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# The Present Giver And Other Stories on Human Connections

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# The Present Giver

And Other Stories on Human Connections

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Thesis

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## Abstract

### The Present Giver and Other Stories on Human Connections

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The Present Giver and Other Stories on Human Connections is a collection of seven short stories dealing with individuals that struggle to connect to another person. However, the stories also explore that these characters still feel the need to connect, stories very indicative of my own struggles with apathy and relationships. The critical analysis takes on a creative non-fiction approach as a way to show my development as a writer and how these stories relate to what I've learned through the years from my love of reading.

## Table of Contents

<b>These Are the Fables of my Street .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>The Present Giver .....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>The Affair .....</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>Wine is the Best Company .....</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>Another Rock and Roll Cliché.....</b>	<b>80</b>
<b>You Can Do the Dishes.....</b>	<b>94</b>
<b>Train Station.....</b>	<b>113</b>
<b>Her Passion .....</b>	<b>125</b>

## These are the Fables of My Street

“Give me a home where the past won’t pay no mind in case I’m bringing my own,” is the opening line to the New Pornographers song “Three or Four,” and I think that’s an appropriate way to start a critical discussion of my writing and influences, especially since my mind is a dangerous thing to unleash. I find myself between reality and imagination most times, often mistaking vivid dreams for actual occurrences. Still, the road to becoming Erin B. Waggoner, a now mature, literary writer starts where everything begins: childhood.

When I was younger, I had no use for short stories; I preferred the longer stories, the novels, the “classics.” Reading (and being able to understand) the “big kid books” at age eight made me feel somehow superior to my classmates. While my peers were still reading *The Cat in the Hat* and second-grade level books with pictures and two large-print paragraphs per page, I was reading novels like *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Les Miserables*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Then, I was handed a book of Edgar Allan Poe’s short stories. I can’t recall who gave me the book, just that I was uncertain at first, but eventually succumbed, since the book was at least two hundred pages. I was enamored with the idea that so much could be said in less than a novel-length story. How in the world could this be literature? This is the moment I changed my mind about short stories, as the “low, dull, quick sound –much such a sound as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton” continued to pound below the floorboards (Poe 221).

When I became bored of just reading the stories, I decided to start writing and found a creative niche aside from music. Granted, my stories were simple stories I would write in a small journal, that had no realization of metaphor, theme, or even characterization and setting, but I was only ten, so I excuse myself for being so aloof in taking my writing seriously. I found myself frustrated that my stories lacked real depth, the same literary prowess I gathered from all those

years of reading classics. I wanted to write more than just a story, I wanted to be able to create a story clearly in a reader's mind without any question to my intent. That's why I chose to go into Creative Writing after realizing that Linguistics made me fall asleep during lectures. After taking four classes in creative writing for my Bachelor's Degree at Morehead State University, I decided to try my hand at being a professional writer, only working at the Goodwill Industries because I liked to eat and have heat. For two years, I went about the process of sending out the stories and poems I wrote in my classes to various journals on the East coast, never producing anything new because I was drained from working elsewhere. Still, I did manage to get one short story published in *HLLQ* and even made twenty five dollars! Even though I knew the story was my most successful to date, I still recognized the errors after seeing it published, finding places I could have clarified or even verified that there was a reason for the pronoun confusion in the story.

However, something was missing from my little writer life: I wasn't happy.

I made the decision to attend graduate school in hopes of finding a focus for my writing. I'd already come a long way from that little girl with a flowered journal, but I wanted to be a more mature writer. I knew I had the natural talent for storytelling, but still couldn't figure out what was wrong with my methods. I wanted to learn what was wrong, how to improve my writing to more a perfect craft, be it style, specific themed issues, or a sense of development that was my own creation, something that said "Erin B. Waggoner wrote this" without having to look at the author. I wanted to hone my craft into something amazing, something I wasn't even aware was possible. The lessons I learned? Revision. I had never revised anything as much as I did when I started my Master of Arts program here at Marshall University. Everything had always come naturally, so revisions for me always dealt with maybe adding a few more sections,

rewording, and editing. I've never completely revised a story before, perhaps out of fear, probably more out of ego. I knew what I was saying; why wasn't it clear to everybody else?

### Testament to Youth in Verse

"There is no such thing as a good influence. Because to influence a person is to give him one's own soul."

-Oscar Wilde, playwright

Even though my favorite book of all time is Cervante's *Don Quixote*, I wouldn't say it was the most influential to my own writing, but the book did open my eyes to a new brand of mature writing: humor, satire, picaresque style, and use of verbal wordplay. These are a few things I often see in my own writing, though they are not all apparent in this collection of short stories. Take for instance this passage:

They arrived that night in the heart of the Sierra Morena, where Sancho determined to spend the night, and indeed, as many days as their food would last. They bivouacked between two rocks among a number of cork trees. But destiny, which, according to the opinion of those whose lives are not illuminated by the light of the true faith, arranges and adjusts all things its own way...

(220)

In several of my stories, destiny plays a major role in the lives of my characters and their interactions. For example, the first story in my collection deals with the destiny related to two girls that grew up playing together but stopped as they got older, only to end up together in the end. After years of trying to avoid each other, "after all those years of not wanting to play house with Ali Merrick anymore, it's exactly what Teagan wanted to do for the rest of her life." Their

destinies are interwoven, and I even use another Cervantes technique: wordplay. These two young girls had been friends when they were younger, but a holiday gift exchange and the changing attitudes of second graders starts to bring them apart. I used the word “chemistry” throughout the sequences, having Teagan tutoring Ali in a high school Chemistry class, only to have them not see each other until Chemistry in college, a much mature Ali ready to realize her attraction to her childhood friend. Their destinies intertwined through a series of events before Teagan can realize her true destiny, before she can become her own “knight-errant” and overcome her petty childhood trauma dealing with giving gifts, allowing her to fulfill her destiny in the end by being able to give the one gift she always avoided: herself.

However, just reading *Don Quixote* as an undergrad wasn’t what triggered my academic curiosity about the book. I managed to take a summer class on the novel, and the name Michel Foucault came up in a discussion, a name I remember hearing but never really cared. In *The Order of Things*, Foucault uses the character of Don Quixote as an example for his claim that all periods in history had underlying conditions of truth that decided what was appropriate. Foucault’s book was my first real experience with theoretical approaches to reading and writing literature. Little did I know that I would be reintroduced to Foucault with *The History of Sexuality*, a book that helped me start to develop a better understanding of sexuality, so that I could use this in my writing. Foucault’s claim that history has repressed sexuality too long opened my eyes, allowing me to finally write freely. In turn, I was able to open up my own opinions on the sexuality within the media and what was deemed appropriate to me, regardless if it was seen as pornographic by others. Take for instance my favorite metaphor: sex as a way to describe playing the guitar. In “Her Passion,” my previously published story that I have revisited for revisions in this collection, the sex and guitar metaphor is taken one step further, playing with

the perpetually confusing pronoun confusion of two female lovers, referring to the guitar as simply “she” or “her,” never giving it a direct name, for that would be to define a passion, and the story revolves around the protagonist, Lyhan’s inactiveness in defining her sexual attraction to her human friend and focusing solely on her guitar, the safer option. When I was writing this story, my biggest problem was with pronoun confusion, and rereading the story several years after publication, after taking those graduate classes in creative writing, I realize ways that I could improve the narrative to make the pronouns work perfectly and still not giving the guitar a name to clarify pronouns. I want the reader to think about it, why “she” does not have a name, so that the revelation that “she” is just a guitar is not as ridiculous or undermining the narrative. In a sense, I’m taking Foucault’s idea of repressed sexuality and completely turning repression into an actual healthy sexual relationship.

Somebody in my fiction workshop at Marshall University wrote this comment on one of my stories: “Another lesbian love story. Nice.” I never wanted to be labeled as a lesbian writer, since my sexuality only defines part of who I am. However, being a female writer, I feel as though I understand the male psyche better than the female psyche, and not because of my several friends telling me I’m worse than a man sometimes when it comes to relationships and sex. I’m not afraid of sexuality, so I’m not afraid to tackle the difficulties of sexual relationships within a story. My frustrations with writing sexuality into a story deal mostly around my want to successfully narrate those non-verbal tensions and sexual frustrations without making it sound like something published in the latest “Dear Penthouse” column. Still, I write from the persona of a woman most of the time, partially because I am a woman, I understand my body and the body of other women, but mostly because women acknowledge emotions more than men do on a verbal level, and the purpose of these stories is to tie them into emotional responses, especially

those stories dealing with women that have trouble verbally expressing their own wants and needs to fulfill their desires, sexual or otherwise.

### Miss Teen Wordpower

“He who does not understand your silence will probably not understand your words.”

-Elbert Hubbard, editor

Now, let’s talk about what we talk about when we talk about literary devices. For me, one of the things I’ve always tried to incorporate into stories but never knew how or when, or what exactly to use. When I started actually studying the novels I read, I began to understand the literary devices used at a new level, began to understand how to better incorporate them into my own stories. In “The Present Giver,” I take a more literary approach to details: the number eight plays a significant role for me, since Teagan was eight when she realized she was different, thanks to a second grade gift exchange and those mean girls in the class. Therefore, the number eight appears subtly during her most significant events regarding her gift giving practices. She is eight when the event happens, in eighth grade when she renounces dating, her younger brother is turning eight when she tutors Ali Merrick, the clock reads eight p.m. when Ali first appears at Teagan’s dorm room, and the trip back to her family’s for the holidays occurs eight years after she starts dating Ali. The cultural claim and image of the number eight when placed on its side is not lost on me, since visually 8 turned on its side means infinity  $\infty$ , but it also gives a visual representation of breasts, an extremely subtle hint into Teagan’s true destiny/sexuality.

However, no works really directly influenced me between the times of Don Quixote, until the early twentieth century, when the Jazz Age, the Lost Generation bore writers like Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald. These works held a new resonance for me when I read them again as an undergrad and graduate student. Studying others’ writing was one thing, but why did

I cling to these particular works, this particular time in literary history? What was so amazing about these novels that I kept going back to the library for more by the same author(s) as a young kid? *The Great Gatsby* by Fitzgerald opened up a new world for me; the novel was short, but it said so much in so little. The intensity of such a short novel made me appreciate the brilliance of Fitzgerald's writing. My curiosity into why I enjoyed these books more than others launched my career as an English major. When I finished reading all of Fitzgerald's books available at the library, I started to read the biographies, only to discover the parallels to his fictional characters and his real life. For example, Fitzgerald uses his alma mater, Princeton, as the setting of his 1920 novel, *This Side of Paradise*, as well as using Manhasset and Great Neck as the basis for his imaginary East Egg and West Egg in *The Great Gatsby* (Meyers 126). Fitzgerald used his own experiences to create his characters, acknowledging in his Notebooks, the comparison between Amory Blaine and himself, stating that both lacked certain qualities but inherited others (Meyers 28). Much like Fitzgerald's "literary double," I have incorporated characteristics from my own life into my characters, places, and events. The most obvious parallel lies with the setting of my stories; the majority of them occur within a Kentucky setting, similar to that of the many towns I have lived in the state, none more obvious than the use of Maysville, Kentucky, the place I was born and raised, in the story "The Present Giver." Every character is given a specific quirk from me that relates to their character as a whole. Take for instance, Tommy Maelstrom in "Another Rock and Roll Cliché," the character the furthest from being a direct literary double. However, Tommy started playing guitar on an old Fender acoustic that was given to him to keep him out of trouble as a youth and used alcohol as a means to cope with his loneliness; these are direct events from my own life.

## The Slow Descent into Alcoholism

“Always remember that I have taken more out of alcohol than alcohol has taken out of me.”

-Winston Churchill, prime minister

Most of my favorite writers were alcoholics (including Fitzgerald) or at least bordering on a major drinking problem, like John Steinbeck. I didn't understand drinking problems until I became an alcoholic myself. When I read the novels, shorts stories, and poems from these writers, even as an undergrad, the only alcohol I had tried was a sip of beer my paternal grandmother had given me at age five. I thought it was disgusting; I still don't like Bud Light. Around the time I seriously considered English as a major (though my intention was for linguistics, not literature or writing) was about the time I turned twenty-one. It wasn't until I became a serious writer, until I graduated and lived that bohemian, writer lifestyle, that I became a serious drinker. I had my first apartment by myself, living in Frankfort, KY, planning on living off of my writing, listed myself as a freelance writer on my taxes, subscribed to literary journals and writing magazines, all the while immersing myself in my own scene, one that I created on my own, since I refused to leave the comfort of my one bedroom apartment, equipped initially with only a stool and clock radio bought from the Goodwill Industries that I worked at, and the twin air mattress borrowed from my uncle. I thought I was finally a serious writer, that I was proving myself by living what I thought was my own little writer heaven. Little did I know that my solitude would lead me to another stereotypical writer woe: alcoholism.

“Wine is the Best Company” forced me to face my own fears. Sure, my parents drank, but both are still living, and the history of alcoholism in my family was always with in-laws, never with blood kin. In the story, Langley's father had died from complications due to his drinking, yet she still followed in his footsteps. However, she lived alone and rarely spoke to her mother; even her neighbors tried to intervene, but she refused to acknowledge anybody. She had

no friends left, no animals to keep her company, and no boyfriend to worry about, so she could continue to drink in what she considered her own peace. However, when one's mother dies, something opens up; emotions you tried to hide, even if you hated your mother, tend to surface. For Langley, her internal affection for her mother causes her to realize that she's lonely. Even though she tries to continue her life the same way, she realizes that a change needs to be made, that she needs to acknowledge her own self before she can acknowledge somebody else.

### Adventures in Solitude

"I lived in solitude in the country and noticed how the monotony of a quiet life stimulates the creative mind."

-Albert Einstein, theoretical physicist

The book that I've read more times than any other is *Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger. I never understood why this book means so much to me; the protagonist, Holden Caulfield seemed lonely, lost, confused about life. That's exactly how I felt, and after reading this novel for the first time in sixth grade, my writing started to reflect those feelings. I was no longer writing about silly things like bees that needed to find honey or little girls that were better than the boys. My writing ventured into darker territories, which unleashed my imagination into creating these dark tales that no longer focused on funny, happy things. It also introduced me to a new way of writing an introduction, that it wasn't absolutely necessary to tell a character's entire life story before the events you want to write. The opening of *Catcher in the Rye* starts, "If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don't feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth" (Salinger 1). In all honesty, I don't feel like going into it, either, which is why I

decide to start my stories only telling significant details, the part of the story that starts the cycle of events told, such as the case in “The Affair.”

After much revision, I decided it was necessary to start right where the tension starts between the married couple: “„These aren’t yours,” Michael said before he looked into Michelle’s guilty, head-lighted eyes. He knew, and she could tell. He was predictable, not stupid. (47)” The married couple, Michael and Michelle, are submissive characters struggling to find their identities, much like Holden Caulfield, so I needed to explore what would happen if a dominant figure moved into their lives. Mikhala is Michael’s literary foil, and at the same time, Michelle’s foil as well. Even though Salinger used first person narrative to establish a character that was afraid to admit his own faults, afraid to face his own life, I eventually decided to write this story in third person, though it originally started as first person in my note-taking process when thinking up the story. I wanted to convey that Michelle was afraid to face her own life, but when I actually sat down to write the narrative, the first person, Salingerian way of illustrating this face sounded so wrong for her story. In the end, I chose to write the story in the third person format to showcase the separateness that Michelle feels from her own life, that she is just a participant and not in control, which both frustrates and excites her. The idea was to determine how somebody could love somebody, yet be so unhappy. The point was not that Michelle was awakened to the world of loving women, but that loving women was exotic, since her affair with a woman had awakened emotions she thought were dormant. Michael as a character was written as a brick, because this is the way that Michelle views him, not how he really is beyond her viewpoint. When she and Michael finally fight, she realizes that they need to learn to communicate better, that they both need to give a little if they want the marriage to work, so I leave the narrative with a dangling ending.

## Ballad of a Comeback Kid

“Gratitude bestows reverence, allowing us to encounter everyday epiphanies, those transcendent moments of awe that change forever how we experience life and the world.”

-John Milton, poet

Thanks to advanced placement exams in English, I did not have to take a single English course in college. Since I had taken the AP English course in high school, I was given the option to take the exam to try for college credit. Not one to pass up an opportunity, I paid the necessary fee and successfully took the exam, which counted towards my English course requirement in college when I started my freshman year. Then, I transferred my sophomore year, floating until I could make up my mind about what I wanted to do. Maysville Community College was not going to let me graduate without taking *some* form of English course, so, I went about finding a combination of 101 and 102 for an independent study, an advanced English course with me as the only student. The professor had me read several novels, and she gave me free reign to pick topics for essays. When I first read *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by James Joyce, I wanted to shoot myself, because I had never felt more stupid in my life. Then, the chapters progressed, and the Joyce’s writing style progressed, and I understood. The opening of the novel is the perfect example: “Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down along the road and this moocow that was coming down along the road met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo...” (3). This novel was brilliant! I became enamored with the stream of consciousness (SOC) method of writing, and began to imitate that, trying my hand at writing down thoughts and not revising them to make sense later. At one point, I even found some of my old stories that I’d written as a child, using the basis of these stories and my mentality at that age as an experiment. It allowed me to understand exactly what Joyce was

doing with his stream of consciousness method; not just getting me to read and understand, but to actually have my writing skills expand through these examples.

Despite the fact that I managed to somewhat successfully incorporate the Joycian stream of consciousness method with my characters and narratives, I decided that pure SOC was not exactly how I wanted to tell my stories. In “The Present Giver,” the main character starts out as a young girl, and even though the story is in third person, the eight year old mentality is still apparent:

After considerate contemplation, she decided to buy a coloring book with super heroes she had seen in the comic books some of the boys read at recess. She knew she had an extra set of eight crayons at home that her parents had purchased for eight cents at the beginning of the school year, so she could give a coloring book AND crayons.

(22)

However, unlike Joyce, I wanted to pay more attention to the actual events, not overly concerned with the aesthetic process of completely immersing text into a character’s consciousness. While I respect and understand Joyce’s use of SOC in Portrait, I decided that mimicking a master of writing was not how to tell this story.

### Bones of an Idol

“Indeed the Idols I have loved so long / Have done my credit in this World much wrong: / Have drowned my Honour in a Shallow Cup / And sold my Reputation for a Song.”

-Edward Fitzgerald, poet

Now, let's talk about the literary movement that affected me the most as a writer: the Beat movement. Kerouac, Ginsberg, Burroughs, DiPrima. All these writers combined stream of consciousness, humor, struggles with self, and managed to tie their own lives into the equation as literary doubles. This impressed me, because I had done them all separately, but here was a movement that I didn't really discover until I went for my Bachelor's degree, until I was taking back to back English courses that varied from Old English to Shakespeare to postmodernism. This was the time I took my first writing workshop, as well. I didn't realize until I sat down to write – combining all of the methods, styles, and themes that had shaped me as a writer – how much the Beat writings influenced me, even if I did have trouble following along at first. In "Train Station," I explore what happens on the figurative road of a person staying in an idle state, a person given the opportunity to change, with the ability to convert to the beatnik manifesto, but who chooses to stay dormant, afraid of what she'll find once she makes that move. During the story, Fred realizes that she is trapped in time, a fact made prominent by the giant clock watching over her in the train station. Even though Veda could promise to turn into something more than a casual conversation while passing the time, Fred decides to stay in place, sitting on those old, worn benches in the station, waiting for a life that traps her. Fred's unhappiness lies within her want to be "on the road," to escape established responsibilities she feels, one of the very reasons Beats existed in the first place.

However, there was something I noticed about the Beat movement, something I noticed in most of the movements I enjoyed: where were the women? I was immersed in boys' town, and didn't even realize it until I took a Women in Literature course at Morehead. Even though the class was structured around novels like *Jane Eyre*, I was still introduced to women writers that were writing at the same time, the same movements as my favorite men like Hemingway, Joyce,

and Kerouac. I wouldn't really immerse myself into my curiosity until several years later at Marshall University during a Beats, Black Mountain Arts, and Black Arts poetry graduate class. Since I now had an excuse to research more on women writers in the Beat movement, I took the opportunity to discover that even the women writers, these free bohemian types, were still revolved around the hype of the movement, usually involved some way with an influential man of the movement, and not published until years after the movement ended. In *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, Diane DiPrima states:

Meanwhile, in the outside world everything was changing faster and more than we realized. We thought we were doing the same things we'd always done because the changes happened in slow motion, but happen they did, and when we looked out the window again we were someplace else.

(125)

DiPrima talks about the changes that happen, not just personal but in the surrounding world. In the story "You Can Do the Dishes," I write about those changes that happen and how a young girl grows into adulthood without understanding the reasons behind her hydrophobia.

Like the main character in the story, I have a problem being submerged in water. Unlike the main character, I can get into the water if I have to, because I was never abused (that I'm aware of) as a child. Unfortunately, abuse of children happens too often, and repression of these memories is a common coping mechanism, even if we're unable to explain strange quirks and fears. Hydrophobia usually emerges among children, and adults that gain this fear of water usually never seek treatment. What isn't mentioned is those children that develop the fear after age five and before adulthood.

The thing about this story that disturbs me the most deals with the fact of repression. Sigmund Freud was one of the first to study psychological repression. One of the reasons he gave was traumatic events, and childhood molestation definitely falls into this category (DepressionGuide). Brooks Glendower experienced something horrible as a child, but has repressed the memory; something Freud refers to as a battle between the id, ego, and superego. The thing that intrigues me the most deals with how a person reacts to a fear that is difficult to escape, since water makes up the majority of the Earth and body, and is required in daily life.

### From Blown Speakers

After silence, that which comes nearest to expressing the inexpressible is music.”

-Aldous Huxley, Author

Music is my first love. When I was reading books like *Tale of Two Cities*, *Catch-22*, and *1984*, I decided that I could handle learning instruments, too. At age eight, my father let me kidnap his old Fender acoustic, the one he had bought when he was sixteen, the age he had learned guitar. I was half the age he was when he learned and too introverted for lessons, so he bought me a guitar chord book and let me hide in my room. My frustration in building calluses on my tiny fingers felt worth it, since I was the first person to play guitar in my class, despite another kid’s claim the next year when he started lessons.

“Another Rock and Roll Cliché” combines my two loves: writing and music. A few years back, I read a review on a book that had already done this, so I searched every bookstore until I found a copy of *Lit Riffs*. The book contained stories that were based on songs and written by critics and others in the music business. Most of the stories were lacking that literary edge, that oomph that makes a lasting story, but one story, “Maggie May” – the self-proclaimed first lit riff by Lester Bangs in 1981 – stuck out among the others. Bangs had taken Rod Stewart’s “Maggie

May” and written a short story about the tale told in the song; he went beyond the song to explore what these characters represented, what brought them to this particular point in the song:

There she was, the Perfect Slattern, propped atop that barstool ugly and coarse as only fargone alcoholics can be, forty if she was alive but still looking all there in a leathery kind of way that surprised him, that turned him on, but here *he'd* somehow ended up, ditched by a friend who unlike him had enough money to keep on drinking, and he looked at her and she at him and a pact was thereby sealed before a single word was spoken on either side – now is that true love or what? Mutual convenience perceived through an alcoholic fog was more like it.

