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### Fever Dive: A Novel

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Fever Dive: A Novel  
by  
Sofia Nicole Ohrynowicz

Master's Project Adviser: Professor Cara Blue Adams, MFA

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the Master of Arts  
in  
The Department of English  
Seton Hall University  
South Orange, NJ  
May 2023

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College of Arts and Sciences  
The Department of English

### APPROVAL FOR MASTER'S THESIS

SOFIA N OHRYNOWICZ has successfully made the required modifications to the text of the master's thesis for the Degree of Master of Arts in English — Creative Writing during this Spring, 2023.

### THESIS COMMITTEE

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Adviser

Date

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Second Reader

Date

## Thesis Craft Reflection — “Fever Dive”

What propelled my writing from my initial proposal stages to the final version of my thesis is strangeness and defamiliarization. This is the heart of my thesis, as inspired by a serendipitous sighting in the summer of 2022. I came across a deep-sea diving shop in Nashville, Tennessee—a landlocked state. This real-life strangeness set me on the path to consider when reality crosses into unfamiliarity, if not impossibility, and how we can navigate our way out again. This concept is more popularly studied as the “uncanny” as coined by Freud, which remains one of my fascinations as it connects psychology with fiction. This is a delicate line that I toe in my manuscript as I constantly tried to take plausible elements and combine them with details to keep both me and my readers guessing about what is real.

One of the primary concerns of this manuscript in progress is to explore the dynamic between estranged siblings thrown into a situation where their world becomes dangerous and unfamiliar, much like the transition from childhood into adulthood can be. To align the reader with Harris and Eliza, I established an arc for these first five parts, plus a prologue, to characterize their relationship and the threat of otherworldliness at the start. I wanted to follow how their unwillingness to be vulnerable drives them apart when they need each other the most. Neither knows that the other is dealing with similar horrific, inexplicable events after swimming in the pool in the deep-diving shop. Until they realize this, they drown silently. Harris wallows in self-pity and depression over his hurt ego after he graduates without any job prospects. Eliza isolates herself from others to rebel against the emotional support that has been denied to her by her parents, brother, and her friends. However, neither he nor Eliza can survive to the end of the novel if they continue to think and act in self-destructive and self-centered ways. The literal

conflict of the novel is dramatized by the otherworldly water being that toys with the minds of both siblings, even turning them against each other, so it can eventually claim its prey.

As the first reader of my manuscript in progress, stories such as Algernon Blackwood's "The Willows," Lovecraft's "The Colour out of Space," and Tananarive Due's "The Lake" helped me consider tone in accordance with the horror genre when I began writing. One novel that had the most effect on the final structure of "Fever Dive" is Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*. As a result of a class workshop, I learned that the strangeness of the pool was unclear to my audience. When I reconsidered the setup of this thesis, I returned to Jackson's novel. *Hill House* tracks the descent of Eleanor Vance, an arguably queer-coded character, into insanity as a result of her time spent in the notorious Hill House. The novel toys with what is real and what is not in relation to the house's architecture and Eleanor's sanity. Without the prologue personifying Hill House as something more than just a house, the novel may hinge only on insanity from the suggestion of the supernatural. However, since this prologue also serves as the epilogue after this brief episode, this suggests there is a strange, impossible life to this structure that wanted to keep Eleanor inside forever. This prologue inspired mine as it gives the author a moment to set the audience up, warning them to be mindful of their steps, especially because the protagonists are not. This builds suspense and also establishes the tone without getting in the way of the necessary exposition.

Additionally, one chapter from Charles Baxter's craft book *Burning Down the House* had a major impact on my revision process: "On Defamiliarization." Baxter cites Gerard Manley Hopkins in his critical understanding of defamiliarization by paraphrasing "[He] appeared to believe that images become memorable when some crucial part of their meaning had been stripped away from them... You may not remember your violent abusive uncle very well, but his

blue glass ashtray or his decoy duck stays in your memory...” (Baxter 31). This concept of how images seem to appear familiar, only to reveal a new mystery about them is what drives me as a reader and writer. Carmen Maria Machado, for one, applies this technique in her story “Mothers.” In this story, the nameless narrator is left with a baby that her ex-girlfriend, Bad, allegedly gave birth to. Bad is a lesbian, however, and has only been with the narrator. There is no description of medical intervention either, which means the baby just inexplicably came to be.

While the story traces the abusive descent of the relationship between Bad and the narrator, the narrator learns to care for the baby who she decides to name Mara. The impossible nature of two biological women having a baby without any medical intervention is one element that amplifies the defamiliarization. More importantly, Mara becomes an image that seems to overlap with the narrator. As she reminisces on her relationship with Bad, she considers a moment when Bad led her “like a child” around Brooklyn (Machado 49). Other moments as their relationship soured suggest that Mara is an extension of the narrator, perhaps the inner child Bad stole and abused only to abandon with the narrator at the onset of the story. The only person Bad has made is the narrator, with love and severe emotional abuse. This might be the only interpretation if Machado does not throw out all the rules of traditional storytelling at the end. Immeasurable time passes between the narrator taking Mara in, starting to feed and care for her, leaving on a day trip with her, and returning home. Back home, people seem to appear inside to stare at the narrator. There is an older Mara, a younger brother named Tristan who the narrator “remembers” birthing, and a man and a woman. “The woman tells Mara to stay away, the man clutches Baby Tristan across his chest. They ask me who I am, and I answer them [...] Mara, remember how you kicked sand into that neighbor child’s eyes? I yelled at you and made you

apologize in your best dress, and that night I cried by myself in the bathroom because you are Bad's child as much as you are mine" (62). We become attached to Mara as a baby and the narrator as the only available decent caregiver around. Machado pulls this familiar rug out from under us with this confusion of time and identity.

There is a wonderful confusion in the narrative at the end as this new family arrives with an older Mara, her (real?) parents, and her baby brother Tristan. The structure breaks down as well; there is no more dialogue offset by quotation marks. The narrator begs her children to remember and jumps around in time as though she and the baby she had already experienced a full life together. The story ends as the narrator first says to Mara and Tristan to stop running because:

your mother will see, she will see and she will be so angry and she will yell and we cannot, we cannot, I cannot. I say: Don't leave the faucet on. You'll flood the house, don't do it, you promised it would never happen again. Don't flood the house, the bills, don't flood the house, the rugs, don't flood the house, my loves, or we could lose you both. We've been bad mothers and have not taught you how to swim. (63)

The most unique application of defamiliarization at play is how the narrative itself is made unfamiliar to the reader who has remained with it until the last two pages. Although we have been tracing one story, the ending interjects with an outside story, perhaps a blend of the narrator's own childhood and fantasy future. Machado expertly blends possible narratives on top of each other to create something unfamiliar. These stories in isolation, such as an abandoned baby, a woman who breaks into a family home, LGBTQ+ domestic abuse, are all plausible. On top of each other, these narratives embody defamiliarization. There are many directions that this story moves in, and we cannot tie down a single meaning to it. This is what Baxter seems to



encourage in the chapter “On Defamiliarization,” and her story became an important example for my thesis. While I could have written this thesis as a simple monster story, defamiliarization and narrative interruptions gave the story more of its own beating heart. Although the elements of defamiliarization I incorporate are more subtle in this thesis, this concept pushes the narrative forward. How much time passes when Harris is drinking? Is he ever hallucinating because of his drug abuse, or is there something else at play? These are not questions I plan to completely answer because there is not supposed to be a clear line between fantasy and reality. We can experience hallucinations that have a medical explanation, but fiction can also introduce elements that go beyond our understanding of reality. I do not want to isolate either of these infinite resources in writing, and I leave it up to the reader's interpretation.

Another major source for my thesis is Stephen King's *On Writing*. King discusses his life and struggles with addiction, but halfway through his memoir, he shifts his attention to crafting characters and the revision process. He describes the writer's toolbox and uses this image to explain the basics of writing. To summarize, he suggests that grammar and vocabulary go at the top, and they are supplemented by subjects (nouns) and predicates (verbs) (King 91). After explaining at length why adverbs and passive voice are the death of writing, he delves deeper and considers what an effective writing process should look like for any writer. “When I'm writing, it's all the playground, and the worst three hours I ever spent there were still pretty damned good” (115). Although King's book is a rant on his perspective on writing, his reflections helped me the most. This is not because he is Stephen King, a successful speculative fiction author, but because he expresses an idea I have heard or read from others I admire such as Neil Gaiman, Shirley Jackson, and Laura van den Berg.

Somewhere between my undergraduate and graduate careers, I forgot to approach writing with the mentality of having fun. The question of “what happens next?” often inhibits my ability to keep generating content. It stunts my progress, and this is something I had to contend with as I fleshed out my first draft. When King reflects on advice he got during his first writing job at a local newspaper, this changed my process of drafting. “ ‘When you write a story, you’re telling yourself the story,’ he said. ‘When you rewrite, your main job is taking out all the things that are *not* the story’ [...] write with the door closed, rewrite with the door open. Your stuff starts out being just for you, in other words, but then it goes out” (King 44). I originally began my thesis with a storyboard that I never quite finished. I believed this was the framework it took to move from the idea stage to the finished product, but this process did not work for me. This idea from King about telling yourself the story first, of letting yourself be the first reader, freed up my approach.

When I began my rewrite for the second draft, King’s book and Baxter’s chapter guided me back to discovery writing. “When all the details fit in perfectly, something is probably wrong with the story. It is too meaningful too fast. Its meaning is overdetermined and the characters overparented [...] The writer has decided what her story is about too early and has concentrated too fixedly on that one truth” (Baxter 26-27). Again, when I set out to initially write my thesis, I thought storyboarding would guarantee its successful completion. Instead, storyboarding took the fun out of reading and writing altogether, thus eliminating the possibility of defamiliarization. I only saw one possible path of what I needed to work toward and neglected to examine other possibilities to move in different directions. So, I began a new document and rewrote each page of the first full draft. I used the first draft as a guide for the story points I needed, but I also

considered the emotional targets I wanted to hit for each scene instead of writing in concrete chapters. This process reminded me of the importance of honesty, even in fiction writing.

