

Spring 5-1-2015

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Recommended Citation

Phillippy, Francesca, "The Stella Stories" (2015). *Seton Hall University Dissertations and Theses (ETDs)*. 2099.
<http://scholarship.shu.edu/dissertations/2099>

The Stella Stories

By

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts
Department of English
Seton Hall University

May, 2015

SETON HALL UNIVERSITY
College of Arts and Sciences
Department of English

APPROVAL FOR SUCCESSFUL THESIS

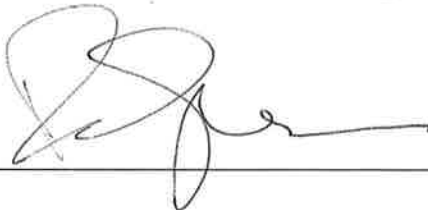
Masters Candidate, **Francesca Phillippy**, has successfully defended and made the required modifications to the text of the master's thesis for the English Department during this Spring Semester 2015.

Thesis Mentors
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Thesis Advisor:
Nathan Oates, Ph.D.


_____ 8/31/2015

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Donovan Sherman, Ph.D.


_____ 8/31/2015

“The Stella Stories” Introduction

My Master’s thesis, “The Stella Stories,” is the first three sections of a longer work. Each section is connected to the one before, switching point of view between characters previously introduced. The main question presented through the characters would be how something that catastrophically alters one person, that being Stella, ripples throughout the lives of those around her. In these three stories I look at Stella, the protagonist of the situation, two years after she has been beaten by her old boyfriend, Dallas. Currently Stella is in a loving relationship with her boyfriend, has a job that she enjoys, and a sister that she is incredibly close with. Though each of the characters are in their mid to late twenties and currently starting out in some profession, meaning that everyone is broke, they have a path toward a certain career that will hopefully be fulfilling. Despite the fact that she created a peaceful life for herself, Stella is unable to let go of Dallas and allow herself to be happy with her current boyfriend, Jordan. There is a feeling of distance between the two of them that Jordan cannot break through. It is now Stella’s job to move past the trauma caused by Dallas and find out what it is that she really wants. Can she really let go of Dallas, or is something so catastrophically painful doomed her to a life of detachment? In Jeffrey Alexander’s critical novel, *Trauma: A Social Theory*, Alexander looks into how societies deal with collective trauma. Alexander says that “[w]hen social groups do construe events as gravely endangering, suffering becomes a matter of collective concern, cultural worry, social panic, gut-wrenching fear, catastrophic anxiety” (3). The separation between the individual and the collective would be the greatest distinction in trauma. This is because the “[i]ndividual victims react... with repression and denial, gaining relief when these psychological defenses are overcome, bringing pain into consciousness so they are able to mourn” (3). The collective uses the incident as “a matter of symbolic construction and framing,

of creating stories and characters, and moving along from there” (3). In the context of this thesis, it is not just Stella that must overcome the abuse of Dallas. Stella herself must face the trauma and break past the defenses that she has created in her own mind. She is unable to think of what happened, and similarly her sister has her own scars to confront. In the communal context Jesse must find how to heal from her own involvement in the situation while also aiding her sister in the healing. Jordan must come to terms with his girlfriend’s shortcomings, aid in her recovery, and understand his own place in the narrative. Morgan, an outsider in this ordeal, must create her own dialogue from this situation and see how she fits into the narrative. While nothing happened to her personally, the strain affects those that she cares for, Jordan, and must use the dialogue to comfort him. This leads to the theme of familial bonds and whether or not they can be sustained. Do we cling to siblings because they, unlike friends, understand our narrative better than most, or because we truly love them as people? For both Stella and Jordan, they must come to terms with what they have and have not done for their sisters.

In searching through these themes, I have used the tools inspired by Russell Banks’ novel *The Sweet Hereafter*. This is the story about a small town in upstate New York where thirty children die in a horrific bus accident. The novel switches perspective in each section, showing how the accident disturbs separate characters while also pushing the plot along. The points of view switch between the bus driver, a father of two children killed on the bus, a lawyer coming to town for a lawsuit, the only child that survives the accident, and then back to the bus driver by the time the story ends. Each character adds depth to the story and a different perspective on how the accident changes their lives. It shows how tragedy ripples out and can destroy an entire town. By switching points of view the narration takes power away from each character, as separate people mark the situation in their own way. No one person can know everything or control the

situation. It also shows how an issue can be too much for one character to completely comprehend. It is in this narration decision that “The Stella Stories” takes its station in literary fiction. While Stella is ultimately the protagonist of the situation, as she is the one harmed most by Dallas, other characters are changed by the violence. Her older sister, Jesse, harbors a great amount of guilt from the attack as she was having an affair with Dallas. Jesse must come to terms with her own guilt and attempt forgiveness in the position that she placed herself in. Jordan’s twin sister, Morgan, views Stella’s distance from her brother as selfish and cruel. While struggling with her own addiction issues Morgan chooses to direct her energy into Stella. Morgan ultimately is the driving force for Stella, as she is one of the few to not allow her to wallow in her own pain. Morgan also pushes Jordan past his obsession with Stella, as he should be caring about more than just his own girlfriend. He has allowed himself to become consumed by the situation and lost sight of his own sister, someone that needs him as she struggles toward sobriety.

In James Wood’s book *How Fiction Works*, Wood discusses the role of sympathy and complexity in the writer’s work. He uses Ian McEwan’s *Atonement* as an example of how a writer must place their reader into the shoes of an unlikable character. The protagonist, Briony, “wrongly convinces herself that Robbie Turner is a rapist[,]” thus failing to understand another person’s point of view and complexities (173). However, Briony’s own shortcomings do not impact the reader’s opinion, as McEwan “carefully inhabit[s] one character’s point of view after another” (173). The characters themselves do not understand their own faults until much later in the novel, after they have viewed the consequences of their own actions. McEwan creates this pivot in the characters by having Briony read a letter between Robbie and Celia, one that is both personal and sexual. Before opening the letter Briony becomes aware that “[t]he very complexity

of her feelings confirm... that she is entering an arena of adult emotion” on in which she is not ready to be exposed to and sees this as fuel for her own means rather than something that should be left as a private event (McEwan 106). Briony knows that she is much too young for whatever is in that letter. The issue is that she wants to know things that are beyond her comprehension so as to become an adult before the timing is appropriate. Briony does not understand this choice as a mistake until much later in life, after she has grown and seen more of the world as well as viewed the consequences of her own actions. As a child Briony even attempts to protect Celia from Robbie, whom she believes to be dangerous at this point in time based on the letter. Briony had “opened the sealed envelope to read [Robbie’s] note and been disgusted, and in her obscure way felt betrayed” then as a result went “looking for her sister – no doubt with the exhilarated notion of protecting her” from the fiend that Robbie now is in her own distorted imagination (130). McEwan does not state outright that Briony is impulsive or naïve, but rather allows the story and the change in character create that dialogue. It is with this example that “The Stella Stories” takes its identity. By switching points of view McEwan is able to show what some characters know that others do not. Briony believes that Robbie is a rapist and convinces herself of that truth. However, both Robbie and Celia, Briony’s older sister, know that the young girl does not understand sex at this point in her life and as a result misinterprets their own interaction as something violent and cruel. The complexity of character is brought out through the change in point of view throughout the novel, but it is also created with the imperfection of each character. Celia and Robbie do not take the time to explain their sexual relationship with Briony, creating the confusion in the child. They themselves have refused to admit their own feelings to one another until the last moment, creating the situation for Briony to walk in on. No character is perfect, but they are not fully aware of their own shortcomings until later in the novel. This adds

a realism to the imperfection that is humanity, something that must intrinsically be a part of a story in order for there to be sympathy and a connection with the character.

A fundamentally important technique in building characters, in excavating the complexities of their personalities, is that most basic bit of narrative architecture, dialogue. It is the tool in which characters explain themselves to others, showing how they connect with other people. It is how they make their pain known to those around them and show the audience what they want to keep secret. This characteristic is one of the most important to “The Stella Stories,” as what a person says and what they mean are two separate entities. Wood looks at Henry Green’s argument “that dialogue is the best way to communicate with one’s readers, and that nothing kills ‘life’ so much as ‘explanation’” (213). Green believed that in life we cannot “know what other people are thinking and feeling” and that any sort of authorial explanation of a character is inauthentic (214). However, in Francine Prose’s *Reading like a Writer: A Guide for People Who Love Books and for Those Who Want to Write Them*, she discusses how when beginning writing she was taught that one “shouldn’t, actually *can’t*, make fictional dialogue – conversation on a page – sound like actual speech” (143). This is because the conversations in real life are filled with “repetitious, meaningless expressions, stammers, and nonsensical monosyllables with which we express hesitation, along with clichés and banalities that constitute so much of everyday conversation” (143). The most realistic dialogue would be incomprehensible. When people speak they switch topic, use incorrect grammar, and leave conversations unfulfilled. They also will talk about one subject far longer than is interesting. Prose believes that written dialogue “should speak more fluently than we do, with a greater economy and certitude” (143). It is between these two contrasting philosophy that “The Stella

Stories” lives. In an interview with Deborah Eisenberg the interviewer, Rachel Brown, asks Eisenberg

“[p]eople often talk about how precise your language is, I feel that your characters' thoughts are often inarticulate, and poorly expressed or guarded, even when their intent is perfectly plain to the reader. The fact that you can express how much people struggle to express themselves is very--I don't know if comforting is the right word (Brown)?

Eisenberg responds that expressing one's self

is a struggle, and often people don't know. They're aware of having something to express, but they're really not aware of exactly what it is. Meanwhile, their mouths are open, they're trying to get certain things to be understood, and they're trying to hide other things, hide them both from their interlocutor, and from themselves. And so it all creates a kind of thrilling dynamic. What people say is never inert (Eisenberg).

While Green believes that an author cannot know the character completely if it is meant to be an accurate depiction of humanity, “The Stella Stories” places more in what goes unsaid and undone. Eisenberg's belief that humans can attempt to express themselves, but this ultimately is the greatest struggle not just for people, but characters as well. For a character to be as realistic as possible they must have a disconnect between their own understanding and the means to have others understand them. It is in this tension between the internalization of self and the externalization of information and communication that “The Stella Stories” creates most of its drama. Can any of the characters understand themselves enough to communicate this with those that they love? Can they express this or even talk about it in general?

James Wood similarly disagrees with Green to a certain extent, in that “as much can be communicated with no speech at all” (219). What the character does, their actions, movements,

jobs, and choices can all show a great deal about the character. While Stella is evasive in her speech, it is her inability to communicate the trauma of Dallas with her current boyfriend that the conflict arises. It is both in what is not said and what is done that Stella's personality is made clear. She is unable to think about the trauma, let alone communicate it. In the context of trauma theory there are four different stages and representations of trauma in the collective minds of a social group (Alexander 17). There is "[t]he nature of the pain" which looks into what actually occurred and the facts of the situation, "[t]he nature of the victim" or who was actually damaged by the situation, the "[r]elation of the trauma victim to the wider audience," and the "[a]tribution of responsibility" on the person that caused said pain (17-19). In each of these stages there is both an internalization of the experience and the pain as well as a step toward retribution. Each characters must find their own footing in the pain, but their own recovery will ultimately affect the primary target of the incident: Stella. Stella herself lacks the ability to physically commit to Jordan through his desire for permanency, or the tattoo. She cannot allow him to place a tattoo on her body, not just because of the commitment in such an action, but in her fear of him seeing who she really is. This both in relation to the nature of her pain and as a victim, she has not come to terms with the memory and therefore must shut out any situation where she would be exposed to the memories. When she does confront them there will be a collective understanding in her social group and the responsibility will be placed on Dallas, but the process in which Stella must come to terms with her own pain is the tension of the story. Later in her book Prose directly discusses Wood's novel, specifically his opinions on Green's use of dialogue. Prose points out that Green "often minted words that were not in use during the period in which his novels are set (or during any other period) but nonetheless sound utterly right" (164). Prose goes onto say that "Green was less attuned to how people *sound* when they speak – the actual words and

expressions they employ – than to what they mean” (164). Green’s “notion of dialogue as a pure expression of character that... transcends the specifics of time and place may be partly why the conversations in the works of writers such as Austin and Bronte” are so contemporary (164). The realism in what the characters say is not as important as what it tells others about the character. For Stella, Jesse, and Morgan, it is the balance between what they are unable to say and what they want to tell people, as well as how they choose to communicate, is what defines their personalities and how other’s view them as a result.

The future of these stories is not set in stone, but there will be at least three more sections. The first will be from the mother of Stella and Jesse, Mary, as she struggles with her sexuality and divorce from the father, Jack. Mary and Jack have been together since their teenage years, but Mary has been a closeted lesbian throughout their relationship. Though Mary has had several affairs throughout their marriage, she has recently met a woman with whom she would like to begin a life with. This section will be focusing on Mary’s own relationship with her two daughters, mainly her estrangement from Stella, as well as her desire to find her own place now that she is accepting this hidden part of her own identity. It is also about how Jack deals with the end of his marriage, as the woman that he has loved for almost twenty years is leaving him. The section ends with Mary finding Jack a few hours after he has committed suicide. The next section will belong to Dallas and his own perspective on the Stella situation. Though riddled with guilt over harming her so intensely, Dallas is too much of a coward to see the extent of his impact. Eventually Stella shows up at the garage in which Dallas works, days after finding out that her father is dead. Stella eventually breaks down and Dallas takes care of her. When Stella wakes she thanks Dallas for being kind, but the section ends with her saying that she does not forgive him for what he did. The final section will be the funeral of Jack where Stella finally

resolves her own issues with her mother and her sister. Jesse's affair with Dallas is made clear and Mary's own shortcomings, or what she believed to be shortcomings, as a mother due to her hidden sexuality are finally brought to the table. Jesse and Mary also make it clear that Stella's detachment is breaking her relationship with the two of them apart. While all is not forgiven, Stella makes the conscious decision to let go of the past. She is not in a complete position to be "healed," if that is even possible for Stella, but she is ready to attempt some sort of active mourning and progress. The section will end with Stella telling Jordan that she would like to try again. However, Jordan refuses to resume a relationship at this current time. He needs to take care of his own sister and figure out his own life without Stella in it. They decide that someday they will try again, but now is not that time.

