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SCREEN MEMORY

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THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

BY

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ABSTRACT

SCREEN MEMORY

BY KRISTIN HAEGELIN

Screen Memory is a short story collection that fuses the science fiction and bildungsroman genres in a near-future Los Angeles. Focusing on the experience of young adult girls, these four short stories uncover the way technology encroaches on the mind, as well as what nostalgia feeds on in a new world. While the protagonists do not know each other, the stories are linked by their setting in LA, a city that grows older throughout the span of the collection.

A hookup in Hollywood brings back memories of a former friend. A young reseller runs into a ghost in a fire-scarred Bel Air. A teenager gets attached to a strange online forum. A new work-from-home technology might free humans from their day job—at a cost. *Screen Memory* explores the fluid ways the mind filters time as it dwells inside, moves through, and looks back on adolescence.

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“It looks as though a memory-trace from childhood had here been translated back into a plastic and visual form at a later date—the date of the memory’s arousal. But no reproduction of the original impression has ever entered the subject’s consciousness.” - Sigmund Freud, Screen Memories

*“It’s the alienation capital of the world.” -Gregg Araki, Totally F***ed Up*

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THE HILLS

Haley was seven miles from home when she wished she'd brought her glasses. The Uber ride to Hollywood was thirty minutes—he was paying, of course—and each streetlamp was a long, expressionist smear outside. She pulled at the collar of her gingham dress and mussed with the carefully maintained waves around her face. Her purse sat next to her on the seat, containing her house keys, student ID, Trident gum, three condoms, and at least two receipts from CVS. Her glasses were on the nightstand at home—purposefully forgotten. She always felt the small oval frames made her look like a different, tedious person.

The driver had kept up a steady stream of smalltalk for the entire ride, despite her steadfast dedication to examining the nothingness outside. He looked like he could be her grandfather, a stout Chinese man with driving gloves, who asked multiple times what she was studying in college. She had told him part of the truth, '*sociology*', but not the whole truth, '*I'm actually sleeping with a thirty-three year old tonight. He's a perfect stranger.*' She was eighteen and not inclined to share her dating history with anyone but her closest friends, let alone an adult. And anyways, when she sat with her two roommates in the dining hall the next morning, she still planned to keep a few details to herself, cherishing the sweetness of a small secret.

The map's ETA dwindled from three minutes to one. Outside the car, a hulking snow globe flashed up and filled the entirety of the window. The building was massive and took up half the block. The Cinerama Dome, now closed. And the moment she saw it, Haley knew she had been here before, only three years prior. She remembered sitting in the passenger seat on a different day, a spring afternoon, driving down Sunset Boulevard with her friend Claire.

Back then, Claire was her best friend in the entire world, even though they were completely different people. It was an “opposites attract” situation, Claire liked to joke. Claire was loud and she was quiet. Claire was cool and she was getting there. Claire tied her platinum blonde hair up, always pulling out two strands to frame her face. Haley wore her thick hair unstyled, or tamped down with a headband she had bought at the mall, back when she lived in Denver.

They had officially met in the second semester of their freshman year in first period, only to find that their schedules lined up to a tee. She was a new transfer to Eastwood Senior School (of the Holy Child Jesus), while Claire had been there since seventh grade and often asked her what it was like at a “regular” school where you didn’t have to get a hall pass from a nun. In all honesty, she didn’t like Claire at first. She had a bad reputation, said to linger in the hallways at co-ed dances and lead guys off to who knows where. She was asked to homecoming by a boy at St. Marks, even though she was only a freshman, and often received dirty looks from the senior girls during assembly. But Claire had actually talked to her in first period and sat next to her in second. In the fourth week of spring semester, Claire invited her to her hidden lunch spot, the overgrown patch behind the library with the remnants of a failed community garden. Among the dried-up snap peas and brown lily-pod leaves of a pumpkin patch, they liked to gossip about teachers, older girls, and the hot substitute for history class. After school, they did homework in the living room of Claire’s mom’s house and watched reality TV when they were too tired to do geometry. And soon, even as she tried to keep her distance, it was hard to ignore that they had become, undeniably and almost inevitably, friends.

Friendship with Claire meant a series of firsts. Claire was the first person to offer her a cigarette. The first person she got drunk with (it was a miserable experience at Claire's dad's

beach timeshare, involving a Nalgene covertly filled with Smirnoff's. This, of course, led to two piles of vodka vomit in the nearby alley). Claire's first time having sex, which she heard about afterwards over the phone the next morning. It scared her to learn about the older boy Claire had met at a cafe and the photos they sent to each other. The way she had snuck into his house at midnight and somehow drove back home before morning without getting caught. It felt like Claire had crossed over to another realm somehow, that with each successive experience Haley was losing a hold on her. When Claire called her late at night with frantic pleas for advice, she felt useful again. Haley was the first person Claire called, the person she trusted most. She was a part of her life, even if Claire never took her advice or answered her own calls. But what did Haley know? She'd never dated anyone and it felt good to be there for a friend. This was all practice for one day when it was her turn, when she'd finally have something interesting to talk about. Her own lucky life when she'd no longer feel like she was playing dress-up at the mall and never had to ask Claire how to apply eyeliner.

Though she loved their closeness, it hurt to be with her sometimes. It felt like everyone was staring at her, noticing how plain she was next to Claire. At times, when she caught the jealousy flowing through her, she would feel so guilty that she wished she could be taken out of her body and set free. It wasn't fair. She was too young to live independently, to skip all the awkward parts of growing up. She was too old to be blameless, to run around naked, to break things when she got mad. Instead, she was stuck where she was, with envy built into everything, constantly waiting for Claire to grow up and leave her, once and for all. To shoot so far ahead that she disappeared from Haley's view, leaving behind a trail of prep school boys and Quick Powder Bleach.

The first time she saw her friend cry was in the spring of junior year when they had decided to ditch school two hours early to visit David, Claire's not-quite boyfriend in the Hollywood Hills. He was an actor first, and rich second, and Claire mentioned that they had discussed being exclusive. This meant a lot, Haley assumed. She remembered Claire smoking behind the wheel, only cracking the window a bit as they sped down the freeway. The smell was strong and distinctly European, settling over her face like a blanket. Cigarettes always seemed stupid before meeting Claire, before she saw the way you could take a long drag and it made you look like you were thinking much harder than before. Haley accepted the cigarette and then coughed out the window. Watching was better than doing. She laid back in the front seat, vaguely worried about what time she would get home and when to do her homework.

Claire's old Prius took the next exit and a series of mysterious turns, revving as it pulled up the steep incline into the tucked-away neighborhood. The place was all tall trees and dappled shade. The Santa Monica mountains stretched into the air above them, shielding modern mansions and the celebrities that lived in them from view. It was hard to believe someplace as quiet as this could exist in the middle of LA, undisturbed and unseen. Even as her friend talked over the radio songs, returning to David every other sentence, she felt grateful to know someone like Claire who could share this secret world with her. It was strange how a mundane school day could become infinitely more significant, how each day could hold the same promise. And the best part was that none of their classmates would know what they had seen, what they had learned about this new and infinite Los Angeles. These hills belonged to the two of them, as long as they didn't tell a soul.

“Is this your friend’s place?” The Uber pulled up a peaceful side street lined with old-fashioned multiplexes. Haley opened her phone and double checked the address. “You’ve been here before, right?”

“Yeah.” She scrolled over the map and cringed, admitting, “Well, maybe drive up a bit more.”

He looked at her for a long moment, saying nothing. Haley wondered what it meant to be caught in such an inconsequential lie. She knew he couldn’t get her in trouble; he couldn’t call her parents. At worst, he would judge her as he drove away.

“Is this okay?”

She thought about admitting she was there for a hookup right then, but got out of the car instead.

“Yep,” she popped the “p” of the word and slammed the car door shut. She felt she was being uncharacteristically rude for a moment and turned back to mouth a “thank you” through the window, waving awkwardly until his car pulled away.

Haley followed the map on her phone screen till she ended up in front of an odd, one-story house sandwiched between two bigger buildings down the street. The house was simple: beige concrete. There was a small driveway leading up to porch steps, where she could make out the figure of a man sitting on the stoop. As she got closer, she saw he wore a loose button up and wranglers. He might feel nervous, too, waiting to meet a stranger outside. Neither of them were fully visible to the other, and there was a certain power in seeing someone first. Like you were a wild cat, moving through the bushes, choosing when to show yourself. Like you had the upper hand.

The image reminded her again of the view through the windshield as Claire walked up David's long driveway, called his name through the window, and communed with him without moving from that awkward space at the doorstep. They looked like they were fighting, but it was hard to make out the words from the car. From her safe and secret lookout, she was an intruder, despite the invitation to be there. Claire had pleaded with her to come on a longer drive all month, mentioning offhandedly at lunch and between classes, "When's the last time you did something fun?"

She kept going over the day's sequence of events and all the assumptions she had made along the way. It seemed obvious that David would be expecting them, that they would pick him and his friend up, and the evening would seamlessly move into a double date. They would change the seating arrangement: David and Claire would sit up front, while she would sit in the back with Lev, David's friend from high school before both boys had dropped out. They would discuss what they should do—maybe David would suggest the hiking grounds around Griffith Park where she had always wanted to visit, but never had the time. Maybe she and Lev would have lots to talk about, maybe she could make him laugh till David and Claire asked what was so funny. And maybe they would split off from the couple on the dusty trail later, the tourists would vanish from view, and Lev's shoulder would brush hers as they craned their heads to see the Hollywood Sign looking over them.

But she couldn't remember if Claire had said Lev had a girlfriend or not, a fact which made all of these ideas feel childish and vain. It was a silly fantasy—Claire never confirmed Lev was coming—and still she'd embellished the evening with false conversations and locations and love stories.

The car chirruped loudly, interrupting her scolding. Claire walked back down the street, defeated after ten minutes on the porch. She wiped the corner of her eye with her corduroy jacket and said David was not in the mood to see her today.

They drove around Hollywood, all the way down to the Cinerama where they parked and walked around. The mood was strange, Haley recalled. It was too humiliating to admit they were having a bad time, instead they half-heartedly recalled inside jokes and tried to see what was playing that day. When none of the showtimes lined up, they walked down the strip outside till it got too windy and she suggested they get dinner before going home. There was a small Thai restaurant on the block, with wood paneled walls and lots of potted plants. She ordered green curry and watched the knobs of eggplant and carrots float around in the dish as Claire brought up David again.

“I think he’s been kind of depressed recently.”

“Oh. Do you think he’ll want to talk later?”

“Maybe I’ll bring him a little treat or something. To make him feel better. Like some ice cream or a box of chocolates.”

“Mmmm.” It was unlikely David wanted to see them again. In fact, she wasn’t sure that she wanted to see David again.

“Do you think he’ll like that?” Claire asked.

“I don’t know...”

“I’ll ask him what his favorite dessert is. We can drop it off after dinner if he’s up.”

“Okay.” It was still unclear why they had driven across town, why Claire hadn’t told David they were coming in the first place. And what was David’s mysterious draw that kept Claire driving up and down those hills? He didn’t seem particularly charming or even handsome,

even if he had more stubble than the guys at St. Marks and played bass on the weekends. He didn't buy her flowers or take her on dates. But maybe the answer was as simple as sex and the mystery surrounding it. It made sense. Whenever the topic came up, Haley's mind faltered and stuck on it like gum. If she didn't stop herself, deliberately fix her thoughts on a distraction, she would run back the sound of a boy's crackly voice and the weight of his stare till the desire ran right off them, like a song played too many times. Haley could tell she was doing it, when a familiar memory began to play and she could add another detail this time, making life into fiction. Now she was being watched and eaten up. Being desired. Close the distance, she thought, touch me and what do I feel like under your hands? Stare bruises into my skin and kiss me for the first time.

She dragged herself away from her head again, fiddling with the plastic peeling at the edge of the menu. "Wanna split the mango sticky rice?"

Haley returned to herself, sitting cross-legged in a stranger's carpeted living room. The thirty-three year old—his name was Liam, she had learned—held a pineapple-yellow edible to her lips and asked her to bite away half. She did, watching him as he took back the sticky remainder and finished it, granular bits of sugar clinging to his thumb and pointer fingers.

She followed him through the small house into his bedroom. The room was lit with one of those ceiling fans with the light attached, and there were film photographs of some national park taped on the wall. It dawned on her that there wasn't much of a difference between a boy's apartment and an "adult" apartment, besides the fact that he had more fridge magnets in his kitchen and a bit more space to walk around. She had thought there would be obvious signs to tip

her off: he would have his own house; there would be half-finished tax forms on the kitchen counter; he'd have a divorce under his belt by now. Or at least an almost engagement.

She lay down on the bed with him and rested her head on her folded arms, reclined like an actress she had seen on the cover of *Elle* one time at the orthodontist's. He sank down next to her on the comforter and reached out to hold her hand. He was going to kiss her. He *was* kissing her. Now, they were careening head-first into that familiar tangle. It was a predictable and welcome sensation by then, the choreography of a dress unzipping, the pull of a shirt over the head, the shimmy out of pants. Then there was the way the space between them narrowed imperceptibly and the goosebumps that followed, like ghostly thumbs moving down her back. The sensations crept in—the asking, the stretch of muscle, the smell, the sweet and bitter hurt, the all-consuming nature of it. As she moved off his lap into a new position, she marveled at the still unsolved magic of the act, how it seemed to slow down and speed up time. When she looked at the clock, she could barely comprehend what it meant. The world outside had ceased to exist, sloughed away by the pull of sex.