One of my professors mentioned in one of my classes that good writing comes from honesty. Baxter says this as well, and so too do King, Neil Gaiman, and way too many of my favorite authors. This was not something I ever deliberated on because I thought to “write what you know” could be unreasonable, or even lazy. No one knows what it is like to be physically and psychologically tormented by an isolated hotel that wants to consume you and your family’s souls (*The Shining*). Or if they can, proving that happened is another matter entirely. Honesty, I thought, meant I could only write what I experienced. But unlike my character, Harris, I am not visibly disabled. I do, however, come from a similar background as a sister who often feels like she lets her siblings down. This honesty, insecurity, and even arrogance Harris experiences is not something I realized was a core element of his character until after my first draft. I often felt disconnected from Harris because I am not a queer man who lives with a hearing impediment, but this idea of “write what you know” and “write honestly” helped me find him. This got me to understand what he does and why on the page, and to let him make his own decisions, whether they are good or bad. This understanding and trust pried open my iron-clad grip on the strict plot.

Although cosmic horror relies greatly on the larger-than-life unknown, and sometimes gratuitous violence, there are more important elements that make fiction like this familiar to an audience. Fiction is where the only limit to telling the right story is your dedication to telling the story. The elements of genre mixed with defamiliarization can add to the underlying narrative instead of simply existing to thrill an audience. The narratives I read explore the known and unknown, as well as their effects on those who try to run away when that boundary dissolves. As

the Introduction to *The Haunting of Hill House* states, “The literary effect we call horror turns on the dissolution of boundaries, between the living and the dead, of course, but also, at the crudest level, between the outside of the body and everything that ought to stay *inside*” (Jackson x).

Although my characters experience turmoil and impossibilities because of their possession by the being, much of what the being does is simply reflect their darkest selves back to them. My creature may distort Harris and Eliza’s realities, causing them to act cruelly and irrationally, but there is an honesty about fear of the self in relation to their futures that both characters have to face. The creature identifies and uses this fear to “play with its food” until its prey is too weak to resist. But even beneath the blanket of water, light and the way to the surface can still be found through a negotiation between the one sinking and those looking in from the outside. At the end of my excerpt, Harris begins to see that he might not be the only one suffering. Something has changed with his sister, and for both of them to survive this trial, they must be able to help each other reach the surface.

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# Fever Dive

- Prologue -

The thing in the pool was asleep soon after the last fled in horror from it years ago. She found the pool undulating and glowing, but from the creature's perspective, this being intruded in its own domain. It did not know how to communicate, but it tossed the memory around, trying to pinpoint where it went wrong to see why this human realized she was in danger. The creature remembered a soft quiver that gave the human pause.

She bent toward the water, checking it to see if something was inside perhaps. She appeared to be looking for something, but that was ludicrous. If anything lingered inside too long, it would break down and become one with the endless body occupying this particular pit. But with her, the food was so near, so close. Because she wouldn't touch the surface, the creature extended a watery limb toward her hand, slowly and curiously. It hadn't had a human before. It barely knew what a human was, but learned quickly after that small taste as a drop landed on her hand.

The human screamed and ran, and she never came back. But the creature lingered on her skin, seeping inside and evaporating in the hot air of an outside world with so many more beings like her. Before this drop died off, the pool quickly learned there was much more out there than it could have imagined, and it wanted to get out.

The pool spread itself thin, working its way into the machines and pipes connected to it, seeking its way out. But it could only go so far before finding a block, and nowhere could it find the light that it had seen on the human's skin. It was all dark and cold and boring, and eventually, it gave up.

It was hard work being so still. Even though sometimes a few humans would wander in and toss aluminum cans inside, no one really wanted anything to do with it. The body learned by watching and caring for the refuse the humans tossed in, listening to the loud sounds that came from a box that could fit inside a pocket in their clothes. Only sometimes would someone fall in, but digesting took time. They wouldn't stay in the water for long, and would quickly climb out, trailing the body along the ground in droplets that would eventually die off separate from the main body. But it learned over time, taken outside by these humans to see what their realm contained before disintegrating.

It did not care about death and learned to let life forms approach it. It clung to them, sinking into their fur or skin, tasting and feeding and learning about the great wide world outside where there was so much else just like it. These morsels were enough to sustain the body, but not for long. Even a being such as itself could not last without food, so hibernation was its only option. Squirrels were mere crumbs in its ocean. It sank into the concrete, into the pipes connected to it, and found its way into others nearby. Somehow, as it searched for food, it found a way to wind itself through the room before it sank into a painful, starving hibernation. By that point, it had learned enough about the realm outside that it did not know, but wanted to, and it resolved to get out even as it drifted into a deep, starving sleep.

All it knew was hunger, and it had studied the humans, inside and out, and dreamed of finding a way out.

- One -

Harris' sister forced a loud laugh in the booth she shared with her three friends. Even though he looked away and considered taking out his beeping hearing aids, he could still see the scene playing out, thirty feet from the bar. Three of the four girls were on their phones, scrolling



and not talking, and Eliza had been gesticulating, ignoring the clear fact that they would rather be anywhere but here.

Each girl, as distinct as they were from each other, was mostly stone-faced. One had an earbud popped in, a bright white peeking behind her auburn hair curtain, and Harris wasn't sure how Eliza missed that. Eliza continued to play out a story he couldn't pick up on from the distance between them. She performed, ignoring her audience. The one with the earbud turned to the girl beside her who sported two black hair buns, and they rolled their eyes at something on the screen.

Harris looked down before Eliza caught his eye and focused hard on drying a highball glass he forgot was dripping in his hands. He was glad that he wasn't a waiter. It made it easier for him and Eliza to go on pretending they just shared a house and a childhood that ended long ago. They once shared their lives, but that was over now.

Even without really knowing her friends, he could see the rift between the trio and Eliza. It didn't seem difficult for Eliza to form closer friendships as she grew, although Harris thought he was once her favorite friend. Maybe that was out of pity. She was often invited to birthdays and sleepovers, but she seemed to be home a little more after Harris got sick.

Maybe she returned because Harris didn't have many friends. He was always quiet, preferring video games and books to the company of his peers as his ear infections, a side effect of the chemo that left his immune system weak, often left him outside of most friend groups that formed in his absence. It was nice to see her instead of being home alone with his bass, plucking away on scales as he watched reruns of 90s films instead of doing homework. How she didn't see that her friends were distancing her, he didn't know. He hoped he was wrong.

Harris remembered Eliza, at seven years old, dragging her purple sleeping bag into his room at night when there was a thunderstorm. Even if one of their parents was home, she still preferred to slip into his room, and he let her, every time. They were all each other had growing up, but they were on two different timelines. Harris left for Berklee while she was still going through middle school. She was beginning to form better friendships with kids her own age. Neither had cried when they left each other, but they signed their private “goodbyes” as his family entered Logan Airport to fly back to New York. They were three hundred miles away by the time Harris finished setting up his dorm room closet and managed to find a rolled-up joint in a plastic baggie on the high shelf of the wardrobe.

The bell from the front door sounded as a family of four thundered inside, waving at their skin with their fingers. They looked like tourists with their designer clothes, and Harris softly groaned when he read the woman’s lips that said “upstate” to the hostess.

“Upstate” was a loose term that meant anything north of Manhattan according to City People, as though New York City was all of the state. It didn’t matter to City People if you could see the skyline from the Tappan Zee bridge on a nice day—the city was its own special blue entity far from the remote red of the North. Harris could see that better now that he had finished college and slunk back home. The hostess led the family away into the main dining area, opposite where Harris stood and seethed.

He did not anticipate the anger that consumed him as he searched for jobs, hoping that this next one would be his ticket out of there for good. He had a degree from Berklee, what was he doing in this hick town? He deserved better.

As far as Harris was concerned, Barracuda Bar and Restaurant was not even adjacent to his definition of what he deserved: long nights at the top clubs or playhouses, supporting only the

best performers behind the scenes. Maybe even working at Madison Square Garden. He wanted to sleep through the day until lunch, when he'd get up, smoke, maybe drink something, and go to work—then do it all over again. He'd befriend musicians and actors, maybe even find himself climbing the ranks to work as an audio producer for the top musical groups. It wasn't money he cared about. It was prestige. And damn anyone who asked him about his love for music as a hard-of-hearing kid.

But, in the village of Glenn Heights, Harris had to drive past the scattered lawn signs in support of a Republican-red United States on his way to work. He drove under the thick green canopy of trees more than a century or two old, passing by a country-style local chain store selling candles and candy a few doors down from a gun shop, just after the acres of apple orchards. It was only a twenty-minute drive from his parents' grand house, but, of course, the tourists never saw that shop. They migrated north from the south, looking to flee the city for a few hours on the weekend.

The City People like the family settling into their chairs, scraping them against the old wooden floors and giggling, were dazzled by the small town that had some life in between its Revolutionary War history, even after nine o'clock at night on the weekends. And it was still so *accessible* to Grand Central Station. Glenn Heights was just an hour and a half ride away. It was oh so convenient. City People could peep at the autumn leaves on Bear Mountain in the fall, or sit beside the Hudson River and eat homemade ice cream from the local creamery in the summer, or take in the estuary's breeze on a warm day. All this for the price of a ticket and thirty minutes on a crowded train where they could see how the "other side" lives. There, the City People did not notice their sunburns until they returned home. It was the same red Harris felt the town tried to veil behind their local Hicksville pride.

If only the tourists walked just a little further to the Northwest, away from the sparkling estuary. But that was simply too far on foot, and Harris knew they would never notice the signs or the gun shop, or anything else that mattered. For once, he was thankful for his condition. No patron wanted to talk to him for long after noticing his hearing aids, which he consciously exposed from behind his chin-length hair whenever they attempted small talk. Besides, the more he spoke to guests, the lower his tip seemed to be. Or else, it was higher than twenty percent, possibly out of pity for his poor condition. He wasn't sure which was worse and decided to not think about it.

