

Transmissions from the Hot Planet: Stories

A Senior Honors Thesis for the Department of English
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The Replacement

But Rui is not a replacement, Mona's mother will say over and over. Rui is a visitor, a guest, special company for the next four months. She is just like every other exchange student their family has hosted, doesn't Mona remember? But to Mona it's no coincidence that Rui — a girl, one year younger than her older sister — arrives from Beijing only one week after Lara Jean has left for Yale, filling whatever space was left behind in her absence.

It's different, Mona's mother says, the two of them cleaning out Lara Jean's room for Rui to stay in.

And when Rui arrives, she is different. Where the last exchange students from Germany were loud and cheerful, Rui is quiet and inquisitive, always looking deep into you like a body of water. Where Lara Jean was hardly in the same solar system as Mona, different planets barely orbiting the same sun, Rui is there — interested in Mona's life, Mona's house, Mona.

You speak English so good, Mona says the first night that Rui eats dinner with them. Mona, her father says. It's well, not good, dear, her mother says. Rui just laughs, light, easy. I went to an international school, she says. Catholic. All the nuns only spoke American English. She spears a spinach leaf, and then eats it slowly, like she's tasting it for the first time.

Mona loves turning this over in her mind. She pictures herself in an international school with Rui, sitting on yoga mats, maybe. Mona, a nun asks her, what are things like in America? Mona tells them about drive-thrus and stick-on earrings, soda cans and big TVs. You wouldn't believe, she says to a class of wide eyes, how gross the school busses are. Rui beams at her—in this fantasy, Rui is sitting right next to her.

At night, Mona goes to brush her teeth at the same time as Rui. The toilets in America are fascinating, Rui says. It swirls around and around. It's just a toilet, Mona says.

All the toilets in China are square, Rui says, smiling. The water just falls straight down. Later, as Mona lies in bed listening to the sounds of the house, she thinks she can picture a Chinese toilet from behind closed eyelids. For as long as she can remember, Lara Jean's room has always lain silent at night, even before she left for college, Lara Jean out with her friends or quiet doing homework. Now with Rui, there's a soft humming as she moves around the room unpacking. To Mona, it must be an ancient song, a melody that can charm animals and heal wounds, one that swirls around and around Mona's head until she slips into the darkness, asleep.

By the time that Rui has been there for a few weeks, she has easily become the most fascinating person that Mona has ever met. Whenever Mona gets a chance, she asks Rui about her life in China: what kinds of shoes do people wear there? she might say. What kinds of cars do they drive?

She comes to understand that there are two kinds of answers that Rui gives her. The first is what tells Mona when her parents are listening: oh, just like the kinds you have here, she might say. Reeboks and tennis shoes; Toyotas.

But when they are alone, Rui tells Mona of fantastical things, stories exciting something deep inside her. At night in Beijing, Rui says, children—chosen children—grow wings and climb out of their bedroom windows, soaring around the sky until the sun starts to rise, tumbling into their beds just before their parents wake them up for school. How do the children get chosen? Mona asks, and Rui's eyes open wide, as if gazing into the future: why, she says, they only have to believe.

For Mona's part, she knows that stories are stories, and that if anyone else were telling her the things that Rui was telling her, she wouldn't believe them. But there's something that's

so different about Rui, an authority that emanates from her. If anyone were able to travel between the realms of the real and the mystical, it must be someone like Rui: someone from the East, someone that is alone.

And Rui is often alone; as long as Mona can remember, Lara Jean has always left the house most nights, off to study with her friends, or else to the mall with a group, these hours and hours logged away from home. But Rui doesn't leave the house, or even talk on the phone for entire afternoons. She sits in Lara Jean's old room listening to music or staring at her phone. This marks her as someone special in Mona's eyes: someone carrying magic must have no need for companions.

She can believe her—almost, Mona thinks. If Rui had any sort of proof of the things she said, even a hint, Mona knew that she'd rise all the way to faith.

Still, there are times when she can't help letting Rui's stories slip out. At recess, Mona gets into a fight with a boy who says that Mona is lying about Chinese schools, that the classes aren't held in swimming pools. My dad does business in China, he says, so he would know. My friend is actually from China, Mona says. So I *do* know. Your friend is a liar, the boy says, and Mona pulls his hair and brings home a note. At the kitchen table, her parents sit down with her. You just can't do these things to other people, her father says, and Mona, who knows by now that adults can't understand these things, nods solemnly.

Later she tells Rui what happened, expecting her to be proud of her. Instead Rui's eyebrows fly upwards. She sits down on Mona's bed, serious. We need to be careful Mona, she says.

Why's that? Mona says.

We can have our fun, Rui says, but it's only fun if we're the only ones who know about it. Like secrets. You know what secrets are?

Mona knows secrets well by this point, the things you don't say to other people who wouldn't understand. A few days after Rui's arrival, Mona had climbed the stairs to her father's upstairs office, and found a large mirror propped against the wall, bordered by a gold frame. The mirror's presence itself wasn't unusual—Mona's father was a collector (a curator, as he said) of objects, things he put together in groups to make museum exhibits. But when Mona knelt down and blew the dust off of it, she saw something peering back at her that wasn't her face.

Except it was her face, wasn't it? She had leaned close, trying to pick out exactly what was different. Her mouth was the same mouth, her nose the same nose; every feature by itself was the same as it had always been. And yet when she leaned back and looked at it all together, the face didn't arrange itself properly. The girl looking out from the mirror would not, could not be Mona. It was the face of a stranger.

Mona blinked, the stranger blinked. She licked her lips, the stranger licked her lips. She bared her teeth, and the stranger did the same: angry, aggressive. Frightened, Mona pulled away.

Yes, Mona understands secrets, the way she has been back there several times since to see if the mirror has gone back to normal yet, only to always see the stranger still there, waiting for her. In the bedroom with Rui, she nods solemnly.

Good, Rui says, smiling again. She stands up off Mona's bed. Let's go downstairs for dinner, then.

Now, some nights, Mona talks to Lara Jean on the phone, or at least talks to a voice that says it is Lara Jean, running through a wire that snakes directly from their house all the way to

New Haven. Logically, Mona knows that the voice must be Lara Jean, but she can't connect it her image of her sister: in her mind, Lara Jean must be walking on stone paths under Narnian lampposts, sitting before roaring fires in great stone halls. This voice is tough and stilted, and if there is any evidence that it's separate from Lara Jean, it's this: before now, Mona has never had any trouble talking to her sister. With the voice, she is constantly afraid of the silences that stumble up from nowhere in their conversations, immobilizing both of them.

It's nearly impossible to say anything real to the voice. It asks about Rui, and Mona gives offhand answers that mask truth: she's alright, Mona says, and I think she's making friends. Too, there are moments when Mona wants to tell the voice about the stranger in the upstairs mirror, the face-that-is-not-her-face; it is this type of thing that Mona has always told Lara Jean, these stories that she could never say to her parents. But now, they reach those moments when Mona feels like she's about to spill everything, and the voice suddenly disarms her with staggering questions—do you like school this year? What are you studying?—and before Mona knows it, the call is hung up and before her is her house and her parents and Rui, neither Lara Jean nor the voice anywhere to be found.

Do you miss your sister? Rui asks in spare, casual moments: after school when they both sit in the living room, evenings in Mona's room when she tells her stories. Mona grapples with putting everything into words: with Lara Jean so far away, it feels almost as if she has simply faded out of existence, like a ghost. Of course she misses her, but in the way you miss your younger self, a thing that can't return though it's somewhere deep inside you. I do, Mona answers, honest and lying all at once.

One afternoon in the kitchen, Rui presses for more details about Lara Jean. What did she used to be like? she says to Mona. What did people think of her? Mona shrugs: Athletic, I guess,

she says. Really smart. Why? Rui doesn't answer, instead eating blueberries from a small strainer. When she smiles, her tongue has been stained blue like a lizard.

Rui, Mona repeats, why do you want to know?

But Rui shakes her head and launches into a story of a monkey king born on a mountain, destined to conquer the world. As she speaks, Mona feels a twinge of guilt echo inside her. Whenever Rui discusses Lara Jean there's something off in her tone that Mona can't place her finger on. Somehow, Rui has come in and taken a place left open by Lara Jean, and Mona has let her do this.

The monkey king, Rui is saying, dove deep underwater to a cave filled with trick mirrors, one that didn't show the real him. In one mirror, he saw himself as he had looked as a baby; in the next, the face of a goat staring back at him.

Something sharp runs through Mona, a sense of being looked at for the first time. Rui? she says, and she pauses before continuing. Do you think these mirrors exist in the real world? Rui looks into her and says: Everything is the real world, Mona.

Mona nods, queasy. Can I show you something?

She leads Rui up the stairs to the mirror, heavy and full. Mona watches Rui, who squats down and peers into it for a long time. She is nervous, but excited; she should have done this earlier, Mona thinks. Of all people, of course it's Rui that knows how to fix it.

You see it too? Mona says. The stranger who looks back at you?

Of course I do, Rui says. But she doesn't move from the mirror, still staring into it. Mona watches her, the only part of her moving her fingers, twitching abruptly as they rest on her leg.

At last, Rui stands up straight. This is a very special mirror, Mona, she says slowly.

But you can fix it? Mona says.

A very special mirror, Rui repeats. Her accent is stronger than usual, the words thick with it like butter slathered on toast. But yes, I think we can do something to fix it. Another long pause. A little ritual. You know what I'm talking about?

Like magic, Mona says, almost embarrassed to say the word out loud. She has never spoken about magic to adults like Rui, knowing that they would laugh. But Rui only nods, solemnly.

I can show you, Rui says, the next time that we're by ourselves. Tomorrow after school. You understand? We can fix it then.

After she leaves, Mona is alone with the mirror. She's excited to remove the stranger, but there's something that feels strange, something that's unresolved. She thinks about earlier, going back to Rui speaking just now in the kitchen: an error of speech, something that can be chalked up to English being her second language. Still, it stays with Mona—an eeriness when Rui asked about Lara Jean, the way she'd talked about her, as if Lara Jean were some figure that was dead.

Years from now, Mona will be in the bathroom of some polished restaurant washing her hands, and a woman will walk in who looks so much like Rui that for a moment she'll freeze, hands still under the stream of water from the faucet, but the woman will not turn towards Mona and will pull the door to the stall shut behind her quickly.

That afternoon, she will think, Rui had led her across the lawn, had the two of them sit down in the back woods in a grove, the dim light coming through like a church. Rui had lit a candle between the two of them, told Mona to look at it carefully. Relax, she had said, the words hovering between the two of them. Breathe.

There had been something that Rui was putting into the air then, some feeling being cast over the two of them. Focus on the flame, Rui had said, and Mona had watched as the flame grew larger and larger, the size of a sparkler, then a campfire roaring in between the two of them, sparks flying up into the night sky. Mona: aware of a sound that was unknowable, as if it was one of the earth's natural frequencies, before she realized it was Rui humming once again, transporting the two of them to a different plane altogether. Then from nowhere, Rui pulling out a mirror hardly as big as her hand, holding it up before Mona. You see it in the mirror, Mona? she had said. Do you see it?

In the restaurant bathroom: a noise from the stall, while Mona leans closer to the large polished mirror. For a moment, does her face shift its form? Or does it look the way she always does, the way she has looked for years now?

From the small mirror that Rui held, she had seen the face again. Somehow, Rui had done it, she had thought. Somehow, Rui put the stranger from the upstairs mirror into this one as well. Mona had looked up, only to see her leaning forward—she had smiled at Mona, directly at her, and then suddenly blown out the flame of the candle.

Everything around her had suddenly vanished, the dark engulfing her so that she had been floating in some black space: and Rui's humming too had been cut off, snapped off into silence like breaking a carrot.

The woman will emerge from the stall and come to the sink next to Mona's, ignoring her as she turns on the faucet. She will wash her hands methodically, as Mona will not move, debating on whether or not to turn to the woman and ask her: by chance, are you—?

But suspended in the darkness, Mona had not spoken, had not even dared to move. Rui? she had wanted to say, but her mouth had been stuck, full of mud. There was a noise all around her, and then there wasn't.

She had imagined that she had suddenly switched places with the stranger in the upstairs mirror, Mona now caught in the black behind the glass; meanwhile, the stranger took on Mona's place in the world. Mona could see the stranger eating dinner in her place, watching TV in her place, going to school in her place, living out the rest of Mona's life, no one the wiser that she was trapped in this state. Had Rui done this, changed the two of them? She imagined the stranger across from her in the dark, the stranger smiling devilishly. Why are you doing this? Mona had thought. In the darkness, the stranger snarled. Mona gasped and was awake.

Of course in this mirror, Mona will not ask the woman whether she is Rui, whether long ago she had known Mona in her house for a fall—Mona will never be that kind of person. Instead she will watch the woman give her a glance before leaving the restroom, the sound of each heel tapping the floor as she walks away.

Later, the stranger opens her eyes in the woods to find herself all alone, the candle gone, Rui having gotten up and left her alone. Night has fallen, and she walks inside just as the table is being set, her mother not seeing anything different but only telling her to wash up before dinner. Lathering her hands, she looks at the face in the glass and the face-that-is-not-her-face peers back at her, no longer confined to the upstairs mirror. So Rui has done it, the stranger thinks; Rui really has made the two of them switch. She dries her hands, and when she walks into the hallway Rui is suddenly there, like a ghost manifesting. She yelps, and the noise makes Rui flinch.

Goodness Mona, she says, you scared me.

She looks the same as she did before, but the stranger sees a glint in her eyes, some knowledge of what she has done, and Rui's hand starts to leave her side, reaching, a claw—but before anything happens, there's a noise from the kitchen and it drops, and the two of them go to eat dinner with Mona's family again.

Shortly after this, the upstairs mirror disappears, and no one will say where it's gone to. The following day, Mona finds a blank wall in the golden mirror's place, the office naked without its presence. Her father has no idea where the mirror has gone, or that it's even existed at all: I'm dealing with lots of mirrors everywhere, he says, his voice heavy when she asks. If there was one, you'll see it at the exhibit in a few weeks.

Rui would know where the mirror is, but Rui has become untouchable after the incident in the woods; now, a heaviness surrounds her, a different energy about her now. After dinner most evenings, she calls Mona into Lara Jean's bedroom, as if she's just remembered something for her. You want to hear a story? she'll say to Mona, and Mona will not, will instead want to run out of the room far away from Rui, but her tongue is always fat and unsure how to say no, and she'll nod.

Rui's stories are different now than they were before. Rui tells Mona of trap doors underneath beds that demons crawl through when people fall asleep; Chinese housewives washing clothes who tumble into rivers and drown, only to come back as ghosts and peek through the windows of houses. Once, she returns to the story of the monkey king, but the tale is altered: now, as Rui tells it, the monkey king sleeps in a large cave with his wife next to him but wakes up in the middle of the night only to find his wife dead, a body turned into stone lying

next to him. The cave is empty and cold, Rui says looking at Mona, and Mona shuts her eyes but does not leave.

Nights, she wakes up from dreams where she lives out these new stories of Rui's; back in that spot in the woods with Rui, she watches as the characters march around the two of them as Rui tells the stories. In bed she sits up, breathing heavily, and from far away she thinks that she can hear Rui's humming once again. It's impossible, for it's three or four in the morning, and the whole house is dark, but the sound persists as if from a distance, like a ghost shouting from far away.

One evening as Mona passes Rui's room, she sees Rui standing over the picture frames on Lara Jean's dresser, photos of Lara Jean and her friends; she watches as Rui looks for a long time, bringing one of the frames up to her face, her lips moving, before putting it down again. Mona starts to move away, but Rui looks up and sets the frame down, a strange look on her face. Come in, Mona, she says.

The two of them sitting on the bed, Rui tells her about a family in the middle of the prairie, terrorized by wild dogs that pace around their cabin, snarling and scratching at the walls. It's a family just like ours, Rui says. Two sisters, a mom, and a dad. Something in Mona shifts, as Rui says this, and she interrupts: you mean my family.

For a moment—just a moment—Rui looks as if she's been pushed out of the power she has over Mona, confused. My family, Mona repeats, nervous but gaining confidence. She's aware that she's coming in on something. You're just visiting. You're not actually a part of us.

Something snaps Rui out of her trance, and the smile is back again, only lips and no teeth. Well Mona, she says, standing up, if that's true, then you probably shouldn't be in this room.

A buzzing everywhere as Mona backs into the hallway, as Rui shuts the door behind her. For a moment she is still, understanding deep down what she must do, what she should've done before all of this happened. She goes into the kitchen and picks up the phone, dialing Lara Jean's cell phone. At the table, she sits and listens to it ringing before the voice picks up: Hello?

But Mona is unsure how to start, all the words inside her trying to tumble out of her, but instead getting tangled up with each other. She inhales—Hello? the voice says—then exhales, trying to figure out how to start, how to say anything at all. Mom? the voice says from the phone.

Still Mona says nothing, and in the next instant, when she looks up Rui is standing there in the kitchen. The suddenness surprises Mona, nearly making her drop the phone; instead, she clutches it harder, breathing into it, heavy, nervous. When the voice speaks again—is anyone there?—Mona hears fear in the voice on the phone. But with Rui in the room, now at the counter putting bread in the toaster, Mona can't say a thing.

For a few seconds, there's silence on the other end of the phone, and then Mona hears the voice hang up, the line falling through the empty tone that plays. Rui stands at the counter until the toast pops up, and then takes it out of the room.

The headset lies on the table, and Mona stares at it, knowing she should pick it up again to call back. Pick it up, she whispers, pick it up—but after a minute, she still hasn't moved.

