

THE CARSON REVIEW

MARYMOUNT MANHATTAN COLLEGE

2020 - 2021

VOLUME 5

THE CARSON REVIEW

The Literary Arts Journal of Marymount Manhattan College
221 E. 71st Street
Department of English & World Literatures
New York, New York 10021

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In One Accord, Digital Media, by Via Donovan-Hodge

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Literary Award Winners

Published under the auspices of the
English & World Literatures Department

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Printed and bound in the United States by Bookmobile

Submission Guidelines

The Carson Review is published once a year in the Spring. We invite submissions of poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, and cover art from current students at Marymount Manhattan College. Selecting material for the next issue will take place in the Fall of 2021. The deadline is *October 15th, 2021*.

All literary submissions should include a cover sheet with the writer's name, address, telephone number, e-mail address, and the titles of all work(s) submitted. The author's name should not appear on the actual pages of poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction. Double-space all prose and single-space all poetry. For such texts, we ask that you send electronic submissions as Word documents (non-pdf) to carsonreview@mmm.edu. The same cover sheet directions apply to art submissions, which should be at least 300 dpi JPG images. If you have any questions about these guidelines or about working on the *Review* as a student editor, please contact Dr. Jerry Williams at jwilliams1@mmm.edu or at (646)393-4118.

Editorial Policy

The editorial staff of *The Carson Review* is an assemblage of students at Marymount Manhattan College. In order to cultivate an atmosphere of integrity and evenhandedness, the staff evaluates all entries without knowing the identity of the author or artist. To maintain a thriving literary arts journal at MMC, a variety of submissions remains absolutely vital, so please send us your best work.

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POETRY

Shelby Breen

I COULD LOVE HIM (IF I DON'T ALREADY)

In the brown and black hues of the coffee shop, he glows. His pink sweater and toothy smile make him hard to look at. I force myself to. Freckles cover his cheekbones, glittering as he orders five sugars in his coffee. Distaste threatens to nearly drown my butterflies and my teeth ache in phantom distress. But my lips tingle with the urge to brush against his—strawberry Chapstick and sugar-milk.

I let him coax me into taking a sip of the vile drink at our table in the corner, pressed against the windows but hidden from the world. His giggle is far sweeter than five sugars. It tinkles like piano keys in my head, plucking my favorite melody. His eyes crinkle up into crescents, shining with love and happiness and fondness. He tilts his head back and reveals a smooth column of skin. I want to press my smile into it over and over until he is breathless. His cheeks flush. My cheeks are warm, but I don't know if it is from the heat of the coffee, embarrassment for his echoing voice drawing gazes to us, or pride at being the one making him beam like that. Maybe it is all three. Maybe it is first-date flutters.

I interlace my fingers with his on the tabletop, tiny hands cradling mine better than I had expected. I doubt I could cup his with the same delicate grasp; he has always been better at control than me. He hid the pounding of his heart for months. I blurted it out when the daze cleared and I realized just how desperately I wanted him to be mine.

I am cracked glass. Sticks and stones have left gaps. I want to make myself waterproof, seal up the cracks with freckles and bleached hair and baggy jeans that let two knobby knees peek out of the rips, so that I can let his syrup fill me up without losing a drop. He is far too thin, dancer's bones. Maybe it is fate that gave me strong shoulders so I could keep him safe. The world is always in search

of bright, sparkling things. He is the shiniest diamond I have ever come across. Not a single fleck of dirt on him. He isn't rough. He doesn't need harsh hands to uncover him. Just gentle fingers.

I chase his sweetness with a swig of black coffee. I don't mind the taste as much. If it wasn't love already that let me swallow down his drink, it would be soon.

Tavia Cummings

WHEN YOU LOSE A GEMINI

I haven't been good since that sunny day in March when I grew confidence like wildflowers. I was ready to exist, to be seen, to be loved. Then the call came of my grandfather's death. The water in which I feed my flowers ran red like Exodus. Repentance. I told everyone who looked at me with pity-eyes that we weren't very close. I never wanted to admit that I was just like him: selfish, loveless, lonely. I always imagined I would die alone in an empty apartment on the riverfront too. Feels like I've been sewing myself back together by the nerve endings, but the stitches unravel like shoelaces. I'm tripping on shoelaces down the yellow train track edge. Stop to tie. Stop to tie. Stop tying. I tuck the laces back into my joint sockets.

