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THE KNIVES I USED

by

KateLin Carsrud

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate School,
the College of Arts and Sciences
and the School of Humanities
at The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts

Approved by:

Dr. Joshua Bernstein, Committee Chair
Dr. Olivia Clare Friedman
Dr. Charles Sumner

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ABSTRACT

The Knives I Used is a collection of short stories written between August 2020 and April 2022, while the author was a student at The University of Southern Mississippi. This thesis contains stories joined by the thematic thread of self-harm and demonstrates the spectrum of ways it presents itself in individuals.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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DEDICATION

Special thanks to my husband.

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INTRODUCTION

“The Knives I Used”

“Some small tug of my heart pushed words into my mouth, asking *hit me or harder*, only for the hope and trophy of a bruise that might form the next day”

—Elle Nash

I first cut myself when I was eleven years old. I used my sister’s razor, pressed it into my skin, and ran it along my arm until I had an inch long cut. When I close my eyes and focus, I can remember exactly how the first cut felt. There was a sharp, stinging pain, my chest tightened, and then there was relief—the most relief I still, to this day, have felt in my life. As I continued with my cutting, I progressed from a razor to a hunting knife my dad gave me. I’d hold the knife to my skin, push down as hard as I could stand, and then yank the knife over my flesh. Usually, I would do three cuts in repetition—if I approved of them as good enough, meaning they were *bad enough*, then I’d stop. If they weren’t good enough, then I’d do it again—another three cuts, as deep as I could handle. I never got it on the first try.

Self-injury is relatively new as a field of medical study, despite the act’s longstanding recorded history. In the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), self-harm, or Non-Suicidal Self-Injury (NSSI) is described as a condition that needs further study. In the section specifically dedicated to self-injury in

the DSM-5, the proposed criteria for the condition states: “In the last year, the individual has, on 5 or more days, engaged in intentional self-inflicted damage to the surface of his or her body of a sort likely to induce bleeding, bruising, or pain (e.g., cutting, burning, stabbing, hitting, excessive rubbing), with the expectation that the injury will lead to only minor or moderate physical harm (i.e., there is no suicidal intent)” (DSM-5 803). As someone who has engaged in self-harm, I find that this definition for NSSI is lacking and does not completely cover all aspects of self-injury. This definition requires that an individual engage in self-harm at least five times in a year, which I find problematic. For example, an individual could self-harm three times a year, with each of those three times consisting of multiple wounds badly enough to leave lifelong scarring. Likewise, a person could self-injure every day for a year without causing permanent markings on their body.

In this introduction, I will define self-harm as the harm that an individual inflicts on themselves or invites from a second party—this could also come in the form of deliberate neglect of self-care (e.g. an individual not seeking medical care despite being financially able). This definition broadens the parameters of what is considered self-injury while also removing the DSM-5’s requirement of an individual to harm themselves five times in a year. In my writing, wherein I include eating disorders as a form of self-injury, I depict various versions of self-harm that accord with my definition. My fiction, infused with personal experience, uses my definition of NSSI to illustrate the myriad of ways self-harm can present itself. This presentation provides me the therapeutic opportunity to explore my own personal relationship with self-injury in a fictional arena and to question some of the norms surrounding how we conceive and respond to self-harm as a perceived illness.

I continued to cut as I grew up, but once I left home for my undergraduate degree, the cutting got worse. This is also when I began to seek out other forms of NSSI. As an adult, one of the ways I self-harmed was via another person. I began a relationship with a man who didn't care about me—I knew it from the start, and I signed up for it. I continued harming myself in various ways—cutting and branding, namely—but the most significant way I was harming myself during this time was through the relationship. In the most literal of ways, I asked to be hurt both emotionally and physically. I *was* self-harming; even though I was not the one inflicting the pain, I was allowing it to be inflicted upon me. This idea of injuring oneself through another person is a form of self-harm that I address in this paper.

Committing self-harm through another person is a complex idea. For example, a woman who stays in an abusive relationship is not necessarily self-harming. The distinction needed comes from the individual's knowledge of themselves. Staying in an abusive relationship out of fear might not be self-injury; however, staying in an abusive relationship because one wants the pain is different. In her story collection *Nudes*, Elle Nash writes about this complicated idea: "I liked how awful you made me feel. I was never one to cut myself, for instance. I was a coward like that; I was selfish. I wanted you to do the cutting for me, figuratively speaking" ("Survivalist" 171). In this example, the first-person narrator is using her partner as a form of self-harm—cutting, biting, and head banging are all used a tool. If all these tools can be used to self-injure, then an individual can also use another as a tool to harm themselves. Finally, in this paper, some eating disorders are represented as self-harm. "Feeding and Eating Disorders" (329) has its own section in the DSM-5. Yet I choose to include eating disorders as self-harm because of

the therapeutic nature of this paper and my own personal experience of using an eating disorder to self-injure—and because of the fact that *anorexia nervosa* and *bulimia nervosa* are both disorders that can lead to voluntary physical and emotional damage of individuals' bodies. I say they can lead to voluntary physical damage of bodies because that was my own experience, but I acknowledge that eating disorders are sometimes seen as an involuntary disorder.

I illustrate this type of relationship in several of these stories. In “@francisfallingapart,” the protagonist involves herself in an online relationship that is harmful to her well-being. This protagonist engages in self-harm through an eating disorder, and she uses her negative relationship to fuel her eating disorder. In the story, she states:

I'd sent him a body check, and he sent back mean words that made me want to starve forever. He might as well have said *holy fuck, you're the fattest thing ever*. Hell knows that I said it to myself enough. But coming from another person? The self-hatred rolled in hot and heavier than it ever had before. I told him I did [like it], and then I made myself, asking for meanspo at least once a day. (cite)

This example depicts Francis, the protagonist, as someone who wants to feel the emotional pain inflicted by @thinblueboy. In this case, the emotional pain conveyed in the form of words. For instance, when @thinblueboy responds with meanspo—a term that is literally shorthand for “mean inspiration”—the protagonist decides that not only is the pain worth it, but it is also something she'd ask for again. She convinces herself that it is what she wants. As depicted in the story, @francesfallingapart begins to seek these negative words from @thinblueboy.

My story “Avery” is another that mimics Elle Nash’s writing about self-injury through a second party. During this story, the protagonist is in an unstable relationship with a man who is emotionally abusive. However, in the story, the protagonist is very much aware of the abuse she is suffering. In fact, there are many moments in the story where she relishes in her own pain. For example, while out on a walk at night by herself, my character thinks, “I thought of being attacked. I didn’t know if I would fight it; part of me yearned for it—I wanted to feel all sorts of pain; I felt I needed to be punished” (cite). This isn’t a moment of fear for the protagonist, but a moment that presents a challenge she can overcome. Pain is the obstacle, and she wants to feel it. During the story’s climax, my character agrees to have anal sex with the man she is in a relationship with. While having anal sex, the protagonist feels immense pain, but refuses to tell her partner to stop: “He asked me if I was okay, if it hurt he said he would stop, but I told him I was fine, that it felt good; and even though it was painful, I didn’t want to say so, I wanted to take it; to accept the hurt and feel all of it and survive it” (cite). This particular moment is important because it shows that the partner is not abusive, but communicative during their sex, while the protagonist is the one who feels the pain and chooses to keep feeling it. By choosing that pain and not stopping her partner, the protagonist is self-harming through another person.

Many individuals who engage in self-harm don’t go into the action of NSSI knowing exactly why they are inflicting pain on themselves. In the “Introduction to the Special Section on Suicide and Non-Suicidal Self-Injury,” author Mitchel J. Prinstein writes, “Findings from past research clearly have demonstrated that the most commonly endorsed reasons for engaging in NSSI pertain to the emotion regulation functions served

by this behavior” (3). These regulations can be an individual trying to feel something or trying to erase a negative emotion. Many individuals who engage in self-injury report that NSSI helped alleviate negative emotions, while some even reported that they engaged in NSSI to punish themselves (Klonsky). That said, there are numerous reasons behind self-injury and my fiction aims to explore those motivations while also critiquing the singularity of conventional thinking surrounding self-injury. In writing these characters, I have been able to therapeutically sort through my own emotions as they relate to self-injury.

In trying to put these complex psychological dilemmas on the page, I often look toward authors like Toni Morrison, who’s known for her unflinching gaze at some of the uglier aspects of her characters’ lives. Her beautifully constructed sentences are a model for my more emotionally charged scenes. In her novel *Sula*, Morrison writes, “The body must move and throw itself about, the eyes must roll, the hands should have no peace, and the throat should release all the yearning, despair and outrage that accompany the stupidity of loss” (107). The scene from which this passage is taken depicts a character’s inability to express their anguish. My story “A Soft Kiss, Light, a Memory” depicts its protagonist weaponizing NSSI as a way to relieve emotions she is unable to articulate. The story involves two women who were in a romantic relationship in college but have since been distanced from each other. The conflict begins when one of the women returns to the other in a moment of self-induced chaos. In the instance of self-harm in the story, before the protagonist bites herself on the forearm, I write, “She wracked her brain, felt arms and hands digging through her head, trying to grab ahold of something solid—something she could do, some place she could go. But nothing. Emptiness coursed

through her body like a rush of water” (64). And then she proceeds to bites herself until she bleeds. In my fiction, I aim to write self-harm scenes in a way that shows interiority on the part of the character both before and after the abuse.

Writing such jarring scenes, it is important that my characters have depth; otherwise, the jarring scenes are reduced to simple shock value. This can be seen in Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Wintergirls* (YEAR), a novel focused on the competition between two young girls who are both facing eating disorders—Lila and Cassie. When Cassie dies, Lila is left alone to continue with her illness. This novel follows her as she deals with the repercussions of Cassie’s death. Throughout the novel, the Anderson repeatedly writes the weight of Lila. The novel relies on that effect to illustrate the character’s worsening condition—“I’m late again, and dreaming half-way out the door (099.0! 099.0! 099.0! Tomorrow will be 098.0!)”—rather than creatively showing the reader the severity of the condition in a way that does not give individuals ammunition with which to judge their own weight and relationship to food (Anderson 54). The author uses a shockingly low weight to present the eating disorder as opposed to using descriptive language, figurative or otherwise, to create an image of the girl’s body.

When writing about self-harm, there is a critical line drawn about what should or shouldn’t be shared. Some details are gratuitous and share too much information. This is especially true when writing about eating disorders as self-harm, which is a theme that permeates through my writing, both fiction and non-fiction. In “The Edible Woman: Reading/Eating Disorders and Femininity,” essayist Abigail Bray writes, “...the anorexic body functions as a fetishized feminine monstrosity within the mass media” (4). This monstrosity is powered by the competitive nature that propels eating disorders. When

writing about eating disorders, it is important to me that certain guidelines must be followed in order to protect the mental health of the audience because of this fetishization. There is not a set list of rules, per se. Rather, it is my own decision to exclude numbers when writing fictional or non-fictional stories about eating disorders. For example, number of calories consumed or the number on the scale never appear in my fiction. I set these boundaries to avoid triggers that may encourage other individuals to use fiction as a ‘how-to’ manual. And, while I hesitate to put parameters on what should or should not be included in fiction, I do believe that a story can be told just as effectively with these restrictions as without. And, if a story can be told just as well without the often triggering and overly informative numbers that accompany eating disorders, I am compelled ethically to keep exempt the inclusion of weight and caloric consumption.

For example, in my fiction I never mention that my characters use a scale—I assume the reader can infer that (or not infer that, it doesn’t really matter since it’s not necessary for the building of a world or a character). Similarly, when I mention food, I do it in a way that avoids talking about how much is eaten. In my story, “Wonderland,” my character performs the action of eating in this way: “I put some oatmeal in the bowl, added water, and then put the bowl in the microwave [...] Adding peanut butter and cinnamon, I mixed it around” (47). In this moment, the language specifically avoids mention of numbers, quantities, and caloric intake. I agree with these editorial limitations because the point is not to glorify the eating disorder or self-harm, but to illustrate the realities of life with an eating disorder.

Making fiction a safe place for readers is essential. Some may believe excluding certain details in fiction is censorship or a distortion of reality; however, when eating disorders, which are a deadly mental illness, are the subject matter, I, as an author, feel that I must take these precautions. These restrictions do not take away from the fiction as some might think; instead, they open themselves to all readers. Melissa Broder is an author who is known for writing about eating disorders. In her novel *Milk Fed* (2021), she begins by outlining her character's routine. The protagonist talks about beginning her day with nicotine gum: "I preferred the coated varieties, Fruit Chill or Mint Blast, and did not count the coating in my daily caloric intake" (1). This is an example of Broder skillfully writing 'around calories.' She acknowledges they exist and that her character is aware of them, but she does not go so far as to give the audience numbers. This method does not inhibit the reader from understanding the novel at all. In fact, these restrictions force the author to find new ways to describe routines of those practicing eating disorders.

As a writer who has struggled with an eating disorder for years, finding new ways to write about this illness is both a challenge and an opportunity to explore various modes of description. My writing began as journaling before morphing into fiction. Most of my fiction is based on my experiences, which presented a particularly challenging obstacle early in my career. I ran out of ideas, so to speak, because I felt I had covered the gamut of my experiences. John Gardner's *The Art of Fiction*, however, allowed me to see I could create imaginary worlds in which I could dramatize my real-world experiences. Gardner writes, "Real life characters do sometimes hold their own in fiction, but only those, loved or hated, who the writer has transformed in his own mind, or through the

process of writing, to imaginary beings” (126). Learning to convert my non-fictional ideas into fiction induced growing pains that have benefited my craft. While writing my story “Can I Feel You,” I let my mind travel past the bounds of my own experiences and incorporate imagined scenarios in my fiction.

I have written about certain “restrictions” I believe one should follow when writing about self-injury. What I must not forget, however, is that fiction is a creative, expressive art form that must make way for some degree of lyricism and poetry. This is storytelling, entertainment, as much as it is a venue for contemplation. Homing in on my craft has required me to analyze other writing, which has motivated me to read people like the aforementioned Toni Morrison, Sally Rooney, and Jamie Quatro. All these authors bring multiple techniques for writing fiction I hope bleeds out of their craft and into mine; moreover, each of these authors represent certain stylistic choices in their work that I imitate.

I wrote earlier about a striking emotional tenor in Morrison’s writing, one that I try to emulate in my own fiction. This ability to weave emotion through words on a page is necessary for all writers; however, I find it to be especially important when dealing with subject matter as sensitive as self-injury. The audience’s emotional connection to a specific scene can serve to eliminate shock value in fiction, and Morrison is a master of finding ways to orchestrate these types of reader response. In *Sula*, Morrison uses a reunion to develop a pair of complex character portraits. She writes about two friends and their growing relationship: “It was like getting the use of an eye back, having a cataract removed. Her old friend had come home. [...] Talking to Sula had always been a conversation with herself” (95). Morrison uses an effective mix of anecdotes, lyric prose,

and self-reflection to paint a portrait of a relationship based on what we already know about who Sula is. When the character says that talking to Sula was like talking to herself, Morrison is capitalizing on the character work she's already established in the novel's opening chapters. Because we know Sula, we now know Nel. Morrison positions this central relationship as a type of oneness.

I was inspired by Morrison to create a similar relationship in my story "A Soft Kiss, Light, a Memory," which features the reunification of two women with a decade's worth of unresolved tension. In order to establish the intimacy between my two characters, I toggle between the present and the past. The following passage is pulled from one of the flashback sequences:

Jules and Ana were holding hands while they walked around downtown. They were connected, two bodies soldered together by fingers clasping. They followed the music [...] It pulsed through the humidity in the air, surrounding them and inserting itself into the crevices of their bodies, twisting through their ears and filling their heads with heat and melody. (CITE)

Whereas Morrison uses an eye analogy, I use the holding of hands to portray a similar "oneness." My characters are "soldered together." The two hands bind the girls as one, therefore showing, rather than telling, the reader that the two girls' relationship is charged with a passionate history. Additionally, the language I use surrounding the music, the way that it "inserts itself into the crevices of their bodies," has a similar motive.

Another author who has greatly influenced my writing is Sally Rooney. Her prose does not display the same grandeur as Toni Morrison's. In fact, there are many stark differences between the two women's approaches to style. In the hands of a lesser stylist,

the lack of figurative language in Rooney's writing could leave the audience thinking she is uninterested in her prose; however, the simplicity of her language is rendered powerful by its focus on the unadorned observations of her characters. They are direct and sometimes even dry in their reflections. Rooney's novel *Conversations with Friends* follows Frances, a young woman who enters into an affair with an older, married man. Writing from Frances's point of view, Rooney writes, "The next morning my mother picked me up outside the apartment building. I got into the car and strapped my seatbelt on. She had classical music on, but she turned it off when I shut the door" (Rooney 254). The direct prose imitates a staccato beat, which moves the reader along the page at a faster speed. In the passage depicted above, each sentence contains a new action that is constantly pushing Rooney's characters forward toward the inevitable climax of the novel. There is no pause for hyperbole or metaphor. This quickened pace captivates the reader on a deeper level that, combined with the emotional tenor that my NSSI scenes include, allows the reader to engage with the text more intimately.

My writing has recently begun to shift toward Rooney's unflinching directness. I have found that writing about NSSI and eating disorders is best done as straightforwardly as possible, with regards to the rules of writing about eating disorders from earlier. Additionally, I find that all my writing benefits from moments when I swerve away from figurative language and be as direct as possible. I have a tendency to over-write; attempting to keep my prose clean and efficient creates an environment where my writing is controlled. In my story "Wonderland," much of my writing leans into the staccato rhythms used by Rooney. This story centers itself around a young competitive swimmer who engages in an eating disorder with one of her friends. When talking about the

formation of her eating disorder, my protagonist says, “My parents wondered why I wasn’t eating. I told them I didn’t feel well. They nagged me. Eventually, my dad sat down with me in my bedroom one afternoon and asked me if I knew what anorexia was. I told him that I didn’t. He explained it” (cite). This sentence is specific about events and the order in which they happen. The sentences do not allow the reader to become overwhelmed with dense language; rather, they get to the point quickly in order to keep the reader engaged for the duration of the story. Furthermore, I use this same methodical language in order to describe a more sensitive scene later in the same story. My protagonist is purging, and I write it this way: “I leaned back over, knees and right hand holding me up, left hand free, let my chest press against the front of the toilet. My left-hand fingertips found their way to my bottom lip, and they rested there for a moment, feeling the territory. I pulled my bottom lip down, let it bounce back up” (cite). While these are longer fragments joined together by commas rather than periods, each fragment is working to insert forward motion into the story. With every new action the protagonist performs, she is getting closer to her goal of purging, which is an appropriately intense moment in the story. Because of how tense the moment is, I chose to not pause the forward motion of the protagonist’s actions. The sentences become clipped, small actions that move the reader toward the climax at a faster rate.

While increasing the speed of movement in language increases tension and moves the reader along faster, it is not the only technique that can be used. For example, the book *Fire Sermon* by Jamie Quatro is written in small chapters—about a page or two for each. This is another way that tension can be wrung out of a novel or short story. In fact, in my story “Lurch,” I attempted to model these short sections in order to increase tension

and make the story a quick and easy read. Quatro's small chapters work to make the novel feel faster because there is more white space on the pages. Additionally, these short chapters set a tempo that propels the reader forward at a swift pace. Though Quatro and I are working in different forms—she a novel, and I a short story—I modeled the structure of my story “Lurch” after Quatro's novel. Even though novels and short stories often differ immensely in tempo, some of the same techniques can be used to help the reader through the work at a brisker pace. Topically, Quatro's and my fiction differ in that she delves into a realm of spirituality that I hope to eventually, but do not yet, encapsulate.

All the modeling I have done has only served to benefit my work about self-injury by creating a full, believable picture for the reader. While writing about self-harm has its own rules, fiction also has rules that should be followed. In the above paragraphs, I described how Morrison, Nash, Rooney, and Quatro have influenced my craft in a positive way—a way that creates a full picture for a story about NSSI to thrive. To write self-harm “well” is simply not enough; fiction must be written and re-written, revised until it reaches its publishable state. Melding both thoughtful depictions of self-injury and craft, my work portrays stories of women who engage in self-harm in a number of ways. I believe my story “Punisher” gets closest to the ideal balance of honed craft and writing that is self-harm sensitive. The goal for me is always to produce a fleshed-out representation of NSSI. This story follows a young woman named Lucy as she engages in self-injury through an eating disorder. This story stands out from my other stories about eating disorders because my character Lucy also is representing a character who inflicts harm. Lucy becomes friends with a woman named Megan, and they begin to enable each other in different ways—both are borderline alcoholics, but Megan uses Lucy to avoid

her struggling marriage while Lucy uses Megan to avoid being tempted to eat. But, when Megan's relationship with her husband begins to rekindle, Lucy acts as a wedge that attempts to separate Megan from her husband.

This story was difficult to write compared to my other stories, requiring multiple rounds of revision to effectively frame Lucy as a victim as well as a punisher. Because of that, there is a certain balance in her character that needs to be created. In addition to the struggle of creating Lucy's character, this story is much longer than the rest of the pieces that make up *The Knives I Used*, so I had to use language to increase momentum. I did this in three ways: first, I returned to my study of Rooney's writing and attempted to make my sentences more direct in certain parts of the story; second, I model the voluptuous language that Morrison uses by allowing my characters thoughts to go places that are unexpected and refreshing; lastly, I create engaging self-injurious scenes that depict the realities of self-harm for the reader. Every one of the above three techniques were useful to me in writing this story; moreover, they were necessary.