“It’s fun if you push back a bit,” he whispered into her ear, now on top of her.

“What’s that?”

He gripped her wrists, pinning her down against the sweaty mattress. She felt his immovable weight and met his eyes.

“You can push back. Struggle. It can feel good.”

When they had both finished and collapsed in a heap under the covers, Liam put his arm around her in bed, thinking that’s what she wanted. Then he began to small talk in the cocky way guys always did post-coital.

“Have you fucked any older guys before?”

“Not really. You’re the first.”

“I did the whole age gap thing when I was younger too.” He thought for a moment, stretched, and rested his arms behind his head instead. “You’ll look back on it totally different when you’re older. It doesn’t mean a lot now, I know. But then you’re my age and it matters.”

A sick, broiling feeling stirred in her stomach. There was no winning, she thought. No degree of innocence or wanting it that would make things change. That made sex feel less like a defeat, like a mistake that she’d spend the rest of her days resolving. Why couldn’t pleasure just be pleasure? Attraction emerged from nothing and became a part of her, heat in her stomach and the wish to do something about it. She’d waited and wanted and submitted and once she’d done it all, she was still somehow wrong.

“We’ll see,” she laughed with no humor. As she moved to rest her head on his chest, hoping to end the conversation, she knew that this exchange in that one-story house would come back to her in dreams and moments of absentmindedness, a secret that she didn’t want but would not give away. She hoped she’d learn someday. She hoped wherever Claire was, she was happy.

—

“I like this song,” she admitted to Claire. She was mainly talking to fill the silence. After picking up a pint of Cookie Dough ice cream for David and an energy drink for the ride, they had driven back to his place, temporarily parking in the street once again. David gave her a hug this time, but Haley had looked away. She didn’t want to see anything beyond what Claire would choose to tell her later. When they hit the road at nine, the sun had set for hours already and it was drizzling through the cover of the low-hanging buckwheat trees. They sat stuck in traffic, fixed on a main road to the highway. Claire picked up her phone and changed the music to a twangy rock song. She shot Claire a look.

“It’s David’s favorite,” Claire explained. “I’ll send it to you later.”

A long silence opened up between them, almost like a dream. The city was terrifyingly beautiful outside, full of slick buildings that weren’t ready for a downpour. A person scurried across the street with a paper bag full of groceries, barely looking at the light changes. A sign advertising flowers was left out on a road divider, a few peonies floating down the gutter below. At the end of the road, right before the freeway ramp went up, a palm tree stretched out towards the sky, strangled by ivy. She memorized each image to replay later, the pretty parts of tonight to convince her that she’d had fun. High school was supposed to be an adventure, not a tragedy. She had to speak now before she lost her courage.

“Claire.”

“Yeah?”

“Do you...like David?”

“Yes. Sometimes, I think?” Claire did not speak for a bit. “I mean I don’t love him if that’s what you’re asking. I don’t know. I don’t know, I guess. I guess I’m just trying to pass the time. And he’s cool when we’re alone. Like, his friends are cool.”

Claire’s phone buzzed in the cup-holder.

“Can you check who that is? Hope it’s not my dad. He’s been on my ass lately about draining the gas.”

Haley picked up the phone and scrolled on the home screen. “It’s David.”

“What did he say?”

“He said he’s sorry he couldn’t hang out tonight. He’s feeling better now.” She watched as another text popped up. “Also, Lev came over and they’re grabbing Mexican food to cheer him up.”

Claire white-knuckled the steering wheel. She clenched her jaw. There was an air of desperation in the car, as if either one of them might scream or run out of the car right then.

Haley hesitated, but the words still slipped out.

“David’s...kind of a dick.”

She watched Claire carefully, nervously. The rain began to come down harder in an unforecasted downpour. Maybe all the people on the road were having the same thought and flicking on the same windshield wipers. They were all creeping through the world’s largest car wash.

Claire deflated into her seat. “Yeah.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No, you’re right.” She grabbed the phone and skipped the song. “Fuck David,” she muttered.

Haley nodded. “Fuck David.”

“Fuck Lev.”

“Fuck Lev *and* David.”

“Fuck Lev and David and every boy we’ve ever known.”

“Agreed.”

They smiled to themselves, happy they had come to this neat conclusion together. The night was still young, if they knew how to spend it right. But, she couldn’t help remembering Lev and David driving out into the storm together at that very moment, free and uninhibited and young and callous. She and Claire were an afterthought in their story, while boys had become their entire story. Boys were what they talked about at night and woke up thinking about, the ones they drove across town for and lived for, in a way. They were the reason for their makeup

routine in the morning, the simultaneous fear and wish to be seen. But when they were older, she thought, they would be free of boys. They would be wiser then, time stacked into knowledge. It would be Claire and her, wrinkled and forgotten but united against the world.

Back in the one-story house, Haley lay barely awake, close to dreaming. She couldn't help it. She went over her later memories of Claire, hoping for answers she hadn't found before. But there was only the anticlimactic ending, a slow distancing and then nothing at all.

They had grown apart towards the end of senior year, calling each other less and finding ways to fill their lunch hour. Haley worked on college applications in the library, while Claire snuck off campus to smoke at a nearby fenced-off field, a soon-to-be housing development. When they did hang out, Haley found herself more and more irritated with Claire. Her lifestyle was fascinating at first; she was a force of nature, unwilling to submit to the dreary constraints of morning chapel and SAT prep. But the cycle of hookups and exes had no end. Claire never asked how she was doing, what she thought about. It was tiresome living in Claire's orbit. The last thing to drive them apart was a boy, funnily enough, but Haley could have predicted that if she'd thought about it more. It was her fault, but she didn't have the energy to patch up what no longer existed.

She thought about the summer before senior year, the last time they'd really felt like friends. In mid August, they took a final trip to Claire's dad's timeshare. Her dad was moving to Arizona next year with his new girlfriend, a wellness coach in Tucson, so they wouldn't be back anytime soon. This particular beach was kinda shitty anyways, Claire reminded her on multiple occasions. Too many rocks and signs with stingray warnings.

Haley and Claire were more seasoned drinkers by that time, no more vomit and no more Smirnoff. Before they had left, a friend of a friend had hooked them up with a bag of green and blue BuzzBallz. As Claire predicted, her dad was too preoccupied with work to care about the plastic cocktails stacked in their minifridge.

That night, after dinner at a touristy fish place and a few episodes of *Family Guy* on cable, the girls declared they were going for a late night stroll on the beach. They slid on their flip flops, and unceremoniously pushed the chilled drinks into the tote bag Haley had won at a library raffle.

Claire's dad barely turned his head. "Stay safe out there," he called from a plastic chair on the balcony.

They walked a few blocks down to the shore. All the restaurants closed early on Monday, so their voices echoed strangely on the streets. Columns of shells hung down from storefront windows. A row of tall beach houses glowed ahead dimly, like lit candles.

Following Claire's lead, Haley took off her shoes and socks, and held them in one hand. She scanned the sand, wondering where to sit. She hoped Claire didn't want to swim. The ocean was scary, even more so at night. She thought about missing person reports and riptides and the beginning of the movie *Jaws*. Typical. As soon as teenagers start having fun, a Great White shows up.

"Can you believe we're at this tiny beach again?" Claire asked.

It was hard not to get nostalgic. A year from now, they would have graduated already. They were technically supposed to be working on their college essays by now, but neither of them ever brought up the topic. Haley pulled her chunky cardigan tighter and took a long sip of her drink. It was colder outside than she anticipated.

“It’s weird. Funny if we’re here at fifty and we’re still drinking BuzzBalls.”

“Yeah, right. It’ll be white wine and klonopin by then.”

“What do you think we’ll *really* be like when we’re older?” She asked, half-joking.

“Cooler, hopefully. Maybe on a different antidepressant.” Claire said, laughing.

“Do you think we’ll still know each other?” She hadn’t been sure she was going to say it out loud, until she did.

Claire turned towards her on the sand. “That’s a stupid question,” she answered crossly. “What, you think we won’t be friends?”

“No, no, I mean maybe something will happen that we’ll drift apart. Like you’ll live on the other side of the country or we’ll go to different colleges or...I don’t know. My mom doesn’t really see any of her high school friends anymore.”

“Well, maybe she didn’t actually like her high school friends.”

“Maybe.”

“They barely had phones back then, anyways, right?”

“Okay, but—”

Claire fell onto her back in a pouty sprawl. “But this, but that. Can’t we talk about something else? I feel like you only want to ‘get deep’ about depressing stuff.”

“That’s not true.” Haley answered quickly. She hoped it wasn’t true, that she wasn’t just regurgitating the same morose words of every other edgy teenager. “What um, what do you want to talk about?”

“Anything! Anything fun!” She sighed and made a sand angel. “Okay fiiine. We can talk about sad shit too.”

Haley reclined onto the sand. “I’m sorry”

“Don’t be sorry. You’re right. Obviously, stuff is gonna change after this year. But like, it’s not forever. We’ll call each other and visit.”

“Yeah?”

“Of course, I mean you’ll probably be in New York and maybe I’ll be in Boston. And then we can see each other over break, but we’ll be wearing really ugly puffer jackets like they have on the brochures. And who knows, maybe we’ll be eating fucking clam chowder the whole time. What else is there to do over there?”

“I can take you to see all the hot guys in New York?”

“You’ll be at liberal arts school, so it’ll probably be a bunch of gay guys.”

“That’s not exactly new for you,” Haley teased.

“Oh fuck off.”

They both laughed. Claire rested her head on Haley’s stomach.

Claire turned her face to look at her, strands of blonde hair staticky on Haley’s shirt.

“Maybe we could live together some day.”

“When?”

“After we graduate and move back to LA. So we don’t have to find some rando on the internet.”

“That’d be cute,” Haley replied.

“Cute? It’d be fantastic,” Claire grinned and threw her hands into the air.

“We could decorate our apartment like the ones on Pinterest.”

“Yeah, with all the plants by the window-”

“Exactly, but also with really cheap Ikea furniture.” Haley smiled, beginning to get into the fantasy. “And we’d have a coat rack on the wall where we’d hang all our jackets. And a kitchen with an espresso machine-”

“And a bathtub and a record player-”

“Perfect! And we can have dinner parties every week-”

“Or just straight up parties—oh fuck! We could have our own bong!” Claire yelled.

“I’d bet we’d decorate the fuck out of a house. If we had one of those New York brownstones...”

“Yeah...”

They trailed off into silence. An apartment was within reach, but a house was for another part of life. The part without each other, where they would both meet a guy, date until it got serious, and move in with him. It was hard to imagine anything else. She wasn’t sure they’d ever wanted anything else. Their mothers had settled down, lost touch with their childhood friends, and were always saying they needed to ‘catch up’ with this or that person. Adulthood seemed so lonely, Haley thought. No one said it out loud, but it seemed there was a point when women were too old for friendship.

Haley’s heart hurt. A moment was always coming and leaving. In its place, she could feel the scab of nostalgia forming. Blunting happiness and sadness, till she couldn’t remember how she really felt at the time. Wistfulness wasn’t a real emotion. It was a shadow of something fuller. No wound, just its indent. No fruit, just the rind.

Claire looked so beautiful tonight. Haley imagined she’d be beautiful all her life. Seeing the smooth curve of her forehead, Haley wondered if you could love a friend. Then it seemed to her that a friend was the *only* person you could love.

Haley rolled over on her side away from Liam, pulling the comforter below her chin. For a moment she felt Claire's fingers on her face.

She closed her eyes and thought she saw a girl with two white braids down her back. The girl was waiting outside the Cinerama Dome, pacing by the box office. The theater was open, for the first time in years, and Sunset Boulevard was paved with shining sand. She checked her phone anxiously, once then twice. She looked across the street, before entering the double doors alone. Curiously, her shoes left bleach stains on the dark concrete. Haley wanted to follow her. She tried to run across the street, but it felt like she had been running for miles. She still had something she needed to say.

Haley woke to the sound of rain, swallowing words beneath her tongue. She listened to the tree branches against the window and smelled the wet pavement. But she could not remember her dream.

THE GHOST OF BEL AIR

“Try watching the road next time!” Winnie yelled, squirming out of her seatbelt.

“Ever heard of a blinker, asshole?” Her mom smacked the inside of the windshield with the back of her hand.

It was sometime in the mid-2040s, the first time her mom took her to a sale. Winnie was around ten then and they were doing one of their favorite bits: Legal Road Rage. The idea was you could yell whatever you wanted at drivers, so long as the windows were up. Both of them loved it. Her mom described it as radical anger management. Winnie just liked having an excuse to scream.

Earlier that cool Saturday morning, her mom had scrawled an address on her forearm and invited her to sit shotgun for a new sort of adventure. Apparently, Winnie was finally old enough. They drove down the Arroyo Parkway, a long outdated route, the narrow birth canal of the modern freeway. Its age showed as their car squealed around sharp bends and almost missed an abrupt exit. Then they were in Pasadena, parking on a quiet tree-lined street.

