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The Beast Lives Here

by

Kelli Kirkland

A Thesis
Submitted to the Honors College of
The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment
of Honors Requirements

May 2023

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ABSTRACT

A staple of the *bildungsroman*, or coming-of-age, genre is a loss of innocence, often through trauma, so it is only natural for our protagonist to grasp at whatever coping mechanism may offer them comfort. As a coming-of-age novel, *The Beast Lives Here* asks: How does folklore and the supernatural interact with young, impressionable protagonists who are desperate to find explanations for their pain?

The Beast Lives Here follows teenage narrator August (Aggie) Cain as she and her best friend move from junior to senior year of high school. Her excitement, however, is cut short by her best friend's lengthy trip to Italy and her odd attitude once she returns. Because she is constantly surrounded by her father's artwork of local legend, The Rougarou, Aggie begins to convince herself that her best friend's new, aloof demeanor is proof that she has been taken over by the beastly creature who punishes sinners.

The Rougarou serves many purposes throughout the novel, such as villain, manifestation of emotional deflection and immaturity, lesson, and (to some) muse. The meaning of the Rougarou is subjective and, appropriately, reflective of the Rougarou's actual place in New Orleans culture. As a local legend which was previously used to frighten misbehaving youth, it modernly serves as an aestheticized representation of Catholic Louisianian/Cajun culture, particularly around Mardi Gras season. *The Beast Lives Here* aims to show the multi-faceted purpose of the Rougarou as a concept, as well as portray a way in which a young adult might make sense of the world.

Keywords: coming-of-age, bildungsroman, Louisiana, folklore, coping, adolescent literature

DEDICATION

To my friends and family who inspired the love in this novel. And to every best friend whose number I didn't mean to lose.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is hard to put into words how much I love writing—which is ironic considering that working with words is the whole point. So, I want to thank the Honors College for giving me the chance to pursue my passion academically. I feel this opportunity has allowed me to properly enter the scholarly conversation surrounding fiction, and I owe it to the Honors College for motivating me, challenging me, and guiding me.

Speaking of guidance, I want to thank my wonderful thesis advisor, Dr. Adam Clay. Not only did you offer feedback and help me create the best work that I possibly could, but you consistently believed in me and my ability. Even when I was confused or overwhelmed, my advisor helped remind me that I *am* a writer, and, sometimes, I should stop overthinking and just write. I think this moral support will stick with me much longer than any revisions would.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS.....	xi
PART I: CRITICAL INTRODUCTION	1
PART II: THE BEAST LIVES HERE	12
Nerve Endings.....	13
CHAPTER ONE.....	14
To Cross the Road.....	28
Requiem to Reunite with Missing Light (or a Divine Mission)	29
CHAPTER TWO	30
Mother Earth.....	44
Sandcastles	45
CHAPTER THREE	46
The Best View.....	57
What It Is That I Do	58
CHAPTER FOUR.....	59
Driving Home	67
Roommates	68
CHAPTER FIVE	69
Well Trained	72
Jekyll and Hyde.....	73

CHAPTER SIX.....	74
Sacrificial Sun.....	82
Eventual Apathy.....	84
CHAPTER SEVEN	85
Vore.....	91
The Artist	92
CHAPTER EIGHT	93
Green.....	99
Meat	100
CHAPTER NINE.....	101
Resuscitation Again	110
Twin Flames.....	111
CHAPTER TEN.....	112
Broken Parts.....	116
A Star Rests in Your Palm	117
CHAPTER ELEVEN	118
Collateral Damage	133
Pulling yarn out of the dog’s mouth	134
CHAPTER TWELVE.....	135
The Zoo.....	142

Infestation	143
CHAPTER THIRTEEN	144
The Breath of Life.....	147
Learned Helplessness.....	148
CHAPTER FOURTEEN	149
A Sunday in Spring.....	153
Dead Languages.....	154
CHAPTER FIFTEEN	155
Song Lyrics for Later	164
Stains.....	165
CHAPTER SIXTEEN.....	166
Puppet Master	170
Body Language	171
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN	172
Laundry Day	175
condolences.....	176
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN.....	177
i hope they are happy	179
On Being Alive	180
CHAPTER NINETEEN.....	181

REFERENCES 184

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

IQ Intelligence Quotient

PART I: CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

The *bildungsroman* genre, often used interchangeably with the coming-of-age story, is one which features adolescent narrators learning harsh lessons about life and reality. These narratives will commonly feature an epiphany or loss of innocence for our protagonist—event marking that childhood is ending and adulthood is approaching. There are, however, exceptions to this trend; sometimes, the protagonist might find themselves trapped in a murky middle ground between maturity and youth. Observing this often brutal period of development, I was inspired to ask how an adolescent protagonist might cope with grieving the loss of familiarity as they grow older. This interaction between personal growth and psychological distress is where myth and legend come into play; as a way for people to rationalize the makings of the world which they could not previously understand, it follows that a young adult narrator would latch onto a cryptic local legend to make sense of her pain. Bearing in mind the potentially traumatic loss that accompanies aging, young protagonists in the *bildungsroman* genre may rely on myths, legends, and monsters as a way to rationalize their negative feelings. In the case of *The Beast Lives Here*, our narrator, Aggie, actualizes the Cajun werewolf known as the Rougarou in order to explain why her childhood best friend is behaving strangely.

I decided to use a mixed medium of prose and poetry to construct *The Beast Lives Here* rather than any singular mode of writing. Each chapter of fictional prose begins and ends with a poem that loosely reflects the themes of the plot, though they are not directly synonymous. In fact, the poems can be read as a totally separate storyline—one that conflates the experiences of Aggie with more universal feelings that the audience, themselves, can interpret regardless of author's intent. Meanwhile, the prose itself delves

into Aggie's individual story, describing in detail her specific adventure as she discovers herself and her relationship with the Cajun Rougarou.

Though both can be powerful means of storytelling, poetry and prose have stark differences in the way they present themselves. While fictional prose generally presents a story to its reader in some sort of ordered fashion (whether it be chronological, thematic, or otherwise), poetry does not require the same continuity. Poetry, as a genre which allows itself to be more abstract, is able to capture more ambiguous emotions. In turn, poetry lends at least part of its meaning to the individual reader's subjectivity. Within the scope of Aggie's story, the poems paired with her narrative can be seen as a broadening of her experiences in an attempt to breed reader connection and, perhaps, eventual empathy.

Poetry, as a medium, arguably appeals more to universal emotions than pure narrative prose. For example, Karen Simecek of *British Journal of Aesthetics* claims that non-narrative artwork is more abstract and, therefore, better suited to explain often inexplicable human emotions. Further, Simecek argues: "In particular, by drawing on Bennett Helm's theory of emotion...such non-narrative works can enhance our understanding of the evaluative nature of our emotional responses by making clear the influence of perspective" (498). When considering this organization of abstraction in relation to the *bildungsroman* genre, I felt it could greatly enrich the text to include original poetry which loosely reflected the themes of each chapter.

When it comes to coping, there is a psychological basis for fixating on myths and legends. Steven Walker of Anglia Ruskin University discusses adolescent psychology in relation to the mystical in his essay "Young people's mental health: the spiritual power of

fairy stories, myths and legends”. When it comes to coping mechanisms, Walker argues: “Myths, legends and fairy stories as part of their early child development offer a rich source of material to draw from and enlist in the therapeutic endeavour [coping]” (83). In the same vein, adolescent imagination can offer a healthy method of escapism which, when used correctly, may help the adolescent justify their own feelings with the ultimate goal of fully understanding them.

Since the *bildungsroman* genre, by definition, details a young protagonist learning difficult, mature lessons, it is only natural that mental health—or, better said, mental illness—moves to the forefront of discussion. One coming-of-age novel that demonstrates the topic of psychological turmoil well is Stephen Chbosky’s *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999). Charlie, the novel’s teenage protagonist, is paradoxically “both happy and sad and [he’s] still trying to figure out how that could be.” (Chbosky 2). Though Charlie exhibits a certain level of self-awareness to his mental strife, he, too, faces the universal emotion of adolescent confusion and, ultimately, repressed childhood trauma which permanently alters him: his Aunt Helen molesting him. Chbosky’s novel, written in first person narration as a series of diary entries, eloquently details the experience of trauma and how it can shape an individual, even when forgotten.

While Charlie’s coping mechanism is to repress or forget the memory, Aggie reacts by imagining a fictional world in which Valerie is possessed, which forces her to act distant towards Aggie. Not only does this theory provide in significant contrast, as Charlie faced sexual abuse and Aggie is facing growing apart as an unfortunate outcome of growing older, there is still something to be observed when comparing these coping mechanisms side by side. When faced with stressful situations, teenagers may lean

towards escapism, imagination, and a peaceful fiction (even when this fiction is the material of nightmares).

When considering the potential psychological benefits, however, one must then ask if this practice has the potential to become maladaptive and, if so, when? Hannu Jouhki and Atte Oksanen of Tampere University write that “To find relief from psychological isolation, individuals escape their true selves by submitting to new power structures in society.” (203) In Jouhki and Oksanen’s interpretation, escapism occurs as an attempt to free oneself from the burden of free will. In other words, if one fully surrenders control and escapes from their own mind, then they are, therefore, not responsible for the chaos that ensues. Furthermore, it frees them from the necessity of choice. Though Jouhki and Oksanen do not directly say this is harmful, I argue that nurturing delusion which hinders personal choice fosters complacency—passive acceptance of one’s own misery. In the case of our protagonist, Aggie, reality is far more difficult to understand than monsters, so she unconsciously surrenders control to the fictitious monster of the Rougarou, which she sees in her father’s artwork. To her, the Rougarou is a force that she cannot control; she is haunted by it, and she readily accepts the monster with no consideration of any other possibility. In any other scenario, she would have to examine her own actions and confront her potential responsibility. By fostering an impossible reality where she is hunted by a cryptid, Aggie ensures that she is not at fault.

The legend that Aggie fixates on is a piece of Cajun Folklore referred to as the Rougarou. Derived from the term *Loup Garou* (French for “werewolf”), the Rougarou intertwines French, Louisianian, and Catholic legend. The purpose of the Rougarou was

often that of a cautionary tale, meant to keep children well behaved in context with Catholic tradition. As described by Bill Curtis et. al at the New Orleans Professional Development Conference of 2013:

The Rougarou or Loup Garou is a werewolf that prowls the swamps of Louisiana. One Cajun described a Rougarou as a creature with a human body and the head of a wolf that runs on two legs and prowls on four. Nothing keeps him away. When you think you are safe, he is right behind you. Society used folklore to control people through fear. Mothers warned their children not to go into the forest at night, or the Rougarou would get them. The deeply Catholic Cajuns admonished people to keep their Lenten practice lest evil spirits turn them into werewolves. (90)

Curtis et al. continue to describe the ways in which the Rougarou remains ingrained in New Orleanian culture, citing examples such as Mardi Gras costumes, the Rougarou as a scapegoat for hurricanes which disrupt natural order, and even children's books (91). Though modern New Orleans celebrates the beast as a fascinating piece of local legend, the unholy, grotesque origins of the Rougarou were previously used to ignite fear, especially when it came to moral consequence and religious scrutiny. Amy J. Ransom in the *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* states: "In contrast to these early tales of courtly werewolves, the French oral tradition depicted the loup-garou as a savage beast linked to the devil" (254). For the earliest traditions, the Rougarou was a predator to be feared—a reality which still remains true in Aggie's delusions.

At its core, however, Aggie's challenge does not originate from a fear of the Rougarou in and of itself, but from an inability to accept change. While inching towards a

period of transition (in Aggie’s case, high school graduation), she senses that things are beginning to change in the eyes of her best friend, Valerie. Once she is capable of genuine reflection, Aggie draws a conclusion about this phenomenon, stating: “Valerie once asked me if I was afraid of things changing after we graduated. I never expected that things would change before” (Kirkland 150). Aggie’s refusal to accept inevitable change leads her to latch onto whatever stability she can manage. In *The Beast Lives Here*, she fabricates a sense of stability for herself through escapism with the Rougarou. Bearing in mind the aforementioned use of escapism in order to avoid free will and personal responsibility (Jouhki, Oksanen), it follows that Aggie finds solace in supernatural forces outside of her control—even if she fears them.

Another *bildungsroman* story which utilizes supernatural, mythical forces is *It* (1986) by Stephen King. In *It*, a group of outcasts affectionately known as the “Loser’s Club” are hunted by an ancient, cosmic being known as Pennywise the Clown. While the “big bad” in *It* is canonically real, there is undeniable symbolism which inspires the use of the Rougarou in *The Beast Lives Here*. Pennywise, a monster that can only be seen by adolescents (and is largely invisible to adults), represents a universal feeling amongst those experiencing the loss of childhood; it is daunting, it is inevitable, and it can be materialized as a predator which gains power from fear. The only adults that seemingly remember Pennywise are the Loser’s Club, themselves, who are thrust back into their childhood traumas by the return of Pennywise. As articulated by Richie Tozier’s internal strife:

They’re [childhood memories] not records but dead bodies. You buried them deep but now there’s some kind of crazy earthquake going on and

the ground is splitting them up to the surface. You're not Rich 'Records' Tozier down there; down there you're just Richie 'Four-Eyes' Tozier and you're with your buddies and you're so scared it feels like your balls are turning into Welch's grape jelly. Those aren't doors, and they're not opening. Those are crypts, Richie. They're cracking open and the vampires you thought were dead are all flying out again. (King It 64)

While King is referencing an interaction with an unimaginable monster in his youth, Richie's lamentation can easily be read as a reflection on childhood as a whole. For many, the experience of puberty, loss, and growth is so intense and harrowing that it can be compared to legitimate horror. The thought of remembering his adolescence immediately brought about imagery which includes death, corpses, bullying, natural disaster, and (most relevantly) cryptids such as vampires. *The Beast Lives Here* attempts to dramatize growing up to the same horrific extent by allowing the Rougarou to fill the same role that Pennywise does in *It*: the physical manifestation of the unresolved, prepubescent fear of growing up. By being such a vulgar, grotesque figure, the symbol also lends itself well to a general loss of innocence.

The use of a cosmic monster additionally emphasizes the inherent horror in losing innocence. The concept of maturing as a terrifying endeavor is common in King's work. Another novel of his, *The Body*, details a twelve-year-old friend group's journey to find a dead body to satisfy their morbid curiosity. Along the way, they learn mature lessons about growing up, mortality, and harsh reality. Though *The Body* does not employ supernatural forces like *It*, it similarly villainizes the experience of change that comes with aging by associating it with horror elements, such as death, decay, and human greed.

In addition to the association of the *bildungsroman* story with horror elements, *The Body* offers a powerful commentary on family dynamics and the significant effect they have on adolescents. Because of the integral power of the family unit, one's home life can completely alter the way that they view the world; it could add to the horror or mitigate it. In *The Body*, specifically, Gordie often laments that he feels invisible to his parents following the death of his brother which occurred before the book began. As a result of this neglect, Gordie heavily leans on his friends and even wishes to pass up an opportunity to take advanced classes so he can remain close to them. Luckily, his friend Chris speaks some sense into him:

“I wish to *fuck* I was your father,” he said angrily. “You wouldn’t go around talking about takin those stupid shop courses if I was! It’s like God gave you something, all those stories you can make it, and He said: This is what we got for you, kid. Try not to lose it. But kids lose *everything* unless somebody looks out for them and if your folks are too fucked up to do it then maybe I ought to.” (King, *The Body* 109)

King’s sentiment here that most directly corresponds to Aggie’s story is the thought that “kids lose everything unless somebody looks out for them.” (*The Body* 109) While Aggie’s family is predominantly a loving one, she tends to keep them at arm’s length in order to hide her true feelings. Her biggest source of emotional solace is found in her best friend, Valerie. Once Valerie begins to isolate herself from Aggie, our protagonist is left scrambling to find a reason for this shift that she can understand. Further, she is looking for an explanation that accurately reflects her internal influences: The Rougarou, inspired by her father’s artwork. Ironically, her unknowing father is the

one who plants the idea in her head, further exemplifying the direct or indirect influence that family dynamics can have on a developing teenager. According to Caneiro et al., a child's IQ, which is susceptible to external forces, is just about fully developed around age 8, meaning that cognitive ability is difficult to significantly alter after this period (3). In conjunction with Chris's revelation, this research further exemplifies that children tend to rely on their environments, especially at a young age.

In reflection with this research, both Gordie and Aggie find themselves irreparably changed by the external environments in which they were raised, for better or for worse. For Aggie, this means that she has adopted her family's unhealthy coping mechanisms as a means to actualize her own experience. As stated by Aggie's older sister, Stephanie: "For some reason, no one in this family can talk about their feelings" (Kirkland 124).

In preparation for writing *The Beast Lives Here*, I attempted to consume as much *bildungsroman* media as possible to find commonalities, contrast different genres, and, particularly, find coming-of-age stories which similarly present adulthood as horror. Excluding those previously mentioned, my research includes (but is not limited to): *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton (novel and film), *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson (novel), *Forever...* by Judy Blume (novel), *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf (novel), *Looking for Alaska* by John Green (novel), *The House of the Scorpion* by Nancy Farmer (novel), *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang (graphic novel), *Goodnight PunPun* (vol 1) by Inio Asano (manga), *Booksmart* (film), *Ramona and Beezus* (film), *Nocturne* (film), and *As You Are* (film).

While most, if not all, of these stories illustrate central themes of the *bildungsroman* genre such as mental health, coping, and major life lessons, they are all multi-faceted in their presentation, as they also exhibit the wonderful parts of youth. Perhaps the starkest example of this phenomenon can be found in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. The aforementioned repressed trauma and confusion is a major theme, yet Chbosky ensures that Charlie's life is not strictly melancholy; rather it is, reiterated, "both happy and sad." (2) Despite his depressing revelations, Charlie finds himself enchanted with love for his friends: "Sam sat down and started laughing. Patrick started laughing. I started laughing. And in that moment, I swear we were infinite" (Chbosky 39). A quintessential part of puberty-ridden development is bittersweet, yet overwhelmingly immeasurable moments of joy.

King, despite the horrific nature of his novels, also provides examples of happiness and nostalgic reflection. In *The Body*, Gordie gushes: "I never had any friends later on like the ones I had when I was twelve. Jesus, does anyone?" (King 59). In contrast to the trauma being faced by the protagonist, the heart of the story revolves around the human inclination to genuine connection.

Later on, Gordie laments love, saying: "Love isn't what these asshole poets like McKuen want you to think it is. Love has teeth; they bite: the wounds never close..." (King, *The Body* 165). Despite Gordie's attempt at an edgy cynicism, King is further revealing how powerful love is in the life of Gordie; it has the power to hurt, heal, create, or destroy.

Following suit, *The Beast Lives Here* begins and ends with love. Though Aggie is primarily the recipient of her own horror story, no page in the story dismisses the power

of human connection—for better or for worse. Even when Aggie wholeheartedly believes that the Rougarou is hunting her, she promises: “Monster or not, I was hers; I wasn’t giving up on her” (Kirkland 109). This declaration was, admittedly, an unhealthy one. Aggie, ultimately, realizes that the best way to love Valerie was to let her go so she can discover herself; in turn, our protagonist realizes that she deserves better than a best friend who keeps secrets from her. However, the feeling of fondness and nostalgia towards her friend never leaves. Overall, *The Beast Lives Here*, along with many coming-of-age stories from which it drew inspiration, is a story about the perseverance of adolescents—and the love they are capable of.

In final observance, the *bildungsroman*, or coming-of-age, genre is one that emphasizes adolescent lessons, drama, fear, love, happiness, and despair. In *The Beast Lives Here*, every one of these concepts can be exemplified in the horrific presence of the Rougarou. By exploring this bone-chilling Cajun folklore in the mind of Aggie through both poetry and prose, I hope to create an enriching reading experience which exemplifies the simultaneous inherent terror and moments of joy that go hand and hand with coming-of-age.

PART II: THE BEAST LIVES HERE

Nerve Endings

Frostbitten fingers feel the best
in the moments before they go numb.
Forcing the stiffened joints to bend, I smile in agony.
I've never felt anything like this.

I sit covered in cold and ice
while I count the minutes left of light.
My stimulated nerves dance before they go still.
I've never felt anything like this.

It won't last until the morning.
Surely, my senses will surrender soon.
Once the sun is gone, I will lose a finger or two in the fight.
But eventual apathy always starts with delight.
I've never felt anything like this.

CHAPTER ONE

Every time I have something to talk about, I go to Valerie Elbert. She and I have basically been inseparable since birth if you consider birth to be the second grade. She sat in front of me in class, and I remember thinking she had the most beautiful long, brown hair I'd seen in my life. Which makes it even more embarrassing that she only really noticed me whenever it fell over my textbook, and I, making invigorating eye contact with the floor, closed it, and pulled. My long-awaited reward was a brief shout of surprise. Then, her eyes saw me for the first time, glaring at me through bushy, furrowed eyebrows. Normally, this simple expression of displeasure would have silenced me for at least a month, but I must have been feeling brave that day--or I just wanted her to be nice to me. With motives unclear, I stood my ground.

"You should try to keep your hair to yourself," a smaller, younger, only mildly more sarcastic version of me said.

She must have been feeling a little adventurous that day, as well, because she didn't turn back around. Despite my dicey response, her eyebrows slowly relaxed. She said:

"My name is Valerie Elbert."

Though I was annoyed, the boldness of her response surprised me enough to offer mine. "I'm Aggie Cain."

My full name is August, but it felt too formal for a kid my age. Now, most people call me August. Valerie refused; I guess when you grow up with your best friend Aggie, old habits die hard. Besides, I never minded being Aggie to Valerie; in fact, I kind of like the comfort that comes with it, even if I'd never admit it. "Aggie" feels like a name that

belonged to Valerie more than me, now, so I let her hold it for me. I've never thought to give Valerie a nickname; I suppose I'm not that clever, and I'm sure this is making me sound like a terrible friend.

If it helps my case, I never closed Valerie's hair in a book again. Besides, she claimed later that it didn't hurt, per se, but she was aggravated with the idea of her back neighbor being so inconsiderate as to close her hair in a hardcover, booger-infested version of an *Alice in Wonderland* picture book. I later told her that she shouldn't look a gifted horse in the mouth. I was just shocked she remembered which book I was reading. The book was in *my* hands, and as soon as she turned around all I remembered was the name Valerie Elbert and the big, brown eyes that came with it.

I've always been decent with names, but faces are my ultimate strong suit. Waving in public to a vaguely familiar classmate – or my sister's friend's cat's neighbor – is an occurrence that I oddly pride myself with. My problem, though, is that I have to keep walking. If we stop and actually get to talking, I'll eventually fold and then the jig is up; they'll know I have nothing to say. But faces I don't forget. They say that you never dream of a face that you haven't seen before; if that's true, then I have enough actors casted for a seven-season contract – ten if the ratings are good. The point is: I'm good with faces, especially those I care about. That's why the first time Valerie Elbert didn't quite look like herself, it was a moment I will never forget.

Growing up, Valerie and I essentially became one unit. If one of us missed a day of school, our teacher would ask the other if we were okay. So on, so forth. As soon as we were old enough, we carpooled to and from school. We were each other's date to homecoming every year. One specific homecoming, we snuck out of the dance early and

drove to the lake behind the school—well, *Valerie* drove. I was wearing five-inch heels and a blue mermaid tail dress, and the high heels ended up being held in my hands after about ten minutes. In the passenger seat of Valerie's car, I felt safe and comfortable, despite how prominently my feet were aching. This was only a couple of months ago, but it already hardened into one of my favorite moments of our junior year.

I always thought that Valerie looked more beautiful than I did that night. Perhaps that is something I needed to work on. Her dark hair was tied up in a bun and she was wearing a black evening gown that made her look like a movie star. I thought that I would look like Dory from *Finding Nemo* if she took the same deal that Ariel did. When I joked about it, Valerie rolled her eyes and never commented on that. She was never jealous like I was. She even told me I looked nice that night, offering a warm smile and I could only dream of creating. Her fingers were white-knuckled around the wheel, and she leaned forward often, careful not to nick a curb. Still, she paused every so often to grin at me, as if saying: *Don't worry, I got this. Rest your feet.*

If I try to grin at a child in a grocery store, there is a reasonable chance they will burst into tears. I am typically overly aware of my face—of the grimaces it produces when I try to smile or the scowl that forms when I am resting. Other times, I am oblivious; I glare at people in public and I give sarcastic, insensitive cackles when it is inappropriate to do so.

Meanwhile, Valerie Elbert could say a million words to you with a look, and they were the sincerest you would ever hear. She had these kind, brown eyes that acted like quicksand and a contagious smile that would stick with you for hours.

Once we got to the lake, we stumbled through the dirt, giggling with a sudden disregard for the cleanliness of our expensive wardrobe. I let my bare feet step in sand and mud with the ever-present risk of broken glass, bugs, or seaweed—typically three of my least favorite things. But Valerie was cracking jokes and pulling me forward, and I was struck with that same love that I had felt with her for years. It was a love that told me she was my person—my soulmate—in whatever way that might be. We ended up putting our feet in the water and telling ghost stories, letting ourselves be exhilarated by the way our backs tingled when we started to be afraid. Eventually, we lowered our standards and let ourselves sit on the sand. *Dry-cleaning exists for a reason*, Valerie would say.

At one point, Valerie turned to me with a strange look in her eyes, and I reciprocated the sudden brooding nature.

“Hey, Aggie?” she asked, taking on a new tone.

I responded with an affirmative hum, urging her to continue.

“Are you ever afraid that things might change after we graduate?”

I wasn’t expecting this question, so I cleared my throat and toyed with the bracelet on my wrist. I thought about answering her genuinely, but next to recognizing faces, avoiding truth is one of my strengths.

“Are you ever afraid that we’ve met a serial killer and don’t know it?” I looked her in the eyes and tried not to crack a smile, which always made her laugh. Luckily, I was right. She chuckled softly and pulled her knees to her chest.

“I guess there’s a lot of things that we don’t know,” she offered in response.

“You more than me, but I get where you’re coming from.”