My inclusion of the aforementioned craft moves utilized in "Punisher" came only after repeated revisions. Initially, "Punisher" was the beginning of an attempt at a novel. I was around 40 pages in when I realized the piece was functioning better as a short story. From there on out, I began my changes. Many sections of the story needed to be tightened because of the necessary formal differences between novels and short stories. In the sections of the work that specifically needed tightening, I turned to my knowledge of Rooney's unflinchingly direct prose. For example, I begin the story with a direct statement that positions Lucy's friend Megan as an important character: "This is how I met Megan" (cite). This small statement inserts into the reader's mind that Megan, even

though they do not know who she is yet, is someone important to the story. Next, it insinuates a relationship to come between the two women. Lastly, it literally introduces Megan into the story. This direct statement is working for the story's well-being in many ways, all of which would not have existed had I not used Rooney's stylistically direct prose as a model.

In addition to making the story more direct in places, I also needed to have slower moments—moments that allow the reader times to process everything happening. Just because I converted this novel beginning into a short story, it was still necessary for there to be moments of open metalepsis. For this, I returned to Morrison's winding prose. I utilize her style specifically in a moment that Lucy is at work. For example, I write, "I pictured Grace Balloch Memorial Library as a ship where reading for the children was the captain's job; Jessica was jealous of the captain and, therefore, was planning mutiny against Rachel. Mutiny made me think about ships, which, in turn, caused me to recall the phrase *loose lips sink ships*" (cite). I use this moment to allow the reader to get a look into Lucy's mind as she is at work. It's a slow moment, and there is no need for a clipped, direct prose. In fact, this section benefits from the interiority that exists in Lucy's mind. As she sits at work and lets her mind travel, the reader has the opportunity to get a closer look at the character. This works to develop character as well as give the reader a chance to breathe.

Finally, I used my knowledge from my own experiences with self-injury to create a believable, sensitive internal struggle in Lucy. Not only does this internal struggle develop character, it also gives me as an author the chance to choose how my reader will be inserted into the self-harm of the story:

My heart slowed again and I began to take off my shoes. I rolled my jeans up to my knees. Already, light purple splotches formed under my skin, just from being outside, and I hadn't even stepped into the water yet. But I wasn't scared and I didn't hesitate. I wanted to wake up, to feel this; I wanted the cold to rip me violently from the slowness that settled in my body—and I knew that it would, if only briefly. I'd done this before. (cite)

I chose this scene because it veers away from what a person would typically see as self-harm. However, in studying Lucy's motivations for wanting to stand in below-freezing water, it is clear that she is performing another version of self-injury—one much more subtle. Lucy is not cutting her skin or purging, but she is simply using a dangerously cold creek to shock her from her mind-numbing emotions. One may consider this a lower-scale version of self-harm, one that does not involve the mutilation of skin; however, that argument does not take away from the fact that it is self-harm. This speaks to the myriad of ways that I present self-injury in fiction; indeed, I believe self-injury is best viewed as a spectrum of conditions rather than a monolithic disorder.

Most of the research on NSSI relies on individuals to self-report. Because first and close-third point of views allow a voyeuristic window into the mind of these women, I believe that fiction is a potent arena in which to analyze and immerse ourselves in the lived experiences of people who engage in NSSI. I also think fiction is a great place to analyze self-injury because everyone's experience is slightly different. By using fiction to create stories involving self-harm, I am able to look at the multitude of ways people think about or practice self-injuring. By combining different philosophies of craft, my story "Punisher" acts as a summation of my best work in my time at the Center for Writers at

the University of Southern Mississippi. This work, following my own definition of self-injury, serves to represent the countless ways that individuals engage in NSSI and attempts to argue for a broader and more encompassing definition of what NSSI is.

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WONDERLAND

I was tired. It had been a long day, and both morning and afternoon practices had been difficult. Most of the freshmen girls had gone up into the apartment above mine to watch a movie. I followed them up even though I knew I couldn't sit in a room full of people for as long as a movie would last. As soon as we entered the apartment, it felt like too much—a room congested with college aged girls laughing and talking. I noticed another one of my teammates, Jess, one who lived in this apartment, wasn't present in the living room. The door to her room was cracked, and a light was coming through. Jess and I hadn't been close, but we'd spent enough time around each other for me to go knock on her door and peek inside. She was sitting on her bed.

I smiled a little. "You don't want to watch the movie?"

"No, I'm tired."

I walked forward and crawled onto her bed with her—me above the covers and her below them. "Me too."

It was quiet for a bit. I didn't have any small talk in me to give. I wanted to be able to say that I felt something big inside of me, an overwhelming emotion that I didn't belong here. All I had wanted to do was leave home for university, hoping it would fix the way I seemed to feel so often; school hadn't helped so far, being on a college swim team hadn't helped much either. At the end of most days I just felt tired and lacking, like I needed something.

"I don't feel good, on the inside." I let my words fall out. I needed to tell someone, needed someone to talk to. I'd never done that at home. My parents weren't the

type of people I could open up to, and I'd been too consumed with getting a swimming scholarship to ever try to find a friend that I was comfortable enough around. Even now, Jess wouldn't have been my first choice if I had to pick a girl out of the crowd, but there was something comforting about her not taking part in the movie, the large group of girls. And now, with the combination of a new place and the same old feeling that I seemed to always have, an urgency in me pressed inward, telling me I had to talk.

“What do you mean?”

“Like just not good. Sad.”

Sighed. “Me too.”

I looked up at Jess's face, waiting for more.

“I just broke up with my boyfriend. We've been dating for three years. The thing is I don't even care. I just stopped loving him. He even gave me a promise ring—but I don't care.”

I didn't know what to say.

Jess spoke again, a soft voice floating at me: “I use to not eat, for a few years I was really bad about it. Then I just got over it. I don't know why. Now I stopped again.”

My heartbeat quickened. There were so many things I wanted to say. First: How is it possible?

Instead I opened my mouth and spilled a story out to her: I couldn't sleep when I was little. It was bad. I read books most nights and stayed up alone. One night, when reading *Becoming Me*, the first book of a Christian YA series, I came across the word anorexia. One of the characters was anorexic. I didn't know what that meant, so I did what I always did when I was unsure of a word—I left my room and walked to the

laundry room, grabbed the big red dictionary off my mom's messy bookshelf, and looked it up. I was stupidly in awe. There had always been something in me that had wondered about the mental strength in people. I had started swimming competitively when I was nine and every day I couldn't wait for practice. I wanted to work until my body gave out, to see how long I could last. I decided then, 12 years old, that I would make myself become anorexic. There wasn't a thing in the world that was stronger than a mind made up, willpower. It only lasted for three days, though. My parents wondered why I wasn't eating. I told them I didn't feel well. They nagged me. Eventually, my dad sat down with me in my bedroom one afternoon and asked me if I knew what anorexia was. I told him that I didn't. He explained it. I promised him that I wasn't doing that; I just hadn't felt well the past few days. From there on I decided that if I couldn't be anorexic then I would make up for it with working out.

I told Jess about high school, how I had morning practice at five, school, and afternoon practice. I would go to the gym and weightlift before I went home for dinner. Before bed I did push-ups and sit-ups. It was such a structured routine that I'd break down if I couldn't make it to the gym some nights. During my push-ups I sometimes started to cry and couldn't stop. I was exhausted in all the ways a person could be, had unreasonable fights with my family. My parents tried to talk to me the summer before I left for college. I told them there was nothing wrong with loving to work out. I left home.

Jess said, "Yeah, it sucks." Like we understood each other, like we were in the same boat. Suddenly my insides didn't feel quite so bad, like her words were magic or strong medicine.

"I guess I just always thought that I had to eat if I was going to swim."

“Well, you should.” Jess gave a dry laugh. There seemed to be words she wasn’t saying that crawled off the end of her statement, invisible letters with legs. No one has to do anything they don’t want to.

Talking with Jess was like being Alice and falling down the rabbit’s hole—except Jess was Alice with me. I wasn’t experimenting by myself with the locks and keys, the growing and shrinking; it all with Jess. After talking with her I didn’t feel alone. There was always a mission. Jess and I spent every second we could together. We sat in her room every night, and it wasn’t an apartment anymore—it was a new world, another planet; we weren’t people, we weren’t anything.

We started journaling, obsessively. I didn’t doubt we wrote the same things over and over again: *Today I won’t eat, tomorrow I’ll have a salad and an apple, the next day I’ll drink three cups of coffee before I let myself have oatmeal. Sundays mean no food—no practice, no eating.* We put the small stickers that came on the side of our apples in our journals to show how many we’d eaten in a day. No one thought about us separately anymore. We swam in the same lane at every practice, bitched about how cold we were, laughed about our psycho heads, went home and got under the pink covers of her bed, our world.

I lost weight fast. At first it was easy to not eat. It was a mind game, and my body’s instincts hadn’t fought me yet. It felt good to go into a practice empty and to come out even emptier. If I sucked my stomach in hard enough it felt like I could almost touch the front of my stomach to my back, like my intestines, kidneys, and all other inside organs had dried up and disappeared. But it wasn’t long before the urge to eat became

strong, an ever-present feeling. After practice on Saturdays, I began to stay in bed as long as possible just to avoid walking out into the living room and seeing the kitchen. Jess and I spent nights driving around, heat in the car on high, until we were exhausted, just so that we'd fall asleep as soon as we got back to our apartments.

One Sunday, a no-eat day, I woke up with my stomach cramping. I lay in my bed for as long as I could, hoping it would go away. After that I made coffee: appetite suppressant. It only helped for a little. I went up to Jess's room.

“You know what I wish?”

“What?”

“I wish I could throw up. I've tried before and I can't get it. Just imagine—you could eat a little and then just puke it up. It would be perfect.”

Jess nodded her head. “I've tried too. I can't.”

“I hate that I can't.” A frustration with myself began to wrap itself around my ankles and twist its way up my body. I wanted to do it.

“Jess.”

“Hm?”

“I'm going to go down to my room, eat something, and then not come back up here until I throw it up, okay?”

Jess laughed. “Okay. Good luck—I'll be here.”

I left her room, her apartment, and walked down the stairs to mine. My mind was firm—I would throw up whatever I ate; it wouldn't stay in me. I cut up an apple, heated up peanut butter and honey and drizzled it on the cut-up pieces. I carried the plate into my room, locked the door behind me, sat on my bed. Putting a piece into my mouth, I bit

down, first through the soft layer of peanut butter and then through the meat of the apple. There was a slight resistance as my teeth reached the skin, then a small pop and I was through. Closing my eyes and chewing slowly, I attempted to keep the sweet and tart taste in my mouth for as long as I could—swallow. I ate the rest of the pieces, the whole apple, the exact same way: meticulously, savoring every bite, taking as long as possible to swallow. After I finished, I walked to my bathroom.

This was a new process to me. The tile on the floor was hard and I didn't want to bruise my knees. I folded one of the towels hanging by my shower and set it at the base of my toilet, in front. I lifted the rim of the toilet up like boys do so that I'd have more room to work with. Getting down on my knees, I leaned over the toilet, pressing my right hand on the ground to stabilize myself. My t-shirt hung forward and into my face, so I pushed myself up and took it off. I leaned back over, knees and right hand holding me up, left hand free, let my chest press against the front of the toilet. My left-hand fingertips found their way to my bottom lip, and they rested there for a moment, feeling the territory. I pulled my bottom lip down, let it bounce back up. I traced the inside of my bottom lip, where the skin was softer, a little wet.

“Stop stalling,” I whispered into the porcelain, to the water.

My fingers crawled past my lips, into my mouth, stopping at the middle of my tongue. I pulled my hand down, pressed my fingers hard against my tongue and bottom teeth, feeling the sturdiness, fighting to control my hand—make it go back. I lifted my hand from behind but kept it at the same place in my mouth. Breathed out. Moved it back, let it slide along the wetness of my tongue. Back, back, back, until I gagged and coughed and pulled my hand completely out.

My head hung over the toilet, my eyes welling up from the gagging, making my vision blur. Where the water met the porcelain was fuzzy. I breathed in deeply, out through my nose. Try again, try to stay calm. I focused on my breathing, told myself to not cough, only gag. I did it again, the same routine—whether I was slow because of dread or anticipation, I didn't know.

I couldn't remember how long I'd been on my knees when I finally got it. The world had disappeared around me and the only thing I could feel was elation. I laughed, face still hanging over the toilet. I couldn't wait to tell Jess. Staying on my knees, I moved away from the toilet and over to my counter. Placing my hands on the linoleum, I pulled myself up. There was a certain anxiety I felt about seeing myself after completing such an act. I felt like a new being, transformed. I would be prettier after this, stronger. How many people could do this; how many could say that they were able? Up, up I went, saw my face, the same me only red and puffy. It was the way I looked after I'd cried hard. I pinched my cheek and then turned on the sink and washed my face.

Most of the time I dreaded practice, knew that it would hurt. It was worse if my body didn't feel well. Some days, though, I lived for it. They were days like this, when I dove in and felt able and smooth from the beginning. My arms were strong today; they were longer, leaner, and they reached out and grabbed the water, pulled me forward with strength I didn't know I had. I was swimming faster than the girls around me, wasn't taking as many strokes. I was more capable today. The water was mine, and I forced my way through it—easily, without force, a hand stretched out then pulling backward. My arms and legs propelled me forward, the glassy pool water soft as it hit the top of my

head; it rolled down the sides and front of my face, hesitating as it rested for a moment at my collarbone and shoulders. I wasn't human. My muscles weren't there, and if they weren't there then it was impossible for them to become tired. I was all bones and skin, moving effortlessly, machinery made for this. Stroke, pull, stroke, pull, legs kicking in tune, body rotating slightly, muscle memory without the muscle—bone memory. Twenty-five yards to the wall, flip, push, streamline, dolphin kick under the water, a mermaid, expelling used-oxygen out of my nose, round bubbles slipping down my face and gliding along my body, eventually making their way to the top of the water and back into the air. Breaking the surface, I took a stroke, turned my head to breathe, and kept going until I reached the wall.

We'd just finished warm-up and all thirty of us girls hung onto the gutter as our coach wrote the pre-set out onto the white board while she explained it. I hooked both of my arms over the gutter, resting my chin on them. Pressing my body flat against the wall, I reveled in the feeling of my hip bones against the tile, my skin pinched between the two hard objects. I felt thinner today, bonier, stronger. The rest of today's practice excited me. I couldn't wait to swim until my body gave up, to reach a breaking point and still try to push further, to try to control my body. In those moments I told myself to steel my mind or else it would be stolen from me. If my mind was stronger than my body's pain then I would never grow tired; I could swim forever, never taking a moment to rest. To me this was enlightenment, and it placed me higher than everyone around me—to not be controlled by pain or fear or feeling was to be a perfect robot.

We swam the pre-set—3,000 yards, and I mentally added the yardage to our 1,500-yard warmup. 4,500 yards. After the pre-set, we got out of the water while Coach

explained our main set. It would be hard—like it always was; nervousness grew in me. But I reminded myself that I felt good, that I could do it. It was 5,000 yards total. After practice we would have swum 9,500 yards—5.7 miles. I imagined how my body would feel afterwards, exhausted, drained, empty; it would be the good-empty, the one where I didn't need anything.

Energy coursed through my body for the entirety of the main set. I felt as if I could go forever. My consciousness was outside of my brain and I let my bone-machine body take over. Briefly, I was aware of Jess hanging onto the wall, squeezed against the lane rope and out of the way. Her legs were easy for me to recognize, long and dangly; I spent almost every moment with them. I flip-turned by her and pushed off, kept swimming. We weren't allowed to stop during the main set. When I came back to the wall, she was gone—not hanging onto the gutter, not squeezed against the lane rope, not in my lane at all anymore. My consciousness returned to my brain and I began to worry. I knew all too well how some practices—most—my head would fill with fuzz and I felt like I couldn't breathe, blood flow not making it to my limbs very well. Jess and I played with fire, tried to re-write the laws of mankind by denying ourselves the very energy we needed to complete these practices. We told ourselves that we didn't need calories, that we would create energy ourselves out of willpower—the rejection of need.

Jess was sitting in her locker when practice ended. She was dressed in baggy sweats and a sweatshirt, and her wet hair was pulled to the side, over one shoulder, and dripping down the front of her sweatshirt. A few of the girls went up to her and asked her if she was okay; I kept my distance. One by one, girl by girl, the locker room emptied. My

roommate asked Jess if she wanted a ride home, and Jess said no but thank you. She was going to talk to Coach and then go to the trainer. I told my roommate that I was going to the trainer and that I'd see her back at our apartment.

Soon everyone was gone, and I sat in the locker by Jess. "Want to walk home?"

"Yeah."

We were quiet as we walked, bare feet trudging along the sidewalk. I don't know why we held our shoes in our hands. It was about a third of a mile to our apartment complex.

I'd had such a phenomenal practice; I was riding a high. I wanted to encourage Jess, to tell her it was just a bad day, that she'd feel better in the morning. Eventually I just asked her what happened.

"I passed out."

We kept quiet from then on, walking. I didn't understand why she was so down about passing out. I thought I would have loved to—I would have worn it like a badge of honor. I pushed my body that hard; *I did that*.

When we reached our complex, I followed Jess up to her room. We got in her bed. Stayed there for a while.

"I have to pee." I got up and walked to her bathroom, closed the door behind me.

When I came out, Jess was sitting up on the edge of her bed.

"I think that's the worst I've ever felt in my life." Jess looked down at her knees when she spoke. "I thought I was dying."

I didn't know what to say. We were living on an edge. Sometimes we might slip off and have to climb our way back up. I settled with: "Do you feel better now?"

Jess laughed softly, air slipping out of her lips. “I feel crazy.”

“We are crazy. We’re psycho.”

“Psycho.”

“It’s bound to happen sometimes.”

She looked at me finally. “Why do we do this?”

“Because we’re psycho. I don’t know.”

“Maybe we should just eat. Have you ever thought about that? Why can’t we be normal?”

I sat down on her carpet. “Okay, you eat then.”

“You need to eat, too. This isn’t good. Maybe we’ve gone too far.”

It was her fear talking, I knew. Tomorrow she’d wake up and we’d be the same two people, living the same extraordinarily mundane lives. She was scared; she had a bad experience. She would bounce back.

“I do eat.”

Jess glared at me. “Are you serious?”

“Jess, I seriously eat more than you do.”

“What the fuck? I know you. You don’t.”

I lifted my hands in a questioning gesture, laughed at her ridiculousness. “I eat way more than you do.”

Yelled. “No, I eat more than *you!*”

Silence. I couldn’t help it, but my lips spread apart slowly. I grinned like the Cheshire cat. I began to laugh—so hard I couldn’t breathe. I rolled onto my back and

rolled around on the ground and laughed and laughed and laughed. Jess joined me, putting her hands in her hair, eyes wide and smile big.

Jess's laughed slowed but her big smile stayed. "What the fuck is wrong with us?"

I sighed, stopped my laughing, and stared at the ceiling. "I won't lie. This sucks. It's not easy. I wish I didn't care; I wish I wanted to stop badly enough to actually stop—but at the same time, I *love* it. Jess. This is the only thing that makes me feel satisfied."

"Sometimes, when I walk by the brick wall outside of the pool, I want to slam my head into it as hard as I can, over and over."

Lifted my head, looked at Jess, who was looking at me. "I think about things like that too."

Most nights I laid in my bed like this—flat on my back, blanket only over my mid-section, feet hanging out of the blanket, hanging off the bed just a little. I stared straight up at the ceiling, but I couldn't see the ceiling because it was dark. Instead, little lights darted across the blackness in my vision. It looked the same way when I closed my eyes. Dark ceiling sky or eyelid sky accompanied by a meteor shower of colors—stars, shooting stars, planets. I decided a long time ago that there was no such thing as complete darkness. Colors were everywhere, even painted to the insides of a person's eyelids, even floating through the clear oxygen—you just have to look hard. This is what not sleeping is; it's imagining or noticing all sorts of small things.

Nighttime feels like forever though, especially when you can't sleep. A person can only follow not-really-there, but there, lights for so long before they begin to think

about everything else in the world: day to day life, work, worries. Sometimes a person needs to get up and move around, even when it's not the time to.

I got up, left my room and walked to the kitchen. I looked at the pantry, my food was separated from my roommates by shelves. I had plain oatmeal, apples, peanut butter, protein powder, and protein bars. My roommates had crackers, cookies, chips, oatmeal, brown sugar, ramen.

“Fuck it. I hate myself.” I grabbed my oatmeal and peanut butter and put it on the counter, grabbed a bowl out of the cabinet. I put some oatmeal in the bowl, added water, and then put the bowl in the microwave. After a minute of waiting, I pulled the bowl out, looked at the plain cooked oatmeal. I didn't want it. I wanted ice cream and I wanted lasagna; I wanted something that was good. Adding peanut butter and cinnamon, I mixed it around. Better. A last-minute decision: I turned toward the pantry and grabbed my roommate's brown sugar. I poured a good amount in the bowl, watched the heat melt it. I put everything back into the pantry, grabbed a spoon out of a drawer, and took my bowl to my room.

I wrapped myself in a blanket and sat up against the wall, on my bed. Touching the tip of the spoon to the oatmeal, I told myself that I could stop. If I stopped now, then I wouldn't have gone too far. I could dump the whole bowl of oatmeal down the toilet and flush it. I didn't have to eat it. Still, I put my spoon in the bowl, pulled it out, and took out a bite. I ate it. It tasted like peanut butter and sweet, and I couldn't stop. I ate the rest and then sat in my bed. Regret began to fill me. Did I really need that? I wished I would have just gone to sleep, empty. I wished I could have stopped myself before I spiraled and ate.

This is why I needed Jess around me. She held me accountable, didn't make me want to eat so badly, didn't make me want to eat at all most the time.

I sighed, knowing what I had to do. I walked to the bathroom and leaned against the wall in front of the toilet.