You must be Rui, Lara Jean says, arriving home at the start of Thanksgiving break. She stands at the bottom of the stairs, wearing a scarf and with a hand on her suitcase. Mona feels odd to see her again, and she has to remind herself that this is still Lara Jean. Still, it's a Lara Jean that is three months removed from the rest of them, a Lara Jean with three months of growing up and new experiences spent away from them. Once, Mona learned in school about all

the cells in your body being replaced every seven years, and sometimes she periodically checks herself, trying to see how part of her is completely different than before. She has this feeling now, looking at Lara Jean.

It's pronounced *ray*, she says, and feels very small when everyone turns to look at her.

To have Lara Jean and Rui home at the same time is to watch two different worlds collide, a twisted crossover event between characters not intended to meet. On the stairs, Mona watches the two of them nearly collide, as Lara Jean goes up and Rui carries a laundry basket of clothes down.

Sorry that you have to move out of the room for a few days, Lara Jean says, cheerful. I should have asked to be the one to move downstairs.

It's okay, Rui says. Her mouth is narrow, and her arms look as if they're straining underneath the laundry basket.

Well, if you end up not liking it, I'm always happy to swap, Lara Jean says. It's just a room.

Your room, Rui says, and before anything else happens, she throws a smile onto her mouth and passes Lara Jean to go down the stairs.

All week it's like this, a strange tension that Mona feels in the house now with the two of them there. I don't know if that's a real word, Lara Jean says during Scrabble that night, and Rui looks up at her, still for a fraction of a second, before pulling the tiles back: well, if you say so. Thanksgiving morning, Rui slides over a chair when Lara Jean comes to the table with her breakfast, and Lara Jean shakes her head, telling her that she doesn't need to move; but Mona was just telling me how you always sit here, Rui says, though Mona had not been just telling Rui any such thing.

Right before dinner, Rui and Lara Jean disappear into their room as Mona and her parents start bringing the dishes to the table; they emerge right before dinner with Rui wearing a face of makeup. She looks beautiful and nothing like herself, and Lara Jean presents her proudly like a doll: aren't these colors look perfect on her? Rui is quiet and sits down, a cool expression on her face.

Earlier that day, Lara Jean had caught Mona kneeling on the bathroom counter, looking over the stranger in the mirror; she had laughed. What are you up to? she had said, and Mona had turned, looking into Lara Jean's eyes, wondering if she noticed that Mona was wearing the face of the stranger now, instead of anyone else. If Lara Jean noticed that Mona was different, if she seemed to have even a flicker of understanding, Mona thought she'd be able to tell everything. But Lara Jean had laughed as Mona stared at her, and then walked away.

At the table, Mona sees the way that the family interacts. She watches as Rui doesn't speak while everyone else talks about Lara Jean's first semester. She watches her mother's eyes dart from daughter to exchange daughter, moving over the dishes of food; she watches her father look everyone in the eyes when he starts speaking except for Rui. The two of them sit across from each other, the tablecloth a battlefield littered with gravy boats and candlesticks of fire, but Mona sees that Rui is the only one who sees the hostility, the anger in only one direction. Are you getting along well here, Rui? Lara Jean says at one point, and something else is underneath the question, something being assumed.

Rui chews, letting a silence grow over the table for a beat, before answering: I like it just fine. She hesitates, sitting in the makeup of Mona's sister, and the conversation at the table stalls before it returns to Lara Jean again.

Friday, their father takes them to see his finished art exhibit, set to open in a week or two. The gallery is closed, and he fumbles with his keys at the front, before he unlocks the door, leading them through the museum to his collection which has been placed at the very back. Over the break, the university has put the building on a power saving mode: every room in the museum is dark until someone walks into it and a motion detector floods the room with white light. Then, after everyone leaves a room, the light shuts off rapidly and it all goes black again. In this way, their father leads them in a winding path, plunging into the darkness of each gallery for a brief second before the lights come on, and on, and on until they reach his exhibit.

Rows and rows of mirrors, of all shapes and sizes, covering all the walls and the ceiling. Some are modern, sleek black or brown frames, while others are more ornate. There's a pattern here to how they're arranged, but Mona isn't able to figure out what it is, wandering the room as her father explains the meaning of it all. This one's frame is metal, twisted into the shapes of vines and flowers and roses; another is supposed to look like a lion roaring, the mirror in the wide O that its mouth forms. The stranger looks back at Mona from all the mirrors, before she looks up to the top right corner of the room to see the big golden mirror, close to the ceiling. Too high for her to ever look into ever again, gone.

When she walks back to her father, she does so slowly, her feet heavy. Where's the bathroom? she says.

Her father glances at her. It's a different part of the museum, he says. I don't think you should go by yourself.

I can take her, Rui says. Mona takes a step away, but her father notices nothing.

Following his instructions, they turn through several rooms. Each room is still on the energy saving mode; at every moment, there's that instinctive fear that the lights won't turn on as

they enter the dark of one room, until they hear a click and then they do. When they step into the hallway with the restroom, the light in the room flickers and then goes out, only the hall light staying on. Rui leans against the wall while Mona enters. Inside, she pees and goes to the sink, the stranger's face steady in the glass before her. You've done it, she thinks, shaking her wet hands. You've won.

Outside, Rui hasn't moved. You ready? she says, reaching for her hand. Mona pulls away from her, instead stepping into the dark exhibition room, old enough to walk by herself.

The lights don't come on. Rui waves her hands in the air, but the dark is steady.

Well, Rui says, her voice still. They must have burnt out in this room. We can try the next one.

But in the next room, the lights still remain off. Now the light from the hallway barely touches them, the darkness in the room coming around them like fog. Mona is starting to hear Rui better than she can see her: a low breathing in the dark, like that of an animal.

Is the power out? Mona says, and Rui doesn't reply, letting the silence grow. Can you get us back to everyone else?

I think so, Rui says, and again, she reaches for Mona's hand, which Mona avoids. In a quick movement Rui grabs it, harsh, and Mona nearly screams: the movement is sudden, like a monster reaching out from the dark.

Each footstep is a loud tap in the silent gallery; the voices of the rest of their family are gone. Further and further the two of them descend into the black like a cave, and when they turn the corner the faint light from the bathroom hallway is cut off.

Blind, they move slower, and Mona unable to even see her hands. What must be Rui grasps Mona's hand so tightly that it hurts. But in this kind of darkness, Mona is no longer

certain that whatever is holding her hand is Rui. Cut off from all light like this, something else—the monkey king, the ghost, the stranger—is there instead of Rui. She pulls at her hand once, twice, but it's caught firm.

Rui? Mona says.

But there is no answer from whoever it is with Mona. She feels the sharp thing against her hand, and then in a rapid burst of terror, she pulls sharply.

The thing-that-may-be-Rui lets out a scream as she loses balance and falls to the floor, nearly pulling Mona down as well. For a second, Mona imagines that the thing has fallen into a deep hole in the ground, that Mona is now in the museum completely alone.

Rui? she says, but there's nothing.

Rui? and then the sound starts in front of her, kicking into a gasp, panicked, before the breathing starts again.

Slow, heavy, labored breaths.

Rui? But now it's a whisper, one that barely extends past Mona's own ears. She strains to see into the darkness before her, and she kneels down in front of her. She feels a foot, connected to a leg.

The body coughs. Mona, Rui's voice says, and Mona backs away.

My foot is twisted, the voice says. The leg pulls away from her. Go get help?

Mona stands, but she's rooted into place, unable to make her legs start and move away; somehow, she's frozen, staring into the void where the thing speaks.

Please, Mona, the voice says, louder now, desperation starting to take over it. Go get help? And Mona is trying to run, out of the room, out to anyone, anyone but Rui, anywhere but here—but she's stuck.

Mona? Mona?

And then the sound of humming from the body on the ground, that sound that Rui has always made, eerie now. Where it once was beautiful, drawing magic out of the air, now it pulls from a nightmare. Now Mona's legs start: she walks, then runs into the next room, the next room, the next. Still the humming follows her no matter how far she goes; the sound is a part of her, embedded deep within.

She stops. Mirrors and mirrors and mirrors around her, climbing the walls like ivy. The room is empty, filled with a dim blue light emanating from nowhere. From each mirror the stranger looks out at her, bouncing from mirror to mirror, wall to ceiling, the image filling the room.

The humming reaches its loudest, and Mona turns to see Rui's dark figure, standing at the entryway to the room, staring at Mona. They both take a step towards each other, and then another, and the figure appears as so many things—a fairy, a witch, a sister—and then it draws closer and closer, all those images flickering together until all that's left standing before Mona is this strange woman, small, with slanted eyes.

Who are you? Mona says. Who are you really?

Rui looks around the hall of mirrors, at the stranger that Mona has become, and she shakes her head.

It was all ridiculous, she thinks in the car home, all of them waiting outside for the entire time. She sits behind Lara Jean and Rui in the last row. They're driving on the highway, the sky above them purple in the moments just after sunset, colors vibrant from pollution. Her father has the radio on, an AM station telling the story of a woman whose vehicle exploded in combat. She

had come home with third degree burns all over her body. The connection is weak, waves of static rolling through every few seconds that drown out her voice.

It was terrible, the voice on the radio says before the static comes in, ...couldn't even look at myself...no one recognized me when...saw me.

The static rolls in constant now, filling the car, but it's as if no one else can hear it; their father only continues to drive. Can you turn it off? Mona says, but no one moves or reacts. The white noise grows louder. Can you please turn it off? she says again, and she's suddenly seized a terror, a deep knowledge hooking itself in which she's disappeared, her family and Rui and the whole world unable to see her or hear her. Turn it off, she screams as the static deafens, consumes her, turn it off.

Their father shuts it off with a click, and everyone else has turned around to look at her. What's your deal? Lara Jean says. Rui is quiet and just looks at her, blinking.

But there's nothing to say; a creeping isolation has come over her. She meets Rui's eyes as the car pulls them along the highway, and Rui stares into Mona for a long time, as if searching for something, before she breaks the connection and turns away.

Aspects of How to Speak F—

Section I

1. Never question it. Often, we learn a language to communicate with other people, to speak in a different way than we have before. Only two other people in the world speak F—, and one of them has gone missing a long time ago. If you learn how we speak, you will have no one to talk to.
2. And don't say that it's just noises, just motions that have arbitrary meanings. It's true; we invented F— as children, when Casey and I were kicked out of the house for long periods of time. I suppose that at its core, it is juvenile—no more than some secret language between brother and sister. Still, there's a deliberate design to it, even if accidental; for a long time, it was the only way that I could speak at all. F— is designed for scattered minds, to distract from thoughts that overwhelm.
3. But you never had a scattered mind, did you, bird boy? You've always been level-headed and rational; for most of your life, I'm pretty sure you had never been scared. Wrapped in the security blanket of your parents' wealth, you moved through the world as if surrounded by a bubble, an assurance about you constantly that nothing could ever hurt you. After that afternoon, did we fix you, finally? Did you finally see how the rest of us live? Or did you see us as monsters, no motive behind what we were doing, our sole desire to terrorize you for the sake of fear itself?

Before we go any further, now you should know that I know you saw me too, bird boy. It was for the first time in years, the first time since that afternoon my freshman year. You were visiting the high school from out of town, trying to see Miss Bates. But Miss Bates no longer teaches here, bird boy; none of our teachers do. You didn't recognize me at first, in my janitor

uniform. It's the hat, hiding half my head; you moved past me and over the floor I'd just mopped, and your dress shoes were muddy. I was invisible to you, then.

But later, I saw you at the place where Casey's locker used to be; you still remembered which one it was. It had gotten dark outside, New England wintertime, and I stood at the end of the hallway. I took off my cap and started walking toward you. Your face changed, your eyes widened; your hands dropped from the locker and then after a moment, you snapped out of your trance and walked quickly down the hallway, then out the door and into the night. Anything to get away from me.

4. Still, your muddy shoes left prints on the floor. I stayed later than I usually do, just to go over the places where you had walked. I didn't mind this of course; it's always been a pleasure to clean, to get the filth out of places where it doesn't belong. I mopped back and forth, removing that any trace of you had ever been in these halls. I just wanted to tell you, so that you understand the things that I've done for you.

Section II

1. Of course, I have to acknowledge the possibility that Casey had already taught you to speak F—. He certainly had enough time to, what with all the time the two of you spent in his bedroom. Why, then, are you reading this, bird boy? Do you already know how to speak it? Do you already know what it means when I cover my right fist, raising my arms to the sky?
2. It's impossible; still, I worry, the idea of Casey betraying the two of us in this way, teaching something that I've always thought would always stay between the two of us. You weren't the only one he brought up to his bedroom, bird boy; there were others, both

boys and girls who came before you. There were many others, bird boy, but you and everyone else that I ever went to school with already knew that. Casey had a brooding energy about him that attracted a large subset of people who were also unhappy; you could always see them, sometimes in crowds, standing by his locker between classes, talking to him, almost like a cult. Technically, you were the last one, if you need something to feel special about.

3. I mean that you were the last one in the house, because Casey has disappeared now. My mother says that Casey has the blues and is moving all over the country because he's trying to shake them off. Of course, I have them too, she says. It runs in the family. Her version of the blues, is quite different, and involves getting into bed at ten in the morning and staying there all day with the shades down; all this since our father left. Even still, you'd think by now, Casey would have found a place where he could leave the blues far behind him now.
4. But you were different from the typical crowd that Casey ran with, bird boy. In the halls, you stood out from the rest of us. I remember seeing you in the hallways with clothing that ran like a world map: pants made in Italy, shoes that your father picked up for you while traveling in Scotland. You gleamed, bird boy, never wearing the same thing twice; I remember staring at you, trying to catch some item of clothing that was a repeat, but you never did. I remember you walking through our house for the first time, stepping through our tiny dark rooms with covered windows, the general stench of garbage and piles of things all over. There was a look on your face of trying to hide whatever you were feeling as you both walked to Casey's room. I laughed at you then, as I've often wanted to laugh at you since.

5. In his bedroom, you had a routine. You'd both start off talking, then after a while, you'd both fall silent, and the only sound at all coming through my thin wall would be the scratch of my pencil as I did my homework. After a while, the talking would start up again for a long time, before Casey and you would get in the car to drive you home. I would eat dinner, and our mother would emerge from the bedroom where she'd been crying all day, and I'd ignore her.
6. All those nights I'd stay up late, watching for Casey to return. I'd imagine the headlights pressing through way through the dark as I watched from my bedroom window. I don't know where the two of you went, what you said to him. All I know is that by the time Casey returned, it would be so late that I'd always be asleep. In the morning, I'd try to perceive some difference about him, trying to understand what it was that the two of you had been doing, but I'd never understand it, and never come close to understanding it.
7. I never brought anyone up to my bedroom, then or later. I've always had something a little like Casey deep inside me, something radioactive that other people can sense that pushes them away from me. Maybe it was worse because I was a girl; in school everyone veered away from me, and so I moved alone through the hallways and through all my classes, keeping my head low. I've never even gotten close, bird boy. My only contact was with Casey, driving me to and from school every day. He was brilliant, beautiful, the one thing that kept me grounded that year. We rarely said anything, but that was okay—it was enough to feel like I was a part of something, that someone else understood me even in all of the quiet.

Section III

1. Maybe you have things to teach as well, bird boy; you affected Casey in a way that none of the others ever did. I don't know much, of course, but what I do know is that before that afternoon that you're thinking of, bird boy, you had another afternoon with Casey. This was the afternoon where you both went to your house, bird boy, instead of our house as usual; Casey dropped me off at home and the car sped off into the distance, and you both went to do whatever the two of you did together.
2. Inside our house, it was even quieter than usual without Casey there. In her bedroom, our mother was watching game shows and the only noises I could hear were from the TV. There was clapping and groaning and cheering, but the worst of all was the laughter. The shades in my room were pulled down, and I closed the door and stood in the dim light, listening to the laughter come, as if I were packed inside a box somewhere. It was horrible to listen to all that sound, all those people delighted at something I couldn't make out.
3. When he came home that night, Casey was angrier than I'd seen in a long time. He never said what happened at your house, bird boy. I don't know if you told him something, or if he met someone at your house, or if you did something. I don't know what it was, but I do know that he refused to talk to me or anyone for the rest of the week, and that the first time I heard him speak again was the following week, in that afternoon in the woods, bird boy.

Section IV

1. Believe it or not, the focus wasn't always on you, bird boy; that week, I was thinking a lot about the summer that we invented F--, only a month or two after our father had left. Every morning, our mother would lock us out of the house, retiring to her bedroom to be alone. That was when Casey got mangled, turning from a quiet kid to something more twisted, darker. Then, I thought it was just a phase, something he could be drawn out of: come with me, I'd say to him those mornings. I lead him around the yard and down the streets of the neighborhood; into abandoned construction sites and lots no longer used. At first he followed me quietly and I thought it was working, but I was mistaking my own two-year-younger excitement of being in the world and projecting it onto him; he was having his own set of thoughts that he never shared with me. Soon after, he distanced himself from me, going off on his own, not letting me follow him or see where he went.
2. My father must have had something to do with this. Before he left, Casey had a closer relationship with him than I'd ever had, one which involved the cultivation of a certain kind of masculinity. He'd taught Casey all kinds of things: how to build a fire, how to follow a trail in the woods that had been marked decades ago. The two of them used to go down to the river on hunting trips, and Casey would come back from those different, something deep inside of him awakened, alive in a way that I'd never seen him before.
3. Soon, I started to see what Casey was doing in the times that he went off alone. I found those hunting skills inverted into something ghastly: squirrels staked down and tortured to death, robins' nests at the bottom of trees with eggs smashed. He caught me watching him, one day, when he had caught a rabbit that had been hopping around the backyard, as

peaceful as ever in a bin that Casey had put it in. You want to watch? he said, already knowing what I knew. Let's do something else, I said. Not this. But he never listened.

