

# UC Riverside

## UC Riverside Electronic Theses and Dissertations

### Title

Go Tomorrow

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8051w2vc>

### Author

Marcelo, Brian

### Publication Date

2012

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
RIVERSIDE

Go Tomorrow

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Brian Nichol Marcelo

June 2012

Thesis Committee:

Professor Andrew Winer, Chairperson

Professor Michael Jayme

Professor Robin Russin

Copyright by  
Brian Nichol Marcelo  
2012

The Thesis of Brian Nichol Marcelo is approved:

---

---

---

Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

## Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I want to thank my mom, dad, and little brother for being constantly supportive of my writing aspirations.

I want to thank the Creative Writing program of the University of California, Riverside for helping me learn and grow as a writer over the last six years.

Special thanks to Michael, for knowing exactly what to say; Andrew, for sharing his funny & sometimes painful life stories; and Robin, for his deep insight and sense of humor.

Thanks also to my colleagues in the MFA program at UCR, especially Brandon, Brett, Paolo, and David.

Lastly, thanks to Sita, Steven, Anna, Pamela, and Lisa, the normal people I forced into reading my stuff, even when it wasn't quite finished baking.

To my family and friends

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Honda Civic '94	1
The Other Women	18
The Nest	36
Mission Peak	55
Go Tomorrow	73
Transformative State Highway	104

## **Honda Civic '94**

*San Jose, September 2012*

“I think she’s waking up!”

She didn’t know where she was. Everything was faint, and dark, and she could smell something burning, something like rubber and metal. No, she was upside down, or to the side, and the only reason she wasn’t lying down was because her seatbelt was holding her in place, dangling her above the ground, or whatever it was that was beneath her. She was surprised to find that this was only mildly uncomfortable, like hanging from a playground swing on your stomach because you were pretending to fly.

“Just stay still,” a voice said. “Don’t move. They’re on their way.” A shadow moved out of the corner of her eye, shuffling around like the person didn’t know whether to stay or go. “Don’t move or you might hurt yourself. I’ll try to wave down some people. Just stay put, okay? Don’t move your head!”

She wanted to tell the person that she was fine, that this was normal and it probably happened to everyone. That would have been a stupid thing to say, though, and might have made her look crazy. Her mouth felt dry and she was tempted to reach behind her seat for a water bottle, until she remembered that it probably wasn’t there anymore. It was coming back to her, what had happened, as if her brain was coming back online after being shutdown. She wanted to pass out, as if this was all a dream and that if she went back to sleep she’d wake up in bed, as if nothing was wrong. No, she could have a

concussion, so she kept her eyes open and alert. She was hanging, from her seatbelt, in a car that no longer had much of a windshield left.

She had crashed the Civic.

The car was already old when her family bought it in 1998. Her father and mother took her and Peter to Stevens Creek Auto Mall, where they spent the better part of a day going to different dealerships. Her mom wanted a minivan, but her dad wanted something with a little more style. Evelyn could still remember coming across the Honda Civic, in the corner of the lot, passed up by most people looking for flashier cars. It was painted a cherry red and already looked old to her, but her parents both appreciated it for being a Civic. Reliable, they had both said, because it was Asian-made. It would have better mileage and be more dependable, especially in the case of an accident. The Indian salesman wholeheartedly agreed with them, although Evelyn knew that it was probably because he was the guy that the dealership trotted out for her family because he had sad, relatable eyes. She realized, much later on in life, that it was hard to say no to people with sad eyes.

Bringing that car home was one of the few times that she had seen her father's face light up. He was proud of that car, taking care of it like a new toy that he would rarely let anyone else play with. Sometimes they would all pile into the car and drive around, to no place in particular. Evelyn enjoyed these rides; she'd press her head against the window and watch the world go by at 65 miles per hour, as if her family was moving away to somewhere more exciting than their San Jose home.

Peter was sullen the entire time they were looking for cars, angry for being dragged all over the place when he could have been hanging out with his friends. It wasn't his car to drive, Peter argued, so why should he care about it? He took the bus or rode his bike when he wanted to get around, and he was still just young enough that a car would have been impractical for him. Evelyn, on the other hand, kept entertaining the idea that one day the car would be passed onto her. She'd be able to drive it to anywhere she wanted to go, like water parks or friends' houses or maybe out of California.

More people came. She could see red and blue lights flashing—the police, maybe even EMTs—were there now, possibly surveying the scene. It then occurred to her that maybe she wasn't the only person that was injured. Her face felt hot at the thought of someone else hanging upside down in their car, wondering what had happened and how they got there. From what she could remember, she was alone. For all she knew, a completely normal, happy family could have been out there, in a car like hers, only in much more serious condition.

She still didn't know how she ended up in this position. She remembered bits and pieces of what had happened before she had ended up into her car: clocking out on the store computer in the backroom of the American Spirit, picking up a late night meal from McDonalds consisting of a dry chicken sandwich and greasy French fries, checking her purse for five minutes because she thought she couldn't find her flip phone, and then—nothing. It was like she had teleported in time, how she'd feel after a heavy night of drinking and then pretending to be sober enough to drive home.

More footsteps approached her side of the car, heavier than the ones before. A man crouched down, his face level with hers. “Miss? Can you tell me your name?”

“Evelyn,” she said carefully, “Evelyn Nguyen.”

“Can you move your arms and legs, Evelyn?”

She felt alarmed at the question, instinctively causing both her arms and legs to thrash against the car in fear that she may have lost the ability to move. She could still feel; she was fine; this was going to be okay; heart racing, blood pumping; she was all together, all in one piece. “Yes,” she croaked out. “I can move them.”

The man was joined by two more people as they forced the door open, unbuckling her out of the car and carrying her out. She was able to stand on her own power, wobbling but otherwise fine, as she was guided away from her car and to a waiting ambulance. It was then that she realized that it was late, maybe 2:00 AM, so that the only people on the scene were the police officers and firemen, and neighbors still dressed like they had just woken up. They were in the middle of a neighborhood that she did not recognize, and she felt thankful for that small amount of luck. It was just her—no other car seemed to be on its side like her—and she felt thankful for that, too.

“Are you okay?”

A paramedic approached her, setting her down in the back of the ambulance gently. She felt embarrassed by all the attention, wishing she had chosen a quieter, more secluded place to have her accident. The paramedic offered her a blanket, but she declined it, her embarrassment providing more than enough heat for her at the moment. She resisted the urge to squint as the man shined a penlight in her eyes.

“How do you feel?” he asked.

“I feel okay,” she said.

“You were just in a wreck,” he said calmly. “You may be experiencing shock. I need to examine you.”

He continued his examination, checking her vitals like Evelyn had seen on TV until it looked like he was satisfied with the results. Even as the EMT held her head, sternly telling her not to move it, she could see the on-its-side-Civic over his shoulder, broken glass littering the street and curious neighbors taking pictures of the scene so they could post them on Facebook. Her poor car was going to be reduced to an internet conversation piece. They were probably going to say that the girl was drunk, maybe crying over a boyfriend when suddenly she lost control of her vehicle and flipped it, and everyone would believe it. She felt foolish for caring so much, but she knew that she was distracting herself from a harsher truth: what was she going to do now?

“You’re very lucky. It doesn’t seem like you broke anything. You don’t appear to have signs of a concussion, either,” he said. “It’s remarkable, all things considered.”

“What about the shakes? Blood?” she asked.

“Shaking is normal. No blood, but your heart rate is elevated,” he said, pointing to her chest. “Just breathe normally and it should stabilize. Do you need any oxygen?”

“I’m good, I think,” she said. “I can breathe okay.”

“After you talk the police, you might be able to go home,” he said, adding, “But don’t lie to them.”

“Excuse me?”

The paramedic leaned in. He looked close to her age, maybe a few years older. Maybe he was someone that went to her high school, or attended one of her community college classes at Mission or De Anza. She always imagined emergency medical people to be older, like parents and teachers, nurturing and caring, like they knew all the answers to what ailed you.

“You don’t look like you’ve been drinking. You aren’t intoxicated. But these police officers will be looking for signs of it, especially if you’re dazed and confused like you are now. Be careful and tell the truth.”

She wanted to tell him that no, of course she wasn’t drinking, that she must have been driving responsibly, but that would have been a lie because she would have been home then, in the small apartment that she shared with her father on Checkers Ave. She would not have been sitting in the back of an emergency van, with a paramedic roughly her age, her only source of transportation totaled because she had crashed it against a tree.

“Alright, thank you,” she said.

Peter and her dad were fighting again. Peter had stolen the car, to go on a date with Tiffany because she heard that he could drive. Evelyn didn’t like Tiffany, because of all the rumors that he heard about her: that she threw up in the bathrooms to stay skinny, that she only dated guys with cars, and that she did “everything.” Peter brought her over once to the house, and they both hid in his room for most of the night. Evelyn had been awake, waiting for him to come back home, when they stumbled in, giggling and

whispering to each other. She hid, peeking from the kitchen, as they went into his room and stayed there.

Evelyn closed the door, not wanting to get dragged into another fight. Peter was yelling and stomping around the living room, and she was sure that her father was doing the same thing. Peter would always tell her that it was complete bullshit that dad wouldn't let him drive the Civic, much less give him his own car. "I'm old enough to drive the goddamn Civic, I don't know why he doesn't trust me with it," he'd tell her. "He treats it like it's such a big deal, but it's not. It's not even that nice of a car." That was a lie, of course. She saw how he would stare at the car, how he'd look up pictures of it on the computer in different colors, like he'd color it or something to make it his own.

She hoped that this fight would be over soon, fizzling out like all of their other fights in the past. One of them would grow quiet, still angry but unable to speak the words anymore. Then, one would walk away, to sulk in another part of the house. Then things would go back to normal, until the next time Peter would do something to piss off their dad. She liked to think that this was just a phase he was going through. Peter was five years older than her, after all. There were expectations with being a boy, and it was probably harder when a boy became a man. Her brother was in-between those two things, angry at the world but at the same time wanting to see more of it. He wanted to drive and stay out all night and meet girls and be free to do whatever he liked to do. Maybe, if she stayed out of his way, he would bring her with him on one of those drives.

Evelyn was thankful that the police officers had been relatively courteous. They were quick with their questions, and seemed satisfied by Evelyn's genuine state of confusion. "It'll be fine, ma'am," one of them said. "It's fortunate that you only hit a tree." She agreed, relieved that the family that owned the home in front of the tree didn't seem to mind. "The damn thing was an eyesore to begin with. I've been meaning to get rid of it," the man had said. "The wife hassled me to get the permits to do it. You pretty much saved me the trouble of hiring some folks from Home Depot to cut that sucker down."

She rejected an offer to go to the hospital for observation, not wanting to disclose that she didn't have health insurance. The police officers gave her a ride home to her apartment, telling her that her street was part of their beat, and warned her that she shouldn't stay for too long. "We get too many calls to El Rancho Verde apartments, family disturbances and what not," one of them said, chuckling. "People having kids too young and all those crying babies can really drive people crazy." She didn't know what to make of his statement, so she remained quiet.

They dropped her off at the dilapidated front office of El Rancho Verde. She expected them to walk her to her apartment, but felt somewhat relieved when they were distracted by the dispatcher radioing in a burglary. "You'll be okay the rest of the way?" one of them said, although it sounded more like a statement than a question.

Evelyn's heart sank as soon as her feet touched the pavement. Even after the police officers left her, she stood in place, unwilling to walk the short path to her apartment. Going to the apartment would mean that everything tonight was real, that it

actually had happened and that there was no turning back. Standing there, with her breath visible and her body trembling, allowed her to numb herself to the idea that she was completely screwed.

The Civic was totaled. It had been a sad sight to see: the Civic being towed away, grill torn up, Honda badge missing, cherry red paint chipped away to show dull silver, driver's side of the car looking unrecognizable. She wanted to go with the car out of a sense of loyalty, like how one would follow a sick relative to the hospital. That's what the car had become, in a way: part of the family.

She wanted to go somewhere else, but it was almost 3:00 AM and anyone she knew would have been fast asleep. If she had a boyfriend, she probably would have texted him and asked if she could sleep at his place tonight. This imaginary boyfriend would be kind and understanding, even being there to pick her up from her crash. Work got in the way of forming meaningful relationships, though. Working the hours she did made meeting anyone over the age of eighteen impossible, and she refused to look like a desperate twenty-five year old woman. She would rather stay lonely than to proposition one of her nearly-underage employees.

\*

It felt odd, the first time behind the wheel. Evelyn had been used to being a backseat passenger, quietly listening to music through headphones so that she could avoid the inevitable fights that would erupt between her parents. The Civic had been an engrained part of her childhood, like an antique that her mother would put on display behind a glass case. Her father was fiercely protective of the car, refusing to let people

drive it unless it was absolutely necessary. He had kept the car in good condition, blowing money on repairs and upgrades that an aging vehicle didn't necessarily need. As the car got older, and with maintenance piling up, it became a familiar sight to the people at the Sears Autocenter near Eastridge Mall—her father was on a first name basis with half of the mechanics there. Evelyn knew that her father, despite appearances, didn't know much about cars, but wanted to make sure that the people who did work on his car knew what the hell they were doing.

It was strange, too, seeing her father in the front passenger seat. It was an awkward thing to witness, like he had been emasculated in a way. He tested the seatbelt multiple times, making sure it would keep him in place in case it was pulled on. "This car is very important to me. I don't want you to do anything flashy. Just take it slow." Her father had insisted on being with her, not trusting a driving instructor or her mother to properly show her how to handle the Civic. She wished that her brother would have taught her how to drive, if he hadn't left home because of another argument with their father. She couldn't remember what it had been about, and she suspected that her father didn't care to remember.

Being driven in a car was a very different sensation compared to when she was actually in control. When her father would drive her to the bakery on the weekends, where she was paid under the table for menial work, she'd fall asleep in the backseat of the car, no longer conscious of the movement of the vehicle. Being behind the wheel opened up possibilities in her head, even as she was increasingly conscious of every too-quick turn, every bump in the road, and every disappointing murmur from her father. She

was in control of the car, and she made it bend to her every whim. If she wanted go somewhere, she could. Just the idea of it, the temptation of it, was enough to satisfy her seventeen year old self at the time.

“You’re getting better,” her father admitted, once. “Your handling is getting smoother. I don’t feel when you use your brake. But go easy on those right turns.”

She treasured this compliment, telling herself that this was her father’s way of telling her that he approved.

The apartment complex was what Evelyn imagined dorms to be like, if she had ever gone away for college. People would be awake, even at this time, walking around the complex, with pets (or children) in tow. Some would be hanging over the railings of their second story apartments, smoking cigarettes or what looked like cigarettes, and throwing her glances that she would pretend not to notice. The kids her age would try to sell her drugs or fake designer purses from the back of their cars, even though she would always politely say no, no thank you, I don’t have money this week.

She walked carefully through the long winding paths, hoping she could figure out how to explain what happened to the Civic.

Maybe he wouldn’t even notice. There was always the hope that her father, by this point, might have completely stopped caring. It wouldn’t be a huge stretch of the imagination for her to come home, see him in his chair, a bottle of god-knows-what next to him and bleary, vacant eyes. She imagined that she would walk past him, tell him quietly that the car was gone, and he would grunt and say nothing else.

It had been easier for her dad to let himself go, after he lost his job at Walgreens. He came home drunk that same day, passed out in front of their apartment for the rest of their neighbors to see, still wearing his work clothes. She had to drag him inside, making up a story that they would have to move if the owners saw him in this state. He called her by her mother's name—Michelle—and went in quietly.

Before, when it was just the two of them working, things were okay. They didn't have to see each other too often, except for late in the day when one of them would come back home. It was quiet, and nearly cordial, and for awhile Evelyn was fine with this being her life. Go to work, come home, and sleep. Repeat until the weekends, then sleep. See friends, if they remembered to invite her. Buy groceries when they ran out of food. Pay the rent, because it was her responsibility now. She was a grown up, so it was okay that she was taking care of both of them. Her father was in no shape to work.

She paused when she finally reached the door of her apartment. For a brief moment she thought about turning around and running away. It worked for her mom and Peter. Both times her father did nothing, even though one was the love of his love and the other was a son in his own image. She was the odd one out—a girl that was nothing like him, an afterthought in the grand scheme of things.

Evelyn opened the door, her heart pounding in her chest and her pulse quickening. The lights were on in the living room. She saw him sitting at the small table in the cramped kitchen, on his computer. No bottle next to him, or bleary eyes. He seemed okay, like he decided that tonight he was going to be just a concerned father, waiting up for his daughter.

“Hi, dad,” she said.

He looked up from the computer screen. She could lie to him. Tell her that she got home late, that she was going to bed. She’d feign surprise the next morning, in disbelief that the car was stolen. But no, that would be too easy. Paperwork was going to be sent to her apartment, plainly stating that she had been in an accident, that no one was severely injured, that a tree had been damaged, and that a 1994 Honda Civic DX car was totaled in the process.

“It’s very late,” he said. His eyes darted back and forth between her and his computer screen.

“I know,” she said.

“It’s dangerous to be out this late. You know this already,” he said. “San Jose isn’t that safe. Don’t believe what you read in the papers.”

She put her hands into her pockets, eyes downcast. She started to scratch at her thighs, hoping that maybe if she did it hard enough it would get some tears going. Crying had never been something she was good at, because it meant getting vulnerable in front of people, something she did her very best to avoid.

“I couldn’t help it. Work was running late. The kids made a mess of the store,” she said. “I had to supervise to make sure they didn’t steal anything.”

He rubbed at his temples, something that she was also prone to do when she was particularly frustrated. “You need to leave that job.”

