

Drew University  
College of Liberal Arts

Death to Dandelions: A Novel

A Thesis in English Creative Writing  
by  
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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements  
for the Degree of  
Bachelor in Arts  
With Specialized Honors in English Creative Writing  
May 2025

## Abstract

*Death to Dandelions* is a creative project exploring the memory of the sixties counterculture through fiction. The novel, set in the fall of 1968, follows a young woman, Margret, as she comes of age in a communal living house situated in a suburban environment. She navigates the cultural moment, finding her place, and friendships with her housemates as they deal with external factors challenging their living situation. In the accompanying Writer's Statement I describe the writing process and influences on my work. Inspired by a short lived 'communal living experiment' located across the street from Drew in the late sixties, I use newspaper coverage and interviews with members of that house to construct my fictional commune and the story surrounding it. I also study fiction, including Emma Cline's *The Girls*, Lauren Groff's *Arcadia*, Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*, and Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*. I discuss the way these inspirations influenced my writing, as well as decisions I made while researching and drafting. I then explain my revision process; the ways that I identified problems, addressed feedback, used reverse outlines, and made decisions to move the project towards my vision. I also discuss future directions, and the revisions I will continue to make.

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## Writer's Statement

*Death to Dandelions* is set in the fall of 1968. The narrator, Margret, has recently graduated from high school and is living with several other young adults involved in the counterculture in a communal living experiment at Oakwood House. Through this novel, I explore her friendships with housemates, her attempt to find herself within the counterculture, and the tensions between the house and the suburban environment it's situated in. The fictional Oakwood House is inspired by an actual communal living experiment that existed across the street from Drew in the late sixties known popularly as "Hippie House," and the setting of the novel is a fictionalized version of Madison, New Jersey.

I learned about the Hippie House during my first semester at Drew in my DSEM on "The Sixties." In this class we learned about the culture of the sixties, and I became particularly invested when the professor, Dr. Carter, told us about the concerts that happened at Drew, and the way the music scene on campus connected to a house of young adults across the street. The story fascinated me, and it offered a premise I wanted to explore in my own writing. I knew I was more interested in writing fiction than nonfiction, so I set out to write a novel inspired by the idea.

At the time, I didn't know a lot about writing a novel. I had tried and failed in the past, getting deep into a story and then not being able to finish it, or feeling like I outgrew it. For a long time, this project was another unfinished work to add to the list. I found myself bored by my own story. It underwent several transformations in different genres and styles. One version of this story was a fantasy novel, and another attempted to explore the lives of everyone who lived in the house. Nothing seemed to work when I sat down to write it. I gave it several genuine attempts, but didn't yet have the skills I needed.

Two years after I initially started to write the novel, I described the abandoned project to a friend and she asked if I would ever return to it. I described what I understood of its problems, but I also admitted that the premise of a short-lived communal living house still interested me, and I wasn't ready to fully let go of the story. For my Advanced Fiction Workshop in Spring 2024, I wrote a short story with the same base inspiration, but changed almost everything about it. I focused on one conversation between two characters, Margret and Annette. These characters were completely transformed and unrecognizable from my earlier writing.

Even though I knew I wanted to develop this story eventually, when I started thinking about my thesis I was not confident I was ready to take it on. I knew I wanted to write a novel, and that it was one of my biggest aspirations. At the time, however, I felt much more comfortable with academic writing, and knowing that I had never been able to finish a novel even when spending years dedicated to one in the background of my studies, I worried I would be setting myself up for failure. I also worried that I wouldn't be able to do this story justice. I really wanted it to be something I was proud of, and I wasn't sure if I was ready to write this story. However, I found myself thinking more and more about the era of the sixties and the story I had begun in workshop. I decided I would rather fail, but attempt to write a novel and have dedicated a year getting closer to having written the novel than to be no closer to realizing my aspiration.

Over the summer, I did some preliminary writing and research. I read *The Girls* by Emma Cline and *Arcadia* by Lauren Groff, which both dealt in some way with the era of the sixties and commune life. What was most helpful for me was paying attention to the feeling that was being created, how they were conveying the tone of the sixties. Both novels were extremely atmospheric, but seemed to exist in two different versions of the sixties. Cline describes a dirty

and tattered sixties with an undercurrent of dread as the situation reveals its cultish nature. Groff's sixties are painted with a childhood nostalgia, difficult conditions and things that seem strange to the reader are described with love and whimsy. Seeing multiple depictions of the decade and the ways these authors memorialized the time helped me decide on the tone I wanted to craft. I decided I did want a sense of idealism in the beginning of the story, and to have disillusionment and burnout seep into the story. In addition to the tone, these novels helped me consider the commune of the story I was telling. Unlike the violent and cultish ending of *The Girls*, or the way that internal tensions pull apart the *Arcadia*'s commune over a long period of time, it was important to me that external forces of the town are what requires the commune of my story to dissipate. I realized that what made this story interesting to me was the way it was situated within a larger suburban setting, and the tensions this location creates.

I wasn't sure how to approach historical research. I made a timeline of important cultural events, and what I knew about the timeline of the house. I also revisited some of my notes from the class I took my first semester. I also experimented with the character voice, and wrote fragments of the story which I didn't include to help me get a more concrete sense of what I wanted the novel to become, and reach a point where I felt like I might be able to start drafting.

I dedicated the fall semester to researching and drafting. At the start I was overwhelmed with the feeling that I hadn't done enough historical research. In order to better understand the cultural moment, I took a class on the Vietnam War. Analyzing the factors and effects surrounding the War helped me understand the unrest of the decade. I was particularly inspired by an article by Lauren Mottle, "Striking the Machine from Within: A Case for the Inclusion of the GI Movement in the New Left," which described the GI involvement in pushback against the War from the American public, as it expanded...

Though I wanted to be careful about representing the era in a genuine way, I was more so interested in exploring what we remember about the past than discovering what had actually happened.

In my Capstone class, I explored this idea of remembering history, and considered books that dealt with history and memory in ways I found interesting. I focused on these author's writing processes and the effects of these processes in order to apply them to my own writing. I examined Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* and Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* while focusing on my approach to writing chapters one and seven, or the version of those chapters that existed at that point, and considered the ways in which author's process choices manifest in their novels while reflecting on my ongoing process. I was inspired to discuss *The Remains of the Day* after examining it for a seminar on Kazuo Ishiguro. It was in this class that I was exposed to Ishiguro's intentions of depicting the myth-like memory of history rather than the actual time period.

*The Remains of the Day* follows Mr. Stevens, an English butler at fictional Darlington Hall in 1956, reminiscing on the period in between World Wars during the height of Darlington Hall's greatness as he drives through the English countryside. The reader also sees how Darlington Hall fits into the larger historical landscape with Lord Darlington's connections to the Germans and must consider Stevens' complicity in all this.

In an article published in The Guardian in 2014, Ishiguro describes his process of writing *The Remains of the Day*. One key element of his process is the materials of his research. Before he began writing, Ishiguro read "books by and about British servants, about politics and foreign policy between the wars, many pamphlets and essays from the time," (How I Wrote the Remains

of the Day in Four Weeks). I posit that these servant guides are evident in the novel's narrative voice.

Steven's worldview, and thus his narration, are framed through his occupation. His thoughts are filtered through the primary concern of being a good butler. A reflection of what makes up the greatness of Britain leads into Stevens discussing what it means to be a great butler, which Stevens describes as "the question that has caused much debate in our profession over the years," (Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day* 29). He continues to answer this question for the next sixteen pages of the novel. With this long tangent, Ishiguro not only establishes Steven's opinions and provides an overt expression of values, but exemplifies through volume the extreme level of importance which Steven's holds being a butler, and assumes the reader also holds. This assumption that the reader is a fellow butler can also be seen through the use of the pronoun "our" when describing the profession, and through statements such as: "If you have ever had the privilege of meeting such men, you will no doubt know the quality they possess to which I refer," (29) when referring to specific butlers who are considered to be great. It is not only the style of the narration affected by this, but Steven's relationships and understandings which are filtered through this emphasis on butlering when being described to the reader. Stevens describes Britain by saying: "What is pertinent is the calmness of that beauty, its sense of restraint," (29). These descriptions of 'calmness' and 'restraint' are significant in that he later characterizes a good butler in the same way— a connection which is further cemented by the way that his discussion of those qualities of the country lead directly into his questions about being a good Butler. Stevens also frames his relationship to his father in these terms, describing an instance in which his father exercised restraint and dignity. Stevens sees his father as a representation of what a butler should be, going so far as to say, "my father not only manifests, but comes close to



being the personification itself, of what the Hayes Society terms ‘dignity in keeping with his position.’” (42). The extreme way in which Stevens' voice is concentrated on being a butler demonstrates the way in which Ishiguro’s research process affects not only the style of the prose, but is so ingrained into the writing that it permeates the themes of the story. The content of Ishiguro’s research, the books about servants and the contemporary servant pamphlets, clearly had a great influence not only on the tone, but also the content of the novel through the way it shaped his narrative voice. My argument is not that these narrative elements should be attributed to the research and writing process alone, rather that the writing process is inseparable from the written product. As a writer it is imperative to be mindful of methods of research and writing as a tool. In writing my piece of historical fiction, I was mindful of the research materials I was using and what I found most helpful to my own process.

I also found Ishiguro’s approach to writing interesting. In his article for *The Guardian*, Ishiguro describes “The Crash,” a writing process he developed in order to write *The Remains of the Day* in a few weeks. Ishiguro also reflects on the question of how much research to complete before starting the writing phase. Rather than provide a specific answer, Ishiguro remarks that “It’s damaging to start too early, equally so to start too late. I think with *Remains* I got lucky: the Crash came just at the right point, when I knew just enough.” Once entering ‘the Crash’, Ishiguro wrote for thirteen and a half hours, six days a week, taking only two breaks a day for meals, with the goal to “reach a mental state in which my fictional world was more real to me than the actual one.” Ishiguro explains that “Throughout the Crash, I wrote free-hand, not caring about the style or if something I wrote in the afternoon contradicted something I’d established in the story that morning. The priority was simply to get the ideas surfacing and growing.”

In an interview published in 1986, before he had published *Remains*, Ishiguro explains “My method is that I make everything up and then I do some research afterwards to make sure I have not gotten something outrageously wrong.” Ishiguro treats research secondarily to writing. He does so because he is more interested in depicting the image of the time and location that exists culturally rather than exploring the actual historical context. In a 2015 interview with the Wall Street Journal, Ishiguro explains “I had no, kind of particular interest as a social historian about what it would have been like to be a butler at that time.” Rather, the subject of his writing is the England that we all imagine to have existed.

The combination of this intensive writing state where he fully inhabits the world of his story and his method of researching secondarily contributes to the way the reader experiences a version of England that is almost fictional. The pastoral landscape is more a representation of nostalgic and made up memories of England’s great past than it is of the actual historical period. In an analysis of *The Remains of the Day* following Ishiguro’s release of a fantasy novel, Richard Rankin Russel remarks that “Ishiguro employs the stereotypical images of the allegedly static, beautiful English countryside to ironically highlight the activities of his figurative monster of a butler in *The Remains of the Day*,” (304). Russel also suggests that “Stevens’s entire world is a constructed fantasy that consistently bumps up against the reality of post-war England,” (305). Russel highlights the construction of an obviously fictional English landscape and analyzes the ways in which it interacts with reality. I argue that Ishiguro’s process helped to create this identifiable effect in the text.

Though my research and writing processes do not resemble Ishiguro’s, examining his process and the way it is reflected in the text made me consider the ways in which my own process affected my writing. I realized that for me, research increased my writing confidence.

Even if I wasn't employing any of the information I learned, I was more sure of myself in writing after learning about the topic relevant to the section I was writing about. I needed to be comfortable with the subject I was writing about to have authority over it. When I am able to focus less on getting specific information correct, regardless of its importance to the scene, I am better able to access my creativity and write more concrete and specific details which make the writing interesting.

In Capstone, I also reflected on the way my choices of research texts influenced the content of what I wrote. I discovered that interviews with people who lived in or spent time around the house were the most influential materials to my writing. I listened to several people in recent years reflect back on what they remember about the Hippie House and life during the late sixties. It was helpful to hear what stuck with people through the years, as well as what they thought about it now. Listening to people reminisce helped me find my narrative voice.

In the draft I wrote during the fall semester, my first chapter opened with reflection. I used the present tense to convey that Margaret is remembering the story we are about to be told from a point in the future when she has additional insight. She wonders if she left at the end of the summer as she had originally planned, if she would remember things differently. This is my attempt at employing reflective tone, something I was inspired to do from the oral history interviews I listened to. Margaret is trying to interpret the situation while looking back—something which I heard in the way that people reminiscing about Hippie House discussed it.

In the background of what would eventually become chapter seven, a march to protest the Vietnam War is about to begin. Although neither the War nor the protest are central to my story, and neither happen on the page, having a somewhat thorough understanding of these topics

helped me to write this chapter well. In the first draft of this chapter I hadn't done enough research to feel comfortable, so the scene relied too heavily on dialogue, much of which was vague and generalizing. I found it challenging to continue writing the story until I fixed this chapter, so I revised it early on. Before approaching my revision of this chapter, I learned about Vietnam through a history class at Drew, and did some additional independent research on the protests. Though the details I learned are not placed on the page, they helped in filling out my understanding of the scene within a larger context, and provided me with a confidence which helped me better approach writing this chapter. In revising the scene, I added a lot more sensory details, as well as more moments of movement.

One of the interviewees, Barabara North, described one of the residents with this distinctive reddish hair. This resident was also described as taking on a leadership role within the house. This reputation being tied to bright red hair began to form an image in my mind as I heard it repeated, and as a result I decided to include it in the fiction. These traits—the hair color and perceived leadership—are the only two traits which connect my character of Dale to a real person. The rest of his character, as well as the other characters, are entirely fictional.

In Capstone, I also explored Colson Whitehead's process of writing *The Nickel Boys*. *The Nickel Boys* take place in Florida during the sixties. Elwood, a Black teenager with a bright future is sent to The Nickel Academy after being wrongfully accused of a crime, where he meets Turner. The Nickel Academy is based on the real Dozier School for Boys where a multitude of horrible mistreatment and atrocities took place.

In a 2019 interview with Lee Cohen, Whitehead describes the process of using a real place as inspiration for a fictional story. Whitehead did much of his research online using sources like the investigative journalism that uncovered the atrocities which happened at the school. The

details described in these articles “ends up making a real portrait that I can pick and choose for my own Dozier, which I call the Nickel Academy,” (Whitehead). In describing his process of fictionalizing the story, Whitehead reveals that it wasn’t just picking what details to include, but it was also a process of creation. Whitehead explains, “I wanted to have the freedom to make my own school and make my own characters. I’m not telling a nonfiction story. I’m creating my own people that I have to put in a situation.”

I am particularly interested in the decision of which details to transfer to the fiction, and which to leave behind or change. Whitehead explains that he likes to “use people's own words. And the White House Boys organization has collected a lot of testimony of former students.” One detail which Whitehead used from the actual Dozier School was the White House, a shed where beatings occurred. In the novel, Whitehead describes, “The white boys bruised differently than the black boys and called it the Ice Cream Factory because you came out with bruises of every color. The black boys called it the White House because that was its official name and it fit and didn’t need to be embellished,” (64). Whitehead not only kept the concept of corporal punishment being administered in the middle of the night, but also the name. In a 2019 interview with Dave Davies, Whitehead explains that “it was too great a detail to change and — the name, that is.”

Another detail which Whitehead decided to include in his story was the way in which after Elwood is beaten at the White House, he gets jean fibers embedded in his legs. In the Davies interview, Whitehead reveals that this is a detail which had repeatedly come up while researching. “And, you know, more than one person relayed that detail. And —so you see it's a, you know, it's a bit of a factory, unfortunately.” Whitehead felt compelled to use this detail not

only because of the vivid image of the atrocities which happened, but also because it stuck with so many people in their memories and is somewhat representative of the experience.

These details end up being some of the most visceral images of the story, ones that stick with the reader. A lot of these details are what remained in the memories of trauma survivors, and I argue this contributes to the way that the novel has been received as such an authentic trauma narrative. In their article, “Psychology of Trauma and Resilience in ‘The Nickel Boys’: A Historical Perspective,” Swetha, Aravind, and Uthradevi analyze the ways in which the novel deals with the three stages that follow trauma, safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection with ordinary life, as well as how Whitehead depicts the enduring nature of trauma. As the authors point out, the fragmented nature of the narrative structure is representative of the way trauma is often experienced and remembered. The narrative switches between the present and past, a choice which “effectively conveys the enduring presence of trauma in Elwood’s life, as past horrors continually intrude upon his present.” Whitehead’s use of accounts by real people and inclusion of select real details results in a story representative of not only Elwood and Turner’s trauma, but a narrative widely recognized as representative of traumatic memory as a whole.

Observing the impactful way in which Whitehead chose details to include in his fictionalized story made me especially mindful of what elements of the real story I was including in mine. One particular thing that stuck with me was Whitehead’s comment about acknowledging that he was not writing nonfiction, and the freedom that gave him. Giving myself enough distance from the real events was necessary for me to feel like I could take full control of the story. I relied on the real events for the setting and premise, but I did not write about any of the people who lived there. In listening to the oral history interviews, I adapted details that felt

meaningful, such as the complaints about furniture on the porch Bob Courboin mentions. I drew inspiration from Barbara's interview while writing the scene where the raid occurs. In the interview, she recalls a narcotics raid on the actual house: "I always remember Robbie standing in the stairway and looking at every single one of us and saying, 'Are you clean? Are you clean? Are you clean?' And everyone said, you know, we were." I was interested in what she verbalized as memorable, and included a similar scene in the novel at the beginning of chapter twelve: "I didn't understand what was going on at first. Dale pushed through, asking over and over again the same question: 'Are you clean?'"

Whitehead's historical knowledge is supplemented with his emotional imagination and ability to draw on personal experience. Employing emotion into the story is what makes it come to life, and turns an event into a narrative. My story started to really come together when I began to understand the character's emotions and motivations. To do so, I had to approach the characters with empathy, and also occasionally draw on my own experience. Though none of the situations in the story are inspired by any I have experienced in my life, some of the emotional responses are derived from my own responses to similar events. One way I personally approach writing emotion is by reading through my old journals to see thoughts I expressed at different moments in time which might relate to the situation of a character in some way. Then, I rewrite and translate these reactions into the voice of the character. I find this to be a helpful way to get in touch with a character when I am struggling to write an emotional scene.

One section in which I initially drew direct inspiration from my own experiences is Margret's dialogue as she tries to tell Dale why she feels that living in Cloverhill House is so freeing. Her statements have undergone such a transformation that they no longer resemble their origin, but the first iteration of these thoughts existed in my own personal reflections about

identity. I then rewrote this reflection, translating it into Margret's voice and applying it to her situation. Then, I put Margret in conversation with Dale, and bits of these thoughts come through. I further edited these bits of dialogue to fit the scene throughout my revisions of this chapter.

The writing processes of both Kazuo Ishiguro and Colson Whitehead were helpful in understanding how processes can affect a piece of writing, and served as guides for my own process. The thinking I did in Capstone helped me frame what I was learning while writing my thesis, as I've been thinking about the process as I partake in it and learning about my writing process rather than writing solely with a focus on product.

As I drafted, I continued to read and learn from fiction, as well as think about ways to improve my writing. My writing often lacked interest because of a lack of tension. At first, I thought I needed to increase the interpersonal tensions between my characters, and so I focused on that during the chapters I wrote during that time. However, I was still finding that my writing seemed to fall flat. During a meeting with my advisor, Professor Zoffness, we discussed adding "microwants," or small things that the character wanted at the scene level, not even necessarily related to the overall story, but that could drive the scene forward and create a small level of tension. This was incredibly helpful to think about as I revised some of the scenes I was struggling with, and as I continued to write. As I wrote chapter ten, I reflected that thinking about the microwants was useful to keep writing a scene when I got stuck. In reading, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, I also noticed the dissonance between what the characters were thinking and saying was a way that Julia Alvarez was creating tension. I employed this technique in my own writing to create interest at the line level. While reading *A Pale View of Hills* by Kazuo Ishiguro, I noticed that a dissonance was created by the way that the character dialogue



didn't seem to directly respond to one another. I like the way that this effect created a sense of tension as if two conversations were going on at once and competing rather than being responsive, and kept this in mind while writing conversations where I wanted the characters to feel disconnected from each other.

While writing chapter seven and eight, I needed to return to the research stage. I wanted to immerse myself more in the culture of protests. I returned to Lauren Mottle's "Striking the machine from within: a case for the inclusion of the GI Movement in the New Left" for the Vietnam War class, and read *Steal this Book* by Abbie Hoffman, which gave me another perspective of how people engaged with the counterculture, political movements, and protests. Following this, I watched "The Trial of the Chicago Seven" (2020) for further inspiration. Most significantly though, One of the people I had listened to an interview with, Tom Wetzler, had also been interviewed about his involvement in the antiwar movement in *Winter Soldiers: An Oral History of the Vietnam Veterans against the War*. I read his and several others' accounts of their involvement and reasons for involvement in the movement. I was inspired by the way that Wetzler described the way his disillusionment set in. Wetzler describes being young and thinking that the American Army would need justifications to carry out orders (Stacewicz 44). Later, Wetzler describes his experience in the army, explaining "I just kept on meeting people who kept on telling me what to do and didn't want to tell me why, and I had this nasty habit of asking why all the time. I found out that they didn't know why either; and when they didn't know why, it pissed me off." (Stacewicz 107). These descriptions inspired a character Margret talks with following the protest, and the need to know why that Wetzler expresses is reflected in their conversation on page 78:

"For me," continued Paul, "It was those things a little bit. But fundamentally, it was the fact that no one knew why." He took a giant bite out of his sandwich. I remember

thinking he had no table manners, feeling slightly bitter that he wasn't waiting for me to get my food. Then, I realized that I hated the whole concept of table manners. Somehow, still, I was able to be upset about something within this random set of rules that I didn't even subscribe to.

"I thought that was what made the American military different," Paul began speaking before swallowing his food, making it slightly difficult to understand him. "That when orders were given, they were given with justification. I really did think we were doing good things in the world."

To write chapter nine, I looked through old editions of *The Drew Acorn* from the late 60's and the 1968 edition of *Oak Leaves* for inspiration. I knew that I wanted to connect the story to the college campus, and I used the *Acorn* to get a sense of what campus issues students were writing about. I used this to create the character of Lily, a student who visits the house with the hopes of writing about it. She complains about the controlling nature of her dorm, which was a complaint I found within the *acorn*. I used the yearbook as inspiration for physical descriptions.

During the spring semester I focused on revisions, with the initial goal of fully revising the novel. I returned to feedback I had received months earlier, but had not gotten a chance to implement in the earlier chapters. I knew that I needed to add stakes to the story, and one way I tried to approach this was by making Margret unable to return home.

I thought that if this house was her only conceivable living option, then there would inherently be stakes involved if that situation was threatened to end, more so than if it was just something she didn't want to happen because she liked living there. I figured something big and dramatic would need to happen during her return home. In an early draft, I jumped from the time of the first chapter to two weeks later, and in that second chapter explained what had happened when she went back home in an expository way. When I approached turning that moment into its own scene, I struggled to get the characters to say the things I had envisioned or act in the ways I had imagined in a natural way in order to add those stakes to the story. The scene became its own

chapter, in which I tried to depict the relationship between Margret and her family, especially her mother and set up the stakes for the rest of the story.

Another thing I worked on during my initial revisions was the way that the character relationships developed over the course of the story. One of these relationships was the friendship between Annette and Margret that developed into romantic feelings. I knew from the start that I wanted the emotional arc of the relationship to line up with high emotion parts of the plot, as I thought it would make these moments more dramatic and link Margarets feelings about Annette to the feelings of the house. I rearranged and rewrote the story in order to align these moments.

I also wanted to shift around the way that Margret's feelings about Connie and Martin changed over the course of the story. Her relationship, especially to Connie, felt very cyclic and that it was constantly shifting but in ways that felt more inconsistent than developmental. One way I approached fixing this was by merging two separate moments where she thinks back to her time over the summer into one. One showed an initial jealousy from Connie, and the other depicted a small fight with Martin as she adjusted to her new living situation. In combining the two, I was able to focus more on the way that she had to find her place in the dynamic of the household and that fitting in wasn't a completely smooth process, and simplify the feelings she had towards both Connie and Martin into something that could actually be picked up by the reader. Additionally, having only one scene meant I had to deal with more characters interacting, which helped me to think about and convey the larger group dynamics, or at least parts of it.

I really struggled to submit the first full draft, as there was still so much more I wanted to revise. A realization, which really helped me to continue to make progress on this project, was that my initial goal to have a fully revised novel at the end of this project was not possible, but

that instead I would need to learn about my novel, and about the revision process during this semester, in order to get to a point where I would know how to revise and continue working on the novel beyond this project. It was after this realization that I was able submit my work in progress, and receive the feedback that would guide the rest of my revisions.

My committee's feedback gave me a lot of clarity, and helped me see the novel from a step removed, highlighting things that weren't clear and where my vision didn't align with what was on the page. One of the hardest parts about receiving feedback was seeing how sections that at one point I was really proud of, or that defined the piece at an earlier stage, no longer fit. Once it was brought to my attention, I could not unsee it. I noticed too, how there were parts of my own thoughts seeping into the novel, and bits that weren't actually my characters voice, but my own. It was difficult to get rid of these moments because they felt really important to me when I initially wrote them. Deleting the moments I had once felt proud of, also felt like undoing my progress, and felt like I was making the work I had done in the fall semester worthless, even as I kept reminding myself that it was a part of the process for my work to develop and outgrow certain sections.

The feedback also helped me to realize that, even after trying to revise to add stakes, there still were not enough stakes and the readers did not understand why Margret could not just return home. One way I considered approaching this was going back and making the scene back home more intense, and making her mother more unreasonable. However, even through this perspective of her memory, I wanted both characters to be reasonable, but for the driving issue between them to be the generational divide. I needed to find a way then, to keep the stakes in the story.

One of the most helpful things I did to figure out where I needed my novel to be was to make a reverse outline. Rather than a linear timeline, I made a map of Margret's wants and needs, and what she was going to be doing to work towards them. I tried to extend this beyond the microwants that made a scene move forward, and look at the big picture but with more specificity than I had approached it with initially. I asked the following questions: What does Margaret want or need? Why does she want it? Why can't she have it? And what does/can she do about it? The first question I found important in creating stakes. The fourth question helped me to ensure that she was an active participant in the story. I also asked myself follow up questions for each line of reasoning. Another purpose this exercise had was to help me make sure that there was a cause and effect feeling in the story. I didn't want it to feel like things were just happening, rather that there was a reason for each event and that it made sense in the story. I also wanted to make sure that it didn't just feel like other characters were doing the actions around Margret, rather that she was an active participant. As I mapped, I got a sense of what wasn't connecting in the way I wanted it to, which allowed me to make changes to the story that I would later implement in my revisions.

As I approached revising chapter one, I used my outline to figure out what I needed the chapter to do in order to set up Margret's wants and needs, and the obstacles that prevented her from having them, then attempted to revise the chapter to fit with these intentions and cut what was unnecessary. The first want that I outlined, as the initial conflict we are introduced to in the narrative, was that Margret wants to live at the house and continue the counterculture life, which she could not have because of her obligation to return home. She doesn't want to break the promise she made to her brother because she felt really hurt when her friend Martin broke his promise to stay in touch for that year and she doesn't want to be like that. The question that was

most important to me, was what Margret could do about it. In the first version of this chapter, Annette suggests to Margret that she goes home to explain, then returns to the communal house. However, through the map of wants and needs, I realized that it was important for Margret to be the one to decide this plan, in order to situate her as an active character pushing towards her established desires.

I was mostly unsuccessful in attempting to revise this way, and found it really difficult to do all the things I wanted to do with chapter one and get the actual writing to match what I wanted. I received feedback that I could spend less time in the introductory scenes, which was something I was trying to work on while simultaneously considering all the other ways I wanted to revise. I found much more success when, at the suggestion of Professor Zoffness, I focused first on compressing chapter one.

To do this I made a second reverse outline, this time inspired by my revision process with academic papers. This was different from my larger character-driven map. I read through the chapter and commented on the purpose of every section, and how the story was developing. During this read-through I also started to note where I thought some things I would want to add might fit in and areas that I might cut, or suggested where I might want to move something if I thought it would fit better in a different spot. For example, next to the first paragraph, I commented “reflection from a future moment,” and “considering the stay and ending.” Later, in a moment of description where Margret observes the room and imagines, I commented with the question: “This was supposed to characterize Margret, but is this really even the character that she's turned into?” With this outline I was then able to write a new and compressed first chapter by leaving out what no longer seemed necessary and achieving each purpose with less space. I compressed that first paragraph of reflection, and removed the unnecessary description from her

moment of observation. I found that I left out a lot of description and metaphor during that second round of revision, which was difficult because while they were sentences I really liked, they no longer fit with Margret's voice and slowed the story down. In a way, it did feel like I was taking out my voice, but at the same time, I also gained a feeling of control over my writing. The writing on the page began to actually sound like the story I was trying to tell, in the way I was trying to tell it.