At the end of a lawn, an English-style manor stared down at them with a big paper sign taped up on its white balcony:

Everything Must Go | Open from Sat-Sun. 1/15-1/16.

Winnie looked around then, at the high doorway and thick grass. She rubbed at the precipitation on her purple-rimmed glasses. Then, without knocking and without invitation, her mom stepped inside.

An older stranger greeted them inside, sitting in a cushy lounge chair with a paperback in his lap. He smiled with none of his teeth showing and beckoned towards the hallway, lined with delicate wall lamps made to look like candles. An easy listening record played from another

room; location indiscernible, as if the mansion itself was emitting music. Further into the house, Winnie began to notice all the tables—long dining room tables, coffee tables, kitchen counters, footstools, and bedside drawers—and the contents laid out on their surfaces:

It was like the world's richest crow's nest. Everything glittered, gems inlaid in silver rings and knots of heavy necklaces, the kind that had a real weight in your hand. There was a bowl of earrings, fish-hooked treasure that she wished she could jab into her ears that second. Her mom returned her smile, the same look of awe in her adult eyes.

“You wish you could take it all home, don't you?” Her mom had whispered.

Winnie nodded.

“Me too.”

She beckoned for Winnie to follow her into the next room. The parlor led out to a sprawling backyard with multiple levels of patios and a large kidney-shaped pool at the bottom. There, she directed Winnie with a flutter of her right hand, a finger curling out towards what she wanted. Winnie picked up tiny glass animals, so small they could live in her palm; fine lace doilies; and good cutlery, slipping them into the deep pockets of her overalls and canvas tote bag, oversized on her shoulders. As her mom kept watch on the doorway, she thought about what it would look like if all of her belongings—every ratty stuffed animal, ticket stub, spelling test, and velcro wallet—were displayed side by side for the world to see. She wondered if people would want it for themselves, if they would put on old-timey music in her apartment and walk through where she lived. Maybe they would wonder who she was, but she doubted they'd get it right.

It was a gloomy day outside, a slight drizzle coming down and turning the pavement dark. If only they could stay here, she thought, and light the fireplace and take a nap in every room.

But it was time to go.

When Winnie shot her mom an anxious look on the way out, she simply squeezed her hand and let her eyes drift toward the car, a smile dancing on her lips. “They’re already dead, baby. Nothing can hurt them now.”

—

"What are we looking for today?"

"Glassware. Wood furniture. Ceramics."

Hen paced back and forth in the small space in front of the couch, rubbing his hand in the same place over his forehead.

“You’re gonna mess up your hairline doing that,” Winnie called from in front of the stove.

“It can’t get much worse than it is,” he quipped back.

She had met Hen a little less than a year ago, and while she wasn't sure she liked him as a person yet, he knew how to get a good deal. Hen was an inch taller than her and had a head of thick black hair, just slightly thinning around his temples. His eyebrows were lush and his eyes downturned, painting a perpetual look of disgust on his face. He took measured steps with his back hunched over, like he was shielding himself from rain that wasn't there. More ornery than you’d think for his age, only eleven years older than her.

“Breakfast’s ready,” she called.

“Okay, okay. I don’t even know if I’m hungry yet.”

On weekends, they liked to go to the sales bright and early to make sure no one snatched up the good stuff first. They would sit at the dinner table—she would fry an egg, pressing it flat against the pan with a spatula until the yolk ran out the sides. Hen would sit at their round dining

table beside the window and slowly finish one serving of greek yogurt and a banana cut into slices. Then he'd lick the top of the foil yogurt top when he was done and chuck it into the trash a few feet away. Their conversations were curt, but suitable.

"I'm going to do a dropoff at Bordeaux Antiques this Monday. Wanna come?"

"Maybe." He tossed the end of the banana into his mouth. "Did you see the fire warning yesterday?"

"No, nothing."

"Well there was a big bushfire somewhere in Sierra Madre—maybe we should go down there later this week. People might be looking to pawn stuff."

"Okay."

"They'll need money for hotels, probably. More sales are coming, then."

"You don't have to be so crass about it."

"What's that mean?"

"I'm just saying, we'll just look it up when the time comes and if there's more sales, there's more sales."

"Nothing wrong with making a living."

"Well, you make it sound like we're rooting for it."

Hen set down his spoon and stretched his arms over his head, both joints cracking.

"Death, therefore, the most awful of evils, is nothing to us, seeing that, when we are, death is not come, and, when death is come, we are not."

"What the hell was that?"

"Epicurus. Letter to Menoeceus."

They were resellers; that meant that they were part of a larger ecosystem. Hastening the life cycle of old to new to yours. On the weekend, they frequented estate sales and haggled with grief-stricken fifty-somethings, loaded vintage chairs and sofas into their minivan, and set off to their dingbat in Palms. The rest of the week was spent sanding, softening, soaking, and sawing. Polishing old wood and stripping bad paint jobs. Restaining dressers to look pricier than they were. Hasty woodworking jobs to even out wobbly legs and help furniture stand on its own again. Then, it was off to the market—flea markets, furniture stores, and internet auction sites. They stood by their wares and made sales to young adults looking to furnish their new apartment, thirty-year-old artists needing a new set of drawers, bamboo chairs for little old ladies, and mid-century modern cabinets for hipsters in need.

Hen pushed his chair out from the table, weaved his way through several piles of cardboard boxes (filled with vintage slip dresses and Tiffany lamps respectively), and began to rummage through the TV console.

“We’re almost out of flower.”

They smoked weed in the morning. Hen knew how to roll and Winnie would diligently cut up the buds with a small pair of sewing scissors, both of them sitting on the couch. Then, they checked on their shrooms in the spare closet. They were coming along nicely in a big plastic bin. Chestnut heads pushing out from a grey-brown substrate. Their side hustle. On Fridays, they went to backyard markets in Culver, always a small table in the back behind the clothing racks and handmade jewelry. The business was slow but consistent. There were always a dozen or so sixteen-year-olds that came up to them over the course of the day, playing cool, examining the identical bags on the table, asking how much they should take and how long it’d take to set in.

Hen shook out the shredded weed remnants from a Ziploc bag into her lap.

“Thanks a lot. I’ll smell great at the sale.”

Hen chortled. “Your jacket stinks of the stuff already.”

Their ritual required near-silence, nothing but the crinkle of papers between them. From the corner of her eye, she watched Hen’s long, nimble fingers at work. His hands fidgeted and found themselves in the action. His crooked right pinky stuck out, alone.

Hen finished first. Though she'd been rolling with him for a while now, he was still faster. They had four joints in total: some for now, some later. Hen tucked one behind his ear and grabbed a lighter from his pocket.

"Wait a second," Winnie said, dusting herself off and heading to the bathroom. "I haven't finished getting ready." She peeked her head inside, calling back, "Were you able to pick up any more hand soap?"

"Forgot last night. Just put a little water in it for now."

She shut the door, ran her hands under the faucet, and pulled her hair into a ponytail. It was better to look younger and fresher at the sale, maybe she could be mistaken for a teenager still. She wasn't so far off from that time, only she felt that others could sense the years on her skin. Like each year the cells were building up on her face, falling into new divots and wrinkles, creating a canyon of difference between 21 and 22. Or maybe nothing had changed at all. It was hard to tell.

The bathroom had less storage than the outside by a slim margin. There was a tray of old-fashioned perfume bottles on the counter that she was supposed to drop off for a boutique's front window display. She was proud of that; it was one of the first times she successfully arranged a gig for Hen. Below the sink, there was a family-sized mouthwash, a few bins of fancy hand soap samples, and Hen's extensive hair care kit. But her eyes kept drifting towards the trash

can. She knew it was still there. Her hands ached to uncover it. To dig through the overflow of balled-up tissue paper, hairballs, toenail crescents, used Q-tips, to find what she had left there that morning. A plastic stick covered in piss. The two pink lines she had summoned from it. If it stayed at the bottom of the trash, maybe it would cease to exist. She pulled her belt a notch tighter. Then she pressed her fingers to her face, breathing in the heady weed residue over and over.

—

Growing up, her mom always called herself a “collector,” but Winnie found out there was another, dirtier name. She had seen a TV special about them one time after school, the kind of people who let pizza boxes stack up into columns and made their homes into mazes of unopened mail. They typically lived in cluttered spaces overrun by bugs or housed long-dead cats in the basement. Some of them couldn’t even find the front door. “Hoarders” was what the show called them.

She felt lucky that her mom wasn’t the kind that collected trash. Instead, it was always the finer things. Things her mom found to be art. Every free inch of space was covered with old boutique magazines and limited-edition photo books, antique ashtrays, and carved statues with horrid, strange faces. Winnie’s father had been a mixed-media artist—part painter, sculptor, and photographer—and she often thought that her mom was trying to recall his presence back into their space through her gathering. If they found the right combination of items, the perfect rug or best set of enamel cutlery, they would eventually have a monument he’d be willing to sign his initials onto.

Sometimes she could forget about the mess for days at a time. Then she’d look around and the sheer amount of things threatened to crush her where she stood. The house exuded dust

at all hours; mothballs settled on her face at night. When she still lived with her mom, she'd try to find the most useless item in the house and present it at dinner, asking her to show-and-tell:

"What about this thing? Can we throw it out?" She'd hold up a bundle of cords or a newspaper clipping or a singular scuffed loafer. The answer was always the same.

"No, of course not."

The cords belonged to her dad, an essential part of his first solo Noise Experiment at the MoMa. The paper had a quote on "mid-life optimism" that she needed to live her life. The shoe was her favorite, even without its twin. It was the shoe she wore on her third date with Winnie's father. They couldn't sell anything either, because her mom believed their objects would be worth much more one day.

"Patience is what we need. There's always a new fad every year or so, and one of these days we'll ride it out. We'll have enough history to sell."

Her mom was kidding herself. It wasn't about waiting for values to rise and getting rich quick. She loved the possessions. She cherished them. There was a mental logic to her collecting, both obvious and sad. The first time Winnie had broken something by accident, her mom had cried.

"I got that after my first ultrasound with you," she knelt on the floor and began to pick up the largest pieces of a shattered porcelain shepherdess. "Your dad found it."

"We'll find another one," Winnie answered. The guilt hurt in her body, like the figurine had fallen to the bottom of her stomach instead. She rested her head on her mom's tense shoulder, waiting for forgiveness, hoping it would give way to tenderness. They were crying for something that wouldn't end. It couldn't for long. They'd simply throw a memory in a dustpan and replace it and grieve it all over again.

Hen flicked on his turn signal, pulling up to the stoplight on Sunset and Bellagio. Through the windshield, the two frosted arches on either side of the Bel Air entrance loomed large, their white plaster reminiscent of mission dioramas from elementary school, built up from sugarcubes and fifth-grade spit. Winnie pressed her nose to the window as the minivan passed through the gates and began its climb up the hill.

Bel Air was a strange place. A private ranch of California's old Wild West, bloated with the oil money of a millionaire and tennis champion, and turned over to the hands of movie stars. Sarbonne. Stradella. Airole. Cecina. Street names of mangled Italian, pieced together to sound fancier. Expansive lawns and tall hedges to box in mansions, as if the houses might keep growing while the owners were away. No sidewalks, so it's quiet when cars drive through. Like a rich ghost town.

There's a lot of trees in Bel Air, she thought. Centuries-old coastal oaks dying where they stood from the drought. Thick tree trunks with peeling bark and fallen leaves for workers to sweep away in the early morning. Easy to believe the trees never had the leaves in the first place. Her head spun from the windy road. A buzzing, fuzzing quality stretched over her brain; she rubbed at her tired eyes.

As they passed over another hill, there was an open plot of land covered in dry brush. A few remnants of old trees, wooden shafts charred away. They must have had a fire recently—more and more common the past decade, especially with all the undeveloped space.

"Did you know this place almost burnt down?" Hen said without turning to her.

"Recently?" She could make out a collection of stones where the walkway must have been. Only ruins now.

“No, not since the 1960s. More than 400 homes were destroyed. I read that somewhere; I think a bunch of old Hollywood stars had to evacuate.” He messed with the volume on the stereo, his thin fingers loosely holding the wheel. “Can you imagine them running down to Westwood in their dressing gowns in front of a bunch of college students? Must have been a sight to see.”

It wasn't so hard to believe. There were fires all the time in Los Angeles, though Hen told her it wasn't like that when he was a little kid. All the city needed now was one windy day. Then a powerline would fall in El Monte or Hollywood or Baldwin Hills and there were sparks flailing, baby fireworks learning to eat and walk.

Children. The thought swam up again, unasked for. She had never wanted to be a mother before. The fear of pregnancy crossed her mind often and bubbled up into nightmares of waking up on a delivery table. Like a primordial terror. Sometimes she even avoided pregnant women on the street, as if she'd erupt into baby fever by proximity.

And Hen as the father? She thought of them picking out tiny clothes and shoes together or walking through a park, toting a toddler to the playground. She stuffed them into every Hallmark movie scene imaginable and shuddered.