“I can’t. They just promoted me a few months ago.”

“Your mother,” he started, “wouldn’t have approved.”

She wanted to laugh. Her mother left years ago, not long after Peter went off to live his life elsewhere. It wasn't a dramatic exit, where her mom tearfully said goodbye to both of them. One day, she was there, and the next, she was gone. Evelyn came home from school and found her father sitting outside, a bottle in his hand and an envelope in the other, already opened. He never told her what was written down.

“Mom? Really? You're going to bring her up now?”

He set aside the computer, looking more concerned than she could remember.

“She wanted you to go to school.”

“Community college is school,” she said.

“You're twenty-five. You've been stuck there too long. When will you graduate?”

If she was here, she would want you to be responsible about your future.”

She didn't have an answer for that. “I don't think you can use mom and responsibility in the same sentence.”

He hit the table and stood up, surprising her and causing her to stake a step back. He was an imposing figure, the kind of man that scared away the boys she knew in high school with just a stare.

“Don't,” he said, “speak like that about her.”

She opened her mouth to say something, the first thing she could think of, but the words died in her chest. She wasn't prepared for her conversation to revolve around her mom. It was a sore subject, for both of them, so it caught her off-guard to see her father bringing her up like she was still a presence in their lives.

“The car, dad,” she said, her voice lowering. “I crashed the car.”

Saying the words makes the last few hours real. Evelyn can't take it back now, even though she immediately regrets saying the words.

Her dad is in disbelief. "The Civic?"

"I crashed it. Into a tree."

"Was anyone hurt?"

"Just me."

"And you didn't hit anyone?"

He goes around the table, taking her by the shoulders, squeezing hard. "Were there police?"

"Yeah," she said, her voice straining. "They let me go. The person didn't press charges."

"How can you be sure?"

"They drove me home. The police," she said. "I'll have to file some stuff, but they didn't want to bring me in."

"The car. Where is it now? Can we pick it up?"

He let go of her and walked over to the couch, putting on a coat. "Do we need to pay money to get the car?"

"The car's totaled," she said, quietly. "I don't know where it is."

He brushed past her, grabbing his keys and wallet from the table. "You don't know that. You don't know anything about cars." She flashed back to being in the car: broken glass on the ground, dangling a few feet off the ground, her ears ringing and the sight of twisted metal all around her..

“Dad, it flipped on its side. The front is all fucked up. It’ll cost you more to repair it than its actual value.”

He threw her a bewildered look, like she was speaking in another language.

“We’ve had that car for years. You were a little girl when we bought that car. Peter drove that car. I gave you that car, Evelyn.”

His shoulders slumped. She watched him turn away from her and go over to the couch, sitting like he just heard that someone had died. She wasn’t sure what to make of the situation, or what to say next. The more she spoke, the more upset he seemed to become.

“I’m sorry dad,” she said.

“That was my car,” he said.

“I know. I don’t know what happened.”

“Did you drink?”

“No.”

“Did you fall asleep?”

She paused, unsure if that had been the case. “No,” she said, a little less sure.

He took off his coat and set it aside. “You don’t have a car anymore.”

She shouldn’t have been surprised. After crashing the Civic, there was no way in hell that he would let her drive his car. “How will I get to work?”

He stood up wearily, like something was weighing him down. “I don’t know. I don’t know.”

“I need to get to work. We need to pay for this place,” she pleaded, unsure of what she was really asking him. “What am I supposed to do?”

“Figure it out,” he said.

He went over to the kitchen table, gathered his laptop, and passed by her without another word. She saw him disappear down the hallway and into his room, closing the door behind him and hearing the audible click of the lock.

She wanted to yell at him, to tell him that this wasn't her fault and that he should be helping her. He wasn't supposed to dodge the problem, like a petulant child, unwilling to listen to reason. That wasn't what adults were supposed to do. They were supposed to take action and make assurances that everything was fine, that they would fix things and it was just a miracle that she was still alive and unharmed.

Evelyn went over to his door. She stood in front of it, wondering if he would come out and say something to her—anything—instead of leaving things this way. She was sure that he could hear her breathing outside his door. He didn't acknowledge her presence, so she gave up and went to her room.

She should have known not to expect him to change. She felt foolish for thinking that her accident, and her very real brush with death, would have made him feel any differently about her.

The car was gone. Her freedom to go wherever she pleased was gone, too. She would have to take the bus, or bum a ride from friends (what friends?), and make excuses at work as to why she was always running late. Her father would be angry for long time.

Anger meant that he would be quieter with her. She would have to endure his one-word answers, lack of eye contact, and tense shoulders, like her mother and brother before her.

She went to bed, trying to ignore the empty feeling in her chest. As she curled up, hugging her knees to her chest, all she could think about was how easy it was to fall asleep when her dad was driving.

## **The Other Women**

“Did you want anything?”

Ben took his eyes off his laptop, scanning for the body that the voice belonged to. His daughter, Evelyn, stood in the doorway. She looked tired, but she always did after working that mall job. She should have been working in an office. He paused for moment, thinking about what to say to her.

“Just get me something sweet,” he said. “And cigarettes. Get me some cigarettes. Winstons.”

She nodded, walking out of the apartment without another word. He remembered when she used to come up to him while he was working in the garage, back when they still lived in a house. “Can I play too?” she would ask, looking up at him with her big eyes and round nose. She was twenty-two now, still living with him and saying less and less with each passing day. This is what happened when children grew up, he figured. His son Peter was the same way when he left, and it looked like his daughter was going down the same path. It was inevitable.

He went on the dating site again, where he made a profile because he was lonely and wanted someone warm to sleep next to. The profile picture he had chosen was him from ten years ago, one of the few pictures where his wife had caught him smiling. It occurred to him that this might have been like lying, but he was sure that half of the women on this site had only chosen pictures that emphasized youth and sensuality. No one wanted to put up a picture that was real.

The white woman had left him a message in his inbox. He clicked on the link, finding himself excited.

**Ben,**

**I wonder if the people on this site are real sometimes. Sometimes I think that this is all one big advertisement by corporations. Like Christmas cards. Or Valentines cards. Did you know that half of the holidays we celebrate are made up by companies so that they could sell things to us? Candy companies stole Halloween from the pagans so that kids could have candy. Coca-cola made up Santa Claus so that they could make parents buy soda and gift wrap and turkeys. I'm still working on my theory for Black Friday.**

**I wonder what I would do if I had kids during the holidays. I'd probably try to blend in with the other helicopter parents. I'd buy them birthday cards and Nestle candy bars and dress them up in ironic Halloween costumes. I sound like a walking cliché.**

**I painted today. There was a bowl of fruit that my friend had set on her table. It looked so completely American that I snapped a photo of it and painted it later when I got home. I attached it to this email. I hope you don't mind letting me know what you think.**

**I got a dime bag the other day from a kid down the street, just so you know.**

**We should meet again soon. It's getting colder, Mr. Nguyen.**

**Yours,**

**Sarah**

**P.S. You're real, aren't you?**

She talked a lot about nothing, like she was straight out of television and needed to fill air time in-between commercials. He imagined that she talked the way that his daughter would talk with her friends, with words that they'd make up on the spot like they had a secret language. They probably talked about everything with a sense of self-importance. It might explain why he had trouble understanding her as she grew older.

The painting was as she described it. The computer screen was missing the fine details, as it always did compared to seeing it in person at her house, but it was still good. The bowl had an apple, an orange, a banana, and some grapes. It was American, like Sarah. It was normal, like Sarah. He would write this back to her later. He wondered if it bothered her that he never had much to say about her art. To him, it was always good, even if he couldn't tell her why it was good.

Sarah was right though, it was getting colder. He set aside his laptop on the kitchen table and walked the short trip to his room. There were discarded clothes on the floor, jackets and shirts and pants that he took off because he had been too drunk to care. He reached into his closet and found the ugly sweater that his wife had given to him for his birthday years ago. It was green and had the logo of a basketball team that he didn't care for. "I got it on sale," she told him. He wrapped himself in the ugly sweater, thankful that it didn't smell like stale Heineken, since he wasn't sure when the last time it had been cleaned.

He walked back into the cold kitchen and to his computer. Sarah wanted to see him again, which he was glad for. He thought that she might have yellow fever, an

attraction to Asians like him. It was something he had overheard someone his daughter's age say at Save Mart once. He leaned close to the computer screen, clicking on her profile and admiring the picture she had chosen for herself, with all the wrinkles and signs of age and fading blonde hair. She wasn't trying to hide anything.

Evelyn returned after awhile, looking tired after carrying the groceries for what was now a two mile walk for her. It would have only taken her a couple of minutes in the past, but with the Civic totaled she could not drive, and he wouldn't allow her to drive his Accord. The car could barely start half the time, but he also could not trust her not to pull the same stunt twice.

Ben moved past her, rifled through the plastic bags, ignoring everything and picking out the pack of cigarettes and a single Snickers bar. She had bought two bars, but he left it for her. He went back to sitting at the table, setting aside the cigarettes for later and unwrapped the Snickers.

She lifted up the other candy bar. "You don't want the other one?"

"Keep it," he said.

She gave him a curious look. "Okay."

She pocketed the chocolate in her jacket, turned around and started to unpack the rest of the meager groceries. He watched as she put away the bread, milk, eggs, rice, and other foods into the cabinets and fridge. It was a familiar sight, like he had seen this done before. She was starting to resemble her mother, at least from the back.

Ben met his wife, Michelle, through mutual friends when they were both young, but still old enough that people worried about them. She was like any other Vietnamese woman: a long head of dark hair, a short stature, and a fiery temper. She wasn't quiet and demure, but he was getting older and didn't want to die alone like his old co-worker James, who had a heart attack at the age of forty-two. He wanted someone to take care of him, who would be warm when he would lie in bed next to her. When she finally left him, the first thing he had to get used to was sleeping alone.

"I'm going out tonight," he said. "Don't forget to put some coffee on."

"Are you going to go see her?" she asked.

He momentarily forgot that Sarah had been to the apartment before, and that Evelyn had met her briefly. It had been awhile since another woman had been in their lives, so Ben was unsure of how his daughter would react to a stranger coming in.

"Yes," he said carefully. "She left me a message."

Evelyn put away the last of the groceries, balling up the plastic bags and shoving them into a drawer filled with other bags. It was cheaper than buying real garbage bags that they couldn't afford.

"That's good," she said.

Ben examined his daughter closely. He assumed that children were supposed to react badly when their fathers were sleeping with women other than their mothers. They would never say it, but they were supposed to fidget or look uncomfortable or try to hold back their childish rage.

"I like her. She's very kind," she said. "She's kind of a hippie."

“A hippie?”

“Oh, she kept talking about painting me. She said there was something about my face that she liked. I think she was just being nice.”

“She’s a very nice woman,” he repeated.

After a few moments she left the kitchen, retreating back to her room and closing the door behind her. She always closed the door to her room. She was becoming a woman, so she needed her privacy. That’s what he told himself, anyways.

He wondered how she’d react if he had said “She would make a very nice mother” to her instead. Would that get her to react badly? Would she stomp her feet and become emotional with him, like when she was younger and when she was still filled with feelings after her mother abandoned the family? Would she yell at him like her mother before her, her eyes growing wide and her finger pointed at him, blaming him for everything?

It seemed strange to him that she reacted so easily to the news. Maybe she was okay with him and another woman. That would make things easier.

Ben had narrowly avoided the potted plant as it shattered against the wall, bits of clay and dirt gathering next to the door. He had closed it only seconds earlier, tired of having Michelle yell at him defiantly in front of his son and daughter. He didn’t want his kids thinking he was weak, bullied by an overbearing woman. He was the man of the house and he could do whatever he wanted.

The desktop computer he had bought earlier was half-gone, the 14 inch monitor placed back into the box that he thought he had flattened and put outside. The computer tower itself was standing against the box, probably too heavy to lift for anyone but him.

“How could you buy that thing?” she asked again. “Remind me again where we have the money for that in our budget, Binh.”

Whenever she was exceptionally mad, she’d use his real name. It let him know when he had to be extra serious with his answers to her.

“We can pay for it in installments. Frys Electronics will let us buy back the difference over the next few months.”

He watched as she paced around the room, biting her bottom lip and putting one hand to the side of her head like she was having a headache. This was a normal response for her, a common move that she made when she was having her moments. Her “moments” only seemed to be getting worst the longer they were together.

“With interest. That’s how they get you. You’re paying them back the full price of the thing with money that we don’t have, money which is supposed to go into things like a college fund or house payments. How can you be so irresponsible?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I thought we could pay it off quickly before the interest would hit.”

He didn’t want to be behind. His co-workers were raving to him about what he could do with a computer. He’d be able to watch movies, write letters, listen to the Eagles, and read the news— everything he could think of and more. How could she not see this as an investment? Why did she always have to be so blind to these things?

“You’re going to have to return it,” she said.

He felt his eyes well up in frustration. He was tired of compromising and apologizing and feeling angry all the time.

“No,” he said. “I’m not going to fucking return it.”

He parked his Accord outside of Sarah’s home, a one story house painted white with blue accents. She lived on Story and Tully, a “bad” neighborhood. This was the part of San Jose where mostly Mexicans, Filipinos, and Vietnamese lived in. There was a Pho Viet a mile down the main road, a La Victoria a couple of blocks away, and a Red Ribbon just next to the freeway exit. On the way to her house he had passed by Lion Plaza, as well as an assortment of smaller, family owned-stores that sold homemade foods, international phone cards, and cheap cell phones. He was comfortable with these things, even frequenting Pho Viet every once in awhile, but couldn’t imagine a woman like Sarah there. There were rules in this part of San Jose.

The street where her house resided was dirty. There were discarded candy wrappers and cigarette butts collecting on the side of the curb, blocking off the storm drain. The roads looked like they hadn’t seen city street cleaners in a long time. The sidewalk was cracked and uneven, with weeds growing in-between.

People like Sarah, he imagined, would have lived on the north side, away from the bad schools and gang-ridden neighborhoods, and closer to the mountains and cities like Sunnyvale or Fremont. He remembered asking her why she lived here, expecting a

grand response that would answer all the lingering questions he had. “I just like it better here,” was her simple answer. “There’s a lot of culture here that I’ve grown used to.”

He could hear the faint sound of an ice cream truck in the distance, even though it was getting dark and most of the neighbor kids were probably inside by now. He felt sorry for whoever was driving it. He wondered what they sold when it was winter, when it was cold all the time and no one was in the mood for ice cream.

Ben walked up to the door, knocking softly. He took out his cell, checking his reflection on the dark screen. He was getting older, looking much different from the profile picture he had put online. His hair was getting lighter, becoming something in-between black and the whitish grey that he remembered his own father having a long time ago. He shaved before coming, but only because Sarah told him that it hurt when he put his face against her body. Before he left the apartment, he had changed out of the ugly green sweater that his wife bought him and changed into a dark navy shirt and brown jacket.

Sarah opened the door, her face lighting up when she saw him standing there. She wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him in close. She was just as he remembered from the last time he had seen her. Her light brown hair was tied up in a bun—he remembered it spilling over his chest in waves. She was still curvy, not thin like what a lot of women were supposed to look like, and she was tall, almost as tall as him.

“I’m glad you could come,” she said. “It’s been getting so cold.”

She took him by the hand and into the house, setting him down on the brown couch that was adorned with a quilt. She left for a few moments into the kitchen. Ben

took off his shoes, placing them next to the door even though she said that she didn't mind if he kept them on, but he did it anyways. He took off his jacket and placed it to the side, reminding himself that the pack of cigarettes was in the right packet. He liked having a cigarette after being with Sarah.

Sarah came back, with a small black container and a few rolls of paper. He watched as she set the items on the table and uncapped the black container, where he could see small bits of green mashed up.

"Truong from down the street has been planting this stuff in his backyard. His parents don't care, as long as he's not stupid about who he sells to," she said, carefully spreading out the fine bits over the square sheet.

He wondered if Evelyn did this too, in the bedroom of some boy that he didn't know. He didn't know the names of any of her friends, especially after they moved into the apartment on Checkers Street. He remembered one night when she returned home at two in the morning, smelling of weed and her eyes red. As a parent he should have taken her aside, but what could he do? Ground her? Take away her allowance? Send her to her room without dinner? Tell her that her mother would be ashamed of her? He let the incident go, not bringing it up the next morning or the day after that.

"How is this stuff?" he asked.

"I haven't tried it yet, but the kid tells me it's good, not too harsh. I wanted to save it until the next time you came over," she said.

She stopped what she was doing and smiled at him, placing a hand on his thigh and squeezing. He wanted her to go lower, to take hold of him. He put a hand on top of

hers, pushing down and directing her up his thigh, but she took her hand away and smiled.

“Not yet,” she said coyly. “Be patient.”

She packed the rest of the green bits onto the square sheet and rolled it up carefully, licking the paper and closing it.

“Do you have a light, Ben?” she asked.

He went to his jacket and pulled out the lighter, handing it to her and watching her light up the joint. He watched as she sucked on it, taking a long hit and inhaling deeply. She coughed a little and then passed it to him, smoke rings rising up to the ceiling. He was thankful that she had removed the fire alarm.

He lit the joint, inhaling as much as he could. He closed his eyes and then exhaled, feeling his chest get warmer. He laughed and coughed at the same time—the stuff was stronger than he had anticipated. Sarah laughed with him, a hearty laugh that made him feel even more lightheaded than he already was.

“I told you,” she said, still giggling. “That Troung knows what he’s doing.”

He took another hit, more controlled this time. He blew out smoke, enjoying the taste as it escaped his mouth. He felt younger the more he inhaled and exhaled, like he was in his twenties again, on the prowl for women with the guys that he used to barhop with downtown.