(2)

Even though Bangs was mostly a music critic, he had written something that was inspirational enough to start a new type of literature, as opposed to songs coming from literature, such as “The Ghost of Tom Joad” by Bruce Springsteen, inspired by John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Ever since this book, I have wanted to write my own lit riff but have never been motivated or even found the perfect song. After fall semester 2008 ended, I drove home for the holidays. Listening to cheesy Christmas songs on the radio put me in the wind down mentality on my cold drive back home to Kentucky. Then, Dan Fogelberg’s “Same Old Lang Syne” came on, and my mind turned back to creative mode. I was familiar with the song – heck, it had been played on the radio every year since before I was born – but the thought had never occurred to me to write a lit riff on the song. Inspiration hit and wouldn’t leave until I sat down and penciled out the story. The main scene in “Another Rock and Roll Cliché” – the scene that takes up most of the story – between Tommy and Maria is my version of the song. However, the framework was all invented in order to allow Tommy to get to the point where he “met [his] old lover in the

grocery store” (Fogelberg). Much like Bangs, I invent a story for the characters in the song, giving the song a larger context.

### Letter from an Occupant

“Just don't give up on trying to do what you really want to do. Where there is love and inspiration, I don't think you can go wrong.”

-Ella Fitzgerald, Jazz Singer

That brings me to Lisa Alther, my biggest influence as a Southern woman writer. My fiction writing professor at Morehead State suggested I would like her work, since my own work in his class reminded him of her writing. So, I went and picked up a copy of *Kinflicks*, to discover that I now had a favorite new author. I loved her novels so much that I did research independently to write a scholarly book on her works, since there were so few academic-type resources on her writing. After graduating with my Bachelors, I put a few years of effort into preparing this book, but still didn't feel ready, so I decided to go to graduate school, planning to use my work on Lisa Alther as my thesis. I even managed a brief email correspondence with Ms. Alther herself. At one point, she even requested to read my story, “Her Passion,” sending me this response:

Very many thanks for sending me your story, which I read with great amusement and admiration. It was touching watching Lyhan gradually gather the courage to transfer her desire from her guitar to Kate. I'm so glad Harrington had the good sense to decide to publish it, and I hope things continue to go well for you with your writing.

We emailed back and forth for about three months, mostly me asking questions about her methods of writing, and her giving me tips on my own writing. In her first novel, *Kinflicks*, Alther uses the alternating chapter point of view method to tell her story in flashbacks and the present. The story follows along a picaresque, *bildungsroman* story method to tell how Ginny Babcock came to be sitting with her dying mother, turning the tables on the definition of a caregiver, right after Ginny leaves her own daughter:

The tables had turned; her mother was looking at her as though she were the one in control of the situation...Ginny was accustomed, when being around her mother, to sinking into a stupor of passivity as her mother took charge of everything, organizing, arranging, planning, scheduling. The ball having been tossed to her, Ginny's inclination was to toss it back as quickly as possible.

(98-99)

In my story, "Wine is the Best Company," I tackle the death of a mother when the daughter is not there, yet still pay attention to the identity crisis apparent in *Kinflicks*. However, the somewhat similar event between *Kinflicks* and "Wine" isn't the only thing I use of Alther's influence. In the story, I use the third person narrative to tell how Langley struggles within her own identity, similar to the third person chapters involving Ginny that deal with her own struggle to determine her own identity without any outside influences, such as lovers in Ginny's case or alcohol in Langley's. The use of the third person illustrates how far gone these characters are, yet at the same time establish why these characters need to experience these events, the death and/or dying of their mothers, in order to realize their need to determine their own identity.

## Unguided

I put my heart and my soul into my work, and have lost my mind in the process.”

-Vincent Van Gogh, painter

When it came time to actually write stories for my thesis, I discovered that I was not ready to tell stories on the impact of death and mourning (my original thesis proposal), on how even though there are several different practices, the emotions are still the same. I was still too apathetic, too unfeeling to show the emotions eminent in dealing with such an intense topic. I know my creative process puts me in a mindset that completely tears all sanity from my existence. I wasn't ready to deal with my own fears and complications revolving around death and bereavement.

Still, despite my apathy, somehow, the stories I *was* writing started to all involve relationships, which became the segueway into my explorations of human connections, or rather the struggles and inabilities to connect to others. In the end, *The Present Giver and Other Stories on Human Connections* became a stronger project that oftentimes forced me out of my seemingly emotionless cocoon and taught me that even those with inability to connect to another person still feel the need to connect, stories very indicative of my own struggles with apathy and relationships.

As I started to wrap up my thesis, I realized how much these stories were all reflective of my own life. At least one aspect in each story directly relates to me, even though these instances never occurred to me. Of course, that's why they call it fiction. Still, the best stories come from writers that can incorporate their own lives into the story one way or the other. Raymond Carver often wrote about alcoholism and money issues – two things he struggled with his entire life. I

write about what I know, and a lot of what I don't understand, the loneliness inside of me that I struggle to ignore through my own drinking and apathy.

Even if I'll never be part of some elaborate movement – despite my efforts to change this fact – I coin these writers as being the first influences in my life as a writer. Even those writers that aren't the most directly influential like Poe and Anton Chekhov, they still paved the way for those writers that did influence me, introduced me to a world of literature – especially short stories – that I wanted to write. As I grew as a writer, my tastes, my styles, and my process evolved. The writer I am today is because of my early love of reading, the only thing being a child “genius” makes me proud to admit.

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**\*All titles and subtitles have been taken from New Pornographers song titles.**

**\*\*All quotes found on [www.thinkexist.com](http://www.thinkexist.com).**

## The Present Giver

Mrs. McIntosh set the limit for the Christmas exchange gift at five dollars. When Teagan Miach informed her parents, they took her to the Dollar Store, and let her pick out a “girl” gift, giving her one dollar and six cents exactly. Her parents wanted their little girl to pick the gift herself, as they watched her browse the toy shelf with careful consideration for each water gun, each doll, each rubber ball. For a second grader, she was already starting to show signs of frugality (a word she’d heard her father say about her), making sure the dollar went as far as possible, an early lesson picked up from her parents.

After considerate contemplation, she decided to buy a coloring book with super heroes she had seen in the comic books some of the boys read at recess. She knew she had an extra set of eight crayons at home that her parents had purchased for eight cents at the beginning of the school year, so she could give a coloring book AND crayons.

“That’s a boy’s gift, Tea. I’m not sure the other little girls will like that very much.” Her mother never acted concerned that Teagan liked the old Atari games instead of dress up, generic Matchbox cars instead of generic Barbie dolls, blue instead of pink. “Maybe try a coloring book with Jem or the Care Bears?”

“Okay, Mommy.” Teagan was disappointed that her carefully chosen gift was not good enough for her mother.

“Maybe Santa will bring you that coloring book,” her father said. He was so much taller than she was; both her parents were.

“Maybe. I already told him I wanted gummy bears in my stocking...and the She-Ra figure.” Teagan knew Santa only brought her two or three things a year, so she had to be very selective in her letter.

“Well, we’ll see what happens.”

Mr. Miach was going to switch jobs after the New Year, and Teagan was going to miss riding in her dad’s potato chip truck. He would pick her up from school in his truck, and she would rush out, ready to help him finish his work for the day, traveling to the different stores around Maysville that sold the local Grippo’s chips. How was she going to ride in bathtubs when they didn’t move from the store? She wasn’t even sure what he would be doing at the bathtub store, either. At least her mother would still be at the beauty shop downstairs from their tiny apartment that overlooked the rusting, green fountain that no longer ran water, so she could still run in circles in the bright pink chairs like a merry-go-round, never caring that she got in trouble by her mom’s boss ladies, or that she fell to the floor from her dizzy giggles when the chair stopped.

When they got home, her mother pulled down some old wrapping paper and tape from the hall closet for Teagan to use. She was going to teach her how to wrap presents this year, so that Teagan would be able to help her wrap the many socks and clearance shirts her mother bought for their family. They had everything they needed sitting around them: the tiny black and white television with the rabbit ears on top, showing a fuzzy version of *The Christmas Story*; the hideous brown couch with the birds that her mother hated held the already wrapped gifts, the wrapping paper splayed before them on the middle of the orange and brown speckled carpeting; tape, safety scissors, nametags, and pens around them in a circle. She watched how her mother watchfully showed her how to handle the paper, so that she wouldn’t get another paper cut. Her

little fingers each held a piece of carefully measured tape, as she taped the tiny crayon box to the coloring book, careful not to cover Jem's microphone. Her mother helped her fold the corners of the paper, showing her the perfect places to add a piece of tape. When the present was wrapped, Teagan asked if she could go to bed after the *Hawaii Five-O* rerun her family watched together (even though she usually fell asleep during the theme song), wanting the next day to come already so she could see one of her classmates unwrap her present. Her mother helped her pick her outfit for the next day and tucked her in before turning on the night light, extinguishing the lamp, and leaving the door cracked, just enough to see the living room light and hear her parents' voices.

In the morning, she didn't struggle when her mother brushed her long red hair to pull it up in the side ponytail she always wore. When she got on the school bus outside by the fountain, Teagan held the present close, so that the other kids on the bus wouldn't try to steal it from her. She just knew her present would be the best. When she got to the classroom after eating her greasy bacon and soupy oatmeal school breakfast, Teagan went to place her present carefully beside the other gifts. It looked out of place somehow with all the other shiny wrapping paper and bows. Still, she knew her present would be the best. Her mother always said it was what was inside that counted, not how it looked.

The teacher gave the day's lessons, but nobody in the classroom cared about Kentucky history or their multiplication tables today; they all kept staring at the pile of presents, wondering when the teacher was going to let them have their Christmas party. Finally, Mrs. McIntosh succumbed to the pressure of twenty sets of glossy eyes and started to explain the gift-exchange rules. The girls would pick a number for a girl gift and would take the gift that coincided with the number on the present; the boys would do the same thing. Teagan drew number eight. She

wondered what number her present had, since Mrs. McIntosh put the numbers on the presents while they were at lunch.

The room was filled with red Kool-Aid-stained lips screaming in delight as they tore through the wrapping paper, not taking the time to appreciate the pretty bows or ribbons, though one girl, Ali Merrick, seemed interested in her reflection from the silver wrapping paper. Ali was pretty, and Teagan liked to be her husband when they played house at recess. Sometimes, they would pretend they had a little daughter whenever Shanita White wanted to play, but they couldn't decide who would be the black parent, since they were both pale, Irish kids with red and blonde hair, and Shanita was black all over. They just decided to take turns.

Nobody took turns opening presents now, though, as the floor became littered with more red, green, silver, and gold paper than Teagan had ever seen. She carefully peeled off the tape, savoring the moment, just like she'd seen her Papaw do on Christmas and his birthday. For just a moment, she forgot about her own present, too consumed with discovering what her skinny little fingers were unwrapping.

"Coloring books were so kindergarten." Teagan knew that voice belonged to Mary Bride, the girl that sat at the table behind her and kicked her chair all the time. "And *Jem*...that's not even on TV anymore."

Teagan did not want to turn around, she didn't want to see the face of disgust that she knew Mary had. Looking around, she saw the girls were getting New Kids on the Block pillows and Barbie dolls, and the boys were getting Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles action figures and Nerf footballs. Teagan hadn't even opened her gift yet, and already the others were comparing, trading, and playing with their own gifts. Hers was supposed to be the best gift.

“Who gave this anyways?” Mary was still complaining. “I mean...only eight crayons? How am I supposed to color with just eight colors? Haven’t they ever heard of aquamarine and burnt sienna?”

“Oh, I like burnt sienna. I like it almost as much as I like yellow-green.” Ali sat at the table with Mary, and she was showing off her Jordan Knight pillow, hugging it, showing everybody how she was going to snuggle with him when she slept. Teagan had never even heard of yellow-green; she didn’t know there were crayons that were already mixed colors. She tried not to cry, too upset to even find out what her half-unwrapped present held.

“I’ll bet it was that Teagan. My mommy says her parents don’t have any money.” Mary’s parents belonged to the country club, just like most of the kids’ parents in her class, just like her Aunt Bunny. “Daddy says I should ask her to my birthday party but I don’t want another coloring book.”

The way she said coloring book reminded Teagan of her Aunt Bunny, and how she would act when she opened the present, a shirt that her sister, Teagan’s mother, gave her. It always made Teagan want to cry to see her mother’s sad face, and now she understood why. Her gift wasn’t the best gift.

“Let’s not have her to birthday parties ever. I don’t want anymore crappy gifts.” That’s the last thing Teagan heard before Mrs. McIntosh asked what was wrong with her present. Teagan asked if she could go to the bathroom, and Mrs. McIntosh took the entire class for a break. Instead of opening her present, Teagan handed it to her mother when she got home, and said she should give it to Aunt Bunny. Whatever it was, she knew it was better than the gift they were already going to give her.

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Ali Merrick never played house with her again, but Teagan liked playing with the boys better anyways. They weren't afraid to get dirty, though they never had recess anymore when middle school started.

In sixth grade, Teagan got her first boyfriend, and she was invited to his birthday party, the first party she'd ever been invited to. At first, she panicked because she didn't know what to get him. They were both learning to play guitar, and that's all they really had in common. She took the money she had saved, and wanted to get him the perfect gift. When he unwrapped what she got him, he kissed her on the cheek and said it was the best present ever. All she'd gotten him were funny-shaped guitar picks and a cassette tape of music from the 1970s that was on sale at the Dollar Store. She thought he'd like it because she liked the songs, the music her parents liked to quiz her on when they took trips, since the car radio was always playing. It was their version of *Name that Tune*, and Teagan loved learning new songs and bands.

Then, she and Bran broke up...but the next year, he asked her out again, and again, he invited her to his birthday party. She liked that he bought her nachos with extra jalapenos at the basketball games, and that he always wanted to hold hands during church. It made her feel super special, and she liked that he invited her to his parties. Teagan decided he was an okay boyfriend, but she wasn't dying to kiss him on the mouth like all the girls talked about in the locker room while they were changing for gym. His mouth was kind of funny-shaped, and he drooled a lot because of his braces.

Then, she and Bran broke up again, though she was never really distraught like she saw the other girls act over a breakup. She wasn't going to go home and listen to "their" song over and over, and cry into the stuffed animals he won for her at the fair. If anything, she won *him*

prizes at the fair; she didn't have any stuffed animals he gave her, and they definitely didn't have a song. After all, she and Bran Martin still acted the same way they did when they went out; he just never kissed her on the cheek anymore. That fact didn't bother her, either.

When he asked her out again in eighth grade, Teagan started to save up the money she would earn doing odd jobs, wanting to get him something great for his birthday again. He always seemed pleased with what she got him, and that made her happy. She knew not to get anybody coloring books; they were grown-ups now, and her parents didn't seem as tall anymore. Teagan decided what to get Bran but didn't want to ask her parents for money, so she started to shovel snow for her neighbors and baby-sit her now four-year-old brother and cousin on Saturdays. When she had enough saved, Teagan had her mother drive her to the record store. Bran got a CD player last year for his birthday, so she knew not to get him cassettes anymore. It was hard to buy tapes anymore anyways, which upset her since her parents couldn't find the soundtrack cassette she wanted for her birthday.

At the local *Sam Goody*, she was surprised to find the CD was cheaper than she anticipated, believing it would cost her entire savings. While she waited on her mother to finish at the JC Penney next door, she started to browse the rest of the store. She'd only ever been in here twice before; it was too expensive. She looked through the clearance, just like her parents taught her, and found a guitar strap and earphones on sale. She pulled out her money, and recounted to make sure she would have enough. Just barely, but she thought Bran would love these things, too. The more things to open, the better; that would show Mary Bride who gave the best gifts. After paying, Teagan clutched the bag to her chest, afraid somebody would try to steal it, since there was no time to save more money before the party. She stood outside the store to

wait on her mother, still clutching the bag and not wanting her mother to know she had bought more than she intended.

Bran loved the gifts, again kissing her on the cheek in thanks. She wished Mary Bride could've heard him say it was good to have an extra set of earphones, since his parents got him a CD Walkman that year.

It wasn't long after the party that they broke up again. She didn't even try to make Bran jealous when his friend James asked her out, though the other girls in the locker room were telling her she should have; Teagan wasn't sure how they even knew about it, since she surely hadn't told them. She just didn't seem to care, maybe she didn't really like Bran but it was the fact that he liked her.

"Bran said the only reason he wants to go out with you is because you give the best birthday gifts." Shanita White sat next to her in art, even though she was friends with Mary Bride and Ali Merrick. They were way past the days of trying to figure out who would be the black parent. Shanita didn't even talk to her outside of art class.

"What do you mean?" Teagan stopped shading her drawing, not caring that the teacher was scanning the room with a watchful eye. Big Brother. She'd just read *1984* last week, and was afraid Mr. Wallner would torture her with rats just for talking in class. She wouldn't put it past the older man; his billy-goat beard was probably hiding spy cameras, his outdated white-man Afro holding a microphone to record everything these students did. Maybe that's how the girls in the locker room knew about her affairs; they must've stolen Mr. Wallner's spy tapes somehow.

"He was telling Ali that he only liked you because you got him guitar stuff, and that's all he ever wants. Nobody else gets him that stuff. He says you give the best gifts." For just a

moment, Teagan only cared that somebody thought she *did* give good gifts. She learned more than how to color from a coloring book. “Mary says it’s probably only because you gave crappy gifts when you were a kid, and you’re trying to make up for it by selling yourself to old men for money so that you can buy people gifts, even if hers are still better. She gave *her* new boyfriend tickets to the Kentucky/Louisville game.”

After she had some time to think more about what Shanita said, Teagan decided she didn’t really want to fool with boyfriends if that was the only reason they liked her. That’s when she decided that she would not have a boyfriend when she was in high school. She’d just wait until college, when the boys were more mature.

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In high school, Teagan was surprised to find how easy it was to ignore the boys. One of her friends liked to hold her hand sometimes on band trips, but she never paid attention, and her ignorance of the male gender worked for her just fine until senior year of high school. That’s when she and Ali Merrick were assigned as chemistry lab partners, just because their last names were next to each other alphabetically. She didn’t like Ali Merrick anymore, and didn’t want to be her partner.

The bitchy comments about class started almost immediately from Ali, and Teagan was always the one doing the actual work. Ali would talk about her boyfriend, and how he was the best basketball player on the varsity team. Teagan never reminded her that he only played an average of five minutes per game, if that. If she wasn’t talking about her boyfriend, it was Mary

Bride's latest party, or the last thing her father bought her. When the first semester ended, Teagan was glad for the Christmas break away from her chem lab partner. She definitely didn't want to be her husband anymore.

The next semester started, Ali needed a tutor, and Teagan needed the money to buy her brother a birthday present. He really wanted that new video game, *Resident Evil*, and she really wanted to get it for him since he was turning eight, even if she didn't think an eight-year-old should be allowed to play a game where killing zombies (or any type of creature) was the main objective. However, she remembered being eight, and she didn't want him to have to suffer the wrath of second graders, just because he didn't have everything the others did. At least her parents waited to have another kid until they were better able to support the family financially. She didn't miss the potato chip truck anymore, even if they did seem closer and happier then. She did miss the apartment above her mother's work, though, even if visiting wasn't as exciting as it used to be, ever since the boss ladies bought those chairs with the locks.

"I just don't get this chemistry stuff. It's not like we'll ever use it in real life. I mean...unless you're gonna be a doctor or something...but who in our class would really do that?" Ali was more concerned with her pencil's retractable eraser than she was with the equations Teagan was trying to show her.

"Why do you bother then? Why ask me to tutor you if you don't want it?" Teagan wished there was an easier way to make money than this. She wished her father would let her get an after school job, but he insisted that she enjoy her childhood, since he didn't get the chance. Flipping burgers would be much easier to tolerate than Ali Merrick.

"Daddy says he won't get me a new car for graduation if I don't bring my Chemistry grade up." Ali wouldn't even look Teagan in the eyes anymore. It wasn't noticeable at first, but

when they were in her bedroom alone, it became harder to ignore. Apparently, her Eric Clapton and Beatles posters were more interesting. They were the only decorations in her room that weren't books other than her guitar and CDs, aside from her motel-like twin beds that set on either side of the room with the matching dark blue thin bedspreads. Her mother thought it was funny, so she taped a printed picture outside her bedroom doorway (since there were beds and no door) of a Motel 6 sign she had found on the Internet. "Besides, it's partially your fault I'm failing anyways. I don't see why he has to pay you for this."

"It's not like this was my first choice, either." Teagan gripped her pencil, imagining what it would be like to poke it in Ali's eye. "And what do you mean my fault? I'm the only one that *does* the work. If you actually did something in the labs besides play with the equipment, you'd understand the quizzes and tests. That's why you're failing. Not me."

"I can't help that I'm not as smart as you." Ali finally looked in her eyes, and Teagan briefly remembered what appealed to her so much about Ali in grade school: those deep brown eyes. They were so dark and eerie, and she couldn't help but stare even now.

"You were never stupid, Ali." Teagan loosened the grip she had on her pencil.

"I do try...sometimes...but I just don't like to read. I mean...look at your room. It's intimidating." Ali waved her arm at all the books along the built in shelves. "How could I not be intimidated? You were always smarter than me."

"That doesn't mean you're stupid, though." Teagan was starting to become uncomfortable. She liked her anti-Ali bubble just fine.

"It doesn't mean I'm smart, either." Ali started to cry, and Teagan started to panic. She wasn't getting paid enough for this, and she refused to boost the blonde's ego.

“Uh...maybe we should call it a day? Pick up tomorrow in the library?” Without question, Teagan decided to never tutor in her own house again. Only the library from now on; there were more people, and less likelihood of the tutee breaking down into a giant puddle of tears. Then again, she suspected that Ali Merrick would cry anywhere, regardless of a crowd.

“I must look a mess.” Ali used the tip of her slender fingers to wipe the eyeliner stains from her eyes before grabbing a tissue from the desk. She patted her hair and continued to dab under her eyes, more black streaks disappearing from her face and staining the once-white tissue. “I’m sorry. I know I’m not your favorite person.”

“Well...” Teagan couldn’t deny the statement. “You used to be, though, so that has to count for something.”

Ali just nodded before grabbing another tissue to blow her nose; it was the most attractive she’d been since second grade. Teagan helped her gather her things before agreeing to meet her in the library the next day. She was seriously considering just getting her brother a coloring book. It would so much cheaper, so she wouldn’t have to deal with Ali to make money, and she could even color with him, teach him how to draw inside the lines.

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When she arrived on UK’s campus, Teagan prayed to any deity listening that she didn’t have to room with Ali Merrick. There was no way in hell. She would drop out of college or live in the back alleys of Lexington before she would share a life with Ali, foregoing her undergraduate pre-med, foregoing med school, foregoing any of her dreams. It was bad enough they were still going to the same school. Teagan thought she was escaping her former torturers.

At least Mary Bride had barely graduated high school before she popped out a kid. That was one less person she had to see on campus.

To her delight, she had no classes with Ali Merrick, and Teagan's roommate was from Alabama. At least her freshman and sophomore year there weren't any classes with Ali. She had done a good job avoiding Ali on campus for two years, never regarding her presence in the lunch hall or the quad. It always came down to Chemistry for them. At least this time they weren't lab partners.

Halfway through the semester, there was a knock at her dorm room door. The knock startled Teagan from her concentration before she examined the clock. Eight p.m. She'd been working on her History of Religion essay for four hours and forgot to grab dinner. Looked like it was cereal again tonight, since milk was the only thing she had in her tiny cubicle fridge. She lived in a single now, her loft bed neatly made above her desk in the small room, so she knew it wouldn't be somebody for her roommate; and she never got visitors, so she was and wasn't that surprised to see Ali Merrick on the other side. She had been crying, if her swollen eyes were any indication, though her hair and makeup still looked perfect. Teagan cursed under her breath.