She had liked him once, when they first got to know each other. They'd encountered each other for the first time in the back of a furniture store in WeHo. She was trying to pawn off one of her mom's cabinets when Hen walked up and told the seller that he'd be an idiot to turn it down. It was a rare Neoclassical cabinet, the whole nine yards. Clawed feet and such delicate carving on the front—what a wonder it hadn't worn off, he pontificated. The seller bought his bullshit and her cabinet, and Hen had taken her to his apartment, where she had begun collecting dust ever since.

It wasn't all bad. He was sweet when he wanted to be. He liked teaching her and taking care of her. He was a good lay when he had the energy for sex. Even as his care turned into a new condescension, she hadn't wanted him to leave. But a baby was different. It conjured up middle school science class with its slides on Punnett squares, Mendel's peas, disorders, the things you can't control in your body or others'. Her mother, her, Hen, and an unknowing baby. Stupid thing, DNA. What a fucking inheritance.

Hen turned down the music and waved a hand in front of her face. "Are you greening out on me, kid? We haven't even parked yet."

The estate sale was held in a modern Japanese-style home at the end of a cul-de-sac. Burnt-cedar walls, two stories tall. White lattice shutters over the windows and a flat, tiled roof. The garage was in the front of the house, its doors open, with a few people already milling about.

"Nice place."

"This was a good find," Hen agreed, measuring the dimensions of the minivan one last time before slamming the trunk. "We can reevaluate the kind of stuff we're scouting after the first look-through. Maybe they were an art collector or something."

"Sounds fine to me. Take it easy in there though." Winnie caught up with him at the base of the lawn. "Hey."

"What?"

"Do I need any eye drops?" She whispered to him and widened her eyes so he could see the whites.

"No."

"Do I?"

Hen's eyes were wet and reddish, but they were always like that even without smoking.

"They're fine. You can always blame allergies."

The pair walked inside the place, their feet immediately greeted with off-white carpet.

"That's a choice," Hen chuckled. Winnie elbowed him in the ribs.

The mansion was surprisingly drafty, all of the windows and doors flung open till the place filled up with ocean breeze. Immediately, Winnie could tell this wasn't going to be a great trip. Despite the polished front, the living room was dusty and full of cheap, plastic-covered furniture. The couch and chairs were patterned with peonies in pink, coral, and magenta. In the middle of the room, there was a heavy coffee table covered with scented candles and books on investing. A single metal walker sat in the corner where a young woman (A dutiful granddaughter? A family friend? An estate manager?) stood greeting visitors.

Hen let out an audible sigh and turned towards the kitchen. "Let's walk around."

They played a game sometimes—no one had actually named it, but Winnie privately called it "Guess Who." When the sales were boring, they would entertain themselves by trying to figure out who lived in the house. First collecting facts. Then making stories, making pretend. In Fairfax, there was the little cottage full of tiny decorative spoons, risque novels, and the smell of cat litter—clearly a cat lady with a cocaine problem full of repressed desires. The bungalow in Eagle Rock where they found a guest book placed on the kitchen counter and a closet full of glow-in-the-dark bikinis. Must be a former raver turned AirBnB owner. The miniatures collector in Monrovia with a replica of their home half-finished. The bodybuilder with a steroid habit in La Canada. The cookbook writer's BDSM closet that locked from the outside. They knew more about the city's inhabitants than most, and there was nothing so wrong with that, Winnie

believed. If other people looked around, they would find the same things. Come to the same conclusions. Nothing wrong with having a bit of fun in their profession.

Hen peeked his head out from the upstairs bedroom, speaking quietly. “I think she was married at some point, but the husband’s probably been dead for a bit. I don’t see any of his clothes in the closet.”

“What makes you think she married someone?”

“This place feels too big for one. I think I saw a family photo in the hallway—is that cheating?”

“We never wrote down any rules.” Winnie looked towards the son’s bedroom across the hall. It was mostly bare besides a remaining plaid comforter, a bookshelf, and a box filled with action figures in the corner. “Where do you think the kids went?”

“Oh, it’s a tale as old as time—the kids grow up and go off to school, get married to some East Coast classmate, and never come back. They’re too far away to visit...starting families and moving around.”

“But they could call-” Winnie argued.

“Yes, they *could* call, but suddenly you’re home alone in this big house you wanted, and your kids are chasing after the same thing, and you don’t want to be a burden. You remember what it was like to be young. It looks like she hired help anyway.”

“Maybe that’s her kid downstairs,” she said.

“I think so. Sometimes the best occasion to come back is a funeral. It’s just that no one admits it to themselves.”

“At least she had a nice view,” Winnie added. The windows opened up to a terrace above the backyard, a few pieces of furniture dotting the green below. DTLA twinkled in the distance, half-obscured by the clouds.

“Do you see that rocking chair down there?” Hen asked.

“Yeah, the one by the lawn chairs.”

“It looks fancy.”

“Do you think so?”

“The light wood is a giveaway. Seems expensive, Nordic maybe. We could polish the sides, maybe get 1,000 for it in the Arts District,” he replied.

“How much do you think they’re selling it for?”

Hen scrunched his eyebrows together. “I’ll go down and see. Finish the tour and grab a few smaller items while I’m making the deal, okay?”

“Fine.”

—

Winnie perused the empty kitchen, seeing if there was anything small and pricey enough to ferret away into her bag. Most times no one missed anything at the sales, since the family had already decided they weren’t of sentimental value. Outside the door, Hen approached the young woman. Older than Winnie had initially thought, she was a thin lady in her mid-twenties. Maybe a year or so older than her.

“\$350?”

This was the part where Hen got mean.

"You're serious?"

Winnie watched through the curtains as the thin lady nodded slowly as if she wasn't entirely sure of what she had said.

"I mean sure, it's nice. It's a fine piece. Just tell me one thing: are you thinking of holding onto it?" The lady shook her head.

"I'm just saying that if you're thinking of selling this, from my experience, with a thing like this...it'll be hard to sell this for even \$250. Maybe it was worth a lot more when it was first purchased, but now it's got these scratches along the side. I'm not sure if that'll be an easy fix. I don't know, just one man's opinion. I've been to a few markets around here and they've been getting kind of choosy with it. But it's your call of course; you've got another day of the sale. That's eight hours, right? If you're actually looking to sell..." He trailed off and the woman began to nod her head, deep in thought.

Winnie tried to tune him out and focused on picking through the rows of ceramic dinnerware in front of her. Not too bad. Maybe the former owner of the home had loved to entertain when she was younger, taking pleasure in preparing dinner courses all day long and picking out the right dish set to serve dessert. Winnie imagined guests coming through the front door, paying compliments and filling the high-ceilinged house with conversation. Maybe the past owner left the door unlocked these nights, so visitors could come in and out and promise they were coming back soon.

She placed a few choice plates into her knapsack, gently nudging them down and fastening the bag's buckle shut. As she reached for a crystal champagne flute at the edge of the table, she caught a glimpse of white out of the corner of her eye. Someone was watching her. She spun around, the glass resting in her left hand behind her back.

It wasn't a person, but a tea-length dress hanging on the sliding glass door. White layers of lace spilled out in a soft petticoat. Gauzy shoulders. Satiny hips. A perfect wedding dress protected in a plastic sheet.

She stood in front of the dress and reached out to touch it. She could almost see the outline of the person inside, the way a dress holds the form of a body, clings to skin, and knows its owner. The air shimmered, a trick of the midday light. Winnie felt her skin go goosebumpy in that windy kitchen.

A familiar figure hovered there in the dress, face turned away from her. The body had the quality of an older photograph with its blurry edges and grainy, unfocused features. Even without seeing her face, she could tell it was her mom. The same gaunt frame, the same sharp shoulders. As she drew closer, she saw how her mom's skin was covered with dust. Bits of old newspaper and the cut-off edges of photographs stuck to her hands. Shards of shattered glass and porcelain clung onto her, some caught in the dress. Winnie reached out towards her to brush off the debris, to take her home from another sale as she had always done before. She felt the warmth of a hand. Delicate, invisible fingers plucked the flute from her grip.

Something shattered. High and sharp. Glinting splinters scurrying across the floor. Her mom was gone.

"What the hell are you doing?"

Winnie looked up to see the thin woman glaring at her through the open window.

"Are you trying to steal from this family?"

Not the deceased's daughter. She was an estate manager, which meant she was taking a commission of whatever they sold and reselling everything they didn't at auction houses. Which also meant she was pissed.

“Um-”

“I think there’s been a misunderstanding,” Hen interjected. The woman fussed with the window for a moment, attempting to take off the screen, Then she raced back to the sliding door, entered the kitchen, and placed herself firmly in Winnie’s path.

“Who *are* you people? You and her came together, I remember that. You’re a creepy-looking pair-”

“Wait a minute,” Hen said. “We were just looking-”

“What kind of scam are you running? Is this some kind of-kind of-illegal...plot? Are you working with others? ”

“No ma’am, this is a two-person operation.”

“Operation?” The woman nearly yelled.

“A visit,” Winnie clarified.

“You know what?” The woman began to jab the air with her finger. “You should leave. Yes, I think you should leave right now.”

“I wasn’t going to-”

“You should leave right now, or I’m going to have to call the police.”

“Wow, okay we’re going, we’re going. We. Are. Going.” Hen backed up across the living room with his hands above his head. Winnie joined him, nodding vigorously.

Hen mouthed “what the hell” at her and pinched the bridge of his nose.

The estate manager hadn’t stopped yelling. “You have no right to steal from this grieving household. Leslie’s remains were only moved from here nine days ago. And you steal from her...like...like a grave robber!”

Hen and Winnie ran down the front porch steps empty-handed and hopped into the minivan. Hen smacked the dashboard and started the car with a growl.

“What the fuck was that? I had almost closed the sale and you’re just staring off into space with half a china cabinet sticking out of your bag!”

“I thought I hid them fine,” she mumbled.

“You can’t be serious. You didn’t even close the damn sack.”

Winnie was silent, sulking.

“Do you want me to go alone to these things? Is that it? You can’t pull shit like that even if you don’t agree with my methods, okay? Then neither of us can make a living.”

The car shot down the Italian roads, bumpy and scarred with past fires. Bel Air was aging too. The hills were tired, crumbling back towards the earth. Soon there’d be nothing left, no houses, no sales. There was no way to take it all with them.

As they reached the gates, Winnie rested her head on the dashboard. Her stomach broiled.

“I wonder if we’re living right.”

“Why don’t you open a philosophy book then,” Hen fired back. “You could learn a few things.”

“Don’t you ever wonder if we’re hurting these people? Maybe I could find us a paying job. Something easier,” she pleaded.

“Do you want a clear conscience or independence? You can’t have both—that’s not how things work.” His face clouded and he chewed on his words. “I’m not gonna have a layabout stay in my fucking house. If you live with me, you gotta work. And if you’re working, you gotta do what I do. There’s nothing else for us to do in this place.”

That was that. Nothing else to say. She set her bag between her legs and felt a sinking sense of regret. She didn't know who or what it was for, only it was the same feeling when she realized she'd answered something wrong on a test in high school. Now the mistake was unfolding, slow and unstoppable, out of her hands. She tried to think of better times, if only so she could drift off to sleep sitting shotgun. She thought of cruising down the Arroyo Parkway with her mom, before collecting became a chore. When a sale was just an adventure, a reason to get out of the house. She remembered how her mom smelled like warm dust and lemony wood polish, and how she rolled the windows down at the start of every car ride. And if they didn't talk, her mom liked to click her tongue and hum absentmindedly. Winnie didn't think she even realized she was making all that noise, but it was comforting to hear the sounds through the closed bedroom door. Proof that she was still there.

Then the times even before the sales and the clutter, when she was only four years old and her dad was still alive. Her mom took her out to different parks and neighborhoods while her dad was at work. It was a dim memory, but it was still there. A big ginkgo tree at the end of the road. It lost its leaves all at once in mid-December, and a great yellow carpet unfurled over the yard. They collected the leaves into pillows and lay down together. Half-asleep there, her mom explained that the ginkgo was different from other trees. All the stems were in conversation with each other. They formed scars together, protecting themselves from winter. And then the moment the cold arrived, they dropped together.

She remembered this. It seemed impossible that she could remember an explanation from before she could really think. Her mom had shown the world to her and she had liked it, had asked questions, and remembered. And after all of that teaching, they were still different people.

She was not her mom, even with the same nose and hands. She had separate wants and thoughts. When she went to sleep at four years old, she had different dreams.

They pulled into the driveway, ate dinner quietly, and went to bed in separate rooms. Hen went to the bedroom and shut the door. Winnie drew a blanket over herself in an armchair. At night, the stack of boxes across the room looked like a person. She hid her face in the pillows, a feeling of finality moving through her. It started in her head and swept to her toes. The air smelled the same as it always had, the mothballs became dust bunnies became dust people. She was playing house in a graveyard.

In the early morning, she stirred awake in the armchair. She moved swiftly, as if the motions were rehearsed. First, she grabbed her knapsack from the rack beside the front door. She found her rainy-day cash, a few changes of clothes, her phone, charger, and a jacket. She grabbed a pencil, smiled, and wrote her initials in a tiny script on the corner of the front door. Outside, the streetlights were still on, but she could see light blue sweeping across the sky. She committed all of it to memory. The ginkgo, her humming, big bridges over a retired freeway, the pink dingbat, Hen, the creaking minivan, the feeling of an arm draped over her side. I'll keep them around, she thought, plenty of space in my head. Call them my heirlooms.