He laughed a little, handing the joint back to Sarah. “You think Evelyn does this shit?”

Sarah coughed again, waving the smoke away from her face. “Little Evie? Why not? She’s a young, beautiful woman.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” he said.

She smiled like she knew a secret. “Oh, Ben, don’t you know anything about her? Have you taken a look at her?”

“She’s only a kid,” he said. He leaned back against the couch, resting his head against the homemade quilt. It felt nice against his face.

“A woman,” she corrected. “She probably has guys crowding her at parties, offering her alcohol and drugs all the time. She’s probably popping or rolling or whatever the fuck it is they do now.”

Ben narrowed his eyes at the thought. “They probably don’t have shirts on. The guys at these parties.”

She laughed again. “Maybe!”

“Maybe,” he repeated.

He found her hand placed in his, holding on tightly. Sarah’s other hand was holding on to the joint. Her hand felt good to hold.

“I don’t know how to talk to her,” he said.

“Evelyn?”

She offered the joint to him, but he passed, feeling dizzy and unsteady. He held on to her hand tighter and closed his eyes. The room was starting to move sideways.

“She’s getting old now. I don’t know the words I should be saying to her.”

She set aside the joint on the table, putting it on an ashtray. He felt her body shift as she put her head on his shoulder, her arms around his neck. He let out a sigh.

“Don’t worry about her,” she said. “All kids grow up. They all go through that phase where talking to their parents is awkward as fuck.”

Ben laughed. He enjoyed how unfiltered Sarah could be. She was wild. She’d smoke weed that she’d buy from the neighborhood kid a few houses over. He wondered if she would make a good role model for Evelyn. Probably not. She would encourage her to go out with men and smoke with them and have sex with them and not feel ashamed about it.

“Let’s stop talking about your daughter right now, okay?” she whispered into his ear.

She slipped her hand into his pants. He murmured and sighed again.

“I thought you hated that thing,” Michelle had said, taking a long drag on her half-finished cigarette.

Ben walked over to her from the sliding glass door, wearing the ugly green sweater. It was cold outside, but it was a quiet escape from the kids for a few moments.

“Everything else is in the wash,” he explained.

“Oh.”

He reached over to the pack of Winstons on the patio chair and took one for himself. He didn’t like them in particular, but his wife preferred them over the Marlboros that he smoked. She took out her lighter and offered it to him.

“Thanks,” he said.

They stood there for a few moments in silence, each of them looking up at the night sky. It was rare for him to see his wife so peaceful around him. She had quit smoking awhile ago, or so he believed, telling him that she didn’t want to do it around the kids. Maybe that’s why she seemed more relaxed.

“Evelyn was yelling at Peter earlier,” she said. “She was telling him to play with her or she would break his toys.”

“I feel like I’ve heard that before,” he said.

Michelle laughed and shook her head. “I hope she doesn’t turn out like me.”

Ben was taken aback. “Don’t say that.”

“I want her to be happy,” she explained. “I don’t want her to...”

She trailed off, looking ahead and not at him. He wondered what she meant to say, but was afraid of asking her. He stood closer to her, wanting to make the space between them smaller. He had grown used to being around her. He imagined it would be strange if she wasn’t there, even if she was angry with him.

“She will be happy. She has a good mother taking care of her and her brother,” he said. “You’re a good mother.”

Michelle dropped her cigarette and rubbed it out with her slipper. “Yes. Thank you for saying that.”

Ben wanted to bring up the fight from earlier, but stopped himself. He wanted her to tell him that he was a good father.

“I’m going to go inside,” she said. She crossed her arms and shivered. She kissed him on the cheek and turned around and went back into the house, through the sliding glass door and out of view.

He thought about following her and holding her from behind. He wanted to kiss her hard and let her know that she was important to him, even if he had trouble showing her.

He stayed outside and sat on the patio chair and smoked cigarettes for an hour instead, before coming inside the house and falling asleep on the living room couch.

He didn’t understand what attracted Sarah to him. He wasn’t the easiest person to get along with. He had trouble telling her things. He was quiet most of the time, unless they were smoking together. Even then he was guarded. He didn’t even really like art. He thought it was something for kids, not grown adults, but he would never tell her that.

He knew what attracted him to her. He liked her for being warm and for being there. He didn’t feel lonely when she was next to him in bed. She was passionate when they had sex together, doing things his wife never did, which he liked. She didn’t have a real job either, which made him feel less bad about collecting unemployment checks and asking his daughter for money. She didn’t believe in marriage or forced the topic on him. She rarely asked him about his wife. He liked Sarah.

She was sleeping now, her back turned to him. She thanked him for shaving today when he kissed her thighs, like it was a big deal that he had done that. He figured that

men she had dated in the past were not so nice with her. She probably had low expectations with men, but he found himself fine with that.

Ben noticed the painting when he went to the kitchen to get a glass of water. It was propped up on an easel in a corner of the room, half-covered by a sheet. He still felt lightheaded, but the room had stopped shaking by this point. He took the sheet off the painting, letting it drop to the floor. The painting was new, not quite finished, but most of it was there. It was a family portrait, with a mother, a father, a son, and a daughter. Their facial details were vague, except for the daughter. It looked like Evelyn.

He felt uncomfortable seeing his daughter on the canvas. He should have felt pleased. Sarah captured his daughter well, if that was her intention. It startled him to realize that her interpretation looked so much like Michelle, but knew that it couldn't have been—he was careful about never showing her a picture of his wife. He wondered what the rest of the painting was going to look like once she was finished with it.

He started to fill in the rest of the faces. He saw his own face appear, smiling. Peter came next, or what he thought his son would look like after a number of years of not seeing or hearing from him. He expected to see Sarah's face show up, but it didn't. He stood there for awhile, in the dark, forgetting about his thirst and wanting the painting to change.

Ben opened the window of his small, shared apartment. He took out the Winstons from his jacket and lit one of them, blowing a puff of smoke outside of the window. He grabbed a chair from the kitchen and placed it beside the window, so he could sit, feel the

morning air on his face, and continue to smoke without setting off the fire alarm. It wasn't the same as his old backyard, but it would do for now.

Sarah was going to ask him where he went once she woke up. He would make up an excuse later, like he got a bad high or that he was worried about Evelyn. She would understand because she was lonely too and wouldn't want to push him away because she being was clingy. He didn't want to see her at the moment, but maybe later he would visit her. Not now, though. He took one last drag on the cigarette before he tossed it outside and closed the window.

Evelyn forgot to set up the coffee machine, which irritated him. He would have hoped that she would be more responsible when he asked her to do something. She wasn't home yet, even though it was almost five in the morning. Her work sometimes kept her late. He would ask her for money later, to give to the landlord because it was almost the end of the month. She would be upset with him, ruining the quiet understanding that he felt growing between them, but that was okay, because she'd be leaving soon anyways.

She was becoming more like Michelle with each day. In her face, in the way she spoke to him, even the way she moved around their small apartment. And, like her mother, she'd realize that all she would have to do would be to walk out the door.

## **The Nest**

### **Grace Nguyen: Old Wagon tonight?**

Cole read the text on his phone. Of course it would be Old Wagon, because it was Friday. The gang always went to Old Wagon on Fridays. Not Applebees or Dave and Busters, because Friday was always the night that everyone from the old high school would go. Cheap booze and arcade games felt like a college thing, acceptable when you were younger and excited about getting your older, legal friends to slip you some of their Blue Moon when the waiters weren't looking. Now that they were in their mid-twenties, the gang had decided that they'd try to go to more grown up bars downtown, even if it cost more for the same thing. It was sophistication and atmosphere they were going for, not brightly lit neon signs that advertised "All Appetizers Half-Off" or seeing old acquaintances that had never quite left the high school scene, desperately clinging to tales of former glory.

He tapped away at his smartphone.

### **Me: Sure, I'm definitely down. Who's going?**

He could imagine Grace, on the other side of their conversation, being annoyed at his question. "Does it matter who is going?" she would sometimes text back. "You're going to come either way." Sometimes she would just text back, "Everyone," which only served to annoy him. It was a game for him, to see how he could irritate her. He figured it was a harmless little quirk of his that she probably didn't take too seriously. His phone

buzzed to life, the screen glowing and showing a very simple message on its home screen.

**Grace Nguyen: Evelyn's going tonight.**

He felt a lump develop in his throat. When was the last time he had seen her? It had been a brief glimpse at the mall, seeing her tired face through the window of a darkly lit clothing store. She was berating what looked like a kid—one of the many teenage employees working under her, no doubt—for making a careless mistake, like forgetting to say a tag line or flubbing a secret shopper interaction. He had been in a hurry, not even having the time to pop in and say a quick hello. He couldn't remember why he had been in a rush at the mall—it couldn't have been that important not to say hello.

Cole had known Evelyn since high school, back when he had gel-spiked hair and wore baggy clothes that his mom had told him he'd "grown into." Evelyn was smart, and funny, and sat next to him in homeroom their senior year. She wasn't like most Vietnamese girls he had known, who were more interested in gossiping and watching Korean pop videos on YouTube and getting their older boyfriends to buy them beer. He'd find her in the library after school, doing her homework, or reading books like *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, or listening to music like The Shins. He would join her until his mom picked him up on her way home from work. "Do you want a ride home?" he would always ask, and she'd always politely say no. She spent a lot of time in the library, even though she only lived a few blocks away.

Cole walked to the bathroom and set down his phone, careful not to place it on the puddles of water that inevitably formed on the countertop every time his dad shaved or

brushed his teeth in the morning. He examined himself in the mirror: a casual, black hoody, a bit of stubble, dark slim straight jeans. All of this would be fine for a normal night of drinking with the guys, but it would not do tonight.

He went to his room and rummaged through his closet, producing a black pea coat that hadn't been used too often. He shook it up to free any dust and put it on, grabbing a lint roller to gather any remaining loose particles. Cole hadn't worn it often, finding it difficult to pull off the "look" that a coat like that required. He didn't want to seem like he was too fashionable, afraid that it would betray his rather simplistic views on style. Plus, there was always the off-chance that it could make him look gay, something he took great care to avoid.

He wondered if he should text Evelyn, to get a feel of where she was at the moment. No, that would seem too eager of him, too out of the blue, not organic like a real conversation should be. He would just have to wait a few more hours and then she'd be there, like she used to be, and then they'd catch up like old friends inevitably do.

The Old Wagon Saloon and Grill, like most decent bars, was usually packed on Fridays. It was popular for being a bar where people could watch Sharks games, appreciate old Western aesthetics, and avoid seeing people that they never really liked from high school. Cole usually enjoyed drinking outside, casually sipping from a thirty-two ounce mug of Shocktop while the group would sit around a fire pit and trade stories about what they did during the week. It was nicer than sitting in a crowded Applebees, where waiters would be forced to call out Bingo numbers, or having to avoid stepping on

a kid whose irresponsible parent decided to bring them to Dave and Busters' because they couldn't get a babysitter on a Friday night.

"I got a bonus at work today," Matt said. "My supervisor said I've been doing really 'stellar' work the last couple of weeks."

Cole tried not to roll his eyes. Matt, and most of the group, were temps, workers hired for weeks-to-months at a time to fill in for people who were on maternity leave or extended vacations. This bonus that his friend was bragging about probably amounted to a little less than a hundred dollars, judging from the way that Matt had a tendency to exaggerate his successes. He was happy for him, of course—any friend would be—but it was always about money with Matt. He'd spend his earnings on nice coats, skinny jeans, and other things that he thought would enhance his appearance. The money should have been going towards paying his student loans, which hovered in the \$25,000 range from what Cole could recall. Not an easy sum of money to pay off when you only made eleven dollars an hour.

"You should save it," Cole said. "Don't do anything too reckless with it, holidays coming up and all. I know how you like to spend."

Matt brushed him off. "It's two-thousand and twelve, Cole. The world's supposed to end this month. I want to buy something I'll enjoy now, instead of letting it be boring in a dusty old bank."

"It's twenty-twelve, not two-thousand and twelve. You didn't say nineteen thousand and ninety-nine, did you? And you're crazy if you believe the world is really ending in a couple of weeks."

Matt laughed and took another swig from his glass. “Whatever man. It doesn’t really matter either way.”

The rest of their group of friends laughed along with Matt. Matt was charismatic and people liked him, even though he was a show-off. Before Cole could go further, he felt something tugging at his shoulder. Grace was behind him, her face visibly getting red even under the dim lights of the bar. “Don’t mind him,” she whispered. “You know how he gets. Let it go Cole.”

Cole nodded and sat to the side, allowing Grace to sit next to him. She was struggling to sit down, her legs dangling off the bar stool like a little kid. She was short at only 5’3, but that was normal when it came to Asian girls in the Bay Area. Above average, in some cases. He wondered how she dealt with the younger guys who would try to hit on her, not realizing that she was twenty-four years old. It was probably embarrassing for both parties.

She was pretty tonight, even though she had gotten off work—wherever that was, she refused to tell him—only an hour ago. Usually she didn’t go to the trouble of being fancy on these nights, but maybe she wanted to impress someone at the bar. It could get very lonely during the holiday season, so he didn’t blame her.

“You look good,” Cole said.

“Thank you.”

He sniffed. “What is that?” The scent she was wearing was sweet, not like the cheap crap that you’d get at Walgreens, but the good kind from Macys or JC Penney. It was something a mature lady would probably wear, he imagined.

He couldn't tell if she was getting redder. "It's nothing. I just splashed it on." She paused. "Do you like it?"

"It's nice," he said. "You should wear it more often."

He took his eyes away from Grace and stared into his half-empty mug, assuming that he probably looked quite serious. That would be a good look for him to have, a nice, serious, not-quite-foreboding look that would attract girls and really capture their attention. Girls liked guys who had a sense of mystery about them, not the ones who wore their hearts on their sleeves and talked about their feelings. That was something you were only supposed to do when pestered into it, and even then you were supposed to guard yourself very closely. More than one girl had accused him of being sentimental, that he attached too much importance to things and actions, and that he was, more than anything else, too sensitive.

He looked again at Grace, who was sharing a shot with Matt, something brown that he didn't recognize. Everyone seemed to be having fun, even though the bar was getting more and more crowded. He wanted to get some air, maybe take a walk around the block to clear his head, but then he remembered that there would be people smoking outside, and he didn't want to lose his seat.

Maybe he shouldn't drink too much tonight. Sure, he was driving, but he drove alone and he always drove better when he was by himself, sober or not. It was easier to concentrate when he didn't have drunk people in your car, shouting and hollering and telling him to turn right on Berryessa even though they lived closer to Landess. Staying sober might be a nice change of pace, considering who was coming tonight. He didn't

want to be like the rest of the guys, blending in and being an anonymous voice in a choir of drunken ramblings.

“You aren’t going to find any answers by staring at it.” Cole realized he was staring down at his mug again. He flashed a smile at Grace to assure her that everything was fine, that he was probably just buzzing by now.

Grace toasted his glass and proceeded to down hers, a darker beer that was probably a very bitter IPA. She was a tank, and could hold her liquor better than most girls her size. It was impressive, even though it meant half the time he was competing with a girl that could pass for his kid sister.

“I think I’m just nervous,” he mumbled, taking a sip of his beer.

She made a face. “You make it sound like you haven’t seen her in awhile. It hasn’t been that long, has it?”

He wasn’t sure. It wasn’t like either of them had ever left San Jose, but the city only seemed to get bigger as they grew older, like it was actively trying to put as much distance as possible between them. It was a crazy thought, of course, something only someone with an overactive imagination would think.

“What if she’s like, more mature now?”

Grace scoffed. “And you don’t think you are? You’re always the one scolding us. You’re like the big kid on the playground who tells everyone how important he is.”

He threw a half-smile at her, though her words stung him. He wasn’t much better than the rest of his friends, even though he liked to think so. He was still drifting through community college, now in his fifth straight year, unsure of whether or not to major in

accounting or economics, and working part-time as an “administrative assistant,” even though he knew it was just a gender neutral term for secretary. It didn’t bother him too much—money was money and it was just a stepping-stone job—but he figured that it would all come together in time as long as he was conscious of his shortcomings.

Grace rested her head against his shoulder. She radiated heat, like she was sick and needed to be taken home and tucked in. It was a thing he noticed that she was good at—getting drunk enough that guys would take her home, only for her to sober up as they reached her driveway. Then she’d thank them profusely, apologize for being such a mess, and leave before they could say another word, stumbling into her home and leaving them with a serious case of blue balls. She had pulled this on quite a few guys, but never on him.

“I feel sleepy,” Grace said, looking up at Cole with her big eyes. “I don’t know if I can drive home.”

“Sleep,” he said.

He set aside her mug, careful not to move her. Today must have been a difficult day, wherever she worked. She was always careful to avoid the topic of her job, like she was embarrassed about it, even though it probably wasn’t as bad as working as a secretary for a home real estate company. It probably explained her current state, half-drunk on his shoulder and being snappy with him and making cute noises.

“Do you need any help?”

Evelyn stood in front of their table, her hands buried in the pockets of her grey coat. He wondered how long she had been standing there, watching him. Maybe long enough that he heard him ramble about her? She looked amused regardless.

“Evelyn,” Cole said, “I didn’t even realize you were here.”

She waved hello to the others, all of whom were busy carrying on with their own side conversations. To the rest of the guys, her appearance was a non-event, something casual and normal. She took a seat next to Grace, looking her over. At that moment, he was secretly disappointed that Grace had fallen asleep next to him, if only because it meant that Evelyn was now a seat away.

“I didn’t think she’d be out already, it’s only ten,” she said, disappointed. “I would have gotten here earlier, but I had to take the bus.”