One significant choice I made while revising chapter one was the opening. I had a few first lines while drafting, and wanted to be really intentional with the first thing readers would take in about my novel, and be sure to set an appropriate tone. For most of the drafts of this chapter, the opening line was a reflection because I wanted to orient the story with immediate attention to memory and the remembered past and to immediately provide the reflective voice of Margret's narration. The opening paragraph of my second draft read,

Martin once told me that the way you remember a period of time is by its ending. He didn't need to tell me that he was thinking about November of '68. I often wonder if I had left in August if that summer would occupy the same space in my mind where that fall has taken permanent residence. If my stay at the Greenwater House ended on that high, maybe everything would have folded into my other memories and faded gracefully with the rest of them. I want to believe the period would remain just as vibrant as it is now in my mind, only stained with a different flavor of sadness.

However, I decided that I did not want to open with general reflection about the time as a whole, and wanted to first ground the reader in some sort of material reality and physical moment, then moving into reflection as we get deeper into Margret's internal mind. Another reason I wanted to change this opening was that the first sentence was about another character's thoughts, which de-centered Margret in the story by framing her thoughts in response to Martin's. I wanted the opening, and this paragraph, to be about Margret's thoughts and feelings of the time. Even after moving this paragraph further into the story, I still decided to rearrange

the order of thinking so that I could better center Margret. In my revised version, I begin with the line, “The semi-silence of darkness— soft breathing and rustling sheets— parted for Annette’s whisper.” A line of dialogue follows this, then she observes the room around her and reflects on the way that her time at the house did end. This new beginning opens into an actual moment, and it centers Margret’s thoughts and concerns. It also allowed me to achieve my intended purpose of that first opening, which was to quickly introduce the reflection and allude towards an ending from the very beginning.

Another section of revision I would like to highlight is Chapter 5. Most of the chapter didn’t feel relevant to Margret’s story, as when I wrote it I was still discovering what the story was about. After finishing the story, and getting some distance from the chapter— by taking time away from the section while working on other elements and by getting the external perspectives of my committee to take into account— I was able to revise the chapter in line with what the story had become. The original draft included a lot of focus on Star, the lead singer of the band that comes through, and I spent a lot of time characterizing her as I thought she would be a larger character in the story. In the first drafts, Margret spent a significant amount of time physically describing Star and the captivating effect she had on a room. There was also a scene where Star tells a story about the band. However, she isn’t as important in later chapters as I had thought she would be when I initially wrote it. I was able to remove a lot of Star's description and dialogue in order to make the chapter better fit within the larger story. In addition to trimming the unnecessary parts of the chapter, I also reorganized it based on what I identified as the purpose of the chapter. I wanted to introduce the clock as a prop, which would later be destroyed, discuss some of the tensions between the commune and the town, as well as have Margret deal with her



routine being broken as a ‘microwant’, applying the insights I had gained while writing this project to the chapters written before I gained them.

Throughout the story, another major change I made was the course of Margret’s relationship with Annette. In the first draft, the tension between them culminates after growing jealousy with a fight at the party which is interrupted by the raid, and afterwards they acknowledge their romantic connection. I wanted the personal relationship and the plot events to culminate at the same time. However, this didn’t seem right for the characters and so I rewrote and added the scenes that deal with their relationship throughout the story. In the new draft, during the party scene the point of tension comes from Margret’s inability to express her feelings and attempts at control. In the scene where they act on their romantic connection, I changed it from Annette suddenly kissing Margret, to something that Margret thinks about and eventually acts on.

I was not able to fully transform the arc of their relationship into the vision I had mapped out when outlining. In future versions of this project, I would like to continue to adjust this relationship. Specifically, I envision that Margret realizes afterwards that the romantic relationship does not fix the tensions that were building between them, and that she is disappointed that it does not fulfill her in the way she expected it to.

In the future, I would like to expand the last chapter and spend more time exploring the effort Margret puts into trying to save Oakwood House. Throughout the story, Margret tries to find her place within the counterculture and find what she is passionate about, and her project of saving the house is where she really finds this, only for it to ultimately not be successful. I want to find a way to make the chapter feel more like the culmination of the discovery she has done while at the house. I also want to add more trial and error throughout the story as she tries to find

her place. One way I imagine this happening is for Margaret to get involved in a cause one of her housemates is really passionate about, and for her to deal with the balance of supporting causes and finding her own place.

I would also like to take every chapter and edit it with the reverse outline method I did for chapter one in order to really focus the story and the prose. Though I couldn't do this within the scope of this project, editing the first chapter so closely really helped me craft the story I was actually trying to tell in the way I wanted to tell it, and I want to give the same attention to the novel as a whole.

## Chapter One

The semi-silence of darkness— soft breathing and rustling sheets— parted for Annette’s whisper. “Are you awake, Margret?”

For the previous hour, I’d restrained myself from asking Annette the same question. My eyes were still open, memorizing the ceiling I had watched all summer during the long minutes awaiting sleep. Chipping white paint yielded two parallel scratches directly above her, and I imagined the ways it might have gotten there. Friends trying to rotate furniture or squish an insect. Mostly, I hoped someone would wonder one day about some small mark I made in this house.

From my spot on the floor, I could see under the ledge of the windowsill Connie and I painted earlier that summer, and discovered we forgot to paint the bottom side. I decided that in the morning, before I left, I would carve something into the exposed wood. I never followed through on that plan.

I often wonder how I would remember Oakwood House if that night had been the end of my stay. Though I’ve had many adventures, I remember none as vividly as the summer and fall of ‘68. Sometimes Martin likes to say the ending shapes how we remember a time, but I want to believe the memories would remain as vibrant in my mind as they are now with any ending.

“Trouble sleeping?” I whispered back so as to not wake Connie.

“First night in a new place is always just so weird,” she said.

“So is the last.” I wanted to savor every bit of the night. Tomorrow I would be back home just in time for the August harvest, and I didn’t want my summer of freedom to end now, or ever. But I promised I would come home, and I wasn’t the type of person to break a promise.

I propped myself up; a thin pillow separated my elbow from the floor but it was already uncomfortable. I waited to see if there was a reason for her initial question. Through the diffused moonlight, I could only make out the silhouette of Annette’s features: a soft nose and sharp chin. Memory filled in the details.

Earlier that day, I opened the door to the brightest brown eyes I had ever seen. They appeared golden in the sunlight, perhaps illuminated from the inside.

We idled there in the entryway. She was taller than me, wearing a pair of men’s jeans and a sepia t-shirt. Her hair, which draped unstyled around her shoulders, was a similar shade of rich brown to the t-shirt.

Dale told us to expect her as he stumbled into the house half-awake that morning. The most we got out of him before he retreated upstairs was that her name was Annette, she needed somewhere to stay, and she was “totally our style”.

I knew she was arriving in the same way I knew I was leaving. Seeing her physically at the door gave me the strange sense I was already gone. The summer had passed in a blink; one more blink, and I would be looking back fondly on those days. Maybe I should have let Connie answer the door.

It occurred to me this was an uncomfortably long time to hold eye contact, and so I stepped back and gestured for her to enter.

"I'm Annette," she said, extending her hand with a soft smile.

"Margret." I shook her hand with a firm grip, the way my mother had taught me to do if I wanted someone to take me seriously. She must not have been expecting much force because I found no resistance in her own hand and yanked her whole arm down.

"Sorry, sorry," I rushed.

She straightened and smiled. I think she meant it to be reassuring, but the grin held a tenseness. I could feel my own embarrassment creep across my cheeks, and we stood facing each other again.

"Can I take your bags?" I offered.

Annette hesitated, then extended a canvas pouch and a weightier green nylon satchel. I hoisted the satchel over my shoulder and realized I'd offered to take the bags to prevent the moment from becoming uncomfortable, but I didn't actually know where Annette would be sleeping that night. I wrapped my arms around the canvas pouch, and climbed the stairs towards the room I shared with Connie.

"I can help with one of the bags," Annette offered.

"It's no issue," I said, and made an effort to relax my shoulders so it didn't look like I was struggling. I rounded the corner and saw that our door was already opened, and Connie was sprawled across her bed reading a heavily creased paperback.

"This is Connie," I said, gesturing as best I could while carrying the bags. With my knee I nudged my half-packed suitcase into the corner of my bed, then watched hers sink into the covers.

I knew someone would eventually fill the empty bed, but I'd figured it would take some time and wasn't expecting to actually meet my replacement. I had only been a part of the communal living house for a few months, but I'd grown accustomed to the dynamic each housemate created.

I imagined Annette eating oatmeal next to Martin, gardening in the late evening while Stella and Grace cooked dinner, discussing (and sometimes arguing) with Dale and Billy about the latest news, or reading next to Connie before bed.

"You must be Annette. It's nice to meet you." Connie's voice pulled me out of my thoughts and I shook them from my mind. She'd placed the book down on her chest, but had not gotten up.

I turned to Annette. "I guess this is your bed."

"You don't sound very sure of that."

"She's not," Connie said.

"It was my bed for the summer," I said.

"But not anymore?"

"I'm leaving in the morning. I'm sure we can find you fresh sheets in a closet somewhere."

“Where will you sleep?” Annette asked.

I shrugged. “The floor.” I really didn’t mind sleeping on the floor, though I was sad my last night in this house wouldn’t feel like the others.

Connie stood up abruptly, tossing the book on her bed. “Gonna go find Martin,” she said. Annette and I watched her stride out of the room; her blond hair trailed behind like a comet.

Annette traced the grainlines. Her fingers kissed the wood in gentle waves, then in sweeping curves. I imagined her motions as brushstrokes, painting a labyrinth of vines onto the floor that crept beyond her touch and slithered toward me. Hesitantly, they inched up my wrists.

“My fingers are covered in dust now,” she whispered.

“You can move to the bed—it’s less dusty up there.” Her statement hadn’t sounded like a complaint though, simply an observation.

“I’m still not going to take your bed before you’re gone,” she said.

I shook my head, but I was glad she joined me on the floor. Neither of us could convince the other, and eventually we both gave up insisting.

“Thanks for making me feel so welcome,” Annette said.

“I haven’t done much.”

She shrugged. “I can tell you don’t want to leave.”

I nodded. “I love this place. I know that you’re gonna love it too.”

She stayed silent.

“When I arrived at the end of June, I had never been around anything like this, my parents are so traditional and that’s all I’d ever been around,” I said. “When I got here, everything was so different I didn’t know what to do. I still don’t know what to do, but being here makes me feel like I have a place, I just need to find it. And I’m surrounded by people who help me figure things out and navigate all this freedom. I think that’s what I’ll miss most actually, is these people. They’ll help you out too, I know it.”

I struggled to make out her expression in the darkness.

Annette lowered her whisper to just barely audible. “I think maybe everyone feels like I’m taking your place, and that’s why they haven’t taken much of a liking to me.”

I doubted they thought that. I was afraid she was taking my place, and doing my best not to give into those feelings of jealousy because I really did want her to have as wonderful of an experience at Oakwood as I did.

“No, this is the sort of place people pass through. They come and go. They’re all used to the revolving door of people.”

I believed what I was saying, but at the same time I found it difficult to imagine the house with any other dynamic than the one that existed right now. Two people had moved out within the same week I arrived, but that just felt like part of the adjusting that had happened as I settled in.

“I don’t blame them.” Annette said. “They’re just going to miss you.”

The bed beside me creaked as Connie rolled over. “Go to sleep,” she groaned. We laid unmoving and silent while we waited for Connie’s breathing to even.

When I first arrived at the yellow house I would call home during that short period, the air was sticky with the eager heat of early summer. It was blindingly bright in the midday sun, but the awning over the door dripped a blanket of shadow onto the porch. When Martin answered the door, I did not care how much sweat pooled beneath my underarms or that neither of us was the hugging type. I dropped everything from my overstuffed arms and embraced him in a suffocating hug.

I released Martin and took in all the ways he seemed changed since he left the year prior. His clothes still fit loosely though he looked taller, and his hair now brushed his shoulders. He was grinning with a smile wider than I knew his mouth was capable of opening, and his eyes were brighter than they had ever been back home.

I felt his smile mirrored on my own face, but I also felt tears threatening to surface. I was happy to see him, and glad he was doing so well. Still the misery of the past year without him—a year filled with loneliness and expectations and constraints—didn’t melt away like I hoped it would. He’d left me to finish my last year of high school alone, promising to keep in touch. I heard nothing until May, when he called my house and suggested I come stay with him. He didn’t apologize over the phone, and I ignored the tight anger in my stomach when I agreed to it all. I didn’t want to be mad at him; he deserved to escape. He deserved to be happy, and I didn’t want to be one more weight tying him to our home.

But the feeling in my stomach returned now, and I struggled to keep my face even and my voice cheery. “Thank you for letting me stay with you!”

“Oh. Well, you can thank Dale. And everyone. Technically speaking, it’s Dale’s house, but we all contribute and...” Martin trailed off and closed his eyes. “And I’m sorry, Margret.”

“What do you mean?” I knew what he was referring to, of course, but I pretended nonetheless.

“I had to leave, and I’m not sorry I left, but I’m sorry that I left you. And I’ve been waiting a year to tell you this face to face, and a year for you to come join me.”

It didn’t fix everything. In fact, I don’t know if it fixed anything, but at that moment, a tendril sprouted inside me. Some mixture of hope, relief, and expectation that would blossom as the summer went on with each connection I made and deepened.

The interior of Oakwood House was alive with colors and textures. Martin pointed to a couch covered in a soft pink fabric that puckered around the edges.

“This one used to be all gray and ripped up, but Connie just fixed it up. Look’s good, don’t you think?”

“Don’t try to flatter me, Marty,” said a voice behind me. I still remember my first impression of Connie. She seemed effortlessly cool bounding down those stairs. Long blond hair

laid smooth around her face and swept over her elbows, and seafoam eyes looked out beneath dark lashes.

“That’s Connie, our resident seamstress,” said Martin.

“I presume you’re Margret,.” Connie said, “Let’s see if you live up to all the stories Marty’s told us.”

There was a challenge in her voice that tugged at something inside of me, and I felt the urge to tug it back. “Connie... Martin might have mentioned you in a letter once,” I said. Martin had gushed about Connie for half a page in the single letter I received after the phone call in May, though I didn’t say this.

“What’d Marty say about me?” she asked.

Martin looked at me with pleading eyes, but I couldn’t tell what he was asking for. Was he asking me to not reveal that he had talked so much about her? Or was he trying to signal for me to say that he said something nice about her?

“Supposedly, you’re friendly.”

“Supposedly?”

I meant well. Martin had mentioned that Connie liked to banter, but I worried she had taken it as cold. I struggled to get along with Connie at the very beginning, though it only took a week for us to warm to each other.

“You probably already fit into the house better than I did when I first arrived,” I told Annette.

Connie sat up and huffed. “I can’t sleep like this.” She threw off the covers.

“We’ll be quiet,” I said. Annette apologized simultaneously.

Connie turned to face me. In the moonlight, her hair looked particularly pale.

“No, you won’t.” She left swiftly, but closed the door gently behind her.

“She definitely doesn’t like me now,” whispered Annette. “I wish I didn’t have to start over.”

“She’ll come around,” I said. I wasn’t sure how to respond to Annette’s other comment, and so I didn’t. I’d assumed Annette wanted to leave wherever she had come from like I did.

“I miss my friends. And my brother.”

I thought of my own brother, who I would see tomorrow for the first time in three months. I didn’t really miss him, or any of my family and I felt a pang of guilt for that, but also annoyance. I promised him I would come home, and because of that I needed to leave this place. I promised my parents too. I said I’d return home and work on the farm and eventually take it over just like we had always planned, but I didn’t feel nearly as much guilt about breaking that one.

“What’s your brother like?”

“He’s caring,” said Annette, “You wouldn’t think that at first because he’s subtle about it. But he does way more than he needs to, wordlessly and unthanked. He was more of a parent to me than my parents were.”

I sat up and leaned my arms over the windowsill. I let the moonlight drip over my face and watched the speckled sky. I felt bad that Annette missed her brother.

“In the countryside, up by my family, the stars are brighter.” I continued to whisper though I no longer needed to. Whispering in the dark seemed to let more information slide between us than chatting at a normal volume with the lights on would allow. “And it’s funny because I was expecting it to be the opposite. Nights here are so free, I thought the stars might feel freer, too.”

“The countryside wasn’t free? Not with all that space?”

“Not for me. There was space for dreaming, but not for doing or being. Sometimes I don’t even know what I want to express but I just need to be able to express it. All the expectation and criticism was suffocating.”

“Why are you going back?” she asked.

“I have to. I made promises.” The words felt hollow as they fell out of my mouth. We sat in silence and I scanned the stars.

“Martin and I grew up together. We found our families equally suffocating, but we dealt with it together. He ran away as soon as he graduated high school. I only got a day’s notice, and he didn’t even tell anyone else. He didn’t get along with his family, but they missed him so much. He promised he’d come back, or at least stay in touch. But then he didn’t, not for a year anyway. He broke free, and I had to spend the year alone in the same miserable place. I hated him for a while. I can’t do that.”

“I don’t want to go back though. I feel like myself here, or at least like I’m able to figure out who I am. I can question everything, and try things out. If I go back home, I’m worried I’ll be stuck there forever.”

Annette rested a hand on my arm. “You really can’t stay here?”

I shook my head. “I’m not going to be the type of person that abandons someone.”

“But what about you? Do you want to be the type of person who abandons their own dreams?”

I let Annette’s words swirl around my mind. I’d found a place that was exactly what I needed. How could I give that up?

“Well, you’re here now anyway and we can’t sleep on the floor forever.”

“I don’t have to be. I was lucky that I met Dale, and he happened to have an extra spot in a house and invited me to stay. I’m grateful, and it’s wonderful here, but I’m positive I can find somewhere else,” said Annette.

“If, if I were to stay, we could definitely just find another bed for you,” I said.

“Then stay.”

“I promised Will, my brother, that I would”



Annette cut me off. Though she'd stopped whispering, her voice was still soft. "Why don't you write Will a letter, or give him a call? Everything you've told me tonight, tell him. You've forgiven Martin haven't you?" Annette said.

"I guess. I'd still be breaking the promise though."

"Then maybe you should go home."

I felt a pang at those words and knew it wouldn't be possible. I couldn't do it. I couldn't go home.

"Maybe I could come back," I said.

"When?"

"Tomorrow."

The more I thought it over, the more I knew this was what I needed to do. It would be difficult facing my parents and telling them I didn't want to come back home. Facing Will and telling him he would be alone now. But it didn't feel nearly as excruciating as the thought of leaving Oakwood House which in that moment felt so much like home, like somewhere I would be forever happy and free.

## Chapter Two

Sometimes I regret dragging Martin back into our old life to face his family. I think he felt guilty when I explained why I had to tell my family in person. It was important for both of us to properly say goodbye to that place and those people though. Otherwise, we might have ended up back there more permanently.

The bus was mostly empty, and I was grateful for it. Near the front, two small children climbed on top of a couple. On the other side, an elderly woman held a book two inches away from her face, turning the page a maximum of ten times for the entire two hours she sat there, and sitting directly behind her was a clean cut young man in a suit who looked thoroughly annoyed to be here.

Martin and I sprawled across the back row which didn't part for the aisle. After five minutes in the stagnant heat, we went to every empty seat and opened the windows so that we would get as much wind as possible.

I leaned against the window and my skull vibrated. The landscape wasn't familiar yet, forests and small towns blurred in my vision.

Martin slid over. "What are you going to say?" he asked.

I shrugged and remained silent, even though I had extensively thought this through. I would stand tall and strong, and speak in a gentle but firm voice, I'm not staying. I'm sorry I'm leaving you again, but I need to go back. And inevitably when they asked me why, I would answer, I found my place, and it's there. It's where I belong, and where I feel like myself. I tried not to let myself think past that, not to worry about what the response would be.

Martin narrowed his eyes, "You really don't know?"

"I'll tell them I feel like I belong there."

He pursed his lips. "Great. I'll say that too."

"Thief," I nudged his shoulder. Martin fell dramatically across the scratchy seats. He didn't sit up right away, and I watched him watch the ceiling.

"I hope it works," he said.

"What are you worried about?" I asked.

He propped himself up into his elbows. "Do you think they'll be mad at me?"

I shrugged, "I'm sure they'll forgive you."

"So they will be mad." He flopped back down.

I shrugged again. I wouldn't lie to him. I had been angry for a long time, and I knew about his plan. Of course his folks were going to be upset about his sudden disappearance, and that he showed up with no warning over a year later only to leave again within the day. I imagined though, that they must feel some relief in seeing him, and I hoped for his sake that this would outweigh everything they were mad about. I felt a pit in my stomach grow as I pushed away thoughts of my own family's reactions and pressed my cheek harder against the glass, letting the vibrations of the road rattle in my brain. The speed Martin bounced his leg increased as the landscape grew more familiar.

I thanked the bus driver as I climbed out, and he looked back blankly. The bus stop was just down the road from Martin's house, and it wasn't too bad of a walk considering we had only packed small backpacks with sandwiches and a single change of clothes just in case.

I accompanied Martin all the way to his front door. It was strange seeing him stand on his own porch, waiting to be let inside his own house.

"Knock louder," I urged.

His mother, a short and perpetually stern faced woman, opened the door. Her pupils shrank in the sunlight, then widened again as her eyes focused on Martin. She scanned the situation rapidly, looking both me and Martin up and down. Her jaw tensed and relaxed and tensed again. I waited for her to say something, but instead she simply opened the door wider, and stepped out of the way.

"Oh, I won't be coming in," I said. Martin shuffled his way through the door, and looked back with pursed lips. I tried to offer a smile that would be encouraging, but not unsettlingly bright for the situation.

"That's alright," Mrs. Comly said. She stepped onto the porch, and closed the door partially behind her, one hand remaining on the handle. She rested her other hand on my shoulder. "Thank you for bringing him home."

I shifted uncomfortably beneath her touch. I wondered if she would still be so grateful for his return if she knew we were leaving again before dark. It was probably best for her to know this sooner rather than later, but all I said was a polite, "You're welcome." I said. I stepped backward down the porch steps, the muscle memory of where my foot would land still lingered in my body.

I had told Martin that I needed no assistance in returning home, but once I actually faced the old house, I realized this might not be true. I could hear my pulse in my ears. I had no idea what I would find.

Before I ever gathered the courage to rap my knuckles against the wood, I heard a clatter and loud gasp, and spun to find Will had rounded the corner of the house and dropped the bucket he was carrying.

He ran towards me, a wide smile displaying his crooked teeth, and I opened my arms to embrace him. He didn't slow down as he approached, and the impact of him collapsing against me nearly knocked out my wind. Tears had already begun to stream down his face, and I instantly felt terrible about what I was going to him.

Hearing this commotion, my mother opened the door.

"Margret," she said.

Despite my best efforts, I couldn't read her face or her tone. Though she had announced my name as though it were an uninteresting fact, I knew that she must feel some sort of extreme emotion; whether that was relief or anger I had yet to find out. She wasn't surprised to see me the way Martin's mother had been, because she knew I was coming back today. I watched her circle the date on the calendar before I left, and she made sure I knew the day I was coming back too. I wondered when she decided that she was going to answer the door with complete indifference.

I waited for her to invite me in. When she didn't, I peeled Will off of me and ventured in on my own.

I felt her eyes as I set my bag down on the kitchen chair, much like I used to for school. She wasn't usually quiet; most of my memories in this house were of her yelling. Yelling at me for doing something wrong, hollering out the window that dinner was ready, and just expressing herself, whether it be joy or frustration at the world, herself, or us.

"Is that all you brought?" she said.

"Yes."

"Well where's the rest of your belongings?"

I stiffened, though it was exactly what I had been waiting for. I should have told her then. Instead, I shrugged. I wondered if Martin had already told his parents.

I took a glass from the cabinet and ran it under the tap.

"Well, I suppose when you live with strangers, belongings are bound to disappear."

I spun around.

"No one stole my stuff."

"Turn off the sink, Margret."

They weren't strangers either. I trusted all of them, though I was closer with Martin and Connie, I would even trust Steven. Even having met Annette only the day prior, I think I would have trusted her more than my mother.

"Margret," she snapped.

I twisted around and shut off the sink.

"Well you had more than that."

It was the perfect opportunity to tell her that I didn't need to bring it all back because I was going back. And yet, for some reason the words seemed to stick against my throat. I swallowed them with a gulp of cold water, and though it was refreshing it didn't wash the guilt along with it like I had hoped.

"I left it there."

She muttered something about people like me and influences and being grateful. Cold vibrated through my teeth as water passed through them and I resisted the urge to ask my mother to repeat herself.

I went up the stairs, instinctually skipping the first, loudest step, a habit I had developed from trying to sneak around, but had kept as I realized the noise annoyed me, and closed the door behind me in my room.

I looked around at the remnants of my past. Clothes I had decided not to bring still draped over the chair. Old school work papers scattered across my desk, and my trash can had not been emptied. My closet door was open, revealing its messy interior, and at the foot of my bed, the box of things I didn't know what to do with remained. I wished I'd left it in a better state.

Little bits of memory decorated the wall; photos, postcards, ticket stubs, cutouts from magazines, and paintings Martin had given me. I sunk into my old bed, which was half made, a blanket thrown roughly over the whole thing. At Oakwood House, I had pinned a single image to

the wall, an image of a forest from a magazine cover that had no significance to me, and I realized that the room didn't really even feel like it was mine. I was simply one of its occupants, but I felt no sense of ownership.

Being back in my own bed unsettled me. I was glad it was preserved in its state, that my mom hadn't ventured in and tried to organize. I wished I could put it in my pocket, and take it with me. But at the same time, I didn't want to ever have to take it out and look at it. Everything around me made me feel like a younger— even if it was only by three months— version of myself, and it made me feel trapped. I understood why Martin was worried that if he went home, he would never leave again. It wasn't that I wanted to stay, but being here in the physical location of last year's misery made me feel helpless in the same way I was.

I knew that the journal was underneath me, beneath all the layers of blankets and sheets and mattress, tucked into the wood frame from underneath. I tried not to think about it.

I sat up, and remembered my purpose for coming in here. I was to gather anything I might want to bring with me. I shuffled through the papers on my desk, then threw them all away. I peered in my closet, but going through that would be much too overwhelming, and so I decided I was okay with abandoning anything in that corner. I paused at everything I had on my wall. I unpinned a postcard, and flipped it over from the Greetings filled with palm trees to find a message from Rebecca, a girl I had been friends with in childhood and friendly with in my high school years. I dropped it onto my desk.

I peeled off a photo, the tape left a dull grey spot on the wall. It pictured my dad's entire family, my parents and my brother, my dad's two siblings and their children, and his parents. It was taken at my grandmother's 70th birthday, right before she moved back into the cottage house on our property. She always complained about how strange it was, to live right next door to the house she had grown up in and then raised her children in.

She moved out soon after I was born, I have no memories of her living in this house. She could have stayed, or moved next door, but after spending her entire life here, she decided that she wanted to be somewhere else, so I didn't see much of her growing up as she spent her years in various new cities.

I always had a fondness for that little house. Sometimes Martin and I would be allowed to play in there, and something about the closeness of all the furniture, and the wooden beams that ran throughout it, with lace curtains covering the grimy windows, it just felt magical. I used to ask to sleep in there, but my parents only allowed it once, and my dad had to stay in the house all night too.

For a short while, my dad's brother and his family lived in that cottage. It was a tight fit for the four of them, only one story, with two tiny bedrooms, and kitchen, living room, and bathroom all squeezed into the tiny box. I liked having them around, but I felt bad for wanting them to stay because it clearly made them miserable.

I looked at Eve in the photo in my hand. She looked so much different here, so much more serious than when she had been living on our farm. Eve was only a year and a half older than I was. We did most of our chores together, and for a little while, I really did enjoy living on

the farm and tending to my duties. Getting to show Eve how to do everything gave me a sense of pride, and then getting to share the work made it less boring. It helped that we were always getting into trouble, and would often abandon a task that was taking too long.

It was clear that Martin had an adolescent crush on Eve, and Eve and I had a lot of fun with that. We took advantage of the fact that Martin would do almost anything if it was Eve that asked him, getting him to steal us candy from his house and paint amateur portraits of the both of us doing silly things. She asked him to paint a picture of her father doing a headstand, and though Martin's paintings had not yet become anything close to lifelike, we treasured that picture like nothing else. For some reason it was the funniest thing in the world to us, and one day we decided to replace a framed photo on her parent's dresser with that one, and we got grounded for a week for disrespecting my uncle.