4. He listened to the language though, something I'd invented on a whim. We started small, but soon we turned gestures and whispers into something beautiful, coming up with new words and phrases every day. It was like those hunting trips again: that same vitality coming through again. Maybe he liked the secrecy of it all, the way that I was the only one in the whole world that could understand what he was saying. Maybe he liked that it felt like someone else was finally communicating with him.
5. We started with just movements of the head, then expanded to full body movements coupled with whispered, garbled noises. A circle with the left arm and two clicks of the tongue: I understand you. A clap while puffing out both cheeks: I can't stand this. Eventually, we moved even beyond the body: at night, in separate rooms, we'd knock twice and flick the lights on and off again. This was a way to sign off for the night, though awkward: we never invented anything close to "good night," and instead we only said "goodbye forever".

Section V

1. You realized things were off that afternoon, bird boy, when we changed routes going home. Usually, we followed the main road all the way until we reached our neighborhood, but this time Casey turned off onto a side road that ran deep into the forest. You glanced in the rearview mirror, a reflection of me sitting in the backseat, but I looked away so that we didn't make eye contact.

2. You hadn't been in the car for a week. You hadn't been talking to Casey by his locker or in the hallways for a week. You and he must have finally been through, I thought, just like all the others—but then there you were that day, riding home with us once again. I suppose you thought it was safe, with that inbred confidence that you have that every space you step into is always safe. I remember catching a glimpse of a new watch on your wrist: something leather, sleek, thin.
3. Casey pulled to the side of the road, where a small trail led into the woods. He got out and shut his door and rummaged around in the trunk. For a second, it was just the two of us, bird boy. Now, you turned around in your seat, but that was a mistake; I didn't know what was going on either, but I knew I'd support Casey no matter what it was. After a moment, Casey came back to the car with a camera around his neck, and he leaned in through the driver's side of the car. Out, he said, his voice cool, calm. He was looking at you, but one of his hands fluttered by his side at the same time that he blinked, and so I left the car too.
4. You should remember all of this, bird boy, but just in case you forget it I can remember it too: the stark white of snow in the forest as we followed Casey down the trail, the cold gnawing at my hands, the bright white that came from the clouded sky. I remember seeing Casey from behind and being taken aback by how skinny he seemed from a distance, a skeletal body that seemed to defy possibility. I don't remember anything about you, bird boy, except the sound of your footsteps following the two of us slowly. Even then, you trusted him so much.
5. Though sometimes my memory too plays tricks on me. I know consciously that things couldn't have happened the way I remember them, but the memories are still stuck in my

head anyways. Casey had never smoked. Casey was never nervous. I'm not sure why I can't let go of these details.

6. Casey lit a cigarette and paced back and forth in a clearing off the trail. You stood there, with your hands in your pockets. Casey, you said, what is this?

Take off your shirt, Casey said.

For a moment, you were silent, and then you said: what?

Simple: your jacket, followed by your shirt, Casey said again.

His voice was shaking, and so was his hand when he drew it out from his right pocket: a flash of metal which took seconds to register as a gun, pointing at you, bird boy. I looked at Casey, and then I looked away. I couldn't tell why he'd asked me to come here with you both—if I was there to help him, or to be killed alongside you.

7. It does get a little foggy here. You took off your coat, followed by your shirt, and Casey's voice got a grip of itself again. He was calm and collected. Now your pants, he said; I looked at the ground, and when I looked up again it wasn't just the pants. You were completely naked, bird boy, save for your socks, a bright purple blend brought from some far-off continent. They looked ghastly against your skin, something so vibrant pressed up against your legs, which were sickly and pale.

8. I wasn't supposed to see you with your clothes off, like seeing an animal without its fur, or a lemon that's been peeled. You were revolting; I remember a rising sense of nausea inside of me, the feeling as I looked at you that some natural law had been violated.

Casey cleared his throat, and when I looked up, he was passing me the gun. It was so smooth, bird boy, like a dance that we'd practiced. But we hadn't practiced. I looked at

him, to see if he was speaking to me in F—, but if he was trying to say something, it was nothing that I could make out.

9. The gun was lighter than I'd have expected. For a moment, Casey turned away from us both and bent over, fiddling with the camera, trying to get it to work. It was a Polaroid, one of the older ones prone to breaking. He turned back around again, and then he raised it and clicked it, once, twice, black photos pulled from the top. Face me, he said, and his voice shook momentarily again. You stopped hunching, bird boy, but it must have been twenty degrees that day, and it must have taken everything to stop huddling and stand up straight, as Casey clicked and the camera whirred, and another photo was printed out, another, another.
10. He took the gun back and passed me the photos, then walked up to you, bird boy. He pushed your head down, so that you were kneeling; he hooked a finger under your chin and leaned your head back. He was saying something to you, but he spoke too softly for me to hear it.
11. I know that you had a moment there, bird boy, where you believed that he was about to kill you: a stillness hanging in the air that you expected to rupture at any moment.
12. But after a moment, he stepped away from you, scooping up the pile of your clothes. Don't move until we're out of sight, he said, or else. And if you tell anyone, he said, and he glanced at the photos developing in my hand. He straightened up, and I tried to say something to him, but he wouldn't look at me, so we both walked down the trail, leaving you naked in the forest save for those ghastly, purple socks.

Section VI

1. The gun was fake, bird boy, some hyper-realistic prop that Casey had procured. You were never in danger all the time; not even later, since none of the photos turned out either, all of them underexposed and too dark to see anything. Casey screamed at me on the way home, threatening to run the car off the road and kill us both until I begged him to stop, my hands fluttering around and saying all sorts of words that he wouldn't hear. Isn't that funny? I only knew that the gun was fake when I tried to shoot you that day, bird boy, as Casey fiddled with the camera, and I felt the trigger glued in place.
2. For a while, you were dead. You didn't show up to school again after that day, or the next, or the next, and so as far as I was concerned you were gone. I decided that you had frozen to death in the forest that day; I couldn't imagine you running through the forest path back to the side road, waiting for some car to drive by so that you could ask them to call the police. I waited and waited for news about you, but I never heard anything at all.
3. Soon after, Casey disappeared too, taking the car with him wherever he drove off to. I rode the bus alone, all the while imagining him driving first along the coast with a view of the ocean along a highway, then being swallowed up by the landlocked states and spit out years later, no one the wiser on who he was. I tried Googling him, even recently, but wherever he's gone he's left no trace of himself.
4. I started to get meaner. Even though no one knew what we did to you in the woods, afterwards people started to avoid me more than ever, as if I was infected with something deadly that they didn't want to get too close to. Alone, I started to find ways of torturing them all, finding a glee in watching others suffer. In lockers, I left notes to girls from the

guys they crushed on; nights, I walked miles to other's houses and slashed tires and ruined cars. For you, Casey, I thought.

5. I was hired back at the school as a night janitor after graduation. There were few other things that I could have done, no other places that I could go, and so I stayed here. The truth was that it was a pleasure to clean: hiding the dirt and putting it in its place, keeping the filth out of sight from the rest of the world. It was something that I knew how to do well by now. I remember running into my old teachers while being in my uniform, the fake smile and eye contact and nods as they walked past me in the hallways. After a while, they stopped the smile, and then the nod, and then the eye contact altogether, and then later, all of them left the school and moved on to other things, and it was just me here with no one that I knew.
6. And then I remember how late at night in our house, I'd walk into Casey's empty room and stand in the dark, practicing all our words and phrases that we'd done. Come back, my arms fluttered, looking out at the street, but there was no one on the street, and even if he had been outside, how could I know that he was even watching me, even looking at me? I remember, I remember—but we were talking about you, bird boy, weren't we; I apologize.
7. I saw you one more time, last Sunday; I know you saw me too. I was in a booth at the donut shack, the one next to the deep construction pit where they're going to put something big. It was raining outside, and you came in holding what seemed like dozens of paper shopping bags, nearly collapsing under all your possessions. You took off your tan raincoat and sat at the booth and ordered a muffin and a glass of milk. For a long time, I watched you; then, I got up to go, making eye contact with you as I passed. In my

car, I idled the engine and turned up the heat, and everything smelled like wet dog. I was parked in front of the construction pit, deep enough that the bulldozers looked like toys far below. My windows kept fogging up, and occasionally I would lean forward to wipe off the windshield with my hand, clear for a few minutes until I had to do it one more time again.

8. Here's what I thought would happen next: you would come stumbling out carrying nothing with you and open the door to the passenger's seat and slide inside. I'd lock the doors and drive upstate through heavy rain that would feel like the ocean, the two of us arriving at some small bed and breakfast that looked out at the driveway. The room would be on the second floor and covered in floral everything, and we'd lie down among the floral blankets and sheets. I miss him, I'd say, and you'd say: I miss him too, except—. You'd trail off, and I'd turn away from you, being driven crazy by the flowers on flowers on flowers climbing the walls. In the morning, I'd wake up and look out the window and see your body, sprawled below on the pavement. It would be sunny then, and the little shadows from the leaves on the trees would be dancing. My hands would be fluttering and my mouth making sounds, saying things to absolutely no one at all.
9. But you didn't do that; neither of you have ever understood me. For a second, I thought about pulling the car forward, through the guardrail so that I'd fall and tumble into the construction pit, but I thought you'd like that too much; instead, I tried not to look at you through the windows as I pulled out of the parking lot, driving away from you forever.

The Green Sickness

At Camp, the Eyes followed the girls down to their cabins and bunks where they would be staying for the next two weeks. So cute! the girls exclaimed, entering the cabins. It's adorable, they said. Each of the cabins was a perfect storm of activity, a storm of hairdryers and makeup bags and outfit changes and shaving and waxing, all these things that they would do to make themselves presentable to the Lead. The Eyes caught it all with the mics and cameras, sucking up every moment with no regard for quality; no, they wanted it all.

By the week the show had reached Camp, Victoria had finally caught the eye of the Lead, which could only be good news for Casey. Victoria was one of the quiet ones, the kind that you never wanted to be assigned. The first two weeks of the show, she had blended in with the rest of the girls, never standing out, and the footage that Casey had submitted reflected that: wimpy footage, limp, hardly any of which made it into the actual show itself. But with more and more girls getting eliminated each week, the competition thinning out, it seemed like Victoria was starting to gain more confidence. At one of the latest parties, a few nights before they had left for Camp, Casey had watched eagerly as the Lead pulled her aside:

I just wanted you to know, the Lead had said, that I've been noticing you. You're really beautiful, you know.

This had been the seminal moment, the thing that had given Casey a framework for editing the rest of his footage for the week. As he watched and rewatched, he found clips leading up to that moment: Victoria looking longingly over the top of her shades at the Lead across the pool, the Lead glancing at Victoria even though he was dancing with another girl. The girls on

Casey's other two seasons had been duds, but Victoria was giving him reason to hope that this time she'd make it far.

A few hours after he'd submitted his reel that night, Rhoda had found him in the cabin with several other Eyes, making a beeline towards him; rare for her, considering that Casey rarely had a contestant that merited interest in the show. This time, she pulled him away from his laptop and his bed, outside the cabin in the summer heat.

This was an excellent week for Victoria, Rhoda said. I'm starting to think that there's potential for her this season.

I agree, Casey said. If she can keep it up, then we'll be in the clear.

It's not just Victoria, Rhoda said. It's you too. Fight for her.

They were standing underneath the cabin's outdoor lamp. In the night, moths kept soaring toward it, a small cloud of them growing by the second. Casey nodded. I'm trying, Casey said. I'm always trying.

Well, Rhoda said, try harder.

She passed him two more packs of gum. Don't be afraid to get liberal with these either, she said. And let us know if you'd like to orchestrate something to make her stand out even more.

He looked down, and then looked back up at her, but she shook her head and walked off into the darkness, back towards the cabin where the Editors all slept. He stood outside, feeling very liminal, before going back inside to the cabin with the other Eyes.

He opened his laptop, and opened the livestream of the cabin Victoria slept in. Lights out would be in a few minutes, but Victoria wasn't talking with the other girls, wasn't a part of the conversation that they were having. She was sitting up in her bed, a string woven among her

fingers—her shoelace, Casey could see now, which she'd tied into a circle. The other girls laughed and talked about the Lead; Victoria stuck her thumbs through two loops and pulled on her index fingers. She twisted her wrists out in a smooth motion, and Casey could see: Jacob's ladder. She paused, as if someone was about to notice. But all the other girls were still talking, and none of them paid any attention to Victoria.

In a few moments it would be lights out and that day would be over, everything reset in the dark like wiping a slate clean, but before that could happen, Casey watched as Victoria put down the shoelace and turned onto her side and went to sleep, all on her own.

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Unlike the other Eyes, Casey hadn't been a fan of the show before he'd applied to it. Sure, he was familiar with the concept of the show, and had caught an episode or two of it when Katya was binging it in the living room, but instead of entertainment, all he felt toward it was some vague sense of depression. A crowd of beautiful women, parading themselves in front of a conventionally attractive Lead, who eliminated them each week depending on who he liked the best. All in the name of engagement, spending the rest of their lives this man. Casey supposed that in his position, he should be envious of the Lead, wishing that he could be in his place; but instead he was exhausted by it, even as Katya watched it endlessly.

But the job had appeared as he was going through a dry spell, after what had been months now of unemployment and form rejections. He was starting to feel crazy, stuck in the apartment all day as the rest of the world functioned on a clock. It was Katya who'd encouraged him to apply in the first place. It'd be so great, she had said to him. You'd learn all the insider secrets of how they make it. You'd be so close to the stars too.

I don't even have the experience required, Casey had told Katya, but Katya had had the solution for that too: as of now, you're an editor for the videos that I post, she had said. And besides, it says it right in the description—you hardly need any experience for this kind of thing. You just have to fake the passion.

She was right, in the end. It was high-pay and required low experience. He found himself driving downtown the following week, riding an elevator to an office in the sky for an interview. He was interviewed by Rhoda, a black woman in her early thirties. What we're looking for most of all, she said to him, is excitement and stamina. You'll be shooting fifteen- and sixteen-hour days, then editing that footage for us. You understand the kind of stamina that requires? Casey had said yes, yes he did.

Toward the end, Rhoda had hesitated. To be honest, she had said, we've had a few duds lately. We get all these film types who love the show, but then they drop like flies because they can't handle the job itself. It's competitive, and we give you a lot of independence. You're assigned one girl to film, and you choose how and when you want to get that footage. But your job progress is tied to how well she does on the show, just as mine as an Editor is tied to how well my group of Eyes does. You're filming her, but you're also orchestrating things for her to help her get ahead with the Lead. That's where the passion comes in. You're really up for a job like this?

Casey, in danger of losing his health insurance by this point, said yes, yes he was.

He'd received a congratulatory email two days later, welcoming him as an Eye on the show. At a brunch he could finally afford, Katya had talked at length, excited. You have to tell me everything, she said.

There'll be an NDA, he'd said.

You can hint at things though, Katya had said, and Casey wondered again how the fascination behind this show worked, how it could make people so crazed. He himself had no reservations about the integrity of the show or his role on it; It was a job, something he would show up to next Monday that would last until a different one came around, and yet in the following week when he told people of his work, he always noticed an excitement behind their eyes, a craving that awoke in them that they wanted him to satisfy.

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At noon, they brought several groups of girls out to the field that was at the edge of the camp, a big plain of grass with rigs for the Eyes' cameras. The activity for the day was ultimate frisbee, but a convoluted version of it in which four or five disks were constantly at play. The girls showed up clad in leggings and sneakers; the Lead had showed up in a T-shirt and shorts but had been stripped of the shirt by one of the Editors and misted with water for the cameras.

Whatever Victoria had had with the Lead earlier in the week, she had lost by that day. Casey followed Victoria on the field, peering through his lens to make sure that she was constantly in the shot, but she wasn't athletic, and she wasn't trying very hard either. Some of the girls screamed as they jumped for frisbee after frisbee; or, the non-athletic ones dawdled around the Lead, cheering for him whenever he did anything, no matter how banal. At one point, Victoria reached her hands up for a disk flying her way, standing stock-still, and another girl jumped up in front of her to grab it, crashing into Victoria on the way down. Victoria didn't look hurt so much as stunned that she was in this situation at all, lying on the ground for a few moments before pulling herself to her feet again, and walking to the sidelines, toward Casey.

It was tough when a girl was like this, refusing to keep trying, but he had to work with whatever he got. He pulled her around to the other side of the line of cameras, swiveling so that the focus of the frame was on her.

It's just so frustrating, Victoria was saying to the camera. All these other girls are here, and how am I supposed to stand out? He doesn't even see me compared to everyone else.

Casey was frustrated as she continued to speak, eventually shaking his head and pushing her back onto the field. The girls pitying themselves made for the most boring television imaginable. Before she went back on, he pushed two sticks of gum into her hand. Here, he said. Chew this before going back out.

Jonathan was working next to Casey that day. His contestant was Stana, a short blond girl from Long Beach, who was louder than Victoria, but still hadn't managed to catch the eye of the Lead yet.

They're beautiful, aren't they? he said. His camera was pointed toward the field, but he wasn't paying attention to his shot in the lens—he was looking over the top of the camera itself, watching the scene live.

Jonathan was the type to be taken away by the beauty of the girls that he was working with. Several of the Eyes did—it wasn't uncommon, surrounded by so many beautiful women and not getting caught up by them. But for Casey, it wasn't like that. He felt that all the girls were so separated from his reality; they hardly interacted with him or saw his existence. Half the time, he felt like he was watching a car commercial instead of actual real life playing out in front of him.

Casey looked up at the field, at all the girls playing. Chewing the gum, Victoria had a slightly more serene expression on her face now. She spit it out into the grass, and headed more

directly for the Lead himself, ignoring the flying frisbees. Maybe this was it, the moment she would finally assert herself—but no, she stopped a few feet away, and then backed away to the outskirts of the game again.

Casey looked at Jonathan. Jonathan had joined the show the same season that Casey had. They'd gone through the same training together: learning to use the cameras, to adjust to the idea of filming someone's every waking moment and leaving behind any personal sense of encroachment they might have had, to edit that footage later to make something interesting to submit to the Editors. The trouble with Jonathan was that he was too similar to Casey. They had both struggled every season so far, neither of their contestants ever standing out of the pack, even to be stars.