“The bus? Who takes the bus?”

She rubbed the back of her head. “I do. Totaled the Civic a few weeks ago. I fell asleep at the wheel. I think.”

Cole sat up. “You crashed your car? Why didn’t I hear about it? Was it on Facebook? Are you okay?”

“No,” she said quickly. “I don’t really like putting stuff like that on there. I don’t want to bother people about it. Bad enough that I don’t have a car. I don’t need anyone’s pity on top of it. And I’m okay, just a bit banged up.”

Cole reached out to put a hand on her shoulder. “I’m glad you’re okay.” She flinched at his touch, and he quickly retracted his hand, feeling like an idiot. She must have been tender still and was trying to hide it. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” she said, rubbing her shoulder gingerly. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Okay,” was all he could say, the right words not coming out.

Evelyn’s eyes focused on Grace. “Is she going to be okay?”

“She’ll be fine. Probably had a rough day.”

“I can relate,” she said, brushing back some of Grace’s hair from her face. “Thank you for taking care of her.”

“I do what I can,” he said. “She usually does a good job of doing that all on her own, anyhow.”

He took a sip from his beer, and then a swig, the bitter orange liquid tasting dry as it went down. This conversation would be a lot easier if he weren’t the only person drinking.

“Let me order you a drink, on me.”

She paused briefly, before nodding. Cole sat up, careful not to disturb Grace, and went to the counter, taking out his last twenty and waving down a waiter. He ordered a mug of Blue Moon.

Evelyn seemed looser at this point, less like the woman Cole caught verbally berating an employee and more like the easy-going girl he knew when he was younger. Cole appreciated that alcohol, for all the evils it seemed to bring out in people, was a fantastic social lubricant. She seemed at ease, talking with her hands and smiling and laughing.

“I don’t know. I don’t really see myself working at American Spirit forever. It’s not something you can grow into. The clothes, guys, the clothes. I can’t keep dressing up like I’m seventeen when I’ll be thirty,” she said with a laugh.

Cole was relieved to see that Evelyn didn’t have any false sense of job security. It was something he noticed in a lot of his friends. They’d get a job—scanning documents, answering phone calls, checking for spelling errors—and assume that they were good to go, that they were developing into grown-ups like their parents before them.

“But I hear there’s, like, benefits to working as a manager for the company,” said Matt. “They give you the option to travel to different places. Sure, it’s a shit job where you essentially fold clothes and make sure the little bastards who work for you don’t steal the merch, but you can go to Hawaii and work there. Or New York. They have a big store there. Not like the rinky dink one you work at. I don’t know how it all works, but I’m sure you could ask one of the higher ups, yeah?”

Cole witnessed Evelyn’s face light up for a moment, before settling back down to a more reserved expression. “Maybe. It never crossed my mind. You sure you’re thinking about the right company?”

“Just imagine. Our little birdie Evie leaving The Nest,” Matt said, amused with himself. “That’d be something.”

“The Nest” was a little nickname that someone—Cole couldn’t remember who—had coined for San Jose. The city was known for being one of the safest cities in the nation, not to mention the heart of Silicon Valley. An area rich in technology meant that their parents were better off financially than most of the nation. Most of Cole’s friends

had engineers and accountants and programmers for parents, meaning they were provided for.

“The Nest?” Evelyn said.

Cole was surprised she hadn’t heard the term before. Maybe it had been a long time since she had last been around their group.

“It’s just some stupid thing, don’t worry about it,” Cole said, throwing a stare in Matt’s direction. Matt threw back a carefree smile in his direction, almost like he was challenging him to say something else.

“I’m going to get another beer. Anyone else want one?” Matt said, taking orders down before disappearing into the growing crowd that had gathered at the counter.

“What’s the Nest?” Evelyn asked.

Cole felt himself growing embarrassed. He didn’t like talking about money. Unlike Matt, who threw it around easily, Cole was reserved about the role money played into his life. It wasn’t something to be proud of, to flaunt in front of others, just because you might have more than them. Being financially responsible was all about smarts.

“It’s just a stupid nickname for San Jose,” he mumbled. “Just that...well, most of our families work in technology and businesses around here. Or in Santa Clara, or Mountain View. Google, Facebook, eBay, Intel, places like that.”

Evelyn wrinkled her nose. “So?”

“Some people,” he said, careful not to implicate himself, “have a kind of trust fund sensibility about all of it. Like they were born into an easy life, where any problem can be taken care of if you throw enough cash at it.”

“It’s not like you guys are rich, though, right?” Evelyn said. “I may not be around too often, but I don’t remember you guys being millionaires when we were growing up.”

Cole felt her last comment sting him unintentionally. He hated that it bothered him when she said that, like her opinion of him had lowered.

“Well, no, it’s not like that. More like, some of us are comfortable. And we’ll be comfortable no matter what, cause of who our parents are. A lot of them don’t even care that we live with them still. It’s not like back then, when you were expected to be completely self-reliant after college. They want us to save the money we’d waste on renting out apartments. Stuff like that. It’s not as bad as it sounds, I swear.”

Her face fell, and he felt his own redden. “Oh,” she said. “I see.”

“Yeah,” Cole said, again at a loss for words.

Cole hoped that he made sense, and that he hadn’t insulted her or made her feel lower than she already must have felt.

“Like a bird. That’s why he called me that,” she finally said. “A little bird that hasn’t managed to fly away yet.”

She looked at him, and for a brief moment he could swear that she looked vulnerable. Or wasted, which was also a possibility. It reminded him of Grace, who had woken up earlier to go throw up in the bathroom. He should have been checking up on her, but he was sure that one of the other guys had it handled. His mind was focused elsewhere.

“What about you Cole?” she asked. “Are you a little bird who hasn’t left nest?”

Evelyn made a bird motion with her right hand, flying about before resting on top of Cole's hand. He was thankful that the beer had dulled his senses, or he wouldn't have played things so cool. He did his best to pretend not to notice her hand lingering on his.

"No," he said. "At least, I don't want to be. Not for long. It's not the life for me. I want to get out."

Evelyn laughed quietly. "Why not? It sounds easy. Just sit back, work a little here and there, and have your parents take care of you. It sounds nice." She paused, considering her next words. "It's like being a kid again."

"I don't want to be a kid," he said. "I want to grow up. Be a man."

Evelyn stroked his hand. She seemed pleased with his answer.

"Are you sure you can drive?"

He watched as Evelyn wrapped herself in one of the jackets that he left in the backseat of his Corolla. He turned up the heater in his car for her, something he usually didn't bother with, telling people to just rough it out because he didn't want to waste the energy on them. He was conscious of the fact that he was being "that guy," the guy who goes out of his way to be an absolute gentleman to the ladies. He hated those guys, seeing it nothing more than a big, macho guy bullshit act to get laid. But he was different from most guys, or at least wanted to believe that that was the case.

"I'm fine," he said, giving her a reassuring smile. "I can drive you home. I don't want you taking some sketchy bus tonight, sitting next to some homeless dude."

Her hand found its way to his thigh and he almost jumped up in excitement, but held it in and started the car.

“Just head down until you hit the old high school, then take the first right after the flower shop on the corner of the intersection,” she said. She stroked his thigh, like it was a normal thing between the two of them.

“I know, don’t worry,” he said.

He remembered dropping her off a few times, when their group would gather together to see a movie at Great Mall or at the AMC 20. He was one of the few of them to own a car back then, so it was up to him to sometimes drop and pick up people. He always secretly hoped that Evelyn would be in his car after group outings. He felt manly picking her up and dropping her off, like he was someone that she could depend on. However, she’d usually ask him to drop her off near the lobby of her apartment complex, and he had been far too shy to try and offer to walk her all the way to her apartment.

They passed by the old high school, with its brownish-yellow exteriors and tennis courts and race track all looking the same way they had left them. Cole usually had no reason to pass by the street adjacent to the school, usually avoiding it because it reminded him too much of being a kid.

“Flying doesn’t sound half bad,” Evelyn said, pressing her head against the passenger side window. “I’ve never flown before. On a plane, I mean.”

Cole turned right on the flower shop, remembering that it was the same place where he bought a corsage for his date to senior prom. She ended up passing out at the after party at Jenny’s house, drunk off shots of Raspberry Smirnoff.

“It’s not a big deal,” he said. “I think I flew to Disneyworld when I was really little.”

“That’s cute,” she said. “I bet you were a cute kid.”

Cole didn’t know how to respond. “It’s not like you can’t fly right now. Southwest flights are cheap. They have deals if you check online.”

“I just don’t know where I’d go.”

“You could go anywhere,” he said matter-of-factly.

She slowly removed her hand from his leg and looked away from him, and he felt disappointment and worry rise up in his chest, wondering if he had said the wrong thing, and that maybe she was sober now, and that maybe she wanted him to stop the car right now and that she would walk the rest of the way home and never ever speak to him again.

“We’re here,” she said.

He stopped the car and parked on the side of the street. It was cold out and he could see the mist illuminated by the street lamps that lined the streets. The winter chill made him wish that she were still touching him. He tried to think of what to say, how to apologize for whatever it was that he did that made her stop touching him. He gripped the steering wheel tightly, looking ahead and afraid to look her in the eye.

She turned to face him. “Do you want to come inside?”

He thought he heard her wrong. “What?”

His jacket was still wrapped around her. “It’s cold outside and it’s late, and I’m not sure you’re completely sober. You shouldn’t be driving, really. They have checkpoints near your neighborhood.”

He nodded in agreement. They left the car and she took his hand in hers. He followed behind her, walking through the maze-like apartment complex, passing by a small playground filled with forgotten tricycles and rubber balls, until they walked up some stone steps that led to her apartment.

Evelyn put a hand to her lips, signifying him to be quiet. She reached into her coat and searched for her keys, producing them and putting them into the doorknob. She pushed the door open quietly; the apartment was dark except for the illumination from the nearby street lights filtering through the windows.

He followed her movements as they tiptoed through the apartment, like it wasn't her home and she had broken in and they were about to be caught at any second. His imagination was getting the best of him again.

They reached her room, and again she reached for her keys and opened the door. He was surprised, wondering if she was that worried that her privacy would be invaded by the other occupants of the apartment. Evelyn reached for the light switch and Christmas lights turned on around the room, bathing it in a warm glow. He closed the door behind them and took off his shoes, setting them to the side as a force of habit. Evelyn tossed her coat on a chair and plopped onto her bed, pushing aside the clothes that were on it to the floor.

Cole stood in front of her, nervous and suddenly wondering what to do with his hands, missing the feel of holding hers.

“Come here,” she said.

He climbed into bed next to her, and she turned on her side to face him, laying her head on his arm. In response, he rested his free hand on her hip without even thinking about it.

“I don’t usually bring people over,” she said.

“Oh.”

“I live with my dad,” she said. “Just him.”

Cole vaguely remembered a mother and a brother from back then, but wasn’t sure how to bring it up. Maybe something had happened to them. Now wasn’t the time and place to start asking too many questions.

“I’m pretty sure he’s either out or passed out drunk in his room,” she said. “So it’s okay that you’re here.”

“I’m glad,” he said.

He noticed that the room was smaller than he imagined. There were posters on the wall of bands like The Shins and Incubus and then smaller ones that he didn’t recognize. A small bookshelf was next to her dresser, which had a vanity mirror next to it. There were some toys on the dresser, small little things that looked like they came from McDonalds Happy Meals or from the toy dispensers that you’d see at Safeway.

She didn’t seem like the kind of girl that would still keep toys around; he found it at odds with how mature she presented herself to be. Maybe they were a comfort to her, like a security blanket. He didn’t know why this fact bothered him.

“I didn’t expect this,” she said.

Cole curved his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close to him.

“I’d like to see you again,” she said quietly. “Is that okay?”

“Yes,” he said.

“We could do stuff around here, when we have time. There are a lot of things to do. It’s not so boring here if you have someone with you.”

He took a good look at her, her face faintly visible under the Christmas lights. She looked sad, but he may have been mistaken. Why would she be sad? He was seeing things.

“I’m down.”

She nodded against his chest then reached down with one hand and deftly unbuckled his belt.

“Maybe we could disappear for a day or two. Go on a Greyhound bus and see where it takes us.”

She took her shirt off and he mimicked her actions. His phone buzzed to life—maybe Grace, he lost track of her earlier—but he quickly set it on silent and tossed it to the floor. Not now.

“We could even take a flight. A really cheap one. Southwest. Somewhere close by. Just to see what it’s like to be in the air. Clouds. Like birds.”

He let out a gasp. The room felt like it was spinning around him, the Christmas lights dancing in his vision. He shut his eyes and felt warmth wash over him as she touched him again and again.

“We could fly away from here.”

## **Mission Peak**

Cole stopped again, crouching down low on the steep dirt path. Everything hurt. Every single part of his body was aching in a way that he hadn't thought possible. He hadn't been ready to do this—he should have researched and should have scouted ahead of time—but he thought that it would be good to be impulsive. People liked impulsivity, he argued, because it meant that you were pretty much down for anything. But this, his body kept reminding him, was a big fucking mistake that he should have not signed himself up for.

He used to run before, in the summers when he wasn't in school, so that he could lose the stress-and-studying weight that he had accumulated during the year. He'd throw on an old shirt, put on his running shoes and shorts, call up Missy or Amy to meet up with him, and then they would all go to the park or the high school track and run. That was easy: flat surfaces, low-impact circular pathways, and living in a safe city like San Jose made it easy to run, even during the evenings when it was cooler.

His breathing was becoming labored, already uncomfortable by the time they had hit the first resting area that only had a bench and nothing else. Cole always figured that hiking Mission Peak was no big deal, something that all his friends on Facebook had accomplished with relative ease. He had always pictured it as some long trail, something easy enough that a kid could do it without breaking much of a sweat. That's how everyone had described it to him whenever the topic came up. People took pictures of

themselves at the top of the hill, overlooking the rest of the valley in a post-victory haze. No one ever took pictures of the way up, or at least posted them for him to see.

“I know you’re not okay,” Grace said. “It wasn’t a question.”

Cole wanted to laugh, but felt that it would be a waste of energy that was better spent sitting on the ground. “I feel horrible.”

“I know. Just looking at you is making me feel exhausted.”

The rest of their group—consisting of Matt, Justin, and Holly—had gone ahead, telling him to catch up and to take breaks when he needed to. Matt was probably just as tired as he was, but was hiding it so that he could impress Holly. He couldn’t accept that a guy with a similar frame to him—and similar lack of exercise, he imagined—could be in much better shape.

Cole got up, refusing Grace’s hand and dusting himself off, his legs wobbling and his throat starting to hurt from all the air he was inhaling and exhaling. He carried on, step-by-step up the steep dirt path, dragging his feet. He was torn between letting his arms sway back and forth or staying in his jacket pockets—he chose to rest them in his pockets, figuring that rest was better than expelling energy that he already didn’t have.

“We’re already past bench one,” she reminded him. “There are still three more benches before the home stretch.”

“And then we’ll reach the top of this hill,” Cole said. He knew that he was saying it for his own benefit, to reassure himself more than anything else. “To the top.”

Cole could sense that Grace was walking behind him, to make sure that he didn’t fall backwards or try to stop for longer than he had to. He knew it was mostly an empty

gesture—he was 5'11, 180 pounds, she was 5'4 , 100+ pounds, he wasn't sure—but he appreciated it all the same. Cole knew that she had hiked this trail since she was a little kid with her family, which was one of the reasons why he thought that this was something that was appropriate for all ages. Maybe it wasn't about physical prowess. Even with the pain surging through his legs and chest, he could appreciate the fact that this hill—it should have been called a goddamn mountain—was something you lived and grew with, instead of something you checked off your list once and forgot about. This wasn't a one-and-done deal for him, but something he wanted to keep coming back to, like an old habit.

A small child ran past him, yelling about forgetting his iPod in the car and wanting to play games. A young mother, barely older than Cole, took the child under her wing and whispered something to him. The child relaxed and walked alongside the older woman, holding on to her sleeve.

Cole appreciated computers for eliminating a lot of social pressures and anxieties that used to come with face-to-face conversations. Before computers were around, he would have been forced to go out and socialize with people, in order to avoid the awkward stereotype of being a guy who lived with his parents. He knew he shouldn't care about what others thought, because most people were stupid, but at the same time he didn't want to be completely anti-social. With the advent of technology—texting, blogging, status updates—things were streamlined. There was a natural buffer to social interactions, a way for him to judge whether or not he wanted to make himself available.

Getting invites to things on Facebook was easy. If he wasn't interested, there were a multitude of excuses he could give. "You sent an invite? Gosh, I don't think—I don't think I got it. Are you sure?" Playing dumb, or ignorant, worked surprisingly well. "I saw it, and I swear I meant to come, but you know, the damn site can be so unintuitive—uh, it means that it's clunky—that I just plain forgot. I'm sorry. Raincheck?"

Iris' invitation to him, however, was straight and direct to the point:

**Iris Connelly**

**November 10, 2012 at 12:33 AM**

**Hey. I texted you, but I'm posting this on here so that everyone sees it. You have to go to my engagement party! If you don't go, everyone will know. Please dress nice, so no jackets or whatever. I'm talking about dress pants, man. P.S. You can bring a pretty girl as a date. =)**

Cole was surprised that Iris finally got Joel to pop the question. They had been dating since their sophomore year of high school, with Iris hopelessly in love with him and swearing off all men since. Last time he checked, Joel looked perfectly content to be "Facebook official" for as long as he possibly could. Getting an expensive ring and partaking in a fancy celebration didn't seem like his style, but maybe Iris finally wore him down.