KENOSIS

Valerie couldn't pinpoint how she started watching the videos, only that before long she couldn't stop.

It was her first summer away from home, far from Riverside and the Salton Sea. In the years before, she had spent the three-month break inside. The heat was unbearable in the desert. Each year, the air smelled even more strongly of eggs than the last, the sulfide from the diseased lake wafting through the town like a giant's foul breath. She remembered how her father would announce the air quality each morning, opening the door a crack to tell her if there was too much toxic dust to go outside, or if she could walk to the grocery store if she wore her mask. He'd tell her not to sleep the day away, and she would duck her head under the covers so he'd know that she had heard him. She had hated summers at home, the flattening of time with nothing to fill it. Few young people lived nearby, except for the yearly spring migration of influencers from Los Angeles to the Coachella Valley. They rarely stopped in her town, but you would hear about the congestion on the road for two whole weeks, drunk drivers careening into ditches or wrapping their cars around stop signs.

One time she had seen an influencer in real life. As her father finished talking with the convenience store cashier, Valerie stepped outside to open her soda and caught a glimpse of a strangely beautiful girl at the automotive shop across the street. She had pink and orange crystals placed around her eyes, then scattered across her high cheekbones. Her top looked like an elaborate fishing net, and her hair was threaded with embroidery string and fake butterflies. Valerie couldn't stop staring. She didn't know people like that could exist outside of her screen, but there she was in front of her. Waiting for her tires to fill. Valerie's heart jumped, a mix of

admiration and longing. What must it be like to be this girl, only stopping in this town because she was on the way to somewhere better. If only Valerie was just a little bit older.

The bell on the door clanked, and a wave of AC spilled out as her dad joined her on the curb. He saw where Valerie was looking and scoffed. He thought the getup was tacky, the spray tan too obvious.

Now, she lived in that girl's world, at that locus of culture and well-dressed, tan people. Los Angeles was not as popular as it once was, she had to admit. Following a series of earthquakes and fires, its richest inhabitants moved into planned communities at the edge of the Great Lakes. Promotional materials advertised immense, fortified lodges with bulletproof windows, belowground shelters, and a scenic view. But she had done what she had planned in those adolescent daydreams and moved to LA (Culver City to be precise). She believed it was time for her real life to begin—everything else had been exposition. Because nothing had happened. Nothing important. When she looked back on her life, she couldn't pick out specific, vivid moments, nothing like what she saw playing in the movie theater thirty minutes from her old house. She simply hadn't *experienced* things.

And there was no going back now. Her childhood bedroom was gone, the family home bulldozed two years ago to make space for a B2 industrial property. It was some chemical facility, although no one had ever officially announced what they were manufacturing. After the announcement and Valerie's college decision, her dad had cut his losses and moved to Washington to take care of his parents.

It was still summer outside, late June, and the sun kept peeking through the shades with warm, creeping fingers. She sat in her shared bedroom, feet tucked beneath her on a swivel chair, and wondered how she had let the weeks pass her by. Her roommates were in Malibu, two

blonde girls from Santa Barbara who had become fast friends in the first week of their sublet. A yoga mat lay rolled up and dusty at the foot of her bed and she clicked from website to website when she somehow stumbled upon it. That first video.

An odd website popped up with the domain name “kenosis.” The video began to play instantly, and Valerie almost closed the window with a double tap of her mouse. It was probably a computer virus, seconds away from showing her an interactive porn game. But when she looked at the screen again, she saw a woman crying. She was older—that was one of the first things Valerie noticed—perhaps in her late fifties. Her bob had gone grey, frizz sticking up around the sides, and she had a heavy, round face. The skin seemed to hang around her mouth. Tears collected in cracks and dripped onto her shirt, her neck an estuary of snot and spit. Comments bubbled up from below—praising her, insulting her, pasting links to other sites. The woman barely acknowledged the camera and seemed lost in her distress. Did she know where she was? Valerie couldn’t make out the reason for this video; she wondered if the woman was under the influence and made to perform. Or if it was even acting at all. The only words she could make out was the repeated sob, partially swallowed words from between her sighs. “He’s gone. He’s gone. He-”

Valerie turned up the brightness on her laptop and scooted closer to the table. It was endlessly strange, hard to look away from. She couldn’t believe how many viewers were watching—nearly a thousand for just a livestream. Did people actually seek out these videos? Even though she watched her own fair share of online content—GRWM routines, athletic workouts, meal preps, even vlogs of people doing laundry—this was new.

The older woman looked back at the camera, almost peering right into her and smoothing her hair. Then the woman reached for the phone and the live stream went black. Valerie leaned

back in her chair in the way she wasn't supposed to, till she was close to tipping right off. She bookmarked the page. Kenosis. It felt like she had been honored with a secret.

Valerie continued to explore the forum when her roommates were away. When they didn't leave the house, she would wait until the apartment was quiet to take her phone to the bathroom. Then she would sit on the floor and hold the phone's tinny speakers to her ear. There were a lot more videos than the first—it seemed to be an entire online subculture. Some videos only had a hundred views, while others had thousands. People were out there watching these videos, anonymously, but still far more than she'd thought. Most of the content was live and the titles of the streams varied: “Public Meltdown,” “Divorce,” “Breakup/Long term,” “Parental Death,” “Pet Death.” She assumed the generic names helped with a search algorithm, clickbaiting old people with a shakier grasp on technology. Some streams didn't have titles at all. There were old women and men crying, young and attractive girls, scantily clad boys, regular people who looked like her friends' parents or grocery shoppers or strangers she had passed by on the street earlier that day. She thought it was fetish content at first, a new way to get off. And sure, some of it was. But that couldn't be all of it. That couldn't be the only reason people posted. Some people, Valerie suspected, did it to vent. The privacy of this space, far away from family members and children. There was a freedom in being seen, as if that was the same thing as being comforted. There were witnesses, even without faces to attach them to.

Still, after a week, the website lost its charm. It was just a new kind of snuff or shock film, nothing the internet hadn't seen before. Instead, she found herself desperately bored again. She had to find something to do, before she wasted yet another summer indoors.

So some Saturday when the breeze took on a miraculous quality, leaving droplets of sea water on people's sunburned skin, she followed the address scrawled at the bottom of a flier (which was, itself, stapled to a telephone pole outside a fried chicken restaurant). The navigation app routed her to a house in Silverlake. The green bungalow was at the top of a hill, fringed by a rosemary bush in full bloom. She was struck by the huge windows in the front of the house. You could stare inside and see anything, as if the inhabitants wanted to be watched as they made dinner each night, as they sat curled up on the couch and watched television, as they doted on their successful children. It was an earnest house, she thought. A house that looked back at you with huge, open eyes.

She followed the sign in the driveway, opened the side gate, and found herself in front of a long flight of stairs leading down to the backyard. Below, there was a small stage set up with an audience sitting cross legged on picnic blankets. She was very late. A girl around her age played the guitar, her voice scraping against the air. Her limbs looked big for her body as she curled around her instrument, Valerie thought. She resembled a swan on land, graceful yet uncomfortable. It was too crowded to join the audience below, so she leaned on the side of the house and watched from above. A laugh rang out near her ear.

"It's funny, you and her kinda have the same bob." A skinny boy with a buzz cut and an expensive-looking cardigan smiled and gestured at the singer. For a second, Valerie evaluated her uneven bangs and chop below the ears.

"You're not wrong," she admitted.

"Do you know how long the show is?" His voice was a stage whisper, still too loud for the venue. An audience member looked over their shoulder.

Valerie lowered her voice and peeked over her shoulder quickly, trying to signal to anyone else there that she didn't arrive with this guy. "Dunno, I just got here a few minutes ago."

"She's cool. I went to an art show last month and she performed there too, although I liked the noise band a bit better. I guess she's a regular. Maybe I'll get a t-shirt this time." He took a step forward till he was standing next to her, pretending to get a better look at the merch table on the patio. She gave a small nod and feigned at paying close attention to the show. "Interesting," she said. She wanted to shut him up, but he simply looked around and pressed a hand under his chin, assuming a thinking pose.

"*Very* interesting," he echoed.

After the show ended, he walked down the steps and talked to the singer; then the artist couple in matching coveralls; then what appeared to be the owner of the house, a greying man in a ratty white shirt and linen pants. He took his time as Valerie stood there, afraid to start up small talk with anyone and reveal herself to be an imposter. A fake creative, and worst of all, a transplant. It was like he was baiting her, showing off.

When the sun had gone down and she had put on her jacket to trek back down the hill, he finally materialized in her path, hands scrunched in his slouchy jeans. Despite herself, she couldn't help feeling pleasantly surprised he'd remembered her.

"I didn't get the chance to introduce myself earlier. I'm Zachary on my birth certificate—colloquially Zach."

"I'm Valerie."

"Where are you from?" He asked.

"Riverside."

He nodded absentmindedly, then looked her up and down, waiting for her to ask him back.

“And you?”

“Oh I’m just coming back from college, only here for the summer.” He played with the sunglasses folded over the edge of his wife beater. “My parents live in Venice.”

She asked what he studied and he explained he was a graphic design major at some school in New York. He helped create those 3D logos that companies added to the frontpage of their websites. She hadn’t even known there was a job for that in the first place.

“I’m not really trying to head in a commercial direction, but if you wanna see any of it, all my *real* work is up on my site. I can show it to you later.” Later. The word burrowed in her ear. “What kind of stuff do you do?”

“I write a little bit. But I don’t really do that much. I mean I’m starting school in the fall where they’ll probably teach me to do things better. So I don’t know if I’d call myself a ‘*writer*’ writer.”

“School’s bullshit. Besides the connections, of course. They can’t teach you what you already have and, plus, half the teachers are teaching outdated lesson plans.” He walked in front of her and held the gate open with the toe of his leather sneaker. “But a writer...that’s old-fashioned. Mysterious. You gonna make me a character in one of your stories?” His blue eyes pinned her down where she stood, searching her for something. His features didn’t quite fit together at first glance, only you got used to it after a moment or so, noticed the slyness in his smile, the ease, the teasing presence about him. Poking fun and playing it cool, easy to figure out through his too strong cologne. She was attracted to him, even though she hadn’t planned on it.

She could tell he liked her, which was a new, happy realization. At home, she hadn't found much attention.

"Are you going to give me a reason to write about you?"

He laughed, "I'm going to a party after this in Laurel Canyon. You should come, Ms. Valerie PhD."

Zach was sometimes surprising, sometimes confusing. He was rich—that became clear rather quickly. His parents lived in a two-story house overlooking the canals, vaguely East Coast with its shingled front. It had several fireplaces, a grill, and an infinity pool that made the ocean feel redundant. She hadn't learned what his parents did for a living, mostly because Zach hated his family and didn't like talking about them much. He hated that he was tied to them, that he felt like he owed them something (which, of course, he did). He liked to make odd jokes, vaguely racist jabs that seemed plucked from another generation's dinner-table talk. It seemed a lost cause to correct him; he was like an overgrown child trying on adult clothes and manners.

But he made her feel loved. At night, he kissed up her thighs and called her nicknames; Val, Vee, Valentine. He left hickeys below her neckline when she asked him to and let her stay at his place for weeks at a time. She remembered when he left her favorite flower, baby's breath, in a vase on his night stand for when she'd stay over. He hadn't thrown them out, even when the white buds dried up and shed themselves on his rug. When he introduced her to his friends, they said they'd heard great things—Zach just couldn't stop talking about her. She liked the idea of her name spoken in other rooms, a girl they'd want to get to know, constructed out of his adoration. He told her that they would be a good couple if they gave it a chance, even though she

wasn't looking for anything serious. In all honesty, she hadn't known she was looking for anything at all.

Only a few weeks after they had met, they were spending every day together. She was surprised how much you could do in twenty-four hours. You could paddle across a pond in a swan boat, go to a bar with a Redwood growing up through the middle of it, and party in a stranger's greenhouse for the afters. Zach wanted to show her everything. With the itinerary packed so tight, she couldn't think too hard about the future. The usual restlessness she felt was sealed away, replaced with a giddiness at her potential. She was becoming someone new as she sat by his pool and practiced making cocktails at his parent's tiki bar. Under Zach's gaze, she was fun, interesting, and singular. Perhaps the more people he introduced her to, the more others would feel the same.

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For her first time, he had made a big deal of it, picking a day when his parents were far out of town (a trip to a relative's place in Nantucket) and lighting several scented candles by the bed. He laughed and said it was funny to fuck in his childhood bed again, and Valerie wasn't sure if she was supposed to laugh, too. Afterwards, he had ordered a special meal to their doorstep. Two neat boxes with sushi packed inside, rolls filled with albacore and pink tuna, piles of succulent roe glinting like gems. He put on a movie, while she reclined her head on his lap and looked at his soft jaw, the light stubble. She wondered to herself if she had been bought—if there was a difference between being bought and treated nicely. Or if the only thing dividing the two was perspective, all the things she didn't know that time would pencil in. Whether he liked her or not, whether this was temporary or forever. If she was someone who could spot love when she saw it, if she was the type of girl who didn't care about it at all.