On the field, Victoria pouted, hanging her head. She touched Stana, and said something to her—then, the two of them glared at the Lead and the rest of the girls, and they went to the sidelines and sat down, not participating, looking angry that they had to be there. The cameras caught their expressions, but only Casey knew this, because Jonathan still stared at the girls themselves and not the shot that he was framing.

Still, Casey couldn't help but feel repulsed by the way that Jonathan looked at the girls; it felt too raw, too carnal, too unprofessional. It made him think of men staring at naked women on computer screens, of carnal pleasures better left unsatisfied, of the way that Bryan must be looking at Katya from behind his screen.

—

He had known of Bryan for about a month, now, and only due to the fact that he watched all of Katya's videos, not because Katya told him anything. You could count that Bryan would

be there on every video that Katya made, either in the comments or, if it was a livestream, constantly in the chat, making his presence known.

For a living, Katya was a Youtuber, if that's what you wanted to call it, though not in the traditional sense of the word, not in the sense of people jumping in front of their webcam to talk about the day-to-day details of their lives. Katya made videos for people to fall asleep to, whispering into a microphone in front of her camera, or tapping objects with her nails for hours on end. In a hushed tone she read books and poems, roleplayed as a doctor conducting an exam of a patient, even just sat there and talked about her day and everything that had happened—no matter what she was doing, she treated the camera like a viewer, gazing into it as if it was a person she was talking so, so that the effect when you watched her videos back was of a person looking directly at you, seeing you as you were, and interacting with you.

Casey had watched all of her videos, though it certainly wasn't because he enjoyed them. He found them all uncomfortably intimate, in spite of the fact that she was his girlfriend; in some ways, he would have preferred if Katya was getting naked, instead of pretending to stroke some imaginary viewer's head. Every video was filled with hundreds of comments, nearly all of them positive, viewers thanking her profusely. I suffer from severe anxiety and haven't been able to sleep for months now, wrote one commenter, but after five minutes of watching you, I was out like a light.

It was the commenters that made Casey nervous. At first, he hadn't cared about the way that Katya made a living, even though it was impressive that she could turn doing something on the internet into an income that paid her share of the rent every month. But after a while, he started to think more about the comments on her videos, what they were standing in for, especially those by men. Though they were nearly all universally about sleep, Casey came to

understand that the comments being left on Katya's videos were about something greater, some euphemism that he wanted to parse. You make me so relaxed, one person would write, and Casey could imagine the look on his face, some post-orgasmic bliss played out on his features. Your voice just hits me differently, another wrote, and Casey scowled, to think that others in the world were falling asleep with his girlfriend's voice in his head, her image beamed around the world for their pleasure.

He'd never brought it up with her, but since then, he had watched everything that she uploaded, monitoring every video and livestream for what she posted and for the comments. It grew to an exhausting workload sometimes, since she uploaded several times a week, but in his mind it was worth it. If she ever was going to leave him, if she ever wanted out of this relationship for one that had started in the comments of her videos, it wouldn't be said that he had been taken unaware.

The week before the show made them leave for Camp, the figure of Bryan was rising high in his mind; for over a month now, Casey had watched as the account of someone named Bryan had started interacting with her videos, becoming a regular fixture in the comments sections. His avatar was a grinning cartoon man, in a way that suggested something lewd was occurring; but his comments seemed provocative, as if Bryan knew that Casey was reading every comment, aware of how it infuriated him. You're so beautiful, Bryan wrote on several videos. On her livestreams, when Katya showed a grainy image of her face, Bryan flooded the chat several times. Can you say my name? he sent into the chat, with a praying hands emoji, and a moment later, Katya had seen it, and smiled. Bryan, Bryan, Bryan, she had whispered, close to the camera, and Bryan had sent a wave of heart emojis. Casey had watched this live under a fake account, sitting two rooms away in the kitchen, feeling tenser and tenser by the moment.

Still, Casey never brought any of this up with Katya, knew that he never would unless it got really terrible with Bryan. A year ago, Casey had started a fight about Katya's commenters and how they reacted to her videos. She'd been furious. Look at yourself, she had said, look where you work. Do you think I sit around and get mad about the fact that your job is to run around with women all day? That every season, you follow one beautiful woman around with your camera, getting beautiful shots of her looking beautiful? Because I don't. It's all professional, all separate. Just like this.

He could still remember the harshness of the kitchen light on her face, the way the air conditioner had been broken at the time so that they both sweat heavily. He had understood her point about his job as an eternal advantage that she could wield at any time, that she had a free pass to behave however she wanted to as long as he was an Eye for the show. This summer, he hadn't figured out any way to rebut it, but still he watched everything she did on the platform, and still he stewed in anger about Bryan.

In his dreams sometimes, he lay as usual in bed with Katya, but Bryan danced as a demon in the night in front of them, and Casey was paralyzed. Frozen, he could only watch as Katya rose to meet Bryan, to touch him right there in front of Casey, knowing that he could only retaliate. Bryan opened his mouth to speak, to say some words to Katya, and all that Casey could hear was the sound of whispering surround him, like some spell they were casting to obliterate him forever.

—

That night, the show would be holding a party on the beach, and so they clipped waterproof mics to the girls in place of their regular ones. For a little bit, Victoria was nowhere to be seen; then, she came out of her cabin in a bikini that highlighted everything. Stana stuck

right next to her; they had apparently become inseparable ever since arriving to Camp, which Casey had noticed in previous footage.

Can you pass me another piece of gum? Victoria said, as Casey clipped a thin wire on her back.

He knew for a fact that there were five pieces left in this week's pack. You're getting pretty low, he said. You're going to use it all up before the week is up.

I know, Victoria said to him, I know. Just give it to me. He passed her one, and she popped it in and chewed it quickly, her jaw like a piece of machinery. In a few moments, she had relaxed visibly, her shoulders let out of a tense pose.

On the beach, large white tents had been erected, underneath which sat several long tables filled with wine glasses. Strings of globe lights dangled in elegant swoops. The show had gone and achieved a very specific aesthetic, one that they adhered closely to every season.

The Lead appeared wearing only a swimsuit, holding a beer. He had clearly already been drinking tonight; it seemed like it was all he could do to not slur his words in front of the girls. He had a stupid, silly grin on his face as he spoke, greedy for all the bodies in front of him. Who wants to go swimming? he said, and when the girls collectively let up a cheer, he became leerier, and pantomimed as he spoke: who wants to ramp things up a notch?

For a moment after his suggestion, the girls didn't move, and Casey could almost sense the power shifting away from the Lead. But then, one of the girls let up a small yell, and took off her suit, and ran towards the water with the Lead, naked. Not wanting to be outdone, the girls had been sent into a frenzy, chasing after the Lead and the girl and taking their suits off as well, as they all raced into the lake's waters.

Only Victoria and Stana were left standing at the shoreline, crossing their arms. For a moment, Stana frowned, and started to wade in, but you could hear the Lead's voice calling from deep in the water: No getting in with clothes! and the chorus of girls screaming: No cheating!

She backed out, and went next to Victoria, and the two of them walked onto to a rock that jutted out over the water, sitting down. This is so unfair, Stana said, this is so—

I know, Victoria said. It's ridiculous. Look at all of them.

I don't want to skinny dip. Is that so much? And I don't want them—here, she gestured to the row of Eyes on the shore, scanning the waters—to see me without anything on.

Your bodies will be blurred, Jonathan called toward the rock. Casey felt dizzy, as if in some other life. He wondered what Katya say when she saw this clip on TV months from now. There was a hand on his shoulder, and he turned. It was Rhoda.

We need to talk, she said. Now.

Now? he said.

You can leave the camera rolling. It'll only take a second.

She led him up the path toward the cabins, and he followed her until they were out of range of the cameras and the other Eyes. The lights from the water were still visible from this distance, and he could see them reflected off one of her earrings, studs.

We need more from Victoria, Rhoda said. What she's doing now—this—it's unacceptable.

I know, Casey said. I'm sorry.

She's one of the weakest contestants with the Lead right now, Rhoda said, and if we don't get more from her, she's going to get eliminated. And that means that you won't advance either.

Casey struggled for the words. She's not acting right, he said. I'm doing my best with her. But she's too quiet. She won't act like the other girls.

It's not about her, Casey, Rhoda said, and her voice was sharper than it had been before now. We aren't bringing the girls here to make them feel good. It's your responsibility to get her out of her comfort zone. Yell at her, starve her, I don't care, but do *something* to get good TV out of her.

She paused, and Casey could see her pondering, her thinking. Then, she said:

This is your third season with us, correct?

Yes, Casey said.

And in all your seasons, you've never once been able to get a contestant to one of the final stages of the show—never even past week five. You see what I'm getting at?

I understand, Casey said.

I'm not sure you do, Rhoda said. If Victoria doesn't go farther this season, we'll be having a talk about your employment prospects with us from here on out.

She turned and walked back toward the beach. Casey waited for a beat until she was out of sight, and then he followed her slowly back to the beach, his palms sweating.

On the rock, Victoria hadn't moved, but Stana was standing up now, staring out at the water. What she saw, the cameras saw: the Lead surrounded by women who splashed and stroked and patted him, him leaning backward in total bliss. Stana's eyes were red. For a moment, she stood staring out at the water, still as a statue; then, she screeched and her voice rang over all the commotion of the girls in the water, and the girls and the Lead and the Eyes all watched as she leapt off the rock, her arms flailing through the air, before landing in the water.

When she reemerged, she was still screaming, making fast strokes toward the Lead as if she was about to kill him; and the girls surrounded him, forming a protective ring in the water as Stana drew closer and closer. But Stana didn't even make it to the ring. Halfway to the girls and the Lead, she started to gasp, exhausted with the effort it took to get that far out. She stopped, only treading water, and she was crying.

For a second it was quiet—then, a slow laughter rose up among the girls in the water, first low and then loud, moving over Stana even as she cried harder and harder. Even the Lead had a smile on his face, though he was clearly doing his best to keep himself composed. Casey filmed the laughing naked women; he filmed Victoria still sitting on the rock, her knees hugged to her chest like a child, staring out at the scene; he looked up at his camera to see Rhoda from a distance, looking at the water and then at him, blinking once, and then giving a slow nod.

—

He noticed it the next morning, in the footage that had been filmed while he had been off with Rhoda by the cabins.

I have an idea, Victoria had said, her voice so low that even her mic almost didn't pick up her voice. Stana had leaned closer, and then Victoria had said: the gum.

What about the gum?

They didn't shift positions, as Victoria laid her plan out: the gum that the producers gave them, they could chew enough of it to pull off a stunt in front of the Lead. Pass out in front of him or something, so that he'd have to notice them and give them attention. It'll get us to stick in his mind, Victoria had said, and only then had Stana turned slightly.

They won't give us enough gum to pull that off, Stana had said.

Victoria shrugged. Your Eye will. He's desperate.

That kind of stunt could kill you, Stana said. They put all sorts of stuff in the gum.

So you want to lose? Victoria had said. You want to go home already? She had paused, and watching the footage back, Casey could see how her mind worked, devising something manipulative. You know how he views you, Stana? He doesn't. You're nothing to him, and neither am I. We're both going to flunk out of this competition to all of them. She had gestured out at the water, and now was about the part where Casey had come back from the cabins with Rhoda, because now was the buildup to the freak out, the moment when Stana lost her mind and jumped into the water. On camera, it looked even more dramatic than it had when he had been there to see it, her limbs moving quickly.

He shut his laptop and stood up, his head spinning as he walked to find Rhoda. It was morning, and she'd be eating breakfast with the rest of the crew in the mess hall. No one else was in the cabin.

Keep it under a pack a week, they had said at training, a pack and a half as an absolute maximum. Your discretion to dispense it however you want, but never more than a few pieces at a time. It'll loosen them up, get them to talk to the cameras, get them to talk to the Lead, but it's strong too. You might as well douse your liver with a bottle of Nyquil. Casey could remember the presenter at the front of the conference room they had been in, the way that he had a large red X through a photo of a fist of gum. You can kill someone, he had said. There have been incidents.

There was little going on throughout the Camp. Girls walked through the paths lazily, but the Lead was nowhere in sight, and so there was no hurry for them, an uncharacteristic calm hanging in the air. At the mess hall, he stood at the back of the room until he found Rhoda's table at the back, which he stood before until she noticed him. Yes? she said.

Can I talk to you? he said. Outside?

She looked annoyed at having to leave her table, but they wove through the mess hall and stood outside on the balcony, in front of the glass doors. They were in clear view of everyone else, but at least the conversation would be private.

It's about Victoria and Stana, he said. I think they're going to do something dangerous.

Dangerous? Rhoda said.

Dangerous, he repeated. They're going to try and obtain extra gum to pull some kind of stunt. Something with passing out in front of the Lead to get his attention.

He already knew at this point that he wasn't having an effect on her, the way you might speak your own language in a different country and get no response. He continued anyways. It could kill them, he said. I thought I should tell someone higher up than me.

Rhoda smiled.

That's ridiculous, Casey, she said. Is that all you're concerned about? Eyes don't give out nearly enough gum to hurt the girls.

Jonathan will, Casey said. They're going to hurt themselves.

Casey, Casey, Casey, Rhoda said. Her lips had curled upward.

There was a long pause. Down below them on the paths leading to the cabin, Casey noticed the Lead walking slowly, clad in last night's swimsuit and an unbuttoned dress shirt.

You should be brainstorming ways to break Victoria out of her box, Rhoda said, not shut her in.

I know we've talked about this before, Casey said, but when it happens—

It won't happen, Rhoda said firmly, but this isn't the attitude I want to see from you. She shook her head slightly, and then took a step back toward the mess hall. Below her, a pair of girls

had seen the Lead on the path, and had screamed, running toward him. Besides, Rhoda said, turning back toward Casey, if it were to happen, I would think you'd relish this chance to advance your career.

Another step, and then another, and she was back in the mess hall, walking away from him to her table with all the Editors again. He could see one or two of the Eyes staring at him, wondering what he was doing to get ahead with an Editor.

Is this what they want? he thought, and he stayed staring at Rhoda at her table for a long time, before he walked away back to his cabin to be alone.

In the early afternoon it started to rain, at first in thick sheets of water that came down all over the camp, before turning to a thin drizzle that emerged from fog. Seamlessly, the girls transitioned from shorts and sundresses to leggings and sweatshirts. In the middle of the afternoon, with no events that needed attending, several of the girls started to disappear into their cabins to nap, and many of the Eyes stopped filming, assuming that nothing television-worthy would happen before the evening.

It seemed like the right opportunity for Casey, who had decided to approach Victoria at a low-key moment. He left his camera in his cabin and found her in a group of girls near the beach. They were suspicious as he approached; if an Eye approached you without a camera, it usually meant something big, whether good or bad.

Can I talk to you for a moment? he said to Victoria.

A whispered hush going up among the group, and Victoria blinked. Talk to me here? she said.

Just come with me for a second. I'll be quick, he said. I promise.

Still an uneasiness from her, but she said: well, I'm going to bring Stana with me then, at least. They looked at each other, and Stana nodded, and then the two of them followed Casey away from the cabins and on one of the paths toward the woods.

He had planned to lead them just a little way away, but the rain was starting to pick up, heavier drops falling from the sky now. Here, he said, and he pointed to an A-shaped structure that was down one of the paths. We can talk inside the chapel.

They whispered behind him as they followed him, but never loudly enough to hear what they were saying. Occasionally, one of them laughed. They passed other groups of girls, who stared at them as they passed.

The chapel was dim, one of those ancient structures that didn't have electric lighting installed, lit only by the windows so that the room grew darker with the closing afternoon. There was a row of thin windows near the top peak of the chapel, as well as a few translucent ones closer to the ground. Casey unlocked it, leaving his keys hanging in the door outside as they all ducked in from the rain. Inside, he noticed that there were two cameras in the far back corners that looked out onto the chapel floor, remnants from some season far past, he was sure. They were an older model, black globes like frog eyes, and he grimaced, and turned away from them toward the girls.

Look, he said, I know what you're gonna try to do tomorrow night.

I don't know what you're talking about, Victoria said too quickly. Stana nodded.

Your gum stunt, he said. Don't play dumb. It's all on camera from last night.

They looked less surprised than he would have expected. Victoria shrugged. We were just talking. It's been a stressful week.

I know you're going to get it from Jonathan. I know that you're going to do it tomorrow night. I'm not telling you because it's against the rules—you're putting yourself in danger.

He had the feeling of being an actor in a haunted house, trying to scare two kids who were clearly too old for this kind of move; both Victoria and Stana looked unimpressed, looking at Casey with no regard for him at all.

Why do you even care? Victoria said. If we do well, it's good for you. If it goes badly but gets a lot of attention, then that's also good for you. You should be thanking us right now.

He had lost them both, and he felt dizzy, like he wasn't living on the same planet, stuck in his own head about everything. He looked up. Do you have the gum with you right now?

He'd struck on something; the girls looked nervous, and then shook their heads.

He repeated himself: do you have the gum?

No, Victoria said, clearly lying.

He took a step toward them. Give it to me, he said. They stepped back, and he finally felt like they were finally listening to him, the guilt on their faces so clear. Give it to me, he said again, louder. They were against the door now, and Victoria looked at Stana, and then back at Casey, before reaching slowly into her pocket.

Everything after happened quickly: at once he felt a sharp shove and fell roughly, landing on his back; he heard a shout at the same time, and then the two figures rushed out of the chapel, slamming the doors behind him.

He lay there for a long time, letting his breath return back to normal. Well Rhoda, he thought, if those cameras at the back work, then you've gotten your footage alright. Physical

feuds with the Eye always made for great television. He stood up, and pressed against the door to leave, but nothing happened.