"Mind if I come in?" Ali didn't wait for an answer, walking past Teagan, and slowly examining the body of the room. "Your room is nice."

"It does its job." Teagan scanned her room, the only thing hanging on the walls was a picture of her family, her dark blue bedspread she'd had since high school was still neatly tucked into the extra long twin bed, too short and showing her maroon bed sheets, clothes presumably folded and hidden in the drawers in the dresser beside her desk, her guitar standing at attention in the corner by her closet, right in front of a new poster she'd bought last semester of Cream.

Everything else was on the questionably sturdy dorm shelves and her desk, which consisted of strewn notes and opened books.

“Working on something?” Ali walked over to the desk, and picked up a book to scan the *Queer Jews* title before placing it on top of the *History of Religion* textbook. “I’ll bet this isn’t due for another couple weeks.”

“Monday, actually.” Teagan wanted Ali to leave, didn’t want her to be in her room at all. “Why are you here?”

“Oh.” Ali blinked, seemingly surprised at Teagan’s harsh tone. “I just thought...well, it’s Saturday, and...we haven’t hung out since we came to college.”

“Why would we?” Teagan knew she was being mean, and she knew she didn’t really have a reason to hate Ali Merrick. She knew they would have outgrown playing house eventually anyways; it didn’t hurt as much as it used to. “Sorry.”

“No, no...it’s okay. It’s not like I’ve given you a reason to want to go out with me.” Ali sat down at the computer desk chair, and Teagan knew it was still warm from her recent vacation from the spot.

“If you need help in Chemistry, I’m free on Friday nights.” Teagan closed her eyes, and pinched the bridge of her nose, even though there wasn’t any pressure. She hoped that Ali would be busy on the weekends, so she wouldn’t have to fool with tutoring her again.

“I’m doing fine, actually.” Ali threw her purse on Teagan’s loveseat, the one she’d bought at the Goodwill that was small enough to fit tightly in her dorm room but great for late night movie marathons; Ali was acting like she had been there before, like she belonged. “How long have you been working anyways? Don’t you ever stop?”

“I take breaks.” Teagan moved closer to the couch, and refused to sit down, refused to get comfortable and make Ali feel like she was wanted there, like she fit in.

“Remember when we used to play house?” Using the tips of her slender fingers, Ali made concentric circles on the old wooden desk, right next to the keyboard, right next to Teagan’s fifteen-page typed essay that she ignorantly hadn’t saved before she answered the door. One click, and all her work would be gone; she just hoped Ali was still not the brightest crayon in the box. “We used to have fun.”

“Yeah, well...recess is over, and I don’t want to play your husband anymore.” Teagan crossed her arms, just now realizing she was standing in her pajamas from last night. The shamrock boxers that held bleach stains from a botched laundry experience freshman year, the waistband starting to fringe, and the Harvard Medical School t-shirt that she’d bought during her tour of the hospital and campus last summer. She’d never even gotten dressed from that morning. At least she had a bra on, so her boobs weren’t immaturely sagging.

“Yeah? I hear you like playing house with girls still.” Ali’s tone wasn’t challenging; it was just a fact. Teagan wanted to yell, to kick her out but instead, she just gripped her bicep tighter.

“What do you really want, Ali? I’m busy.” Teagan sighed before releasing her arms. It’s not like she’d tried to hide her relationships at college; she was very open, very out. She wasn’t going to deny herself anymore, and she sure as hell wasn’t going to let Ali Merrick make her feel guilty about liking girls better.

“I already told you.” Ali stretched her arms above her head, cleavage popping out of her low cut shirt. Teagan refused to look. “Tea, you need a break. Religion can wait.”

“Actually, I need you to leave, so I can finish my essay.” Teagan picked up Ali’s purse, and handed it to her. “I don’t know what you want from me, Ali.”

“I already told you.” Ali stood from the chair, clutching her purse with both hands. “If you change your mind, I’m in the student directory. If not, I’ll see you in Chemistry. Maybe I can help *you* with it this time.”

Teagan didn’t comment, too bothered and bewildered to even fathom the hidden meanings behind Ali’s words. No way in hell was she going to work on her chemistry with Ali Merrick.

Every Saturday night, Ali Merrick knocked on her door. Teagan decided she should study in the library to avoid her but she never did, she was always there when Ali knocked, and she always opened the door. The last few times, Teagan finally sat down on her loveseat next to her, and they actually had civilized conversations, even if she still kept her arms crossed. She was starting to warm up to Ali again; so much had changed since high school, even if she didn’t want to admit it.

They talked about politics, religion, books, movies, music, and they always got into fiery arguments over everything. The latest argument was over the real meaning behind Emily Dickinson’s poetry. Nothing surprised her more than to learn that Ali Merrick actually knew who Emily Dickinson was, never mind that she had actually read her poems. However, they never discussed sexuality, never discussed relationships or their social lives; it was their unspoken agreement, even though it baffled Teagan that Ali wouldn’t have dates lined up on Saturday nights.

Teagan even got dressed on Saturdays and made sure her daily homework quota was filled before Ali knocked, though she would leave books and notes out anyways. She didn't want Ali to know she actually liked their conversations, that she was actually starting to dig her company.

One night, Ali mentioned how she was always jealous that Teagan could play so many instruments, as she ran her hand seductively up the acoustic guitar's neck. Teagan watched the way Ali's slender fingers handled her guitar, and found her cheeks and body heating up, her leg shaking up and down as she wiped her suddenly sweaty palms along her thighs. She didn't want to be Ali's husband anymore; there was no way in hell. Conversations were fine, company fine, but playing house again with Ali Merrick was at the bottom of her list of life and short-term goals.

When she went to pick up some guitar strings during the week, Teagan saw a box of kazoos behind the counter. She didn't know why she asked for one but she did; it wasn't like it was breaking her budget. She was on a full scholarship, and she even worked in the biology research lab twenty hours a week; she didn't plan on needing any student loans until medical school, which she knew she would need if she was accepted to Harvard, so she still kept her tight budget to save money. However, when she went to change her guitar strings, she put the kazoo in her desk drawer, never putting her mouth around it. It stayed in her desk, and she would stare at it, wondering why she bought it if she had no intentions of playing it. Her parents taught her to only buy the things she needed, so why did she buy something she definitely didn't need and definitely didn't use?

Ali didn't show that Saturday.

Instead of mentioning the absence, Teagan just went back to ignoring her again. It's not like they talked outside of her dorm room, they never even waved to each other in Chemistry, though she would sometimes catch Ali smiling at her during labs. Teagan would just internally chuckle at the memories of all the nearly broken test tubes and flames gone awry from their high school chemistry lab experiments.

One Saturday, when Ali didn't show, Teagan pulled out the kazoo from her desk drawer, and stared at it for what felt like hours. It was just a piece of cheap plastic, yellow-green if she had to determine a color. She wasn't paying attention to anything else, and the knock at the door startled her, as she hid the kazoo in her fist. It was well past eight o'clock.

"Hi." Ali's smile was crooked, like she was planning something positively evil. Teagan wasn't sure how she felt about that smile. "Sorry I'm late."

"You're not late. It's not like I expect you. You just kinda...show up unannounced, whenever you want. You're like..."

"Don't be mean." Ali settled down on the loveseat once she flung her coat across the desk chair; she instantly relaxed and stretched across the couch. Teagan thought she looked like a lioness after a satisfying hunt, stretching and smiling, her blonde hair splayed across the cushions. "Did you miss me?"

"Why would I? It's not like I expect you." Teagan could feel her palms start to sweat, and was afraid the acid from her hand would damage the little plastic instrument she was holding. For some reason, she wanted it to stay perfect.

"Now you're just repeating yourself. That means you did miss me." Ali seemed certain with her observation, as she started to examine the room. "I see nothing has changed in my absence."

“You’ve not been here for three weeks. What did you expect? A new paint job? Maybe some banners exalting your return?” Teagan shifted her stance, folding her arms across her chest.

“I know that’s not your style...but I’m not saying it wouldn’t have been nice, just a little indication that you’re happy to see me.” Ali sat up on the loveseat, completely ignoring the frustration in Teagan’s stance. “What’s in your hand?”

“Oh...uh, a kazoo.” Teagan sat down next to Ali on the couch, and opened her palm to show her the plastic instrument.

“Cute.” Ali moved forward, feet folded behind her, and invaded Teagan’s personal space. It was the closest they’d been since grade school.

“I think...I actually think I got it for you.” Teagan didn’t like the vulnerability in her own voice, as the realization came to her. In retrospect, she had missed Ali, and she had been holding on to the kazoo, afraid she would never be able to give it to her. “You said you don’t play an instrument. I thought you wouldn’t feel so intimidated by me if you did.”

“You got me a present?” Ali looked amused, her tongue threatening to spill from between her teeth she was so happy. “It’s not even my birthday.”

Teagan couldn’t believe how much she’d grown to like Ali again. Then, she saw the blonde’s toothy grin, and she was again reminded about her deep brown eyes, and how she could see her own reflection in them when her eyes were dilated like they were.

“Show me how to use it?”

“Oh...you don’t...I mean...it’s a kazoo. You hum.” Teagan figured Ali was smart enough to at least figure out a kazoo.

“Show me.”

Teagan just nodded, feeling the heat coming from Ali's thigh against her own. She placed the kazoo gently against her mouth, and started to hum, the vibration making a squeaky buzzing noise. She could see Ali watching her, and decided that there wasn't much else she could show before she handed Ali the kazoo. After taking the kazoo, Ali didn't even wipe the spit away before she placed her own lips gently against the mouthpiece, right where Teagan's mouth had intimately touched. Her hum was slow at first but it built into a steady rhythm before she hummed one last loud buzzing whimper, shaking Teagan from her trance.

"Thank you. It's the best thing anybody has ever given me." Ali leaned forward, and kissed Teagan gently on the lips. Teagan didn't pull away.

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Glad to leave the hospital for a vacation, Teagan shut her locker and hung up her white lab coat before bundling up for the Boston cold, clutching her briefcase in one hand, her keys in the other. She loved her job, loved helping people, loved saving lives and seeing the looks on the faces of those she could fix. Ali was probably finishing their packing, getting them ready for the flight back to Kentucky for the holidays. She was glad to have a break for a week, though she worried that something dramatic would happen in Diagnostics while she was gone. She'd probably still get paged, but she'd be four states away, leaving behind the snowy Massachusetts weather and seemingly impossible medical cases, trying to enjoy the company of her extended and immediate family. It was only the second year she would bring Ali home with her for the holidays, even though they had officially been together for eight years, if they didn't count that year apart because Teagan was being an ass during medical school, too stressed to deal with

anything but her studies, and Ali was definitely a distraction. She was finishing her fellowship this year, and had started looking into her next career move already, wondering if playing house with Ali was what she really wanted. They'd only lived together for three years, since it took Teagan a long time to decide she could live with somebody else again, even if Ali did follow her to Boston after college.

When she got home, she saw Ali zipping the bags that were on the black leather couch. They decided to buy presents when they got to Kentucky; it'd be easier than dealing with baggage claim, even if the massive tree in their condo was lonely. Teagan placed her briefcase and keys on the table before hanging her coat and scarf in the closet. They would be leaving for the airport in an hour, and she still couldn't break from daily habits.

"Tea, I made tea." Ali carried the bags to the front door, ready to leave. "Figured it would help settle your stomach before the flight. Dramamine's on the counter by your laptop."

"Who's the doctor now?" Teagan kissed Ali's cheek before heading to the kitchen. "About ready? We need to leave in an hour."

"I'm getting that way." Ali was nervous, Teagan could tell. She always bit her bottom lip and played with her nails when she was nervous. Ignoring the tea, Teagan took Ali's hands in her own.

"It'll be fine. I already talked to Mom, and she's going to talk to Aunt Bunny. No rude comments this year, I promise...and if there are, we can go to another room." Teagan leaned her forehead against Ali's, smoothing the soft palm with her thumbs. "This is how things work with my family; I've been hiding in rooms for years. You'll be a pro in no time."

"Maybe next year, my parents won't avoid me, and we can go to the cabin with them." Ali sighed before squeezing Teagan's hands, and releasing her hold.

“They’ll come around.” Teagan walked around the house to make sure everything was off and shut down. No need to run up an electricity bill when nobody was here, so she unplugged everything, and turned off all but the bathroom light. In the cab ride to the airport, she started to feel the Dramamine kicking in, as her head became hard to hold up and her eyes threatened to close. Ali just squeezed her hand every time Teagan thought she’d fall asleep.

Settling back in with her parents was interesting, especially since they had moved to a much bigger house in a fancy neighborhood, and Teagan hadn’t visited since they’d moved in; she always seemed to be on call, or she and Ali would plan small vacations when they could both get days off from work, mostly places within driving distance, just for a romantic weekend to reconnect. Since she had been on call for Thanksgiving and Halloween, she was given the Christmas holiday, so it was decided that they would go to Kentucky early for an official vacation. Since this was her first time in the new house, this was also her first time in the new guestroom that her parents had designated for her, the one on the other side of the house, away from them and away from her now nineteen-year-old brother. After they were caught last Christmas making with the merry after too much eggnog, Teagan suspected her parents didn’t want a repeat of finding their daughter and her lover half naked and wrestling on the floor. Since there was just a bed and no dresser in the room, they didn’t bother unpacking their suitcases, instead putting them on the windowsill and leaving them closed in case the new family cat, Mr. Cat the Third, decided these were new litter boxes.

Teagan and Ali went to do their shopping while the Miachs worked. Since Teagan was making good money at her fellowship since she was officially a doctor, they were able to afford

nice Christmas presents for everybody. There would be no more socks or clearance shirts, no more coloring books or Dollar Store cassette tapes. Teagan made a list of everything she wanted to get for everybody in the family, finally happy that her struggle to pay for Harvard Medical School through massive student loans and small scholarships had paid off in the end, allowing her the financial freedom to afford nice, expensive gifts for everybody, spending more on her parents and little brother than anybody else. She couldn't really call her brother little anymore, though, since he was nineteen and was much taller than her now. He was still blowing up zombies in video games, but she loved him anyways.

After everybody else had gone to bed, Teagan and Ali wrapped everything on Christmas Eve in their room, getting more tape and wrapping paper confetti on each other than on the actual presents. In between teasing and arguments over whose wrapping skills were the best, they managed to get every present wrapped. After piling the gifts in one corner of the usually bare room, they sat back down to clean up their mess, though it happened slowly.

"I actually have something I want you to open now, because I know you'll get mad at me if I have you open it in front of other people." Ali stood, pulling scotch tape from her upper thigh as she made her way to her suitcase. She dug under her clothes, and pulled out a nicely wrapped package, small, thin.

"Did you get me a copy of *War and Peace*?" Teagan examined the thin book-shaped package, as she chuckled at her own joke. Ali wasn't laughing, though, so she settled her nerves, and took the offered present, waiting for Ali to sit down across from her again on the floor. "I suppose you want your gift now, too? Is that what this is about?"

"No. Just open it. I can wait, but I know you, and I don't want you to be mad at me because you're embarrassed in front of your family." Ali started to fidget with her hands. Teagan

loved that it annoyed Ali that it took her so long to open presents, which is probably why Teagan always unwrapped Ali the same way when she asked for a quickie.

“I wouldn’t be mad.” Teagan stretched her fingers before using her thumb and forefinger to peel the tape on the sides. The shiny silver paper was reflecting her image back at her but she ignored it, more intent to see Ali’s reaction, since she was acting nervous.

When she pulled out the coloring book, she was surprised to find the yellowing pages inside were all colored; Jem and the Holograms were all perfectly outlined and vibrantly shaded in basic colors, the colors that were included in an eight pack of crayons. The Dollar Store sticker was fading on the back.

“I never told you that I traded with Mary. I was tired of listening to her talk about you, so I traded my pillow. I think I colored every page that Christmas break, even used the eight crayons you gave with it until they broke.” Ali was still fidgeting with her hands and biting her bottom lip when she stopped talking.

“But...why didn’t you tell me? I mean...I thought you loved that pillow. It’s all you talked about that day.” Teagan ran her slim fingers over the microphone in Jem’s hand on the cover. “Why didn’t you ever say anything about this?”

“I didn’t know I still had it.” Ali scooted closer, pushing ribbon and wrapping paper out of the way. “When I went to visit my parents over Thanksgiving, they made me go through all my boxes in the attic, and I found this and a bunch of pictures of us together when we were kids. I remember you talking about it a couple years ago, about how hurt you were that nobody liked your gift...and I never hated you. I know you think I did, even if you never say it directly. I was just a little kid. Kids aren’t exactly known for their great decision-making skills.”

Teagan didn't say anything else, just pulled her girlfriend closer to her from across the wrapping paper, ribbon, and tape scraps strewn about soft carpet that was a shade lighter than the tan bedspread, and planted a deep kiss against her lips, not letting her out of the embrace when it was over. It was a good decision on her parents' part to give them the room furthest away from the rest of the family.

After all those years of not wanting to play house with Ali Merrick anymore, it's exactly what Teagan wanted to do for the rest of her life.

## The Affair

“These aren’t yours,” Michael said before he looked into Michelle’s guilty, head-lighted eyes. He knew, and she could tell. He was predictable, not stupid. “Does she want to join?”

She suspected he’d only said that as some sort of male-predictable response. That’s all he said before he’d gotten out of bed, seemingly not caring about the cold Lexington weather that snuck into their house from the supposedly tightly shut windows. Her silence told him everything.

The thing that prompted the inquisition was a simple mistake. Michelle had put on Mikhala’s bikini underwear by accident when she was scrambling for clothes, knowing Michael would be home soon. Mikhala took her time, always basking in the afterglow that one of their sessions produced, saying she was amused and perplexed that Michelle never did the same. When she trudged into the apartment, she hadn’t expected Michael to be home already. He was always predictable, home by six from traffic and commute, giving her and Mikhala an hour together once they were both home from work. Mikhala usually didn’t leave for work until dinnertime, since she was a food critic, travelling around Lexington restaurants for her article on Kentucky cuisine in *Good Eats*, that chose to write at home during the day instead of a random coffee shop full of strangers; Michelle would get home from the monotonous phones at the front desk of Johnson, Walters, and Strayer around five, sometimes before depending on the traffic on Winchester Road. Whenever Michelle would get home from work, sometimes Mikhala would be home; sometimes she wouldn’t be home until after Michael. Her neighbor’s attendance at home was sporadic, always causing Michelle to fantasize about luxurious, wild parties, and finger-fucking Mikhala in a dark corner, surrounded by large crowds. She’d never even used or thought

of terms like “finger-fucking” or “eating out” until Mikhala came along; she always used more clinical terms, if she said anything at all. Orgasms were rare with Michael, and they’d never learned about the clitoris and its purpose as a purely sexual organ. It was always missionary, because that’s how Michael liked it, that’s what they knew. When they did try something different, it backfired, and Michael couldn’t perform until he was on top of her again.

Michelle looked around the room, trying to decide whether to console Michael or stay in bed to feign sleep. He had locked himself in the bathroom, leaving her naked except for the underwear that had triggered his flight response. The flowing curtains in the room were blowing from the vent, like they did every day, yet Michelle found she resented their simple flow, the way the floral patterns contrasted the light blue bedroom walls. She hated those curtains; the only reason they were there was because Michael’s mother had given them as a housewarming gift. When Michelle refused to put up the hideous curtains, Michael wouldn’t talk to her at all until she installed them on the bedroom window. She suspected the same treatment was about to happen now that he had finally voiced his knowledge of her affair.

Four months.

That’s how long it took Michael to say something about Michelle’s change in behavior.

Whether he didn’t notice, or chose to ignore it, she would never know.

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“Thou Shalt Not Cover Thy Neighbor’s Wife.” The good book said nothing about coveting thy neighbor.

Michelle went about pleasantries with Mikhala for the first month after the woman moved in, saying hello in the long, seemingly unending hallway, doing the neighborly duty of loaning sugar (though it was usually some spice like curry powder or cumin, and they only stocked the basics like salt and pepper). That was four months ago, but it seemed longer.

Michelle was never one to trust new people, especially new neighbors, and she knew she didn't trust this tanned beauty, particularly when she started having fantasies about Mikhala: knocking on the door, asking for cayenne pepper, wearing nothing but a "Kiss the Cook" apron. The dreams left Michelle in confusion during her morning routine in the small bathroom, and she found she didn't like the idea of having to change the way she lived, and living with Mikhala in her life would definitely be a major break to her simple reality.

Yet, Michelle was still drawn to Mikhala's curves and inviting, dark stare. There was something about the way Mikhala looked at her, as though she knew all Michelle's secret desires, even ones Michelle wasn't aware of herself. That unnerved her. It was a dangerous feeling, and she found she liked it. The way her head would feel heavy, her ears would pound in rhythm to her heart, and her palms would sweat. She never had any of those reactions with Michael; their relationship was always like playing from an unpublished rule book from his basketball days, following the predetermined time before declaring they were "going out" (though they usually stayed in his dorm room), waiting six months before they decided to start having any form of sexual conduct, and then another two before going "all the way." Sitting in the "girlfriend" section at the college basketball games, cheering when appropriate, getting engaged senior year, married the summer after graduation. Maybe it was the lack of excitement in her youth that spiked her adult interest in a lesbian fling, even if it was only fantasy at first.

Michelle was bored. That was the only way to explain her emotions. She was bored with being married, and she was bored with Michael.

“You don’t have to act like you’re afraid of me,” Mikhala said, while brushing her fingertips lightly down Michelle’s upper arm. Michelle could feel her skin reacting to the touch, as she suddenly felt the need to either cover up her arms from the cold or tear off her work clothes and plain white apron and let Mikhala just take her right in the doorway.

Mikhala’s fingers brushing her arm made her stomach growl. A good or bad growl, she couldn’t tell. She hadn’t felt those emotions since the first time she fumbled in bed with someone: safe, predictable Michael. He wasn’t bad in bed, but it seemed they still fumbled. She’d only ever been with him. Sure, she’d dream of wild excursions on an exotic beach with Studly McHollywood, but her reality was a six-foot-five mute with a growing beer belly. He was too young to start getting a beer belly. At least he still had all his hair, though knowing his family, she wondered how much longer that would even last.

“I was just making dinner.” Michelle pointed into the tiny apartment, thankful that the bedroom door was shut. She never wanted Mikhala to see where she slept, wanted it to remain a mystery, didn’t want her to think Michelle had chosen those curtains.

“I can smell. You should try adding some garlic salt and parsley to your potatoes.” Mikhala stood there unmoving from the doorway, as though she didn’t want Michelle to close the door on her just yet.

“I appreciate the tip from the food critic, but we like our potatoes just fine,” Michelle replied. She had been avoiding Mikhala ever since Michael found out last week, though seeing her standing in the doorway now, she regretted that decision.

Mikhala was always wearing bright colors, Michelle's favorite the deep browns and oranges that contrasted perfectly Mikhala's skin and eyes. She had yet to see the inside of Mikhala's apartment, but Michelle suspected that her decorations were just as exotic and colorful, not like her own plain blue and white walls, simple couch and coffee table that was perfectly positioned for watching television every evening. Michelle couldn't imagine Mikhala owning a television, instead reading tales and adventures in novels, and traveling to the places to live her own adventures like the characters in the books she read. Michelle owned two books: the Bible and a cookbook, neither had been opened since they were given as wedding gifts.