Valerie punched my arm, her mouth slightly agape. I let myself sway from the inertia of her touch, but I eventually landed back in my original position. I was good at bouncing back in that way.

“You’re lucky I’m so nice to you,” Valerie told me, and, for some reason, that gave me the push that I needed to be genuine. It was a brief moment of weakness, but it was the truth. I chose to expose it for an instant of sincerity. Valerie—the real Valerie—deserved that.

“You’re right. I *am* really lucky.”

That got me a smile in response, and Valerie’s eyes were shiny and wet. She was sensitive like that. That was one of the things I loved about her. She was an open book, and her reactions were almost immediate. Being friends with her was like being friends with the sky; one disruption and it was grey all day, but when the sun shined, the warmth lasted a week. Part of the reason we fit so well together was our dual personalities. Valerie expressed too much; I expressed too little. Together, we created an almost emotionally healthy human being.

When the wind picked up, the air dropped about ten degrees, and Valerie and I realized it was time to go home. As was typical, I slept over at her house that night. I saw Valerie’s mom yell for the first time. In fact, I had never seen her mom as angry as when she saw the mud that we tracked in and the sand on our expensive gowns. Valerie apologized, but we giggled the entire way back to her room. That night, we were on a high that couldn’t be brought down. Once we got into our pajamas and laid down in bed, the clear most interesting topic in the world was who Evan Price danced with that night. To be clear, the answer was everyone. Or, more accurately, *almost* everyone. Valerie and

I kept to our own group. We had the clear intention to talk about it afterwards, which we did.

By the time we fell asleep, the sun was almost beginning to rise. That was one of my favorite memories to date. So, naturally, it is my point of comparison for every moment following.

Valerie had plans to visit Italy with her family over the summer. She was going to be gone for four weeks, so I took the chance to catch up on my favorite tv show...then a couple of movies...then a couple of books. Valerie wasn't my only friend, but she surely was the only one I went out of my way to see during the summer. Maybe that's something else I needed to work on.

We video chatted a couple of times, but less during the third and fourth weeks. Valerie's family was going to more outings, she was hanging out with some people she met there, and she used her free time to read books on the beach—as she told me. I didn't think much of it at the time, and I didn't say anything. I felt her absence like the absence of a winter coat, so I was left shivering in the cold. I still didn't say anything. I didn't want to ruin her vacation, and it was purely coincidental that we had been talking less. There had been times like this in the past, and sometimes it was me who was too busy for our daily chats. Contrary to popular belief, we *did* have our own lives, and I tried to be inclined to let her live hers even if it was a little difficult for me.

It wasn't until Valerie got back that I really had something to worry about.

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“If you aren't back in town by 6 tomorrow night...” I built up the momentum of the sentence, setting up my words like pins and waiting to knock them all down. Valerie

was quiet on the other end of the phone call, but I could feel her rolling her eyes. "...I'm finishing this season of *The Voice* without you, and that's a promise."

Valerie gave a small chuckle, but she was holding back. She had told me prior that her family was frantically packing since their checkout time was in less than an hour, and it was clear she was trying to be quiet as to not stir the pot.

Eventually, she replied. "That's the ultimate betrayal, Aggie. You know that."

I didn't miss a beat; I had been planning this conversation for days. "What I know is that I had to watch the last two episodes with my dad because *someone* wanted to go to Italy." It was only meant to be a joke, but there was an air of truth in my words. Like I said, we hadn't been talking every day, and I understood why. Valerie was busy—and beautiful and charismatic. She probably had family and friends out there to hang out with. She didn't want to be calling home every night when Juliet Capulet's house was minutes away. And I understood; the lack of communication just gave me time to overthink what I was going to say to her when we *did* talk. So, you'd think I would have been smarter with my words.

So, I fumbled, adding lazily and awkwardly: "You know, not like I care. I'm sure you'd rather be hanging out with Romeo and Juliet."

Valerie paused just a little, but broke the silence with another low, breathy laugh. I had a small sinking feeling, wondering if the delivery of my prewritten line was offensive in some way, but then she spoke again.

"Your dad makes great company. I think I miss him more than you."

I deserved that one, so I let her have it without much of a fight back. I mumbled a drawn out "suuure" before I was interrupted by a thump and chatter in the background.

“It seems like they have everything packed,” she explained, followed by more mumbling and shuffling. “I should go.” There was a strange sense of urgency in her voice that hadn’t been there before. I shook it off; she was probably stressed.

“Tell your family I said hi, okay?” I asked, remembering that I hadn’t spoken to her parents in a while.

“Will do. Love you, Aggie.”

Valerie was typically more sentimental than I was, so it wasn’t rare for her to express love verbally, but it still caught me off guard. I smiled into the phone, grateful that it was not a video call—otherwise, the vulnerability would have been mortifying. “Yeah, something like that,” I settled on, my cheeks feeling warm. I would think about those words for a long time.

Valerie told me goodbye and then I was met with silence and a gentle beep as the call ended, almost as if my own cell phone was afraid of ruining the moment. What moment? I caught myself in a weird state of observation and decided to move on. I had a dad and a cat waiting for me in the living room and a mug of coffee to drink. Best to focus on that for now.

Once my phone had gone silent, I left my room and met my dad in the living room. He was sitting on the edge of our green couch, as if he was ready to hop up at any moment. When I entered the room, he did.

To be totally honest, I lied to Valerie about watching the last two episodes of *The Voice* with my dad. In reality, I watched it next to him, and he sent a plethora of emails and scribbled in his notebook. My father is an artist—a pretty successful one, as of recently. Several of his paintings have been placed in local exhibits, and he just started

making enough money last year for art to become his full-time job. After waiting my entire life (and his entire life, for that matter), it is not rare to walk into a public space and see “Frederick Cain” scribbled in the corner of a canvas. My father has a lot of pride in what he does, which means that he has a lot of pride in what he tries to get me to do. There have been countless nights where he tried to show me the basics of drawing, and all he gets in return is a disorganized scribble which faintly resembles some abstraction of a horse. I’ve never had an eye for art. My dad, on the other hand, seems to come up with fantastical new ideas every single day.

“Where are you running to?” I interrupted him as he beelined towards the kitchen.

He paused to pat my head quickly. “Not enough sugar in my coffee.” His movements were sporadic and energized. His thinning brown hair was uncombed, but his thick mustache was unchanging. That was one thing that was consistent about him.

“Or too much...” I muttered, but there was a chuckle in the back of my throat. I loved my dad, and watching *The Voice* next to him while he scribbled in his sketch book was better than a lot of people ever get. While he was in the kitchen, I walked to his makeshift desk—also known as the cushion next to him on the couch. On the middle cushion, there was a sketch that seemed as if it was fresh out of my dad’s mind onto the page. There was a half-used piece of charcoal resting lazily next to it, the ebony pigment seeping into the green couch. This wouldn’t be the first stain, and I’m sure it wouldn’t be the last.

What caused me to pause, however, was the drawing that seemed to stare back at me. On the page sat a spindly creature with thin grey skin stretched impossibly around sharp bone. Though it seemed half-dead, tufts of thick, greasy hair poked out of its pointy

eared head. It was wolflike, with an elongated snout and grey, rotting gums full of dagger-like teeth that sneered at me. Even laughed at me. It stood in the midst of a misty swamp, knee-deep in what seemed to be algae and murky, black water. The trees were bald and twisted with moonlight shining through the dead branches. I say the creature was wolflike, because that is the easiest way to describe it, even if it truly was incomparable. It, perhaps, resembled more of an unearthly, undead creature than it did anything remotely close to a dog. Then again, I don't have the privilege of ever having seen a zombie demon, so a wolf is the closest I can get. It was hard to pinpoint the emotion of the piece, but one thing was certain: the eyes were the most memorable part. They were the only feature which wasn't devoid of color—a deep blood red which seemed to drip from the page and sear itself into my brain like a bright light. To make matters worse, it was so vivid that I swore they followed me, but I knew I was probably just surprised. After all, my dad has never done art like this before.

Speaking of the art, itself, it was good. If I saw it in a museum, I'd probably applaud it or snap a photo. In my house, though, it felt out of place. My dad's art was normally colorful—abstract. What I was looking at now was a greyscale piece of realism depicting a sharp-toothed creature that sent chills down my spine. The charcoal was still fresh, and as I picked up the drawing to look at it more closely, dark dust fell off the page and onto the floor.

I cursed under my breath and set the drawing back on the couch cushion. I know my dad would assume that he created the mess, but my conscience told me to grab a broom or else it could get all over our shoes and socks. Then, it would get all over the house and all over the carpet and...I walked into the kitchen to grab a broom, where my

dad was stirring his cup of coffee with a spoon, letting it clink against the glass. He was staring into the cup of coffee like he saw his next muse in the spreading cream. It took him a few moments to cease his actions; it couldn't have been more than thirty seconds, but it felt like years.

He must have noticed me getting the broom because he said: "Cleanup on aisle Aggie?"

I gave a breathless laugh and shook my head. "I guess you could say that."

Dad followed me into the living room, where I proceeded to sweep up the loose charcoal bits I knocked onto the floor. When he noticed what I was doing, Dad perked up.

"Were you looking at my sketches?" He was always excited whenever I expressed an interest in art—especially when it gave him a chance to talk about his most recent endeavor.

I nodded towards the dusty sketch of the creature. It felt like it was already staring at me, and I figured that was the goal. "Really just that one."

Dad's eyes widened with excitement, and he sat down on the couch where the charcoal stain wasn't. He was growing giddy, and in his scattered jumble of unintelligible artistic lingo, he said something that sounded like "Ragu". I had no earthly idea what the painting was supposed to be, but I ruled out pasta sauce pretty quickly.

"Dad," I ended up interrupting him, "I'm seventeen, and I don't think you're speaking English." My dad seemed to develop an awareness of who he was speaking to, and he nudged me with his elbow.

“Sorry, Bug. You just have such an old soul—like you should be teaching me.” He shook his head, but I think there was a shadow of something existential that crossed his eyes. It was only for a moment, and my dad wasn’t really the emotional type. Besides, I still had a year left at home. Maybe I was thinking about it more than him.

“Anyways...” The way he said that word was like a professor about to begin a lecture. I loved my dad, but I hoped we wouldn’t be there that long. Typically, his artwork is realistic or interpretative, so I was interested in what he might say—but maybe not enough for an hour and fifteen minutes. “It’s called Rougarou, supposedly. Just some French Louisiana history I’ve been reading up on the last couple of days. Do you like it?” His gaze shifted back to the charcoal sketch.

Now that he pronounced it deliberately, it sounded a lot less like tomato sauce. It would still take me a couple of tries to be able to pronounce it, myself. For now, I didn’t have to. It became apparent that my dad didn’t want to talk about the Rougarou. He wanted to talk about his art.

I nodded, and I wasn’t lying. It was a good piece. Besides the fact that its eyes seemed to follow me and give me the creeps, the only feeling I couldn’t shake was that it was different...grittier than his usual work. I liked his usual work, and I silently hoped he was only experimenting, soon to be gracing Louisiana with his bright colors and contrast. Naturally, I kept that feeling to myself. For my dad, I focused on the positives. “I like it, Dad. It’s cool that you’re into it.”

My dad was seemingly pleased by my response. He wrapped his arm around me and squeezed. “That’s great to hear. I might branch out and do a series if I have enough time.”

He paused, as if awaiting some sort of response from me. Even though I didn't know what to say, I forked up an awkward response so he would know I was listening. "Is that your new muse?"

My dad tilted his head a bit, as if he hadn't thought about it, himself. "For now, sure. I think it's interesting. I don't know if I'd use the word muse...I try to save that one."

"Is mom your muse?" I asked automatically. Perhaps the reason I thought of her so quickly is because she is my muse—inspiration (of course, if I beheld any creative talent). My mom is one of the bravest people I know, working full-time as a human rights lawyer and never showing a glimpse of the stress we know she feels. She comes home with a tired, but warm smile—one that everyone says we share. As well as her smile, my mom also gave me her thick, dark hair. I think, though, our faces are where the similarities stop. If someone put me in a court room, I'd either avoid every question or cry, and I most definitely wouldn't be able to come home with that signature smile. She is the only person in the world who seems to be busier than my dad; she wasn't even home when we watched *The Voice*.

In response to my question, my dad chuckled, and I swear I saw a pinkish blush spread through his cheeks. My dad never stopped acting like the nerdy, chatty kid that my mother decided to take a chance on—and I hope the phase never ends. Supposedly, to propose, my dad crafted a portrait of my mother by writing "Helen + Frederick" in various colors and fonts. That piece is still in their bedroom to this day.

"I suppose she could be."

I gave him a smile that I hoped was warm. I glanced back at the charcoal Rougarou, making eye contact with it once more. At this rate, I was going to make more eye contact with this malnourished werewolf than any boyfriend I've ever had—but I digress. “Well, your new drawing looks really great. Creepy.”

He returned my grin and patted my head with his slightly moist palm as he stood up. “Thanks, Bug. Try not to get too many nightmares.” I knew he was kidding, but I had a strange feeling that I would be thinking about that drawing next time I'm alone in the dark. I wasn't sure what it was—normally, I don't scare easily. Something about the eyes looked just eerie and familiar enough to carve a home in my memory. Then, he started making his way to the kitchen—perhaps for more sugar, though I didn't ask. Instead, I took out my phone and checked to see if Valerie had texted me. She hadn't, yet. But I was sure she would. She was probably busy packing and traveling. I would see her tomorrow, and everything would be fine. Just as it was.

In a strange stroke of coincidence, my dad called to me from the kitchen: “Hey, August, isn't Valerie coming back tomorrow? Do you think she will be sleeping over?”

“I don't know,” I called back. “Maybe.” I clicked my phone screen once again, staring at the purple haze that was my wallpaper. The lack of notifications somehow felt more crowded than it had ever been before.

“Tomorrow...” I breathed to myself and put my phone screen to sleep.

To Cross the Road

If I could find someplace quiet,

I swear the leaves would sing to me. The dirt might bite me, but

I always knew the price of letting the world touch me, and, still, I begged.

Alas, it's always so loud, and the leaves can't reach me no matter how much they scream.

I've never heard them, yet they whispered in a dream that they want me, so I followed
their call.

Blinded by traffic lights and the screech of tires, I step towards the greener grass.

Requiem to Reunite with Missing Light (or a Divine Mission)

Give me an identity
or some reason to be,
and I will give you praise.

If I am to be raised from perdition
of a perpetual purgatory,
I promise to be a puppet
as long as I am given a name.

As I am now, I stare
towards a starless sky
shrouded in clouds and a damning fog
I swear to God I never asked for.

But He is exasperated; He yells at me:

You asked for a purpose!

Now, go find the stars.

CHAPTER TWO

I fell into a light sleep, and I dreamt of a dark swamp. I was standing in the midst, my feet bare and digging into sticky sand. As far as setting goes, my brain seemed to fill in a couple of gaps. First of all, she traded in my dad's black and white landscape for a murky green, only illuminated by moonlight. I could see dully colors and stars. Besides that, everything was foggy. I don't know what more I expected from my randomized dreamscape.

I was wearing jeans, and they, too, were soaking up the muddy water. Disgusted, I started to walk towards shore. I typically prefer things clean; bugs, dirt, and uncomfortable textures are three of my least favorite things. A swamp checked off every item on that list. The water was only up to my knees, but it was uncomfortable and smelly. It shifted as I walked, creating splashes and ripples. Then, the soft arch of my foot stepped harshly on a stick. I yelped in pain, reactively stopping in my tracks. I leaned down to examine the wound, giving up on cleanliness and reaching beneath the water to run my hand across my foot. It had barely broken the skin, luckily, but I would have a pretty nasty bruise come the morning. So, I stood crouched in the center of the swamp, listening to the splashes and ripples around me as I thought about the trillions of microorganisms that could be having a field day in my foot.

Then, I realized I was standing still. There was splashing around me, none of it mine.

I froze, straightening my back and taking a sharp inhale of breath. As if on cue, the splashing ceased, and all I was left with was a ringing in my ears. The air itself seemed to be holding its breath. Until the still air was manipulated into a warm breath

down my neck, followed by a low, rumbling growl. I screamed, running forward, but the muddy sand had turned into molasses. The last thing I could see was a pair of glowing blood red eyes.

Then, I was awake. My clothes were damp, covered in sweat, and my bedding was twisted beyond recognition. I paused, catching my breath and partially shaming myself for letting a drawing seep so far into my thoughts. Despite being alone, I was embarrassed. If I kept this up, next I would be dreaming about vampires and the boogeyman.

I checked my phone to see what time it was: 3:07am. More importantly, though, I saw a text that basically made everything else on my phone seem like a boring smudge on my screen. Around midnight, Valerie texted me and said: “Just got home. Longest flight of my life. Talk later.”

I was happy to have a text from her—giddy, almost. I was about to see my best friend for the first time in weeks, and then everything would finally be back to normal. My senior year of high school started in a week, and I haven’t seen my best friend since June. I think I could use a little bit of normalcy. I texted her back immediately, despite the time. We had known each other long enough that typical social rules were not our top priority. I texted back: “Had the weirdest nightmare about my dad’s new creepy art LOL. Tell you about it tomorrow if you want to sleep over?” I stared at my phone for about ten seconds, re-reading the message. I’m not even sure why. No sane person waits for a text after 3am.

With a sigh, I placed my phone on my nightstand and laid flat on my back. For the first time in my life, I noticed the smoke detector on the far wall of my room blinked with two glowing red dots.

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I woke up with a sunbeam shining directly in my eyes. Two rude awakenings in eight hours. I sat still for a moment, stretching and cracking my joints. About thirty seconds later, I was grabbing my phone. When there was a possibility I could be seeing my best friend for the first time in weeks, it felt like the most urgent thing in the world.

I did, in fact, have a message from Valerie. If it was anything like in the past, she would be at my house within the hour, hugging me tight like she was afraid she would never see me again (even if it had just been a couple of days). There was one time that Valerie came over after I camped with my parents for three days. I was sitting on the porch, a cup of coffee in my hands. That camping trip was the one that got me addicted to caffeine, in all honesty—not because I needed the energy, but it gave me a reason to sit with my mom on the porch while she talked about how nice all of the trees are. I'd take any reason to be able to pretend I was like her.

As I was sipping coffee in my rocking chair, Valerie's mom's car pulled up, and she jumped out before the car had even fully stopped. Her frizzy hair was tied up in symmetrical buns, and she was wearing her favorite purple sweater. In preparation, I placed my glass mug on the ground and stood up. Valerie just about tackled me in the most aggressive hug I've ever experienced. She lifted me off my feet and spun me around as she lightly squealed.

She repeated: “My Aggie, my Aggie, my Aggie.” I laughed uncontrollably, flailing uselessly to try and touch the ground. After at least a whole minute, Valerie put me down and cracked the warmest smile I’ve ever seen.

Instinctually, I told her: “If I knew I was going to be attacked, I would have stayed in the woods.” My best friend just chuckled, turning to retrieve her overnight bag from her mom’s car.

“So which movie is it tonight? My mom’s picking me up at noon tomorrow.”

Back in my bed, I grinned at the memory as I unlocked my phone. Within five seconds, my smile faded. I *did* have a message from Valerie. That message, however, said this:

“Super jetlagged, sorry! Tell me about it tonight, maybe. We can get dinner.”

I shouldn’t have been disappointed, I guess. Valerie had traveled the previous day, and she deserved a break more than anyone. I knew that. It’s just that, most of the time, I *was* Valerie’s break. We were normally so comfortable around each other that recharging was a part of our agenda. I briefly perked up seeing that she wanted to get dinner, but I couldn’t stop myself from being a little taken aback. Dinner seemed to suggest that she only wanted a dose of me—and hour and a half at most. I knew it was a bad use of my time, but I found my mind spiraling and comparing today to all the times before. Namely, I thought about the times when Valerie couldn’t wait to see me—that time she basically jumped out of her mom’s moving SUV to spend the whole day with me. It gave me an uneasy feeling that she didn’t want to hang out today, but I was also partially rational. Valerie had never lied to me before; she was probably telling the truth

about being jetlagged. Like I said, Valerie deserves a break. I'd be a bad friend if I didn't give her that.

So, I responded and asked: "Pizza around 6?"

She responded: "Pizza is perfect."

Perfect. She was right. Pizza was perfect and seeing her would be perfect. I quickly forgot why I was so anxious in the first place. Comparing, as pointless as it was, ended up taking ten precious minutes of my morning. Then, I was finally able to send a quick "See you then" before dragging my two slippered feet to the kitchen. It was a Monday morning, so I expected the kitchen to be empty—at least mostly. My dad sporadically leaves home for meetings or supplies, but my mother seems to work every weekday.

I made a beeline towards the couch, so I nearly passed up my mother who was leaning over the kitchen counter, typing carefully on her phone. Her long, silky hair was tied behind her back in a low ponytail and her grey suit seemed freshly pressed. She only noticed me when I noticed her, causing me to stop in my tracks. My mom looked up from her phone, revealing her slightly furrowed eyebrows which quickly transformed into a warm smile as she approached me with her arms out.

"Good morning, Bug."

I returned the hug; she smelled like flowery perfume and laundry detergent. "Hi, Mom. You aren't at work today?"

She shook her head and checked her phone once more with subtlety. "I had a case, but the guy didn't show. Puts him in a horrible spot...gives *me* the day off." She

said with a twinge of guilt and raised eyebrows, but her delivery made me laugh. Before I responded, she added: “Did you see your father’s new art?”

Once she mentioned it, memories of a swampy dreamscape flooded my brain, but I pushed them aside. It was just a randomized production of recycled memories fueled by the subconscious—nothing more. The truth was that, after going back to sleep, I had completely forgotten about it until my mom mentioned it. My plans for the day took the forefront in my mind, and the Rougarou was pushed in the back seat.

“It’s good. It’s different, but good,” I responded honestly. Like before, I chose not to mention that I preferred his other work.

My mom nodded in agreement, but I sensed an air of hesitation from her. “I love it; I don’t think I’ve ever seen him draw like that. He’s so…” She hesitated to find the right word. “...*passionate* about it. I don’t know what possessed him. It’s a little creepy, though, isn’t it?”

I thought back to yesterday—the first time I saw the sketch and the way the beady red eyes followed me all the way into my bedroom and then into my dreams. My stomach twisted in a twinge of embarrassment, so I, once again, chose to withhold the full truth. “I guess so...in the same way the Boogeyman is a little creepy.”

That earned a chuckle from my mom. “It is interesting that he’s back into that kind of stuff. Your dad’s always been like that—like a carousel. He eventually finds his way back.”

I knew my mom was making small talk, but something about the way she casually hinted at familiarity with the subject caused me to hesitate. My dad, bubbly and lovable, was the last person I expected to fixate on old wives’ tales. The details shouldn’t have

drawn me as they did; Normally, I would have been able to move forward and talk to my mom about anything else. This time, the red beady eyes in my dream warranted me to ask:

“You mean *Dad* was into dark stuff?” I asked, releasing a genuine chuckle. As uneasy as it made me feel, it was humorous—*my* dad, thinning hair, thick mustache, and big apple-like cheeks, hunched over a book about death and legend. It was an oxymoron, at best.

Mom returned the laugh, and her face came to rest with a fond smirk. “August, when I first met your dad, he was really into ghosts, cryptids...*all* the creepy stuff.”

“No way.” Disbelief flooded my voice as I dragged out the words. “*Dad?*”

“We were teenagers when we met, and I guess teenagers have their phases. For your dad, it was—” she gestured to the drawing paraphernalia littered across our home, the drawing of the Rougarou in the mix. “—this. Especially that thing.”

“The Rougarou?” I asked, wondering if she had forgotten the name. She raised her eyebrows as she nodded, seemingly impressed that I nailed the pronunciation. Lucky for me, she wasn’t there when I thought it was a pasta sauce.

“So, he and you talked about it?” When I nodded, she continued. “Well, your father used to be really interested in the Rougarou—the local lore, the religious symbolism, all of that... He kind of grew away from it once we graduated high school, but it’s nice that he’s exploring that, again.”

I nodded again, struck with a strange feeling that I don’t know as much about my parents as they do about each other. It was a natural, yet strange thought. “Yeah, it’s

pretty cool,” was all I could muster. The rest of the day, frankly, was waiting to see Valerie.

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After a series of hours which felt like days, it was time to get pizza with Valerie. Based on the wording of her text, it was going to be perfect, and I chose to believe that. I only spent about half an hour choosing a proper outfit, and then I only spent about ten minutes thinking about how silly that was. *Valerie has been your best friend since second grade, she's not going to care what you wear.* My inner voice wasn't normally so calming, but this time I silently thanked it as I walked out the door.

Valerie picked me up. Once she got there, my dad told me to “get lost” while he giggled lovingly and scribbled dark paint onto another drawing of the Rougarou. I joked back to my dad, telling him that it would be my pleasure. I tried to avoid eye contact with the drawing—painting, now. Silly, again, but not worth pondering.

I stepped out of my door and for some reason, the air felt especially crisp despite the heat. I took a deep breath and reminded myself that I didn't have to miss Valerie anymore. With a smirk on my face unexplainable by me, I approached Valerie's grey ford focus. Its years were beginning to gain on it, the paint dull in the setting sun. Valerie saw me and promptly exited the car without turning it off, which put a smile on my face. I immediately embraced her, wrapping my arms around her neck and taking in her lingering scent of suntan lotion and perfume. She hugged me back, but softly. I told myself it wasn't hesitation.

“You have *no* idea how boring it is here without you,” I said over her shoulder, intentionally sounding exasperated. “Next time, we should go together. That, or I stay here and go insane...again.”

That got a chuckle out of Valerie, which was a victory in my book. “Yeah, I missed you, too,” she assured me, as I took in a new feature on her face. Her skin was freckled as usual, but a silver ring hung from her septum with little screws on the end.

“And when were you going to tell me you got *that*?” I pointed at her nose. Though it was said accusingly, I was excited for her. It was unexpected, but nice that Valerie was trying new things. Just like my dad.