Rather than give all sections in the thesis, I have chosen to end with Morgan's section. Morgan's need for rehabilitation is the final push that Stella needs to face her past with Dallas. By placing an emphasis on Stella's beginning toward rehabilitation and closure, I want to show the pain of taking that first step toward healing. While none of these characters are perfect, they are learning how to be functional adults and take responsibility for their actions and choices. The point that I would like to get across with these stories, and the tensions that arise from the characters, is that people always have a choice when it comes to healing. There is no proper way to handle trauma, but one must make the choice to move forward. Pain cannot be ignored, as it is too complicated and prominent in a person's life. It is especially important to not bury issues, because ignoring the past does not make it nonexistent. While learning to be an adult, one must not be looked down upon or judged for their failures in life. All of these characters must learn and grow, creating the tension and drama of everyday life.

The Start of Stella: Just a Pinch

Jordan loves to draw on my skin. Every time we see each other he rolls up my sleeves and pulls out a sharpie. I started to carry around a bundle of multi-colored non-toxic markers after the first few sketches. It always starts out simple: a star or a heart on my hand. But those always lead into something more complex that will drift up my arm and over my elbow.

Bracelets and bras come off the farther that he gets into it. Dragons that shoot flames and black barbed wire and clouds mixed in with candy all swirling together in color and sweat until one day the designs spread over my chest and breasts. Now he loses track of how far down he the sketches go. It's only until he reaches that one spot he can't draw on that he realizes what he's doing and we end up making love. The ink never smears, no matter how tightly we hold one another. Afterwards he'll trace over some of the figures on my back, connecting my freckles or detailing the angel wings. Every night my shower washes away his work, turning the stainless steel drain into something much more beautiful than it was before.

"We could make it permanent," he'll say when I emerge, all fresh and pink from my shower. I like to run my hands over his pale shaved head, the first prickling of hair scraping against my warm palms. Everything feels heightened in that moment and I have to contain myself. I have to stop myself from moving my hand down his face and over his neck, tracing the thick veins that popped up; from grabbing hold and never letting go, no matter how hard it is for him to breathe.

Instead I ask, "But then what would we do on dates?" He never has an answer for that. He just stands up and moves away from my hands. I bite my lip. "Besides, you don't even have one. What kind of an artist are you?"

"The kind that can wear short sleeves."

“Or the kind that rips people off.”

Jordan owns a parlor named *Fat Katz* on the South Side of town with his baby sister, Morgan. She got her ink license before Jordan and practically had to beg him to start up the shop with her. You can't blame him for being skeptical. Morgan's last business plan was to open a plushy store in New York City. That was back when her hair was cotton candy pink.

“To match the walls!” she would squeal.

After that she wanted to go to a culinary institute in France. She gave up after burning her apartment complex down in an onion experiment. Then she tried out for American Idol, right before the shoe modeling career. I think he agreed to the shop so that she would shut up for a while, but we all have false hopes when it comes to Morgan.

That's where I had met Jordan. My big sister Jesse wanted to get her belly button pierced and begged me to come along. I had just gotten off of work and still smelled like stale grease and cigarettes. It was two in the morning by the time she picked me up.

“We need a new truck.” she said, her voice screeching over our new *twenty one pilots* album. “Preferably one from this century.”

“When you feel like paying for it, be my guest.” She would just roll her eyes when I said stuff like that, her bony frame crackling against the torn leather. She switched out the music to a jazz station right before lighting a cigarette. She probably felt uber cool at that moment. I tried not to laugh at her. We finally arrive at *Fat Katz* and parked out front, double checking the locks and hiding our purses under the seats. We walked up to the parlor, the crisp November air tickling our skin. The neon orange sign buzzed *OPEN* at us from the front window. Once inside we walked up to the counter where a very tall platinum blonde in skinny jeans stood reading a

motorcycle magazine. Her face practically looked silver with piercings. She didn't look up when Jesse asked if there was room for her.

"Yeah in about an hour or so," she said, her whiskey scratched voice bored. She pointed her black nails toward the couch and said, "You can sit over there."

We settled into the surprisingly clean black leather couches and waited. I flipped through the tattoo portfolios, not seeing anything but a blur of colors and lines. They weren't even playing good music here, just some stupid Goth mix with too much screaming and not enough bass. Nothing like how Jesse plays. They could at least have had some classics if they're going for a tough look. Minutes ticked by and we just sat there. Jesse played with her phone and I pulled out a cooking magazine. Dad always sent me old ones with good recipes every once in a while. My legs started to shake and I could still smell cooking oil in my hair, even though I had left the windows open while driving. I wanted to go home, but I promised Jesse that I would stay. But, god, I was tired. I could feel my eyes drifting shut while we waited. Christ on a cracker, it was just a needle. She was being such a baby about this. But she never really needed me for anything, even now, and I was just being cynical and grouchy. I looked down at my watch. It had been an hour and a half.

"Excuse me," trying to get the blonde woman's attention. She didn't even twitch. "How much longer will it be?"

She ignored me. I called out to her a few more times before walking over. Jesse shot me a panicked look, begging me to stay calm. I stuck my tongue out.

"Excuse me, miss? How long will we have to wait?"

"Dunno." My teeth started to grind. She could at least look at me. Or add some enthusiasm to her voice.

“Can you guess?” My voice tight.

“No.”

“Please.”

“Take your hand off the glass.”

“What?” I looked down at the glass case acting as a counter. It held every type of piercing imaginable, most of them looking not too safe and more than a little painful.

“I just cleaned it.”

“Sorry.”

“Go and sit back down.”

“Yes but-”

“Just wait.”

“But it’s been-”

“Wait.”

“But if you would just-”

“Wait.”

I grabbed her face, careful not to pull out one of the rings on her face. “Hi there. Hey, funny story. I like it when people *look* at me when I talk to them.”

“Wha-”

“What’s going on out there?” a gruff voice shouted. I did not look away from the girl, but let go. I didn’t even leave a mark.

“It’s cool Jordan,” rubbing her face. “Just some bitch that needs to leave.”

“Excuse me? All I wanted was for you to look at me. It’s a little thing called customer service. You should take a course in it.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” her eyes narrowing. Jesus her voice was monotone. “In the meantime, you and your friend can go.”

“What’s going on out there Morgan?” the voice was coming from the back room.

“Nothing.” I could hear footsteps. “Great…”

A bald man came out of the back room, dressed in ripped jeans and a simple black shirt.

“Can I help you?”

“No you can’t,” Morgan said, her voice finally raising an octave. “This crazy bitch-”

“Morgan,” his blonde eyebrows raising up.

“But she-”

“That’s enough.” He turned to me and smiled. “I’m sorry about this. Just ignore her. I do.”

“It’s okay.” My face was warming up. I could feel the grease on my uniform. I zipped my black hoodie up a bit, trying to cover myself as much as possible.

“How can I help you?” I looked over at Jesse. She was redder than I felt and glaring at me.

“Mam?” He was smiling.

I sighed. “She wants a piercing.”

“What kind?”

“Navel,” she whispered. She had gone white and was chewing on her lip. I walked over and helped her up, careful to support her weight.

“Okay. Come on back.”

We stiffly made our way to the back room and I let go, seeing if she could hold herself up. Her steps seemed steady. She reached out and grabbed hold of my hand, squeezing until my fingers go numb.

“Go on and lay down,” he gestured to the black padded table smack in the middle of a painfully white room. Everything smelled like Lysol and lemon pledge. Packets of needles and sterilizing liquids littered every possible surface and a small needle gun sat to the side, silent and still. Jesse pulled me with her to the table. She laid down, pushing her corkscrew curls out of her face. I stroked them, trying to bring some color back into her face.

“It won’t hurt,” he started washing his hands in the sink by the wall. “It just feels like a pinch. Most people don’t even know that it’s happened.”

I took a few deep breaths, hoping that Jesse would mimic me. He pulled up a chair and tugged her tank top up, exposing her soft midriff. He swabbed it down with rubbing alcohol before patting it dry.

“So what’d you do?” he prepped the needle.

“Excuse me?” Jesse’s voice was shaking.

“No you. Her,” he cocked his head in my direction. “What’d you do to Morgan?”

“Nothing she didn’t deserve,” I stared at the floor. “You should teach your girlfriend better manners.”

“Sister.”

“Oh...” My face felt hot again. Everything felt hot. I wanted to run, but Jesse squeezed tighter. He stood over her, his long fingers tracing over her navel. Jesse was breathing too fast.

“I’m just going to do a simple hoop,” he did not look away from her stomach. “It’ll heal up in a month or so and then you can get something more intricate.”

“Mmhhmm,” she said.

He snapped the clamp over her navel and Jesse squealed. I held her hand tighter.

“Make sure that you stay out of water for a while. No beaches or pools.”

He positioned the needle, pulling the flesh out as far as it can go.

“And be sure to wash it out every morning and night.”

Blood pooled over her stomach. He hooked the hoop in.

“I’ll give you some printed out instructions.”

He stuck another cotton ball inside her navel, soaking up some of the fluids.

“And you can buy the wash up front with Morgan.”

“Can you just pierce it already?” Her voice faint.

“What?”

“Can you pierce it please?”

“I already did,” mopping up the last of the blood.

“Wait what?” she tried to sit up.

“Stay down,” he pushed her shoulder down and removed the clamp. “I’m just cleaning up.”

“But-“

“I told you it wouldn’t hurt.”

“But there’s...”

“Yeah, these bleed a lot.”

“And I didn’t...”

“Yeah. You can let go of her hand now,” he nodded in my direction.

“What?” she looked at me and then finally released my hand. “Oh right. Sorry Stella.”

My hand started to burn as blood made its way back into my fingers.

“Stella?” he cocked an eyebrow. “For star?”

“I’ve never seen the movie,” I massaged my fingers, relishing in the tingling sensation.

“You’ve been deprived of good cinema.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“So, anything for you?”

“No.”

“No ink?”

“I don’t have any.”

“But virgin skin is the best. A tattoo would look good on you.”

“I’m sure.”

He shrugged and helped Jesse sit up. “Take it easy. You’re not driving, right?”

“No, Stella is.” Some color had made its way back into her face, but not enough for me to be happy.

“We’ll get some food and water in you,” I said.

“And stay with your girlfriend tonight,” he said. “You might get a bit feverish.”

“Sister,” I pursed my lips.

“Stella...” Jesse was holding her head in her hands. I helped her stand, holding up most of her weight. We made our way up front and paid Morgan. She still would not look at me, speaking only to Jesse. We left the guy a nice tip and made our way out the door.

“Wait,” Jesse said. “I forgot something. Stay here.”

She made her way back in, doing her best to keep her balance. I could see her talking to him through the glass windows. It only took a minute and then she was back at my side.

“What was that?” I stood firm while semi-lifting her into the truck.

“Just a question about cleaning the piercing.”

Jesse was feverish all night. I gave her some ibuprofen before sending her off to bed. We rushed back to our apartment that night and I periodically switched out the cold rags, doing my best to keep her calm. She must have chugged a gallon of water. She finally fell off around three and I followed soon after. I woke up around ten and took a quick shower. It was nice outside. Crisp and clear. Winter had not fully hit yet, making my usual walk around the block easy. My old boyfriend, Dallas, got me in the habit of walking every morning. He was an exercise freak, always going for runs. I never could keep up with him. One moment he would be right with me, our feet slapping the broken concrete in unison. The next he would be a block ahead, saying that I slowed him down too much. Jesse’s a fast runner too. Her cleaning jobs always kept her in pretty good shape. I turned the corner and made my way over to the park. The leaves had been cleared away from the walkway. Everything was shriveled and brown and it felt colder than I had first thought. My jacket was not enough. Still I pushed on. A few people were out walking their dogs. Parents dragged their children back to the cars, the puffy coats not enough to keep them from getting sick. I walked over to the now empty jungle-gym and sat on a swing. My legs pumped and I stared at the sky. So light. So soft.

“So you like swings too?” a deep voice asked. My whole body locked and I dragged my feet against the woodchips and dirt. God help me. The universe thought that it was funny or something.

The tattoo artist from the night before was sitting on the swing next to mine, smiling. I quickly stood up and he followed in suit. I hadn’t noticed how small he was. Or maybe I just felt

tall... either way he was there and smiling and my stomach was starting to feel funny. Were my cheeks as red as they felt? Thank the gods I wasn't covered in grease for once.

"Do you live around here?" he asked. I stared at the ground and rubbed my sneaker into the dirt.

A few seconds passed with him smiling and me shaking. God I hoped that I was not sweating.

"You have work soon?" he asked.

"What?"

"Work. Is it soon?"

"In- Not until tonight."

"That explains all of the burns on your arms."

"What?"

"Your sister told me last night. You're a cook? It explains all of the scars on you."

"Jesse told... She's my sister. Why would-"

"You should be more careful. You don't wanna mess your skin up too bad."

I looked at the guy for a few more seconds. I wanted to say something... until his sister showed up and jumped on his back.

"Die guo." God her voice was always so irritating. She looked over at me and forced a smile. "Die guo, you promised me ice cream."

"Mei mei, it's too cold."

"That just means that it won't melt." He hooked his arm around her neck and pulled her into a headlock. I took that as my hint to go.

“I’ll see you around,” he yelled. I took a deep breath, trying to cool down for just a moment.

A few weeks passed without much consequence. I didn’t see the tattoo guy again and that was both a relief and... something else entirely. I never noticed that my drive to work passed by his shop. Part of me wanted to go back and look through his books, see the designs and colors. His sister was always there in the front, flirting with customers and moving furniture. If she hadn’t been there maybe I would have gone in, just to say hi, sorry I’m a spaz and a bitch and whatever else I am. Instead I just went to work and lost myself in the flour and flame. My Dad was a cook at a local dinner when I was growing up. Mom was always too busy for me with work and Jesse and friends. So Dad took care of me, taught me to cook, and would even bring me to the dinner sometimes on super slow nights. My favorite times were after closing when we would stay extra-long and bake a few pies for the next day. He taught me the best mixture of flour and butter and water, kneading it just right to the crust was flaky and moist. In the fall we would go apple picking and later on slice the fruit and mix the pieces with brown sugar. Baking, well cooking in general, is both an art and a science. You need to know how much of what goes with another ingredient, but then you try something new. Something everyone says would be gross. Like my lasagna recipe. *That’s too much cheese*, they would say. *That’s not enough sugar in the sauce, it’ll be too tart for people*. Then they try it and BOOM. That’s my favorite part. The silence after people try something really great. The satisfaction when they eat good food. The happiness it brings them when their bellies are full. Dad and I always loved that part.