He stopped watching the family after they picked up their menus and returned his gaze to Eliza's table. He considered saying something to discourage her from trying so hard. A pink tint bloomed across her face as she surrendered to the leather booth seat and slipped out her phone. Because it seemed that she had finally taken note of her friends, he would say nothing. Not even when they were both home and bumped into each other in their joint bathroom.

All he had was another two hours of mixing drinks for the local retired folk, tourists, and college students home for the summer, and then he'd be back at his computer, scrolling just the same as Eliza was, looking for new jobs. But that would simply turn into another late-night session with his bong until he fell asleep.

That's what he really looked forward to as he steamed the wine glasses from the dishwasher over a pitcher of hot water. He rubbed them until they were dry and shiny, and then made the mistake of looking up and seeing Eliza. She gave him a thin-lipped smile and looked away. They shared a silent language with their faces, their own sign language, and this new term formed in her thin smile: "I see you, hi, but please keep your distance."

He copied her and looked away quickly, eyes landing on a booth across the wooden room. Two men, roughly Harris' age or perhaps slightly older, sat across from each other. One was tall and lean, the other was short and skinnier than a toothpick. The skinny one had bleach-blonde spiky hair with black roots. It was surprise more than curiosity that steered Harris' attention. Glenn Heights wasn't homophobic, not exactly, but it was unusual to see a gay couple in this particular spot.

Harris couldn't make out the other's face, nor could he lipread or turn up his hearing aids to better eavesdrop. But clearly, something happened. Even as Harris decided to not gawk at the couple, the blonde stormed past the bar, heading to the door in his silver Doc Martens. He was surprised that no one, except for Eliza's table, had noticed the spat. For a second he thought that maybe the town had changed while he was away, but when he noticed the girl beside Eliza had her phone camera angled at the man who stormed out, aiming to capture the couple's spat, his heart sank. He went back to work, thankful yet again that he didn't need to share the bar with anyone that day. Then, a hand clapped down on the counter.

Amanda, his manager, looked at him below her high-arched eyebrows. She was a self-righteous woman with short, red-dyed hair that was often stringy and greasy from her constant tic of raking through it with her fingers. She looked like a punk rocker gone corporate and carried herself just the same.

"New guy!" she half-shouted, not understanding how hearing aids worked even as Harris jumped. He wasn't new; he'd been a regular seasonal bartender for three summers in a row—not that he would correct her. She joined only six months before. Since Harris' first day, she proceeded to project extra loudly and speak slowly for him as though he couldn't understand her at all. Harris didn't bother to inform her that he could hear perfectly well.

Before he could ask what she needed, she spoke again. “So, it’s nearing the end of June, which means it’s time for some Fourth of July decorations. Y’know, an American flag, some streamers...that sorta thing, like the rainbow flags we did for June.”

“What rainbow flags?” Harris asked, immediately regretting his honest question by the look in her eye. He never noticed more than a single flag posted beside the front door and was surprised to see even that made its way into Glenn Heights.

“Just get ready to decorate next time you’re in. The boss says he’ll bring over a box from his house.”

“Jimmy has decorations?” Harris asked again before he could stop himself.

“Tell you what,” she leaned in. “I don’t like your attitude today. We’ve already had two complaints of you staring, and now this. So, why don’t you finish up and go home?”

“N-no, I just meant...”

“Don’t worry about it. Just go home and come back tomorrow, with a better attitude. Might do you some good to clear your head.”

With a finger swoop through her hair, she turned and strode back through the arch. As she exited, Eliza signed at him. *You ok?*

Harris nodded, and she flashed another thin-lipped smile as she pointed to her phone. Even though she could sign, he knew she was rusty, and slipped his phone from his pocket.

Her message read: *Going to Tatum’s tonight. Won’t be back, we’re kicking off the summer.* And then, a follow-up message: *Mom and dad know.* When he looked up, she was already walking outside the window, trailing behind her three friends, whose arms looped around each other’s shoulders. Eliza waved to him, then rushed to catch up with them.

He untied the mandatory black apron from his waist, balling it up in one hand. When he turned to leave, the man at the booth had looked up and locked eyes with him. The man gave him a gentle nod and an interested smile that brought out soft dimples by the corners of his almond-shaped eyes. Harris' breath halted before he hurried past. The fading scent of lavender caught him as he passed by the man's table and walked out of the back exit.

#

Harris caught himself missing the unwelcoming bar as he stared into his computer screen, black and white with job postings that clearly didn't want him. He scrolled, skimming, telling himself he'd stop in a minute. Just one more minute before he'd grab his bong and forget the tightness in his chest that squeezed more and more the longer he looked.

Three years of experience, entry-level position.

Minimum wage, eighty-hour weeks, in New York City.

Managers, with two years of experience, wanted.

Directors, with experience in musicals, wanted.

Engineers—with fifteen years of experience—wanted.

He finally turned away and tried not to curse his useless music engineering degree. He thought at the very least a degree from Berklee would catch people's eyes. Really, all it awarded him were a few interviews before graduation that consisted of "Wow, you're deaf and studying music?" or "So you're kind of like Beethoven!" or "So how do you *really* hear music? Is it as good? Y'know, with your condition?"

At least at the bar he could work and wish he was home, making plans to practice his bass or mash songs together that really never should be together for more social media clicks. He loved but mostly hated music now. It was something he knew he *should* do, and yet his base

remained tucked away in its hardshell case. He hadn't tried plucking at the strings since he left Boston.

He used to play any instrument he could get his hands on, from the piano to the piccolo. It was comforting to have an instrument to take home with him, a part of school that he could do on his own better than his math homework. Even when chemo left him exhausted, he reached for his instruments and compensated his silent practice when the ear infections began to recur. He would press the pads of his fingers against the buttons on his oboe or recorder, reviewing the movements of scales and songs.

When his hearing started to wane, he struggled to connect with the instruments he was once close with, until he picked up the bass. His parents wouldn't permit a drumset, citing that they didn't want to hear it when they were trying to sleep. The bass, however, vibrated in his bones. It was something he could feel, and the bass became his lifeline. Even with his diminished hearing, he wasn't afraid of losing the ability to play it. He could still feel the bass even if his body turned completely against him. It was a nice past-time by this point. No longer a career option though.

Harris leaned back in his chair and swept his eyes around the dusky room. *Fuck this.*

Harris closed all his tabs, not bothering to bookmark even the job openings he seemed slightly qualified for, and turned up his speakers. Quartered, his favorite metal band, queued up with the crash of a symbol. The rumbling bass thudded in his chest, as he opened his window and made for his bong hidden beneath his bed.

His hands quickly found the green monster he splurged on as a personal graduation gift, and broke open the sealed tin beside it for the necessary paraphernalia. In a trembling haze, he scraped the remaining flower out of his grinder into the bong. He didn't bother adding a screen,



just fresh water from a bottle on his headboard, and inhaled the butane from the lighter in his hurry to light the bundle. His breath tugged the flame to the yellow-green plant and he stifled his cough as the butane flattened into a spicy-sweet smoke. He pulled, held, and released, repeating until the cherry went black, and he laid back, lifting into the music. He removed his hearing aids and focused on the bass in his chest, the ease spreading through his veins, and drifting into quiet euphoria.

Harris planned to stay like that all night, basking in the lazy high and burnout to kick off a nice, dreamless, ten-hour hibernation. It was only a few hours before he was interrupted as his phone's light flashed at one in the morning.

Half-awake, he hit ignore, but the phone buzzed instead from the incoming message. Eliza's name popped up on the screen, so he grumbled, heavy with dehydration, and let his eyes adjust before looking at her messages.

*You up?*

*I need a ride*

He rubbed at his eyes with his free hand. *Why*

*Please*, and then her next text. *Please come get me. And then, Don't tell mom and dad.*

*Fine, where?*

She sent him the address. *The fuck...* he wondered, sobering up with concern and annoyance. He shut his window now wet with rain and wiped his hands on his sweatpants.

*Why would she go there?* He wondered as he hurried to his car.

- Two -

The old 2008 Jeep cut through the purple dark in a silver blur. Harris' foot lay heavy against the gas pedal, and he was only dimly aware of the slick roadway as the memory of his sister's texts looped in his mind's eye.

*Please. Please come get me. Don't tell mom and dad. Please come get me, don't tell mom and dad. Please come...get....don't tell....*

He swore as he swerved out of the right lane into the left, narrowly missing a driver going under the speed limit. He didn't know what he was walking into, just where he was supposed to go. Fifteen minutes stretched across the black pavement until he finally found the entrance and began to brake. The tires wobbled over the cracked pavement that was more dirt than rock, and he transitioned into the bushes and trees as he pulled in front of the dilapidated building. It squat, dark and wooden, beneath leaves, vines, and moonlight.

The old shop, Abyss Diving, was boarded up years ago, back when he was finishing middle school. Sun-bleached graffiti including "666," "Fuck," and other nonsense phrases and caveman renditions of penises watched Harris as he put the car in park. Beneath the grimy shop window, the one with the sun-bleached vacancy sign, was the remaining spine of the wooden steps. Eliza sat alone on one of the vertebrae, head angled at her feet like an old statue left behind in the sudden shop closure.

He hurried from his car, using the headlights to light his path as he rushed over. "Are you okay? What happened? Whose idea was it to come out here?" When she didn't respond, he huffed. "Did you *want* to get arrested for trespassing?"

Eliza's dyed-platinum blonde hair cascaded down her cheekbones to meet her arms, which were far too busy cradling her head and her knees to help her stand. She shook her head,

avoiding looking up into his face, and Harris softened before sitting down beside her on the stair. It groaned as it met his weight, but it held.

“...are you alone?”

