Katies on our street. Then, when he kissed me, he told me not to worry where wet paint
went, because this was our place, and I reminded him of the security deposit, and he kissed me again.

Soon, we’ll have to paint that room white.

###

We communicate in new ways, Aaron and I. Through forwarded emails and Venmo requests and a magnetic notepad stuck to the fridge, where he leaves notes like “dishwasher is clean” or “out of eggs.” Sometimes I write back. We never see each other. Still, it’s impossible to ignore the evidence that we still live together, like the way our toothbrushes share a water-stained cup on the bathroom counter. But every morning when I sleep in the apartment, I wake up closer to the center of the bed, past the invisible line we drew in the middle of the headboard, the one I used to tell him not to cross whenever his cold feet would creep over.

In December, my sister, Meredith, visits before my shift. We’re in the apartment, and even though it’s winter, I keep the living room windows down. I like the cold because of the sort of clothes you can wear in it—large, soft pieces that swallow you whole.

“Grad school could be fun,” Meredith says. She’s brewing coffee in Aaron’s Chemex.

“I don’t need another degree,” I say. “I didn’t need the first degree.”

“Communications,” she says under her breath, like it’s a dirty word. She pours hot water from the kettle, and I watch it drip out the bottom, an amber brown. “You need to get out of the house.”

“I worked forty-six hours last week.”
“Not work,” she says. Meredith is a young twenty-one. She’s a Junior at BU and acts like a Junior at BU—house parties and getting high and nights out that become mornings out. I don’t fault her for anything. You’re allowed your fair share of twenty-something fuck-ups. I spent all mine when I married Aaron.

The wedding was in an apple orchard an hour north of the city. It was the week before Halloween, so our photographer had to maneuver us around store-bought cobwebs and scarecrows. One photo is still framed on our mantle: me in the dress I found at a sample sale, him looking at me in a way that now seems fantastical and far-fetched. I think of all the ways he looked at me the last time we saw each other, and all the ways he didn’t.

“We’re going out Tuesday for Jade’s birthday,” Meredith says. “You should come.”

I’m too old for twenty-first bar crawls. I’m a few signatures and a court date away from being a divorcée. “I’ll be at Mom and Dad’s.” Our parents live in a 1970s two-story in Brookline. It’s far enough to be an excuse.

“Yeah, how is that going?” Meredith asks, eyebrows raised.

I pull my legs into my chest, wondering who’ll take this couch when we finally do move out of here. “Mom keeps asking what happened.”

“What do you say?”

I shake my head. “None of my answers are good enough for her.” I’m not sure if any of my answers are good enough for me, either. We aren’t compatible anymore. We want different things. We’re walking different paths. Sure. How can you argue with reasons so vague?
I feel my heart rate picking up and let it. I’ve thought of a thousand things I could’ve said to him when he broke the news, words I’ll never get to say now, arguments I’ll never be able to win. I want to let the resentment fester, like a mold or an infection, because everything would be so much easier if I could hate him.

“He’s a dick,” Meredith says.

I nod slowly. “He can be.”

“We should do something before the lease ends,” she says. “A belated housewarming party.”

I shake my head. “That’s stupid.” Aaron and I didn’t do things like that, not on a regular basis. When I think of him, even though he’s only twenty-three and I’m the one who taught him how to cook an egg without breaking the yolk, he seems so adult, so realized. He’d say a party is irresponsible. “Maybe,” I amend.

I almost miss his call, but pick my phone up from the area rug just in time. I raise it to my ear, but wait for him to speak first. My mouth is dry.

“Are you there?” he asks after a moment.

“Yeah,” I say. “Is something wrong?”

Meredith mouths “Aaron?” across the room. I put the phone on speakerphone.

“What?” he says. “No. I mean—sorry. How are you?”

I almost let his voice pull me back, let it erase the weeks of inching closer to the center of the bed, but Meredith rolls her eyes, holding me here. “I’m fine,” I say. I don’t ask how he is. I know Meredith will be proud of me for that.
“Are you home?”

*Home.* It’s a tiny, delicate dagger.

“Yes.”

He exhales, though I can’t tell if it’s out of relief or frustration. Once, I would have been able to tell the difference. I could parse glances across rooms and touches of my wrist, could tell how tired or joyous or drunk he was by the set of his shoulders. He’s harder to reach now, not since we separated, but since we got married, maybe before then. It’s hard to pinpoint a beginning.

“I need to come by,” he says, and Meredith and I lock wide eyes. “I have a client meeting during lunch, but I didn’t pack my suit.”

“Oh. Sure. Do you need…” I break eye contact with Meredith. “Is it ironed?”

“It’s good enough,” he says. “You can just hang it on the doorknob downstairs.”

I almost laugh. “I’ll meet you out front.”

“You don’t have to do that,” he says. “I’ll come up.”

He tells me he’ll be here in ten minutes. I tidy up, light a candle, make Meredith scrub out his Chemex and set it back on the shelf. Ten minutes later, he rings the doorbell.

I buzz him up, standing in front of the door, waiting on his knock. When it comes, Meredith tells me to give him hell.

Aaron’s hair is as long as it gets, the way it looks the morning of a cut. I wonder if he has one scheduled. He’s in a button up shirt, chinos. Work clothes. Clarks. He looks a bit disheveled, like he ran here from the T station, but his shaving job is clean, free of nicks or missed spots.
“Hi Katie,” he says. Then he glances at the couch where my sister sits. “Hi Meredith.”

“Hey,” Meredith says, detached in a way that I know has been practiced in countless bars and petty feuds. She and Aaron used to get along. They had inside jokes and the same taste in TV. Siblings on paper and in practice. She can’t even say his name nowadays, resorts to vague references and four letter words.

“Your hair is darker,” Aaron tells me.

“I got it done.” I hand him the suit. “Good luck at your meeting.”

He takes it. “Thanks.”

We’re out of things to say. This is what he came here for. He should probably leave now.

“Do you want to get ready here?” I ask. I glance at the clock on the oven. It’s an hour ahead, because neither of us have changed it since daylight savings ended.

“It’s not my turn,” he says with the slightest smile.

“It’s fine.”

“I hope you’re doing well.”

“Yeah,” I say, mustering courage and anger. “I am.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

He asks me about my art shop, and I lie and say things are going well there. I want him to know I’m doing well, moving forward, but I hate the way we’re talking. It’s not even angry, just empty. There’s little left of us.

“You should go,” I say, and he says he will, but when he turns to leave, I tell him I’ll walk him down.
He opens his mouth, probably to protest, but then closes it and nods. He tells Meredith bye, and she doesn’t respond. When the door closes behind us, he says, “Is she mad at me?”

I follow him down the stairs. “She’s my sister.”

“Yeah, but why would she be mad at me?”

I look at him. He has to be joking this time.

“What do you mean?”

We’re outside now, standing on the sidewalk by the building’s mailboxes. Ours still reads LAUGHLIN. I separate our mail into separate piles on the kitchen counter.

“I mean,” he says, “it was mutual.”

I’ve always known that he thinks this, but he’s never said the word. Mutual. To him, this is a we problem.

I say goodbye and watch as he goes, his body blending into the others on the sidewalk, just another person.

###

I don’t see Aaron again until the new year. We only have a few weeks left on our lease. He’s moved all his things into the guest room, and there are no traces of him left unless I look for them, which I do.

I’m cut barely an hour into my shift. It’s a relentlessly cold night, the first Thursday of January. Half the city is cleared out for holiday trips or snowbird excursions, and there’s a lonesome sort of quiet on my walk back to the apartment. I pass a few people, but their heads are turned down against the wind. I miss walking home to someone.
My last good night with Aaron was on a night like this—cold and empty. We were twenty-two and felt like the city was ours. We hit the bars on Comm Avenue, by campus, and walked or jogged or spun from one to the next as snow fell. He held my hand and didn’t worry about annoying the wait staff by sitting on the same side of the booth. He told me that night that he felt so young, and I told him that he was.

Meredith has been successful in select attempts of reintroducing me to my twenties. She says I need a re-brand, so I’ve agreed to the housewarming party, which she’s been quietly planning for weeks now. I haven’t been on any dates, but I let her download the apps on my phone.

“Nothing has to happen that you don’t want to happen,” she told me the night we set up my profile. “You’re in control.”

In control. I’ve preached that to myself lately, a new year’s resolution. I keep reminding myself that I don’t need to take Aaron into account—anyone into account, for that matter—when I make decisions. I can go on a walk at night because I feel like it. I can gently flirt with customers at work because the money’s nice, and maybe the attention’s nice, too.

So I do the things you’re supposed to do when you’re young and someone just broke your heart. I drink protein and stay out late and go to bottomless mimosa brunches. I haven’t spoken to him apart from my monthly money transfers for rent and the electric bill. I’ve been good.

The wind is picking up by the time I make it to the apartment. I walk into the vestibule, and the door swings shut behind me as if vacuum sealing. I catch a glimpse of myself in a window. My face is wind-whipped and pale apart from my nose and cheekbones, which are flushed red. I can already feel my skin drying out, my lips chapping. I resist the urge to lick them.
I revel in the sound the stairs make under my boots and tell myself I’m allowed to miss this place. This is the only place I’ve lived on my own, apart from my parents. I moved here when I was nineteen, painted the walls and learned the musky smell that seeped into my clothes and hair until my nose had gone blind to it. The apartment is more than just Aaron.

I reach the third floor and fit my key into the lock. I know he is here because the bedroom light is on, and I smell cigarettes.

“Aaron?” I say.

I can hear his footfalls from the living room and can hear when he curses under his breath.

Aaron walks out of the bedroom with his black duffel at his side. He finally got a haircut. “I’m sorry,” he says, keeping himself in motion. He sets the duffel by the door and walks into the kitchen and grabs a styrofoam to-go container from the fridge. “I thought you had work. I’m just leaving.” He doesn’t look at me.


“It’s the break,” he says.

“I know.”

All his movements are hurried and stiff, like someone’s rushing him. I stand in the middle of the living room while he moves around me, gathering odds and ends and stuffing them into his duffel. He picks up loose pairs of shoes he’s left out in his days here. “I’m sorry,” he says again.

“It’s fine, Aaron,” I say. I love that I can say his name now without an aftertaste. I don’t have to tell myself to hate him anymore, or tell myself not to love him. My feelings toward him
have dulled out, gone smooth around the edges. I’m in control. I kick off my shoes and sit on the couch. I turn on the TV. I am unbothered. “Take your time.”

I hear his footsteps stop, then start up again. He zips his duffel and hoists it onto his shoulder. “I had lunch with my mom the other day,” he says.

“That’s nice,” I say, because it is. I always liked his mom.

“She has a friend who’s a lawyer.” He clears his throat, scratches his nose. “She said she can make it real easy on us.”

He’s looking at me now, and I look right back, searching for any signs of levity and finding none. It hits me without warning, how this is the first time we’ve been alone—actually alone—since he left me.

“Easy?” I say.

“Cheap, too. No court, if that works for you.”

I shake my head, then nod. “No, yeah, of course it works for me. That’s good.”

“Good,” he says, holding tightly to the straps of his duffel. “I’ll let her know.”

I take the cold doorknob in my fingers but can’t bring myself to turn it. He waits behind me. I turn around. He waits in front of me. His posture is refined, his breaths steady, unaffected. He doesn’t have a crack in him, and here I am, telling myself I’m in control.

“Do you remember,” I say, “that time you ruined my favorite sweater?” I go on. “We were in Cambridge for one of your work dinners, I think. You kept pulling on that loose piece of yarn on the cuff.”

“Katie,” he says.
“I told you to stop, but you wouldn’t—you and your nervous habits. It’s better than smoking, I guess, so I just let you pull on it until there was a hole. I still have the sweater in my closet. Do you remember that?”

Aaron looks at the tips of our toes, inches apart. He closes his eyes and breathes and for a moment, a fraction of a moment, I can read him like I used to. He remembers.

“I quit smoking,” he says. “A few weeks ago.”

“That’s good,” I say. “Are you sure about all this?”

“Most of the time,” he says.

Aaron gathers himself. He reaches out, touching my hand only to take the doorknob out from under me. He opens the door, and I shuffle out of the way. But before he leaves, he presses his mouth to my hair, just above my ear. It’s intimate without being romantic, the way an old relative kisses you at a funeral.

###

It’s the last weekend in January. The apartment lease ends Monday.

Most of my belongings are packed, but the larger pieces of furniture remain. There are twenty-something people in my shell of a living room. Some friends from college, two or three from the bar, and the rest more my sister’s friends than mine. I drink and I chit-chat. I’m having fun.

I don’t post anything about this on the internet. It’s not a secret, but I don’t exactly want Aaron to see that I’m throwing a party the week before giving the keys back. He’s made preparations to get the place back in order, so I should, too. During the week, when it was his turn at the
apartment, he painted the bedroom white. He didn’t warn me—I guess he had no reason to warn me—but walking into the bedroom this past Thursday night was a blow. We started the divorce process last week. He was right: it’s been easy. The lawyers highlight all the places I need to initial.

I stand in the kitchen, talking with a girl named Maria who I’d only met on Instagram prior to tonight. She tells me she loves the spot and asks why I’m not renewing the lease.

“Just time to move on,” I tell her.

When she leaves, I search the pantry for snacks to put out. I come across a bottle of Aaron’s favorite cheap whiskey still sealed on the shelf and fight the temptation to pull the cap off and smell it. Not because I like whiskey, but because memories seem to come in higher resolution when tied to smells. Maybe if I smell it, maybe I’ll remember a time when he came to bed late, after getting his ass kicked in a game of Call of Duty with his friends from high school.

Maybe I’ll remember him pushing up my eye mask to show me some head-in-ass right wing post my mom shared on the internet. “How can people be so wrong and think they’re so right?” he asked once.

“What if we’re the wrong ones,” I said, “and we think we’re right?”

It’s in the thirties outside, but the apartment is getting stale with all the moving bodies and stagnant air. Another person shows up, one I don’t recognize. Two dozen people in the apartment, tracking in the streets of Boston on the rubber soles of their boots. The downstairs neighbors probably hate me, but that’s okay. I’m moving out this week. This is my swan song: bottom shelf liquor and the bass of an MGMT song.
The man on my couch’s name is Travis. He’s a delineation of a friend of a friend, someone I’d seen around in college and on Facebook since. When he walks to join me at the makeshift bar by the fridge, he tells me he works middle management at an office downtown.

“It’s a great party,” he tells me.

“It sort of got out from under me,” I say. “Meredith did most of the planning.”

I see him glance at my left hand before he asks, “Is—what’s his name—your husband doing alright?”

My hand twitches. I saturate a stack of napkins with spilled coke. “He stays in Quincy on the weekends.” It’s not a lie, and he doesn’t press. I ask him the basic questions you ask another when you’re catching up, and learn that he’s single and living near the North End. I also learn that he has a collection of shot glasses from every currently operating Hard Rock Cafe.

“They actually have good food,” he says.

“I’ll check it out sometime.”

“I’ll have to take you.” He’s looking at me, all over me, the way you look at your waiter when they bring your food. He steps closer to me and into the puddle of soda on my kitchen floor. “Your hair looks good like this,” he says. “Darker.”

I’m taken aback, not by the fact that Travis is trying to flirt with a woman he believes to be married, but by the fact that he is flirting with me. That anyone is flirting with me. I’d been with Aaron since I was seventeen. We did the flirting thing back then, through text messages and suppressed feelings, but this is new. This is a man with a job, in a kitchen that is mine, telling me my hair looks good like this. I tell him thank you. I don’t know if I want to say more.
He’s bearable enough. Travis from college. He cuffs his blue jeans and has spiky, early-aughts hair. In another world, one where my divorce is finalized and I don’t miss Aaron anymore, where I’m perfectly content staying at home combing my hair and drinking mint juleps, so long as I have dinner on the table when my white collar husband gets home from his long day of answering emails and catcalling receptionists, I can see myself with him.

Except I can’t see myself with him at all. Because my husband is standing in the living room.

He’s in a version of his work clothes—black pants and a slightly-loosened tie—and he sees me, and I can read his expression the same way I could the last time we were in this apartment together, only this time, I wish I couldn’t.

I step away from Travis, feeling guilty. I have no reason to feel guilty. Maybe Aaron has been seeing someone. I’ve never asked but would be lying to say I haven’t thought about it, about him asking out a girl from work, taking her to his favorite lunch spot by the college and slyly covering the bill. He’d be nervous, and would make gentle jabs at her to compensate, would fit his hands in the pockets of his hoodie, not wanting to come on too strong by taking her hand. I know he’d do all this because I’d been the girl before, and he’d been the boy.

The party doesn’t fall to a theatrical hush exactly, but his arrival is felt. He’s the kind of person people notice, the kind of person whose presence fills the room like the smell of the heater running.

But Aaron isn’t looking at any of them. He’s looking at me, and the dirtied apartment, and me.
Aaron walks into the kitchen just as Travis leaves, and regards me with a tilt of his chin. He swings his backpack onto the counter, narrowly avoiding the coke spill. “Having fun?” is all he says. I would give anything to not know exactly what he is thinking right now.

I bite down. “It’s my night.”

He gets out a glass and fills it at the tap, as if this is his place tonight. I get what I’ve wanted since he left me: I’m angry at him. The pedantic, defenseless, kind of anger that hangs over playground fields and did-not-did-toos. “Why didn't you tell me you’d be having people over?” he asks.


“I didn’t realize I’d be interrupting,” he says. “Sorry.”

“Why did you come?”

He opens the refrigerator and just looks in, taking nothing. “I left my phone charger.”

“It was Meredith’s idea,” I say, even though I don’t owe him an explanation.

Aaron surveys the room. There are bags under his eyes that I hadn’t seen before. “Some party,” he says, like he’s one to talk. Like he didn’t study his way through high school with his blinders on, only to get hitched to the one girl he ever had the nerve to hold hands with.

“Shut up,” I say, and he looks impressed by the way I spit it out. His eyebrow twitches just high enough and just familiar enough that I know I love him. I follow him when he storms to our bedroom because I’m a glutton for punishment and I still love him. I want him to say my name.
The lamps that once lit this room are packed in cardboard boxes, and now, with only the fan light switched on, the walls bare and white, the room has a yellow filter that makes Aaron look sickly as he hunches over to stuff the charger into his backpack. He still uses the same black Jansport from when we were in high school, the one that I drew a smiley face on in silver Sharpie during AP Lit. Holes have opened and frayed at the bottom, exposing the corner of his hand-me-down laptop. He sits on the edge of the bed and zips it up. “I should have called before just coming by,” he says to the floor. I wonder if that’s supposed to be a white flag.

“The only reason I didn’t tell you—”

“You’re right,” Aaron interrupts. “It’s none of my business. Just have everything out by tomorrow.”

I stand up straighter. “Are you my landlord?”

“Come on,” he says.

The man on my bed looks like my husband. He even looks at me like my husband now, in the room that was ours. “You could have bought a charger,” I say. “Why did you come here?”

“I just think it’s irresponsible is all.”

There it is. Irresponsible. I usually like being right.

“I’ll have everything cleaned up by tomorrow,” I say. “Don’t worry.”

“Yeah, I hope,” he says. “I’m counting on the security deposit.”

“Who ever said you’d be getting the security deposit?”

“The fact that I paid it in the first place.”
“I think it’s unfair to call me irresponsible,” I tell him. I can’t help it—I’m stuck on that.

“I’m twenty-three. Having friends over isn’t unheard of.”

“I never said it was.”

“You implied it.”

“Don’t put words in my mouth.”

“It’s not hard to when you’re so fucking predictable.”

“Predictable,” he repeats. “Do you mean responsible?”

“Don’t put words in my mouth.”

“Funny,” he says. I remember these downward spirals from when we lived together. I remember the feeling of helplessness, not being able to stop anything.