When I was finished, I texted Jess: *Are you awake*. She said that she was. I asked: *Do you want to go walk around the track and smoke a cigarette?* Yes, she said, yes. I told her I'd meet her at the bottom of the steps outside of our apartment. Jess and I saved cigarettes for special occasions—the nights we decided were special, or necessary. When the nights were necessary, the occasion didn't matter.

Jess came down the stairs in a big sweatshirt and sweats, all bundled up, same as I was. It was kind of cold outside. We walked past the farthest apartment complex and out onto the track that the soccer team practiced on. Past the bleachers, we stopped at the concessions building. Jess and I sat there, backs to the brick wall, and I lit the cigarette. I inhaled it into my mouth first, then breathed in fast like someone scared me so it went into my lungs; I held on a little and then I breathed out. The buzz hit my head immediately. I gave the cigarette to Jess, and she smoked it like I had taught her—she hadn't smoked them until she met me, the same way I hadn't learned things about apples, about how it burned more calories to digest one than it did to eat one—or so she said. I believed her, though, just like she believed me.

We smoked the cigarette until it was gone, and then we lit another one and got up, moved our bodies out onto the track, started walking. We smoked and passed and talked.

“I ate dinner tonight.” Jess didn’t look at me as she spoke; she looked forward, out ahead, handed me the cigarette when she was done inhaling and exhaling.

I took it and put it to my lips.

“I’m an eater now,” she said.

“That’s okay.”

“I did it because I was scared.”

I handed her the cigarette. My head felt fuzzy, my stomach a little nauseous.

She inhaled, passed it to me. “I don’t want to pass out again.”

Grabbed the cigarette. “You might.”

“I know.”

I put the cigarette to my lips, breathed into my mouth and then inhaled quickly like I was scared, like one of my past friends had taught me, like I had taught Jess. It felt good. I wouldn’t have minded if Jess ate more; it would make me feel better, like I was ahead of her, more controlled. I always felt like she was better than I was at starving. She didn’t throw up like I did; she just didn’t eat. But at the same time, I didn’t know if I’d be able to do this without her.

“Listen.” I looked at Jess even though she wasn’t looking at me. “We’re walking right now. You’re moving. Tomorrow we’ll go to practice and you’ll burn it all off. One dinner doesn’t hurt.”

I gave her the cigarette and we walked circles around the track, the dark sky and stars above. There was an agreement between us: this wasn’t good, but it felt good; this wasn’t healthy, but it felt like health; this wasn’t the world, but it was our world. We’d

keep living it until we couldn't anymore. It felt like goose bumps and cold, like magic, a land that was ours, just ours.

A SOFT KISS, LIGHT, A MEMORY

Jules stood on the welcome mat of apartment D11 and hoped that Ana was home, hoped she'd gotten the correct address. It didn't matter that it was late in the day, the Mississippi heat wrapped around her skin, clothes stuck to her body. Her suitcase wanted to slip through her sweaty fingers, so she set it at her feet. Jules didn't have much—she didn't have time to sort through all her shit. She grabbed a few items and left for the airport.

She thought about what Ana would think when—if—she opened the door. They hadn't seen each other in five years, and Jules hadn't left things well the last time they'd been together, but here she was, suitcase in her hand.

A steady sick nervousness pulsed through Jules' intestines and pooled in her stomach as she reached her tightly clenched fist forward to knock on the door. She'd stood out front for too long now. Her knuckles hit the solid wood and called to Ana. Jules exhaled and waited.

But nothing. She let a minute go by. She felt a bit of relief—if Ana didn't come to the door then she wouldn't have to face her, to think of something to say that would make their not talking for years okay. But the relief was short-lived. A mosquito bit her ankle, then her wrist, and she remembered that outside was not a place she could stay forever, let alone sleep.

The second knock was easier, but it produced nothing. The saliva the mosquitos injected into her skin began to seethe, and Jules picked at the small bump on her wrist. She knocked a third time, urgently, loudly, but didn't wait for a response. She remembered that Ana, while they were in undergrad together, used to hide her key

underneath a flowerpot outside of their apartment. Jules began to search—she lifted the welcome mat, she felt on top of the doorframe, and just as she bent down to lift one of the potted plants from the ground, the door opened.

Ana's newly dyed-bright hair seeped red water down her neck and shoulders and into the pool. It reminded Jules of blood, how the water might look if a shark bit into one of their thighs. Jules brushed a drop off Ana's forehead before it could slip into her eye.

They met not long into their junior year at university. They lived in the same dorm; and after meeting, decided to rent an apartment together for their senior year. The pool in the apartment complex was where they spent most of their time outside of class—letting the sun burn into their skin during the day and floating under the moon at night.

“Pretend you're a statue,” Jules said.

Ana stopped moving, glued her eyes forward, cemented her neck into a solid position.

Jules stretched her hands forward and grabbed onto Ana's hair. She twisted and squeezed the red-tinted water out of it, watched it run down her forearm, hesitate at her elbow, and then fall into the pool. She pulled all of Ana's hair up and piled it onto her head.

“There,” she said. “You're Marie Antoinette.”

Ana turned her head sharply, lifted her nose high, and pointed her finger at Jules. “Eat cake,” she said. “Will you cut my head off now?”

Jules swam forward and wrapped her legs around Ana's waist. “Yes. Maybe. Listen. You have three chances to guess the color I'm thinking of.”

“The color game?”

“Higher stakes. No dunking. If you don’t guess it then off with your head.”

“Where’s your guillotine?”

“I’ll asphyxiate you.” Jules placed her palms on the sides of Ana’s neck, laced her fingers together at the base of her skull. Her thumbs, left over right, rested on Ana’s larynx. “Guess.”

“Blue.”

“No,” Jules said. She applied soft pressure with her thumbs.

“Let me think.”

Jules liked watching Ana’s lips move. She liked the way she noticed her crotch pressing up against Ana’s stomach. Jules crossed her ankles behind Ana’s back tighter.

“Yellow,” Ana said.

Jules especially liked the way Ana’s lips moved when she said yellow. Jules thought of everything she could with the word yellow in it. She said to Ana, “Repeat after me: Yellow Submarine, Tie a Yellow Ribbon, Yellow Polka-Dot Bikini.”

Ana repeated the words.

Jules stared and decided she wanted to kiss Ana. In the same moment, she felt the urge to unwind her legs from Ana’s waist and put space between them. She said, “Last guess.”

“Red.”

Jules traded her hands for arms and hugged around Ana’s neck. “Yes,” she said, “like your hair.”

“I’ll rule for another year,” said Ana.

Jules unwrapped one arm from around Ana's neck. She traced the water drops on Ana's face and brushed her thumb over Ana's lips, and then she leaned forward and kissed her. Their wet lips together were hesitant, but neither one of them pulled away. Jules thought the kiss felt bright, she couldn't help but close her eyes.

Jules thought nonstop about what she would say to Ana when she first saw her, but her brain went silent when Ana opened the door. She felt herself swallow and pinch her lips together, and then she felt her eyes well up—they filled quickly, spilled, then refilled. She tried to speak but couldn't get a word out in between her hyperventilating breaths.

Ana said, "Come in. Sit down."

Jules let Ana grab her suitcase from the ground and walked inside. She saw a sofa and went directly to it, sat down, and continued to cry. The tears from her eyes ran in steady rivers down her cheeks, and she couldn't stop them, even after she controlled her breathing. Ana sat down beside her.

Jules rubbed her eyes with her hands until her eyebrows were smeared with tears and a thin sheen of wetness covered her face. "I had nowhere else to go," she said. "I left Seth. I can never go home again. I've been so unhappy—"

"Jesus, Jules. Your leg."

Jules had fallen down the steps of her front porch while rushing to carry her suitcase and purse outside. Her thigh caught her fall and the sharp edges of the wooden steps sliced three gashes into her leg. She'd been in such a hurry to leave for the airport that she'd run inside to change into longer shorts, ones that covered her wound, but she hadn't cleaned up or tried to stop any of the bleeding. Her shorts bunched up when she

sat down, the fabric tearing from the dried lacerations, and Ana saw cracked redness covering her leg and new blood beginning to bloom out of the freshly opened wounds.

Ana jumped up. “Let me get a shower for you.”

Jules didn’t have an opportunity to tell Ana what had happened to her leg. She was gone; she disappeared through a doorway. Jules missed Ana’s presence immediately, the comfort that came with it—the comfort that had allowed her to want to feel weak and vulnerable. She sat still, frozen, stared down at the ground. Soon she heard water rushing through pipes and Ana came back through the doorway. Ana told her she put a clean towel on the sink, and to call her if she needed anything. Jules stood up and numbly followed Ana through a bedroom and into the bathroom. Ana left and Jules undressed.

The hot water burned Jules’s skin and stung when it ran across her thigh. Her legs felt suddenly too dead to hold up her body. She sat down in the shower and folded her arms over her knees. She bent her head and rested it on her arms.

The silver lining was Ana, except she hadn’t turned out to be much of a silver lining. More gray and faded and Jules thought maybe she didn’t care for her, at least not how she used to. Jules knew that it was unrealistic to expect Ana to open her arms and fold her in, nurture her, love her, but she hoped, still, that Ana might. Now Jules felt more alone than ever—and insecure. She thought she never should have come here, surprised Ana like this, but she didn’t know anywhere else she could have gone. She wracked her brain, felt arms and hands digging through her head, trying to grab ahold of something solid—something she could do, some place she could go. But nothing. Emptiness coursed through her body like a rush of water breaking through a dam and told her she should

have stayed, should have clung to her marriage. Now that she'd left and written that stupid note to Seth, there could be no going back.

She cried, small pathetic sobs. Her forehead pressed into one of her arms and she bit her wrist—a huge mouthful of skin, teeth clamping down, harder, until she tasted her own blood. The door opened and she froze, without releasing her skin from her teeth.

“Tell me what happened,” Ana said from the other side of the shower curtain.

Jules and Ana were holding hands while they walked around downtown. They were connected, two bodies soldered together by fingers clasping.

They followed the music coming from a few blocks away, light at first and then stronger as they got closer. It pulsed through the humidity in the air, surrounding them and inserting itself into the crevices of their bodies, twisting through their ears and filling their heads with heat and melody.

Jules pointed forward, without speaking, to a small stage in the park where a band was playing. There were people gathered in front of the stage, sitting and standing in the grass, blankets and coolers spread out beside them. Jules walked faster, her arm stretched behind her, still clinging to Ana. Jules pulled her until she found a spot, a small square of grass where their bodies could slip, stand, fit. Hand in hand, they followed the movement of the people around them. They swayed back and forth in perfect time, together one person.

Jules felt like she was in a dream, like she just placed a tab of Lucy on her tongue and let it dissolve. She felt free and unafraid. The people surrounding Ana and her weren't even people anymore; they were trees, blowing in the wind, twisting and moving

to the beat. Everyone's eyes faced forward to the stage, and no one looked at Ana and Jules. Without saying a word, Jules sat on the grass and pulled Ana down beside her. They sat ankle to ankle, hip to hip, shoulder to shoulder, temple pressed to temple, with people towering over them.

They sat that way until the music stopped and the crowd began to leave, until the band put their instruments away and disappeared, until all that was around them was oxygen, scattered empty beer cans, and trash.

"It smells good out here," Ana said.

"I wonder who cleans up all this garbage."

Ana looked around, as if just noticing their aloneness. She stood up and walked a few feet away then leaned over and picked something up. She walked back to Jules and sat, facing her. In her hands was a flower crown, perfect, every petal in place. It was pink and yellow and had a few pastel-colored ribbons hanging off the back.

Lifting the crown, Ana leaned closer than necessary and placed it on Jules's head. She tucked it behind her ears, gently, and pulled a few wisps of hair out from under the crown so they framed Jules's face.

"The May Queen," Ana said. "I'd kill to drug you, watch you dance for hours."

"I'll dance for you," Jules said. She stood up and spun in slow circles, closing her eyes and relishing in the knowledge that Ana was watching her body move. She spun, spun herself dizzy, spun until she knew she wouldn't be able to see straight when she opened her eyes—and she couldn't. Ana's face looking up at her was fuzzy and doubled. Jules fell over, landing hard on her palms and elbows, sliding until she was on her stomach beside Ana.

“This is perfect.”

“I have grass stains,” said Jules.

Ana leaned over and put her nose on Jules’s neck, breathed in. “A real May Queen. You smell like grass and flowers.”

“I’m a garden,” Jules said.

“Garden of Eden.”

“I’m the tree with the forbidden fruit.”

“I’m Eve,” Ana said.

Jules inhaled and vowed to remember the moment—where the sun was in the sky, with the leftover smell of people lingering in the air, with herself and Ana nestled in the grass.

Jules was alone in the shower again. She’d told Ana the bare minimum. Jules wanted to say that she was ready now, that she’d thought of Ana for years and she still wanted her, but she couldn’t bring herself to confess. She thought it would be selfish to show up out of nowhere and expect Ana to care for her still, in the same way. Jules had been aching to tell Ana all, to be completely open, but when Ana gave her the chance, she’d only told Ana a half-truth, that she felt as if she was wasting away in her marriage, that she’d been suppressing her real self for years, and she was suffocating. She had to get out, so she left. It was anti-climactic. It took her a handful of sentences to tell Ana, and then it was over. Ana told Jules that she was sorry, that she could stay a few nights, get back on her feet, and then she left the bathroom so Jules could finish.

Jules scrubbed the blood off her leg but didn't wash her hair; she didn't have the energy or care to. She turned off the shower and wrapped herself in the towel Ana had left her. It was soft and warm—she felt secure for the first time since leaving Seth and driving to the airport. She wanted to stay in the bathroom forever, in the towel.

Her suitcase was still in the living room. She wrapped herself up tightly and walked out of the bathroom to get clothes. Ana was standing by the coffee table, pouring hot water from a kettle and into a cup with a teabag.

“You still like mint?” she said.

Jules nodded. “I just came to get my suitcase.”

Instead of walking to her suitcase, Jules walked up to Ana. She couldn't help herself. She reached out a hand and brushed a piece of hair off Ana's face; she cupped her cheek. “I've missed you,” she said.

“I've missed you too,” Ana said.

Jules felt exhilarated. She wanted Ana as much now as she had back in their college days. She forgot about the safety of her towel; she let it drop around her feet. She took two steps forward and pressed forehead, nose, and lips to Ana's. A soft kiss, light, a memory.

Their lips came apart, but their foreheads still met. Jules grabbed Ana's hand and pulled her toward the bedroom.

“Please,” Jules said, and she was surprised when Ana followed.

In the doorway. “Stop,” Ana said. “I can't.”

Jules thought it looked hard for her to say it, like the words coming out of her lips were sharp at the edges. “You can.”

“We’ve already tried this,” Ana said.

“I loved you. You loved me.”

“And then you left me.” As Ana spoke, she moved from the doorway to the bed.

She grabbed a sweatshirt and belt off the mattress and tossed them to the floor.

“I was stupid,” Jules said.

“You might still be.” Ana pulled the covers back on one side of the bed.

Jules thought she hadn’t been stupid for years. She realized that Ana was who she wanted; she left her husband for a reason.

Ana closed her eyes and was silent. She inhaled, slowly, exhaled. Then she crawled into the bed, in the place she had prepared for herself, and laid on her back.

Jules pleaded, said, “I love you.” She crawled from the foot of the bed to the top, rested her head beside Ana’s chest.

“Stop.” Ana sat up and pulled her shirt off, undid her bra. She sat silent for a moment, shoulders hunched over hanging breasts, victims of gravity. She turned to face Jules, twisting her back a little. “If we do this, you have to promise me something.”

Jules’s breath sped up; her heart raced. She looked from Ana’s bare, hardened nipples up to Ana’s face. “Anything,” she said.

Laying her body back down to a resting position, head pointed up to the ceiling, eyes closed, she said, “You’ll leave in the morning. I’ll write you a check and call you an Uber. But you have to go. I can’t do all of this again.”

Jules would leave for home next morning—all her finals had ended, and she and Ana’s lease would be up in a few days. Jules was sad to leave Ana, but there was another

feeling that had been escorting her through the day. She felt unnerved, an odd eagerness to go, to pack up and leave as soon as possible. The day planned with Ana felt like a biding of time, like she imagined someone on death row might feel hours before their execution.

They slept in together, showered, laid out in the sun, and picked up dinner. Indian. They sat in bed and watched television while they ate. When they finished eating, Ana undressed and laid on her stomach. Jules sat on top of her and began to massage her back and shoulders. With every knead into Ana's back muscles, Jules felt small frustration build in her; she felt this even as she attempted to remember every inch of Ana's back, the way her skin looked when she pressed it inward. Ana said they should switch; it was Jules's turn. Jules took off her clothes and relaxed onto her stomach, her head turned sideways, and her cheek pushed into the mattress. Confliction wormed through her as she longed for Ana's hands to touch her everywhere, even though she felt suffocated. Ana's weight felt heavier than usual, more necessary, but more demanding. Jules wanted to stay with her forever, but she also felt she had no more to give her. By tomorrow night Jules would be states away, miles away, living a different life, one that was separate from Ana.

“Could you get off?” said Jules.

Ana's hands stopped moving but stayed rested on Jules's back. “Am I hurting you?”

“No, I just—” Jules writhed her body out from under Ana's and sat up on the bed, “—I need to get up.”

They sat facing each other, neither speaking. Something in the moment felt final to Jules. She said, “I need to finish packing.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I have more to pack.”

“I helped you pack everything,” Ana said. She waited, eyes on Jules.

Jules held eye contact with Ana. Her heartbeat became louder, more urgent. She could feel it pulsing in her head, her ears. She didn’t have anything to say to Ana that wouldn’t be recognized as a lie, so she remained quiet.

Ana’s eyes began to glaze over with tears. “Please come here. It’s our last night.”

“I can’t, Ana. This is better. I don’t know how to say goodbye to you.”

“Tomorrow is how. I drop you off at the airport and I kiss you and hug you, and you go, and we call each other every day.”

“I’m going to call a car in the morning.”

Ana was crying now. “No, no, no. Come here.”

“Ana, this is wrong. This can’t happen.”

“What?”

“My parents,” Jules said. “They won’t like this.”

“What? You never even mentioned this before.”

Jules throat began to tighten. “I can never be out with you. I can never marry you.”

“You can!”

“Even if we married, my parents would never see you as my wife. They don’t believe this way,” Jules said. She felt trapped between Ana and her parents—choosing a side felt necessary and she couldn’t cut herself from her family. Her words sounded

pleading; she felt like an animal with their leg caught in a trap—except she wanted the sharp teeth of the trap clamped on her ankle just as much as she wanted freedom.

“They would get used to it. They’d have to,” Ana said.

“I’m not a dike,” Jules whispered.

Hurt unfurled across Ana’s face, and it was everything Jules could do to not cry with her, to not crawl into her arms, but she didn’t. She told herself she would wait until she got to her room, until she was by herself. Jules pressed her lips together. She shook her head back and forth and then turned around and left the room.

Jules started small. Even though she had been here, done this before, it still felt like she was exploring something new. From their college days to now, Ana’s body had changed. It was older, a woman’s body. Her breasts had grown some, and there was a small swell in her stomach where it used to be flat. Jules knew that she had changed too, that her body didn’t look as good as it used to; and as eager as she was to be with Ana, a small nervousness accompanied her want.

“We’ve grown up,” Ana said.

Jules looked down at herself and pinched a bit of loose skin on her side. “Is it terrible?”

Ana shook her head. “Come here.”

She tipped her head up and kissed Ana, tongue wet in her mouth. Ana made a hmm noise. Jules pressed forward on Ana, so they fell on the bed. They faced each other, both lying on their sides, their feet tangled together. Jules used a finger to softly touch Ana’s nipple.

“Did you forget about me?” Jules said in a whisper.

“I made life without you.”

“Was it good?”

“It was.”

Jules widened the reach of her hand, stretching her fingers as far as she could, so she held one of Ana’s breasts in her hand. “I made the wrong life,” she said.

“Was it so bad with Seth?”

Jules removed her hand from Ana’s body and laid on her back, looking at the popcorn ceiling, trying to connect the small white bumps to create an image. “No. It’s terrible of me, but I think I was so easily sold on marrying him because I knew that I’d messed things up with you. I couldn’t imagine ever being as happy with someone else, so I just caved, gave up.”

“You didn’t love him?”

“He was my best friend. I loved him like that.”

Ana crawled on top of Jules, straddled her with her legs, kissed her lips and neck.

“Forget him. Just feel me.”

It was easy for Jules. She couldn’t think of anything other than Ana on top of her. Ana ran her lips over Jules’s ear and licked, kissed. Goosebumps formed over Jules’s whole body, all her soft body hair stretching outward to grab Ana and pull her in.

Ana moved a hand down, touched Jules, put a finger inside of her. Jules closed her eyes, feeling remembrance course through her body. She pressed her hips down hard into the bed and moved her feet until they were twisted around Ana’s.

“I don’t deserve this,” Jules said.

“Don’t say that,” Ana said, and she unlocked their feet and inched her way down Jules’s body, stopping only to kiss certain parts of skin. She didn’t stop until her face was nestled between Jules’s legs. Ana moved her tongue over her, relishing the feeling of Jules’s legs beginning to shake. Ana kissed and sucked on Jules until she came, and then she crawled up and rested her head on Jules’s shoulder.

Jules turned her head and kissed Ana. She sucked on her bottom lip, pulling it outward and then letting it pop back to Ana’s teeth. “I’m sorry,” Jules said. “For what I said all those years ago. I didn’t mean it.”

“I know,” Ana whispered.

“We were never wrong.” A tear slipped out of Jules’s eye before she could try to blink it away.

Ana said: shh. Lying side by side, Jules moved her hand down to Ana’s crotch and touched her until she came. Jules wrapped her arms around her and held her.