A frown. He pressed again, but the doors didn't budge.

With a start, he thought of his keys, hanging outside the door. So they had locked him in, he thought, they'd done it. Behind him, the chapel grew dimmer and dimmer in the afternoon light, and he thought of the two of them, on their way to get ready for their date now, while he was still stuck in this Chapel.

Behind him, he thought of the cameras planted in the walls, watching him do everything, no place to hide from them, unblinking eyes of some animal too large to even comprehend.

For a long time, he waited for some sound to signify that he'd been set free from the locked door. He had pushed against it, then had rammed it with his shoulder over and over, but there was never any give, and at last he gave up and let himself sink down against them with his back to the doors.

This is ridiculous, he thought, along with a vague sense of unease of what he was doing in general, in the larger picture of things. He got out his phone and unlocked it, and he could see the last time he had opened it, when he'd been watching one of Katya's livestreams, checking up on her. She wasn't streaming now, but she would be soon, a little clock in the corner of the screen showing how long it would be until she would be live again. He could imagine those thousands of people out there, waiting for her to appear on their phone and laptop, her image sent all around the world.

He shook his head, exited the app, then to his calls where he called Rhoda. She took her time in answering, her phone ringing at length before it stopped.

Casey, Rhoda said. Not a question, but a statement, as if she was naming him.

Thank God, Casey said. Listen—I—

Got locked inside the chapel? Rhoda said.

His head was spinning. Victoria told you?

Not at all, Rhoda said. Victoria is in the middle of preparing for her—we'll call it, an event that will take place, later tonight. She's currently getting ready with Stana. They haven't thought to tell a soul about you.

How? Casey had wanted to ask, but he stopped himself.

Behind him, those two twin black globes sat in the corners. If he listened, maybe he could hear a soft whirring of them from back here.

He turned back to the phone. You saw it all?

Of course, Rhoda said. We see everything.

Casey swallowed. Are you going to let me out of here, then?

Rhoda laughed, voice harsh through the tinny phone speaker. Of course, Casey. We're not monsters, after all.

He let out a breath he hadn't been aware that he'd been holding. Thank God, he said. My keys—

What I meant, Rhoda said, is that we're leaving you in there until after tonight's event. We're not going to run the risk of interference.

It descended on him, like the cloud of moths over the light a few nights earlier. His head felt foggy. You're going to lock me up in here, he said, just to let them kill themselves.

Snap out of it, Casey. Rhoda's voice was hard. You'll be fine, and they'll be fine. We'll talk about this later.

They won't be fine, he started, but his voice was loose and rambling, and he was aware that his spiraling emotions were only one of the ways that he was losing this argument. How can you live with this, he was saying to Rhoda, but his voice was cracking, and he didn't know how comprehensible he even was.

A long, long silence. We'll also be talking about your employment prospects with us, later, Rhoda said.

But—, and then the line was dead, and his phone was cold in his hand.

Inside the chapel, the light grew dimmer as the afternoon progressed. He was aware of the shrinking amount of light in the room, first by the darkness that seemed to emerge from the corners of the room; then later, by the way that he started to struggle to make out the shapes of his own hands in front of him, as if he himself was disappearing.

If he had one thing to be grateful for, it was that he still had his phone. At first, he used the flashlight to see, but that drained the battery too much. He opened Twitter and scrolled for a long time, then decided against tweeting about the situation. Everything was exhausting.

He couldn't have told you how much time had gone by before he decided to watch Katya's livestream, unsure of what else to do. In another lifetime he might have texted or called her about what was going on here, screw the NDAs, but the thought of confiding in her now was unbearable. He felt humiliated, picturing her with Bryan, somehow manifested off the internet, the two of them holding each other as his voice, pathetic, came through the phone whiny. Afterwards they'd hang up, Katya dropping her phone into a glass of water so that he could no longer reach her.

By the time he opened the livestream, she had already started. He recognized their bedroom behind her, the camera perched on what must be their dresser, plugged into a laptop next to it. She was whispering to the camera, but he was ignoring her, and instead was perched over the chat section, like a man holding a flyswatter. It would be any second now that Bryan would appear.

Tonight, Katya whispered, is something a little different. She reached off camera and pulled out a large bowl of fruit filled to the brim. Apple slices, grapes, strawberries, all sliced and ready to eat. Like clockwork, Casey watched as Bryan's name popped up in the chat window. You've been spoiling us lately with all these great videos, he had sent, and though Casey couldn't be certain, he was sure that the giggle that Katya made after that was due to reading that comment.

At the same time, he was slowly becoming more and more aware of the cameras behind him; they were impossible to forget or let go of. He could so easily imagine himself outside of his own body, viewing himself as each camera captured him. Maybe they were on right now; maybe an episode of the show was currently streaming live, and viewers back home everywhere were watching him slowly disintegrate and fall apart.

Katya bit into the first piece of fruit and her microphone picked up every detail of it, the crispness of her teeth through the skin, the swishing of the food around her mouth as she chewed. Thank you so much for doing this, Bryan wrote in the chat window; but why was he commenting, Casey wondered, if he was right there in their apartment with her, if he was the one behind the camera filming her. Earlier that day, Casey watched as he had come to the door, Katya letting him in and greeting him. It's so nice to meet you in person, she must have said. Casey will be gone for the rest of this week, so we can do whatever we want.

They must have known he was watching this video too, that this was their own way of torturing him: Katya, now consuming grape by grape, the bowl diminishing, Bryan seeing it all. The voluptuousness, the intimacy imbued in it all—slowly, it drove him crazy. Did they think that he was stupid?

Of course not—they knew what they were doing; they were watching his image live contort and break as they saw him watch them. I'm literally so calm right now, Bryan typed. You're blowing my mind. They must have moved the TV in the apartment so that it was behind the camera, so that Katya could watch it as they filmed this; the episode streamed live on TV, as all the cameras in the world were on him, gazing him, his every image sent outwards on and on and on.

For a moment he thought that he was floating in the void, darkness all around him, and the video of Katya was dropping away into some deep pit away from him, and then he realized that he had dropped his phone and was crouching toward the ground, and he closed his eyes wanting to cry, but even then he didn't want the cameras to see.

—

The sound was disorienting. He realized that he had been asleep, that it had come through his dreams to shake him awake. In the dark chapel, he opened his eyes.

A creak, and the door to the chapel was open. Light fell inside in a trapezoid, only penetrated by a shadow.

Hello? he called. Is someone there?

The shadow in the doorway paused, and Casey sat up, frightened that the door would close again before he could get back. Hello?

In the door frame: a small figure, a silhouette, shorter than he was. As he got to his feet, he could make out the shape—it was one of the contestants on the show. He recognized her but didn't know her name.

To his relief, she didn't back away as he got closer, but instead stepped aside to let him out. He felt so overcome in the fresh air, leaving behind the cameras in the chapel, emotionally drained and ready to cry all at once.

Thank you, thank you, he said, as if the girl had just released him from certain death. The girl looked at him quizzically and did not answer.

His stomach sank. Did Rhoda send you? he said to the girl. It was all over now, one or both of the girls dead, and no one caring anywhere.

Who? the girl said, and Casey blinked. Victoria told me about this as she was heading out. She said that she'd locked someone in here. I wanted to see for myself.

He was frustrated by the girls' blind reasoning at the same time that a dawning urgency came over him. So it wasn't too late, so Victoria and Stana were heading to the field now.

He left the girl by the chapel door, bounding down the path toward the field on the other side of the camp. He moved faster than he had ever moved through the camp before, through the clusters of cabins, winding past the beach, then through a dark cluster of trees, and then the parking lot, and that road that lead back to civilization, back to home and Katya. The field's edge was in sight. There must still be time, he thought. The girl's coming to get him was the universe trying to send him some sign.

He stopped. At the other end of the field, the Lead ate dinner with one of the girls on a stage. Eyes were standing in lines, all focusing their attention on the two of them. But something was off. Along with the stage, the field was also prepared for something, strings of lights

dangling all over the place, at the edges and overhead, suspended by tall stakes planted in the ground.

One by one, the Eyes and their cameras all swiveled toward the other end of the field, where someone led the two girls out by their shoulders. She pulled them close and whispered something sharply, and then she disappeared, leaving the two girls barely standing upright on their own. He had been too late.

Their eyelids fluttered as if they were sleepwalking as they took one step forward, and then another, now underneath all the lights. You could see their jaws moving, all the gum that made their cheeks bulge, stepping now so that they were in view of the Lead, who stood up with his date to watch in horror as the two of them moved closer, like zombies.

At the middle of the field, Victoria raised a hand up to her eyes, and then so slowly that you couldn't believe it was happening, she started to topple over onto the ground, like a building falling into the sea, her body still but her mouth open as she gasped.

She's not breathing, called one of the Eyes, but there was no emotion or surprise in his voice; he must have known that it would happen. They were going to let her die on camera, Casey thought, like an animal.

After a moment, he saw a man was running across the field toward Victoria, kneeling down and putting his hands on her chest, pumping at it once, twice, over and over. His head bent down to touch her lips, before straightening up again and pumping once more. All of it the Eyes took in: the doctor's rapid pumps, Victoria's blank face, Stana's fluttering eyelids as she stood like she was in a nightmare, the Lead and his date with hands covering their mouths, but not moving from their perch. From the sidelines, behind a row of Eyes, Casey could see Rhoda licking her lips.

Later, Casey would remember that exact moment when he'd been sure of Victoria's death. When he went home fired, later that night, he knew that Katya would be waiting for him at the door, all his things packed into boxes that she had done for him. Bryan, whether he had been in the house or not. You knew that this was coming, Katya would say, and Casey would have to nod.

With a sputter, Victoria choked, and the gum went flying out of her mouth onto the grass, a few feet away from her body. A moment of silence, a fraction of a second as the world stopped—then breathing again, raspy. In and out again, and then slowly the Lead started to clap, and his date clapped, and the Eyes and the other contestants and what must be the whole world also had to be clapping too, because the noise was deafening and everywhere.

Later, it wouldn't be the noise that he remembered, but the way that the Lead's eyes had looked as he watched Victoria sputter on the ground like a fish, a disgust and amusement mixed together, all of it broadcast by the cameras for the whole world to see.

Hunger

For a long time now, I've been the one to feed the hyenas that live beyond the gate, the one to exit the house past midnight with the scrap bucket. This was Casey's job when he was still here, and then Dad's job after Casey was gone. Later, Dad would complain about his joints and go to bed earlier, and I was the only one left in the house to do it. I have never asked why we feed them, knowing only that it is something that we must do, the way you jump the car when its battery dies, or make a run for water when the well dries up.

I am thirteen now, the *wow* age—the age where you go into town and everyone asks how old you are. Thirteen, I say; *wow!* says the man at the general store, the church organist from her porch, the wife of a hunter who used to come to our house. *I remember when you were born, like it was yesterday*, they might all say. It is the same age that Casey was when he started to feed the hyenas, taking over after Mom had left us. I can just remember when Mom left, asking where she went, but not old enough for it to have had a lasting impact on me.

She swam out into the ocean and never came back, my father used to say to my questions, pestering.

So she drowned, I said, so young that the last three letters were their own word.

No, he said, She's still out there. But we can't get to her now.

It was my mother's idea to feed the hyenas I'm sure, though no one will ever confirm this for me. It's so easy to watch in my mind, remembering her from the small box of photographs behind the TV. My favorite has her hair tied up in a bandana, and so that's how I always imagine her: the bandana tied around her head as she picks up the scrap bucket we keep by the stove, disappearing into the darkness as she steps out the back door, letting it slam behind her. She'd always whistle as she did this, the song floating off behind her as she walked off. But I don't

usually let myself think about that. I think about that photograph instead: my father took it from the seat behind her in an open-top Jeep, one of the years before they were married. They were on a safari in the desert, and she looks back at the camera leaning out the window, and I think that she is laughing.

I don't laugh much anymore. Now, I slip on my shoes when it gets to be that time of night, and I grab the scrap bucket, shaking it so that the older pieces rise to the top. Just like the rest of them, I push open the back door, and let it shut behind me, and then I too am walking on the trail through the backyard, on my way to the gate and fence that line our property, out in the scrub. The trail starts off bright from the lights that come out the windows of our house, but it gets darker as you follow it, and I have to go by memory.

At dinner, Caleb used to tell my father and I stories about men who went looking for gold in California, digging down into dark caverns looking for a glint of something precious. Some of them got lost and never got out, he said.

My father snorted. That's ridiculous. They all got out.

How would you know? Caleb said. Surely some of them got lost. It says so, right in my book.

They all got out, my father repeated loudly. A stillness came over the table, fog. Caleb looked at me, at my father, and then he got up and brought his dish to the counter, scraping the rest of the meat off his plate into the bucket.

I come to the end of the trail at the edge of our property, lined by the high fence and gate. Here it's nearly pitch-black, and you can't see anything except for a patch of sky in the distance, a distant clearing in the trees. I unlatch the gate and heave the bucket's contents out into the dark,

before stepping back behind the gate and latching it, quick. The scattering meat hits the ground pattering, like rainfall.

I have never seen the hyenas beyond the fence, but I know that they're there from what happens next, a series I know to listen for: the padding that comes towards me from out there, the sound of something big shaking against the wire fence and gate. And the growls: low, deep. Eager.

I imagine a paw at the bottom of the fence, two yellow eyes that stare. If I were to stay one of these nights, maybe I would finally get a glimpse of what the hyenas look like, but that will never happen to me—instead I break out of it, running through the dark and the trees and the black, until the light of the house is in front of me again.

Ichabod

Years ago, there was a girl who was trapped in a tower in a castle, except the tower was a corner bedroom and the castle was a large house resting on great columns set next to the ocean, and she was hardly trapped because she lived her life as usual, going to school and around the town and to wherever she wanted, for the most part. And there was a burly knight who rode up on a horse to rescue her, but when he grew closer the girl saw that the horse was a car and the knight was nothing but a boy smiling, his teeth in a fat face, his hands resting at his sides, greedy; and the girl saw in the distance that a tall boy also ran toward the house, but as the tall boy grew closer and closer, she saw that he was horribly ugly as well.

The girl had met the tall boy for the first time in the spring. In school, they were learning about the local history of the town they grew up in, and she had set out that afternoon to purchase her textbooks from the bookshop at the center of town. The bookshop was murky and wasn't lit; as a result, the front half of the shop was illuminated by the large windows that let in the sun from the street, and the back was encased in darkness. The girl browsed between the light and the dark, and found almost everything that she was looking for except for one volume. As she stared at the shelves, the tall boy emerged from the shadows, like an animal in a cave. The girl gave a slight yelp as he came into view; his face was long and serious, like an undertaker's.

What are you looking for? the tall boy said.

She told him, and he scowled. You won't get very far with that one, he said to the girl. It's full of filler.

It's not for me, the girl wanted to say, but she bit her tongue. What would you recommend instead?

He led her to the front counter and pulled out a stack of books from underneath. He pushed several across to her. Start with one of these, he said. You'll get more mileage from them than you would with that other.

At night, she sat in her bedroom reading them. At first she was skeptical; then, one by one, the images started to emerge for her. She read about demons that lurked in the graveyards of the town at night; witches who had been hung in the town square who were said to still haunt a select few. One of the books was a dry history to the contrary of all of this, which the girl supposed the boy had thrown in as a counterargument. The past is the past for a reason, the book said; we've already conquered that time and have moved on. The line was both highlighted and underlined. I see, the girl thought. So you think that this has nothing to do with you.

—

Before all of this, the girl had only known about the tall boy from school. The tall boy had moved here a year before from the northern region, where, the girl had had heard, they practically raised their children in dusty libraries, an entire classical education in them by fifteen. As a result of this, the tall boy was unusually good at school. He was attentive, but his answers were bored, thrown carelessly across the room with the confidence that they would land in the right spot every time. He had an arrogance hanging around him like a cloud of flies, and as a result, everyone at school and in the town veered away from him.

The girl had first been aware of the tall boy precisely because the burly boy complained about him so much. The tall boy had moved into the block of apartments near the burly boy's right by the cathedral; every afternoon, the tall boy passed the window of the butcher shop where the burly boy worked, smirking as he did so. The two of them couldn't have been more different: where the tall boy seemed gaunt and hollow, the burly boy was strong and present. Where the

tall boy seemed always to be slinking off into the shadows, the burly boy was loud, always making his presence known.

The burly boy had never cared for school; his main interest was in his group of friends, a pack of boys as loud as him that caused general mayhem. During the hot months when the tourist season reached its peak, the burly boy and his gang raced through the town in his car, whipping through narrow streets and honking at the evening crowds as they passed. Some mornings, cafe and restaurants owners would open their shops to find their outdoor tables overturned and their front windows smashed; then, they sighed and salvaged what they could, knowing that they'd been visited in the night by the gang.

In spite of all this, here was another difference with the burly boy: he was well-liked throughout the town, inexplicably so. The chaos he caused with his gang was seen like an act of the weather: unpredictable, with no way of stopping it and no reason to complain about it. The boys had always belonged to the town, and the residents here had a way of circling around their own, while rejecting anyone new who tried to come in.

Still, the girl let these scraps of knowledge about the tall boy ferment, letting them all build up to a picture she had of the tall boy in her head. She added to this the rumors circulating that she knew of the tall boy, how he spent much of his time with the widow in town, instead of making friends his own age. Several crude theories were in place about this; still, the girl heard that the tall boy did nothing more than swap ghost stories and theories with the widow, talking about the spirits which they claimed were everywhere.

Sometimes too, she thought about the tall boy's apartment overlooking the cathedral at the center of the town, and she wondered what it was like to live in the presence of something so

grand—but then she always returned to her own house, large and on the water, and her wonder died away.