Valerie smiled big and twiddled with the metal. “I got it a couple days before we flew back. I thought it was a good souvenir. Do you like it?”

It didn’t matter whether I liked it. Valerie was stunning, septum ring or bare nostrils. Nothing I said could change that. Still, I said: “It’s not bad. You do look like someone I’d be too scared to talk to—out of my league.” *Not bad* was understood to mean lovely. A moment passed, but I didn’t give Valerie time to mull over that statement. “Are those allowed at school?”

Valerie shrugged. “I honestly didn’t bother to check.” This caught me off guard; normally, she double and triple checked everything. “But, if they have a problem, I can just do this.” Without hesitation, Valerie turned around the septum ring until it was upside down in her nose. Slight silver shine was still visible, but it would take a detective to see it. The entire situation was uncharacteristic, for sure, but it was nice to see Valerie acting outside out caution for once.

While getting in the car, I couldn't help but continue to tease her: "Did you get any tattoos that I don't know about?" Valerie rolled her eyes, but I continued. "I mean, seriously. I got tons of tattoos that you don't know about."

She raised her eyebrow knowingly. "Did you really?"

"No," I folded quickly, but only because she knew I was joking from the start. "You see, if I did, I would have written you a whole letter about it."

Valerie mainly drove with entertained, silent eye rolls while I continued rambling. Eventually, I got off the topic of secrecy and we both spoke about which tattoos we may or may not want in the future—me a bit more than Valerie, but there was a consistent smile on her face, so I figured I was doing something right. I do wish she had more to say, but I knew from our texts that she was severely jetlagged. It would be fair if I forced her into social niceties when she would probably be sleeping right now in Italy. Besides, Valerie and I were past niceties—she knew everything about me, including my tendency to ramble.

Walking into the pizza parlor, I was immediately hit with the smell of melted cheese and sizzling meat. Though I hadn't paid much attention to my stomach's low grumbles on the ride, my stomach resorted to screaming as I was suddenly overwhelmed with options. Valerie stood on my left, seemingly taking in a deep breath of the doughy delight.

Once we had both ordered, we sat at a table in the far corner; I don't enjoy having my back face a wide, open space, so I sat by the wall. Valerie took the other side, sipping on a soda she had ordered. A few beats passed without words, so I subconsciously filled the air.

“Are you going to tell me about Italy, or is that a secret, too?”

My best friend smiled over her straw. “I mean, there’s not much to tell…” The way she trailed off told me that there definitely *was* much to tell.

So, I pushed just a little. “How is your family? That’s who you were visiting, right?”

It seems I knew her too well, because she bit her lip and promptly placed her cup down on the table. “Well, *yes*. There were others, too.” Luckily, she continued; otherwise, I would have had no earthly idea what “others” meant. “You know my cousin, Leo?”

I nodded. We had only met a handful of times (perhaps, in part, due to his living in Italy), but I was familiar with his name.

“Well, he has these friends—Luke and Mia—that are planning on studying abroad here in a couple of weeks, so he made sure to introduce us. They’re brother and sister—twins, actually—so it makes sense that we hung out as a trio most days. There was this one, time, though, that Luke and I kind of got away and went to the pier. He told me all about some show that he likes—and it sounded a lot like you would like it, too.” She seemed to realize that she was suddenly speaking very quickly, so she paused and took a deep breath, but made no mention. I wondered if she tried to hide it. “Anyways, I think you two might get along, too.”

The gears seemed to click into place as I realized the way that Valerie said the names of her new friends—especially the way that she smirked with subtlety when saying the name Luke—and the way all of the words fumbled out of her mouth with

excited vigor when she spoke about him. It was as if the name had been resting in the back of her throat and was pleased to finally reach the surface.

Admittedly, talking about boys was not how I pictured Valerie and my first encounter in weeks going, but there was something familiar about the way she waited for me to ask for more, biting her top lip to keep from smiling. So, I asked: “I’m guessing you’ve been thinking about this Luke guy a lot...” I pursed my lips as I watched a blush rise to her cheeks.

She put a hand on each side of her head and smushed her face before promptly resting it on the table. From the inside of her hands, she mumbled, and it sounded like a whole lot of nothing. I leaned down close to her and said: “Val, I don’t have ears on the table.”

Valerie sat up, the blush slightly dissipated. “Yes, maybe I like him a *little* bit. But don’t mention anything to him, okay? Because I *do* want you guys to meet someday. You, Luke, and Mia, too.” She emphasized “do” as if she was trying to convince me, and I didn’t really know why. Not to mention that she offered “someday” as a far-off notion. I tried to remind myself that she had only known him for a couple of weeks, and he didn’t even live here.

I inevitably giggled at her flushed composure, and she gave me a death glare. “I won’t say anything,” I assured her, just as the pizza was arriving. “But I’m not responsible if you give it away first.”

Valerie rolled her eyes, thanking the waiter and reaching for the red pepper flakes that rested on the table. Looking at my pizza, my already hungry stomach was doing

handstands and flips as it celebrated the arrival of bacon and warm cheese. Looking at Valerie's plate, however, I noticed something that caught me off guard.

"So, you like banana peppers now?" I asked, as I so patiently waited for my turn with the red pepper.

Valerie knit her eyebrows. "What, do you *not* like them?"

I shrugged. "I mean, I've never thought about it. I just seem to have a distinct memory of you gagging and turning red at eighth grade graduation because banana peppers *touched* your piece."

That earned a laugh. "Yeah, well...I guess my taste changed." Then, she took a large bite, as if to prove it to me.

After this, we ate and talked like we normally would. She told me about her uncle's boat, the weather, Luke and Mia's dog...anything I could think to ask was already answered by Valerie's rambles. I enjoyed hearing her excited, so I had no complaints.

Once we both paid, Valerie said: "So, I was thinking I'll drive you home and then go pass out, myself."

My unwelcome thought from earlier came creeping back into my brain. Once again, I pushed it aside. "Only if you don't drive like a maniac this time. I'm still motion sick from the ride here."

On the ride home, it felt like Valerie cut corners especially hard in accordance with our conversation.

"Okay, Baby Driver," I mumbled (loudly). Valerie stuck her tongue out as some pop song I hadn't heard before pulsed in the background. She was good at playing along

like that—and she never seemed entirely silly while doing it. Valerie could act as immature as she wanted, but she was always a lady. She was always pretty, never awkward, even if she contorted her face to complete a punchline. I always noticed that.

Then, we were at my house. There was a pause while the music hummed low. The only other thing to be heard was cricket chatter and the steady rumble of the engine. After a couple of goodbyes and niceties, I turned towards the door in preparation to leave.

“Aggie?” Valerie called as my fingers grazed the handle, causing me to pause.

I turned towards her expectantly. In that moment, I was ashamed that I had no idea what she was about to say. I was, perhaps, more ashamed that I turned around so eagerly. Maybe it was another joke or something I forgot, I thought. Instead...

“I really missed you.”

Her voice was soft. Her eyes were kind—perhaps even emotional. The corners of her mouth were turned into a small smile, something about it feeling bittersweet.

I couldn't stop my lips from curling upwards. “Ditto...welcome back, Val.”

With that, I climbed out of her Ford Focus. As soon as my feet hit the pavement, the atmosphere felt different. It was no longer me and Valerie; it was just me. She hadn't even left yet, and I was becoming acutely aware that she was no longer here. I closed the door gently and watched as Valerie slowly and carefully backed out of my driveway. She nearly hit a curb on the way out, which caused me to giggle a bit. Then, as she drove away, I watched her two glaring red brake lights slowly disappear—two little blips in the night.

Mother Earth

I carry the weight of being a good mother on my back and
the turtle who bears the weight of the world is the only one who
understands. Others offer to take a turn, but

how can I trust them with the only thing I have?

Muscle memory keeps me in place, doing squats and
sit-ups with the heaviness of you on my shoulders.

I protect my title of mother like a dragon with her gold.

All I know to do is be a sole protector alone.

Better to have tired thighs than broken bones.

Sandcastles

Salt-soaked grain slips through her hands.

The damp, makeshift clay becomes a castle holier than man as
she vigorously digs a moat—dirtied fingernails and
a sandy, sour coat.

The wave pays no mind, for she does not know
the amount of time spent, so
she rushed up to the shore, splashing sea foam
into the eyes of the girl building a home.

She kidnaps the castle; breaks into a billion pieces.

A time for creation turned time of killing.

The girl shivers, mourning the merciless reckoning,
but the sea recedes, and with patient hands, she begins again.

CHAPTER THREE

I floated through the last couple weeks of summer like a ghost living in some sort of intangible limbo. I slept, read, and then slept some more, routinely forgetting what day it was. Valerie talked to me relatively often, but Luke and Mia moved in a week or two before school started, so she seemed to naturally fall into their company on days when we didn't meet. I'd be lying if I said it didn't sting at least a little whenever I texted Valerie to hang out and her reply was something along the lines of: "Sorry, helping Mia decorate!" or "Sorry, seeing a movie tonight with Luke!" Eventually, the texts ceased to include any type of apologies, and Valerie did not express guilt when she preferred to spend her time with them.

I should clarify that Valerie *did* try to include me in some of these plans. The first time, specifically, was when Valerie drove Luke, Mia, and me for about 45 minutes to one of the close Mississippi beaches. Admittedly, the sand was littered with random spots of glass (one should be very careful to wear shoes unless in the water) and it smelled like a ripe can of tuna fish (which meant that I only actually encountered the water when I was feeling especially brave). Normally, I brought a book or laptop to fill the time in the sun. While prepping Luke and Mia for the experience, Valerie explained it in a similar way:

"So, it's not quite the beaches in Italy...*far* from it, actually. But the sand and sun is nice—we'll find a good spot and then we can walk over to one of the restaurants when we get hungry."

Luke and Mia giggled at Valerie's "Italy" comment. It was always a little bit uncomfortable whenever the three of them talked about Italy. Every time, I was reminded

there was some elaborate inside joke that I wasn't (and could never be) a part of. The fact of the matter was that I didn't share a summer in Italy with them. In fact, I've never even *been* to Italy.

At this rate, it wasn't looking like I would be able to visit any time soon.

Luke was an averagely tall eighteen-year-old boy with rich brown eyes and even browner hair which fell in uneven spirals. He had a kind, bright smile which always brought a subtle blush to Valerie's cheeks when it made an appearance. She thought no one could tell. In all honesty, I liked Luke. He was nice, funny, and acted as if we had known each other for years upon our first time meeting. So far, the only thing I didn't like about him was the fact that I currently stared at the end side of his head as I sat in the back seat of Valerie's car. Until then, I don't even think I had *seen* the back seat of Valerie's car; Nevertheless, he had claimed the throne of shot gun already when I was picked up from my house. Even worse, Valerie had said nothing. Instead, she expectantly stared at me, her eyes flickering between me and the back seat.

So, I was condemned to the back with Mia. She wasn't the reason it felt like a punishment, though. In fact, I also quite liked Mia. She shared many characteristics with her brother—to be expected, I suppose—but she had her own way of presenting herself as a totally different personality. She, too, had dark eyes and hair, but hers was lighter than Luke's. It was a soft light auburn, chopped neatly into bangs while the rest ran down to the middle of her back. She and Luke shared a smile, but she tended to crinkle her nose when it emerged. Her cheeks were lined with the slightest array of freckles, and she smelled of coconuts and suntan lotion—at least from what I could tell sitting in the backseat of Valerie's Ford.

“What kind of food is around here?” Mia asked, echoed by Luke’s hum of agreement. Both of them had a slight Italian accent and would sometimes slip into a language I did not understand. Sometimes, Valerie would laugh at jokes made in Italian; I tried to remember that they most likely were not speaking about me. Most likely.

“Seafood, mostly,” I pushed myself to respond. “It’s a huge retirement community, and I guess seafood is a huge hit.”

“When *I’m* retired, I’d like seafood for every meal,” Luke chimed in with humor behind his voice.

Mia scoffed playfully. “...and what job, exactly, are you hoping to retire from?”

Luke turned around quickly, reaching over the seats to flick Mia wherever he could. He tried to flick her knees, hands, arms...whatever he could reach. Mia screamed in feigned terror, writhing to escape her brother’s wrath. I couldn’t help but laugh at the pair and wonder if my siblings and I would be like that if they still lived at home. I have a sister and a brother, but both had gone to college and moved away before I even started middle school. For all practical considerations, I was an only child. At first, it never felt like it—but then their visits became special events, and reality became clear.

Finally, Valerie’s holler interrupted the chaos. “You two stop or I will turn this car around, so help me!” It sounded as if she was holding back laughter. It was clear she, also, was contributing to the joke. To Valerie’s credit, Luke did stop flicking Mia. Then, however, he took his two pinching fingers and held them close to Valerie’s arm.

“Luke, I am *driving*,” Valerie warned, her eyes glued to the road while suppressing a smile. This time, though, it didn’t seem as if she tried so hard to hide it. Perhaps she wanted him to see.

“I know,” he responded as his fingers hovered. After a few long moments, he removed them. “I just have to keep you on your toes.”

Once the conversation had zoomed in on Valerie and Luke, I was hit with an unkind reminder. Luke was in the front seat, and I was in the back seat. I wondered if this was something I would have to get used to.

It seems that Mia, too, felt the tension, as she leaned over and mumbled to me: “I wonder if we should have just drove separately and given them some privacy.”

Though it felt like my heart was a stone in my chest, I let out a low chuckle. “Sure...if you’re a fan of my dad’s car that smells like Frito’s.”

Mia offered Luke’s smile in response, but her nose crinkled uniquely. “Better than having no car. I’d take that deal.”

This made me smile and briefly turned the stone in my chest into something slightly less dense. Then, my ears tuned into the front seat, where Luke and Valerie were passionately discussing the superiority of dark chocolate to milk chocolate.

“Milk chocolate is so sickeningly sweet,” Luke was saying. “I’d rather have something bitter, but real. Anyone else has the palate of a toddler.” Unsure how they had moved the conversation forwards so quickly, I strained to keep up.

Mia did not hesitate to jump back into the conversation. Unlike me, she seemed to be good at that. “Takes one to know one, I guess.”

There was a repeat of the earlier scenario in which Luke taunted Mia with some vague threat of harmless annoyance, and Valerie laughed while telling them to stop.

Another thing that was synonymous was my lack of involvement. This happened at least

two or three times on the whole ride. I stared at the window until the concrete interstate was replaced with sand.

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Once we arrived, Luke jumped out of the car and glided on his feet. “Bet I’m going to find the best shell this beach has to offer.”

Shockingly, he didn’t mention the difference in quality. As I said, I had never been to Italy, but I can confidently say that the beaches in Mississippi can’t compare. Despite this, Luke and Mia only spoke about shells.

Mia was the one to take him up on that bet. “I’m going to find one bigger—*and* a sand dollar.”

I was the last to exit the car, grabbing my tote bag equipped with my paperback book and large towel to sit on. I like shells as much as anyone else, but not enough to get my feet all sticky with sand. Sometimes, if I feel inspired, I would, but I felt sleepy from the car ride.

While Mia and Luke sped ahead, kicking sand at each other as they ran, Valerie waited for me to get my things together. That simple act made me smile. It assured me that she didn’t *totally* forget I was there.

Once I closed the door to the car, Valerie locked it and we began to walk together. “So...” Valerie began holding her lips in a pursed “o” position for a couple of seconds. From that moment, I had a feeling I knew what she was going to ask, but I waited for her to say: “What do you think about Luke and Mia?”

I was as honest as I could be. “They seem cool enough. I’ve mainly figured out that they *probably* aren’t serial killers.”

Valerie rolled her eyes. “Mia is in the clear. *Luke* is still on the radar.” As if it wasn’t clear enough, this statement confirmed her infatuation with Luke. Valerie and I did have one ironic habit in common: we tended to tease the people we liked the most. If Valerie is being too nice, it’s almost a surefire sign that she is feeling unpassionate.

“I have a feeling that you and I don’t have Luke on the same radar.”

Valerie widened her eyes and elbowed me gently as she mouthed words that were, admittedly, reasonable at the time. *Not here.*

I bit my top lip stifling a laugh as I changed the subject. We were almost caught up to the twins, anyways. “Are you going to get in the water today?”

Valerie hesitated, glancing towards Luke and Mia. Both of them were already ankle deep in the algae infested waters, pushing aside sand and kelp to search for shells. Luke, wearing swim trunks and a T shirt, had chucked aside the shirt onto a dry patch of sand. Mia did the same, though she was wearing a one-piece. Typically, Valerie shared my distaste towards the water, but she was brave more often than I was. Today, I had a reasonable feeling that she would be brave.

She had already started to unbutton her Hawaiian shirt when she said: “I think I’ll give it a try.”

There was no reason for me to feel abandoned, so I didn’t. There was definitely *no* hint of sarcasm in my voice when I said: “Sure, have fun with the fish.”

Once Valerie had joined the twins in the water, I set up a reading spot on the dry sand beside the others’ clothes. It was hard to focus, and the sun was hurting my eyes, but I truly tried to have fun for Valerie’s sake. The amount of time that I sat there, alone and bored, sort of escaped me after a while. I might have even briefly fallen asleep. The next

thing I knew was that Mia, soaked and salty, collapsed beside me on the towel with an exasperated sigh. Surprised by the sudden movement, I turned to face her. Wordlessly, she gestured towards the ocean, where Valerie and Luke were splashing and pushing each other into the water. A few moments of silence passed before she spoke.

“I swear Valerie is a different person than when we first met in Italy. She was so shy at first,” Mia said with a fond smile and a nose crinkle. I agreed with a grimace. Though I hadn’t put it into words since Valerie returned, I realized with a stone heart that Mia was right. Something *was* different. I told myself it might not be a bad change. Nevertheless, there was a Valerie shaped spot in the sand that was empty by my side.

About an hour before we left, Valerie tried to get me in the water. Again, it was nice to know she remembered I exist. The other three hours (in which Valerie didn’t talk to me) were, however, branded in my mind.

“Come on, Aggie,” she groaned, interlocking her fingers into mine and trying to pull me up from my spot on the towel—my dry, comfortable spot. Admittedly, the name “Aggie” made me pause, but I stood (or sat, rather) firm.

I shook my head and let a chuckle escape my lips. “No way,” I responded, shaking away her hand. “This sand has perfectly molded to my butt by this point. I’ll never achieve a more comfortable seat in my whole life.” There was underlying discomfort, but I couldn’t stop myself from laughing and joking, anyways. Perhaps that was yet another thing that I had to work on.

Valerie pouted and let her hand drop, but there was still an air of lightheartedness to her glare. I figured, in the end, she would be happy as long as I was vaguely included

so she didn't have to feel guilty, and Luke was around her at all times. Come to think of it, it was a bit strange that Luke was out of sight when Valerie came to grab me.

“So, I take it we're still the only ones in the water?” Luke skipped towards us, as if he had heard my subconscious thought.

Valerie blew a silent raspberry out of her lips before saying: “*Please, Aggie?*” Then, she held out her hand while patiently waiting for me to take it. Though hesitant, there was something about Valerie's thought to include me that inspired me to reach out and grab her hand. Apparently, feeling seen by my best friend was a rare luxury these days, so I figured I should capitalize on it while I had the chance.

“That's what I'm talking about, Aggie,” Luke said, running ahead of us into the water. Naturally, this caused me to pause. Valerie didn't say anything. Of course, she was accustomed to calling me Aggie; Anything else from her would be a crime. I, on the other hand, was frequently reminded that Valerie was the *only* one who has called me Aggie in years—the only one who I *wanted* to, anymore. Luke saying the name “Aggie” felt foreign and, more importantly, unwelcome. In consideration of Valerie, I kept my mouth shut, but I wondered if she saw my side-eyed shudder.

All I got from the water was getting damp, salty, and grimy. Once I got in the water, Valerie only spoke to me a total of three times. It's unhealthy to count (I know), but it's incredibly difficult not to keep track when you can count on only one of your hands.

Eating was better, but not pleasant in totality for me. Valerie sat next to me, but almost exclusively stared at Luke for the whole meal. He was, after all, sitting across from her, so it must have been hard to avoid his gaze, even if she wanted to. Meanwhile,

Mia and I occasionally offered each other eye rolls or side glances which playfully mocked the two for their obvious flirtation.

In all honesty, most of my pleasant memories from dinner were due to Mia's eagerness to mock her brother—and, in turn, my relief that there was at least one other person who wasn't enchanted by him. This seems to include Luke, himself.

Like I said, I like the guy; he's charismatic, nice, charming...but first and foremost, I remember him as the one who occupies Valerie's thoughts. He's the one who heard and took the name Aggie as if it belonged to him when it was only ever Valerie's.

And, of course, Luke sat in the front seat on the way home. My house was the first stop on the way back home. To my pleasant surprise, Valerie put the car in park so she could hug me goodbye in my driveway. It was slightly unexpected but welcome in my given state. However, something was different. The hug was short—distant. It felt like a formality more than anything, like she was covering all of her bases so I couldn't be angry with her for ignoring me all day.

"Thanks for coming with us today, Aggie," she offered, and I wanted to believe it was genuine.

That feeling of uncomfortable distance crept back to me, and it suddenly felt like I was making small talk. Rather than telling my best friend goodnight, I was conjuring up niceties and offering them in vain to an actor pretending to be here. Rationalizing is one of my self-acclaimed talents, so I told myself it had been a busy summer for Valerie. Eventually, life would slip back into place, and, in turn, Valerie and I would slip back into the forefront of each other's lives. This optimism in mind, I said:

"Don't go all soft on me. I had a good time with you, too."

She gave me a small grin which resembled a grimace's distant cousin, and I hoped I was simply overthinking. Once Valerie was back in the car, Mia and Luke both waved to me and showed off their shared smile. Mia, with the window rolled down, called me over to the car.

She handed me her phone, unlocked it and opened it to her contacts page.

“So, we can keep in touch...with or without these bozos,” she gave as an explanation. I took her phone, the unfamiliar case and screen feeling foreign in my hands. With little thought, I entered my number and handed it back to her with a smile. Normally, I probably would have laughed at her joke. In fact, it sounded a lot like something I would say. But something felt off tonight, so I was, suddenly, a humorless zombie. It is unfortunate that Mia had to be the recipient of that.

Inside, my parents were both sitting together on the couch. I unwillingly paused, as this was a bit of an odd occurrence, since their schedules were so wildly different. They were both dressed in pajamas and the monotone voice of a documentary hummed peacefully in the background.

“Hi, Bug,” my dad offered, turning his attention to me.

My mom did the same. “How was your day out?”

I thought about talking to them honestly; I thought about voicing my fears. Quickly, though, I realized that it sounds ludicrous no matter how I say it. Valerie has been my best friend since second grade

So, instead, I responded with a casual shrug as I sat beside them on the couch.

“The beach was stinky, but I had a good time.”

“Good,” my mom affirmed, reaching over my dad and patting my shoulder. “Give Valerie our love, okay?”

A bit numbly and with an enthusiastic grimace, I nodded. Eager to drop the subject, I casually glanced at the television and tuned into what they were watching. Night vision, poor quality camera shots of a bigfoot-esque creature was flashing across the screen, while the monotonous narrator said:

“...and that is what continues to be so frightening about Catholic Louisianian legend. The Rougarou is not a singular mythical being, but the Rougarou is a human slowly turned monstrous with a transformation triggered by breaking Catholic tradition. To some, this is not a creature to be avoided in the woods. These are your neighbors, family members, and best friends...”

I found myself sitting up straight, my boredom fading away to be replaced by an unsettling, inexplicable anxiety. I nonchalantly excused myself, kissed my parents goodnight, then laid on my back, praying for my bed to swallow me up. I felt many emotions, but none of them were drowsiness. It was like I had taken a shot of espresso, despite the time. I stared at the red-light smoke detector on my wall, and, for the first time since I was a child, I imagined in great detail what monsters might be lurking in the shadows I could not see. Through all the monsters that cycled through my brain, there was one that was especially intrusive and childish. Grotesque ideas of monsters flew through my brain, despite my suppression, and I realized with horror that Valerie was among them. In my warped imagination, she was lurking behind them, barely seen. It was a small thought—easily dismissed by tiredness and bitterness.

Nevertheless, the thought was born. Now, it sat in the back of my mind, waiting.

The Best View

The world is prettier through your eyes,
so I rip them out and put them in mine.

I can't see the beauty better, anyhow,
but at least I'm not alone in the dark, now.

What It Is That I Do

It's hard to believe

I will make beautiful things.

I fumble and try but all I can do is

consume.

I was created to use,

a spark without a fuse,

an artist without a muse,

gasoline with the weakest fume,

uninspired except when it comes to you.

CHAPTER FOUR

The next day was a Sunday, so I wasn't surprised that my parents were home, but suspicious chatter brought me to my feet in the morning. There were additional voices which warranted investigation. An unmistakably familiar giggle echoed through the hallway, and I recognized one of the guests. Then, another voice seemed to edge her on, and I finally pieced together that both of my siblings were here: Stephanie and Warren.

Surprised (and still plagued by drowsiness), I hopped out of bed and sloppily put my slippers on with my heels spilling out of the back. I wasn't worried about my appearance; they had changed my diapers, after all. A moderate case of bedhead wouldn't be the worst they had seen. Once I reached the kitchen, I would see that I was correct.

Stephanie sat across the table from my mother, her brown hair cut into a shaggy bob. She was laughing my mom's laugh and drinking out of one our souvenir clay mugs. Being 10 years older than me and chronically mature, she seemed to look more like my mother's sister than mine. She had Mom's intense eyes—the stare that probably won people over in court. There were a lot of things intense about her: strong jawline, pointed nose, and thick eyebrows. Yet, her smile was kind and typically eradicated any intimidation. Stephanie was my mother's child, and it was clear when looking at her. Sometimes, they even dressed the same, sporting a business casual glow that only a pretty (and therefore respectable) young woman could have.

Meanwhile, my brother, despite the whopping 13-year age gap, looked a little more like me—which means that he looked a little more like my dad. Our features were a bit softer, with rounded faces, doe-like eyes, and curved eyebrows. It's worth mentioning that we all looked like a family; anyone walking down the street would immediately

recognize my sister and me as siblings. It's just that when you've had as much time to think about it as I have, subtle differences like face structure and whose smile you inherited falls into the spotlight. By the way, I have my dad's smile. And so does Warren. So, we probably gave each other the exact same smile whenever he was the first to see me cut the corner and barge into the kitchen.