After a while, Ana’s body began to relax and her breathing became heavy. Without jostling Ana’s body too much, Jules slipped out of bed and walked to the living room. She sat on the couch and scrolled through her phone. She looked at flights, she thought of places she could stay, people who would take her; she thought about jobs and realized that she would need to find one. Briefly, she thought she could stay here, go back to the bed and fall asleep—if Ana made her leave in the morning, then she would; if she didn’t, Jules would stay. She thought they could make it. They could work out if they tried. She opened her suitcase and found an outfit. As she dressed, she tried not to cry. She tried not to think about the warm bed in the other room and the warm woman that she wanted to hold.

MARGARET'S HOPE

There are things that I will never lose, and my knowledge of tea is one of them. So, as my cousins argue over how to store the tea, I can't stay quiet.

“Kennedy.” When I say her name, she stops arguing with her sister, and they both look at me. I shrug my shoulders a bit and give a slight smile. “Abby is right. I know you think the glass looks pretty and modern—it does, but if the tea is out in the sun then the leaves will be ruined. If you want the tea on display, then you should probably go with the tin.”

Abby smirks at Kennedy, showing off her right-ness, and Kennedy rolls her eyes. “Fine, we'll do the tin. Only because Liv knows what she's talking about.” She gives a sideways glance to Abby. “I know you're just making shit up.”

Even though I barely know my cousins these days, this is how I remember them. As children, they never stopped going back and forth. They were constantly arguing about something, but that didn't put a wedge in their inseparability. I always wanted to be wild with them, but my little sister hung on my wrist like a ball and chain—these days I was only a little bit better at detaching her from me, and that was because I felt like a country away. Thinking of her made me want to run home to Cody, Wyoming. I had moved to Orlando to help my cousins out with the tea shop that they decided to open. I left on a whim, because I knew a lot about tea, and because being around my sister was a bad as it was good.

Kennedy was talking and rolling her eyes again. “Since you're so smart at the arranging, you do that. Liv and I can go grab the rest of the boxes. Liv?”

I nodded yes, and we walked outside to Kennedy and Abby's bright red Kia Soul. I stood behind Kennedy as she lifted the back hatch of the car to get the boxes. Her arms followed the hatch as it lifted, and the movement caused her shirt to rise up past the waist of her pants. They were tight on her, and it caused her skin to fold over the pant line just slightly, not a lot. Kennedy had always been an in-shape girl, but not in an extreme way. I studied her, followed her movements as she let go of the hatch, then leaned over to grab a box. Inside of myself, I wondered if I thought she was attractive. I asked myself—if I had to look like Kennedy for the rest of my life, would I be happy?

She pulled the box out of the car and turned around. "This is kinda heavy. I'll take it and you grab the next one."

"Okay." I smiled and stepped out of her way.

She walked by me, her arms flexed under the weight of the box, small biceps showing. As she walked away, I wished that she was wearing shorts instead of jeans so that I could know whether or not her legs were covered in muscle or loose skin. If it was muscle, I would have considered her thick thighs sexy.

She disappeared inside. I turned, grabbed a box, and followed.

The night air was dark, and it threatened to push inside the barrier of the porch that surrounded my cousin's tea shop, *Fire King*. They chose to name the shop after their favorite antique coffee mug. They wanted an edgy atmosphere. A tea shop, but without teacups. They only had fire king mugs, an array of them. They began collecting them when they were in college, and now they were putting them to use. Kennedy and Abby

were still inside, finishing with decorating and setting up the kitchen. We were opening the tea shop officially next week.

I decided to take a break from the work, and I escaped with a cup of tea. Margaret's Hope, Darjeeling. It's considered the champagne of tea. I wrapped my fingers tightly around the old, faded fire king mug, and I sipped lightly from the burning liquid. It was hot, and a little sweet from the honey that I added. Growing up, my dad taught my sister and I that tea was best with honey, never sugar. We learned everything about tea from him.

Darjeeling was my sister's favorite. I didn't understand her obsession with it—maybe she just wanted to please our father. She drank it constantly. It became the only thing she ate or drank. She spiraled. The epitome of a mess—she rarely escaped the safety of her fluffy yellow duvet. When she did come out, it looked painful. She walked on the hardwood floor like it was covered in nails, and her eyes darted every which way, preparing herself for something. I never knew what. I wasn't sure who lived inside her anymore; she became dangerous, a drowning little girl who wanted to grab hold of me in order to pull herself up and out of the water. She would kill me just so that she could breathe. I loved her so I stuck out my hand. Eventually, it was better for me to leave.

I became aware of a presence beside me, a warm arm holding another fire king mug filled with steaming tea. It smelled like On the Waterfront, a strong peppermint tea with rosehips and rooibos.

“We're basically finished,” Abby told me, looking out into the wild night with me.

It was still busy outside, even though it was late. Most of the businesses around us were open, because they pulled in the nighttime crowd. The Orlando Eye threw all its bright colors around the air, the atmosphere alive.

“I think I’ll stay out here a bit more.”

“I’ll stand with you. It’s nice out.” Abby shifted on her feet, settling in.

We were quiet for a while, our eyes absorbing the scenery. I watched regular people, walking and laughing and talking, doing regular people things. I wondered what they were going home to, if they were content here, or if they had sisters like mine.

Abby let out a loud breath from her mouth. “How’s Kaylee?”

Kaylee: my sister, the girl who I had been trying to forget, the name that I had been trying to misplace.

“She’s still in inpatient treatment. They take their phones away, so I haven’t heard from her.” It was a lie. Kaylee got to have her phone for an hour a day; I knew this, because she had been texting me since they locked her up.

My peripheral vision caught Abby’s small shake of the head. “I’m sorry. It’s terrible, what she’s going through, making everyone go through.”

“Yeah.” I agree quietly with her, and I know that she mistakes my soft voice for sadness instead of confusion, pain instead of longing and uncertainty.

“You know you can stay here as long as you need. The loft is always open, and we love you here with us. This business is perfect for you.”

Abby looks at me now, eyes wide open and waiting for my response. She has the nicest eyes. Light green, and popping. Her face is thin and her cheek bones angle down to her mouth perfectly. Her forehead is a bit long, but it suits her. She’s got nice heart lips,

straight teeth. I think she's prettier than Kennedy; and if I had to choose, I'd rather look like Abby. I hate myself for thinking this; this is the Kaylee in me that I can't leave behind.

"I know. Thanks, Abbs. I love you." I say this to her because I know that it is what she expects. It's what I should say—it's polite, an appropriate response. But in me, my brain is thrumming and shaking, not knowing exactly what to think, but just wanting someone other than myself to know how I feel.

Wanting Kaylee. I wanted the forbidden nights where I crept into her room and giggled over what hurt. One night, I pushed her door open and found her, same as always, on her phone, in her bed. Today was a bad a day for her, I knew. I came to give her my support, and I came to feel her pain.

She tried to smirk, to act tough and invincible, but it was impossible. "My doctor told me I'm anorexic."

I walked to the side of the bed and got in with her, waited for her to say more.

She did. "Now I have to deal with that on top of being fat."

I blew out a laugh. "Kaylee, you're fucked up —"

"Don't I know it."

"Mom and dad made you go to the doctor, though, really?"

She shrugged. "They can't make me do anything. I'm 18."

"But you went."

"I couldn't tell them no. Not after everything else I've refused." A small voice, defeated.

"It's good that you went," I told her.

She turned her head quickly, glared at me. “You should have gone too.”

I smiled big, laughed with no sound, but showed all my teeth. “What the fuck?”

“Whatever.”

Our eyes met in the darkness, and we laughed like life was good.

I walked down the stairs of the loft the next morning, comfortably entering the kitchen of *Fire King* in only my t-shirt and underwear. The sleep was still in my eyes, and my hair was pressed to my head, matted. Kennedy and Abby were already there, wiping down spotless counters and hanging up new art on the walls.

Kennedy raised her eyebrows at me. “Nice bum girl.”

I smiled and laughed. “Thanks. Did you guys bring your French Press here? This is a coffee morning for sure.”

“Yes, under the cabinet by the fridge.” Abby had her back to me and was putting a nail in the wall. She hung up a picture frame—it was a painting of a woman who had a bird cage for a stomach.

“That’s kind of unsettling,” I told her. “I like it.”

“Right? It’s my favorite.”

I put the kettle on the stove to heat up water, and I spooned pre-ground coffee grinds into the French Press.

My phone rang: Kaylee.

Quickly, I hit the side button twice to decline the call. I hadn’t spoken to her since before she had been put into treatment. I hadn’t told her that I was leaving, that I

wouldn't be visiting her. I trusted my parents to tell her the information, but for all I knew, she had no idea where I was.

I flipped my phone over, so that I couldn't see the screen. I tapped my fingers on the counter, waiting for the kettle to boil. Tapped my foot on the ground, kept tapping my fingers.

My phone made a sound, a text message alert.

I tapped my fingers on the counter by it, didn't flip it over to look. I tapped my fingers again, and then I gave in and flipped it over.

It was from Kaylee: I need you to answer the phone. I have to talk to you. Live. Please. Just give me five minutes. It's killing me, not hearing from you. Please, Liv, please.

"Be right back," I told my cousins, and I walked outside.

I stared at my phone for what felt like whole minutes, contemplating, telling myself yes and then telling myself no. Yes, no, yes. I swiped left on the text message, and I hit the call button. It only rang once.

"Bitch." Kaylee's voice was raspy, coarse. "Where are you? How could you fucking do this to me, leave me here?"

Her voice made goosebumps grow on my arms; it sent me back to long nights and cold days. It made tears well up in my eyes, and I bit my cheek to keep myself from crying.

I was silent, so she spoke again, begging this time. "Liv, are you there?"

"I'm here," I said.

"Where is here, even?"

“Orlando. Florida.”

She breathes in quickly. “I hate you, how could you leave me here like this? Liv, you’re so far away. You don’t answer my calls.”

My chest tightens, and I start to cry, quiet tears that I can’t hold inside of my eyes for any longer. It’s silent for minutes, because I don’t speak, but I can’t bring myself to hang up. Kaylee is waiting for me, I know.

Finally: “I love you. You need this help. Maybe even this distance.”

She is aggressive, her voice growing into arms that try to reach themselves through the phone and pull me back to her. “I don’t need fucking help. I don’t need fucking distance. I need you.”

I hear her cry, even though she tries to cover it. Violently, she punches the ‘end’ button and my heart. Just like that, she’s gone, miles away. I breathe in as deeply as I can, to push away the sadness and the feelings that won’t decide whose side their on.

My phone begins to ring again, and Kaylee’s name pops up on the screen. I decline the call, leave my phone out on the porch, and walk back into the kitchen.

My cousins look at me curiously as I enter.

“You good?” Kennedy asks.

I nod my head. “Yeah, I’m good.”

“Well, I made the coffee!” Abby tries to lighten the mood, to push away the unknown sadness that is clinging to me.

“Perfect.” I smile.

But I want to tell them that it’s Kaylee. I want to tell them that she’s trying to kill me and that sometimes I want her to. I want to tell them that I’m much stronger than she

is, but I wish I wasn't. I wish it was as easy for me as it was for her to slip under the waves and the water and forget how to breathe and live. I wish I could leave and resign so easily.

But I don't. I don't, because I know that their minds won't understand, and my words won't be strong enough to make them. I don't tell them these feelings, also, because there's something attractive about the stupid, happy world they live in. I want to sip tea and feel the sun on my face and say things like: yes, I'm good.

EVERY

Avery traced my jawline with his thumb, then moved his hand back to the place just under my earlobe, a little behind the beginning of my jawbone, and pressed his pointer and middle finger into my skin. Not too hard. Not soft.

“It stands out,” he said.

“What?”

“Your jaw. It’s sharp.”

I let the corners of my mouth turn up a bit and then returned my eyes to the television in front of me. I was sitting up in bed, the blanket wrapped around my waist. My hands were to my sides, pressing into the mattress. I leaned on them.

He traced my jaw one more time.

I wondered if Avery really wanted to be around me, or if he was just biding his time until we fucked. Watch a movie with me first, spend time—both things collateral for sex. Then I’d leave, and he could be alone. I didn’t want to think these things, but I forced myself to. It’s what people said about him, that he liked to fuck and then move on. It was hard for me to not want someone like that, someone who felt unearnable.

Last week, when I first went to Avery’s apartment, I told him my lease was up in two months and then I had to go. I could only give him that time. It was a half-truth, though, one I said for him, a half-truth that I hoped made me more desirable, less complicated. In a couple months I’d be gone. Get what you can while it’s here.

When our movie was over, Avery propped himself beside me, putting the weight of his head into his palm. I laid on my back, staring at the ceiling, trying to think about

something other than him. My jaw. I forced myself to focus on the way my head was tipped, make my jawline noticeable.

Avery moved his free hand up onto my stomach, rested it there. Briefly, I pictured something intimate, a husband gently placing his hand onto his wife's pregnant stomach, a life growing, a man trying to ignore the existence of skin and feel deep down into a new being. I thought about how what we were doing here was the exact opposite of that. It was skin going into skin, and then coming out. People fucked all the time and then just forgot about it. I wanted to be one of those people, but I knew I couldn't be. Deep down, I wanted everyone I slept with to stay attracted to me forever. I needed to constantly be wanted.

I grabbed Avery's hand with my own, pushed it a bit farther down. He went in my sweats, moved my underwear to the side and put two fingers in me.

He moved his lips closer to my face, hovered his cheek above mine. "Do you want me?"

I said yes because it was what I was supposed to say. I wanted to. I took my clothes off and Avery pushed himself on me and into me.

It was nice to be covered, the bed on one side of me, pressed to every angle of my body, and Avery on top of me. I was in a cocoon, separate from the world for as long as it lasted.

When we were done, Avery turned and laid on his stomach, facing the tv. I sat against the headboard, held his feet in my hands. They were big, calloused in some parts, soft in others. I rolled my fingers over the big toe of his left foot, stayed there for a while. It was easier to talk with my hands when I was around him. They were sure and knowing

where my words were fleeting if not completely absent. I never knew what to say. Sometimes he wouldn't respond after I spoke. I wondered if he didn't care or if he was just thinking. It made me feel like he was in another world, one that I had to slowly press myself into. I thought he might like me more if I was able to stick around through the silence. When, eventually he did speak, I hung on every word, even if it wasn't about anything I had previously said. I wanted to know what he thought, I wanted to know how to make my mind be like his.

I kept rubbing his feet. He stared at the television.

When the movie ended, I told him I was tired, that I was going to go. Avery, barefooted, walked me to my car, the small bit of snow that had fallen and rested on the concrete while we were inside melted quickly under his feet. He kissed me, took his time. I imagined frostbite forming on his toes and wondered why he didn't just tell me goodbye at the door, inside. He gave me hope with his small gestures.

"Night," I told him.

"I'll see you tomorrow."

Driving away, I acknowledged the truth in his statement. Avery would see me tomorrow if he wanted to. He knew I was waiting.

The clocks on the walls, the ones I could never seem to hear during the day, came alive at night. They were nocturnal creatures, like me. The one I had hanging on the wall in my living room was the loudest—hard square frame encompassing the roman numerals, all circling themselves around the long, pointing arrows. I could hear it from my bedroom, talking to me in clock-language, maybe wanting me to come out and sit on the couch

instead of on my bed. *Tick, tock, come, here.* In my head, I told it *not, now,* and I imagined that it heard me, even if it didn't stop asking. The square clock lent its voice to me from the other room, just letting me know it was there.

The circular decorative clock hanging on my bedroom wall, beside my closet, was out of sync with the square living room clock, each of them traded beats with each other in even time. They sounded like a single, quick-paced metronome when heard together. I laid on my bed, listening to them chat back and forth, closing my eyes and focusing only on my ears. The clocks spoke and I listened hard to see if I could decipher which tick was which clock's voice.

Sighing, I sat up and slipped off the side of my bed, walked over the cabinet below my bathroom counter and opened it. I grabbed the tools I needed: new pack of #2 pencils, non-toxic ink, tape, thread. I carried them back to my room, set them on my bed, went into the kitchen to grab a small cup. I crawled back onto my bed with my tools. This was a habit I'd picked up from my younger sister. Last time I visited home for Christmas, she'd told me that one of her friends showed her how to do stick-and-poke tattoos. I let her do one on me while I was home, and then we each did one on ourselves. It was how my sister and I bonded; we traded goods and services. I bought the vodka, and she showed me how to permanently mark my skin. After the holiday break, when I returned to my apartment a few states away, I found myself thinking about the tattoos we did, wanting more. It wasn't just about the tattoo. It was a soothing process, to prick myself over and over again, to place a tiny dot of ink under my skin, to repeat until a line formed. It took nearly an hour to complete a fingernail-sized tattoo.

The first round of pricks were the ones I liked the most—before my skin swelled and numbed itself. I felt them sharply, hesitated before I added pressure, the needle bending my skin inward as it resisted before the pointy end broke through through. Over and over. Small dots of blood bloomed, and I wiped them away before dipping the needle into the ink and going again. It was addicting. Even when I knew the tattoo was finished, I still dipped the needle a few more times and poked, poked, poked.

As I went over my heart, I thought about a conversation I had a few nights ago with Avery. We were sitting together after we had sex.

“Where’s your mind?” Avery said.

My chest swelled. I knew it was pathetic that one question from him made me feel this way, so fulfilled. “Gone,” I said.

“You act like you’re a mystery.”

“No, I don’t,” I said.

“You’re just a girl,” he said, his voice laced with a serious tone.

“I’m just a girl.”

“I’m an idiot,” he said.

“I’m an idiot,” I repeated.

“You act so tough,” he said, he almost spit it.

I winked at him, antagonizing him. Trying to push buttons.

This was how it was with us. I tried to act like nothing bothered me, and he tried to prove that things did. Our conversation consisted of that, nothing substantial. Of course, I pretended I was content with that, but I wasn’t. I wanted dig under his skin,

figure out what was going on in his head. But I would take what he would give, no matter how small, and I'd pretend it was enough.

I wiped the ink and blood off my skin for the last time, carried my supplies back to the bathroom and put them away. Standing in front of my mirror, I grabbed unscented lotion, rubbed it over the new heart on my wrist, covered it with a bandage. I stood there for a moment, still, my eyes resting on my wrist.

Moving, I pressed my hands on the counter and let my weight lean in. Inhaling and then exhaling, I looked up at myself in the mirror, moved my eyes around my body. I had lost weight since I had begun seeing Avery. I told myself it was subconscious, me trying to be attractive, but I knew it was more than that. I could see it in my thighs the most, at the tops, just where they almost met in the middle to touch, but not quite. I brought my eyes back up, rested them on my face, tried to look into myself.

Lips moving: "Claire, what are you doing?"

Response: "Claire, what are you doing?"

I closed the front door behind me and kicked off my shoes. I hadn't even made it to my bedroom before I began undressing. I didn't like wearing jeans and nice shirts; they felt too constricting, made me too aware of the shape of my body, the way my stomach looked after I'd eaten a meal or had too many drinks. But Lauren had asked me to go, and she always looked nice. So, I put my jeans on, slipped into a tight cropped t-shirt, and went. We had a few glasses of wine, talked. When she asked me about Avery, I told her it was fine. She hinted at the fact that he might be using me, and I told her I was using him too.

I carried my heels into my room and threw them in the closet, feeling hot and tipsy. Good. I wanted to feel more this way. Grabbing the ice trays out of the freezer, I twisted with my hands so the cubes would break loose. They make a *clink, clink* as I dropped them into my glass. I opened the freezer again, to put the ice tray back and to grab out the Absolut. When I twisted the cap off, the familiar smell of vodka, strong, sharp, crept up my nose. I didn't like the way it smelled, but I didn't hate it. I poured some in my glass and then carried it and the bottle back to my room. Whatever reality tv show was on was fine with me. I nestled into my bed, pulled a blanket over me, and sipped my vodka. I relished the slow feeling of heat crawling up my cheeks, the burning sliding down my throat and landing in my stomach.

After my second glass, my eyes began to blur. It was difficult to focus on objects in my room. The alcohol motivated me to move, and I got up from bed. I pulled sweats and a sweatshirt out of my closet and put them on, then tennis shoes. Tucking my phone in the pocket of my sweats, I walked outside and locked the door behind me.

It was dark out, but I wasn't afraid. I just wanted to move, to have something to do that was just for me—something that wasn't me waiting on Aver to decide to want me—even if it was only a walk. I moved my legs at an even pace, not too slow, not fast, and turned my head to look at the shadows that I passed. I got out of my neighborhood and onto the sidewalk that followed a main road, walking and walking, and not thinking—letting my mind turn off and my legs carry me.

A car passed. I kept walking, until I came to part of the sidewalk where it dipped down and ran along the base of an overpass. It was darker down there, and for the first time since I'd left my house, a wave of fear passed over my body. I felt it prick my

shoulder blades, make the back of my neck hot. I considered turning back, calling it good, going home and to bed, but I corrected myself. Just as quickly as the fear washed over me, it left, and was replaced by another feeling—one of nervous excitement, want. I imagined walking in the darkness that the overpass created, and someone being down there. My heart raced. I thought of being attacked. I didn't know if I would fight it; part of me yearned for it—I wanted to feel all sorts of pain; I felt I needed to be punished.

I turned around and began walking home. Just as I was getting off the main road and back into my neighborhood, my phone rang.

“Hello?” Avery's voice was slow; music came through from the background.

“Claire,” he said.

“What's up.”

“Can you give me a ride? I'm at the Montgomery.”

“I can't.” But I wanted to—so badly I wanted to end my night with him.

“Claire.”

“I'm not home. And I'm drunk anyway. I'm sorry.”