Everyone is yelling into the void they call fate or some type of God. "Manifesting" a life of positivity measured by half cups of comparison. Look at them: already published, already in love, already dead. Someone is listening to them. I'm still tripping on the things I claim to love. On men who remind me of him, my father, my mother. Incestuous reincarnations. His death breathes down my neck, and I stumble with every jerk of the train. I'm falling down the clock face. Begging for time to stand still so I can stitch myself up once more. I lost my legs two hours ago. At night, I take out the stitches on my chest and let God use the hands of the clock like the Jaws of Life to pry open my rib cage. Please, snatch my heart. I have abused her.

Tavia Cummings

BREAK-UP RITUAL

The altar is set with burned sage and grapes. I light the candles that litter the floorboards one by one. Melted into place with repeated cleansing. Slowly dipping the thirty-inch needle in and out of my ear like a paintbrush, relishing in the steady drip from the ear canal. I paint on my eyeliner with the blood of my eardrums. I don't want to hear him lie to me again. But he enjoyed watching me eat my nails to the quick for his attention. My tears mixed with the flaky brown patches. I paint fields of coffee beans and green tea leaves on the walls, something to remember the old me by. Red trickling down the walls diluting the chilled bathwater. The bath is set with vanilla incense burning around the ledge. Purple lotus pads floating like clouds on the water. I pour in the cream, mixing with the red that swirls around the tub; today I must cleanse myself of another man again. I drop my silky white robe to paint gory hieroglyphs on my nude body, ignoring the way the brush's fine point tickles my inner thighs. With steady hands, I plunge the rusted knife down from the base of my neck. Cut open from throat to belly button. I set my heart in the sink and settle into the murky water with a glass of wine in hand. My organs float around like lily pads. Finally washed clean of his fingerprints.

Kellie Diodato

WRITER'S BLOCK

My knees look up at me,
these pathetic, lopsided mountains.
Scorched in their splotchy, heated redness,
they believe themselves Olympus, they believe me their muse,
but I'm tired of cranking out the same, expected prodigies.

The showerhead plays its threnody.
A cacophonous chimera, I'm jealous of its mastery,
but I burn more time. I focus on the way fiery droplets
meet the sheath of my skin, rejecting the derma in one quick burst.
I'm trying, but there's no mythos there.

Doused flames tumble down my mountain tops,
whisk past the dip in my hips, and sink into the drain,
to burn me, to burn me, to burn me alive. Like a torch in the rain
I crackle and steadily succumb to the Titan
of my own creative vices.

He lulls me with empty prophecies.
I crank out the same, expected prodigies.

Kellie Diodato

EIGHTH SWIPE RIGHT

The eighth swipe right of the night
stood me up (my very first time)
at some janky joint crammed
with draft beer and all of the Lower East Side.

I bought a new top for the would-be occasion,
an audacious little thing, pastel pink with an open-tie front.
It made me feel confident, considering,
so I stayed and ordered a drink.

I flagged down and flirted with this waiter-boy,
his five o'clock shadow ticking toward nine:
“Would you bring me your favorite?”

Through the rum pots and their clinking Pilsner's glasses,
which splashed around various stouts and ales,
he brought me a mojito
served from a peculiarly sensual Collins glass.

His fingers grazed mine in delicate transfer of the aromatic
beverage.

It occurred to me that it'd been months
since I'd held a man's providing hand.

Waiter-boy let me be with the vibrant green mint leaves;
they lay flush against the glass. My lips
tingled from the lime juice that sweated down the rim,
and I whirled around chunks of pineapple—
tart, gorgeous yellow shapes—
with the circular motion of my wrist.

He watched me watching him
from the corner of my cat-eye.
I sipped slowly, seductively,
but the bounce in my knee
and the click in my heel
gave my whereabouts away.

Waiter-boy whisked back around.
This time, his wistful hands
were laced together behind his back—
just what was he hiding?

Maybe it was the cool breeze
or lime's bitter burn that melted on my lips,
but I believed he was mine and ready for the taking.

No mistaking fate tonight: his phone number
is on a bar napkin, folded neatly between his palms,
kissing the crevasse of his lower back.
Like some broken-hearted maniac

I offered my digits first.
He didn't accept. "A girlfriend," he said,
then shyly revealed a menu from behind his body.
I didn't accept. "Other plans," I said,
but he wasn't so sure of my alibi, either.