"Look who decided to join us!" my mom exclaimed playfully, as if I had slept *so* very late. Admittedly, this made me do a double take towards the clock. It was barely 10am.

Before I could fire back, both of my siblings got up and engulfed me in a comforting hug which smelled of both cologne and flowery perfume.

When I separated, I finally asked: "What are you doing here?"

The corners of Stephanie's mouth turned downwards, and she furrowed her eyebrows, as she often did when she was caught off guard. "Mom and Dad didn't tell you?"

Before Mom *or* Dad could tell me, Warren jumped in. "Apparently, Dad is going to be famous around these parts." He put on a goofy cowboy accent as he grabbed my dad's shoulder and shook him.

Dad shook himself out of Warren's grasp, squaring up as if he was preparing for a fight. Warren began to play along, and the two circled each other with echoed exclamations of "boy I ought a-..." and various cartoonish declarations of battle.

Despite the obvious disregard for my question, I had to laugh at the antics of my family. It was rare for all of us to be in the same room like this (and it was rare for my dad to be around someone that matched his playful energy quite so well). In moments

like these, we felt like a real family...Of course, our family *was* real. There's nothing fake about us. We love each other just fine and we get along, but in moments like these we feel like the family I could have had if I was just a couple of years earlier: the family that grows up together and always has a built-in friend. The family that Stephanie and Warren got. As random as it seemed, Luke and Mia came to mind.

Realizing that my dad was far too distracted to explain himself, my mother interjected with an exasperated, yet amused sigh. "Your father got accepted in the museum's next art show, and this time, they are giving him his very own exhibit."

"They called Warren and I to give us the news. It turned out we were both free, so we decided to stop by," Stephanie finished my mother's thought, remembering the initial question asked. Stephanie was like that—organized, calm. She was the type of person to be called "mature for her age" until she's forty years old. She always seems to be a couple of steps ahead.

The outlandish grunts and chuckles coming from the men in the room highlighted another thing I inherited from my dad (and, maybe even, my brother): his incredible ability to avoid the "serious".

Finally, once Dad and Warren had stopped spinning in circles speaking gibberish, my dad confirmed what my mother had said with a large, goofy smile. "So, it's not *guaranteed* to be a big deal..." he began, confirming what my mother had said, "but, yes, this will be my first time having an exhibit dedicated to my own work." If he was trying to downplay the news or hide his excitement, he was doing a horrendous job.

It was impossible to be cranky when my dad was this giddy, even if it *was* 10am (practically the crack of dawn). So, I said: "Cool, Dad. Who is the star of the exhibit?"

Despite how convoluted it may sound to an outsider, my dad knew exactly what I was asking: *Which painting is going to be front and center?*

Instead of answering, my dad held up a finger, as if to say “one second”, as he pranced to his studio. Presumably, it was to grab the star of the exhibit. While he was gone, Warren chuckled and muttered: “How much do you want to bet its going to be that creepy ass-...?”

My mother interrupted. “*Language, Warren.*”

Warren nodded in all seriousness and whispered (once again): “How much do you want to bet it’s going to be that creepy ass painting of the monster?”

My mom pinched the bridge of her nose, but I could tell she was stifling a laugh, refusing to show that she found humor in her son’s rebelliousness—if, of course, using the word “ass” at 27 when your mom didn’t want you to can be called “rebellious”.

“The Rougarou,” I offered in response, as the word crawled out of my throat as if it had been sitting there for days. Involuntarily, I found myself swallowing hard at the thought of the creature. The little voice in my head told me it was ridiculous and childish to be spooked by a two-dimensional folktale. It was even more childish that the thought of Valerie being one had crossed my mind. Sure, it was a moment of weakness late at night after a bad day, but it was nonsensical and absurd. The Rougarou didn’t exist, my dad liked studying legend, and I needed to get used to Valerie’s new priorities (and maybe a little more sleep). Even though that’s what the little voice said, an even smaller voice, one miniscule and almost invisible, said: *But if it were real, that’s exactly what it would want you to think.*

My brother snapped and nodded, pointing at me with an approving finger gun to let me know he was, in fact, referencing the Rougarou.

Then, my dad re-entered the room. He was holding a piece of canvas which covered the whole length of his legs. I had a feeling the Rougarou was no longer just a sketch. Then, he turned the canvas around. Needless to say, my feeling was warranted. The painting resembled the sketch of the Rougarou I had seen before, but the dimension he added was new...haunting. Instead of beady red eyes that glowed through an array of shaded areas of gray, the Rougarou had red, bloodshot eyes that tore through a dimly lit swamp—filled with greens, blues, and murky browns. In fact, the only feature that remained gray was the creature's paper-thin skin which stretched across miles of bone. It had the same gray, spindly tufts of hair—the same sharp, yellow, wolf-like teeth. This time, though, its mouth was dripping a deep red stain which dyed the fur around it an unforgiving maroon.

It felt out place—now more than ever. I tried to imagine what the rest of the exhibit would look like, with my dad's abstract, cheerful art beside it, and it was incompatible. His other art was happy, playful, and fun; if I saw this next to my dad's work, I would insist that it could have never been drawn by him. Nevertheless, the name "Frederick Cain" is written in the corner, clear as day.

Despite the breath caught in my throat, I said: "You revamped the sketch." Revamped was a vague word; really, he brought it to life. The flat, colorless sketch allowed for some degree of separation between the viewer and the piece. Now, it was alive. It was in the room with us.

Dad nodded. “I decided it deserved a little more depth. I’m calling it ‘The Beast Lives Here’.”

“It’s really cool, Dad,” Warren offered as he nudged me with subtlety. I looked up at him as he smirked mischievously and mouthed the word “creepy”. Pride was clear on his face, but Warren, like me, found it difficult to avoid an opportunity for sarcasm. I gave the grimace I could muster and nodded. *If only he had any idea*. Meanwhile, I had a feeling my nightly routine would begin to include more time spent staring suspiciously at my smoke detector that keeps me awake—those annoying, beady, little lights.

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Stephanie and Warren were able to stay through lunch, so Mom decided to order hamburgers. Dad set up the fold-out table outside, setting up cold metal chairs that only ever made an appearance for when we had guests. Remember, that’s what Stephanie and Warren were, now: guests.

I sat between my siblings and ate my hamburger dressed in the works. Stephanie, as usual, preferred a style plainer—cheese and maybe lettuce. Warren created some sort of bacon mustard monstrosity that had its own zip code. Once we sat, Mom and Dad started asking questions. It’s worth mentioning that my parents were generally laid back. The “laid back” parenting style was especially fitting for Stephanie, who was the second google result for “real estate agent near me”. Warren, on the other hand, seemed to conjure a different attitude. He was nice, creative, smart...and obnoxious every time he opened his mouth. Understandably, my parents had questions about his life—details that he typically kept to himself.

“So, how have you been, Warren?” my dad asked before taking a bite of his well-dressed hamburger. It was probably good that my dad began the conversation. He and Warren were so much alike that Warren typically did not take offense to his inquiries.

“I’m good...really good.” The addition of ‘really’ was what raised suspicion. He seemed to realize this as he attempted to elaborate. “You see, I’m processing one of my songs with this producer who cut me a really great deal, so...You know, it should be out soon.”

Like I said, Warren was the creative type. It made perfect sense, considering my dad’s knack for art. That was one thing I didn’t inherit from my dad—and I didn’t get my mom’s composure or work ethic to make up for it. Even Stephanie, the spitting image of her, dabbled in short story writing. Maybe I needed a hobby. Maybe I was comparing myself again.

My dad smiled warmly and congratulated Warren on his little victories. If I’m being honest, I don’t think that would have flattered me if I was Warren. My parents were the supportive pessimistic type; their doubts were littered in between statements of encouragement, so you sometimes had to cherry-pick if you wanted to know what they really meant. There are worse things parents can do, I guess. But I often found myself reading between the lines in conversations, waiting for secret messages in invisible ink. When my mom said “That’s great, Warren,” I noticed that she was making eye contact with the sesame seeds on her bun. Then, she ever so slightly cleared her throat before offering a smile that appeared to be warm. It was a small detail—a short cough that could easily be justified by an itch in the throat. But I knew Warren noticed it, too.

Stephanie must not have noticed, or she had an excellent poker face. Without missing a beat, she offered an anecdote.

“You know, if you ever wanted to invest in a studio, I might be able to give you a good deal.” Whether they meant to or not, my siblings often reminded me that there is nothing easier to casually talk about than your career. It almost always became the centerpiece of the conversation, and I just about sunk into the ground when it did. I hope that when I’m an adult, I can find better things to talk about than my career...whatever, exactly, that may be.

Driving Home

My own exorcism expelled me from my
body, and now the demon remains.

Astral projection propels me forward,
third person perspective as I watch my own eyes
look at the things I love most and feel
nothing.

Living on autopilot so as not to alarm anyone.

I notice her eyes glow gold in the light. Sometimes they
are watery and squint too much, but
they are mine.

Roommates

Every day I wake up and try to convince myself that I

exist, but the footsteps in the hall are never mine.

The floorboards creak and the door slams, and

I hear it all from my four walled tomb—too dizzy,

too tired, too scared to move. In the stillness of nonexistence,

dust forms and flakes off my cocoon. Ghosts moan

from the attic. At least

I am not alone.

CHAPTER FIVE

On the first day of senior year, the school hallway smelled like dust with a lingering aroma of socks. It was clear that not many people—if anyone—had roamed the halls during the summer. With the lack of interference, it seemed that the checkered hallway had returned to its natural state: musty, drab, and, somehow, freezing. No matter how hot it was outside, the internal climate of our school was always subarctic. Since the first week of freshman year, I kept a (school approved) sweatshirt in my locker in preparation for the weather. That first week, Valerie loaned me her cardigan when I got cold. The wholesome gesture made it a little easier to forget my sweatshirt. Eventually, I fell into a reliable routine.

Normally, Valerie and I carpoled to school, with my house being on the way. This was still true during the beginning of senior year. Of course, there were differences, now. For one, Luke and Mia were also in the car when Valerie pulled up to my house. Though strange to say, I didn't find myself surprised. Instead, I found it a bit irksome. Luke, as per the new usual, was sitting in the passenger seat. The last time I sat in Valerie's passenger seat was the night we got pizza together—the night she told me she missed me. The more I thought about it, that was the last night she spoke to me with authenticity. Now, she acknowledged me. She smiled at me. She was polite. Sometimes, she even joked with me. When she had the choice, though, it was Luke she talked to. It was Luke she joked with. I was willing to bet that Luke was the one who received her sweetness. Somehow, I was so sure that he was getting the sly comments, the secrets, and the surprise sentiment that was once mine. If I knew that Valerie would downgrade me to an accessory once Luke and Mia moved into town, I would have cherished that last

moment of tenderness more completely. I would have put it in my pocket and saved it for the drought.

I was comparing again—catastrophizing, even. But I rode, once again, in the back seat of Valerie’s car while staring at the back of Luke’s head. I watched her whisper and giggle to him.

Once we pulled up to the school and parked, Mia asked: “Do you have any advice?”

It took me a moment to realize she was talking to me. I shook my head but answered her anyways. “It’s a Catholic school so be prepared for prayer in the morning and before meals. Besides that, just avoid the Calculus classroom and you should be fine.” My words felt distant, as if my mouth had gone on autopilot. I hardly had a choice.

Mia laughed Luke’s laugh again. As much as I wished I could separate it, it invoked the same reaction of annoyance in the pit of my stomach. Regardless, I smiled at her. I might have been resentful, but Mia is a nice person. I’m no monster.

Valerie walked with me into school—the one which smelled of dust and felt like the freezer section of a grocery store. I hated the grocery store.

I turned to Valerie with a smirk and said: “Want to walk to English together?” Another effort to return to some sort of normalcy. I was tossing out a lot of lines lately.

Valerie wasn’t going to bite. Her mouth turned downwards into an inconvenient frown. It was the same frown she gave her parents when she spent the night at my house for the third night in a row. It was a frown that so clearly said: *I feel a little guilty, but I’d really rather be doing something else*. I had seen it a million times, but I never thought it would be given to me.

“Actually,” Valerie began, a little resigned. “I promised Luke that I would show him around the school before we got settled.” There was another pause. “But will you save me a seat?”

That was the moment I realized Valerie was being polite to me. In fact, she was being *overly* polite, stepping on eggshells as if not to rock the boat. For Val and I, being overly polite was worse than yelling. It meant she didn’t even care enough to fight with me.

I stared at her with disbelief, and, perhaps, I stared at her just a little too long. I saw her nose and cheeks, familiarly freckled. I saw her lips, securely transformed into a kind, soft smirk. Most prominently, I saw her eyes. Weirdly, it felt foreign, like it was the first time. Her eyes were deep brown and, by textbook definition, looked exactly like Valerie’s eyes. They shined in all the same places and the color was identical. But her stare was wrong. The emotion that she normally held was jarringly absent. And the longer I stared, the faster I saw the red exit sign reflecting in her eyes. Red reacted with the brown as if it had found its new home. I would never forget this moment; it would be burned into my mind for the rest of my life as the moment I realized my best friend was finally skewed beyond recognition.

Well Trained

Breath but no bite, I crave something physical.

I'll trip and fall into you as a pathetic excuse to be touched, but

I fall right through. Your grip loose, your knuckles pink,

forcing me to accept my fate of squeezing until I see white.

Too embarrassed to say that I'm foolish so I run and lick at your heels
like a dog.

Touch me, hold me, I plead in the first draft with a blinding sense of
urgency. The final product dribbles out a less than eloquent slobber.

I say: *When are you going to introduce me to your parents?*

You shrug. No words. An apparition down a hallway.

I smile and bark at passersby.

Breath but no bite.

Jekyll and Hyde

If I can't have a beautiful death in the garden, I want
a bone chilling death on the news. Children will tell
campfire stories about me—the way I grew horns,
sharpened my teeth, darkened my eyes when you
were cruel to me. Like a wolf, I hunted you, lunging
for the throat. I will become, in time, the thing I
hate most.

Please give me a garden first.

CHAPTER SIX

They say that the Rougarou is cursed. Some versions of the legend say that one becomes a Rougarou by breaking Catholic tradition. Others say that the curse can spread from person to person, deliberately or by chance, like a disease. In many cases, it's said that the creature can transform, either by calendar or by will, so it could be anyone. That was something else I learned from my dad's documentaries. He was watching them pretty often, now—at least one or two a week in preparation for the upcoming exhibit. As if that wasn't enough, he had his sketches, diagrams, and research sprawled across the entire living room. The only sacred place I had left was my bedroom, and even then that damn smoke detector...

“Only three weeks away!” my mom cheered lightly as she entered the front door and kissed my father on the cheek. I was sitting at the kitchen table, reading. From there, I inadvertently watched my dad work over the low hum of a documentary which I put forth effort to ignore.

My dad beamed at her, doing all but blushing. I couldn't help but smile at them. You could say a lot of things about my parents, but first and foremost is that they loved each other, and my dad seemingly will never get used to the fact that he actually married her. No matter how gushy and sickening it is at times, I knew we were all lucky.

When Mom saw me, she gave me a cheesy grin before kissing my forehead.
“Hey, Bug. What are you reading?”

I shrugged. “Just something for school.” And it probably was. It was definitely not something worth remembering the name of. In fact, most of the time I spent reading, my mind was occupied by an uninvited guest. If it wasn't on the TV, it was in the art. If it

wasn't in the art, it was in my parents' conversations. If it wasn't in my parents' conversations, it was in Valerie.

There was the thought again, both unpleasant and overstaying its welcome. This time, it took a little bit longer to shake away. I was afraid that, next time, it might never fully leave.

My mom glanced over my shoulder. "Well, don't let me distract you."

"Don't worry, you aren't." Something else was.

While sitting at the table, I got a text from Mia. This was not totally out of the ordinary (we had texted back and forth a couple of times since meeting), but the occurrence was rare enough to warrant a doubletake. After waiting a couple of minutes as to not seem to eager, I checked my messages.

Mia said: "Hey! Pretty random, but would you want to see a movie with me tonight? There's a new horror film and Luke is a total scared-y cat."

Yeah, I've been feeling like one, too. That's not what I said. Instead, I found myself wondering if Valerie would be there. Worst of all, I wasn't sure if I wanted the answer to be yes or no. I spent a few moments gathering the courage and then I wrote:

"I could go for a movie. What time?"

Mia was nice, after all, and I could use a break from my haunted house. Though horror is not the first genre I reach to, I've always enjoyed movies. Valerie and I used to have pretty famous movie nights, sometimes watching entire trilogies in one night as if it was our full-time job. I remember one time, while we were watching the first Hunger Games movie, Valerie asked me the big question.

“So...Gale or Peeta? Be honest.” She side-eyed me behind her bowl of popcorn which was so big it basically swallowed her. We were freshly fourteen, and this was when Valerie started talking more and more about boys.

With an affectionate scoff, I teased her: “Of course, that’s what you care about. You do realize there is a really complex political message in these movies, right?” I didn’t mind Valerie’s newfound interest in boys *all* the time (I, too, was capable of a boy crush), but I did instinctively roll my eyes whenever Valerie brought up one of the many guys she was crushing on. They were mostly celebrities, but it was still funny how she treated them like her own personal episode of *The Bachelorette*.

“Come on,” she whined. “You have to have an opinion. That’s part of the point.” Admittedly, she was right. I had crushes, but I mainly cared about *us*—Valerie and I’s little bubble. Whenever we were together, I never really worried about that other stuff.

In all honesty, I wasn’t a huge fan of either of them while watching the movie. In hindsight, Peeta is the correct answer. In the moment, I fumbled: “I don’t know...Gale, I guess?”

Valerie opened her mouth in shock and allowed several pieces of popcorn to fall out of her mouth. I laughed at her dramatics. “Well of course you think you’re right. You always do, wise guy.”

With feigned disdain, she picked up the popcorn that had fallen on the floor and threw it at me. “No, I know I’m right...I usually am, but especially about this.” She continued to throw popcorn at me, and it didn’t take long before I had to retaliate. I picked up a throw pillow that sat beside me.

“I have an embroidered pillow and I’m not afraid to use it!”

Without a moment's hesitation, Valerie grabbed it from me and held it above her head. "Not so high and mighty now, are you?" Apparently, the look on my face must have been hilarious, because, before waiting for a response, she burst into uncontrollable laughter. She tossed the pillow aside and grabbed her stomach for support while she wheezed. Valerie's laughter was contagious, so I began to giggle, as well. We did this until we were both on the floor, catching our breath. Valerie said a phrase that I had heard before, but this time she presented it as a sarcastic *tsk*: "Aggie, Aggie, Aggie." I still don't know what was so funny, but I know I haven't laughed that hard in a long time.

In real time, I was tying my shoes. Mia asked if I could pick her up about an hour after we talked, and that time was rapidly approaching. It felt a bit strange to pick up Mia and not *be* picked up by Valerie. Throughout high school, every time I had plans there was about an 80% chance that Valerie would pick me up. Otherwise, I'd borrow my dad's car, but Valerie was kind of a control freak when it came to driving.

But Valerie wasn't picking me up. I was driving. To meet Mia. And my phone just lit up to tell me she was ready. As I floated out of the house, my dad called out: "And don't come back here!"

Knowing his sense of humor, I said "Wouldn't dream of it, old man." He smiled proudly as he tossed me the keys.

Then, I was in our green SUV. It always smelled just a little bit like Frito's no matter how much we cleaned it. Oddly, it became a bit of a fond memory. Now, when I see a vending machine, I think of Dad's car. There are worse associations I could make.

I followed the GPS as it guided me through unfamiliar streets, and, at first, I was only a little bit unnerved by the eerie trees around me. It was about 8 o'clock, so the sun

had gone down and the only company I had was Siri (who proudly gave me directions), the light hum of pop music on the radio, and the spindly trees on either side of the road.

Things were calm until, without warning, my phone began buffering. There is a specific panic that comes with being lost while alone in a car. Then, that panic is multiplied for every year younger than twenty you are. Not to mention, it was dark. The sky was cloudy with no remnants of stars and the moon shimmered behind a misty fog. The house that Luke and Mia were staying in was a little farther from the city, closer to the lakes and swamps—the neighborhoods where all of the houses stood on pillars twenty feet above the ground. I didn't need houses towering twenty feet over me when I already felt so small.

Trying desperately to remember what the GPS had said, I went through the motions. I knew I was about two minutes away. I knew the house was, eventually, going to be on the right. I knew there was a 3 and a 7 in the address. Eventually, I settled on the house 357. Biting my nails, I pulled into the driveway and tried to wake life into my phone. I knew it was the connection but shaking it and pushing buttons never hurt.

Then, the music stopped.

Again, this was a connectivity issue. I am pretty far from the main city, so it makes sense that my music apps would buffer or stop playing altogether. But the darkness outside licked at my heels and the hair stood up on the back of my neck. I squinted my eyes to adjust to the dark and peek at the house in front of me for any indicator that I was in the right place, ignoring the quickening of my hummingbird heart. As much as I tried to pretend I was calm, my palms were sweaty, my neck was cold, I

saw something moving by the tree, my ears were ringing, my phone was buffering, I saw something moving by the tree...

I saw something moving by the tree. I cannot tell you if it was my own fear or a trick of the light, but my eyes quickly focused on one of the spindly trees that sat on the side of the property. For a brief moment, as clear as day, I saw a man—or what I first assumed was a man. It was tall, at least seven feet tall, and it reached around the tree with great care as though not to make sound. Though it was dark, I swear I saw talon-like claws peeking through its big, meaty fingers. In contrast with the shadows, I could also see teeth. They were sharp, yellow, rotten teeth. Then, I saw them. The main subject of my nightmares. Right in front of me, I saw two glowing red orbs: eyes. Only this time, they saw me, too.

A bang on my window caused me to jump, screaming involuntarily in terror. In turn, I frightened Mia, who had politely knocked on the window so I could unlock the door. Quickly, I unlocked the door. If it was out there, it could get her and...

When I turned back to look, all I saw was a tree.

Taking the opportunity I had been given, Mia innocently opened the door and climbed in. She smelled like coconuts, but this time held off on the suntan lotion. There was another figure behind her, which almost forced out another scream, but this one was only a little less frightening.

“Hey, Mia. Hey, Luke,” I greeted them in my best voice, low and strong. I tried to breathe slowly and unnoticeably, hiding the shaking as best as I could. After a few minutes to calm myself down, I knew I’d be okay.

Luke was already laughing. Mia was, too, but less obnoxious. I couldn't be too upset; a couple of days ago, I would have laughed at something like this, too.

"Sorry for scaring you, Aggie," Luke offered, beginning to slow down his laughter. Then, he turned to Mia. "And you said that *I* was too much of a scared-y cat to come." I was so disheveled it almost didn't bother me that he called me Aggie again. Almost.

Mia rolled her eyes, nonchalantly checking her lip gloss in the mirror. "Hi, August. Thank you for picking me up." After greeting me properly, she turned back to her brother. "Hey, Luke, didn't you cry at *It*?"

Luke suddenly got very quiet. He was still playful, but clearly humbled. "I don't like clowns. Lots of people don't like clowns."

Mia gave me a knowing look, and I managed to force out a half genuine laugh. I was still in disbelief, my hands tingling and my thoughts floating as if I were in dream. I took deep breaths that I'd hoped the twins didn't see to steady myself.

At this point, I had recovered enough to be snarky. "I'm not scared of movies. I'm scared of creepy twins knocking on my window at night." Apparently, I had chosen the right words because they both chuckled in approval. Though there was no test, it somehow felt like I passed. My heart was still pounding, and my mouth was dry, but at least I passed some sort of fictional test.

With a final glance towards the tree (where I was again met with nothing but branches), I tried to place the thought in the back of my mind. It went into the box that I keep at the end of the shelf—the shelf that is only touched when I'm lonely, hungry, tired, or it's a little too late at night. I hoped it would stay there.

Putting on a brave face, I turned to Mia. “We should probably get going if we’re going to get decent seats.”

I noticed that Mia’s hair was French braided, and her lips were shining with what I assumed was some sort of lip balm or gloss. Noticing her neat and pretty composure suddenly made me feel bleak for my bare face and hardly brushed hair. On the flip side, I wasn’t sure why Mia decided to get so dressed up if it was just a movie—and me. It was dark in there, anyways.

She turned towards Luke, who hovered by the door, resting his elbow on the open window. “That was polite for ‘Luke, you’re leaning on the door...also, move.’”

Mia was either funny or we had the same boring sense of humor, because I chuckled at the same point she did. Meanwhile, Luke silently removed his arm from the door, giving a sarcastic “ha...ha”. Then he waved as he turned towards the door. “Don’t say out too late, sis!”

“Don’t tell me what to do, old man.”

Luke whipped back around and shouted: “I’m older than you by eight minutes!”

“Best eight minutes of my life!”

Though their words were sharp, both twins sounded light, as if this was an inside joke between them. I backed out of the driveway, offering Luke a polite wave. Then, we were on our way towards my second horror experience of the night.

Sacrificial Sun

Long nights are fun until they lead to
darkened days. Cold, flushed cheeks grow rosier
in a way that makes me dread the coming of dawn.
Giggling in secret, shaving off the hours until I remember
pink cheeks are just blood which stains my mouth every time
we kiss. You can't help it, your entrails sometimes creep up
your neck, and that metallic taste has become my
medicine—only comparable to a caress
from your hand.

Frosted yet fickle, our breath fogs in the dark.

Steam clouds my words as I avoid saying goodbye.

The sun coming up is often unnoticed, until

the warm light feels emptier than the night.

And we were just kids, afraid to speak.

We fear the pendulum's swing.

Always back to Autumn

when the evenings were endless

and months froze in time.

But staying too still tends to attract flies

I've missed too many trains sleeping in

because of nights that introduced us to a

deathly high.