Late that night, she woke up, the sheets beneath her drenched with sweat. Her skin itched all over, and her stomach churned. She didn't know why she was scared, but she felt the dread as if it were a person behind her. She tried to take deep breaths. None of them would reach past her chest. If she didn't do something, Zach would hear her and wake up and then?

She snuck into the hallway and closed the door behind her, without ever turning on a light. Turning down the brightness on her phone, she pulled up the bookmarked "kenosis" page and began looking for something good. No divorce vids, no deaths. She clicked on a video with no punchy tagline, just the date as a header. It was a user around her age who called herself "Alison." Maybe eighteen or nineteen but nothing older than twenty-one. She had shiny dark hair to her shoulders, clipped with a bunny-shaped barrette on the left side. She was pretty with her black eyes and berry-red lips, with an almost masculine face. Interestingly, she didn't explain why she was crying. Like there was no explanation needed. The tears were simply there when she summoned them, streaming down her rounded white cheeks in an abundance. And it worked. Valerie's breath slowed down. The tears never fell; her nose never ran. She couldn't say how, but Alison soothed her. It was as if she made Alison feel for her.

She bookmarked Alison's user page on her phone. For safekeeping. And though she tried not to, she recalled Alison often. When Zach stared through her as she spoke, and it seemed like he was patiently waiting until she was finished. When he suggested she move in with him to his New York loft and she got that scared animal feeling, like she had embarked on unknown territory without realizing it and was now lost. When he sped down windy roads with one hand, his eyes in a far off place, and she remembered that they were strangers to each other only a month ago. And as that claustrophobic feeling started up in her throat, the mental image of their

car crashing through the plastic road dividers flashing up, she could stop her panic by thinking of Alison.

Alison crying in the room of her mind, behind a layer of protective glass.

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“This city is fucked, you know? We should move to Chicago or something before this shithole sinks into the sea or burns down. I don’t get why people are still moving. They don’t even make movies here anymore, it’s just strip malls and the homeless.”

Zach tried both the up and down elevator buttons, before giving up and heading towards the fire escape. They were headed to a pregame at someone’s apartment, a Koreatown highrise which seemed neither renovated or occupied. The lobby was cloaked in translucent plastic along the walls, blue construction tape sealing in each seam. Even though it was new, the place struck Valerie as haunted, stranded between alive and abandoned.

“Chicago? If you’re trying to freeze your ass off, maybe. You’re just saying this cause your parents are finally selling their place. Next thing we know, you’ll be going on about the underrated art scene in Ohio,” Anya laughed. Anya was Zach’s “friend” from high school, a former romance who had come out as a lesbian after their relationship ended. She had silvery dyed hair down to her waist and lived in the Bay most of the year, besides her past month-long stay in Santa Monica. Valerie had tried to make friends with her, but she had a strange, prying quality to her. Each time they talked, Valerie got the sense that Anya was trying to figure her out, rooting around in her life for something interesting to seize upon. When they got high together, she would ask rapid-fire questions, expectant, ready to collage a secret knowledge of her together. When she confided one time that she wasn’t sure if Zach was losing interest or if

she needed to put in more effort, Anya had started coughing mid-inhale. “That’s just Zach,” she laughed. “Did you think he was trying to get married?”

Zach stopped in front of a white door labeled #887 and knocked three times. “No, I’m serious,” he continued. “This place isn’t gonna be around much longer—just look at this apartment. They built a bunch of highrises and no one moved in. No one wanted them, and at the end of the day, it’s cause people can tell there’s no future here. I feel sorry for anyone who hasn’t figured it out yet.”

Margot answered the door in a vintage teddy, brushing out her pincurls with a metal hairbrush. She was a beautiful girl, that kind of Old Hollywood type beauty with a narrow nose and dark blue eyes and a cupid’s bow so perfect it looked painted on.

“You guys are early! Almost done getting ready, but I need a few more minutes.” She turned around and walked back into the living room, beelining towards her kitchenette. “Do you guys want something to drink?”

“Do you have any wine?” Zach asked.

“Only hard stuff—I was thinking about wine, but then I didn’t know what to get. I like white wine, but I’m not always into it when it’s too fruity. I don’t know about you, but I can tell there’s a ton of sugar in it, and it makes my skin break out if I have it too often. Do you think that’s true? I feel like I read that somewhere, but I don’t know if someone just said it online one time.” In the other room, she ducked into the closet and came out with a silver bikini top in her hands. “Cybergoth is a fun theme, but I barely have anything for it.”

“Looks fine to me,” Zach said.

“I love the color,” Valerie admitted. Even under the fluorescent kitchen LEDs, each rhinestone twinkled. Margot stared at her, seeing her for the first time, and slung the bikini over

her shoulder. She flitted to her side and took Valerie's hand in hers. "Oh my god, I know we've met, but remind me of your name one more time."

"I'm Valerie, Zach's girlfriend."

"Oh my god!" She hit her forehead with a soft thwack. "Zach, how did you not mention this?"

A pause filled the room. Margot blushed and smoothed her teddy down, before pouring a double shot. She offered it to Zach, who offered it to Valerie. What was the right thing to do? Valerie chose the path of least resistance and accepted the shot. She could swear Zach had been talking to Margot on the phone only last week, but maybe he'd only mentioned work.

"So where were you before this?" Zach interjected.

Margot explained that she had taken a leave of absence from school—she went to the same art school as Zach, even lived on the same floor of his dorm. After leaving, she had flown to her father's place in Lyon and finished writing a poetry collection before traveling around Europe for the past two months.

"So it was definitely a much-needed break. All the freshmen are always so excited to be in a big city for the first time, but I'd been a ton of times visiting my mom's side of the family already. And I knew, even when I applied, that New York can be a really chaotic city if you grew up in the countryside. School is just such a creativity suck, don't you think?"

Valerie nodded along with Zach, even though Margot still hadn't asked her anything directly. She wanted to talk, but wasn't sure what people like Margot would enjoy talking about. Even worse, what if she said something and no one heard, so she had to repeat herself? Did Margot laugh at the same things that Zach laughed about?

Zach downed a shot and smiled broadly. “That’s what I’ve been saying this whole time!” He looked around at us, nodding still. “Isn’t that what I’ve been saying?”

It was interesting how they talked about cities as places to escape from. She had felt they were places she had just unlocked. Only now she found out she had come too late for Los Angeles, too late for New York. It was like arriving at a party she had finally got the address for, only to find empty solo cups in the street.

“Of course, I missed school sometimes, but it was always the people. You, Cameron, Lucia, Eva—I mean she’s dropped out too now, but you know what I mean. It’s no fun without you guys.”

“And Miles?”

She made a face, her makeup crumpling in for a moment. “I *knew* you’d bring him up. You were right, okay, he was a dick. It was this whole thing last winter when he left me alone—didn’t even say anything, no text—at this Berlin club, and I knew we were done.” She grabbed a shot glass off the table and began to pour a round of tequila. “Anyways, I bounced back fine. I met this university teacher friend of my dad’s. He was sweet. And actually, just a few days ago, I broke off things with a stockbroker guy on the Upper East Side. Could’ve gone on longer, but the time difference was getting on my nerves—you ever had that issue? I don’t know, you can feel like a real idiot sexting at 8PM.” She took the shot gracefully, tilting her head back ever so slightly. “I love this place. I could never live here, but it’s like, you can never leave it for good.”

“To LA,” Zach picked up his glass, gesturing for the rest of the group to follow. They toasted and let the drinks warm the back of their throats. “It’s got its charms.”

They wound down a narrow alley in Mission Junction, holding each other's wrists in the dark. Drunk and daisy-chained. Anya led the way with her phone flashlight and the GPS, following the coordinates to the rave location. The rest of them were giggling, stumbling, wondering when the tabs would hit.

"You have to tell me when it happens, okay? You have to be like 'Margot. Margot. My third eye just opened.'"

"What does it feel like?" Valerie asked.

"Like being drunker and you'll want to touch everything," Anya replied.

"Yeah, textures are huge," Zach slurred.

Between the buildings, there was a service tunnel propped open, a bundle of glow sticks duct-taped to the handles. The dull thrum of bass pounded below their feet.

Anya double checked her phone. "That should be it."

The rave was on the LA River, at the foot of a bridge. Teenagers and early twenty-somethings traipsed by in gas masks and cargo pants, repurposed army jackets, and head-to-toe mesh. A gas tank whined, propped on the margins of the venue, and a few girls lounged nearby with balloons pinched between their fingers and knees. An old man in roller skates bear-hugged the 6-foot sound system.

"Fuck, that guy's gotta be on something," Anya laughed.

"There goes his hearing," said Margot.

One song bled into another as they stared up at the sky, a light show unfolding in the smog. The crowd was warm, broiling. Bodies shifted past each other, and Valerie imagined bubbles of air popping and forming again between them, breathing cushions of space. She inhaled someone's exhale. Anya passed her a balloon and she sipped the nitrous in, letting her

head spin like that dream she used to have as a kid where she was falling, falling, only to find herself on the floor of her bedroom when she woke up. Anya danced nonstop in front of her and Valerie watched with amazement as a detailed ladybug tattoo crawled across her back. Fluorescent lights and a sputtering fog machine. That's all they needed to ascend, she thought. When you were in a place like this, you lost track of past and future, even the city you belonged to.

Valerie wrapped her arms around her and felt her skin, then the smooth, soft hair of her forearms standing on end. Then she tried to swallow and found her mouth dry, cracked. Her body was sweatier than she thought, the back of her top soaked through. She swallowed hard this time—a sore throat was coming on. A new superstition took hold of her: if she lost her hold on sensation for even a moment, the fun would end. She leaned her head on Zach's shoulder, suddenly exhausted. The end of the night would come soon; in a blink of an eye they'd be slumped over in the backseat of a car. They'd fall asleep in a heap on the bed, too tired to make it below the covers. She wondered what they would talk about over breakfast the next morning.

She looked to her right to catch Zach's eye. Only she wasn't leaning on Zach at all. It was a boy with thin arms and hands, like her shadow grown taller. His head drooped down to his chest, half-dreaming, half-dancing. She jerked back and felt her hips, her ribs, the tops of her shoulders, checking if she was still awake.

She scanned the bobbing, growing crowd. Zach was at the back, cradled in a pocket of darkness by where they'd entered. His arms were wrapped around Margot's middle, tender and intimate. They rocked back and forth as if at sea.

Over the banks of the LA River and the empty railroad tracks, the moon waned. The concrete stream had begun to crack. Now, brown reeds sprang up from the moist dirt, and you could hear the sound of running water. Smell the pond scum, touch the fuzz of young algae. Water returning.

Valerie clomped down the gravel in the puffy boots she had borrowed from Anya that week. She was hungry and had to pee. Her body felt vacant, like someone had lived there before and forgot to lock up.

She tried to push herself into outrage, but she couldn't. The emotions were too obvious—jealousy and self righteousness flickered in her stomach, but faded away with nothing to fuel them. Perhaps she deserved this. If she had ever said what she wanted, if she had let herself be more than a phantom, more than an outline of a girl, she would have an excuse to complain. But she hadn't. What was the good of crying now? She emptied herself out for his ideas and hoped she would become someone along the way. Simply by being noticed for long enough. To be loved, you had to be someone.

If things had been different she might have turned to a friend and they would be driving home together about now. She'd sob on her friend's shoulder till they stopped in the driveway, then feel the wet fabric below her cheek and promise to wash her shirt the next laundry day. It would all seem so funny then, to talk about Zach's empty platitudes and shitty portfolio and how everyone he hung out with was someone he had tried and failed to fuck. It would become a story then. A night they could recount and weave into the past. Instead, the events of the past summer sunk to the bottom of her and would not leave.

She kept seeing Margot, Margot grabbing coffee with Zach the next morning. Her straight teeth set in a smile, giggling, telling him they should have kept in touch over spring. It

had simply been too long. And what was that Riverside girl's name again and how long had they talked for? Margot's mind had likely already left her.

A square white building emerged from the dark: a diner. There was a smell of sizzling pork grease and ketchup mopped up on cheap paper napkins. The roasted warmth of infinite drip coffee. Valerie stopped on the pavement and stared through the wraparound windows, lit up with buttery yellow light. Tired truckers dug into eggs at the counter. A couple with a sleeping baby ate a stack of pancakes. She could have a meal here.

Suddenly, she caught sight of a group of girls in a corner booth of the restaurant. A dark-haired girl smiled and nodded along to some spirited conversation. Her red lips tried to contain a laugh. It was Alison. She wore a big zip-up hoodie and a beanie scrunched over her forehead, but yes, it was definitely her. Alison began to talk; she was one of those people who moved their hands as they spoke, almost pantomiming. Valerie strained to hear her words and watched as the other girls around her howled and slapped the table. Alison was real. She was funny. And degree by degree, Alison was closer to her and yet more of a stranger.

For a second, she wanted to run into the diner, confront Alison, tell her off. She could force the girl's tears and save the image for herself. Make her feel the same. But Valerie couldn't. Her feet didn't move. For the first time in months, she began to cry.