I left a generous tip as consolation
and staggered out of the Lower East Side.
My stomach churned, ostracizing
the alcohol and embarrassment.

I fished my phone out of my bag.
I swiped right again;
I tried again.

Kellie Diodato

BASIC INCISIONS

Six days ago, the doctor took my tonsils out. He said they were “geographic” and “infected,” which was a good reason to carve them away. I asked if he could try his scalpel on cheating boyfriends, since festering throat rocks and a contaminated companion seemed like one in the same. Instead, the doctor coughed up a Jurassic chuckle and wrote me a prescription for liquid codeine. “Take it every four hours,” he said.

I woke from surgery with the urge to vomit. The nurse shoved a straw for soda in my face, but I declined the invitation. With every swallow of saliva, the exposed nerves in my barbecued throat blasted an excruciation at my eardrums. “I have to vomit,” I could barely croak. The nurse didn’t believe me; she kept insisting on the straw.

When I refused to suck upon the pipeline of her fizzy drink and one-way ticket to diabetes, she handed me the trash bin, and I upchucked a beaker’s worth of room temperature maroon goo. “A complication during surgery,” the nurse said. “You swallowed a lot of blood.” With my head hanging over the bin—the way a past lover’s voice echoes over a wedding vow—I wanted to say, “Put a straw in that.” After I filled the receptacle to maximum capacity, the taste of iron on my lips, the nurse helped me undo my wafer-thin hospital gown. I dressed in my street clothes. “If I come back in another life, I wanna come back in your body,” she said, clipping my patient wristband off the bone I bruised in the early hours before surgery. I slapped a pitiful admission out of the silly little sperm-slinger, bidding him—along with my tonsils—a glorious farewell.

Now I melt my mouth with liquid codeine every four hours. My body wakes from its empty bed for a fix. I stumble around and crash into the medicine cabinet, whimpering from the pain. My dog must think I'm dying. I've lost eight pounds; my throat can't fathom food. I don't feel like measuring out the proper dosage. Instead, I chug the fiery syrup while my dog throws his front paws up on my thighs, trying to knock the bottle from my hand with his snout. "Dependency is a concern!" he barks. "Dependency is a concern!"

Natalie Dombrowski

SPIRITUALITY & POLITICS

A man is selling sage and handmade jewelry on my block. When I ask him how he's doing, he tells me about how blessed life can be. About maintaining a positive outlook. I buy a bundle and tell him, *I am trying, but it's hard*. His eyes meet mine and I am reminded that not everything is bad, not everything is ugly or doomed. *We shall overcome*, he tells me. It sounds like a promise. And I am reminded of how everything I love can do just that: prevail.

I go to Washington Square Park, my favorite place in the city. I light the sage and watch it burn. Someone asks me what I am doing and I tell them I am trying to cleanse what is impossibly dirty. When I attempt to smother the sage, the smolder refuses. I go to a protest and let the sage burn. One woman comes up to me, frantically motioning for me to please douse her with smoke, purify her and the air around her. Someone on a bike asks if he can borrow the sage, so I watch him ride one-handed as he holds the smudge stick like a torch and smoke flies behind him. During the march, I see paintings of people who were murdered by the police. Their facial features are exact. I can tell who they are right away. I am reminded of how art can be born from something so ugly.

I have never considered myself political. I have always considered myself spiritual. I don't know how else to ward away evil. If I took a walk anywhere right now, at least anywhere in this country, the sage would burn and scorch the whole way through, aching to fill the air forever. What comes first, rebirth or return? How does the saying go? Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

Kasey Dugan

A SERBIAN POEM

I went to open the window when my lover screamed, *Promaja!*

What the hell could that be? I thought. I fled the room as though I'd let some strange Serbian bug inside. My fiancé chased after me, half-laughing at the misunderstanding.

It's not a wasp, it's our superstition, he said. *Promaja means evil wind.* He used his fists to pantomime the breaking of a stick.
The draft gets in your spine and it kills you.

A week later, when visiting the Cathedral of Saint Slava,
I came across a mural of children with missing arms and legs.
Jasenovac, a concentration camp, he explained.
The babies were dismembered with a *srbsojek*,
a special blade for chopping up Serbs.
I couldn't look away from their torsos,
those empty faces drenched with gold blood.