She finally looked up as the headlights on the car shut off. Just before it disappeared, he saw the tear-lined paths down her face. Although his heart tightened, he knew better than to wrap his arm around her shoulders. Her body was closed entirely. There was no room for him, no invitation to touch, so he placed his hands on his knees and waited.

Eliza rubbed the tip of her nose, then her cheeks with both her hands, and stared at the bushes before them. Harris did the same. There was a soft hiss of traffic ambling nearby, and Harris became aware that he was sitting close enough to Eliza that she could probably hear the ringing of his hearing aids. The ringing made him self-conscious, always worried that it would disturb those around him. She never indicated that it bothered her though. but it had been a long time since they sat that close.

She managed to clear her throat to speak in a cool and distant voice. “My friends are going...far away. To college.”

Harris nodded. He didn't know them well, but he knew her three best friends were all a year older than her. If he remembered correctly, they met in middle school when Eliza first went into advanced classes.

“Tonight, they wanted to kick off the summer by coming to see the pool. We've never been.”

Harris guessed this was the case, and almost dropped a “well duh.” It was a townie tradition, after all, to go to the shop at least once. There wasn't much else to do there if you didn't have a car to drive away in, a college to run off to, or anything else to get out of dodge.

After the shop had been shuttered for a year, kids understood it was not going to reopen. No more local birthday parties at the pool, or auditorium presentations by the old owner who explained the many uses of deep diving in the world. No one knew who broke inside first, but once the floodgates opened, teens pooled inside, carrying beer cans, condoms—if they were smart—and the occasional hand pipe or pre-roll.

First, it was just the Satanic graffiti of bored upper-class children with nothing else to rebel against. Then, it was the parties as Harris' class aged into high school. They tried to open the door to the practice pool where lessons were once held for the diving equipment. Harris had never been close with his classmates and continued to remain at home with his bass, watching cartoons either alone or sometimes with acquaintances from Marching Band.

There was a legend about the pool though. It was said that the owner's husband drowned at the pool—well, her words were different. Harris recalled seeing her on the news one day as he sat through a session of chemo. He didn't want to fall asleep, he hated the feeling of the needle in his arm and waking up to a nurse, or his parents, tugging it out of him, so he leaned back in the leathery chair and fixed his eyes on the boxy television in the corner of the too-bright hospital area. The other three people there were busy sleeping, knitting, or reading, so no one thought to ask a nurse to change the channel for his sake.

He watched as the caption scrolled by. The woman who had once come to his school when he was there stood in front of cameras with a microphone being held to her by the anchor. She looked wild-eyed and as though she just finished crying when she claimed her husband had been *swallowed* by the pool, and insisted that the government needed to investigate. "I saw it," she insisted, "it reached up and pulled him in. I was scared to go in myself, and he just sank deeper and deeper, even though I threw him a life jacket and anything else I could grab..."

Harris remembered that in particular. She had been trying to explain why she didn't go in after him, and then the segment cut to the police in charge of the investigation. He rubbed his mustache and disinterestedly said they found nothing to suggest her husband had drowned. There was no sign of a struggle, no body, or anything else. It seemed that he just left her, but because she was so upset, he decided to mention the police were more concerned about her harming herself.

So after the crime scene was shut down, it didn't surprise him when kids began speculating that it was haunted. The myth of Abyss was born. Apparently, if you looked into the water, you would see his reflection instead of your own, and he might try to pull you in. People went, some intending to actually hold a seance in his name, but mainly they went there for other reasons. Boys got to second base with the local track stars or the occasional thespian. But, there were others who swore it was true, and they were always denounced as liars. The pool had been drained long ago, and if there was any water left, it probably came in through the roof or leaked from an old pipe burst. Nothing about that sounded appealing to Harris. Apparently, it did for Eliza.

Harris blinked and realized that Eliza had stopped talking. He chimed in again. "So, your friends left you here? Nice."

Eliza sank back into her legs, shuddering just once. Her voice was muffled behind her body, so Harris leaned closer. "I thought I was crazy. They were so busy with prom and then graduation, and we could go back to normal tonight." She inhaled and lifted her head once more. "When we got here, they were all scared about going in, so I said I'd go first. After I crawled in through the window, I heard Jade's car turn on and they sped away. I thought maybe it was a

joke and waited...a while.” Eliza wiped her face and finally met Harris’ eyes. She looked tired and somewhere far, matching the distance in her voice.

Harris’s mouth flattened into a line. “They ditched you,” he said. She remained still, watching him. Listening.

Night hung over them like a shroud, a fallen spiderweb, sticky and deserted. There were no crickets, very few lightning bugs, and the air was wet and still, clutching their skin and tangling in their hair.

Harris thought he should do something to cheer Eliza up, but he wasn’t sure what. She hadn’t just gotten up from the stoop when his headlights appeared and climbed into the car, so something else needed to be done, whether she meant that or not. But Harris couldn’t bring himself to touch Eliza’s shoulders, and she wouldn’t move from the steps alone.

“Are you hungry? We could go find a White Castle or something.” Harris waited for a few moments for an answer. When he didn’t get one, he rose stiffly, surprising both Eliza and himself.

Eliza’s eyes and mouth opened. “What are you doing?”

“...how did you get in? The door’s chained shut.”

Eliza, still gawking, narrowed her eyes. “I never thought you were interested in shit like this—mom and dad’s *perfect* little musician.”

“Listen,” he sighed, “we’re already out here. Let’s just go inside and take a peek, then we’ll go home.” When that still didn’t spur Eliza to action, Harris squared his shoulders. “Or, I could just call Mom and Dad and have them come pick you up whenever their shifts at the hospital are over.”

“*Fine*. Come on.” Eliza pushed her hair behind her ears, swung a backpack Harris hadn’t noticed earlier onto her shoulders, then led him down the steps and around the corner of the building.

They passed by barely legible blue and orange bubble letters. Harris tried to read it, then gave up after deciphering only a B that could have been an E. Eliza pointed to a broken window partially hidden behind ivy on the left side of the building, just past the driveway. She stepped on an unsteady rock and reached her hands for the bottom of the frame to lift herself inside. After she disappeared, Harris checked his pocket for his keys and followed her.

He stepped atop the rock, not that it was all that necessary for him, and grunted as the rock slipped, sending him tumbling in head first as he dropped inside the window. When his eyes adjusted to the dark, he saw the shop for the first time. *People actually come here?*

There were some shelves that had fallen on each other along the walls, broken and empty display cases, and tables strewn with dusty goggles, fins, and other small, grimy equipment. There wasn’t even much evidence other people had been there before except for the dim shine of abandoned beer cans and four plastic lawn chairs, one of which lay on its side.

Eliza waited for Harris and gestured for him to go first to the back of the shop. As he took the lead, he recalled the old summers when their extended family would take them in and drag them to the beaches that were too far for Harris and Eliza to get to alone. Eliza would climb the rocks and their aunts and uncles would ask Harris to go with her. She would climb until the lifeguards blew their whistles at them, forcing them to climb down and return to writing words in the wet sand with their heels. He barely ever led her, then or now, and the task felt like a pair of too-large shoes worming uncooperatively around each step he took.

Neither of the siblings gave much thought to the animals they might be disturbing who took residence in the overgrown shop. Instead, they fixed their attention on the door behind the register counter. It looked like it opened to a submarine and waited, sealed and dirty. Eliza was a good six inches too short to look through the window, so she poked Harris in the ribs. “What do you see? Is it empty?”

Harris flinched at her touch and straightened up. “Hold on, alright? Jeez.” He moved closer to see if he could peek through the porthole window, but it was caked with yellow-brown dust and age. He could see the outline of the windows and even a little bit of the moon, but he couldn’t tell whether or not there was any water. He tried rubbing the glass with his hand, but it did nothing. “Can’t see. It’s too dark.”

“Fine, move over.” Eliza’s hands found the door’s wheel easy to turn after its first groan. She spun it with mild effort until the metal door clicked. She leaned her body into the metal, grunting, trying to force it open, and Harris gave her a moment to try before combining their efforts with his shoulder. The door clutched its frame for one final moment before yawning open.

Inside was no different from the window. It was dark, but not dark enough to miss the outlines of a pool box, the square border of the twenty-five-yard pool, and two ladders for getting in and out. They both froze at the entrance for very different reasons. Harris recoiled from the soft sour smell of old, stale, long-evaporated water. It poured over him when they opened the door.

“Whoa...” Eliza managed to say.

She was the first to step onto the fragmented tile. After shrugging her backpack off and dropping it to the floor, she gazed at the ceiling, then the far wall that was mostly just windows



like the side of a greenhouse. Dust as thick as wood lined the glass, allowing only a little bit of moonlight to reach inside.

“Ugh...that smell.” Harris pulled his t-shirt collar over his nose.

“What smell? It’s empty.”

Harris held onto his shirt as he ducked through the doorframe but quickly dropped the hem after his head thunked against the top of the frame. He stepped into the pool area. “What do you mean, empty? It...” The odor was gone.

He moved to where Eliza stood by the edge and looked down, expecting to see his reflection or a softly rippling surface. There was nothing. It was just sixteen feet of old white concrete.

“Well, this was a colossal waste of time. I knew Dean was lying about seeing his ghost.” Eliza busied herself by freeing her water bottle from the side pocket of her backpack.

“Who’s Dean?” Harris asked.

She swallowed what appeared to be the last bit of water from her bottle before answering. “Some guy that’s into Jade. He wouldn’t shut up about this place, so she suggested—oh.” Her shoulders slumped once more. “C’mon. I’m sorry I got you out of bed. Let’s just go home.” Eliza started to walk to the door that had started to fall shut under its heavy weight.

“Hey, come on, we can still do something! You wanna write our initials on the door? Or, break a window?”

“Harris, please,” she sighed. “I just want to go home.”

Harris moved to the edge of the pool. “Come on, just five more minutes, *mom!*” he whined, teasing her, pretending to get ready to dive in.

“Harris, you’re being cringe.”