His phone held the same message, only a little more forceful:

**Iris Connelly: We have been friends for years. I swear to God you better show up in a black tie.**

He replied back, letting her know that he was coming, even though he knew that it would be a big, bombastic celebration that would cost way too much money for a couple their age. There was no way of making up excuses, no way of using work or travel as a scapegoat to get him out, because neither of them applied. He worked for a goddamn real estate company as a low level employee, someone that the office wouldn't care to miss for a day or two. Worst, she called him out for everyone to see. He knew he shouldn't care about such things—and that he could probably easily delete the post—but the damage had been done. Everyone could see it, and he wanted to avoid having to explain to people why he missed out on one of his oldest' friends engagement party.

There would be couples there, apart from the recently engaged duo. The older Cole got, the more he noticed it: friends and friends of friends getting together and having profile pictures together and posting up updates about their shared cat and/or dog doing something funny. At first he chalked it up to irresponsible kids his age getting committed too early, afraid that if they got any older that “it” would never happen to them, that they would die alone because they were single past twenty-two. Slowly, though, the people around him started bunching up together, settling down and wearing less make up and putting on a little more weight and not wearing contacts anymore, because everyone stopped caring so much about how they looked.

His phone rang, Evelyn's picture appearing on his screen. He slid his finger on the touch screen and put the phone to his ear. “Hey Cole.”

An involuntary smile formed on his face. He was glad that no one could see him. “Hey there, what's up?”

Her phone sounded whiny, but in a cute way. “I’m bored. I don’t want to be here.”

“Where are you?”

“The DMV. I’m getting that whole car crash shit taken care of,” she said.

“Do you want me to pick you up later?”

“Can you? I don’t really want to go home. My dad is still pissed about the Civic.”

“Sure.”

“Great. Do you want to do something? Get something to eat? We can go to Great Mall if you want.”

He paused and looked at his computer. Bring a pretty girl.

“Are you free this weekend?”

There was silence on the other hand of the line, and the sound of her rifling through what sounded like her purse. Maybe she was checking through her calendar.

“Yeah,” she finally said. “I’m free. How come?”

He shut his eyes tight. He never believed all those silly warnings before, the “if you feel faint, dizzy, or short of breath, immediately stop what you are doing” warnings printed on the side of exercise machines, chalking them up to something that only happened to fat people. His vision was blurry, though, and he was short of breath, and he felt a fear in his heart that went above and beyond the pain: was he dying? Was he actually dying on a stupid hike?

“Take the video,” he said, in-between gasps of air.

Grace took the phone and started recording him. At each bench he had been recording his progress, something to show off on Facebook so that everyone would know that he climbed the damn thing. They were now at bench three out of four, a monumental occasion by this point considering his erratic breathing and strange colors that he was seeing.

“Well, I’m here now, and it’s cloudy, and cold, and I can’t believe people like to hike this thing in the summer,” he said.

He avoided looking directly at the camera, not wanting his phone to capture the fear that must have been present in his eyes. He didn’t expect to be this tired at this point in his video journey, thinking that this would be a fun little thing to show Evelyn when he saw her again. “You should come with me next time,” he was planning on telling her. It was intended to be a nice way for them to bond, for him to show her a place she had never been to before by her own admission. Checking it out beforehand was supposed to make him look like a goddamn expert, all manly and tough as he’d lead her by the hand, all the way to the top. “We did it,” he was going to tell her. “Together”

“Are you sure you want me to record this?” Grace said.

He motioned for her to continue. “Yeah, it’s nothing. Don’t worry. I’m fine.”

“You don’t look fine.”

He snapped at her. “Did I ask for your commentary, Grace?”

She grumbled and muttered something that Cole couldn’t hear, although the popping in his ears didn’t help matters. Maybe he was being too mean to her, but he

hoped that she would realize that it wasn't merely just him being an asshole, but due in part to the exhausting hike that was quickly devolving into a death march.

"I'm hoping to reach the top of the trail before I pass out," he said, with a forced chuckle. "Maybe the air is better up there and I can relax for a little bit. Enjoy the view. Maybe I'll be able to see my house from the top."

He looked over to Grace, expecting a pity laugh, but got none. "I guess I'll see you all at the fourth bench, then."

Grace turned off the camera on his phone and handed it back to him. She brushed past him and started back on the dirt path leading upwards.

Cole sat back down on the bench, exhausted. "Grace? Where are you going?"

She didn't turn to look back, but instead continued to shamble up the path. Cole could sense that she seemed angry, by the way her body swayed and how her fists clenched and unclenched. She tried to make herself look small, like she was retreating back into her body. He tried get up, but a sharp pain went up his legs, causing him to sit back down reluctantly.

"Grace! Wait for me!" he yelled.

She continued to walk, disappearing around a mound of dirt and out of his line of sight.

Cole pulled on his tie again. It was a nervous tic of his, something to do during a lull in a conversation. He never understood the significance of a tie, figuring they were a decorative thing that became a symbol of power or professionalism over time. He felt that

they were restricting, like putting a leash on someone. The only thing he enjoyed about a tie was how he could pull on it, because it gave him something to do with his hands when he spoke to people. He felt that it made him look smart, grown up, like he had important business to attend to.

“You don’t need to keep pulling on it so much,” Evelyn said. She pulled his hand away from his tie and fixed it for him. “It’s just on too tight.”

She stood next to him, wearing a smart black dress and sipping on some wine. He liked seeing her this way, made up and dressed up, as opposed to her usual laidback attire. “I don’t dress up very often,” she had explained to him. “I don’t have the time to really go to things like this.” It took a great deal of encouragement from him to persuade her to go. He felt relieved that at no point did she bring up the fact that they had only been dating for a few weeks. He saw this as a sign that she liked him more than she led him to believe.

“This isn’t so bad,” he said. “I thought it’d be a little rowdier than this.”

“Most of the people here are older. Check out those two over there. Aren’t they her parents?”

They were across the room, having a spirited conversation with what looked like other family members. Cole knew Iris’ family had deep pockets, so he wasn’t surprised at the idea that they were probably paying for the whole event. She was born well-off, but unlike many of his other friends he didn’t begrudge her for it. She never threw money around like it was going out of style, and she actually bothered to find a real job as an accountant, something he was still struggling to find.

“It must be nice to have parents who could afford all this,” he said.

He stopped himself from elaborating further. Family was a touchy subject with Evelyn. Her father, and only remaining family member, was an unemployed man who spent his days drinking and going on singles websites.

“They look very happy,” Evelyn said. She gestured toward the large crowd gathered around Iris and Joel, attached at the hip and greeting everyone like they were royalty.

She was right. It was a strange sight, seeing a guy like Joel so domesticated and cheerful. This was a far cry from the Joel he knew when he was younger, a guy who seemed aimless in his pursuits and appeared destined to fade away into obscurity. The thought of disappearing terrified Cole. It reminded him of television shows, where characters who were once essential to the story gradually faded into the background.

The happy couple came over to Cole and Evelyn, greeting them warmly, as if they were all old friends. “You brought a guest!”

“You remember Evelyn?” Cole said.

“Of course I did,” Iris said, although Cole knew that she was bullshitting him. “It’s so nice seeing you again. You look amazing.”

Evelyn smiled sheepishly. “That’s kind of you to say.”

Cole wrapped an arm around Evelyn’s waist. “I agree. Look at this woman.”

Iris nodded in approval, then leaned in. “You better lock that down.”

“It’s only been a few weeks.”

Iris leaned back, smiling at Evelyn. “You wait any longer and you might miss out on a chance to be happy. Like us.”

Evelyn wiggled out of his grasp, embarrassed. “I’m gonna go get some air. I’ll be back. It was really good seeing you.”

She walked off in a hurry, like she had someplace better to be. Cole felt a tinge of confusion, wondering if he had said anything to upset her. Things were still new and fresh with Evelyn, and it was hard to interpret the signs that he knew were there. At this point in their relationship, the way she carried herself sometimes said more to him than the way she spoke to him.

“I don’t think she’s ready to be hearing that kind of stuff,” Cole said.

Joel scoffed. “San Jose isn’t like LA, man. The dating scene here is awful. Great place to live and raise a family, terrible place to meet new people.”

Joel wasn’t completely off-base. San Jose, despite being one of the safest cities in the nation, didn’t necessarily evoke much of a bar scene. The last girl Cole even met at a bar, before being reacquainted with Evelyn, had given him a fake number, despite his buying her drinks and chatting it up all night.

“All I’m saying is that she seems nice. Quiet, but you can learn to work with that. Settling down is something you need to think about before you hit 30. If that doesn’t work out, then, well...you still hang out with that Grace girl, right?”

Cole felt awkward at the mention of Grace. He wasn’t sure what to make of being associated romantically with a girl who had a questionable relationship history. I

“She’s right,” Joel said. “It’s the new thing. Moving in together. Sharing household responsibilities. Settling down.”

Settling down sounded strange to Cole, like a phrase that was mistranslated. To him, it sounded like slowing down, finding a nice rocking chair for two, and watching the rest of the day pass by. The only functional relationships he had ever seen were on television, and even then the only interesting couples were the ones who fought and had would-they-or-won’t-they romantic tension until the very end. Sam and Diane, Ross and Rachel, Mulder and Scully—all of them had to fight for their relationships, against all odds and differences and misunderstandings.

Evelyn had been easy to get, because she was lonely and needed someone. He wondered if a story about his relationship with her would be entertaining to watch if it was televised for everyone to see. He hoped so.

“Go get her, champ,” Iris said teasingly. “Before some other guy tries to hit on her.”

Cole left the two in search of Evelyn. It would be okay; he would just explain to her that they were kidding, and that they were wedding-crazy, and that she and him would take things nice and slow.

Cole grabbed a clump of grass as he crawled his way up the rocky path. The steep dirt paths had disappeared, replaced by climbing portions that made him regret not turning back earlier. He was past the fourth bench now, with still no sign of Grace. He was upset that she was decided, of all days, to play with him like this. This was not the

time or place for Grace to be childish, especially considering that she had taken their supplies with him in her backpack, including his water. He cupped his hands to his mouth and yelled.

“Grace!” he called out. “Grace, where are you?”

He tried not to sound desperate, but he was fairly sure that he came across as sounding like a lost child trying to find his parents. Screw the other people around him. These people were probably long time experts of Mission Peak anyhow, so they couldn’t understand the physical pain he was forced to endure. His mouth was dry, his legs felt heavy, and he was sweating too much under the jacket. He took it off and tied it around his waist and kept on going.

“Grace!” he tried again. “Grace!”

No sign of her.

He worried for a brief second. What if she had abandoned him completely? What if she had actually found an alternate route down the hill because she was so damn angry with him? It wouldn’t be the first time she had stormed out after he made an inappropriate comment to her. Sure, he could be mean to her, and maybe he wrote her off too often, but only because it was easy with her. If he had to admit it, he treated her the way he did because she let him.

Another family passed him by, a Filipino family with two young children, judging by the bits and pieces of what they were saying to one another. The kids bounced up and down, unhindered by the steepness of the path or the rocky terrain. The whole family held their backs at an angle, like they were going under a hula-hoop. They looked at ease

as they climbed back down and past him. He was thankful to see this technique; he didn't even think about how he'd get down, but imagined that he would have been crawling backwards so slowly that it would take him twice as long as it took him to get up in the first place.

He continued going up, reinvigorated with the new knowledge that had obtained. He had to keep on going. He had a plan now, a method of attack to get off this mound of dirt. There was no way he could quit now.

He found Evelyn, sitting on a bench and sipping from a beer bottle. Two empty bottles were under the bench next to her. Her dressed looked wrinkled and she was squinting at something in the distance. He took a seat next to her, but she kept on looking forward, like whatever she was looking at was about to move. He tried to find what it was, but all he could see was the rest of the park that the reception was taking place in.

"I thought you were going to get some air," he said.

"I did," she said, "and then I got some drinks."

He turned to look at her. "You don't usually drink."

"I didn't really know anyone at that party," she said. "I was hoping this would loosen me up."

"What about Iris?" he said.

Evelyn laughed. "I don't think she remembers me. Shit. I sat behind her in Spanish class. Or was it Bio? I'm mixing them up. Ha." She took another sip from her Corona.

“Hey,” he said.

She turned her head to look at him. “Hmm?”

“I’m sorry about earlier. I hope it didn’t weird you out, all that relationship talk.”

She shrugged her shoulders. “It’s whatever. It’s just not something I’m used to hearing about.”

It never occurred to Cole that the conversation had never been brought up with her in a long time, if ever. It was never something he had been willing to bring up in the past, afraid of scaring her away with horror stories about his past failed relationships. He just assumed the same about her.

He put his hand on top of hers. “Well, maybe, given enough time, we could have this discussion again?”

She took another sip from the bottle, finishing it and setting it aside with the other two. “That doesn’t sound like a bad idea. Sure.”

It wasn’t the answer he wanted to hear, but it wasn’t a no, either. He could live with a “sure.”

He found Grace, sitting next to the long metal pipe that served as a marker. She looked upset. Her face was puffy when he approached her.

“To answer your question—because I know you’re about to ask—I’m fine,” she said. “I’m just tired and I tripped over a rock trying to run up here.”

He walked over to her and leaned against the metal pipe. It felt cool to the touch, like he expected it to be. As he held on to the pipe, he felt feelings of accomplishment

and pride surge throughout his tired and beaten body. He made it to the top, and from there he could see the hills, and the houses and cars and people in the far off distance. He could see the haze of the fog blanketing the trail below him. He felt connected to everything and everyone.

After giving himself a few moments to enjoy his victory, he leaned against the metal pole and slid down next to Grace.

“I wasn’t going to say anything, by the way” he said matter-of-factly. “And—because I know you’re going to say it—the answer is yes.”

She looked at him strangely. “Yes? Yes to what?”

“To your question.”

“What question? I didn’t ask you anything.”

“The question was, ‘Are you grateful that you came with me?’” he said. “Yes.”

Her face scrunched up, like she was about to cry. Instead of doing that, she punched him hard. “Don’t think you can play it that way.”

“Play it what way?”

“Pretending you weren’t a total asshole to me earlier,” she said.

Cole rubbed at the back of his head, feeling red hot from the allegation. “I was tired. Exhausted. I didn’t mean to snap at you.”

“Work’s just been really…” she said, drifting off. She looked like she was unsure if she should continue. “Stressful. It’s been really stressful.”

“You never talk about work,” he said gently. “I’m sorry about whatever it is.”

“It’s just...there’s this new hire, and she’s been getting a lot of attention from the boss. And the customers like her a lot better. Most people like her better.”

He scoffed at this. “Well, what does she have that you don’t have?”

“She’s taller.” She said, and then put her hands in front of her chest like she’s holding something. “And, she has this.”

He laughed and put her hands down. “I’m sure they’re not that big.”

“I guess you’re right,” she said. “I’m just...”

“Jealous?”

She grunted.

“I’ll take that as a yes. Well, whatever it is you do, I say, don’t worry about it.

This new person may be the new shit, but you’re classic. People like you, hell, guys love you. They like the whole 5 foot-whatever thing you’ve got going on.”

“Thanks,” she said. “Maybe there’s hope.”

“There has to be,” he said. “Otherwise, why wake up in the morning?”

“To pay the bills so that you have a place to wake up in?”

They sat there for awhile, admiring the view. After a couple of minutes, Grace stood up and started to stretch. “We should head back down soon. It’s getting colder.”

He reluctantly got up, but not before taking a picture on his camera phone. “I want to show this to Eve when I see her later this week.”

“Why?”

“I wanna show her the trail. You know, a bonding exercise for us,” he said. “Been seeing less and less of her lately and I’m catching her at all the wrong times. She’s not allowed to answer her phone at work, and she has such strange hours.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“I’m hoping it’ll bring us closer. Doing this with someone has to be special, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Grace walked past him. “Well, good luck with that Cole.” She started making her way down the trail.

Cole shoved his phone back into his pocket and walked as quickly as he could to catch up with her, doing his best to ignore the burning sensation in his legs and chest.

## **Go Tomorrow**

The voice on the other end of the phone tells her that her services are no longer required any longer. Evelyn thinks that this is a mistake, because she's the damn manager of the store, not one of the many employees that she has to hire every week. She hires a lot of Asian girls, because they have pretty friends who visit them at the store and buy clothes, because they're cheaper than the ones at the Valley Fair location. She's sure that one of their names must have been Evelyn, too, because it was a popular name for girls.

"The store no longer requires your services, Miss Evelyn Nguyen," the disinterested voice tells her again.

"I don't understand," she says. She leans against the bus stop shelter, ignoring the grime and dirt that's accumulated on it. "I was scheduled to come in today. I have to close tonight. I'm the only one who has keys."

The person on the other end of the line sounds scratchy and far away, and she half suspects that the woman is doing something else while talking to her, like looking at her nails or checking her Facebook.

"We've hired someone to replace you," the voice says, pausing for a few moments before adding, "a person by the name of Kari Brown."

The name clicks immediately in her head. She clenches her teeth and closes her eyes. The area manager kept on pressuring her to hire a white girl, telling her that she wanted her front and center as a greeter to attract more business. "I want to make us look like we're multicultural, Evelyn," her manager explained.

"Kari's a new hire, she can't handle my job," she says. "She barely knows anything about how to handle a store."

The static only gets worse, causing Evelyn to strain to listen. "According to this, she's worked at The Gap and Banana Republic before. She'll be fine."

She wants to throw her phone onto the street, so that the person on the end of the line has to hear the sickening crack of a phone getting run over, but she decides against it. "What did I do?"