Eventually, my uncle found another job somewhere in Connecticut, and they moved to some nice suburbs there. It was during that time, when I still had some remaining fondness for the farm, that I began to dream of living in that cottage. For as long as I can remember, I always knew that I would be taking over the farm eventually, at least, it was expected that I would. The farm had been in our family for generations, passed down from my great grandmother to my grandmother to my father, and they always told me that it would be mine someday. At one point, that idea was exciting, especially when I thought about living in that little cottage instead of the main house. However, as I grew older and began to detest my work and dread the reality that I would be responsible for running the thing.

Now that I had returned, they probably expected me to start taking on more of an active role in the farm. During high school I had gotten by doing the bare minimum of help. They were probably anticipating the help, and I did feel a little bad not contributing, but the farm was not my passion, it was theirs. They could manage without me, I've never been all that much help.

I put the photo of my family down on the desk next to the postcard. I decided that I didn't actually need to take anything from my room.

I agreed to help my mom cook dinner. Despite the season, she was making soup. With just the two of us, quietly chopping vegetables and potatoes, and sliding them off the board into the simmering pot, the kitchen felt empty. Every once and a while, she would sigh, or click her tongue, but I didn't ask what she was thinking about. She seemed to be in a pleasant enough mood, and though the silence was a bit awkward, I worried that any conversation topic might erupt into an argument.

It was nothing like cooking in the Oakwood House. Stella or Grace would usually take the lead, and I would follow whatever orders they gave me. That kitchen was always full of laughter and gentle shoves when someone was in the way. We didn't have a rhythm, the way my mom and I seemed to move around without ever bumping, but there was something fun about the chaos, the way we didn't work perfectly together.

After swiping the carrots off my cutting board, I gave the pot a stir. Heat simmered onto my face, and I groaned.

Though my mom didn't ask what was wrong, she looked at me, and the eye contact asked the question for her.

"It's just hot," I said. "Why are we making soup anyway?"

"It's your favorite."

It wasn't my favorite, and I wasn't sure where she got the idea it was. I supposed it was a good soup for the winter when the drafts scurried through the house leaving my core feeling empty.

"Thank you," I said.

"Did you miss it?" she asked. Her eyes met mine, and I recognized them as an older version of my own. I hadn't realized how alike our faces were, but after only a few months, those dark irises standing out against her pale skin and light eyebrows underlined with blue exhaustion resembled so clearly what I looked at in the mirror that I was surprised to never have noticed how similar we were before. I was of course always told that I looked like my mother, but I suppose this was the first time I truly saw it with my own eyes.

"The soup?"

"Yes."

I swallowed.

"Well, it's been summer so I really haven't been much in the mood for soup. I am glad we're making it though."

"And us?"

She had paused her chopping while I spoke, and I waited for her to resume. The knife hovered over the board, and it became clear she was not going to cut down until I provided an adequate answer.

"Of course I missed you guys," I said. The lie coated my throat. I thought of Will, and how had clearly missed me so much, and felt terrible that I had scarcely given him, or the rest of my family much thought throughout the entire summer, save for the dread of having to return to them.

The sound of the knife hitting the wood resumed. As she slid through a tomato, one half skated off the counter and landed at my feet. I picked it up, and brought it over to the sink to rise off, then began towards my mother.

Her face contorted. "What are you doing?"

I paused. At Oakwood, we had been very careful about not wasting any food. Though we didn't have any official principles or any sort of guiding thought that brought us together, we did loosely share similar values, and minimizing waste, food or otherwise, was one of them. I realized though, that my mother would probably find it absolutely disgusting that I would consider using something that had fallen on the ground. Even though we grew food, and so she definitely knew that her food came from the dirt, I could acknowledge that there was something different about a vegetable that had already been cut up.

“Sorry, guess I wasn’t thinking.” It was true enough and I didn’t want her to think of us as dirty and confirm anything about the image she had in her head, even if there was some truth to the fact that much of my new life was stained and dust covered.

“Did you like it there?” she asked.

I took a deep breath, and for perhaps the first time since entering this house, told the truth.

“It was absolutely amazing. Everyone in the house is wonderful, and we all get along. We’re right there in town, and there is always so much life in the house. I planted this big garden and I take care of it. And I really feel like I can just be myself.”

“You can be yourself here.”

I stopped myself before I could remark that I couldn’t even have emotions here without it becoming a problem. None of my description was meant to be a cut about home, I wasn’t comparing the two places. But when I spoke of Oakwood, I couldn’t help but be filled with giddy excitement.

“I just don’t understand why you felt like you had to leave.”

We’d had this argument before I left, and I didn’t want to have it again.

“What was so great about that place?”

“I just told you why I liked it.”

She clicked her tongue. “But there’s always people in our house here. And you can tend to our farm, and you can be yourself.”

“I can’t.”

“What’s stopping you?”

“Everything. The way I’m not allowed to have an opinion, and you never stop asking me questions but each question is a trap.”

She gasped.

“You know, I’m just trying to understand you. You never make any sense.”

I dropped the tomato into the water, escaping onto the back porch before I could tell her reaction.

I wandered around outside, I had gone through this dance enough times to know that it was best to let both of us cool down.

Will ran to my side. I swung my foot through the lawn, knocking a cluster of dandelions fluff into the wind, dooming the grass to more. He imitated my stride, shuffling his feet and intermittently kicking.

The sun was beginning to go down, nowhere close to setting yet, but at least it wasn’t directly over our heads. We watched our shadows approach the house, knowing that dinner would be ready soon. When the head of my shadow self reached the steps I stopped. Will took a few more steps until he noticed that I had stopped, and his shadow reached the height of my own.

“Why’d you stop?” he asked.

His eyes seemed so wide and bright and I really didn’t want them to fill with tears. I took a deep breath and told myself that I would tell him. I exhaled, then bit my tongue. I couldn’t do



it. I had to though, I had to say something or coming all this way home was for nothing. A took another deep breath, and this time honored my internal promise.

“I’m going back.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m not coming home for good. Actually, I’m leaving for longer this time.”

Already his face began to contort as he tried not to cry.

“When? When are you leaving?”

It was hard to watch his face twist, but I didn’t allow myself to look away.

“Tonight.” I whispered, “You can cry.” He wrapped his snotty self around me. I patted his back and stared ahead, determined not to let this moment of grief affect my decision.

The back door crept open, and I swallowed. My mother stepped out with a puzzled look on her face. I figured she had watched the whole scene from her window.

“What’d you do to upset your brother?” she asked.

“She’s leaving,” Will whined. I fought the urge to push him away. I was supposed to tell her, and though a part of me was angry at him for essentially tattling, another part of me was just relieved that it was out on the table.

“Margret?”

“It’s true. I’m going back tonight. I came home to tell you all in person.”

She huffed. “No you’re not.”

I stopped, taken aback. I was expecting her to be mad, but not to actually just order me not to leave.”

“You’re going to your room, and you’re going to stop throwing hurtful things around.”

I couldn’t believe it. I was an adult, and she knew that as well as I did.

“I just don’t understand what was so bad about living with us.”

Will sniffled against my stomach, and I once again had to fight the part of me that wanted to get away from his whining, instead giving him a squeeze that was hopefully interpreted as comforting.

“You can’t keep me here,” I said.

“I knew it. I knew you were going to leave us again from the moment you walked in the house. I knew before then actually. I knew when you left us the first time.”

Her voice was gradually growing in intensity, and I knew what was coming next. There wasn’t any avoiding this though. And if I was going to leave, I might as well speak up for myself before I did.

“You can’t just scream at me because I’m different from how you wish I was.”

“You watch your tone.”

“I’m always watching my tone. And I shouldn’t have to.”

“Is being respectful really that much of an ask?”

“I just want to be myself. Is that too much of an ask?”

“You have responsibilities—”

“Give Will the farm. I don’t want it.”

“Will couldn’t run the farm,” she snapped, despite the fact that Will was right there. “It’s your legacy. You’d let down generations of tradition to frolic with some mindless long-haired hippies?”

“Yes. Because thinking outside of the norms that are shoved down our throats is mindless.”

“Well then, I hope you weren’t planning on staying for dinner.”

“Just be happy for me. I found somewhere I’m happy.”

I was fully shouting at this point, and I could feel Will tense at every word. I lowered my voice, “You don’t let me feel anything. You get to be angry all the time, but I can’t be angry, or sad, or—”

She spoke over me. “Is this still about the journal?”

I raised my voice so that it couldn’t be covered.

“Yes. You say I can be myself except I can’t even express myself privately.”

She put on her lecturing tone, the same one I had received when she first sat me down.

“What you had written was highly concerning—”

I stopped listening, and was there at the kitchen table again, walking in to see my parents and Christopher waiting with the journal open on the table, waiting. The dread washed over me in the same way it did in that moment. I was paralyzed, but it didn’t matter, because even if I could move there was nothing to stop what was coming next.

I relived that moment so many times. I’d spent a lot of the summer thinking over the events of the year, and recounting them to everyone that became a part of my life with just enough of the truth dripped into it that they would feel a bit bad for me, but not enough to cause true concern. I didn’t actually want them worrying about me, but I craved getting that sliver of pity, as if it somehow made up for the terrible year. It was a fine balance that I was after, and searching for it left a sour taste in my mouth.

More details washed away each time I returned to them, distilled until only the sterile essential remained: Christopher standing next to the chalkboard with wilting flowers, the classroom half-full with expectant eyes. Slamming my bedroom door so hard after a fight with my mother that the wooden frame splintered. Christopher kissing me. The truck accelerating into the puddle as I walked home from taking my senior portrait, splattering mud onto the dress I’d borrowed from my mother. Yelling at Christopher. Christopher and his friends cornering me at school, taking my journal. Walking into the kitchen. The aftermath.

It was as if I had never even left. I felt tears form on my face, and I wiped them quickly with the back of my hand. I would not cry.

“I was hoping this would happen, you know. I didn’t want to tell you, but I really enjoyed this summer. So much less fighting with you out of the house.”

I swallowed. The words weren’t true, I told myself. She was lying to make me angry, and it was working.

“I’m glad that we can enjoy another quiet dinner alone tonight,” she spat.

When Martin came around to pick me up two hours earlier than we had planned, I was glad for it. I hugged Will and my dad goodbye on the porch, where I had sat waiting since the argument, since my mother refused to let me inside and had made it clear I was never to step inside again. She had thrown my backpack onto the porch, and hadn't even come out to say goodbye when Will ran out to tell her that I was leaving. My dad told me she'd come around, but didn't indicate that he'd do or say anything to encourage that to happen. At the time, it felt like I could never return home, and I resolved that if I wasn't wanted, I wouldn't come back home. Eventually I would grow past this, but at that moment I couldn't see outside my own anger.

I didn't need to ask to know that Martin's return had gone equally poorly. I felt guilty for making us both come back, only to get nothing out of the experience. I don't now regret making him come with me though, I think it was important for both of us to properly say goodbye to that place, our childhoods and our families, even if the goodbye wasn't nice.

When we reached the rest of the property line though, I stopped.

"Wait here for one minute." I said.

I ran back, and tore through the house to my bedroom. I pulled every postcard, picture, piece of art off the wall, and I do wish I had been more careful about it but I was in such a rush that I ripped quite a few of them. I gathered it all into a pile on my desk, and shoved it into my pack. Will watched me from the doorway. I gave him one last hug, then raced back to Martin, not looking back to see whatever my mother's reaction was.

## Chapter Three

Annette joined me in the garden that afternoon, as she had often since she arrived. On these days, I plucked weeds with calibrated force, trimmed back stems, and gently snipped off vegetables into a wicker basket.

Over the summer, I had tended the garden alone. Piercing the ground with my trowel while envisioning the way my mother's face crumpled the moment before hardening into anger. Yanking weeds while remembering the cool metal of the lockers smushed against my burning cheeks. I slipped into memories much less when Annette accompanied me.

Mostly we listened to the radio, or to the chatter of birds and frogs and bugs and wind, occasionally adding our own little bits of chatter to the mix. Sometimes though, we would delve into a conversation that seemed to quiet the rest of the world.

"Margret?" Annette asked, motioning for me to come look at the ground she crouched over, "Is this a weed or a carrot?"

"Parsnip," I said.

"Sorry," Annette said. "I'm always asking questions."

Annette apologized a lot in those early days, and I was similar when I first arrived in the house. We weren't yet used to taking up space, and when we did take up space wanted to make sure we earned it.

"No, you're helpful," I said, "And you keep me company."

"I worry sometimes that I don't do enough," Annette said.

I worried a bit about my own usefulness. I had found my place in the garden, and completely transformed it over the summer, so I couldn't help feeling a little possessive over the space. Especially now that I was staying here, I definitely felt the need to pitch in more. I wasn't just a temporary guest, I was truly a resident of Oakwood and I needed to contribute.

"I'm used to growing just herbs."

"Did you have a garden back home?" I asked.

"Not really," Annette said, "I had some plants on every windowsill though. And on the fire escape. It's different though, growing plants in pots."

"Well, I've never been able to keep a plant alive in my bedroom," I said.

"Hm. Well, you're sharing one with me now, so maybe that will change. I think some green would freshen up the room."

Annette was right; the room could use anything that would make it less stuffy. There was barely room for the two twin beds in there before, so Dale, Billy, and Steven constructed a bunk bed out of the two frames, and put an extra mattress right on the floor. I decorated the top bunk with everything that had once been on my wall at home, even though I didn't always want to be reminded of all that. Annette slept below me, and Connie wasn't too happy about being downgraded to the floor. Even with the window open, the room seemed to feel perpetually stuffy, though hopefully that would start to change as the heat relented.

"What types of herbs did you grow? Anything we don't have here?"

Annette let out a little laugh. “So many. I had sage, and three types of thyme, a eucalyptus, lemon balm, tarragon...” she trailed off and blushed. “I could go on, but I don’t think you actually need a list of every plant I grew.”

I laughed. “I’ve never heard of tarragon.”

“We should get some for the garden. Well, maybe next year.”

I was reminded that I would need to find some other way of being useful, as the garden season would soon be coming to an end.

“What would grow well inside, for over the winter?” I asked.

She gestured to the rosemary bush in front of her. “We could take a cutting off here, and stick it in water until some roots form. Then we’ll keep the plant growing over winter in the windowsill. Here, I’ll do it now.”

She snipped off a bit, and went inside. She returned with the rosemary stuck into a rinsed cola bottle.

“I always named my plants back home,” she said. “So, whether you find it weird or not, if the plant is going to live in our room, I’m naming it.”

I thought it was endearing, not weird. “Don’t I get a say?”

“Well I was thinking of Eleanor.”

“What about Buddy?”

“It’s not a dog,”

“To be fair, it’s not a person either.”

“I think Eleanor is very plant-like.”

“So is Rosemary.”

“You can’t call a rosemary bush Rosemary.”

I huffed, and a smirk spread across Annette’s usually gentle face.

“So what were your great plant names?” I asked.

“Well, I bought Lemonade home on a sweltering summer day when nothing sounded better. And Muffin was named after the cat that tried to eat it so many times, my friend had to give me the plant to get it out of her apartment. And there’s Monday, named after the day my ex bought it for me.”

Annette’s voice tightened. This was the first time I had heard any mention of a previous relationship, and I wondered if it had anything to do with why she left the city. I was curious, but from the way her voice shrunk at the end of the sentence, I doubted she would appreciate any pressing.

“Did you name your toaster too?”

“You mean Mr. Toasty?”

She was grinning again.

“Do you have a name for everything?”

“Everything.”

I sunk my trough into the earth, and Annette reached over and pulled it back out.

“Take this,” she waved around the little shovel between two fingers, making me nervous that it might hit one of us. “You might not know it, but this is Gregory.”

“Well, can I have Gregory back?”

“I suppose.”

I pulled on some stubborn roots and tried to think of something clever to keep the conversation going. Though I was not entirely satisfied with this question, the silence had lasted long enough that I was anxious to say anything, and settled on asking, “Do you have a name for the lamp next to the window in our room?”

“Cherry.”

It was an apt name for the lamp, which had a smooth glossy deep red base, and in my head I did continue to refer to it that way for the rest of the time I lived there.

“So what did you do with all those plants?”

“I had to leave them behind. A few of my friends let me leave some at their apartments though. When I got settled somewhere, we planned that they would visit me and bring the plants with them.”

“Are you not settled here?” I asked. It had been a week since Annette had arrived, and considering that we had permanently altered the bed frames to accommodate her, I had figured she was planning on staying indefinitely, as I now was.

“I guess part of me hasn’t really accepted that I’m not living in the city any more. It was such a big piece of me. And my friends are also a big part of me.”

The thought came into my mind that one of the friends might be the relationship she had just mentioned. I wanted to ask about it, but I didn’t want to be nosy and so I pushed the idea out of my mind.

“So will you be sending the address to them?” I asked.

“I guess I should.”

I wondered if I would meet them. There were always extra people hanging around the house, but the prospect I might meet people from Annette’s life was exciting.

“Would you ever invite any of them to come out here for the day or something?”

“Maybe,”

“You should. I imagine you miss them.”

Annette didn’t respond.

“You should invite your brother too. If mine was older I would tell him to come visit.”

I watched her tense, folding her arms into her chest, and I knew I had made a mistake. I was only trying to help make suggestions, but clearly I had made it worse.

“Sorry,” I said.

“Don’t be. It’s just that I can’t.”

Why not?” We had people come through the house all the time, and often people I had never met before but were an old friend of someone’s would stay the night, or even stick around for a few days.

“I just can’t.”

I left it at that, though I didn't understand why Annette was so closed up all the sudden, and we turned back to our respective work. I was twisting off cherry tomatoes now, trying not to pull too hard on the vines. Red juices ran down my arm. I tried to wipe it off, but dirt from my glove just stuck to its trail, and so I zoned out of the physical sensations and fell into a groove of twisting and plucking. In the silent repetition, my mind slipped back into memories of the world I left behind.

Mom was wrangling a sun hat onto Will's head, but he kept throwing it off. A clock on the wall ticked furiously. It was an early Sunday afternoon, and I had finished my chores for the day. She was getting increasingly frustrated, and finally threw the hat at me instead.

Finally, she threw the hat at me instead.

"Take your brother outside" she said, and dragged Will, who had started to cry, out the door by his overall strap.

She let me slide through the doorway before slamming the screen with a huff. The air was hot and heavy with humidity. Will wiped a slime of snot and tears as he gulped for air, trying not to cry anymore.

I knew I should offer some sort of comfort, if not a hug then some kind words, but the exchange left me agitated as well and I didn't want to be outside. My jaw clenched at his shuddering breaths. I plopped myself on the bottom step and began to pick at the grass, dropping the blades into Will's hat.

"Eight is too old to cry like that," I said without looking up. I knew I shouldn't have said that, but my spike of anger had dropped into a heavy puddle of resentment, and when I opened my mouth it seeped out.

"I'm - not - trying to," he hiccuped.

"Whatever." I dropped more grass into his hat.

Will yanked the hat from my arms and emptied the grass onto my lap. Everything about him angered me right now, especially the way he managed to put Mom in a bad mood. I knew I should direct my anger at Mom, but it didn't matter. Will was in front of me, and so I felt angry at Will.

I spotted a muddy white pickup truck on the horizon, and felt a new wave of anger roll over me. I wondered why Christopher was here. He had no right to be here. I hated when he showed up uninvited normally and after what he did on Friday I wanted nothing to do with him. I didn't want to hear whatever stupid apology he might offer.

Will spotted the truck, and his face lightened, which made me even more angry.

"Christopher's here!" he said.

I know it's supposed to be a good thing, but I always hated how Christopher got along with my family. They all adored him. Sometimes it made things easier, Mom was nicer to me when he was around and didn't even blow up when he left like she often did with other guests, but it frustrated me that he liked them when I resented them.

As soon as he opened the door, Will ran up and wrapped his arms around him. Chris patted his back but kept an accusing gaze fixed on me. As if I had done something wrong, and not him.

Then I noticed it in his left hand. A leather bound notebook with brown staining along the edges of the paper and back cover. My journal.

"You're returning it," I said. Heat still ran through my face, but that journal was my most treasured possession. I would do anything to get it back.

I swallowed all the words I wanted to scream for my best attempt at a gentle "thank you."

His knuckles whitened as he gripped the journal tighter. My chest tightened.

"You're returning it," I said, firmer this time. He made no motion to move. Will pulled back from the hug.

"I have something to show you Christopher," Will said.

"Not now Willy," Chris said.

"You are returning it, right?" I wavered. Fear mixed with anger might be the worst combination of emotions there is. Every part of me wanted to lash out.

"Let's go inside," Chris said

Annette's voice yanked me back into the real world., "Sorry, but where am I supposed to trim again?"

I tried not to grit my teeth because I didn't want her to think that I was mad at her. I was grateful she was here, I would have lingered in that memory much longer. I scooted over and pointed to the node beneath some shriveled stalks.

"Are you ok?"

"I'm good."

"You don't seem good." Annette said. She quickly added, "And I'm not saying this to say that you need to be good, or that you need to tell me what's wrong, but," she trailed off and returned her gaze to the tomato plants.

I didn't know where to begin. I wasn't even entirely sure what I was angry about. I let my eyes trail over the garden and wished that winter would not have to come. I didn't want my usefulness to be gone, and to have to find a way to contribute enough that I could be a proper, permanent resident. I didn't want to have to go home, couldn't go home anymore now that my mother had expressly banned me from coming back. Though I didn't truly believe that I would be kicked out of the house for not doing enough, Steven certainly contributed less than I did and was evidence of that, but even the idea that my housemates might not want me there was enough to make me worried about it. I hadn't told anyone what had happened when I went home. Martin and I briefly established on the ride home that it had not gone well for either of us, but I gave no details to any of my housemates. I didn't want to dwell on the fact that I wasn't going back, I wanted it to be a relief, a good thing, and so I tried very hard to frame it as such in my mind. It was, after all, what I wanted. I also didn't want to still be upset about what had happened with Christopher and the journal. I had talked about it with Martin, and then again with Connie, and again with Eileen and Grace and thought I was surely done being upset about it. And yet, my



mind continued to stagger back to that day. It didn't feel like I actually had anything to be upset about, but the way that all these thoughts spun around my mind proved otherwise.

I stabbed the inside of my cheek with tongue, determined not to start crying in front of Annette.

She put a hand on my shoulder, "What are you thinking about?"

I blinked away the stinging in my eyes. "I don't want to be upset about it anymore."

"What happened?"

I couldn't tell her everything, there was no possible way for words to convey the way that everything seemed to layer on top of each other.

"My entire last year was awful," I said.

"I was really lonely when Martin left, and I got involved with this guy who was nice but I didn't really like and his friends were awful and the more we started to hate each other the more awful he got."

Annette pressed her lips together, nodding slowly as I spoke.

"I had this journal. It really got me through the year. I would write about everything I was upset about, everything I hated. I wrote when I got mad at my parents, sometimes things I wished would happen. I wrote about Christopher; a list of everything I hated about him, complaining about how gross he was. I wrote a letter to Martin once, a mean thing I would never have sent, all the things I couldn't keep inside of my chest. I was mean, but no one was supposed to see it."

I could feel the heat in my face.

"Christopher's friends thought I was weird. One day I was writing in the notebook at school, and they took it from me and gave it to him. I demanded that he give it back, and he wouldn't. Then, he took it to my parents. I felt so ashamed it took a while to look either of them in the face."

"I'm so sorry," Annette said.

I shrugged, pretending I wasn't still upset about it. "I wasn't ashamed about what I wrote about Christopher though, just angry. We got into this huge fight in front of my parents, and they took his side. They said he was a nice kid, and that I ruined everything nice that life gave to me."

"That's awful," Annette said.

Of course, there were other things in the journal, little embarrassing things I wrote about, and now Christopher and his friends knew all of them, and they made sure I was reminded of them regularly for the rest of the year. I didn't want to keep complaining though, and so I didn't say anything more to Annette.

"I'm sorry," Annette repeated.

"Don't be."

I did feel better then. Just like I felt better after the other times I let the story off my chest. I started to realize no matter how many times I talked about it, felt the relief of sharing it, the feeling returned. I turned back to pulling out the roots of weeds.

"What did you do back home during the winter?" Annette asked.

“Well, we still cared for the animals, and in the high tunnel we grew spinach and kale and carrots and broccoli.”

“Did that take up all your time?”

“I spent lots of time just watching Martin paint actually., And taking walks in snow and climbing lifeless trees.”

“Wasn’t it cold?”

“Freezing. Sometimes I thought a layer of ice was going to grow over my face and fall off, pulling my skin with it. But somehow it also made me feel so alive and real. The past few days have me wishing for snow,” I gestured to the vague direction of the setting sun.

Though I did enjoy the snow, it also reminded me that the garden would be useless in the winter, and me along with it, which bothered me especially because I didn’t feel like I could return home. I wondered if Annette wanted to go home, and while I would usually restrain myself from asking such a question, I had just shared such a personal story. I thought Annette also might want to talk about her past.

“Do you want to go back to your old home?” I asked.

Annette’s demeanor immediately changed and I instantly regretted asking the question. Her shoulders tightened again, but she answered anyway.

“Yes,” she sounded tentative.

“What do you miss the most?” I asked. I wasn’t sure how this question would go over, but I had hoped it would give her an opportunity to talk about what she loved about home. Instead, seemed to tighten further into herself.

“I miss it all,” she said in a soft voice. I didn’t want to keep pushing the conversation. I was a little embarrassed that I had shared so much, and I found myself a little disappointed that she didn’t want to talk. I didn’t want to push her though, and I felt bad that I wanted her to share things with me.

I’d forgotten to put my gloves back on. The dirt formed cool crescents beneath my fingernails, and I squirmed already feeling the scraping I would have to do to get it out. I wiped the dirt on my jeans, leaving blackened streaks on the thighs that would match the stains on the lower portion then put my gloves back on.

Rain started to fall. I turned my face up to the sky and let it patter onto my skin. The heavier drops splattered as they hit, coolly rolling down in different directions. The tinier drops hit with little pricks, then bounced off my face.

“We should go inside,” Annette said.

But I didn’t want to. I wanted to lay in the dirt and let the rain run over me, washing away my feelings and leaving me clean and light and free.

I inhaled deeply through my nose.

I listened to Annette gather all the tools as the rain grew harder. I kept my face pointed towards the sky.

“Are you coming?” Annette asked.

“In a moment.”

## Chapter Four

The storm swept through and tamped down the summer heat. It was the third day of the cool rain that followed, and the house had finally cooled enough for using the oven.

I was cooped in the kitchen trying to be helpful as Stella and Connie bustled around the kitchen preparing a big dinner for Grace's birthday. Connie, who had wrapped herself in a knit shawl and made each of us a cup of tea, had resolved that the atmosphere was cozy. I thought the heat from the stove recreated the mugginess of summer and the open window did more to let in the humidity than let out the heat.

I finished chopping the tomato Stella had placed in front of me, and itched for somewhere to direct my energy. The first day, I had loved how the rain had brought everyone into the house, but by the third day the rain seemed to have shrunk the house.

Connie pulled a metal tray with a big slab of meat onto the table. She drizzled some oil over it.

"Annette showed me how to make this rosemary salt," I said.

Stella peered into the container I held up. She reached in and sprinkled some over the meat.

"You find a way to bring her up in any situation," said Connie.

"She's right," chimed Stella.

I didn't talk about Annette that much though she was often on my mind. There was something exciting about her, and I couldn't help being curious, but this wasn't something I told any of them.

"I guess we just spend a lot of time together," I said.

"She's so secretive. She's lived with us for almost a month and all of us barely know her. Surely she's let you in on her secrets though," said Connie.

"Not really," I said.

"You don't know about her family?"

"No."

"You don't know why she's come here?"

"No."

"Do you know her at all?" Connie asked.

I don't need to know her past to know her,"

"Does she know your past?"

"Parts."

"Interesting," Connie said.

"Oh, leave her be," Stella interjected. She placed an onion in front of me, and I sunk the knife into it.

While I did know a little bit of everyone else's past, I didn't know everything. And though most my housemates knew a lot of what happened last year, they don't know everything either. I knew that Connie came from a wealthy family in the suburbs, and that her father spent more time at his fancy job in the city than at home. I knew that Eileen came to the east coast for

college, but dropped out during her junior year. Dale inherited this house from his grandfather, and he met Billy while working a construction job.

I didn't want to press Annette about her past, and she clearly didn't like talking about it. Or, I thought so at least. I always found it difficult to interpret whether someone was waiting for you to ask the right question, needing permission to speak, or whether asking was invading. I hadn't attempted to ask any personal questions since our conversation in the garden the other week out of fear of pushing her too far.

Annette didn't even need to ask me questions, I just seemed to start talking when she was around. The evening prior, we had been sitting on the porch, and I mentioned the nights would stop being so hot and muggy soon, but she saw through the comment and offered me a gentle smile and before I knew it I was explaining the way the garden made me feel useful and my worries about contributing over the winter.