It was quiet on the other end, only the light music coming through my phone speaker. He said, “Please, baby,” and I knew he knew I would melt.

“Just wait,” I said. “I'll be there soon.”

When I got home, I check the time and grabbed my knees from my nightstand. I drank a glass of water before I walked out to my car and drove to the bar. He made me wait thirty minutes before he came stumbling out of the doors and to my car. He got in the passenger seat.

“You’re bad,” he said, acting silly, and I couldn’t help but smile. I rarely got to see this silly side of him.

“You mad at me?” he said.

“No.”

“You shouldn’t drive drunk.”

Sighed. “Oh well.”

I was waiting, hoping that he’d ask me to stay at his house for a while, maybe spend the night. That was the reason I’d agreed to pick him up, after all. The thought that I might be alone with him, sleep in his bed, wake up to him.

Arriving at his house, Avery said, “I would ask you to stay but I’m just going to go to bed.”

“That’s okay,” I said. Inside, I asked myself if that was okay. Didn’t I deserve something in return for picking him up? But I knew I wouldn’t say anything. I told him goodnight and drove away before he even got to his front door. I wanted it to seem like I didn’t give a shit, that I was happy to back to my apartment and be alone.

It was a few days before Avery called me next, which I wondered but never asked about. He finally texted and asked if I wanted to get drinks with him and some of his friends that night, and I said that would work. I thought about saying no, slowly breaking the tie, but I didn’t.

After dinner, I met Avery at the bar. I got along with his friends and thought they were fun, and I knew they liked me too. They made fun of me for ordering a double of vodka and sipping on it; Avery rolled his eyes. The more alcohol that seeped into my

system, the harder I tried to explain to them that it was the most effective way drink, which they all laughed off, saying the taste wasn't worth it. I thought the taste was more than worth it.

After we left the bar, I met Avery at his house and then went for a ride with him. He drove out past his apartment, where there weren't many houses around. He played music, and I pressed my face against the window, my hot cheek causing the cold window to fog.

“Before my brother moved, we drove this road all the time at night.”

I peeled my cheek from the window. “Yeah?”

“This road. Back and forth.”

I didn't say anything, my words clogged and bunched in my throat.

“He taught me to drive doing this.”

I wondered if that made me special, that he was taking me where his brother took him, where they shared memories. Maybe I was more than all the other girls, maybe he felt a little different about me. All I wanted was a little.

A song came on, and Avery sang with it, looking me and singing “gorgeous” with the lyrics. He grabbed my hand and held it. I let my cheek rest against the cold window again but kept holding his hand.

We went back to his place and went inside. In his room, we undressed in our underwear and curled up in his bed. About halfway into the movie Avery began to kiss my neck. I turned my head away from him, giving him better access to my neck and at the same time hiding my face. I breathed in and out, heavily, and decided that after this I would be done.

“Do you want to fuck?” I said it before he could.

His actions speaking for him, Avery kissed my neck a few more times and then moved up to my face. I kissed him on the mouth and then waited for what he would do. He hovered over me for a few seconds, breathing, and then asked me if we could have anal sex. I said yes immediately, without thinking, deciding that I didn't need to think. I wanted to do whatever he wanted. So I rolled over onto my stomach, one arm under a pillow and one arm under my forehead. He grabbed lube out of his nightstand drawer and rubbed it over me. Then he was on me, hovering over me, but he didn't cover me the same way he did when we normally had sex. He had his arms firmly planted on each side of me, holding himself up. Gently, he pushed himself inside of me. I bit my lip, pushed my face in the pillow, tried to relax relax relax. He asked me if I was okay, if it hurt he said he would stop, but I told him I was fine, that it felt good; and even though it was painful, I didn't want to say so, I wants to take it—to accept the hurt and feel all of it and survive. I pressed my face closer to the pillow, as hard as I could, while trying to calm my body. I tried to turn my brain off, to receive without feeling. I talked to myself, inside of me, asked myself what is feeling anyway? *Hurt is feeling; no it's not. Turn it off.* Relax, breathe in and out, told myself the pain was making me, believed it. Separate mind from body, *feel* without reacting.

He pulled himself out of me and came on my back. I laid there while he grabbed a towel and wiped my back down. I told him I was going to go to the bathroom, and he asked me if I was okay, if it hurt.

I told him I just had to pee.

I sat down on the toilet, put my head in my hands, started to cry and then told myself to stop. Grabbing a bit of toilet paper, I gently wiped my asshole. The tissue came away with blood. I took a few deep breaths and then went back to Avery's room and got dressed.

He looked at me. "What are you doing?"

"I've got to go. I have a lot to do tomorrow."

"Are you okay?" He got up off the bed and walked over to me.

I looked up at him. "I promise, I'm fine."

"No, you're not. At least let me drive you."

Laughed. "My car's here, why would you do that. I'm really okay. I'll text you tomorrow." And left.

Unlocked my car, opened the door, sat down. I drove down the street, far enough that Avery wouldn't see my car anymore, and then I pulled over. I rested my head on the steering wheel. My eyes welled up, filled, but they wouldn't spill over. I wanted to cry, to hate myself, but I couldn't. There was still a part of me that thought I needed to hurt, and if I wasn't strong enough to do it to myself, then I'd have others do it to me. This is what I was made for. After a few more minutes, I drove home.

It was late, but I couldn't sleep. The clocks in my apartment called to me, *tick, tock, come, here*, but I ignored them, went to my bathroom, and pulled out my tools. I pressed the sewing needle into the eraser of the pencil, right where the metal met the soft part, then I wrapped the thread around the needle a few times, and I taped it off. I poured some ink into the cup, but I never touched it. I grabbed the pencil with the needle poking out of the eraser, and I gently pressed it to the outside of my forearm. I added pressure,

watched my skin bend inward, and then felt the needle pop into my skin. I breathed deeply. I pulled the needle out, then placed it back against my forearm, applying pressure, and then sliding the needle up and down. It peeled away skin, more skin, but I kept drawing, telling myself that I couldn't feel it even though I could.

LURCH

We were slurping margaritas, loosening up. J said, “I want to give you space. That’s why I left for a bit today. If you wanted to, you could.”

I said, “I would never. Even if you were gone. Just you knowing—or even thinking I might—would humiliate me.”

Saying *humiliate* brought me to tears. They were silent. A small stream of snot began to escape one of my nostrils. I used the back of my hand to wipe it away and turned my head so I was looking away.

He said, “You haven’t used that word before.”

We ordered another round and it made J sick. He went to the bathroom to throw up and then we drove home. He moved from the front door to the bed, a straight shot, laid on his back and closed his eyes.

“Everything’s spinning,” he said, and then he got up quickly and rushed into the bathroom. J shut the door behind him. I could hear him vomiting—the forceful noise of a gag.

I opened the door and walked in.

He said, “Get out.”

“Let me rub your back.”

“Please go.”

I said, “If it were me, you’d be in here.”

He didn't argue after that, and I stood behind him as he heaved, told him *good* every time.

I used to babysit for a couple. Their boy was an angel—big eyes surrounded by full spider-leg lashes, round lips, and small, still-growing-in white teeth. He was little for his age. That made it easy to lift him up and swing him around. He loved that game. He smiled and laughed, but he didn't talk much. His parents took him to see a doctor for that. Delayed speech. He was almost three years old and still not putting his own sentences together. I could tell his mom was insecure about it. He imitated, though, so when I was alone with him, I told him *I love you*. I hoped he'd remember it and say it to his parents.

I said, "Andrew, I love you!" Then I picked him up and spun him around.

He laughed.

We sat on the couch, watching cartoons. It was almost bedtime. Andrew's little body curled next to mine, and I imagined he was my own. I focused on the lower parts of my stomach, tried to feel the emptiness rotating through my uterus and then tried to force the feeling of a solid thing being born into that emptiness—briefly, my throat tightened at the thought of all the love and worry that would accompany pregnancy, but nausea quickly replaced the love and a new kind of worry piggybacked itself to the previous one. I felt my stomach expanding in that moment, the heavy thoughts of pregnancy manifesting themselves as phantom growths widening my midsection and bloating my entire body. *Stop*. I leaned my head down and smelled Andrew's hair, rubbed my nose through his

soft strands and onto his scalp. The faded scent of fruity children's shampoo teased my nostrils.

“Bedtime, baby,” I whispered. I scooped him up and carried him to the bathroom, talking to him as I walked down the hall. I said, “Let's go brush your teeth. Mommy said you needed a bath. You wanna play with your boat? Let's go swimmy in the ocean.”

I walked down the overgrown hiking trail in slow, thoughtful steps, aiming to crunch an acorn beneath me every time one of my feet met earth. The air was brisk, and I saw my breath as it left my lungs. My cheeks felt wind-burnt—red and dry, tight—but I liked it. I hadn't felt the outside in almost a week.

It still made J dizzy to lie down, so we sat on the couch, hip to hip, and listened to music. His head was tipped back and resting on the couch, eyes closed. I leaned my temple onto his shoulder. Sweat smeared across his forehead, and he mumbled along to Conor Oberst.

He moved to look at me, and I kissed him. I could taste the sick, warm and sour. It tasted like sharing. I pushed my tongue in his mouth to taste more, slowly, because I knew he might not want to, but he didn't say no. He moved his tongue to touch mine.

I stood up and took my clothes off. J undressed faster; he was only in his boxers. I felt rushed, urgent to have him in me. I wanted his body and I wanted him to forget that I'd stood behind him while he curled himself around the toilet. My perception of him hadn't changed; he was still my man.

I spat on my hand and rubbed it on my crotch, bent over the couch—me in front of him this time, his hands holding my shoulders, hips, body. J slid in and out of me. It was rough at first, then smooth as I got wet. I told him to go harder.

Nature had always been a place of rest for me. I liked to walk deep down a trail, see where I ended up. I never cared to hike to the top. I followed the trail until it faded out of existence and the trees caressed my skin and hung over my head. Dirt and stray acorns were replaced by knee length grass. The Black Hills towered around me. I was alone and I could breathe; just me and the plants and animals. I inhaled the newly made oxygen from the leaves, infused it into my body.

We fucked too hard. He said he felt sick again.

I had a plan. I'd been thinking about it all evening, while little Andrew and I were shooting Hot Wheels across the hardwood, while we were playing monster-chase-the-kid, while we watched cartoons before bed. I'd come up with it while I was making Andrew dinner—dinosaur chicken nuggets. He dipped them in Ketchup. I was hungry, really starving. For two days I had told myself no, told myself to be good. The smell of the dinosaur chicken nuggets made my head buzz.

Bite off the head, I said to Andrew. Like this. And then I grabbed one of his chicken nuggets and bit off the head. I just wanted a taste.

J headed to the bathroom, all his clothes off. I followed him in again, naked too. I didn't stand and rub his back this time. I sat behind him, wrapped him in legs.

He said, "Please go."

"No," I said, same as before, though I wasn't surprised he asked again.

I rubbed his back; I let my hands wander to his neck, his jawbone. I wanted J to know that I was there. Not in a small way—I wanted to feel his neck flex when he heaved strained expelled. I pressed my body as closely to his as I could, tried to become him, to take on his pain. I wanted my body to lurch with his, to be in sync with him.

I gave Andrew a bath, like I did every night. Then I put his pajamas on him—little white undies with pictures of cars on them and a matching t-shirt. I combed his hair, brushed his teeth, made him use the toilet like a big boy. I wiped away the splatters of pee that landed on the rim.

"Come on, Andrew, time to get in bed," I said, then lifted him into my arms and carried him across the hall. His temple and pudgy little boy cheek pressed to my breast, and he looked up at me as I walked him to his bed.

"Book," he said quietly.

"Okay, baby," I said, "dinosaurs or puppies or ladybugs?" I held three books in front of him.

He didn't speak but reached his chubby pointer finger to the puppy book.

I read it out loud, cuddling beside him and thinking about my plan for when I finished.

Andrew wasn't asleep when I left the room, but I cracked the door and told him goodnight. Sweet dreams, I said. Sleep tight. I love you, baby.

I'd left the oven on. I pulled the dinosaur chicken nuggets out of the freezer, dumped some on the pan I'd used to make Andrews'. They were supposed to cook for 25–30 minutes. I circled the kitchen island while I waited. Impatiently, I opened the oven and peeked inside. I listened for sizzling. They were still cold in the middle when I ate them, taking large gulps of water in between every few bites. That would make them come up easier.

I sat down in the grass, weaved my fingers into it. I'd probably only needed two days off from work, but I decided to use some extra vacation days. The whole week had been restful; so many movies, takeout most nights—although I had cooked myself one fancy meal when I started to feel better. I turned my phone off before bed, slept for as long as my body wanted, let myself wake up naturally, with the sun or even hours later. This was my first time out of the apartment since the procedure. I'd saved it for my last day off. I didn't have any regrets about the abortion; I saw it as a service to myself, the first time in a long time that I'd chosen me. I'd always avoided that, always avoided myself.

After a while, the environment overtook me. I'd been so still that the small creatures I'd originally frightened with my presence now slipped back into their routines. I wanted them to see me as a tree, new vines and blossoms emerging from my skin.

Crawl on me.

I walked softly through Andrews' parents' bedroom and into the master bath. I didn't want to wake up Andrew. I never knew if I would be loud. I didn't kneel in front of the toilet like usual. I stood, bent over, stretching my face down, as close to the porcelain surrounded cave as I could. My left hand was for my mouth. My right hand pinched between my body, shoved into my stomach. I wanted to squeeze everything upward and out.

My brain turned itself off and muscle memory took over. My hand was its own being as it invaded my mouth and slipped to the back of my throat. My body strained and surrendered, letting go of sustenance, over and over, until my stomach sucked inward with nothing to stop it.

I wanted to help J, to show him that it could be easy, so I moved from behind J and sat next to the toilet. Watch, I said, like this. I put my hand in my mouth, gagged, threw up, and remembered everything sweetly.

“Leave your hand back there as long as you can,” I said. “Let it build up.”

Andrew wasn't in his bed when I went to check on him. I remembered I hadn't drained the bathtub.

Repositioning myself behind J, I told him to try to mimic what I had shown him. I rested my head between his shoulder blades and waited. J kept heaving and coughing and choking but he couldn't get it right.

I said, “Let me help you.” And he stilled, waiting for me to move, trusting me.

I took my hand from his stomach, where it had been holding him, and I moved it up and up, until I was cupping his cheek. My fingers tip-toed to J's mouth, and he parted his lips for me. My hand stretched back and back, until my fingers felt the curve of his throat. J's neck muscles tensed around me, but I stayed, longerlongerlonger, until he erupted, and his sickness forced my hand out on its own.

I whispered, "Good boy. Now try it by yourself."

He did, and it worked.

"Good boy," I said, my face nuzzled into your back. "*Good.*"

We sat there, my body a blanket over J's, neither of us moving. My skin was stuck to his, both of our sweat a hot glue that held us together. I peeled myself away, slowly, difficultly, and reached for the roll of toilet paper hanging by the toilet. I used it to wipe the vomit and saliva off my hand. I got a new piece for J, told him to sit still while I cleaned him. I dabbed his face, the sides of his mouth, his lips. I grabbed his hands and cleaned between every finger. The air-conditioning kicked on and cold air floated around our bodies, cooling us. Neither spoke. I could hear Conor Oberst singing in the living room. *And I'm not sure what the trouble was / that started all of this / the reasons all have run away / but the feeling never did.*

I thought about leaving. Grabbing my things and walking out the front door. I'd disappear, become a new person, but I knew I couldn't walk past the bathroom door and not look in. If I looked in, I wouldn't be able to leave. I thought about crawling into the tub with Andrew, pressing my face in the water until we matched.

My head felt hot and cloudy as I walked to the bathroom. I moved slowly, not wanting to make a noise. I pretended I wasn't there—not in the house, not in the hallway. Even so, I edged my face around the doorway and peered inside.

Andrew was sitting by the edge of the tub, on his knees, making motorboat noises as he zoomed his toys around in the water. I took quick steps toward him and then collapsed. I tried to play it off, pretend like I was sitting by him. He looked at me like he was in trouble; he knew what bedtime meant, but I couldn't summon the energy to get mad. I felt weak, like all the life had been pulled out of me. Heat rushed over me, and my skin went damp.

“Baby, what are you doing?” I said. “Are you playing?”

He nodded.

“You want to do something fun? Come here.”

I picked him up and stepped into the now cold bath water. The coolness was what I needed, and I sat down, clothes floating up to my sides. Slowly, I set Andrew in: toes, shins, knees, and then he was standing. He giggled.

“Let's play some more,” I said, “just for a little.”

Here. This was where I belonged. I couldn't remember when I laid down, but the back of my skull matted the grass underneath it. Now the knee-length grass towered over my face, the trees towered over the grass and the hills towered over all of us. I was the smallest in the universe. I wasn't ready to have a baby. I pictured myself pressing myself down father inside, forgetting more and more to live. I could be consumed by almost anything. Remembering to make space, quiet moments, places for me to exist and be a

body in the world was already hard for me. I thought about hating the thing I was supposed to love. Sometimes fear needed to be overcome but sometimes it was necessary. Gratefulness hummed around my body, hummed in me; the grass folded me in its arms and the breeze made room for me, parting as it hit my frame and lovingly sliding along my skin.

FRAGILE SKIN

I picked the skin on the side of my pointer finger, so far down that it started to bleed a little. It was a bad habit of mine, one that I hadn't outgrown—I didn't think I ever would. My mom still hadn't, and she was nearing 55. I had downloaded a few playlists onto my phone, but I'd already listened to so much music that my head felt full. I wanted to hear nothing, so I stared out the window of the plane.

I was on my way to June's wedding. It had been planned for a few months already, long-awaited. When she'd asked me to be a bridesmaid, I was so elated to be included, to be thought of as a close enough friend, that I didn't even think about what it really meant for me. She sent us the link to the bridesmaids' dresses we would have to order, and I purchased it—not without little thought. Of course, some worries slipped into my brain, but I ignored them, thinking that five months was years away and by the time the wedding came I would be fine. Now, all I could think about was the black dress in my suitcase that didn't have any sleeves on it. I thought about my exposed arms, visible to an entire wedding of people, all the eyes that might land on me. A world of people was about to see the deep cuts that I'd put into my arms years ago—deep enough that even though three years had passed, and they had scarred, they were still visible. They weren't angry pink anymore, but they still were lifted from the regular skin on my arm, still present. The only person who I felt completely comfortable seeing my bear arms was my husband, and we'd had time to work through our feelings.

I stared at the wing of the plane that was just feet from me, separated only by the thick airplane window. I imagined opening the window and crawling on it, even though I knew the wind would blow my miles away before I could even step a foot out. I thought about being able to fly; really, I was trying to think about anything except the pressing need to overcome pain that I used to feel, how relaxing and comforting it was to me. I wished I'd never done it, of course, but I also couldn't shake the familiarity of it—that action felt closer than a brother, more intimate than any relationship I'd had. I'd even wondered many times if I was closer to my self-harm than I was to my husband, Jared. As much as I loved him and cared about him, and even as much as he cared about me, I didn't think he would ever understand the feelings I carried.

I told him about it not long into our friendship, and he accepted me. He became someone I could be comfortable around. But when I asked him what he thought about it, his answer was vague.

“I don't care that you did it. I just don't want you to hurt yourself,” he told me.

“You aren't embarrassed of me? Like what if your family saw it?”

“No, Kris. Everyone has something.”

“You don't think it makes me look gross?”

“No, I love you.”

I wanted him to say something more profound, even though I didn't know what. I wanted him to ask me about it, to ask how I did it and dig deeper. I wanted him to know that part of me. He never pressed, though.

When I expressed to him my anxiety about the wedding, the short sleeves, Jared told me that I didn't have to go if I felt uncomfortable. He told me he'd help me come up with a good excuse.

“But I think Ann would really like you there. Did you talk to her about it?”

“I don't want to be selfish. She knows I did that, and she's seen them. She knows the dress I'm wearing.”

He told me that he'd support what I chose to do, but I wanted him to tell me to embrace it. I wanted Jared to say “fuck it” and tell me to live my life, to be me. I wanted more force behind it, more opinion, more strength.

Staring into the blue sky littered with clouds, I remembered the night of my last time. It was a time that wasn't supposed to happen—the time before that was supposed to be my last time. Those words always had a way of creeping up on me and proving me wrong. I had been in my last year of undergrad, a month before graduation, and I was in my apartment alone. It was late. I didn't feel anything big; rather, I felt nothing at all. Sleep wouldn't come to me, and all I could think about was the quiet around me. I needed to feel something—that was all I knew. My left hand remembered clearly how it felt to hold the foldable hunting knife that my dad had bought for me last Christmas—I told him I wanted to hook it on the band of my shorts while I jogged, to feel safer. I'd never carried it out of my apartment, though.

For over a year now, that knife had been sitting in a small wooden box that I kept in my dresser—top drawer, behind my bras and underwear. Sitting on the edge of my bed, legs hanging over and feet on the ground, I let my eyes travel to the left side of the top drawer. If I had x-ray vision, I would be staring through the wood of the dresser and

the box, directly at the steel. Standing up, I walked over to the dresser, opened it. I reached out my left hand and felt through my undergarments, to the back of the drawer. My fingertips met the wood of the box that held my knife, and the hair on the back of my neck stood up. My whole body remembered. My mind remembered.

I closed my eyes, moved my hand to the latch, lifted the lid of the box, just a little, let my fingers creep an inch inside the box.

Paused. No. Not this again, Kris.