I broke down so violently I assumed the pain
was not my own but someone else's.
Perhaps one of their mothers possessed me
as I wailed into the sleeves of my jacket.
Outside the cathedral, merchants were selling pastries
with honey and sugar. I ate one and stopped crying.
I nearly forgot all this suffering until a few nights later.

I messed up the knobs in the Indo-European shower
and called for Atze to put them back the way they were.
He teased me for touching everything like a "true American."
Then he pulled me close to him—I was naked and soaking wet—

and I could count the pauses in his spine through his shirt.
Do you really love me? he asked, that nervous look on his face.
Of course I do, I told him, and he closed his eyes
for so long he must have forgotten himself.
When he opened them, all he could say was,
Good.

Kasey Dugan

HYPOCHONDRIAC

It's a beautiful sweater but I don't trust it.
I don't trust anything that came from a village in Ireland
that didn't have electricity until the seventies.
Who installed the first lightbulb there? Let me talk to that guy.
The nighttime is scary enough
without that painting I hate in the corner.
My fiancé insists he's unshaken by the kitchen coat tree,
the curtain rope, and the crooked lamp. He pretends not to see
Death plunking a sugar cube into my coffee.
At night, when I'm bored of the shadows,
I retreat to my dented pillow
and listen to my heartbeat: it's much too loud and spills
onto the mattress like a detached eardrum. It marches
into the bed-crater to wake my partner like a banshee.
Now we sleep with the lightbulbs on.
Now my love for him is as ubiquitous as cells
dividing too rapidly, like wedding doves, broken binder-clips,
and Tchaikovsky. To value objects in their ability
to wrap around the earth is not unlike
the calculations of morning. I'm never certain it will arrive,
and when it does, if it's abiding in me,
I prepare breakfast, willingly, with an asterisk.

Kasey Dugan

MEL

was everywhere, was in my matcha this morning on my ceiling I saw Mel in Washington Square he did not look at me. His crumbs in my hairbrush. A poster not mine. So what? If I did or did not go to the store in his green shirt forgotten. If I did or did not buy his dumb coffee filters because Mel told me I was an old soul. Do men want old souls or just mine? Better keep me out of the Bronx out of his sunroom bedroom you could see Yankee Stadium. Wonder if Mel took my yoga mat 'cause I'll be pissed. How can one person poison the whole block? I keep stepping in oil slicks. In another Universe—don't you hate that phrase?—oil slicks are groovy sinkholes that drop me onto Mel's eyelids so I can plant kisses or tulips or aspirins, just me sorta things. In a bodega whose deli man once made our bagels: *why doesn't that tall boy come here no more?* I skip toward Mel in my mind's beach house. Found a chewed-up bottle cap under the radiator—his? I keep running into my exes like they're Duane Reades. I keep running. The night with its smirk—not unlike Mel's—scopes me out. I can't breathe like this. Not in this bed hijacked by me. I inhale whatever socks come my way. One day in late September I just stop. The morning is fresh again. Coffee is agreeable. All that's left is my appendix, and it might burst at any moment.

Mary Durocher

MY LIFE IS NO LONGER A THRILL

The TV stole my lover.

He refuses orgasmic pleasure
unless another woman's pixels
dance behind us.

Only then can I
kneel on the tan rug
and dip my neck in sacrifice
while he grips our couch cushions.

I've listened to LeAnn Rhimes sing "Blue" a dozen times.
I do not like country music,

but I hum along as I
scrub, scrub, scrub
at our floral-print dishes.

I'm trying to forget the texture of frozen meals.
I'm trying to forget he didn't feed the cat
and now it gnaws at my ankles,
weeping with primal
hunger.

I hope he doesn't ask for a baby.

It wasn't always as it is
now.

Once we laughed

and ate greasy pastrami sandwiches
on a public bench.
Tripping on shrooms
reality's floor dissipated
beneath us,

we took care of each other.

Once he introduced me to Whitman:

I folded myself into him,
in our hallowed sheets,
as he shared with me
eternity's poet.

Now

he needs health insurance,
and I need a new pair of shoes.

I am lonely.
His touch is an apparition
standing in the doorway,
illuminating my isolation.

Cait Gagnon

MRS. WELCH

Rows and rows of teeth
made of marble, and limestone, and slabs of concrete

Plaque comprised of moss, and dirt, and small flags
left over from Memorial Day weekend

Coating the canines in a thick film of
In Memoriam.