She dripped hints of information to me as well. I'd gathered that she loved to go to bars with her friends frequently before leaving, even though she didn't drink much. I'd learned she liked ladybugs because they reminded her of her mother's nice red polka-dot dress, and that she hadn't seen her mother in years.

"Aren't you curious about her? Most people are so eager to talk about themselves."

Of course I was, I just wanted to also be respectful. A part of me resented the way that I didn't seem to be able to get her to talk the way she could get me to talk.

"Why are you being so pushy?" I hadn't meant to be sharp with Connie, though I was getting upset with her.

I tried to reconcile the situation, and explain myself despite my boiling stomach.

"I just mean, you're asking all these questions and I feel like you're not even trying to warm up to Annette," I said. Connie's open mouth made it clear I wasn't helping myself.

"It's hard to warm up to someone who won't let you in at all," she said.

A timer rang out on the counter.

"Connie, take out those rolls before they burn, and then raise the temperature 400 degrees." Stella said.

She shuffled over and spoke to me in a low voice, "I think you better leave the rest of the cooking to us."

I stumbled out of the kitchen. Steven sat with two girls I didn't know in the living room. I greeted them before escaping upstairs.

Annette lay on her bed reading a paperback missing its front cover. She looked up and pushed the majority of her curls behind her head, leaving just two pieces framing her face.

"Are you ok?" she asked.

I inhaled deeply, hoping it would steady my words.

"I'm good." I plopped myself onto my own bed.

"Are you sure?"

I could see the warmth in her eyes. I wanted to give her an explanation. I wanted her to hear, and to share what I was feeling. I didn't want to once again tell Annette everything while

knowing nothing about her. I didn't want to feel that way though. I didn't want what Connie had said to bother me.

"I'm mad at Connie," I said plainly.

"Oh no, did she do something?"

I suddenly felt very embarrassed about the entire situation. I turned on my side so Annette couldn't see my cheeks turning pink.

I was mostly upset that I got angry in the first place. I haven't gotten mad at Connie in a while.

"I just need a moment to think."

I shut the window and wiped away the wetness from the sill with my sleeve. The room was immediately more still, disrupted only by the flipping of one of Annette's pages.

I wished that Connie and Annette would just get along. Though, Connie and I didn't have the smoothest start either.

I thought back to the beginning of the summer, when I hadn't quite settled into my place in the house. Before I found my place in the garden, in transforming the backyard into a vibrant collection of sustenance.

The day I arrived I followed Martin around. I watched him paint, helped him clean dishes, and trailed along as he completed a shift at the general store, where his manager eyed us the whole time but didn't say anything. I helped him tend to some wilting plants behind the house while Connie sat on a blanket beside us and mended the seam of Martin's favorite shirt.

I didn't know what to do. No one told me to do anything, and I wasn't used to that. Back home, there was always something that needed tending, and always someone telling you to tend to it and I didn't feel bad about doing the bare minimum

Here it was different. The house seemed to be full of projects and things that needed to get done, but no one was in charge, and everyone just kind of did their own thing. It was loosely Dale's house, his name was on the lease, and we all knew that he had final say in certain matters, but really it was everyone's home.

In the backyard, a collection of variously styled chairs and a mossy log circled around a stone-lined fire pit. After the sun went down, Eileen started a fire and Dale played his guitar while Martin patted a pair of dull-sounding drums. Connie danced and her blond hair came alive in the warm and cool tones of the moon and firelight as it bounced and swayed. She held out her hand to me, and I joined eagerly, though I had no idea how to dance. I swung my arms and twisted my body, spinning until I was dizzy, and Connie made me sit back down so I wouldn't accidentally fall into the fire.

I awoke the next morning sleepily letting the sunlight tickle my face. It was odd how quickly I had adapted to their lifestyle. At home, we were up at dusk every morning, even in the summer when the sun rose at four in the morning. I awoke normally to the sound of animals, and if not to that, then to my mother yelling at me. I looked over, and saw that Connie's bed was empty and neatly made.

I found Connie and Martin in the kitchen eating breakfast, and joined them. Martin offhandedly mentioned that it was weird to eat breakfast with more than just Connie.

“We’ve developed a sort of morning routine,” he explained to me, “Where the two of us recount the previous day to each other. We both always get up at 8 a.m., and usually the kitchen is empty except for us because everyone either gets up earlier or later.”

He took a bite of his toast and washed it down with a gulp of coffee. “I’d say it’s how we became such close and consistent friends over the past year. That and generally living together.” He chuckled. “It’s honestly kind of an odd feeling anytime someone else joins us.”

“It’s weird for me too.” Connie’s voice was even, but the way she stared straight at me as she said it made it obvious I was an interruption.

I wanted to yell at the both of them to just tell me if I was unwelcome. I swallowed my anger with my oatmeal, huffing it down and leaving to sulk around the house.

Later that morning, I ventured outside and found Martin standing at an easel facing the firepit.

“What are you painting?” I asked.

“The feeling of last night,” he said.

His canvas was covered in deep blues and greens, but I couldn’t make out any distinct shapes, or understand what he meant about the feeling. When I remembered last night, I thought of the orange glow of the fire.

Martin saw my confused look, and added, “It’s just the background. You’re not supposed to see anything yet.”

“Oh,” I said, feeling my face grow hot from embarrassment.

I used to watch him paint back home. We took an art class in high school and I would watch in amazement as his sketches turned photorealistic, and we would laugh at my disproportionate figures. In the winter when it was too cold to climb trees or lay in the grass, I would flip through magazines on his bedroom floor while he painted at his desk. Then, at any stage, I could always tell what the painting was going to be.

“You used to sketch first,” I pointed out.

“I’ll do a rough sketch on top of this first layer. But it won’t be detailed, like my sketches used to be. I like to feel it out with the paint now.”

We sat for a moment in silence as his brush swept across the canvas.

“It’s a big canvas,” I said. It was much larger than the sheets of heavy paper he used to paint on. It spanned from his knees to his forehead. I wondered how much it must have cost him, how many hours of working at the general store it took for him to buy it.

“It’s the biggest piece I’ve ever done. I’ve been waiting for a chance to use it, and last night I was inspired.”

Connie wandered outside and plopped herself beside me with a book.

“Have you been painting a lot since you got here?” It was a stupid question, I knew he had because I had seen his paintings all over the house. Scenes of lakes and skies and forests,

portraits of people at a distance, a very real looking painting of a car that reminded me of the types of paintings he used to do back home.

"Yeah," he responded.

"Your painting style seems to have changed." I noted.

"It has."

Martin was clearly getting frustrated with my attempts at conversation, which was in turn frustrating me. I really wasn't doing anything that I thought deserved his shortness. We had spent the last year not being able to talk, so it was really the least he could do to talk with me now.

"Why'd you change it?" I pushed.

He sighed, which further enraged me. "It changed because I changed."

"Okay. How did you change?"

"I don't know Margret. I just did."

"Why are you being like this?"

"Like what?"

"You know what I'm talking about."

"I'm not being like anything."

Connie chimed in, "Yes you are."

"Thank you," I said to her. "See," I said to Martin.

"Look, I don't mean to be rude. I just need some time alone. I know we haven't seen each other in a long time, but when I paint, I like to focus on what I'm doing."

"We used to chat all the time while you painted."

"That was different. I like to connect with my paintings now."

What he was saying made sense. And I knew from home that he needed some alone time, and I imagine here in such a big and filled house it's hard to get alone time. Still, it was hard to cool my anger.

"I'm not trying to be mean, but I don't want you to just follow me around. You've got to find your place."

I felt my ears get hot. I didn't want to think I was following him around. And back home, he was the one that always followed me around. I wanted to show him that I was more than capable of doing things on my own.

"That was kind of harsh." Connie got up and went into the house.

"I'm not trying to be harsh."

"Whatever." I shot back, and followed Connie inside.

I walked the halls of the house, trying to find something for me to do. I found Eileen and Grace in the kitchen.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" I asked.

"We're all good here."

These quick kinds of arguments didn't linger long. I would spend a little while sulking and then worrying and then we would move on.

Laying in the grass around the firepit, I swatted insects away from my face, and twisted grass between my fingertips. Martin and I told stories to our housemates about the times that his odd older cousin begged us to play hide and seek so he could hide in the most ridiculous places. I explained that one night, we were looking all over the house, only to find an open window, and upon looking out saw him lying in the grass. He had snuck out through the window and climbed a tree only to fall from it.

Martin jumped in, as he had been reminded of the time we had both climbed seven branches high in that same tree on a dare, and become stuck there. The both of us couldn't contain our laughter as he described the ways our angry parents had coaxed us down. I held my stomach as peels of laughter escaped me.

Connie though, didn't seem to find it funny. She huffed and pushed off the ground then went into the house, slamming the door behind her.

"Is she okay?" I asked Martin.

"I'll check."

I brushed an ant off my arm. It climbed right back up, and I let it tickle my skin.

Connie could be sweet and charismatic with her bright voice, but she was also so indirect with everything. When she got passive aggressive, I would feel so compelled to figure out what she was upset about to get on good terms with her. And somehow, everyone, including me, still loved her, despite the way she made you feel about yourself. She exuded such coolness, and acted like the things most people cared about were trivial. Still, she got caught up in her own trivialities.

I didn't act all that different. I often found myself caught up in small things, experiencing unignorable bright flashes of anger. I was always so embarrassed by it. I didn't want to be perceived as an angry person.

Where we differ though, is that Connie could ice you out forever and I would boil over within a few days. I really wish this wasn't true—that I wouldn't explode at the people around me. Especially because those are the people I care about. Sometimes it felt like I used up all my tolerance on the people who didn't matter, and then would snap at the people who did.

When I finally snapped at Connie, it was soon after waking up on a drizzling morning. The house was muggy, but at least the clouds provided some relief from incessant heat that had made all of us more and more irritable all week. I wasn't angry right away, in fact, I had forgotten about Connie's weird attitude until she didn't reply to my "good morning."

She was acting as if I wasn't there. It was like she was an entirely different person than the warm girl who invited me to join her in dancing around the fire and made sure I had a welcoming first week. I had thought she was so cool, and admired her long blond hair and even skin. I'd admired the way her eyeliner swept smoothly upward and her recycled-dresses barely covered her tanned legs, and told her so. And now she was ignoring me. It irritated me, but what irritated me even more was the way that I desperately wanted to win back her attention and friendship. And so when I felt that urge to try to get her to engage with me that morning I snapped.



“You might think you act so cool, but you don’t.” Even as I spat the words, I didn’t fully believe them.

At first, I thought she was going to remain silent, ignoring me in the same infuriating way she had been.

“As if you have any right to talk about what cool is.”

“I’m not trying to be cool. I’m trying to exist. But apparently you can’t seem to stand my existence any more.”

“Yeah, you’re trying to exist in my place.”

I wasn’t doing anything to replace her. I wasn’t trying to act like her, or taking any of her jobs around the house. I even avoided the best reading spot in the yard— a mossy throne of roots beneath the oak tree— when she was home because I knew it was her favorite.

“What are you talking about?” As the words fell out of my mouth, I began to piece it all together. Finally, I understood.

“It’s because I take some of Martin’s attention away from you, isn’t it.”

Her cheeks flushed pink and she dropped her gaze.

Her face turned tense once again and she met my eyes and spat, “Try all the attention,” then let her face relax and drop back to the floor.

“Sorry,” she said. I could tell she was suddenly embarrassed.

The right thing to do would have been to accept her apology, and later after I had cooled down I would. But I layed back down in my bed, and turned towards the wall. The small drip of satisfaction I had gotten out of her admittance had only stoked the flames of anger eating their way up my abdomen. And so I looked at the wall, and tried to just calm down.

“It’s just so embarrassing to be angry,” I said, finding myself once again confiding in Annette.

Annette placed her book down and folded her knees beneath her, “You don’t need to be embarrassed.”

“I hate when I have an outburst though,” I said.

“We all yell.” she said. “I used to yell at my ex. It was frustrating, because in a lot of ways we worked really well together. But then in the times we disagreed, we couldn’t seem to stop. We would just pile on and on and it would get worse and worse,” Annette said.

It did make me feel better, to know that Annette had felt the way I had.

“I know. Even when I care I just can’t seem to stop the words from leaving my mouth,” I said.

“My girlfriend used to—” Annette trailed off, leaving a pointed silence for me to fill.

“You had a girlfriend?”

“That ok?” she asked.

“Yeah. That’s ok.”

“I wasn’t sure if it would be,” she said.

“What was her name?” I asked.

“Julia.”

I wanted to ask if she loved her, if she had dated anyone else, what it was like to date another woman. I wanted to know everything about her past.

“Was that it?” Annette asked, watching me expectantly.

“If you loved the city, why’d you leave?”

The question slipped out. Her eyes seemed to move to a distant place, and for a second I thought she wasn’t going to answer, and I was about to apologize.

“I used to live with my brother, ” she said. “He got mixed up with some people, and needed to leave, which meant I needed to leave. A few of my friends offered that I could stay with them until I found an apartment I could afford on my own, but Sam— my brother— said I should leave the city. He knew the sort of scene I was in.”

I wasn’t sure exactly how I should respond.

“Where’d your brother go?” I asked.

“Probably somewhere much farther from the city than me. I guess it doesn’t matter, he wouldn’t let me come with him.”

Her voice sounded more compressed than normal, as though it was squeezed through a pained throat.

“I’m sorry. You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.” I said.

“Thanks for listening,” she said, and offered me one of those sweet smiles, where her eyes shine brightly through and her nose flares a little bit as her cheeks raise.

A part of me felt bad, like perhaps I had given into what everyone else was expecting of our friendship and what it meant for us to be close, like maybe I had guilted her into sharing through my embarrassment, even as I was grateful for her confession. I hoped that it was helpful to her, and that she knew it was in no way hard on me, and that I would happily listen to anything she wanted to talk about, especially if it meant seeing that soft smile return to her face.

## Chapter Five

I fought to stay asleep. Though I tried to keep my eyes closed, I could tell that the sun hadn't risen high enough to light the room through the translucent curtains. I wasn't sure exactly which noise had awoken me, but the slamming of doors, heavy footsteps, clattering of dishes, and layered chatter kept me from drifting back peacefully, and I found myself clenching my jaw harder at each noise.

I shivered, and realized that I had somehow kicked my blanket entirely off my bed during the night. If I climbed down to retrieve it, my chance of falling asleep would vanish entirely, so I tucked my arms beneath my chest instead. I tried to keep my head empty of thoughts, and let sleep take over again.

Autumn had caught me off guard that morning. It wasn't just the chill— the nights had been growing progressively cooler. The summer crops withered while the fall plantings grew larger, and the x's on the calendar on the fridge spread further into september. It was the sound of the wind that morning though, that truly marked the change. I heard it as soon as I woke, the rustling of air sifting through slightly crunchy leaves, instead of the way they flopped in the summer breeze.

I heard the front door slammed once again, vaulting me further into consciousness. I opened my eyes, resisting the urge to groan with annoyance because I didn't want to wake Annette or Connie if they'd been able to sleep through, something the rest of my house apparently didn't care about.

I peered over the edge and saw that Connie wasn't in her bed, but looking beneath me it seemed Annette was still sleeping. I tried to lower myself as quietly as possible. My feet hit the ground with a soft thud, and Annette opened her eyes. I cringed.

"Sorry," I whispered.

"I was already awake," she said.

I went over to the window and opened the curtains. The sun hurt to look at though it wasn't even fully over the horizon.

There was something odd on the lawn. I squinted to see it better. It looked like an old grandfather clock. There were often unusual things on the lawn; we regularly rescued tables and chairs from the trash.

"Why is there a clock?" I asked.

"Huh?"

"Come look."

Annete joined me at the window and shrugged.

Laughter broke out downstairs.

"It's not even seven yet," I said.

"What's even going on?" asked Annette.

I shrugged. "Guess we'll find out."

New faces littered the downstairs. I attempted to smooth down my hair and adjusted my sleep shorts to sit a little lower. Three strangers leaned against the fireplace mantle, laughing as they talked to Dale and Billy. On the couch, Connie spoke to a girl twisting a pair of sunglasses between her fingers. Stella handed out little oatcakes, and Grace rested in the doorway to the kitchen, stirring a bowl balanced against her hip.

I slipped past Grace and plopped myself onto the kitchen floor.

“You alright kid?” Grace asked.

“Just wasn’t expecting a party so early,” I said. I wasn’t particularly surprised though, we often had an assortment of people filtering through the house at any given hour. We didn’t need to ask each other permission to have anyone over, we just went on with our lives. Come to think of it, there was hardly even a time where the front door was locked. We only had one rule for visitors, which was no dope, or other drugs, in the house. It wasn’t that we thought ourselves to be morally righteous or that none of us smoked dope, but we kept that practice off of the property. We all understood that would be an easy way to shut down what we had going on, and we weren’t going to give authorities such an easy in.

“How long have you been up?” I asked. Grace was an early riser, and was usually out of the kitchen by the time I came down for breakfast each morning. Typically, breakfast was the quietest hour, though it was by no means silent. Watching everyone filter through their routines while I ate my oatmeal next to Martin was my favorite part of the day. The table was situated in such a way that I could watch the entire kitchen and the backyard through the window. I enjoyed the sun on my face too, and didn’t mind that on the bright days I had to squint to watch everyone.

“Sun-up, which is right about when this lot arrived. I’ve tried to keep ‘em quiet with a steady trickle of kitchen offerings, but I think Stella’s going to bake me into a square if I drain anymore of our ingredients. Sorry if the noise woke you.”

I shrugged. “It’s not much earlier than when I normally get up. What’s going on though?”

Though I tried to be nonchalant about it, and it was true that I would be naturally waking up not much later, I couldn’t help but feel aggravated at all the commotion in the other room.

Grace had started laying out the batter in thick blobs on a metal sheet, her back turned to me. “It’s a band passing through. Vera City I think. That one on the couch calls herself Star.”

I crawled over to the door and peeked my head back into the living room.

The girl’s sunglasses now pushed back her long black hair. She pulled two strands forward so they fell over her heavily lined eyes. A denim jacket swallowed the upper half of her body.

“Guess they know Dale somehow. Maybe from back in his Pensylvania days, but who knows. They didn’t do much to clarify before they made themselves at home in the living room,” Grace said. She nudged me aside with her foot and slipped the tray into the oven. She held out the wooden spoon and I took it eagerly. I sucked on the spoon, letting the sugary oat batter stick to the roof of my mouth, scraping any slimy extra off with my teeth.

“I have absolutely no idea how legitimate they are.” Grace.

“Never heard of them,” I said, my mouth still sticky. I wasn’t saying this to discredit them; I was certainly no measure of how genuine a band was. This lot was typically how I found out about new music. Billy was really into that music scene, sometimes he would bring home a new record to listen to, sometimes he would bring home tickets to a concert at the college across the street, sometimes he would even bring home the actual musician, and other times just a story. And that was how I discovered most of that rock soundtrack that seems to play over the times.

Stella returned to the kitchen with a crumb-coated plate. She dropped it into the sink, along with the bowl on the counter. She plucked the spoon from my hand and added that to the pile.

“Out you two go. Dale invited everyone to stay for dinner, I’ve got to start prepping.” Stella rearranged the collection of dishes and produce on the counter with a frantic urgency.

I was not ready to leave my spot on the kitchen floor, and certainly not ready to leave the room.

“It’s not even eight a.m. I know you weren’t expecting this, but you have plenty of time,” Grace said. She put a hand on Stella’s arm, but Stella shook it off.

“Do we even have enough food for everyone?” Stella groaned. She scrubbed at the bowl, splashing soapy water onto me. I scrambled up from the tiles.

“Don’t fret. I’ll run out to the store, we should have enough funds for another trip this week,” said Grace.

“I’ve got plenty of sweet potatoes ready to pull out from the garden, think you can make something with that?” I said.

“Thanks Margret, I’ll use them.”

“I’ll get them now,” I said. I was eager to feel helpful. Even though Stella was still visibly stressed, moving with unnecessary and clumsy urgency, I felt myself smiling.

Dirt piled under my fingertips as I uncovered the sweet potatoes. I had a pair of gloves in the house, but I let the earth cake around my fingers instead. Pebbles stuck to my bare knees as I hadn’t even bothered to change into jeans before going outside. A breeze swept around me and pushed tangles of hair into my face. I had to nudge it away with my forearm. Even still, I could feel that I had swept some dirt across my face.

For the first time since arriving, I felt homesick. Laughter echoed out the open windows, and I missed the quiet of the countryside. There was something magical in enjoying the changing of the season alone, even though when I was there I distinctly remember being sad that I couldn’t share it with other people.

At the same time, I was excited at the prospect of time passing. It meant becoming a long-time member of the house. Before I was just someone who had passed through during a summer, I was going to be a permanent resident, and the season changing seemed to secure this in my mind.

The ‘experiment’ as Dale called it, had only begun about a year before I arrived, in the early spring of ‘67. We thought we’d be living there for the foreseeable future, and at the time it felt like that first year was a very significant period I missed out on.

My pile of sweet potatoes toppled over, and I stopped to rearrange it. Before going back to digging, I plucked a few stray weeds before they had a chance to take hold— the spikey arrows of a dandelion without its head.

I brought in the sweet potatoes, still caked with dirt. Stella shot me a pointed look as dirt tumbled onto the tiles.

“I’ll sweep it up,” I said.

The outside seemed to reset me, as it usually did, and I no longer felt aggravated at the change in routine. Though I was inarguably more of a mess— dirt remained on my knees even after dusting them off and I gave only a superficial attempt at scrubbing my nails— I felt more presentable, and so I joined the rest of them in the living room.

Everyone was sitting, some on the couch and some on the floor. Star leaned back on her arms, one pale leg stuck out straight and the other crossed it. The rest of the room seemed captivated by the story she was telling. I folded my knees beneath me and tried to listen, but I had joined too late in the story and I couldn’t keep straight who she was talking about and so I found myself zoning out. More people filtered into the room, faces I often saw hanging around the house but didn’t know very well. Star was finishing up her story, the room was growing too crowded for a single conversation, and it was getting too stuffy to be inside the house, so many wandered out onto the front porch, and others went out back.

I watched the room empty. There were more voices, but they were all muffled. Steven came down the stairs holding his guitar, it was a Gibson SG with a shiny cherry finish. I watched him take it out the back door, where there was nowhere for him to plug it in. Back in those days he mostly brought it out around girls, who, especially those with their own musical inclinations, swooned over it.

Actually, plenty of people would borrow his guitar for this purpose, just in the same way we would borrow someone’s jacket or someone’s bike. That was somewhat of the point of living communally. We didn’t all need to have nice stuff, we could just enjoy each other’s. It’s a bit funny looking back now though, the way we didn’t just snide America’s wastefulness, but their materialism. We weren’t all too different on that front.

Anyway, when he brought that thing out, it usually meant he was entirely focused on being charming, which always annoyed me. This was enough for me to decide to go to the front porch.

The grandfather clock I saw earlier stood in the grass. From here, I could see that the face was missing beneath the glass. Annette peered into it, and I joined her. A hazy version of us overlaid straight onto the still gears in the glass. The ornate wood didn’t know it wasn’t framing anything.

“So what’s this?” I said.

“Well it’s not a clock,” Dale said. He seemed to be joking, but there was a strain in his tone. I couldn’t tell if he was just tired, or if there was something else going on.

“It is a clock.” Star scoffed in an over-the-top way that signaled she wasn’t actually annoyed.

“It doesn’t tell time, it’s not a clock.” I watched Dale’s face for more hints as to whether he was truly annoyed by this conversation.

“It’s a prop clock, it doesn’t need to tell time.”

“So it’s a prop, not a clock.”

“What I meant-” I cut into the banter, “is why is it here?”

“It symbolizes taking the moment. The audience didn’t get it. We should have put a mirror on it like I suggested, but Tommy said that looked like we were trying too hard,” Star said.

“I got it,” Dale said.

“Well I’m glad someone did.”

“I told them they could keep it here until the show in October, since it’s difficult for them to take on the road but Star didn’t want to get rid of it yet.”

Now Dale clearly seemed stressed, and I wanted to ask him what was wrong but I didn’t know how to bring up the topic.

“Dale said we could put it in the house, but then when we managed to get it here it was clear that it’s going to be a tight fit through that door.”

“We’ll get it in.”

I resolved to ask Dale what he seemed so worried about later, when we weren’t in the middle of a conversation.

“It’s already broken, so it wouldn’t be the worst thing if it got rained on,” Star said.

“Dale are you okay?” Annette asked. It didn’t feel awkward that she redirected the conversation, and I wished that I had asked it.

He seemed surprised by the question. “Yeah. Of course.”

“You seem worried about something,” I said.

He shrugged. “The town would not like that we’ve got a giant broken clock on the lawn.”

“What do you mean?” asked Annette.

“They already harass us about the furniture on the porch.”

“They do?”

“They can’t do anything about it, but the town sends complaints about the worn down furniture on the porch. The landlord warns that we’ll get a ticket, but I don’t know what they’d charge us on,”

Even though he seemed anxious earlier, he seemed completely unbothered by this fact. Perhaps this is why it was the first time I was hearing about the warnings. I wasn’t surprised though. For the most part, we got along with our neighbors, or at least we were capable of participating in the suburban tradition of politely ignoring each other. Naturally, we also had our fair share of people angry at our very existence, who desperately wanted us gone. For this reason, we couldn’t get away with anything. We knew this, and we were careful. We had our drug rule, and we thought we constantly had people over, so we tried not to let it become a party house.

"I didn't mean to cause any trouble. Believe me, I understand. Honestly, driving around in that thing-" she gestured to the vibrant multi-colored van parked beside Billy's tan one, "getting pulled over is almost a daily occurrence."

Dale shook his head. "Leave it here. They'll find something to complain about anyway. And you'll be back to play here in three weeks anyway."

"Here?" I asked.

"Down the street at Greenwater College," Star clarified.

"Are you staying here until then?"

"Just tonight. If that's still alright," Star looked to Dale for approval, who simply shrugged as if he had no say in the matter. "We've got a show tomorrow night in Philly."

"Where'd you play last night?" Annette asked.

"Fillmore East." Dale answered before Star could respond.

"Oh." Annette said. She seemed more disappointed than surprised.

"You'll be able to see us when we play Greenwater." Star said, but that didn't seem to be what Annette was upset about.

"Are you all from Vera City? I don't know where that is," I said. Star lit up at my words.

"No, no. I made up the name. Vera City," Star let the 'a' in the name hang in the air just long enough to almost be one word but separated the two with a breathy stop. "It's a play on words."

I waited for Annette or Dale to react. When their expressions remained as blank as my own, I admitted, "I don't get it."

Star's shoulders slumped and I felt bad. "Like veracity."

"I don't know what that means," Dale said. I was glad I didn't have to tell her I still didn't get it.

"It means we're about the truth," Star mumbled.

I suppose it was meant to be deep, and maybe I just wasn't deep enough for that lot, but to me it felt like Star was continuously forcing meaning into spaces where there wasn't any.

Annette turned to Dale. "I didn't know you were going to the Fillmore East last night."

"We were in the area. Billy and I go pretty often."

Annette sucked in her cheeks. I could tell she wanted to ask something, but she didn't.



## Chapter Six

Connie gifted me a sweater. She knit it herself, and I was thoroughly impressed. It was a deep and muted almost-brown orange, the kind of color absolutely perfect for fall. The stitching was wider at the top, and grew smaller at the bottom, but I loved it for its imperfections. I was wearing it for the first time, throughout that fall and many to come I would wear it two to three times a week. It wasn't quite cool enough to warrant such a sweater, but I had it on anyway and as a result was sweating profusely.

Billy sat hunched over a big piece of cardboard on the porch. He was erasing furiously, made a mark with his pencil, and erased furiously again.

"What are you working on?" I asked.

"It's supposed to say, 'Get The Hell Out', but I can't write even letters for the life of me," Billy said.

"Can I help?"

"Definitely." He slid the poster over, and I knelt down. Halfway across the page, I realized that my letters had been getting progressively smaller.

Billy chuckled. "You're worse at this than I am."

"Connie's got a steady hand. I'll go find her."

I bounded through the house, checking the first floor as well as our room. She was in none of these places, but I had seen her this morning.

I knocked on Martin's door.

"Come in," he called out.

I found him and Connie lounging on his bed. I wondered if I was intruding on something, but Martin had said 'come in' and so I continued.

"Billy needs help with a sign," I said.

"A sign for what?" she asked.

"War protest,"

"Ugh. There's so many protests about everything these days. I just want to exist."

She dragged herself off the bed and followed me downstairs though.

"You're so good at lettering though," I said, meaning it as a compliment.

We approached Billy.

"I don't like to be used," she said.

"Hey, it wasn't my idea," said Billy. "Fine by me if you don't want to help. It's for a good cause though."