But I was so close, and something in me ignored my sane words. Pushing my hand in farther, I folded my fingers around the cold metal. I pulled out the knife, just as I had remembered it, and went back to the edge of my bed, to look at it, to feel. That's all I would do. Pushing the lock on the knife backwards, the way it was supposed to go, I flipped open the blade. I never understood people who cut themselves with razors—knives had always been so much more effective. I pressed my thumb along the side of it, feeling the smooth metal, staying away from the thin, sharp edge. I told myself I wouldn't cut tonight, but that didn't mean I couldn't hold my knife and remember. That didn't mean I couldn't press the tip of my pointer finger to the point of the blade and see how hard I could push before my first layer of skin broke open—not enough to bleed, just a small prick.

I set the knife on the bed beside me and took off my shirt, let my arms free. I looked at my right arm: thin, healed white scars ran horizontally along it. Those were from the last time. My left arm was clean, because I was left-handed, because I had more control that way. I'd never even thought about using my right hand. So, I picked up the knife sitting beside me, put it in my right hand, tested the weight and the feel of it. I let

my finger close around the handle. It wasn't the same as holding it with my left hand—a little awkward, although not terrible. It felt better than holding a pencil and trying to write.

Turning my left arm over, so that the inside of my forearm was facing me, I set the sharp blade on my unaffected skin. I pulled the blade backward softly, let it slide. I didn't press hard, because I told myself I wouldn't cut. It was soft, a caress. I lifted the knife, set the blade farther up on my skin, and pulled it down again, lightly still. Goosebumps raised on my arms and legs, and I felt just slightly less than content. Not as empty anymore, but still wanting. Anticipation for what I knew I could do stirred in me. I imagine what it looked like when my skin came undone so quickly, how it felt to be the one controlling the undoing.

Fuck it, I decided, and my heart began to pump faster. What did I have to lose anyway? I already wore long sleeves to cover up my right arm, so what was the point in keeping my left arm clean.

Kris, you'll sleep better after this, you always do.

I stood up from my bed and walked into my bathroom. It was better to do it over the sink—less messy, and I liked to plug the drain so I could see how much blood would come out of me by the end. Putting my left arm up, I practiced a few times, moving my right arm just above it, phantom cuts. If I replaced my knife with a bow it would have looked like I was playing a violin—one arm up, the other moving back and forth, horizontal to it. My heart beat faster. I told myself to do it, that it would only hurt for a second and then all that I'd feel was relief.

I pressed the blade down, let my skin bend inward, and then I pulled, quickly. It burned, a sharp pain. The once clean canvas of my forearm was replaced with split open skin, a single river of blood. A drop ran down my arm and landed in the sink.

Again, Kris. So, I pressed down, and pulled; pressed down, and pulled; pressed down and pulled, but not as hard as the first two times because it *hurt*, and it was hard to make my hand do something when my brain was telling it to stop, stop, stop.

I rested my arm on the counter, so that the now four bleeding rivers could drip into the sink. I looked at myself hard in the mirror, tried to look into my eyes and then behind them, tried to figure what was going on in my head. It was like this every time. Over and over again I cut until I decided that I had done enough; no, my body and mind decided it for me. The mutilation that I had already done exhausted me, left me with no more stamina. I set the knife in the bathroom counter—I'd clean it in the morning—and I wrapped a towel around my arm. Walking out of the bathroom, I went straight to my bed and crawled on top of the covers. I laid down on my side and closed my eyes, feeling my pulse thrum through all cuts across my arm.

Over the plane's intercom, the pilot said that we were beginning our descent, and I stared out of the window until we landed. When it was my turn, I pulled my carry-on out from under the seat in front of me and my rollaboard from the overhead bin. Leaving the plane, I went to a restaurant near my gate—I had a three-hour layover. I ordered a vodka martini and pulled out my phone, texting my husband to tell him that I landed. I wanted to get a little buzzed before my next flight; hopefully it would help me sleep.

I was glad to have a decent layover; I loved everything about airports—so many people that I didn't know going to different places and not being recognized by anyone. Longer layovers in airports felt like being in a bubble where time didn't exist. I was outside of the real world, just floating. It was calming, soothing, one of my favorite things. I took a sip of my martini and the cold ran down my throat. It felt good, tasted strong. A couple, a few tables from where I sat, was arguing—something about luggage. I wished my husband was here with me; we hadn't flown together since we'd been married. I knew I'd love to travel with him, knew we'd have fun, be carefree. We'd probably get drunk in the airport and laugh loudly with each other our entire flight—we'd be loud; the people on the plane sitting around us would be annoyed, but we wouldn't care. I was always more confident when I was with my husband.

I thought about that confidence, and the fact that I only carried it fully when I wore long sleeves, when I couldn't be seen. I wondered if it would be that way for the rest of my life. God, no. That sounded like prison. I wondered how much my scars would actually heal. Some of them, though still clearly there, looked so far away, so in the past, that I hoped anyone who ever saw would think that I wasn't the same person anymore. They might not even notice them. Since I'd done the cuts, I'd worn short sleeves less than a handful of times, and each time it felt worse than being naked in front of a crowd of people. When I really thought about it, in moments like these, when it was all I could think about, I wished that I had never done it. I hadn't grown from it; I wasn't proud to say I'd overcome it. I was only ashamed that I still sometimes found it lovely and special.

My eyes moved to my suitcase sitting next to me. I imagined the fabric of my suitcase being invisible; I knew exactly how I had folded my dress, the shirts and pants I'd put around it. I knew I'd never wear that dress again after the wedding.

I pulled my phone out and texted Jared: "Hey. Miss you."

He responded right away. "I miss you too. How's the airport?"

"Drinking a martini." I sent him a smiling face and then kept writing. "I want to ask you something, and can you just think about it? Don't reply right away."

He said, "Yes." And then he asked if everything was okay.

I said that everything was fine. Then I typed, "Do you think you could ever love my scars—the ones I did? I mean, do you think you might ever like them?"

I pressed send before I could delete the message. I closed my phone and put it in my purse, telling myself I wouldn't look at it until my next flight. I finished my martini and got up to use the restroom before I headed to my gate. I had some time, so I used the escalator to go upstairs where there weren't as many people so I might not have to wait in a line. I went into a handicapped stall, brought both my bags in with me, and I sat down to pee. I pushed my left sleeve arm to look at my scars, to check them again—maybe they'd healed more since last time I really thought to take a good look. I ran the fingers of my right hand over them; the scar-skin felt different than the untouched skin, softer. As much as I wanted to wish the scars away, my insides thrummed with intimacy when I stared at them, touched them. Nobody would understand the feelings I had for them, the way my body felt when I was in my room late at night and it seemed like the only thing to make me be alive. I pushed the nail of my pointer finger against my skin, scratched

hard—only a red line appeared. I wanted more, deeper, even though I wished I could take them all away. The small red line, no blood, would have to be enough for now.

@FRANCISFALLINGAPART

I looked at Andrew's eyes and teeth as he chewed his gum and felt a tinge of regret pinch at my heart. I would miss his lips and teeth. His facial expressions were completely dependent on what happened with his mouth. His smile was the brightest I'd seen, but he wasn't smiling now. He wore a frown that relaxed and drooped as the seconds passed.

I told him we weren't really working, that I wanted to take a step back. Maybe just be friends.

It hurts that you can't let yourself be loved, he said.

I bristled, said, That's not what this is about.

I wish I could believe you.

Fuck you, I said.

Andrew stood from our small outside table. Luckily, we hadn't ordered anything. Look, he said, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to sound like that. I'll give you your space. If you need anything, give me a call.

He leaned down and gave me an awkward side hug and a tiny, lips-barely-brushing-check-fuzz-kiss. I mean it, Francis, he said, and then he walked off.

For a second I felt relieved, but relief turned to doubt, and I wanted to run after him. I kept my feet still, though, and I waited until I saw his car drive away before I got up and left the table. Right after I sat in the drivers' seat and pulled the door closed, I wiggled my phone out of my back pocket and clicked on the Instagram icon. It opened straight to messenger. I typed.

@francisfallingapart: I just broke up w my bf.

@thinblueboy11: wat!! are you ok?

@francisfallingapart: so okay. I wanted out of it.

@thinblueboy11: seemed like u rlly liked him

@francisfallingapart: I felt suffocated

@francisfallingapart: and I was eating way too much.

@thinblueboy11: Im sorry :(

@francisfallingapart: don't be. I rlly am fine. Promise.

I set my phone in the center consul of the car and put my car in drive. I still felt a little sad. Bummed. But I knew this was best for me. I had become complacent with Andrew; I was starting to enjoy life too much. I gained ten pounds. It had to end.

Standing in the center of my room, cell phone propped on my desk and pointed at my body, I twisted and turned, pushing out bones, sucking in skin. I wrapped the fingers of my left hand around my right forearm, stretching my index finger to touch my thumb. They almost touched. I put my camera on timer—ten seconds—pushed the capture button, and then moved myself in front of the lens, contorting my body to make it look as thin as it could. The flash blazed in front of my eyes, leaving red-orange dots in my vision. Again. One more. Front, side, back. All angles.

I sent them all to @thinblueboy, who responded with his own photos. We sent each other photos of our bodies all the time, but once a month we took “official” body checks to compare to the month before. *Love and hate?* I typed and pressed send.

@thinblueboy: love that I can sort of see your sternum

@thinblueboy: hate that your thighs don't look much different

@francisfallingapart: love your hips

@francisfallingapart: hate your shoulders

This was a game we played when we sent our photos. We'd started this a few months ago, when we first began our relationship. We'd found each other because we were both involved in the ana/mia community on Instagram. For the past three months we kept in touch, for the most part. There was a time when I tried to recover for a while. I deleted my app and tried to keep my thoughts from that secret world. I couldn't stay away, though.

@francisfallingapart: I want to binge so bad rn, but I also want to starve forever

@thinblueboy: you'll hate yourself more if you binge

@francisfallingapart: I could purge

@thinblueboy: did you cut?

@francisfallingapart: yes :/

@thinblueboy: ugh, im sorry. do you wanna talk ab it

@francisfallingapart: I just missed it. felt like I needed it

@thinblueboy: how did u do it

@francisfallingapart: knife

@thinbluebo1: where

@francisfallingapart: ankle

@thinblueboy: can I see?

I stretched the skin around the cuts to make them bleed more before I snapped a photo and sent it. I wondered why I felt I needed to make the cut worse—maybe it was because I thought I deserved it or maybe it was because I wanted more sympathy from

@thinblueboy. I was desperate for his attention, this could-be-fake Instagram person. A big part of me didn't care who was on the other side of the phone as long as they were helping me with my weight and comforting me when I needed it. So far @thinblueboy was all I wanted.

Breaking up with Andrew was hard, and it would only get harder as the night went on and I had no one to lie in bed with; but in the end, it was the best option for me. A healthy relationship didn't seem to be in my future, especially because of my lifestyle—and I couldn't imagine any partner being okay with me sending full body photos out into the world.

I never put my face in them; or if I did, I'd block the top half of my face—forehead and eyes—with the coloring feather on my phone. When I did send these pictures to @thinblueboy, I'd make sure to bite the insides of my cheeks to make my face look hollower. When he responded with heart eye emojis, my breath caught in my throat. It was even better when he said he was proud of me. I couldn't help the smile that stretched across my face, and the butterflies in my stomach soared. The only time I wasn't satisfied with our relationship was when I'd get lonely and the only thing that could satisfy was human, skin to skin, contact. Sometimes it was nice to be held.

It was the same place I broke up with Andrew. I should have said another café, but I couldn't think of one in the moment. Josh was his name. I downloaded a dating app and liked as many men as I thought were even the slightest bit attractive. Josh just responded the fastest and seemed as eager as I was to hook up.

You made it, he said as I walked up to him, like he thought I might have ditched. If only he knew how desperate I was. The only reason I might have hesitated was @thinblueboy's message, which I received right as I was leaving the apartment.

@thinblueboy: Hope you're having a good morning :)

I gave him a simple *you too*, because I didn't want him to think of me as overwhelming. I was constantly checking myself, making sure that I wasn't giving too much to anybody. Despite wanting sex and affection, I didn't want anything that might lead to a relationship. I could get so reliant on the other person, so in love that it hindered my goals—that's what happened with Andrew.

I made it, I echoed to Josh. Sitting across from him, I said, Do you want a coffee?

He agreed, and I insisted that I be the one to get them. I got up from the table and went to wait in line.

Josh was cute and had a nice smile. Not as nice as Andrew's. He was tall and thin, exactly how I liked it. Pretty boys had always been my type, and Josh wore that look. He told me I looked gorgeous, and I shyly smiled without letting my lips part.

What do you do, I said.

I'm in business analytics. And you?

Nothing right now. I teach elementary school, and well. I raised my hands and gestured toward the weather. The sun was shining bright and reflecting sharp lights off reflective objects. Summer was in the air.

Josh told me it must be nice to have summers off and asked what I did in my free time.

It's silly, I said. Crafts. I hoped that turned him a little, just enough that he'd stay interested, but not quite so much that he'd want more dates after we fucked. One part of me wanted him to call me back, wanted him to never stop calling. I wanted his obsession to be me—I needed the validation. If I didn't have that, then I slumped inside of myself, started binging and then hating myself more. It was a painful cycle, so I tried to stay ahead of the game.

We finished our date when the sun was just beginning to lower in the sky.

We should do this again, Josh said.

You can come over, I said.

We got in our respective cars, and he followed me back to my apartment. Inside, I didn't waste much time. Maybe a few words back and forth before I got up close to him and placed little kisses on his neck. My skin felt like fire in the places he touched me, and I knew more than anything that I needed this.

Fingers on zippers and buttons, then nudity. Josh gazed over my frame; I saw his eyes flicker toward my ankle, where my cuts had yet to heal. He didn't say anything; instead, he wrapped me up in his arms and carried me to my bed. He lifted me with ease, and joy coursed through my limbs. I was light.

The photos I sent to @thinblueboy started out innocent enough. He asked to see more and more, and I let him. I thought the more he saw of my body, the more dedicated I would be to losing weight. The pictures I took were never sexual, even if I was naked, and @thinblueboy didn't act like he was getting off on them—I didn't care if he was. See everything, I'd said.

Our lifestyles were repetitive—pictures after pictures, words of encouragement, meanspo. I hadn't known what meanspo was until I joined the ana/mia online community and met @thinblueboy. I'd sent him a body check, and he sent back mean words that made me want to starve forever. He might as well have said *holy fuck, you're the fattest thing ever*. Hell knows that I said it to myself enough. But coming from another person? The self-hatred rolled in hot and heavier than it ever had before. I didn't respond for a while, and @thingblueboy messaged me again asking if I was okay, apologizing for saying what he did. He said, *I thought you'd like it*. And because I thought he wanted me to like it, I made myself, asking for meanspo at least once a day—and it didn't matter how often it came, the words still cut just as deep.

@francisfallingapart: wyd?

@thinblueboy: at work

@francisfallingapart: ok

It was funny; for as long as we'd been talking, I never knew what he did for work—but he knew what I did. It occurred to me that I might be more invested in our relationship, but I let the thought leave my mind.

@thinblueboy: I can talk

@francisfallingapart: I hooked up w someone last night

@thinblueboy: Andrew?

@francisfallingapart: someone random

@thinblueboy: oh

@francisfallingapart: is that ok?

@thinblueboy: you can do whatever you want

@francisfallingapart: u seem upset

@thinblueboy: why do u need to hook up w random people when u have me

Flowers and butterflies and heat swirled in my stomach. The thought of him being jealous for me had me smiling like a little girl with candy. I jumped onto my bed and lied on my stomach, feet in the air and elbows pressed into the mattress, hands holding phone.

@francisfallingapart: I'm sorry. Didn't know u felt that way...

@thinblueboy: we are each other's

It seemed like he meant *you are mine*, and I liked that response much more.

@francisfallingapart: ok

@thinblueboy: have u eaten today

@francisfallingapart: no, you?

@thinblueboy: don't eat today

@francisfallingapart: I wont

@francisfallingapart: will you send me pictures of you

@thinblueboy: after work

@francisfallingapart: I want to see ur face

He didn't respond after that, didn't even open the message. I'd pushed him too far, even though I knew he thought we were good as we were. Still, once he was off work, he sent me the photos I'd asked for. *Thank you*, I wrote in response, and then *can I eat?*

@thinblueboy: no

@francisfallingapart: please

Part of me thought he wanted me to beg.

@thinblueboy: *you can't eat until tomorrow night*

@thinblueboy: *will you obey?*

The word *obey* made me pause for a moment. Still, I responded with an *ok*.

Andrew texted me, asked how I was doing, and I responded with a short *fine*. Even though I was the one who initiated the breakup, there was something about not wanting to seem okay—not for Andrew or for anybody. I needed all the sympathy and *poor girl* I heard whispered around me. People didn't even have to say it; I could see in their eyes, the way they looked at me a little longer at me than they did other people. But I wanted it; I wanted to terrify every person I saw. I wanted them to see my bony body and think of death. I didn't even care if people saw fresh cuts—I let my whole self be seen by the world. Looks and stares, even words, I tucked them all inside of me and chanted to myself that I couldn't feel a thing.

The only being that I let affect me was @thinblueboy. His words were heavy because I believed them. He would tell me the truth about my body. He knew what I wanted and was helping me get there. I decided to give everything to him. All my trust. I didn't hesitate when he told me to do something, even if it scared me or I thought it might hurt. I knew that following his instructions would lead to my goal weight faster than any other option. The photos turned into something more. @thinblueboy took control of my body—told me when I could eat and what I could eat. Sometimes he made me fast for a couple of days, and I loved it as much as I hated it. Our relationship was something of a subjugation—I did whatever he told me to, no matter how painful or degrading. I liked

the way he hurt me, and in the end, I was in control of that, too. I asked him to tell me to eat less. I asked for the hurt, I just didn't want to be the one inflicting the pain.

I don't know when I started trying to feel so little. Was it way back? Back before I can remember? I dig through all the goop inside of me and can't find a single reason to be so sad, but here I am, sticking sewing needles under my fingernails and biting my lip. I felt so disconnected from the real world. I sent a message to @thinblueboy11: *I feel so blah*. Three minutes go by before he messages back.

@thinblueboy11: me too.

@francisfallingapart: I haven't eaten all day, but like I'm so cold

@thinblueboy11: what do u want

@francisfallingapart: thinspo

He sent me three pictures: breakable ankles, purple knees, cinched waist. I wished that the pictures of anorexic bodies would inspire me to stay strong and not eat until the morning. I urged myself to go to bed, to sleep through the hunger, but the gnawing was a lightbulb in my brain that wouldn't turn off.

@francisfallingapart: what would meanspo be

@thinblueboy11: your body is fat; you're disgusting

@francisfallingapart: do you really think that?

@thinblueboy11: yes

I exhaled heavily and swallowed the heat burning my throat. I knew the truth was that I was shallow; I only cared about how I looked, and I was afraid, above all things, to gain weight. I wondered if there could be a feeling deeper than just physical hunger—soul hunger. That's what I felt.

@thinblueboy11: I hate that

@francisfallingapart: it works every time

It wasn't true. He and I both knew that. Sometimes nothing could block out the empty. Anorexia was never easy. All day, every day, I was trying trying trying to keep myself strong, to keep my mind on something else. It was exhausting. And sometimes there were moments where it seemed like nothing could make me feel better—not even all the food in the world.

I set my phone down in my room and went to the kitchen. I pulled a bottle of vodka out of the freezer, opened it, and took a pull. The liquid burned my throat, and I felt it seep down my esophagus and into my stomach. Drinking on an empty stomach was something I enjoyed—especially when I felt so shitty and I needed a quick fix. Almost immediately I felt drunk. The heat from the vodka saturated my body after the one pull; still, I carried the bottle to the couch with me. I told myself I would drink more and more. I'd drink until the bottle was gone, until I couldn't feel or think a single thing.

I woke up with thick cuts across my left arm, my entire forearm covered with blood—it covered my sheets too.

Fuck, I said.

Some of the cuts were still bleeding, had been seeping all night long, so I did my best to create a wrap for them. I pulled a long sleeve t-shirt over my head, hoping the arm-sleeves would hold the wrap in place. Then leggings. Tennis shoes. A jacket. I didn't know what to do about the cuts—I thought some of them needed stitches but didn't want to go to the hospital. I decided to walk to the park and back, couldn't think of anything else.

I just wanted to move and get fresh air. When I first saw the cuts that morning my first reaction had been excitement, not fear, no sadness—that bothered me, but I couldn't have really known why. I wanted to turn the thoughts off, just wanted to be lost on the world somewhere, far far away from any kind of human interaction. I had ruined my body and now I could never wear short sleeves again. I'd have to wear long-sleeves in the summer; no more tank tops, sleeveless dresses, bathing suits. No one wears long-sleeve bikinis.

So I walked about three miles to a park I knew that had swing-sets. I just wanted to swing for a while, feel the cool hair hit up against my face as my body went back and forth, back and forth. I pumped my legs out as I swung upward, and as gravity pulled me downward, I pulled my legs backward, curled them up behind me. I did it repeatedly until I went higher and higher. When I began slowing down, I let go of the swing and let my body drop to the ground, landing on my back, knocking the air out of my lungs. I lied there, staring into the cloudy sky; I could feel my blood pumping in my whole left arm. *Ba-bump, ba-bump.*

Even though I told @thinblueboy that I wouldn't do it again, I planned another date. I resisted as long I could, but the truth was I longed for skin-to-skin contact. @thinblueboy filled me up emotionally, and he was always there to talk; but at the end of the day, he couldn't satisfy me physically. He couldn't wrap his body around me and hold me or make me forget my hungry, miserable life for just a few minutes.

This new guy was named Matt, and I found him on the same dating app that I'd found Josh. It was easy; ask for a date, dress cute, talk like a normal person, and I knew I'd get what I wanted. Just a body to hold me, just for a night.