“I’m not being funny,” I tell him. He’s so detached, so dismissive, that I want to hurt him. I want him to feel this, but don’t know how to make him feel it. So many arguments I’ve won in my head, but now I come up dry. “You do know that you left me, don’t you?”

He looks at me. “Don’t say that.” He shakes his head and doesn’t stop. “It was mutual. We agreed.”

“I lied,” I tell him, and work to catch my breath. “I don’t want to leave.”

He sits there, open-mouthed and clutching his backpack like a kid. He doesn’t speak.

“I don’t want to leave the apartment.”

Aaron looks at me. “I had a meeting with my lawyer today,” he says. “Everything’s in order to finalize it, when you’re ready.” His face is soft. His voice is soft. But his words suck all the air out of my body, leaving my lungs crumpled like an empty water bottle under a tire.
“Otherwise it’s just going to be hanging over our heads,” Aaron adds when my words came up short.

“Is this what you want?” I ask.

“I missed a spot,” he says. He points to a sliver of sage green where the wall meets the ceiling.

“I can paint it tomorrow,” I say, but he’s already on his feet, taking the gallon of paint from where it still sat on the bedside table. He positions the table below the paint spot and steps on.

“That might not hold,” I say, carefully eyeing the cheap IKEA piece.

“I’ll be fine.” He reaches up to cover the remaining green with white. “Baby puke green,” he says quietly, as if it’s not meant for me. The room smells like Aaron and paint and Aaron. But this isn’t our bedroom anymore. The walls are white.

When he finishes, I take the paint can and his hand to help him down. He watches our joined hands and says, “Does next Friday work for you?”

I pull my chin down. A sorry excuse for a nod. “Send me the address.”

“It’s been hard for me too, Katie.” He says my name, and he loves my name. Aaron lets go of me, then walks to the door. “Careful with the paint,” he says before leaving. “It’ll drip.”

I sit on the bed, where the mattress is still pressed in from his weight. I can’t go outside—there are people on my porch and in my living room and my kitchen—but the bedroom smells like him. He just left, and I want to see him again. We have Friday, but that will be formal, like
our meeting at Dunkin’ Donuts. He’ll wear his work clothes. I’ll put on a dress, something pro-
fessional. It’s not enough.

I leave the party, even when Meredith tries to stop me, because I need one more moment,
one more conversation, where we are still married. Where it’s still the two of us. Just one more,
then I’ll be done. Maybe it’s irresponsible.

I find him sitting on a concrete bench at the T station, his face lit by the Star Market
across the street and a fingernail-sized flame flickering from a gas station lighter. He must’ve
heard me coming. Otherwise he wouldn’t have thrown the cigarette on the ground and stomped it
with his boot.

I sit a safe distance from him, and can feel the cold of the bench through my jeans. The
Green Line runs sparsely this late at night, and is often packed with exhausted college students
desperate for their beds or someone else’s.

“I thought you quit smoking,” I say as an outbound train passes.

“I did.” He further grinds the embers into the asphalt. “Why’d you leave the party?”

“Why did you come tonight?”

He breathes in through the nose, out through the mouth, the way they tell you to during
yoga classes. “It all became real, you know?” he says. “I’m sorry. I wanted to see you.”

I have things to do tomorrow, an apartment to move out of. But tonight, I wait with Aaron
until his train comes.

He sits back, and his hand lands in the space between us, beside a piece of blackened
gum.
There was this time we went to see his brother’s band play at a city-protected venue downtown. A little spot, but swarming with college-aged patrons, all looking for the most casual way to hold their heavy coats. Aaron and I were eighteen, but made our minds up that we were much older, driving his dad’s Lexus there and sneaking sips of beer from Aaron’s of-age friends.

The show was two songs into the opener’s set when I first smelled the fire. I wouldn’t find out until later that it was just a small one, nothing life-threatening, caused by a cigarette and a stack of paper towels in the men’s room.

The band stopped playing, but everything else got really loud. Aaron and I were close to the stage and far from the door, and people were already pushing past with self-serving force. He took my hand and led the way out as well as he could find it.

The faces of the people passing by, the words exchanged between the two of us—the details of the night were as much of a blur as grass on the side of the freeway. But I remember, with startling distinctiveness I remember, the thought that clung to the front of my mind as smoke filled the room and the pressing and pulling of other bodies threatened to separate us: that if I could just hold on to him, to his hand, then we would make it out.

Tonight, when my husband’s hand is a reach away and the train is rattling toward our stop, I wonder if that same resolve will hold true.
2: THEIR DAD’S WEDDING

The weather was colder than the forecasts had suggested back when Sarah’s dad booked the date. It was nice in the sun, Howard said, convincing himself more than her, but at the bow of the boat, where nothing obstructed the movement of coastal air, where a white-painted, ivy-covered altar was anchored by four sandbags, the wind felt like the prongs of a chilled fork. There were servers taking cloths to champagne flutes and an over-involved day-of planner wielding a black binder of itineraries and dinner menus. Birds swooping down to steal from the bread bowl. Flower arrangements and table linens draped over the backs of chairs. It was a yacht. It was a wedding.

Sarah joined her father by the bow of the boat. The wind had blown up the little hair he had left, and she patted it down with her fingers. Their dress clothes looked silly with their matching boat shoes. The yacht had a strict policy: their shoes, blue slip-ons with soft rubber soles, or nothing. “It’s like a bowling alley,” she said.

“I hope it’s nicer than a bowling alley,” Howard said.

Guests arrived in ten-minute, ten-person increments, shuttled from the shore on little motor boats that could make it through the rocky, shallow waters of Marblehead, Massachusetts. His was a small wedding. Only twenty-two guests, one more than Sarah expected.

She’d asked her father if he was sure about inviting her brother, Reid. He thought she was joking. He said something about Reid being his kid, just as much as she was. But that’s just something families say to stay family, that parents don’t have favorite kids and kids don’t have
favorite parents—to be a person is to have a preference. She was just as surprised when Reid accepted the invitation.

Three years had passed since Howard left their mother and Sarah went with him. They were both twenty at the time. Nine months apart. They talked sometimes, sending articles back and forth or recapping Magic games, but things were reserved there, clipped. They hadn’t seen each other since.

###

Reid arrived on the final shuttle boat before the ceremony. He looked nice, put-together. Suitable for a wedding or a funeral. Reid resembled Howard so closely in his barely-too-big suit, though she wouldn’t tell him that. Those would be fighting words.

She found him in the ceremony area at the rear of the boat. Here they were spared from the harsh wind at the front of the ship, but she had to yell her pleasantries to wedding guests. The front row of the ceremony was reserved for family. Reid was seated between their grandparents and Great Uncle Samuel.

He wore black-lensed sunglasses. So chic, save for the light blue boating shoes. She wanted to make a joke about it, but figured he wouldn’t be in the mood.

“You made it,” she said.

Reid nodded. His hair was still long, his words still laced with defensiveness. “He’s my dad.” They hadn’t sat this close to one another since she was twenty.

The last time she saw him, Sarah rode shotgun in the U-Haul her father took to Massachusetts with the belongings he gained from the split. It was sporadic and petty, the parents’
splitting of what was his and what was hers. He got the armchair; she got the matching couch. He
got the mountain bikes; she got the truck with the bicycle rack. He got Sarah; she got Reid.

Leaving with him was Sarah’s choice. She was an adult. She knew infidelity was in-
volved and knew her dad was in the wrong, but she’d never known her parents when they
weren’t arguing in the kitchen or across the table at the Tex-Mex joint by their house. If Billie
hadn’t come along, something else would have—another woman, another man, a final fight.
Their home life was noisy. Messy. Her mom drank and spent too much, and her dad always
pieced what was broken back together. They were lopsided. Unevenly yoked, her old pastor
would say. Doomed, everyone else would say.

But Howard. He might’ve been a shit husband, but he was the best dad. If he said he was
leaving tomorrow, she’d go with him again.

Reid scanned the sandbags at the base of the altar and the napkins flying up from place
settings. He made an art of finding issues in happy things. “Was this Dad’s idea?” he asked.

She nodded. “Why?”

Reid looked toward the altar. “Seems like the sort of thing he’d come up with.”

“You know Dad,” she said. The wind blew a chunk of hair into her mouth. “He’s a ro-
mantic.”

Reid’s laugh sounded like a game show buzzer. “Yeah.”

The music cued up and Howard took his place on the right side of the altar. Billie had no
bridesmaids and a modest, tasteful gown, but when she walked down the aisle, she was all the
congregants could look at—even Reid, whose expression was hard to read behind the rims of his sunglasses.

The ceremony was short and sweet. Howard cried into a handkerchief after Billie’s vows, though all the crowd could hear through the microphones was the howl of the wind. Reid made a few noises of displeasure when the cold hit or the boat lurched, but he clapped for the couple as they exited hand-in-hand.

After, the newlyweds disappeared into one of the three suites on the ship to sign a paper and bustle a gown. The yacht seemed plenty large before, but with all guests aboard, the deck was cramped and stuffy despite the chill of the air. Reid disappeared somewhere in the crowd.

She found him later, waiting for a refill at the bar. He was a man now, but reminded her so much of a boy, one who loved chocolate-milk-chugging contests and forcing his big sister to stay up every Wednesday so they could watch the new *Amazing Race* together. Reid was no taller than he was the last time she saw him, but he always made her feel small. The bottom left corner of his jacket was stained yellow.

Beside the Swiss Army Knife and chapstick in her bag, Sarah carried a Tide pen. She took the pen from her purse and handed it to Reid.

“The wind knocked my plate off the table.”

“Yeah, there’s a breeze on the deck.”

“I don’t know what I expected,” he said. “Fucking wedding on a boat.”

She shrugged, watching the gathering of ocean birds on the deck. “Have you met Billie yet?”
He flinched at the name, a small enough expression that it could only be acknowledged between two people whose language used to be glances across the dining room table. “Not yet.”

“She’s good for him.”

“That’s great,” Reid said.

“It’s good you came,” she said. “Why did you come?”

Reid capped the Tide pen and handed it back. “It’s been a while,” he said. “I figured it was time to move on from everything.” There was something so removed about his behavior today. He was pleasant and cordial, but felt so far away from the person she grew up with.

Then Howard, who’d at some point reemerged onto the main deck to greet guests and show off his bride, joined them at the bar. “You have no idea how good it is to see this,” he said, holding his arms open at the two of them, together again. Her dad was a sentimental drunk, the type to dig out home videos and handmade ornaments from elementary school. Recently, after one too many rum and cokes at their hometown Applebee’s, he sang “Butterfly Kisses” on the karaoke mic, and dedicated it to her. “My kids,” he said. “It’s been so long.”

###

Sarah and Reid sat at the table nearest their father’s. They ate Chicken Bryan and drank their cocktails, small talking—moving on from everything. She wasn’t sure what kind of siblings they were now, if they couldn’t be the ones who shared a grade and a wall in a suburban three-bedroom, but she liked talking to him. The yacht staff had passed out blankets from the rooms downstairs when it got dark. The cutting breeze brought with it whispers of a coming storm.
“You learn that there’s a scent to it,” one of the servers told Sarah as he brought dessert around. “Salt and musk. Like expired sunscreen.”

She knew the smell. When she was young, they were a cruise family. They took the cheap four-day Caribbean routes in the off-seasons. Mid-November or February. The cruises were fun, but missing school was the most exciting part. Once, after their mother had gotten a promotion at work, they went snorkeling at the hotel across the street from Atlantis. She and Reid learned to shuffle their feet in order to avoid stepping on the stingrays that sometimes burrowed in the sand. “If you let them be, they’ll let you be,” the instructor had told them.

Reid stuck a pinky in his mouth, between his gum and his bottom row of teeth.

“Do you need a toothpick?” Sarah asked.

“It’s the rice,” he said.

“The food was great..”

“Did you pick the caterer?”

Sarah shook her head. “Dad. Why?”

“Nothing.” He pointed at the front of the ship, where the toasts were starting. Their Uncle Lawrence stood behind a microphone stand, the tops of his cheeks chapped by the wind. Sarah pulled the blanket around herself, and yes, she was cold, and yes, the speakers were rocking with the ship in a way that made her fear for her uncle standing beside them. Rice was stuck in her teeth, too, more texture than taste. Sarah wouldn’t have noticed Reid slipping away if it weren’t for the sudden deviation of Howard’s eyes from Billie. They’d snagged on Reid, leaving the deck.
While everyone else sipped their champagne on cue, Sarah downed her glass, placing it back on the table and following the trail of her brother.

She found him in the kitchen, a small room of chrome countertops and knives. He stood in front of a deep sink, the water running on his hands. Sarah could see the steam. A server eyed the two of them, shrimp platter in hand, and maneuvered out the door toward the party, leaving them alone.

“Why are you in here?”

He stared at the water. “It’s fucking cold out there.”

“There are more toasts.”

“Dad saw you leave.”

“Fuck Dad.”

It was such a teenage response, so impulsive that she felt a twist of warm familiarity in her chest. “You can’t be happy for your father on his wedding day?”

He shook his head and turned off the water. He turned so he was leaning against the lip of the sink, facing Sarah. “Do you know how many times I’ve held Mom’s hand at the dinner table while she just sat there and cried?”

“Dad had a hard time, too,” Sarah said.

“You don’t get it,” he said. “I’m talking about now: She basically collapsed to her knees when the invitation came. He only addressed it to me.”

“She wouldn’t have come.”
“That’s not the point.” He ran his hands along the sleeves of jacket, bringing them around himself and shrinking into his suit. “I thought, if Dad was bold enough to send an invite, I should come.” He breathed hard. “Seeing him smiling out there, though….”

“What happened with him and Mom had nothing to do with us. He never thought he’d lose you, too.”

“What, did he tell you that?”

Sarah pulled her shoulders back. “He loves you.”

“He doesn’t call me.”

“He thinks you don’t want to be called.”

“Jesus, are you his representative?” Reid asked. “Do you get paid to defend him?”

“He’s not a monster.”

“He’s not,” Reid agreed. “But fucked up. You refuse to admit that.”

“If you’re mad at Dad, talk to Dad,” she said eventually.

He wouldn’t meet her eye. “Right.”

“You need to get over this, Reid,” she said, quiet and authoritative. She was the big sister.

“You first,” Reid said. He was the little brother.

When she left the kitchen, she ran headfirst into a crowd of bodies, warm and huddled beneath the awning of the bar. Wind carried tiny shards of rain that sliced across her shoulders and face. She caught her father’s eyes in the crowd and pushed her way to him.

“It’s nasty out here.” He put an arm around her shoulder. “Sorry, sweetheart.”

She shook her head. “Not your fault.”
She couldn’t see the shore through the rain.

###

The downpour sustained. Sarah drank at the open bar until she couldn’t distinguish between the waves’ rocking of the boat and the fuzziness of her mind. The captain made arrangements for lodging.

Twenty-some wedding guests stood in damp dress clothes beneath the ship’s sparse covered area. “The ship will be fine,” the captain said, then told them the storm was larger than they’d expected. “Those little shuttle boats won’t come out in this.”

Guests headed downstairs to their guest rooms in groups of threes and fours. Howard and Billie had a suite prepared, but Howard kissed the top of Sarah’s head before he went. “You sure you’re okay to stay with Reid?”

“It’s fine.” This wouldn’t be the first time they’d been subjected to sharing rooms. They stayed in the upstairs room of their childhood home, him always on the top bunk, her on the bottom, until Sarah was nine, when she was held back and her parents decided she spent enough time with Reid at school. “Today was beautiful,” she told her dad, pulling away.

A staff member led Reid and Sarah to the windowless inner room they’d share for the night. It was all yellow light and warm-toned decor. Dated, but it smelled clean, almost harshly so. Like Lysol. The bed was a Queen, nothing they wouldn’t have shared at a highway motel on a family vacation, but Reid was already rummaging the closet for extra blankets. “I’ll take the floor,” he said.

“Don’t be a moron.”
He took the two pillows from one side of the bed and made a space for himself on the dark red carpet. “This will be fine.”

The staff had lent them clean linen pajamas and single-use toothbrushes with flimsy bristles. They took the bathroom one at a time.

Sarah folded the covers over herself, heavy and scratchy. The room had one vent in the far corner, but the stream of air didn’t hit her in bed. She pushed the covers down to her knees. “I think you should talk to Dad tomorrow,” she said.

Reid exhaled. “Maybe.”

“The choice he made had nothing to do with you.”

“You went with him. Did that have nothing to do with me?”

“Oh,” Sarah said, and turned onto her side, palm pressed to her face. “Dad needed someone, you know?”

“Dad needed someone.” His words were tight and fueled by something, a bit of exhaustion and a bit of anger. “Mom needed someone. I needed someone. You chose the cheater.”

Sarah made a pfft sound. “That’s a bit severe.” When she left that house, she got her shit together. She went to college, got on a career path. She didn’t learn to be a person until she was out from the weight of her mother. “Mom’s a mess, Reid.”

“We’re trapped on a ship, Sarah,” he said. “Mom’s the mess?”

Sarah’s tongue pressed against the back of her teeth, feeling the boat lurch one way, then the other. She felt nauseous. “I’m going to bed.”

“Get the light.”
Sarah lifted her head. “You’re closer.”

“I’m sleeping on the floor, Sarah. Get the light.”

Sarah turned the light off. When she crawled back into bed, she was careful with her footsteps. In the pitch black of the windowless room, she couldn’t see Reid anymore. Couldn’t see anything. She thought of stingrays and sunscreen.

She felt the bed at her shins and climbed in. Reid was silent, but she knew he was awake, the blue light of his phone projecting onto the ceiling. She wondered who he might be texting, what sort of life he might have off this ship. She wondered what kind of person he was now, and what kind of siblings they were. “What do you want from me, Reid?” Sarah spoke quietly. Gently. The air kicked on, grumbling from somewhere deep in the ship. “An apology?”

Reid didn’t answer for a long while. She wondered if he was asleep until he said, “I shouldn’t have to tell you that.”

Sarah pushed her teeth together, rolling onto her side to pull her legs into her chest. She fell asleep like that, curled on one side of the Queen-size bed, her brother on the floor, thinking that this was all so childish.
Terminal B stretched awake, the accordion gates to Hudson News half-open. 2017’s Bachelorette wrote a memoir. The hardbacks were on display in a cardboard case, thirty percent over market price, because when people forget odds and ends at airports they get desperate. Sydney ran past, nearly knocking over a shop employee stocking Sour Patch Kids. A Christmas song was loud on the overhead speakers. Her heels were louder on the tile. She was late to work.

Her father used to arrive at the airport unnecessarily early. He said you never knew. Never knew when security would be long, never knew if the plane would board early, never knew when the nail clippers in your carry-on could be mistaken for contraband. An admirable goal, and one Sydney swore to herself she’d keep when she trained for this job. It was a pesky habit of hers, making promises she knew she could never keep.

It was mid-December. Peak season. She was called in to cover this flight two hours ago, the shortest notice the airline could give to attendants on reserve. She just got home from a trip last night—Seattle and back. Her uniform dress was in a pile on the floor alongside worn tights and her coat. There were a few wrinkles, but she hung it in the bathroom while she showered. It worked seventy percent as well as ironing. It was enough.

She drew eyes when she approached her gate, just because of what she was. Flight attendants were a thing to be looked at. She knew it was egotistical to make note of this, that people thought something of you when you were in the flight attendant uniform, but she wouldn’t pretend she didn’t notice. They all noticed—self-importance was their survival tactic.
Her aircraft for the day was still attached to the jet bridge. The red-lipped woman at the
gate desk checked her in. “Long day ahead?” she asked, fingers on her keyboard, already work-
ing on a different task.