"Still, no excuse to act afraid." Mikhala leaned against the doorway, not giving Michelle any opening to close the door. "Why don't you let me help you?"

"I don't need help. I'm perfectly fine here." Michelle's eyes widened, afraid that Mikhala already knew about Michelle's erotic dreams. "Michael will be home soon."

"Then, I'll see you tomorrow."

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"Where are you going?" The third degree. Every day, Michelle asked the same question. Every day, she received the same answer. Ever since that night that Michael had hidden in the bathroom for hours, not coming back to bed until Michelle figured he had suppressed his anger enough. She wished he had let her see; maybe then she wouldn't be obsessed with trying to force a fight, trying to at least get him to stay home and talk about what was next for them.

"Out." Michael never was one for words. Maybe his lack of communication had been the reason Michelle went outside their marriage. Five years together; it already felt like forty.

At first, Michael didn't reply, just as she had predicted. Michelle wanted to see emotion from him, any emotion. When his anger showcased, all he did was sit uncomfortably, while his face reddened. She had asked for emotion, but she didn't realize her husband of few words had a minimal response pattern. Maybe that's why she kept having the affair. At least, that's what she kept telling herself.

"Can you pick up some milk?" Michelle looked up from the couch to see Michael in his old sweatshirt. He only wore his University of Kentucky sweatshirt when he went to Mikey's Bar to watch the game, any game, since he never watched sports at home. The television was always set to something they could both agree on, and he never argued when she wanted to watch some "chick flick," which usually only happened around the time of the month when she was reminded that she was undoubtedly a woman. Michael was always predictable...and safe. That was what her mother had said to her before the wedding.

When Michael left the apartment, Michelle just continued sitting there on the stupid couch her grandmother had given them as a wedding gift; but instead of blindly watching the latest crappy reality show where a washed-up rock star tried to find a girlfriend, she turned off the television set, and just stared at her reflection on the screen, wondering if Michael would seek some sort of revenge by picking up one of those hussies that came to Mikey's dressed in football jerseys probably purchased on clearance at Walmart just to make the guys at the bar think they were into sports.

Still, Michelle couldn't imagine Michael having an affair. Sure, he was handsome, he had played college basketball, had a good job, but he was the type that committed for life, even if his wife wasn't.

“If you don’t love him, why are you still with him?” Mikhala became slowly bolder in her advances during the first few months she had lived there, and Michelle even started touching back. When they met in the middle, there was a warning siren wailing in Michelle’s head, but for the first time, she ignored the whine, the need to retreat and find shelter. Their first kiss was awkward, unplanned. Michelle knew she tasted of pretzels and whiskey, but Mikhala still pressed her lips softly against hers. The moment when their faces parted was scarier than her first missed period while still in college. Michelle was upset that she had let Mikhala kiss her, so she moved to the other end of the couch. Mikhala had only lived in Kentucky for two months and already she had weaseled her way into Michelle’s apartment. The kiss was unexpected, but Michelle had responded. That fact upset her more. Now, she couldn’t imagine *not* kissing Mikhala.

“I do love Michael. I wouldn’t have married him if I didn’t.” Michelle found herself inviting Mikhala over to watch scary movies while Michael went to Mikey’s with his old teammates to catch the Kentucky/Louisville game, decked out in his UK sweatshirt; always that damn sweatshirt.

“Then, why do you distance yourself from him?” Mikhala ran her fingers softly over the top of the couch, and Michelle kept staring at the movement, trying to avoid giving in to her urge to molest Mikhala right there.

“He’s not home,” Michelle responded, wanting to hide herself under the throw blanket across her legs for only managing to state the obvious. They were, after all, in her apartment.

“I know he’s not home, but that doesn’t explain why you don’t open up to him. If you expect him to open up to you, maybe you should reciprocate.”

“It’s...I’m open! I’m very open,” Michelle said, confused at the slight smirk that Mikhala gave her.

Mikhala had just nodded before pressing forward again with those tempting lips. “Who does this woman think she is?” rang through Michelle’s head, as she responded to the nibbling and teasing.

When Michael had come home that night, Michelle had tried proving to herself that it was all experimentation. As she pounced on him with more fervor than ever, he only responded in the usual manner, still showing no emotion, even with liquor in his system. If he could taste remnants of Mikhala still on her lips, he said nothing.

Vowing that it was a “one-time thing” was a joke. Now, she was drawn to those curves even more, the long flowing hair that barely caressed her lips when Michelle was pressed into the couch – or bed – or floor – or kitchen table. She was addicted to Mikhala, and whenever Michael left the apartment, she felt like a junkie refusing to admit it.

“Could you pass me the salt?” Michael was doing a great job of ignoring their earlier fight. Michelle just steeled her jaw, fighting more tears and the urge to just throw the hideous cow saltshaker at her husband.

There was no talk of their future, no arguments, no yelling. No threats of any kind or forbidding to see Mikhala again. Maybe Michael was the smartest of them all: saying nothing. Maybe he knew there was nothing he could do. When they fumbled in bed, he still didn’t try to spice things up, compete with the other lover to prove he was better. He must’ve missed the class on the Alpha Male. He never even threatened divorce, so Michelle never mentioned it, and they went on with their lives as they had been, except with her affair in the open.

Finally, it was Michelle who yelled, Michelle who screamed, threatened divorce. Still, Michael acted like nothing was wrong, like nothing changed their daily routine. She was tired of his stoicism, tired of his lack of anger; she wanted him to “be a man,” to act like “he gave a damn that his wife was screwing another woman.” He only flinched once, probably surprised that his seemingly calm wife even knew such words. Sure, they weren’t regular church attendees, but he didn’t expect that kind of language from her, not after so many years of never hearing it.

Just like when they started dating, she didn’t have the assertiveness to file for divorce herself. Maybe that’s why Michael never did, either.

“Sure,” Michelle chose to hand Michael the shaker instead of throwing it, believing that if yelling at him earlier didn’t invoke a response, then neither would violence.

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“I don’t know what you want from me.” Mikhala sat up against the headboard, just brushing Michelle’s hair from her forehead. “I don’t know what you expect.”

“That’s the point: I don’t, either.” Michelle sat up, afraid to voice her opinion for fear that it was the truth.

“Well, I told you that I’m moving soon, so you might as well start getting used to me not being around.”

“Do you really have to go?” Michelle’s audible sigh could be heard over the traffic outside the open window, the cool breeze brushing against her bare skin. She didn’t used to like being naked, but for some reason, she couldn’t stand being clothed around Mikhala.

“I can’t pass up a job to tour and review Italian wineries. Besides, my home was never here.” Mikhala took a deep pull from her cigarette, claiming that she no longer had to hide her habits, since the affair was in the open. “You knew I would move back to California eventually; this was just a temporary thing.”

“But do you have to?” Michelle found that she liked her new routine. Why did Mikhala have to be a writer? Why did she have to live by the bohemian manifesto? What was so exciting about moving around constantly? Whatever happened to settling down in one place?

“I’m not what you want.”

“You’re saying that I want Michael? Would I really be here if that were true? Even now that he knows?”

“Especially now that he knows.” Mikhala puffed out the smoke in little rings, the smirk on her face afterwards indicating that she was happy this talent impressed Michelle.

“Well, I...it doesn’t make sense. I want to be here with you. I am now. If I wanted to be with Michael, I would be with him now.” Michelle pulled the covers closer to her body, suddenly more aware that nothing was covering her. She surveyed Mikhala’s room; it wasn’t as exotic as she suspected, but she didn’t mind. Mikhala’s apartment was almost the reverse of her own, except she had been right about there being no television. Instead, there was a large work desk filled with papers, books, and computer equipment. At least she didn’t have any curtains on her windows.

“My job’s finished. There’s nothing here for me now.”

“How can you say that? Don’t I mean anything to you?” Michelle started to cry, envious of Michael for his stoicism for the first time. She would give anything not to show emotion right now.

“Of course you do, but I’m not what you want. You’re still married, I have no want to settle any time soon. You got what you wanted from me; it’s time to move on.” Mikhala was so different from Michael, but at the same time, they both hid their true emotions. Mikhala was just naturally talented at seeming like she cared, at sounding like she gave a damn what happened to anybody but herself. “When I go, you’ll be happier.”

Michelle couldn’t decide if she wanted that to be true.

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When Mikhala moved away, Michelle felt her world explode in a violence of colors. She’d never had her heart broken, wasn’t aware that the cliché was actually possible. She stopped cooking dinner altogether, leaving Michael running to Mikey’s just for sustenance; she stopped cleaning the apartment, which Michael still never cleaned, causing her to walk through piles of dirty clothes to get to the toilet. Still, he said nothing, coming and going to work, kissing her on the forehead before going to sleep himself. Michelle wanted to see a smug grin from Michael, something that said “I told you so,” or “See, I win,” but his expressionless face stayed the same, never indicating anything but his discomfort at the changes in her, the ones that reflected on his own routine.

Then, Michelle tried to bring aspects of Mikhala into her life at home; she bought spices, cooked stir-fry for dinner one night instead of meat and potatoes, started to buy different groceries, even going so far as to “forget” Michael’s cheap beer in favor of some imported ale. All these sudden changes started to disturb Michael, she could tell: his face was always red, and he was more uncomfortable than usual. He started to stay at Mikey’s longer, still decked out in

his UK sweatshirt. That's when Michelle realized that what she wanted from Michael was for him to change, that her boredom wasn't his boredom. He was still content with his routine life, knowing what he'd be doing every single day for the rest of his life.

She knew she needed to do something instead of just wondering what they would do, so her fear of being alone had her starting back on their old routine, hoping that her fling was just that, and she could get past it. Michael was happy again, and they fell into that seemingly happy lifestyle...but it wasn't enough. It didn't take long before Michelle got bored again, and started to fantasize about the women she'd see out during her lunch break, and she also noticed that she never fantasized about another man. Her conservative upbringing didn't know it was possible to even want another woman; her parents never took them to church except on major holidays, so she didn't have the ingrained "this is wrong" going through her head like Mikhala had explained her traditional Mexican family had done to her. Still, Michelle never paid any attention, instead focusing on her work and home, and never paying much mind to what her body would tell her about her peers. She had always just assumed she was supposed to marry a man, have two kids, work, which was the only radical concept in her family, since all the women were housewives, including her mother, always cleaning, reading soap magazines, and having dinner ready for their father by the time he got home from the Central Plumbing store. When she got her scholarship to UK, her parents didn't complain, just helped her pack, and wished her luck, calling her once a week to make sure she was still alive. They were more than happy when she met Michael, though she was now starting to question her own motives about the relationship.

What happened now? She seriously considered just staying married to Michael; it would be so easy, so safe. Her mother's voice rang in her head again. What would they say about her new extracurricular activities? Scoping women, imagining them naked, how her own body would

mesh into theirs. A slight shiver ran up her spine as she finished making the potatoes. Could she live with change? Hadn't she done so with Mikhaila? Then again, was that really change, since she stayed with Michael?

Michelle stopped whipping the potatoes, and laid the bowl onto the counter before throwing the towel at the sink. There were dishes to be done, but she ignored them. She ignored the chicken baking in the oven, ignored the half-whipped potatoes. Instead, she pulled out the chicken, turned off the stove, and put on her shoes before walking down to Mikey's. She knew it was "Michael's" place, but she still infiltrated guyville, sitting down at the bar and ordering the tallest draft of Miller Lite that she could. She wasn't exactly one of the guys, but at least she knew the guys in the bar had one thing in common with her now: they all preferred women.

It only took two hours before Michael showed, and Michelle didn't try to hide the fact that she was being chummy with his bar friends. The moment he noticed her, she knew. His face swelled red, and he acted like he wanted to bolt, but he didn't. Something made him stay, something made him walk up to her with a determination that she hadn't seen since he'd proposed to her.

"What are you doing here? This is my place."

"It's a free country; I'm allowed to be here if I want." Michelle took a long pull from her beer before turning around to acknowledge her husband.

"I got home, and you weren't there. There was this big mess." Michael only leaned forward a little, though Michelle didn't know if it was to be heard over the crowd or because he didn't want to make a scene.

"Yes, I know. I decided I didn't want to make dinner; thought I'd see what was so great about Mikey's." Michelle couldn't believe that she sounded jealous.

“It’s my place. I come here to watch games.”

“Yes, I know that, but we have a TV at home. I really don’t mind if you want to watch games sometimes.”

“We have that rule.”

“No...you have that rule. I never said you couldn’t watch the games at home.”

“Well...I just like it here better.”

“So, you’re saying you’d rather hang out with the guys than your wife?”

“No, I’m not...and ...never mind.” Michael stopped himself from reacting again. It was driving Michelle crazy; part of her thought infiltrating Mikey’s would at least get him to talk to her. At least this was a start.

“Say what you want to say, and let’s move on, for crying out loud.” Michelle finished her beer before pushing the pilsner out of the way. It had been a while since she had drunk so much beer in such short time, so she was already starting to feel a buzz. “I slept with a woman, she’s gone, now get over it.”

“How can you say that?” Michael sat down next to her at the bar. “You’re my wife.”

“Yes, well...a wife shouldn’t want to sleep with somebody else just to feel something, so what does that say?”

“Don’t be mean, Michelle.”

“I’m not being mean; just honest.”

“Well, it’s not fair to bring us into this. She’s gone, true, but...”

“But what? Not fair? Oh, don’t give me that bullshit, Michael. I’ve been hinting that I’m unhappy for the past year, but you won’t talk to me. I had an affair! Yell at me! At least pretend

that you care, instead of sitting there on your ass, just taking it, or walking away and hiding because you're scared."

"I'm not scared."

"Then, what is it? I'm sure as hell not getting that."

"I'm unhappy, too; that doesn't mean I go around fucking somebody else!"

Michael had yelled; he had reacted finally. Michelle couldn't help but feel overjoyed, as she just turned to her husband and smiled at him for the first time in what felt like forever. She could tell he didn't know how to react, so she just took his hand and ordered a pitcher with two glasses.

## **Wine is the Best Company**

Langley's day would start with a hangover from the night before, the two empty wine bottles on the counter her only testament to the evening's festivities. Then, she would crawl off the couch, throw another dress shirt into the stain pile, take a shower to scrub all of the sweat and escaped wine from her body, imagining a slight tingling where the wine once was.

The numbness in her fingers and mouth indicated that today she was still a little drunk, as she used her finger to doodle on the steam-fogged mirror before wiping it clean with her towel. When she finished brushing her teeth, she noticed the red stains from her spittle, though she didn't know if it was wine residual or blood. After ironing her shirt and pants for the day, she would dress for work, blow-dry her hair, and apply some foundation and blush to hide her paler than usual face. She was always on time for work, and nobody would ever guess that her dates last night were named Shiraz and Merlot.

She looked at the top of her cabinet, noticing she was out of cereal again, so she decided to skip breakfast. Instead, she just completed her ritual of cleaning up from the night before: dumping the uneaten green beans from the pot on her stove, discarding the empty wine bottles, and taking out the trash on her way out the door, even though the bag was barely filled.

When she exited her townhouse, Langley saw her neighbor standing in her pajamas and robe, watching her dog squat on the small patch of lawn outside Langley's doorstep. Fifi liked Langley's yard, that much was certain from the various decaying and fresh droppings. Her neighbor, Ms. Sennmore, never cleaned up after Fifi, and Langley never called her on it. As long as Fifi didn't poop on the sidewalk, Langley didn't care where the dog did her business; nor did

she ever complain that Ms. Sennmore didn't use her portion of the backyard, instead opting to walk her dog in the front yard, and usually right when Langley was coming or going home.

"It's supposed to get down in the twenties today," Ms. Sennmore said, just following along as Fifi did her squatwalk. The poor dog looked like she was struggling to get anything out today; she was shivering, probably from her ass being so close to the cold Kentucky ground. "Alan says hello."

Alan; that was a name she hadn't heard since yesterday. She was tired of Ms. Sennmore trying to push her son on her. Sure, he was a doctor; sure, he was handsome enough, but Langley didn't want to date for a long time. Not since the guy last week and his need to call her "babe" every five seconds.

Langley didn't want to deal with Ms. Sennmore much today, and she definitely didn't want to hear how Alan was doing, so she just nodded instead of replying, grabbing her garbage bag from the ground and not putting on her coat. She didn't feel cold, the alcohol still warming her, keeping her dry. She almost stumbled on the sidewalk, right into one of Fifi's presents left for her. Instead of cursing the old lady and her dog, Langley just walked the fifty feet to the dumpster before going to work, no longer concerned that she wouldn't be able to drive this morning.

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"Morning, Langley. Have a nice night?" Her boss, Michael Griffin, was a short man, always wearing the brightest colored shirts with matching ties. She never knew where he found such vibrant attire.

“Nothing to write home about.” Langley could feel her cell phone buzz sporadically, still ignoring it since she didn’t recognize the number. Instead, she kept staring at her computer, kept punching in numbers, kept answering her office phone on the rare occasion that it would ring, kept up with the paperwork on all the drivers and deliveries, kept making work orders for repairs on the trucks. She was already tired of this job, and she’d only been here seven months.

“Did you catch the game last night?” He still didn’t understand office gender politics, probably still uncomfortable with a woman being in this position. Griffin’s Chip Company wasn’t exactly known to attract women, especially her department: deliveries. When she found out there was an opening for the company, she decided to try her luck, feeling somehow closer to her dead father, since he had driven a potato chip truck when she was young. Riding in that truck were some of her fondest childhood memories, and she found a need to try to recreate them somehow. She was disappointed to find out how boring and monotonous the delivery business really is, and she was in the office all day, not out there driving from town to town to deliver the Griffin brand chips and candy.

“I don’t know. I fell asleep with the TV on.” Langley didn’t like being interrupted, just wanting to finish her day’s work, go home, open a bottle of wine, and forget. She was addicted to the numbness that came with drinking. Being sober was like a punishment. She had started to sober up around ten that morning, and she realized it halfway through her budget report from yesterday.

“Well, you missed a good one.” At least he didn’t stay for long, as Mr. Griffin trekked back into the warehouse.

Her phone buzzed again, and again, she ignored it.

She didn't mind that Mr. Griffin was a horrible conversationalist, she didn't mind being in an office alone for almost eight hours a day, she didn't even mind when the new delivery drivers would try to make a pass at her. Langley just wished that she were back home, maybe enjoying a bottle of White Chambourcin, maybe not enjoying it. She could never remember which wines attracted her the most, just that wine made better company than any of the men she'd dated.

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After work, Langley drove to the Meijer in Lexington, twenty minutes away from her home. She had been avoiding grocery shopping, living for almost a week on wine and cans of green beans that were stashed in the back of her pantry. When she was little, her parents would stop to talk to people they knew while perusing the aisles. Grocery shopping was a social event to them, but Langley couldn't stand the idea of running into somebody she knew, so she always drove out of her way to shop. Plus, she was able to pick up a few dress shirts on clearance to make up for the ones she'd ruined, socks and underwear just because she didn't feel like doing laundry tonight.

The music must have been off today, as she strolled through the aisles, not putting much food in her cart. A bunch of bananas that she knew would never be eaten, left rotting on her counter. A box of Cheerios that she would munch on before going to work, knowing she had to eat something. A small thing of milk that would go bad in the refrigerator. Several cans of sweet corn, since she didn't think she could handle any more green beans for a while. Frozen dinners made up the majority of her cart until she came to the liquor aisle. She loaded up on the cheap

wine, always reds, always in abundance. The drier the wine, the better. The cheaper, the better. The more, the better.

When she pushed her cart away from the wine aisle, she heard the intercom ring, an unpleasant intrusion into her quiet musings.

“Cleanup on aisle four.”

For some reason, Langley recalled a grocery trip with her mother when she was younger, right before she started kindergarten, right before her father started to get really sick.

“You’re gonna have a bellyache if you keep eating those gummies.” Langley’s mother always let her eat the gummies while they were shopping; it kept her quiet and from pawing at the other items on the shelf. In retrospect, Langley thought it was the most intelligent thing her mother ever did.

The clanging of the bottles as the cart moved reminded her of beer runs with her father, as she noticed a woman in the next aisle scolding her young child for eating candy from the open bins. She decided that she could wait until next trip to get gummy bears; no need to disturb a touching family moment.

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When she arrived home, she put up her groceries, having to make several trips to her car for the wine, always using the sidewalk so she didn’t step in any new presents Fifi left for her. Ms. Sennmore was there with her dog, as always watching Fifi do her business, just shaking her head in what Langley called her “that poor girl” expression, the one she gave Langley every day.

Today, Langley just nodded her head in return, not waiting for the old lady to comment on her abundance of brown paper bags.

After heating up a meal in the microwave, Langley corked open a fresh bottle, not wanting to wait for her food to finish cooking. Turkey, mashed potatoes, and corn. Shiraz was a perfect compliment. Of course, Shiraz was a perfect complement to fish sticks, macaroni and cheese, chicken and dumplings, ravioli.... She never really took time to savor the woody taste anymore, no longer bought the expensive, nice wines. It was better for her budget to buy the five-dollar wines in abundance, since her alcohol tolerance had increased exponentially since her first drink in college. It took longer to get drunk now, and she longed for the naïve freshman girl that felt the buzz after one shot of whiskey.

When she finished eating, picking around the dark meat, inhaling the food between drinks of wine, Langley decided it was time to stop ignoring her phone. The vibration every thirty minutes was starting to drive her insane, so she clicked some buttons to check her voice messages.

One from her credit card company; she had forgotten to pay her bill again this month. One from that guy she was ignoring ever since their date last week. One from Dr. Sparks, her mother's boss. One from the St. Joseph Hospital Morgue.

Her phone had been vibrating more than usual today, and she thought nothing of it, just ignoring it like a trained puppy. She thought she would've at least sensed something was wrong, like she used to as a child, when the phone would ring at night or early in the morning, and she just knew that some uncle or grandparent had died. The last time she had been able to do that was when the babysitter answered the phone and handed it to her; she just knew her father had died.

Langley was only seven years old, and she didn't completely understand what it meant that her daddy was dead. After getting the news, the first time she saw her mother was the first time Langley cried for her father. She still didn't understand, but she hated that her mother was crying and holding her like she did before she started school.

Now, her voicemail was telling her that her mother had died, and she hadn't sensed a thing. Feeling way too sober, she threw away the rest of her dinner, grabbed the bottle, and settled on the couch before staring at her phone. There was nobody left to call. Who was going to hold her now?

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Langley idly twirled the bottle in her hand. The tight grip she had on the bottle's neck would threaten to break the glass if her hands were bigger and much stronger. She just stared at the way the bottle moved around, the red liquid hidden by the dark green glass, making it look almost black. Glancing at the television, she noticed the program she was watching had changed without her detection. Her mind tried to recall how long she had been lying on the couch, but all she could think was how much she wanted another drink to make the haze deeper.

She felt good and that was the problem.

Her mother, her last living relative, was dead, and she was too afraid to leave the safety of her studio apartment, too afraid to drive to Lexington even though she had been there earlier, too afraid to do anything besides call to make arrangements for the body. Her mother had never discussed what she wanted, had left no will indicating her wishes; Langley was the only heir.

"Why would I need something like a will?" her mother always said. It wasn't like Langley didn't try to discuss it, more like her mother wanted to discuss other things; "life

things,” she had called them. “You only come visit once a year, so let’s just talk about life things. No need to worry about the ending when your story’s still being written.”