"Aren't they all?"

She plopped down and took the pencil from Billy.

"What is it supposed to say?"

"Get the Hell Out"

"Oh good, I'm sure they'll listen."

I was surprised by how resistant Connie was being. As she outlined big blocky letters, I almost felt bad for even asking her to help. It made me angry, the way she made everything feel suddenly so silly.

“Are we supposed to just sit here and let the world burn?” I asked.

“What has the world ever done for us? I don’t like this world.”

Billy dragged the poster back in front of him filled in the outline with black paint.

“Exactly, that’s why we want to change it,” I argued.

“You can’t just do one thing after the next,” said Connie.

“Just because you can’t do one thing doesn’t mean we shouldn’t do anything. There’s more cardboard there,” Billy said, nodding towards a pile tucked between the couch and the window.

“You’re of no help, just repeating what has already been said. No one listens anyway.”

Eventually I would see where Connie was coming from, but I didn’t understand the burnout that would sweep through our generation yet. At the time, I was so desperate to feel like I was doing something, anything.

I slid a piece of cardboard out from the pile and peeled at the edges, trying to get a straight line. “What should this one say?” I asked.

“End the War,” Billy said.

I dipped a paintbrush into the can and painted directly onto the sign, no longer caring how uneven the words looked as long as it was legible. I heard the door open and close as Connie went back inside the house, but I didn’t look up.

We sat at opposite ends of the same couch, feet curled beneath ourselves. Annette’s arms hung over the back of the couch, and I watched as she gathered the curtain up between her fingers, folding and pleating the fabric, then letting it go slack and smooth itself back out. Darkness pooled outside, but we had enough rescued lamps in the living room to make the space feel warm and welcoming.

We were the only ones downstairs, at this hour we would usually be similarly sharing each other’s quiet company, only in our bedroom. It felt weird being down there alone, in a space that was normally always full of people or constantly being passed through.

“Connie is still asking about you,” I said.

“What does she want to know?”

“She’s curious how you ended up here.”

“Did you tell her anything?” Anette asked.

“No, that’s not my stuff to tell,”

“Thanks.”

The window of the house across the street turned dark, and I became aware that we were quite visible to anyone who might be outside. It was weird how public that moment felt, inside our own home. It was like that space existed to anyone.

“It’s not like any of it is a secret, I just don’t want to talk about it.”

“Because you miss it?”

“Even when someone just mentions they’ve gone it makes me wish I was there.”

“You know, if you told Dale or Billy how much you miss the city, I’m sure you could go with them to one of the shows they’re always seeing.”

She pulled her lips to the side.

“I guess if I’ve been living under your roof for a few weeks I should probably tell them I’m a lesbian.”

“They’ll be cool with it, you know.”

I was mostly sure that this was true. I wanted Annette to fully feel like a member of the house. At the same time, I did find myself enjoying the fact that I knew more about Annette than anyone else did. It made me feel close to her in an exciting way and I wasn’t quite ready to give that up.

“You never do know though, that’s the thing. Someone might seem so free and radical and then turn around and be disgusted by you. Or angry.”

“If they react like that then it doesn’t matter what they think.”

She sighed. “It does matter though. I can’t just ignore what people think. I can stand the judgment, sure. But it’s just not safe.”

“Sometimes I hate this world,” I said, “I just wish it could all be different.”

“I think we all do. In this house I mean, I think that’s how we ended up here.”

A stern knock spooked me awake. Annette and I must have drifted to sleep, and I felt completely and totally disoriented. I stumbled over to the door, collecting myself for a moment before opening it.

A cop waited outside, only a little taller than me, and looking thoroughly annoyed to be standing here on the door. I was equally annoyed to have found him there.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“I’m here on a noise complaint,” he said.

“I don’t understand,” I said. Annette appeared beside me, and I could hear a pair of footsteps coming down the stairs.

“We received a noise complaint coming from this house. Said it sounded like a party was going on.”

“But we literally aren’t?” I protested. Annette rested a hand on my arm, and I quieted.

“I’ll let this one go because it’s quiet now, but you lot better keep quiet. This is far from the first time we’ve gotten complaints about this house.”

“Thank you, officer.” Dale said from behind me. I shifted over, so that he could step forward and face the officer.

“If that’s all, we’d all like to get back to bed.”

“Have a good night,” the officer said.

Dale shut the door.

Annette and I retreated upstairs and properly got ready for sleep. Both of us sat on her bed in our pajamas with our legs crossed beneath us. Connie wasn't in her bed. We received noise complaints often, but usually it was because we were being noisy.

"That was stupid," I said. "We didn't even do anything."

"It doesn't matter. Their reason doesn't need to have anything to do with us."

"Do you think it could be different?"

"I want to believe that someday it will be." Annette's words were slow, careful.

"Do you really believe that?" I asked.

"Maybe. Someday. Not anytime soon, but I hope that someday is in our lifetimes. I really want to see it."

"I'd like to see it too..." I noticed that Annette's face was flushed. I realized her voice had been shaky in her previous answer and silently cursed myself for not registering her discomfort earlier.

"Hey, are you okay?" I asked.

I let the silence overwhelm the room as she searched for words.

"It's — the cop. The knock on the door, seeing the policeman, it brought me back to other times."

"Oh," I said. "Do you want to talk about it?"

She didn't take up the offer right away, but I didn't follow up on it. She followed an ant crawling up the wall with her eyes.

She responded without looking at me.

"I, I don't know. I don't want to give it space in my mind, but it seems to be taking it anyway."

You don't need to say anything you don't want to, but sometimes sharing helps." Sharing my own problems, especially about the previous year, seemed to make the memories lighter to carry.

She shut her eyes, and inhaled deeply.

"My friends and I, we used to go out to bars pretty regularly. And these bars— well they weren't nice bars. They were the kind of bars that would serve people like us— Lesbians and Gay men, the people who didn't conform to straight society. Those kinds of bars."

I nodded as if I understood. At the time I was embarrassed to admit I'd never even tried to step foot in one, and now I'm embarrassed to have been concerned with something so trivial as Annette opened up.

"Mostly I went to The Tapestry. It was a dump, but I could dance with my girl."

Something sparked behind her eyes, and now she looked straight into mine. The corners of her mouth pulled wider as she spoke, it certainly wasn't a smile, but it wasn't her previous somber expression either.

"I loved to dance. I didn't even mind the watered-down drinks they always served, because the dancing was enough, and I didn't need anything in my system to start dancing. The

floor was sticky, but I made Julia spin and spin and spin on it. And it was the perfect place to laugh with your friends over some awfully greasy food. Folks paid no mind to what you were talking about.”

Annette took a long sip of water from her glass on the windowsill which left a condensation ring on the wood Connie and I had sanded and painted in July.

“Anyway,” she continued, “That kind of place always means mafia involvement. It was an illegal establishment, and so was the love I experienced inside it. It was always a risk.”

She paused again, and it almost looked like she was going to take another sip of water, but she didn’t.

“I was there one night when The Tapestry got raided. I can’t seem to get it out of my head. One moment it was dancing, then it was banging and yelling and all of the sudden we were all running. Julia and I got separated. I just kept running, I didn’t know what else to do.

Annette’s hands had begun to shake. I steadied them with my own.

“I escaped into the crowd, pushed out onto the streets. I didn’t mean to abandon her, but it was so chaotic I lost track of her and it wasn’t like I could go back. I made my way home, and waited for Julia but she never came. The following morning, I found out she had been arrested.”

“Is she still in jail?”

“No, she had a thirty day sentence. But it shook her, and she never really forgave me. I don’t blame her, I don’t forgive myself either.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” I said. As soon as the words left my mouth, I could tell they weren’t helpful. I tried again.

“I’m sorry you had to go through that. It sounds terrifying.”

“It was.”

Neither of us knew what to say, so we simply existed in the silence. I scooted myself beside her, and leaned my head on her shoulder. She rested her head on mine, and dark curls fell in front of my vision.

## Chapter Seven

I spit tangles of hair out of my mouth and clawed it away from my face in a battle with the wind. It was too cold to keep the windows open, but Dale and Billy had outvoted me, and I accepted this defeat with bitterness from the backseat of Dale's car.

There were supposed to be more of us. Martin, Grace, and Annette all planned on protesting, but a cold swept through the house leaving mostly everyone feeling tired, weak, and in a bad mood.

The house had felt particularly crowded that morning, and I was eager to leave it, even if it meant trading one crowd for another. The protest was two hours away. I was grateful to get out of the car and stretch my legs.

Billy looked around eagerly. His face lit up and he walked towards a man wearing a blazer much too big for his body over a t-shirt and jeans. They shook hands, then Billy pulled the man into an embrace. He waved us over.

"This is my friend Paul. We've known each other since we were maybe three. Grew up next to each other. He got back from his tour in Vietnam three months ago." said Billy. "And these are some of the guys I live with. That's Dale, I told you about him over the phone, and this is Margret."

Dale shook Paul's hand. I awkwardly extended my own. His hand was sweaty. I tried my best to be discreet about wiping it dry on my sweater.

"The last time I saw you must have been before I shipped out," Paul said to Billy.

"We were still arguing about your decision to enlist." Billy said. He checked his watch. "We've still got a half hour 'till we start marching."

"You two should catch up, Margret and I will wait by the van." Dale offered to Paul and Billy. I noted that Dale had spoken for me, but didn't say anything about it.

We propped open the trunk and I climbed inside. My legs dangled over the edge, and I swung them. Dale leaned against a maple tree next to the van and lit a cigarette.

Despite the chill, he wore no jacket over his tattered t-shirt. One hand was tucked into grass-stained jeans. Mud caked his sneakers. That he was wearing shoes at all was an unusual occurrence.

I watched the smoke curl around his hair and into the canopy of the tree. His hair almost perfectly matched the autumn leaves in color— a deep and vibrant orange. I wonder if that was one of the reasons we had all accepted him as a sort of leader. It was always greasy at the top, and scruffy and puffy where it brushed his shoulders, but it made you look at him.

I stopped swinging my legs, and shifted so that I leant against the frame with my hands resting in my pockets. Around us, people exchanged greetings and materials; they shook hands and hugged, pulled signs out of cars and yelled things across the street.

I wanted to float upward with the smoke and to observe the world below. I wanted to watch myself in the third person. I envisioned the relaxed zig-zag of my silhouette among everyone else's equally relaxed postures which somehow combined to create the chaos I sat in

the middle of. I thought about how this scene would upset my parents. The anticipated disappointment gave me a strange sense of pride. I wanted the marching to start, but I also wanted to exist in that moment forever.

“You’re being very quiet,” Dale said. I returned to my normal existence.

“You’re not saying anything yourself.”

Dale shrugged. “It feels like you’ve turned this place into a library, and if I speak, I’ll get shushed.”

I stared at him. “You did talk though, and I didn’t shush you.”

“A fair point I suppose.”

A bus dropped off a dozen people at once. I alternated between kicking each of my legs until my boots became visible above my knees. I quickly became bored of this new, less intense silence.

“So why’d you named it Oakwood House anyway?” I asked. I knew the answer was probably because the house was made of it, or maybe after the ancient tree in the back. Really though, I wanted to ask how he created the thing. I had heard various stories about it’s early days—the time a window broke during a snowstorm in late January, the time someone Dale had invited to stay there managed to trash the entire place in only a week, the time Billy got a splinter from being barefoot on the porch and it got so infected he couldn’t walk— but I didn’t actually know how Dale had established such a place.

“I didn’t name it.” Dale said.

“Oh,” I realized that I didn’t actually know if he had started the experiment, or if he was just carrying it on. I had just assumed so, because he was currently the closest thing to a leader.

“It was actually Oakwood Estate. But I thought the word estate was a little pretentious when you’re doing the kind of thing we’re doing.”

He gestured with his hand as he spoke, the cigarette still tucked between his fingers.

“Can I have one?” I pointed at his hand, even though I didn’t really smoke.

He gave a little laugh, and I wondered what was funny. It wasn’t rude for me to ask for one, even though my mother might say otherwise. We usually shared these kinds of things.

He reached in his back pocket and tossed me a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. I took one out and threw the rest of the pack back.

“Did you make it into the Oakwood House that I know?”

“I had help, but yeah. You could say I did.”

I flipped open the lid of the lighter, and tried to light it smoothly. My thumb slipped on the first pass, and I had to try again. I felt my face grow hot as I fumbled with it, and I hoped that Dale wasn’t noticing.

“How’d you form it? The whole communal living thing?” I asked. I was interested in this, but really I had mostly asked the question so that Dale wouldn’t offer to try and help me with the lighter.

“Well I was trying to do college, which wasn’t working, and I heard about all of these communes cropping up. I decided to visit one, out in middle-of-nowhere Pennsylvania. It was

pretty much just a bunch of people living a farm life, and not really my thing. I did meet Billy though, and we hit it off great. But I wanted to do my own thing.”

I finally lit the cigarette and tossed the lighter back to Dale.

“I moved back in with my folks. Saved up some money and went out to California. I thought I might fit in out West, but I was wrong. I kind of expected to meet all the authors I was reading and all the people I was hearing stories about, like, on the street or something. I thought I would find my way to them. I did find my way to some people though, and got into all kinds of trouble with them.”

“Anyway, I moved back, and I was driving through Greenwater. Did you know I actually grew up there?”

The taste caught me off guard even though I knew it was coming. I had forgotten just how bitter cigarettes were. Thankfully, I didn’t cough.

I did know that Dale grew up in Greenwater. I also knew he had gone to California, and had heard a plethora of stories about his time there. But I just let him talk. I liked the way he told a story, starting from the beginning, no matter how long it took to get somewhere that felt relevant.

“Anyway, I passed this house. It was this greenish tan, not that bright yellow you know now, and it was falling apart. It looked like a baseball had crashed through one of the second story windows, and no one had bothered replacing it, or even boarding it up. But there on the lawn was a sign that said cheap rent, and I just knew.

I knew it was the answer. I moved in the next week. Rent was cheap enough because it was in such bad condition, but I really didn’t mind. And we fixed it up pretty nicely.

It was a place to do my own thing. And I think, in all my travels, that was what I was looking for.”

I inhaled the cigarette and drummed my fingers along the van’s floor. I wondered how many times Dale had told this story, and at what point he came up with that last line about finding what he was looking for in his travels.

“That’s it?” I asked. It seemed kind of anticlimactic.

“Yeah, pretty much. I wrote Billy a letter, inviting him to come live here instead. And I knew Grace was looking for a place to stay, so I called her up. I got impatient, didn’t even wait two days after I sent Billy the letter, I rode out and collected Billy myself. Drove him home on the back of my bike with only a backpack of belongings. And after that, we started to just collect people.”

“That’s pretty cool,” I admitted.

Dale shrugged. It was a gesture of coolness, signaling to me that he was indeed pretty cool and knew it, but admitting you thought you were cool was not cool.

We watched the crowd start to form. Dale checked his watch but didn’t move, so I assumed we still had a few minutes.

“It must feel so freeing to do your own thing,” I said. I thought about how free I felt living in the house. Sometimes I wonder how I felt so liberated while caring more about fitting



into the culture of the house than I ever had cared about fitting into the rest of society. At the time though, it just didn't feel like a burden.

"It did at first. It feels less free now." His voice contained a seriousness, and it surprised me in the way vulnerability is always a surprise.

"What do you mean?"

Dale made a gesture with his arm as if he were serving the whole scene in front of us on a tray. "It's hard to feel free in this world."

I looked around. Two women in short smock dresses unrolled a large piece of fabric with "End the War in Vietnam Now" printed in tall letters. On a patch of grass, two boys tossed a pine cone back and forth. The crowd of people on the sidewalk swelled.

"I guess," I answered.

"I didn't want to be in the middle of nowhere," Dale said.

"I understand that. The middle of nowhere is its own kind of suffocating."

"I don't know anymore. I wanted the best of both I guess. To live outside society and still be connected to it. A communal living experiment in the suburbs where I grew up," Dale paused to suck in the cigarette. He let out the smoke with a sigh. "I didn't have any grand ambitions. I just wanted to be a community within a community."

"Aren't we?" I asked.

Dale chuckled. "Greenwater doesn't want us."

I didn't think this was true. Sure, the authorities didn't like us, but I felt pretty accepted by most of our neighbors. And plenty of the youth around town were excited by our presence. I thought about the never ending stream of visitors.

We got looks, but it felt normal. Like anything young people ever did, certain older folks looked down on it because they didn't understand.

I now wonder if Dale was already seeing the undercurrents of the attitudes that seemed to materialize out of nowhere later that fall. Perhaps the interactions I perceived as meaningless were already simmering with the distaste that seemed to overtake the town, and Dale picked up on a subtext I had not.

Dale repeated his gesture to the crowd. "It doesn't even matter that we're here. Most people just look at us and they see hippies and they disregard us."

I didn't like these conversations about feeling useless but I seemed to be having a lot of them. I thought about what Connie had said, and how angry I felt that she wasn't willing to at least try and change things. It was harder to be angry with Dale.

"Why are you here?" I asked him.

Dale didn't answer right away. It maybe was the wrong thing to say, but I don't know that anything would have been the right thing to say.

"I feel a moral obligation to the world," Dale said.

At the time, I thought I might feel that too. It sounded noble when Dale said it, and I wanted to describe my own passion and anger as morality.

Dale exhaled audibly. His mouth mimicked the shape it made as he blew out smoke, despite his arm still hanging limp beside him.

“I don’t think it’s possible to ever actually feel free,” Dale said. I leaned forward and said, “I’ve never felt more free in my entire life.” “I felt that way too, at first. But it didn’t last.”

“What happened?” I asked.

“I think the longer you exist slightly outside of society’s box, the more you start to see all the walls that still surround you.”

“Maybe, you just forget what it was like not to be free.” The words snapped out of my mouth before I could regulate the tone I was using.

“I know I’m lucky. And that’s where the guilt starts to creep in, the moral obligation.”

I didn’t understand Dale’s answer, and it was upsetting to me. He wore whatever clothes, went to whatever place, sang whatever songs he felt called to. He had formed the home I had become so attached to. He did his own thing, and I didn’t know what could be more freeing. I didn’t want to accept that Dale didn’t feel free.

“But it’s like, I think,” I trailed off. I thought I had been ready to push back, but I didn’t know what to say. I closed my eyes and inhaled smoke. I imagined it rising up my esophagus and into my head, snaking into all the crevices of my brain, and quickly blew it all out.

“Living in the house, there’s no going back,” I explained. “There is no being perceived as normal anymore. I made the choice to step outside, and now that I’m here nothing matters anymore.”

I looked to see if Dale was following. He met my eyes and nodded, orange hair bobbing against his shoulders, so I continued. “I have to accept that people are going to judge me for how I dress and how I act and who I associate with. Embracing it means it doesn’t control me. It used to control me.”

“It’s exhausting though. All the looks, everywhere you go, they wear down on you,” Dale said. I thought again of Connie, how she expressed a different type of exhaustion. It didn’t feel like it was an adequate answer.

Dale looked at his watch, then across the street. I followed his gaze, everyone had started to gather.

“Come on,” Dale said. “It’s starting.” I had already gathered that.

I pushed out of the car and tossed the cigarette on the ground. I stomped on it several times, then smeared it beneath my boot.

Dale shut the truck. He didn’t slam it.

I looked at the flattened cigarette. I felt Dale’s eyes watching me. I knelt down, and peeled it off the ground. My face grew hot as I walked it over to the trash can. I didn’t know why I was so embarrassed, but the feeling made me even more angry. I kicked a piece of gravel, then kicked another harder and watched it skip across the asphalt.

## Chapter Eight

Billy, Dale, Paul, and I sat in a diner after the protest at a booth I'm pretty sure was meant for only one person to comfortably sit on each side. Squeezed between Billy and the window, I pressed my face against the glass, but it was so fogged with the humidity I couldn't see anything outside. Even though the diner was crowded and stuffy, we were grateful for the warmth. We had all become sweaty throughout the protest, leaving a slick chill against our skins as the October sun weakened. In all honesty, I was a little grossed out by Billy's sweaty arm, but I didn't let that show. I didn't want to be bothered by things like that, and I knew I must be equally sweaty.

Dale was telling Paul, and thus the entire table, a story about his California days which I had heard at least twice by that point, and would hear at least two more times, and so I let my mind wander.

The only cool part of me was where my bare feet rested on the tiled floor. About halfway through the march, I had stepped in a pothole which had filled with water. Pain vibrated up the bones in my leg, and I thought at first that I had twisted my ankle. The sharp pain subsided to a dull ache though, and though I winced through the next few steps, I became more annoyed with my soggy foot than from the pain inside it and knew that I would be fine. At some point I decided I would rather have to hold my shoes and step directly on the asphalt than to endure the squishing, and so I marched the last few blocks barefoot. I had left the socks to dry on the dashboard and gone into the diner barefoot as well, earning disapproving and judgemental looks from the waitress, but she sat us anyway with no fuss.

Oddly enough, I found the whole thing a little anticlimactic. Everytime I found myself feeling really passionate, I found myself wishing Annette was there to share it with. I found it odd that I wanted Annette to be there and not so much my other friends, even though they would have made it just as much fun. I also found myself secretly wanting something big and significant to happen. I'm not sure what, exactly. Of course I wasn't hoping for violence.

Even though it hadn't gone exactly as planned, my legs were tired and my ankle ached, I felt a pleasant numbness in the rest of my body.

It felt good to move. It felt good to feel the anger in my feet as I shuffled among the crowd. It didn't feel like being angry alone— the intensity of the emotion amplified by its unhelpfulness. The movement provided direction, it was like I finally had a purpose for the feelings.

At that moment, my skin sticking to the table where my sleeves rolled up and my feet to the tiles, I felt more grounded than I ever had been. I thought I might never feel angry again. Anytime pressure started to build, I would simply need to give it direction.

This felt like a grand discovery to me. In those days, every time I realized something new about myself or the world, it felt like I had finally figured everything out. Then my life would marginally improve, or stay the same, and then eventually that would become normal and I would forget about it until my next grand discovery.

As the feeling returned in my fingers, the pleasant numbness in my mind remained and I couldn't help but compare the way I felt now to the way I felt back home after being angry. In

my whole time at the commune, surrounded by outrage and genuine reasons for anger, I seemed to have spent less time angry than when I was at home being angry about the smallest little things. I thought this was so peculiar, how all my anger about we weren't being told the truth—which in of itself was something I was told—dissipated into this pleasant buzzing feeling in a way my anger over a single comment from my mother about needing to wash my hair never did. In a way it was smaller, but being home also just seemed to breed a different type of anger, the kind synonymous with hiccuping tears almost as much as yelling.

I glanced back at the kitchen even though I couldn't see anything through the little circle window of the folding doors. I'd ordered a burger and fries. My body craved the grease. I hadn't eaten at a restaurant in months, not that I ate out often before this summer either.

The table erupted in laughter and I joined in even though I missed what they were laughing about. Everything lulled into a quiet after that. I watched Paul play with the cuff of his blazer. He didn't look like someone who had gone to war. He seemed timid and skinny.

"Were you antiwar before serving or only after getting back?" I asked.

Billy kicked my ankle under the table. I turned to see that he was glaring at me.

"What?" I asked Billy.

Paul interjected before Billy could reply. "It's ok. Billy's just scared I'm bitter about the subject."

"Why?" I asked.

"We had this big argument a few years ago." Billy said.

"Billy thought I was stupid for enlisting."

"Well that's not exactly true," said Billy.

I turned to look at the kitchen again. The doors swung back and forth after a waitress carrying a steaming pot of coffee pushed through, but all I could see was that the tan tiled floor turned into a gray slab of cement.

"What did you think?" Paul asked.

Billy took a sip of his coffee. "I thought you were making a mistake."

The waitress—Beatrice according to her nametag—leant over the table to top each of our mugs.

"I was right though, wasn't I."

"No." Paul said firmly. He softened, slumping over and resting his cheek on the palm of his hand. "I don't know."

I was surprised that Billy would say that after being so hesitant for me to even bring up the topic. If he really didn't want to argue then he wasn't acting like it. I was even more surprised, though, at Paul's answer. I wondered if he was actually against the war.

"But you were at the protest?" I asked.

"The war is a mistake," Paul said.

"But you don't regret your choice?" I asked.

Dale and Paul took long sips of their coffees while Billy examined the salt shaker.

“You know, Billy and I used to play soldier almost every day. We were always on the hunt for the perfect stick to act as our rifles. My dad, he would tell us these war stories from when he served in Europe, and we would reenact them in my backyard.”

“This one time we set out to dig ourselves a trench,” Billy laughed then continued, “we only got deep as our shins before Paul’s mother came out hollering so loud that my own mama came outside. We had to fill it all in and I couldn’t come around Paul’s for the rest of the week.”

“Billy and I didn’t start getting into all the hippie shit until after high school. And you know, we started to hear around us that the government was lying, and the government was doing this, and that, and I just thought they couldn’t really be all that bad as they say.

“You weren’t ready to believe that,” Billy said. “It’s hard to let go of what you thought was right your whole life.”

“I don’t think any of us were ready,” Dale said. “What little boy doesn’t want to be a soldier, a hero?”

It was hard to imagine Dale dreaming idealistically about the army. It was hard to imagine that there was a time where he wasn’t like this— so anti establishment and against the mainstream and laid back. To imagine that he would have any sort of violent inkling.

“Originally, both of us were going to enlist actually. But after we started to spend time around hippies Billy didn’t want to anymore.”

“What exactly did you call me?” Billy asked.

“Doesn’t matter. I thought you were just involved in the culture. I thought you wanted to bum around and do drugs and that you were backing out.”

“I remember,” said Billy, “I was a waste on society.”

“I said it doesn’t matter. It’s not like you didn’t call me your fair share of names,”

Dale cleared his throat.

“Well,” Paul said, turning to me, “Suffice to say, we didn’t end off on great terms.”

“But here we are now,” Dale said. “All working towards the same cause.”

I looked down. Dark rings of wetness decorated paper placemats above a scratched tabletop. I dipped my finger into my water cup and drew a smiling face onto mine. Billy copied me, drawing a less polite doodle. I felt a pang of hunger vibrate through my body, and took a sip of my coffee to temporarily calm it.

“So how exactly did you get involved in the cause?” I asked.

“What is this, an interrogation?” Billy asked.

“I’m just curious,” I defended.

“I was also curious,” said Paul. “I was always asking questions. The officers got mad at me for asking the questions because they never had any answers.”

The kitchen doors swished, and I turned to see Beatrice hold a plate in each hand, balancing a third in the crook of her elbow, steadied with the wrist of her other hand. She walked in our direction, and I crossed my fingers that she wouldn’t pivot.

“For a lot of vets, it’s the horrors or the lies or the combination of both that make them come back so adamantly against the war,” Paul paused as Beatrice reached our table and placed

the dishes in front of us. She placed a sandwich in front of Paul. Dale received a grayish pile of scrambled eggs in front on one plate and heavily buttered, but barely toasted toast on another. Neither of these took up the entire plate, leaving both of the plates looking sad.

"I'll be right back with the rest," Beatrice said, with a bright smile. I smiled back, despite the fact my growling stomach was angry.

"For me," continued Paul, "It was those things a little bit. But fundamentally, it was the fact that no one knew why." He took a giant bite out of his sandwich. I remember thinking he had no table manners, feeling slightly bitter that he wasn't waiting for me to get my food. Then, I realized that I hated the whole concept of table manners. Somehow, still, I was able to be upset about something within this random set of rules that I didn't even subscribe to.

"I thought that was what made the American military different," Paul began speaking before swallowing his food, making it slightly difficult to understand him. "That when orders were given, they were given with justification. I really did think we were doing good things in the world."

Beatrice returned, and a steaming burger was placed before me. The smell hit me immediately, and I took a bite as soon as I could get my hands around it, burning my mouth only slightly.

"Hungry, huh?" Dale asked.

I nodded, swallowing then immediately taking another bite. I realized that I hadn't actually eaten meat in a while. None of us were officially vegetarian in the house or anything, but I think Grace and Eileen both wanted to be, and so because they often did the majority of the cooking, we just didn't eat a whole lot of meat.

"So," said Billy, "I got a call about three months ago from Paul."

He turned to Paul and said as an aside, "I'm not even sure how you tracked me down."

"Anyway, so he tells me that he just got back from his tour in Vietnam. And during that time, he's really gotten himself involved."

"Involved how?" I asked between bites.

"Well, I wasn't the only one in Vietnam who was getting disillusioned. There were these pamphlets sometimes lying around. I don't know how they got there. But they were provocative as hell, calling out the government and the officers on all sorts of things. We would crowd around and look at them.

I got talking with a few of the guys, quietly of course. You get in some serious trouble for distributing materials or for insubordination. But I really trusted these two fellas, Marcus and Tim."