“Four legs,” said Sydney. Four was the max the airline could give to crewmembers in one
day, but three wasn’t a cake walk. The legs themselves were short—Boston to DC, DC to Char-
lotte, Charlotte to JFK, JFK to West Palm—but those were the worst kinds. Many short legs
meant quick service, more faces to greet, four safety briefings. Long trips, transcontinental or
international, were sought after. That’s why Sydney rarely worked them. She was five years in,
and though that would be a decent amount of seniority in a decent amount of other jobs, aviation
was a long con. You had to put your time in, prove you wanted it.

That’s why Sydney had a letter of resignation sitting in her drafts folder. She didn’t think
she wanted to prove it.

The jet bridge lurched under her every step. She breathed in the jet fuel and cold air that
had seeped in from outside. Canvas prints on carpeted walls told her today is an adventure and to
make the moment count, alongside photos of flight crews that smiled like they were far better
rested and far better compensated than Sydney.

She loved parts of the job, like how asphalt could look like still water when the sun hit it
just right. She stepped onto the plane and told herself she wouldn’t miss it.

The Airbus sat 150 passengers and three inflight crewmembers—the airline called flight
attendants that, inflight crewmembers, because they said language mattered. But the title upgrade
didn’t change that fact that heels and mascara were mandatory, or stop old men in lint-covered suits from calling her “little lady” or—rarely but not never—“kitten.”

“You’re not just attendants,” a stockholder told her training class on their first day.

“You’re servers and performers and safety officers and friends.”

*You make thirty grand at best.* He left this part out, opted for: “You’re the face of the brand.” There were forty-eight fresh faces total, all impressionable and ecstatic and *chosen.* Later he’d tell them, “Your chances of graduating from Harvard are higher than completing this training program.”

Self-importance. It was always part of the shtick.

The rest of the crew was on time. The pilots introduced themselves, and the captain made a comment about her tardiness.

“I’m a reserve,” she told him. “I live in Allston.” It was an hour by the T.

The captain nodded and returned to the cockpit. He’d probably write her up. Pilots were not in charge of flight attendants, but they were frequently sticklers for company policy. They weren’t above sending emails to inflight team leads over phones left on counters or holes in pantyhose. The Boston base’s pilots were mostly dads and mostly dicks. They liked saying things like, “My daughter was around your age when she started thinking about kids.” Today’s pilots’ names were Doug and Paul. Pilots and their four-letter names.

She could press send on the email now, on her walk back to the galley. Then the decision would be out of her hands, cemented in the universe. Then she wouldn’t have to worry about
whether Doug or Paul or Dave or Rick notified her superior. But then she saw the woman in the rear of the plane.

The crewmember knelt in the back galley, her back turned to Sydney, stocking white cheddar popcorn and already brewing the coffee. She had dark hair and impeccable posture, the kind parents ask for at Thanksgiving dinner. She wore high high heels, not the one-inch pumps from Payless most crewmembers opted for.

Her name was Vera—Sydney knew her. It had been years, five of them, since they’d seen each other. Vera was Sydney’s roommate in training. They used to stay up in the conference room studying decompression procedures and eating Cool Ranch Doritos, trading stories from home and business casual blazers for class. They dated, but it felt more significant than that—dating. If you asked her at the time, Sydney would have called Vera her best friend. Training friendships, however, were the same as those made at summer camp: all-consuming and fleeting. Same as her passion for the job. At the end of training, she and Vera were assigned to different bases. It was messy. They hadn’t talked since.

Vera glanced over her shoulder. “I was wondering when I’d run into you,” she said.

“Me too,” Sydney said, but she wondered this in the way you wonder if you’ll ever run into a celebrity in your small, flyover town. An impractical thought, a story you tell yourself of how your smile looks and what you’ll say.

Sydney said her name, as if checking to make sure it was indeed her, and Vera nodded back. Yes, it was Vera. She was just older. They both were. That’s what happens when five years pass, isn’t it?
“Are you covering a shift?” Sydney asked. Sometimes, if there was a call-out or an odd-ball trip, crewmembers from different bases could be assigned to the same leg in a one-time deal. Other than that, she only flew with Boston crews. “You were in Houston.”

“I just transferred to Logan.”

This was not one-time. Vera was here, permanently. As permanent as things could be in their world.

She prepped the cabin for boarding.

###

Leg One

When they were in training, Vera said her name like it was a stolen, sacred thing. Now she read it off a roster. “Sydney, you’re working F2,” she said. Sydney watched how she squinted at the flight log and wondered what happened to the tortoise shell glasses she used to wear. “And I’m F3.”

The man up front, working F1, was named Clarence. He was one of those golden-age crewmembers who talked about TWA like it was a fairytale and got to choose his own schedule and trips. She dreamed about the day when she’d be able to pick her own trips, and when she could, you wouldn’t find her on a four-legger.

But Sydney would be spending the bulk of her day in the back galley with Vera. They were afforded a six-by-two-foot space to avoid each other’s eyes.

Sydney made a conscious choice not to think of the place she and Vera left things. She was an optimist. She wanted today to be nice, or at the very least, easy.
The night before graduation, Vera said something similar. “Let’s keep things friendly.” Both their families were in town for graduation. It was supposed to be a happy time, but Sydney knew that after graduation, after the ceremony and the cake, Vera would go to Houston, and she’d go to Boston.

Vera stayed busy during boarding. She took her job, whether it was checking safety equipment or stocking Cheez-Its, deadly serious. She smiled at guests—that was the airline’s word, guests—but it was a manufactured, soulless smile. The smile of a company man. Sydney didn’t remember her like this, so particular and proud. In training, Vera was so warm, so insight-ful, so wholly herself. Yes, she was a perfectionist whenever she painted French tips on Sydney’s nails, but she also smiled like she meant it, said, “Your hands are always freezing,” as she held them steady, but now she was a cardboard cutout of a person, no more real than the pictures on the jet bridge.

As passengers walked aboard, Vera greeted high rewards members by name.

“The Diamonds don’t notice if you don’t greet them,” Sydney told her when Vera returned to the galley for a can of grapefruit juice.

“They notice if you do,” Vera said.

Vera did enough work for two, so Sydney hung back in the galley. She checked her phone for messages, and occasionally got on the loud speaker to remind passengers to step out of the aisle.
It was a full flight. Business types, mostly older. Sydney liked flights like this, where customers had lost the novelty of a flight. It wasn’t an adventure or a memory to them. It was a commute.

Later, as the aircraft taxied, Sydney and Vera waited quietly in the back galley—Sydney on the jumpseat with her Kindle, Vera checking the latches on the carts. If you were to leave the latches loose, carts would roll out and into the aisle during landing and takeoff. Sydney had seen it happen once, and though no one got hurt, you certainly didn’t want a drink cart barreling down an aircraft at liftoff.

Sydney asked where Vera was living in Boston.

“The East side,” she said. This was the usual haunt of the Boston-based crewmembers who were more concerned with saving money and getting to the airport quickly than having a life outside of work. The East side was close and convenient, but stale. Sydney and Sam lived in Back Bay, near the university. It was loud and young and expensive, a place you could walk around on Friday nights.

Sydney said, “That’s nice. Easy commute.” Because she was keeping things friendly.

“Two train stops away,” Vera said. “You’re in Allston.”

It wasn’t a question. “I am.”

“Do you like the weather?”

She shrugs. “It’s different from California.”

This wasn’t small talk, not really. Sydney enjoyed small talk, and was good at it. They were talking like they had all the background information on each other, like they’d studied the
other’s Wikipedia, but not like they were friends. They side-stepped certain topics and tiptoed on the rest, careful not to mention training or the end of it.

Yes, they still knew each other. But once, they loved each other.

Vera was not Sydney’s first love, but she was her first practical, reciprocated love. The kind of love that feels like it shouldn’t be allowed, because no one should have been allowed to know Sydney like Vera knew her, or to read Sydney like Vera read her, or to break Sydney as swiftly and completely as Vera broke her.

But this was not Vera. Whoever this was bustled about the back galley and aisle, checking and rechecking that seatbacks were in their quote-unquote upright and locked position and tray tables were quote-unquote stowed. She acted as a piece of machinery for the airline, polished and dressed-up. They used to make fun of people like her, people who thought they had to give your lives—had to draw blood—for the sake of the company.

Even after they fought, even when she swore she hated Vera, she thought too much of her to become this.

When Vera came back to the galley, Sydney said, “You really care about this job, don’t you?”

“You say that like it’s a dig.”

She meant it as one.

“Has it occurred to you,” Sydney said, her voice joking, but her words more honest than anything she’d said all day, “that you don’t get promoted for following the training manual to a tee?”
“We don’t get promoted at all,” Vera said. “This isn’t a marketing firm.”

She effortlessly evaded her point. They did not talk for several minutes after.

Sydney knew she could and perhaps should cultivate conversation herself, but she couldn’t think up a question which she didn’t already know the answer to. She’d kept an eye on Vera’s socials on and off for the past five years. She knew Vera used to live in a Houston townhome on the water. She knew Vera had a boyfriend whom she’d recently stopped posting about. She did not know that Vera had relocated, or why. Boston living expenses were steeper, the traffic busier, the trip selection shittier. Vera asked for the Houston base in training because her family lived in the area. Houston was not the sole reason why they didn’t talk anymore, but a major contributing factor in the matter. In training, Vera wanted Houston more than she wanted her.

Things could change, however, in the span of five years. Plans, dispositions, relationships. Vera’s hair, which was now cut to her shoulders and meticulously straightened. Sydney used to love her curls.

Maybe she was being petty. Maybe Vera had only matured, like you’re supposed to. Maybe Vera had meant to keep in touch, had meant to call. Sydney never did, but that was only because she wasn’t sure whose court the ball was in, or who had the olive branch for extending, or who fucked up worse.

The pilots called, “Next in line for departure,” code for buckle up and shut up. Flight attendants were to be silent, on watch, from departure until ten thousand feet, because if something were to go wrong, it would happen here. Vera and Sydney took brace positions, hands under their
thighs and heads leaned back against their seats, minimizing the chance of death if they were to crash.

The takeoff was smooth, uneventful. The double ding in the cabin signaled ten thousand feet, and ten thousand feet signaled drink service. Vera did not waste time. She was already on her feet before the ding finished, jumpseat swinging shut and hands grabbing at a notepad and soda cans. She didn’t spare Sydney a glance before heading into the cabin.

Sydney stacked soda cans in her left hand and cups of ice in her right, orders from row seventeen. Vera said, “You’re supposed to open the cans before serving.” When Sydney only responded with a stare, searching for signs that Vera was making a joke, Vera said, “Because the—”

“I know why,” Sydney said. They were trained to open soda cans for the customers, because sometimes drinks exploded and fizzed over due to the compression of the cabin. It happened with chip bags, too. They sometimes popped in the drawers, loud enough to ring like gunshots. “It’s easier to carry them like this. I don’t want to spill any in the aisle.”

“Better in the aisle than on a guest’s lap.”

Guest.

“What’s in it for you, Vera?” she asked. “The checking of the latches, the walking down the aisles. You’re not a brand ambassador. I know how much you get paid.”

“Does that mean I shouldn’t take pride in my work?”
Growing up, Sydney had only heard about pride in negative connotations. Pride placed the hare in second. Pride scarred Johnny Tremain’s hand. Pride ate the fruit and brought hell to Earth. But Vera thought her pride was doing everyone a service.

“I was looking forward to working with you,” Vera said. “When I saw your name on my assignment I might as well have jumped up and down in the crew lounge. I thought you’d feel the same.”

She tried to imagine Vera, this Vera, jumping up and down for anything. The image wouldn’t come to her mind.

“Why did you transfer?” Sydney asked as the pilot announced initial descent into the Charlotte area.

The question came out less conversational, with more edge than she intended. Vera said, “What?” She’d been checking the latches on the carts.

“To Boston,” Sydney said. “Why did you leave Houston?” Leaving Houston was a different question than why did you transfer:

Vera did not look at Sydney when she said, “I thought the snow would be nice.”

“It snows in Houston.”

“Not in a way that matters.” Vera’s hands found the seam in a garbage bag and fanned it out.

“Yeah, but,” Sydney said, putting down her Kindle, “your family is in Houston.”

“It’s a quick plane ride,” Vera said, because plane rides were nothing to flight attendants and those they loved. “The city was getting...stale.” She chose that word, stale, carefully, the
same way she checked the cart latches. She walked into the aisle to collect soda cans and napkins, gathering trash from the whole cabin, not just her section.

Sydney had learned these healthy work habits in training: How to go above and beyond for a guest. How to go above and beyond for your fellow crewmember. How to make the brand look good. But she lost them quickly, as soon as she learned that shortcuts sufficed. Heels did not need to be high. Cans did not need to be opened before handing them to customers. Nobody saw what happened in the cabins of the planes. There was no promotion structure or incentive program.

She could try. She could be like Vera, straightening her hair and double-checking latches, but what was the point? She thought of the email in her drafts. It would be easy to leave.

###

Leg Two

Vera’s work ethic did not waver in the second leg of their trip, DC to Charlotte. This trip was a bunny hop, they called it. Fifty minutes. The aircraft stayed low in the atmosphere, where turbulence was more common. After a few bumps, the pilots called the back galley and told the flight attendants to stay seated. No snack service, no way out of this galley with Vera.

Vera reached for the phone on her side and gave a message to the guests on the intercom. Her customer service voice had improved since practicing in training. It made Sydney sick. Was there anything left of the woman she knew?

“I’m quitting soon,” Sydney said. It was just something to fill the silence.

Vera looked at her. “Quitting the airline?”
“I don’t have another job.”

“But you’ve made it this far,” she said. “They say it gets easier after five years.”

“They say that.” Sydney pressed her feet against the galley carts across from her, making something like a chaise lounge in the cold, cramped space. “But I’m still a reserve. I’m still sent on these shit trips. My friend works at the little burger joint by my apartment. She makes more than that.”

“It’s not about the money.”

“Then what is it about?” Sydney said. “This is a job, Vera. You serve soda to people who make twice as much of you to sit in a desk and hit on their receptionists. We’re not philanthropists.”

“Aviation a regarded career path,” Vera said. “You have a better shot at getting into Harvard.”

Sydney laughed.

“What’s funny?”

“Nothing. It’s just— You really are a mouthpiece.”

A particularly violent bump shakes the cabin. You feel it more in the back of the plane.

“So you’re out?” Vera asks. “Is there anything that can convince you to stay?”

“A raise, a line,” she said. “Maybe I could find somewhere cheaper to live. I should transfer like you.”

“Maybe.”
“I just feel like…” Sydney started, shook her head, and tried again. “There are two options. You treat the job like a job until it bores you enough or wears you down enough that you find a new job, or you make the job your everything. You sacrifice your soul so you can feel like you’re doing something with your life.”

Vera was quiet for a long moment. “So you think I’ve sacrificed my soul?”

Another spot of rough air shook the cabin so hard Sydney grabbed onto a handle by the aft door. “I just didn’t think you’d sell out to it all.”

“I didn’t think you could be so cynical,” Vera said, and Sydney thought better of arguing the point. She let out a steady breath. “This used to be easy.”

“I know,” Sydney said. “I miss you.” She missed the Vera who shared her flash cards and Googled dive bars by the training facility and made her feel like it was them against the world. They didn’t talk to anyone else, but they were happy that way, on their lonesome little island.

Vera looked out the window. “I miss you, too,” she said, casual, like the way you miss bread on a diet or a sunny day in the winter.

But Sydney did not miss Vera this way. She missed Vera the way you miss being clean when you’ve been on a plane all day.

She said, “You never called or texted.”

“You never said you wanted me to.”

So that was it: Sydney’s court. Sydney’s olive branch. Sydney’s fuck up.

Their fight started quarter past nine at night. Sydney remembered the time because the shuttle bus that ran between the hotel and the training facility was running late that day. The hul-
labaloo of training had subsided—she and Vera had passed every acronym of a test in need of passing to become full-fledged inflight crewmembers. All that was left was graduation. That night, they’d been assigned their bases over an end-of-training banquet, making a whole to-do out of who would be crashing on couches and twin-sized beds where.

The other trainees stayed out for drinks, but Vera and Sydney returned to the hotel for the night. This would not have been unusual for the two women, turning in early while their class went into the city, but tonight they didn’t look at each other on the elevator, nor congregate on one of the two beds to watch a movie or lay in a blissful, understood silence. Because tonight, Sydney was placed in Boston, Vera in Houston.

When Vera did speak again, she said, “I thought you put Houston as your first choice.”

“I did,” said Sydney. Base choices were preferences, not biblical. Houston was a heavily-requested and relatively small base. “You have seniority.” Only three years of it, sure, but it was seniority.

Sydney sat on the edge of her bed and braced her hands on the white duvet, the one Vera never sat on top of, because she said they weren’t washed as frequently as sheets. “We can make it work,” Vera said, because plane rides were nothing to flight attendants and those they loved.

Sydney nodded, tried to look like she believed that. But they’d taken a crash course in each other over the past month. Vera saw through it, sat beside Sydney, and laid her land on hers in a small, comforting gesture.

Things only got messy when Sydney said, “We’re going to be busy.”

“We only work eighteen days a month.”
“What if they’re not the same eighteen days?”

“We’ll request off for the same days.”

“And meet where? Whose place is home?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

It did matter, and Vera knew it. They went on for a while like that.

“Why didn’t you think about this sooner?”

“I came here for a job, Sydney,” she said. “Not a girlfriend.”

“Sorry to get in the way of your work, then.”

“Don’t put words in my mouth.” Vera stopped her pacing. “I worked my ass off to graduate. We both did. We owe it to ourselves to go after it.”

“So that’s what you choose? The job over me?”

“That’s not a decision I have to make.”

“But if you did,” Sydney said, biting down. “That’s what you’d pick?”

Vera didn’t answer, but that was an answer, wasn’t it?

On the plane, Sydney and Vera were still on their separate jumpseats. “I would have answered,” Sydney said. “If you had called.”

Vera stood up, as if sensing the double ding of final descent. “So would I.”

###

Leg Three

Charlotte to JFK. Full flight. Families and vacationers. Sydney was on her feet the whole flight, not because she’d been pressured by the always-moving nature of her coworker, but be-
cause the passengers were a particularly needy sort. Every time she tried to sit down and read, a call button lit up. But it was a longer flight, so the plane cruised higher. The air was smooth.

Because they were busy, Sydney and Vera did not talk. They didn’t lift their eyes to greet each other as they scooted past one another in the aisle. In the back, though, when Sydney tipped over a can of Coke and sent soda all over the counter, Vera quietly grabbed a stack of napkins from a galley cart and helped her clean it.

Vera walked back to the galley and slid into her jumpseat, out of breath. She was still composed, not an eyelash out of place, but it was the biggest crack in her armor that Sydney had seen today. She took her jumpseat, too.

“I need to count inventory,” Vera said, her head against the wall behind her. “We’ll need to stock up on minis and snacks before the West Palm flight.” But she didn’t count inventory, didn’t move.

They sat, the sound of their breaths bleeding into the hum of the engines, revelling in a moment of quiet.

“I said things I didn’t mean that night,” Vera said, words still disjointed from breathlessness.

“No you didn’t.” She may not have meant to say them, but she meant them. If she didn’t mean them, wouldn’t she have called?

“There were openings in Houston,” Vera said. “You know, when the airport expanded. You could have transferred.”
“That’s not why we broke up, Vera.” This wasn’t a good conversation, wasn’t the kind of reunion Sydney hoped to have with Vera one day, but this was better than this morning. “You knew how much I looked up to you,” she said. “God, I worshipped you.”

“Who was the one who said it wouldn’t work?”

Five years. It had been five years. Vera was nearing thirty. Were the wounds still fresh for her? Did she remember this detail, just as Sydney did?

“Why did you transfer, Vera?”

A call button went off. They looked at each other.

“Clarence can get it,” Sydney said.

Vera stood up and smoothed down her skirt. “They’re in my section.”

Corporate spent all this time training and beating into their heads that this job mattered, that the last ten percent was the most important. But Vera had pushed herself further than the airline even required, and where did that take her? Back to Sydney. The same base, the same shit four legger, the same pay structure. It didn't matter.