Her mother was so young, only fifty-two, yet she had died of a brain aneurysm, right in the middle of molding her latest impression. Dr. Sparks tried to call Langley, but she never picked up a number she didn’t recognize on her caller ID; it had been so long since she had called her mother at work that Langley didn’t know the number. When the morgue called, she did the same thing.

From a voicemail, Langley discovered her mother had died.

Staring at her arm dangling over the couch, she noticed that she had stopped twirling the bottle; another glance at the television indicated yet another program change. Langley liked it this way; she liked being alone, her only company the half empty bottle of Shiraz in her hand and the empty one on the counter. She couldn’t deal with having her own Fifi, not since the custody battle over Rupert the Wonder Dog with her ex boyfriend. She didn’t even want the ugly mutt; it was the principle of the thing. Knowing that Rupert had been killed in a hit and run only caused her to chuckle in her drunken stupor, the memory of Todd calling her to cry about the whole situation. She’d let the voicemail take that call, too, even though she *had* recognized that number.

Langley sat up and took another long pull from the bottle, not even caring about the wine glasses her mother had given her as a housewarming present two years ago. She didn’t care that a little of the red liquid fell on her work shirt, the one her mother had sent her for her birthday last year.

“A stain is a stain. Don’t worry so much about the little things. You can always get a new shirt,” her mother always said.

Langley loved playing outside as a kid; until the day she was pushed in the mud by the neighborhood bully and stained her favorite orange shorts. She could remember how her mother helped her put on a clean pair of shorts before sending her back out to play. Instead, Langley sat on the porch until it was time for her to come inside for the night. She didn't feel much like playing after that.

Walking into the bathroom, she kept her grip on the bottle's neck, taking in sips of one liquid as she drained out another on the toilet. After she finished peeing, she still sat on the toilet with her pants around her ankles and continued to drain the rest of the liquid from the bottle. The wine felt good, the way it soothed and tickled her throat, the way it swam in her belly, the way she could feel her brain slowly start to numb. She was normally passed out by now; it usually only took one and a half bottles before she woke up the next morning on the couch, her television still switching programs like a child tumbling down a hill. For some reason tonight, she was still lucid. Well, as lucid as she could be with two bottles of wine in her system.

"You shouldn't drink so much. Your father drank too much and look what happened to him," her mother always said. She didn't want to remember her father right now, the way his liver failed him because of his long-standing battle with alcoholism; Cirrhosis was the topic of many of her research papers in school, but when she got to college, she started drinking herself, choosing to ignore her family history. Langley never saw the harm in having wine or whiskey instead of milk or juice like her mother; at least she didn't smoke or do drugs, not since that ecstasy experiment in college where she woke up naked in bed with her roommate and boyfriend and couldn't remember what happened.

Her head was throbbing, but she was still awake. Stumbling into the kitchen, she placed the now empty bottle of wine next to its sister, enjoying the loud pop the bottle made against the

counter. She probably woke Ms. Sennmore, but she couldn't seem to care; it's not as though she didn't keep her up some nights with her television blasting. Sometimes, she wanted to pound on the wall, but she suspected Ms. Sennmore wouldn't be able to hear above her own noise.

"You need to learn more patience. Don't let your anger control you so much," her mother always said. For a second, Langley could picture her mother trying to demonstrate breathing exercises, emphasizing with her hands as though she were teaching a child to color.

Langley remembered how she would fight with her mother, never physically, but there was enough sting in her verbal punches to create internal bleeding. The last fight had been because her mother couldn't understand why Langley didn't just find a steady job instead of moving from place to place, as though Langley herself, with her private college education and years of work experience, could fix the lack of available jobs that were worthy of her credentials, that she alone could break through the economic barrier. Maybe that's why she had quit work the next day at the sandwich shop when they talked about promoting her to management. With a college education, Langley didn't want to make BLTs and turkey clubs the rest of her life. Not that her current job in Griffin's office was anything to boast about, either.

Feeling too dizzy to stand, Langley sat on the floor in her kitchen before laying down and letting the cold tiles cool her cheek. She felt herself already sweating, as she tried to trace the art deco patterns next to her face, knowing she was probably coloring outside the lines. That's when she felt the tears fall down her overheated face, the salty trail dripping from the tip of her nose.

"You really need to cry more. It's good for the soul," her mother always said.

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Langley woke up on the floor, the pain in her neck testament to why she preferred to pass out on the couch. Sitting up, she noticed the stain on her shirt, and for the first time, she panicked. Quickly unbuttoning her shirt, she walked into the downstairs bathroom in only her bra, one nipple popping out of the disheveled garment. She ignored the wine that was spilled by the toilet; she would worry about that later. Right now, she had to get the stain out of this shirt, as she grabbed the laundry detergent from the shelf, reaching over her washer and knocking down some hangers in the process.

She overcompensated and poured more blue liquid on the small red stain, trying to rub out the stain with her fingers. The cold water was starting to turn her fingers white and pruny, but still she kept scrubbing, ignoring the tears that fell into the sink, or the fact that she could no longer see what she was doing.

When she felt the stain was gone enough, Langley threw the shirt into the washer, stripping from yesterday's spoiled clothes to compensate for using the water to wash just a shirt, even though she had full loads already sorted in her hampers. She watched and listened to the washer clean, as she sat naked on her toilet. Looking down, she noticed the wine spilled on the floor, and decided to clean it up. She got down on her bare knees, ignoring the pain, and used yesterday's shower towel that was still hanging from the rod. It didn't matter if this white was stained; she had bought this at the Meijer, along with several others, just so she could avoid laundry again.

Langley felt the floor and noticed the stickiness, so she cupped her hands under the sink and splashed some water on the floor, using the other end of the towel to scrub the wet, stickiness away. She sat up; what was taking the washer so long? She didn't want to leave the

bathroom in case the laundry finished without her, but she had to clean the rest of her house and get ready for work.

Gripping her hands into fists, she decided to stop watching the washer, and went about scrubbing her toilet, bathtub, and sink. At least she would still be in the bathroom for when the laundry did finish. She still had some time to take a shower before she had to get to work, so she threw her shirt in the dryer before hopping into the tub, scrubbing her own body like she had scrubbed the sink earlier.

On her way out, she didn't even acknowledge Ms. Sennmore or Fifi, just rushed to her car with her coat buttoned crooked.

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To her surprise, Langley arrived early to work. She had never been there late, but she had never been there early, either. She was the type to arrive just on time, since Mr. Griffin didn't like her to be there early. He called that his "morning" time, which meant he liked to shit and let the office air out before anybody arrived. Langley didn't have the heart to tell him that sometimes a bottle of Lysol wouldn't help hide the smell coming from the unisex bathroom.

When she walked in, Mr. Griffin left her alone for most of the day. As usual, he tried to strike up a conversation some time before lunch. His conversational skills hadn't improved since yesterday.

"How was your night?" Mr. Griffin sat on the edge of her desk, getting a little more into Langley's personal bubble than she liked.

“I’ve had better, had worse.” Langley chose to ignore him today, intent on finishing yesterday’s budget report before lunch, so that she could talk Mr. Griffin into letting her go home early.

“Well, did you happen to catch the Reds game? They practically killed the Blue Jays 9-2.”

“No, no, I didn’t watch it.”

“Well, you should have; it was a classic. I think the Reds are making a comeback.” Mr. Griffin picked at his teeth with the end of his thumbnail, and Langley decided she’d had enough of this job.

“Look, Mr. Griffin, I don’t like sports. I don’t watch television; it’s just sort of on as background noise when I’m at home. I don’t like dating. I don’t like anything. I just want to come to work, finish what I have to do, and go home.” Langley’s steely reserve made her look more confident than she actually felt. She could see Mr. Griffin’s face turn red, especially in his receding hairline. “Sorry. I’m just stressed.”

“Well, why don’t you go home at lunch if you get that budget report done?” Mr. Griffin couldn’t figure out her outburst, and Langley liked that, though she wasn’t sure asking him for the day off wouldn’t have happened if he hadn’t already given it to her. He would have no way of knowing that her mother had just died, but it was obvious something was wrong, since she had never said that many words in a sentence to him before, let alone snapped at him. “Take the weekend and rest. I’ll see you on Monday.”

Langley watched Mr. Griffin walk away, suddenly not as sure about going home. At least here, her mind was occupied. As she packed up her briefcase at lunch, Langley decided that she’d made a mistake.

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When she arrived home, she saw that Ms. Sennmore and Fifi were outside, as though they knew she would come home early today. Even though she could come home during her lunch break, she always chose to eat at her desk. It seemed easier than moving around some days.

“Dear, you’re home early. Hope everything is okay.” Ms. Sennmore didn’t bother to pull Fifi back when she went up to sniff Langley’s leg.

“Everything is fine.” Langley stopped turning the key in her lock, staring down at Fifi’s big brown eyes, staring right up at her, begging her to save her from Ms. Sennmore. “The woman is driving me insane,” her eyes seemed to say. Understanding all of a sudden, Langley knelt down to scruffle Fifi’s fluffly white coat, accepting the tongue as it tried to lick her hands and arms. “Everything will be fine.”

After a brief nap, Langley decided to heat up a TV dinner for a late afternoon lunch: another Banquet meal, chicken fried chicken with instant mashed potatoes and watery corn. She pulled it out of the microwave to stir the mashed potatoes, but instead of putting the tiny black tray back into the microwave, Langley just stared at the food. For some reason, she felt she couldn’t possibly eat another one of these bland meals. She needed something of substance; something greasy, something that actually looked like what it was supposed to; so, she threw away the meal, not caring that she was wasting a dollar.

Picking up her purse, Langley forgot to put on a coat before walking into the cold, Kentucky weather. She drove around for about ten minutes until she came to the section of town

with the nicer sit-down restaurants, finally deciding to just go to the Applebee's, since they normally had Happy Hour. It had been a long time, college actually, since she'd been to a restaurant for Happy Hour.

"How many?" The hostess greeted her.

"I'll just sit at the bar area." There was no sense in pretending she wasn't there to drink, so she just took a menu from the hostess and sat down on one of the high stools, swiveling a little to get comfortable.

"What can I get you to drink?" The bartender, a nice-looking young woman, laid down a coaster in front of her that advertised the Brewster mugs, but Langley wasn't interested in draft beer.

"I'll have a glass of red wine, Pinot Noir if you have it."

"Wine isn't included on our Happy Hour menu, but if you're interested, I could make you a fruity drink, maybe a Sangria." The bartender didn't seem to recognize the huff that Langley gave out. Of course wine wasn't on special; it wasn't when she was drinking draft beer in college, so why would it be now?

"No, I'll just take the Pinot. I don't mind." Langley watched as the bartender went about opening a bottle of wine, but the label wasn't recognizable. It was definitely going to be more expensive than her cheap three-dollar wines. "Actually, if you don't mind, I'll just take the bottle."

"That's fine. Would you like to order some food?" The bartender, who bore no nametag, didn't seem to care that Langley hadn't even opened her menu yet.

"Oh, uh, yeah, but let me look a little first, maybe drink a bit before I order."

“Okay, just let me know when you’re ready.” Blondie, as Langley referred to the bartender in her head, left the bottle and a freshly poured glass before tending to the other customers.

Instead of opening the menu right away, Langley decided to just savor the wine for a bit. When she finished her first glass, she seriously considered drinking straight out of the bottle; it had been a while since she had used a glass. Drinking as much as she did, it was always just easier to drink right from the bottle. As she poured her second glass, she realized why.

Sipping her second glass, she decided that she wasn’t really that hungry anyways, so she just opened her menu to browse. Maybe looking at the pictures, the ones that never looked like what actually arrived on a plate, would change her mind. Nothing sounded like it went with wine, except maybe the pastas. At least it wasn’t a Banquet meal, and if she didn’t eat it here, she could always take it home for later, saving her from another chicken fried chicken disaster. So, she ordered and waited on her Cheddar-Jack Mac and Cheese with Chicken, not bothering that the restaurant was slowly getting busy, or that a man that smelled of sawdust and Brut sat next to her, sneaking glances at her that she pretended not to notice. She wasn’t drunk enough to start up a random conversation with a stranger just yet.

Instead, she continued to drink her wine, moving onto her third glass by the time her food arrived. She pushed the large bowl to the side for now; she would worry about eating later. For some reason, she was enamored with the basketball game on the screen. She hadn’t seen a basketball game since college, only going then because she got extra credit in her class. Even though she couldn’t read the subtitles because the wine was finally starting to kick in, she laughed a bit under her breath, since she could finally tell Mr. Griffin she had caught the game, but after today’s outburst, he would probably never ask again.

Since the bartender was starting to look at her and she pushed aside food, Langley decided to start picking at her food before emptying the wine bottle into her fourth glass. She managed to eat about a third of the pasta before she asked for a box and another bottle of wine.

“Are you sure? Would you like some dessert?” Blondie gave her a sympathetic look, and Langley didn’t like it.

“I’m positive. Another bottle.”

“Okay.” Blondie acted like she was questioning Langley’s tolerance, a thought that offended Langley. How dare anybody question her tolerance; at what was probably twenty-five dollars a bottle, Langley was surprised Blondie would even be skeptical if somebody ordered another bottle. That just meant more of a tip. For just a brief, sinister moment, Langley toyed with the idea of stiffing her, but when Blondie brought the second bottle of wine and a fresh glass, that thought instantly dissipated.

“That’s a lot of drink for such a small girl.” Brut Man had finally decided to strike up a conversation, but Langley still wasn’t drunk enough, so she just nodded and focused back to the television without glancing at the man.

About halfway through her second bottle, her food boxed up next to her on the bar, Langley felt her entire body start to burn. She was hot and could tell her face must’ve been red, since Brut Man tried again by asking if she was okay. Still, she just nodded before getting up to go to the bathroom, leaving the wine bottle at the bar while she went to pee. While sitting on the toilet – and almost falling off of it while getting up – Langley remembered that her mother was dead. For a few brief hours, she had managed to forget, the reason why she started drinking herself to sleep. She wasn’t sure that she liked forgetting her mother, the woman that used to kiss

her bruised, cut knees, the woman that taught her how to pee in the toilet, the woman that shoed the monsters in her closet with a broom.

Suddenly, Langley felt numb and emotional at the same time, as she went about paying for the food, leaving more of a tip than fifteen percent, ignoring the rest of the second bottle, despite the cost, but not forgetting to take her leftovers. When she got to her apartment complex, she didn't know how she drove home without wrecking; she hadn't driven drunk or intoxicated in so long that she forgot how much concentration it took. When she parked her car in her designated spot, there was nothing to keep her mind occupied anymore. When she saw Fifi dropping a load by her front door, Langley just placed her head on top of her hands that were gripping the steering wheel and cried, not caring that Ms. Sennmore was staring at her.

## **Another Rock and Roll Cliché**

The Manhattan highrise was lonelier than Tommy remembered. The giggles and temper tantrums that used to fill the fifteenth floor condo were long forgotten; little Sophie and her mother hadn't been back home since they left over a year ago. It was the week before Christmas, and Tommy found he couldn't stand the quiet in his condo anymore. His backing band was taking a break for the holidays, going home to their own families, actually trying to keep their families intact. Tommy was too tempted to drink when he was alone; then again, he was tempted to drink around people, too. His lawyer and agent would throw their own temper tantrums if he were caught drinking again. It was hard enough getting him out of the news when he got that DUI a few months ago. He was still going to the court-ordered AA meetings, but that didn't mean he had to use the resources available. Instead of calling when he felt like drinking, he just drank; there was no guilt involved. Perhaps that was the reason his wife had left him: even when he was home from touring, he was never home.

There was no way he would turn on the radio, knowing that stations would be playing Christmas songs nonstop, making it more likely for him to hear his own #1 song from the early 80s, even if some sound would fill the quiet in his apartment. He knew he didn't want to hear himself this season; it was hard to avoid hearing yourself on the radio when you had five platinum records, one including a Christmas album. Every year, he was asked to sing "Christmas Snuck up on Us Again" during the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, and every year since 1985, he had declined. He didn't even want to think about the year he had agreed to sing for Ronald Reagan during the White House Christmas. He was so drunk that he was tripping over his black

Pradas and holding onto the stage manager to keep himself upright before he went on stage, dressed in a tuxedo for the first time since he skipped prom, which was probably why nobody had asked him to sing for the president since.

As he stared at his apartment's empty bar area, Tommy took a deep breath before making the decision: it was time to go home. Redbone, Michigan. It was no doubt colder and the ground was no doubt whiter than New York, and his family would be happy to see him again after four years. He hadn't seen them since Sophie was born; now, he hadn't seen Sophie since the divorce was final, since the day before his DUI. He missed his little girl, but he refused to admit it. That would mean that he really did mess up, that he really did have a problem. Instead, he just wrote songs, just like he always did in the past. His guitar was his longest relationship, and he had even upgraded from his high school days, from the guitar he played when he first started performing his folk pop in the 1970s, the guitar that made him famous. Sophie used to bang on his guitars all the time, and he was more worried about his first guitar getting damaged than his \$2,000 Gibson 335. Tommy remembered when he first bought that old Fender acoustic guitar at the old Lang's Department Store. Mr. Lang had known his family, knew that Tommy was a good boy despite his long hair, so Mr. Lang had told Tommy about playing guitar when he was younger, how he had wooed Mrs. Lang by playing the guitar, that Tommy should learn so that he could woo his own lady. Mr. Lang took one of the guitars he had from the backroom and gave it to Tommy on the condition that he started to work for the store.

Tommy had said no, that his parents wouldn't let him work anywhere because of his grades. Mr. Lang had just shook his head in understanding, but had insisted that Tommy take the guitar anyways. It was an old Fender acoustic, and Tommy didn't understand the make at the time, but he did now. He had played that guitar for years, until his agent had told him it was time

for a new image in the 1980s. Tommy had never properly thanked Mr. Lang; maybe he would do that when he was back home.

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When the taxi from the airport dropped him at his parents' house, Tommy wasn't surprised that his mom acted like she didn't recognize him. She was always the type to punish you by remaining silent or pretending not to recognize you. His father had just slapped him on the shoulder and told him he'd have to stay in the basement, since they had already given his old room to his oldest sister's two teenagers for the holidays.

His parents were starting to seriously look their age, well into their late sixties now, but they were still trying to be as active as they were when he was a boy. His mother was at the stove, teaching the teens to play cards, while his father was still in the garage building furniture. Tommy didn't have any of his dad's homemade furniture in his house anymore, since the only piece he ever accepted was the baby crib that he and his wife had brought with them when Sophie was born. His wife had it now, probably stored in the attic of their house on Staten Island, just her house now, since he didn't argue, wanting Sophie to at least grow up with a good yard. The house was paid off; it was one less thing his ex-wife would have to worry about while raising their daughter.

The first thing on Tommy's agenda was to visit old Langley, browse through the store downtown to see what changed. He settled his bags in the basement, noticing that the dry wall was starting to rot a little on the top, surprised that his father still hadn't finished the basement

after all these years. When he came upstairs, he asked if they needed anything from Lang's Department Store.

"Oh, dear...Mr. Lang died a couple years ago. Didn't you read that letter I sent you?" His mother touched her neck with her fingertips, something she used to do when she was worried about him. He tried not to act shocked, so that his mother wouldn't know he only skimmed through her letters. Instead of staying upstairs, he just went back down into the basement away from everybody and stared at the drywall, thinking he should help his dad finish the room while he was in, but knowing that he wouldn't.

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It had only been two days, and all Tommy really wanted was to get away from his family for a while. Even though tomorrow was Christmas, he realized that he would have preferred staying in his apartment back in Manhattan, where he didn't have to listen to his sisters argue, his mother nitpick, or his father snore. There was no surprise that they'd been to the country club twice since he'd been home. His parents hadn't changed much since he was a kid, something he actually appreciated. This way, he didn't have to worry about them as much or deal with anything other than his own problems. He didn't want to hear that his mom had a cyst removed from her breast or that his dad was on ten different medications now. Tommy liked that his parents never brought up their own problems with their kids; it was comforting.

After spending two full days listening to his sister's teenagers fighting, his two sisters fighting like the teenagers, and his dad arguing with his uncles over who had the better hockey team this year, Detroit or Toronto, Tommy decided he just wanted a break before he fell off the

wagon only six days into his new sobriety, and the Redbone Country Market was the only thing that was open this late besides the local bars and liquor stores, so he decided a walk to the old grocery store would give him some form of solace, keep him from giving in to his urge to buy some Wild Turkey to ease the wildness going on back at his childhood home; the dark, snowy skies outside in the Redbone, Michigan area felt nice and cold compared to the heated arguments between his aunts and mother over who had the best jam cake recipe. The snow was caking on the bottom of his boots, and the crunch from his walking kept him focused on his task. If he could just browse the aisles, avoid recognition from the locals, he would be content for the rest of the night.

That's when Tommy saw Maria, his old lover, his high school sweetheart. He didn't expect she would recognize him at first, and Tommy was partially afraid of that, since they hadn't seen each other since high school graduation thirty years ago. It was only a fifty percent chance that she would remember his face, especially since he had lost so much weight and gained the muscles that his agents forced him to build, saying it was good for the rocker image since he was getting older.

Still, he took a chance when he saw her in the frozen food section at the grocery, picking up packages of frozen peas and broccoli, probably for a nice Christmas dinner tomorrow. He was surprised he could even make his way to her in the crowded aisles, old ladies and angry men shoving their ways to pick up last minute holiday food and gift items.

He walked up to and placed his hand against her arm.

"I'm sorry, was in I in your way?" Maria asked.

"Maria." Tommy still had his hand attached lightly to her sleeve; she was still warm, even standing in front of an open freezer door.

“Mal? Tommy Maelstrom?” Maria’s eyes widened, indicating that she had finally recognized him. Tommy figured it would have taken a bit longer, if she even recognized him at all, even if they had dated for three years in high school. She was his first lover, he was hers. He couldn’t help but smile, actually glad for once that a person recognized him in a store.

“The one and only.” Tommy wasn’t surprised that Maria went to hug him, she was always affectionate, but she spilled her purse and the bag of frozen peas that were in her hand. “Let me help you.”

“Wow...you look great. Your mother said you might be able to make it this Christmas. It’s good to see you haven’t forgotten us.” Maria was picking up her smaller things (lipsticks, tampons, peppermints) and tossing them in her purse, her basket full of items dangling from her other arm, while Tommy just grabbed the loose papers and pens, handing them to her, trying not to look down her blouse.

“The tour had a break this year, since a lot of the guys in the band have families now. My mother always seems to think I’m coming, though.” Tommy wasn’t surprised to see that Maria had aged well; she was always the pretty girl in school, the cheerleader that wasn’t quite the head cheerleader but preppy and pretty enough to be on the varsity squad. He was just in a band, never even went to the basketball or football games she would cheer for, always opting to practice his guitar instead. “How are you?”

“Oh, um.... I’m...I’m good. Just picking up some last minute foodstuff for tomorrow. I’m afraid I burned the peas again for the salad I was making, not enough water, not enough paying attention to the stove. Thought I’d give it one last shot before dumping the idea and just making brownies again.” Maria’s laugh was still pleasant, but it lacked the warmth that it used to hold, the innocent giggle and twinkle from her bright alto. Tommy laughed along with her,

which prompted them to both burst into laughter until their tears started to form. “Sorry, I needed that.”

“Me, too.” Tommy followed her to the checkout stand, as they discussed their holiday plans. Once everything was bagged and Maria paid, Tommy helped her carry the bags to her car. “Would you like to go get a drink? Maybe catch up?”