Work was slammed that night. I work as a cook at the *Star Dinner*. There had been a recital at a local elementary school and everyone decided to come by afterwards. And of course one of the other cooks called out so it was just me and Jimmy, the owner. Hours passed in a blur as I churned out pancakes and turkey platters. My hair kept peeking out of its ponytail and sticking to my neck. I only burned myself twice and we managed to get the whole rush out in less than two hours. Everything was clean and ready for closing when Kora, the hostess, came back and said we had one more straggler.

“Nice job, Stell,” Jimmy pat my shoulder. I could feel his callouses through my dirty white uniform.

“It’s not over yet,” wiping down my spatula.

“One more’s nothin’ for you.” He cleared his throat. “Hey... Would you mind if-”

“Go home, Jim.”

“Really?”

“You’re my boss, why do you always ask this?”

“You’re the best, Stell.”

Kora came back again, her cappuccino skin bright with amusement. “He just want’s desert.”

“Oh,” I smiled. “That’s easy. What’s he want?”

“He said ‘Stella and some pie. *Please.*’”

I could feel myself turning red.

A few deep breaths. That and some centering and more breathing and maybe some counting too.

I grabbed a slice of cherry pie and scooped a bit of vanilla ice cream on top. I had just made it that afternoon. I made my way out of the double doors and saw him sitting at one of the booths, a cup of coffee steaming in front of him. It was as light as Kora's skin. I poured myself one before joining him. I sat across from him and start to eat my pie.

"I thought that was for me?" he smiled a bit, the corners of his mouth peaking up.

"You bought it for me," I took a sip of coffee.

"You don't take anything in your coffee?"

"I like it black."

"Just like your men?"

"Something like that."

We sat there for a while in silence. The jukebox was playing an old Billy Idol song.

"I like dinners at night," he took a swig of coffee. Thank god he didn't make that slurping noise when drinking. I've always hated noisy eaters. "It's quiet."

"It's my favorite part of the night."

"How's your sister?"

I shrugged. "It's only been a day."

He nods and we fell into another silence. I finished my dessert and sat back. The booth groaned as I shifted.

"What's your name?"

He smiled, "Jordan."

"What are you doing here Jordan?"

"Not sure..."

"Take a guess."

“I want to ink you,” his eyes traveling over my face and neck.

“What?”

“I want. To ink you.”

“Wh – why?” I did my best to stay calm. We were too close. I could feel heat radiating off of his legs, burning mine up.

“I’m not sure. I’ve never wanted to before? Not this badly at least...”

I sat and waited, my hands trying to steady themselves against the coffee cup. I wanted to run.

“When...” he stared down at the table. He traced patterns in the condensation from his cup. “When I ink people... They go still at first. Some try to be tough and act like it doesn’t mean anything. But then... While I’m doing it... People change...”

“Into what?” My voice shaking.

“Themselves. Sometimes it happens when I pierce. But not as much.” He paused and looked at me again. “I see them when I ink.”

“And you want to do that to me?”

“I want to see you.”

We stared at each other until he leaned forward, tracing the curve of my jaw. His fingers felt cool. I felt too warm.

“I want to see you.”

I can’t help but smile at that. I’m lying on his bed now, my hair still damp from the shower. He’s opening up the shop now, trying to give me a to myself. I’ll probably go down and

see him anyway. I don't have much else to do besides clean and rest. I slowly pull some clothes on before hearing a crash in the kitchen.

"Morgan?" I make my way out of the bedroom and into the small kitchen that I painted yellow a few months ago. Morgan has her head in the fridge, her small ass swaying as she digs through leftovers and beer.

"Morgan, what are you doing?"

"I'm hungry."

"Yes I can see that." I sigh and put the kettle on. I get the tea ready for the two of us. Morgan hops up onto the counter, an open container of lasagna in her lap. I grab her a fork, "Please don't use your fingers."

"That's why I like you, Stell. You're classy like that."

"You do not like me."

"No not really. But we don't have to tell people that."

"Everyone already knows."

"Not Jordan."

"No not Jordan."

We lapse into silence before I take the lasagna from her and plop it onto a plate. I stick it in the microwave and watch it spin. The kettle finally goes off and I pour a cup for myself and Morgan. It smells like blueberries and lemon.

"So will you be in the shop tonight?" The microwave goes off and I hand her the plate.

"Why?"

She shrugs. "It's Wednesday."

"And?"

“That’s your day off. You always hang out with Jordan when there’s no work.”

“Well...”

“Hey, when are the two of you gonna get hitched?”

“What?”

“Are you guys gonna get married soon?”

“I know what hitched means.”

“You asked.”

“I meant isn’t it a bit soon for that?”

“You guys have been dating a year.”

“That’s still-”

“Jordan always said that a year is long enough to know if they’re the one. So is he?”

I sigh. “I have no idea Morgan. Maybe if you could stick to something for more than ten minutes you would understand that people can be happy without permanency.” I walk into the living room and slide on my Converse sneakers. I down my cup of tea, the water burning as it goes.

Morgan follows me out. “Where are you going?”

“To see Jesse.”

“I’ll see you later.”

“God I hope not.”

I take the bus back to my apartment with Jesse. And old Jewish woman sits next to me, talking about her grandchildren the whole time. She tries to show me a picture of them, but I barely glance at it. She gives me a flaxseed cracker before her stop came up. I forced myself to

smile while eating it. My stop eventually comes and I walk the last few blocks home. I eventually see our truck and make my way inside. The air hurts when I breathe it in. It may snow tonight. I make my way inside.

“Jesse?” I take my shoes off at the door and throw my coat on our bright red couch before grabbing a beer in the kitchen.

Jesse comes out of her bedroom smiling. “You know that this place is small, right? You don’t have to yell.”

“Hello to you too.”

Jesse is still in her maid clothes: grey sweatpants and a large yellow t-shirt with Etta James on the front. I bought that for her when we were teenagers. She must have just gotten home. She grabs a beer before heading back into the living room. She plops into the sofa and take a long drag from her bottle.

“Rough day?”

“Those stupid teenagers don’t know how to aim when they take a piss. God I hope that if I ever get knocked up it’s a girl.”

I bite my lip. My face feels a little warm. “Which family was it today?”

“The Dercouskies. They have three sons. Three. Each with their own bathroom. I wish that we had that growing up.”

“It would have made school a lot easier.”

“Well I practically have one to myself now, so I guess that makes up for it.”

“I share with you.”

“But you’re never here.”

“More than you think.”

“Keep telling yourself that, Stell.”

“Maybe I’ll start staying here more? If you’re so lonely.”

“I’m sure Jordan would love that.”

“Well, who cares what Jordan would or wouldn’t love?”

Jesse sits forward and sets her beer on the coffee table. “Trouble in paradise?”

“It’s nothing.”

“Are you two fighting?”

“Of course not.”

“Is it about the tattoo again?”

“Jesse.”

“Stella.”

“No. We’re not fighting.”

“Why don’t you just get one? You like them and he’s a great artist. It could be small like a star or a heart. Stella for star?”

“You guys *have* to stop making that joke.”

“It won’t hurt that much. And you wouldn’t be able to scrub it off. You never do go outside with his sketches on you.”

“God, what is it with everyone today? First Morgan-”

“Oh, so you saw Morgan today. That explains the mood.”

“Oh shut up.” I finish off my beer before grabbing another from the kitchen. Jesse left dirty dishes in the sink. She always hated doing dishes. I quickly wash them before heading back to her. Her strawberry blonde curls are pushing against the elastic band, trying to break free. I always wanted those curls growing up, even in the summer when they frizzed into a halo.

“So what did Morgan do?” I should have grabbed her a beer too. I’m out of practice with her.

“She was just herself.” I settle onto the couch with her. She scoots a bit closer and drapes her arm around my shoulder. I melt in a bit. She smells like Lysol and shoe polish.

“I’ve missed you Jesse.”

“Stop avoiding the question.”

I sigh. “She was asking about Jordan and me... and marriage.”

I can feel Jesse start to laugh. “Isn’t it a bit soon for that?”

“Not according to her. Apparently Jordan believes that a year is long enough to know if someone is ‘the one.’”

“That boy is such a romantic.”

“It’s not funny.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“Nothing. She just pissed me off.”

“Then why are you mad at Jordan?”

“We just fought about this a few months ago, that’s all.”

“About being married?”

“No. He wants me to move in. Officially.”

“And you don’t want to?”

“I have a home.”

“Stell.”

“I don’t want you to be alone.”

“You shouldn’t worry about me so much.”

We lapse into silence. My head rises and falls with her breath. “Do you have a gig tonight?”

“Yep at the retro club in Center City.”

“Can I come?”

“You usually spend your days off with Jordan.”

“You’re more fun.”

“Okay. Let me just get showered first.”

“I’ll wait here.”

“Stell? I’m sorry.”

“About what?”

“The kid talk earlier. I know how you-“

“It’s fine,” I pull away from her and scoot to the cool end of the couch.

“I just-”

“Really. It’s fine.”

Jesse bites her lip. She pulls her hair out of the elastic and toys with a few curls. “Does Jordan know about Dallas yet?”

“Why would he?”

“Cause... You know...”

“No. No I don’t.”

“Stell...”

“Go take a shower.”

“Okay. Stell?”

“What?”

“I’ve missed you too.”

The jazz club in center city is Jesse’s favorite place in the world. Posers wear fedora hats with feathers and snap their fingers as she blows on her sax. Her whole band bounces and sways with the audience, giving a 1930’s big band feel to their music. The lead singer is some macho dude whose eyes are permanently glued to my sister’s ass. She’s given him the brush off more than once.

“I’m not like you, Stell. I’m too busy for romance.” Yeah, right. Jesse sits me right up front while her band sets up. The table is sticky with alcohol and cherry stems. The lights are dimmed, not for atmosphere but the amount of cigarette smoke clouding the air. My lungs burn a little before the pain becomes more natural. I settle back into my seat before the band gets going. Jesse is in her own little world right now. When the music finally starts the old men in the audience move forward a bit, eager for the energy and beat. People begin to sway and grind against each other. Some people clap. I just keep my eyes on Jesse, so lost in her joy that I forget where we are. I forgot how happy music makes her. She rocks a bit to the sound of her sax, leveling out the noise with soul and rasp. People shout for the blonde to keep going. The drummer’s beat starts to pick up and the piano player starts to shake with Jesse. People move closer and closer to the stage. They want to touch her, but the bouncers keep them at bay. The lead singer moves back for Jesse’s solo, and she belts it out so hard that I was afraid she would pass out from a lack of oxygen. But Jesse would never succumb to that. She finished out her number before the lead guy moved back into the spotlight.

Hours passed like this. The bartender offered me a few drinks on the house, but I don't want to get drunk tonight. Eventually the set ended and the crowd died down. My ears rang a little in the silence.

"You were great." I go to give her a hug until I see how sweaty the stage had made her. "Ew."

"You would be gross too under those lights."

"Shower time?"

"Shower and sleep time. Are you going back to Jordan's?"

"I wanna go home."

She her smile perks up a bit with that.

I slept in my own bed that night. It wasn't a good sleep. I left word at the shop for Jordan. He tends to panic if I don't call first. Morgan just laughed when I told her. I tossed and turned all night. My bed isn't as soft as Jordan's. It also smells a bit stale in my room. Dust has collected on the dresser. Most of my clothes are at Jordan's as well. Jesse let me borrow some of her stuff. When the sun finally came up I decided to stop pretending and got out of bed. The fridge doesn't have much food for me to work with and we are completely out of tea. It's too early for me to head over to Mrs. Khan's, so I just sit on the couch and flip on the news. The snow is supposed to start soon. The weather man keeps warning us to stay indoors. I don't have any stuff though... Nothing. Not even a toothbrush. This is truly pathetic. I might as well grab some stuff from Jordan's if I'm going to stay over here for a few days... maybe longer. I grab the keys to the truck and slide on my shoes. After warming the truck I head out. It's only a ten minute drive to Jordan's. I listen to Jesse's jazz station on the way, bouncing as I go. When was the last time that

I drove this truck? It feels like forever. I pull up to Jordan's apartment complex and park out front. Once inside I tiptoe through, but Jordan isn't even home. I relax a bit and start to pack a bag. I find my uniform and street clothes, roll them up, and fill my backpack to the brim. He's still not here and I feel kinda gross. Jesse is much thinner than I am and her clothes cling in odd ways. I head into the bathroom and strip down before turning the water on. My skin goose bumps in the chilled air. I trace my fingers over the white sink. Not a spec of dirt in sight. I quickly brush my teeth before the room steams up too much. Once the water is hot enough I step in, grateful for the burn on my skin. His showerhead is much better than mine. Gallons of water pour down on my head, soaking my waist-length hair. I work the shampoo in, slowly rinsing out the suds. I run the soap over my body, taking great detail in every freckle and burn. Why he isn't home? He's not one to stay out late. What if he comes back? Oh, god. That will be awkward. I slowly turn the water off and grab a fluffy towel. The air outside of the steam is ungodly cold. I rush to the bedroom to grab some clothes, but Jordan is sitting on the bed. I pause in the doorway. He's sitting on the bed, staring at the floor. My bag is open next to him. The clothes are spilling out of the top. I start to shake.

"You didn't come back last night." His voice is so soft right now.

I walk over to the bed and pull some clothes out of my bag. I slowly get dressed. I didn't dry off enough and my clothes stick to my skin. I start to towel dry my hair.

"Sit down." He hasn't looked at me yet. I go to sit on the bed, but he grabs my arm and guides me to the floor. I settle between his legs and he takes the towel from my hands. He starts to run it dry before grabbing my brush. He starts at the bottom, taking care of each knot and tangle. My hair is impossible after a shower, so I try to relax. This will take a while.

"Are you ever going to say that you live here?"

“I live with Jesse.” I can feel his grip on my hair tightening a bit.

“Tell me about Dallas.” So much for relaxing.

“What do you want to know?” I’m glad that he can’t see my face.

“What happened with him?”

“He wasn’t nice.”

“Did he hit you?”

“God. Jordan.”