Distance

made me step back

into the sun, but

I wish he, too, had such a handsome voice.

A confession that he, too, misses the dark which

he can never touch.

That he, too, hurts like I do.

Seasons blend and morph with each other and

we follow the same pattern blind.

Eventual Apathy

She often complained to me that her tail bone was sore
after hours of sitting on our rusty tin roof.

“It feels like my spine is offset,” she complained,
directing my hand towards a lump on her lower back.

It was like she was reaching an unspoken quota.

How long could she stretch her time before I told her to come inside?

Though I rarely had the motivation to call her in;

After all, roof is better than railcar.

I bite my tongue. At least she is here.

Feeling the lump, I combine my love and anger.

“Don’t you care about your safety?” I ask.

She shrugs. Dispassionate. Somehow polite. “It’s just sitting.”

“What is it? Are you too lazy to come inside?”

Would you rather the moon to me?

My wife was always adamant. She shook her head.

A defendant to her cause, she took me up there and pointed to the sky.

“Don’t you see it? That sculpture of stars?”

I nod with an unforeseen conviction.

I do see it. I see the valley. And I see the railcar leaving town.

My tin roof slab is warmer than her, so I sigh

“Do you see a future here with me?”

She shushed me as she gestured to another cluster of stars.

CHAPTER SEVEN

By the time Mia and I had grabbed our seats, holding comically large popcorn, I had managed to push my Louisiana darkness-fueled hallucination to the back of my mind. For now, even if it was only a moment, I was going to fear something else, for a change.

We managed to steal the seats in the center of the theater, and we were early enough that an upbeat newscaster told us fun facts about our favorite films on the big screen.

Before taking a bite of her popcorn, Mia gave me a smug look before saying: “I told you we’d get the best seats in the house.”

Personally, I didn’t consider the middle seats to be the best. The screen sure was clear and wide, but I found myself wondering what the back of my head really looked like—and how many people were staring at it right now. In fact, I couldn’t remember the last time I sat in the middle of the theater. Valerie always preferred the back row.

I acknowledged her comment about seats with a hum of agreement. After waiting a beat or two, I finally asked: “So, what was Valerie up to, tonight? Or am I just your first choice when it comes to movie dates?”

Mia rolled her eyes and elbowed me. “Shut up. Valerie said it’s her grandpa’s birthday, today. She’s busy.”

Despite what I was feeling, I nodded politely. I took a bite of popcorn. I laughed at Mia’s jokes, and I made some of my own. I didn’t even mention the fact that Valerie only had one grandpa, and his birthday was May 19th.

It would, however, stick with me for the rest of the night—no, the rest of my life.

When I dropped Mia off that night, I hesitantly glanced at the tree, horrified that if I ignored it too long it would sneak up on me. Alas, it was just a tree. I don't know what I expected, but I let out a shaky sigh. It was just a tree.

“So, what did you think of the movie?” Mia asked innocently. She was so unaware of the tree...of what lurked behind it. I was unsure if I pitied her or envied her. The only thing I was sure of was this: right now, the tree is just a tree. Mia, who is just a girl, is sitting in my passenger seat making polite small talk, because she wanted to talk to me for some reason. My best friend, who might be more than just a girl, lied about her grandpa's birthday so that she could avoid going to the movies. That same night, I saw a creature—perhaps even *the* creature. My brain connected the dots, no matter how badly I fought against it.

“I love a good horror movie,” I offered politely. In reality, I thought the movie was kind of cheap—offering jump scares in lieu of sophisticated plot and refusing to show the monster until the end of the movie.

“But was that one good?” With a smirk.

“I guess so.”

Mia let out a surprised ‘hmpf’. “Well, I kind of thought it was cheap, in a way. I'm never one for too many jump scares.” She paused for a moment. “But to each their own, of course.”

As much as I would enjoy this discussion on a normal day, I could not tear my gaze away from the tree for more than a couple of seconds at a time.

“So...” I felt a tad guilty for ignoring her conversation, but there was only one thing on my mind. “Did Valerie say if they were having a party at her house?”

There was a lengthy silence that followed, and Mia shrugged, somewhat tense. A bit quiet, she said: “I don’t know, I...think so? All I know is that she’s busy.”

I sensed that Mia was a bit exasperated, so I humbled myself for just a moment. “Sorry, I was just curious since I know her grandpa lives in Alabama.” Nice save.

Apparently, it was nice enough because Mia loosened up. “Either way, she probably wishes she was here.”

“Yeah, she really missed out.” Like I said, I thought the movie was just alright. The acting was subpar, the plot was lazy, and if I got the opportunity to go home and watch *It* instead, I would do in a heartbeat. I wasn’t sure if I would take Mia with me, yet. Maybe someday I would, but right now looking at her only reminded me of...

Luke rounded the corner and tapped on my window. Though not as boneshaking as the last time, I flinched, and my heart skipped a beat. Without thinking, I flipped off the window. Then, I opened it so as not to be rude. It was funny, in a way. When he was around, all I could think of was how, despite his sunny disposition and charisma, Luke seemed to give me an itch I couldn’t scratch. Yet, when he spoke to me, I always responded. I rolled down the window even though his first instinct was to make a joke out of me. My cumbersome desire to be liked by him annoyed me just as much as he did. In the end, it was probably about Valerie. It always seemed to be about Valerie. She liked him—she liked him *so* much, so there must be something good in him I’m not seeing. Or there was something bad in Valerie, and I really hoped that wasn’t true.

Luke was standing in front of the tree, blocking my view. I figured he didn’t know what he was doing, but uneasiness had already crept into my mind. The hair on my neck stood up, the tree being blocked from my view somehow feeling akin to my back

facing a dark cave. If there was something there, I wouldn't be able to see it. It could be creeping up, ready to pounce on Luke and tear him apart. Despite our differences, I think I would be pretty traumatized to see that happen to Luke. But I digress.

As soon as the window was down, I was met with Luke's uncontrollable laughter. "Jeez, Aggie, I'm two for two." I shuddered at the way my nickname sounded when it was shaped by his mouth. I tried to pass it off as a subtle chill.

"I wouldn't be so proud," Mia warned, feigned caution in her voice. "With a face like that, you probably scare people all the time."

I stifled a laugh and kept it in my throat, unsure why I was trying so hard to hide it. Luke probably said something about he and Mia having the same face, but I was too busy trying to note the differences between their laughs. Still, the differences were subtle. If I was told to differentiate the twins based on smile alone, I would have to do a double take—at least until I remembered that Mia's nose scrunch immediately gave her away.

Once the banter had died down, we were left soaking in the silence that we had unintentionally created. Usually, I would make a show of myself to get a reaction, improvising a comedy act as soon as I felt a moment of quietness creeping up. In that moment, every time I tried to think of something funny, it grew teeth, claws, and red eyes.

Luckily, Mia broke the silence before Luke or I could. "So, I guess this is me." Mia unbuckled her seat belt, stepping out of the car methodically. If I didn't know better, I would think she was waiting for someone to stop her. Once her feet were on the ground, she turned around and asked: "Do you want to come in for some pizza rolls or anything?"

I wasn't a fanatic for pizza rolls. I was a little bit sleepy from the movie. I still felt like my stomach had found a new home in my throat, and I wanted nothing more than to go to bed and forget about what I saw—the movie and whatever else. Despite my discomfort, I would have gone inside with Mia if it weren't for Luke's face of displeasure. I could tell he tried to hide it, but his eyes widened ever so slightly and his mouth twisted downwards for a fraction of a second. It was just a fraction—not even a moment, but it was already ingrained in my mind. I would be seeing that expression every time I made a joke, infiltrated a conversation, took up space...

“This late on a school night?” He tried to play off the disgusted facial contortion as a humorous, big-brother judgement.

I interrupted. His face was in my mind again. “Actually, that's a good point,” I responded, licking my lips and swallowing the invisible ping pong ball in my mouth. “I may or may have not forgotten about the Calculus homework...I'd better get home.”

Luke jumped in and teased me like we were suddenly buddies. “I think if I forget my homework for one more day, Mr. Terry will take my name off the roster.”

I gave a half-hazard smile, not bothering to respond for once. Instead, I redirected my gaze to Mia. “Goodnight, thanks for the movie. I had a good time.” For the most part, I meant it.

Mia smiled and gave me a wink. She scrunched her nose in that way that she does, and I somehow understood what that meant: Until next time. Though I was fighting a tightness in my chest that was distinctly aware of Luke staring at me, I figured she was right. For Mia and me, there might be a next time. Then, I drove away in my dad's Frito Mobile.

On the way home, I drove past Valerie's house. I didn't know what I was looking for, exactly. If there were more cars than usual, or if there seemed to be a party inside, maybe Valerie wasn't lying after all. Maybe her family did come over, and Mia got the details wrong. At least, that's what I told myself as I turned down her street.

Once I passed the driveway at a casual yet hasty speed of 10 miles per hour, I saw both of her parents' cars. Beside them was a platter of empty driveway. The lights inside were turned off, the only light illuminating from the house at all being the soft glow of the porch light, which Valerie's parents only turned on once they were going to sleep. The ping pong ball in my throat was a tennis ball, now. I turned around and went home, making sure my doors were locked.

The ride home was dreary, and I was hardly aware of my own actions. The road in front of me became a dark, hazy game of going through the motions. Meanwhile, my mind traveled back in time to Mia's house—to the tree. But it wasn't the tree that stuck with me, really. It was the lurking shadow that I knew would never leave my mind. It was Valerie's grandpa, whose birthday was almost a year away, whose car was nowhere near Valerie's house—Valerie's house, which was dark and quiet and dead.

Why couldn't Valerie have just said she was sick?

Vore

Strikes to the chest remind me of mortality while

the twisting of a knife puts name to my flesh.

Lying still is effortless as long as you are numb,

but within the squelching and stabbing...

you are carving out chunks of me.

Ephemeral feminine infatuation fills the void, but

she also mourns the meat whose

purpose is now to rot.

The muscle and tendons that once

protected my heart. Only to be

held like a toy.

Though I am bleeding out, and you are

slicing my severed nerves into a mess,

I sit and watch in bittersweet glee,

because I am finally feeling humanity.

The Artist

Father told me that my touch was too gentle; my
grip too weak. Legs too shaky and flesh too soft.
You need thicker skin, he would say to me when
the stitches holding me together started to
hurt. *God didn't make you to be this sad.*
But He didn't make me—not on purpose,
because He didn't have the choice and
if He did, why make *this*? Father
made me, and he made me
as delicate as I am. He
formed me out of clay
and told me not to be
malleable.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The next time Warren and Stephanie both came over was the night my dad's exhibit opened. It was an evening in September—a little cloudy, a little dark, and filled with a strong energy that I could not discern. Dad started showing signs of anxiety three days before the show...then he didn't stop. He was jittery (even more than usual), he was spouting out what felt like a thousand words per minute, and the house was littered with rough drafts of an opening speech. The words on most of them were scratched out, torn, or simply illegible. My mom ended up having to drag him out of the house on opening night, a pencil still in hand.

Warren, Stephanie, and I rode together. We figured it was best to give my parents some space—and, if I'm being honest, it would have been nerve-wracking to ride in the car with Dad. His energy was palpable—contagious. Getting into the car with Warren and Stephanie felt like a breath of fresh air after being in a house surrounded by ripped up drafts and grotesque portraits of a monster I never invited.

The Rougarou made a guest appearance in my dreams ever so often—a similar story where I find myself alone, blinded, and frightened. I see a pair of glowing red spheres, I feel claws on my skin, and I wake up before I am (presumably) disemboweled. Valerie and I have texted back and forth, but I haven't seen her since her "grandpa's birthday party". There's no use bringing it up, I thought. If she wanted me to know the truth, she wouldn't have lied. Yet, she did. Now, I wonder if the truth is anywhere in sight.

Stephanie drove us to the opening of our dad's exhibit. She was always a more careful driver than Warren. Now that I think about it, her music taste was pretty close to

mine, too. I hadn't realized it before, but she was softly singing along in the front seat, and I found myself mouthing almost every word. Warren zoned out, staring at the trees through the window. I usually hate comfortable silence (it's never comfortable, only silent), but this time felt different. Maybe it was the music. Maybe it was the three of us acting like through and through siblings for once.

Once we got to the museum, Warren sat up and peaked through the middle of the headrests. "Are you ready to go see Dad's creepy ass artwork scar some kids for life?"

I nodded, thinking to myself that he was right. Kids would fear the monster that lived in the swamp. Kids.

Stephanie unbuckled her seatbelt with care, as if she was scared of making too harsh a noise. "Well, we'd better get in before all those kids beat us in line."

Once we were all out of the car, Warren scoffed. "Yeah, right. We're VIPs or something. There's got to be a list that we're on."

"Warren, this isn't a night club."

Once we reached the line, there was a burly looking tree of a man with an earpiece waiting for us. He was holding a clipboard with a printed piece of paper that was definitely a list. Warren gave Stephanie a smug look, then motioned for both of us to follow him as he approached the tree man.

"Name?" he asked, standing straight and puffing out his chest like a professional wrestler. I had a feeling that this guy took his job way too seriously, but we all gave him polite, neutral smiles as we told him our names.

Once he had confirmed that our names were on the list, he immediately opened the rope and let us inside. We had skipped what appeared to be at least a fifteen-minute wait.

Warren turned to Stephanie, but she held a finger up at him. “Not a word.” In response, he mimed zipping his lips and throwing away the key. This was somehow more condescending than the alternative.

The inside of the museum smelled like animal crackers and acrylic paint, so that part wasn’t too different from home. For a moment, I wondered if Dad’s exhibit would also feature the charcoal dust all over the floor—and if his opening speech would be a rambling of Cajun lore intermittently interrupted by a hysterical laugh or an interjection of the ironic nickname “Bug”. Maybe I just hoped that it was. After this, however, I realized that the floor was clean—sparkling, almost. The art on the walls was simultaneously meaningful, profound, confusing, and unreachable. I didn’t understand half of them, and looking at it made my head hurt, so I tried to only offer a polite glance where I could.

Warren, Stephanie, and I spent a couple of idle minutes floating around the museum, suffering from a general air of feeling out of place. The light wooden floors, clean walls, and art that you weren’t allowed to touch felt so different from home: so different from Dad’s creative process. I guess living with him allowed me to see every part of his work—the before versus the after. It got me thinking: so many things can be separated into before and after.

For example, before: Warren, Stephanie and I stood awkwardly in the exhibit, listening to the slight hum of conversation around us. Every now and then, Stephanie

would shuffle uncomfortably, shifting weight from one foot to the other. None of us felt in place, but she seemed especially quiet. She was composed because she's Stephanie. I couldn't think of another reason.

Admittedly, I was beginning to grow slightly bored, biting the inside of my cheek to pass the time. I stared at the wall—art adjacent—and pictured what Dad's final painting might look like in the midst of all of these. Warren's tap on my shoulder snapped me out of it.

"Isn't that Val?" he asked, nodding across the room to a girl with Val's frizzy hair, her wide smile, everything...But this Valerie was different. She was wearing her purple sweater—the same one from that day she pulled up to my house. I was shocked she managed to get it on, especially since it fit her totally differently than the last time I had seen it. Now, it was cropped, it hugged her hips, and it was interrupted in the middle by breasts I never realized she had. Admittedly, Valerie looked like she was having fun. Her smile was as big as it used to be with me.

Then, I saw that her hand was intertwined with another's. I didn't have to look at the body attached to the second hand; I knew as well as anyone that her partner in crime was Luke.

Against my will, I felt rage bubbling inside of me. It was hot inside all of the sudden—*very* hot, and I wished art exhibits could be outside. The walls carry too much conversation. It carries more than I ever want to hear. I wanted more than anything to approach Valerie; I wanted to tell her how much this hurt me. She brought Luke to my own dad's art exhibit, and she hasn't even looked in my direction. She couldn't even

spare me a text, but Luke gets her attention, her time, her big dopey smiles. Luke was her favorite, and there was no room for me.

Despite my fury fueled fantasy, my feet were glued to the floor. All I could do was breathe in ragged, shallow bursts. I did not care if Stephanie and Warren noticed, and I don't know if they did, because before I could fully process, there was a hand on my shoulder. Though I'm ashamed of it, I jumped almost a foot into the air.

"Whoa," Mia giggled, withdrawing her hand. "I'm sorry. Maybe Luke wasn't totally mistaken when he said you were jumpy."

Mia wasn't responsible for Valerie's decisions; Mia wasn't even responsible for Luke. But the nerve that she had to mention him to me as soon as we began talking filled me with more anger. I bit my lip and nodded, holding back tears of frustration. This, I hoped Mia didn't notice.

She may have noticed, but instead of acknowledging it, she let out a low whistle. "I'm sorry, Aggie." Something about her voice sounded sincere. "I won't scare you again."

The name Aggie lingered through the air like a dense fog. I don't know if it was my adrenaline, despair, or confusion, but I finally said:

"You know, only Valerie is supposed to call me that."

There was no mistranslation in my tone. Mia recoiled as if I had slapped her. "Noted."

For some reason, she didn't leave. She turned slightly to face the exhibit, but it was clear she had no intention of walking away. I don't know why. I surely didn't

deserve her company. *She's babysitting*, I thought, *Luke and Valerie pair off together*, *and someone has to keep me distracted so I don't cause a scene.*

I invented this theory and promptly accepted it as fact. It only made me angrier. I took a deep breath and tried not to think about my acute awareness of Mia's arm brushing against mine.

Green

Oranges so juicy, tender, and sweet

are too sour, too cold, hurting my teeth.

Tenderly I swallow, careful not to offend

for the oranges are harvested by a dear friend.

If we waited another week, they would be perfectly ripe,

chewy, delectable, sliced clean with your knife.

Still, I eat one whole—too soon—as you watch.

Because how could I ignore the door when you knocked?

It is no use to ask when the answer is a secret of time,

but I can't stop the thought—can't clear my mind—

that if we waited a bit, the oranges would break apart in my hands,

sticky, sweet, beautifully vibrant, and ready to eat.

Oranges so bitter, sour, stomach churning,

yet I wake up in the night craving, yearning.

Meat

You feast on a diet of dead things,
licking your lips, wiping your face;
Smacking, drooling, biting, and tearing. You're
keeping a smile as you're staring.
I pride myself on being civilized.
clean and proper and, most importantly, nothing like you.
White knuckling silver plated utensils and
a ghost resembling you
on the edge of my spoon.

CHAPTER NINE

The voices floating through the air quieted down as a man in a tweed suit stepped out of what seemed to be nowhere. He was holding a microphone, and his hair was neatly slicked back. It took me several glances to make me realize that this was my dad. Actually, right now, he was Fredrick Cain, the artist. My dad was left at home—probably still trying to tie his tie.

“Welcome, everyone,” Frederick said, his voice slightly squeaky in a way that reminded me of Dad. There was slight microphone feedback. To me, it sounded like nails on a chalkboard. Forcing my back straight, I didn’t recoil.

“I want to thank you all for coming to my first individual exhibit,” he continued. There were scattered claps around the room followed by an awkwardly placed “whoop” from Warren. “As some of you know, most places have their version of a cryptid...a ghost, a vampire, a werewolf. Here, in Louisiana, we have the Rougarou...”

He proceeded to say a bunch of stuff that I already knew. Dad was beginning to sound like one of those documentaries he would watch every night. I began to suspect that, instead of learning from them, he just studied their vocal inflection—a monotonous, foreboding lull, randomly interrupted by dramatic pauses.

Then, he gestured to his new painting, currently covered by a black sheet. “I could never do the story of the Rougarou justice on a single canvas. It serves so many purposes—a cautionary tale, a bed-time story, a fable...” I tried not to think about the fact that he just said three synonyms in a row. “But I tried to capture what the Rougarou stands for, which, I think, is what we find scariest of all—ourselves, and each other.”

With that, he removed the sheet. I shouldn't have been surprised. Uncomfortable eye contact was something that painting, and I often played with. I saw those red orbs everywhere, even in my sleep. But this time, the painting felt more three dimensional than it ever had before. It stared straight through the crowd and into my eyes. The frothy blood foaming out of its mouth somehow sent chills down my spine in a way that was new to me. By a matter of instinct, I turned to glance at Valerie and see her reaction.

What I saw next might have been a result of my white-hot rage. It might have been a trick of the light. I know this, but I'm not convinced. Valerie's eyes flicked towards me only for a moment. She was aware of me; I could tell. But she didn't want to be near—just wanted to see me. And as she did, her eyes flashed a color that I had never seen before. Even if it was just for a second, she had let me see it: the red glow that hid behind her eyes. All of the rage left my body and was replaced by a different type of adrenaline: fear. Then, I knew why she was looking at me. She wanted to see me squirm. Luke wasn't Valerie's favorite. No, Luke was *its* favorite.

The label on the painting read: The Beast Lives Here.

+++

At that point, I had decided Valerie was not Valerie anymore—at least not right now. Maybe there would be a way for me to rescue her, but how? And Luke...My brain lagged when it came to Luke. Thinking about him still filled me up with so much envy, but what if he was in danger? I owe it to him—at least to Mia—to protect him. Warn him.

Once the show ended, Mia, Warren, Stephanie, Mom, and I all ended up outside, waiting for my Dad. It was a strange group, to say the least. Warren, being as outgoing as he is, unabashedly introduced himself to Mia and proceeded to ask her about her time in

Italy. Mia was slightly bashful, but she seemed to be enjoying the conversation. At some point while they were speaking, Valerie and Luke approached. I held my breath. I felt the hair stand on the nape of my neck, but I said nothing. What would I even say?

“Your dad’s work was great. So different from what he normally does.” Valerie spoke in my vague direction, but I could tell my siblings were included.

I bit my tongue. Instead of saying that he’s been working on it for months and she would know if she ever came over anymore, I said this: “I thought the same thing.”

Luke said: “It was so creepy! Were you really told about the Rougarou growing up?”

Instead of saying that I had never heard of it until Valerie became one, I said this: “Not really. My dad knows more about it than I do.”

I floated through the rest of the conversation in this same way—just trying to keep my head above water so I didn’t get swept up in the tide. After Valerie and I’s initial conversation, she didn’t say much. But I could feel her eyes burning into me from behind. This was all I could think about until my dad came to meet us.

Stephanie, Warren, and Mia floated in the conversation like ignorant ghosts, clearly sensing some sort of tension that they did not have enough context to materialize. When Warren saw my dad, I could swear he looked relieved—as if my fear had somehow metastasized and spread like an airborne disease.

“So, Dad, how does it feel to be a fancy schmancy artist, now?”

Before acknowledging his comment, my dad gave my mom a fond kiss on the cheek. Like I said, he was the underdog my mom took a chance on, and I’m sure she’s glad she did. After greeting my mom, Dad said: “It feels like this tie is sucking the life

out of me.” Then, he began to put on a slight performance. He dropped my mom’s hand and dramatically clutched his chest. “Oh my, I-...” His knees buckled. “I suddenly feel the urge to talk about taxes!”

Of course, Warren joined him, clutching his throat. He mock-coughed a few times, forming in between breaths: “Nice...weather...we’re...having...” Everyone immediately burst into laughter.

As much as I was proud of my Dad—and as much as this exchange provided some much needed relief from the dense air that had formed between myself and Valerie—I also saw this grand performance as an opening. It was a place to step out and get some fresh air without anyone noticing. Before I had even fully decided, one foot was moving in front of the other and I was making a beeline towards the outdoor exhibit: a garden full of stone statues and rose bushes. While leaving, I saw Stephanie, stone-faced, standing close to my mother.

The garden was better—at least for the moment. It was quieter, it smelled earthy, and the creepy, dead stare of the statues was ten times better than the thought of looking Valerie in the eyes. Valerie’s eyes...

That single moment replayed in my head like a song on repeat. The way Valerie turned to me, the way she held a look of smug determination so unfamiliar, and the way her eyes glowed like a smoldering piece of molten rock. The more I pictured it, the clearer it became. There was no reflection, no trick of the light, there was just Valerie, and whatever it was inside of Valerie that made her look at me the way she did. A way that Valerie never would.

“Are you okay? I noticed you walk off.” A voice called from behind.

Startled and broken out of my trance, I whipped my head around to find the owner of the voice. Half of me thought that Valerie would be waiting with a twisted smile, ready to taunt me more than she already has.

Instead, I saw Mia. Mia, who was mousy and gentle. She jumped at the sudden movement.

Letting out a breath that I didn't know I had been holding, I asked: "What are you doing here?"

Mia shrugged, glancing briefly over her shoulder like it was possible I was talking to someone else. "Like I said," she reiterated. "I saw you leave; I wanted to make sure you were okay. Why are you so jumpy tonight?"

My first instinct was to deny. I almost told her that nothing was wrong; I was fine, and she was the weird one for following me and analyzing everything that I do. Then, I took note of her big, doe-like eyes. Her innocent, seemingly genuine concern decorated her features. Then, I thought: Screw it. My best friend is a monster. What does it matter if another friend thinks I'm crazy for it?

So, I said: "You're going to think I've lost my mind."

She said: "Try me."

Briefly, I overthought it. *Are Mia and I even friends?* But I had come too far to talk myself out of it now. So, I told her. I started at the beginning—the trip to Vienna, the unease that I felt when she returned, the Rougarou's power of possessing people, the Rougarou's power of punishment for an unholy deed, and what I had seen outside of Mia's own house. And, ultimately, what I saw in my dad's art exhibit. At the end, I timidly mentioned Luke.

She was quiet. I watched as her wide doe eyes got bigger with every word. Her mouth fell slightly more agape each time I referenced the Rougarou—every time I associated it with Valerie. I figured that if a fly flew down her throat, she might not even notice. Several moments went by.

I sat on a rock, exasperated. It occurred to me that this was my first time saying it out loud. Up until this moment, my fears were housed inside of me. What I had just done was open the floodgates. Now, my agony has materialized. It was floating through the air like an airborne disease. Be fruitful and multiply.

I realized it had been several moments, and Mia did not say a word. Her mouth was still agape.

“My mom told me that if you leave your mouth open like that, you’re going to catch flies.”