She came back a minute later to grab a bag of pretzels from an upper compartment and bring it to the passenger. In the aisle, she reached over the row of seats to press on the call button again, turning it off.

Sydney stored up words for when Vera got back—questions to ask her, confessions to make, the things she would’ve said had this been the sweet reunion she imagined too many times before.

A double ding. Final descent.
Sydney glanced out the window. They were close to the ground; the landing gear would drop soon. They scrambled to gather loose items from the counter and strapped themselves into their jumpseats. They tilted their heads back. Descent was a game of hurry up and wait.

Wheels hit asphalt hard, and with the force of the aircraft braking, the high galley bin where Vera retrieved the pretzels moments ago slid out and toward Sydney.

The metal bin slammed against her forehead. The sound was worse than the pain, so bad that Vera let out a hiss of a curse and unstrapped herself from her jumpseat early, while they were still on an active taxiway. It was against the rules.

“I’m fine,” she told Vera. The corner of the bin skidded her hairline. No skin was broken, but she could feel her pulse in her eyebrow and ears.

“It’s my fault.”

“It’s no one’s fault.”

Vera brushed her fingers across Sydney’s hairline. It was against the rules.

###

Leg Four

Sydney got food between the third and fourth leg, holding to promises of clean hotel sheets and an AC unit she could crank as low as she desired. She asked if Vera wanted to walk to the food court with her, but Vera packed a lunch. Of course she did.

Sydney was happier now, for the moment. If you asked her now, as she turned heads at gates and got an employee discount at Jamba Juice, she would keep this job. She would make it work. She knew herself, though, and knew how fickle her heart and mind were. That’s why the
email was still only in her drafts, not sent out. That’s why she wondered now, walking back onto
the plane, if she and Vera could make things work.

Takeoff was smooth. The JFK to West Palm crowd was notoriously picky and notoriously
full of gin drinkers. The bulk of them were older, the sort of people who knew how they liked
things, only because they’d never had them any other way.

During service, she and Vera talked like friends, maybe nothing more, but it was some-
thing. It was easier. She wished the rest of the legs had been this easy. They were prepping drinks
again when Sydney asked, “Do you have plans for the layover?”

“Sleep,” Vera said. She picked up the intercom mic and reminded passengers that the fast-
ten seatbelts sign was lit.

They started drink and snack service. There were little moments of communication—a
bag handed off between them or an extra hand to click a bin shut—that made her tongue feel less
heavy.

A woman in the last row pressed her call button, and Sydney stood to help her before
Vera could.

“My seat won’t go back,” the woman said.

“Seats in the back row don’t recline.” Sydney reached to shut off the call button.

The woman clicked her tongue. “How am I supposed to nap?”

Sydney worked hard not to roll her eyes. You’re not supposed to nap. Not on an airplane.
She’d tried every position, neck pillow, and sleep aid. The environment isn’t conducive to rest.

“I’m sorry,” was all she said.
“Can I move to one of the seats up there?” she asked, pointing ahead at the emergency exit rows.

“Those have extra leg room,” she said. “There will be a fifty dollar surcharge.” Normally she’d just let someone move, but Vera was right behind her in the galley. However friendly they’d been this leg, she’d probably have a problem with Sydney just letting the woman move.

The woman was less than unpleased now. She gripped her fingers around the armrest.

“So I have to sit here like I’ve got a plank taped to my back for two hours?”

She kept going until Vera, still seated in the back galley, said, “Just let her.”

Sydney looked back. “Seriously?”

She lifted a shoulder. “If it makes our life easier.”

Sydney nodded and led the woman to her new row, then helped her recline her aisle seat.

Sydney said, “The people on this plane single-handedly keep Chico’s in business,” and Vera laughed back. It didn’t used to be such a marvel, making Vera laugh.

When Vera headed into the aisle and Sydney wondered again why she followed the training guide in the tiniest, most ancillary ways when no one was watching, she realized she was. She’d been watching Vera all day. Making note.

Vera and Sydney sat opposite each other in the back galley, talking. Just talking. They talked about insignificant things like movies and Boston dives. They talked about their families, both having remembered the other’s. They talked about what they’d do when they landed, and when Vera asked, “Would you like to get dinner somewhere?” Sydney said yes.
They dimmed the cabin lights halfway through the flight, and Vera moved to sit beside Sydney on the bench jumpseat, comfortable for one but suitable for two. This spare seat was there for commuting crewmembers when planes were out of empty seats, but Vera found a new purpose for it, making herself smaller so as not to touch her thigh to Sydney’s.

Sydney asked again, “Why did you transfer to Boston?”

“I told you,” Vera said, still not looking up. “Houston was stale.”

She did not want to ask if Vera transferred for her, because that was a romantic, paltry notion. Like moving tables at lunchrooms to sit near a crush. She didn’t care if she was even a whisper of a reason for Vera’s reassignment, because either way they were here, in the back galley, going somewhere to eat tonight.

“I don’t think you’re an idiot for quitting,” Vera said without prompting.

“I didn’t quit yet,” Sydney said. “Do you think I should?”

“Doesn’t matter what I think. But it’s hard, the job.”

“It’s not hard to you,” she said. When Sydney lifted a shoulder, it rubbed against Vera’s.

“You make it look…pristine.”

She smiled. “Pristine,” she repeated. “I know I can be annoying.”

“You just care. I don’t know if anything is that important to me. Not in a bleak way. I don’t know.”

“I know,” Vera said. “It gets lonely, doesn’t it?”

“Sort of.”
“When I took this job,” she went on, “I thought of all the places I could go, all the buddy passes I could give my friends, but do you know how many vacations I’ve been on in five years?” she asked, then held up two fingers. “And one was barely a vacation. My cousin had a wedding in Mexico City.”

“Yeah,” Sydney said. “I went to Aruba with my dad.”

Vera laughed. Sydney remembered that laugh from training. She recalled a late-night study session, one where Vera snuck some gas station beers into their room. They didn’t study that night, but they drank and ate chips and kissed on her bed and let the TV play to itself. Vera laughed a lot that night, enough to fill a diary.

A call button dinged. “Let Clarence get it,” Sydney said.

“Are you going to quit?”

“Yes,” she said. “No. Ask me again tonight.”

“You haven’t changed,” Vera said.

The hours passed like that, with Vera close enough to Sydney that she could feel her breath on her neck when Sydney made her laugh again and again. She had changed. She knew she’d changed, and Vera had to know it, too. But those words were a small mercy to her, an admission that they could still be the people who shared a room at training. Their lonesome little island.
I’m twenty-four when my father loses his job the second time. It’s October, Atlanta. Early rumors of fall chap my knuckles and blow brittle leaves off their branches. We play cards outside, because we’re not used to seasons like this where we’re from. My mom leans back in her chair after every turn and says some variation of “isn’t this gorgeous?” or “can you believe this weather?” We’ve gotten along well on this trip—she hasn’t asked about what happened with Ryan beyond the vague reasons I gave her when I booked the trip up. I used words like nothing too serious and just need a break.

My parents’ back deck overlooks a drop-off of trees and sparse landscaping. They’ll get to it after the basement, they told me when they bought the place sight unseen. Property around here is going quick. “High demand,” my dad had explained. “Seller’s market.” They overbid for this house, but won’t tell my sisters or me by how much. They still have a strange relationship with money.

The game we play is part-Rummy, part-Convoy, part-years of tailoring and overriding rules over tipsy family get-togethers. My mom’s always finding variations of card games on the internet, always saying, “isn’t this a fun one?” She usually wins the more strategic, plan-ahead games, but fails miserably at anything involving bluffing or luck. This is the former, so Mom is in the lead.

“How’s the coffee?” my mom asks between turns. They just bought an expensive new espresso machine. I looked up the price on my phone while I was in the bathroom.

“It’s great.”
“Isn’t it great?” she agrees. “It grinds the beans for you and everything. We looked into the machine Uncle Pat has, but this one’s cheaper, and actually much nicer.”

It’s just me and them tonight. My older sister is working, my younger at NC State finishing up her degree. We call this, when one child gets alone time with parents, a cheese platter. The phrase comes from my dad’s side of the family, because sometimes my grandparent would keep one kid up after bedtime to share cheese and pasteurized meats. It wasn’t until I was twelve when I learned it wasn’t a real phrase, but a product of our family as much as Mom’s loose-ruled card games.

“How’s work?” I ask my mom.

“Settling in.” They moved here in August. She’s worked in the same school district my whole life, until this year. “I don’t think the other teachers like me.”

“Oh, stop,” I say. “Everyone likes you.”

My dad’s phone rings. He looks at the screen. “Work,” he says, and walks inside.

“He should remind them that he’s off at five,” I say when he’s gone. “Or that his favorite daughter is in town.”

“We don’t have favorites.”

“Most fun daughter, then.”

“He’s been busy,” she says. “How has work been for you?”

She hasn’t asked until tonight, my last day staying with them. I’ll catch the early flight tomorrow, back to the husband, to the dog, to Florida. We were all there once, under one roof and name, but now I’m reminded by the strangest things—an I-95 on-ramp, the Dunkin’ by my
house, the USPS driver that worked my childhood street—that Florida is not my family’s home base anymore. I’m the last one left, the loose end.

“Work’s fine,” I say. “Steady.”

“Did you ever ask about the Wednesday before Thanksgiving?”

“Not yet. I’m not sure if we’re going to be able to swing it. We’ll see.”

“We’ll see means no,” she says in her whiny play-voice. She gives way to immaturity now and then, usually when she needs something. “Maybe means yes.”

I smile at her over my cards. “We’ll see.” Mom calls me her Hard to Get Daughter. Hard to get hugs, hard to get I love you texts, hard to get me here for Thanksgiving. I wouldn’t think to miss my parents’ inaugural Thanksgiving at their North Georgia McMansion, but keeping Mom on her toes is a fun game to play. She always smiles so big when I give in.

When the game gets back to my dad’s turn, we sit and wait. We talk about the brewery we went to this afternoon and which of my sisters’ boyfriends we dislike more today.

“I’m sure Ryan will be happy to have you back tomorrow,” she says. Her voice is casual, but she knows what she’s doing.

“Mhm.”

“What happened there, anyway?” she asks, eyes on her cards like she’s more interested in that.

“With Ryan?” It was too generous of me to assume she wouldn’t bring him up before leaving. “Nothing bad.” I’m telling the truth—it was a small fight, a difference of opinion. I can be impulsive sometimes, and he can be a dick. Our marriage is fine.
“Had to be bad enough that you’d come spend the weekend with you annoying parents.”

I look at my cards, too. “You guys don’t annoy me.”

“I’m glad you have him,” she says. “I love that he lets Taylor be Taylor.”

My eyebrows twitch. “What does that even mean?”

“You know,” she says, shoulders pulling back as she readjusts in her chair. “You still get to do the things you like to do. Like your concerts and coming to see us.”

I’m not happy with Ryan right now, but feel the need to defend him against her thoughts.

“What, did you think he was going to domesticate me?”

“Of course not.” She says everything through a laugh. This way she can always claim she was joking.

“Do you like anything about him that doesn’t have to do with me?” I say everything bone dry. This way I can always claim I was joking.

“I like everything about him.”

“Name something.”

“I like his glasses.”

“His glasses.”


I nod, sip my coffee. Some days I push harder, because I really do want to know what she thinks of my husband, even if she’ll never tell me straight. But this is my last night here, and Ryan is a touchy topic, and I don’t have the energy in me.
When my father comes back out, his posture has changed. He’s slumping—he’s always
slumping a little, but now his cheeks and eyes seem to slump with him. He pulls two hands hard
over his face, dragging loose skin with them. “I’ve got some bad news.”

“Jesus,” I say, letting a laugh out through my nose. “Don’t just start conversations like
that.” Maybe I think he’s kidding, or maybe I’m compensating for how shallow my breaths sud-
denly feel.

“I just lost my job.”

My mom cries immediately. Emotional, like my sisters. I pick a spot on the wall and stare
at it, holding my mug tight as the coffee inside gets colder and colder.

He tells us he’s been laid off. My parents go back and forth on the specifics. Corporate
restructuring. Looking to sell the company. Needs to make sense on paper. All nonsense, or
maybe not nonsense, but meaningless.

I half listen. I nod when appropriate, say sorry when necessary. I think about the house,
the loan, the plans for the backyard.

When I speak again, it’s to tell my mom, “It won’t be like last time.”

###

In the July before my Senior year, Mom took me on a college tour. It mostly consisted of
the big Florida schools, but the last two schools on the trip were a surprise. Harvard and MIT. We
flew out of Orlando and stayed in the Westin. “This is where Obama stays when he’s in Boston,”
my mom had told me on the elevator.
The schools seemed like long shots, but I had a better shot than Anna, who was brilliant in her own way, an artist. She was studying abroad in the Netherlands. Mom loved that for her. But my GPA was high and I had a full-page bulleted list of extracurriculars and honors—*Odyssey of the Mind. SGA Vice President. National Merit Scholar*. I could do it.

My mom could have done it, too. She was a bright student, the first in her family to go to college—Dartmouth, for journalism. She got pregnant with Anna, my older sister, halfway through her Sophomore year. Transferred to a local school. Cheaper, made more sense. That’s when she switched majors to education—she’d always gotten along with kids. She finished two years later than scheduled, but she finished. I admired her for that, but seldom said it. I used to believe that she understood me well enough that I didn’t have to say everything I felt.

We walked the campuses together. I imagined and pretended like I was so much older, so much more independent, so much more of a person than I was. Dad was deep in his unemployment at the time, always dressed up for interviews and lunch meetings with friends with connections. Things were bad, but they never wanted us to know how bad. They saved up for Christmas and annual family trips. Our lack of money in that time was never explicit, never made it past the careful barrier my parents had built around our former way of life, when things were comfortable. To my sisters and I, money issues were like background music at a doctor’s office. You only noticed it if you tried. That summer, though, we could see the wearing of our parents’ savings in the bags beneath our mother’s eyes and the way she smiled when she was sad. Mom has always been the worst liar of the bunch.
We wouldn’t find out until much later that my parents were close to losing the house that summer. My grandma, Dad’s mom, had been lending them money to make ends meet, but they were looking into downsizing.

Mom and I worked on college applications together at the gate at Boston Logan, waiting on our flight. Mom has a good eye for proper grammar and MLA formatting. Before we boarded our flight, I let my mom hug me and she told me she was proud.

“Which do you think I’ll get into?” I asked.

“Which?” she said. “Both. You’ll have your pick.”

I got into both, and I turned them both down.

Many things happened—good things, worthy things—in the weeks after our Boston trip that made me want to stay in Florida. I got an internship at one of the tech firms, paid. I had a local college reach out to me about a full ride. I met Ryan. When the acceptance packets came in the mail, I stuffed them high in my closet, behind my winter sweaters.

I kept it from her for a while, just went along with her excitement when she’d send me a picture of dorms or brought it up to the aunts and uncles. She seemed so happy. I didn’t want to crush her.

On the last day of March, she started digging deeper into the reason behind why I hadn’t received a response yet. We both had the day off from school, and Mom “booked a date” with me for the morning. She made eggs and hand-squeezed orange juice. She sat crossed-legged on the couch, her laptop fan running, and scoured college message boards. I sat beside her, pretended to be interested.
“See this,” she said and pointed to the screen. “This kid got his acceptance package from Harvard in early March.”

“Maybe I didn’t get accepted, then,” I said. I forgot to affect my voice to sound surprised or dejected, but Mom didn’t seem to notice.

“They would have at least emailed.”

“Maybe I missed a message,” I said. “Or something could’ve gone to junk mail.”

“But for both schools?” she asked. “I wonder if there was a problem with your application.” She picked up her phone from the couch cushion and Googled *Harvard admission contact*.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m going to call,” she said. “They probably skipped over you somehow.”

She found the number in seconds, but I was faster, reaching across her to pull the phone from her hands. I held it tight in my fingers, pressing it to my chest.

“I got in,” I said. I couldn’t look at her.


“Both. I got in.”

“Oh, my God,” she said, mouth pulling into a smile and arms pulling me into her.

I couldn’t let myself get wrapped into the moment. “I’m not going.”

She pulled back. “How can you say that?”

I told her about the internship and the state school. I told her that I was excited for next year.
She went quiet for a long moment, but her body was in nervous motion, a mess of fidgets and head shakes. Then she asked, “All this for a guy?”

I had to laugh. “A guy?” I hadn’t even mentioned Ryan.

It was ridiculous, both the idea that he was the reason behind my backing out of the Boston schools, and the idea that he was someone she could call “a guy.” She knew how serious we were, how happy I’d been since meeting him.

“He’s an anchor to you,” she said. She’d said this once before, and I thought she meant it as a compliment then, but now I heard it right. She didn’t mean he kept me steady; she meant he kept me still.

“It’s more than just that,” I said.

Mom laughed. A choked, sharp sound, and she looked at me with a new face.

In her eyes saw, perhaps for the first time, my mother’s raw disappointment. I already knew how to disappoint my mother, what it felt like. I was an argumentative student, constantly winding up in the principal’s office due to my quick tongue and “lack of self-discipline,” as my mom called it when they’d pull her from her classroom to administer her bi-monthly slap on the wrist. But this, the way she looked at me when she found out I betrayed her trust, betrayed her plans for me, was not a disappointment of her expectations or reputation around school. This was a disappointment of the person she thought I was, the person she dreamt up while she watched me grow. It was small, but the first fracture in the portrait she’d painted of me. Maybe I’ve been trying to reconcile that for the past six years, or maybe I’ve been trying to split and crack the canvas further.
We’ve moved inside for the night. We stand on opposite ends of the open kitchen. The house that I was getting used to an hour ago now feels like an Airbnb, like I’m stepping on someone else’s floors with my bare feet, sleeping in their sheets. They can’t afford this place. Mom’s a teacher—she can get a job anywhere—but Dad’s line of work is niche and sparse. This job was stationed in the city. He’ll have to go where he can find work.

“I’m glad we’ll at least have one Thanksgiving here,” Mom says. Her eyes are swollen, but she’s changed into soft clothes. Pajama pants and a sweatshirt, hair pulled back. She looks comfortably sad.

“Come on, Mom,” I say.

“Taylor,” Dad scolds. “She’s allowed to be sad.”

Anna is coming over now to stay with them for a few days. She doesn’t want Mom and Dad to be alone. That’s what she said on the phone, “I don’t think they should be alone right now,” as if one of the grandmas died. Anna likes making things out of things, but that’ll work with Mom. They can cry together and worry together and get nostalgic over this house they’ve hardly unpacked. She’ll feed into mom’s sadness.

Mom cries more while Dad holds her, and when he leaves to have a cigarette, we both pretend not to notice.

My dad got this job while I was on my honeymoon in California. He called me early in the morning because of the time change. It was one of the few times I’d heard my father cry.
“I’m going to take care of you all,” he told me, and I felt like I was missing out a bit compared to my other sisters, because I didn’t need to be taken care of anymore.

Back then, I could only celebrate his victory from the sidelines, and now that he’s lost that job, I mourn his defeat the same way, knowing it is not mine.

We’re alone in the kitchen. The coffee maker in the corner whirs, self-cleaning its filter, but other than that it’s quiet. This house is too big. Mom sits on a stool at the breakfast bar and I stand on the other end of it, palms on the cool countertop. It’s white granite, speckled with gray and black, the first upgrade my parents made to this house outside of painting the walls. Kitchen upgrades always come back to you in resale, though. That’s what my dad taught me.

Anna’s yellow headlights warm the kitchen through the front windows. She walks through the garage entrance with her duffel over her shoulder. She less hugs Mom and more holds her, like our mother is a child in need of cradling and cooing. She hugs me after, short and obligatory. “Hug me for real,” she says, and so I hug her back and whisper that I’m glad she’s here. We go to the living room to talk.