She thinks about working at the store since she was seventeen and unsure of what to do after graduating high school. She remembers the late nights folding clothes in the back room, listening to CDS of Rilo Kiley and Death Cab for Cutie piped through the store speakers. Co-workers came and went, transferring to different stores out of state or leaving to go to college, but she stayed because it was nice and safe and easy.

"You were late," the voice tells her. "We got anonymous complaints. I shouldn't be telling you this, but from what I can see here, it says you've come in late consistently over the last couple of weeks, unacceptable behavior to display to those working under you. We had to let you go."

She slumps against the bus shelter, melting into a corner. "I crashed my car recently, I can make up--"

The voice cuts her off with a few clicks of a tongue. "If you have any complaints, please take it up with management. Thank you for your service to this company."

The line dies and her phone returns to the home screen. She didn't even get the name of the person who just fired her, and she wonders if maybe this is all just a big prank. Was it Fuck-With-Your-Boss Day?

She clicks on contacts and scans for the first employee that pops up: Eli [Co-Worker].

*Who's running the store right now?*

She clicks send and waits. This could be one big put-on by everyone. They're just messing with her because of how depressed she was over the Civic being totalled. This was all one big misunderstanding, something she would forget about as soon as she would walk into work.

Her phone came to life with a chirp, and her heart sinks in her chest.

*Eli [Co-Worker]: Uhhhh, Kari said she's been promoted? Are you coming in today? She's making me do dressing rooms today and I hate that shit.*

She stares at the screen for a little while. The little kid would never lie to her, because she knows that he has a big crush on her. She turns off the screen and shoves it into her jacket pocket, before picking herself up.

She feels dizzy and faint, like she's about to pass out, but forces herself to keep it together. She breathes in, and then out, every couple of seconds, trying to take control of the feeling in her chest.

Evelyn thinks that, any second now, her phone will ring and her prayers will be answered. She's done job interviews all over San Jose, including neighboring cities like

Milpitas and Santa Clara. There are dozens of clothing stores, and one of them has to need a manager or assistant manager or, hell, even a stockroom manager. She knows how this song and dance goes, and even dresses up in the store brand style to show prospective employers that she knows how to wear (and promote) their clothing lines.

But no second interview calls come. She even calls back, something she frowned up when she used to hire kids, asking if they still remembered their interviews. It's always the same response, or a variation on it: "You're great, but we're not hiring at the moment," "We just don't have a position for you at this time," "We have no spots available, but we'll keep your resume on file for the next six months."

She knows that she's already been forgotten, her meager resume tossed into some forgotten pile of paperwork. She never remembered the names of the people she didn't hire either, and she doesn't expect the same from the interviewers. If you didn't wow them the first time, they weren't going to remember you the next time.

She feels humiliated being at home. She hasn't told her dad that she's been laid off, instead making up a story about being given some extra vacation days. She worries about her savings, and how a few months of paying rent will empty it dry and force both her and her dad from the small apartment that they share at El Rancho Verde.

There are some things that she's thankful for, like Cole. Cole makes things easier for her. He drives her to job interviews, buys her dinner (and sometimes lunch), and doesn't really care that she's not working at the moment. "I'm here to support you if you need help," he tells her over and over again. "I don't want you thinking I can't provide, even if it's just a little. Besides, you'll get back on your feet in no time."

She's afraid of relying on him, because he could just as easily leave without any warning. She knew about his crush on her in high school. He wore his heart on his sleeve, even if he did occasionally act like he was better than most of his friends. He hasn't said it, but the way he looks at her makes her feel like she's perfect to him. It makes it worse for her, having to compete with his idealization of her from their youth. The version of her from high school had potential. She wonders what she has now.

Reconnecting with Cole meant reconnecting with the rest of her old friends. Not having a job that meant late hours and forced overtime allows her to relax for the first time since she left high school. She feels guilty, but the late night parties and the free drinks help her forget her troubles for a little bit.

Tonight is another one of those parties, thrown by Matt, a guy that Cole doesn't like very much because he brags about nothing. Still, that doesn't stop the two of them from enjoying the house party, even though it's not really Matt's house but his parent's. A lot of her old friends haven't found places of their own, which makes it easier to relate to them.

Grace has been the most welcoming of her old friends. It's a relief to have another friend her age, after having to deal with mostly younger co-workers or her father for the last few years. They drink together at these parties—Grace talks and Evelyn listens, most nights. Cole tends to disappear at parties. He told her that he hated social gatherings like these, but she knows that, just like most people, he wants to appear social and fun.

Grace leans in. Evelyn can smell the alcohol on her breath. "Do you really want a job?"

Evelyn nods slowly. "I do."

"To keep busy?"

Evelyn doesn't understand the concept of people working as a way to spend the day. "I don't have any ways of getting money."

Grace takes her by the hand to the backyard. She doubts that there's a job for her outside, unless it involves cleaning up vomit or climbing a tree to rescue a cat. She laughs at her own little joke, feeling hot in the face. Grace ignores her and brings her to a corner of the yard, far away from the rest of the party goers. She looks around, like she's suspicious that someone, maybe Cole, might be hearing them. This is the first time that Evelyn notices how beautiful Grace is, because she's not pretending to be drunk or stupider than she really is.

"What is it?" Evelyn asks.

Grace's face becomes serious. "Do you know where I work, Eve?"

It sounds like a trick question, something that she should remember considering how they've been spending more and more time together. Secretary? Accountant? Something-something numbers.

"No," she responds.

For a moment Grace looks away, like she regrets ever bringing Evelyn to their secluded little corner, like she's disappointed in her answer. Evelyn wants to apologize and tell her that she's so sorry that she doesn't know where she works, that this cranberry

vodka is making her head dizzy, and that she should probably find a nice couch to lie down on until Cole comes back from wherever he wandered too.

Grace puts both of her hands on Evelyn's shoulders firmly. "I work near Story Road."

Story Road brings up images of Century Plaza, a mostly Asian shopping center that caters to older people. Memories of beeper stores and the old Price Club pop up, too. Evelyn smiles and wants to tell her that she can only really speak English and that she wouldn't really fit in, but then Grace leans in closer, until their noses are touching. She's never been this close to her, and it makes her feel awkward. Her eyes are pretty. She wonders why Cole doesn't speak about her very often, even though he tells her that Grace is one of his closest friends.

"Behind the Burger King. That store that has the mirrored windows. Do you know what I mean now?"

"No."

Grace sighs. "I work at Cafe Quyen."

Evelyn feels herself smiling. "Don't kid around like that, Grace."

She's heard of Cafe Quyen. She remembers news reports about the growing number of Vietnamese Coffee Shops in the area, places where young women work as waitresses wearing next to nothing, serving coffee and conversation to their patrons. Grace is pretty, but not the kind of pretty that she expected to see at a place like that. She's never been to a coffee shop before, but she imagines that the girls cake on their

makeup, in hues of blue and purple, the kind of unnatural look that would make them stand out and accentuate their features.

"I'm not kidding," she says, her voice lowering. "It's not something I tell a lot of people."

Evelyn narrows her eyes. Grace's face looks all natural, with a just a hint of eyeliner and some lipstick. "Cut it out. You don't look like the type."

Another sigh. "You know what I studied in college?"

"Math?"

"I wish," Grace says. "I left with a degree in economics."

"Oh?"

"You know what it taught me?"

"What?"

"That money is, first and foremost, the most important thing you can have. Unless you have loaded parents, you're pretty much resigned to being poor in fucking Silicon Valley. Do you have loaded parents, Eve?"

Evelyn thinks about her father, sitting at home and doing nothing because he's still depressed about getting fired. She thinks about him barking at her for her bi-monthly paycheck, so that they have a place to stay for another month. She thinks about the totaled Civic, her last source of personal freedom gone.

"No," Evelyn says slowly, drawing it out. "I don't."

"Then you understand where I'm coming from. You and me, we're not like Cole and the others," Grace says, her voice lowering. She holds Evelyn's shoulders more firmly. "You and I have to work to get what we want."

"Oh."

"How would you like a job, Eve? Where you don't have to do much and the pay is good, and you only work a few nights a week?"

It sounds too good to be true, but she can't afford to hesitate and ask Grace too many pointless questions. "When can I start?"

This is the first time Evelyn really sees this building. She had passed by it, before, when she used to go to the Safeway located further down, but it never entered her mind as a particularly important place. The mirrored windows never aroused her suspicions, and the big bold store sign CAFE QUYEN never really made her think twice. She wasn't a coffee drinker, preferring to chug cans of Diet Coke if she ever need the caffeine, so it never enticed her to come in. She's just outside the place now, and still doesn't think it looks particularly all that bad. A Burger King is right across in the same lot, recently refurbished to look more modern. A Super Laundromat and Alex's Arcade are the two innocent businesses that share space beside Café Vi Dang #3, as if it fits in with them naturally.

Grace keeps giving her funny looks, which makes Evelyn want to hide inside of the coat that she's wearing. She feels queasy, if only because of the less than smooth car ride the way there. Excuses for not going inside race through her head, everything from

“Maybe this is a mistake?” to “I’ll just relax for a little bit. I don’t really need this money.” Grace takes her by the hand and pushes aside the mirrored entrance door. “You’ll be fine,” she tells her. “The people here are really nice.”

When Grace mentioned to her that the place was no worse than Hooters, she must have been exaggerating. The first thing she notices is a haze of smoke in the air, and dim mood lighting. The room is bigger than she expected, lit with wide screen TVs mounted on the walls broadcasting sports and Asian music videos. It smells strongly of cigarettes and coffee, which reminds her of her father. Beautiful young women walk between the tables and chairs, balancing trays of iced coffees and teas like experts. They look cheerful to Evelyn, which creeps her out a lot more than she anticipates.

A girl walks past her, looking a good three years younger than her and only wearing a thin red thong, clear six inch heels, and nothing else. She immediately looks to Grace, who nods knowingly. “Don’t worry,” she whispers to her.

“Worry?” Evelyn squeaks out. “Where is that girl’s top? What is she do--”

“Working,” Grace cuts in sharply. She sounds annoyed, or offended, or a combination of both.

Evelyn feels Grace tug at her sleeve again. She takes the two of them past the counter where a few girls—some in lingerie, others in less—congregate, hiding their faces behind their iPhones. They walk past a few crates labeled COFFEE until they reach a black door with the word MANAGER in faded gold lettering on it.

“Remember what I told you,” Grace says. “This place is owned by a former waitress. Don’t say anything you think might be offensive.”

Evelyn knocks on the door. She can hear a person inside, moving around, before hearing a woman's voice saying, "The door's open. Come in."

Grace motions for her to go in. "I'll wait for you here."

Evelyn enters the room, closing the door behind her. The office is sparsely decorated, save for an old desk with a pink Sony laptop on it. An older woman sits at the desk, looking like one of the waitresses from the front. The woman stands up, and offers a hand for Evelyn to shake. She notices that the older woman wears a sharp black dress that hugs at her curves and goes to her knees. Evelyn shakes the woman's hand briskly, before being motioned to take a seat across from her.

"My name is Linh," the older woman says. "And you are?"

"Evelyn," she tells her. "I'm Grace's friend."

The older woman nods knowingly. Evelyn becomes self-conscious, wondering if she talked about parts of her body that would attract customers. She reflexively crosses her arms, which elicits a laugh from the older woman.

"I hope you're not shy," Linh says. "This isn't the kind of place to be a wallflower, Ms. Nguyen."

"I know, just a reaction," Evelyn mumbles.

Linh tilts her head curiously. "A reaction? A reaction to what?"

"Your eyes. I felt you looking."

Another chuckle from the older woman. "This is a family establishment. We hold ourselves to high standards. Entertainment and comfort is crucial to the business we conduct here."

“I understand that.”

“And you understand that you will be expected to conduct yourself in a certain manner?”

“Yes. Professional, light, and fun.”

The older woman gives her an appreciative look. “You understand that we run things a special way here, yes? A lot of the clientele will want to speak with you. They’ll say things that you may feel uncomfortable with.”

Evelyn pauses momentarily. “Yes, Grace told me all about that. I’m willing to do these things.”

“Do you have a boyfriend?”

This question catches her off-guard. “I’m involved with someone.”

“How long have you two been together?”

“It’s a recent thing,” Evelyn says.

“Does he know that you intend to work here?”

Cole isn’t part of this equation for her. She doesn’t want to involve him in this, because of too many things. Maybe he wouldn’t understand, or maybe he would disapprove, or maybe he would leave.

“No,” she answers honestly. “I didn’t know how to bring this up to him.”

“I see. I just wanted to make sure.”

“That’s all?”

“That’s all.”

“Okay.”

The older woman smiles at her. “So, Evelyn. Do you know how to make iced coffee?”

Cole takes her out for dinner, even though she doesn’t want to make a big deal about her new job. He’s happy for her, excited that there’s finally been a break in her job hunt after the last few weeks. They go to Santana Row and eat at Maggiano’s, even though she tells him that they don’t have to go anywhere fancy.

“I want to do this nice thing for you. It’s not hurting my wallet or anything,” he tells her. “I just want to treat you out. Let me. C’mon.”

She lets him do this and doesn’t pursue the subject further, because one of the few things she knows about Cole is that money tends to be a sore subject for him. The less it’s brought up, the better.

Evelyn wears the same dress she wore to the wedding from a couple of days ago, because it’s one of the few that she owns that she can still fit into. The restaurant is nice and the lighting is dim, and she can hear classy music piping through the speakers. She feels like she doesn’t belong in a place like this.

“You still haven’t told me where you work, Eve,” Cole says. “You don’t have to be embarrassed by it.”

For a moment she panics, wondering if Grace spilled her secret even though she promised that she wouldn’t.

“A job is a job, you know. It doesn’t matter if they demoted you to a sales associate or whatever. It’s a stepping stone to bigger and better things,” he says. “I’m proud of you. Working hard finally paid off.”

She smiles at him, even if all of it is a lie. “Thank you, Cole.” She rubs his face affectionately. With each passing day she gets more and more used to seeing his face and the animated expressions he makes when she’s around him.

She breathes a sigh of a relief. Her secret is safe, but she still needs to think of a convincing enough lie to tell him. “Oh, you know. It’s what it is. I need to get settled first. I can’t suddenly start taking everyone I know to work.”

“Yeah, you don’t want to be starting off on the wrong foot with your new boss, huh?” he offers helpfully. “But later, then?”

“Definitely,” she says. She imagines bringing him to her real work place. Changing into her “work clothes” and serving him iced tea. The look of disgust on his face when he’d realize that all the other guys in the place were getting a good view of her ass.

“Great,” he says. He leans back into chair and picks up a menu. “I feel like getting some Rigatoni. How about you?”

Evelyn doesn’t recognize the person she sees in the bathroom mirror. The version of herself that she keeps in her head wears zipped-up jackets and Levis jeans, with minimal makeup save for lipstick on special occasions. She’s used to wearing Rainbows flip flops or slip-ons. Her reflection betrays what she feels she is. The reflection that

stares back at her has make-up, helpfully applied by Grace, which makes her look a few years younger. She's wearing just a lacy black bra and panties, stuff she picked up from Victoria's Secret after Grace suggested to shop there. She wears clear, six-inch heels that hurt like hell—she doesn't believe Grace's comment that she'll get used to them in time.

The bathroom door opens from behind, and she sees Grace's head peeking from behind it. "You coming? Shift's about to start. Jessica's almost done."

Evelyn smiles to Grace through the mirror. "Just making sure everything's in the right place."

Grace walks up to her, dressed similarly. The two almost look like sisters in the mirror. "You look great."

"I do?"

Grace grabs her by the shoulders and squeezes. "It'll be fine. Most of the guys here aren't so bad. They just want to dick around for a few hours, drink some coffee, play card games, and check their emails."

"And they don't take pictures, right?"

"They don't. Not unless you want them to. And that's extra," Grace says cheerfully. "Besides, you don't have to give your real name here. Go by that name I told you."

"Cathy?"

"You look like a Cathy. And there are so many goddamn Cathy Nguyens in San Jose alone...they'd have to try really hard to figure out who you are."

Evelyn rubs at her arms nervously. “All of this is just really new to me. Dressing like this, the fake names...I don’t want any of this leaking out to anyone.”

“Like Cole?”

“Among other people,” Evelyn says. Her mind drifts to her family. “I’m just going to do this for a couple of weeks. Just until I can get settled elsewhere.”

“Do whatever you gotta do,” Grace says. “Ease up and relax for now. This gig isn’t so bad once you the hang out of it.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Evelyn says.

“Remember: lightness. Ease up. Have fun. Customers pay more if you look like you’re having just as much fun as they are. Just think: it’s just like Hooters for Asians, more or less. Well, less. Make this into a game.” Grace offers a quick smile before ducking out of the room.

“Have fun,” Evelyn repeats in the mirror. She adjusts her stance and puts her hands on her hips to look more provocative. Her lips curl into a smile. “Have fun.” She relaxes and tries to think of it as one big game, a chance to act as something that she’s not. “Hi, I’m Cathy. Did you want anything to drink today?” She tries again, trying to carry herself like the other girls out in the front. “Hey, I’m Cathy. Cathy. Cath-y. How do I spell it? With a C, dummy. Oh you, no. The K version sounds so weird to me. Why? Because I was born with a C, I guess.”

Evelyn starts to dress with more clothes on every time she goes out with Cole. It doesn't look out of place, luckily for her. The days are getting colder, with Winter looming in the horizon, so she takes this opportunity to bundle up, especially in public. She's only been working at Café Quyen for a short time, but she doesn't want to take the chance that a client will recognize her. So she throws on coats, and jackets, and jeans and leggings that cover up every inch of her body. She ties up her hair in a bun, and takes whatever opportunities she can to wear sunglasses, even though Cole hates it when she does that, because he can't tell how she's feeling without seeing her eyes.