EVIE

Each morning I wake up to the smell of Evie. She is a warm, fleecy scent and the lingering floral of our laundry detergent. Then the sweet salt of her sweaty skin, the perfume of the day before, worn off behind her ears. Half asleep, I feel her weight shift off the bed and bury my face in the covers, settling back into my dream. I hear the cautious shut of the bedroom door, followed by the creaking of crummy wood in the hallway. The shower turns on in the room next door, distant and tropical. Half an hour later, the high-pitched hum of our hybrid vehicle sounds out, a warning call from our short, inclined driveway, and Evie is gone.

Our routine is simple. For breakfast, Evie always leaves me a container of overnight oats labeled with the day's date on the top shelf of the fridge. It's February 26 today, our six month anniversary. I entertain the idea of making her a cake. Sifting flour till it falls like snow. Using up the brown-spotted bananas tucked away on our kitchen counter. I'd put the cake in the fridge with a crumb coat to frost later and decorate it with edible flowers. She deserves a 'thank you,' I suppose. I haven't had to come into work regularly for two months now because of her, and that's no small thing. The onboarding process hadn't been nearly as difficult as the online forums said—only three months total. It's nice to have time away, like everyone told me, even if the novelty has worn off.

There's a cream Post-it above the sink written in her lovely handwriting, a red cursive script. *Succosa: 7:00 PM*. Evie's picking me up at 6:40 to head to that new Italian spot in Echo Park tonight, a necessary arrangement when owning one car in Los Angeles. She had booked Succosa two whole weeks in advance after seeing a review on a local food blogger's page. We

had disagreed about it—that night she added the reservation to the calendar. It had been one of those quiet arguments, one you give up on before you’ve gotten going:

“We’ve been looking for a new pasta spot near our place, right?” Evie had said, leaning on the pantry door. She looked good that night, borrowing a pair of my high waisted jeans. The dark wash suited her pale skin.

“It’s not exactly cheap...”

“Well, we wouldn’t go there all the time. Special occasions, baby.” Evie crinkled her nose, laughing slightly before crossing her arms. “Amy Standham says we need to create space for joy in order to experience it.”

“I was thinking we could do something at Elysian Park? Grab some stuff we like for a picnic, see the sunset, people-watch?”

“You know I don’t get off work till 6:00. Think about it: the sun will set by the time I get across town and then we’ll be eating in the dark. And it’ll be cold.” Evie squinted at me through the darkening living room and reached to turn on the light switch. Fluorescent light flooded the place and bounced off the white walls, turning her features harsh and the warm-toned wood floor cold. She stepped closer, playing with the choppy fringe of my bob. A hand paused over my cheek, warm and rough. Almost tender. I heard Evie’s sigh before it happened. “God, we need to get a new light for this place.”

Evie was right. She’s always annoyingly right. And that’s why there are reminders of Evie—sometimes even notes signed *‘from Evie’*—all over our apartment. The white bookshelf neatly lined with cookbooks and self-help books. The cushy English roll arm couch Evie had spotted while she was out at a flea market and purchased for \$300. I stand on the kitchen mat she

repurposed from hand-me-down oven mitts. Everything in the house, even me, is made in her image.

I honestly believed PlusOne was a fad at first. The advertisements were so commonplace it seemed hard to believe. The first time we heard about it was probably around 2066. I remember how Adrienne showed us the video at a happy hour after work one night, pushing her phone around the table alongside the pitcher of margaritas. On the screen, a man in his mid 30s—a hipster type with shaggy brown hair and a fitted t-shirt—sat at a work desk in a soundstage with an empty seat beside him. Then, another figure entered the frame. Same clothes, same walk, same man. The double sat down next to him and they began to both scribble furiously on a piece of graph paper in front of them. Over a time-lapse, an architecture plan formed beneath their busy hands as the company slogan faded in:

“Busy? Why not invite your PlusOne.”

A cheeky, stupid ad for a product that was about to walk into our lives.

It seems ridiculous in hindsight, but really, no one thought PlusOne would catch on. At the time, I handed Adrienne’s phone back and asked her point-blank, “Could we do that?” I might have been the most skeptical of all of us. Sure, we’d figured out how to double animals like chickens and pigs awhile back, and it had helped enormously with sustainable farming. Even Whole Foods carried the meat, supposedly less at risk of heritable disease and gene-edited to have less saturated fat. Thinking about it more, I remembered seeing a report a few years back about a successful ape double. The orangutan had a funny name like “Baby” or “Babe” and their twin was called “Babs.” Sometimes I thought that the big companies gave their experiments

dumb names just so we wouldn't get scared of them, the same way newscasters called hurricanes "Sandy," "Jerry," or "Fred."

So maybe the signs were there. But even if we could make doubles, surely there would be too many logistical problems to make them commonplace. Financially, it couldn't be as cost-effective as the company said. You'd still have to feed them and house them, then pay for the installation and onboarding bills mentioned at the tail end of the ad. And what then? Would they pay their own taxes? Have their own families?

"They're gonna get sued out of existence before they even start," Mark said. He was our IP lawyer, a friendly guy from the East Coast who worked from home except for Thursdays. He liked me, so I was one of the only people at the office who he let follow his secret food account (He was on the hunt to find the best Americano in LA. I always wanted to ask him why he didn't pick a better drink).

"Wait-wait. I'm confused," Jamie, one of the older members on our team, asked. "Is it like a thing you have to...charge?"

Adrianne squinted at her phone and typed something in. "No, no. It says here on the website that it's organic, or uh carbon-based and—"

"What does that mean?" Jamie interrupted.

"It doesn't need batteries or code. I think it runs the same way as us."

The table went quiet. We all nursed our margaritas and picked at our chips. I licked the salt from the rim of my glass, my mind wandering.

We were all thinking the same thing, even as our conversation sputtered out.

How big was this gonna be?

Adrianne was the first person to shell out and get one. She almost signed up for the pilot round before I was able to talk her out of it during a work break. She thought she could get a deal:

“Come on. All those PlusOnes are gonna have like serious software issues they’re still working out. You don’t want a double that glitches one day and tries to smother you in your sleep.”

“You’ve seen too much sci-fi,” Adrianne answered energetically from across the communal kitchen island. “This isn’t a Ridley Scott flick, alright? They’ve beta-tested the hell out of these things. I was reading their website earlier and it said they’ve been working on this for more than a decade now.”

“Why do you need one? Seriously. Is it the job?” I lowered my voice. “You can always quit if you’re that miserable.”

“It’s not this job—it’s any job. Don’t you want to have time for yourself? Make home-cooked meals, work in the backyard. Right now, there’s this huge pressure on me—I’m sure you feel it too. You have to be this big career woman and take care of the house and stay healthy and somehow go out and have fun without feeling like you’re totally screwing yourself over somehow.”

“I guess that’s true. But don’t you have Caleb? You could talk to him.”

“Oh Evelyn,” Adrianne gave me a small smile as she moved back towards her office. “You know that’s not enough.”

I picked at my microwave samosas with a strange feeling in my stomach. Change was all around us. Each new phone update, location ping, and buzzing drone was a sign of progress. Planes were new once, cars too. Every building block of the present was once a novelty—that’s

how memories lost their shine and became worn-out, commonplace. How ephemera collected in piles, swept into dusty history. This was something new, until it wouldn't be.

Still, I didn't get one. Not until my dad called me one day in March and asked me to help him with the installation process. The operation was hard on the body at first and my dad was nearly seventy, so he needed a bit of help getting around afterwards. I didn't argue with him like I had with Adrienne. He had been lonely after my mom passed away a few years back and I felt bad about how rarely I visited.

A month later, I took a flight to care for him for three weeks. I drove him to and from the hospital in Tampa, helped him change his bandages at home, and picked up his groceries. When he was sleeping, I worked remotely and talked on video calls. When he was awake, we sat on his back porch in two cushioned wicker chairs and drank iced tea in the balmy air. One night, when I felt too jittery from tea and iced coffee to nap, I asked him what made him get a double.

"Oh, well. That's a good question."

"Mostly asking because I've mainly seen a bunch of young people getting them. I didn't know you wanted one."

"I guess, if I'm being honest with myself, I might have been a bit lonely. And then I heard about it on TV and I really couldn't stop thinking about it"

I nodded. "Makes sense."

"I think a lot of people my age might start getting them," he mused.

"Have you seen Richard and Uncle Wyatt at all recently?" These were his friends from an old pickleball league they'd played in together. He no longer went.

"A few times this year."

"Are you still getting along?"

“Are you asking why I’m getting a double instead of seeing my friends?”

“Ah well. I guess, yes actually,” I answered, embarrassed.

“You know, it’s different with them than with your mother. Before you laugh, I don’t mean intimacy and things like that. It’s just nice having someone to do things with. Friends are great but you can’t be spontaneous with them...you can’t really rely on them to the same degree. They’re their own people with their own families at the end of the day.”

I understood what he meant. It was hard to put a finger on loneliness. Mostly because it didn’t feel so bad at first. Only a little bit of disappointment when you got ready for bed and realized there were a few more things that you wished to say that day, but there was no one to say them to. But eventually the months go by and there are hundreds of conversations inside you that you never had. It’s like you’re watching the world, in a way, but the world isn’t watching back.

When I entered the airport terminal a few weeks later, I opened the PlusOne website and scrolled through the success stories. The doubles had their arms wrapped around each other in one picture. In another, they were bowling. Doubles working on cars together. Doubles on a tandem bike. Everyone seemed to be having fun.

I got a text from my dad, a screenshot of a picture from the PlusOne facility. In the image, taken from behind a wall of glass, you could make out the vertebrae of a spine in a vat of yellowish liquid. Below the pic, a message: “Technology! Your generation is really neat :)”

—

Wet dirt coats the tips of my fingers. I wipe them off on terracotta, leaving dark brown prints wherever they land. I’m crouching by the French doors of the bedroom when a buzz vibrates through my knee and I see that Adrienne is calling. Transferring the call with a jab of

my non-dirty pinky finger, Adrienne's face appears in video on my computer screen back on the desk. On the video, she moves her phone away from her, propping it up in front of her.

"Helloooo," her raspy voice bounces out of the speaker and around my echoey room. "How have you been? It's been a bit since I could get a hold of you." Behind her head, two people walk by in the background, their eyes flicking towards the camera, seeing the video, and moving away.

"We've been doing a lot of home renovations, bonding time—where are you now anyways?" I slide over to the desk on my shins and give her a wave from the floor.

"Oh I hope the background noise isn't too bad. I'm at a little cafe in Los Feliz right now—we went there once together. The one with the great gem salad. So predictable, I know."

"No, it looks great," I reply. Adrienne does not actually need the reassurance. Like me, she's used to doing her own thing, even when that means having a loud call in the middle of a public courtyard. She looks well. The sunlight brings out the flush in her tan skin, and she methodically pats down her baby bangs. I realize she is waiting for me to ask a follow-up question, but I'm sure what's supposed to come next. In the idle hours spent at home, perhaps the rhythm of conversation and leading questions has left me.

"You sound a little tired. Sure this is a good time to call?"

I've been caught. "I'm not tired. What makes me sound tired? I mean I haven't done anything taxing today."

"All riiiiight. I believe you, I believe you. So, would you happen to be able to explain what you're doing on the floor then? Well-adjusted things I assume."

"I've been trying to nurse this dying plant back to health all morning."

“Can’t you just cut off the dead leaves?” She leans in, trying to get a closer look at the tall plant in the window.

“I don’t know—Evie told me that it’s better to repot it than clip anything. Especially for a...” I fumble with the name tag tied to the base of the plant, “...Fiddle leaf fig?”

“They’re always getting into new hobbies, aren’t they,” Adrienne replies, waving her salad fork around, a skewered lettuce leaf flopping with each word. “My double is suddenly an expert on interior design. Can’t put a book on the coffee table before she’s moving it to another shelf. Anyways, don’t say anything but it drives Caleb crazy.”

“You’re telling me. I can’t figure out why the hell Evie would buy such a difficult plant. I’m literally wiping down the leaves with a towel right now.”

Adrienne shrugs, her strong cheekbones pinching as she contains a laugh.

“What?”

“You’ve always liked a challenge.”

“Well not this challenging. And it was Evie’s choice not mine.”

“Same difference.”

I wasn’t even into gardening before Evie came along. It’s hard not to roll my eyes at Adrienne’s prodding.

“Oh don’t make that face at me, I’m only kidding. Have you been feeling okay? Maybe it’d be good to get out more often. We’ve got season tickets at the Little Theater if you want to tag along next week.”

“I might take you up on that.” I may as well be honest with her—we only talk every so often. “I guess things have been a little hard. I mean. Did you ever feel like...working from home would feel a bit more—I don’t know. Fulfilling?”

“It’s an adjustment for sure. I mean the recovery process took a huge toll on me, you already know. The weight gain stuff—Caleb made me start seeing my therapist more than once a week. It gets better eventually, though. I could never imagine having this much time to myself at thirty-three; feels like I finally have time to do the little things. And of course there’s the other benefit,” She smirks.

“Like what?”

“Um hello...instant threesomes!” Adrianne cackled. She and Caleb used to be poly before they got their double. Now, it wasn’t exactly clear what they were. “I’m joking but also not joking. The freedom is nice too. Free time, freedom from productivity.”

“Right, it sounds dumb out loud but I guess I’m still figuring out what to do with all that...freedom.”

“Join a studio! Get a hobby! Or try out one of those creative collectives in Silverlake—I mean you were always talking about wanting to get back into class at some point. You were an illustration major right?”