“Did he?”

“No.” I hope that he doesn’t start yelling soon. I hate when he yells.

“Did he cheat?”

“Sometimes.”

“How long were you two together?”

“Jordan-”

“Just answer the question.”

“Three years.”

“And you stayed even though he cheated?”

“I’m not exactly proud of it.”

“Why did you leave?”

“Let me go.”

“Did he leave?”

“Jordan.”

“I’m not letting you go until you tell me.”

“He left. Okay?”

“What happened?”

“I don’t want to talk about this.”

“I already know.”

That makes me stop. I slowly turn around and look up at him. My face is burning. He knows? For how long? Why didn’t he say anything? How did he find out?

“It was Jesse.” He’s so calm right now. “She told me early on.”

Why? Why would she... No. This is wrong. I don’t want to think about Dallas. I don’t want to think about that.

“You were pregnant,” Jordan goes to touch my hair, but I pull away. The stick turned blue. All three of them. And my pants weren’t fitting anymore. How could I not notice? And I was so nervous about telling him. Dallas. With his curly black hair. It would have looked so pretty on a baby. I told him that night and he... He was so angry. And then there was pain. He started to kick and punch until I was on the ground. And then he kept kicking. And then there was blood between my thighs. Jesse was there. She called 911 and tried to make him stop. No one could though. Finally the red and blue lights shown through the window and people were coming through the door and there was the snap of handcuffs and I was on a stretcher. Jesse stayed the whole time. The doctor said that I was lucky. If the cops hadn’t shown up Dallas could have killed me. The baby had just started growing fingernails. I went home a few days later. Work understood that I needed a few days. Maybe even a few weeks. A few months went by and I didn’t bleed again. I haven’t bled since. No more curly black hair on babies. No more bloating. No more change.

A year had passed. A year of bruises fading and nightmares. Then Jordan showed up. So soon after everything.

I don't want to say any of this though. Jordan doesn't need this. I don't need this. I stand up and step away from him.

"I'm going to stay with Jesse for a while."

"Stella..."

"Please."

He stands up and steps forward. "No."

"Please."

He grabs my arm and pulls me to the bed. He's not very strong. He finishes brushing my hair. The tug of each tangle releases me. I start to drift off. The restless night is finally catching up to me. Jordan pushes me down until we are both lying in the covers. He pulls me close and my head rests on his chest. The towel falls around me and he tugs it away, letting it fall to the floor. I easily drift off. When I finally wake it's almost time for me to head off to work. And there are new sketches on my arms.

Jordan is sitting up.

"Please don't wash them off tonight."

"I want to spend the night at Jesse's place. My place."

He laughs a bit and looks back at me. Such pretty blue eyes.

"I still don't want a tattoo." I bite my lip, ready for his anger. He just laughs again.

"Okay. I can wait."

**Jesse's Lack of Rhythm:
The Sweet Smell of Bleach**

The worst part about being a maid is the sons that don't know how to aim. They could be twenty-two years old and still not know where to shoot their piss. Or worse yet, how to dispose of tissues properly after a flip through a *Playboy*. Is *Playboy* a bit out dated? I guess Tumblr porn is a better example. I should probably ask Morgan later... no never mind, not the point. The point is that after a minimum ten years of jacking off into god knows what, one would think that these boys could learn how to hide it better. Take the trash out, wash a sock, something. But no. They have to leave their dirty tissues all around (not in) the waste basket, just for me to clean. Girls are different. They can at least hide their vibrators under the mattress or in the underwear drawer. They don't leave it out for the maid to see. The worse situation there is if they have a particularly violent shark week. Then all bets are off. At least the families don't ask me to wear anything particular while here. Plus, the house that I clean on Wednesdays has a great sound system. Ella and Frankie and Nat swoon me away and I scrub at tiles and swipe away dust. The Preservation Hall Jazz Band on Pandora is pretty decent. It almost seems like fun. By the end of every day I am sweating and smell like Clorox. Sweet and pungent. Clean yet dirty. If I could just smell like bleach then it would be fine. It's the best smell in my day. It doesn't try to hide itself in floral or lemon flavors. It's just bleach.

I collect the two-hundred owed, each left in a crisp white envelope on their kitchen tables. Some of the families leave me an apple or a sandwich to take home. Stella used to split them with me, back when she was around more. She would sometimes ask the families for their recipes, especially when they left me their homemade matzo ball soup. It became such a hit in the diner that the boss man gave her a nice raise. Stella, Dallas, and I spend it on craft brews and whiskey. We probably should have saved it up instead.

Now I have to dust her old room, ever since she moved out. I haven't been able to clean it yet. That might take her smell out of the room.

Would that make the quiet better or worse? Would it ache less to have her gone?

I just finished cleaning the Jerkowski's house when my phone started to buzz. I flip the top up, careful not to detach the duct tape from the battery cover.

"Jesse?" Someone says. The voice sounds like a boy going through puberty. That could just be the static. "Jesse, are you there?"

"Who is this?"

"Munch."

"Who?"

"The piano player?"

"Oh." Right. The little blonde kid who joined the group a few weeks ago. "Where did you get this number?"

"Stan." Ugh. Stan. With his stupid fedora hat and vests. Poser. Who even dresses like that anymore? He's lucky that he can sing, otherwise I probably would have knocked his pearly whites out a long ago.

"What's up?" I grab my backpack and cash from the kitchen. I make sure to lock the door behind myself and put the key back under the eco-friendly welcome mat. My forest green truck sits on the street. The last time I pulled it into the driveway oil leaked all over the pretty white pavement. It took me hours to scrub that out. My knuckles were bloody for a week. Stella threw a hissy fit that almost made Dallas cringe. He told me about the salt and soda water mix that would clean it out faster. Stella wanted me to quit then and there. Sadly my band does not make

enough for that to be a possibility. And the poor bumper on my baby... it may be forever dented at this point. Duct tape can only do so much.

“Well,” Munch sounds a little breathy, despite the static. “See the thing is that I’m new to town and don’t really get the public trans yet and I don’t wanna be late to rehearsal, especially since I just joined the group and Stan is kinda scary and I know that –”

“Munch, just spit it out.”

“Could I have a ride to practice tonight?”

That makes me pause.

And then I laugh. My truck’s door squeals as I hop onto the leather seat. “Is that all? Where do you live?”

“Really? Are you sure? I can try to figure out the bus if it’s a pr –”

“Munch.”

“Market and Prospect.”

“Be there at 6.”

“Seriously Jesse, thank you so much for this. I just moved out here and I still don’t really know my way around and people kept telling me how easy public trans is around here but they never said how to figure it out and I sold my car right before moving a few months ago and I promise this won’t be the regular thing with us I ju –”

“It’s cool, Munch.”

“No, really it –”

“You’ve already thanked me four times. I get it.”

“Yeah, bu –”

“Munch.”

“Stopping.”

It wasn't static on the phone. He really does sound like he's still going through puberty. He must have had the crap beat out of him in high school. But at least he stays quiet for the rest of the ride. Winter is in full swing right now, freezing the streets and slowing the speed limit. A few years back the salt almost ruined my poor baby. Dallas replaced half of the innards and lubed up the breaks to keep up with the bitter cold. He even found a good dealer to trade parts with at his shop. I wish that he had taught us how to keep up with the repairs rather than handle it all by himself. Then I wouldn't have to blow money on mechanics anymore. Leave it to Dallas to find some new way to screw us over.

Then again, he did do worse than fix the car.

Perspective.

Munch is dreaming out the window, fogging up the glass and drawing pictures. I'll have to clean the smudges later. I turn the volume up and hum along.

There's this note that my sax will hit, right before the drums hit and the bass kicks up. Just before they start singing, when it's just me, and the notes flow and my hips swing. Right then and there, when the sweat creeps down my back and the crowd fades away. Color and life springs out, infecting those around me. I am everywhere and you are with me. I can see it, the light pulling us all together, pulsing with my blood, pooling in my veins.

I am life.

I am sound, worming into your brain.

Myself inside of you.

Until the song fades away.

Am I still with you? Do you remember me?

Can anyone feel me, waiting and wanting, grasping?

We arrive at the *Blue Room* a few minutes later. As one of the oldest jazz clubs in the city, the place has a reputation of quality bourbon and crappy speakers. It adds to the atmosphere, so says Bernie, the owner and my new employer. Stan is up on stage, fiddling with a guitar, hat cocked to the side. His corkscrew curls always pop out of the sides, tickling the top of his ears. I used to play with those when he would kiss me. It was about the only thing that he was good at. Thank god that ended quickly.

His new fan girl is off to the side, watching his calloused fingers as they strum the cherry wood guitar. Ash falls and drifts from his skin the faster he goes, almost pulling me in. But something was missing from the notes. There was no warmth in the tune, nothing to fall into. It could not cradle me as so many other songs had.

Munch has already run ahead of me and planted himself firmly at the piano. Stan said that the kid was some kind of musical prodigy back in high school. They kicked it in pep band together, an extracurricular I'm sure that his parents forced Stan into. Such a wholesome nature may conflict with his pseudo hipster persona. Munch would probably own up to it if I asked. He seemed like the type to be proud of his high school days. Stan said that the kid's main instrument was the flue, but he can play almost anything if you gave him enough time. At the moment he's testing the keys to make sure that everything is in tune. I set my sax down before climbing up with the two of them. The other guys should be here in a bit. I look out and see the mood lighting reflect off of the tables and chairs, all slimy from years of sweaty glasses and fingerprints. I wish

that this place would use bleach. Something to mask the old cigar smell. Something to get rid of all this dust. We sit and wait for the rest of the crew to show up. Munch is staring off into space, his fingers gliding along the keys, not making a sound, only feeling as he went.

The club is always closed on Monday nights, giving us ample time to prep for this weekend's show. Plus the guys are always late. I consider taking out the sax and warming up. Instead I lean back against the piano and feel the notes vibrate through my body.

If we do well this weekend, Bernie said that we could be the new regulars, giving us a solid six days of play. A solid paycheck every two weeks, plus tips from the crowd. Days and Mondays off, other than rehearsal. I could feel it, so close to creeping up the poverty line. The tension ever present in my stomach would be gone. Stella would be so proud.

I can't tell Mom about this until it's for sure. She worries about me so much...

Minutes pass and the guys still haven't shown up yet. Munch has started playing something, his foot tapping and head rolling. Tension has started in my stomach, gnawing away, making it harder and harder to ignore. Maybe I'm hungry. The boss always lets us grab some of his snack stash in the back. Munch is playing something classical, something for a ballroom. It sounds too classical for my tastes, no real rhythm or humanity attached. Jazz has a fingerprint on it, a feeling of time and work and love. It's unpolished and real, like the arms of a man or the taste of a good beer. It's all over this club, the feeling of time.

I hope that we get the gig. I want my mark here.

Is that why my chest is so tight? My skin feels antsy... hot. Burning.

Where are the guys?

I go to stand up when I notice him out of the corner of my eye. He's leaning against the door frame, rag in hand, wiping at the grease that never seems to leave his skin. And he's smiling at me. Small and warm. My chest starts to tighten.

Oh... Dallas why? Why are you here? I sit back down, my legs curling tighter into myself.

Bernie comes out and hands Dallas a bulging white envelope. They shake hands and Dallas turns to leave out the back. He doesn't wave goodbye.

I rush to the bathroom and vomit into the toilet.

Rehearsal went well after the boys showed up. Stan tried to give them a good lecturing about being on time, but they're the best we can get. I drove Munch home in silence, chugging water the whole time. The music couldn't even ring me out. When I finally arrive home and walk through the door Stella is on the couch with a cup of tea, feet curled under her. This has been happening more and more lately.

She looks up and smiles. "You're home."

I set my sax down and walk into the kitchen to grab a beer. Chili is simmering on the stove, enough to last the two of us several days. There's also a pie baking and fresh bread cooling by the window.

"Is something wrong?"

"What makes you say that?"

"Is there?" I walk back into the living room and see that she's huddled closer in on herself. Our favorite tribal blanket, one made for Eskimos, is tucked around her. It's only then that I notice the duffle bag in the hallway. "Are you staying longer than the night?"

“I do live here.”

“Well, yeah, technically. But...”

“But what?” She sets her tea down. “Do you not want me here?”

“No, of course not...” I take a deep breath and sit down next to her. “Never mind.”

She leans into me, resting her head in the crux of my neck. I scoot under the blanket with her. It’s burning hot. “How was rehearsal?”

I take a swig of beer, careful not to jostle her head too much. “A new kid started.”

“Is her any good?”

“He kept suggesting that we add a flute to the ensemble.”

She laughs and sits up, taking a sip of tea. “He sounds cute.”

I pull her hair out from the sloppy bun resting on the top of her head and rake my fingers through the matted locks, kneading the knots until my fingers run through like water. “Like a puppy.”

“Anything else?”

I settle back into the couch, dragging her with me, and start braiding her hair. “Not a thing.”

Munch needed a ride the few rehearsals, bouncing in the passenger seat, switching the channels and CDs back and forth.

“You have a very limited collection.”

“What do I need other than the classics?”

“Kpop? 80s Rock Ballads? Electronic?”

“The fuck is Kpop?”

“Korean Pop Music! Have you logged online in the past five years?”

“I don’t own a computer.”

“Jesse! How can we ever be friends now?”

“Acceptance?”

“No. Reeducation is in order. You need help.”

We pull up to the club earlier than normal and I grab the spare key from my glove compartment. It’s nice being the “responsible” band member. Munch is still babbling about all of the music I should love and it’s starting to give me a headache. The kid has so much damn energy. It doesn’t help that Stella has been throwing off my groove since deciding that she lives with me again. And now Morgan keep texting me about how upset Jordan is. Because I have such a handle on my own shit that I can now juggle the romance disaster that is Stella’s life.

And Munch is still fucking talking.

We walk inside and flick on the lights. Munch runs up on stage and opens the piano lid before sitting down. I hop up with him and sit on the floor, waiting for the others. Munch immediately starts playing and I lean back and close my eyes. It’s that same tune that he played the other day. So sweet and... slightly sad. Maybe not as vapid as I originally thought. It makes me want to curl up and cry from the sheer tenderness of the tune. I try to clear my throat but that only makes my eyes sting more.

“Do you compose your own music?”

“I used to, but it never turned out how I wanted. This is from a movie.”

“Which?”