His eyes fell to the table. Billy pursed his lips and reached over the table to pat his arm awkwardly. I didn't ask what had happened. I could assume. I knew that Billy knew at least one person who had died in Vietnam. I knew that these kinds of things happened. I also knew that Paul probably wouldn't want to talk about it, and for all the claims that I asked too many questions, I did actually know the line of where to stop my curiosity from going any further.

Paul took a bite of his sandwich, and chewed it completely this time before he continued talking.

“Anyway, we started to get these ideas. We thought, if the public knew what we knew, they’d have to stop the war. We thought we’d come back and people would really believe us. Because it was one thing to have all these college kids who’ve never been out to the real world be shouting about lies, but to have someone who had really been there tell you what’s actually going on, that’s gonna really persuade people”

I looked at Paul in his giant tweed jacket. If I didn’t know any better, I would assume he was one of those college kids he was talking about.

“Marcus was always thinking about deserting, but Tim was really passionate about this whole ‘return and tell all’ plan. Then, sometime between when Marcus was shot and when he died, Tim started to really get bold with it all. Anyone who’d have a conversation with him, he’d ask them if they could believe that we were doing this. He figured out the guy that was printing the papers, and got too far involved in that. Got caught distributing the papers around the base, and was court martialed.”

“After that I cooled off on the whole antiwar thing. But once I got home I connected with some other vets, and some active service members through some coffeehouses, and started to get a lot more involved with it all. And when I started to help plan, I called up Billy and invited him out to a march. That one never happened, but he came out and brought you all to this one.”

“So Margret, you’ve got your answer. Now how about you? How’d you get involved in this whole stop the war thing?”

I had just taken a giant bite of my burger. I chewed as fast I could and gulped it down while Paul looked across at me, waiting expectantly.

“Well, Billy mentioned it. So I went.”

“No big dedication to ending the war that drove you out?”

“Well, I am for peace.”

Paul snickered at this. “Peace,” he repeated quietly. I blushed.

“I am. I just mean, I learned about it from Billy. And I decided to come.” I tried not to sound defensive. It wasn’t cool to be defensive.

Paul leaned over and took a fry from my plate. I thought this was bold of him, seeing as we had only met hours ago. I guess he figured I’d be cool with it based on my demeanor though, and he figured right.

“Do you guys spend a lot of time around each other?” Paul asked.

“Yep, well living in the same house will do that,” said Dale.

“These two,” I gestured to Dale and Billy, “spend almost every waking moment together.”

This was, of course, an exaggeration, but there was a certain closeness between them that couldn’t easily be communicated.

“Sounds like you’ve taken what used to be my spot,” joked Paul, nudging Dale on the shoulder.

“And what about you, Margret? You spend a lot of time around these fools?”

“Yeah, well, I live there too.”

“How long has it been anyway? Since you moved in?” asked Billy.

“Five months,” I said, feeling slightly proud at the number, but wishing a little that I could measure it in years instead of months.

“Wow,” Billy said. “I really thought you were gonna be one of the ones to cycle through. But you’ve stayed quite a while.”

“Was it because I was originally going to leave at the end of the summer?”

“Well, I actually thought you would stay only a month before going back home.” Dale said.

I tried to stop my cheeks from going red. I drank the rest of the coffee, attempting to hide my blushing face with the mug. I couldn’t believe that they had thought I was just going to pass through when I first arrived.

“Why?” I asked as nonchalantly as I could.

“You just kind of seemed like you weren’t fully ready to leave mainstream society you know? Like you might want to go back to your family?”

I had certainly felt a sense of duty, but I had never wanted anything more than to stay when I first arrived.

“Well, now I really can’t go back home. So you’re all stuck with me.” I said.

“You should see what she did to our backyard.” Billy said to Paul, and I couldn’t contain my smile of pride. “Turned it into a fucking forest”

“Definitely not a forest,” I said. “I planted zero trees. But yeah, I did make a whole garden thing.”

“Glad you're sticking around. It was pretty cool to eat dinner from the backyard.”

“Me too.” I said. I thought about how I hadn’t yet considered that people might choose to leave. That it had been pretty stationary in my experience, but from the sound of it, it was usually a lot heavier of a rotating door. The only change I had experienced was Sandy and Greg moving out, and Annette moving in. At this point, I couldn’t see any of the house members not being there. It would change the whole dynamic. And I suppose for everyone else, the house changing dynamic would be a normal thing that they were used to. But I couldn’t imagine that. I wanted everything to stay exactly the same as it was.



## Chapter Nine

The front yard looked odd as we approached Oakwood. Bits of the setting sun seemed to reflect out of the grass.

Dale turned the music down as we got closer. Fragments of wood and glass splintered across the lawn. I didn't realize what had happened at first.

"The clock," said Billy.

All Dale said was "huh."

No one spoke as we climbed out of the car. I walked onto the grass, examining the wreckage all around me. I hadn't cared about the clock, but its wreckage made me sad.

I kicked something metallic on the ground. It was an intrinsically bad idea to see something metal and kick it, but I had. My toe stung, and as pain vibrated through my ankle I was reminded that I had twisted it. I clenched my teeth and waited for the pain to subside.

I reached down and picked up a gear the size of my hand. I couldn't have told you where it fit into the clock. I knew it turned and somehow it's turning contributed to the clock running, but I didn't have the slightest clue as to its specific individual purpose. I supposed it didn't matter with the clock spread out across the lawn.

The front door opened, and everyone spilled out of the house.

Grace led the way, "Dale, you're home."

I stopped myself from saying that Billy and I were also home, because I knew that it didn't actually matter. We had accepted Dale as a leader, it was in his name. I knew it shouldn't bother me that he was perceived as more important. I thought about what Dale had said about the revolving door of people. I wondered if maybe Dale was the only one that the other's actually perceived as permanent, because his name was on the lease. As much as we tried not to subscribe to these systems, they still found their way into our life.

I looked around as everyone stood out on the front lawn. All of my housemates; Dale, Billy, Eileen, Grace, Stella, Connie, Steven, Martin, Annette. Two faces I vaguely recognized as being sometimes around. I was fairly certain the boy with the freckled face's name was John. I had never been introduced to the other one, a short girl wearing a cardigan and plaid dress that ended right above her knees, a white collar peeking out beneath it all that matched her rolled-up cuffs. Her dark brown hair was short and shiny, reaching just above her rectangular glasses in the front and curling in front of her jawline around the rest of her head. It bounced when she turned her head. I guessed that they both attended the college down the road.

"What happened?" Dale asked.

Before anyone else could answer, the boy whose name was possibly John said, "It was this group of greasers. I saw them."

"Well what'd they actually do?" Billy asked.

Steven stepped forward as he began to talk, as if he was being called to trial or something. "I was in the back when I heard the glass shatter. As I came round front, I heard these loud bangs and creaks. Then I saw it, this group of boys, I reckon they were fourteen or fifteen

years old, with baseball bats, smashing up that clock thing. I yelled out at them, and they scattered,” he said.

John stepped forward so that he stood next to Steven and in front of everyone and added, “Well, first they yelled back. When Steven, Lily, and I came around they started hollering things at us. Like calling us hippies and freaks, and dropouts.”

Steven rolled his eyes.

Connie chimed in without stepping forward. “Yeah, they didn’t run off until Steven picked up one of those big pieces of wood. They smacked off the thing and started to swing it like it was a bat.” She sniffled and wiped her nose on her sleeve. “Even then, I wasn’t sure if they were just going to crowd around and beat him.”

I looked at all the different pieces of wood in different sized wood. I felt bad for Star. The clock had definitely meant a lot to her.

“So what do we do?” John asked, watching Dale expectantly. “Do we call the cops?”

“No.” Dale said.

“Why not?” John asked. “Surely they can do something.”

“We’re not going to involve the cops.” Dale said, an edge of sternness crept into his tone. John’s eyes widened.

“There’s still a little light to see by.” Eileen said, “We should try and get as much of this cleaned up as we can before it gets too dark to see anything.” She disappeared around the side of the house.

“Can you try to reach Star,” Dale asked Billy.

I picked up the gear I had kicked. It left a greasy imprint on my hand. I didn’t want it to ruin my sweater, and so I used my teeth to pull my sleeve up my arm so it wouldn’t brush against the metal, even though it meant I felt the chill air directly against my skin.

The girl I didn’t recognize dropped to her knees and began to gather little bits of metal. Her forehead creased deeply, and she pursed her lips. Something was clearly stressing her out.

Eileen came back with a can. I dropped the gear in. It clanged loudly as it hit the metal bottom.

I joined Annette in gathering the smaller wooden pieces.

“How was the protest?” she asked in a small voice. It wasn’t quite a whisper, we weren’t worried that people might hear. An odd feeling hovered in the air all around us, I felt apprehensive to speak, like it was somehow disrespectful.

“I met one of Billy’s old friends. The marching felt good.” I paused to look at her, unsure of whether I should keep the following sentiment to myself, but decided to tell her. “I kept wishing you were there with me though.”

A smile tugged at the corner of her lips. The initial embarrassment that came with caring about someone subsided, as I would do anything for one of her smiles.

“Sorry I didn’t come.”

“How are you feeling now?”

“A lot better than earlier.”

I cradled several pieces of wood in my arms. “Here, give me those,” I said to Annette, and she stacked her handfuls on top of my bundle. I marched it over to the bin and released my arms, a few pieces fell over the edge of the can instead of inside, and so I placed those in individually.

The sun had fully disappeared below the horizon but I could still see the yard. I began to move back towards Annette. She grinned at something Connie said.

I was excited to see them getting along, and hurried to join their conversation.

“Annette says the protest went well,” Connie said. I searched her tone and face for hints of mockery, but found none.

“It did. You should come next time.”

“Not my thing,” she said. I considered her words. Was it my thing? I felt invigorated by the experience. I liked doing it, but it was strange to think about it as a hobby or something.

“Do you know that girl over there?” Annette asked. She gestured towards the girl with shiny hair and glasses, and I watched her drop a pile of scraps in the bin. She still looked to be worried about it all, even though we had already mostly cleared the lawn of any big scraps.

“Lily? I think she’s a student at Greenwater,” Connie said.

“Should we go see if she’s ok?”

I picked up a small piece of wood with my other hand, and even though I easily could continue to collect pieces, I took the two scraps over to the can anyway. The wood rested on top of the rest, but I watched the piece of metal slide between other scraps and clamor down to the bottom.

I stuck my hand out over the bin.

“I’m Margret,” I introduced myself. That’s Annette and Connie, I said, nodding over my shoulder.

“Lily,” she replied, shaking my hand with a surprisingly strong grip. “I assume you live here?”

“Yep,” I said. There was pride in my voice. “What brings you here?”

“I work on the school paper with John, and he hangs out here pretty often. He’s a friend of Steven’s. I got really interested in communes, and might write an article about this place. John said I could tag along, so here I am.”

“Is it stressing you out?” asked Connie.

“Huh?”

“You look pretty stressed. Is this place stressing you out?”

“No!” she said quickly. “No, not the house. I just need to get back — it’s so stupid anyway. I thought I would have more independence than at home living at school, but the dorms have these stupid curfews, and mine is very soon, but I feel bad just leaving after witnessing that group just come up and destroy everything.”

“Oh, well there’s really no need for you to stay,” I said.

“John said we’d head back in time, but now I don’t even know where he is.”

“I’ll walk you back.” I offered.

“You don’t have to do that.”

“It’s no bother,” Annette said. “We could come with you too.”

“I might sit this one out,” Connie said. “I’m pretty beat.”

“You should stay too,” I said to Annette. “It’s getting chilly and you should both go rest. It’s a short walk, I’ll be back soon.”

Without the sun, it was considerably colder, and I tugged my sweater down so that my hands could hide within the sleeve. I remembered the grease on my hands, and cursed. I examined the dirtied cuffs in the streetlights. I would try and get it out before Connie noticed tomorrow. I was mad at myself for already ruining the sweater, even though all of my clothes were dirty and tattered by this point. In fact, I usually wore the stains with pride.

I looked at Lily’s clothes. They were crisp– evenly colored without any stray threads. She looked put together in a way that reminded me of high school.

“So, you’re going to write about us?” I asked.

“I was thinking about it.”

“What are you going to say?”

She paused for a long moment, considering. “I think maybe I’ll compare it to what it’s like living in a dorm. If I can get some statements from both sides, that is,” she said.

“Well, you can ask me anything you want.”

“Ok. What does an average day look like for someone living in the house?”

“It depends on who you are. For me, I spend a lot of time tending to the garden, or I try to help out in the kitchen when Stella and Grace don’t kick me out. I walk with Annette, or we read or listen to them play music. I don’t have a strict daily routine though, I go where the day takes me. Today it was a protest.”

“Do you miss the structure?”

“Not really. I hated school. I hated doing the same thing every day, seeing the same people.”

“Don’t you still see the same people all the time, more so now that you’re living with them?”

“Yeah, I guess. But it’s different. I chose to spend time with these people. School was just the worst. I can’t believe anyone would choose to do more of it.”

“College is different”

“How?”

“I have more independence, and I’ve still got a schedule but every day is different. Mondays and Wednesdays are the busiest days, and the most math-heavy.”

“How do you have independence if you still have to get home by eight-thirty pm?”

“I do hate that. When I applied to live in this hall, I thought it would be more like how you described living in your house.”

“But it’s not?”

“No. I want to change it though. I wrote an article about it already, and I’m hoping that this one about your house can further my argument. I have to be careful though, because if I paint it the wrong way they might be completely convinced in the opposite direction.”

“Yeah, you might be better off getting what you want if you don’t bring us into it.”

“I want to though. I want people to see how great it would be.”

“I want that too.”

We had reached the main gates of the school.

“You can drop me here, if you want. My building is only two minutes that way.” She pointed down a path that cut across a large lawn.

“Are you sure?” I asked.

I waited for her response.

“Yeah, just, I’m also covering this concert in two weeks.”

Vera City,” I said, connecting the dots.

“Yeah, you know them?”

“I met Star a few weeks ago. I haven’t seen them perform though. I imagine we’ll all go.”

“It’ll be my birthday, actually.”

“Oh cool! Maybe we could have a little party or something at the house afterwards. The band will probably be there, you could talk to them for your article.”

She grinned, “Really? I’ll see you then, I guess.”

“See you then.”

I turned, and began the walk home. The air had gotten even colder. I often walked around the neighborhood, even at night, but something about that night felt more eerie than usual. Perhaps it was the destruction of the clock on the front lawn, or the way Dale had suggested general unrest around the community, but after dropping Lily off I had become more on edge.

As I exited the campus, I noticed a man walking a dog across the street. He watched me. I picked up my brisk walking pace, and he didn’t make an effort to catch up, but he was still staring. The dog was small and skinny with wiry fur. It sniffed around.

The dog pulled towards me, but the man held the leash firm. He was still staring. My fear melted into anger.

I looked him in the eyes, despite my better judgement. After an excruciating second of eye contact, he looked down at his dog. I marched on, feeling accomplished. By this point, I was halfway to the house.

I turned back around, and saw him staring once again. I looked him in the eyes and scrunched my nose at him.

My face seemed to provoke him. He yelled “Get out of our town.”

I was startled, and began to walk faster.

“All of you hippie freaks. Get out,” he shouted across the street.

I quickened my pace further, only a few houses away. Even as I scurried home though, I held up my middle finger behind me. I raced up the front steps, and looked behind me once more as I opened the door. The man was gone.

## Chapter Ten

The night was dark, and the crickets and frogs were loud. Annette expressed she felt cooped up in the house and needed to get out so we went for a walk. There was a path that led through some woods a few blocks away. We often walked during the day, and through muscle memory we found ourselves there that evening. I was hesitant to go in at first, but Annette wanted to and I didn't take much convincing.

It was creepy at night, as most forests are. In the day, the canopy over the path created a wonderful shade that made the forest ten degrees cooler than the rest of the world, but now it seemed to trap the darkness in. There was a moon out tonight, but I could barely tell through the foliage.

We'd stopped at what we knew to be a grass clearing from our daytime visits. Annette sat on the grass, and I joined her without making any comments about the increased potential for bugs. We looked up at the sky, where the moon had reappeared.

"It's waxing gibbous tonight," Annette said. It was my least favorite stage of the moon, heavy and lopsided. I didn't tell her this though.

She laid all the way down, and I copied, already feeling bits of the earth sticking to my jacket and hair. I didn't mind it though.

I turned to watch her, but even with the moon I couldn't really see her. I remembered the first night we'd spent on the floor, Annette tracing the wood.

"When did you know?" I asked.

"When did I know what?"

"That you," I hoped that my hesitation didn't come across as judgement, "that you liked girls?"

"When I liked a girl."

"How did you know you liked her?"

She didn't answer right away. I listened to the night, and thought I heard something rustling. I sat up, and peered into the darkness, but saw only the flicker of fireflies.

"It was different from being around my other friends. Around her I just couldn't get enough, physically or emotionally."

I considered her answer. Being around Annette was definitely different than being around Martin or Connie and Grace, or any of my friends. But did that mean that I had those types of feelings about her, or was she just an interesting person?

I layed back down.

The fireflies made their own blinking, shifting constellations layered over the distant static stars.

"They're like the stars of the forest," I said. I wasn't sure if Annette knew what I was referring to, but she didn't ask me to clarify, so I assumed she understood.

The sand was cold and so it felt wet even though it wasn't, but I didn't regret taking off my shoes because the way that sand felt in socks was infinitely worse than whatever temperature the sand was. I gripped one side of the blanket between my fingers and threw the other to

Annette. Together we spread it out and on the ground as it billowed in the wind. I knelt on it to keep it on the ground, and Annette did the same on her side.

“Thanks for setting all this up,” said Annette.

“Yeah,” Connie added. “You picked a great day too. There’s hardly a cloud in the sky.”

“Even with the wind it’s not too cold,” said Annette.

“It was nothing I said,” with a dismissive wave of my hand, even as I smiled because I was glad my efforts were noticed.

I held up my hand to my eyes to block the glare of the sun from the lake. It had been a full week since the clock had been destroyed, and the energy still had not returned to normal. However, one good thing was that Annette and Connie were getting along. Before bed, we had begun to talk about little things, gossiping about Connie’s feelings towards Martin or laughing about stories from our days. I had begun to look forward to those moments before we went to sleep. I always made an effort not to yawn even when the other two had begun, because I wanted to prolong the part where we drift off to sleep as long as possible.

That day, I had decided to set up a picnic at the side of a lake which Martin had showed me over the summer. During the summer time we would splash around in the water and lay out in the sand, but I figured that during autumn it would make the perfect place to admire the scenery, as it was encased in trees that turned all of the possible colors of foliage now. I was right, it was absolutely stunning, the reds, oranges, and yellows shimmering in the reflected water.

I invited Martin, Connie, and Annette to the lake, but Martin wasn’t able to go. A week ago, this would have made things awkward, but with Connie and Annette getting closer, I was excited for the opportunity to talk.

“Pass me a sandwich?” Connie asked. She stretched out on the blanket, but she left her feet over the edge on the sand because she had chosen to keep her shoes on.

“Peanut butter and jelly or cheese?” I asked.

“Cheese.”

I dug into the bag I packed and pulled out one of the many sandwiches I had prepared. I really wanted to do something fun with it feeling so weird in the house lately, and so I had set this all up myself. I packed and made all the sandwiches, I even bought all the materials myself.

“Here,” I said, handing it over.

“Do you want one?” I asked Annette.

“Peanut butter,” She said.

I took one out for myself as well.

We sat in the warmth and the chill and the silence, chewing on our sandwiches. I admired the way the leaves floated down onto the water’s surface when the wind blew, the way the reflections of the trees above rippled away from where it landed. It really was a perfect day, and this was the perfect spot. I was excited to make the most of it.

“So,” I said, trying to make conversation. The silence was becoming a little too uncomfortable, only so much could be equated to being hungry and excited to start eating the sandwiches. “I was thinking about having a birthday party for Lily this Saturday.”

“Isn’t the concert that day?”

“Yeah, it’d be like an afterparty. Billy mentioned Star and the rest of them would come over after they’re done anyway.”

“Cool.”

“It’s been so long since we’ve had a party.” I actually could only remember two other times we had a real party at the house and both of them were from early summer not long after I arrived. We had people over all the time, but nothing that would really constitute a party since Billy’s birthday at the end of June.

“Lily seems nice.” Annette said. “But maybe you haven’t had parties for a reason. With how many visits we’ve been getting from the cops, I don’t know if a party would sit very well with Dale.”

She had a point, and I knew this. We’d gotten several visits to the house recently, and Dale mentioned he’d been receiving increasing warnings related to noise, supposed fire hazards, and various small complaints..

But I still didn’t want to accept that we were going to be boxed in by this. Lily was a shiny new exciting friend, and I wanted her to feel included even if she didn’t live here, though I’m still not so sure why I felt so resolved towards this.

“It’ll be so much fun. You’ve never even been to an Oakwood party.”

“They are a ton of fun,” Connie added.

I licked the roof of my mouth, where the sandwich bread had stuck. I hated that feeling. It wasn’t budging.

Connie, making a valiant effort to dissolve the silence that lay between the three of us, commented, “I’ve never been here in fall before. It truly is a gorgeous landscape.”

I nodded, still trying to unstick the bit of sandwich from the roof of my mouth. Since my tongue seemed not to be enough, I tried taking another bite to push it off, which didn’t work either. I had brought no beverages, and in that moment regretted the lack of foresight.

Annette had finished her sandwich, and layed down, resting her arms over her face. I worried she was bored. I thought we would be more chatty, but I couldn’t think of anything to even talk about. How was this possible? I wondered. I seemed to always have something I wanted to say to Annette, and over the summer Connie and I lounged on these very same sands and never had an issue coming up with something to laugh about.

It was nice that they had the lake all to themselves, but I wondered if maybe the bustling nature of it over the summer was part of what made the atmosphere so fun. Maybe all the people and chaos were what allowed them to always have a topic of conversation, in a way that this serene silence did not allow.

I missed the summer. I let myself drift into a memory of the lake during the peak of its business in July, where I couldn’t even fully outstretch myself on the sand because everyone was



so close together that the children running around between groups would step on my outstretched legs if I let them.

It was hot, the hottest day of the year, and nothing in the house could possibly cool us down. We all had wet rags draped around our shoulders, and so I mopped up the little droplets of water that dripped down with my feet as I walked around the house, but I could barely even feel the difference that the rag made. I had watered the garden that morning, and there was definitely some pruning that needed to get done, but honestly I was willing to do that by flashlight in the dark rather than go out in this heat, and the lot of us collectively agreed that it was too hot to get any work done.

Instead, we changed into swimming clothes, packed up towels and sunglasses and sodas, and squeezed our sweaty selves into Billy's van to ride down to the lake. The van was an oven, but once we got out we all ran straight into the water. I didn't bring a bathing suit with me, so I simply wore my most opaque tank top and shorts. Connie, on the other hand, and a baby blue bikini that matched her eyes and showed off her slender figure. The first thing I did when I got there was fully submerged, so that I was sopping wet. Connie waded into the water gracefully up to her waist, where her long blond hair brushed the water's surface. She pulled it all to one side, and began to braid it.

"Go under already!" Martin yelled, splashing water in her direction. She splashed Martin back, getting water in my own face in the process.

"Hey!" I pushed water towards both of them.

"You'll regret that!" Martin said as he lunged for me. I tried to step out of the way, but I was too slow and he scooped me up and threw me into the water with a splash. When I surfaced, I could see that I had sprayed water all over Connie. I was about to apologize, when Martin lifted her up and did the same.

A whistle sounded across the lake, and a lifeguard motioned directly at us to cut it out.

"No fun," I groaned.

"Yeah, let me drown my friends." Martin added.

Connie laughed.

We splashed around for a bit longer, but soon found ourselves laying out on the shore. If you were wet, the hot sun actually felt nice, and I sat criss crossed on the towel, sharing with Grace.

Mostly everyone was still in the water except for Connie, Grace, and I. We barely even had a view of the water, having instead to look at a bunch of people in front of us.

"I have a game." Connie said. "It's simple. One of us picks a person, and the other's imagine their life."

"What if they hear us?" I asked.

"Who cares. They probably won't know what we're talking about, and if they do figure it out, so what?"

"The woman with the big straw hat," said Grace, then she added "In the polka dot dress."

I found the girl Grace was talking about. Her dress had sleeves, and she was completely dry, I imagined she must be so hot. I wondered why she wasn't in the water. I could only see her back, so I couldn't tell her age, but I could see that her elbows were wrinkly.

"She's a widow," Connie said.

Grace gasped with mock surprise.

"And now she's watching her son splash around in the water, but she hates to watch, because her husband drowned in a shipwreck, and her son looks like him, so now that's all she can imagine as she watches."

"That's so morbid," I said, but I couldn't help laughing at how unexpected it was. Grace also gave a nervous laugh.

Connie shrugged. "That's the fun of the game. Now you have to add something," she said to me.

"She's allergic to the water," I said. "She can't even touch it or she breaks out in hives. And so she's even more nervous, because if she has to go in and save her son, she'll have to be all red and puffy in front of everyone."

I looked at Connie, who seemed content with my answer, and I was relieved to feel like I had played the game correctly. She gestured to a set of twins tending to a sand castle in brightly colored swim shirts.

"The one in green is planning to run away and join a circus. She's been secretly training at night for months, and has become really good at acrobatics."

"Oooh. And what about the other one?" Connie asked Grace.

"Um, I don't know. She's devastated when her sister leaves."

"Come on," Connie nudged her. Give us something more than that.

"She's an artist. She doesn't spend all her time painting now, but when her sister leaves for the circus it's all she does."

"What does she paint pictures of?" Connie asked.

Grace thought for a moment. If I were being asked the question, I would answer that she painted all of the different ways she could imagine their futures. Imaginary holidays spent together, things they might do together, days at the lake like this but with versions of their older self. Since they were basically identical, she would know what she would look like even if she never saw each other again.

"Boats," Grace finally answered.

"Margret, you pick someone."

"I feel weird singling someone out."

"Don't. You'll ruin the fun."

"Ok, ok. Um, that guy over there." I pointed to a guy standing at the edge of the water, who seemed to be roughly my age with cleanly cropped hair and sunglasses propped on his head.

"The hot one?" Connie asked.

"Um, the one in the blue shorts"

"Don't you think he's hot?"

I shrugged. "Not really?"

"Come on," Connie nudged. "That's why you picked him."

"No." I blushed. I really hadn't been thinking about that when I picked him, and I wasn't sure why I thought it was so important that I not be mistaken for having liked his appearance, but it made me really uncomfortable to think that they might think I thought he was attractive.

"Ok, ok. We'll drop it." Grace said, and I was very grateful.

"He's an inventor." Connie said.

"And what is he making?" I asked.

"He's trying to make a device that—" I cut Connie off.

"Grace. You answer first."

"He's making... um.... A boat"

We laughed.

"A really small boat." Connie added.

"The worlds tiniest," I said, even though I wasn't supposed to be adding this round.

We giggled. The sun fell on our faces. It was getting unbearably hot once again.

"Let's go back in the water," I urged.

"Race you." Connie said in reply, not even giving me a moment to react and so I had to stumble to my feet and try to catch up with her, dodging around the people sitting on the beach and trying not to be overly disruptive. She hit the water several seconds ahead of me, marking a clear winner.

I wondered then, if there was a similar game we could play. Obviously, being alone, we could not play the game Connie had introduced to me that day, but surely there was something we could do to pass the time without it being so uncomfortable.

"Want to play two truths and a lie?" I asked.

Annette shrugged, indicating sure, or not really? I didn't know which.

Connie answered firmly though, "What are we, teenagers?"

"We played it like last month with the rest of the house." I pointed out.

Connie shrugged, and this one I was readily able to interpret as indicating that she did not want to play.

"Would you rather just sit in silence?" I asked, anger seething out through my words. I was exasperated. I just wanted this to be a good day, to feel like how hanging out in the summer felt. I wanted Annette to understand that we used to have fun during the summer, to see Connie the way I saw her now that they were starting to get along. But that clearly wasn't going to happen.

I knew it wasn't good to compare things to the past. No matter what, nothing would ever be the same. But I couldn't help it. I hadn't expected coming here to be exactly like it was, but I did think it would at least be somewhat fun. This was miserable though, sitting in silence in a place that I remembered so full of life.

“Are you alright?” Annette asked. She placed a gentle hand on my arm. I looked into her eyes, and saw genuine concern. I glanced over at Connie, who seemed to just be annoyed. Anger jolted in my chest, but as I returned to Annette’s gaze it fizzled out to sadness.

What could I even say? I couldn’t even properly figure out why I was so upset about this myself.

“I’m fine.” I answered.

Annette held onto my arm.

“It’s a wonderful picnic.” Annette said. She smiled at me. “You did a great job.”

I felt my chest warm. “Thank you,” I said softly. I met her eyes again, and held them. I wondered what she was thinking about. I didn’t want her to worry about me and my stupid emotions anymore. But I didn’t think she was anymore. Her eyes were as warm as her smile, and I felt lost in them.