Harris half-hopped again, enjoying bothering her, and as he did, his right shoe missed the ground, heading straight for the concrete cavity.

Eliza yelped and ran to him, but Harris was already falling forward. He reached his hands out, preparing to land nastily on the bottom sixteen feet below. Instead, he caught a glimpse of his own reflection just before his body broke the surface of the water that slapped his skin and seeped into his mouth, his nose, and his hearing aids.

The first shock was how eerily warm the water was. Bubbles skirted through his hair, clothes, and sneakers. Water flooded his hearing aids, which gurgled and promptly shut off. He thrashed his arms and legs around, gasping as he pulled himself to the surface, spitting out the stinging, somewhat salty water.

He saw his sister's lips move as he pulled his hearing aids out. She signed *You hear me?* to him.

"I'm not *deaf*," he retorted.

*You good?* She signed.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine."

Eliza squatted down beside the pool and held her hand out to him. "Weird...it really looked empty."

"Thanks," Harris swam towards her, holding his waterlogged aids above the water, as though that would change anything.

When she placed them on the ground and reached back out to help him up, Harris felt like he was watching from inside his body as his hand took her wrist and pulled her down in one swoop. Her shriek before she crashed into the surface whiplashed Harris back to his body.

"You jerk!" she yelled as she swam up and wiped her eyes.

Harris grinned, hoping to pass off the gesture as playful to both himself and her. This seemed to soften her annoyance as she splashed his face, and he skimmed his arm beneath the surface, returning a wave back at her. Eliza launched herself at him and pushed down on his shoulders, sinking him for just a moment, sending the two back into play mode with each other.

The two splashed, yelled, and raced. They swam, attacking each other until their chests and arms burned, so they took breaks and picked up as soon as the burning went away.

The night outside the pool forgot the two as they forgot what led them there. They splashed and dove, climbed out, and jumped back in, intoxicated by the discovery that made them more childish than they had allowed themselves to be in years as it drank their hair and clothes.

Breathless, the two siblings settled and floated effortlessly atop the water. As Harris breathed deeply in, the smell he experienced seemed to streak over him, and for the first time, he considered it again. “Eliza? Didn’t this look empty when we got here?”

She shrugged. “Maybe we need our eyes checked.” She was right beside him, her hair grazing his. “Sucks for you to be both deaf *and* blind.”

Harris would have rolled his eyes if he didn’t suddenly feel cold. After he righted himself in the water and his feet plunged deeper into the darker water, an old instinct that had been locked away in his childhood surfaced. An image of a dark presence near his suspended feet came to him in a prickling sensation from his toes, and he found his body pulling him back toward the ladder. *But nothing could be there*, he wanted to reason with himself as he hoisted himself from the heavy water. The pool seemed to cling to him like resolute mud turning to quicksand.

Harris was just thankful to be out of the water, happy to be exposed to the chilly, biting air more than the muddy water. Vapor seemed to collect around his breath when he exhaled, but he reasoned that that was silly. It was the end of June, it wasn't that cold.

"You done already?" Eliza laughed.

"Come on, we should head home." Even though Harris felt foolish, he urged his sister as he shivered and wrung out his clothes, stepping as close to the pool as he dared.

Something still didn't feel right. The water felt more like slime now that he was out, and Harris didn't like the feeling of it lingering on his skin or sitting inside his hearing aids. He wanted to wash off his skin and hair, scrub every last part of his body that the water touched, and try to salvage his aids. This seemed weird to say though, so he settled for something more reasonable instead. "I'm not sure when Mom and Dad are getting back, and we should shower."

Eliza remained in the pool, floating as gracefully as a lily pad. She exhaled and dove beneath the surface, skirting through the water like a fish, and Harris watched from above, making sure she was going to surface. Not like the shopowner's husband. If he did drown.

When Eliza broke through, she took his hand to help her up to the ladder rung. She ascended from the pit and shook the droplets off her body like a dog, hitting his nose and giggling.

"*Very* mature," Harris wiped his face with the back of his hand.

"Yeah yeah. Come on, I have a towel in my bag."

Eliza shuddered in the cold air, teeth chattering slightly as she handed Harris the towel first. He wiped his face and hair, then returned it to her to collect his hearing aids from the poolside.

Eliza hurried to wrap herself in the towel and moved to the door. They had to pull it open together this time, and as they stepped out into the night, heading back to the window, Harris thought he felt a soft breath on the back of his wet neck. He thought he heard a splash too. He didn't want to turn back to investigate. Besides, he couldn't have heard something like that without his hearing aids. It was just his imagination, so he hurried out the window with his sister, eager to wash off the water and whatever might have been in the water with them.

- Three -

During the night, anytime his eyes drifted closed, something across the room moved.

His chair seemed to suddenly bob, or the cardboard box towers assembled wherever there was space on the floor seemed to fall apart at their taped seams.

Breathing was difficult, and the bed was hard against his body. As he tried to drift off, he would gasp and jolt awake, feeling as though he were on a raft rocketing down a waterfall.

Harris flipped to his stomach at one point, focusing on releasing the tension of his legs and arms. Just when he was starting to pass through the rough current of restlessness, his arm slid off the bed. The end of his middle finger kissed a cold, wet, surface.

The chill hurled him from sleep once again, and he awoke to a room full of sunlight. He wiped his face as he drew in quick, shallow breaths. It seemed that time finally rushed in to save him, and the sunlight came into his room like a car with its headlights on full blast. After a moment of scanning the room with his eyes, he discovered his hand was completely dry, and there was no longer any trace of rain outside the window. Harris did not remember falling asleep, but he must have.

He gathered himself and inserted one of his spare hearing aids in his right ear. The pair from last night lay buried in rice on his desk—not that he thought it would make a difference.

The house was silent, and even after he could partially hear again, he knew it must have been a late night for everyone. The dishwasher remained full and unwashed. The grocery list seemed at least six items longer than it had the day before. The backdoor remained bolted instead of open to allow in the cool, late morning breeze. Harris assumed his role of turning on the dishwasher and opening the backdoor. It was time to wake up the house. He wondered if this task fell to Eliza while he was away.

It was Friday, nearly the brink of noon, and he'd be late if he stayed longer than toasting a frozen waffle, turning on the coffee machine for his parents, and heading out the door. He drove and ate on his way to Barracuda, and the town greeted him as any other small, semi-rural town would. Slow pick-up trucks, the occasional cow crossing, and ambling pedestrian tourists barely paying attention to the crosswalk signs.

He drove past a house that sported a new confederate flag, and confined himself to tunnel vision until he eased the Jeep into a parking spot shaded beneath trees at the back of the lot. Crumbs fell from his pants as he headed inside. The restaurant door swung shut behind him.

The kitchen staff was already set up when he wandered in. They were jabbering and banging pots and pans. Not many of them let on that they knew some English, and he didn't push them to talk. Lip-reading got tiring fast, anyway. He gave a polite nod, filled their water pitchers, and that was it. Still, if he was going to talk to anyone at work, it would be kitchen staff over the servers. Most of the waitstaff were too young for him to connect with anyway.

The front staff, including Amanda, a few waiters, and two waitresses, mostly ignored him, so he ignored them right back. It was everyone for themselves anyway; no tips were shared, so no one bothered with one of the seasonal bartenders. That day, they seemed to be relaxing by the hostess stand, wiping down menus and giggling with each other. They all looked so young,

except for Amanda, who was trying to fit in by joking with the high schoolers and new college students.

The old grandfather clock in the hallway hummed that it was nearly half past, and Harris busied himself with brewing a fresh pot of coffee and cutting up fruit behind the bar. There were a few orders here and there; a Bloody Mary, four sangrias, and at least three bellinis before anyone came to bother him. With her hands on the freshly wiped bar, Amanda gave Harris her best authoritative look as he dried the paring knife he just cleaned.

“So, how are we doing today?” She tested the waters, and Harris wasn’t up for banter.

“I’m alright, you?”

She gave him a satisfied smile, then lazily gestured at the supply closet door down the hall. “I told Jimmy we’d ... decorations for -ext weekend, ... see what we have ... what we might need.”

Amanda was already walking away as Harris pieced together what he could. She pulled out her phone from her pocket before Harris could ask her to clarify, but he thought he got enough. He slung the rag on the edge of the metal sink and trudged to the closet in search of something remotely patriotic.

Box after box revealed nothing but junk: paper Halloween and birthday decorations, Valentine’s Day streamers, and St. Patrick’s Day clovers that Harris wasn’t entirely sure what to do with. But, he returned to the bar with a tangled ball of white lights. It was light, but he needed two arms to support its unbalanced, tangled weight so it wouldn’t drag on the floor. It would be boring work to find the plug, then test the lights one by one to see which was burned out if they didn’t all light up.

Before he had a chance to get started, Harris felt the vibration of a bar stool being moved. He turned around to see the young, lavender-perfumed man, sitting alone.

“Sorry...did you say something?” Harris moved his hair to reveal his solitary hearing aid.

“Oh! I just made a dumb joke about... never mind.” His face softened with relief. “Could I see a menu?”

Harris nodded and gave him water along with a menu, then started lazily pulling at the string lights. He tugged, cursing quietly whenever a plastic bulb popped from its socket, but the man drew his attention again with a light tap on the bar.

“Can I help?” the man asked as Harris looked up.

“No, that’s alright. This is my job. For now. This isn’t my career or anything...” He felt his mouth running off without him. When the man did not look away, or show an indication to speak, Harris took the cue to keep talking, even though English suddenly felt strange. “So, uh, what...d-do you do?”

The man rested his chin on the backs of his hands. “What do I look like I do?”

Something was wrong. Harris couldn’t find a word in English or sign language to characterize the awareness he had of his own arms. He moved closer down the bar to the man and scanned his attire, still clutching the ball of string lights. The man wore a smooth brown leather jacket over a black v-neck shirt, its collar meeting one of his two necklaces. A long, bronze chain drifted low beneath the shirt, as his other necklace anchored an opaque blue stone at the base of his throat.