“Ever since Dad got this new job I’ve been waiting for the other shoe to drop,” she says.

“I’m sorry,” Anna says. “I can’t imagine.”

“You shouldn’t live life like that,” I say.

“I don’t do it on purpose.”

“I know, Mom.” Anna rubs the top of her hand. She’s always so assuring, so affirming. I know those are good, worthy traits, but I wonder if she enables Mom’s bitterness too often. “I’m scared, too,” she says.
“Aren’t you upset, Taylor?” Mom asks. Her head rests against her hand like it’s far too heavy and bulky to hold up on her own.

“Am I upset?”

“I mean, you don’t even seem sad about any of this.”

“Do you want me to be a wreck?” I ask. “Do you think that would make anything better?”

“Taylor,” Anna says. I’m used to hearing my name like this, hushed with a breathy T.

“That’s not what I said,” Mom says.

“I’m worried about you and Dad,” I say. “But it’s different than last time. It affects us less—not to say I’m not worried about you guys, but we don’t rely on you anymore.”

Her laugh is more forced than usual. “You don’t rely on your parents?”

Anna shakes her head at Mom, a silent, Don’t listen to her.

“Financially.” My mom knows what I mean. She only pretends like she doesn’t. “You know, you should try being strong for Dad right now.”

“Like you?” she says. It’s meant as a jab. “You haven’t even told him you’re sorry.”

“I am sorry,” I say. “Why do I need to be sorry?”

Mom shakes her head, clearing it, then says, “I hope you know you can talk to me about what happened with Ryan. I’m here for you, no matter what.”

“What happened with Ryan?” Anna asks.

“I know,” I say to Mom, then to Anna, “Nothing.”
“It’s okay if something did happen,” Mom says, voice soft. “You two were married off so young. It could be that you’re just growing apart.”

“We’re not growing apart,” I say. “Why would you even put that in my head?”

“I’m not putting anything in your head. I’m just talking to my daughter. I married your father young too, you know. Did you ever think I might have some advice to give?”

Maybe she does, but I don’t want it. Wanting her advice would mean admitting that maybe Ryan and I could be growing apart, and I don’t know how to stop it.

I bite down and tell myself no. In my family of five, I’ve always been the only one to not let Mom’s comments creep beneath my skin. I don’t let her get to me. “You shouldn’t worry about us.”

“She’s your mom,” Anna says. “She’s allowed to worry.”

I glare at Anna for a long moment, maybe looking for some camaraderie, but her hand keeps running over Mom’s. She’s chosen her side.

I excuse myself and go to the guest room I’ve been staying in this weekend. The second floor of the house is close to empty, just bed frames and white duvet covers. There are no imperfections in this home—no imperfections in the paint because I used Scotch tape to hang posters from drugstore magazines, no dents in the drywall because I swung my bedroom door open too hard. I never forget that this isn’t home, will never be home, and I wonder if that’s why I feel untethered, why when I look at my mother I cannot find my footing.

###
A month after I got engaged, my mom took me shopping for dresses at a small boutique in the downtown area of the town where I grew up. My sisters were there, and Ryan would meet us for lunch across the street after. That Saturday was sunny and cooler than usual. A cold front had taken the edge off everything. It had all the fixing of a perfect day, if everything had gone smoothly.

I stood on a six-inch podium in my fourth gown of the day. I didn’t usually wear gowns, though I don’t know what sort of people usually wear gowns. Models, maybe, and politicians at galas. My mom pulled on the thick ribbons at the back of the dress, tightening. She quietly watched my waist in the mirror as the dress cinched. Mom wasn’t judgmental of her daughters’ bodies, but she was always aware of them. She would never say a hurtful thing about my appearance, so I learned to listen for the silences, when she’d look and say nothing.

“I like this one,” Mom said. She was drinking champagne, firmly in the giggly and talkative stage. Soon she’d get argumentative. “Isn’t it gorgeous?”

“You look cerebral,” Anna said.

“Celestial,” Kate, my younger sister, corrected. She wasn’t old enough to drink out of the house yet, so had to watch as we gave way to eleven a.m. inebriation. I only had one glass (the bubbles bloat you, my mom had told me), but I was a lightweight then.

I didn’t mind this particular dress. It was simple, yet more expensive than all the others I’d tried on that day. Even though Dad was still out of work, my parents wanted to pay for everything wedding-related because, “that’s how it works,” Mom said. The bride’s family pays. I told her that was an antiquated practice, that I didn’t need a big wedding at all, but she insisted.
“I like it too,” I said, turning to see the back. “But I can’t justify spending this on a dress.”

“You’re not paying for it,” my mom said. “I am, and I think it’s amazing.”

“This dress could pay for an entire semester of college.”

“You’re on a scholarship.”

“That’s not my point.” She knew it wasn’t my point, but she did that often: danced around her understanding of me. She was—is, will be—always pushing me closer and closer to the raw truth of my words, even when she knew she couldn’t handle the brunt of them. “I’ll only wear it one day.”

“It’s a pretty big day,” she says.

“I didn’t ask for it to be.” I pull at the ribbons in the back of the dress, loosening it on my ribs. “I don’t even need a wedding.”

“You’re going to have a wedding, Taylor,” she said, like it was a rule I should’ve known about.

“Then can I at least have a say in it?”

Sobriety fell quickly. Kate hissed my name. “That’s a little harsh. Mom’s paying for everything.”

“We sold the camper,” Mom said and laughed. “You said you liked the venue.”

“I know. I do,” I said. “But I never asked you to spend all this money.” It all felt like a show, like a ten-grand party meant to prove to my aunts and uncles and my mom’s college friends that we were fine. We were good. We were the family we were meant to be, and she was
the mom close enough with her daughter that she’d throw a grand wedding for her. “You’re mak-
ing a bigger deal over this wedding than the person I’m marrying.”

Mom bit down, shook her head, sorted out her thoughts while emotions turnstiled on her face. “Do you think I would spend this much on a wedding if I didn’t like Ryan? You love him. That’s all that matters to me.”

“What don’t you like about him?”

“I never said I don’t like him.”

“Then answer my question.”

“Taylor,” a sister said. Mom left the room, jaw tense like it got when she was about to cry. In that moment, I liked hurting her. It made me feel brave, even as my sisters’ faces soured.

“You’re unbelievable,” Kate said.

“She is,” I said. “She’s making this all about herself.”

“It’s her first daughter’s wedding,” Anna said. “She’s allowed to be excited.”

“You know that’s not it.”

Cowards. I was always the one to say the things that they couldn’t. I got used to being the difficult one, the one with the rocky relationship with a loving mother, reliably tasked with con-
frontation so Anna and Kate and our father could keep their hands clean. I didn’t mind, not usually, but sometimes my sisters looked at me like I was a monster, like they’d seen none of Mom’s manipulation or tactics. It’s so easy to be good.

“Does she hate Ryan?” I asked.

Anna shook her head. “She just worries about you.”
“I wish she wouldn’t.”

I couldn’t tell if it was actually Ryan she disliked, or the changes he’d made in my life. Maybe she thought he was stealing me from her, or despised how he crushed her dreams of an Ivy League daughter, a daughter who did the thing that she could not. Or maybe what she couldn’t stomach was the idea of someone else being able to take care of me, possibly better than she or my dad could.

I wished I couldn’t understand her concern. I wished I didn’t imagine a life in Boston, a mom who came to visit, the girl never hid those acceptance packets.

I went through with the big wedding, with the aunts and uncles and bouquet toss. At the end of the reception, my mom held me and I held her back, a rarity, and she whispered in my ear, “Does this prove how much I like him?” Everyone raved about the wedding.

###

Anna finds me in the bedroom and sits on the foot of the bed. “She thinks you hate her.”

I actually laugh. “Oh my God.”

“You are hard on her,” she says. “It’s like you look for the worst in her.”

“I just see through her.”

Anna leans back onto the bed, feet still on the ground. “Have you ever thought that maybe she’s not a mastermind? That maybe she says what she means and feels what she feels?”

“I don’t think that gives her enough credit,” I say. I wonder if Anna knows how much her and Kate’s silence weighs on me, how much of it I’m forced to fill. “She’s an adult.”

“She’s our mom,” she says, like this is mutually exclusive.
“I just don’t understand her.”

“Why do you need to?” Anna asks, then stands. “I’m gonna walk the dogs with Dad.”

I lay there a bit longer, trying to let Anna’s words calm me even as they poke and prod. I don’t see the point in a mother you can’t understand—a movie mom, there to comfort and be comforted by, who gives pep talks right when you need them, who gives hugs you want to melt into. That seems so shallow, even if nice.

When I walk back downstairs, Anna and my dad are still out. Mom stands at the kitchen counter on her phone, probably checking Indeed listings and my father’s LinkedIn profile for any flaws. “Don’t you think Dad’s picture is a little stuffy?” she asks me, holding out her phone.

“Did you eat?” I ask.

“Just eggs. I can make you some.”

“That’s alright.” I’ll get something at the airport tomorrow. I open the fridge for a drink, but end up just standing in the doorway, feeling the cold. “How’s Dad?”

“Oh, you know,” she says, like I should. “I was thinking about it, and we made things good for you girls.”

I look at her, perhaps hoping for a smile or a reason, but there is none in her posture or expression. “Did someone say you didn’t?”

She shakes her head. “Even when things were bad, I took you on trips and made things fun. I took you to those piano lessons. Every week.”

“Yep,” I say, looking into the blue light of the fridge.

“That’s it?”
I look at her. “Do you even need me to say it? Of course you were a good mom.”

“Were?”

I breathe out hard. “Are. Is something wrong?”

She circles the breakfast bar to sit at a stool. The house feels a little too empty, and every motion produces a little too much of an echo.

“I need to vacuum before the weekend ends,” Mom says, looking at the floor.

“Did I do something?” I say.

“I’m sad, Taylor,” she says through a soulless laugh. “Am I allowed to be sad?”

We’re both quiet for a while. I get a soda from the fridge and sit a few stools down from Mom.

“Did you tell Ryan yet?”

“I texted him,” I say. “Is that okay?”

“Why would it not be okay? He’s your husband.” She puts her back into that word—husband. “I just wasn’t sure if you two were talking.”

“Of course we’re talking. He’s my husband.”

I look around the kitchen and adjoining living room. She hand-picked the white of the walls and the knobs on the cabinets, looked for dupes of mid-century accent pieces so she could say, “Isn’t it tasteful?” and whisper the discount price like a dirty secret, like a piece of our old life that’s carried over. This home, this life, is a careful creation of my mother.
“Are you proud of me?” I ask, hating how small the words feel when they pass my teeth. Why wouldn’t she be proud? I have a steady job, a husband who loves me, a house near the coast. It’s nothing flashy, nothing she planned for me, but I’ve been a good daughter to her.

Mom looks at me. “Of course I am.” But her eyes are more angry than reassuring. “I don’t know how you can ask me something like that.”

“I just wanted to hear it,” I say, but I still don’t believe her, and it’s not that I don’t feel loved and it’s not that I don’t feel understood. That’s what makes it worse, that she does love me and she does understand me, more than I thought someone was allowed to love or understand another person, and yet I still can’t buy into her words. “We’re not the same,” I say. I feel that familiar satisfaction that comes with going head-to-head with her, a selfish, sixteen-year-old glee. “I don’t think things been the same with us since I graduated high school.”

She sucks in like she’s been stung. “What, am I that bad a mother?”

“I didn’t say that,” I say. “Stop pretending like you haven’t thought that, too.”

“I haven’t.”


“Would that be bad?” she asks. “If you were like me?”

“I didn’t think so.”

She can try to tell me she hasn’t noticed our distance, but that would be a lie, too. She’s too smart a woman to have not noticed, too compassionate. I’m the one person in the family who
gives her enough credit. She gives hours thinking of others and what they think of her. She
knows.

“Can you just tell me you’re disappointed?” I say, because maybe if she can say it, and
maybe if I can hear it, things can be how they were. We can stop the lying. Maybe that will give
me permission to be disappointed in myself. “That I’m not the person you wanted me to be?”

“Don’t put words in my mouth.”

“I’m not. It’s okay. You can tell me.” It really is okay.

“Why are you doing this now?” she asks as her voice breaks.

Regret pokes at my skin when she rubs her eyes and cries again. She looks so childlike,
so pitiful, but I push away thoughts of guilt by reminding myself that this is what I do. “Because
I’m the confrontational one, aren’t I?” My words are all consonants. “Your Hard to Get Daugh-
ter. Say it.”

“You’re my child,” she says. “Haven’t I made it clear every day of your life that I love
you?”

“God, I didn’t say anything about you loving me. That’s not what we’re talking about.”
She knows it’s not, but misunderstands me anyway. “I don’t know how to fix this.”

“There’s nothing to fix.”

I grip the counter, feel my short fingernails scrape against the slight texture. “You know
I’m envious of the girl who lives in your head,” I tell her. “The one who moved to Boston when
you wanted her to, and did everything you wanted her to.” That girl is drowning in student debt,
still searching for who she is. That girl’s mother is still just a mother, not an adult or a thing to be interrogated and studied. My mother beams for that girl.

“I don’t even know what you’re talking about,” she says.

We tucker ourselves out, throats dry and words still ringing off the high ceilings.

“How much clearer can I be?” I ask quietly. Even though I’m an adult now, too, and I don’t need her approval, I tell her, “I don’t know how to be enough for you.”

“Enough?” Mom’s eyebrows carry the bulk of her expression. They’re concave, go in toward her eyes instead of away. Her mom’s were the same way. Now, they pull together, forming wrinkles above her nose. “I killed myself to be sure you had everything you ever needed,” she says, “and you didn’t want it.”

I always thought my mother was positioning me on a specific, delicate path in my younger days, but it seems all she was doing was keeping me off a path—hers. When I went against her, when I cracked the canvas, I slipped into the divots of her life, moved seamlessly in the direction that was never enough for her. I thought it would be enough for me, that I’d show her what contentment could look like, but I fear now that I want for more. I fear now that if I have a daughter one day, I’ll want for her, too.

Anna and my dad enter through the garage, the dogs running ahead of them, collars jingling. When Dad sees that Mom is crying, he rushes to wrap her in his arms. She should be stronger for him. Anna looks at our parents, then at me. “What the hell did you do?”

“Nothing bad,” I say. This is what I always do, isn’t it?

###
My mom isn’t any happier in the morning, but she looks more like herself. House slippers and expensive coffee in a souvenir mug. My dad loads my bags into the back of his truck, and she packs me breakfast for the trip. “Make sure you don’t leave it in your checked bag,” she says, handing me a Ziploc of muffins.

“Tell me if Dad hears anything about that Michigan job,” I say, because Mom’s better about keeping me in the loop than him.

“It might take time,” she says, as if resigned to it.

“It will be okay,” I tell her.

“We’ll see.”

She walks me to the car. The morning is quiet and sad. It’s probably just a regular morning, but my mom’s dispositions like to color the things around her.

My bags are stowed and the engine runs, my dad waiting in the driver’s seat to take me to the airport. We’ll talk about work and whatever’s on the news and the Porsche test track we pass on the way to the airport. He won’t ask what happened last night.

“You did make it good for us,” I tell my mom, giving in. I wonder if it’ll be easier this way. It’s still dark out, that odd space between late night and morning, but I see her eyes set on mine.

She holds me and I let her, feeling my body unstiffen as she runs her hands along my back like she might’ve when I was a toddler, sleepy or tired or angry in her arms. I hold her back and I say I’ll miss her, and I wonder if I was ever meant to understand my mother.
In February of your senior year, you fly to Ohio for an audition with the Toledo Phil. It’s a smaller orchestra, unimpressive pay, but as consistent as work comes for a starting-out oboe player. Your boyfriend came with you. You insisted he save his money—he’s a musician, too, and will have his own auditions to book flights for soon—but he’s never had to budget like you. You played well today, so he’s taking you to dinner to celebrate.

“For the record, we would’ve gone somewhere fancy even if you bombed,” he says.

“I’m sure you’d love that,” you say. Not that he roots for your failure, but his five-year plan doesn’t include Toledo, Ohio, even if it does include you.

You anticipated taking more auditions after this, but now that you’re here, you want this. Maybe you’re blinded by the competition of the day—you’re insufferable during game nights and beach volleyball—but the town is eclectic and kind. You can see yourself memorizing these streets, learning which dives are worth taking your family to when they fly up to visit. Maybe you just like the idea of paving a life somewhere, with him.

Snow flurries land on your nose and cheeks, but nothing has stuck to the ground since this morning. He was raised in Florida, where you both go to school. This is his first time seeing snow. His endearment rubs off on you, how he goes out of his way to step in thick, fresh clumps just so he can hear snow crunch beneath his shoe. He bought expensive cold weather boots from REI for this trip, and thinks he might get use out of them wherever he ends up next year. New York, he hopes. Philly is a back-up, and Boston is a back-up to Philly. He has a list written out on his phone. You watched him scroll through it on the plane.
You’re holding hands. His are cold—they always are, even in the September humidity back at school. He’s always apologizing for his weak circulation, but you like the way his hands and feet can cool you down in the middle of the night when the AC has flipped off and you’re too tired to turn it back on. He lifts your hand to his mouth and warms it with his breath.

At the restaurant, he tells you to get anything you want, and you know he means it, but you search for something cheap anyway. Still, *cheap* is a relative word in a place like this. “Are you sure?” you ask.

He nods. “I wanted to take you somewhere nice.”

“Nice,” you repeat. “California Pizza Kitchen is nice.”

He shakes his head. “A restaurant is only nice if they don’t list drink prices on the menu.” He has a matter-of-fact way of saying things that makes him hard to question, and of the two of you, he would know about the merits of restaurants.

The server brings bread and a large glass bottle of water to start, then talks you through the wine menu. Your boyfriend doesn’t like reds, but orders a bottle today because he knows you do.

This dinner—this entire trip—feels like the completion of something, like a sturdy bookend in your college experience. You moved to Florida nearly four years ago on a music scholarship, and it took you a while to settle in—not just to the area, but to who you were supposed to be away from your family and a town that knew you. You were intimidated by the music program at first, by the excess of wealth and talent in one Music Theory class. You don’t know how it got out that you were here on scholarship, but the whispers started a few weeks into your first
Fall semester. Maybe one of your professors mentioned it in front of a student, or you were recognized on the school website. Or maybe it’s because you still look for drink prices on menus.

You met him Freshman year. He was your first friend, and introduced you to every friend that came after. He’d always been a thing people wanted to orbit.

“What do you think about this?” you ask when the food comes.

“The restaurant?” he says.

“Here,” you say. “Toledo.” You hate putting him in a position where he may have to disappoint you, but you have to ask, just to say you did.

He makes the same face when you suggest a movie he’s seen before. “It’s the kind of city you settle down in.”

“Is that a bad thing?” you ask, keeping your tone casual. Testing pool water with your toe. “Settling down?”

He sips his wine. “We’re not the ‘settle down’ kind of people,” he says like you should know, like you’ve discussed this before, but you never have. Not explicitly.

You nod. You really don’t have the right to be disappointed, do you? You already knew he doesn’t like feeling constrained. He finds comfort in his litany of plans and choices. But you love that about him, his fire. He’s passionate, as in love with the world as he is bored of it. You wouldn’t think to tie him down.

Your phone is face-down on the white tablecloth, but you feel it vibrate where your elbows lean against the table. You both look at the phone, then at each other, then back at the phone when it vibrates again. Someone is calling. It could be your mom or spam, but you turn it
over, and the area code is 419, same as your hotel.

“Take it,” he tells you. He tries to smile but can’t quite sell it. He’s nervous. You don’t
know what news he’s hoping for.

You take the call. You’re still, just listening, and when the man on the line says you got
the job, you don’t let yourself feel happiness because you don’t know what to say. You don’t
know what to want. You look to your boyfriend, but there’s no answer found there.