“An anime called *Howl’s Moving Castle*. It’s the theme.”

“Never heard of it.”

“That’s because you live under a rock.” He pauses. “It sounds better on a flute.”

“Don’t ruin the moment.”

He just laughs and continues the song. A swelling is beginning in my chest, replacing the constant gnawing of anxiety. A knot in my shoulder relaxes, one that I wasn’t aware existed. I start to drift, the world turns blue, and everything feels light. No energy, just existence. I don’t notice how much time has passed until the guys show up. Munch immediately stops playing and I stand up. My head feels fuzzy as the blood rushes to the rest of my body. The owner isn’t here yet, so I run the back to turn the speakers on. I head back to the liquor cave, stocked from floor to ceiling with whiskey and wine, find the power box and flip the speakers on when I hear something behind me. I turn and tense.

Dallas is standing in the doorway, filling up every in, frozen. My chest tightens and my legs start to shake. I need to get out. But I’m still lightheaded from earlier. No, now. Now now now. Is there room behind him? Around him? He is everywhere. Everywhere.

Why is he smiling?

“Long time no see?”

I try to laugh, but my chest feels too tight. He takes a step closer. I back up and feel the fuse box dig into my back. He smile widens a bit. He turns toward the whiskey and grabs a bottle, examining the label with more care than I thought possible from him. I look at his hands again, always stained and battered. I wish that I could scrub him clean, bleach away the memories and the feeling in my gut.

“The owner says that you guys have a big shot this weekend? You nervous?”

Still no opening. He brushes his curls back and tucks the strays into the ponytail. Such clean hair. Could I wash away it all? Could we... Is it so wrong that I...

Such filthy hands.

“I’ve mis —”

He moves a bit closer to me, leaving a small space between himself and the door. I make a mad dash, brushing against his side as I go. My skin burns as I touch him. I run out into the main room, trying not to hear him calling my name.

Work the next day is brutal. The new family that I picked up has four children, all in their teen years. And no one knows how to clean the shower. Mold has grown over the grout, black and green and fuzzy. How have they not called someone earlier? I’ve filled three buckets with bleach water to no avail. I had to pull out my secret weapon: baking soda, peroxide, and lemon juice. I scrub and scrub until the walls finally resemble the color white. I ruined three toothbrushes in the process.

Why is Dallas showing up now? Why now, when Stella may actually be moving on? Or fucking it all up. I don’t know at this point. Morgan called me the other day to bitch about how moody Jordan has been. We’re supposed to get a drink tonight, but I don’t know how much I should tell her. Is it wrong to explain Dallas to her? I’ve hinted at it... Stella might get mad... and... it is her business. I don’t need to meddle. But I did tell Jordan already... and Stella blew up at me about that... Plus it’s Morgan. That’s a no go with information. But Dallas being here... that complicates things. Why am I even surprised that he’s there? I’m such an idiot. I should have quit the *Blue Room* after he and Stella broke up. He’s the one who introduced me to Bernie. He got me the audition in hopes that I could finally quit cleaning. He wanted me to have more time for my music. I never should have done it... and now I love the place so much... and how could I explain this to the guys? Sorry, we can’t take this great gig, by sister’s insane ex is

friends with the owner and doing work on his car. Does that mean that he'll be at my shows? This is just... too much. I can't let Stella find out. If she comes to a show and sees him there... will she break down? Will she run to him? God my stomach is in knots. And I can't get that stupid song that Munch was playing out of my head. It just keeps spinning and spinning until my breath falls away. So loud in my own head that Frankie and Ella are drowning. And my chest feels so tight... so ready to burst. To cave in. To something. Something to make this go away.

Why won't he just go away?

It's all about timing. Hitting the F with your band mates. Meeting the right person at the wrong time. Getting to know them before they meet your sister. The feeling when your sound weaves into the audience just before they start to cheer. The silence after a set finishes and everyone soaks in the energy.

My timing has always been off.

I'm so lost in thought that I don't notice the blood leaking from under my fingernails. Fuck. I scrubbed too hard. The mold is all up though. I wash my hands and bandage my fingertips before rinsing everything again with bleach and water. Stella will be fine. I will be fine. She works for the rest of the week while I perform. I can figure something out by then.

It will be fine.

Stan is calling me. I pull off my rubber gloves and gently open my phone. "We have a problem, J."

"This really isn't a good time."

"Boss man is looking at a new band for the club."

"Fuck... you're... you're fucking with me, right? This isn't funny man."

"I wish, J. He's auditioning them today."

“Well what do we...?”

“Nothing man.”

“There has to be something.”

“We can’t get in and scope them out. We just gotta nail it this weekend.”

“Should we...”

“Just keep your head in the game Jess. No screw ups.”

Morgan is waiting at the bar after our opening set that night. The real house band is setting up for their final round. They’ve been playing here for thirty years, not as long as the bar has been open, by far. But still... thirty years and they all have families and kids... and no cleaning jobs. Tomorrow is the big day.

Morgan already ordered me a draft PBR and a water to hydrate. She had a shot of green apple vodka, bottom shelf, sitting in front of her. Her bony ass is digging into the red leather seat, her hair faded from the usual cotton candy to a soft, babyish shade. The kind that you would find in a newborn’s room. Of course that’s off set by the way she’s eye the bartender.

“Not your best set.”

“Good to see you too.”

“You sounded nervous.”

“And this is helping...?”

“Just trying to be honest.”

“Well that is your specialty Morgan. Oh wait...”

“Hey, what Jordan doesn’t know won’t kill him.”

“You act like you hide your extra-curriculars well. You know that he knows, right?”

“Psht. Sure, just like Stell knows how to handle her relationships.”

“Oh, please, tell me how you hate my sister again. It is my favorite topic.”

“She hasn’t spoken to Jordan in days, Jess. Days.”

“We need to stay out of it.”

“The hell we do. Those two –”

“Are adults.” I pause to sip my PBR. Just as bland and watery as I remember. “Besides, I’ve meddled enough.”

“Fine. If you wanna be a chicken, let’s change topic. Any new dishes lately.”

“None that I care to mention.”

“So no one serious.”

“No one really meets my quota.”

“You’re too picky.”

“Just because I don’t hit on bartenders...”

“Please, you cannot tell me that you don’t find that woman attractive at all. She’s practically a stereotype for her profession.”

“I can’t say that I do.”

“You breeders man...”

“I don’t like labeling myself.”

“Well, don’t look now, but there’s a guy staring at you.” I start to turn until Morgan grabs my arm and stops me. “I said don’t look.”

“Do we know him?”

“I don’t. But, man, is he a dish. Prime delicacy.”

“You sure he’s not looking at you?”

“No chance. All you. Here,” she let’s go of my arm. “Take your hair out, real slow, and flip it over your shoulder before looking at him.”

I laugh a bit. “Seriously?”

“Just do it.”

So I do it. I let my hair fall from the band and even bite my lip for extra measure before turning to smile at him. And that’s when I see his small smile in return and my cheeks turn red and I turn back around. Shit. Shit shit shit.

“What’s wrong?”

“I know him.”

“Wait, really? What’s his name?”

“It doesn’t matter. He’s bad news.” I quickly tie my hair back up before chugging the rest of my beer. I’m tempted to order another when the bartender places a glass in front of me. It’s an IPA. I love IPAs. The bartender doesn’t need to tell me who it’s from. Dallas and I drank these all the time together. Stella hates them. She says said that they’re way too bitter. She likes light, refreshing beers. I glance back over and see that he’s still staring at me. He’s sitting with some friends, the guys from his bowling league. They all have those matching shirts on, the baby blue ones with the red stripe down the sleeve. None of them notice me. Just Dallas.

I want to take a sip. I want to take my hair back out. “We need to go.”

“What’s wr – ”

“Please, Mor?” I gather my jacket and start weaving through the crowd. I feel Morgan’s hand on the small of my back, her own way of showing that she cares. That she’s here and nothing will happen. That Dallas isn’t dangerous.

But what about me? Who can keep anyone safe from someone like me?

When I was a kid, before Stella popped out, Mom use to take me to this weird house with her. A friend of hers, some woman with choppy brown hair and dangle crystal earrings, she lived there. There was a living room that I would wait in while she hung out with her. They would talk and laugh for hours while I played with my second hand Barbies. The woman had this record player that they would put on to keep me entertained. Most of the time it was just classical or old hippie music, you know, stuff about love and peace and all that. One day she put on Ella Fitzgerald. I didn't know it at the time, but that's when it clicked. Her voice... god, I could never have that voice. I was out of myself, out of my body, floating with her words. I wanted to be those notes, coming out of those crappy speakers, crackling with energy and movement and passion. Mom's friend only played jazz for me after that. She even saved up and got me my first sax when I turned four, a little over a year after Stella was born. Stella would watch me work to have the lung capacity to make noise, as terrible as it was, sometimes crying when it got too loud and unpleasant. The screeching that would come out of that thing... it took me years to play a note, any note, that didn't sound like it was coming out of Dad's ass. Mom stopped hanging out with that friend after Stella, saying that she didn't have time for her anymore. So the record player was gone. The woman did give the Ella album before disappearing. She said that we need to hang onto the moments that change us, and the people. We need to always remember what made us into who we are.

She was as full of shit as I remember.

After finishing up the cleaning for today and collecting my \$300, I hop in my truck. There's a missed call from Munch on my cellphone. He probably needs a ride again. When I pull

up Stella is hoping into her boss' car for the night shift. She smiles and waves goodbye. I need to get ready for the show tonight. I go inside and jump in the shower before calling Munch. Twenty minutes later we are on our way. His bouncing is making the knots worse.

"I'm so excited! My first show with all of you and we've been working so hard! Oh it's gonna be great! You know what would make it better?"

I choose not to respond. Stan sent me a text earlier. Apparently the other band is good. Really good. How did Stan even find that out?

"Jesse? What would make it better?"

I sigh. "If you say a -"

"That's right! A flute!"

"Munch..."

"Just think about it Jesse, it could bring the whole sound together!"

"Munch, really..."

"Maybe that's why you guys haven't landed a solid gig yet."

"Excuse me?"

"It just wasn't working until I got here!"

"You cannot be that arrogant."

"You don't know me that well."

"Munch. Stop. You're pissing me off."

"You're right. It's not a maybe. It's a definite from my presence and talent."

"Munch you are cross -"

"Can't you just hear it? Because I -"

"MUNCH. Can you please, PLEASE, stop?"

Oh shit... where did that come from? Oh God... Oh God oh God oh God... I can't even look at the poor thing.

"I'm sorry... I just... had a bad day. I need some silence right now, okay?"

He doesn't say anything. We go the rest of the way just as I asked. And somehow that is worse than him babbling. We finally pull up and Munch jumps out before the truck is even in park. I sigh. This is gonna be a fun set.

All things considered it went well. Munch didn't do his usual warm up, but he played well throughout the set. Everyone was in time with each other and the crowd danced and whistled along. We bounce and smiled and the owner seemed happy. Stan stood back for my solo on the finale and man, I was on fire. And the spotlight hit me and I swung with my beat and just as the crowd started to fade away and I hit my note, the note, the one that kept me with everyone... all I could feel was Munch.

He hasn't even looked my way.

I tried to talk to him, to apologize again, but he just sneaked away after our bow. And he's so tiny... I can't find him in the crowd. We have another set in an hour or so, for the later crowd. So I grab a bottle of water, sad that this place has such shitty beer, and laugh with a few patrons to pass the time. I can't find him anywhere, no matter how hard I look.

Stan is talking to the owner as I make my way over to the bar. Fuck... did we sound off? We must have sounded off. We didn't get the gig. I'll be a cleaning lady forever because I pissed off our piano player and ruined the chemistry between all of us. I messed up. It's all my fault...

I see Stan and the owner shake hands just before Stan walks to me.

"First rounds on me."

“Is it my birthday?”

“We did it.”

“Did wha –” Wait... That... crap I have to sit down. “You better not be fucking with me, Stan.”

“Well, kinda. It’s a ‘you guys are good, don’t fuck it up.’” He leans over and gives me a hug. And god damnit I’m so happy that I give him one back. Stan orders us two IPAs on tap and we clink glasses.

“What about the other –”

“Boss man’s a dick.”

“He... he just wanted to psych us out?”

“You surprised?”

“Yes.”

“Forget it. We finally got it Jess.”

“We got a good group.”

“Yeah, Munch really levels us out. I’m glad I found him again.”

“Yeah... Hey Stan?”

“Hm?”

“What’s Munch’s deal?”

He pauses and chuckles a bit. “Getting a little crush?”

“No, idiot. I pissed him off earlier and...”

“Oh, shit dude. That’s not good.”

“Seriously?”

He nods. “Yeah man. Kid’s wicked sensitive and can hold a grudge. He practically sabotaged a half time show once because our conductor made fun of his height.”

“Ugh... fuck...”

A few girls are waving Stan to come over. He pats my shoulder before walking off.

I chug the rest of my beer. I just wanna go home... And I now have to pee. I can do that before running home. Leave it to me to ruin a night like this.

I head to the back to take a leak and run into something hard, something warm. It puts a hand over my mouth and drags me to the liquor cave. I hear the door close and the lock click. The smell of stale cigarettes and motor oil fill my nose. Warm arms catch my waist and pin me against the line of bottles and boxes.

“Long time, curls.”

Fuck fuck fuck no. No no no.

“Dallas,” I mutter against his palm. My stomach clenches. I squirm and push, but crap he is too tall. Too warm. “Let go.”

He takes a step back and releases me.

“Cur -”

“No. Dallas, get out of my way.”

“Or what?”

“I’ll scream.”

“Go right ahead. It’s practically sound proof back here.”

He was right. All I could hear was the music, vibrating the bottles and floor. “I still want to leave.”

“But why?”

“Dallas... please... I don't want to see you.”

“But -”

“No.”

He takes a step closer, his arms on either side of my head, pinning me with his heat against the wall. I look at his hands, scarred from that night with Stella. How much of that blood was his?

“Dallas, let me go.”

But he grabs a handful of my hair, tilting my head to the side as his mouth comes down on my pulse point. I wish that bile would fill my mouth, repelling me to him. I wish that my body wasn't heating up. I wish that I wasn't leaning in, but I am. “Don't.”

“What's the problem?”