—

As the spring turned into summer and the end of school approached, the girl returned to the bookshop several more times. Sometimes, she'd talk with the tall boy at the front of the shop, discussing the books that he was so fond of. He knew more about myths and legends and witchcraft than anyone else that the girl had ever met, even her teachers at school. What they said, the tall boy said, was really easy to find flaws in, if you dug deep. The girl enjoyed talking about these things; she herself had noticed this in the past, and with the tall boy, she finally had someone else who understood.

Other afternoons when the girl entered the shop, it was the owner instead of the tall boy at the front counter, an old widow that no one knew what to make of. He's not in today, dear, she said to the girl, and the girl scowled, hating her identity being reduced to the tall boy like this.

There was another milestone on the girl's mind: on the summer solstice, in a few weeks, a party would be held in which she would choose the boy in town that she intended to marry. It was all tradition; all the girls in town held a ritual similar to this, a hearkening to the town's way of life in the past that the girl had questioned several times. Still, the girl had been raised expecting this; had often imagined the moment that she would stand on stage in the ballroom in her house and decide who to live out the rest of her life with.

All this time, the girl had thought she would be going off to marry the burly boy in town. Even now when the girl closed her eyes, it was difficult for her to imagine her choosing anyone else. On the playground as a child, when he'd teased her incessantly and tugged at her hair, she overheard their parents talking in the background. Her mother had been the worst culprit of this;

the burly boy would be chasing the girl, cornering her in the bushes, and wafting over from the side of the playground would be the voice of the girl's mother: you know she'll choose him one day, she said. Later, walking home through the streets of the deserted town, the girl's mother said: he likes you more than all the others.

He still liked her; nights, the burly boy invited the girl to go out with him and his friends, tearing about the town. The girl would sit in the back of the passenger's seat then, observing all of them as the gang ripped mailboxes off their posts, threw stones at stray cats that were slinking in the alleyways. On the beach, they built a fire and baked several large rocks in the flames; then, they scooped the stones out with a shovel and tossed them into the cold ocean, where they would explode. The girl stood at a distance wrapped in a towel, and the burly boy approached her. You should join in more, he said. I should, the girl said. Why don't you go back there and show me how it's done? The burly boy didn't notice her tone; he didn't notice several things about her.

And then still: something in those long afternoons with the tall boy in the bookshop that pulled her in as they pored over the old books. Something deft and subtle about the boy's criticisms of everything, but especially of the old legends, which made the boy in comparison seem smart and nuanced. It was fun to listen to; even more fun to jump in on and say ruthless things herself. All of it excited her, as if the heat of the cruelty bonded the two of them closer.

Sometimes, sometimes, sometimes; but she had no idea who she'd pick, who would best suit her. Once, the tall boy gave her a sign that she should come up to his apartment, the great one by the cathedral, but to her it was the same kind of move as the burly boy, who on occasion had suggested that they go on a drive together in his car, just the two of them. No thank you, she always said. I'm not nearly old enough for that kind of thing yet.

In school they were taught that a man had once come here from out of town, claiming to see things that no one else could see. He set up a little booth on one of the main streets and charged three coins to hear about the hidden spirits that were lurking through. They burned him later that afternoon, a mob lead by several of the local priests; it wasn't his ideas that they thought were dangerous, their teacher said, but how popular he seemed, with so many people flocking to him. From the back of the room, the burly boy yawned, lazy, bored; from the front, the tall boy leaned forward, pricking up with attention.

—

As the engagement approached, the girl's father had learned about all the time that she was spending with the tall boy. She'd been able to shake off his attention for some time now; she always woke and left the house early, and returned late at odd hours, taking routes through the large house that avoided him. One night, returning home thirsty, she had entered the dark kitchen; about to turn on the lights, she had noticed the glow of her father's cigar suspended in the black.

She flipped the switch on; he was sitting in the chair, smoking and drinking. Late at nights now, he often drank until his face grew puffy and his hands could hardly grasp the cigar.

I know what you've been doing with that boy, he said to the girl.

I'm not doing anything with anyone, the girl said.

She filled her glass of water at the sink and sat down at the table across from him. His eyes were red, as if he'd been crying, but her father never cried.

He's no good, he said. He spends half his days with the widow. You choose him, and people will talk. A disgrace.

That would be ridiculous, the girl said.

Your mother wouldn't have wanted it like this. The decisions you're making have consequences. I can't make them for you.

I know, the girl said.

The kitchen was illuminated by a single light which was hanging from the ceiling, swaying slightly. Outside, the girl could hear the waves lapping at the dock far below; too, if she listened, she could hear something closer—a low sound coming from her father, guttural, almost a growl.

Christ, her father said. He finished his glass. You look just like her now.

The girl breathed heavily.

What? her father said, raising his hands, palms out. I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I can't say that? It's true, isn't it?

Already, the girl knew that she'd reached the age where she looked near-identical to her mother when she had been this age; photographs and her father's behavior confirmed this. Sometimes going about her day, the girl would catch her father staring at her, and she would know then that whatever she was doing her mother had done in the same way, a time-capsule preserved in a person.

What's wrong with the widow? the girl said, shifting the conversation back.

The widow is a slut, her father said.

A long quiet. The light above the table swayed again, changing the shadows on their faces.

He sighed. Just promise you won't choose that boy, he said.

She wouldn't meet his eyes. I'll make the right decision.

I can't make it for you.

I know, the girl said. You said that already.

—

Late at night, wrapped in the sounds of her father snoring, the girl went down the long hallway to the bay windows which overlooked the dock and the sea. Like usual, she stood close to the glass, looking down at the waves which lapped at the dock's edge

A few minutes passed, but the girl didn't move until she saw what she had come for: finally, a white figure slowly moving down the dock, a young man dressed in the soldier's garb, a uniform of several wars before. His movements were predictable: a walk with a limp barely perceptible, stopping at the end of the dock looking over the water. For a moment, it was all still, and then the girl could see a woman coming down the dock, wearing a dress from a period that the girl didn't recognize. The two figures were translucent, just barely see-through.

The woman on the dock walked slowly before coming to rest at the end of it, sitting down next to the man and placing a hand on his back. This was it; this was what the girl watched every night, some little piece of time from long ago looping over and over in these early hours before morning. Never did the ghosts ever give any indication of being seen from the upper window—their lives only played out below the girl, a little bit of time suspended.

She'd almost never seen how this scene ended. Usually, the girl would hear a sign of her father stirring and would creep back to her bed before he could wake and find her; or else, many nights she would become exhausted, unable to keep her eyes open long enough to finish watching the two ghosts. One night, when her father had slept soundly and she had pushed past the dizziness, she had watched it happen—the sun had started to rise, and as the sunlight hit the dock, she watched as the man and the woman scooted closer together and remained seated. They were there for a moment, and then as the light came over the docks, they vanished.

—

Soon before the solstice, the tall boy learned where exactly the girl lived. When he found out, his eyes bulged and his mouth dropped, slack. That's where you live? he said, incredulous. That old thing?

It's not that special, the girl said. It's just a house.

But the tall boy wasn't listening to her. He knew so many things that had taken place at the girl's house—stories stretching back centuries. Did the girl know that in the past, her house had been a hideout for pirates, docking in the town's harbor? That they hid out in the house during the day and, at night, penetrated the village, looting all the houses and bringing their riches back there before they sailed away again? The tall boy spoke of this lavishly, as if he had been there to see it. What's more, he said, your house is swarming with ghosts.

I don't know if it's swarming, the girl said. Maybe—

Of course *you* wouldn't, the tall boy said, cutting her off, and the girl frowned but he didn't notice. I've always known more than you about this stuff. If you let me come by sometime, I'll give you a tour and show you around.

The girl straightened up; she twisted the point of her foot into the floor. And how, she said carefully, do you know so much about my house in particular?

The widow told me all of it, the tall boy said. You wouldn't believe what she knows.

But how does *she* know? the girl said.

He shrugged. You want to ask her? She's here today, somewhere in the back. I'm sure she'd be happy to tell you.

We don't need to do that, the girl said.

The tall boy called the widow's name, and then something took place in the dark of the back of the shop. First the sound, as if something buried under a pile of books was moving; then from the shadows, the widow's figure materialized.

You know all about the old home, the tall boy said, don't you?

Oh yes, the widow said. Many things have gone on there for a long time. She looked at the girl, and smiled, ghastly; several of her teeth were black. Many, many things of great interest. Your family lives there now?

Yes, the girl said. But now, she was feeling squeamish. She'd always felt uncomfortable in the widow's presence, but now that feeling was heightened, with the widow looking at her as if she could read the girl's every last thought, everything dirty or wrong that she'd ever know.

The tall boy was oblivious to this. You have to let me come by sometime to see it. Sometime, the girl agreed.

She had begun to feel very queer with both the tall boy and widow looking at her, as if they knew something about her core that she herself couldn't know. I should be going, the girl said.

So you'll show me around? the tall boy repeated as she walked out.

Whatever, the girl called, going out the door. On the hot street, people bustling around her again, she felt as if she'd just emerged from a dream, some realm in another world. Impossible, the girl thought as she made her way back home, but still, she wondered.

—

That night, the burly boy picked her up again; his entire gang was driving out into the country to an abandoned castle, planning to drink themselves to sleep in the ruins. On the moonlit roads, the car was uncharacteristically quiet, and the girl felt strangely peaceful as the

car pulled through bends of mountain roads, looking out onto the black ocean in the distance. At the drive's end, they pulled the car into a vast field and bumped over dirt ruts and stones, before they tumbled out to see a stone structure rising high, tall, dark. The girl followed them all inside, passing through dark rooms that smelled of rot. The gang used metal flashlights to find a staircase that went up to the roof, and when they all emerged, the girl was surprised by how bright the night seemed in comparison.

As they all drank, the burly boy scooted closer to the girl. His words were imprecise now, his tongue slipping off the syllables of each word, unable to keep it balanced. I can't wait for this to continue, he said, and then he tossed his head back, staring at the stars. The girl watched his simple wonder, his hands resting on her thigh, his howling laughter when he caught one of the jokes from his friends.

They all passed out sooner or later, and when the girl awoke again it was the hours before dawn, the day starting to leak at the edge. Down below, she saw several ghosts standing around the burly boy's car, watching it with confusion and wonder. Amazed, their mouths hung open; they pointed first at it, and then they turned toward the castle and they pointed at the girl on the roof.

She didn't want to see what would happen next; instead she shut her eyes and laid down next to the burly boy and pushed up against him tight. The ghosts she thought, would reenter the castle and climb the stairs to the roof of the castle, and then—

But her imagination was exhausted here. The only comfort the girl could find as she laid there was that the burly boy snored, stopping any other thoughts from entering. Around all of them, the night ebbed on; as the day grew closer, the ghosts would surely disappear.

—

The tall boy biked to the girl's house the day before her engagement, dropping his bike on the stones outside of the columns. The girl was swimming when he arrived, jumping from the dock out into the water, then pulling herself out only to jump in once more. She repeated this over and over, as if trying to shock something out of herself, and when she saw the tall boy approaching, she jumped in once again. When she broke the surface of the water, he was standing on the dock, tapping his foot.

Show me the house, he said. In response, the girl dunked herself under the water again. When she came up, she wiped the water from her eyes, pulled the hair back from her face. She was breathing heavily, but the tall boy only repeated himself: show me, he said.

She pulled herself out and toweled off, expecting the tall boy to watch her, but he didn't. He had brought one of his old books with him, and while waiting for her, he'd opened it and read it, moving his finger slowly over the page.

She led him into the house and down a stairwell. The basement was dark, and the only light came in through long, thin windows close to the ceiling. All kinds of things were stored underneath this house; old wagon wheels and discarded appliances, barrels of wine aged older than the girl herself. The tall boy acted as if he was in a church, moving around some sacred space.

He whispered, some excitement pressing his words forward. This is where it all happened, he said, energized. It all took place here. He was pacing, following all the walls, stepping around old furniture and making his way; he saw his fingers gently over the dusty stones that made up all of the walls. He looked back up at the girl in awe.

The girl said: the widow told you about this too, I guess.

She was sardonic, but the tall boy didn't take any notice. He nodded reverently. This is where the pirates hid all the bodies.

You must be able to see a lot of ghosts here, the girl said, partly joking, but the boy responded, his voice flat: you can't see ghosts.

Come upstairs, the girl said. I want to show you something.

The girl's bedroom was in the back corner of the house on the top floor, looking out over the ocean and the horizon. In the afternoon, the sunlight filled the room with the dimming afternoon light. The tall boy was golden as he sat down on the girl's bed.

She turned to shut the door, but when she turned back around again, the tall boy had stood to peer out her window. From her bedroom, you could see boats scattered across the surface of the ocean; if you squinted, further in the distance down the coast was the town's harbor. Annoyed, the girl sidled up next to him. She pointed to the dock. During the war, she said, soldiers used to come here at night and sit here with their wives.

The tall boy frowned. He glanced at his book, and then back out the window again. No they didn't, he said. All the action was far away from here. He was so close to the window now that his breath fogged up the glass slightly, obscuring part of the view.

It would be like this, then. A lifetime like this, of her standing here and the tall boy being unable to see. A lifetime of doting and petting, and when the tall boy spoke, she would have to listen, and when he was wrong she'd act as if he was right. Something deeply ugly had settled in her, she felt, as the two of them continued watching the boats.

As he left that afternoon, she called to him: you're coming to the ball tomorrow night, right? He looked back, raised and lowered one shoulder. I might, he said, straddling his bike carelessly. But as he rode away, the girl knew that he would.

The night of the solstice they came from all over, men and women from every corner of town, arriving in cars and by foot to the girl's house. In the ballroom, candles were lit, and dishes were laid out on long tables. The tall boy showed up early in the evening, saying a cursory greeting to the girl before disappearing off into the corner, where he'd soon be joined by the widow. The burly boy arrived later, when the ballroom was already packed, and the music was loud. For a while neither of them made any effort to seek out the girl again; the tall boy stood with the widow, and the burly boy stood with his group of friends. At various points in the evening, they would point at some other person across the ballroom, and they would all erupt with laughter.

The girl made her rounds with her father, talking to everyone. Her father was euphoric with all the attention paid to him. You could see him spinning throughout the room, growing fatter on the compliments that people gave of his daughter, his grand house, the ball. The only moment of weakness came when they spoke to one of his friends, a fisherman. You're the spitting image of your mother, the fisherman said, and the girl saw her father's face wobble, a tower on the verge of collapse. She'd switched to a different subject quickly, before anything could happen.

The hours stretched on, and the girl drank glass after glass of wine, spinning from person to person, convincing herself she'd feel the right thing soon. Who was she going to pick? everyone asked, and she only smiled, refusing to indulge them, as she should. A playfulness seemed to hang about her: you'll find out with everyone else, she said, with a smile. But she turned quickly away from everyone who asked her this, and her hands shook as they held her glass.

She finished another glass of wine, and the tall boy came over to her. Come talk with us, he said, gesturing to him and the widow, who was holding a mug in her wrinkled hands. We've been swapping stories all night. You wouldn't believe how much she knows about this mansion.

You're having a good time? the girl said, aware that she danced away from the subject; she didn't want to talk to the widow. From the corner of the room, her father glanced at her with the tall boy.

The tall boy raised and lowered one shoulder. All these things are artificial. Throwing everyone together into a room like this. Just a bunch of people talking about nothing. You know?

There's dancing too, the girl said. Are you going to dance?

Not my thing, the tall boy said. But I'm serious, come with me and the widow. Her stories are good.

The girl nodded and then left the tall boy alone, moving through the crowd to find the burly boy. He was easy to spot: the crowd gave his group extra space, a clear bubble around them. He stared as she approached; she hated the way he looked at her, a greediness behind his eyes. You want to dance? she said; of course, the burly boy said. Pig, she thought.

Out to the middle of the dance floor where they whirled in tandem, as the music swelled; one two three one two three. The burly boy wore heavy shoes which clomped as he danced like an animal, something half civilized. He held the girl tightly throughout the dance, and at the moment she least expected it, he suddenly pulled her close, so that she could smell the sour cologne on his neck.

From the stage at the front of the room: her father standing above the crowd, hitting a knife against a glass. The music and the bodies all stopped, everyone turning towards him. It's

time, he said to the crowd, and he nodded to the girl. She left the burly boy, then stepped onto the stage.

Thank you for coming, she said, and then she was quiet.

Amidst his friends, the burly boy's face was wide and his smile even wider. She could see that his suit was straining underneath the effort of containing him. In the corner with the widow, the tall boy was watching her too, a hand covering his mouth. The girl saw that he tried not to look invested, but that he was.

She thought about the burly boy causing mayhem in the town, the ravenous way he watched her. She thought about the tall boy sitting in the widow's bookshop, the two of them talking about the legends of her house. He thought he knew everything, but he didn't, he didn't.

The crowd was stirring, growing impatient as they waited for her. I choose—she said, but the tall boy wasn't any good, and neither was the burly boy.

She shook her head. It'll be decided at the start of tomorrow morning. Thank you.

She stepped off the stage, feeling the crowd's confusion. Before he even reached her, she could sense her father moving towards her quickly, angry. What was that? he said, when he reached her. His face was pinched into tough lines.

She shrugged. Tomorrow, she said. I need to figure out one last thing.

This isn't how it's done. You'll be sorry if you don't go announce it now.

But he was speaking to no one at all; the girl had already disappeared through the crowd, not going toward the tall boy or the burly boy, and thus toward nowhere at all.

—

With the decision stolen away from them, the crowd went home grumbling. Slowly, the cars turned on their headlights and drove away, and the rest of the people drained back through the streets.

She'd told the burly boy and the tall boy at this point to meet her here out on the dock. The tall boy arrived first; he didn't say anything about her on stage, but instead told the girl about what the widow had said about her attic. Your old family members are up there, he told the girl. She said your entire house is haunted, that invisible ghosts throw things around and disturb the peace. You can't believe everything from the widow, the girl said, and as the tall boy shook his head, the burly boy came toward the two of them.