“I mean, you’re looking a little done up, but not like for an office. You look nice!” he quickly added. Harris cleared his throat after several moments had passed and the man kept waiting for him. “Um, are you a performer, or something?”



The corners of the man's eyes dimpled as he smiled. "You could say that." He paused for effect Harris realized before he continued. "My name's Ha-Joon, but you can call me Joon."

Joon lifted a hand with several black rings on it toward Harris. His hands were not yet free, so he abruptly placed the lights on the counter, wiped the dust from his palms, and took Joon's hand.

"I help run a concert hall up in Poughkeepsie."

"I'm Harris. That's a cool gig," he tried to downplay his sudden interest, but his eyes felt like they were bulging at the poor guy. "How'd you get into that?"

Joon took his hand back. "Nothing special, actually. You could say I know the guy who owns the place."

"Ah, yeah. That's...that's good." Harris was struck by a familiar sting. After graduating, it seemed as though all his classmates had somewhere else to go: touring or teaching, or helping to open a start-up studio. Meanwhile, all Harris could do was return home. To this bar. He cleared his throat. "Well, uh, can I take your order?"

"Oh no," Joon's face fell. "I'm not bragging, I promise. Really, my uncle owns the place. I even didn't go to college," his face colored. "I do what you do too, kind of. So, can I *please* help?" When Harris didn't move, Joon continued. "I sort of have the world record for untangling messes like that. *Fast.*"

Harris was concerned that Amanda would give him grief for it. Then again, maybe if he made friends with Joon, this might be his way out of Glenn Hell. "If I do that, will you let me take your order?"

Joon's posture eased once again as he held his hand out for the string lights. They continued to chat even after his order was placed. Joon asked Harris about college; and Harris

asked Joon about his music tastes, pleased by Joon's answers. He was surprised to learn there were local bands who didn't sound bad at all. But most importantly, Joon didn't ask Harris anything about his condition or how that affected his perception of music.

That had been one problem with his classmates, which he noticed right away. Even his roommate in his first dormitory—*Charlie*, he thought if he remembered correctly—had to ask him how he could be interested in music if he was deaf. They didn't remain roommates for more than the first semester.

Other classmates turned out to be kind, and he made more than a few friends. As the last year unfurled, a doubt settled inside him. They probably would not remain friends after they left school. It didn't matter how many midterm or finals week cramming sessions they had, or how many times they shared boxed macaroni and cheese, or put down traps for mice in their apartments. Harris let a rift grow between them, and they didn't do much to keep it at bay either.

He didn't struggle in the same ways they did in classes, and they constantly approached him for help on projects or exams. While Harris was always happy to help, seeing all of those who came to him once step seamlessly into jobs stung. Not even that, but jobs related to the fields they studied. To Harris, the idea of asking for help from them felt like admitting he was the only one failing now that school was over.

Sitting with Joon, however, Harris felt lighter than he had in a year. They did their best to pull apart the lights, and when Joon found the plug, Harris connected it to a socket where the blender had been moved out of the way. After a few flickering moments, they discovered that none of the lights worked, and laughed.

“All that for nothing,” Joon huffed.

“Yeah, after one whole wrap and three glasses of water.”

“Hm. Well, I’m sure we have some extra lights if you want to borrow them. I could bring them over next time...unless you wanted to come by the hall? Maybe check out some of the local bands?” Joon’s eyes glittered.

Their hands on the bar were side by side. He didn’t realize both of them were leaning toward each other, as though they were friends who’d known each other forever. When Harris’ mouth opened, he was unsure of what was trying to form, but he didn’t have a chance to find out. Another barstool scraped loudly against the wooden floor, and Harris and Joon immediately shot away from each other.

“Sorry...am I interrupting?” Eliza froze halfway into her seat. One of her hands waited on the bar while the other stayed on the back of her stool, as though waiting for permission to sit.

“No!” Joon said. “Not at all. I was just asking for my check.”

Harris cleared his throat. “Yes, I’ll get that for you.” He hurried toward the opposite end of the bar, rang up Joon’s minuscule tab, and returned it to him, all while avoiding Eliza’s beaming stare. Joon didn’t bother reading the check before he reached for his black wallet and began fishing through it.

To give him privacy, Harris finally turned to Eliza. “All good with mom and dad?” Tightlipped, she said “Mhm” low in her throat, nodding stiffly as she settled into her seat. She kept peeking at Joon, much to Harris’ horror, who seemed to be struggling with counting his singles. She cleared her throat and signed *Lemonade please*.

Harris reminded himself not to look back as he got her drink. With Eliza stepping in like that, right at that moment, he felt like he was caught changing his clothes. Eliza, although normally welcome, was one of the last people he wanted right then and there.

It did not need to take long for Harris to grab the right glass, but he took his time, checking all the glasses for water stains. When he came up from his squat behind the bar, Joon was gone, and Eliza took it upon herself to examine the bill. Harris replaced the green tray with her lemonade.

“That’s rude,” he remarked.

“He left you a huge tip *and* a business card.” She reached over to pluck a straw from the box just behind the bar and slipped it into her glass.

Harris had already turned away from her and was staring down at the tab in disbelief. Money aside, he held a matte black business card with Joon’s name, email, and phone number, in gold lettering. He looked up to see if Joon was still there, but, of course, he was already gone.

Eliza sipped and raised her eyebrows. “It really looked like I interrupted *something*. Looks like you got his number, hmm?” she gave him a teasing smile. “Didn’t know you liked guys.”

Harris remained stone-faced and returned to the register to log the order. He was no longer embarrassed. “That,” he remarked coolly, “Was just a business thing.” He correctly anticipated Eliza rolling her eyes in response.

“Come on. You two were acting like no one else was here. I just had to come and introduce myself!” she winked. “He’s really cute.”

Harris turned white as he slipped the card into his back pocket. The air changed between them, but Eliza didn’t seem to notice. She slurped from her straw, looking up at Harris with innocent, probing eyes as she drank. It was Harris who broke their contact and noticed Amanda across the restaurant giving him a displeased look, gesturing to the string lights. He quickly

swept them off the counter and onto the floor by his feet before picking up a rag to wipe the countertop.

“Have you told mom and dad yet?” she let the straw fall from her lips as she sat up straight. “No, no, wait, have you had a boyfriend before? Like at college? When did you realize you were—”

“Listen,” Harris snapped. “This is where I *work*.” Rather than meet her eyes, he busied himself with peeling a lime in as perfect a curl as he could manage. He wasn’t sure why he kept talking. He just knew that he had to end this conversation. “Just because your friends have all ditched you, it doesn’t mean you can just use me as a replacement.”

His skin still felt hot, and the silence dilated between them. She had every opportunity, every moment, for a snide comment. He hoped she would say something, but she was facing the window. Her attention was fifty feet away from the barstool.

She stared at a girl Harris vaguely recognized as one of her former crew. The girl was fully absorbed in her walk, tossing her glossy auburn hair over her shoulder. Much too busy to notice the two pairs of eyes on her as she passed by.

Eliza’s shoulders hiked up to her ears and she hopped off the barstool but stopped herself from going any further.

“Have you said anything to her? To them?” Harris asked, remembering. After a brief hesitation, Eliza shook her head. “...are you going to?”

“I’m just...gonna get out of your hair. Sorry,” she swept her gaze across the empty room. “I’ll go to the cafe next time. Sorry...again.”

“Look, I didn’t mean—”

“It’s fine. Whatever.” She flung the word out of her lips like a hook without any bait, aiming to pierce. She met her mark; Harris flinched as she walked away. When she passed by the window, she didn’t pause to look at him or her former friend’s path. She stood tall and walked across the street toward the river.

Harris sighed and barely registered that he poured himself a shot of vodka. He promised himself he wouldn’t after he moved back home, but he was just so tired.

*Just this once*, he told himself. And he threw it back down his throat.

- Four -

It was 2:22 AM and Harris was heavy with sweat, recalling nothing but blackness interspersed randomly with flashing strobe imagery.

After he went to college it was difficult to remember his dreams. It wasn’t something that bothered him usually, but something felt unfair about it now. Wasn’t he home, in his childhood bed, surrounded by all the things he grew up around? Couldn’t he just find that familiar comfort and summon the images of his dreams?

If he was being honest with himself, it wasn’t exactly like his childhood. Pagers, and then phones, no longer went off to summon his parents at or before dawn. Sometimes, they would ring as their heads just landed on the pillows. Back then, before his hearing started to go, Harris could hear their groans reverberating through the vents. Now, the house was extra silent. No middle-of-the-night waffles when their parents were no longer on call, or spur-of-the-moment sleepovers in the living room with the original *Jumanji* on the TV. He and Eliza always swore they weren’t falling asleep, even as their breaths grew heavy and their heads drooped on each other’s shoulders.

He lifted himself to reach for his phone on the headboard. It opened to messages of group chats he hadn't really contributed to except for a "thumbs-up" here, and a laugh there. One sent selfies of working on a matinee of an obscure musical in Boston Harris never heard of. Another sent photos of a Christian rock band performing on a Sunday afternoon at a local church in Tennessee. Annoyed, he once mistakenly sent a photo of the empty bar on a Wednesday afternoon. Everyone sent encouraging remarks about how it was hard to find work, but he'd get something soon. After all, he was the best of them, even with his disability and all that. They'd ask around their own networks for him if he asked. He groaned and rolled over, muting the two chats he was in before stripping himself from the damp bed.

His thoughts drifted to the bong he left on his desk. There was still some green left, and the water was not yet completely stained with smoke. He just rinsed and refilled it hours ago, after finally flinging an application to at least one promising opportunity. Not that he could remember what it was; he was overburdened by the crash of the high that knocked him to the bed in the first place. *Hair of the dog*, he signed in the dark as he wrapped himself in a small robe and hauled his bong and matchbox into the bathroom.