“Sure, I’d love that,” she replied. Maria unlocked her car, letting Tommy into the passenger side. “I heard you lost your license; how are you doing?”

“Well, I feel trapped most of the time, but I get by. These things happen; it’s good for me.” Tommy didn’t like to talk about his drinking, how he was lucky he hadn’t killed the driver in the car he had slammed into, one unlucky drunk driving, after so many without getting caught. He didn’t say anything about his six-day sobriety, already feeling the urge for another bottle of Jack; he just let her drive around the local bars, none open this late on Christmas Eve. They spotted a liquor store, one that he didn’t recognize from the last time he had been back to his hometown, and bought a six-pack of Miller Lite. Since the snow was still coming down, they decided to just drink in her car, the heater was already warm, they were already settled, so she pulled into an empty parking lot next to where the local Moose fraternity still was, the abandoned Lang’s department mural on the side of the building staring at them through the windshield.

“Here’s to us.” Maria was the first to open a can, not taking the tentative sips she used to when they would go to house parties in school. Tommy didn’t hesitate to grab one himself, sighing as the foamy liquid rolled down his throat. It felt good after six days of nothing, even if it wasn’t the whiskey he usually enjoyed. Neither said anything until they had finished half of the beer in their hands. “I got married.”

“Anybody I know?”

“Not really, an architect from Detroit. We moved back here three years ago.” Maria just stared at the top of her beer can, and Tommy couldn’t help but understand what she wasn’t saying. “I’d like to say I love him, but you remember how I feel about lying.”

“It never does anybody any good. I’ve been divorced for a year now.” Tommy drained the last of his beer before grabbing another, opening one for Maria before he opened his own, knowing she wasn’t really done with her first one yet but trying to be polite. The falling snow was starting to hide them from the world, the old Lang sign fading in front of them. “What happened to Mr. Lang? My mom told me he died, but I was too unnerved to ask.”

“Oh, he died not too many years after you left, from what I hear. Liver failure, I think.” Maria smiled, as she took the offered beer can from Tommy and placed it in the cup holder in front of the stereo.

“Well, here’s to Old Mr. Lang.” Tommy upturned his beer can and took a huge swallow. Mr. Lang was dead; that meant he would never get to thank the old man for doing him such a huge favor by giving him that Fender.

There was silence in the car for several minutes, and Tommy couldn’t help but keep drinking. Three wasn’t going to be enough for him to feel anything but a slight stirring of a buzz, but it was a good start. He briefly wondered why Maria would even drink with him if she knew about the DUI; he was sure the press had mentioned his abuse of alcohol over the years. The inside of the car became darker as the snow got heavier on the windshield; he wondered why Maria didn’t turn on the inside lights in her car, but he liked the dark better. It didn’t take long before Tommy couldn’t stand the silence anymore. “You look great; the years have definitely been good to you.”

“You’re just saying that.” Maria’s blush made Tommy remember how he used to like teasing her, how he liked saying dirty things to her just to make her lightly slap him on the arm and scold him under her breath, her bright blush and smirk indicating that she was amused even if she acted offended.

“No, your eyes are still as blue as I remember.” Tommy noticed that Maria just stared at him, but he couldn’t tell if she was doubtful or gracious.

“You’ve lost a lot of weight; muscled up I guess is a better way to explain it. I still remember you as that skinny kid that was always on the bench in little league because he couldn’t throw or hit the ball very far. I’m not sure you’d have much trouble with that now. Not bad for a man of fifty.” Maria looked away while finishing her beer, staring at the blanket of snow that had covered them completely from the outside world, hiding them in the car. She moved to turn the heat back up to defrost the windshield before grabbing the full beer in the cup holder, waiting for the snow to slowly melt from the windows. “I’ve seen your records in the store. It’s good to see you’ve done well for yourself.”

“I like playing, but the traveling always gets to me.”

“Being away from your family?”

“Just being on the road.” Tommy didn’t want to talk about his family, how his wife of three years had left him, wanted out because he was never home, even when he wasn’t on tour. How his own daughter would probably never know him, thanks to the court ordered restrictions his ex-wife had placed on him after the divorce. After the judge had ruled he would only be allowed to see his daughter every other weekend and some holidays, Tommy had gone out drinking, his normal nightly activity, going to the bar, sitting around a bunch of strangers who would come up to him and ask for autographs, pictures, and kisses. He never went home with

any of the women, but he wanted to; he thought he was being a good husband. But that night, for some reason, he felt the need to go to his ex-wife, tell her how much he was sorry, how he wanted to be a good father to little Sophie. He had only proved himself even more unworthy when he had gotten behind the wheel, knowing he had too much to drink, apparently swerving when he thought he was driving fine, hitting an oncoming car head on, almost killing the other driver, breaking his strumming arm and delaying the tour for another month. He wasn't the victim he had spent his life trying to be; instead, he became the violator.

After drinking the rest of his second beer, Tommy decided that he should drink the third one fast, even if he wanted to pace himself with Maria, who was opening up her own beer can this time, having drunk the second beer much faster than her first.

"Remember when we used to go to the drive-in with Lisa and Jimmy?" Maria looked at Tommy with this needy look, one that he couldn't recall ever seeing. She was asking him something more, but he couldn't figure it out. "That is, if I could ever get you to leave your guitar long enough. I'm surprised you didn't take it on dates."

"I did that one time, but you scolded me about it. Said I was more in love with the guitar than I was with you." Tommy didn't want to admit that he probably was, since his ex-wife had accused him of the same thing several times.

"I don't remember that," Maria said; she scrunched up her face, which Tommy assumed was her starting to feel the buzz. She placed the beer in the cup holder, right in front of the heater controls. Tommy had already finished his third one and placed it in the brown paper bag that came with the beer. "I'm finished."

"What about Lisa and Jimmy?" Tommy stared at the beer can sitting there, all alone, and he felt compelled not to let it feel any loneliness on Christmas Eve.

“I was just thinking about those drive-in movies, how you used to hide in the backseat so that my friends didn’t know I came with you.” Maria gripped the steering wheel, and Tommy took that opportunity to pick up the lonely beer can to finish the rest. Maria’s lipstick wasn’t on this can like it was the others, but he could still taste the slight cinnamon from where her lips had previously vacated. It was the first time in a while he had managed to savor any alcohol. “I guess I wanted to apologize, or thank you, or something. I’m not sure what.”

“It wasn’t the only place I hid. Recall the time your parents came home early, and I had to hide in your closet?” Tommy asked with a smirk, as he finished the rest of Maria’s beer. “Let me just say, it’s not easy getting dressed in such small spaces.”

“I’m sure you’ve become a pro since then,” Maria replied with a smirk of her own.

“I’ve never hidden since,” Tommy mentioned. He looked at Maria’s forlorn look, trying to decipher what was really happening. He loved reminiscing, and he missed the look she gave him earlier, the one that made him think they were seventeen again, parking somewhere away from popular make out spots so that her friends and parents didn’t know how much she loved fucking Tommy in his old Mustang, the one his parents gave him to compensate for always being at the country club, leaving him with his sisters. “I still remember the look on your face when your dad yelled upstairs, right when you’d managed to stick my cock in your mouth.”

“Tommy Maelstrom! Such language.” Maria blushed, though her smile did remind Tommy of their high school days.

“I never complained,” Tommy said, running his fingers through his short, thinning hair. Tommy missed his long hair for the first time since he cut it during the end of the disco era. It wasn’t cool to have long, rocker hair according to his manager, and when big hair came back during the last part of the eighties, Tommy decided to just keep himself clean-cut. His fans were

aging along with him, so he didn't want to scare off any of his remaining fans, since new ones weren't as forthcoming. Being a solo artist was much tougher than being just one member of a band, since all the attention was always on him.

Tommy noticed that the car was bathed in silence, the only noise coming from the outside. Maria was no longer gripping the steering wheel, as she leaned her head against the back of the seat and just looked at Tommy with this hungry, forbidden stare. Her eyes really were the same shade of blue. It was tempting to give into the look, but something told him that they both would regret something happening. Maria was still married, he was trying to reconcile with his ex-wife so that he could see Sophie again. His media reputation couldn't handle an affair with a married woman right now, even if everything in him was telling him to go for it.

"I should head back home. I'm sure they're all wondering where I've been," Tommy said, though he doubted the truth in that statement. He imagined that he would return to the same exact scene he left, nobody realizing that he had left in the first place.

"It's...I'm glad we ran into each other," Maria replied, but she didn't move, just continued staring at Tommy with that same look. "Say hello to your parents for me."

"Do the same for me." Tommy smiled before touching Maria's thigh briefly, just a reassurance that she wasn't an illusion, something that he was dreaming after he'd passed out drunk again. "I hope it's not another thirty years before we see each other again."

"Twenty seven. It's been twenty-seven years." Maria sat up and leaned forward, placing her hand above Tommy's shoulder. Tommy just smiled, figuring she needed to know he wasn't an illusion, either. He knew she was going to offer to drive him home, but he wanted to walk home again, feel the crunch of the snow beneath his feet, calm him down again after seeing Maria so that he would be able to face his family again.

“Goodbye, Maria,” Tommy stated, as he went to grab the door handle. He wasn’t fully turned around before he found himself being kissed, so quickly and harshly that he wasn’t sure it had really happened.

“Goodbye, Mal.” Maria’s hand fell from Tommy’s shoulder, as he just nodded, not quite ready to deal with her tears, the ones he saw about to break behind her eyes. Instead of comforting his ex-lover, he got out of the car, into the snow storm. He just waved to her, keeping his hand in the air as he watched her drive away, slowly until she disappeared around the corner, leaving the only light around him coming from the flickering bulb above the Lang’s sign. He was glad that he ran into Maria while he was sober, not quite sure what he would’ve said or done, knowing that the pain both felt back in high school would’ve come up instead of being skirted around throughout the conversation. He never mentioned that his first album was dedicated to her, though he suspected that she knew every song on there was about her.

Instead of walking home right away, he looked up at the Lang’s sign painted on the side of the building, remembering all the candy he bought at the store as a boy, despite his father’s insistence that his teeth would rot out, that he should save his allowance for something more practical. He bought Maria a bouquet of flowers there, to apologize for missing prom, for not showing up because inspiration hit him to write a song. He even convinced one of the sales clerks that he was old enough to buy beer once, his first ever. Now, he stood under the faded sign, the curly-q from the L the only part that was showing from the snow. He decided it was time to go back home.

On his walk back, Tommy ignored the fact that his entire body was freezing. He forgot how cold it got in Michigan, no longer surprised that his entire face was numb from something

other than alcohol for once. He was so cold that he didn't notice the snow changing into a small drizzle of rain as he walked up the steps to his childhood home.

## **You Can Do the Dishes**

Brooks Glendower didn't understand why her mother made her do the dishes. It was such a boring thing to do every night after dinner, and she hated that her hands had to be submerged in water. The way her fingertips wrinkled and her skin would feel dirty after the last plate was dried and placed neatly back in the cabinet with its sisters and brothers. She even hated taking baths or going swimming, hated the idea of being submerged in water in general. Yet, she loved the feeling the shower's spray would induce in her.

When her sister Jenna left, Brooks and her little brother, Danny, each had to take half of the chores that their sister did. Of course, she got stuck with the "girly" jobs like dishes, laundry, and tending the horses. Not every girl loved horses. Matter of fact, Brooks hated horses, and she hated the farm even more. She couldn't wait to get out of Podunk, Kentucky, into a bigger town like Lexington or Louisville. Anyplace was better than a town that didn't even have a Wal-Mart because it was so small. Since she was seventeen years old, she should be allowed to get an after school job instead of still doing chores around the family's Kentucky farm.

Glancing out the window from her place behind the sink, she saw Danny teasing the cows, something her father would throw a fit about if he found out. Sure enough, he would find out. Dads always knew, just like moms knew what their daughters were up to, which is why it was always hard to sneak outside on the roof from the second story to smoke those cigarettes she had found in her father's drawers. Like Brooks didn't know her parents smoked; they had smoked openly when she was little, but "quit" when she turned sixteen last year, after they found that first pack of cigarettes in her own dresser.

“Aren’t you done yet?” her mother asked. Her mother was a quiet woman, kept to herself about most things, and rarely yelled. Yet, Brooks was more afraid of her mom than her dad, even with his furrowed brow that let you know he was mad.

“Almost,” Brooks replied, as she picked up another plate from the water and washed it in the air instead of in the sink. “I have a test in French tomorrow. Can I go to my room after this?”

“That’s fine but keep your door open, and don’t forget about feeding the horses in the morning.” Her mother wiped her hands along the old, muddy jeans she was wearing before leaving the room. Brooks sighed, wishing for the umpteenth time that her mother would just let her do something else. Hell, she would clean up the horse shit in the barn if it meant she didn’t have to do the dishes anymore. She had asked once to switch with Danny, but her father told her that cleaning the stalls was a man’s job, no place for a little girl. She hadn’t been little in five years; not since she went through that growth spurt in middle school and grew to almost six feet, though she was mostly legs.

When she went into her room, Brooks didn’t study for her test. She wasn’t even taking French. Instead, she pulled on her headphones and rocked out to whatever was playing on the radio, whatever would pick up; anything but country. She was tired of country music, tired of all those boys at school with their boots caked in manure and John Deere shirts. Her boyfriend, Jimmy Waller, was just as boring, and she had tried to hint that she was tired of him; he wasn’t getting the message, making her think she should just break up with him instead of waiting for him to do the breaking. She was a farmer’s daughter; didn’t mean she wanted to be a farmer’s wife. Only a few more months until graduation, and then, only a few more months until she moved away from here to attend college, hopefully someplace far away like NYU or UCLA. Brooks closed her eyes, letting the music soothe her brain, wishing she was already gone.

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Finally, her parents allowed her to get a job outside of the home once she graduated high school, so Brooks took a job working at the local Pizza Hut in town for the summer. She didn't realize when she started working that she would be doing the dishes there, as well; after all, she wanted a job to escape the monotony of her farm chores, especially the dishes. The first few days, while in training, she had gotten away with just using the automatic dishwasher and the spray nozzle. Her boss, Mr. Rafferty, didn't look much older than she was, though Brooks suspected that Podunk kept him because he didn't have a choice.

"Brooks, can you wash the marinara bowl for us? I think John put the burner on too high again, and the sauce smells like it's burned. It's almost empty now, so now's a good time to switch it." Mr. Rafferty asked.

"Oh, uh...sure." Brooks figured it was another one of those dishes she would have to put through the washer a few times to clean it. She didn't expect there to be caked, burnt sauce stuck on the side of the stainless steel container. "Shit."

After three times through the washer, Brooks recognized that the container was clean except for the ring of burnt sauce on the side. The washer wasn't going to get it clean, but she thought that maybe nobody would notice, since the restaurant was always busy. It was, after all, one of three restaurants that Podunk had where you could sit down and order food; the others were Mama's Kitchen and Gray's Diner, both locally owned and full of "home-cooked" food that in no way compared to her mother's chicken and dumplings.

A few days later, Brooks came into work, and noticed the container on the dish pile again. Somebody had noticed, and now she was going to be chastised as the girl that doesn't know how to do dishes.

"Brooks, can you get that pot again? It didn't come clean." Mr. Rafferty didn't yell at her, just gave her a disappointed-like look. "There's a scrubber in the closet, if you need it."

"Yeah, sure." Brooks could feel her face flush, her palms start to sweat, as she scratched them into fists. Just the thought of the water rising in that container, the dish liquid making bubbles reminiscent of childhood bubble baths; Brooks was afraid she was going to hyperventilate, but instead took a deep breath and smiled awkwardly when she noticed John, the cook, staring at her.

Placing the pile of plates, forks, and cups into a rack, Brooks sent them through the massive machine first. Here was this giant, steel box that produced steam that would burn her face off if she stood over it, and she was more afraid of sticking her hands and arms down into a medium container. She had never realized how silly her fear probably seemed to other people, but there was just something there, something nagging at the back of her mind that told her submerging her body into water would cause bad things to happen.

She must have been staring too long at the water as it rose in the container; Mr. Rafferty came over and placed a hand on her shoulder to get her attention, but Brooks only jumped at the contact.

"Something wrong, Brooks?" Mr. Rafferty might have looked concerned, but that alarmed her for some reason.

“I’m sorry. I can’t do this.” Without a second thought, Brooks took off her apron, cap, and nametag, handing them to Mr. Rafferty. “I’ve gotta go. I can’t do this. I’ll have my dad bring back the shirts tomorrow when he comes to town. I’m sorry.”

Brooks walked out of the Pizza Hut, got into her father’s old Nissan work truck that he let her drive to work, and drove away faster than she did when Jimmy Waller broke up with her last month. She had tried working, had escaped doing dishes at home, but found that it was easier to avoid submersion when her mother dirtied the dishes.

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Her parents refused to acknowledge her brief stint as a worker, only giving her this look that said “I told you so,” yet with a slight smirk at being satisfied for proving a point. Brooks hated that look. She hated feeling like a failure to her parents, especially her mother; Brooks wanted to prove to her mother that she was a strong woman, just like her. However, she was never happier to escape farm life when she moved to Morehead State University. Dorm life was easy; she could go to the cafeteria, never had to do dishes, since she could snack on chips and sodas. There were no bathtubs, only showers, so she didn’t have to worry about people noticing her fear. Nothing really exciting happened at college aside from class and the occasional date. She refused to join any clubs or go to any sporting events.

Then, her new boyfriend, Len, wanted to go swimming in the pond on his family farm. There were a few friends coming, and they were going to make a day of it: picnics, sunbathing, and swimming. Len was excited about making plans, so she couldn’t tell him no. He was nice to her, after all; she may not love him yet, but she did enjoy his company sometimes. He didn’t

push like some other boys; he was the sweet, patient kind, which is why she had jumped into bed with him much quicker than any of the other boys she had dated the past three years at college.

So, here the new gang was: Thora with her bright yellow hair and thick country accent, who was dating Mark, Len's best friend, so Brooks felt like she had to be nice to her. Mark was only recognizable from a crowd because he hardly ever took off his Ford Racing hat, making Brooks think that he would actually wear it in the water, though he did take it off right before jumping into the pond. She was surprised to find that he wasn't bald, like she had assumed was the reason for the hat; she thought he was going to keep it on during sex even, but it was still too dark to tell if his hair was cut short or balding. In the sun, it was clear that his hair was just a short dirty blonde. Len was waving to her from the water, his farmer's tan still apparent as his floating torso made it look like he had no legs.

"Come on, Brooks...just get in for a bit," Thora said, her "new best friend," as she liked to refer to herself. Brooks didn't have the heart to tell her that she didn't enjoy her company in the least. "The water really isn't that cold."

"No, I'm okay here. I'm not a fan of swimming." Brooks used her hand to block out the sun from her eyes, as she watched Thora get ready to wade into the water about fifteen feet away. This was as close as Brooks was getting to the pond, especially since the grass that was growing around it looked razor sharp and violent, as though would get cuts on her legs just by venturing towards the water. The rocks along the bank looked like broken glass, so she decided that a good half a football field away was the perfect place to wait for the others.

For a few chapters of *Huckleberry Finn*, Brooks just enjoyed sitting in the sun and doing her homework for American Lit. She was never happier to have an excuse not to swim, and

nobody really argued with her over doing homework, though Len did pout when she wouldn't come in the water to sit on his shoulders to play chicken.

When everybody came out of the water, they all finished off the twenty-four pack of Bud Light before they started to pack up their belongings, before Len made his way over to Brooks.

"Why wouldn't you get in the pond? You didn't have to swim; I brought floats for you. You need to take a break from all that homework you do." Len stood over Brooks, his tall, thin frame barely blocking the sun from her eyes.

"I know. I just wanted to finish this book, so we could be together more this weekend." Brooks was starting to shift, trying to escape Len's shadow over her. She missed the warmth of the sun against her tan skin. The trees seemed to laugh at her, their branches swaying they were laughing so hard.

"Well, I don't get it. We were here together today, and you didn't want to do anything. So...what is it? Are you on the rag?"

"Oh, eww. No, I'm not...and, maybe I just wanted to tan. You know swimming's not my favorite." Brooks pulled out her old gray hoodie sweatshirt and cutoff shorts before packing the rest of her orange tote bag, the one she picked out to match her orange and teal bikini she had bought just for this occasion. It was for show only; she didn't want Len to think she didn't own a bathing suit, even though it was probably the first one she had since she was a little girl. Just because she wore the cloth didn't mean she had to get it wet.

"Well, it's not that bad. Was it the water? I know it's not a pool with all the chlorine and stuff, but it's still pretty clean."

"No, it's...look, I just didn't want to swim today, but I still came, okay?" Brooks was about to pull on her hoodie and shorts, but Len came at her and picked her up before he took her

to the dock. She felt her fear turn into pure anger that Len would do something like this. “Put me down, Len! Dammit, put me down!”

“No, not until you tell me what’s wrong.” Len held her as though he were going to throw her into the water at any time.

“I told you. Just me put me down, dammit, Len, put me down!” Brooks felt her heartbeat so fast that she was surprised that Len didn’t feel it, though his grip was loose on her body. Their friends were already walking back to Len’s Ford pickup, trying to ignore the scene the couple was making.

“Not until you tell me!”

“I told you! Please, just put me down.” Brooks felt like she couldn’t hold back her tears anymore, as she felt Len keep acting like he was throwing her in the water before keeping his grip on her body. “Please, please, just let me down. Please don’t.”

“What’s wrong? Oh no, baby...what’s wrong?” Len put her down, making sure her feet were placed gently on the dock. “Did I hurt you?”

“Take me home.” Brooks steeled her jaw, and didn’t even dress as she grabbed her tote bag and clothes before making her way up the hill towards Len’s truck. She knew she would wait to break up with him until they had dropped off the others, no longer afraid to be the one to do the breaking.

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For the first few years after college graduation, Brooks had decided not to date anybody when she moved to Lexington, deciding that it was easier to get by without doing dishes if she

didn't have a boyfriend that wanted her to cook. Living alone, she wasn't frowned upon as much for getting takeout or buying cheap TV dinners that came with trays. Plastic forks, paper plates, and on the rare occasion she would cook, a dish-washing wand so that she wouldn't have to put her hands in the water.

Then, she met Ollie.

It was hard to deny the attraction to Oliver Landover, so she stopped after flirting back and forth with him in the break room at Grigsby Advertising. She enjoyed her job, but she could find another one, since she wasn't allowed to date Ollie; he was her boss, after all, and the company had specific restrictions, even though for the first three months of their relationship, they ignored the rules and wound up dating behind closed doors. He would do the dishes, since they would usually go to his apartment. When she offered to help out of kindness, he had only allowed her to dry the dishes, saying he didn't want her hands to wrinkle or lose their softness by being submerged in the water. She fell in love with him right then.

After a year at her new job, managing the Cabinets and More office for her uncle, Brooks had agreed to marry Ollie. When they moved in together at first, it was a difficult adjustment for them both after the honeymoon stage was over, and Ollie started to subtly hint that he noticed she never took baths, or that she avoided going near standing water. Even when it rained, she went out of her way to drive and walk around the puddles that were on the ground. He was worried, and she understood that, but she still felt he would laugh at her for such a silly fear. When he tried jumping into the shower with her, she was fine with that after a little coercion, but when he suggested taking a bubble bath to relax together, she froze, bringing it to his attention more. She could drink water, because it was going inside her body; it was the submersion in

water that bothered her, and she couldn't ignore the problem anymore. She needed to tell somebody, and she wasn't ready to admit her problem was big enough for therapy.