What's he doing here? the burly boy said. The tall boy said nothing, but stared at the burly boy's shoes, his shoulders tense.

We'll all go for a swim, the girl said. If you both get into the water, I'll join you, and we can all swim out somewhere.

The boys started to protest, but the girl was already walking back inside too quickly to hear what they were saying. She changed upstairs in her bedroom and stopped at the bay windows on her way downstairs. On the dock, both boys had stripped to their waists. The burly boy was already in the water; the tall boy was getting in now, lowering himself in slowly holding onto the dock. For a moment, he disappeared; then, two heads were bobbing in the black water. They were arguing about something.

The girl came out again. Actually, I don't feel like swimming much, she said to the two heads. You two should go without me.

What's the point of that? the burly boy said. With his hair wet and flattened, his faced seemed rounder and younger, like he'd looked as a child. The tall boy was paddling quickly in the water, as if a stone was tied to his ankle and he was afraid of sinking.

Race, the girl said. There's a buoy a mile or so out. You can swim there, touch it and then come back.

And then what?

The girl traced a shape on the dock with her foot, not looking at either boy. A prize, she said. I'll reward whichever one of you makes it back first.

This had the desired effect; both boys started swimming quickly out to sea, their pale shapes disappearing quickly in the darkness. The girl watched them for a little while, but they both seemed to be making equal time, and so she turned back to the house, relishing the quiet.

—

Upstairs with the boys gone, the girl felt tired, as if she'd become very old since the day had begun. Her father had quickly gone to bed, and his snoring drifted down the hallway. She walked into his bedroom and stood over him for a long time. He slept with his mouth open, and drool leaked out and came down the left side of his face. His blind was slightly open; a sliver of the moonlight was coming through.

She left his room and went to the bay windows. The ghosts were there now; they must have arrived after the boys swam out. She wondered if the boys would swim back in time to see the two of them sitting there, or if they wouldn't see anything at all. Maybe she was the only one who could see these things. The soldier was staring at his wife, crazy with desire, the girl thought. He was willing to go through this every night because of how badly he wanted her.

She froze: the soldier's wife had turned around and was looking up at the windows, directly at the girl, beckoning.

For a moment, the girl thought that she was imagining this; she blinked, but when she opened her eyes again, the wife was clearly still looking at her. One hand was tucked behind her back, and her fingers were crooked and bent and moving, seeming to say come here, come here.

The girl went through the dark house and out to the dock. The two ghosts were facing away from her, but as the girl stood at a distance, the wife turned again.

She stood up from the dock and slowly came towards the girl; she was dimmer up close than she had seemed from far away.

The wife started to speak to the girl, but whatever it was the girl couldn't hear it, and could only see her mouth moving. The girl shook her head, and the wife started to move her mouth faster, then open it wider and wider. She was screaming, waving her arms around, but there was no sound; behind her, the soldier hadn't even moved from the dock, his hand hovering in the exact same place where it had been while his wife was sitting there. She gave up, slumping down, and then sat back down next to the soldier and turned away from the girl.

The sky was getting brighter, but the girl couldn't bear to watch them disappear from so close, and she backed into the house again so that she wouldn't have to see the ghosts any longer.

—

Her reflection seemed clearest in the bay windows as the sun rose. First, she tried to see herself as the tall boy saw her, tried to make the same expression that was on her face as he criticized and theorized and told her stories; she looked bored, she thought. She tried to see herself as the burly boy saw her, and found herself turning sideways towards her reflection, sticking out one leg in a pose. She looked much smaller all of a sudden.

The sun had risen; the ghosts were gone. She slumped and let both these visions drop. Far off in the water, she saw a splashing, one of the boys swimming back.

She rushed onto the dock, unable to see which boy it was yet; her eyes were turned downward, looking at the spot where the ghosts had been. Would they come again tomorrow night? Would she be around to see it?

In the water: the burly boy splashing around, looking as if he was on the verge of drowning, flapping around in the water, exhausted and frantic, hardly able to stay afloat.

Abe, the girl said. Abe!

Abe floundered in the water and reached the dock, which he clung to before pulling himself up. On the wood, he lay like a great fish gasping for air. After a few minutes the gasps had subsided into heavy breathing and he sat up again. The grin on his face was terrible; the girl sat down on the dock in the same place that the ghosts had, far away from him.

I won, he said.

You did, the girl said.

What's the prize to be, then?

The girl didn't answer, but this didn't seem to bother him. He came and sat down next to her, too close for her liking. Water seemed to come out of him like a sponge, oozing toward the girl until her leg was wet. They faced the horizon, the sun rising behind them.

What happened out there? the girl said, after a long time.

Abe didn't answer, but his fingers tapped the wood dock. He's a slow swimmer, he said, finally. The girl didn't move, staring out at the water until she could hardly see.

You think he'll be coming in soon? she said. Abe spoke, but she didn't listen. Something hung in the air before her that she was distinctly aware of, a future that was waiting for her to grab onto.

Transmissions from the Hot Planet

I have waited for a long time for a sign from the hot planet. Here is how I see it: some signal first—a certain way that the sky looks, or maybe something I feel, deep inside me, telling me that it's time. I'll call Casper and we'll run down to the beach together, and there will be a ship, large, sleek. The Venusians, the ones who left us all that time ago, will come out. We never meant to leave you all the way out here, they will say to us. Please come with us again.

Of course we will go with them, entering their ship to leave Earth. The Venusians on the ship will lower their heads as I walk by; a survivor, they'll say to me. You are strong, for making it through that desolate planet. When the ship blasts off to take us somewhere better, I'll take Casper's hand as we both look down at world falling away before us. All this time, I'll think, looking at the outlines of the continents, and you people never had any idea who I really was.

These days, Casper comes home later and later. Casper is a content producer at some buzzy startup downtown, writing listicles and articles to distract people from what they're supposed to be doing. He looks exhausted, and at night, I rub his shoulders and smile as he tells me about his day. Sometimes we don't need to talk at all; then, we lay down next to each other, communicating in silence.

He sits for a long time tonight, before he gets up to make dinner. His face looks even more gaunt in the harsh lighting of the kitchenette, those circles under his eyes dark.

You should be going to bed earlier, I say to him, as he pours pasta into the boiling pot of water. Two months that I've known him, and he still doesn't take care of himself nearly enough. I tell him to do all the right things, but most of the time he doesn't listen to me, shaking his head while smiling, a thin smile on his lips.

You're excited for this weekend? I say, sitting down at the table with him as he eats.

Yeah, he says. He smiles, something that's always radiant. Wouldn't miss it for the world.

I'm really excited, I say. You know. Just the two of us in a cabin for a whole weekend. Getting away from other people.

He laughs. We already spend most of our time away from other people, he says.

This is true. Most nights are spent like this: making dinner, watching a little TV, then getting under the covers and going straight to sleep. Casper will on occasion drink a glass or two of wine. You should have some, he says to me, but I always shake my head. I never understand why he drinks it, why he voluntarily dulls his mind like that. You shouldn't drink, I say to him, but he doesn't listen to me then either.

But my favorite time comes later. It's like clockwork: eventually, Casper says that he's tired, and he crawls into bed. This is when I go to my desk in the corner of the room, bending my head over piles of equations for work. I stare for a long time at the numbers, feeling that pleasant buzz in my head as I work out the problem and how to fix it. Every once in a while, I look back up again, back at Casper lying on his back in the bed.

In the white sheets his arms are stretched out to form a T. I watch his chest rising and falling like the waves on the ocean and I think: how do you find someone as perfect as this? How is it that I continue to peel back layers and layers of you, and never find anything to give me pause?

A snore, something that shakes the bed, and I smile as I turn back to my equations. I'm sure that you can see this too; together we are very, very happy.

—

Then, late at night, right before I go to bed, I take out my orange notebook, and I write down my memories from long ago.

Billions of years ago on Venus, there was the two of us then too. On Venus, Casper and I lived together in some open-air palace, great pillars in Roman-Greco style supporting the weight of it all. On Venus, there was a boiling orange lake right next to us; Casper and I wandered through the steamy halls and rooms, lounged out on stone benches and tables. Long ago, when the Venusians were still there, Casper and I were revered by all; you could feel our greatness as soon as you caught sight of us.

Back then, we threw parties that everyone on the planet wanted invitations to. I mingled amongst the intellectual circles, the greatest scientific mind of the day; and Casper, immortalized for his good looks, drew the artistic and literary crowd, everyone wanting to see him in person. We never managed to talk to everyone; so many people wanted to see us, and there was never nearly enough time.

My favorite memory doesn't come of these parties, but when the place emptied out afterwards, Casper and I standing at the edge of the palace looking out onto the orange, boiling lake. My pen slows down here, scratching the paper more precisely to take this all in. One of his arms was around my shoulders as we leaned against each other, knowing how we were forever perfect in these lives. Don't you think this is all beautiful too? Can't you picture the way that we stood there, the two of us endlessly gorgeous before you?

—

At work, I am not a Venusian, but an aeronautical engineer, calculating the air flow above and below the wings of an aircraft, running models to figure out whether the jets we build will take off and stay afloat.

With Cassie, I pull out the stacks of paper that I'd written the previous night, laying it all on the table between the two of us. Cassie raises her eyebrows, a certain expression on her face.

I was thinking about this last night too, she says. See—, and she pulls out her own pad of yellow paper, showing me a few elementary things that she worked out.

I shake my head almost immediately when I read what she's written. This is no good, I say.

But I think—

Look right here, I say, impatient. I circle one side of her equation, unbalanced. This is wrong. I've already figured this out. There's a look that arrives on Cassie's face around this time, but I never parse it; it's the answer that matters, not her feelings.

The thing is, I never wanted to work with Cassie. All this time, I just wanted to be alone and solve the problems on my own, but she joined me anyways. She doesn't contribute anything, I complained to Greg early on, who had assigned me to work with her, but Greg had just frowned. It's a big problem, Stephen, he said. He was drinking coffee as he said this, from a white thermos on his desk. Solitude won't get you anywhere; you're going to need more brainpower than one person can provide. Just give it a try. He slurped his coffee, incessant noise, and I glanced down at his desk at the photos of him and his family. They were displayed outward, placed to mock me. How would you know about solitude, I thought.

Too, there are time when I think I understand how Cassie feels, when the playing field switches. At lunchtime every day, when I go to the break room to microwave my food, I see her in her natural element: sitting in the middle of the table in there with Greg and a bunch of other people, everyone laughing or chatting about something cheerfully. I try not to look at them as I stand at the microwave, watching my food rotate around and around, but even though they don't

say anything, I know they look at me, even laughing at the way that I stand there. Cassie's revenge, I think, for being outsmarted by me. The microwave beeps, and I bring the container back to my cubicle as fast as I can, burning my hands, not wanting to stand there any longer than necessary.

Today, I take lunch later than usual, and when I go in the room, it's only Cassie there, sitting at the table by herself. How are you doing, Stephen? she says to me as I stand there, and I nod. Just fine, thank you, I say to her. I glance at her face, and then look away, as if making eye contact with her could burn me.

But she keeps talking. Are you doing anything this weekend? she says.

Out of town, I reply.

She pauses, and then she stands up, and she holds out a paper slip, something plastered with ugly clip art that's been flattened by the black and white office printers. Well, she says, if you free up at all, you should come to Greg's barbeque Saturday. The whole office is invited. We'd love to see you.

I nod, taking the slip from her; the way she's holding it makes it impossible to refuse it. Thank you, Cassie, I say. I won't be coming. The microwave beeps, and I grab my Tupperware and walk quickly back to my cubicle to eat, the white slip of paper sticking out from between my fingers like a little white flag.

On Venus, Cassie and Greg and the rest of them aren't there. They were never a part of the world to begin with; if they were to appear in Venus at all, then they'd have to be tourists, visiting from another planet. But they'd never get that far, I think. They'd all be turned away while landing, booted back into space faster than anything else you've ever seen. Maybe they'd see me there and beg me to vouch for them, but I think that Casper and I would just laugh.

—

The apartment is clean when I get home. I've left work early to pack my things for this trip, before Casper gets home later. I note that the dishes are dried and stacked up properly in the cabinets, that Casper's picked up his things off our bedroom floor correctly, and I give a little nod of approval, before pulling my suitcase out of the closet.

Meeting Casper here on Earth was a fluke, as most people here are. I found him while swiping through some series of dating apps with monochromatic syllables, ones that hadn't turned out for me, everyone else too sloppy or too quick to jump into sex or not willing to keep up the conversation for long enough. When I saw Casper, I knew instantly; we met up to walk through the park, and we connected immediately. On long, winding paths that traced past exquisite leaves, I felt like I was being heard for the first time in a long time; he listened to the things that I said, the mangled words and sentences that fell from my mouth, and he nodded slowly, and didn't judge me for it.

I had known all along that there was a Casper somewhere out there, but it had been vague, lacking in detail. In all my dreams of Venus, I had always imagined someone else beside me, someone that I could trust and cherish and love, but always in the vaguest sense; some figure, tall, but always standing in the shadows so that I couldn't make out any details of who he was.

Maybe other people take months and years to fall in love; with Casper, it took seven days. I remember sitting with him in my apartment, where we had all of our dates: I think I am starting to feel something for you, I said to him. He laughed at that; he laughed at a lot of the things that I told him. Well that's something to celebrate, he said. Before he left that night, he said: maybe I'm starting to feel something for you too. A month later, and he had moved in.

Then, after Casper had come into my life, I had a new vision, one where we met in the woods of Venus. It was the afternoon, and I was looking out at the river, a melancholy light shining all over the place. I can remember every moment of this, because I've imagined it so many times: how looking at the water, I felt the presence of some other being behind me; how I turned and saw Casper, standing at a distance, looking at me; how the two of us turned, and, as if choreographed, edged closer and closer together, the tension growing between us at every moment until we stood before each other. We both knew that it was exactly right. That was the day we moved into the palace, the day that would mark the beginning of the rest of our lives.

I hear the door to the apartment open, and then the bedroom. He's five minutes late, but I don't mind; I could never be upset at him. You ready to go? he says, and I look at him, his beautiful frame poised there in the door frame, and I say: of course I am. Let's go.

Then, later, after we drive upstate, after we drop our things in the cabin and settle in, we have enough time for a short hike in the woods before it gets too dark. Casper holds the map and leads us on a winding path, trees marked with yellow paint turning into those marked with blue and orange, and all around us the foliage is starting to turn different colors, the first mark of autumn. He's alive for the first time in weeks, Casper, perking up from whatever was flattening him before.

I'm coming alive as well in these woods, following Casper as he bounds ahead. As soon as I entered the forest I felt a feeling of recognition in these trees. Maybe it's just because Casper loves them so much, but in my mind, there's something here so similar to the forests on Venus. I can't tell what it is, whether it's how the early-evening light hits the trees, or the way that the trail will dip past beautiful vistas with views sloping downhill, or else the way that both Casper

and I move along the path like echoes, some part of us in line with the natural frequencies out here. Out here, I can forget all about work and Cassie and Greg, and the barbeque that I'm skipping this weekend; all about any part of the outside world at all. In front of me, there is only Casper.

Then: we round a bend in the forest, and I think that I catch a glimpse of *it*—the it, the thing I've been waiting for to happen.

Wait a minute, I say to Casper, and he looks back at me and frowns slightly, but it doesn't matter; I'm already stepping off the path, moving through the trees. I can catch the glint of the river just a little farther off the path, and I know what I'll see when I get there. With quick footsteps, I move down a steep incline, hearing the water flowing ahead of me.

Then: in front of me, the scene that I've pictured all this time. On Venus, I saw this exact view, watching the water flow before me in the shadowy woods. Wasn't I standing just like this, in this very spot, looking out on the river—and then, in another moment, turning back to see Casper, pulled there by fate to meet him for the first time?

I turn back expecting to see Casper in position, but instead there's nothing but forest and a steep hill before me. I moved further than I thought I had off the trail. Casper, I call out uphill, but there's nothing.

The forest seems emptier all of a sudden, creepier now that I'm not with someone. The wind starts up, blowing the leaves around, and between that and the sounds of the water, I can't hear anything at all. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe this isn't the right spot to reenact what took place on Venus.

Casper, I call again, and then I start walking up the slope. I start to feel a twinge of anger growing inside me. Where is he? I think to myself, walking slowly. Doesn't he know that this is

the moment that we meet, the moment that everything takes place and becomes perfect? He's supposed to be standing there—uphill, waiting for me, his eyes locked on me, both of us moving toward us. I know that he can't have known this—but shouldn't he feel it? Shouldn't he have followed me here anyway?

In the next instant, I realize what's happening an instant before it does: I try to step forward, but my previous foot gets caught on a root, and before I know it I've lost my balance, and fall. The entire earth seems to fly all around me at once as I tumble back down the hill, rolling over myself again and again, unable to stop myself from falling further. I reach but only scrape my arms, and I try to brake with the heel of my foot, dragging it along the earth until I come to a halt at the edge of the river.

Every part of me is covered in dirt, as I try to stand up again, but I wince. My ankle is sprained. I fall back to the ground again as soon as I try.

Casper, I call again, and then louder, letting the panic take over now: Casper. Casper!

The water flows down the river. The trees rustle in the wind above. Far out on the horizon, the sun starts to set and bring in the night, and if Casper doesn't come find me soon then that night will fall and in a minute I'll be out here, in the dark, alone.

—

I lie there for a long time, before I realize that Casper won't find me.

For some time, I thought that he would. I convinced myself that at any moment I'd hear him coming over the slope of the hill, calling my name; scurrying down it and rushing up by my side. I waited and waited. Down the river, the sun disappeared, and the sky turned a mixture of bruised yellow and purple. A blueness settled down all over everything as the light faded.

Eventually I stand, wincing from the weight on my ankle. I can still move it—it's not broken, likely just a sprain—but the pain resonates as I start trying to walk up the hill, limping and nearly losing my balance every step that I take.