The flame struck on the first go with a soft snap. He held the match to the bowl, inhaling, pulling the flame in by his breath, then shook the match out and tossed it in his sink freckled with blue toothpaste.

Steam and smoke rose to the vent on the ceiling. He wasn't sure which curled more, or when the water from the shower met the smoke, and he considered it as his mind grew lighter. He let his gaze drift to the mirror.

Pale, cloaked in a too-small blue robe, he saw himself breathing in the cloud of smoke billowing from yellowy water. It was too yellow. It was putrid. It looked like rancid lemonade.

*No...* he thought, when his mouth filled with a raw and acidic taste that matched the liquid in the bong.

*Urine.*

His throat dried and something snapped like a twig as he choked and dropped the bong, tasting bitter acid and salt snaking down his throat and into his lungs. He could see them saturating with the yellow, like sponges that he could never properly ring out as he hacked into his robe, eyes streaming, hoping to muffle the sounds he made as he pushed out the remaining smoke and vomited into the sink.

The glass clattered against the counter, but he was too busy coughing up the fire in his throat to catch it. He flung the tap on to wash down the pink vomit, shoved himself underneath the tap and spit, then drank deeply from the icy spout. The water greeted him with a similar taste: it was coppery and chlorinated, but he forced himself to keep drinking until his throat soothed enough and went numb. He only remembered the broken glass after he lifted his hand and saw the smear of blood.

The bong's bowl had shattered, and part of the stem had cracked. He swore, especially when he saw the remaining water in the bong was only mildly dark. *Tea-stained*, as he liked to think of it. Why had he thought it was urine?

He cleared his burned throat one last time and cleaned up. The bong water went into the toilet, the glass shards fell into the garbage pan by his feet. He loaded up his hands with soap and stepped inside the shower that had been running for too long. The door slid silently on its track as it closed behind him, and the water slipped down his bloodied, stinging right hand. His heart thumped as his body circulated the smoke throughout his system. Pinpricks made threats at the back of his neck to relax, or else.



The heat and the weed bewitched him, and once he dried off and crawled back into bed, removing his top sheet before climbing under the comforter, he picked up his phone again. Not even the shower had wiped away the thought of the urine bong. Though he had rinsed his mouth in the shower, even considered taking his bar of soap and scrubbing his tongue, he was still shaken. It would be forever before he fell asleep. Again. So he dusted off his hearing aids from the rice and was greeted by beeping in his ears that sounded only mildly out of tune.

The screen was blurry from Harris' reddening eyes, but as he scrolled his socials, he saw suggested people to follow, including Joon. *Ha-Joon*, he reminded himself and blinked a few times before clicking on his profile.

Joon posted daily, it seemed. Nothing like a photo of an iced coffee or a selfie, but clips from The Cave. This wasn't his personal page, and Harris took in the impressive diversity of posts. Concert posters, tour announcements, events with local bands, photos with up-and-coming artists Harris had heard of. He only stopped when he found a photo of Joon, sitting on a stage behind a long line-up of seven performers with heavily teased hair and eyeliner. But Harris hardly registered the performers, except for the fact that their hair was much longer than Joon's.

It wasn't just the fact that Joon wasn't looking at the camera, but he rested his head on his hand just as he did at the bar. He smiled distractedly, perhaps even with exhaustion, and his hair was curly and fluffy—nothing like the straight and careful style that framed his heart-shaped face. It drew Harris' attention from his eyes down to his pink lips. Joon looked small, happy, and tired, and Harris' heart skipped to see it. He put his phone down, and instead of considering why his heart was pounding, asking himself why he wanted to keep studying Joon's lips, or trying to sleep, he remembered the bong in the bathroom.

His sister would see it, and he considered lifting himself up to properly hide and maybe clean it. But the best he could do was stare at the door as he drifted back into his pillow. And as he stared at where he presumed the door was, his eyes readjusting to the dark, Harris snapped awake, training his trembling gaze on the shape of a body against his door.

The figure remained still, even as Harris rose.

“Eliza?” he asked.

A low roar answered him, which surged through his ears, plugging them up entirely. A moan escaped Harris’ chest as his head spun from the rumble, and he fell back to the bed, twisting into a ball, reaching for the hearing aids to get away from the sound. He flung them on the ground and the noise followed with them. *Shit, they must be busted...* he thought.

He felt a gust, as though a window had opened, and he tried to shield himself from the cold, but his body sank into the mattress, unwilling.

He floated, eyes above the rim of the mattress, refocusing on the body despite the darkness seeping into his vision. It trickled in from the borders of his line of sight like a trickling, blurry migraine ring, and he fought to keep his eyelids peeled when the figure moved closer.

It was as though someone took scissors, cut the shape of a body from his wall, peeled away the room, and left nothing behind. Nothing except for a deeper, breathing darkness that Harris wanted to scream at but could not.

He held his breath, clutching the bed, feeling his heart squeezing in his chest as though it might burst.

*Please...* he thought, unsure of what he was asking for as the figure grew into the swarming blackness. When the night disappeared, Harris thought the figure moving closer to him undulated like something underwater, or even liquid itself. And then he fainted.

The morning after what Harris chalked up to night terror, he could no longer drink water without wanting to spit it all out.

Every third sip turned to salt in his mouth as the nightmare returned to his mind. His tastebuds recalled the phantom flavor of copper, salt, and yellow. It was painful to rinse his mouth after brushing his teeth. Even if the temperature was warm, hot even, there was a chill like razorblades that swerved between his teeth and gums. Water wasn't just disgusting. It was painful.

And it didn't stop with tap water. Little by little, he tried it all at home, and then more at the bar when his shift began. Bottled water, distilled, melted ice. Seltzer too, which he found was the worst of it all. It went down like spoiled milk. The acidic bubbles popped gas in his mouth, and he couldn't bear to swallow. After seltzer, he figured milk couldn't be that bad. Milk turned out to be a mix of yellow water and baby powder, and he dumped the rest of the tiny sip down the sink.

After he stirred a screwdriver for a customer, he expanded his research and tried juice. First, he panicked at the taste of mold and age. He hurtled to the bathroom to vomit not without escaping Amanda's bored eye. She was waiting for him outside the bathroom and asked if he was pregnant.

Harris didn't register her joke. "I think the orange juice is bad."

"Yeah? Eh, that guy seems to be fine with it. You hungover or something? Because that's really unprofessional."

Harris shook his head and pretended to agree with Amanda when she suggested he brew himself a cup of coffee. If water was already disgusting, he couldn't imagine ruining coffee for himself.

All that was left for him to try was liquor.

He sucked on a mint from the hostess' stand, tricking his mouth into numb mintiness before chugging as much water as he could. He finished two glasses, and when Amanda was out of view, Harris poured a sample from the tap of hard cider. A frothy sweetness blossomed in his mouth, and he promptly took more, relieved by the taste.

Although he preferred the dry smoke dehydration to the liquid hangover that made his legs and stomach feel loose and elastic, liquor had always been easier to get. If he was out of weed but had something else lying around, he might take a shot before class or a final. Before going to study or to the grocery store, where he could easily get overwhelmed by all the aisles and choices of brands if not for the alcohol blurring his senses. Back then, he commended himself on being able to stop. This time, he didn't want to.

The rest of his shift blurred by as he accidentally overpowered every other drink and had to wipe down the bar extra carefully before Amanda would let him leave.

He did this the next day as well, even though the bar closed early, rained out from its usual busy patronage. He thought about the alcohol at home on his drive home, taking a mental inventory of all he could remember that tasted okay. Good, even. So focused on inventorying, he didn't notice his parents' car in the driveway beneath the redbud tree. He didn't notice them at all until he stepped into the kitchen and they were seated at the island counter.

They waved, and he waved back, taking note of the large green bottle between two pizza boxes. It was good that they were drinking. That meant he could too, without them asking

anything of it. After finding nothing in the kitchen refrigerator, he snagged a brown bottle of blonde ale from the garage and sat down with them.

His mother and father were already two glasses deep in a bottle of red wine when he joined. It had been almost a week since they last saw each other, and they both swallowed their latest sip before turning to him.

“Hey Hare,” his father held up his wine glass to clink Harris’ bottle. “Show some ID!” His father laughed himself into a coughing fit that only broke when his mother gestured to the pizza box. “Oh, *yes*, please.” Ropes of cheese stretched from the pie when she selected one for him, and they broke into loose strands that clung to the paper plate as his father lifted the slice to his mouth.

“When did you get home?” Harris asked.

“Oh, just...” his mother looked at the watch on her left wrist. “Shit, about thirty minutes ago. Did we not text that we had pizza? I’m so sorry, we had a helluva two days,” she hurried before Harris could respond. “Can you—”

Before she could finish, the screen door slid open, and Eliza was there.

“Honey!” their father said. “Come, come, we have your favorite: cheese, garlic, and olives!” The skin on his face had grown red and shiny from the drink and evening humidity. “We’re celebrating your mother, who saved twins from a mother in a car accident today. *Twins!*” he reiterated.

Harris gave Eliza a look, then signed to her while their parents weren’t looking. *Like old times*, he said, but Eliza’s smile was meek. They both knew it wouldn’t be long before their parents retired to their bedroom to sleep for almost a full day. It had become a regular occurrence since Eliza and Harris were old enough to figure out how to cook eggs or mac and cheese or call

for takeout. Sometimes, they saw their parents only twice a week, and Harris and Eliza spent their time learning sign language together, even creating their own slang.

“That’s cool, mom. Nice,” Eliza responded.

Their father poured another glass for himself and continued to shower praise on their mother. Harris tried to make contact with Eliza’s eyes, but she was busy opening the box of pizza, devoting her attention to choosing the right slice, and then carefully placing it on a plate. Once their parents worked on the wine bottle and their own pizza, Harris sank further down in his seat.

*You mad?* he signed. She shook her head and dropped her gaze. Harris didn’t believe her and scoffed to himself.