“True, true. It’s been ages...”

“There’s always the alternative, I suppose.” Adrianne grimaces. “Did you hear about Annie?”

“Annie?” The name sounds familiar, but there’s a chance it’s just one of Adrianne’s friends.

“She used to work in finance at SketchX. Black hair. Ended up leaving for that job in Torrance.”

“Yeah, yeah, I remember now. What’s up?”

“She got a separation.”

“What?”

“Crazy, right? I mean they were only together for nine months and then just...kaput.”

“Wow.” I had heard of it happening before, but never to someone I knew.

“It sounds like such a fucking drag. I mean tons of paperwork. It’s a huge legal procedure every time, cause you have to sort out every asset.”

“Did she really go through with it?”

“Yep. All the way. It must have cost a ton of money. No one knows where she ended up moving.”

“Huh. Do they have to move?”

“Most do—it’s not like it’s that common though.”

Separations were the last resort and for good reason. They kind of blew your life up. You had to separate your finances, review your insurance, and help your double file registration papers. Due to a clause in the PlusOne policy, you also had to financially support the double for some time. The logic was you had brought them into the world, so you were responsible for ensuring monetary safety for a year post-separation. And then there was the plain personal blow of not being able to hack it with yourself. Those who had separated from their doubles reported higher rates of depression, anxiety, whatever you could put on a psychiatry chart. It was hard to even conceive of going to therapy, because the problem was glaringly, so clearly, you.

“I just...can you imagine going back to normal after that? Knowing you couldn’t...” She shakes her head. “Thank God we get along.”

“Us too.” I don’t want her to think there’s something wrong with me or Evie. Nothing bad has happened, just the regular friction. I let myself smile; help ward off her worries. It wasn’t

unheard of to get separated, but Evie and I had done everything right. We couldn't fall apart like that.

A week after Evie woke up, I caught her watching me from the balcony. I was stripping the paint from the wood of our living room chairs, squatting in the driveway to reach the inside of the bottom legs. When I lifted my head from the work, I caught her blue stare. She didn't speak yet, but she was moving and talking. Words would come in a week, or at least that's what the physician said. She made a movement with her arms, stretching them towards me, beckoning. A smile teased at the corner of her lips, her eyebrows raised. It reminded me of the way my mother spoke about me as a toddler, as if I knew how to speak all along, but was merely waiting for the right time. She would pull up a picture of me, wide eyed in a high chair, and repeat to me, "You were so expressive. We always knew exactly what you were trying to say. It's like you didn't even need words."

What was Evie's first memory? It was likely the same as mine, where she found herself in an air-conditioned movie theater, lights off as animated animals moved across the screen in pinks and grays. Our first movie. The sound was loud to young ears, louder than the television at home because it was all around.

My first memory of Evie awake was this:

I was making eggs one morning when I heard noises coming from the bedroom. First, the sound of a comforter being thrown off. Then her timid steps to the kitchen. I saw her in the doorway. "Good morning, Evie," I had said to her. I walked over and let her press her head to mine. For a moment, I wished we had different faces. There were some people I knew with doubles who had dyed their hair, so that it was easier to tell them apart. That didn't change what

was inside, though. We had the same childhood memories, the same prom dance, the same first time getting high between classes in freshman year. We got that same antsy feeling on crowded elevator rides, minimized by staring at a spot on the ceiling and counting to ten. We talked in a shorthand that others couldn't understand, as if everything was an inside joke. Sometimes it was—I'd never felt so much before Evie.

Succosa looks like a tucked-away neighborhood bistro from a distance, a red brick building beside a row of bare tree saplings. Up close, you can see the mounted space heaters above the patio seating and the thirty-forty-somethings chatting over herby cocktails through the window. As I walk through the entryway, I hear snippets of conversation. Dim lights blur out the shapes of their mouths and flatten the lines of each face, relaxed with drink. Workwear boots and ballet flats dangle midair on wooden barstools—I spot Evie's taupe loafers drumming on a bottom rung. She is deep in thought, the tips of her teeth peeking out over her lip, the nervous wetting of her tongue. I try my best to read her mind, project my own worries onto her. Perhaps she had a tough day at work—I used to be scared about that, myself. The familiar anxieties would run non-stop on a teleprompter in my head: so-and-so weeks left to finish a project, spotty communication from designers, and never enough hours in a day. I can't remember how I liked to be comforted. I only remember the tempo of the workday, rigorous yet steady. She hates it, but she'll miss its absence. The way an assignment keeps her brain busy, leaves her with dreamless sleep. Till the day is booked up and the head is humming, buzzing, too loud for you to live with yourself.

Evelyn shrugs her cardigan off her shoulder and closes the menu.

"I talked to Winston earlier today."

Winston's the head of HR, the second in command to the CEO of the company. He wears his shirt with the top three buttons undone and likes to spin around in his desk chair after finishing phone calls. We used to have lunch with each other on Tuesdays when his other coworkers were working remotely. I suppose I was his last resort option, but he wasn't exactly my first choice either. He liked this one sandwich place around the block, and I remember the way tuna salad would collect in the corners of his mouth as he talked about his weekend clubbing plans. We tolerated each other.

"Yeah? What did he say?" The waiter makes rounds on the other end of the room, even though everyone's water glass is full. We've been sitting here for fifteen minutes. I want to order the chanterelle gnocchi before she does. I know what she wants, because it's what I like.

"Well, it was actually about you." She scowls and picks up another crostini, shaking off the burrata and shelling beans to see it more clearly. "They didn't proof this long enough."

"How would you know," I mumble below my breath. Winston's mouth flashes in my mind, celery bits crunching in his molars. He has no right to talk about me when I'm not there.

"Huh?"

I sigh; repeat myself. "I mean how would you know, you haven't worked with that kind of bread before."

"We took that workshop in November, remember? With that buff European guy teacher. It's the bubbles on top here."

"Like I guess...but we can't know for certain if that's what crostini is supposed to look like." She avoids my question again, feeling the spongy bottom of the bread with her fingers. It is under-proofed, but who gives a shit?

"What is your problem tonight? Are you mad at me?" She finally sets the crostini back down on her plate.

"No, I'm saying that I get what bread looks like, but we might not always be right about everything, you know. We can't just walk around pretending we know how the whole world fits together."

"You *are* mad at me," Evie raises her eyebrows, almost taunting me. She's waiting for me to ask again, I know it. Winston wouldn't bring me up for no reason; he barely brings up work, even when he's clocked in.

"Jesus Christ. No. What did Winston say?"

"Now I don't even know if I should bring it up."

"Well, is it about me or not?"

"He was thinking I should work full-time. Okay? I wanted it to be like a celebration thing, especially on our anniversary, but I don't know, the mood is all wrong now."

A gaping silence opens between us. I study Evie's fidgeting hands, then my own. They're the exact same, besides my chipped clear nail polish. "What do you mean full time?"

She speaks quickly, in spurts. "Like you don't have to go back to work every few weeks anymore. Things have been going well. All of the projects from before August have been sent to the Digitals team. Laura trusts me with the rest of the artists. They like me, okay? They want to have me stay on."

Evie grabs my hand from across the table, insistently. "You can retire, Evelyn! You can finally relax."

Retirement. The word lodges itself deep, so much more permanent than "vacation." I'm her housewife, then. An apron tied around my waist, a roast chicken in my mittened hand,

straight out of an old Christmas postcard. She wants me at home and out of mind. I feel a flush in my face: shame. I'm too young to retire. Evie can't get rid of me—she's me but less. People want the real thing, don't they? Or do they want Evie?

I think about her stupid self-help books lined up like soldiers on the living room cabinet. She wants to change, "self-optimize," is how she says it. Evie doesn't even want to be me.

My stomach clenches and lets go. I can't help but wish she would hold me.

Her eyes trace up to my roots and fix at a point there for a moment. A moment later, I feel a faint prick on my forehead and she brings down a thin silver hair between her fingers. She tilts her head at me, a dimple in the corner of her cheek. "There's some Quick Blue Bleach beneath the sink if you need some."

—

I follow Evie up the stairs and watch her ass in her jeans. It's windy outside and she has her hair in a messy bun, strands staticky and blown around like bits of lightning streaks.

She's pretending that nothing happened; I'm too tired to bring it up. We're not very confrontational.

A man walks with his dog down the street, illuminated by a streetlight. I can hear the jingle-jangle of the dog's collar and can even make out the scuff of its paws on the concrete. The owner has tangled blonde hair cropped just above his shoulders and is wearing an oversized button-up and expensive-looking jeans. He gives me a warm smile as he passes, his mustache heaving up and down. I wonder if he has a double. Perhaps he is the double, although there's no way of knowing when they're on their own.

I think of Evie out in the wild each day and how many people see her, never knowing that she was made in my image. The first months I spent with her, there were moments where

she felt like a stranger. Lots of PlusOne owners talk about the unfamiliarity of it, seeing the parts of yourself that you can't catch in the reflection of store windows and shadows. They'll say their double "walks weird" or has "bad posture." The double "leans on one leg all the time and bites their nails when no one's around"—dumb comments like that. It was different than that. When Evie and I went to SketchX together for the first time, it was like observing any other person from afar. I could forget that it was myself I was looking at. I was a pretty stranger.

The man's back moves further down the path, falling out of sight under the cover of a tree. Perhaps he has no one and is returning home to heat up leftovers in the microwave. Better yet, he has a wife and a young kid waiting at home and no need for a double at all.

Evie beckons to me from the top of the stoop. She opens the door with a jiggling of the keys (neither of us can remember the way to get the lock open on the first try) and we file in silently. No one turns on the light. We stand by the closed door, fumbling with our shoes in the dark.

"Do you want me to sleep on the couch tonight?" Evie asks softly.

"No, it's okay."

"You're overthinking again."

I stare at her, saying nothing.

"We shouldn't go to sleep angry."

"What do you think we should do?"

She takes a step closer. There is violet collecting in the bags under her eyes and they make her look sleepy and beautiful. She tugs me by the waistband on my jeans.

"Do you want to destress?"

A cheesy porn line. I smile.

Her pussy is soft, heady, and I bury myself deep inside. Evie all around me. The smell of skin and sweat and cottony underwear texture and the oils in our hair. We fuck the way we sleep. In one dream. Our clothes collect in a pile on the floor till we're one person again, undressed, tangled in themselves.

"Do you like that?"

"Yes."

"How do you want it"

"Right there. Deeper. Deeper."

Her fingers crook inside me. Hot flash in the pit of my stomach. The walls are warm. The bed beneath me is hot. There is no night in this room. Instead, we are a breath of cold air, white steam pouring from the window. Touch me. In the way we like.

She says I am beautiful, backs away from me and pantomimes taking a picture with her two fingers forming a frame.

"You're pretty good-looking too."

"I know," she answers, rolling her eyes even as she clambers towards me over the rumpled comforter. She smells sweet, wrapping her arms around my middle. I recoil.

"Not there."

Evie glances down, caught up in the moment, her lipstick smudged to the corner of her mouth.

"I'm sorry."

She releases my waist and feels the raised bump of my scar. It runs along my back, an angry eight centimeter cut where my bottommost rib used to be. The flesh is pinkish and tender, the stitches have been removed, but the scar will not recede even with cream.

“It's okay. I just wouldn't want you to have to see that the entire time we're...”

“I don't mind it. It uh...it makes me feel closer to you.”

It's her rib now, accepted into the body. I want to touch her again; I wish she hadn't said anything at all. Her words stretch out between us, taut and painful to touch.

"It's getting late. You've got that meetup tomorrow, right?"

“Right.” She rolls over, holds a ruffled pillow to her chest. “I'll grab you a coffee on the way back.”

—

I lay next to Evie, our bodies curled above sweaty sheets, and think about those days in August when the heat was near unbearable and the AC unit worked overtime. I could hear the metal box breathe in those evenings, a ventilated gasp in the wall, and then that pulsing in my stomach. The umbilical cord connected the both of us, me and the rib-turned-Evie, and I had to remind myself to lay flat on my back, so as not to disturb her. I remember her mouth opening and closing in her sleep like a fish. My memories coursed through her head, through the thin skin of her eyelids, causing the furrow in her brow. That familiar line above my own eyes.

I loved her then, a feeling that struck me tender in the place between my ribs. A breathy snore escaped her lips, swallowed up again by an inhale. So this is the sound that I made when I slept—you never know that you snore until the first time you sleep next to someone, feet idling beside each other in the same bed. As I flipped the pillow beneath my head and pressed the cool

fabric to my neck, afternoon melting into evening through the window shades, I wondered who she would become. Perhaps, I'd lose track of her, the same way a mother does her child.

I sit up in bed, gingerly peeling the comforter off me, and take light steps to our French doors. Outside, the balcony is cold, covered in dew that soaks through my socks. I hear the flutter of night birds around the old palm tree in front of our apartment. The grayish tree dips low under limp brown fronds, as if hiding itself until the summer. The street is empty, the same way it was when I was alone. A few hours from now, the same dawn will come. The same sun.

Behind me, Evie hums a song in her sleep that I don't know. Can't make out the melody, though her mind runs up and down thoughts the same way mine does. I'll ask her in the morning where she heard it. I'll try. It's so much easier to think when she's asleep.