I asked Matt if he wanted to come over for a while and he said *yeah, that sounds nice*. The date was almost identical to my date with Josh. First dates usually are. All the questions to ask a person when you first meet them basically take up the time of a full date. I asked Matt if he wanted to come over and he agreed. Just like Josh, he followed me back to my apartment.

Do you want a drink? I said as he entered.

He said sure, so I poured him some vodka—plain, all I had.

Sorry, I said.

He laughed. I might need to stay the night, he said.

Cute.

He walked up to me slowly, having barely taken a sip out of his vodka.

I felt like I was being stalked a bit, but it turned me on, and I stood in from as sweetly as I could. Once he reached me, he kissed me. His warm lips sent shivers down my spine. I wrapped my arms around his neck. We kissed for a few minutes, Matt's hands traveling up the inside of my shirt, before I led him to my bedroom. He stopped holding me only take his clothes off, so I did the same.

Matt looked up from his clothes on the ground, and his eyes went, right away, to the cuts all over my arm. The blood was cleaned off my arm, but each cut still was open and bleeding lightly. Then he moved his eyes to meet mine and said, I think you need to go to the doctor.

I smiled brightly at him and held my bad arm behind my back.

No, Matt said.

I stared at him, hoping if I glared long enough he would give in. Then, I said, I'll pay you.

I couldn't take it back after I said it, and stillness entered my bedroom. Matt pulled his clothes back on and walked backward out of my room. I heard the front door open and close, and then I slumped to the ground and held my body in my own arms. I started to cry, then stopped myself.

I said mean things to myself like: Fuck you, Francis.

And: Get up and stop crying. Nothing matters, this doesn't matter. It's nothing to be upset about. This means you're doing well. You're doing a *good* job.

I quieted, pathetically stood up, and walked to the bathroom. I looked in the mirror at my red face and eyes and tried to decide if I looked pretty this way or not. I ended up thinking, yes, maybe, the red around my eyes made my green irises pop.

It had been three weeks since I last talked to @thinblueboy. He still texted me every day at 4:00PM when he got off work, just reminding me he was there, but he never sent more than that. I missed him and I wanted to go back, but I'd been trying to recover, so that meant cutting out of my life anything that could hinder my progress. @thinblueboy had been the last to go. I kept him as long as I could.

I started going to Alcoholics Anonymous—I just made the eating disorder sound as addicting, which it was, and then I replaced all the eating disorder lingo with alcoholic lingo. It could be silly, sometimes boring, but it was something just for me that no one knew about. I found the option to be comforting. *There is a place I can go.*

Andrew texted me a few times, which I ignored. I saw him at the grocery store later one of those days—it was awkward. I thought he would see the weight I'd gained and be glad I broke up with him when I did. He waved at me, and I pretended not to see him.

Today was Saturday. I slept in as long as I could, woke up and ate some fruit and almonds. One of my old high school friends, Julia, messaged me and asked if she could stay at my place while she drove through town. I told her yes and then got onto social media to look her up. Made sure I was remembering the right person. I remembered her; we were in English all four years of high school together. She'd always been perfect, so beautiful, and envied her every day of my high school life. But back then I wasn't anorexic, so I didn't do anything to make myself like her. From her social media pictures, I could tell she'd gained weight—not insane amounts, but it was noticeable. Her face looked as beautiful as ever, just a little rounder, and her hair looked healthy and shiny. She dressed so fashionably, and insecurity floated through me. I wanted to shop before she came, to change my wardrobe entirely.

So I went. It was the worst thing I could have done. I tried a few dresses, and each made my body grow more than the last. I tried jean shorts and couldn't bear to look at my thighs. I just wanted to be covered by soft clothes that draped off my body, big and comforting. I broke down in a changing room stall and cried my eyes out. Then I left the boutique empty handed. I was in a sour mood throughout the day, and low self-esteem wouldn't leave me. A meeting would have been good, but I knew there wasn't one at this time.

My phone buzzed.

@thinblueboy: I miss you.

My heart skipped a beat. The corners of my lips turned upward. I corrected them. The idea of @thinblueboy missing me and thinking about me left me feeling hot and happy. Picking up my phone, I started typing. Then stopped. I deleted the letters, then typed them again. I sent: *I miss you too*

@thinblueboy: please don't leave me

@thinblueboy: I'm good for you. I know how to comfort you and help you be happier. You can't really be enjoying such a carefree life. You'll get fat.

I dropped my phone, told myself *no more*, and got back in bed. His message made me feel things, things I'd been suppressing this week as I went about eating apple cores and sucking on Tic Tacs.

Looking at my phone, I searched for the date and time that Julia would be coming. Couldn't find it. I texted her: *what's the date again?* Waiting for her to respond, I took my clothes off and moved my body in front of my phone, videoing myself as I moved in a slow circle. I felt excitement flicker in my stomach about seeing myself on screen, my bigger body moving in the same ways my smaller one used to. Watching the video, I swallowed back a lump in my throat. I told myself recovery made me happy, but I was still constantly sad. When I was starving, it sucked because I was hungry, cold, and dizzy all the time; but when I was feeding myself, I was unhappy with my body. Constantly, I missed the smaller one, even while knowing that the bigger one was more sustainable; it was a body that was capable. When I starved, I use to stare at my body for hours. I'd smile and fake a laugh. I'd do it again. I'd change my smile, try a new one, move my body in every way, sucking my stomach in to make my waist appear smaller.

But nothing felt better than waking up and hitting your goal weight. Nothing felt better than being breakable and weightless. Was a child possible? Not right now, maybe later. Only if I kept working towards recovery. But nothing felt better than putting on clothes that have outgrown you, clothes that stay the same while I shrink inside them.

I picked up my phone.

PUNISHER

This is how I met Megan.

It was noon, and I was trying to wake up. I'd spent the evening before in my bathtub, legs over the edge so I didn't get too hot and my head resting on the small ledge behind me, eyes closed, breathing in the steam rising off the water. I was drinking a bottle of wine, making my mind warm as the bath. I left only when the water ran out, making it to my bed, sleeping too long into the morning. Now the world was blurry. My head would turn and my eyes followed moments later, like typing on a slow keyboard. Click, pause, letter.

The best remedy would be blood flow, a quickened heartbeat, so I left my apartment and walked half a block to Spearfish Creek. When I reached the side of the creek, I stopped to let my breath catch up to me. The water was coming from the canyon, the mountains. It would have been frozen solid if it hadn't been running.

My heart slowed, and I began to take off my shoes. I rolled my jeans up to my knees. Light purple splotches formed under my skin. I hadn't even stepped into the water yet. But I wasn't scared and I didn't hesitate. I wanted to wake up, to feel this; I wanted the violent cold to rip me from the slowness that settled in my body—and I knew that it would, if only briefly. I'd done this before.

My first foot in the water pulled the breath out of me, as always—as hoped. I know it isn't possible to be in this moment forever. I only stay as long as I can handle, until I feel so cold I'm wide awake.

I put both my feet in and held them there.

“Excuse me.”

I turned, the movement recharging the bitter cold that assaulted my feet. Water splashed up and soaked the bottoms of my pants.

A woman was about ten feet from me, standing on the bank. She laughed. “Are you good?”

I stepped out of the creek quickly, for some reason embarrassed at being found like this. My feet were the color of skim milk.

The woman squinted, blinked, didn’t say anything. “Is this the fountain of youth?” she asked, maybe mocking me.

I sat down and put my boots on. I wasn’t sure what she meant. “Hm?” I lifted my eyebrows and pressed my lips together, peering at her. I felt uncomfortable, caught.

“Should I get in too?” she said.

My feet were burning. I sniffed, nose running. “It’s cold. You probably shouldn’t.”

“Maybe next time, then.” Her nose was bright red, her lips a mixture of their natural color and just a bit of purple. She was attractive, eyebrows pulled together and lips (with possible injections?) jutted out.

“Maybe.”

She nodded but still stood there. “My name’s Megan.”

“I’m Lucy.” I waved at her. “Have a good day.”

I turned and walked away, my feet void of all sensation. I wondered about the woman behind me, hoped that she was okay. It worried me that my back was to her, that I was alone and walking, that my feet weren’t responding well. What if I needed to run? I put my head down, my hands in my pockets, and quickened my pace. Listening intently, I

waited to hear the footsteps behind me that told me she was following. She could have attacked me. I wouldn't have told anyone.

Sticky, hot. My eyes opened and met darkness. I threw my covers off. This had been happening more and more recently. Sweat pooled at the base of my skull, soaked into my hair and then seeped into my sheets. Down my neck, between my shoulder blades, my lower back. I lifted myself off the mattress, swung my legs to the side and off the bed. I sat there for a second; the sweat cooled and dried on my skin. Something about being asleep made me sweat—waking up fixed it.

I stood, and instead of pulling the wet sheets off my bed and replacing them, I walked out of my room into the kitchen, to the refrigerator. It was mostly empty: a carton of eggs, one missing; a thin grocery bag with three Gala apples; carrots, whole, unpeeled. On the top shelf, though, was a little box, another apple inside—a different kind of apple. This one came from a new chocolate shop downtown. It was covered in white chocolate and then rolled in cinnamon and sugar. I grabbed it, took it out of its package. Loose bits of cinnamon and sugar fell to the ground. I didn't care. I decided against biting straight in. I imagined my teeth getting stuck, pulling off all the candy and not getting enough apple in the bite. I turned, opened a drawer, grabbed out a knife with a smooth, sharp edge. It had to be able to cut through cleanly, no tearing.

When I purchased the apple, they asked me if I wanted them to cut it for me, but I said no thank you because I couldn't commit to eating it just then. Buying the apple was risky, rebellious, and eating it in the same moment would have been too much. I brought

it home, put it in my refrigerator, saved it for a moment like this. A sudden, unexpected, exciting moment—like waking up in the middle of the night, drenched in sweat.

I placed the sharp edge of the knife onto the apple, pushed through the hardened white chocolate and the apple, all in one quick motion. I grabbed the sliver and brought it to my lips, let it sit just under my nose. The smell from the white chocolate and the spice of the cinnamon rose off the apple. The aromas twisted around each other. I brought it slowly into my mouth, let it sit pinched between my teeth. The sugar coating the outside was rough on my lips. The sour juice popped on my tongue, the white chocolate melting as soon as the heat from my mouth touched it. It was the best thing I had ever tasted. I chewed it slowly, feeling every texture, reveling in the flavor. For as long as I could, I chewed, not wanting it to ever leave my mouth, my taste buds. But it dissolved, more and more, heaven slipping away from me, so I let it slide to the back of my tongue, held it there at my throat for as long as I could, then swallowed.

Grabbing the rest of the uncut apple along with the leftover piece in my hand, I walked to the pantry, twisted the doorknob with my sticky fingers, opened it, and threw away what remained.

Instead of stripping my bedsheets and replacing them, I grabbed an unused blanket and laid it over my sheet. I crawled back into bed and closed my eyes.

It was a little past six in the evening, Wednesday, the next time I saw Megan. It was during one of our library's children's readings. I was at the front desk, adding an event to our Google calendar, when she approached me. The small jean shorts she was wearing added emphasis to her long, tan legs, and I was sure now she had gotten her lips done—

just a little, top lip. She said the usual, that I seemed too young to be a librarian. *Yes, it seems like that.* She told me that on top of being young, I was too pretty. *Thank you.* I thought that would end it, but she kept talking. It seemed to me that she was choosing her words carefully, planning her sentences. She was lonely, married to a careerist. I was in the right place at the right time, she found me appealing, thought that maybe I could add color to her life. Maybe. But in my eyes, it was the opposite: Megan was the one bringing color.

I remember she was quick to tell me she had no children. “I brought my niece,” she had said. “Her mom, my husband’s sister, she had a migraine.”

“Migraines are terrible.” One should say something like that. Sympathy in response to other’s pain.

“Yes, but I don’t mind helping her. I don’t work.” Like it was a confession, like she had just given me a secret, a bit of her shame.

I didn’t know what to say. It was an odd stopping place for a conversation, so I thought maybe she wanted me to ask why she didn’t work. I settled for an “Oh?” A small answer with a slight lilt at the end. She could interpret it how she pleased.

“My husband has a good job. I don’t need to work. I don’t mean that to sound arrogant.” She offered a smile.

“Not at all.”

She opened her mouth and began to emit a sound, lips hovering around an invisible word, but then closed it. It was a quick thing, but I noticed—a slip up, a stumble, because she was about to admit a minor vulnerability to a person whom she thought maybe to impress.

Megan recovered. “It can be difficult making friends my age. Most women have young kids so they meet each other at things”—she motioned to the kids sitting on the floor and the watching parents—“at readings.”

At this point, after her admission, I thought that she was certainly grasping for friendship of some sort, like hands trying to grab onto a hot plate, dancing around the edges to find a cooler surface, one that could be held surely. Watching her was painful—I felt that she was skirting around the blatant question that she could have asked, only maybe she was afraid I would be overwhelmed by her honesty and slowly remove myself from further conversation. It was difficult for her to acknowledge her loneliness or sadness or need—I thought it only could have been something similar to that—regardless, it was a difficulty that I knew I had felt at least once before in my life. I recognized it, decided to save her.

“I don’t have kids either,” I said. “I’m not married. Or with anyone.”

It was visible, her relaxation. “Do you spend time with the other librarians, like, outside of work?”

I laughed a little. “No. They’re fine. But, you know.”

I didn’t know what I meant by that, but Megan appeared to be happy with my response. It opened up, for her, a way to ask the question she had been tiptoeing around. “We could maybe get a drink sometime?” She shrugged a little, tilted her head to the side, like her question was only a suggestion and she wouldn’t hurt at all if I thought to say no.

It was what I always said anyway, the word came out easy. I said yes. I gave Megan an old date due slip whose columns had been stamped full. On the top, above the columns and the typed *date due*, I told her to write her number.

About a week later we met for a drink—it was on a Friday, after I had gotten off work. We were both on our best behavior, ordering only two drinks instead of the three, four that we really wanted. Surely, we both had a few more when we returned to our separate homes that night. And that was how it began—drinks at restaurants, coffee in the mornings, walks, drinks at her house, and then sometimes, even, drinks at my house. It was a progression.

She shared whispers of details about her marriage, which was deteriorating. She was young, ten years or so Trey's junior. He was nearing 40. The age gap didn't appear to be the issue, but I had gotten the feeling that something wasn't quite right, that them together was unstable. That feeling stemmed from the fact that they were hardly ever together. Trey was a surgeon, an ENT who was obsessed with his work. Apart from each other they appeared as two perfectly formed people, but together they were lacking. So, better to keep a distance and keep civility. I wondered why they didn't consider divorce, but I couldn't bring myself to ask. It was unusual for me to have a girl friend like this, and I liked it. I felt at ease around Megan—superior, in a way that I had never felt before. Mysterious maybe. I couldn't put my finger on it, identify my feelings, but I liked them. I liked Megan.

Our conversations were deep in a superficial way, dancing words that made light of our realities—never quite telling the truth but always acknowledging its presence. It made our relationship more exciting. To give in to honesty would have been to admit that

we were both borderline alcoholics and mostly miserable, each for our own separate reasons—and where would that have gotten us? No, we would sip on our gin and tonics or wine or whatever and talk about the things that barely mattered, say *oh, it's just so hard sometimes* without ever saying what *it* was. Vague understanding was our silent agreement, pretending to get it even if we really didn't. Maybe this was just part of us being new in friendship; I couldn't tell.

When I first went to Megan's house, she introduced me to Trey. He was handsome in the most generic of ways. He looked at me briefly and said it was nice to meet me but quickly became distracted. Megan and I moved to her and Trey's master bathroom. He came in and out as he got ready to leave for work, but he didn't say anything to either of us. I could understand Megan's need for company.

Megan was seated at her makeup station, a chair nestled between two drawers and still connected to the main counter. Marble countertop. I sat on the counter, facing the mirror, feet in the sink. We were both fixing errors on our faces—she applying skin toner, part of her nightly routine, and I plucking my eyebrows. Each of us had a glass of wine nearby.

“Will you stay the night?” Megan finished her skin care routine and turned to face me.

I laughed at the thought of an adult sleepover. “I have work in the morning.”

Megan rolled her eyes. “At nine?”

“Yes.” I smiled and continued to perfect the shape of my eyebrows.

“An excuse. Please?”

“And Trey?”

Megan sighed. I couldn't tell if it was sadness or annoyance. I wanted to know. "He's not coming home tonight."

I felt uncomfortable, like I shouldn't have asked. I plucked another hair. "I'll stay."

Megan smiled, a full set of teeth aimed at me, tinged purple from wine. "Good."

We went to the kitchen, an elaborate room, just like every other—the entire house had hardwood floors, no carpet. Granite countertops. Covering the entirety of one of her living room walls was a mirror. It made the room look like it went on forever. I hopped up on the island in the kitchen, sat, legs dangling off the side. Megan was dressed for bed already, cute silk shorts with a loose tank. Every time she moved it caressed her skin underneath in a different way, hinting at her ribcage, the indent of her belly button, just a slight protrusion at her stomach. She gracefully waltzed back and forth on the hardwood floor, gossiping about her rich neighbors. I watched, sipped my wine, listened. She was the talker.

Megan was drinking heavily, more than I was. Perhaps because this was an occasion for her—to have someone keep her company this late. She must have forgotten about dinner, replaced it with wine and gossip; I didn't mind. I was grateful for the numbness beginning to fill my lips. I began to zone out, to feel my body rather than listen to Megan.

She walked up to me, stuck her hand out. "Bedtime."

I grabbed her hand and held it as I slid off the counter, wobbling when I landed, but holding fast to Megan. We both giggled like children. We stumbled and laughed

down the hall, all the way to the master bedroom. We got in the bed, pulled the cover over us.

I asked, “Is it okay if I sleep here?”

Megan’s cheek was pressed into a pillow, her lips kissing the fabric. “I asked you to stay.”

I almost clarified. In the bed. On Trey’s side.

Megan moved slightly, stretched one of her arms across my stomach. I told myself that Megan was my sister, though I didn’t have one. I thought *best friend*, this is what best friends do. I thought back to high school, younger. Maybe I had one. I thought: feel this.

Mornings are the best time of day for me. There’s a willpower that exists in the morning. It isn’t always like that in the afternoon or at night. Somehow, during the day, my body turns traitor and forgets what it woke up with. That’s expected. What’s not expected is to have a difficult morning, one where my lethargic body communicates with my mind and whispers, convinces it to weaken. The thing about sleep is that it’s magic. Whatever headaches line the inside of my skull the night before tend to disappear after a night’s sleep. So, as I drove home from Megan’s, frustration began to nestle in my bones, deep. I had wanted to stay, a little. I knew that. But now it wasn’t worth this feeling like I would need another night in order to conquer the day. I berated myself, promised that I would be more careful next time. I wanted to cry—tears of anger, the ones that come when you’re little and you don’t get your way.

Opening the door of my apartment, I walked immediately to the kitchen, opened the pantry and pulled out a bag of almonds. I grabbed three from the bag and put them in my mouth, chewed, decided they were my new favorite food, the best thing I'd ever tasted. I decided that this was good—a good decision.

No. Think of your progress. You haven't gone too far yet; you haven't undone yourself. You haven't ruined it. Stop chewing, stop. Spit it out.

I stilled my jaw, then swirled my tongue around my mouth, collecting every bit of the chewed almonds. Walking over to the sink, I bent and spit. Turning the faucet on, I let the chewed almonds run down. That was a close one.

I avoided Megan's good-morning text, only a small amount of remorse settling in my stomach. She said that she didn't even hear me leave. Responding promptly would reassure her, at least in my mind, that our night was successful. Of course, I couldn't be sure if that was the case—maybe Megan slept badly, maybe she was uncomfortable and regretful about inviting someone into her usually empty bed. But that didn't explain the good morning text. That text, to me, meant *hi hello I'm here see me*. I was hesitant. I felt that my survival depended on my ability to control my day, and the night before hadn't allowed me to do that. I couldn't draw a veil over, sweep under the rug, forgive and forget, push aside. Self-accountability demanded that I analyze every action, make decisions based on what I knew to be best for myself. I thought, if you sleep over at Megan's again, drink more, make sure you pass out, sleep hard.

I opened Megan's text message and then locked my screen, removing the notification that remind me she was there. I forgot about her for the rest of the day—

cataloguing books and movies, dealing with late-returns and patrons who didn't want to pay their fees. One little girl, short, with towhead hair and thick-rimmed black glasses filled out nine interlibrary loan forms. The little girl told me she *had* to have these nine books, smiled like she was embarrassed, told me she read nine every week. Every week.

When the library closed and I left, I felt good. I decided that instead of going on a walk, like I usually did, I would go for a run. I left work and drove back to my home to change into leggings and a long sleeve. I decided I would just run the loop round the City Park, see how many times I could do it. I thought *forever*. I was ecstatic to feel this way.

When I began to feel fatigued, I tried to trick my body by thinking of myself as a skeleton, bones moving like machinery, no muscles to grow weary, no heart rate to get too high and need to come down. I could make my legs keep the pace even though they were begging me to slow down, stop, take a break. Soon, I was just a worn-out girl running.

I began to walk home but became so dizzy that I had to sit down. A warm liquid rolled down my pants, urine staining the cloth darker and seeping down my leg. Once it left my pants, the urine rolled slowly down the slight tilt of the sidewalk. I sat there in the puddle I'd made until all the dizziness passed. I couldn't smile, but I told myself to be proud.

I tried to call Megan once I got home. She didn't pick up, which didn't surprise me. I thought she might be miffed since I hadn't responded to her text. Grabbing a Coke Zero and an apple, I sat on my couch, resting, until my phone began to ring.

"Hi," I answered.

“Hi, Lucy. Sorry I missed your call. My phone was in the other room.” Megan’s voice was sweet, kind, and I knew that she wanted my presence more than she wanted her pride.