“I’ll let you think it over,” the man on the phone says in closing. “You have my contact.”

You hang up and set the phone back in its place. Your boyfriend looks at you expectantly,
because he’s never been as good at reading your moods as you are at reading his. “Did you get
it?” he says.

“Yes.”

You both know the job means long-distance. You both know the closest orchestra he’s
trying for is still hours away. If you take this, you won’t wake up in his bed as often as you do
now, and you certainly won’t live together. You can’t remember who you were without him,
without a vibrant, hot star to orbit.

But you also know the job means security, connections, being payed to play. The job is an
answer when your mom asks what you plan to do with a music degree. Maybe you won’t know
who you are, but you’ll know what you are: a musician. No asterisks or fine print.

None of these thoughts are new. You knew when you took the audition—knew when you
decided to date another musician—that the two of you living your dreams and the two of you
living together were mutually exclusive. You knew since your first date. Did you really believe
the future would work itself out if you refused to acknowledge it?

He reaches cold fingers across the table so they find yours, and they’re the one thing steadying you and the one thing setting you off. He asks, “Are you going to take it?”

Don’t take the job: go to I

Take the job: go to II

#

I

It’s a nice night when you get back to Florida, the kind of night that makes you question why you’d ever dream of elsewhere. Clear skies and a sea breeze. No wear of humidity on your skin.

When you pull off the exit by the college, he asks to come to yours. “If you’re not sick of me yet,” he jokes. Both your shoes pile up by the front door, and in bed he spins up a story about the two of you together in Seattle or Austin—“Some trendy tech city like that,” he says—and the orchestra you’ll play in together and the open-concept loft you’ll lease.

“Do you think I made the right decision?” you ask him.

He nods. “You’ll have enough offers to fill a scrapbook.” You believe him, because when he speaks things, says they’re impossible or inevitable or doomed, he does it with such confidence that you and the universe have no choice not to. That wasn’t the first thing that drew you to him, but it was the thing that made you love him, when he said so infallibly that you were the most spectacular person he’d ever met. It came out of his mouth, so it must have been true.

No one thought you’d make it until you met him. Whenever you doubted yourself, he laughed. Like it was a joke, the idea of you being anything but a musician. You’d never known
such blind belief.

“I get to decorate the Seattle loft, by the way,” he says. “Or else everything will be Ikea.”

“What’s wrong with Ikea?” You pull the covers over your shoulders, goosebumps rising as the AC kicks on. “It’s sleek without showing off.”

“What made you think I don’t want to show off?” he says, and then he’s snaking an arm around your waist and kissing you and helping you forget—even if only for an evening—every what if that lingered in your mind on the flight home. It’s good.

The next days are a whirl of orchestra rehearsals and researching upcoming auditions. You and your boyfriend play different instruments, and it’s hard to find openings in the same city, even the same state. As you scour search engines, you try to remind yourself why you said no to Toledo: because you wanted to do this together. But what was this? A chance at a job in the same city? Going out on a limb, moving to a metropolis together in the hopes that you can break into the gig scene? You can’t come up with anything but hypotheticals.

“What are we going to do if we can’t find openings in the same city?” you ask the next weekend, sitting out front at his favorite French cafe. You pick at your apple tart.

“We will,” he says.

He’s so easy to believe, but you run your tongue over your teeth and brush crumbs off on your jeans. Your tart has too much almond extract in it. The taste sticks to your tongue. “What if we don’t, though. You know,” you say, “hypothetically.”

He lifts a shoulder. “I’ll follow you to whatever city you land a gig in,” he says.

“What makes you think I’ll land a gig first?”
“You already got one.”

“Yeah, but it was just Toledo.”

“Don’t do that,” he says, talking through a bite. “Toledo’s a great orchestra. They’d have been lucky to have you.”

“It’s a great orchestra or they would’ve been lucky to have me?”

“Both,” he says, and licks a bit of food off his thumb.

You roll your eyes, but you love his belief in you.

“Are you regretting not taking it?” he asks after a moment has passed. “Toledo?”

“No,” you say immediately, because you know you’re not supposed to regret it, that regrets will do you no good—the job’s already been filled. “I guess I’m just wondering if it was responsible of me.”

“We’ve got plenty of time to be responsible.” He takes the leftover tart off your plate and eats it.

He invites you to Philly for one of his auditions the next week, says it might get your mind off things. You’ll both miss class, but it’s your last semester.

You scroll the travel website together for a flight that gets in early in the afternoon. “We have to be back in time for Gabby’s recital.” Your best friend at school. Her whole family is coming into town, and she’d kill you if you didn’t make the time.

The city is cold like Toledo, but fast-paced and crowded, the kind of place you get buried in. And maybe that’s nice in a way, to walk streets that know nothing of you, your desires, or your failures. There are no expectations of you. You fly up a day before the audition so you have
time to explore and settle into your hotel.

“I can come with you if you want,” you tell him the next day. You lay belly-down on the hotel bed, watching him button his dress shirt in front of the mirror.

You expect him to say no. Typically the two of you don’t talk much on audition days. But he catches your eye in the mirror and smiles. “That might be nice, actually.”

The audition is at a convention center in the city. The orchestra has blocked an extra room off for warming up, and you follow him in, help him find a quiet corner where he can practice his excerpt.

This isn’t the normal routine. If you were back home, you’d keep to yourselves, practicing your respective parts and scales. Game mode. But today, as he warms his embouchure from the unforgiving weather outside, he keeps glancing over at you, smiling around the mouthpiece of his trumpet. You smile back, tell him he sounds great.

“You’re distracting me,” he says lightly, like he wants you to do it more.

You walk hand-in-hand to the door even though it’s not entirely professional. You don’t care. No one knows you here. You straighten his tie and kiss his cheek and tell him good luck. “Not that you need it.”

You find a quiet spot not far from his audition room and take out your phone. You scroll the usual musician job boards, filtering the results to Pennsylvania.

There’s a new job posting for here in Philly. *Seeking Oboe for Woodwind Quintet*, it reads. You click and read the small description. It turns out to be more of a gig than a job, a for-hire quintet that plays weddings and church events. The compensation window is too wide to
count on, and you know what that means in this business: inconsistency. One month you’ll make a couple thousand bucks, the next barely enough to pay for gas to and from gigs. It’s not a long-term job, but it’s here and it was posted just this morning and it’s just enough to make you—for a second—believe in fate.

You call the number at the bottom of the listing. The woman on the phone, a fifty-something flautist whose voice reminds you of your mom, tells you she can meet tomorrow for an audition.

“I can do the morning,” you say. Your flight home doesn’t leave until one. She puts you on her calendar and messages you the address.

You hang up, face warm and skin tingly. You close your eyes and let yourself imagine them—all those hypotheticals before, ones where you lived a life as musicians in the same city. You’ll go to your respective rehearsals in the mornings and meet for lunch at the little sandwich and salad joint by your hotel. You’ll sit, alone and content, at his concerts just as he’ll do for you, and on the day that an oboist in his orchestra comes down with a bug, he’ll pull some strings to get you in. You’ll rehearse together like you did in college. You’ll reminisce, locking eyes across the rehearsal room and texting each other secretly, with your phones propped up on music stands. You don’t tell yourself to stop getting ahead of yourself like you usually do. You don’t chastise yourself for being impractical. You sit with your eyes closed and you hope.

You don’t open them again until you feel a familiar hand on your shoulder.

Your boyfriend stands over you, shoulders hunched. Your stomach twists into a knot you won’t try to untangle. He’s not hard to read, especially not when he’s angry or heartbroken. He
holds emotions in his eyes and jaw, in every rise and fall of his chest as he breathes.

You don’t ask him what went wrong. You only take his hand and leave the convention center in silence.

On the walk back to the hotel, you grieve the life you painted for the two of you. You don’t know how he does this every day. He’s always optimistic, always rooting for himself and anyone he cares about. Sometimes you tell him to be more practical, that building himself up will only lead to a deadlier fall, but he says the high is worth it. When the world bends and aches for your will, you can say things like that.

In the hotel room, he loosens his tie and sits on the bed.

“Do you want to talk about it?” you ask.

You watch him swallow. It looks like it hurts. “I flubbed it. I stopped halfway through the excerpt and I just—my head wasn’t in it.”

The guilt that passes over your body is cold and relentless. You think of every second you stole from him while he was trying to practice, the way he blushed when you kissed his cheek before he went into the audition room. You threw him off.

“I’m sorry,” you whisper, walking to pull him into a weak hug, knees against knees.

“There’ll be more.”

He nods against your chest. “Thanks.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

“I just wish we were home,” he says.

You touch his hair. “Yeah.”
“What if I look into flights for tonight?”

“Oh.” You thought he was speaking hypothetically. “You…can.” You want tell him about the audition tomorrow morning, but you don’t know how. Not when he’s crumpled into you, something broken and wholly unlike himself. “Is that what you want?”

He pulls back to look at you, eyes tired. “Yeah.”

He gets you both on a nine o’clock this evening. When he asks you, “Does that work?” on the phone with the airline, your mouth can’t form the word no.

It doesn’t matter anyway. If he won’t be here, what’s the point of the quintet gig? You push it from your head and pack.

“I called a car,” he tells you an hour later. “You want to head down?”

The ride down the elevator feels endless, like the universe is giving you extra time to reconsider, but you close your mouth and look straight ahead. There will be other opportunities.

There’s a ding with each descending floor, and when his knuckles brush yours, you’re quick to stagger your fingers with his. He breathes out like he can only breathe when he feels your touch, and you wonder how you can ever be more than a reach away from him.

“I really want this,” he tells you.

“I know.”

“I want the long rehearsals. I want the shit pay and those nights trapped in practice rooms.” He runs a cold thumb over yours. “I’d do anything for it.”

You bite down. “I would, too.”
The weeks that follow include phone calls and trips to the school library to print out W2s and employment contracts. When you call your mom to tell her the news, she says she is relieved for you. Not excited or happy, but relieved.

No one thought you’d make it until you met your boyfriend. Whenever you doubted yourself, he laughed. Like it was a joke, the idea of you being anything but this. You’d never known such blind belief.

One night after he goes to bed, you roll over so your back faces him and scroll Zillow on your phone. Apartments are cheap in Ohio. You could get a three bedroom for the same price as a studio in New York. You can’t imagine how he’d want to live in a city like that, in all that movement and pavement, so instead, you imagine the life you could have if he found a gig nearby, even in Cleveland. You’re selfish—you want too many good things at once.

When you fall asleep that night, you dream that you’re both sitting on the balcony of your shared apartment, and he drinks coffee even though he’s always hated it, and he tells you the city’s grown on him.

You wake in the middle of the night, thirsty and hot. You feel around in the bed until your hand lands on his, cold as you hoped. You’ve talked about going long distance, but only in broad, wishful terms—in sentences starting with “one day.”
Will you be able to do this, to reach across the bed and know what you’ll find, when he’s in his apartment, you in yours?

He’s out of town the Wednesday after you take the job, in Philly for an audition of his own. He invited you to go with, but flights are expensive last-minute, and you refuse to let him cover your ticket. You have a job now—you’re not a broke college student for much longer—and you can’t have your boyfriend buying you plane tickets, so you tell him to keep you updated.

While you’re in orchestra rehearsal, he sends you a picture of the snow, writes, *From this point on, I only ever want to live where there’s snow.*

You smile at your phone, propped up on the music stand so the conductor can’t see. You glance at his empty seat beside yours and inefficiently type with your pointer finger, writing, *Ohio has snow.*

You look the message over, eyeing the conductor every few seconds to be sure you haven’t missed your cue.

You decide the message is too pushy. He gets stressed before performances and auditions, and when he gets stressed he gets short. You’ve learned not to take it personally.

You delete the text and send a new one: *You’ll learn to hate it. Promise.*

He says that’s impossible, and when he speaks things, says they’re impossible or inevitable or doomed, he does it with such confidence that you and the universe want to believe him. That wasn’t the first thing that drew you to him, but it was the thing that made you love him, when he said so infallibly that you were the most spectacular person he’d ever met. It came out of his mouth, so it must have been true.
You made a pact early on not to let the competition of both of you being musicians get in the way. You established healthy boundaries around chair placements and competitions. You’re both professionals. You’re equals.

Word’s gotten around about your job in Ohio. It’s March now, coming up on Spring Break, and you’re so close. You have juries, final exams, the graduation party your best friend, Gabby, has been planning since you met in your first year. Good things, exciting things.

After rehearsal, Gabby braces her hands on the back of your chair and leans over so her hair tickles your cheeks and nose. “Nice of you to still come to rehearsal,” she says, and calls you a big wig. She’s teasing you—Toledo isn’t exactly prestigious—but she doesn’t mean any harm.

She follows you back to your apartment. She lives with her parents in a mansion (she hates it when you call it a mansion) on the river, but that’s twenty minutes off campus, so on days like today, when he’s out of town or she’s got an early class the next morning, she steals a T-shirt from your dresser and crashes in the living room. Gabby is Type A and cocky, but not without reason—she’s the brightest of your class. She just found out she got into Northwestern’s masters program.

You sit on opposite ends of the couch and flip through the Netflix home screen.

“I told my mom yesterday,” you say.

Gabby’s face sours. “How did that go?”

“She said she was relieved.”

“She doesn’t understand the industry,” Gabby says. “It’s huge for someone as young as
you to get a job right out the gate, even at a low-level orchestra.”

“Yeah.” She doesn’t mean any harm.

You check the time on your phone, shoot him a good luck text, then check the distance from Philly to Toledo on a map. It’s farther than you thought, too far to make a weekend trip to see him, but maybe you could find a halfway point.

You breathe out and let your head fall back until it hits the couch cushion. You want this—you really want this—but what if you get there and find that you don’t? What if you make it to Ohio and realize the world you’ve built yourself is only the one you think you’re supposed to want? You were fourteen when a conductor first called you gifted. Your mom thought it was nice you were good at something, but only in the way moms were pleased with handwritten cards. You looked elsewhere for affirmation. State music competitions and private instructors you paid for with a part-time job at the mall. “If you only work for it,” they said. “If you only keep going. If you only give everything you are to this.”

So you did. You gave everything you are to this, and you did it. You got the job.

“Did I tell you my recital was moved to the auditorium?” Gabby says. Her senior recital is tomorrow. Usually recitals are held in the Rehearsal Hall or a well-decorated classroom in the music building, but knowing the amount of people who love Gabby, it was doubtful that either of those spaces could accommodate hers. “We’re going to Grills after. You can ride with me.”

“Grills is fancy,” you say.

“My parents will pay.”

Your scholarship covers classes and portions of your books, but you underestimated how
much life costs. Monthly rent and a phone plan. You got a few gigs last summer—some playing, some babysitting—and have made the money last through this final semester, but things are tight. You’ve started packing lunch and ordering water when you go out with friends.

“Starts at seven?” you confirm.

She nods. “Don’t feel like you have to get me a gift.”

An hour has passed on the couch and you’re nodding off to a Judd Apatow movie when your phone vibrates on the couch armrest. You pick it up, see his caller ID, and you’re awake.

You skip pleasantries. “How did it go?”

You hear the smile in his exhale and the way he says your name.

Gabby sits up, too, listening to your half of the conversation. She mouths, “Good?” and you nod back.

Good. He’s called with good news. You’re glad—you’ve never been the best at talking people through low points. You’re better at giving your time, distracting them with movie nights and weekend trips.

He won’t find out for a few days, but he’s optimistic. He’s always optimistic, always rooting for himself and anyone he cares about. Sometimes you tell him to be more practical, that building himself up will only lead to a deadlier fall, but he says the high is worth it. When the world bends and aches for your will, you can say things like that.

“I’ve never played so well,” he tells you. “It’s like something came over me.”

You shake your head even though he can’t see. “Nothing came over you. You practiced your ass off—”
“My flight got delayed, by the way,” he says. You hate being interrupted, but don’t make a thing of it. He’s just excited.

“Okay. What time do you get in?”

“Six-thirty.”

You sit up and do the math in your head, even though you already know it’s useless. There’s no way he’ll be off the plane and through baggage claim before seven, when Gabby’s recital starts. Even if he is, the airport is almost an hour away. “Oh,” you say, stalling.

“That okay?” He sounds like he’s walking, always too fast, always with one or both hands in his pocket.

“Don’t slip on the ice,” you say.

“I won’t. Is that okay?”

You should be there for him, should be the person who waits in the cell lot for the person you love. He’d do that for you. It’s a little thing, but he cares about little things, like ordering an extra lime for you at the bar and Rain-Xing the windshield before you go on a long drive. He cares about the person who picks him up when he’s had a stressful week.

This is Gabby’s senior recital, though. It’s a capstone for her, and you’re her best friend. You want to be as reliable to her as she’s been to you.

He breathes into the phone, says, “You still there?”

Pick him up: go to V

Go to Gabby’s recital: go to VI

###
III

The elevator dings once. Twice. You let go of his hand.

“I have an audition tomorrow.”

His eyebrows pull in, more confused than anything. “Where?”

“Here.”

“Philadelphia, here?”

You nod.

“What?” He looks around like the elevator buttons and fingerprinted chrome walls will give him answers. “When did this happen?”

“Today. During your audition.”

“You didn’t think to tell me?”

“There was no use. Why would I still want to move here?”

He holds the handle of the roller-bag with both hands. “So why did you tell me now?”

Because now that you’re on the elevator it feels too real that you are leaving. Because you’ve already abandoned one job and don’t know when another will come along. Because you’d do anything to be a musician.

“I’m going to take it.”

“I already called the car,” he says, shifting weight back and forth only because this is too small a space to pace. “I changed your flight.”

“I’ll change it back. I’ll call. I just…I’d be angry at myself if I didn’t at least try for this.”

“Why do you want this audition so bad?” he asks. “What’s here for you?”
“It’s a job,” you say. “Don’t pretend you didn’t just take an audition here. What’s in Philadelphia for you?”

“But Toledo,” he says. “You turned that down.”

“Maybe I was wrong.”

They’re small words, but weighty. You watch as they settle onto his shoulders, beneath his bones.

The elevator dings twice now, and the double doors part to the lobby. He looks out, then back at you. You hear the question in his eyes, but you don’t follow him when he steps out.

In the lobby, he turns to mirror you, still in the elevator. There’s a finality in this moment, in the way he inhales and says, “Are you sure about this?”

You’re crying because you’re grieving both the life you imagined with him and the life you had with him. You’re grieving your Seattle apartment and you’re grieving the mornings when you’d wake to find that he’d filled your Brita. You’re grieving him. His blind hope, his cold hands.

You nod as the doors close between you.

Try Again

###

IV

Nothing is in Philadelphia without him. Maybe if the audition tomorrow were for a full-time job. Maybe if he were to nail his audition today. Maybe then. But it’s impractical

You wait until you’re in the rideshare to angle your phone slightly away from him and
message the woman from the quintet to tell her you won’t make the audition. You keep it vague. Something came up. You fall against his side, something solid and immediate, and close your eyes.

You call your mom the next day. You tell her about the audition.

“And you didn’t take it?”

“No,” you say. “It wasn’t practical.” You think she’ll be proud of this, your sense of responsibility.

“I see,” she says. “Well maybe you can send your resume out to some orchestras in the Northwest. We’d love to have you close to home.”

“It doesn’t really work like that.” But your mom has never seemed too interested in how music does work. She wanted you to do something else with your life, and though she was outspoken while you were applying for colleges, she’s held her opinions close as of late. At this point she’s just glad you’re getting a four-year degree, something to fall back on.

You love him because he thinks you don’t need anything to fall back on. As graduation nears and you still don’t have a job, your stress multiplies on itself, but he reassures you at every turn. “It’ll be great.”

You decide that, if you have him, that can be true. Maybe you’ll have to make compromises—maybe he will. You spend more nights together than not, though, and you feel the paranoia in each sleep, like something somewhere is ticking down.