Whatever trance Mia was in seemed to be, at least, mitigated by my shallow attempt to lighten the mood. No matter who it was or what it was about, I could not appear vulnerable. I felt more lost than ever—I felt scared, alone, and abandoned. But I would never admit that out loud if my life depended on it.

Mia cleared her throat. “So, you think-...” Think. I could already see where she was going with this. “You think that Valerie has become some sort of monster, and she is...preying on my brother? How does that even work?” Suddenly, she grew pale. “I don’t even want to think about how that would work.”

I shrugged. “I don’t know, but I do know that she seems to have—I don’t know—sunk her claws into him, and I don’t have a good feeling about it.”

“Agg-..” Mia paused and her lips became a thin line. She started again. “August, are you sure that you aren’t just stressed? I know a lot has been happening in school and it’s never easy when your best friend gets a boyfriend-...” She continued saying more, but the word “boyfriend” repeated in my head over and over. Valerie had never told me that she and Luke were official, now. Then again, why would she? I’m sure updating her Facebook status is the least of the Rougarou’s worries. *What was it doing, then?*

“I just think we should consider the possibilities.” Mia stared at me expectantly. She seemed to have finished speaking. I guess there wasn’t much for her to say—at least, nothing that could change anything.

I wasn’t listening, but it truly didn’t matter what she said. It was clear she didn’t believe me. The worst part was that I couldn’t be that angry with her. If I hadn’t seen what I saw, I might not have believed me either.

“I know what I saw. You should be glad I’m looking out for your brother.” *Even if he’s given me no reason to.* That part, of course, was left unsaid.

Mia sighed, kicking her feet in the sand. The wind picked up, and the smell of the rose bushes was overwhelming—pleasant, yet sickeningly sweet.

“What proof could there be?” Mia asked. To be fair, this was a better response than I was prepared for.

In brutal honesty, proof was not a concept that I had considered before this conversation. I guess there was no one to prove it to. Maybe there was no use because I knew it was true.

There was no witty comment to be made, regardless of how desperately I searched. Instead, I said: “I don’t know.”

Mia nodded, expectantly quiet, but unexpectedly attentive. At this point, she seemed to have managed to force her mouth closed. No flies for dinner today.

“Aggie, I can’t believe you until there’s proof. That’s my brother’s girlfriend you are talking about.” She sounded oddly determined. I wondered where this strange stoicism had come from. More importantly, though, I stopped in my tracks at her choice of words. In the course of a couple of months, Valerie had gone from my best friend to Luke’s girlfriend. She wouldn’t do that—not my Valerie. “But I think I have an idea—a deal.”

This suggestion surprised me enough to push my mourning aside. This time, I wasn’t even upset by her calling me “Aggie”. She had said it so confidently that it did not feel out of place. My wide range of emotions mixed together like some sort of alphabet soup. Instead of firing back, I said: “What’s the deal?”

She sighed, and there was slight shakiness in her breath. I could not tell if it was fear (from her beginning to believe my elaborate story) or exasperation (from her having to entertain my elaborate story as to not cause conflict). It was probably the latter.

“The deal is this: We give it three weeks. If you can’t find proof within the next three weeks, then you have to drop it. If you do...” She paused, thinking. I could tell she did not consider the second outcome a legitimate possibility. “If you can prove it before then, I’ll help you...deal with it—kill it, I don’t know.” This was the first time I, myself, had considered the right thing to do with Valerie. For Mia, it was easy to say the word kill. It rolled off of her tongue like a perfect note—likely because she didn’t think it would ever have to happen. I, on the other hand, froze at the word kill. Images of Valerie flashed through my mind, but one remained on top: those damn red eyes.

I took the deal.

Resuscitation Again

When I hear your sultry song,
I am haunted by a higher pitched melody,
surrounded by a chorus of river nymphs and
soprano-suited symphonies.
I see glowing, ever-changing eyes, but
only a glimpse.

A victim to gravity, I fall into your
arms. Yet, too quick, I feel slimy, wet scales and the
cold water seems to seep into my veins, sharp and piercing.
Your hand hits hard on my chest and
my heart is beating faster. I suspected you were secretive, but
never an actor.

I clutch my chest, yelling *why? Why did you hit me? Don't
you know that I was resting? Falling asleep?*
All I get in response is an ear-splitting tone.
A reminder that you are made of magic, and I am made of bone.

Leaving your grasp, my rib cage is bruised, but my heart beats steadily.
Stuck with a need to walk
on my own. No falling for spells, no
arms to catch me. I should have known
because any other day,
the sound of a siren warns:
move out of the way.

Twin Flames

We're two poets who wrestle with words.

It's a rough match, similes and symbolism

suffocate each other trying to explain

feelings far too big for a page.

My God, we are going to wreck each other.

CHAPTER TEN

Stephanie had eventually found me and dragged me to the car, muttering something about how I could learn to answer my damn phone every once in a while. There must have been something hostile in the air that night. To conclude her rant, she said something about Warren waiting in the car to drive us home. Apparently, she had looked everywhere for me—of course, except for the garden ten feet from where they greeted my dad.

Maybe it was because I was overwhelmed. Maybe it was because I was already being treated like a child by Mia. So, I said: “Why are you always so uptight, Stephanie?”

Apparently, I struck a nerve. She pushed her lips together and did not utter another word the whole ride home. Even when we got in the car with Warren, the only responses she gave him were nods and incomprehensible mumbles. A twinge of guilt gnawed at me, but it felt small in the grand scheme of things.

I sat in the back seat. Always the back seat.

+++

Instead of going to sleep once I told my parents goodnight, I stayed up for another two or three hours. I didn't do any research on the Rougarou—thanks to my dad, I didn't have to. Any time a question arose, a documentary narrator possessed me and spouted out the answer. I would call it the most useless superpower on the planet, but that would be a lie. Plus, I might win a lot of trivia someday.

Rather, I scoured my room until I found an empty composition notebook, and I wrote down ways to prove that something was off about Valerie. The first bullet point was simple: catch her eyes changing on camera. Bingo. If I was able to capture the red

glow, it just might be enough to convince Mia. I paused a moment while writing. *Why do I care what Mia thinks, anyways?* This is about Valerie. It's about saving Valerie—Luke, by extension, I guess. I'm not a monster. *Monsters...*

I scribbled down my second point: record her admission. This one would be a bit more difficult. Not only have I been unable to be alone with Valerie since our pizza date the first night she came back, but I was almost certain she would never openly admit to being a ravenous Louisianian swamp demon. I almost scratched it out, but I opted to add three question marks next to it...just in case.

Then, I stared at my notebook page, my mind a blank slate. I counted what I had already. I had written down two ideas, nine words total. I had three weeks to prove that my best friend was a lycanthropic monster, and two ideas.

This brainstorming session only took me about ten minutes, then I spent at least an hour and fifty minutes lying in bed, tossing and turning while chills crawled up and down my spine. The ludicrous horror of the situation I was in filled my chest, and I put a sticky note over the red light of my smoke detector.

+++

The next morning, I woke up to see that I had an unread text from Mia. This wouldn't have been too odd, except it made me realize that I had sent Mia a text in a tired stupor—the text was stamped 2:38am.

It said: "Meet me T the paparizzapizza."

Her response was: "I could go for cheese. 1 o'clock?"

So, I guess she was able to decipher my sleepy stumbling. Though I didn't remember asking, I did think it was a good idea to get lunch with Mia; it definitely beat

staring at my walls. My walls, by the way, were still filled with each and every stage of my dad's artistic process—there were at least twenty pairs of those eyes watching me everywhere I went.

I had a little bit of time before 1 o'clock, however, which left me wandering into my living room with about half an hour to spare. My dad was hunched over an easel, which I did not initially find strange. Then, I saw what he was drawing: yet another sketch of the Rougarou. This time, it was not the center of attention. The center of the painting was a boat which featured two generic teenagers staring off the edge. One of them, with long brown hair, pointed off the side of the boat, seemingly pointing out some sort of attractive sight. Behind them, the Rougarou lurked in the trees, watching the unsuspecting teens. In anticipation, he licked his lips.

Stifling any reaction I might have to the drawing, I said: "Good morning."

Dad turned around to face me. "Good morning, Bug."

I pointed at the painting, feigning nonchalance. "I thought the Rougarou exhibit was over."

He gave a small laugh, glancing at his drawing once again and then turning back to me. "Well, yeah...But sometimes, it just comes to me, and who am I to stop that?"

"The Rougarou...comes to you?" I spun the phrase, adding comedic nuance and sarcasm. I hoped my dad would not notice the fear interwoven between the lines. Of course, part of me hoped he would.

"Well, of course. It stopped for a while—I wasn't really interested in this crap for the last couple of years. It was a cautionary tale to me when I was a kid, so I guess it didn't really make its way back until now." *Until I had my last kid: you.* My dad didn't

say it, but he didn't have to. He looked at me and he saw the Rougarou; I looked at him and saw the same.

It could have been a simple case of miscommunication. My dad could have been speaking about some sort of artistic process that I don't understand, but he still managed to say everything correctly to confirm my worst fears: there is something hereditary in the Rougarou. My dad is haunted by it—mentally or otherwise, and I am haunted by it in the real world. I hardly responded to him. I told him I loved him, and I would see him soon, then I left to go to the pizzeria with twenty-five minutes to spare.

Broken Parts

Body parts s-t-i-t-c-h-e-d together with twine, you
cry to me that you cannot move. Words are foreign.

Your lungs meet air for the first time and you say
it hurts.

I stay calm and collected to comfort
my creation, *you are so lovely.*

You will learn.

A Star Rests in Your Palm

Death does not happen once, but
one of your deaths is going to last. Until then, you toy with
reanimation, rebirth, reaching a little bit
farther each time. Pushing your limits,
crying in church parking lots, screaming
at the sky and jumping with a hand stretched out
until you catch a star and decide
it is yours, now. You spend the days crept towards death
treating her kindly and learning who she is.
It burns and you don't care.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I reserved our table, but I waited until she got there to order. By the time she had hit the chair, I had memorized all twenty-five possible toppings they had listed (as well as eight different combinations that I was considering ordering). When the waitress asked if we were ready to order, I almost instinctively blurted out my request, but Mia politely interjected with:

“I think I’ll take a few minutes to look over everything. Thank you.” Mia was so sure—so polite, that the waitress didn’t even look at me for confirmation. She gave a charming smile, promised us a few more minutes, then disappeared behind the counter. I don’t think she had even looked at me.

Soon after the waitress floated away, Mia commented: “I love this place. The first day we flew in town Luke and I both got slices the size of our heads.”

I vaguely nodded towards this comment. Then, we traded half-hearted small talk until the waitress came back to tack our orders. She asked us if we would be together or separate, and this time it was me who spoke for the both of us: separate.

Once the waitress disappeared to place our orders, I didn’t waste any more time.

“So, I’ve been thinking about this whole...thing.” At this point, I didn’t have to say the words. Mia knew what I was talking about, and her eyes grew tired. She bit her lip and took a sip of her drink, bracing like she was waiting to be slapped.

“What about it?”

“I was thinking that it can’t be a one-person job.” I chose to ignore her discomfort. Saving Valerie—saving Luke, even—felt much more important. Later, Mia would understand. “Valerie is over at your place more than mine, now, anyways. I’m

thinking that I'm going to need your help." I avoided saying the truth that Valerie hadn't been over to my house in months. It wasn't important to say.

Mia shrugged and made long, intimate eye contact with an ice cube. Or maybe it was the rim of her cup. Either way, I knew I wasn't the recipient of her gaze. "What would I even do?"

To me, it seemed obvious, but I had to keep reminding myself that Mia was a hair away from not believing me. "I think maybe we could start with hanging out at your house more often—especially when Luke and Mia are there. Then..." It had occurred to me that I didn't have anything else to say. "Then, we will know."

Mia could have pushed the topic more; In fact, if she had asked one or two more questions, there's a real possibility I would have gotten frustrated, cried, or went home. Instead, she scoffed in a way that felt playful and stirred around her straw in her drink. I don't know what it was about that damn drink.

"So, you're saying to prove that Valerie is a Ragu-Ragu, we need to...hang out more?"

I didn't bother correcting her. "Sure."

She shook her head with a small smirk, as if part of her was amused. "Sure," Mia echoed.

+++

The first time I went inside Luke and Mia's house, it was a cloudy afternoon in November. There was a chill in the air that was rare for Louisiana, and I dug up Dad's old brown coat from the closet. It smelled vaguely of dust and leather, but it was warm—and that's all I wanted. Plus, it was comfortably oversized, now.

The last time I wore this jacket, it hung off me like an oversized blanket. Stephanie drove us to the park to see the Christmas lights display while Warren, Valerie, and I “oo”ed and “aah”ed at every twinkle we could see from within the car. I tucked my arms into my dad’s jacket, hugging myself around the waist and savoring the warmth. My head was on Valerie’s shoulder, and her skin warmed my cool cheek. Though I made eye contact with Stephanie in the rearview mirror, she didn’t acknowledge it. Come to think of it, Stephanie was quiet that whole ride. She was wearing a sweater that was probably too tight for her to fit her arms into; besides, she was driving. I wonder, though, if she was cold. The heater was on, and the windows were up, but Stephanie’s decade-old Kia could only do so much.

At the ripe age of twelve, I didn’t think to ask. Instead, I snuggled closer to my own safe haven. The jacket helped, too. Valerie had the sniffles, and normally I hate germs. The thought of resting my head on the cold, lifeless window or (god forbid) holding my head up myself was unbearable when placed beside the option of Valerie’s shoulder. The germs I could overlook.

“How long do you think it took them to set up these lights?” Valerie’s voice cut through the low hum of Silver Bells emitting from the radio. It was the first thing that had been said since we entered the drive-through trail.

“I bet Santa and his elves did it overnight,” Warren said with feigned seriousness. Admittedly, we were a little old for the Christmas magic, but I always hesitated to let it go. Until I was fourteen, my mom and I danced around the subject, and I refused to acknowledge my own wit. When Christmastime came around, I was perpetually eight years old.

“I’m sure,” I said with sarcasm, even though I would have been displeased with any other response. Valerie traced circles on my jacket sleeve while humming to the music.

In present time, I wore the jacket, fitting for the first time, as I mustered up the courage to follow Mia into the house. Valerie’s car sat lifeless in the driveway, covered in leaves as if it has been sitting for a long time. I took note of it before going inside. The passenger seat was pushed all the way back. Someone tall had sat there last.

“Are you coming?” Mia asked innocently, likely wondering why I was staring into an empty car. For clues, I wanted to say, but I knew how it would sound. So, instead, I said:

“Coming.”

The inside of the house was cozy and smelled vaguely of apple pie. I could not tell if it was a candle or if someone was cooking an afternoon treat. A dark wooden floor cast a warm tone on the room, and several candles added to the ambiance. The faint hum of a television floated to us, and I knew that Valerie was nearby. I copied Mia as she slipped her shoes off at the door, then shed my jacket to toss on a rack. I tried not to make my awareness of Valerie obvious. Uncertain why, I tried to avoid looking for her, keeping my eyes glued to the back of Mia’s head as I followed her to the next room.

Mia ended up leading me to the last room on the right down a long hallway. One of the other rooms, door slightly ajar, revealed a room that I assumed to be Luke’s. Posters clung to the walls, the bed was unkempt and messy, and clothes littered the floor. I tried not to think about the bugs that might be in there. If I had, though, maybe I would not have noticed the polaroid photo taped to the wall—Luke kissing Valerie’s cheek,

smiling into her face. I couldn't believe she was so charmed by a boy who left clothes all over the floor. Then I paused, thinking maybe *it* likes the mess.

Apparently, my feet were still moving one after another, because I eventually landed in Mia's room. Unlike her brother, I could actually see the floor, but it was the walls that drew me in. Her walls were lilac, bringing a brightness to the room that felt like it belonged there. She had various posters of musicians, movie posters, art...it was a mosaic of her interests, I assumed. None of them truly matched one another, but they were placed there on purpose. I could tell.

Mia gestured to a shelf with various DVDs on it. "Do you want to watch something? I have pretty much every Jim Carey movie that exists, so if you want to-..."

My mouth spoke out of sync with my brain. "So, what do you think they are up to in there?"

After an exasperated sigh, Mia shrugged. "I don't know. I think they're baking something." She was speaking quickly, as if she was answering my question out of begrudging obligation. "What does it matter?"

With knitted eyebrows, I loosely pointed towards the door. "I'm sorry." I wasn't sure why I was apologizing, but it felt natural. It felt like what Mia wanted—the path of least resistance. "I thought we were going to hang out with them, too...like we talked about." I tried to avoid words like "spying", "plan", or even "Valerie". It felt too strange to say it out loud when Valerie and Luke were a couple of walls away. Come to think of it, Mia was the only one who knew about my theory. It felt best to keep it that way until I had proof.

Apparently, my response was sufficient to melt away a bit of Mia's discomfort. Still, though, she sucked in her cheeks like she was deep in thought. "Yeah! Yeah..." Her inflection suggested that he had forgotten that keeping an eye on Valerie was the main objective. "I guess we can go make a snack or something in the kitchen. We'll see if they want to join us for the movie."

Without a glance at me, she made a beeline towards what was implied to be the kitchen. Still unfamiliar with the layout of the house, I followed her like a dog at her heels until she stopped at a big, silver refrigerator. Valerie stood by the oven, watching Luke clumsily remove a pie from the oven. The edges of the crust were nearly black, flaking off onto the ceramic floor. One piece of the crust that fell off exposed a deep red ooze underneath. Valerie giggled as Luke stumbled to find counterspace, exclaiming "crap" every time he accidentally burned himself on the side of the tin.

With a smug laugh, Mia said: "I think your pie is bleeding."

"Very funny," he scoffed, placing the tin on an unoccupied potholder. Then, he gestured dramatically. "This is a real pie. We made it from scratch and everything."

"Hope it's not *real-ly* gross," she fired back, but the tone was lighthearted. I also offered a small chuckle. Though I laughed along with them, I felt separated and despondent. Forcing out a lighthearted smile made me realize how lonely this situation really was.

Valerie and I hadn't spoken, but we were both undoubtedly aware of the other's presence. She was wearing a pink tee shirt with an embroidered flower on a pocket. The last time I saw that tee shirt, she was handing it to me to wear after we had gotten caught in the rain outside of her house.

“Here,” she had said. “You can wear this tonight.”

As I grabbed the shirt from her, our fingers brushed, and I realized just how soft the shirt was. I put it on against my bare skin and I thought about how grateful I was for her. The tee shirt smelled like her—vanilla body spray and coconut conditioner. After I changed, I handed her my soaked grey shirt and she lovingly shook her head at me.

“My Aggie, my Aggie, my Aggie...” Every now and then, she said it like a prayer. I guess it worked, because I was still hers, even when she didn’t want me. Monster or not, I was hers; I wasn’t giving up on her.

In real time, “Valerie” looked me up and down, and for a moment I wondered if she could tell my smile was fake. A couple of months ago, she would have been able to. Does the Rougarou know everything she does? It hadn’t occurred to me before.

As if she could sense I was thinking about her, Valerie spoke to me for the first time since we had seen each other: “Aggie, do you want to try a piece?”

Numbly, I said: “Sure...if you do first.” Luckily, my comment came off as a joke, even earning a giggle from Luke. Admittedly, though, my comfort from seeing Valerie take a bite first was considerable. In response, she raised her hands in defeat and then took the first piece from Luke as he was cutting it, exaggerating her reaction as she chewed. Seemingly, it was hot, because she fanned herself with her hands and began to breathe through her mouth. Once she had finished the moment of chaos, she said:

“It’s really good!” Pretty quickly, I realized her attention had now shifted to Luke. Once again, I was in the background. Though I tried to stop it, a voice echoed in my brain, which repeated that Luke is its favorite. I didn’t want to be *its* favorite, so the nagging in the back of my head didn’t make any sense.

Mia soon shoved a plate in my hand with a piece of pie on it, and I gave her a nod to say thank you. Without hesitation, I tried it, and Valerie was right. It *was* good. I also mumbled a “thank you” in Luke’s general direction. I tried to remind myself that we were on the same side here. Correction: We were going to be on the same side once I had proof.

Before either of them could scurry away, I took the initiative. After all, investigating is what I was here for.

“So, Mia and I were going to watch a movie,” I began, glancing towards Mia for a reassuring look of approval. “Do you guys want to watch with us?”

There was an odd, inexplicable moment of silence in which Luke and Valerie glanced at one another. I found that I was holding my breath until Luke finally nodded and said:

“Sure, why not?”

Valerie grimaced, and I wondered if she would be able to list a couple reasons. Reminding myself that this wasn’t Valerie, I tried to keep calm. Mia, excited about the film, dashed to her room to pick one out. Luke meandered towards the living room to set up the DVD player. For the first time in weeks, Valerie and I were alone in a room together. Of course, it wasn’t by her choice. Silently, I wondered if we would ever be alone together again if she had had the choice.

It. If *it* had had the choice.

“So,” I began with feigned casualty, taking a bite of pie. “What’s the deal with you and Luke?” It was a genuine question. Whether it was Valerie or the Rougarou, I was curious about the boy that had stolen her affections.

Valerie looked down, her face matching the hue of her pie. “I mean...we’re friends.”

If that were true, she would have never said the word “friend” like that. Mia would have never referred to Valerie as “my brother’s girlfriend.” I thought about what she had told me at the pizza parlor—what felt like ages ago. She was lying through her teeth. Instinctively, I said: “But you...like him, right? That’s what you told me, at least.” I knew Valerie would hate that I said it out loud...here of all places. What she had confessed to me in a giggle-filled dinner date was quickly turning into leverage. Part of me felt like I was betraying her, but I had to remind myself it wasn’t Valerie I was talking to.

Her eyes immediately widened, and I knew what she would say. “Aggie, what are you talking about?” Deny, deny, deny. But her eyes told a different story. Her eyes begged me to stop talking.

Feigning nonchalance, I shrugged. “I don’t remember. I was probably thinking about something else.”

I remembered why I was here, and suddenly it felt extremely important not to scare Valerie away. This was the first time we had been alone in weeks, and I wasn’t about to start back at square one. Beast or no beast.

Valerie breathed what appeared to be a sigh of relief and picked up her half-eaten plate of pie. “I’m going to go help Luke set everything up. Why don’t you help Mia pick out a movie?”

Why don’t you... with Valerie is code for “I’d rather you...” It means that it would be easier if I wasn’t around. *Of course, it would be easier*, I tell myself. *She knows*

you're onto her. A small part of me, though, suffers a punch to the gut that I don't waste my time trying to understand. Instead, I nod, abandoning my pie where it sits to find Mia.

I remembered the way to her room, so it was an easy journey when I ignored the stinging in my eyes and the heaviness in my chest. I couldn't stop thinking about the way Valerie looked at me, what she said, how she said it... It was like we were strangers. We were strangers. She was buried somewhere deep down in there and a monster sat on the surface—one I had never met before. The beast didn't care about me. Part of me grieved because I missed Valerie. Most of me, though, grieved because I didn't know how to rescue her.

At some point, I realized that I had been standing in Mia's doorway staring at the wall for quite some time. Luckily, she didn't seem to notice me until I made that decisive step into her room and said: "Need any help?"

Seeing me, Mia smiled sweetly and held up two movies I had never heard of. "I can't decide between these two. Do you have any suggestions?"

I didn't. "I haven't seen either of them."

Her mouth dropped in playful shock. Apparently, these were two of her favorite movies of all time, and she was appalled that I had not seen them. Admittedly, they couldn't have been that good. I had never heard of them and had already forgotten what they were called.

"We're going with this one," she announced, holding up the movie that she was holding in her left hand. The cover had mountains surrounded by a blue sky where four boys sat looking dramatically next to red font to name a title that I, apparently, should have already known.

“Sounds good.” I hoped my apathy wasn’t apparent. My interaction with Valerie in the kitchen replayed over and over. Nothing else seemed important.

Despite my best efforts, Mia did notice. “Are you okay?”

Though the question tempted me to surrender all my feelings to words, I swallowed it down. “Don’t worry about it. I just want to watch the movie with Valerie and them.”

“Valerie and them...” Mia repeated in a small voice. She seemed taken aback for a brief moment, before she shook her head and asked again: “Are you sure you’re okay? If you’re not feeling well, you and I could-...”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” Cutting her off was only half-intentional.

“Aggie, I-...”

“August,” I corrected as an instinct. “Not just anyone can call me Aggie, okay?” It was a knee jerk reaction. The way I responded said so much more about the way I feel about Valerie than it did about Mia. Actually, there *is* something I want to talk about. These are three possible things I could have said that would have been better than staring at Mia blankly, allowing her mind to fill in the gaps.

Regardless, that is what I did. Stared at Mia in awe of myself. Frozen.

Mia’s bottom lip began to tremble. “So, that’s the way you feel, right? I’m ‘just anyone’?” Her voice was quiet, but her words packed a punch—especially because they were my own. Stunned, I stuttered.

“Mia, I-...”

It was her turn to interrupt. She tossed the movie on her bed and crossed her arms. “Do you even want to be my friend?”

After saying this, she bit her cheek (I suspected to keep her lips from trembling) and examined the floor. Stunned, I let a few too many seconds pass by. I was trying to make sense of my own feelings, all while learning about hers. I was hurt that she saw me as a person who would pretend to be someone's friend for gain. Then, I sat horrified as I realized that she wasn't wrong. The spotlight was turned back on me: *Do I really want to be her friend? Or have I been pretending? Is that fair?*

When I felt it had gone too long with no one speaking, I fumbled. "I... Yes! I want to be your friend." I wasn't sure if it was true yet, but it must have been. I wasn't a person who manipulated other people. *Was I?*

Mia didn't seem satisfied. Now that the spout began to drip, there was no stopping the flow. "You hardly act like it," she accused, her voice gaining a little bit more traction. "Every time we're together, the conversation becomes 'Valerie this' and 'Valerie that'. Would you have even come here today if you thought she wasn't going to be here?"