“That’s okay. Are you busy?”

“No, honey. What’s up?”

“I was wondering what you were doing tonight. I thought we could make a few drinks.”

I didn’t have to see her to know that she was smiling. “Never too busy. What time?”

“I’ll change after work and then come over.”

“I’m glad you called. I thought something was wrong.”

“I’ve been stressed. But I’m excited to see you.”

“Water under the bridge. Text me when you get off.”

I pulled up to Megan’s house and walked inside, calling her name, but she didn’t answer. Thinking she might be out back, I walked through the house and outside. I yelled her name again but was greeted by Trey instead. He walked out from the shed in the back, sweaty and breathless.

“She’s up in her room,” he said.

I turned to walk back inside, but Trey stopped me.

“I’m sorry if I was rude the other day,” he said. “When we met.”

I said, “Not at all.”

“When I’m off work—you should come to dinner sometime. I could cook.”

“You cook?”

“Not well. But I can,” he said. He flashed a smile and looked like perfection—his body wasn’t sculpted, but he had broad shoulders and was skinny. A small amount of fat accumulated at the base of his stomach.

“Sometime,” I said.

“Do you have allergies?”

I paused. “I guess I’m an omnivore.”

He looked amused. “How did you and Megan meet?”

I considered telling him it was at the creek, but I stopped myself, knowing I wouldn’t have a logical explanation for that story.

“Work,” I said. “At the library.”

“You’re a librarian?”

I nodded my head.

“You could recommend a book for me some time.”

I said, “Sure,” and began twisting my body away from him. Hips, shoulders, whole body.

Megan was straightening her room, pulling her sheets tightly over the mattress. She smiled when she saw me, the brightest smile I’d ever seen. Her mouth was big, and it stretched widely around her white teeth. She walked to me and gave me a half-hug, said *hi hunny*. Her cinnamon breath slid up my nostrils. I breathed it in like oxygen.

“Trey’s home?” I said.

Megan nodded. “And doing yardwork.”

“How are you guys?”

“He told me he wanted to be around more.”

I stared at her, waiting for her to say more.

“That’s it,” she said. “Of course I don’t believe it.”

I put on my makeup: loose powder and mascara, the right amount for a librarian.

An hour into work, I couldn’t resist any longer. I texted Megan and asked what she was doing that night.

“Come over,” she texted. “Once you get off.”

I responded: “Okay, plan?”

Megan: “Surprise.”

A knot formed in my stomach. I couldn’t tell if it was excitement or suspicion. I was jealous of my time with Megan. It had become my lifeline—she distracted the hunger out of me with her big house, personality, and liquor. I never wanted to stop being around her. The idea of Trey slipping in between our relationship pained me to a point of sick anxiety. If he started spending more nights at his home, where would I sleep—not with Megan. The guest bedroom reminded me of the solitude of my own house. Small, frustrated tears began to fill my eyes, but I didn’t let them spill. I’d never been happier than when I was with Megan—never so at peace with myself—and I didn’t care that I drank myself to that state.

Drained from my worry, I stumbled out of work five minutes early, went straight to Megan’s. Without knocking, I pushed open the front door and went directly to their couch. I wanted my body to melt over the expensive sofa. Lying on my back, I turned my head to the side and pressed my cheek into the soft material. I thought about dissolving,

skin turning to plush. For the first time that day, I felt comfortable. A thickness in the air cemented my body to the couch and began to force my eyelids shut.

Someone walking into the room woke me. I wondered if I'd fallen asleep for long. My eyes cracked open and found Trey staring at me.

“We didn't hear you come in,” he said.

I cringed at his use of “we,” at the idea that he and Megan were now one together. I preferred them as separate entities—Megan for me and Trey for work.

“Sorry,” I said.

“Everything good?”

I told him it was, then used my core and hands to push myself to a lounging position. I looked away from Trey and then back at him. “So you're the surprise,” I said.

“I am.” He half-smiled.

“Great,” I said softly, before moving to a standing position. Spots clouded my vision and my knees buckled under me. I let myself fall back down onto the couch.

Trey rushed toward me. Checked my pulse, looked at my face. He was close to me. I wondered if he saw the color of my eyes or if he was only looking at the size of my pupils.

I pushed him off me. “I'm fine.”

He stared at me for a moment, and I knew he was deciding whether to be doctor or friend. “Megan's in the kitchen,” he said.

I left the room.

We were all three sitting at the table, and Megan was glowing. She smiled hugely at Trey and me; I imagined feeling what I thought was her picturesque completeness, and knew that I would never. It wasn't in my nature. I felt born to be sad, called to misery and self-hatred.

Megan said my name. "What did you think?"

"It was good." I avoided looking at my plate. A few bites were missing, and the rest of the meal was cut into small pieces and moved around the plate. I looked at Trey and thanked him for cooking. He said *you're welcome* but kept his eyes on my plate.

Megan seemed oblivious. "Have more wine," she said to me, and filled my glass. She moved to pour Trey more, but he put his hand over the glass. "Party pooper." She pouted. Her eyes stayed trained on Trey, though, and she looked at him the same way that she looked at me when she wanted something. I wanted to yell across the table at Trey and tell him to drink whatever she asks. Do what she says. I would have drunk bottles for her.

I accepted the wine and decided that the best way to survive the evening was to get drunk as soon as possible. Not to mention, the dinner I "ate" left me feeling hungrier than before. The few bites I took did nothing but awaken my hunger cues. Now I was starving. I let the warm liquid fill me.

"I'll clean up with you," I said to Megan.

"Yes," Trey said, and pushed his chair back to stand up.

"There's not much," I said. "Megan and I can do it."

"No worries."

"We can all clean," said Megan.

“Let’s turn on music,” I suggested. I needed to win Megan over, to remind her how it was better with just us, to make her see that Trey would probably go back to his usual ways and leave her alone again.

Megan looked at me and spun in a circle.

“Dishes and dancing.” I shook my shoulders a little.

Glancing at Trey, I was glad to see he was left out of the moment. Still, he followed Megan and I to the kitchen, carrying a few plates and glasses. I held my own plate and quickly walked to the garbage bin to dump my remains.

The music played, and I grabbed hands with Megan and danced with her. I giggled and sang along with the music loudly, letting my voice carry so I could be the largest presence in the room. I was drunk, could feel the alcohol’s burn coursing through my body like fire.

Megan and I washed and dried the dishes side by side, and I used the opportunity to bump and slide my body along hers. My hips rocked back and forth, and I sloshed suds from the dish water onto my shirt. I scooped a small handful of bubbles and placed it Megan’s nose. She crossed her eyes to look at it, then she looked at me. I continued singing and dancing. My actions said *don’t forget me*. But a slow song came on, and Trey tapped Megan’s shoulder. He said, “May I?” and took her hand. They swayed back and forth in the middle of the kitchen and I stood on the outskirts watching. Megan’s face tilted up and her eyes locked on Trey’s face. I saw all her want there, just by how she looked at him. She’d forgotten I was in the room; I knew it. She was so entranced with her husband’s newfound affection. The song ended.

“I think I’m going to head home,” I said.

Megan's face contorted. "No! You're staying the night."

"I think it's better if I go home."

"You're too drunk." Megan beamed as if she'd won. It did feel nice for her to show she wanted me.

I held up my phone. "Called a car. It's on its way. I'm just feeling tired."

Megan frowned but stopped arguing. She kept her eyes sternly on me and glared, but part of me hoped she'd fight a little harder for my presence, that she'd want me just a little more. She used to persist until all my walls had caved in and the word no didn't exist anymore.

I told them goodnight and went outside to wait for my car.

Pressing my head into the window, I breathed on the glass the whole drive home. Fog built up and before I got out of the car, I traced an L through the moisture.

Inside was dark and quiet. I tiptoed my feet across the linoleum as if to not wake someone—something about the dark made noise feel intrusive. Once I turned all the lights on, I let my steps fall harder. I walked to the shower, turned it on, and got in.

The steam from the hot water curled as it made its way up, up, eventually higher than the rod that held the shower curtain, and out. I started with the water just a little hot; as I grew used to it, I turned it up. Eventually, I had the water as hot as it would go. It was a burn that my skin was prepared for, still it turned bright red—especially so on my chest, right where the newest falling water hit. Nothing was as bad as opening the curtain, my last protection from the most condensed steam that the shower gave me. It was a race to grab my towel, wrap it around me, shiver until my skin dried.

I wondered where Megan and Trey’s night had gone. The thought of them getting along and ending the night intimately turned my stomach—not because I loved Megan, but because I considered her mine. Trey had his chance. I couldn’t justify his sudden change of heart. As I shivered, I pictured myself separating Megan and Trey, wedging myself between them so far that I couldn’t be removed.

I wanted Megan, and I wanted her with me tonight. The idea of stealing her from Trey stuck with me. I thumbed the corner of the bathroom counter and felt its sharpness. I got on my knees in front of it. I pulled my head back but couldn’t bring myself to swing it forward. I talked to myself. Back, then forward. Just once, one really good time. Ready, back. I hesitated again and almost gave up—but I calmed myself. Deep breath in and out. Back, then forward.

The collision blurred my eyesight and tears clouded my vision. Warm and wet blood slid down my face. I stood, slowly, and looked in the mirror. A bruise had already formed beneath split skin, blue mixed with purple. Light-headed and dizzy, I sat on the tile and leaned my head backward for a moment—but only a moment. After breathing in and out, I grabbed my phone off the counter and took a selfie, highlighting the bruising and blood. I sent it to Megan, wrote, “I slipped out of the shower. Hurts really bad and am dizzy. Will you come over? Maybe stay the night.”

She responded: “On my way.”

Sticky. Hot. Heart racing. My eyes opened wide, and I stared through the darkness and at the ceiling of Megan’s guest bedroom. I hadn’t wanted to sleep in this room, but I had no choice—Trey was home tonight. Colorful specks floated through my vision as I strained

to see more clearly. I imagined my pupils expanding, stretching over my irises and widening to grab hold of any present light. Only small bits of illumination from the moon splintered their way through the window's curtain. Peeling myself from my sheets, I sat and swung my legs off the edge of the bed. I knew the sweating was because of the room, which was just as extravagant as Megan and Trey's master. I felt Megan's absence and pictured myself a child being swallowed by a king-sized mattress and a lavender purple duvet that covered the entire bed and even hung to the floor on each side. When staying over at Megan's I had become used to her bed, her body by mine, the way her curves pressed the mattress downward.

I stood up, paused for a moment as dizziness and just a small amount of nausea passed through me. I left the bedroom and walked quietly through the house, ending up in the kitchen. Earlier that evening I'd seen the inside, turned my nose up at the chocolate cupcakes I wanted so badly. Now I reached for them, the plastic container bending slightly, whining in my hands and begging to be opened. Sliding to the floor, I sat with my back against the cabinet. I opened the container as quietly as I could, reached a hand in and delicately pinched one of the soft cakes between my fingers. Slowly, I tore away the paper wrapping around the base of the chocolate pastry, a few crumbs landing and sticking to my sweat-soaked shirt.

I desired it too much. I knew the moment I tongued the ridges of the frosting, took it into my lips, rolled it against the roof of my mouth, that I had lost every bit of wherewithal I'd ever had. Space and time slipped from me, I was just me on the ground in a kitchen, low glow of the refrigerator light above me, consuming calories upon calories of baked heaven. I finished one and ate another, then another. Small bits of

frosting touched and stuck to the outside of my cheeks, but I ignored it and continued to eat.

A light turned on in the hall and Trey walked into the kitchen. His eyes immediately found me. Staring up at him, I stopped chewing and forcefully swallowed the thick cake.

“You too?” He walked over, sat down by me, and pointed to a cupcake. “May I?”

“Go for it,” I said.

He took a large bite, chewed, and swallowed. “For me,” he said, “it’s the vanilla ice cream.”

“So plain.”

“But it’s my choice.”

“True.”

“And yours?” he said.

“Remember? Omnivore.”

He laughed—the first genuine laugh I’d seen come out of him. But then he quieted. “You don’t look like much of an omnivore.”

I shifted my eyes to the ground, then back toward Trey. “Fast metabolism.” I finished the cupcake in my hand and grabbed another. There was only one left.

Trey cleared his throat. “You know, Megan doesn’t love you.”

“She--,” I began.

“Not saying she hates you,” he said. “She pities you.”

I stopped chewing the cupcake in my mouth, spit it into my hand.

“Like a dog,” he said. His knees cracked as he stood up and walked back down the hallway.

My tailbone dug into the hardwood. I sat, surrounded by wrappers, crumbs, and the sweet smell of frosting.

I would finish the night here, only because I was desperate to see Megan in the morning—ratty blonde hair and too-plump lips. I knew she looked like this because she stayed with me when I hurt myself. We slept in my bed—a full—pressed close all night.

CAN I FEEL YOU?

She could have blamed it on the alcohol. It opened up the inside things—thoughts. Maybe if she and her husband drank together, she would want him more. She didn't believe that, but she thought it. Mostly, though, it was the talking. She and her husband were good, but they weren't perfect. There was something pressing itself between them, something only Laci seemed to feel.

Talking with Jamie was uncensored. They were like teenage girls together, sitting on the bathroom floor, locking the door behind them.

Laci sipped on a double of vodka, watered down by ice and a splash of water. She considered the fact that beer was safer for her, but it was her birthday. She was home; that was as safe as safe could get. Her husband had wanted to have a party, something small, a few friends, so they did. It was afternoon, but the sun's harsh rays still beat down on them, had effect. Laci felt sweat begin to bloom at the top of her neck, just where skin met hair.

What she thought about: Jamie's body twenty feet away from hers.

Cross-infection also reminded Laci of layered and overlapped things. She thought of herself as a cross-infected being. She loved her husband and she loved Jamie. It was different. Cross, cross, cross-pollination, cross-cutting, cross-stich. All things intertwined.

The sun still hit Laci the right way, and a drop of sweat moved from its spot at her hairline and rolled down the middle of her back. She knew the sun wouldn't burn her—it was too low in the sky—but she wished it would. She wanted her skin to peel.

Her husband walked up and stood beside her, wove his arm through hers, connected her to him. He moved his face closer to her, kissed her cheek, whispered into her ear, Are you drinking vodka?

Laci gave him a half-smile, It's my birthday.

I just want you to be smart, he said, a bit louder. People might have heard, wondered. They might've thought it was Laci's fault, which it might've been.

Laci gave him her eyes, opened them wide, told him to stop, asked him why he would say that.

She removed her arm from his, softly, squeezed his hand once before she let go. It reminded her of the *Creation of Adam*, two hands slowly, delicately slipping away from each other.

She thought of her seizure, her mind delicately slipping out of her body, out of consciousness, before she fell headfirst onto the cement of the grocery store. Her arms tensed up, hands curled toward herself. She shook.

Laci thought she might have different sides to herself now.

The sweat that slid down her back collected at Laci's waistband. She felt the dampness of it clinging to her; it wouldn't leave until she showered later that night, used hot water to soak up the sticky salt that tried to dry onto her skin.

The thing about Jamie's legs was that they were exactly the right size. When they sat on the bathroom together and drank, talked, and Jamie's leg lay on top of Laci's, it didn't hurt at all. Jamie's leg didn't force her own into the ground. Laci thought maybe the quick hard smack of her skull onto concrete just woke her up. She didn't know if normal could satisfy now that her body had opened her eyes.

Jamie wrote Laci a letter. It was the first time Laci was sure how Jamie felt. Before, she could sense the buzzing between them, but she didn't know if it was reciprocated. Laci found the letter in her make-up bag.

Jamie wrote: I'd like to go on a date with you.

Laci thought of *date*. It made her think of time, a time set. She remembered the date she and her husband went on for their anniversary, a nice restaurant. He told her to order whatever she wanted. Laci thought of fruit—ripened dates and dried dates. She never tried them ripened, but she'd heard they melt in your mouth and taste like caramel.

Laci and Jamie got ready in the bathroom, dancing to music and doing each other's hair. They did it every week, a normal girls' night. But now that the letter had been written, it was different, a little awkward. Something heavy hung around them. Laci felt the pressure of the air when they put their makeup on. She thought of gravity, wondered if it was only a force pushing something toward the center of the earth. When Jamie curled Laci's hair, Laci felt the air in front of her pushing her backward. She leaned back just enough to feel Jamie's breasts brush against her shoulder blades.

Later that night, when Laci was alone, she sat at the edge of her bed and unfolded the letter. Seeing the words on the page made her breathe in deeply. She closed her eyes, waited a second. Laci read the words out loud, pictured Jamie saying them to her, imagined Jamie's voice, the way it sounded different than her own. The thought of hearing Jamie's words in real-time sent electricity into her stomach.

Jamie wrote: Can I feel you?

Laci let her body fall backward until the bed caught her. She thought of Jamie's words, thought of Jamie's hands on her. *Yes, you can feel me, what do you want to feel? Touch me. That's what I want. Please, I'm dehydrated.* Laci held the letter with her right hand, pressed it to her sternum. Her left hand moved itself underneath her waistband. She touched herself, gently, in an exploratory way, like she imagined Jamie might touch her. Like it was the first time. Laci's fingers were the conduit for Jamie's words. They controlled her, crawled over her body, made it move, made her blood hot, made her heart fight to escape her chest. Can I feel you?

The kettle on the stovetop let out a soft hum, a breathy noise. The water was close to boil. The hum grew louder until it was a clear, shrill whistle. Laci wanted to see how loud it would get; she watched the steam billow out of the tiny hole that covered the spout. She put her hand over the steam, not so close that it would burn her, but close enough to handle. Moisture collected on her palm, hot and sticky.

Her husband walked up behind her, snaked his arm in front of her, turned off the burner. The whistle dissolved and the hum returned.

I was listening to that, she said.

Laci was interested in the strength of things. She wanted to see how hot the shower could get in the morning, see if she was strong enough to stand in it. Laci liked to watch the Olympics just to see records get broken. She wondered if they'd ever stop, or if people would get better and better until there was no point in competition—everyone would be the best. Laci wished she could take her car onto the interstate, push her foot all the way down on the gas pedal, watch the speedometer climb. Mostly, she wished she

could take her car anywhere—she had to be seizure free for six months; she had another five to go.

Being confined to her legs made Laci more aware of her house. She spent a lot of time cleaning. She scrubbed the kitchen counters with bleach over and over. Her knuckles started to bleed. She folded and unfolded the clothes in her closet. She arranged outfits, ones that she thought Jamie would like to see on her. She took pictures of the outfits so she wouldn't forget. She shopped online. She purchased lingerie pieces and didn't tell her husband about them. She saved them to wear when she and Jamie were getting ready to go on their dates.

Bathroom. Locked door. Sideways-gravity.

Laci was on the bathroom floor, lying on her stomach, hands to her sides. Her cheek pressed into the rug on the ground, nose pointing toward Jamie, who was sitting next to her. Jamie unclipped Laci's bra—silky black—made her back a canvas. With her pointer finger, Jamie traced the bumps of Laci's spine, all the way down to her tailbone, the same downward path as yesterday's sweat. Laci let her eyes fall half-closed. Jamie's finger moved, straight as an arrow, up Laci's back. It made its way to the base of Laci's skull, paused to play with the wispy hair that had fallen out of her ponytail. Jamie lifted her finger over Laci's ear, set it down on her cheek, and traced over her face until it came to Laci's lips; it brushed over them, rested there.

Laci let her tongue push through and found Jamie's finger. She teased it forward, into her mouth. Laci's teeth bit down, just a little pressure, and her tongue circled around Jamie's finger. She tried to feel the ridges of Jamie's fingerprint, hoped to steal it off of her skin and keep it with her forever. Always identifiable.

Jamie pulled her finger away. What does it taste like, she asked.

Laci tasted the absence of it, wanted to keep it in her mouth. Skin, she said.

Laci thought of her seizure when her husband fucked her. It was how he went in and out, his body pulled away from hers briefly before pushing back, colliding. She couldn't relax. She felt like she was on the ceiling, watching herself. She thought about how different parts of her looked when he pressed into her, her shoulders sliding up an inch or so on the bed, catching the impact, then sliding back down. The back of her head kept time with the mattress like a metronome. She didn't want to think about her skin, squeezed pressed hit, rippled from being grabbed, pinched.

Laci's husband looked at her eyes, held her gaze while he moved in her. Laci felt like a bobble-head, but she didn't break concentration. It was the home stretch, the finale; Laci said, *yeah, baby*, over and over, like she had lost every other word in the English language. She lent him those words, feigned enthusiasm, hoped to push him over the edge as quickly as possible.

Sometimes she felt bad for being so good at making him think she still liked it. She preferred pretense, would rather dance around the issue, pull the wool over his eyes than tell him the truth. She pictured the empathy that would cloud his face, the way he would say sorry and I'll be less rough, like a softer seizure was somehow better than a Grand mal.

Laci waited for her husband to fall asleep. She slipped her body out of bed and made her way to the kitchen. It wasn't her plan to curl up on the tile, but it felt good. She took turns pressing her cheeks to the cool floor, alternating what was in her line of sight:

the bottom of the dishwasher, floor meeting cabinet, turn, the base of the oven, a drawer holding pots and pans, turn, repeat.

She liked the solidness of the tile. She lifted her head up a few inches, dropped it down and let it hit the hardness, a small headache. Repeating the action that set her free made her feel good, helped her to remember that she loved the result even though she hated the shaking.

She moved herself onto her stomach, hands to her sides, rested her cheek on the floor, left it there. She closed her eyes, freed her right arm from its place and used a finger to trace the same spot on her hairline that Jamie had touched. She copied Jamie's actions, moving her finger to her mouth and sucking a little.

Laci thought of things: bodies, her/Jamie's hands holding, grasping, reaching; stirring; anticipation.