“Is that even a real question?” But despite that my heart was racing. I haven't been touch in so long... so very long. Since that one night... that night when he was always so warm. When I fell into him and forgot about everything. Now his mouth is moving up my throat. I grab a handful of his hair and push him closer. He needs to get away. Far far away. But instead he pulls me with him and kisses me. My arms wrap around his neck and he's pulling me closer. Please be closer. My hands move toward the buttons of his bowling shirt, pulling them apart one by one. His are moving up my shirt, across the sweaty skin of my back.

Wait... his hands... his scarred hands...

Stella.

No. No I can't. No more.

“Stop.”

“Why?”

“Because I said no.” I try to push him away, but he has too much of a lock on me.

“Dallas. Enough.”

But he’s not listening. He still has me pinned against the bottles. I push against him, but he is as hard as I remember. And his hands move just as they did before, so very long ago. I say no against his mouth, but he must not hear me. I thrash and push to no avail. I try to let out a scream but his mouth absorbs it. I bite down on his lip and he pulls away, replacing it with fingers. The taste of motor oil fills my mouth. Copper liquid is all that I can smell and taste. His hands start to move up my shirt and I scream against his hand. *Please please please no. No no no. Let go.* No one can hear me though. I hear a bottle break next to us, but even the smell of liquor can’t drown him out. He pins me to his chest, his other hand holding my ass in place. I slap and scratch and punch, but that spurs him on. Munch’s song starts playing in my head, moving faster and faster. Losing me in the notes. Pushing this away. His hands on my breasts. His mouth on my face. My pulse pounds. My palms sweat. One of his hand moves up and begins ripping my hair. Just as his other hand starts to work at the button of my pants the lock clicks and Munch walks in.

“Oh, sor...”

Munch’s face... His cheeks are bright red. He looks a bit embarrassed before taking in the full scene. A key glitters in his hand. I can hear people moving in the hallway. Cold air rushes in with him, making the hair on my skin stand on edge. His arms, holding the door open before, shake in an attempt to be prepared. So small... so soft. So not Dallas. But he still looks like he’s trying to be ready and I can feel the blood leaking from my mouth and dripping down my chin.

“We were just finishing up,” Dallas smiles and pulls his hands away. He brushes his hair back and pulls a cigarette out of his jean pocket.

“There’s... There’s no smoking in here,” Munch says. “Maybe you should go.”

Dallas laughs. “The owner won’t mind.”

“I think that the others inside will. They... wouldn’t want Jesse... inhaling...”

Dallas smiles and looks down at me. Then he sees the blood and his natural bravado falters. My body wants to collapse... but I want to be ready in case it happens again. He reaches out to cup my face and I flinch. He looks so sad... so scared. Munch moves a bit closer and breaks Dallas’ concentration. Dallas could hurt him, and I’m almost afraid that he will. Instead he walks away, stroking my hair one last time before leaving. He walks a bit faster than normal, the length of his legs taking over. Then he’s gone and the air around me cools a bit. My knees finally give. Deep breath. Deep deep breath. Nothing happened. You’re okay. I curl my knees against my chest and my breathing speeds up. I can’t get enough oxygen. It just keeps coming in and everything feels tight and the blood had finally stopped flowing in my mouth but now there’s another saltiness on my face. And the breaths just keep coming and pushing against me and it’s all too much. And that stupid song... still there. All all too too much. And then a new pair of arms are around me and Munch tucks my arms to my sides.

“Jesse.”

Everything is tightening. My chest. My body. All curling in until I become myself. Until I am nothing.

“Jesse, you have to relax.”

It’s my fault. I gave in. How could I do that to Stella? How could –”

“Jesse stop breathing in.”

That... that doesn't make sense.

"You have to exhale. That's the only way to stop hyperventilating."

"I... I don-"

"Breathe. Out."

And so I keep pushing the air out of me until I can't anymore and take a small gasping breath before blowing out again and again. With each breath my body relaxes more and more. I sink against Munch and wait for it all to stop. For the quiet to begin. I don't know how much time has passed. I fall into his soft chest, trying to match my pulse to his slow, rhythmic one. Eventually Munch helps me stand, keeping his hands around my waist. I feel so tired. We head back out to the main stage and he tells the others that I need to go home. He grabs my keys from behind the bar and drapes my coat around my shoulders. After helping me into the truck I mumble the directions to get back to my apartment. My head is pounding and I want to wheel the window down, but that seems just too hard right now. The small space is too hot and my jeans stick to me uncomfortably. Everything smells like sweat and motor oil. Do I smell like that now? Will I never be clean?

We finally arrive home and Munch helps me up the stairs and unlocks the door. We make our way into the bathroom. He sits me on the toilet and cranks the shower nozzle until the mirror steams up. There's no mold in here. It's just clean, beautifully clean.

"Do you need help undressing?"

I shake my head and he leaves, closing the door behind him. I can hear him in the kitchen. I slowly peel off my clothes and survey myself in the mirror. A few bruises are blooming over my hips and arms. Stella and I always bruised easily. Our parents eventually got used to us always crashing into tables and walls. We just couldn't go to the hospital. Never

enough money for anything. I wanna call my mom... I make my way into the shower, crying out as the water hits me. I start to shake and curl into a ball. Everything burns against my too raw skin. Everything is stained. I stand there, shaking, until the tears finally subside. I rinse out my mouth and scrub down with Stella's homemade honey wash. Sometimes, when I miss her being here, I smell it. If you mixed cooking grease in it's like she never left. Like we were still clean, before we met Dallas. Minutes pass and I can still hear Munch out in the kitchen. I turn the water off and towel down. I left my pjs in here from this morning and slip them back on. My favorite big blue t-shirt and sweatpants. They belonged to my father. He let me keep them when Stella and I moved away. I leave the bathroom, releasing the steam into the hallway. Munch is sitting at the kitchen table, staring off into space.

"Thank you."

He jumps and holds a hand to his chest.

"Sorry."

"You don't have to -"

"For being so mean earlier. I'm sorry."

I take a seat across from him, my chair scrapping against the cracked tile floor. "I would offer you something to eat, but I don't cook."

"You never learned?"

"My sister. She's a cook."

"Where is she now?"

"She lives with her boyfriend."

We fall back into silence. Maybe I could order pizza.

"Do you need a doctor?"

“What?”

“Do you need-”

“Of course not.”

“You’re pretty beat up.”

“This was nothing.”

“Jess-”

“You don’t know how bad Dallas can be.”

“Dallas?”

I bite my lip. I stand up and look in the fridge. I still have a few Mooseheads left over from last week. Hopefully they haven’t skunked out yet. I pop both of them open and place one in front of Munch.

“My sister’s ex.” I take a swig. “Not the best guy.”

“I noticed.” He seems like he wants to know more, but can’t ask.

I sigh. “We hooked up before him and my sister met. And then... once or twice... after they became... a thing.”

“Does your sister know?”

“Why should she?” I take a deep breath. “They were pretty happy... until later.”

Munch takes a sip of beer and leans forward in his chair. And I want to tell him. About Dallas. That one of the few times I couldn’t... say no... that night... when Dallas kissed me and I gave in. I had missed him so much. Wanted him so much, for so long. Stella loved him and I couldn’t take him from her. But that night I gave in... and then a week later... she was in the hospital.

Munch reaches out and cups my bruised face. There are no callouses on his hand. He must take care of them. They smell like soap. Just soap, nothing else. My chest starts to tighten again and finally the real tears spill over my face. My fault, my fault. It was all my fault. If I hadn't given in... if I had stayed away, he never would have... she would be... my fault... always my fault. And the sobs ripped through my chest and I feel forward into Munch's chest. His arms wrap around me, holding me together.

My fault. My fault.

How do you apologize for that? What... says that?

All my fault.

We stay like that for a while, until the tears finally stop and all that's left is dry heaving. Then that ends too. Eventually.

I lift myself from Munch's chest and sit back in my chair. His eyes are puffy too. But he smiles and cups my cheek, resting his forehead against mine.

"Hey, Munch?" My voice is horse. "What's your real name?"

He laughs a bit and pulls back. "Ezekiel."

That makes my tears dry right up. "What? How does... Munch?"

"It's short for Munchkin."

"But... You're not that short."

"Hey, it's better than what they called me in Middle School."

"Which was..."

He laughs a bit. "Nugget."

**The Annoyances of Morgan:
Just a Little Bit More**

I'm really glad that I didn't do that extra line last night.

It was staring at me, perfectly straight and rounded, tinted blue from Mickey's lava lamp, the one that sits next to my favorite squishy couch. That lava lamp that I could stare at it for hours after a dragon session with him and his favorite bong, just before his hand moves over my knee and the button of my skinny jeans comes undone. When I start thinking of actors like Garrett Hedlund or that guy from Thor instead of the person who hasn't showered for days and is erratically moving over top of me. Someone who, in my mind, should be lasting at least a few minutes longer than this.

He wanted me to take the line. It makes things easier for us, fast and simple. He doesn't have to take anything off and I just lie there, ready for it. And sometimes I almost like it. I even imagine that I still like him. That his jokes are funny and his hands feel good. But the line never lasts long enough for me to stay. I always wonder, right before walking out the door, if we used a condom or not.

But I didn't do the extra line. I wanted to, but Jordan was ringing in my head.

"You have work tomorrow."

"I can make it on time, we don't open the shop until 3."

"You'll be mean to customers."

"Like they care."

"You're going to get addicted."

"You say that about everything."

"For me, mei mei?"

So I said no to the line. I left before that special moment when the jeans would pop off.

Now that a few hours have passed since the lava lamp and my squishy couch, I wish more than ever that I had taken it. That I had felt that elation, that burn, as the powder worked its way into my bloodstream and made me feel like light and beauty and hunger and love all at the same time. All of it rolled into a sting and drip in the back of my throat, a bitter sweet taste in my mouth. That deliciousness that can only come from the forbidden. This wanting has made my legs shake all day and god damn it my head is killing me and my eyes won't stop watering. I glance at the clock. It's only 9:00. The shop is dead, even for a Tuesday night, and Jordan has been playing that stupid old person music that Jesse got him turned onto. He's barely spoken to me in days, and for once I don't think that I did anything wrong.

I take another swig of my Coke, trying to ease the edge with caffeine and irony, but eventually I need to pace or find a joint or sleep or something. When was the last time I slept? My head is pounding. Anything to make this headache stop. Do I have some Vicodin floating at the bottom of my bag? I search through and only find Altoids. I chew them up as fast as possible, tasting more of the lint than any trace of cinnamon. I flip through the books in the waiting room, glazing over my brother's designs. Harsh lines with a slight softness in the curves. He individualizes each one depending on the person and their body shape. He always says that people love tattoos for the externalization of self. Or something like that. I always zone him out when he talks like that. People are people. There's no "internal self" that can be brought out through a needle. People want them for attention. Nothing else.

It's 9:03. Come on. Be closing time already.

I pop a few aspirin and start to rearrange the waiting area. Jordan loves these beat up leather couches. He got them second hand at the local thrift emporium. A gigantic warehouse, three stories high, filled with people's crap. It smells like old people in there. And hot sauce. I

don't even know why those two go together, but in there it's all I can smell. Jordan had to get me a cupcake afterward just to make the memory a bit better. A vanilla one with sparkling blue icing and sprinkles. I wish I had taken a picture of it so that Jordan could ink it on me. He always promised that someday he would do one for me. Just a small one. But it should be special, whatever he draws on me. Like what he does for Stella.

Jesus I'm tired.

I continue to push the couches and glass tables around, pushing until my bony arms start to ache. Maybe the loveseat by the wall? No, that would hide the fancy designs that Jordan painted. When we opened up he wanted the waiting room to be as comfortable as possible. The walls were painted a soft baby blue with tribal prints and flowers patterned in various shades. The wall closest to the door had blackboard paint on it with chalk sitting nearby. Jordan wanted people to leave a mark when they left, just like he did for them. He wanted to remember them, even if it was only for the night. Just no dirty pictures. If you drew a dirty picture Jordan would throw you out. Maybe the TV could be next to that wall. No the dust could ruin it. Think Morgan. Oh man, the place is a wreck. I can smell my own pits and my hair is sticking to the back of my neck and I don't have a hair tie. God damn it. If I had just taken that line instead of listening to Jordan, none of this would have happened. Why does he always have to butt in anyway? He should be out wooing Stella, not invading my personal time.

And yeah, where is Stella? Today's her day off... she always comes in on her days off. Unless she's trying that whole "space" thing again. Which would explain why Jordan hasn't come out to yell at me for moving the furniture. Again. Or checked the appointment book. Or counted the draw... oh shit.

I quickly push everything back to where it originally was, hopefully, and make my way back to Jordan's workshop. The building is small, leaving maybe ten feet between the front counter and the disturbingly white back room where Jordan inks people. It smells like Clorox back here, like usual, but the smell is more pungent. It burns my nose. It burns like the line, making me crave the drip that I always feel in the back of my throat. The rush in my brain as the room feels more alive and every –

Stop it. Now. You're at work.

Jordan must have just wiped everything down again. That's why it smells so strong.

He's sitting at his small white worker's desk right next to the inking table. His reading glasses are making their way down his aristocratically long nose. My nose. Well, it would be, but his has a small bump on the bridge from when it broke in high school. Some jerk kept smacking my ass in the hallways and Jordan was fed up with it. Too bad Jordan's not a fighter. The other guy's shoes does didn't even get dirty.

"What do you want Morgan?" Oh boy. He sounds stressed. There are papers spread all over the desk. It must be bill time.

"Can't a girl come back and see her big bro every once in a while?" I hop up on the ink table next to him and lie back, my pink hair fanning all around me.

"I'm four minutes older than you."

"That's practically ancient."

"Furniture not entertaining enough for you?"

"I'm bored."

"No pretty ladies walking in?"

"None that are my type."

“You sure that’s all it is?”

“Are you trying to say that I have commitment issues, die guo?”

“You’ve chewed off half of your nails Morgan.”

I glance at my hands and see that he’s right. My fingers are inflamed and red. Some of them are bleeding. When did I do that? I pull my legs up and hug them to my chest.

“Do we have to fight?”

“We wouldn’t if you would ju –”

“I’m trying...”

I hear Jordan place his glasses on the table, but refuse to look at him. He gently starts to pet my hair and my eyes drift shut.

“I’m sorry, mei mei. It’s not you.”