“It is great,” Connie said. I startled, having forgotten she was there. “I’m sorry if we’re not being as talkative as you wanted.”

“It’s ok.” I felt bad now, for putting my expectations onto them.

We sat in silence for a little longer.

“Are there any more sandwiches?” Annette asked.

I passed her one.

Rather than take a bite though, she simply held it between her fingers as she leant on her hand.

“So, what are you thinking for Lily’s birthday?” she asked.

“I hadn’t really thought about the details yet,”

“It’s close.” Connie said. “If you want it to happen, you should definitely start planning soon. Do you need help?”

Her offer made me really happy, and I felt a grin spread over my face, but before I could respond she asked Annette, “What about you? You gonna help?”

“Of course.”

“Have you got any party planning experience?” Connie asked.

“I planned a surprise party for my girlfriend all on my own back in New York.” I paused. I held my breath, and watched Connie’s reaction, hoping she wouldn’t react negatively like Annette had feared.

I could feel Annette still beside me as well, and I wondered if the mention had been purposeful or not. Connie’s eyes simply widened in a bit of surprise, she gave no further reaction beyond that.

## Chapter Eleven

I expected the gymnasium to smell like sweat and bodies, and it did, but what I hadn't anticipated was the smell of rotting fruit that seemed to hang over it all, though I couldn't locate its source. I remember only blips of the concert, and though most of it was amazing, I must admit that there is a sort of stain that hangs over the memory.

I remember slipping my paper ticket between my fingers; standing in line and watching two girls in front of me vibrate with energy and clench their fists around their tickets. They told us how it was the first concert ever. When they reached the doors, they opened their clasped hands. One girl handed over her ticket, and the other began to cry. She had sweated so much that her ticket disintegrated. She raised her hands for proof. They glistened with sweat, and little bits of rolled up paper dusted her hand. The doorman let her in anyway, but when she disappeared from my sight she was still crying.

I remember being between Annette and Lily, linking arms with both of them as we shuffled through the busy gymnasium trying to get as close as possible. I remember Lily holding a small notebook tight to her chest with her other hand, occasionally breaking away to write something down.

I remember Star walking out onto the stage, and being awed by her total transformation from earlier. Her eyes were darkly lined, and her lips painted a dark purple. Her shirt was choppily cut at her midsection, and her tattered sleeves draped bands of rolled fabric over her arms. She wore a pair of gray shorts, but what I could not stop staring at was the pair of thigh high boots that left only a sliver of leg visible. I remember how the crowd barely got any louder, only more collectively focused—going from chattering and yelling over each other to cheering together.

I remember talking to my right and not seeing Annette anymore. I remember worry flashing through me, and Lily screaming to ask if I was ok, and nodding that yes, I was. Surely, Annette was fine and was with one of our other housemates, all of which were somewhere in his room.

I remember spinning around and grabbing Lily's arm and spinning her too.

I remember the rush of cold as I slipped outside after the show was over. I remember shivering as it passed through my sweat soaked clothes and opening my arms to let the chill take over me, a thankful release. I remember my ears ringing. I remember my head beginning to pound. Finding Annette with Connie and Martin, and a collection of people who they were bringing back to the house for the party.

I remember feeling so happy to see Annette, smiling so widely at her. She smiled back, but I could tell it was half-hearted. It didn't contain that light and warmth that I always craved from her smiles.

When we got back to the house, I already felt drunk. I got this way after a show. In the kitchen, Billy began to hand out cheap beers. I grabbed Annette's hands and began to sway back and forth, the music still echoing in my mind. My head pounded to the beat, but if I clenched my jaw it wasn't so bad. I tried to spin her around, but she didn't follow my arms.

“What are you doing?” she giggled, but it was an uncomfortable type of giggle that made me sad.

“I’m trying to dance,” I whined.

“But no music yet,” Annette said.

“Come on, we don’t need that. It’s up here” I pointed to my brain.

“Alright, let me get a drink first.” Annette said, as Billy slid her a beer that he had just opened.

Martin swung his arm over my shoulder.

“How much have you had?” he asked, I could hear concern drip through his voice despite his attempt at a joking tone.

“Nothing yet.” I said, smiling proudly, then grabbed a beer off the table even though I didn’t need it.

I placed the bottle to my lips, but he snatched it before I could sip.

“Hey!”

“I don’t believe you.” Martin said. He took a swig of my drink.

I yanked it back. “I’m telling the truth.” I said, and then took a sip of my own.

Martin stared at me with an intent look, and for a moment I thought he might take the bottle away again, but then Billy thrust one into his hands, and he seemed to relax.

I glanced at Annette. She held her bottle with flexed open hands, rolling it back and forth between her palms. Her face was neutral, but held tightly.

I leant over, and whispered, “Are you okay?”

She nodded, and smiled, but I could tell it was forced. All I could do though was accept her word. Except, I thought about it anyway. I wondered if she was nervous about the party. I figured she had been to plenty in New York, at the very least I knew she had similar experiences of lots of people trying to have fun in one space. It was probably something else bothering her, but I couldn’t even decipher what type of upset she was. It seemed like she might be anxious, but her nervous motions could also just be hiding that she was sad about something or angry. I resisted the urge to ask if she was ok a second time.

“Come on, let’s see what’s going on,” I said instead, and she allowed me to drag her into the dining room.

Every one of the chairs was pushed away from the table and contained at least one person. Even more people sat on the table, or leaned against it. How had it gotten crowded so quickly?

It was definitely too packed to stay, and almost too packed to pull Annette through, and around to the living room. This room was less full, but contained more familiar faces. We covered the two lamps in scarves, bathing the room in a wash of blue on one side and orange on the other. Lily sat on the couch between Tommy from the band and a girl who seemed like she was one of her student friends. Connie and Martin leaned against each other on the floor, and Dale stood talking to some older guys I didn’t recognize in the corner.

After sitting on the ledge of the fireplace next to Martin and Connie, I realized that the radio was on, even though it was so loud in the house you could only hear it when you were right next to it, which I was and then it was the only thing I could hear. Connie said something to me, but couldn't hear her and I never was the best lip reader, so I switched the radio off.

"Let's play a game or something," she said, still having to yell to be heard.

"Like what?" I asked.

She shrugged, and looked around for suggestions. Grace entered the room with a mug and sat on the floor in front of me and Annette.

"Charades," Martin said with a shrug of his own.

"Truth or Dare?" Lily timidly suggested.

"That's so overdone," Connie whined. She was starting to get drunk. Lily shrunk into her seat.

"What about that game we used to play at the lake?" Grace said.

I leant forward. "I was just thinking about that game the other day."

Connie shrugged once again. "Yeah, I guess we could do that,"

Annette leant over to me. "I don't know what the game is."

"It's basically just imagining things about people," I explained.

Annette nodded.

"Let's make it more fun," Connie said.

I felt a little scared of this statement. I'm not sure what wasn't fun about it to start, but I was anxious to hear whatever Connie was about to come up with.

"Liilyyyyy," she drew out her name in a sing-song voice. "Birthday girl. You go first,"

Lily said something in a soft voice that I could barely make out. I think she was saying that she didn't know how to play.

"No, silly. You don't have to do anything. We're gonna guess about you."

Lily pushed her dark hair behind her ears and folded her lips inward.

"Maybe this isn't such a great idea," Annette started to say, and I was about to suggest the same sentiment, but Connie cut her off.

"I'll go first. You." she hiccuped, "You used to live in Canada."

Lily furrowed her brows, "No, I—"

Connie leant over and put a finger on Lily's lips, "Nuh-uh" she said. "That's not the game."

Grace chimed in, "You lived in a giant apple orchard, and got to eat a fresh apple every day of fall, and spend evenings making apple pie."

Connie turned to Martin, who looked thoroughly uncomfortable. "She lived in a blue house?"

"Until the rats came."

"The rats?" Lily asked, clearly caught off guard.

"Millions of them, without warning. They swarmed the house and ate everything and everyone except you." Connie pointed a finger at Lily's chest.

Connie turned to me, expectantly, but I remained quiet.

“Go.”

“I think we should stop.” I said.

Connie just groaned, and turned to Annette.

“I agree with Margret,” Annette said.

“Ugh, you guys are no fun.” Connie whined as she stood up.

“I’m going to get another drink,” she announced and Martin stood up after her. “I don’t think you need one, yet” He rested a hand on her arm gently, but she shook it off and went towards the kitchen anyway.

Annette turned to me, and said, “I’m also going to get another drink.”

I adjusted the way I was seated on the bricks, moving to my knees to give my bottom a break from the hard surface. I took a final long sip of my own beer, then peered inside the bottle. I blew into it, letting the low howl resonate through the room.

Martin returned alone, with two beers in his hand. He handed one of them to me.

“Where are Annette and Connie?” I asked.

“They went on a walk.”

“Alone? Connie doesn’t seem—” I trailed off

“They’ll be fine.” Martin sighed, and put his head in his hand. I willed my own pounding headache to go away.

“Are you?” I asked.

He turned to look up at me, cheek still balanced on his palm.

“I don’t know.”

I wished I was better at comforting people.

“They’re not all alone. There with a few others. And Annette will look out for Connie.”

I nodded.

“I’m just tired,” he said.

I knew from the way he said it that he didn’t just mean physically. Still, I replied, “I doubt you’ll be able to sleep with all this noise. Want me to make you coffee?”

“Maybe I do need some caffeine.” he said, responding to my lightheartedness.

“Do you ever hate how hard it is to get time alone?” he asked.

I thought about it.

“Not really.”

“I just, I love all of you, but sometimes, the way it’s all the time, it’s just— It’s always here. I can’t go home and be alone. It’s never off. It’s always on, all the time.”

“What is?” I asked.

“Me.” he said.

“Just— maybe there is too much of a good thing.”

“Is the good thing living here?” I asked



My head pounded. The room had begun to fill with faces I didn't recognize. I tried really really hard to focus on Martin's words though, to give him my full attention regardless of how jarring the laughing voices in the background were.

"Sometimes. It's also," he paused, as if he really wasn't sure if he wanted to tell me this. "Connie can be a bit much, sometimes."

"I know." I said.

He quickly retreated, "I don't want to hear anything bad about her, and I don't want to complain either, it's just, I'm exhausted."

This time I simply nodded slowly to show that I understood him, and was listening.

He smiled at me, a soft genuine smile, and I thought for a moment maybe I was good at comforting. Then he hopped up and slapped a hand against my back. He turned and looked back down at me, a smile much bigger than the one he had given me just moments before squished on his face.

"Sorry for being so down just then," he said. "Come on, let's enjoy the party." He outstretched his hand towards me, and I took it with a smile plastered on my own face. But really, I wish that moment, as painful as it was, could have lasted longer. I wished that Martin would open up more to me, I wanted to be there for him, and I wanted us to be close. There was a time where I could have told him almost anything, but now we never seemed to talk about that kinda stuff. Sure, I wanted us to party and be happy, but I also wanted to know if Martin wasn't actually feeling happy.

He released my hand once I got to my feet. I followed him into the dining room, which had somehow got more crowded. He shifted through groups of people talking and couples kissing and reached the kitchen doorway. I struggled to keep up, it seemed like each opening that allowed him a pathway collapsed as I reached them. He waited by the door for me to catch up, so I motioned for him to go without me. Martin slipped through the door.

No longer in a rush, I let myself stand still for a moment. Get pushed around in the crowd. I wondered how we hadn't yet gotten shut down. I wondered how the party had gotten so big. I felt guilty all the sudden, feeling like this was my fault. I wanted it to happen—I pushed for it to happen.

All because... why? I hadn't even actually talked much to Lily tonight. I hoped she was enjoying her birthday. I remembered then that we had actually spent quite a lot of time together—at the concert. It surprised me that it was today, and suddenly I felt very disoriented.

The room was no longer people, it was colors and shapes, and I wondered how long I had been standing there. I swam my way to the kitchen, trying to shake the feeling of exhaustion that had washed over me which made it ten times harder to ignore my headache.

I found Martin, Eileen and Grace in the kitchen arm in arm. I laid my face against the cool kitchen counter.

"You okay Mar?" Martin broke away from the two and sat on the counter beside me.

"Yeah," I answered. "What time is it?"

Martin glanced at his watch. "Almost 11:30"

“Do you think this is bad?”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s so late. Do you think we’re gonna get in trouble for being this loud?”

Martin shrugged, but I could tell he was also tense about it from his pursed lips.

“We haven’t done anything,” Eileen said. But I thought about the police waking up me and Annette in the middle of the night over nothing. I thought about everything I had been hearing. A pit formed in my stomach. I wondered if Annette was back yet. I pushed through the kitchen, looking for her.

I found myself back in the living room facing Lily. A smile spread across her face. Someone had given her a crown of tinsel, and little flakes of silver plastic dusted her shoulders.

She leaned towards me and I could smell the alcohol on her breath as she shouted, “Thank you for all this!” into my ear.

I pulled back, as it wasn’t so loud we couldn’t shout at each other from a normal distance.

“It wasn’t just me,” I said. She flapped her hand dismissively.

“I’ve never had anything like this. I’ve never even been to something like this.”

I smiled, though I wondered what exactly she found so great. Even though I had pushed for this, I couldn’t identify anything fun about the situation now. I remember having fun at other parties, the ones over the summer. But now as I looked around, all I saw were people I didn’t know in a situation where it was too crowded to really get to know anyone. All I could focus on was my pounding headache.

“I guess I like that there are so many people all in one place having a good time together?” she said. “And I know that most of these people don’t even know it’s my birthday, but it still feels really nice, you know?”

I guess at some point I had let the question slide out, but luckily it didn’t seem that Lily picked up on my own distaste for the party at the moment.

“Have you seen Annette?” I asked.

She seemed to think very deeply for a moment, and then answered, “Not recently.”

“That’s your friend with the big dark hair?” she asked, and I nodded, “The one you’re always trying to be next to?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Well, you know. You’re always pulling towards her, and you always choose the seat next to her.”

“I guess I do.”

“Is she your best friend?” Lily asked after a hiccup.

I thought about Martin, and how he was my oldest friend, and how I cared deeply about him. It felt like a betrayal to answer yes, even though I knew he wouldn’t mind. He wasn’t the type to care about who else I was close to, still, it felt weird to rank someone as my closest friend. And yet, I felt a strong desire to say yes.

“Yes,” I gave in. It felt good, surprisingly in that moment, even with all the weight of guilt, to put Annette above all my other friends. To acknowledge that there was something special.

“Cool,” Lily said. I suddenly felt embarrassed for putting weight on the word at all. Clearly, Lily had not been thinking so deeply about what it would mean for me to call Annette my best friend.

“My best friend is Tammy,” Lily says, in a way that would suggest I have met this person, and maybe at some point I have, but at that moment I had no idea who Lily is referring to.

I nod along, looking behind Lily to scan the room for Annette, or maybe even for Connie.

“I miss Tammy. I never get to see her,” Lily whines. At this moment, I began to wonder if Lily had too many drinks, but she seemed to be ok after a quick once over.

“I wish Tammy was here,” she said.

“I wish Annette was here,” the words slipped quietly out of my mouth, but Lily heard them anyway.

“She is, isn’t she?”

“Somewhere nearby at least.”

“See.” Lily said. “You always want to be near her.

“We just have a good time when we’re together.” I said. “It’s fun.” I wasn’t sure why I was being so defensive about it. Obviously it was okay to try to spend time with your best friend. Nothing about that required a defense. But still, it was as if I had put up a thin veil to hide behind, and Lily was looking straight through it.

The front door opened, and though I couldn’t see very well, I saw blond hair move through the door, and figured that was Connie. Which meant Annette would also be coming in.

I stood on my tiptoes and strained to try to see her. I didn’t see Annette, but I did confirm that it was indeed Connie who had come through the door, she seemed now to be considerably less drunk. I watched her shuffle into the house, and was reminded that I was kind of mad at her. She was being weirdly mean to Lily. I wondered then, if this was a justified feeling. My head thumped. At that moment, I felt genuinely unable to tell whether this was a reasonable thing for me to be thinking or if it was odd of me to feel that way.

I spotted Annette then, and felt mad at her as well. I tried to let go of all the confusing thoughts that filled my brain, but with each thump they seemed to pound deeper into my mind.

I waved over to her, and as she approached a concerned expression spread over her red eyes and flushed face.

“Are you okay? You look unwell,” she asked.

“Just a headache.”

She pulled me in for a hug, and my face was filled with hair that smelled like a sour smoke.

I pulled away, confused. Was that what they were doing on their walk?

“You know the rules,” I said. And Annette looked surprised, but didn’t say anything.

Connie was now near us, and her own red eyes confirmed for me this suspicion. “You know the rules.” I repeated.

“It’s just grass.”

“Come on, you always say fuck the rules,”

“No, this is different. This isn’t some random rule. It’s not even Dale’s rule. It’s our rule, collectively, to protect our home. And you broke it.”

“Technically we didn’t,” Annette argued. “We left the property, we went into those woods at the end of the road.”

“Ok, technicalities. But someone had the drugs on the property. If the cops came, found it,”

“Relax,” Connie said. “They didn’t. That’s why we left. This guy in the kitchen was trying to pass some grass around, and we took it away, and left.”

“So joining in, just not here, that’s the responsible thing I guess?”

“Yes, it was.” Annette said.

“Whatever,” Connie said, “It was fine.” She walked away, seeming unbothered, which made me more aggravated with the both of them.

I placed a hand on my forehead, hoping it would be cold and provide some cool relief, but it wasn’t nearly as cold as I wanted it to be.

Annette rested a hand on my arm, but I shrugged it off.

“Come on, let’s get you a glass of water,”

“I don’t need that. I just need to know why you thought that was a good idea.”

Annette looked very tired all of a sudden, but I was too angry to feel bad.

“Come on, you’re not actually that angry about this are you?”

“We all agreed.”

“Look, I know you’re stressed, but we were careful. Connie and I didn’t do anything wrong.”

I scoffed, I couldn’t help it. I could feel my pulse everywhere now, in my head, in my chest, even in my fingertips.

“If you’re angry you weren’t invited, it was a spur of the moment thing, and I figured you’d have no interest in smoking.”

She was right, I wasn’t interested in smoking, but also that wasn’t what I was angry about right now. I felt betrayed moreso, like my trust had been broken. She started to turn away.

“You know that’s not what it’s about.” I spat.

“Why are you being so controlling with me? You’re not in charge.”

“I’m being reasonable.”

“You let Connie just walk away but you’re being so harsh with me.”

I knew she was right, and it made me angry that it was true. I did care more about the fact Annette was involved than Connie. It felt like a betrayal.

“I can’t do this.” Annette said.

“Do what?” I asked.

“Do you even care about me?”

“What? Of course I do.” The background noise picked up suddenly in an alarming way. Something was wrong.

## Chapter Twelve

I didn't understand what was going on at first. Dale pushed through, asking over and over again the same question: "Are you clean?"

He turned to me and Annette; we both nodded and said yes before he could ask us. The look in his eyes was pure terror. Even as he received yes after yes, the expression remained.

Gears started to turn in my head, and when I turned to face Annette I could tell she had come to the same conclusion. Annette's face carried the same terrified expression I had seen in Dale, and her hands had begun to tremble. I held them between mine, and stepped closer to her.

"It's going to be ok," I assured.

"What's going on?" I recognized Lily's voice in my ear. I turned towards her without letting go of Annette's hands.

Her face flashed blue, and I turned to the window, where the light flashed through the curtain.

"I think the cops are shutting down the party," I said.

Though I had not had confirmation on anything that was going on, I felt confident now in my assumptions.

"You should go home." I couldn't remember how old she was turning, but I doubted she was of drinking age. She stood, unmoving, her expression didn't turn to terror, rather it stayed in that initial contortion of confusion. I wondered if she had processed what I had said.

"Go out the back. Now." I tried to make my voice stern enough to force her into going, but when she remained unmoving, I placed my hands on her shoulders, turned her around and gave her a light shove, then watched her disappear.

It seemed that everyone had begun to move in that direction, and I pulled Annette into my arms as people shuffled around us.

"Do you want to go with them?" I asked, and I felt her shake her head against my shoulder.

"No," she said, and I had expected this to be the answer. It was my house, I was staying, and it was her house, and she was staying. I wasn't sure exactly what kind of trouble we could get into for having a party, but I assumed it couldn't be that bad. It wouldn't ruin any of our lives. Annette grabbed onto my hand, and squeezed it. I began to imagine the ways we could raise money to pay for the fine.

The front door swung open, hard. It slammed against the wall. Cops filed into the house, waving around painfully bright flashlights despite the fact that someone had already turned on all of the lights and it wasn't dark. I squeezed Annette's shaking hands, but they didn't calm. I squeezed my eyes shut as a flashlight's gaze passed over my face, and struggled to open them again against my tight head and the chaos of the room.

Someone screamed, a younger girl, after an officer roughly pushed her aside.

I realized that Billy was beside me, and shuffled so that both me and Annette were closer to him. He was certainly the biggest out of all of us, and the terror of my surroundings had begun to sink in, but I tried not to let panic overtake me.

He looked down at both of us, and I could see fear in his own face as well, though he kept it behind a mask of furrowed brows that gave him a mean appearance. He was biting his tongue.

"I'm going to go talk to them," he said, and I stepped back to let him begin moving towards them.

Then, despite my desire to run the opposite direction, I pulled me and Annette closer, so that I would be able to hear what Billy was saying.

"We'll shut it down. Ten minutes and it'll be quiet as a mouse. No need to use any force," Billy said, his hands raised with open palms to signal his peacefulness, though his voice was steady and powerful.

"We have a warrant," the cop replied, and they dismissed him.

A warrant? I wasn't an expert, but I was pretty sure they didn't get warrants just to ask us to be quiet.

"Show me." Billy said, louder now. Dale was next to him now, and I hadn't seen him approach. He put a hand on Billy's shoulder, but Billy shrugged it off and pushed forward through the group of cops as he repeated himself.

"Show me."

They closed around him, and I could no longer make out what was going on. He seemed to be resisting them in some way, but then when they parted and I saw him again, he was in handcuffs, eyes trained on the ground, and quiet.

I took a step backwards out of surprise, pushing into someone behind me. No. They couldn't be arresting Billy. He hadn't done anything wrong. And yet, I knew that they were. And I knew that this wasn't the end.

Annette spun around at my sudden distance from her, and she looked at me with eyes that we're here and not here all at once. She was remembering that night at the bar, I could tell, and I wished that I could tell her that everything was still alright, but my throat tightened. I grabbed her arm and pulled her towards me, linking my elbow in hers, I tried to pull us through to the back of the crowd.

Before I knew it though, I felt us being pulled apart. Rough hands on my shoulder yanked me backwards while I watched another cop pull her in the other direction. I tried to pull forward to get back to her, but I couldn't.

"Do you have anything on you?" The voice sounded artificially deep.

"No." I answered.

"We'll see." came the deep reply, but he released me.

Annette was across the room now, but I met her eyes. I saw in them a plea for forgiveness, and suddenly I felt awful remembering that we had just been arguing about her smoking out in the woods. She asked if I cared about her.

I cared about her so much, and I wished that I could tell her that. All I wanted to do right now was protect her, to reassure her, to get her out of here. But I couldn't so instead I felt guilty. I felt guilty for being mad at her, and I felt guilty for pushing for this party to happen even

though I knew the cops, the town, wouldn't appreciate it. I felt guilty for the fact the cops separated us, that she had to go through something like this again.

I tried to tell her, across the room, with just my expression, all of this. Of course, even then I understood that there was no way for her to accurately interpret all of that from my face. I do hope though, she at least knew at that moment that I was sorry.

The same cop that had pulled her away from me, now guided her upstairs. I watched as they herded other women up. Someone pushed me forward, in that direction.

The man spoke over a megaphone, which amplified his voice but made the sounds run together and difficult to understand, especially it blasting almost directly into my ear, and the fact that my brain seemed to be making its own static at the moment didn't help.

He was repeating something over and over, and I eventually made out the words.

"Women upstairs. Men stay downstairs."

I realized that I too was being herded upstairs, and I began to resist the flow of traffic. I didn't know why they were separating us, but a deep pit had formed in my stomach and I knew I didn't want to leave.

I turned, but directly behind me stood an officer with big bulking armor, and I knew it was useless to try to pass him. I tried to shuffle sideways instead, to slip out right next to the staircase, but he seemed to catch on because he put a hand out and pulled me back on the path, and up the stairs. I stumbled up the first few steps, then grabbed the railing and hoisted myself back up as quickly as possible, not entirely certain I wouldn't get trampled if I wasn't able to. I couldn't see the face of the cop behind me, but I had the strong sense he was smiling.

At the last moment, before the railing hid behind the wall, I looked out at the scene below me. Cops pushed people around, the men were being guided into the dining room. An officer stood square to the door with wide legs, one hand wrapped around a wooden stick, the other rested on his belt, and though I couldn't see the gun, I knew it was there, right beneath his fingertips. He puffed out his chest and angled his chin upwards, which made me able to see his blank eyes from beneath his cap, as though the entire scene had no effect on him, and he was simply there, on display.

I watched Martin get pushed through the dining room door. My heart dropped, and I was reminded that pretty much everyone I had come to care about was going through this exact thing, and it was largely my fault. I still didn't understand why they were doing this, what the warrant was for.

A cop—I gave up on trying to tell them apart—slashed open the couch, right through the pink couch cover Connie was so proud of, even though all you had to do to take it off was lift it up. Yet, I watched as he dragged the knife through the fabric and the cushions. I tried to look around for Connie, to see if she had just seen her hard work murdered. I imagined my garden, stomped, and realized that actually might be a possibility. I couldn't find Connie in the crowd before I was forced to stumble up the rest of the stairs.

I was guided to my own bedroom, where several other young women were already standing around, shivering and whispering. I looked at Annette's tucked sheets, and my own bed,



wrinkled blanket hanging over the side. I hadn't even known, until now, that I'd forgotten to make my bed this morning. This wasn't uncommon for me, and no one was ever bothered by it, but for some reason it really bothered me that today I hadn't bothered to make the bed look nice.

A couple more women entered, and Lily was among them. I thought she had been able to make it home, but I guess not. I wondered where they had taken the other girls, probably in the rest of the rooms, and then I wondered whose room Annette had been shoved into.

Lily caught my eye, and came to stand beside me. Her hands were clasped and tight against her chest. We didn't say anything to each other, what was there to say?

Another officer entered, closing the door behind him. I recognized him as the same burly one who had ripped me from Annette.

"You. Go into the hall." he pointed to one of the girls, who stepped out into the hall, then they both disappeared as they closed the door again.

"What's going on?" Lily asked me, but I didn't have an answer. Around us, I heard murmurs of similar questions.

"Quiet," ordered the officer who remained in the room.

One by one they pulled us out into the hall, the girls never returned to the room. I wondered if we were going to be interrogated, and if so, what about? As far as I knew, the only thing we had done wrong was being too loud, and what was there to ask about that?

Eventually, it was my turn. I took one last look around my bedroom, and with a pain pictured them ripping through my mattress the way they had done with the couch downstairs. I wanted to tell myself that wouldn't happen, tried not to imagine my room with everything strewn about everywhere, but I knew that it might happen, and that now I was leaving and there was nothing I could do to protect it. I looked at the windowsill, plants decorated it, and little bits of dirt covered the white paint which Connie and I had worked so hard to freshen. I tried not to imagine the plants knocked over, with dirt spilling out across the floor. I looked at the floor, where Annette and I had slept on that first night she arrived. I looked at the sketchily constructed bunk structure that we had made for the three of us to share a room.

I met Lily's eyes one last time, and offered the closest expression to a smile I could make, trying to be reassuring, though I have no idea if I was successful in that, before the door closed behind me.

There were two officers waiting for me in the hall, but I could only see one of their faces, the other was hidden behind a darkened sheet of glass coming down from a bulky helmet. The face I could see was one I recognized from earlier when he yanked me downstairs and came into the room. At that moment, I decided I hated him the most. I looked at his chest, where the nameplate said Moore, and decided I would remember that name.

"Take off your clothes," Moore said. I stood, stunned, and looked down the hall where another set of officers stood with their hands crossed over their chests while a girl was taking off her pants outside of Grace and Eileen's door.

"We need to search you. Take off your clothes." Moore repeated. My anger towards him was growing.

“No.” I said, unable to contain my thoughts. “Can’t you just search my pockets while it’s on?”

Moore’s face hardened, which honestly surprised me that it could get any grimmer from his already stern expression.

I began to fidget with my shirt without actually lifting it up. He repeated his demand again.

I felt something drip onto my chest, and realized suddenly that my entire face was wet. I let myself fully sob, breathing heavy breaths. I lifted my shirt above my head, then held it close to my chest to stay covered.

“Drop it on the ground.”