Today's their trip to the IKEA in Palo Alto, planned simply because neither of them has ever been to one before. She appreciates Cole for driving her on all these little trips, even though they aren't very far. Not having a car made every mile seem just a little bit longer, and each car ride just a little more special now that she wasn't in charge of where to go.

"I can't believe I've never been here before," Cole says. He looks like a little kid, face filled with awe at all the pretty and bright colors around him.

Evelyn watches him go to the living room displays. All of them are impeccably clean and tidy, colorful and filled with appropriate amenities like wide screen television sets, too-big living room couches, and magazines that seem to cater to families. She thinks about the living room back in the apartment, cramped and sparsely decorated except for the signature ashtray and the occasional bottle of whatever alcohol her dad managed to bring back home.

Cole motions for Evelyn to join him in another home display, this time a modern looking kitchen. “Wouldn’t having something like this be awesome?” he says. “I feel like this is something right out of the future. Remember that scene from Back to the Future II where they cooked those tiny little pizzas into big ones in seconds? I could totally see something like that here.”

She laughs. She appreciates the fact that Cole can say something so silly around her. When they’re with friends, like Grace or Matt, he becomes too serious. He lectures them about money, responsibility, and growing up. She appreciates those things too, but even she secretly admits to herself that sometimes he can come across as heavy handed. He’s not perfect, not by any stretch of the imagination, but he’s there for her, and she feels that’s more than what most people could ask for from anybody.

Evelyn walks into another display that looks modest, like it’s actually reasonably affordable on her budget of no-extras and save-everything. There’s a light fixture, a two person couch, and a table for magazines and television remotes. The color is all whites and blues, and it reminds her of the house that she used to live in, before she and her dad moved to El Rancho Verde.

She feels hands wrap themselves around her waist and she murmurs softly. Cole smells like Adidas cologne and Dial for Men body wash. The scents don’t complement each other, but he’s warm and that’s what matters.

“I like this room,” she says. “What do you think?”

He nods appreciatively. “Nice and simple. Looks like a starter family living room.”

“Oh? What makes you say that?”

His face lights up. “That.”

He points to a cleverly arranged mess of toys on the ground. Fire trucks, Barbie dolls, and miniature musical instruments. “Smart idea to have all that there. Makes this look just a little more like a home, huh?”

He squeezes her hand.

The first couple of days aren't so bad. Linh arranged for her to take on lighter shifts at first, so that she would get used to demands of the job. Evelyn appreciated Linh for knowing that it wasn't easy to step into the role immediately.

Linh motions for Evelyn to come over to the counter. She holds a piece of paper—the girls' collective timesheet—in her hands.

“You're going by a different name?” Linh asks.

“Cathy,” Evelyn says. “It's a common enough name. They'd get lost trying to find me online or whatever. Probably confuse me with a Youtube singer or something. The last thing I need in my life is a stalker.”

Linh seems amused. “It's not unheard of to change your name. Not all the girls are comfortable giving out their real names. It's understandable. They want a separation between work and their lives. I don't mind.”

“You used to work here too, right? Before the old owner sold you the joint?”

“Yes.”

“Did you go by a different name?”

The older woman thinks for a second. “No. I wasn’t ashamed. All my friends worked here. I was comfortable. I didn’t need to change it.”

Evelyn isn’t satisfied with the answer. She wants to probe deeper, ask what her family thought about her choice of job, but she’s still new and she doesn’t want to offend anyone just yet. “I see. Thank you, Linh.”

“No problem.” She jots an E next to Cathy’s timesheet, probably so that she’s reminded of who it is. “

“Is that it?”

“That’s it,” Linh says. “Oh. Do you see that man over there?” She points to a Vietnamese guy her age, wearing a hat, sunglasses, and an old sweater emblazoned with “St. Victors Youth Leader.” The man makes a quick check of the place, before relaxing and taking a seat near a television that’s showing the game.

“Try to serve that guy,” Linh says. She lowers her voice to a whisper. “He tips ‘cause he feels guilty. Make sure to talk cute.”

“Talk cute?”

“Some of the guys want the girls to be really young. You’re what, 24?”

“Yeah,” she says. “You said that wasn’t a problem?”

“It’s not, but it does make things a little harder for you. Less bounce in your step. Just go over there and talk cute.”

The man looks over to the two of them. Evelyn perks her head up and smiles at him. The man has the same build as Cole, minus the not being Filipino thing. It makes her wonder if Cole has ever been to a place like this.

On her days off, she goes to Cole's place. He's one of the few people she knows that lives by themselves. He prides himself on this fact, and explains to her that it's all connected to his growing concern that the rest of their group of friends are experiencing "arrested development."

"It's when people aren't hitting the right landmarks in life," he tells her. "Landmarks being things such as graduating from college, getting real jobs, getting married, having kids. You're supposed to be hitting those landmarks at certain ages."

"Real jobs?"

He quickly backpedals. "Real jobs, like, you know, jobs that you have for the rest of your life. Jobs that don't pay by the hour."

"What about us? You're an administrative assistant and I'm," she says, thoughtfully pausing, "not exactly making bank."

"Well, I mean, you and me, we're different," he says. She can sense the hesitation in his voice. "We're more mature than the others."

"Mature?"

"Not relying on our parents to make ends meet. There's something to be said about that, right?" He looks frustrated and she suddenly feels sorry for being so pointed with her questioning. "I mean well, I do."

Evelyn puts her hands up to stop him from going further. "You don't have to get all riled up. It's fine. Don't worry about it."

Cole eases up and smiles. He leads her to his couch, where the television is already on. She sits next to him, putting her head on his shoulder. She thinks it's admirable that he's mature enough to have a place of his own, without needing to rely on roommates or parents to help him with things.

“Do you ever get lonely here?” she asks.

“Of course not.” He switches the channel on the television. It shows a plane flying over a smiling woman.

“Where do you want to go?” the woman on the television says, smiling a perfect smile with perfect white teeth. “Follow your dreams—with us.”

Cole playfully nudges Evelyn and points. “You’ve never flown before.”

She remembers her mother telling her that she had flown once, when the family had to attend a wedding in San Diego on short notice. This was back when her family took trips, before her mother and brother left, and before her father became withdrawn and jobless.

“Yeah,” she says. “Never been higher than that time we went to Twin Peaks in San Francisco.”

Cole puts his arm around her. “That was a fun day, wasn't it?”

It was cold and rainy and she was half-asleep from a late night shift when they went, but she nods anyways because she doesn't want to hurt his feelings. “Really fun day.”

“Choose your airline and go!” the television woman announces. The screen shows airplanes majestically flying over people of all colors smiling. All of them are waving at the plane, as if the pilot could see them, and Evelyn laughs inwardly at the ridiculousness.

“There’s never been a better time to travel. Why wait? Buy your tickets today, and go tomorrow!” A golden ticket is handed to the woman, who suddenly finds herself transported to a tropical paradise, complete with the appropriate clothing for the occasion. Cole snickers and then changes the channel to HBO.

“We should check that out sometime. Maybe book a flight to somewhere nice and sunny. Doesn’t that sound nice? We should save up.”

She tunes out the rest of what he says. There’s something about the end of the commercial that caught her. Not the cheesy editing, or the lifeless acting, but the idea at the end. Pack up one day, leave the next.

Linh explains to Evelyn that she is getting popular with the regulars, that they like how she carried herself, so she has to move her to a busier shift to please them. “You should feel flattered that they want more of you. Better tips.”

She doesn’t know why. She’s not as skinny as the others. She’s not as well-endowed, either. Her first day, she ended up breaking the coffee machine, causing a lot of tension between her and some of her co-workers.

She dreads being at work on a Friday night. Friday nights meant guys coming in from the bars—they didn’t have a liquor license at Café Quyen—and being exaggerated

versions of themselves. They'd pinch and slap, and only drink the complimentary free iced tea to sober up before they drove home to their girlfriends and wives.

"Hey, you!" One of the customers calls after her. "I need a refill on this." He smells like cheap beer and cigarettes. It makes her think about her dad and the Winston cigarettes that he demands her to get every time she makes a grocery run.

"Of course," she says. "Did you want to order anything?"

She notices that the customer and his friend are rocking back and forth in their seats.

"Not yet," the customer says. "Me and my friend are still deciding." She knows the guy is lying. She imagines he'll sneak out when she's not looking. Maybe, if she's lucky, he'll leave a dollar or two so that he doesn't look cheap.

"You sure you don't want anything?" she asks the other man.

He smiles and averts his eyes under her gaze. She's not surprised—a lot of shy, decent young guys came into the place because of their friends.

"I'm fine, really. Thank you," he says.

She starts her rounds around the tables. She's gotten better at navigating in heels, which depresses her when she remembers that she's been at this for awhile now. Another customer motions for her to come over. He's one of her regulars, a Church youth group leader that always wears sunglasses and a hat when he comes in, even though the place is dimly lit.

"Eric," she says with fake warmth. "Where have you been? We've missed you here."

He motions for her to sit next to him in the booth. “Oh, you know how it is. Work’s a real pain in my ass.”

She sits next to him and leans in, like she’s invested in what he has to say. “Aw, I’m sorry. At least there’s the weekend?”

He scoffs. “Not happening. Gotta go on a retreat with the church. My girlfriend’s the one organizing it.”

These are the times when she feels guilty, when the men mention their loved ones. She’s not doing anything wrong, not really, but she still feels like an unwilling participant in these relationships, a third party that helps fulfill a one-sided fantasy. She wants to believe that happy men aren’t the kind of guys that come into these places, that they’d be home with their women instead.

“That’s too bad,” she says.

He smiles appreciatively. “Cathy, you get me, you know that? Sometimes she gets so into all that community service stuff. I’m not sure how much more time I can give up to please her,” he says.

“That’s really selfish of her.” It gets easier to lie to the guys, to tell them exactly what they want to hear without being too on the nose. “She should understand that you need you-time. To unwind and relax.”

“I mean, it’s not like she doesn’t know. I’ve told her that sometimes, I want to do things like sleep in on the weekends. And she calls me lazy!”

“Aw, it’s okay. Just take it easy. You can always deal with that nonsense later,” she tells him.

He reaches into his back pocket and takes out a hundred dollar bill. He lays it out on the table for her to see. "I went to the bank today and withdrew a little bit extra."

"Big spender," she says. "At least there are some benefits to working that lousy job, huh?"

He looks nervous, like there's something he wants to say but can't get it out. Cole had the same look on his face when he told her that he was falling in love with her.

"You got something to say?" she asks.

He takes a deep breath. "I noticed you never, you know." He motions with his head to a table close by, where Grace is making small talk with another customer. She's shorter than most girls, but she makes up for it by only wearing body paint. "It's like the same shit," Grace had explained to her. "As long as the cops don't come in, it's cool."

"I want that," Eric says.

Evelyn feels her stomach churn. "I can call her over, if you'd like."

He cuts her off. "No," he says. "I want you to do that. I want to see how those things look."

Her first reaction is to walk away. Her second reaction is to chew him out for even suggesting the idea. But, she looks at the crisp hundred dollar bill and feels it staring back at her, telling her that it was going to happen anyways.

"The customer's always right," she says. She takes the hundred and slips it into the string of her panties.

"Oh, thank you, God," Eric says.

She reaches behind her back with one hand, unclasps, and lets it fall to the floor.

She leaves the money in an envelope on the kitchen table. Her father is nowhere to be found, but she suspects that he might be gambling at Bay 101. Still, it's better that he's not in the apartment, laying around and feeling sorry for himself or, worse, berating her over working at the menial mall job that he thinks she still has.

She goes into her room and sets aside the rest of her earnings into a small box. She's getting closer to saving up for that used car that she saw on Craigslist a few weeks ago. She contacted the owner and told her that she would try to get the money as soon as she could. It's an older car, a '92 Corolla, but she doesn't care. She doesn't mind the fact that the car has a discolored driver side door, or that someone tried to cover up the cigarette smoke smell by blasting the car with Glade fresheners, or that the odometer is probably broken. All she cares about is getting from A to B once she can afford to buy it.

Her phone starts to vibrate, but she turns it off without looking. She already knows that it's probably Cole wondering where she is.

Without thinking too much about it, she bends down and pulls out a gym bag from under her bed, and starts to pack it with clothes.

Evelyn starts to come up with a mantra: "I'll leave tomorrow."

She's sure she's heard of the phrase somewhere, but time has been slipping from her lately. She likes the sound of her secret statement, the way it sounds affirmative, but it's not quite urgent enough for her. It doesn't express the desperation she feels, the same desperation that gnaws at her when she goes into work every day.

She's tired of going into the dingy bathroom of Cafe Quyen, with the dim light bulb hanging overhead and the broken mirror with phone numbers scrawled into it. She hates having to strip down to the "underwear" that they made her buy because it "accentuated" her curves. She's paranoid that she'll go to her locker one day and find her regular clothes gone, and then she'll have to call Cole to pick her up and have to explain to him what she did for a living.

So she changes her mantra: "Leave tomorrow."

But it's still not good enough. It still feels long. It doesn't sound right, like she's lying to herself. She wouldn't be surprised if that's what she was doing. She lies to the customers each day, and she's getting better at it.

She walks around the bunched up tables, balancing a tray of iced tea and trying not to fall in her six inch, clear heels. She looks for the older men, sitting by themselves, because of how easy they are. It gives her a chance to sit down and rest her tired feet while still looking like she's working. The older men usually come dressed in button up shirts and ties that their wives buy from JC Penney, and usually order two to three drinks in the evenings.

"I like coming here because it reminds me of my childhood," one of the business men tells her. He laughs and smokes a cigarette, even though there are No-Smoking signs posted on all the walls. "It's a part of our culture. My dad used to go to these things when he was my age, too."

Evelyn puts on a smile, leaning forward in her chair so that he can get a good look. This guy is one of the better ones, because he never touches and he always tips even

when he only gets one drink. She makes small talk with him, asks about his work so that he feels important, and never brings up his wife unless he does it first.

"Why is a pretty girl like you working here?" he asks her. He smiles appreciatively when she slides a glass of iced coffee across the table to him. "A girl as pretty as you probably has a boyfriend that can support her, I bet."

She doesn't bring up Cole, because he is separate from this side of her life. She doesn't tell anyone about him, because then people would Facebook him, or try to find him and tell him personally what she did in the evenings when she wasn't with him.

"I like my freedom," she says, and for once it's not a lie. "I like being able to do anything I like. A boyfriend would only restrict me. He'd never understand me working here."

The businessman likes this answer and slips her a ten. "Young boys like that are so brash. And angry. A boyfriend would be very jealous of all the older, more experienced men you'd meet in this line of work." His tone sounds suggestive, but she ignores it.

She pretends to notice her manager motioning to her from the counter, maybe to take someone's order or to make small talk with another regular customer. She gets up and ignores the pain of the six inch heels digging into her feet, and flashes another smile at the older man. "Gotta go. See you...?"

He raises his glass to her. "Go. I'll see you tomorrow."

She can feel his eyes staring at her ass as she walks away. She can feel all of their eyes staring at her again, noticing every beauty mark, every scar, and every tiny little

imperfection on her body. Her clothes leave little to the imagination, and she fights the urge to cover up. Give them a show, the other women tell her each day. Let them desire you, want you.

Evelyn throws the test in the garbage and lets out a sigh of relief. She's not going to tell Cole about it, because she has a feeling that he'll be disappointed instead of relieved. He's been slipping her hints about family over the last couple of weeks, and she can't help but think that it all started because of that trip to IKEA and seeing those little toys on the floor.

She goes over to her bed and lies down on it. She appreciates the feel of it, how it's not too soft, and how she can stretch out her arms without hitting anyone by accident. She can't remember the last time she's slept by herself, let alone in her own bed.

"Go tomorrow."

She likes the sound of it. The urgency. The brevity. She doesn't have to stay here, in this city. She can leave anytime she wants. The old woman who owns the Corolla still hasn't sold it, so it's as good as hers once the money's all in place. Then she'll be able to get from A, to B, to wherever the hell she wanted. If all else failed, there was always the Greyhound station downtown—it wouldn't even cost her that much.

Her phone lights up, but she turns off the sound and tosses it to the side of the bed. She doesn't bother looking at the screen. She lets it go to voicemail, and later, she'll contemplate whether or not she'll call back.

## **Transformative State Highway**

*San Jose, January 2013*

He was late again. I wondered if maybe he was in trouble at work. From what Evelyn told me, he had been fired from his last job—it was Walmart, or Target, or Kmart. She never told me what he did, but I assumed that he was a greeter. Not because he was a friendly, relatable guy, but because the idea made me laugh. A gruff, barely-speaks-to-his-daughter guy being forced to stand near the entrance of some mega-store and pretend to be friendly was an amusing image to me.

I shifted in my car seat, growing antsy. I had been staking out Ben, Evelyn's father, for a couple of nights now in the parking lot across the street. I was getting hungry, so I hoped that he wouldn't be too long tonight. I had finished eating my food a few hours ago and I didn't want to lose my parking space. I was afraid that he might slip past me and drive off and see Evelyn if I took my eyes off him for too long. I was sure that he knew where she was. They may not have had the best relationship, but she would never leave home without at least telling him where she was going. She always kept telling him that she wasn't like her mom or brother.

All of this staking out stuff was new for me. I was supposed to be the rational, reasonable guy that people came to if they needed someone. I didn't expect this to become a long-term gig, but by this point I was in so deep that I might as well see this to

its logical conclusion. I kept telling myself that I was just acting like a concerned, caring boyfriend, and that following Ben was a good thing to do. Hell, it was the right thing.