You give a name to it one day while talking to Gabby. “I’m starting to get worried.”

“You mean getting work?” she asks. She sits on your couch, scrolling the Netflix home
screen for something to watch until your boyfriend gets out of class and the three of you can go
to dinner together. “You’ll find jobs. You’ve just got to break into the gig circuit.”

“But where?” you ask. He still hasn’t landed anything, either.

She shrugs. “Wherever you want. Wherever excites you.”

You look at her, at the gentle set of her shoulders. It’s like the gravity she feels is signifi-
cantly less than yours. She’s going to grad school next year, will continue to have a set of classes
and friends and experiences laid out for her, neat and in line. You don’t fault her for taking that
route. You might consider it too, but grad school is expensive and music scholarships are few.
Even though you know that more school isn’t even what you want, you envy her. You just wish
you had somewhere to go, something in writing. Maybe you could be more happy about the end
of this chapter if you knew the start of the next.

He keeps taking auditions. Flying to place to place, practicing excerpt after excerpt.
Money’s not an issue for him, but you sometimes worry about the mental toll of it all. If he’s
growing tired or disappointed, though, he doesn’t let on. “This is what we signed up for,” he said
after Boston. He’s excited.

Your on-paper reason for no longer accompanying him is money—that you don’t have
much and that you don’t want him to lend you any more—but there’s more to it. You think too
often about sitting beside him in the Philadelphia warm-up room, the way you walked him to the
door. He does better without you.

“When are you going to get back out there?” he asks you that morning, both of you dress-
ing for class.
“Auditions?” you say. “Nothing’s come up.”

“Do you check the boards?”

“Every now and then.”

He nods like he’s trying to work something out. Then he says, “Oboe’s tough. It’s not like trumpet. We’ve got openings all the time.”

“Maybe I’ll just follow where you go,” you say. “I can find a serving job, work my way into the gigging scene.”

He narrows his eyes. “You’d do that?”

“If it comes to that. That’s why I didn’t take Toledo, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.” He rests a hand on your arm, and you roll your shoulders back in a small, quick motion, shaking him off. You pull your top on. “Something will fall into place for you.”

“I know,” you say. That’s the first white lie.

He must hear some faltering, because he says, “Are you okay?”

“Yes.” That’s the second.

He’s exactly the same person—bright eyes, a list on his phone, a hot star to orbit—but you feel the physical sensations of your straying from him. A hollowness in your chest and something that makes you push your teeth together when he speaks to you. It becomes hard to buy into his promises. You tell on yourself when you stop asking about his upcoming auditions, when you listen to a podcast instead of calling him on walks home from class, when you start spending more nights alone, using Gabby as an excuse. He never asks what’s wrong, though, and you don’t know if you want him to. You keep thinking about the choices you made, and you keep
telling yourself not to—you can’t change anything now.

You drive to West Palm together for Spring Break. Gabby’s parents have a condo. She and a few friends are meeting you there. It’s two hours in his car, sitting in the passenger seat where you learned him. You sat here when you learned that he wanted to be a trumpet player because of a chamber group that came to his church one Christmas, and he cried. You sat here when you learned that goosebumps would rise from finger to shoulder if you ran your fingers across the inside of his elbow.

You ride in relative quiet, his satellite radio turned to the alternative station he likes.

“Even satellite only plays the same thirty songs,” you comment as he merges onto the highway.

“Yeah, but it’s a better thirty songs.”

He holds his hand palm-up on the center console, and you take it. His fingers are so cold they sting.

“This is good for us,” he says. He sort of nudges you with your elbow. “Are you excited?”

“Mhm.”

“Hey,” he starts, glances shared between you and the road. He closes his mouth.

“What is it?”

“Nothing,” he says.

“Okay.” You look out the passenger window. “I love you.”

He sighs a little. “I love you, too.”
Sometimes you imagine the alternate version of your life as you do in the car, ones where you said yes to Toledo or went to the audition in Philadelphia. You wonder if you’d feel more accomplished now, finishing school. You wonder how calling yourself a musician would feel on your tongue after working toward it for so long. You wonder if you’d still believe his reassurances or your own.

The condo is a three bedroom, so the two of you get your own room with a view of the ocean. He slides the glass door open, letting in the smell of salt and the white noise of crashing waves that always makes you sleepy. He braces a hand on either end of the doorway and leans out, letting sea breeze muss his hair. You wish you could find something other than resentment in the laugh he throws toward the ocean. You don’t know how he can be so light and charged, but you suppose this world of auditions and denials is made for a person like him, who has so much assurance stored up that he can afford the failure. You envy him in a childish, unfair way, the kind that tightens up the things beneath your ribs.

You step onto the balcony with him. It’s only March, but you feel summer looming in the sweat on the back of your neck. You pull your hair back.

“Do you want to go to the beach later?” he asks.

“Sure.”

“You’re quiet.”

“I’m tired,” you say, feigning a smile. You brace your hand on the rickety metal railing between the balcony and a four-story fall. You trace the whitecaps with your eyes. When one crashes, you find another.
“Do you still want to do music?” he asks.

“Yes,” you answer, voice tight.

“You haven’t been taking auditions,” he says. “And you don’t practice.”

You turn to face him, and hair pulls from your ponytail, into your mouth. “Does that worry you?”

“It’s not that it worries me,” he says. “I think about that Toledo job a lot.”

You squeeze the railing harder. “Do you think I should’ve taken it?”

“Yeah.” His answer is quick and unflinching.

“It would have been hard on us.”

“We would’ve worked it out.”

“How can you be so sure of everything?”

You know the answer. You know it’s because nothing in his life, not music nor money nor you, has given him a reason not to be.

“You told me once you’d do anything to make it.”

You remember the elevator in Philly. “I was just talking.”

He makes a grunt of understanding.

“What?” you say.

“The person I fell in love with was so passionate about the things they wanted.” He shakes his head. A wave crashes below. “I don’t know.”

“Are you saying you don’t love this version of me?”

Now he takes your hand and leads you inside, somewhere where it’s quiet and cool. He
closes the door behind you, pulls you to sit on the foot of the bed, says, “I wanted to wait until
the end of the trip to talk to you about this.”

You feel the precise moment when you detach from his orbit, feel the snap as you float
into space, aimless and out of air. It’s hard to know which way is up and down. You did every-
thing. You denied yourself and denied yourself, holding to the promise that he knew you’d both
work it out, a promise he is no longer tethered to. He talks slowly, generously. He touches your
knee and your wrist and you don’t ask him to stop because you know it’s the last time, and de-
spite everything, you want to remember this.

Try Again

###

V

He waits in the vestibule between two sets of automatic doors, luggage by his side. You voice-to-
texted him to come out five minutes ago when you pulled off the highway, toward Arrivals.

You know something’s up by the speed of his steps toward your car and the way he
heaves his suitcase into your trunk, making your car lurch. He walks to the driver’s side window,
and you roll it down.

“How was the flight?” he says. The Ts and Ds of his words are pinpricks.

“I’m okay.” Your mouth is dry. He rounds the front of the car and sits in the passenger
seat. He always holds tension in his face—in a tightened jaw and eyes fixed on something to-
ward the ground. You see the signs now, and reach your hand out to find a place on his knee.

“How was the flight?”
“I didn’t get it,” he says. He puts his elbow on the armrest and rests his head on his fist.

You hold the steering wheel harder, say, “Okay,” under your breath. Though you’d rather avoid these situations, you’ve dealt with his frustrations before, the careful game of managing his emotions. He doesn’t like to be prodded when he’s upset, but he doesn’t like to be left with his thoughts, either. You’re always left to parse the gray space between. You lick your lips and think through your next sentence like you’re diffusing a bomb. “Do you want to talk about it?” you ask.

“What do you think?”

There were times when you would know, when he’d be so obvious to you—in early moments of the morning and when you’d catch eyes at boring parties—but now as you touch him, fingers running across rough denim, but he feels so far away. You wish you were better at this.

“I missed you,” you say.

“I’m sorry. I missed you too. I’m sorry.” He pulls his palm across his forehead. Airport smell sticks to his clothes. “I’m caught off guard here. The audition went so well.”

“Did they give you any feedback?”

He barely opens his mouth to speak. “Just that it won’t work out.”

“That’s ridiculous,” you say. “That’s a non-answer.”

“I know.”

“How is that supposed to help you in the future?”

“It doesn’t.”

“You’ll have more auditions.” You move your hand to the center console face-up, an invi-
tation. He doesn’t take it. “The next one will be better.”

“No,” he says.

“What?”

He shakes his head and shakes his head. “There is no better. That was my best.”

He never talks about himself like this, so hopelessly. “You just have to find the right match.”

“Dammit,” he says, just shy of a shout. “Dammit, babe, can you just—don’t.”

So you don’t. You drive in silence, but the hum of the spinning tires seems so much louder than before. Worn toll roads, cheap tires.

Later, when you’re pulling off your school’s exit, he says, “I don’t know what I’ll do if I don’t get Boston.”

You pull your lip through your teeth, and speak like you’re stepping on unsteady rocks.

“You’ll try for New York.”

His laugh is hollow. “You think I can get New York if I couldn’t get Philly?”

“Philly’s a great orchestra.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel better about not getting the job?”

“No, I’m just—” What are you doing? You want to help him, but every attempt to do so has made matters worse. You try a new approach. “How long did you warm up before your audition?”

He only moves his eyes to look at you. The high points of his face—his nose, the sharp edges of his cheekbones—are red, reflecting the glow of the traffic light as you brake at an inter-
section near home. “I didn’t keep track,” he says. “Maybe an hour and a half?”

“You probably tired out your embouchure,” you say. There’s a careful balance in warming up just enough without tiring yourself out—the mouth is a muscle like any other. “Maybe in Boston you should—”

“Are you coaching me right now?” he says.

“I’m trying to help.”

“Because you got a job at a community orchestra?”

“It’s not a community orchestra,” you say. “Toledo has great musicians.”

“Toledo’s where great musicians go to die,” he spits back.

You feel your palms go sweaty, the way they do during midterm exams and recitals.

“Why are you doing this? Are you jealous or something?”

This gets a laugh out of him, pointed and humorless. “I’m not jealous,” he says, voice quieter but clearer than before. “I’m fucking disappointed in you. I thought we were going to do this together.”

“What, that we’d land jobs in the same city?” you ask. It’s improbable, impossible, but the world has always bent and ached for his will.

He shakes his head. “I thought you’d do more before giving up. I thought we were equals.”

You let yourself be spiteful. “I can’t fly to Philly and Boston and New York and whatever city is next on this never-ending list. I can’t afford to hold out for more. I can’t call home when I’m in a bind.” You can’t even call home for congratulations, for someone who’d be anything
more than relieved by your victories.

“Do you actually think I’ve come this far because of my parents?” he asks. “Jesus, I thought you of all people wouldn’t believe that bullshit.”

“That’s not what I’m saying.” But maybe, you realize, it is.

The light turns green, and you turn onto your street. You tell yourself he didn’t mean it. You know he did—you are not who he thought you were.

You check the time as you pull into his apartment complex. Gabby’s family is probably just heading to the restaurant. You wonder how her recital went. You wish you were there, then feel terrible for wishing you were there. It just would’ve been better if your boyfriend’s buddy picked him up tonight. Then this tension could’ve been someone else’s. You’d see him in the morning, after he’d calmed down, and maybe by then he’d be ready for a distraction, for what you do best. You could have taken him to the park, or that French cafe he likes.

But you’re here, and even if you were there, this fact wouldn’t have changed. College—the structure of classes, on-campus housing, syllabi and grading rubrics, the consistency of him by your side—has helped you pretend, but now it’s obvious. You’ve never been equals.

You count tonight as a mercy—you were going to realize it sooner or later.

Try Again

###

VI

You’re one of the only non-family members invited to the afterparty at the riverside seafood joint, but Gabby’s family is warm and large enough to get lost in. They’ve taken you in as an
honorary daughter since Gabby first brought you over Freshman year. She sits at the head of a long table, you at the seat beside her.

You scan the room, taking inventory. You have to bite down bitterness when you realize you won’t have enough people at your recital to fill a classroom, let alone the school’s auditorium. Your parents will probably fly into town, or maybe they’ll save the trip for graduation. They’ve never understood the music stuff anyway. Caps and gowns, a framed degree, that’s what matters to them—or maybe just what makes sense to them.

Gabby’s father sees that you’re at the bottom of your drink and orders another round for the table. He’s so smooth with it, so unflinching.

The extravagance of wealth has never fazed you. You don’t understand the appeal of name brand shoes or luxury cars. The convenience of wealth, though, the ease of it, makes your chest hot with envy. They’re isolating sometimes, these hard-edged reminders that you and your best friend live in such different realities.

You drink more than you should and eat less than you should, and by third course you’re loose. You know you’re safe with Gabby, though. She answers for you when her mom asks what your plans for next year are.

“She got a job in an orchestra in Ohio.”

Her mom raises her graying eyebrows. “Columbus? Cincinnati?”

“Cleveland,” Gabby says. It’s the kind of stretch you make when people aren’t familiar with an area, like how your mom tells your friends you go to school in Miami even though your school is two hours north.
You know who’s calling as soon as your phone vibrates on the table. He’s probably landed, but you recruited one of his buddies to pick him up from the airport when you decided to go to Gabby’s recital.

You want to talk to him. You want to ask how his flight was and if he’d heard from Philly since you last spoke this morning. He’s so good at telling you about his day. He does impersonations of strangers and mentions tiny, purposeful details. Normalcy sounds so brilliant in his voice.

You still hold the attention of Gabby’s mom, though, and it would be rude to excuse yourself when she’s covering the bill for the vodka soda you’re working on. You reach for your phone on the table and flip it over to stare at his caller ID, deciding.

Decline the call: go to VII
Take the call: go to VIII

###

VII

You decline the call and text him instead. Still with Gabby. All good?

Your phone dies shortly after, and you don’t check it again until you’re back at your apartment. Gabby’s house is full of out-of-town guests, so she’s sleeping on your couch tonight. You fill a glass of water from the Brita, then plug in your phone and shower while it charges.

You’re patting off your hair with a hand towel when your phone boots back up. Missed notifications from the night pop up out of order, and you sort through them to find his singular message: I didn’t get it.
You lean against your bedside table, in search of something steady. You shake your head at the phone because that can’t be right. He said this was it, and when he spoke, he spoke things into existence. Not getting the Philly job was a betrayal—not to his playing, but to his being.

Do you want to talk? you ask.

I’m in bed, he responds. I’ll see you in the morning. I love you.

You type that you love him too, both guilty and grateful that you weren’t the one to pick him up tonight. It’s for the best that you don’t talk again until the morning, once he’s sorted out where his feelings are coming from and where to direct them.

You meet at a French bakery in the small strip the locals call downtown. You’re from a proper city, so you find it both ridiculous and charming that this street, with its French bakery and Catholic thrift stores, could be the place to be. You like it here, though, at the wrought iron porch tables with the cloth umbrellas and laminated menus. He sits on the same side of the table as you so he can show pictures from his trip. He seems good, optimistic. He shows you the audition list on his phone.

“Boston Pops is in a little under two weeks,” he says. He tells you he knows it’s a long shot, but there’s no loss in trying. The convenience of wealth. Then he shows you a picture of a sandwich which he claims all the real Philly locals order. “It’s more than just cheesesteaks, you know,” he says, as if he’s been let in on a trade secret.

He forgets to ask you about Toledo, even though he knows you had a video call with your section leader while he was gone. You tell yourself not to make a thing of it, that today’s about him and this audition and the next one. Sometimes you have to do that in relationships—real
ones, not the ones you see on TV. You have to put yourself aside for a moment, a conversation, a season, for the sake of your partner. Now is your turn to do that, and maybe tomorrow will be his.

You swallow hard, your croissant suddenly dry.

“What?” he says.

It seems you’re both tiptoeing around the only certainty here: that in a few months, you will be in one place and he will be in another. And today is so good and his shoulder is bumping into yours, but how long can you take this day by day? What happens the day after graduation? The day you catch a flight for Ohio?

“I’m fine,” you tell him.

“Something’s on your mind,” he says. “You can tell me anything.”

You know you can, but you’re not sure if you want to.

Bring up next year: go to IX

Change the topic: go to X

###

VIII

You excuse yourself from the table to take his call. You couldn’t pick him up from the airport, and the least you can do is take his call.

“Hello?” you say, pushing into the restroom because it’s quiet and private.

“Hey,” he says, and he’s hard to read without seeing the set of his jaw or whether there’s a wrinkle between his eyebrows, but he doesn’t sound like himself.
“What’s wrong?”

“I didn’t get it.”

“What?” you say, not because you didn’t hear him, but because maybe if you hear the words again in his voice, they’ll file into your brain more seamlessly than they did the first time. But he repeats himself, and the words are just as jagged, like a potato chip lodged in your throat. You swallow down, say you’re sorry.

“Did they give you any feedback?”

It sounds like he’s talking through gritted teeth. “Just that it won’t work out.”

“That’s ridiculous,” you say. “That’s a non-answer.”

“I know.”

“How is that supposed to help you in the future?”

“It doesn’t.”

“You’ll have more auditions” You wish you could touch him, wish your hands were folded together atop the center console in your car. “The next one will be better.”

“No,” he says.

You want to ask him to explain himself, but this doesn’t seem like the type of conversation to have over phone. Instead you ask, “Are you with Brian?”

“He’s running late.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Yeah,” he says through a scoffed laugh, like he’s agreeing a little too hard. Like he’s saying, You should be sorry. But he’s upset and you should get back to the dinner and you don’t
want to make a thing of this.

This would be easier if you were together—it always was. The car would be quiet, and the AC would hit the backs of your knuckles as you drove. He’d be there. You’d be sober and would know just what to say.

“How was Philly?” you try.

“It was fine. I don’t really want to talk about it right now.”

“Whad’ya want to talk about, then?” the words trip over themselves on the way out, and you hope he doesn’t notice.

He breathes into the microphone. “I don’t know. I just wanted to talk to you.”

That should be nice. You should be endeared that he called just to hear your voice, that your presence across a phone line is enough to calm his nerves. “I sort of have to get back.”

“Oh,” he says. “I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s just I’m at dinner with her family and the food will be out soon.”

“No I get it. It’s fine.”

It would be easy if there was only frustration in his voice. Then you’d be able to brush him off. He’s being a dick, you’d tell Gabby when you returned to the table. But the edges of his words are singed with hurt. It’s the hurt that keeps you fixed to the bathroom counter.

“I hope you know how talented you are,” you say. “Those idiots in Philly don’t know who they’re giving up.”

“Stop it,” he says quietly. “Don’t…do that.”

“God, then what do you want from me?” you say. Your voice may be louder than you
meant it, or maybe it’s the reverb of the tiled bathroom. “I don’t know how to help you.”

“You could’ve been here,” he says with some finality, like this is the point he’s been circling since you took his call. Like he expected you to know.

“I couldn’t miss Gabby’s recital. This is important.”

“We’re important,” he says.

“We are or you are?” You wouldn’t normally say something so barbed, but you’re loose. A strangled laugh. “Come on.”

“I’m serious,” you say. “Sorry I couldn’t pick you up from the airport because tonight’s my best friend’s senior recital. You’re acting like it’s my fault your flight was pushed back.”

“It’s just not the same with Brian picking me up.”

“It’s a ride home from the airport!” You don’t care that you’re shouting at this point, nor do you care that your conversations don’t usually go like this—you’re not usually the one letting words spill out, and he’s not usually the one to exercise restraint. You don’t know how to navigate from this end. “I’ll be done here by the time you’re back in town. You could come to my apartment and we can talk or watch a movie or—whatever you want. What does it matter whether I picked you up from the airport?”

“It shows your priorities,” he says.

“My priorities?”

“What can I expect from you next year?”