By the time that I find the trail itself again, it's night, and the only light comes from the moon rising over the forest. Dim, the path is just barely visible as I continue to walk.

So many things swirl in my head as I trace the trail that leads back to the cabin. I think about things from Casper's point of view—how he watched me go off the trail, disappearing into the woods. Did he look at me, then continue to hike without me? Did he run after me and get lost himself? If that's the case, then he could still be lost here too, wandering aimlessly in the trees, trapped by the landscape.

Could I get back to the cabin and find that Casper is gone? That he's disappeared, not just into the woods, but that he's never existed in the universe at all? Somehow, I'd have managed a slip into a different dimension, one where neither Casper nor I exist on this planet any longer.

I stop, listening. For a minute, I heard something. Rustling, footsteps. Something behind me. I turn around and stare into the dark, but there's nothing, and it's silent.

But there *is* something as I continue walking—if not something on the trail behind me, then just off the path, crouching in the trees. The night shadows of the trail don't help this image; I look out past me, and think that every rock is an ogre, every tree off the path reaching out. I hobble along more quickly, but the movement behind me only follows me more quickly now.

Is it Casper, also confused and lost in the woods? Watching me from a distance, trying to see if it's really me before he pops out and we navigate our way back home together? Or else will I turn around to find something else in the woods with me—a lynx, a bear, some creature that crawled out of a cave. I'll stagger faster, but it will only chase me, until I step on my ankle

the wrong way and fall to the trail again, only to look up and see something ghastly, something to terrify me to my core.

I wander along the trail for a long time.

There was a time before Casper, but I don't think about it much. If you'd asked me, I'd have said that everything was perfect, but maybe there were signs that things were off. I remember how back in college, Saturday nights I'd leave the library close to midnight, my head bursting from the symbols and numbers I'd been poring over for hours and hours. I remember moving along those lit paths slowly, the darkness moving out into the rest of the world on all sides. Shouts of groups of other students and parties going on would echo through the night, and I'd hear them and wonder. The other students moved in groups and were laughing together, slovenly, euphoric. Somewhere buried deep in me, did I ever wish that I was among them?

It was around then, during those late nights, that I learned to identify Venus in the stars and planets high above the world, picking out the bright dot amidst the other noise in the sky. On Venus, I decided, it hadn't been anything like this; everyone had been quiet, beautiful. My people, I thought; I was once among them, but now had been cast apart from them, separated by millions of miles and billions of years. It was a trial; they would come back for me someday, I thought, they would have to. They couldn't strand me out on this planet away from them all forever.

In my little concrete dorm room, I closed my eyes and tried to see the place where I was really from, scenes blooming in my mind, the world growing larger and larger. Awake in the day, I wrote down what I saw so that I could remember it all, and at night the hot planet burned before me in my dreams. I didn't know it then, but Casper was out there, just waiting for me to

find him, to make those visions complete. Months from now, I would go out and find him again, but for now it was just me and the visions, images of my true home giving me strength, bringing me back to life.

—

In the parking lot, the light in the cabin is on. I hobble slowly and pause at the entrance, clutching the doorknob, before I open the door and enter in.

Casper is sitting on the sofa, his feet propped up on the coffee table, like I've always told him to never do. He glances up as I enter. He's watching something, some sporting event that's taking place states away from us.

Oh, he says. You're back, finally.

Where have you been? I say, standing in the door frame, not moving any further into the room.

Casper shrugs. You were taking long enough on your detour, so I decided to come back here. He checks his watch. I've been waiting for long enough by now.

As he says this, there's something eerie about me standing here, as if I wasn't really in this scene in this moment, but instead looking in through a camera, viewing this through someone else's eyes. I can picture it framed like a diorama, placed nicely inside a shoebox: me, standing stiffly in this corner; Casper, sitting on the sofa. But it's not Casper that I'm looking at in front of me on the sofa; I'm staring at some clone of Casper, something that has never been Casper but who looks exactly like him. I have fallen into a new dimension, just one that I could have never anticipated, one in which there is a completely different person inside Casper's body. *You left*, I think.

What are you doing? Casper says.

I've somehow hobbled to the kitchen, and I've opened the fridge, looking for all the food that I brought with me up to the cabin. *You left*, and all I can think of is the stuff we brought for sandwiches—bread, lunch meat, cheese, that kind of thing. I close the refrigerator, standing there motionless for a moment as if I was waiting for instructions from someone (*you left*), and then I move again, as if in a trance.

You're being weird, Casper says, still from the sofa, the TV still showing some baseball game, as I go into the bedroom, and then he calls: you're weirding me out.

You left, I say, and my voice is different, stretching octaves lower, I think. I'm standing over my suitcase, the one that's still mostly packed save for my toiletries. Who needs those?

Casper has gotten off the sofa now, has followed me into the bedroom. What in the world, he says, standing in the door frame, are you talking about.

But there's nothing I can say; it's as if my mouth has been disconnected, that I can only hear and can no longer speak English. As if the only phrase that I can remember is the one that I repeat over and over, like an idiot, *you left*, and Casper stares at me as I zip up my suitcase.

You're leaving? he says, incredulous, not stepping out of the way as I approach the doorway.

I look up at his face, feeling everything hot and far away, trying to find any other word in the language to say. There's a pressure behind my lips, trying so hard to find other words, and then finally:

I fell, I say, and my voice is garbled, far different from what it sounded like in my head. I fell, I repeat, you left. You left. I close my eyes, but other words are out of reach.

He moves to the side from the doorway, and as I pick up a sweater from the couch, the last thing that I need for the drive home, I've decided that I'll never speak again. For the rest of

my time on Earth, I think, I'll pretend I'm mute. The front door squeaks as I open it, and I grab the car keys off the side table. I won't speak, and I won't write, and for the rest of my life I'll go it completely and utterly alone.

Stop! Casper says. Wait.

His voice is loud, and I turn back. He's standing in the living room, his arms at his sides like he's just dropped something.

Let me get my things too, Casper says. If you're really leaving. Jesus fucking Christ. Of course.

I idle the car as I wait inside, staring out towards the black forest. Anything could be in there, if you think about it, and you'd never know it. I close my eyes, and I'm aware suddenly of all the sounds around me—the humming of the engine, the sound of Casper pulling the front door shut behind him, the click of the trunk opening as Casper throws his luggage in and then the car shaking slightly as he slams it shut.

Casper slides into the passenger's seat. Our last moment together, I think. This is the last moment he has to change it all. I'm not sure what he could say to make things right again, right now. *I fell, you left.* This is his last chance.

Do the keys need to go anywhere? Casper says. I left them in the mailbox. I shake my head.

Then drive us home, Stephen. His voice is tired, and as I pull the car down the dirt road, angling us back toward the main road again, I realize that I don't even know what that word means any more. Home, I think, but home is just a syllable at this point, like a word you've repeated so many times that it's lost its meaning.

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There are no streetlights this far north on the highway; for most of the drive back to the city, you have to keep your high beams on, dimming them when you see the red taillights of another vehicle appearing on the horizon. There aren't many other cars on the road either. Most of the vehicles that we pass are trucks, great beasts that rise above us, sending their rumblings out into the universe. Far from the light pollution, the stars are brighter here, but Venus isn't visible any longer; it's too late at night.

In all my dreams of that planet, did I ever see this coming? All that time when I wrote down my visions, did I ever imagine it to be like this? But of course not; it was always the opposite.

Nothing could last on that planet either; after years and years on Venus, the planet was starting to heat up, a runaway greenhouse effect trapping the sun's heat. We started to wear our summer things all year round; we lay out on couches and beds with our arms spread wide, drinking cool water by the pitcher, but eventually it got hotter than we could bear. It was a problem bigger than us, one that no one could solve.

Get on the rockets, they said to us after a while. We've built ships to take everyone to a new planet. We'll get along there.

But I wouldn't go, and Casper said that he wouldn't go either; that we would stay behind together and watch the end of everything. It wasn't the months in space that I was against, nor was it being cramped in those tiny vessels for the journey. It was life on a new planet itself. I couldn't imagine it—the Venusians, all of them on the surface of the new world, what civilizations they would find. And no matter who they found, they could never be the same as everyone else.

From a distance you see the lights of the city, and then we slide into the city itself, the buildings rising on both sides as the road glides further down, taking us back to our apartment. The streets become smaller, more familiar. I pause in a parking space on the street, thinking for a moment.

You go in, I say to Casper. I'll be up in a sec.

He doesn't say a thing; he's hardly looked at me once on this drive, much less said anything. I watch him take his luggage to the door of the building and pause; then, once he's inside, I back the car out of the parking space again, and drive, out of the city. I pass out of my neighborhood and into the next, and a little while later, I move out of that one too.

The buildings grow squatter and shabbier the further I drive; I'm looking at a series of buildings that are two and three stories high, small businesses instead of chains. A mix of residential and business. Residential only. I drive further, imagining the link between me and Casper getting weaker and weaker the further away that I get from him.

It's late when I reach the park, but it's a warm evening, and there are still a few people here. Several couples are here lying on the grass, staring up at the stars together; I like to imagine that they're all sleeping, that they've all come out here to go to bed and dream together. On the shore of the pond, there's an older man with kayak. It's one of the older wooden ones, and he tugs at the bow, trying to pull it into the water.

I stand up, get out of the car. I'm limping slightly as I walk, but the sprain feels less severe now, like it took place longer ago than it really did. I find my way to a bench not too far from the water. Several dark figures are moving around the path that goes around the pond, walkers late at night, but I can't make out their exact faces. I feel as if I'm floating, buoyant in a way I've never been before.

The old man tugs at the wooden kayak, but it barely moves a few inches, if any at all. He doesn't make any sound, no grunts or moans—but he pants, breathing heavily, a rhythm that only grows faster and heavier as he continues to pull at it. I can't look away from him, but find myself saying something that resembles a prayer, a plea with whoever is up there—let him get it. Please let him get it.

The Venusians had tried to convince us one last time as they boarded the spacecrafts. Come with us, they cried from the platforms, but Casper and I shook our heads, watching from the edge of the launch pad. It was night then too, and as they all took off, smoke and dirt and debris filled everything. A hot rain began to fall all over Venus, and Casper and I stood there with our hands linked. Maybe it would all be fine, and we would go back to our palace by the boiling lake; or maybe the hot rain would dissolve us forever, the end to everything. In that moment, you couldn't be sure of anything at all.

On the shore, the man stumbles and falls onto his back, laying there with his legs splayed up in the air. Watching him lie there, I make out several bottles on their sides that I hadn't noticed before at the side of the kayak. A drunk.

The drive home seems faster than the one here, and as I drive down our block, I look up at all the buildings. Squares of yellow light from all of them, arranged in varying patterns, and the beams from them come down onto the blue street, like lights on a dark stage.

I park across the street and get out of the car, and I pause. From here, I can see the bedroom light still on in our apartment—then there, in the window frame, I can see Casper sitting at the desk. He's reading my orange notebook, moving his finger slowly over every page.

I don't move for a long time; then I go to the corner store, open twenty-four hours. I purchase a mineral water and drink the entire thing while still standing inside the store. The man

at the cash register doesn't look up from his phone, doesn't notice that I'm still there. At home, Casper will be waiting. At home is my notebook, my everything, and Casper sitting among all of it. I stay in the corner store until the cashier looks up, recognizing my existence—and only then do I leave.

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In the apartment, the door to the bedroom is closed, and so I go to the kitchen where there are dishes to wash and cups to clean. After all that, I disinfect the sink. I read once that, because of its wetness, bacteria there grows the fastest; that, feeding on the moisture and the food that gets dropped in there every day, it becomes the dirtiest part of the home, dirtier even than the toilet. The light underneath the bedroom door goes out, and I wait for a long time longer, before going in.

Outside, it's started to rain, the noise pressing against the walls of the apartment, as if we lived in some little box suspended in the sky. Casper is asleep, and I stand over him, looking at him. In his sleep, he shifts in the bed, rolling from one side to the other. Asleep like that, he could be the same way that he has always been to me; he could be anything. It's only behavior in the end that marks people as who they are.

Hours from now, in the morning, it will all be different. Casper will come into the kitchen, and I will be waiting for him there. I'll ask him to leave—but he's not stupid; he'll know that he's going to have to leave anyway. You were everything, I will think. You were my last hope for this stupid planet.

I think about that crumpled invitation from Cassie, crumpled in some dark corner of my desk right now. It's all over, I think, looking back down. I have to be among the rest of you now.

Asleep, Casper is still beautiful. I sit on the edge of the bed, and watch him, then look out at the wet street below. The rain picks up speed, coming down harder than ever, but I realize that I can no longer hear it.

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I am not a Venusian; I am not from Earth. I don't know what I am anymore.

I land in Greg's neighborhood to find a faux-Midwestern street with trees that arch overhead and touch in the middle. This is out in the suburbs, large houses painted with pastels. You can tell where the barbeque is from the other end of the street; cars line both sides of the road and lead up to one especially perfect driveway. I find a space and sit for a long time, thinking about the possibility of driving away, of not going up there at all.

I decided to come here this morning after Casper shut the door. I didn't, I don't want to be here. I don't belong here.

But Casper's departure tore a hole in my dreams, and all of a sudden I was deflated. You see me more clearly now: all those words, all those visions of Venus that I built up over the years, cocooned myself with—all of that has fallen apart now. Now there's nothing but to search for a new home.

When I step out of the car, I wonder if this is how the Venusian's felt coming out of their ships on a new planet. For a moment, the air feels especially clean and fresh, and I'm invigorated; I step quickly before I can second-guess myself, and I move down the street and up the driveway, and I'm there.

Strings of yellow lights dangle from posts, and people mingle in small groups all around the large backyard. A long table in this part of the yard, near the house, with chips and meat and

condiments scattered across it haphazardly; at the other end, Cassie and my coworkers, everyone that I've avoided for the past three years.

My breathing starts to pick up, and I stand at the table. The heaviness of what I've just done starts to cramp up in me. All around the yard, no one has notice me yet, but in a moment they will; what am I doing here?

This morning, Casper saw me as I really was for the first time. And another thing, he said to me. I know what you've been writing about the two of us. He was holding a box at the time, but he was straining underneath the weight of it, and he jerked it up quickly, regripping it as it fell again. You live in a twisted world, Stephen. Get help.

One by one, everyone starts to look over at me, where I'm standing. At first, it's just a few people glancing over occasionally; then, it seems to spread like a virus. I hold on to the side of the table, like I'll collapse without the support.

Cassie sees me and comes over after a minute. You came! she says, almost incredulously. I thought you couldn't make it.

Something came up, I say. More and more eyes turning to look. They try to be discreet, but I know that they're seeing me, know what they're really thinking. They can see what I really am—not one of them.

Cassie continues talking, bubbly as ever, but when I look in her eyes I see it too. That clear, clear sign that she gives me: you're set apart. Not from this planet like the rest of us. Around us, the partygoers, my coworkers seem to have stopped talking completely, to ogle me further. Are they moving closer, starting to crowd around me to see my differences better?

Greg will be so happy you came, Cassie says, wrapping up some speech, her voice as light as ever. I'll go tell him you're here.

That crowd, growing bigger and bigger as Cassie walks away for a moment; as if in her absence they've gotten bolder, have started to invite their friends and family and more neighbors to come look, come see what's here before them. I shut my eyes for a moment, but Venus is no longer there for me either. When I open them again, Greg's in front of me, and before he can say a thing, I ask: where's the bathroom?

Up the stairs, to the left and straight ahead, and then I'm passing through Greg's house, moving through the kitchen. Someone—his wife, I recognize from the photos—is standing at the counter, making some salad of colorful vegetables, tossing it in a large bowl, glancing at me as I move past her. The bathroom itself is child-sized and comically small, with a high window that looks out onto the backyard.

It all feels impossible. Ten minutes on this planet, and I'm already dying.

I glance out the window again, and the barbeque seems normal again, everyone having gone back to their positions. The difference is that now, I know that this is all a ruse, that the second I go out there the ogling and looking will start up again, impossible to withstand.

If I stretch a little further, it's so easy to imagine it: here is Casper, crawling over the back fence like a spider, lowering himself onto all of them. I can see him, standing amidst the different groups, Cassie, Greg, telling them all about where I've really come from, who I've been all this time. The people, moving closer and closer to the bathroom window, a crowd of them trying to catch a glimpse of me. All this time, Casper, I thought you were one of my kind. But you were one of them all along.

I pull away, and look at myself in the mirror, pale. I look terrible. No, I think, I'm not dying. But I'm not one of you either.

I decide that I will leave.

Back in the kitchen again, Greg's wife is no longer making the salad, but is staring at her phone, her head on her hand. She looks up when I move toward the hallway instead of past her to the backyard again. The door outside's that way, she says.

I was going to go out the front door, grab something from my car, I say to her, and she nods, looking back down at her phone. I hesitate before moving again. Something about her seems familiar to me, a feeling that I get from her.

It's nice of you to be prepping this stuff inside, while everyone else is out there having fun, I say.

She looks up from her phone, glances at the salad, then at me. I don't mind too much, she says. It's kind of nice to take a few minutes away from everyone else. Get a little headspace away here inside. She's smiling, her phone dropped to her lap, as if she knows what I'm about to do.

You take care, she calls, as I exit through the front door, down their perfect steps and across their perfect front lawn. I will, I think, I will.

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Late at night, I drive hours to the ocean and stand on the shore underneath space, looking out at the water. Will I ever find any of my kind on your planet? Up, I find Venus among the other lights, and I can almost hear all of them trying to tell me something, voices stretching across the great distance. I listen for a long time, but I can't understand what they say.

When I look away from the sky at the water, there's dark mass bobbing in the waves, something big, unknown. If I lean forward, I think that I can just make it out—a rocket ship? Something sent to collect me? Whatever it is, it disappears under the water before I can see.