“Is the shop doing badly?”

“Of course not.”

“Do you want me to stop moving the furniture?”

“That doesn’t bother me.”

“Do you wanna go out and get some ice cream?”

I hear him laugh, soft and rough. “It’s January and snowing.”

“So? That just means that it won’t melt.”

“Mei mei.”

“We could paint the place again? You said that the designs are starting to fade?”

“We can’t really afford to shut down for a few days right now. Unless you want to give up the hair dye and dedicate that to the shop.”

“What about the tat con that’s coming up? We always make a lot of money there.”

“Not this year.”

“But that’s where you get to see all of the new guns and ink? Remember when you found that glow in the dark ink?”

“Yeah, but it doesn’t sell well.”

“Die guo, what’s wrong?”

I hear him sigh. “Stella’s gone.”

I open my eyes and look up at him. There are rings below his eyes. “So? She always flips between your place an –”

“Morgan, she’s gone.”

That makes me sit up. “Like... gone gone?”

“Yeah... Like gone gone.”

Jordan buries his head in his hands. I hop off of the table and wrap my arms around him, carefully cradling his head under my chin. He sinks into my chest and takes several deep breaths. After several minutes he pulls away.

“It’ll be okay,” he says and smiles up at me. “You cool with closing early tonight?”

“Only if it means ice cream.”

“Pizza first.”

“Bu –”

He stands and kisses my forehead, ruffling my hair a bit. I sigh and turn to go lock up.

“Morgan?”

I pause in the hallway.

“You’re really cutting back?”

“Don’t you trust me?”

“Not with this.”

I laugh a bit. “I’m practically sober.” And I lick the blood from my fingers, tasting the saltiness of my flesh. Just because.

A few days pass and I don’t even want a line at this point. Well, I do, but I want is to punch that little bitch’s face in more. That’ll feel better than... well it feels better in my mind. How dare she? To my brother? To Jordan, the sweetest person ever? Like she can land anything better. For Christ’s sake, she’s homely. Why does Jordan like her? He could get so many girls. Enough hit on him in the shop. But no. All of them offering to strip down for the smallest tattoo or piercing. Stella just rolls in one day and acts like an uppity I don’t even know what, and suddenly Jordan’s wrapped around her little finger. I mean JESUS the boy is wiped. Any time that I try to bring up the fact that the girl keeps his balls in a deadlock he gets all defensive and starts spouting how I don’t understand. The hell I don’t. I’ve met girls like her before and Jordan deserves better.

At least, that’s why I’m standing on her porch, right?

Her seriously decrepit porch. You would think that Jesse would keep things in better order. The door could use a fresh painting and some better hinges. And I think that termites may be living in the foundation. The place creaks enough. Oh god, don’t think about that. That’s just too gross.

I dig around the top of the doorway, trying to find that elusive key. Jesse always said that I’m welcome to the couch. When my hands finally close over the brass object and I unlock the deadbolt. The outside may be gross, but Jesse’s job has definitely leaked over on the inside. Not a dust ball in sight. Even the furniture is polished. I’m actually afraid to touch anything.

“Jesse?” I hear a voice call from the other room. Stella. “What are you doing back so early?”

I walk down the hallways, the walls littered with photos of their family, and I glance a moment too long at one picture. I’ve never seen a photo of their whole family before. The mom... wow. She’s pretty. Like, really pretty. How the hell did Stella come from someone as smokin’ as that? Her platinum blonde hair stands out amongst a group of brunettes and redheads. She actually looks like me when my hair isn’t dyed. I can see where Jesse gets her looks from. But the mom... her smile seems off. Like something is just beneath the surface, waiting to get out. Something sad...

“Jesse?” She calls again. I shake myself from the photo.

I slowly enter the kitchen, my motorcycle boots scuffing the floor a bit, and I see Stella’s back as she makes herself and Jesse a cup of tea.

“Chamomile okay? I ran out of blueberry.” She’s wearing Jordan’s shirt. His old one from the high school art club that he ran. It’s blue and gold... our school colors, signed in markers from all of our old friends. People that were good to Jordan and I. People who cared.

People who didn’t fucking abandon him.

“Yeah,” I say. “Chamomile sounds great.”

Stella jumps and spins on her heel dropping the mug of tea, causing water and glass to splatter all over the tiled kitchen floor. Her eyes are wide and she’s clutching her chest, trying to catch her breath. I just smile and shove my hands in the pockets of my hoodie. Stella sinks to the floor, curling her knees into her chest.

“Don’t pass out on me. Jordan would be pissed.” I wink. Because why not? I grab the broom from behind the fridge, right where Jordan always keeps his, and sweep up the debris. By

the time it's all in the trash Stella has calmed down enough to scowl at me. But she made a second cup of tea when I wasn't looking. I guess disdain doesn't validate rudeness in her mind. Is she wearing boxer shorts with the shirt? Are those his?

She sits at the small mahogany table, her knees pulled to her chest and the mug balanced on her bony knee. I grab the mug before hopping up on the counter. The kitchen reeks of her style. It's small with soft yellow walls and a window over the sink. White lace curtains blow from the wintery breeze. I can see the soft, cotton-like snow start to come down, melting on the windowsill. The dark wood table is a bit scuffed, but clearly has many years left in it. Homey and comfortable.

And so fucking stereotypical.

“So how's life Star?” I blow on my hot tea, relishing in the thawing of my fingers and nose. I hate the winter.

“Can everyone *please* stop making that joke?”

“Sheesh Stell, lighten up.”

“Says the girl who broke into my house.”

I pull the key out of my pocket and roll it back and forth over my fingers. “It's not breaking in if you have a key, princess.”

“Oh, because that makes it better.”

“It makes it less illegal.”

She takes a sip of her tea. “To what do I owe the pleasure, mei mei?”

I purse my lips. “Don't call me that.”

“Then get out.”

“I was hungry.”

“Are you fucking kidd –”

“You’re being a bitch to Jordan.”

That made her pause.

“He’s a mess,” I say, rolling the key back and forth a few more times before pocketing it.

“He deserves better.”

She takes another sip of tea, her breath fanning the steam up into her nose and cheeks. She then stands up and walks over to the dingy fridge, pulling out some sort of leftovers. She pours the contents into two bowls and heats them in the microwave. My leg starts bouncing as I wait. When she’s done a small serving of pumpkin chili sits in front of me. My stomach gets the better of me. We eat in silence for a few minutes as I scarf the food down, not even feeling the heat as it makes its way down my throat. My body groans in pleasure, almost aching from the foreign object lodging its way into my digestive system. Jesus... have I been that bad about eating?

I finish long before her and start sipping the rest of my tea. Stella is eating at her usual slow but steady pace, her eyes glued to the bowl, taking in the static silence that constantly surrounds our interactions.

“So that’s why you’re here?” she finally says. She finishes her food and sets the spoon down on the table. “Pleading for your brother? He must not know that you’re here. He would freak if –”

“Well, yeah, but it’s worth the risk of him being a little pissy.” I sip more of my tea before taking it down in one big gulp. Stella stares at the table and plays with her ridiculously long hair. It always reminded me of a mop, flopping against her small frame. As black as the night sky. If she lightened it up or cut it, she could look almost pretty.

I hope down from the counter and brush my hands over my jeans.

“You hate me,” she says, not looking up from the table.

“And?”

“You have no reason to want me back with him.”

I just smile and walk out of the kitchen. “Tell Jesse I stopped by?”

Work was pleasantly steady that night. Several people came in for very intricate ink and I got to flirt with some pretty cute guys. Jordan likes to spend a good amount of time with each customer, crafting the perfect design for their body. He always says that women are easier to ink. Their curves make the images intrinsically more beautiful. Like a canvas that wants the art to work rather than working against you with hard lines and chiseled bone. I can't complain since I just stare at their asses the whole time, a prepubescent boy always ready to go at any given moment. I tried to ignore the need for a line, like a constant itch in the back of my brain, making its way to the frontal lobe. I clean the waiting area and rearrange the furniture until it looks exactly the same as when I started. I chew on my nails and drink my soda. Dr. Pepper tonight.

We eventually closed up at 2 AM. I try calling Jesse but it goes straight to voicemail. She's probably driving home now. Jordan counts the draw down and I bring a few PBRs to the front for us. Jordan doesn't like me back in the work room, so we almost always hang out up here. He doesn't want me getting the area dirty. He's super paranoid about germs around the guns. I hop up on the glass counter and pop the tabs on our cans. We both take a swig and he ruffles my hair. I grab one of the old issues of *Inked* that Jordan loves subscribing to. I flip through and see a few new models and kits on sale. Maybe I should get him a new gun for our

birthday. It's coming up in July and I seen him eying the Cyclone shader that came out last month. I think that it comes in black and orange... plus I really gotta save up for that...

"How'd we do?"

"Pretty good for a Wednesday."

"If you weren't so into the design beforehand we woulda done way better."

"Because taking the art out of 'tattoo artist' makes so much sense."

I chug down the rest of my beer and pop a new one open.

"Take it easy mei mei. It's not a race."

"I have no retort, therefore beer."

"I could make you some tea."

"I seen Stella today."

I take another swig as he freezes in the middle of counting the credit card slips. He takes a deep breath through his nose and covers his eyes with his hands.

"At least tell me that you were nice."

"Not even close."

"GOD DAMNIT MORG-"

"She deserved it."

"She didn't deserved to be yelled at by you."

"I didn't yell."

"You had no right."

"I had every right. You're my brother."

"Morgan."

I take a deep breath. “Look, all I did was tell her to get her head out of her ass. Okay? Besides, she’s totally still in love with you.”

Jordan takes another deep breath and goes back to counting the slips. Eventually he gives up being around me and takes all of the paperwork to the back room.

“Die guo, come on. You know that I –”

“Lock up before you go,” he says. And I just finish my beer and leave the furniture alone.

Jesse called me back after I left the store. I was thinking of heading over to Mickey’s until my phone buzzed. She swings by and we head back to my place with a six pack of chick beer and some pot for my one hitter. It barely does anything for me at this point, but Jesse likes to indulge every once in a while. I live in a studio about half a mile from the shop. The plaster is starting to crack and the building has a few rat problems, but I barely spend any time here as it is. I put the six pack in the fridge, two in the freezer, noticing the beyond ancient pizza on the top shelf next to the Brita water filter. The light’s been blinking red for the past few months. Jordan would kill me if he knew.

“How was the set tonight?”

“Slow on tips, but we tried out a few new pieces. The crowd seemed to like ’em.”

I pull my mattress down from the wall and smooth the comforter out for Jesse to sit. She slips off her Vans before curling up, Indian style, in the center.

“How’s the puppy working out for you guys?”

“His name is Zeek and he’s great.”

“Or you could call him Munch like everyone else.” I head back to the fridge and check the beer. Good enough. I pop the caps off against the counter and bring one over to Jesse before sitting next to her. I take a quick swig. “Has he asked you out yet?”

She looks down the neck of her beer. “It’s not like that.”

“Dude are you blushing?”

“Shut up.”

“Dude, you are so –”

“Don’t man. Seriously.” She downs half of the beer and settles into the bed a bit more. “Besides, he’s too young for me.”

“Jess, you’re twenty-seven.”

“Five years is a lot.”

“Yeah, if you’re a teenager.” I hop off the bed and reach into her purse, pulling out the CD buried bellow the keys, gum wrappers, receipts, and hair clips. “Is this the latest mix that he made you?”

“Mor, give it back...”

“Dude, he went prehistoric for you.” I boot up my laptop and pop the disk in. Music works its way out of the subpar sound system, flowing over us, glazing our minds. This song is so familiar. I look at my screen and see that it’s “Last Kiss” by Pearl Jam. Oh. My parents loved Pearl Jam... well... Mom loved them. Dad didn’t really listen to music. I take the laptop over to the bed with us and settle back with Jesse, my head resting against her stomach, her breaths lulling me up and down. The softness of her curves cradle me and I snuggle in deeper as she begins to play with my hair. I feel that familiar charge in my pelvis when she touches me, so I sit up before things get a bit out of hand. Instead I grab the baggie and my one hitter, breaking apart

the leaves before packing them in. Jesse pulls out her lighter and takes the first hit, the thick pungent smoke pouring in and out of her mouth. I shake my head and look away before taking a hit of my own. The smoke rubs against my throat the wrong way and I start coughing. I take a few swigs of beer and look at my Mac.

“Dude, did he put Johnny Cash on this mix?”

“I know, I know.”

“Does he know that you only listen to Jazz?”

“Why do you think he makes the mixes? The last one was just classical stuff from Japan.”

I settle back once more, this time away from Jess, and wonder about Mickey. He used to study astrology when we first met. He loved to look at the stars and see what their mass was and constellations. Whenever a new mass was found he would go on for hours about it, how the universe is always expanding and subtracting, how at any moment it could all be gone. He took me to a planetarium on our first date, first official one at least. I loved hearing him talk about the stars, something that I had never cared about before meeting him. He told me about the improbable, yet possible desire for humans to find aliens on other planets. How he thinks that it's just part of the human desire to not feel alone. How all we want is companionship. He told me that he didn't need that kind of hope, he had me. He bought me glow in the dark stars for my bedroom, but I tore those down months ago. Mickey worked at a factory in town back then, melting down old metal parts that people recycled so that they could be used again. He was saving up to go to college and finally become a real scientist. He wanted to see everything so long as it was somewhere else, somewhere better.

“So if Munch is too young, what about that dude the other night?”

She laughs a bit. “Which one?”

“The tall guy with the ponytail? He was watching you and...” I trail off when her face goes pale. “Jess? You okay?”

“Yeah...” she takes a swig of beer before downing the rest in one shot. “Just... I don’t like him... he...”

I reach toward Jesse and rest my own soft and fragile hands against her bare arm, my fingers dancing against her freckles. I’m about to pull away because this is Jesse, my Jesse. And she’ll go away soon. Just like Mickey did. Just like Jordan. But she looks so scared and sad, so fragile in a way that I have never seen before. So instead I move in close and cup her face. It was meant to be a comfort, a feeling of solidarity between friends. But she’s softer than I expected, fitting against me just right. I plant one soft, hesitant kiss on the corner of her mouth, ready for the angered reaction. But though unresponsive, she does not pull away. I try again and this time she kisses me back. Then we fall together back against my pillows and she pulls me closer and clothing hits the floor and all we are is softness and breath. She falls asleep next to me when it’s over and I curl closer to her, clinging.