“What do you mean?”

“Will you even come to see me?”
“I’ll try to. Of course I will. It’s just—it’ll be expensive to fly. I won’t be making much.”

“I know,” he says. “It’ll be tough. My parents said they lived off bologna sandwiches when my dad was starting out in the army. Maybe we could do that.” He laughs a bit. “But it’s worth it, isn’t it? To see me?”

And then the restaurant bathroom is too lavish, the flowers beside the faucet too showy. His world has fed him, clothed him, tucked him in at night—he’s a romantic because he can be.

The convenience of wealth.

You swallow hard, wading the swampy water of your brain for some out. “I don’t think it is.”

Try Again

###

IX

“Next year,” is all you can get out at first. You take a big sip of water and a bigger breath. “Long distance is hard.”

“But romantic,” he teases, but you know there’s truth to it in his mind. “You’re worth it.”

“You are too.”

“Good.”

“If you had to choose,” you say. “Me and this. What would you do?”

“This?”

“The job,” you say, because music would be too high a cost.

“You,” he says decidedly. “If it came down to that. But it won’t.”
You smile and take a sip of your coffee. He’d pick you.

“What would you pick?” he asks. Why wouldn’t he ask? Why would the question make you a little dizzy, a little guilty?

You nod. “Same.”

“Then there’s no problem,” he says.

“Yeah?” you say, hopeful.

He nods. “I’ll always pick you. It’s as simple as that.”

He holds a pinky out between you to make a promise, and you laugh and push his hand away. “Fucking dork,” you say.

You think of Philly. You think about “the best I’ve ever played” and “this is it,” the first of his prophetic words to fail. But he sounds so sure again, so sure of you. It’s as simple as that. The universe may be done listening to him, but that doesn’t mean you have to be done, too.

“It will be good,” he says, and you say it back.

The following weeks are busy with juries and a dozen little lasts of your college life: the last trip to the club you frequented when you were underage, the last dining hall meal, the last Music Theory class with your favorite professor. For Spring Break, you go to West Palm with your friends, and you and your boyfriend make plans to come back once you’re both situated next year.

He flubbed his Boston audition, but says that’s okay, that he’d rather lose a job over a fluke audition rather than the way he lost the Philly job.

“It’s easier to fail when you’re not so close,” he told you as you debriefed the audition.
together, and though he said it with levity, you can see the way the audition circuit is already wearing on him.

The week of his jury, his family comes into town. They live in Venice, Florida, a three hour drive. They’re conservative and always find a way of asking you inappropriate questions, but still, he doesn’t know how lucky he is to have family on the other coast of the state. They have you over to their rented Airbnb for dinner and ask you about your job next year, all the while applauding the two of you for “making it work.”

“I could never do it,” his sister says, passing a carafe of sangria around the table. “I would miss my husband too much.”

Your shoulders tense. Under the table, his hand finds your knee.

“It’s just for a season,” he tells his sister. He folds one forearm over the other on the slightly sticky table. “She’s only doing the Toledo job for a little bit. You know, to build up her resume.”

“That’s very nice,” his dad says. His pity is like an odor.

“It is,” your boyfriend says. “It’s a great stepping stone.”

Then he puts a hand on your back like he’s just saved you, like he’s just verbalized what you couldn’t all this time. You shoot him a look, but he only smiles and turns back to his family. The conversation moves on, but you don’t.

Toledo isn’t a resume filler. It’s not your dream job, just a regional orchestra, but more than he’s got. When he excuses himself from the table to get seconds, you contemplate following.
“The food went down funny,” you say, forcing a cough and downing half your water. You try smiling again, and he either buys it this time or gives up on nudging you. “How was your flight?”

“It was nice.” He blinks like he’s just remembering something. Forgetful a person as he is—always forgetting keys and social engagements and to move the wash—he blinks often. You’ve memorized a myriad of his tiny expressions, the ones he makes in bed or across the bar when he’s silently communicating something to you, and you wonder if you can ever learn another person so quickly and wholly as you’ve learned him.

“There’s a spot I want to take you,” he says.

The car ride is short, but he holds your hand the whole time, his jagged, bitten thumbnail tracing circles on the side of your hand. He pulls into a small lot next to Grills, the same restaurant where you ate last night.

“Are you allowed to park here?” you ask, glancing at the sign that says Valet.

“We won’t be long.”

He walks you to a patch of grass that runs along the river. It isn’t soft green Sound of Music grass, but the dry and spiky grass you’ve found is unique to Florida. It’s like a bed of nails as you lay down: prickly at first, but unnoticeable once your body weight is distributed evenly
across it. He’s next to you, sharing the view of an overcast sky.

“We might have to wait a moment,” he tells you, his hands folded over his stomach.

So you wait a moment, quiet and aimlessly expectant, swatting gnats away from your nose.

You hear before you see it: an airplane passing overhead from the east. Its landing gear is lowered, its howl loud in your ears as it makes a shadow over the two of you. You feel the wind of its wake when it passes, mixed up with the sea breeze.

“I noticed while I was landing yesterday,” he says. “I passed right over you.”

“It’s a little loud,” you say.

“It’s peaceful,” he argues. “Think about it. There were maybe a hundred people who flew over us just now. Each with their own lives and shit going on.” He sits up on one elbow so he can face you. “Someone on that plane probably hates their boss. Someone else—I don’t know.

Someone else might be writing poetry.”

“Someone might be moving,” you say.

“Exactly.”

Your mind goes to one place, but his must go another, because he’s still smiling, still beaming down on you like he’s all your energy and all your warmth.

“It’s almost Spring Break,” you say.

“Yeah.”

He still doesn’t get what you’re suggesting. You would get it, if the roles were reversed.

Has that imbalance always seemed so troublesome?
“Spring Break is almost the end of the semester, and the end of the semester is the end of this.”

He pulls his eyebrows in, confused. “We’ll go long distance.” He says it like it’s romantic. Everything is romance to him—hard-fought relationships and staring at the sky. Thoughts of meetings in airport terminals, fifty dollar gigs, cramped apartments, fights over FaceTime. He doesn’t need plans or certainties. He’ll spin a pretty story around each of your concerns.

“This is going to be hard,” you say.

“You’re worth it.”

“I don’t know.”

“I do,” he says, one hand resting on the ground beside you so you’re caged between him and the grass. “I’ll always pick you.”

“I’ll always pick you, too.”

He smiles. “Then it’s as simple as that. Everything else will work itself out.”

Another plane passes overhead, another batch of people off to somewhere. “Things aren’t always going to just work themselves out.” Maybe they would for people like him, but you and him don’t exist in the same reality. “We need to talk about this. There are expenses and choices and difficulties in being in a relationship with a musician.”

“But you’re a musician, too,” he says. “You get it.”

You shake your head. “The best thing for our relationship would be if one of us went into another industry, got a nine-to-five or something.”

“I wouldn’t ask you to do that.”
“I wouldn’t either.”

“Then why…” He pulls his fingers through his hair. “Are you trying to start something?”

“No. It’s just—we have to be practical here. I’m trying to talk through things that we should’ve talked about months ago.”

“What, like we should’ve discussed healthcare when we started dating?”

“Maybe,” you say. “I don’t know. It would’ve been easier if we had thought about how hard this would be.”

“But then we probably wouldn’t have gotten together.”

You look at him, watch the shifting of his eyes as his words sink in.

He lays back, hands once again finding a place crossed on his stomach. “Are you breaking up with me?” he asks.

You want to say no. You can probably work it out. You’re smart, good at thinking your way through problems and making rational decisions. But today, as you lay beside him and watch a plane approach, your rationale leads you here.

“Yes,” you say.

Try Again

###

XI

You excuse yourself and take your plate with you so no one thinks anything of it when you follow him into the kitchen. It’s the next room over from the dining room, but most of the view of the kitchen is obstructed by a drywall partition. You stand with your back against it, dirty plate in
your hands.

“Hey,” he says, clueless as he scoops pasta onto his plate.

“What was that?” you ask.

His hand pauses. “What? Did someone say something?”

“A stepping stone?” You keep your voice low and casual so you can play it off if some-

one walks into the room.

He breathes a laugh. “They don’t know anything about music. They don’t get why you

took a job in Ohio.”

“Have you tried to explain it to them?”

“No.” He sets his plate on the kitchen island and presses his hands into the granite on ei-

ther side of it. “Are you okay? You seem upset.”

“What about you?”

“What about me?”

“Do you know why I took the Toledo job?”

He laughs again, looking away from you. “Of course I do.”

“Tell me.”

He shakes his head, holding frustration in a clenched jaw. “I don’t know, it’s full-time.

It’s easy to get into off the bat.”

“Easy.”

“Yeah, it’s easy,” he says like it’s obvious. When he looks at you again, you hate the dis-

approval in his eyes. “Do you really want to do this here?”
You step closer only so you can talk more quietly. “What does your family think my end goal is? To keep myself busy until you can find a job to provide for us?” You know his family is traditional. Their expectations of you are clear even if they go mostly unsaid. “You know I plan on staying at Toledo, don’t you?”

He presses his lips together. “For how long?”

“For however long they’ll have me,” you say. “It’s a job in music. If anything, I’m the one more suited to provide for us right now.”

“Thanks,” he says. “That makes me feel great.”

“It’s not a bad thing.” You place your plate on the counter. “But if your family wants us living a ‘conventional life,’ you’re not going to find it gigging in New York.”

“So you want me to move to Ohio with you? Is that what you’re saying?” He says Ohio like a punchline.

“No, but I don’t want you to make excuses for my job in front of your family.”

“They’ll just think—”

“Fuck what they think,” you say before you can stop yourself. “This is our life, not theirs.”

“Shh.” Spit flies between his teeth and hits you on the cheek. “Are you kidding me right now? You’re gonna say that under their roof?”

“This is a fucking beach rental!” you whisper-shout, wondering how he’s dodged every point you’ve tried to make, how he’s turned every one of your concerns back on you. These are your problems, your complaints, your choices inconveniencing his life. “Jesus, whose team are
you on here?"

He cranes his neck to catch a glimpse of the dining room. Then he takes you by the arm and pulls you farther away, into the foyer. His grip isn’t hard, but his cold fingertips shock your wrist. When he speaks again, his words are all consonants. “Don’t make me look like the bad guy here,” he says. “You’re going to tell me you wouldn’t take a different job if you were offered one?”

“Maybe I would,” you say. “But I haven’t been offered one. Neither have you. And you can act high and mighty for ‘holding out’ or whatever you think you’re doing, but be realistic. What are you going to do next year while I’m filling my resume? Do you think New York’s going to have you?”

“At least I’m trying.”

“You didn’t make Philly,” you say, keeping your voice down like he asked. “And you didn’t make Boston. You know what I think you’re going to do next year?” He doesn’t try to answer—he usually would—so you keep at it. “I think you’re gonna take a few more auditions, and I think you’re going to get bored and tired of living on couches and practicing etudes, and I think the moment it sinks in that you’re not special out there, you’re going to quit.”

His eyes turn glassy, threatening tears, but footsteps approach behind you before you could say sorry or that you didn’t mean it. It’s probably for the best—you’re not sorry, and you did mean it.

“Hey,” his sister says, voice chipper. “Mom was going to put out dessert. You two coming?”
He looks at his sister, then you, and though you’ve catalogued every twitch of his eye-
brow and angle of his smile, you cannot read his expression. You’ve lost access to him, and
you’re not sure there’s anything you can do to regain it.

“I’ll be there in a minute,” he tells his sister, his eyes leaving you for the last time. “We
were just saying goodbye.”

Try Again

###

XII

You stay put at the table, telling yourself not here, not now. You can talk about it later.

But you bite your tongue on the ride home and when you go to bed together that night.
You calm yourself down, rationalize. His family doesn’t understand this lifestyle—music, gig-
ging, art. He probably just had to dumb it down for them.

In the morning you watch him sleep. He always wakes later than you. He doesn’t stir
when you push yourself up on your elbows to view him from above, nor when you run a finger
along his eyebrow. You’ll always pick each other—it’s as simple as that. You think it to yourself
again and again, like the verse of a song you’re trying to memorize.

Gabby’s party is held at her parents’ place on the Saturday before graduation. Later this
week, your parents will fly into town to watch you walk. They missed your recital, but that was
small, anyway. Graduations mean more to more people. Your mom will want pictures of you in
your gown, your academic achievement cord. You hope they’ll come to see you in Toledo next
year—you found a two-bedroom by downtown and will want to put it to use.
Now you spend this last weekend reveling in the familiarity of a town you know: sticky air, sparse lightning, the salty smell of the riverside. Just this once, you don’t mind the way the heat seeps the energy from your bones and muscles. You don’t mind how the walk up her driveway and to her front door leaves a sheen of sweat on the back of your neck. You think of Ohio, of the dry cold, and tell yourself that this is something to be savored. Maybe you’re feeling nostalgic.

He drove you here, and told you to have a good time, because he planned on driving home.

“We should crash here,” you tell him as you make your way to the makeshift bar in the kitchen. “I want you to be able to have fun, too.”

“I am having fun,” he says. “I’m with you.”

Your flight to Toledo leaves in six days. You didn’t mean to keep count, but it’s like the second hand in a quiet classroom—once you notice it, you can’t keep yourself from listening for the ticking.

You blow-dried your hair carefully before leaving the house but throw it up fifteen minutes into the party. The hairspray stood no chance against the Florida humidity. Gabby’s mansion-house has built-in speakers at various points throughout the living space and patio, hidden in the ceiling and decorative rocks. The Black Eyed Peas song that’s playing reminds you of homecoming dances and your first solo drive to the mall. You know you’re just feeling wistful, but you can’t fathom how so much time has passed since then. You used to think twenty-two was so old, that when you moved to a new city for college, wisdom would find you and you’d find
yourself, but now you wonder if you knew more back then. You had such a clear view of what you wanted and how to get it. You’re about to graduate music school and you’ve got a great job lined up, but there’s no closure in this ending, nor is there a new goal to strive toward. You don’t dwell too much on it, and pour a drink instead.

The party is technically to celebrate graduating seniors of the music program, and though your class is relatively small, around forty people total, there are enough half-drunk half-adults at Gabby’s place to make the open floor feel crowded. You and him share a space on an armchair in the foyer, where the music is quieter and the crowd sparser. Your hips don’t quite fit together on the leather chair, so your body overlaps his, limbs twisting together like ivy up the side of a house.

Exams are over. Juries have been passed. You’ve all but graduated, and the only thing you can do now is sit and wait. Six days to go. A week from today your relationship will be whittled down to car ride phone calls and weekend trips. You’ll always pick each other. It’s as simple as that.

He’s still searching for that perfect job, still busting his ass signing up for auditions, paying for fees and plane tickets, keeping his etudes and scales brushed-up and in shape. He’s getting closer. That’s what he tells you. He’s spending a few weeks in New York this summer, staying with a friend with hopes of sliding into the gig circuit there.

“I’m surprised you’re allowed to just crash on your buddy’s couch,” you say, nearly yelling over the music.

He clears his throat. “Well, I’m contributing a little.”
“You are?”

He nods. “He actually has a spare room where I’ll be staying. Week-to-week basis, nothing set in stone.”

Tonight’s supposed to be a fun night, and you don’t want to kill the mood, but you ask, “How are you going to pay for that?”

He snakes an arm around your shoulder, his body warm but fingers cold as they lightly tickle your upper arm. He looks away and says, “My parents are spotting me a little.”

“Oh.”

“I’m paying them back,” he rushes to say. “As soon as I get a solid job. I swear.”

“You don’t have to swear to me.”

“I feel bad.”

“Why?”

“Because you have to go to Toledo.”

All at once, you’re hyperaware of how many people are trickling in and out of the foyer. A group of friends standing by the front door glances in your direction, and you feel their eyes lingering on you even when you look back to him. You’re basically straddling his lap, but it’s the conversation that feels too intimate to have in public.

You untangle yourself from him. You’re still close, still sharing a seat meant for one, but you turn your shoulder so you’re not facing him so directly. “I have to go to Toledo?” you repeat, searching for the meaning in the words and feeling a cold anger tingle up your neck when you find it. “Do you pity me for taking the Toledo job?”
“Of course not,” he says. His eyes wander the room. “I just—” He licks his lips, shakes his head, runs a hand through his hair, does all the things you do when you’re stalling the inevitable. “I’m sure if you had the means, you would hold out for a better orchestra, too.”

Now you don’t want to touch him. You push up from the chair and head for the stairs to the next level, but he follows you up the steps and into Gabby’s bedroom. You hate that he follows you, but you’d hate it more if he hadn’t.

The bedroom is quieter and more modest than the rest of the house. Remnants of Gabby’s adolescence litter the dressers and walls: beat-up notebooks and years-old eyeshadow palettes. You stand on one side of the bed, him on the other. “I didn’t mean that,” he says.

“I know what you meant,” you say. “You feel sorry for me.”

“No,” he snaps. “I—”

“You think I’m beneath you.” And here you were, thinking he saw you as his equal.

“No.” He runs both hands over his face before dropping them at his sides. “You can’t tell me you’re not going to keep an eye out for other jobs.”

“I’m proud I got Toledo,” you say. “It’s not some community orchestra. I’m getting paid to make music.” You wish your words were stronger, wish you could sell them. “Can you say that?”

He’s only silent for a few seconds, but speechlessness doesn’t come easy to people like him, people who are always going, always charming, always winning.

“You can’t,” you tell him, spitting each word out with increasing fervor. “You can keep pretending you’re better than me because you’re holding out for New York, but at the end of the
day, you’re unemployed and I’m not.”

You stop yourself only because you’ve run out of breath. You just want him to under-
stand, but you see in the set of his jaw and the slant of his eyebrows that you’ve gone too far.

When he speaks, he does so with dizzying control. “I don’t blame you for taking Toledo”
he says, stepping closer. “You were afraid that nothing better was going to come around, so you
took the first offer thrown at you—”

“Fuck you, I would have gotten more offers.”

“I never said you wouldn’t have.”

“And nothing will ever be enough for you. No job, no person, nothing. You have all these
plans, all these cities in your phone.”

He sighs and looks at you, tells you to breathe.

These are new grounds for you—usually he’s the one to lose his temper and you’re the
one who finds it. Usually you stage every word, placing them right where you want them before
you speak them aloud. But you’ve held your tongue for weeks. You’ve thought through what you
want to say for so long that you’ve forgotten what you want.

“I didn’t mean that,” you say, but he’s already turning on his heel to leave the room. He
closes the door behind himself, and leaves you alone.

You look at your shoes, telling yourself to think. Just think. You used to be so good at that
part. Maybe you need to clear your head, get some distance before facing him again, but you
have six days left. Do you really want to waste them alone?

Follow him: go to XIII
Stay in Gabby’s room: go to XIV

###

XIII

You run after him, searching room after room while telling yourself what you’ll do when you find him. You’ll pull him down by the neck and he’ll hold you back. You’ll apologize and he’ll accept it. You’ll tell him you still pick him and he’ll say that he knows, that it’s simple as that. You’ll spend your last six days with him. At his apartment, in a practice room, at the French bakery. You search for him. You search for a way to make this work. You search for a choice you could’ve made somewhere along the way. You come up empty.

Try Again

###

XIV

You let him go.

You don’t hate him, don’t even resent him. You hope he gets what he wants, hope that one of the cities on his list is enough for him.

This won’t be the last you see of him—there will be overlapping auditions, gigs where you’re seated side-by-side—but you can’t orbit him anymore. You listen to the party from the comfort of Gabby’s bedroom. It’s hard to tell if he’s gone, or if his voice and footfalls have blended in with the rest.

Try Again
READING LIST


5. AUSTIN, EMILY. *Everyone in This Room Will Someday Be Dead*. ATLANTIC BOOKS, 2022.


47. WILLIAMS, TIA. *Seven Days in June*. GRAND CENTRAL PUB, 2022.