*She was the one who showed up to my job, making me look bad in front of the staff. I should tell mom and dad about it. I should tell them about the other night at the shop. She isn’t my problem, I just got back here—*

The room went on without him: his father talked endlessly about work and the importance of it in between mouthfuls of pizza, his mother regularly poured glasses for both herself and his father, Eliza stared blankly at their father who believed that everyone was listening to every word he had to say on the matter of work and medicine and how *it’s just so easy for him*, Harris thought, *He had a job he was trained for and stepped right into it, who does he think he is talking to me about work, he’s clearly trying to say something to me without saying it directly to me and I won’t stand for it because I work hard, I work so hard and I’m trying but the market is just terrible and they don’t even want me around and I’m not even sure I can be a sound guy for anyone—*

“Harris?” his mother said. The motionless room and everything in it stared at him. “Sweetheart, did you eat anything? You probably should before finishing that,” she gestured to his bottle.

Actually, there were two bottles. On the island before him sat an empty one, and in his hand was another. Had his mother gotten him one? When? He sat it down.

“Y-yeah. Um, can I get one of the meat lovers?”

His father lifted the lid of the box to show him there were none left.

“Didn’t you just get the food?” Harris asked.

“Yeah, and I’m running for president,” his father yawned and fixed a slice of the olive pizza for him on a plate. “You okay? Drink too much, *college* boy?” he teased, bumping his elbow against his wife’s.

“I’m not *in* college anymore,” Harris huffed.

“Yeah, and where are you with applying to jobs?” His father no longer had a twinkle in his dry eyes. After he handed the plate over, he clapped a hand on Harris’ shoulder. It was a warning more than a friendly check-in, and Harris knew his suspicions were correct.

Harris bit into the slice and chewed, thankful because the food still tasted decent, and he didn’t have to answer his father right away. The long-cooled dough bit back against his teeth, rubbery and already stale. He hated olives and shivered as the salty oil burst over his tongue. The flavor brought back the bong water and his eyes watered as he resisted the reflex to gag on the dry and dense mass he wasn’t sure he could swallow. He picked the olives off the rest of the slice, which Eliza seemed to watch.

“Harris is still applying,” his mother said into her wine glass. “He hasn’t forgotten our deal. He can live here while he figures out his next steps and gets a job where he can pay for

himself.” She swallowed. “It shouldn’t be long now,” she lifted her glass to him. “It’s been almost two months. Keep at it, honey.”

Eliza finally locked eyes with Harris as he finished his bite of pizza and downed the dried dough with a swig of ale. There was concern pulling her eyebrows together, but not for Harris. Her hair was wet, and it left a dark ring around the neckline of her t-shirt.

Eliza hurried to throw out her paper plate and yawned dramatically. “Sorry guys, I’m really tired. I’m going to head to bed.” She hurried from the room, and when she walked past Harris, he caught a perfume of seawater as she passed. His stomach lurched, and he put the pizza slice down.

“So, have you heard back from anyone?” his father asked.

Harris blinked. “What?”

“I was asking about work.”

“Yeah, no,” Harris said. “Work is fine. I’m applying to stuff. Haven’t heard back yet, but I might have an interview next week,” he lied.

“Oh, that’s great. What is it for?” his mother asked.

He opened his mouth, and when no words came out, his father sighed.

“It’s not a great market right now, Hare. We understand that. Just let me know if you want to take me up on my offer—”

“I’m not going to talk to any of your *buddies*, Dad.”

The words flowed from his lips before he could reconsider, breaking the brimming surface tension and spilling into the room. “I-I’m sorry,” he amended. “That didn’t come out right. I just meant that I want to do this on my own.” Harris signed as he spoke, his parents flitting their eyes from his face to his hands, processing what little they could of sign.



Harris didn't say anything else, and the silence swelled. Instead of waiting for their response, Harris took over cleanup duty and whisked the pizza boxes outside, taking extra care to do so extra noisily, not for any real reason. Since cardboard was not very loud at all, he dropped all three glass bottles, his two ales and their wine, into the empty recycling bin, ensuring that they had enough of a distance to drop in and shatter.

When he rounded the corner to return through the backdoor, he almost tripped over a bag behind one of the shrubs by the sliding door. It was Eliza's green knapsack. When he touched the fabric, he found it was damp.

He lifted the lid of the bag open and found a damp towel, a one-piece bathing suit, and a black snorkel and goggles carelessly tossed inside. The side of the goggles had a faded logo on the left side that read *Abbyss*.

Harris looked up into the kitchen to check if his parents were there, but they appeared to have shuffled off, disinterested in Harris' sourness.

The wet strap of the knapsack suctioned against his skin as he carried it inside. He shut off the lights in each room as he made his way to her door. It wasn't late, but the ale and olives were heavy in his stomach. All he wanted to do before finding the bag was to crawl into bed. Now, he dragged both the bag and himself to her door and knocked his knuckle against it.

Her light abruptly shut off. Eliza muttered something through the wall, so he knocked until she came to the door and opened it an inch.

"I said, I'm trying to sleep," she uttered from the crack.

"Since when do you sleep at *nine*?"

"It's summer. It's hot, and I'm tired. Can I go sleep now?"

She moved to shut the door when Harris held up the knapsack. The door swung open and Eliza grabbed it from him, holding it against her chest. “I left this outside to dry.”

“You hid it behind a bush. Not sure that’s a great place to let anything dry.”

She walked the bag from the room, holding it to her chest, to the bathroom. As she unpacked the contents and hung them up, Harris walked into her room and neared the only sources of light in her room: her desk lamp and laptop, primed for reading the news article pulled up on the screen. Harris had to scroll up to find the title.

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### Longtime Deep Diving Shop Makes Final Splash?

Glenn Heights, Wappinger’s Falls, and other neighboring town residents along Route 9 awoke last week to find the doors to Abyss Diving firmly locked behind police tape.

The homey shop of fifteen years offered everything from swimming and diving lessons to children’s birthday parties to diving equipment for local waterway construction. As of now, it will remain closed until further notice, leaving residents and visiting tourists at a loss.

“Where am I supposed to have my son’s birthday now?” one local mother inquired online. “He was looking forward to having a deep sea theme birthday, but try hosting something like that with a dozen kids at the lake!”

According to a spokesman for Commercial Realty, the current tenant, Alicia Jackson, indicated no intention of selling the shop. When asked why, Mrs. Jackson indicated “He’s still in there. I know it.” She would not elaborate or leave any other comment.

Police officers at the scene also would not comment. In a statement later issued by the Chief of Police, Stanley Finer, he asserted there was no need to panic. “We have combed the shop and

have found no evidence to aid in the case of the disappearance of Jerome Jackson. As Mrs. Jackson is co-owner, the shop falls to her full ownership until Mr. Jackson can be found. We believe this should take only a matter of days now...”

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“It’s sad, isn’t it?” Eliza leaned against the doorway, interrupting Harris’ reading. “If you read more of it, you’ll see that she thinks her husband is in the water. Not drowned,” she added. “Just...living there or something.”

Harris straightened up and looked at his sister. She seemed taller. Thinner. She didn’t have that same bubbly air he once thought was imprinted in her DNA that made her the maestro of whoever was around her.

Eliza had settled into the doorframe and appeared more like a spider clinging to the curve of the wall and the frame. Harris shivered when he thought she looked a lot like that thing in his room the other night, especially as she moved back into the room, staring him down.

“Are you...still going there?” Harris asked.

She remained silent and instead began to sign. *Why are you still here?*

*I saw the snorkel.* He waited for her to say something to disprove him. *Seriously?* he asked again. *El, I’m going to tell mom and dad.*

Eliza gazed at him coolly. *I was just curious about its history. I took the snorkel the night we were there as a souvenir.* She put her hands down.

Harris narrowed his eyes. *Why do you have swimming stuff then? Why is your stuff wet?*

She slowly broke into a distant, sugary smile.

Harris shut her laptop. *This is stupid,* he continued. *The pool was full probably from some pipe discharge or flooding from a hurricane.* He knew that wasn’t likely. The water was warm and clear, without any refuse or litter decorating the surface. *Or,* he considered when she

remained unmoved, *maybe someone filled it for the summer for parties or something. Look...it doesn't matter.* He paused for a moment, sensing that if he was going to try and be a good brother again, it was now or never. *I know you're still upset about your friends—*

Eliza dropped her smile. “Don’t you have an *interview* to prepare for?” She jutted out her chin. “Or perhaps a date to get ready for so you can get a job?”

Harris blanched. “That’s not...you don’t understand—”

“Sure I do,” she spoke, interrupting him. “You fought cancer and won. How do you think mom and dad would feel knowing that you smoke weed and drink every day? Their perfect son. Poisoning himself.” She took one step closer to him. “Do yourself a favor. Go get a job. Go to the city and network or sleep with that guy for work, or money, or drugs. Just leave me alone, like you did when you went to college.”

Harris didn’t register when or how he made it back to his room after that. His mind drew a blank in between the time it took to move from her bedroom to his room, and he faintly remembered her pointing to the door after some time had passed.

He stood in his dark room, staring at the floor, wondering if there was anything valid to what she said. Of course Joon was an excellent connection, and he might be able to do a lot for Harris. Maybe. But he wasn’t desperate enough to do what she suggested. He would never do something like that. *Be with a man?* he asked himself.

His mouth was dry. If that was all Joon wanted from him, he wouldn’t bother. It didn’t matter how hurt he was or how much he just wanted to get out of his hometown, get away from his childish bedroom, run away from the sister he left behind. Again. After all the work he was doing, including all the work of graduating, he believed he earned his weed and alcohol. At least he wasn’t obsessing over something that could get him arrested.

He broke his gaze and picked up his phone from his headboard, shooting off a message to Joon, finally asking him to meet. *How's that for networking?* Then he hurried from his room to chase away the crippling taste of old, dirty pennies in his mouth with vodka. When he climbed the stairs, Eliza's bedroom light framed her closed door. He flipped the door off before shuffling to bed.