I gripped it tighter first, then released my hands and it fell in a lump on the floor, which the other cop lifted and examined. I watched him as I pulled my jeans off, they resisted leaving my leg, needing to be peeled from the sweat. Apparently determining my shirt was free of drugs he placed it back on the floor. He examined my jeans in the same way.

“Shoes.” Moore said, despite the fact I wasn’t wearing any shoes. I resisted the urge to comment on it, and peeled off my socks.

“No bag.” Moore looked at me, waiting expectantly for an answer even though the way he had said the words, in a firm monotone manner, did not indicate that he was asking a question.

“I live here.” I said.

“No bag?” he repeated, emphasising the end, but in a way that made it clear he was angry, still not necessarily indicating that he was asking a question.

“I don’t have a bag.” I tried to match his firmness in my own voice.

He pointed to the clothes on the ground. “Get dressed. Follow Officer Carnelli.”

I did as I was told, eager to get my clothes back on. Carnelli led me down the stairs and directly out of the house. As I stepped out into the cold, the entire night seemed to hit me with a shock. Goosebumps raced down my arms, and it was as though I was in the hallway again, clothes in a pile on the floor. I shivered, and felt the vibrations of the party.

I was pushed into the back of a police car which already had two guys I didn’t recognize inside, and simultaneously I felt myself in the crowd of the concert.

“Wait,” I said, suddenly coming back into the moment, “Am I getting arrested?” I tried to push out of the seat, but the officer slammed the door in my face.

“Hey!” I banged on the glass, but they ignored me.

“No,” I shouted, “I shouldn’t be getting arrested. I didn’t have anything on me. I was clean.” I watched three cops outside the window, and though I knew I was loud enough that they definitely heard me, they made no indication that they were paying any attention.

“We’re all clean. It doesn’t matter.” The man beside me said. I slumped against the window, my wet face sliding down the cold glass. I stayed that way for the entire ride to the station.

The throbbing in my head returned, made worse by the sharp turns. I hadn't realized my headache had stopped until it began again. The adrenaline must have scared it away. More tears fell down my face, I didn't even know where they were coming from at that point.

## Chapter Thirteen

The end of that night is as blurry and fragmented as the beginning in my memory. I found Annette in the station, crying as hard as I was. I spent most of the night waiting beside her, having no idea what was going on.

By morning, we figured out that it had been a narcotics raid. They told Dale it had nothing to do with the party, that it was mere coincidence. None of us believed that. They also told him that they didn't find anything.

"I was charged with contributing to the delinquency of a minor," Dale said.

"Contributing what?"

"You'll probably get charged the same," Dale said.

He was right, an hour later or so, they called me into a room and told me that I was being charged with contributing to the delinquency of a minor. I remember wondering what the fuck that even meant. I think I might have asked it out loud. It must have been close to sunrise by that point, and I was too tired to filter anything.

We were all charged with that. Over sixty of us. I suspected it was everyone who wasn't actually a minor. Billy drove us home in the van, the morning sun was somehow more blinding than the lights of the police station. Everyone's eyes were red and faces were puffy. I rested my head against Annette's shoulder, and Martin rested his on mine.

We entered the house silently, and it was almost unrecognizable. The front window was shattered. Furniture flipped over and cut into. Cups were strewn about, spills and stains everywhere.

I stepped over a broken bottle.

Grace began to collect some cups. "Don't bother," Dale said. A pang of grief ran through my chest at the defeat in his voice.

"Everyone should get some sleep. I can't think right now."

The door to our room was open, and all I could think about was being pushed inside. I hesitated at the top of the stairs. I could already tell, looking in from down the hall, I didn't want to go any closer.

I felt a hand wrap around my own, and looked over to see Annette smiling softly at me, though the smile didn't seem to reach her eyes. I knew she was trying to be encouraging, but I didn't feel like I could be encouraged.

I didn't want to go back into the room, where I waited to be called out to the spot I stared at right now and asked to strip. I didn't want to face what had happened, I wasn't ready. But even more upsetting to me was the idea of facing the present reality which I knew existed in that room.

I knew that I would find the room nothing like how it was in the past, that it would probably look like the complete disaster the rest of the house was in. I didn't want to find out that it was gone. That this place, that I had called my home, was gone. It was here physically, obviously. But just walking through the place, I knew something had changed. It was no longer this secure place I couldn't see myself leaving. I wasn't ready to accept the idea that I might need

to leave. And where would I go? I couldn't go home. Maybe if I hadn't ended things so terribly with my family, I could return to a life I would hate, but now I couldn't even do that.

I tighten my grip on the railing, feeling dangerously weak in my legs. Annette gave a squeeze, and I realized how tight my grip on her hand was. I loosened it.

Martin put his hand on my left shoulder, and Connie rested her hand on my other.

"I know it's hard," Martin said softly.

I nodded. I knew it was equally as hard for everyone else. It was sweet of them to comfort me, when they were dealing with the same thing I was. And looking back, I wish I was more willing to let them help me, so I could help them in return. But I couldn't be grateful then, all I felt was guilt. I felt terrible for insisting we throw the party. I felt a weight in my chest for every time I doubted how much danger we were in. And here they were, caring about me even as our house lay wrecked from something that I wanted. I pulled away from all of them, not wanting to be a further burden on anyone.

Swallowing, I entered our room and found exactly what I was expecting.

A ceramic pot shattered on the ground, and a plant yellow and wilting, sticking out from the dirt scattered across the room. All the mattresses were slashed several times, and pushed up against the window, so most of the room was cast in shadow, except for two little lines of slight seeping out from the sides. The bedframes looked both naked and crowded at the same time from all of our things laid out in messy piles. How could we even sleep in here? The reality that we probably couldn't fix it all vibrated through me once again. I couldn't even think about leaving though. I was just so tired. I wanted to sleep. I wanted to sleep in my bed, and wake up to everything normal, and find Martin having breakfast downstairs. I just wanted to close my eyes. Or to sleep in and be awoken by Annette shuffling around the room too loudly. I did not want to deal with any of this. I felt tears form and scrunched my face so as to not start crying, but they fell anyway. I swiped them off my face.

From the sigh she gave when entering the room, I could tell Connie was equally exhausted. With her shoe, she pushed all of what used to be our plant into the corner, squishing what still seemed to be alive with it. If I wasn't so exhausted, I would have tried to save it. She flipped a torn mattress down, so that it laid between the two frames, then took a sheet off the one which was usually her bed, and spread it over top. Usually, we kept the spare sheet on the top shelf of the closet, but they had searched through everything inside it.

She dropped forward, so that she knelt on the mattress.

"Come on," she said, "it's the best we can do for now."

I collapsed beside Connie, and Annette layed down on my other side. The slashes through the mattress made it sink and push up in weird ways, and it was quite squished between the two of them, but nonetheless, I fell asleep immediately, and dreamed of nothing at all.

I woke up covered in sweat, some of it mine, some of it not. My mouth was dry and my entire skeleton felt glued together. I tried to sit up without waking Annette or Connie, but as I stood I heard both of them groaning.

I looked around the room and felt immediately disoriented, taking in all the damage once again. Events from the long night, I could hardly believe it was only last night, replayed in my head. Once again I was in this spot, and it was like I was waiting for them to call me into the hall once more, except this time I knew what would happen next.

I found Martin sitting at the table in his usual breakfast spot, though the space in front of him was the only part of the table not covered with pots, pans, jars, and various items that used to be in our cabinets. I realized I had no idea what time it was. I looked out the back window, and was surprised to see the sun setting.

I sat beside him wordlessly, not bothering to move the tin of baking powder, peanut butter, or mugs that decorated my spot on the table. We stayed that way for a while, doing absolutely nothing in each other's company. It reminded me of being home. Or, what I used to consider home. I called Oakwood House home for a while, and though I wanted to call it home for years to come, I no longer had confidence that I would be able to do so. I looked at Martin with his blank stare, and wondered if he was thinking the same. He couldn't return home either, even if he wanted to. I tried to shake thoughts like that from my head, we would repair and rebuild. It was about the people, not the place, and we were all still here. We all returned home. It would work out. It had to. Yet still, the doubt crept in.

I wasn't sure what to do with myself. There was obviously so much that needed to be done around the house, but I didn't know where to start. So when Annette asked if I wanted to go for a walk, I jumped at the offer.

The sun had just disappeared below the horizon, and the entire world was cast in a soft blue. I could see nothing clearly, and yet it all was beautiful. I looked over my shoulder at the house. Someone turned on the porchlight, and so the porch, littered with the usual wooden and metal chairs and tables, glowed with warmth. A bicycle lent against the stairs, motorcycle and van on the gravel driveway, and I could see two silhouettes in a second floor window. I guessed it was Billy and Dale based on the shapes, but wasn't sure. Except for the broken window, from the outside it looked like nothing had happened.

"This is my favorite time of day," Annette said.

"It makes me sad."

"Everything looks so lovely," she said. "The moon has just come out, and everything is gorgeous."

I agreed with Annette. It was the most beautiful time of day, perhaps only matched by sunrise, which was equally temporary.

"It'll be gone so soon," I said, "It's already harder to see than it was when we left the house."

"Isn't that what makes it so special?"

Our hands brushed, and I quickly pulled mine into my side, embarrassed. We had held hands so often in the previous 24 hours, and all fall we had shown affection with hugs and other touches, so it made no sense for me to feel so awkward now over grazed hands.

Annette pulled a flashlight out of her back pocket though, and switched it on. It wasn't strong and flickered occasionally, but the weak yellow beam cast across the forest floor was enough to guide our way. I let her lead, remembering when we had been here last.

"There are no fireflies this time," I said.

"I wanted to apologize," Annette said, "For last night."

It took me a moment to understand what she was talking about. If anything, the events were my fault, Annette hadn't done anything to push the party, in fact, she was the one who was nervous about it. And she was the one who had already been through a police raid, who had already confessed to me how much it haunted her, and it was my fault that she had to go through something like that again. If anything, I should be apologizing. Then, I remembered her words before the party devolved into chaos. She asked me if I cared about her.

"I forgot we were fighting when it happened," I said. It was difficult at that moment to remember much more about our argument. I couldn't remember if I answered her question, or if she even needed to be apologizing.

"I do care about you. A lot," I said.

I glanced at her, barely able to make out the features of her face in the dark. I hoped to see one of those warm smiles, but instead she seemed to cringe at my words. Suddenly I wanted to slink into the shadows of the trees, to step off the path and be consumed by the dirt.

"I shouldn't have said that," Annette said. I wished I could take my own words back. Maybe I cared too much, and she didn't care that much about me. We walked for a few minutes in a weighted silence. Dry leaves crackled beneath us. I wanted to fill the silence, but saying anything felt like it would just make the situation worse.

"I don't want to start fighting again," Annette said. Her voice wavered and I wondered if she was about to cry, "I just want to explain myself better, I guess."

"Are you still mad?" I asked. She shook her head without looking back, and I watched her curls bounce over her shoulders.

"Are you?"

"No. Last night, I was just worried."

"And it turns out you were right to be. But we came here to smoke so that it wouldn't be on our property."

We stopped at a little clearing, and she shone the flashlight over a ring of stones surrounding a few charred sticks and some ash, surrounded by logs. I sat on one of the logs, which was covered in moss. I felt it squish under me, and left my legs damp. I didn't realize it was wet. Annette sat beside me.

"So, are we good?" I asked.

"Yeah, we're good."

Annette flicked the flashlight around the pile of sticks, as if controlling a fire of her own. She leant her head against my shoulder, and I stilled. I felt myself breathe in, painfully conscious of each inhale and exhale. Sharing space hadn't felt so stiff before.

“It’s been weird right? I want to say we’re good and nothing’s wrong but something does feel wrong, I just have no idea what it is.” Simultaneously, a sense of relief and distress rolled through me.

Annette lifted her head off my shoulder and looked at me. Our faces were close. I wondered if she was going to kiss me. I wanted her to kiss me.

“Have I been acting differently since last night?” she asked.

“I think we all have,” I said. I didn’t think that was the source of this strangeness between us.

“I’m sorry I upset you right before we got separated,” she said. She didn’t need to tell me she was thinking of that other night at the bar in New York as well as last night.

I wanted to forget it had ever happened. I wanted to put everything back in its place and move on as normal. But Annette seemed like she needed to discuss it.

“Were you okay? After we got separated?” she asked.

I didn’t know how to answer. Nothing they had done was okay.

“I’m okay now. I was worried about you.”

“I’m also okay now. The house isn’t.”

I leaned against her. “When Dale first found the house it was also a mess. We’ll clean it up, scavenge for some new furniture. We’re good at that kind of stuff,” I said. Earlier it had seemed so overwhelming, but discussing it now I felt the same invigoration I felt at the protest. I was eager to start fixing it up.

“You’re not worried?”

“I am. I’m scared we won’t ever get back to how it was,” I said. I turned to look at her. Our faces were still only a few inches away, and I noticed the way her eyes creased downward as she listened.

“You’re right, it won’t be the same.”

“That’s terrifying.”

“It always is,” she said.

We stared at each other. She seemed to be studying my expression. I leaned forward, and then my lips were on Annette’s and we were kissing. I have no idea how long we stayed like that, lips pressed together. It felt like she would never pull away, and I knew I wouldn’t, and then suddenly just like that we weren’t kissing anymore, and Annette returned to studying my face.

“Did I get it wrong?” I asked. Her eyes were still searching, looking for something in mine. She shook my head, and dropped the flashlight to wrap her arms around me. I slipped my hand into her hair. For the briefest moment, everything made sense. Feeling her warmth so close to me. I wanted it.



## Chapter Fourteen

It was the middle of the night, but we were all awake. The moon was high in the sky, though it had already passed the midpoint and was now beginning to sink. At Dale's suggestion, we all gathered in the kitchen to discuss what came next.

"Alright," Dale said, a brace for his next words. Already, I could see that same defeated look I saw when we talked before the protest, and it saddened me.

"We have to leave," he announced. "We're being evicted." I felt my mouth drop open, and around me expressions of equal shock painted my friends' faces.

Billy spoke first. "Can they do that?"

"It's Mr. Higgins. He's ending our lease. He wants us gone by the end of the month."

"Is it because of the raid?" Grace asked.

"He says it's not. He says it's plain and simply because we violated the terms of our lease."

"What? What terms?"

"Severe destruction of the property."

"We didn't do that though."

"Yeah, we built this house up from basically nothing."

"Well, all of that is undone now."

"Well, did you tell him that it was the cops fault?"

"It doesn't matter. He wants us gone. He'll find something we did."

"What does it matter to him?"

Dale shrugged. "He lives in this town. He owns several properties in this town, rents them out. We're not just ruining the value of the house, but apparently we're ruining the entire town."

"There has to be something we can do," I said.

Dale shrugged.

"Surely the whole town doesn't feel this way. Think about how many people were at the party, how many hang around. They'll support us."

"Yeah, but a lot of those guys aren't even from this town. And that's another reason why our neighbors hate us," Connie said.

Stella played with the fabric of her shirt, twisting it around her fingers. "I have tea with Betty at least once a week. She would support us."

"I'm not sure how much sway an elderly woman with no other connections to the town and who is barely affording her own rent will have," said Billy.

"Come on, let's protest. A march or something." I said, eager to put my energy somewhere. Eager for some semblance of hope.

Dale hesitated, but agreed.

"You need to find a backup plan though. That goes for everyone. You need to figure out where you'll go when —"

"If," I corrected.

He sighed. "If we need to leave at the end of the month."

I looked at Martin. Real fear began to grow in my stomach, dread building. Would we be homeless without this place? I didn't have any other connections, and I doubted that Martin did either. We couldn't go back home. Though eventually I would begin visiting that place, at the time it was unfathomable.

Annette grabbed my hand. I wondered if she would be able to go back to the city, live with one of her friends there. She sucked in her cheeks and looked deep in thought, as stressed about this as I was. I wondered how many of us had no other place to go.

I pushed these thoughts away. We had put so much work into this house, and I would put in as much work as needed in order to keep this place. I tried to focus on the details of the plan, making a mental list of everything I would need to organize this, and realized I didn't actually know a lot of what went into organizing something like this. I vaguely remembered Paul mentioning permits and phonetrees and petitions but I didn't know where to begin. I would ask Billy for Paul's phone number, and ask. I knew that Grace had experience with sit-ins, and decided I would also ask her for help.

Even before I understood fully how I would go about this, I began to form plans in my mind. I would call up everyone that anyone in this house knew, pass out fliers at the college, get Lily to print something in her school's paper.

Dale found me sitting alone on the front steps, cutting out the fliers I had gotten printed at a shop down the street. The teen who was working had felt bad for the cause, and revealed that he had actually been at the party himself, but had begun to walk home shortly before the raid began. He didn't charge me for the fifty copies, and even gave me an extra ten. I hoped that this would be enough, and I also hoped that I would find enough people to give sixty copies to.

He sat down beside me. The wind blew through both of our hair, and all the fliers I wasn't actively holding I kept beneath my leg.

"I'm going to pass these out around the town and college. And I'll try to actually have a conversation with people, if they'll stop," I said.

"I hope this works," he said, though his voice felt hollow. I could tell he didn't believe in it, and for that I hated him. I hated that he was losing faith in this thing which he had created, which meant so much now to so many people beside just him. I would prove him wrong though, I would save this place, I resolved.

"But, what is your plan for if it doesn't?" There it was. The evidence he didn't think it would work.

"We're going to march down, starting here from the house, all the way to the courthouse. We'll mostly stay on the main road, to get the most attention, though we'll march on the sidewalk."

"Billy and I have been talking. We're going to go west, maybe I'll wind up back in California."

“Once we get to the courthouse, that’s where we’ll stay. Paul helped me get a permit, so we won’t get into more trouble.”

“Last time I went to California I didn’t find what I was looking for. But I don’t know if I’m looking for anything anymore.”

“I’m hoping people will bring signs, but I’m also going to make as many as I can. Martin and Connie told me they would help with that.”

“We’ll stop along the way, between me and Billy we know quite a few places that could accommodate us for a few days at a time.”

“I should probably figure out what we’ll be chanting. I want something kind of rhythmic, you know?”

“You’re welcome to come with us. I don’t know if you have anywhere else to go, but that’s an option. I’m inviting the entire house.”

I paused considering. If we all stuck together, if we recreated this somewhere removed, maybe it would all be okay. But this house felt so special, and I had a feeling we wouldn’t all go in the same direction if we left. I had never felt so passionate about something before, had never wanted something so badly. It was like a more temporary version of the way I felt at that protest, consumed by a cause, and invigorated by a direction to put my energy.

“I don’t have anywhere else to go.” I said. “But, I’m going to make this protest work. The town will see that we want to be a part of their community.”

“Do we?” Dale asked.

I ignored his comment, and focused on cutting a straight line between the two fliers, then adding them to the stack beneath my left thigh.

“How would we get there? In the van? It would be quite difficult to move for all that time.”

“Well, I think most of us will stay around here. But the offer’s there for you.”

“No, we have to stick together. Either we all stay or we all go, right?”

Dale put a hand on my shoulder. “I don’t think so. I’m sorry kid.”

I pulled away. I hated the way he called me kid. It was like he didn’t take me seriously. I hated how small and naive it made me feel. Maybe it was foolish of me to think I could save the house, but I had to at least try.

I gathered up my papers, and marched inside the house.

Martin and I sat in the midst of the mostly dead garden. In the mornings, a frost coated the world, and now, a few light snowflakes flurried down. It was early in the season for snow, but the past week had been particularly cold.

I hadn’t tended to the garden in several weeks, and I saw now that weeds overtook some sections. I also noticed though, that we had plenty of broccoli, still thriving out here in the cold untended garden. I would have to gather that all up tonight. I should also probably cover the ground for the winter, but for now my energy was focused on just being able to stay here. And if

the protest didn't work out, then I supposed there would be no point in tending to the garden anyway. I pushed the thought out of my mind. It had to be okay.

I pulled the weeds that were in arms distance out of the ground. It wasn't meaningless. I examined the dirt covered roots I now held in my hands, and the jagged dark green leaves on the surface. They were dandelions.

"We can make tea from these roots," I said. "We should, it's cold."

Martin nodded. His hair was getting really long, the back going past his shoulders and in the front, grown out bangs covered his eyes.

"Are you ready for Monday?" I asked.

He nodded again.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

I expected him to say nothing was, since he hadn't expressed any interest in talking.

"What are we going to do?" he asked.

"We're going to start here at 11. Then, we're marching down Cloverhill Lane to--"

"That's not what I mean."

"You mean, if it doesn't work?"

Martin nodded again. "I've been thinking about going with Dale and Billy. Have you considered it?"

"The protest will work," I said.

Martin turned to me, and held both of my hands. "Margret, we'll try. But even if we have the support of every person in this town under thirty, that still might not be enough. It's out of our hands."

"It's not out of our hands yet," I insisted.

"Ok." He said. "We can't just go back home though."

"I know." I said.

"So, just in case, we need to plan."

I folded the roots between my hands, dirt sprinkled out between my fingers and onto my lap.

"Please don't leave me."

"I won't." Martin said. "I won't leave you again. I promise. We'll stick together."

"We'll stick together," I repeated.

"Connie's already talked to her parents. She's going to move back in with them," he said.

"If we have to leave."

Martin looked down. "Yeah."

"Steven said some of his friends are looking for a roommate. Grace is considering going with Dale and Billy though."

"Ok."

"Have you talked to Annette? I know you've gotten pretty close."

I didn't want to think about being separated from anyone in the house, but I felt an especially deep pang at the thought of not having Annette around.

"I don't know. I don't even know what I'm gonna do."

"I think we should go with Dale and Billy," Martin said. And it did provide a bit of comfort knowing that Martin wanted to stay together, that no matter what I would not be separated from him.

"Okay. If it comes to that, we can go."

"I know it's hard," Martin said.

"I just, I really liked it here,"

"Me too."

"I don't want to leave Annette," I said. Hot tears rolled down my face, quickly chilling against my skin. More snow had begun to fall from the sky, dusting our hair and clothes.

"You've become really close friends," Martin said.

I took a deep breath. "She's more than that."

"Oh," Martin said. I waited for him to say something else. Anything else. "I didn't realize you were..." he trailed off, though he didn't sound upset.

"I didn't really know either. I never really considered I might be a lesbian. I just realized that I really like Annette."

"So, you're going out?" he asked.

I shrugged, "I'm not really sure what we're doing, but it just doesn't feel like a time to be doing anything."

It occurred to me that for all that I considered myself able to talk to Annette for hours and hours, we had not discussed what we felt for each other since that night. We'd begun to sleep with our hands intertwined on what was left of her mattress. We played with each other's hair, and when we found ourselves alone shared kisses. But this closeness had also created a distance. I had not asked her where she would go if the march could not save us. Sometimes I would talk about the protest and get the sense she didn't think it would work, but I didn't mention it.

"Are you going out with Connie then?" I asked. I assumed that they were, but realized I didn't actually know.

"No," Martin said. I dropped the roots into my lap.

"You're not?" I asked.

"No," Martin said. "I care about her, but we're probably going to go our own separate ways, and I think I'm okay with that."

"Oh," I said, "I'm sorry."

I took the roots out of my lap and shifted onto my knees so that I could envelope him in a hug.

Curled up with Annette, I tried not to think about the fact we were only two days away from the march, and if it didn't go well, I had no idea what would happen to us. But I couldn't stop thinking about the questions Martin had asked me, which I had no answer to. Still, I let the thoughts simmer in my brain, and didn't bring them up.

Something felt wrong, but I chalked the uncomfortable energy between us up to everything that I was unable to keep out of my head. We were quieter than usual, finding it difficult to land on casual topics of conversation, or even to go over any details of Monday's plan again.

"I got a letter from my brother," Annette said.

"Really? How did he know where to send it?"

"He saw a picture of me in the paper from the night of the raid. He wrote to make sure that I was alright."

Tears were forming in her eyes, and her voice wavered.

"What's wrong?" I asked. "You've been wanting to hear from your brother for so long."

She swallowed.

"He said he sorted things out. Not everything, but we can go back home. Well, not our old apartment, but we can go back to New York. And I can be near my friends again."

I didn't know what to say.

"Are you going to go?" I asked. She pursed her lips and didn't say anything. I watched her blotchy face for any indication of her decision.

She closed her eyes. "I really care about you," she said.

"Well, if we can stay here, you'll stay with us, right?" I asked.

She wrapped her arms around herself, her eyes still closed. "I really care about you," she repeated. "I've been waiting for this. To be able to go back home."

"I know," I said.

"But I've also come to love it here. In this house. With you."

I felt tears press against my eyes, the pressure in my head stinging, but if I cried I knew I would fully sob, and I couldn't do that to Annette right now. Internally though, I wanted to scream. Everything was falling apart, and I had no answers for anything. Our intertwined limbs felt tangled now, and I pulled myself away.

"I understand. If you want to go home," I said, keeping my voice as steady as I possibly could with all of the pain that those words caused me as they left my mouth.

"Where are you going to go?" she asked.

"With Billy and Dale, I think."

"Oh," she said.

"Would you..." I swallowed, "would you consider coming with us?" Maybe, I could settle for that. It wouldn't be the same, it wasn't everyone, but exploring somewhere new with Annette carried its own excitement. But Annette didn't answer me.

"Is that a no?" I asked.

"I just, I don't know if I can leave. My entire life is here. My brother, my friends, I miss them so much and now I can go back to them if I want."

I nodded, barely able to hear her over the pressure of holding back my tears.

"And I love the east coast," she said.

I bit my tongue, but tears began to roll down my face anyway.

“Lets just,” I sniffed, trying to steady my shaking breathing, “We’ll just have to hope Monday will work.”

I began to visualize marching down the street, pictured the signs we had made, the ones we still needed to finish. It would work. It had to work.

The sun was out, and I was grateful. I let it fill me with energy. This was it. I looked around me. My housemates, even the ones who entirely doubted my plan, surrounded me, no signs of their hesitation showing now. All I could do was hope that it would be enough. It was easy, in that moment, to let hope fill me. So many of us crowded on the sidewalk, so many people supported us. I saw so many faces I recognized and so many I didn’t. Lily was surrounded by a group of faces I vaguely remembered from the party. I saw Star and Tommy and the rest of the band in the other direction.

Even Dale, who had seemed so hopeless these past few days, looked hopeful. Through his angry expression of course. The air buzzed with energy, and I felt a true confidence that everything would work out for the first time since the night of the raid.

We let our anger spill out of us, stomping down each injustice with the rest. We held signs and yelled about how the raid was illegal and they went beyond their warrant, and we shouted about the unfair eviction, and that we just wanted peace with the town, and we asked them to let us stay.

It does seem naive now, and I can see why Dale was so hesitant to let my hopes get raised through such a plan. Because he was right. During that march though, it didn’t feel like a final plea, as I’m sure Dale must have seen it. It felt like a victory already won. All the people who had come into my life surrounding me and showing their support and fighting to stay. I wish that was enough. I wish, much as I imagine Dale must have, I could somehow shelter my young self from the devastation of learning that all that hope didn’t go anywhere. That our march, which felt so impactful and so loud, had changed nothing. Of course, I know now that marches rarely create instant change. Opinions take time to be won over, and causes take time to be fought. But the devastation I felt at learning the march did nothing, losing everything at once, it was like my world came crashing down.

All at once, everything I was fearing but kept pushing to the back of my mind came rushing forward as reality. I fell to my knees and I screamed and I didn’t even care about making a scene, even as I felt dozens of eyes on me. This place which I had come to love, full of people who made it so special, was. It was over, and despite my best efforts, there was nothing I could do about it.

It felt like I had sobbed for two days straight. I was by far the most dramatic about our leaving than any of my housemates, but I didn’t care. I let myself be comforted by everyone. I tried to appreciate being wrapped in Annette’s arms, but found it awkward to try and fit together as though we wouldn’t soon be separated. I went out to the garden, and brought in the broccoli I

realized I had forgotten about the other day. We cooked one last meal all together with it. We wanted to be happy, to have our last memory of the house, even though most of it was still in shambles, be that of the lively energy it usually held. I ruined many of these attempts with my tears.

In the gravel driveway, I stood with one satchel over my left shoulder and a suitcase already packed in the trunk of Billy's van. Steven had already moved into his friend's apartment. Eileen too, had already left for Vermont, where a friend had driven down to pick her up this morning. Stella, Connie, and Annette had plans arranged for later that day, and they stood with the rest of now, ready to watch us go. I'd given each of them a hug and said goodbye at least once by this point, but we all seemed to rearrange in a never ending cycle to drag out the inevitable. I no longer remember who I said goodbye to last.

When we'd finally piled in and Billy pulled the van out—Dale riding along on his motorcycle in front of us, Grace in the front seat, and Martin beside me—I twisted to see the house.

I watched as Annette, Connie, and Stella got smaller. Annette wiped her arm with her sleeve. We rounded the corner at the bottom of the hill, and I couldn't see any more of that bright yellow house.



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