I was taken aback. "We're...investigating. Together." I whispered the word 'investigating' like it was a curse word meant to be hissed in secret. To be fair, I was surprised. When we had spoken before, Mia seemed okay with the thought of the Rougarou—apprehensive, but okay.

"I thought you would drop it," she admitted. "I thought it was maybe some excuse to hang out more or—or you would realize it was silly once you actually got here. I don't know, and I'm sorry for enabling it, but Luke was right. You're obsessed with Valerie, and this whole thing sounds totally irrational."

"You talked to *Luke* about it?" I had a vague sense that she had never taken me seriously, but I thought I could at least trust her not to bring it to Luke. This felt like the

ultimate betrayal. Then, my stomach was in knots as I realized there was only one thing that would make matters worse. “Does Valerie know, too?”

Mia shook her head, growing a bit frantic. “No!” There was a pause. “Well, I certainly didn’t tell her—and I told Luke not to mention it.”

“Kind of like how I told *you* not to mention it?” At this point, my confusion and beginning stages of guilt were beginning to turn into some sort of defensive hostility. *Why should I feel bad about exaggerating my enthusiasm to be close to Mia?* After all, it was becoming clear that she never took me seriously. All I was to her was a point of gossip with Luke—something to make fun of. “God, Mia, this is exactly why I wanted to keep this a secret. Of course, Luke thinks it sounds crazy; I don’t have any proof yet!”

Mia took a deep breath, closing her eyes and seemingly absorbing my words as she gathered her own. Then, she looked at me with surprising sincerity. “But what proof are you going to get?”

I felt cornered. The entire point of investigating was to gather evidence, because I didn’t know where to start. I thought Mia understood that. So, instead of giving her an honest answer, I stumbled and stammered: “I—I don’t know. Something! If we’re here enough, sometime at some point she will slip up and you will see what I see.”

“What if it never happens? Are you going to admit you were wrong?”

My first instinct was to ask Mia where this had come from. Deep down, though, I already knew: Luke. Maybe even Valerie if Luke had told her everything. I realized that I wasn’t the only one telling Mia secrets, and I certainly wasn’t her favorite. What’s the point?

Instead, I say: “How do you know I’m wrong if you won’t give me a chance?”

Mia seems a bit ashamed—embarrassed, even. I can't tell why. In response, she tells me: "Aggie—I mean, August..." Something feels strange hearing the name 'August' from Mia, as much as I had pushed her into it. I try to remind myself that she never had my permission to use my nickname in the first place. "I think you should take a couple of days and think things through. What you're doing...it's not healthy."

A pause.

"And to be frank, it's not fair to me."

Though she didn't directly banish me, it was pretty clear that this spiel was my cue to leave. Then, I should wait a couple days before trying to be around them, again. I don't know Mia very well, but I know her well enough to infer that she was being passive. She had hoped that I would distance myself for a couple days, she would be able to have a breather, and eventually I would come to my senses and realize there is no such thing as the Rougarou. At the root of it, though, it hurt that Mia needed a break from me. I was too much for her.

Just like I was too much for Valerie. Quickly, though, I corrected this. It wasn't Valerie I had talked to in the kitchen that day. It was someone else. It was the Rougarou, there to punish Valerie or me or whoever else.

My dad was right. The Beast does live here. It lives in my best friend, and it is convincing everyone around me that I am crazy.

I didn't say any of this out loud. There was no point, as it seemed Mia had already made up her mind. Instead, I grabbed my bag and beelined towards the door. I didn't even say goodbye—to her, Valerie, or Luke. They probably wouldn't notice, anyways.

Once I stepped outside, it dawned on me that I would either have to walk half an hour home or call my dad to pick me up. Knowing the Beast wasn't following me, I set out walking. One less thing to worry about. As I rounded the corner, I realized Luke's pie left a sour, bitter taste in my mouth. Sure, that's real pie, baby. I wondered if the sweetness would ever come back.

Collateral Damage

I don't know how to be a good mother; I always
over water the plants. No child of mine can live
without being weighed down by me. Sandbags and
droopy leaves. Easiest to prove that my love exists when
it destroys things.

Pulling yarn out of the dog's mouth

Sometimes, you have

to stand over them and pull it out

of their throat slowly as to not hurt them, while they

gag and choke and it makes you feel like a bad mom, but *damn it, I refuse to let*

you die from choking on something you never should have swallowed in the first place.

CHAPTER TWELVE

My bed is my new best friend. I'm with her more often than not, and she holds me without me asking. There is no chase. It just is. She's always there at the end of a long day. Even if that day is spent meandering around the house and perpetually channel-surfing until I feel myself losing brain cells.

At least, that's what I've been doing for the past three days since Mia told me she needed a break. Mia has become my only friend besides Valerie. Now, neither of them want anything to do with me. The Rougarou is the one making them feel this way, but either way there is a very real, heavy feeling in my chest which holds me down in bed. The bed who is now my best friend, since I have none left.

Around noon, I decide it's time for my daily migration to the couch. In a lethargic haze, I groan as I force myself to sit up. Honestly, I don't see many reasons for me to get out of bed at all. Then, I remember that this is exactly what the Rougarou wants. For some reason, it's been targeting me. Isolating me. Silencing me. I can't let it win by retreating into my antisocial cave. So, I fight back the only way I know how without a car or a friend to drive me anywhere: I put one foot in front of the other until I end up sitting somewhere else. It's not much, but at least the living room has ample sunlight, and eventually an Applebee's commercial will remind me that it's time to eat.

As soon as I finish my pilgrimage, I feel a vibration from my phone. This catches me off guard since my cell phone has been a barren wasteland for the past couple of days. Immediately, I try to stifle my excitement; it's only more disappointing when I expect a text from Mia or Valerie and end up making eye contact with a weather app notification

screaming about a flash flood warning (true story). As if I was leaving the house anyways.

I make a point to wait a minute or two, shimmying into a comfortable spot on the couch and picking up the remote. I mindlessly scroll until *The Voice* flashes across the screen, then I sit still. Thirty seconds pass, I feel my cheeks get hot, and I turn the TV off completely. Maybe I should pay my new best friend another visit.

As a last-ditch effort to find purpose today, I flip my phone over and check the dreaded notification. It's from Stephanie:

“Got off work early. Want to grab lunch today?”

As a reflex, my eyebrows furrow in slight confusion. I love my sister, but we aren't really the “grab lunch” type of siblings. I spent most of my life feeling like an only child, and that's a mentality that's hard to grow out of. Maybe going to my dad's opening together reminded her that I existed. Then, I realize that the confusion from Stephanie's text stopped me from feeling disappointed that she wasn't Mia or Valerie. So, I responded:

“Sure. Pick me up?”

+++

If I had to rank the roles that Stephanie fills in order of importance, it might go something like this:

1. Daughter
2. Real-Estate Agent
3. Scholar
4. Dog-owner

5. Careful Driver
6. Lover of lemon water
7. Person who had a tweet go viral in 2014
8. My big sister

It's not her fault. We didn't really have a lot of time to bond in my formative years. She was in school, in more school, then working to get her career off the ground. She didn't have time for me, and I didn't have any idea that I was missing something. As much as I didn't want it to, I was thinking about Stephanie's list that I made up as I got into her car.

"Hey, August," she greeted me in her real-estate voice, which might just be her voice. "What do you want to eat?"

I shrugged, pushing out a friendly: "Hi."

She waited a few moments, staring at the side of my face until she eventually cleared her throat, shifting the car into drive. "I'm going to take you to that new Italian place downtown."

Italy, of course. I must have subconsciously rolled my eyes, because Stephanie picked up on my discomfort.

"What, you don't like Italian food?"

I shook my head, in part to avoid awkwardness or confrontation. "No, I like Italian food. Sorry."

Stephanie glanced at me in her peripheral vision. As always, her hair fell neatly, pushed gently behind her ears. Looking at her drive from the passenger's seat, she

especially looked like a younger version of Mom. I turned away, looking at myself in the side mirror. At least I know I'm related to Dad. Mom is almost nowhere to be found.

"Are you sure something else isn't wrong?" Stephanie asked, and her inquiries began to feel more and more like badgering.

"Yes, I'm sure. Italian food is great. Can we just go, please?"

In response to my urgent, aggravated tone, Stephanie scoffed. Shockingly, she actually pulled off to the side of the road, shifting the car into park.

"What are you doing? Can't we just go?" I asked, but she ignored my pleas. Instead, she stared at me with a sternness that I have only seen Mom muster.

"I'm going to tell you something, okay?" she said with a certain candidness I had never heard from her before. I was frozen in shock, which allowed her to continue. "One time, when I was in high school, I had my first break up. Let me tell you, it was brutal. I'm talking crying into my pillow for weeks. I really thought that he was my soulmate or something." I couldn't imagine Stephanie crying, but that was beside the point.

"What does this have to do with—"

"I was a wreck. And when I cried to Mom about him—when I told her how much I missed him, she gave me this really sincere look, and she said: 'Honey, I can't believe you're letting him get to you like this. You're such a mature and beautiful woman, you can do better than him.'" She paused, taking a breath. "And I love Mom so much, and I know she meant well. But the way she said that made it sound like I had a choice. Like being a mature, beautiful woman meant not crying over boys—or anyone, for that matter." She stared at me again indirectly through her peripheral vision, but I could tell.

I wasn't sure how to respond this time, so I waited. She let the last line hang in the air, taking a breath before she continued.

“So, from that point on, I decided I was going to be different. I was going to be this mature, beautiful woman that she thought I was. I wasn't going to cry about boys. I wasn't going to ever complain or skip class or lose my composure, because I'm a lady. Do you want to know what happened instead, Aggie?”

I had to put forth physical effort not to cringe at the name Aggie. I don't know why she decided to start calling me that all of the sudden. “What?”

“I still cried. I still complained. I still lost my composure—a lot. I just did it alone.”

There still wasn't much I could say. I had gone my whole life knowing Stephanie as my big sister who was also a stranger, and now she is strangely spilling her cuts to me on the side of the highway when we're supposed to be getting Italian food.

Again, I said: “But what does that have to do with—”

“I still do this. I still bottle everything up because I'm mature, I'm put together, I'm composed. The world is a storm, and I am the statue that doesn't succumb to the elements.” The way she said this made it sound like she was also trying to convince herself—also that she secretly wrote poetry. Then, she looked at me and she got that serious, sincere look that I assume Mom also had when she talked to Stephanie in high school. “Don't do what I did, Aggie. Don't do it alone.”

“I'm not,” I shot back. “I'm not doing that.”

“Come on. It runs in the family,” she continued, casually accusing me of lying. “Warren does it, too.”

Confused and growing aggravated, I knit my eyebrows. “First of all, what are you talking about? Second of all, you told me that the first time Warren got dumped by a girl he mooned her through the window.” True story.

Stephanie grimaced, and I suspected she might have been holding in a laugh. Nevertheless, she soon returned to her calm, solemn composure. “Exactly. For some reason, no one in this family can talk about their feelings. I hide behind pantyhose and paperwork that makes me look important. Warren hides behind fart jokes and bad accents.” She sighed again, turning to face me and look me in the eyes. “Look, I just want you to break the cycle and talk about whatever is going on. Mom and Dad are worried about you, and they wish you would talk to them.”

At this, I grew a bit angry. *Would she have even invited me to lunch if Mom and Dad didn't ask her to?* Usually, I would filter this into a cryptic, interpretable sarcastic response, but I figured Stephanie had shared enough personal details to warrant honesty.

“So, you only invited me to lunch because Mom and Dad asked you to?”

Quickly, Stephanie hit the brakes. “No! Definitely not. Mom and Dad told me they were worried something was going on, and I thought...”

She hesitated just long enough for me to insert my own speculation. “You thought that you could take me on as one of your responsibilities? Move me a little higher on the list so that you don't feel bad for ignoring me for seventeen years?”

I could tell my comments stung. Stephanie stopped, her breath catching. “August, that's not fair.”

She was right. It wasn't. I knew that in the moment, too. But I was too far in to back out now. I simply shrugged.

“I just thought that...when I was in your place, I really could have used a big sister. But I see you don’t want that.”

Then, she put the car in drive, and within the hour I was eating chicken alfredo in awkward silence. Stephanie paid for my meal, then dropped me off. As I was getting out of the car, she mumbled something as I left:

“I’ll call you tomorrow. I don’t care if you answer. I’m calling.” Then, she sped off. As much guilt and discomfort as I felt, I liked this Stephanie. This Stephanie was honest, raw...I just had to figure out how to be the same. Then, maybe we could be friends. Sisters, even.

The Zoo

Often I wonder what the wallaby whispered,
walking through an empty safari, scorched
shoes too thin and I've been stepping on
stones. While wallowing, she stood straight up
and spoke to me--that is, the wallaby.

I could not comprehend her call for
conversation (if, of course, that is what it was),
but I saw something clever and wise, hidden in
the eyes of the wallaby (if, of course, that is what
it was). My sight is sore from the sun.

So the wallaby (which could have reasonably been
a kangaroo) stared at me with patience.
She blinked and it was as if she then knew
her language and mine were incongruent.
Convolutd. Untranslated. Cruel.

So she stared at me, the wallaby, until she
eventually waddled away. Her eyes such big,
wet balls of black obsidian. This time they did
not look at me. I walked the rest of the path
alone. No water. No wallaby. Far from home.

Infestation

Butterflies tickle as they hit the edges of your stomach.

What started as a lonely cocoon has quickly bloomed
into a swarm. When there are too many of them sometimes
one might slip out of your mouth. But the energy they
generate is warm. Hot air rises, and their
wings pull you up, but the weight
keeps you down.

Your insect friends
have now bloomed, but you realize
in the shuffle, they got too excited to take you.
Floating, they give you a dull stomach ache and
You find yourself in a circumstance of swapped place,
seeking comfort in bed sheets turned scandal turned cocoon.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Stephanie was a lot of things (at least eight), but she wasn't a liar. She called me the next morning around 11am. It was a Saturday, so Mom and Dad were also meandering about the house. Because of this, I had been showered and dressed since 10am. There was no need to have them worry, especially since Stephanie made me aware of them watching my every move like a hawk. So, I brushed my teeth, I made myself breakfast, and I sat next to them as a 90s sitcom I had never heard of blared in the background, even though all I wanted was to go back to bed. I kept this up until 11am.

“Yeah?” I decided to answer when Stephanie called. I don't know if it was the boredom of the sitcom or the disheartening realization that I simply had nothing better to do, but I answered.

“Oh, good, you're still talking to me,” Stephanie was quick witted this morning. “I talked to Mom and Dad—not about anything we talked about, I swear—but I suggested we all go to the movies today as a family. You, me, Warren, Mom, Dad.”

I fought my urge to smile, which meshed with my muscles to form some sort of half-upwards, half-downwards stifled smile monstrosity. I was still upset with her for overstepping. “I get the aisle seat.”

+++

Within the hour, Warren and Stephanie had arrived at my house. Warren was his usual goofy self, roughhousing with my dad and talking in his cowboy voice within thirty minutes of arrival. Mom shook her head at them but was wearing her proud Mother/Wife smile. This was another one of those moments when I wondered what it would have been like if I had this growing up.

More importantly, though, it proved to me that either my family is collectively winning an Oscar, or Stephanie held up her promise and didn't tell anyone about our fight in the car. That meant something, at least.

Once my dad and Warren were done with their obligatory showcase of theatrics, Warren plopped down on the couch, wiping sweat off his brow. It took a grand total of three minutes for my mom to ask him how work was going.

“So, do you have any offers yet? For your songs?”

I know she meant well, but her question only pointed out what was left unsaid: *What is he working on? Does he like it? Do other people like it?*

Warren rolled his eyes. “Mom, just wait.” He fanned himself and bit his lip in feigned confidence. “They all want me; they just don't know it yet.”

But that was it. Feigned. Since Stephanie pointed it out, I could see that. Warren's body stiffened as soon as my mom asked the question. After his humorous comment got a laugh, there was a moment where the mask slipped. His eyebrows furrowed and his confident smirk turned into a grimace as he stared at the floor. Then, he cleared his throat, and all was as it was.

Stephanie was right. Warren was terrified. Worst of all, Stephanie was right about me. I am a mosaic of the worst parts of each of them. Looking at Stephanie, I realized that I, too, wanted to be seen as an adult by my parents. Or, in the least, I wanted them to think that I am someone who can deal with her own problems—or, even better, never has them. If I'm perfect, it means they did something right. *And don't you owe them that?* Hurting isn't only disrespectful, it's embarrassing; *I'm more secure than that, right?* But I look at Warren, and I realize sincerity only lives behind crude remarks. I realize that

when things feel too real, I get scared. I hide behind jokes. I desperately seek a laugh, then the attention is tossed swiftly away from the issue at hand. Analyzing both of them, I realize that it doesn't matter if we grew up together or not: I have pieces of them in me.

I was thinking about this all day. I don't remember the movie.

The Breath of Life

Heart only beats when someone else tells her to.

I sit in a quiet room waiting for the other shoe to drop, but the silence fills me up like a lousy meal.

Now I'm stuffed with empty calories, begging Heart to become something alive and real and then a lovely smile walks in. Heart throbs like a jackhammer and I become a beacon of sin.

"How dare you?" I proclaim in a quiet heat. "I've been waiting for you to speak for weeks, but someone looks at you and suddenly you are alive?"

They love me more than you is all she says in reprise.

Heart speaks when she is spoken to, but never by me. I beg her for morsels of actualization and she offers a wistful sigh. Then a pair of pretty eyes walks by, and she cries: *You! You are what animates me!*

And I am yanked in whatever direction her magnetism pulls.

Learned Helplessness

Do I dare to lament I am unclean

when is it true that I avoid the opportunity to wash?

Grimy yet timely, I hoard every trace of you

even when, too soon, I realize you mostly gave me filth.

Sticky and slimy and the opposite of smooth,

I writhe in discomfort, gritting my teeth

and refusing every brush I am offered.

Soon, they will learn that I am far too busy.

I am far too tired.

It is far too late.

It is far too soon.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Once we got home, Warren and Stephanie left quickly, since it was already dark outside. They both hugged me goodbye, and I actually tried to return it this time. No more awkward side-hugs for the time being. Part of me just wanted to see if I was capable of four whole seconds of uninterrupted authenticity.

When I got to Stephanie, I paused while breaking away. I asked: “Are you going to text me tomorrow?”

Calling is great and all, but there’s only so much of it I can take. If I’m going to talk to Stephanie every day, I’d much rather it be words on a screen. And I think I am going to—or going to try to. I am going to talk to Stephanie every day.

She seemed touched by what I had asked. She smiled a real smile, not a business smile, and nodded. “Of course.”

Then, she and Warren drove away. This time I knew it would not be for long.

+++

That night, my parents cooked pasta and insisted that we eat at the table like a family. This only confirmed Stephanie’s confession that they had been hyperaware of my behavior. It was suffocating more than anything. We each made our plates and sat at the table in agonizing silence. The noise of them chewing made me want to rip my hair out, and I wanted more than anything to finish my meal so I could go visit my new best friend in peace. I could feel them staring at me, yet they said nothing. *How could they say nothing when I knew that there was something to say?*

Then, Stephanie’s words came back to mind. Apparently, there is cycle that she is trying to break—we are trying to break. And it starts with—

Clang. I dropped my fork onto my plate, attracting even more attention. Luckily, this time, it was all part of the plan. “Go ahead,” I demanded before I lost the courage. “Tell me what you’ve been thinking.”

I don’t blame my parents for being surprised; I even surprised myself. Two days ago, I would have preferred to talk about severing off my own leg than my feelings. But I thought about Stephanie and Warren—two adults with full lives. Yet, even now, they have the same problems that I do. They feel alone. I should text Warren. Break the cycle.

Mom’s expression held just a hint of horror and sadness. “What?”

Dad chimed in after almost choking on his bite. “What do you mean, Bug?”

I made intense eye contact with a piece of parmesan cheese. “I know that you’ve been speculating about me, watching me...So just get it over with.” I couldn’t stop myself from gritting my teeth and cringing. As much as I hated this, it had to be done. “Ask me what you want.”

My mom leaned forward, clearing her throat and wiping her mouth with a napkin. She is always so graceful, even caught off guard. I stared back at my cheese, imagining how much of it was probably on my shirt and lap.

“Honey, do you want us to take your dad’s art down for the time being?” My mom asked, her voice gentle and soft. If anything, it was patronizing, but I tried to swallow my annoyance. I looked around the house briefly, and saw several doodles and rough drafts of *The Beast Lives Here*. Under different circumstances, I might have rolled my eyes and told her she was being ridiculous, but instead I put my pride in a firm chokehold and asked: “Why are you asking that?”

Mom looked to Dad, waiting for him to take the reins. I hadn't seen Dad have a serious conversation in months. Maybe even years. But he bit his inner cheek while thinking, then began speaking in a low voice. "Well, Bug, you've been acting pretty strange lately. I've noticed the way you tense up around it and, well, whatever the reason is, I don't want you to have to look at something that makes you feel that way."

"We were wondering if maybe you felt a little neglected by our preoccupation with your dad's project." It didn't take long for my mom to speak again. After all, she did speak professionally after all. If anyone could get her and dad off the hook, it would be her. "If you do, you don't have to, Sweetie." My mom kept throwing out terms like Honey and Sweetie like it would somehow mitigate what she was saying. I had never heard her use those terms so much before.

The truth is that I hadn't thought about this possibility before. The concept of being forgotten by Mom and Dad hadn't crossed my mind, but it didn't sound all that unlikely now that it was mentioned.

"I don't know," I said, honestly. "But you can leave the paintings up." That was also true. At this point, the paintings and I had an understanding. Besides, they weren't haunting me anymore. Now, it was my (former) best friend.

"Bug, you're my muse," my dad blurted, unprompted. "You asked me once if it was the Rougarou or your Mom, and I guess it's a little bit of all of them. But, Aggie, my muse is you. I draw about Louisiana folklore because this is where I wanted my children to grow up. These are the stories that my dad told me to scare me into being well-behaved, and these are the stories that I chose *not* to tell you, because you shouldn't be scared into acting good. I should raise you to be good."

An odd silence spread across the table, and I felt my lip begin to quiver. In a desperate attempt to hold back the emotion, I bit it to hold it in place. My dad admitting that I inspired him was a true surprise. Besides, the irony was undeniable. I have been haunted for months by the Rougarou, but the only reason the Rougarou exists in my life is because of me. I thought of my mom. It should have been her. She should have been his muse, because *she* is inspiring. *How could I inspire anyone?* I'm moody, I'm sarcastic, I'm...

"Do you think I'm good?" The question was an impulse, but if I didn't ask it then I never would again.

"Aggie," my mom cooed, her voice smooth. "You're wonderful."

I started crying. It wasn't because I was suddenly convinced I was good, but it was because I could tell she meant it. Mom and Dad abandoned full plates of noodles to hold me. Valerie didn't come up once.

A Sunday in Spring

Mom hums as she tends to her garden, the sweet sound smooth and soft like honey, and you watch.

Bees swarm around the white and yellow flowers—

Petals dancing in the wind,

all because Mom tells them to. The garden is also her child.

Your sibling, homage to Mother Earth.

It's a beautiful beginning, she says, pointing to the sprouts, green and growing. Varying flowers grow as parts of the same body—together, they breathe.

You have a feeling it will be a beautiful end, too.

Dead Languages

Frustrated with fickle words,

I spit venom instead. After everything,

How can you not understand?

I translated my grievances into your native

tongue, yet you stare at me blankly,

refusing to grasp the basics of mine.

There are finite ways to say the same thing.

I've whispered it in all the Nordic languages;

I've sung it in Latin, screamed it in

Old English, but all to no avail.

I can write you a dictionary, but you hold the agency to open the page.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

After I humiliated myself by crying at the dinner table, I slept for ten hours. This time, though, was different. I didn't sleep for ten hours because I had nothing better to do, but because I needed the rest. That, my friends, is progress. Then, I found myself focused on progress of another kind.

Around 11am, I found myself sitting at the edge of my bed concocting a plan to end things for good. Now that I had let some feelings seep out of the bottle, it felt achievable. I needed to document, once and for all, that Valerie was the Rougarou. And since Mia wasn't going to help me anymore, it had to be me. I was the only one who could expose Valerie for what she is and save the town. Then, I would be good. I would be wonderful. And I wouldn't have to worry that everyone thought I was strange or selfish or scared; they would know that I was saving my best friend from losing her identity forever. In turn, everyone would find out that Valerie did still love me—somewhere deep down.

Which leaves me here, on the edge of my bed, plotting like a mad scientist to prove that my former best friend is possessed by an ancient Cajun Catholic Beast that my dad is obsessed with. I knew it sounded impossible; that's why finding proof was so necessary. Without it, no one would ever stop to consider that I might be right. There is no one on my team but me, so it is clear where the evidence needs to come from: Valerie. If I could catch her letting her mask slip, others might think twice about my theory.

The plan I hatched was simple but should have been effective, nonetheless. I decided that I was going to (somehow) get Valerie alone, I would (somehow) corner her with pestering questions, and I would hope and pray that she would (somehow) slip while

my phone is recording audio in my back pocket. Privacy and legality was not at the top of my list of concerns. If I was right, no one would care about that stuff, anyways.

So, with shaking hands, I opened Valerie and I's text conversation. It had been barren for weeks. I tried to avert my gaze; I needed to remain objective and avoid overwhelming emotions. I drafted a message that I thought was foolproof:

“Hey, can we talk?”

Short, sweet, and direct. The thought of seeing Valerie and being alone with her again made my palms sweat, but I briskly wiped them on my pants. I had to remind myself: You are not going to hang out with Valerie, you are going to hang out with the Beast. I needed to be alert.

Within minutes, my phone buzzed in my hand, and I couldn't breathe until I read it.

“Sure. When?”

Checkmate.

+++

The real answer to Valerie's question was never, immediately, and yesterday all at the same time. So, I settled for a quick, snappy response of “whenever works for you”. It wasn't close to what I meant, but I had given up on authenticity long before the Rougarou came into play.

At the end of our brief, yet agonizing text conversation, “Valerie” and I had decided on a place and time. We were going to meet tomorrow at the pizza parlor, like old times.