"It's not silly, honey." Ollie was picking at the remnants of pot roast on his plate, the gravy the only thing really left besides tiny strands of beef and potato skins. "I'm afraid of spiders. We're all afraid of something."

"Yeah, but I'm afraid of water," Brooks replied. When she saw the skeptical look on Ollie's face, she clarified. "Okay, not water, but being *in* water. It's a little silly." Brooks kept staring at her own plate, afraid to see Ollie's expression.

"It's not silly." Ollie reached over the table, and placed his hand overtop Brooks's left one that was sitting idly face up by her plate. "Please, just talk to me about it. It'll make you feel better, I promise."

"I don't want to talk about it. I don't even know why I'm afraid; that's why it's stupid." Brooks pulled her hands back and placed them on her lap before deciding to get up and place the dishes in the dishwasher. She forgot that the dishwasher was broken.

"Honey, let me do the dishes tonight. You can go read, relax a bit. I've got this covered." Ollie came up behind her, wrapped his arms around her as she stood over the sink, and kissed her head, just like a father would a child.

"I can do this alone. I don't need you to help me." Brooks wiggled out of his embrace before turning on the water. "I've done it before without help. I just don't want anybody near me when I'm in the water, okay?"

"Honey, maybe you should see somebody." Ollie had this scolded child expression on his face, immediately turning from the father figure into the child.

"I don't need help. I know what I'm doing."

“I mean to help you figure out why you’re afraid; it seems like being afraid of water, you can probably fix that, right? I mean...being afraid of spiders and snakes, they just hypnotize you or something, and make you hold them, and apparently, you’re cured or whatever. Maybe they can find out what about being in water you don’t like. You don’t have to be afraid, and I’ll be here with you. I’m not going anywhere. Whatever you need.”

“Ollie, I love you, baby, but can we talk about this later? Right now, I just want to be alone.” Brooks always hated arguments with Oliver, but she didn’t want him to see her in the water, her hands getting dirty from the cleaning process. She didn’t want him to think any less of her, so she felt relief when he just nodded and left her alone in the kitchen.

“Whatever you need,” he had said. She had lived so long with this fear that she wasn’t sure who she would be without it. Spending over twenty years obsessing about how to avoid being submerged in water was what had defined her for so long, she was actually afraid to find out what happened. She only remembered being afraid of water since she was about five years old, that every time her mother went about giving her a bath, she would throw a fit, which prompted her to learn how to take a shower earlier than what her mother said was usual. Her parents never said she was a difficult baby to bathe, said she actually used to love the water, that she was like a little water baby. There were pictures of her in pools, floating in a yellow ring meant to hold her tiny baby form while her parents splashed around her.

Now, while she and Ollie were considering children of their own, Brooks decided it was time to get professional help, even if she refused to admit it to herself. She wanted pictures of her babies with happy faces, the ones she had in that yellow floaty.

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“Focus on my voice,” her therapist said. She had been going to Dr. Case for two months now, and he had suggested hypnosis to uncover possible repressed memories. She doubted it would work but agreed anyways. “Now, Brooks, think back to the last time you enjoyed swimming, taking a bath, doing the dishes.”

“I don’t think anybody likes doing the dishes, Doctor,” Brooks replied, trying to avoid being hypnotized, just in case it did work. He had already tried taking her to a session around a private pool, but she had stayed around the bushes, refusing to go onto the concrete around the inground pool. After a month of failed therapy sessions through trusting herself in the water, the doctor had decided to try hypnosis to uncover the problem, since it was obviously more severe than originally expected. Brooks wasn’t sure what to think about that observation; it frightened her more than she cared to admit.

“Okay, Brooks, focus.” The doctor kept talking, and Brooks kept listening, following his instructions, feeling herself go to a happy place, a place she hadn’t been in years. She was five, the bottle of Mr. Bubbles next to the bathtub, her long, wet hair running down her back. Her mermaid Barbie was trying to save the family of rubber ducks from the wrath of the evil Mr. Penguin, her favorite villain and soap animal.

“Long, deep breaths,” Dr. Case kept saying, but all Brooks could see was her babysitter, Jim, her favorite, handsome neighbor. She told her mom she would marry him one day, even if he was in high school and she was just in kindergarten.

Now, Brooks started to ignore Dr. Case, focusing on how happy she felt just playing in the tub, having Jim there to see her help Barbie conquer Mr. Penguin and save the day. He only smiled, sitting on the toilet seat, watching her like he always did. Only this time, he moved over

to the tub before her fingers were wrinkly, the time that indicated she had to get out of the tub. This time, he came over and decided to play with her. He was going to be Mr. Penguin this time, give her a chance to show off even more.

However, something was wrong. Mr. Penguin went under the water, but the bubbles were too much, so she couldn't see where he had gone. Jim's arm was under the water and he had a determined look on his face, like he was planning something extremely evil for Mr. Penguin. Brooks was excited she would really get to show off, so she made Mermaid Barbie swim over to protect the duck family. That's when she felt something was wrong. Mr. Penguin was burning her peepee, just like he did when she washed with him, but it burned worse this time. Then, she couldn't feel Mr. Penguin's beak anymore, and she fell into the water a little more, her body almost completely in the water except for her head. Brooks didn't know what to do, so she just waited to see if Jim would find Mr. Penguin and make it stop hurting. She remembers crying, remembers the pain in her peepee, remembers Jim telling her it was okay, that he wasn't hurting her. She didn't think he was until he had said that.

"You can come back now, Brooks. Follow my voice," she heard, but the pain was too much. "It's okay, follow my voice. When I say open your eyes, open your eyes, okay?"

Brooks didn't try to stop Mr. Penguin anymore, the burning was permanent now; she knew it would be, so she stopped Mermaid Barbie from saving the day. Instead, she just lay submerged in the bathtub and cried silently.

"Open your eyes," Dr. Case said, and Brooks found herself awake again, her forehead sweating, her tears freely flowing, and her vagina sore. "Everything is okay, you're back now. What did you see?"

“I...I...was...he was...I need to go.” Brooks tried to stand, but her legs disagreed, so she fell back onto the couch. She sent Dr. Case a desperate look. “I really need to go.”

“If you feel that’s necessary, Brooks, but why don’t we discuss what you saw first? Maybe that will help us figure out what to do.”

“What to do?” Brooks was lost. She didn’t remember any of that happening; she only remembered how much she used to adore Jim. “Jim...my babysitter.”

“What about him?” Dr. Case leaned back in his chair, and Brooks felt a little relieved that he wasn’t in her face anymore. “What happened with Jim?”

“Bathtime. I wanted to play, so did he. I let him. I didn’t know it was wrong.” Brooks was lost in her memories now: how Jim stopped wanting to babysit after that, how her mother stopped buying soap animals, how she never wanted to take a bath again. Now that she knew what really happened, did she really know what happened afterwards? Was her life a big lie she had been telling herself?

She flashed back to when Len threw her into the pond. Hadn’t he reminded her a little of Jim? How could she forget something so important as being molested in a bathtub? Then again, she didn’t blame herself for forgetting. Who would want to remember that pain?

“What did Jim do to you in the bathtub, Brooks?” Dr. Case reminded her of her father, the balding spot on top of his head, the gray on the side, trimmed nicely around his ears, his rosy cheeks and welcoming smile.

“He touched me, he hurt me. I...I can’t...” Brooks came out of her after trance, realizing that maybe she was just dreaming. That she wanted to explain what happened, so her mind was making things up to help her, even if it felt so real. More than a dream, less than reality. She couldn’t explain it very well, so she stopped trying, and left Dr. Case’s office, hoping that Ollie

would be home early from work today like he promised. She didn't want to deal with this alone, not anymore.

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“What do you mean, Brooks? I have been helping,” Ollie yelled, as he threw the kitchen towel across the stove. “I’ve been helping, doing everything you ask, but you keep pushing me away. I thought you wanted my help.”

“I do, Ollie, I do...I just...” Brooks didn't feel like yelling anymore, or crying, or not sleeping, or missing work. She sat down as hard as she could at the kitchen table, not caring that her butt hurt now. “I’m tired of fighting. Can we not tonight?”

“I’m tired, too.” Ollie meant more than just the fighting, and Brooks could tell.

“Can we just eat in peace tonight? Not talk about how I’m feeling? How was your day today?” Brooks tried to smile, but she knew it looked as fake as it felt.

“Brooks...” Ollie sat down across from her, ignoring the water boiling over on the stove.

“Please, Ollie...just for tonight. I promise I’ll go see Dr. Case again tomorrow.” Brooks knew she was lying, and she suspected Ollie did, too. Then again, maybe she would get enough strength to go see Dr. Case again. She hadn't been back since she had walked out of his office; it was easier to blame the doctor for unleashing this nightmare on her. At least she had called her mother like Ollie suggested, found out where Jim was, how happy he was with his three children and his second wife, working at the car dealership there in town. Brooks wished she had never made the phone call.

“Honey, you’re right. No more fighting. I’m thinking of setting up an appointment with Dr. Case myself for next week, see if there’s any advice he can give me. I just don’t know what to do.” Ollie looked so sad, but Brooks couldn’t blame him; she wasn’t exactly being the model wife he had married. She was happier when she didn’t know what happened, at least that’s what she kept telling herself.

“Please don’t? We’ll get through this. I just need time,” Brooks replied. Instead of fighting, the couple ate dinner in silence that night.

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“Brooks, this is a safe environment. You just have to trust that I’m helping you,” Dr. Case said.

“I know, I just want to kill that bastard,” Brooks replied. She knew it was a harsh reaction, but what was she supposed to feel? It had been three months since she went under hypnosis, since she found out she was molested as a child, and still, she felt trapped, even more now than when she didn’t know what had happened. Part of her wished that she had never learned the truth and just continued being afraid of water. It would be easier than going home, worried that your own husband was judging you. Ollie was trying his best, sure, but his best was driving Brooks crazier.

“That’s a normal response, but I would suggest not confronting him. There’s a possibility it’ll only make things worse for you if you were to see Jim,” Dr. Case laid down his notepad before standing up from his desk. Their session was over already; Brooks thought it had just

started. "Next week, why don't we arrange for a supervised visit to the YMCA pool? We'll work on getting you adept at being around water again."

"Are you sure that's a good idea? I mean...I don't feel ready for that," Brooks replied.

"Baby steps. We're not going to just throw you in a pool and tell you to swim, though. That would do more harm than good. However, gradually acclimating you to the possibility, going slow, getting you to overcome your fear of water, that will help." Dr. Case walked with her to the front desk before saying goodbye. The entire ride home, she couldn't stop shaking, the thought of going to the pool next week making her more nervous than that trip to the lake with Len back in college. Instead of driving home, she decided that she wasn't ready to face Ollie today, so she just continued to drive around Lexington, seeing all the familiar sites, passing by Transylvania's campus, driving through all the buildings downtown, passing Rupp Arena and the fountains.

All of a sudden, she stopped shaking, but she didn't understand why she suddenly felt calm. Her moods and emotions lately had been acting like an on/off switch. Seemed like her nerves were turned off, only this time she didn't have warning, and she found that she liked the sensation of being calm. That's when she drove home, deciding that the first person she wanted to tell about her recovery steps was Ollie. Even if she never recovered completely, Brooks knew that she wanted Ollie with her during every step.

When she pulled into the driveway, she noticed that Ollie's Camry wasn't there yet. Of course, it wouldn't be, she was home earlier than usual. Ollie didn't get home until after five, after struggling through the Man O'War traffic to get home, even if the neighborhood was only about a mile down from where he worked. Since it was close to that time anyways, Brooks decided to go ahead and fix dinner, have everything ready and on the table when Ollie walked in

the door, something she hadn't done in a long time, usually only on special occasions like birthday dinners or anniversaries.

While the chicken was baking in the oven, Brooks set the table, even lit the tapers on the table that had probably been lit once and blown out after ten minutes of burning. They weren't a fancy couple, they didn't entertain friends or family that often. The house wasn't large, just the right size for them and two children in the future.

Ollie walked in the door just as Brooks pulled out the chicken from the oven. It burned a little, but she didn't care. Instead, she accepted the silent smile from Ollie, who was loosening his tie and removing his jacket. He looked pleased, and she liked it. Instead of saying anything else, the two just stared at each other across the island counter and knew everything was eventually going to be okay.

During dinner, Brooks didn't even mind talking about her therapy session, how she expected he was going to force her to the Y pool next week. She wasn't as worried about it when Ollie was sitting across from her.

"I want you there with me. Do you think you could get off work?" Brooks chewed her bottom lip, not realizing it until she broke skin.

"I'm not sure I could get off, but I could make arrangements to take a long lunch once a week. Whatever you need," Ollie replied.

"The only thing I'm sure about is that I want you there. Maybe it won't be as strange if I know somebody. I'm not even sure if I can do this yet. I'm overwhelmed just with the idea, yet I feel calm, like I subconsciously know this is what will help."

“You really have been going to therapy. You’re starting to sound like it,” Ollie smiled warmly at her. Just last week, she would’ve interpreted his comment as undermining and cruel, but today he sounded genuine and happy to see her recovering.

After dinner, Ollie offered to do the dishes again. Instead of letting him or arguing that she could just to have him do them in the end, Brooks Glendower Landover took her husband’s hand and they did the dishes together.

## Train Station

Fred put her glasses on to get a better look at the people. The station was full, barely leaving room for anybody to clearly see another person across the room. When Fred noticed that her girlfriend was nowhere in sight, she decided to take a seat on the oblong worn, wooden benches that had probably been there since the nineteenth century; the seats were definitely showing their age. In one section of the benches, she would have to sit by a quiet older lady who was reading a book, at another by a couple expressing their love for one another in constant touches, longing looks, and embraces. She decided to take the third option next to an arguing family. The father yelling at his oldest daughter, who Fred decided was still in her preteens, reminded her of childhood.

After ten minutes of waiting, she noticed that the crowd had started to dwindle, but there was still no sign of her girlfriend. She pulled out her cell phone. After the fifth ring, there was no answer, and she received Trish's voice messaging system. She disconnected, thought briefly about dialing again, but pocketed the phone instead. Glancing back at the big clock above the payphones, she noticed that she'd been in town approximately twenty three minutes, and Trish was late as usual. *She never was one for proper timing. No wonder my dad never liked her.*

For the past five months, Fred had been in England, finishing her internship with the British Museum, giving lectures and teaching public classes on Celtic traditions. Trish was still here in Bufford, Kentucky, located on the outskirts of Lexington, finishing her final semester at the University of Kentucky; they had parted ways right after the last spring semester ended, knowing that they'd physically be apart for what seemed like a long time but promised to keep in touch through phone calls and emails. Fred had received only a handful of either. The first month

was fine, but being that far away had really contributed to a downfall in their relationship. After the initial passion had worn off from their early dating days, they tried connecting emotionally, but the only time they really cared for each other was when one said something vile to the other, lowering their already unusual relationship to an uglier depth. She had called Trish the night before she left London and informed her of all the necessary information regarding her flight times, and the time that her train was scheduled to arrive, but she knew that her curvy brunette girlfriend would purposefully pick her up late and think of a nasty excuse that involved an insult towards her, blaming Fred for her obvious tardiness.

“Did your boyfriend leave you?”

“Pardon me?” Fred looked over, relieved that she wasn’t hearing voices, and noticed that while she was replaying several scenarios for when Trish did arrive, that the verbally violent family had left, and a young, attractive redhead had taken their place.

“I asked if your boyfriend left you here. Forgot to pick you up?”

“Oh...yeah. Something like that.” She looked up at the clock. 5:42.

“Well...I’m sure he’s just delayed in traffic.”

“Yeah...I suppose.”

“Would you like some gum?” The young woman’s eyes had a serene glow, and Fred couldn’t stop staring at her light bluish-grey eyes.

Fred’s eyebrows scrunched in confusion until the redhead held out a small green package of foil-wrapped sticks. Nodding, she took the offered gum, and opened it carefully, making sure to fold the wrapper neatly before tucking it into her coat pocket. “Where’d you ride in from? If you don’t mind me asking, that is...”

“I just got back from London. I took a flight into JFK, hopped a train into town from

Grand Central.”

“It is kind of a strange town. This is, I mean...though New York is, too, if you ask me. It’s big, yet there’s nothing really important to see here. I just rode in myself, but I’m coming from out west. California, actually. I’m visiting family for the holidays.” The redhead’s smile seemed utterly genuine, and Fred tried to think back to a time when she had smiled that way; she already knew the answer was buried, so she didn’t try to dig.

Fred glanced at the clock again. 5:51.

“I grew up here, anybody I’d know?” Fred wasn’t making eye contact, her leg shaking up and down, up and down.

“Maybe...do you know Pete and Loretta Jensen? They’re my aunt and uncle on my mom’s side of the family. I haven’t seen them since I was twelve.” She cocked her head to the side, her eyes still glowing, and her smile still genuine. It was starting to make Fred squirm in her seat.

“Oh, yeah? I went to school with their oldest daughter. She was actually my first kis...kindergarten friend.” Fred felt her temples start to build tension, hoping that this beautiful stranger hadn’t caught on to her sexuality slip. Then again, why would this stranger care?

“That’s nice. I always thought she was a brat.”

“She is.”

“I thought you said you were friends.”

“In kindergarten...that doesn’t mean that I have to like her now.” They both shared a small smile, but Fred knew hers was still partially fake.

“That’s true,” the redhead said. Fred looked up at the clock again. 5:56. “So...have you been waiting long? For your boyfriend, I mean.”

“Um...not too long. What about you?”

“My train arrived early, so I still have an hour to kill before my uncle picks me up.”

Getting more comfortable, the young woman placed her little brown purse on top of her suitcase.

Fred nodded her head, just passing the time as she glanced at the huge clock again. 5:59.

“Did you want to use my phone?” Fred went to grab her phone from her pocket, but the redhead just shook her head.

“No, thanks. I already called and left a message. He doesn’t get off work until seven, and my aunt is working night shift at the hospital, so I don’t want to bother them.” The redhead’s smile appeared permanently locked on her face. If Fred didn’t know any better, she would think the girl was smiling at her. “What were you doing in London?”

“Oh, um...doing my internship at the British Museum.”

“That sounds fun,” the redhead commented.

Fred noticed the genuinely interested grin that had permeated the young woman’s face, and she tilted her head for a moment in thought. “Wasn’t that bad. I enjoyed it.”

“That’s good.”

Fred craned her neck around, once again looking to see if Trish had arrived, but there was still no sign of her. She also noticed that the large crowd had thinned down immensely, and she took a glance at the clock before returning to sit properly in her seat. 6:09.

“Does he usually pick you up late?” The question was asked, and Fred’s concentration wasn’t focused on the redheaded speaker.

“She’s always late for everything.” Fred froze, holding her breath for the sermon that she expected. The sermon always came when she mentioned something about dating other women, especially in this town.

“Oh, well...you could have said something. Here I was going on about your boyfriend, and all this time it was a girl you were looking for; I feel silly.” The young woman’s face and neck turned a dark red hue, but she never flinched or showed any signs of discomfort. The air around the two was still light, and no obvious tension had been added.

Fred just stared at her wide-eyed, shocked that the sermon didn’t come at all, and she strained to remember a time when somebody had been all right when they first found out about her sexuality. She still remembered every damnation her father slurred towards her, and that was before she officially came out of the closet.

“No need to be. I’m just not used to telling strangers my business.”

“I understand that completely.” The redhead smiled at her. Fred decided that this young woman was not going to fit in very well around town if she smiled warmly like that to everybody. “I’m Veda, by the way.”

“Winifred... but I’ve gone by Fred since I was little.” Again, they shared a warm smile, and Fred was confused for a second at the tingle that spread through her body at the glow in Veda’s haunting eyes. She couldn’t place the feeling; it frightened her to some degree.

“I like that. Keeps it short and sweet. Seems to fit you better, too. I don’t see you as a Winifred.” Veda smiled warmly again, and Fred cringed internally, knowing that outside the doors of the station, her smile was going to go to waste. Fred turned her body more towards Veda and attempted to smile warmly back at this untainted young woman, but didn’t know if she was doing it right. For all she knew, her warm smile was frightening.

“So, are you staying in town long?”

Veda’s face seemed to light up at her sudden interest, and Fred suddenly let her inhibitions go, realizing that she really was interested, which was somewhat scary to her. “Oh,

well...until January?" The questioning gaze on Veda's face made Fred scrunch her eyebrows in confusion. She may never know where she is exactly, but she always knew how long she'd be there.

"You don't know?"

"Oh...see, my uncle Pete is sick, and we're not sure how long they'll need me here. I may need to stay after Hanukkah to help with his therapy. They're not sure yet." Fred moved her body further open towards the girl and relaxed slightly, actually finding it easy to listen to the young woman. *It's awkward, but she makes this little half-grin when she smiles sometimes. I've never seen anybody smile like that before...it's like she really has something to smile for.*

"Sorry to hear that." Fred was taken aback by the actual compassion that was in her tone, and tensed her body again, shifting in the seat, missing the comfort of the relaxation.

"Thanks," Veda replied.

"You said therapy. Are you a therapist?" She shifted on the bench again, once again opening her body, subconsciously inching a little closer to the redhead.

"Well, not as in psychology but in musical therapy. I'm a music therapist, actually, and before you ask, yes, it's a real profession."

Fred smiled at the way Veda was moving her head around to show that she usually got that question once she mentioned her career choice. "I know what a music therapist is. I was a music major before I switched majors."

"What did you switch majors to, if you don't mind me asking?" As Veda asked the question, the two of them were facing comfortably towards the other, and suddenly Fred wasn't worried about the diminished crowd moving around in the train station.

"Anthropology," Fred said. She explained how she graduated with her masters in Celtic

traditions, and she was going to look for work curating a small museum in the states, since she had finished her internship in London. Sitting there discussing the career choices that was possible for that major with a complete stranger, Fred started to remember the day she had decided to change her major, even if she always believed she would stay in music somehow. She hadn't picked up her cello in four years; it was still sitting in the basement of her parents' house.

After falling asleep in her musical theory class for the thousandth time that second freshman semester, Fred wasn't surprised the professor approached her after class, admonishing her for never paying attention, even if she did get near perfect grades on all of her quizzes and tests. When she started walking into the cafeteria, she started to wonder exactly what it was that made her keep falling asleep in class whenever she did attend. It was obvious that she understood the material and loved music, but she just could not get into the lectures. Grabbing her tray of food, she wasn't paying attention, and her messy meal decided to make her white t-shirt a Jackson Pollack painting. After flinging the noodles from her arms, she bent down to pick the tray up and met another pair of hands moving to pick up their own tray. Looking up, Fred stared into the eyes of a seemingly middle-aged woman that wore a simple green dress that matched her glowing emerald eyes, and her red hair flew over her freckled shoulders like an embrace. To her, this woman was beautiful and truly amazing, and all she had done was crash trays with her.

When the apologies came out, the two giggled, and Fred noticed that the woman had a slight brogue in her voice. Asking where she got her accent, she found out that she was Irish, and Fred smiled, remembering her own Irish Jew heritage. It was extremely rare to find an Irish Jew, but her family had moved to the states back in the 1800s, venturing further and further south until they landed in the hills of Kentucky. Sighing, Fred watched the redheaded woman leave to clean up, and that is when she decided that she wanted to embrace her heritage. After filling out

many papers, and listening to more small lectures from her music professors about how she was wasting her talent, she finally had her major changed. She always looked for that woman again but never did run into her after that, and looking at the young woman before her, she started to wonder if Veda could be from an Irish heritage. After all, Fred had been chasing a dream woman for four years, and this extremely attractive young woman that she seemed to fall into easy, comfortable conversation with was a younger version of that woman minus the accent, green eyes, or dress.