Of course, if I told anyone that I was trailing my girlfriend's dad every night, it would look bad. I wasn't crazy. I knew that what I was doing looked crazy, but it wasn't. I was just making sure that she was okay.

"Maybe she wanted to visit her family back east?" was what Grace kept telling me. "Impossible," I kept telling her. She hadn't spoken to either her mother or brother in years, I reasoned. There was no way she would be on speaking terms with either of them; they were a source of shame and embarrassment for her, ever since they abandoned the family years ago. They'd be the last people she'd want to see.

When I started staking out her father, Ben, I wasn't sure how to go about it at first. After I found out he got himself a job at Walgreens, I thought Evelyn might have returned home from wherever she had disappeared to, so that they could be a real family again. I thought that he was cleaning himself up for his daughter by getting his life back together—that's what fathers were supposed to do. So I went to Walgreens, expecting to confront him and ask him where Eve was. Instead, I chickened out and walked around the store for an hour before giving up. I felt stupid and small.

Once, when I went to their apartment, they weren't there. All of their stuff was gone, and some new family was there, a couple that I think I went to high school with. I felt like a real idiot, opening their door with the key that Evelyn gave me and finding Ronald and Angela sitting on a couch and watching TV in their pajamas. I felt even worse when Ronald tackled me to the ground, using the same chokeholds that I think I

saw him use during wrestling. I was lucky that Angela, a girl that I forgot existed until that day, believed me when I told her that I thought Evelyn was still here. “I heard she left,” was what she said. “Don’t know where. I put her stuff away in storage because her dad didn’t take any of it with him.”

She ended up giving me the key to the Public Storage unit, even though Ronald was giving me a dirty look the entire time. “I don’t trust him,” I heard him whisper to her, but she shushed him and wished me luck. “I hope she’s okay. She was really sweet. It’s not like that Rachelle Li thing, right?” I told her that no, it wasn’t the same thing, that I didn’t think that she was lying in a ditch somewhere, cut up into pieces, just because a girl was jealous that her boyfriend was sleeping around. From the very moment she disappeared I told myself that she had to be somewhere, alive and well, afraid that even thinking that she was dead might make it come true.

When I went to the store unit, I found most of her stuff there, packed away hastily. Her bed, where we first made love, was propped up against the wall, her pink colorful sheets wrapped up in a garbage bag. Her vanity mirror was covered by a sheet, which I was secretly relieved to see, because I might have been spooked myself if I had walked in and saw myself in it. The rest of her belongings were haphazardly stuffed in bags and boxes. I was disappointed. I thought that maybe I’d find a clue to see where Evie would be, perhaps a letter that would dictate to me that she was kidnapped for ransom, or that she was just going to on a trip to the store to get milk. She didn’t even have a diary that I could flip through (and apologize later for, when I would find her). The only positive thing about this whole mess was that it would make things easier when

I found her and told her that I found a house for us on Tully Road. Then it'd just be a matter of moving all the bags and boxes into the house and making it into our home.

Angela did most of the packing for us—I made a mental note to thank her later. I rummaged through the bags carefully, until I found the photo album that we had been working on together. I felt disappointed that she hadn't brought it with her. I flipped through the pages until I found the picture I was looking for. It was taken right after we got off the roller coaster at the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk and my legs were still shaking. I took the photo out of the album and flipped it over to read the note I had scribbled.

*Cole and Evie*

*November 4, 2012*

*Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk*

*This'll be a good one to show the kids.*

I had the picture with me. I'd take it out while waiting for Ben to leave work, afraid to use my phone around closing time in case he noticed the light from it. I knew that he might recognize me, but there must have been hundreds of people who went to Walgreens everyday that looked like me. It helped that it was easy to mistake me for any other Filipino guy. Dark hair and skin, H&M jacket, dark jeans—I pretty much blended in with the rest of the Asian hypebeast culture.

My phone buzzed in my jacket pocket, and I carefully took it out and under the steering wheel, out of sight. Grace was texting me again.

**Grace Nguyen: Where are you?**

She had been checking up on me more frequently over the last couple of weeks. It was annoying. So what if I didn't want to go to Applebees with the guys? Maybe I was tired of drinking my money away all the time. Responsible adults like me were supposed to think about finances in the long-term. Meeting Evie only strengthened that belief. Instead of tequilas and playing beer pong, she got me thinking about important shit like managing my taxes, eating healthier, and raising children.

**Me: I'm at work. Late. Paperwork.**

That should satisfy her. Before I could even put my phone away it lit up again, Grace's name flashing on my screen.

**Grace Nguyen: I can see you. You're not at work.**

I jumped up in my seat. Where was she? She couldn't have seen me. She wouldn't know where I was. She was kidding, trying to rile me up. I rolled up the windows and slid low into my seat, trying to ignore the pounding in my chest and the red-hot feeling in my face.

**Me: Haha, funny.**

I tapped send, my fingers trembling. Play it cool. Play it safe. Don't play it like you're being defensive. She's just trying to make you paranoid. She played games like this all the time. Today was no different. I hoped to God she would change the subject, maybe to something stupid like the Knicks or climbing Mission Peak again.

**Grace Nguyen: I can see you. Outside of Walgreens.**

I peeked out from my hiding spot, hoping that maybe I'd catch a glimpse of her before she saw me. She should have been at work, wherever that was. Or maybe bar hopping with the guys somewhere.

I heard a faint voice call out, "Cole?" I slid back into my seat, hoping that maybe she would walk past me, forget about this whole mess, and be back on her merry little way. A shadow loomed over me—she had found me. "Cole? What are you doing here?"

I sat up and rolled down the windows. "I'm just sitting here."

Her face looked different. "Why do you have makeup on?"

This seemed to catch her off-guard. She blinked once, twice, and then leaned down to my driver's side mirror. "Shit," she said under her breath.

"Going on a date or something?" I asked. Try to change the subject. Shift the direction of this conversation. Make this about her.

"No," she hastily said. "I was at work." She took out a napkin from her purse and dabbed at her face. I hardly ever saw her with makeup, even when we'd hit the bars and she'd troll for guys to take her home.

"It doesn't look bad," I added.

She laughed. "Aren't you always the one telling us to go all natural?"

"Yeah, but it doesn't mean I can't appreciate it once in awhile," I replied back.

For some reason her shoulders slumped at this. I didn't think I had offended her, but she reacted like I had called her out for sleeping around. "It's a nice thing."

"Thanks," she said plainly. Her eyes narrowed at me. "What are you doing here, though?"

“Is there a problem with me sitting here?”

“It just strikes me as a little weird. Shouldn’t you be at home or something? Are you waiting for someone?”

“I’m not waiting for anyone.”

She looked around. “I don’t see her.”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “C’mon, don’t joke about that.”

“You’re being paranoid.” She walked around my car to the passenger side. She motioned for me to open it, but I shook my head.

“Open, open, open.” She kept on trying to open the door, lifting the handle up and down until I finally gave in and unlocked the door.

“You’re on a stakeout, aren’t you?”

“No.”

“Why are all these wrappers in your car then? It smells like food in here.” She picked up one of the hamburger wrappers in disgust.

“Stop complaining,” I said. “Or I’m kicking you out of here.”

I noticed movement from out of the corner of my eye. It was him! I pressed my face against the window. He walked out of the Walgreens, bid a co-worker goodnight, and walked to his car, a Honda Accord.

I revved the engine. I had to see where he was going to go. She might be there.

“What the hell are you doing?” she asked.

“I’m starting the car,” I said, not taking my eyes off Eve’s dad.

“No. No, no, no. We’re not going to do this tonight.” She tried to pull the keys out of the ignition but I batted her hand away.

“What the hell are you doing?”

I stared her down. “You can either leave the car or come with me. Either way, I’m going after her,” I said.

“Cole, listen to yourself. I thought you were getting better. She’s not here anymore. Following that guy—is that her dad?—isn’t going to fix things.”

“I need to know for sure,” I said.

She slumped against the passenger seat and started to put on her seatbelt. I won, but I didn’t have time to celebrate.

“Alright,” she said. “But remember, you might not like what you find.”

I waited a few seconds, and then started to follow behind the Accord.

\*

“How do you know she’s not dead?”

I gripped the wheel of the car tightly. I kept my eyes on the Accord, afraid that it would vanish if I looked away for even a moment.

“She’s not dead.”

“How can you be sure that she didn’t meet someone who wanted to see her from the inside-out? I know San Jose is safe and shit, but it happened to that Rachele girl from awhile back.”

I raised my voice. “How could you say something like that? She’s your friend too.”

“I’m concerned about what her little disappearing act is doing to you. You seem stressed,” she said. She put her hand on mine, but I pulled away from her angrily.

“She’s alive,” I said, this time with more conviction. “I just know that she’s out there, waiting for me to find her.”

“Why haven’t you called the police then?”

“Because...because the police here are incompetent. They spend all their time answering noise complaints or writing speeding tickets. They wouldn’t want to put the energy into finding her.”

“They tried to look for Rachele,” she added, quietly. “If you really think she’s missing, you should call them. Get them involved.”

“Maybe,” I mumbled. I was going to find her myself—that would prove how strong our bond was.

The Accord stopped in a neighborhood that I was unfamiliar with, far from the El Rancho Verde apartments that Evelyn used to live at. I parked a few houses away, turning off my lights and trying to look inconspicuous. He left the car and walked right into the white house, disappearing from my view. Grace turned to look at me.

“What now?” Grace said. “Are we just going to wait here?”

“I’m not sure,” I said.

My legs shook and my heart was pounding in my chest. I wasn’t sure if I was scared that I had made it this far, or that I was excited at the idea that Evelyn was possibly in the house, waiting for me to find her.

Grace nudged me. “Do something.”

“Like what?”

“I’m not going to stay here while you sit and do nothing. If we’re going to do this, we’re getting this done tonight,” she said, and without even pausing she got out of the car and started to walk towards the house.

“Shit,” I cursed. I cranked up the parking brake and then ran after her.

“This is my thing,” I said. I stop in front of her, holding my arms out. “You can’t suddenly take charge of my thing.”

She brushed past me and kept going. “Someone needs to take charge of this situation. If things were up to you, we’d be sitting in your car—which, by the way, smells awful—and waiting until Evelyn or whoever the hell decided to magically appear before us.”

“Well, fuck,” I said. “I don’t really know what to say to that.”

“You’re just relieved you don’t have to do this by yourself,” she said.

We walk up to the white house, but stop before the door. Even with all her false bravado she’s apprehensive about ringing the doorbell.

“Well?” she said, motioning towards the buzzer.

“I’m thinking,” I said.

“Think faster.”

I reached over and pressed the door bell.

“What are you going to say to him?” Grace asked.

I didn't know. I remained quiet, trying to listen for the sound of movement coming from within the house. I strained to hear, putting my ear to the door. What if she was behind the door at that very moment and knew I was there?

I saw Grace stiffen. "Did you hear that?"

I heard a faint rustle and backed away from the door. Moment of truth time. I tried to look serious. The footsteps got closer and closer. The deadbolt slid open. The door creaked open, hesitantly.

"Mr. Nguyen?" I said.

A white woman appeared at the door, dressed in a baby blue bathrobe with matching slippers. I cringed—she smelled like she had been smoking something earlier.

"He's asleep," she said. "He's had a long day at work." She paused, then squinted at me. "Truong? Is that you?"

I wanted to speak, but my mouth moved without words coming out of them. Grace sensed my distress and started to speak for me. "I'm sorry to disturb you. Do you live here with Mr. Nguyen?"

The white woman adjusted her bathrobe. "Yes, Ben lives here with me." She extended a hand to us. "I'm Sarah."

I shook Sarah's hand wordlessly. Grace continued to speak. "I'm Grace, and this is my friend Cole. We're friends of Evelyn. Do you know Evelyn?"

Sarah smiled and nodded. My heart leapt.

"Ben's daughter. I've met her a few times. Lovely young woman."

“Do you know where she is?” I said. I nearly grabbed at her bathrobe, but stopped myself. “Do you?”

Sarah’s expression fell. “I’m afraid not.”

“She doesn’t live with you two?” Grace asked.

“No, she moved away,” she said, sadly. “Ben moved in after she left.”

“Where did she go?” I asked. I want to chew out Ben for not convincing his own daughter to stay with him. I want to tell him that he’s a terrible father that couldn’t keep his own family together.

Sarah rubbed her chin thoughtfully. “I’m not entirely sure. Ben said that she was going down to Los Angeles. Or San Diego. I’m pretty sure it’s one of those two. Are you planning a surprise visit to see her?”

This old woman doesn’t know that Eve disconnected her phone, and deleted her Facebook, and had no other real way of being contacted. She doesn’t know that I put all my faith into the idea that she had suffered a nervous breakdown and was staying with her father until she got better. She doesn’t know anything.

I took one last peek behind the woman. Nothing.

“Last I heard she was going down I5. I think.”

“Thanks,” I said.

She smiled sweetly. “When you see her, do you mind letting her know that her dad is doing just fine? And that he’s thinking about her?”

Grace nodded. “Of course we will. Thank you.”

I nodded along, even though I wanted to yell, “Well, if he’s thinking so much about her, why hasn’t he tried to bring her back home?”

She closed the door on us. Last she heard Evelyn was going down Interstate Five. Interstate Five. Interstate Five leads to Los Angeles, not San Diego. Evelyn must have been in Los Angeles. Of course! It was the only place she could possibly be, if she wasn’t in San Jose.

I started walking back to my car. Renewed purpose. Interstate Five. Evelyn. Los Angeles. I was going to find her there.

As soon as we get inside the car I say, “I’m going to Los Angeles.”

Grace doesn’t put up a fight this time. “You might get sleepy driving there.”

“That’s a very real possibility,” I said.

“Do you want me to come with you?” she asked.

“Don’t you have to go to work?”

She made a face. “Fuck work.”

After we left Safeway for some last minute supplies, I insisted on driving. I let Grace know that we were already behind schedule, and that if she wanted to come with me any further she had to let me do things my way.

My car had never left San Jose before; the furthest it ever went before this impromptu trip was Gilroy, for the outlet mall and cases of fresh fruit. For a second I wanted to ask Grace if we could take her car, but only because mine was still like a new toy to me, something I didn't want to get all dirtied up from driving down Interstate Five.

I hated that I felt like those douche bag new car owners who spend hundreds just to buffer out a scratch, but I couldn't help it.

Grace munched on a can of sour cream and onion Pringles as we started the two hundred mile drive down to Los Angeles. I told her to go for the cookies, because they didn't smell up my car, but she stuck out her tongue at me and kept on eating. I want to tell her that she better not make a mess, but I keep to myself. I'm too excited at the thought of seeing Evelyn again after all the weeks of not seeing her.

"I wonder if she's really down there." Grace leaned her head against the passenger side window.

"Of course," I said. "That Sarah woman didn't seem like a liar."

"How do you know that?"

"Know what?"

She sounded anxious. "That she wasn't just telling you what you wanted to hear?"

I wanted to tell her that wasn't the way things worked. There was a clear purpose to meeting that woman tonight, instead of Evelyn's father. She had just the right bit of information for me to go on. It couldn't have been more perfect. I used to talk to Evelyn about flying down south on a weekend when neither of us had to work. I wanted to go to the Petersen Automotive Museum. She kept telling me that she wanted to go to the Santa Monica Pier, and then Melrose Street, and then see all the touristy attractions near Hollywood. If she was in Los Angeles, she'd be near those places. Probably.

"When's the next stop? I need to pee soon," she said.

I hadn't planned on stopping until Lost Hills. We were already past Gilroy and on to Interstate Five. We were making good time and I didn't want to be late for Evelyn.

"How bad do you have to go?"

She turned to me, looking irritated. "How bad do you like your leather seats?"

I turned into the rest stop. Grace bolted from the car, running as gingerly as she could to the girl's restroom. I leisurely walked out, stretching my legs. I wasn't used to driving for hours at a time. I was used to driving to work, or to Dave and Busters, or the occasional trip to San Francisco or Sacramento.

I walked over to the information kiosks next to the Coke vending machines. I wanted to get a sense of where we were. I had taken the trip down to Southern California once before, when I was five, and I had been asleep most of the trip. The map was a brownish-yellow color, overexposed and looking like it was put up in the early 90's. A prominent blue star next to the phrase YOU ARE HERE was helpful in letting me know where I was. I traced my finger over the hard plastic case protecting the map, going down from San Jose to the blue star. 150 miles and I was still barely across California. Los Angeles suddenly seemed so far away.

YOU ARE HERE.

I half-expected to see her name on the map, letting me know where she was with the same ease. I laughed. Her star would be bigger and brighter, of course, and it would say EVELYN instead of just YOU ARE HERE. And then my star and her star would start to get closer together on the map, like when you're using a GPS. Then—and this

would be when I wasn't looking—I'd see the map again and find that my star and her star were right next to each other, and it would say, YOU ARE HERE EVELYN.

"What are you doing?" Grace came out of the bathroom, looking concerned. She kept a few feet of distance away from me.

I froze, not realizing that I had been pounding away at the map display, which now had two very prominent holes in it. My hands felt raw and tender. I looked over to her, my hands still held up in mid-strike, as if I was asking her what to do next. Some of the other rest stop patrons stared at me, unsure of what to make of the scene. I could hear them whispering to each other. I took a step forward, and everyone flinched, including Grace.

Oh, Grace.

"I don't think she's here," I finally say, very quietly. I lower my hands.

Grace crosses the distance between us and wraps her arms around me in an embrace. I slumped to the ground and stared at my bloody and bruised hands, while Grace apologized over and over again for a lot of things that I had trouble paying attention to. Something about a coffee shop? Grace, I don't drink coffee. You know that.