Like old times, she said that pizza would be perfect. She put a smiley face on the end of the text. Unlike old times, the smiley face felt cold and out of place. Rather than warm and exciting, the emotionless emoticon served as a reminder of the monster wearing Valerie's face, stretching it into a forced, unnatural smile.

As much as I tried to forget about it, the idea bounced around my brain until I fell asleep that night. I guess my parents could tell, because they kept looking at me like they could tell I was off; my discomfort was tangible and contagious. Every time I walked into the room, my mom would pause the DVR and turn to me as if there was some teenage wisdom that I was supposed to have memorized. Instead, all she did was put two little red dots on the DVR—one for power, one for pause. I wish she would have just turned it off.

Things had been better since we talked, but not perfect. Never perfect. Nothing ever is.

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I asked to borrow Dad's car the next day. The last place I wanted to confront Valerie was in a closed space where no one could hear me scream. Besides, I liked having my own bubble. My bubble meant that I didn't have to answer to anyone. My bubble meant that I could show up to the pizza parlor thirty minutes early and stare at the door, imagining all of the ways that this day could go wrong. I also imagined ways the day could go right, but that list was much shorter.

I made sure my phone was fully charged, ready to record what could be hours of a harrowing confession. I needed to know why the Rougarou chose Valerie, I needed to know why it was so fixated on Luke, and, most importantly, I needed to know how to save my best friend. There was no way I would leave this parlor without an answer.

After twenty-five minutes of tapping my foot and taking deep breaths, I saw Valerie's car pull up. My breath caught staring at that gray Ford Focus, which felt irrational. It just looked so familiar; I remembered staring at Valerie driving in her prom dress. She looked just like the creature that crawled out of the car and waved to me with a polite smile.

Another sign that this was not my best friend. Valerie and I were not exactly polite with anyone unless we didn't want to talk to them for very long.

I got out of the car and stepped towards her, the cool air outside (or perhaps the monster that was ten feet in front of me) gave me a chill. Once I reached her, she smirked again and said:

“Do you want to go inside?”

Numbly, I nodded. I knew this would be a long, awkward lunch.

Valerie grabbed the same table that we sat at last time and ordered the same topping she did last time: banana peppers. My Valerie never liked banana peppers. More evidence. It occurred to me that I should be writing this down.

Once we sat waiting for pizza, Valerie glanced at me slightly suspiciously.

“So...did you want to talk about Mia?”

“What?” I asked, caught off guard. “Why would I meet you here to talk about Mia?”

She scoffed slightly, taking a sip of her drink. “I mean...Aggie...it's not a secret that you guys fought. She won't tell me what it was about, but she seemed really upset.”

Then, I began to feel a little bit guilty. The truth was that I hadn't thought about Mia since I began hatching a plan to catch the Rougarou in the act. To be fair, saving my

best friend (and Mia's brother) from a killer creature felt more important, but I couldn't tell Valerie that. Instead, I said:

“Yeah...well, I'll talk to her, soon.”

Valerie scrunched her eyebrows. “So, it wasn't about Mia?”

I shook my head. “Erm...no.” With half an hour to overthink things before even entering the building, you would think I'd be better with my words. “It's...about you.”

She seemed taken aback, her eyebrows now raised. Then, her face totally relaxed as she seemed to have some sort of revelation. “Aggie Cain, is this your way of trying to apologize to me right now?”

I wished she wouldn't call me Aggie right now. Calling me Aggie made her sound so much like Valerie—my Valerie. I didn't know if I could stay objective anymore.

“Apologize? Why?” This was another knee-jerk reaction. Stupid. She was trying to distract you. It was working.

She blinked and tilted her head innocently—politely. “Well, yeah. You've been really dodgy the past couple of weeks, you're really cold to Luke for some reason, and...” she looked around as if to make sure no one was listening. I braced myself for a comment from the Rougarou. “...you know about my feelings for Luke, and you blabbed about it in his house.”

There was no way to remain objective. This creature was accusing me of being a bad friend. It was twisting truth and shifting to a narrative in which I was the villain. I couldn't allow that.

“No kidding—my best friend was taken over by a religiously righteous swamp monster that is obsessed with Luke and hates me. Of course, I’m going to act a little cold.” I can’t believe I said it so directly. I became aware of the phone in my pocket; I could practically feel the electricity pulsing as it recorded every single word. I silently begged: please admit it. Please admit it. PLEASE ADMIT IT.

Valerie’s mouth fell open. For a moment, I thought I surprised her just enough to get the evidence that I needed. But, then, she began to look sad—really sad. “That’s not fair. I’m not a monster for having another friend—or having a crush on someone. I swear, sometimes it’s like you aren’t happy unless I’m *only* paying attention to you.” Her eyes grew shiny, and her face grew flushed, like this was something she was holding in for a long time. A breath that she needed to let go.

I flinched at what she said, but I didn’t respond. Not yet. I knew the Rougarou was just messing with me, trying to get me to give up. Instead, I plowed on:

“You lied about your grandpa’s birthday. What were you doing?”

Valerie’s mouth snapped shut. At this point, we were barely having a discussion—just throwing accusations back and forth.

“Do you really want to know the truth?” she asked, a look of both defeat and anxiety on her face.

“Yes. That’s all I want.” Finally. Proof.

Valerie looked up at me, and her somber expression returned, this time accompanied by a vague anger that I couldn’t identify. “I was with Luke,” she admitted, looking down. “I didn’t tell you because I didn’t want you to be jealous. And I didn’t want your judgement. I can’t take that right now... I’m happy for once.”

Shit.

“No,” I insisted. “I don’t believe you. I saw something—I saw you.”

She shook her head. “I guarantee you didn’t. Luke and I locked ourselves in his movie room all night. I parked in the garage, so I wasn’t in the driveway.”

Rougarou or no Rougarou, I couldn’t stop the next thought from coming out:

“You went through that much trouble to hide it?” My voice was shaking. I couldn’t help it. I was upset, I was confused, everything was moving so fast. There was no control. My plan was failing miserably and even worse I felt my eyes burn in weakness. I told myself I was just overwhelmed. No way I was letting it get to me.

Valerie shrugged, looking as sad as I felt. “Yeah...” She took a deep breath.

“Would you have let me hang out with him—*really* hang out with him? Because, in my experience, you would have made me feel bad, you would have made me feel guilty for choosing him over you, even for one damn night.”

I grit my teeth. As much as I wanted to say she was wrong and it wasn’t true, I couldn’t. The truth is that I didn’t know what I would do. I surely wouldn’t have wanted her choosing Luke over me, even for one night. There was a rock in my stomach. It was embarrassment, guilt, or gas. It could have been all three.

“Why wouldn’t you talk to me?” Knee-jerk response. An appeal to Valerie, even if I didn’t fully believe she was there.

“Would you have let me?” Her voice was shaking like mine was.

“Yes,” I responded, desperately. “Of course, I would. You were my best friend...I don’t even recognize you anymore.” The word “were” was heavy in the air.

Valerie shook her head. She looked down at the table. The waitress delivered her pizza with banana peppers, moving quickly. She probably sensed the tension, too. I took a deep breath.

“What happened in Italy?” One last chance for her to confess.

Valerie swallowed. “I grew up.”

“And that means you have to ignore your best friend? Change everything about yourself? Eat banana peppers?” I was growing more frustrated. “I’m sorry, but I don’t buy it.”

“I’m not going to stay the same, August!”

It was a shrill, unexpected burst which she basically spat. It was like the emotions had been building up inside of her and finally insisted on an explosion. “I’m allowed to change. I’m allowed to eat banana peppers. I’m allowed to grow up. I’m allowed to like boys and spend more time with other people and learn how to be my own person.”

A tear fell down her cheek, and she wiped it before she thought I saw it.

“I can’t be the same person as you anymore, August. I need space, and we aren’t debating that.”

Then, she got up and left the pizza parlor. Just like that. She even abandoned a full pie. There was no confession, threats, apologies, or (like she said) debate. All I could do for the first couple of minutes was sit in shocked silence, my chest tight. When I swallowed it felt like there was cotton in my throat, and my face grew hot as I realized Valerie being the Rougarou was not the worst scenario.

The worst scenario was that Valerie would call me August for the first time in a decade, and it would be the first time I truly recognized her in months. The

disappointment in her voice hung in the air like a dense fog, and I was struck with the reality that it was *her* voice. There was no mistaking it. Only Valerie would know how much the name “August” coming from her would hurt me. And that’s why she did it. To hurt me. To push me away. Now, I was sure there was no Rougarou, but this revelation offered me no relief. Harsh reality cut deeper than sharp claws ever could. My best friend hates me. This is the worst possible scenario. It felt so impossible that I pushed it behind the possibility that my best friend had been possessed by some sort of monster. Alas, it was possible, and it was happening to me.

I pulled out my phone, stopped recording, and deleted the video. I didn’t want to remember anything about this day.

Song Lyrics for Later

I need to stop biting my nails. My finger is
bleeding in the Books-A-Million cafe and I
don't have any napkins to slow the flow. Looking at
my hands and I realize they are rougher than I remember.
Callouses touch skin every time I try to caress and
I am struck with the reality that I have the hands of
an artist. Meant to make music, write words, touch keys--
Whatever it is, an artist's hands must be careful touching
flesh, because it could soon turn that supple warmth into
a muse. Everyone wants to live in the mind of a poet until
their calloused, bleeding hands are around your neck and
you reduced to a world of two dimensions.
My finger scabbed over. I really need to stop biting my nails.

Stains

A white knuckled fist grips the fabric,

and in a flash, I am where it was last.

The green V neck sweater holds my hands

as I speak in tongues.

Driving away, those scratchy, sage-colored sleeves

swiped at tear-stained cheeks.

It was never about the sweater--

indistinguishable between the cloths in my closet,

simply meant to keep me warm on a cold day.

Now, it stands as my last remaining trace.

For a moment I pause.

Thumb the thread in my hands. Then,

without delay, green ribbons rain into the bucket.

Two rinses, machine wash cold.

Whatever is left will come off in the wash.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

My throat was scratchy the entire ride home, and I couldn't even blame it on the intense Frito smell this time. About two minutes into the ride home, tears began rolling down my cheeks against my will, forcing me to pull over to avoid driving in a blurry haze. Even obscured, the brake lights in front of me didn't look like eyes—only brake lights. A part of me was still in denial, remembering the way the creature haunted me in my dreams. Most of all, this part of me remembered the way Valerie used to look at me. She used to giggle and kick her feet and tell me all of her secrets. I was her Aggie. Then, I became August, and she needed space away from me. I'm too much. Plain and simple. The end of summer.

Valerie once asked me if I was afraid of things changing after we graduated. I never expected that things would change before. On prom night, I looked at her instead of the stars and I've never been sure why. Forward in time, I found myself crying in my dad's crappy car while I came to earth-shattering realization that I'm glad I looked at her instead. The sky will always be there. Turns out, she wouldn't.

I cried myself out until I was numb, then I realized I was pretty smart. By allowing myself to wallow in self-pity for no less than an hour, I made sure that a reasonable amount of time had passed for Valerie and me to have eaten a drama-free meal. By the time I got home, my parents wouldn't suspect anything was wrong. They would ask me if I had a good time, I would half-heartedly say yes, then I would retire to my room to get further acquainted with my pillowed best friend.

It wasn't that I didn't want to talk about it with my parents. It was that I was exhausted from every angle. Their sad eyes and pitying looks definitely had nothing to do

with it. All I wanted was to lay down in a cocoon and emerge once I had transformed into someone totally new—someone who is collected and mature and doesn't care what Valerie Elbert thinks. I wouldn't come out of my room until I was a person who would never cry in a crappy car for forty-five minutes about someone who stopped treating you like a friend months ago.

At least, that is what I told myself. When I got home, this is what happened:

I walked through the door. As I anticipated, Mom was sitting on the couch typing on her laptop. As she looked up at me, her eyes sparkled and she said: "Hi, Bug."

Eye contact was very important to me at this moment. No one who was about to burst into tears at any moment made such daring eye contact. So, I stared at my mom like I was medically examining both of her eyeballs. I mumbled a short "hey" before making small talk. That's what adults do, after all. "Where's Dad?"

"He's picking up some coffee from the grocery. I realized we were out and I have to be in court early tomorrow morning." She paused only a beat. "Hey, how was dinner? Did you have a good time?"

I immediately burst into tears. So much for being inconspicuous.

In a fit of confusion, my mom stood up and ran to meet me. She wrapped her arms around me without hesitation, rubbing my back. "Oh, Bug..." she cooed, "was the food that bad?"

I never knew Mom to be the type to crack a joke during a serious time, so her comment surprised me enough to earn a teary-eyed chuckle. Dad must be rubbing off on her. Even so, I didn't feel inclined to respond until she asked:

“Aggie, what happened?” This time, the name Aggie felt good. It was familiar. The fact that it was coming from my mom made me feel like a little girl being tucked in for bed. And, for once, my first thought wasn’t Valerie. In this moment, my first thought was Mia—kind-hearted Mia who called me Aggie because she thought it was my name. Mia who accidentally made me Aggie again.

A guilt began growing in my chest when I thought about Mia, but I pushed it further down. Right now, the problem was...

“Valerie,” I choked out, furiously wiping my tears. I thought I had gotten rid of all of the water in my body on the way home, but time seemed to prove me wrong. “She doesn’t want to be around me anymore.”

Mom separated from the hug to look at me. Her expression was solemn, yet unsurprised. Perhaps it was the fact that Valerie hadn’t been to our house in months or perhaps it was the way that I avoided speaking about her wherever possible. Either way, Mom seemed like she had suspected this outcome for a while. She gave me a sure look.

“If Valerie doesn’t want to be around you, then we don’t want to be around her, okay?”

That should have made me feel better. My mom’s reassurance was genuine and viewed me as good—wonderful, even. But something about it didn’t scratch the itch in the right place. I was reviewing the events of the past couple of months in my head, and, for the first time, I was looking at it from Valerie’s perspective. Then, I saw Mia’s perspective. I even spent a brief, weird moment in Luke’s perspective, and then I croaked out a conclusion that I knew was the ugly truth.

“No.” I shook my head frantically. “I’ve been a terrible friend. I need to make it better.”

I wasn’t sure how my mom would react to this. Part of me wondered if she would tell me I was wrong. She might tell me that I am a great friend, and I shouldn’t be so down on myself. Instead, she hugged me again and whispered:

“Okay. Then, let’s make it better.”

Somehow, that was exactly what I needed to hear. I hugged her back and, for the second time in the last couple days, allowed her to see me at my most vulnerable. Catching up for all the times missed, I guess.

“I’m sorry if I’m not good like you thought,” I mumbled, unfiltered. The thought hadn’t even scratched the surface before it came tumbling out of my mouth.

Mom rubbed my back. “Good people aren’t perfect, Bug.”

+++

With Mom’s help, I calmed myself down over the course of half an hour and then lay in my bed. This time, it was because I was tired. For once, I wasn’t avoiding my feelings. In fact, I think I left all of my feelings, as well as half my body weight in tears, in the living room with my mom.

Sinking into bed was easy and felt well deserved. But there was something I had to do before I slept.

I pulled out my phone and typed a text message to Mia.

“I’m sorry about everything. Can we talk?”

Sent 8:59pm. Then, I went to sleep, because no sane person waits for a text message after 9pm after when they’re as tired as I am. Sweet, sweet catharsis.

Puppet Master

I am a wooden puppet
without the strings.
And before you lift finger,
I'm waving my limbs
in an off-beat, fragile dance—
a mismatched tango
full of stepped-on shoes and
no audience at the show.

I am playing a part, and
there is no vitality to this.
A puppet with no strings
follows the rocky notes you sing
without ever being touched.

Body Language

When the sun goes down, I offer you a drink.

You remind me that talking is

why we're here.

Sure, but sometimes the fire going down

makes the ice come up smoother.

We sat on the rug, no chair could possibly

confine us today.

You spent an hour searching for the right words,

pretending they exist, and I admire the way you

grapple with the dictionary, wishing you could

crawl out of your skin. You accept my offer.

We share a drink.

We try to understand without words.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Fifteen hours later, I sat at a booth in the pizza parlor—a different booth than the last time. I tried not to even look at the place where I last sat. I knew that once I looked, Valerie’s words would play through my head, and I would be where they were last.

I can’t be the same person as you anymore.

As much as it stung, there was a certain irony to this phrase. For Valerie to be the same person as me, I needed to first be a person at all. Lately, I’m not sure that I was.

The door chimed as Mia entered the building. Her face was soft, but I don’t think she wanted it to be. Her eyebrows were furrowed but she was plagued with a delicateness that told me she wouldn’t be here if she didn’t at least hope to forgive me. More importantly, it was a delicateness that made me never want to hurt her again.

I motioned for her to sit, and she did. There was a strange pause where neither of us knew who was going to break the silence, but I soon realized that we would wait forever if I stayed quiet. The only problem is that I still wasn’t sure what to say. So, I just started.

“I’m sorry that I’ve been so shitty lately.”

And kept going.

“I’ve been selfish, and I haven’t been listening to you. And I haven’t appreciated you as a friend.”

And kept going.

“I’m sorry that I didn’t act like it before, but I do want to be your friend, and I understand if you think I’m terrible and never want to talk to me again and if that’s the

case then I'll leave you alone." A deep breath. "I just needed you to know that you were right, and I'm sorry."

The tension around us broke and fell like Jenga blocks. I was forcing the words out and Mia could probably tell, but I meant it. Hopefully, she could see that, too. A couple of agonizing seconds went by where Mia stared at me blankly. Despite her softness, I wondered if she would get up and leave. I wondered if I was deceived by her gentleness.

Then, she shrugged. It wasn't great, but it was better than storming away. I counted my blessings. She had a perfect opportunity to leave, and she didn't.

"I'm a person, too, you know. It's not all about Valerie all the time."

I nodded instinctively. "You're right." I paused, trying to decide if I should say what I was thinking. "I wasn't a very good friend to Valerie, either. I don't think we're going to be talking for a while." Ultimately, I did.

Mia was quiet for a few more seconds before clearing her throat. "So...if Valerie forgave you, would you ignore me again?"

"No. Never. Even if Valerie and I made up, I want you in my life." A moment to collect my thoughts. "Actually, I think that is what got me in this mess in the first place. I was so focused on keeping things the way they were that I didn't give us a chance. And I should have. I like being around you, Mia."

Mia's brown eyes were big and doe-like, once again reminding me of what I had done. I thought about the first time I told her about my feelings towards the Rougarou—how I questioned if she was even a friend. Now, in this pizza parlor, the most important thing seemed to be convincing her that she was.

She mumbled something under her breath, and I leaned forward in anticipation.

“What did you say?” I asked, keeping my voice close to a whisper.

Mia rolled her eyes. “I said: you like being around me?”

I nodded. Easy question. Now that I wasn’t focusing on a ravenous swamp monster, I could see Mia for everything she was and, ultimately, everything we could be to each other.

“Mia, I do like being around you. I want to be around you a lot more if you let me.”

For a moment, the booth was quiet. Somehow, I knew that this was the moment of truth. Mia would either get up and leave (in which case I wouldn’t blame her), remain seated while berating me, and remain seated while beginning to forgive me. After a few seconds, it became clear she was not going to get up and leave. That leaves us with two options.

In a grave voice, Mia said: “I have a question.”

My breath caught in my throat, and I nodded.

Then, Mia smiled Mia’s smile. I realized in this light that Luke has Mia’s smile—not the other way around. She said: “What toppings do you get?”

A wave of relief washed over me. *We are going to be okay.*

And we were. I was.

Laundry Day

I walked into the bathroom where
the mirror was fogged up from
his shower steam.

I envied the stream of water that is allowed the
pleasure
of gracing his bare skin,
slowly tracing down the
most intimate parts of him
with soapy sandalwood suds.

I told him I was going to town
to buy spearmint toothpaste and
maybe some wine for us tonight.
He said okay,
but he stayed put,
as he slipped his shirt over his head
and threw his dirty towel
into the hamper.
My feet left for the store,
my soul rests in his laundry basket.

condolences

when i saw the empty look in your eyes, welling with water,
i whispered "i'm sorry"--and, for once,
it wasn't an apology. it was a declaration
of truth. i was sorry. i *am* sorry. i think i might be sorry forever.
you were the first person to fill me with regret like that.
i wear it every day like ankle weights.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

There was a letter I stuck in Valerie's locker and then walked away, never looking back. It went something like this:

“Dear Valerie,

The past couple of months, I've done a lot of thinking. I mean, I've always done a lot of thinking, but this time, I think I thought about the things I should. By that, I mean that I left you alone. It doesn't matter how many times I wished that I could call you and apologize. That, though, wasn't all bad. In a certain sense, I knew I was doing the right thing. You said you needed space, and I had to give that to you. The only way to know that we can work together as friends is to know that we can live apart. I know that now. The worst part, I think, is whenever Mia said something really funny—or I embarrassed myself at the pizza parlor again, and I would whip out my phone in a reflex. I would rush to my recent calls, where your name used to live, and come face to face with reality. No matter how much I progressed, that part always stung.

I've seen you a couple times since at Luke and Mia's house, but we don't talk. Not really. Valerie, you forget that I can tell when you're being nice because you want to be or you're being nice because you feel like you have to—dispassionate, uncomfortable. For me and you, it's the latter. I guess it could be worse. You could never talk to me again. But I hope you do. It might never be the same, but I think I'm okay with that now.

I guess that's why I'm writing to you right now. I know it's only been two months, but I want you to know where I am. More importantly, why I'm glad you were hard on me. I needed it, I think.

After you told me that you needed space, I finally let go of a fantasy I had been holding onto. What it was is not important. What is important is that I think I finally stopped looking for signs. It took me a long time to say it, but red lights are just red lights and people are just people. Sometimes, art is just art. That might not make a lot of sense to you right now but trust me. I've never been so glad to grow bored.

Mainly, I wanted to tell you that you were right. You deserve to have your own life. But I also deserve to have mine. In mine, I deserve friends that are honest with me about what they want. And you deserve friends that will let you grow without holding you back. Maybe I'm finally growing up, too. I would have never said this a couple months ago. I hope you learn to say things you used to hide, too. If we both did, maybe things would have gone differently.

Most importantly, I'm sorry. I realize I expected a lot from you—more than someone should expect from someone else. I know things are different now, but I wanted you to know.

With Love,

Your Aggie, if you'll have her.

P.S. Mia showed me your graduation dress. You look even prettier than prom night.”

i hope they are happy

in a parallel universe, we are driving to my grandma's christmas party
and i am putting on lip gloss in the passenger seat. your
hand is on my thigh while we joke about all of the
things we can't say once we get there.

On Being Alive

Rather than travel through the body, the electric shock settles in your chest. It's
a part of you now--the Doctor stares with overenthusiastic delight, his observatory
ceiling the only thing in your line of sight.

A finger twitches, a toe curls.

But I'm not a monster,

I'm just a girl.

You notice how

the stars are

pretty.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

For a while, I wasn't sure if Valerie ever got my letter. After graduation ended, Mia, Luke, and Valerie all convened near her car, and I was prepared to pass them without a look until Mia beckoned me over. Unable to ignore her, I was pulled forward as if by magnetism.

“Aggie!” she exclaimed, wrapping me in her embrace. Over the past two months, I found out that Mia was a good hugger. She was also funny and kind. And, I think, maybe one of my best friends. Over the last couple of months, more people were calling me Aggie, and I was correcting them less. Once we separated, Mia grabbed my shoulders: “How did it feel?”

“When I fell from heaven?” I couldn't resist. The corners of my mouth unintentionally tugged into a smirk.

Mia blew a raspberry at me. “As if. I meant graduating.”

The reality was that I wasn't sure how it felt. Being aware of my emotions was kind of new for me, and it's a skill rarely done well under pressure. I knew that the gymnasium smelled like popcorn, the gown made me sweat, and I teared up at the cheesy video they made even though I never spoke to half of the people in it. I will admit, though, there was something strange in my chest. A piece had shifted out of place. It wasn't bad, just different.

But I didn't know how to tell Mia that without sounding silly, so I said:

“Strange.”

It wasn't until later that I realized my eerie sense of calm was likely originating from the fact that my change had already come.

“So, nothing’s changed, then?”

The abundance of chatter was briefly overruled by Mia and I’s laughter. After we had settled, Mia continued: “You should come with us to dinner. And bring your family. Valerie’s dad is barbecuing, and he said he misses you.”

Naturally, there was an odd period of silence where the air grew strangely thick. Unable to control them, my eyes darted towards Valerie. Though hers were confused at first, they eventually softened in a way I wasn’t expecting. The mask slipped off and, for the first time in months, I saw a glimpse of my Valerie. But she was different now. It wasn’t because she was a monster or a demon or a Rougarou; it was because she was grown up. She didn’t wear pigtails or chase after my car when I got home from vacation. I wasn’t her priority anymore. She had bigger things to worry about, like her career and her boyfriend and, maybe eventually, being my friend again. Most importantly, she had to take care of herself.

Maybe I’m a few steps behind the new Valerie, but I’m going at my own pace.

After we had stared at each other for what felt like hours, Valerie’s lips cracked into a smile. The gesture was small, but it told me what it needed to: she had read my letter.

I smiled back.

An hour later, I found myself at her family’s barbecue. I brought my own family. Everyone was joking together. Everything was exactly the same and irrevocably different. It might feel this way for a long time, but there are worse things to feel. And there are worse places to be on your graduation day. I found a comfortable lawn chair and, sometimes, I ran out of things to say, so I stared at a big cloud. At first, I was

looking for shapes. Then, I realized that the clouds didn't have shapes today, but they were still pretty. So, I still looked at them. Bitter, but real.

A couple of people that I loved approached me and asked me questions about myself. I didn't feel like talking about monsters, so I told everyone about a couple of things I am considering for a career. From what the adults said, careers and monsters might not be too different. So, we tried to find something better to talk about after that.

At one point, Luke sat next to me. Things were silent for a few moments while we were both oddly hyperaware of the other's presence. He took a breath in as if he was going to speak, but I interrupted him.

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