“What are you going to do once you leave?” Upon hearing Veda’s lack of brogue, Fred came out of her memories and shook her head clear of the pleasantness. Realizing that Veda asked her a question, she backtracked and started to realize those nine words meant more than just the simple question. *After spending...*

Fred looked up at the big clock, and noticed that over an hour had passed since she last checked the clock, and that Veda’s uncle was probably in the parking lot. However, she didn’t say anything to her. They had been talking for only about an hour and a half, and it was the best conversation in Fred’s life. This woman provoked more pleasant sensations in her than she had ever experienced, and she could only wonder if it was happening to Veda, too. Sneaking a peek at her, she noticed the flirty gaze and position she was sitting in, and suddenly Fred realized the signs that were clearly there but chose to ignore when the conversation had started; her gaydar had taken a vacation apparently.

Fred thought back over the entire exchange, and remembered every glance of the eyes, and the things that weren’t being said verbally but through looks, and noticed that the two young women shared something more in common than originally thought. Looking into her bluish-grey eyes, she saw them shining at her, telling her that she was more than welcome to gaze. There

were also the gentle touches that Veda would give her arm, and Fred realized that she had never once flinched, something that she always did with everybody else, even as a child. There was comfort there, longing, desire, and suddenly the room became a little warmer.

“Are you...that is...” All Fred got was a simple nod from the redhead, and another gentle gaze, followed by the half-grin that seemed to be the young woman’s trademark smile.

“Well...that’s news.”

“Yep.”

“So...why didn’t you just say something earlier? It’s obvious I wouldn’t mind.”

“I thought you would have known already,” Veda said with a grin and slight shrug of her shoulders.

Fred sighed and averted her gaze towards the parking lot again, deciding to still keep the time out of the conversation.

“So, Fred...” Veda slurred, and Fred brought her gaze back to the smirking girl, and had to arch an eyebrow at the more than friendly tone emanating from her voice. “If I give you my cell phone number, do you think we might be able to get together for a drink?”

Fred thought about the implication behind that question. Veda was asking for more than just a drink; she was also not asking for just a one-night thing, either. There was genuine interest there, and for once in her life Fred was not afraid for herself. No, she was afraid for the petite redhead.

“Veda...what exactly are you asking of me here?” She looked at the redhead, and noticed that she understood the question and was glad that Fred had seen the undertones in her own.

“I’m not asking anything of you...at least, nothing that you don’t want. I see it in your eyes, and I’m not usually this forward about these things. Truth is that I’m not in a very stable

relationship, and there is just something about you that speaks to me. I don't know what it is exactly...but I want to. I'm not afraid of you for some reason, and I'm not sure if that's a good or bad thing, but I want to know. Call me crazy, but I think we have something here." That final sentence spoke to Fred. How many girlfriends had she had that said that, only to break her heart later? How many times had she said that line herself just to get a girl into her bed? However, the way Veda spoke those words were genuine, as pure as they would ever be spoken, especially to her. Fred had always just settled for relationships, and that was proven with Trish, since their warped relationship consisted of insults and violent sex. All she wanted was to find somebody untainted by the cruelty in the world, but then reality would sink in, and she would realize that she would only taint them herself.

As she sat there, she realized that she had found what she was looking for in that very train station, and the young woman was sitting comfortably across from her, their knees touching gently, moving subconsciously every once in a while to caress the other. Fred was dirty, and she didn't want to stain this amazing young redhead sitting before her. When she made that decision, she wondered what exactly had marked her for an unhappy life. The first thing she could remember was her father always yelling at her, never giving her time to rest in peace in the darkness of her wooden, boxed room. Then, there was the rabbi, and the Jewish mothers at temple that were always trying to force their sons on her. When she wouldn't take the bait, opting for their daughters instead, she was seen as unclean, and sent away from the temple, seemingly disgracing her family, who had disowned her at that point. It was her freshman year in college, where everything changed, the small naiveté from her childhood long forgotten. At least when she was smaller, she did not have to worry about the yelling, the constant lashings, or arguments that would arise from her simple longing towards her same sex. *Was that when it*

*happened? When my father would lash me with his black, leather belt? Is that when I lost my innocence, my faith in good?*

Turning her attention back to the redhead, she noticed the concerned expression on her face and scolded herself for being so long gone into her head. Eventually, the girl's family would come inside the station looking for her, and she wanted every moment with the woman because she feared this would be the only time they would have. Deciding to continue the conversation, she reassured Veda that she was just lost in unpleasant memories, and the redhead embraced her entire body completely, just as the two lovers from her initial arrival at the station had done. It was comforting, gentle, soft, and beautiful...unlike anything Fred had ever known. She felt rejuvenated, as though her tank had been refilled, but that's when Veda's family decided to join them. The two girls looked up at the older man that had cleared his throat and parted their embracing bodies; Fred suspected he didn't recognize her from all those sleepovers with his daughter in kindergarten. Fred's body seemed to chill suddenly from the loss of warmth that came from Veda's. When she moved her attention from the older, balding man, she noticed that the redhead was writing a sequence of numbers in black ink on the back of a crumpled receipt. Tossing the pen unceremoniously back into her purse, she zipped it up halfway, and handed the paper to Fred, who just glanced at the numbers, willing her self to memorize them. She wanted more than anything to have a better life, and she immediately recognized that is what the redhead was offering her.

When Veda stood from the bench, Fred helped her with her bags. They embraced one last time, and she felt the warm softness of the redhead's lips brush against her neck, leaving her whole body tingling from the sensation. *I could get used to that...* Waving goodbye one last time, she watched Veda's figure get smaller in perspective as she found her way to her uncle's car

with him. Looking around, she noticed that she was the only one left in the station. It was completely bare. The only things left were her and the huge clock that seemed to overlook the entire station. Looking back at the massive timepiece, Fred realized that she wouldn't call Veda, even though she had said she would. The young redhead was an innocent, and there was no way that Fred would allow herself to ruin her. Sitting back down, she ran her hands through her hair, as she sighed in frustration at a life gone sour, and sat up on the hard, wooden bench, continuing to wait for her still absent girlfriend.

## Her Passion

Lyhan looked at her with deep passion, and with every movement of her eyes, she could not contain herself. She had to get her hands on her, hold her, feel her between her fingers. There was just something about her that made Lyhan know she wanted to spend the rest of her life with her. She could never forget the first time she had touched her, felt her neck between her fingers, loving the feeling of her skin sliding down her neck, her body. To Lyhan, it seemed like only a few moments, despite the fact that she had been touching her for years. Every time she came near her, smelled her, felt her, there was a reassuring passion that never failed to grow inside of her, all over her, around her. There seemed to be consistency with their relationship that Lyhan knew would never falter. Lyhan took care of her, making sure that nobody would destroy any part of her no matter the cost.

After sitting at her desk for what seemed like hours, Lyhan finally decided she couldn't control herself any longer, and went and held her with a deep embrace but holding her lightly enough not to harm any delicate part of her body. This was her soul. This was how she was meant to spend the rest of her life. She slowly slid her fingers from her body, and moved her hands around her neck, making sure to squeeze tight enough to cause her to cry out in ecstasy. Her moans were soft at first but as Lyhan moved her hands around her, she was able to make her scream with pure joy. There was no doubt that Lyhan had an effect on her that nobody else could achieve. With every movement of her fingers, Lyhan was able to make her weep, laugh, and sound out a plethora of emotions all at the same time. Lyhan knew what she was doing.

As she sat down on the bed, Lyhan again slowly moved her hands around her neck, up and down her body. When something was not right, and she didn't like the sound she made her make, she knew exactly the right knobs to turn. This was her life, and there was nothing going to change that for her. She could tell what was too much, and what was too little. The other girls in the dorm agreed that the relationship between the two would appear completely physical but once they heard the sounds coming from Lyhan's room, the other girls could hear that there was so much emotion emanating from the sounds that each girl would immediately be affected by the emotion that she produced from her sounds. There was no denying that Lyhan was good with her, and when each girl saw them together, they would only smile, wishing that Lyhan would be able to make the same effort in other aspects of her life. She devoted too much time to her, and even missed her classes frequently, causing classmates and teachers to wonder what exactly went on in Lyhan's head but nothing fazed her, and she would only stay in her room, and make love to her for hours, never getting tired, or sore. Her hand would cramp every once in a while but Lyhan would only brush the pain aside, and continue moving her hands, her fingers moving in slow and fast paced rhythms that caused her to moan out over and over again in ecstasy. If she ever hurt her, or any part of her would break, Lyhan would cry, trying to fix the problem the best that she could, and after years of being with her, Lyhan was able to fix the problems quicker than she had years beforehand when they were only starting to become familiar with one another.

Lyhan remembered the day that she first held her but it felt like she had held her all of her life, and days, months, years seemed to pass quicker than expected, and memories were difficult to process. She was only interested in the here and now, and how she would continue to improve her movements in order to produce different sounds from her. Sometimes she would be pleased, others she wouldn't. Lyhan could feel the softness of her hard body as she ran her hands up and

down, making sure she knew where to place her fingers, and the right combination of movements of each finger lightly pressing against her neck. This was her passion. Her touch flowed with intensity, and with each impact, she could feel whether her sensation was pleasurable or dissonant to her. She could feel her, every fiber of her being. Lyhan could smell the lotion on her neck, and her body that Lyhan had placed there with her hands, her fingers. The smell of vanilla coming off of her as though a burning candle was lit in the room. She smelled sweet, she felt sweet, she sounded sweet. There was no wonder why Lyhan could never keep her hands off of her.

**KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK!**

The pounding of the door startled Lyhan, and she quickly sat up in an immediate response, afraid of being caught. She didn't like others to see her in a passionate moment. She released her hands from her, and picked her up off of her lap, and placed her down beside her on the bed.

**KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK!**

"Hold on, I'm coming. Give me a second," Lyhan screamed at the door, scrambling around for her sweatshirt. Where had she placed it? Dammit! Where was it? Finally, after a panicked moment that seemed to go on forever, Lyhan pulled her sweatshirt on, and ran to the door, trying to catch her breath before finally opening it.

"What took you so long?" Kate asked. Lyhan stared at her friend, noticing her silky brown hair was flowing over her shoulders, and her deep, penetrating brown eyes were staring intently, passionately at her. Lyhan forgot about her passion in her room every time that she stared back into Kate's eyes, and she became frightened. There was nothing coming between them, and despite her desire for Kate, Lyhan always held back, never wanting to tread new

territory, never wanting anything new. She held the door so that Kate would not see beyond herself, and Lyhan started to reply but once again got caught in her glare. She just wanted to touch her, hold her...no. She couldn't. She wouldn't.

"Are you still with me here, Lyhan?" Kate asked, waving her hand gently before Lyhan's deep hazel eyes, noticing the passion in her eyes was being returned. "What are you doing in there? Why weren't you in class today? I missed you. I was hoping that we could, you know, get together tonight, hang out before your gig." Lyhan looked into Kate's eyes again, and she smiled, looking away, and nervously ran her hands through her brown hair.

"I was here all day. I got, uh, caught up, and well, I just lost track of time again I guess." Lyhan stood there, clutching to the wooden door tight enough that her hands could have bled from any more contact. She wouldn't hurt her hands, though. She needed her hands. She needed to touch her...touch Kate...no, touch her. *What is going on? Get yourself together.*

Noticing Lyhan's tortured expressions, Kate held out her hand to touch Lyhan's arm. Lyhan knew Kate thought her babbling was adorable, and she could see from Kate's expression that she wanted to ravage her body right there in the doorway. However, Lyhan also knew that Kate would never make the first move because she knew Lyhan was already involved with her "passion," as she called her. Lyhan never dispelled her name to anyone, including Kate, whom she had known for the four years that they had been in college together. Four years of wanting to touch her but never allowing herself the moment to, never allowing Kate to get close enough to her to make the contact that would send Lyhan over the deep end. Kate had told her that she knew Lyhan would never give up her passion but she couldn't help but have lustful feelings for her. She heard the sounds that Lyhan made her compose from the room, and Kate only wished that Lyhan would touch her, just once, and make *her* cry out in the same ecstasy she felt when

she heard the two of them from the other side of the door. Lyhan saw Kate's face become flushed, and her own heart pounded vigorously beneath her chest as thoughts of her and Kate slowly crept throughout her mind.

"I'm getting ready for the gig now," Lyhan lied beneath her breath. Kate smiled, and Lyhan wanted desperately to let her beyond the door into her room but as always Lyhan nodded, and told Kate she would be out in a few minutes.

Lyhan moved nervously around her room, trying to pack everything up, finding her bag, her amp, her equipment, and finally coming to her guitar case. When she was packed and ready to go, she quickly went to her closet, and found a pair of clean jeans and the tight blue t-shirt she got from the Shins concert a few weeks back. She brushed her teeth vigorously, while trying not to have a panic attack like she did before every gig. She had been playing in bands her whole life but she always got nervous before a gig, and would freak out. The only thing that ever calmed her down was being near Kate, and she knew that she would never allow Kate further into her life than she already was, despite the fact that her stomach always played hockey, trying to get Lyhan to take the shot. Lyhan just ignored her feeling, and never let her eyes off of her passion. If she were to ever touch Kate, she knew that she would not be able to feel her passion the same way...that her life would drastically change, and things she was always content with before, things that were consistent in her life would no longer be there, and she would have to change. She did not like change. Lyhan quickly threw on her bright blue shoes, and grabbed her jean jacket, putting it on while opening the door. Kate turned around again, and smiled, helping Lyhan grab her equipment, and both headed towards the evening's festivities. Lyhan tried to keep herself from smiling when she saw Kate take such an interest in her music. Kate hardly ever missed a gig, and was always helping Lyhan before and after gigs. *I'd like her to help me with*

*other things...NO!!! Stop thinking these things, Lyhan. You already have a life, a love, and you would only screw things up.*

When they arrived at the bar, the rest of the band was already there, starting to set up their equipment on the stage. Lyhan looked at Kate again before walking up to the stage to start doing her part of the setting up. This was the easy part. She immediately headed for the stage, and placed her guitar case on the ground, pushing her equipment and amp up on the stage, getting ready for the night's entertainment. As she hooked up her amp, she still couldn't keep her mind off of Kate. The thoughts would not stop, and this time she wasn't sure if she could hold on much longer, or if she even honestly wanted to let them go. Her heart was pounding rapidly, and with each stammered breath, she would let Kate know from the stage what cables she would need to hook up things. She wanted to think of Kate just as a friend, just as a person that helped her with her music equipment, studies, and projects but she couldn't escape her thoughts this time. She turned around again, after hooking up her effects box, and saw Kate smiling that hundred watt smile, and with all of her might, she controlled her emotions, and decided to focus on the gig that lay just ahead.

As the band started to play, the crowd began to gather in the old bar, and the room was filled with misty smoke, and scents of alcohol and sweat. The sounds of the band overwhelmed the sounds of the people throughout the bar who were attempting to shout over the speakers and sounds of breaking glass to communicate with others around them. Lyhan was never one to look up while playing, never focused on anything but her playing, bringing her head up only to add those additional background vocals when they were needed. Song after song after song continued throughout the night. Drunken college students, groupies, and community members all sat

around the tables, drinking their last drinks, while the band just played on without halting for a moment.

While she was playing, she refused to look down at Kate who was sitting at a table nearby with some of their friends from the campus. However, tonight she couldn't stop herself, and she was staring at her again with deep loving eyes, and was still able to play her guitar with such passion that surrounded the room. She realized that she *could* love two things at once. Throughout the songs, she just played back all sorts of memories of the things she and Kate had done together those past four years. She was smiling the whole time, and couldn't shake her thoughts away. She finally gave into the temptation, and when she placed her fingers on her neck, she felt like she was caressing Kate's neck. When she moved her hands along the body, she felt like she was softly touching Kate's body. The sounds that escaped the guitar this time was not what she was used to, it was changed somehow. It was different, and it had slowly been creeping into her playing throughout these past four years, and at that moment, she was playing with more passion, more grace, more loving splendor, and the sounds that she produced were sweeter, clearer, and full of pure ecstasy more than ever. This epiphany wracked her brain, and she could feel her whole body shake with such stammered breathing, rapid heartbeats, and more sweat than she ever knew was possible. This was unlike anything she had ever experienced, and that was the moment that she realized Kate would not take her passion away but only be able to fill her with more passion, allowing her to play with such sweetness and intensity that she would climax to new heights each time her fingers touched her body.

"FREE BIRD!" somebody yelled from the crowd, and stumbled out of his chair in a drunken stupor. This was typical, cliché to the bar environments the band played in frequently. Somebody was always bound to yell "FREE BIRD" from the crowd, and the band usually

ignored the cries. Lyhan, Mark the drummer, Denny the bass player, and Hannah the lead vocalist were warned about the bird-callers, and they decided to always let the comments fly by, instead of giving in to the temptation to play the Lynyrd Skynyrd tune. Tonight, though, Hannah decided that they should play it, since they only had a few people in the bar left, and last call was already announced. This would allow them the chance to play the song out until they were ready to tear down. Usually, they played songs at the end in order to do this but they usually played “Cocaine,” “Hotel California,” or “Layla.”

The band had been playing together for over 3 years, and their sound was matched with eloquence, and each member was able to play into each other with ease and grace. Hannah’s voice was light, and husky from chain-smoking, and when she decided to start the band three years ago, the other three fell in line. Lyhan lived down the hall from Hannah, and she was the first person Hannah approached. Since Lyhan had only been playing acoustic gigs around campus over the past year, she decided to give the full band mojo another shot. The first practice was rough but the foursome managed to muddle through until the end, hitting all sorts of wrong chords, and notes along the way. Finally, after a month of hardcore practicing, Denny and Mark were playing off of each others’ rhythms and beats, which made Hannah’s rhythm strumming fall into place. Adding the finishing touch, Lyhan ripped the lead licks on her guitar, and the four had found their musical medium. From there, the band just started flowing into songs, and coming out the other a little more successful each time, gradually getting used to each others’ style.

When the end of the song started, Hannah tore into her black beauty, her Gibson Les Paul, with such vigor and force that almost matched that of the original tune but with a more immature sound that was easily distinguished by hard-core fans of the Florida rock band. Then,

Lyhan pulled in with her baby, her pride and joy, her Gibson ES-335. That beauty...the gorgeous tone, the sounds she could build from her. Her body was so invigorating, and the smell of vanilla almost escaped the frets as Lyhan moved her hands up and down the neck, fingers moving in a passionate fashion. This was her passion: the guitar...this guitar. Ever since she laid eyes upon her in the music shop, she knew it was love at first sight. She had only gone to buy some new strings for the old Fender she had been playing since she was 10, and there she was, propped up on a stand, calling out for her to hold her just once, feel her, let her know that they belonged together. After she saw her, Lyhan could not take her eyes off of her. She had never seen anything so beautiful. Vintage sunburst with a hint of flame maple top, and F holes carved masterfully into the sides of the pickup board. The strings fell from the head to the body, down the neck with such grace that if one were to touch her, he or she would fall into a constant state of ecstasy. Lyhan was her victim that day, and would be for the rest of her life. She had entranced Lyhan from the moment their eyes locked. Lyhan held her, and she felt safe, and knew that in Lyhan's hands was where she was meant to be, and that Lyhan was the only person she could love...let her feel her...touch her...make beautiful music with her. When Lyhan graced her hands over her body, around her neck, smoothly touching the head, there was no denying the passion that sparked between the two. It was a match made in musical bliss. Lyhan could not help herself, and immediately went next door to the bank, withdrawing money from her savings, despite the argument she knew would be provoked by her parents but she had to have her, there was nothing going to stand in her way. This was her life. This was her soul.

“Lyhan, you played great tonight...then again, you always do. You never cease to amaze me,” Kate said, with a playful grin, hoping that Lyhan would get the hint.

“Um, yeah, thanks. Can you hand me the bag?” Lyhan asked, while unplugging her passion from the amp. Kate handed her the bag, and their hands touched slightly but enough for the friction to pass between them, sending a slight, startling shock between the two. They just stood there for a second, staring into each other’s eyes, deeply entranced, and Lyhan never once let go of her hold on her passion. She felt the neck between her fingers as she stared into Kate’s eyes with so much passion passing between them.

Lyhan came out of the trance, and went to place her baby in the guitar case with such grace that a scratch would never touch her, never harm her. She would make sure of that. Nothing could harm her. She finished packing all of her equipment into the bag, and zipped her up, ready to take off. She looked around to find Kate but she couldn’t find her. She was always there to help her. Where was she? *Oh, no. Some drunken idiot has taken her somewhere. She’s dead. Some idiot must’ve killed her. Oh, G-d! What have I done? This can’t be happening.*

She felt a tap on her shoulder, and turned around swiftly, almost hitting the culprit. It was Hannah. She let out a long sigh, relieved that she wouldn’t have to use any violence but also worried because Kate was still missing in action.

“Good show tonight. You need to teach me that riff in “Caring is Creepy.” I almost have it down but my fingers don’t seem to wanna cooperate with what my brain is telling them. I always fly to the G too soon, and stick on the B minor too long.” Hannah stood there, noticing the look of worry on Lyhan’s face.

“Uh, yeah...let me get the CD for you, and I’ll let you listen to it. If you need me to transcribe it for you, just let me know.” Lyhan continued looking around the bar, in search of any clue that Kate was somewhere, anywhere, just not harmed.

“You know I can’t read that shit. Just get me the CD tomorrow. I’ll figure it out eventually.” Again, Hannah noticed Lyhan’s lack of attention. “You okay? You seem a little off there.”

“Uh, yeah. I’m just...yeah...you know. Have you seen Kate?”

“Yeah. She left about ten minutes ago with some biker. He looked big and brawny. Lots of tattoos. Long gray mustache. He was a looker.” Hannah said, trying not to laugh, then noticed that she wasn’t getting the response she was looking for, and Lyhan was getting even more worried. “She’s in the bathroom. I was just kidding.”

She saw Kate come out of the bathroom, swinging the door open the best she could, trying not to slam her fingers in between the creaky hinges. With the look on her face, Kate must have thought that Lyhan was about to have another panic attack. Lyhan’s face lit up with too much joy, she didn’t know why she was so worried. It was simple, and she knew Kate was smart enough not to do anything stupid. She didn’t expect her to be there all the time. Her emotions had just been running high that night.

This was it. Kate was standing before her. Dropping her bag to the floor, Lyhan grabbed Kate’s waist with strength she never knew she had. This was it. Kate looked back up into Lyhan’s eyes, amazed at the confrontation. They just stood there looking into each other’s eyes, until Kate finally understood. It was as though Lyhan had been whispering to her but not saying a word. She just nodded. This was it. The moment of truth. The moment both had been anticipating for four years but only one was willing to give into. Their breathing was heavy, and Lyhan knew what she had to do but her fear still lingered over her. *Okay. You can do this. This is Kate. Just give into your passion. You can do...*

Lyhan was brought out of her thoughts by Kate's lips pressed softly on her own. It was unlike anything either of them had ever experienced before, and they were caught up in the moment, completely unaware that the owner was calling for the band to finish up so he could lock up. She didn't care. She was here...with Kate. They both deepened the kiss, while Lyhan's hands made their way up Kate's body, and gently touched her neck. All of a sudden, the music in her head grew around her, and she completely gave into her passion.