She’ll be gone when I wake up.

I’m back at Mickey’s and I’m staring at the line, a rolled dollar bill in my hand. Mickey is rubbing my shoulders and working his way down my back, down to the edge of my shirt. I know what happens next.

I had first met Mickey at a party shortly after moving into town. Jordan and I had just opened up the shop and some guy invited us out to a party at the warehouses by the docks. Jordan didn’t want to go. He wanted to finish the sketches for the waiting room books. Plus the

designs for the walls weren't done yet. He wanted the place to be perfect. I wanted to go out. So I said yes and hopped in the guy's car. I don't even remember what he looked like. He just had snakebites put into his lips and was majorly swelling from the process. I had to drive us there so that we didn't crash. Once there I lost myself in the crowd, the flailing bodies, the heat, the flashing lights. My heart matched with the pulse of the music, erratic yet steady, and my body took over. I started grinding with strangers and surrendering to the waves of energy. I was sinking, deeper and deeper, until I was lost. Or I would have been, but a pair of hands were on my waist, one pair, moving with me, holding onto me. I looked down and seen the bandaged and callused fingers on my hips. So I spun into the person and met Mickey. He had an easy smile, open and kind, guiding me through the crowd.

“You seemed kinda trapped in there.”

“I was having fun.”

“Oh... well sor –” But I kissed him before he could finish. It was a sweet kiss, just like his smile. And I pulled him closer, my hands searching up his hoodie for the skin underneath. But he pulled away and led me back to his car, one of those old boxy Volvos from the '90s. We kissed for a while in the backseat before he asked me back to his place. He didn't like sex in cars. We drove back, windows down, the sticky summer air on our faces. He played Bon Jovi's “Dead or Alive” and sang along. His place was actually clean back then. When he wasn't working or studying the stars, Mickey liked to bowl in his free time and shopping for oddly designed throw blankets and eating Mexican food. We sometimes would play video games and try local craft brews. Then one day we were hanging out with his friends and someone pulled out a party favor, they showed us how to break it down into a power and line it up. I had taken up pills a few years ago during high school. Nothing to intense, just a few pain killers and some other junk that

friends would mix together in a cocktail. Sometime we would crush them up and snort them, just for an extra rush. Lately that had been boring. They didn't feel as good as they use to. But this line... I didn't feel much until way later. Mickey's touch was so much more now. The room, the furniture, it was all moving so much faster, so much brighter. His friend started playing the guitar and we danced until it was time for another line. We kept going for two days. Then I looked at my cell phone and seen all of the missed calls from Jordan. I told Mickey that I didn't want to see him anymore.

A few days later I had this itch just beneath my skin. This need. Everything seemed so dull: the customers, the shops, the city. All of it needed some color, something to bring it to life. To bring me to life. Jordan didn't have to know where I was going. I could keep it under control. So I went back to Mickey's. He clung to my side, pinning me there with him, enveloping me in his warmth. It almost felt comfortable, almost like when we first met. When the chip on his front tooth was new and quirky rather than part of the scenery. When his lava lamps were soothing. When his throw blankets didn't have holes in them.

Now it's two years later and I need the line. I've wanted it for days. The bong wasn't enough this time. It's never enough.

Jesse and I haven't talked in days. She won't call me back. Everything hurts.

So I lean down, holding the straw up into my nasal passage and take it in. An electrical shot to the brain. A drip in the back of my throat. A sting and numbness to my nose. I take a few more before sitting back and feeling the air on my skin. Feeling the charge and the lightness in my head. The rush of blood singing in my veins, ready for sensation and movement. I start rocking to the beat of Pearl Jam, feeling that lull all over again. . When Mickey touches me it almost feels like it used to.

Almost.

I woke up the next morning with Mickey wrapped around me. I pull his sticky limbs away and slide off of the mattress. There were no sheets between myself and the springs last night. And the stains. I find my clothes and sneak out the front door. Mickey doesn't move through it all.

When Jordan and I were kids we never really talked. Sure, he would get the gum out of my hair and I chased the bullies away for him, but we weren't close. We had different friends. He liked art class and crafts. I kicked soccer balls and loved gymnastics. He spent his time at the local library reading and taking the free Sunday morning art classes. He loved figuring out the way things worked: bikes, pens, sewing machines, computers. He took apart spare scraps from the junkyard just to see what went on just beneath the surface.

Then Mom left.

Dad was really busy back then. We lived upstate where it snowed eight of the twelve months. His plowing and salt company was just getting on its feet. This was before he had workers and a good amount of savings. Mom was always running around making sure that Jordan and I were fed and washed and doing our homework. She worked part time as a waitress at the local diner. She was so pretty, like a model with long legs and the platinum blonde hair that Jordan and I both inherited. Always toned, her body never showed the pregnancy of naturally birthing of two children. People practically threw money at her. Every man in town, married or single, requested her tables. But all of it went to us. On her off days she sewed our clothes and cooked enough food for the week. She bandaged our knees and read us stories at night. When she wasn't working or cooking, Mom went from yard sale to yard sale trying to find

gifts for us. That's where Jordan got his first "Art for Beginners" book. I got a skateboard and a helmet. She couldn't find elbow or knee pads anywhere. She loved walking us to school, singing with Jordan and cheering me as I rode. If I close my eyes I can almost see her in the distance, waving and cheering me on.

Then she was gone. Dad was working on the latest snow storm and had pulled an all-nighter. Jordan and I woke to pancakes and a note saying goodbye. Jordan didn't sing on our way to school that day. I left my skateboard at home.

I always imagined her in California smiling for the camera and being her glamorous self. She would lay out in the sun, her skin soaking in the vitamin D while men wait on her. She would be happy wherever she went. She would never have another family because we were her children. This was her time to live a life. A free life. Jordan imagined that she would come back. She had to. She loved us. She said that every day. But she didn't come back. I knew that she wouldn't. And Jordan cried so much those first few months. There were no stories or hugs at night. Dad worked more than ever. It kept on snowing. I was playing outside one day after school. I didn't want to be around my friends. All they wanted to do was ask questions and trash talk her. I wanted to build a snowman and went inside to make Jordan help me. He was tearing apart his art book. His sketches were torn and scattered all over the room. His paints smashed against the crisp white walls. Broken glass scattered across the carpet. Jordan was in the middle of it all, down on his knees, furiously clawing at the book.

I rushed over to him and ripped the book away. "Jordan, stop."

"She hasn't even sent a postcard." He tried to stand, but his bare feet scared me and I stopped him. "Let me go."

"Jordan, this has to stop. She's gone."

“What do you know?”

“It’s been months. Don’t you think –”

“Just shut up Morgan.”

So I stopped, letting him cry it out. I held my big brother and waited for the sobs to end. I wrapped my arms around his prepubescent shoulders, feeling them spasm against my chest. And I cried too. Because she never came back. I knew that she wouldn’t.

These thoughts... I hate them. So much. I want to turn around for the line.

Jordan... my big brother. My die guo. He always, always knew what he wanted. Creation and color and life. The chance to make something that people will love. To see how everything works and to know what that means. He wanted simplicity and calm. For things to be stable. He wants that. People to be there when they say that they will be. Someone that cares and sees... He always had a place with the shop and art and Stella. He always knew what he wanted. I... never fit the same way. I don’t know the things that he intrinsically understands. I don’t have a place in his life. I’m not Stella.

So I keep walking, clutching the key in my pocket until the teeth cut in and my palm starts to bleed.

I have the worst fucking headache ever. It feels like my insides have expanded, pulsing, gushing. I want it to stop. If I go to Mickey’s it’ll stop. I’ve been so good... it’s been a week since I’ve been there. A week since the line. A week since Jordan has spoken to me. Oh god, my chest hurts. A stabbing, shooting pain rocks through my rib cage, right above my heart. It knocks the breath right out of me.

I go back to Stella's. Well, technically I've been here every day since the line. I don't want to go in while Jesse is there. She'll think I'm a basket case or something. But today's the day. Jesse is out while Stell is home. Finally. But I'm so tired right now. I let myself in, not even bothering to be quiet this time. She's sitting on that stupid squishy couch with a bowl of ramen and some tea. She's mid slurp when I walk in and plop down next to her.

"You can't keep doing this."

"You haven't called Jordan yet."

"Morgan..."

"No," I scream. I jump up and start pacing. The pain in my chest is moving into my bones. All of them. God, everything hurts. Sitting is making it worse. Movement is the only option. "Do NOT lecture me right now. You have not right."

"Morgan," she's trying to be soothing. It grates against my ears. God it's so fucking cold in here. I can't stop shaking. I've been shaking for days. "This is more complicated than you think."

"What's so complicated about love? You either do or you don't."

"This isn't about love."

"Then what is it about?" I stop pacing and turn toward her. She seems very tired, her face buried in her hands. "Do you love my brother?"

She rubs her face before looking up at me. She seems on the brink of tears. "I don't know."

I laugh. "Are you that fucking pathetic? You don't *know*?"

She sighs and sits stands to go into the kitchen. But I'm not letting her off that easy. I follow her in, right on her heels.

“Answer the question.”

“Morgan, what’s going on?”

“He doesn’t need me anymore. That’s what’s going on.”

“Morgan. You’re sweating.”

I look down at my hoodie. It’s drenched. My headache is worse. Its spread down my neck and into my shoulders. I chew on my nails, trying for some release.

“Why don’t you sit down?” She says. But I can’t sit. Sitting hurts too much. So I shake my head, but lose my balance from it because that was faster than I expected. Now my head is spinning.

Everything looks funny. Everything is rotting. My head is splitting open in the front, bursting open with powder and lines. Where’s my cell phone? I need to call Mickey. Fuck being good. Jordan hasn’t answered my calls and told me not to come to work. He’s ignored me for months because of this stupid bitch. Now Jesse is gone.

Mickey can make it not hurt. He can make it...

“I’m taking you to the hospital.”

No, I try to say. But my head... how did I end up on the floor? Why is it so cold? Is this death? I didn’t think that it would hurt this much. I curl into a ball and cringe away from Stella’s hand. Just let me die. Let it end. Let the pain end.

“Morgan...”

She starts to drag me along and I’m too weak to fight. She places me in the passenger side of some ratty old truck. I wonder why Jesse doesn’t have it while working before the world finally goes dark.

I wake up to florescent lights and cold starch sheets. I try to move my arms but plastic cuffs pin them to the railing. I struggle some more before giving up, ashamed of my weak rebellion. I try to take in my surroundings, but everything is too white and my head is swimming and I can't focus on anything.

“Easy,” he says. He touches my forehead and pets my hair. “You’ll be okay, mei mei.”

And that breaks me. I start sobbing and saying how sorry I am and how I was trying to stop for him but it just hurts too much and can he forgive me no he could never forgive me why should he I’m bad to him and I’m so sorry for being a bad sister. Please die guo. Please forgive me. I made it worse. I made everything worse.

Why do I fight with people so much? We always start yelling at each other right away. It’s like a button, a detonation of sorts, that I can’t help pressing. Blow it all up. Destroy it all. Even when I wanna make everything better.

Especially if I wanna make everything better.

He just pets my hair until I pass out again.

I wake up again and the cuffs are gone. Stella and Jordan are standing at the foot of my bed, talking.

“You don’t have to keep coming back,” he says. Bags have formed under his eyes. How long have I been here?

“I want to,” she smiles and hold up a bag. “Plus, what else am I going to do with all of the leftovers?”

Then there's an awkward silence. Jordan stares at the floor and rubs his hand over the stubble growing in on the top of his head. They stand like that for several minutes and I stay quiet the whole time, not wanting to ease their embarrassment.

"Thank you..." he says, finally looking up. "For... you know..."

"Yeah, of course." She rubs his arm and moves to cup his face before twitching away. Her eyes move over to me, blushing at the audience.

"I don't mean to interrupt," I laugh. But then I regret it because laughing hurts. Stella smiles at my obvious discomfort. Damn it I still don't like her. "Don't enjoy this too much, Star."

That wipes the smile off of her face. "Glad to see you're feeling better."

"Better than ever. So you two are back together, right?"

Jordan scowls at me. "Just because you're in the hospital doesn't mean that you get to be rude."

I laugh again and my chest spasms. It takes me a few minutes to catch my breath.

"Sorry die guo."

He tries to hold the scowl. But then he softens a bit when Stella touches his shoulder.

"Can you give us a few minutes?" she asks. He hesitates a bit, worry clouding his eyes. But I nod and he kisses my forehead before heading to the waiting room. Stella hands him the bag on his way out. At least she feeds him.

Stella sits at the foot of my bed and rearranges my covers a bit, tucking them around my feet. "How are you feeling?"

"Like shit."

“Yes... well the doctors have put you on some meds that'll wean your body off of whatever you took. It'll be much less painful.”

“Good to know.”

“But Jordan still wants you in NA meetings.”

“Does he now?”

“Rehab too.”

“That sounds a bit dramatic.”

“I don't think so.”

“We all know that's the most important thing.”

She starts to pick at the cloth of my sheets.

“Jordan says that you've been trying to cut back lately. He feels really guilty for... not being around for you...”

I just stare at her, waiting for the point.

“I'm sorry that my... that I pushed you to this. I didn't think...”

“You should be. Sorry, I mean.”

She sighs. “Morgan...”

“Stella, you know what I want to hear right now.”

“I don't think that this is the best time to talk about that.”

“No time like the present.”

“Jesse will be here in a few minutes. She's been really worried about you.”

Jesse. I smile a bit. She'll be here. We can be... whatever we were... something. But that's not enough to get me off track. “I'm in the hospital, Stell.”

She chews on her lip a bit. “I don't want to...”

“... talk about this?”

She sighs. “I do care about him.”

“Okay.”

“But... I need to do some stuff first.”

I purse my lips. “Like?”

Now it's her turn to stay silent. This is bullshit... she know that it is. I know that it is. But I've done all I can. So I give a quick nod, but that makes me dizzy so I sit back and try to ignore her smirk. She stands up and strokes my hair a bit.

“Go easy on Jesse, okay?”

“What?”

“Also, you can keep the key. Just try leaving some food for the rest of us.”

I laugh even though it hurts. Jordan and Jesse are waiting in the hall. I hope that she brought cards. I'm already bored.

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