The Earth's tongue
soft and moist

like the tongues of the women buried beneath it.
A gargantuan molar reads:

“Moses Welch 1832-1893”

“And Wife 1832-1914”

She is an abscess,
a pocket of rot and puss

infecting the root of this bicuspid
after aching and waiting to be filled

A cavity that went overlooked,
festered, and went numb.

Just before they placed her next to Mr. Welch
only to be “And Wife.”

Frankie Kavakich

DISCO DYSPHORIA

I look in the kaleidoscopic mirror and think,
Yeah, you got 'em all fooled.
Draped in bubbled robes of rust orange and red,
when will they figure me out?
I'm a lizard person through and through,
hidden in a sheathe of stolen skin
pale as cocaine.
I'm disco-crazy for identity.

In my room, there's a glitterball,
and in every tile, I see the truth:
my long, dripping jaw, my snake-scale epidermis,
my smile, twisted with pliers and yellow with age.
Then I get your call and I'm a human.
Skin, eyes, ears, hair—all as you remember.
You speak to me like I'm some alleyway snack:
“Hey, baby, wanna hit the clubs?”

So dress me up and take me out.
I'll be your precious little princess,
downing vodka cranberry's sweet as bile.
I'll boogie with you all night.
I'll sway my hips like my mother.
I'll be soft and pliant, a woman, a lie—
until I sneak into the bathroom and vomit up my regrets,
swirling pink sparkles viscous as glue.

I slip out of my pumps, climb out the window,
and slither through the greasy highway grass until I'm home.
Alone and naked in my room before the disco ball.

I break my mirror with the blunt heel
and shovel the blue glass into my mouth.
I swallow every shard,
bitter and familiar as cough syrup,
until my intestines are a bloody purple.
Downstairs, my father says, "Be a man,"
while my brother cries over a broken toy.
I slip out of my skin and lie under incandescent light,
whispering to myself, "I'm trying, I'm trying."

Sadie Marcus

ABOVE THE SKY, BENEATH THE GROUND

If the moon is my mother,
then the sun is her schizophrenia.
Paranoid, she sets me on fire
with her delusions.
The dusty minds of dirty pewter bugs
release from the earth below
with a scent as pathetic as I am.
High above, let the world witness
my sorrow under glass.
The black Nikes on my feet.
A tar-drenched roof.
A plucked-out tooth.

I arm my pocket with a razor blade,
penetrating my thighs with rapacious sighs.
Existence like a colony of ants,
I'm the lone bee. Queen of jagged edges
on the in-between.
I puke what spurns to flee:
the vanity of escape
from Mother Moon's tidal desperation.
Tenderness unknown to my skin,
I cradled no loss.
The callouses formed so deliberately,
I needed acid-lined spit to writhe inside.
Unstable, just like the men.
And the women abandon me, too.

I'm no phony,
you'll inherit the truth

from the grand, harrowing ice box.
The red shouts at the wrist,
an afterthought.
Solid people, their bones, I'm so envious!
And when I merit the execution chair,
I will perform
to the rhythm of my father's guitar
gnawing on Chuck Berry.
He needs to know
the hum-drum of sucker-chumps,
the ape-y grin of deserted desert dwellers
and my own lack of true strife.

Amanda "Pand" Milo

NOX

the night comes
in tidal agony
and i am drowning in the stars
the moon around my neck like a noose
i try to grab a dark cloud
as scarred hands reach out
i dream of escaping the night
but even the clouds refuse
they float away to anywhere else
while thunder bellows at me
and lightning illuminates
a star stabbing my heart.

Maria Santa Poggi

THE PRAYER BEFORE SUPPER

Let us pray

I brought my guilt
to the dining table,
even though you
ordered the wine.

King of kings

We go to church
on Sundays,
and I only take
a sip of blood.

This is salvation

I'm not of age
yet I'm asking
repentance for
sins that aren't mine.

God of glory, majesty

Infidelity scorched
wooden floors as
I wore a white dress
at first communion.

For the love of Jesus Christ

I prayed until
my knees were red.
I wished for their
mistakes to be forgiven.

He who resurrects me

A child doesn't
take wedding vows.
A sheep does not know
the intent of its shepherd.

In his freedom I am free

I kissed a girl
to then crucify myself.
I kissed a boy
to then sacrifice myself.

This is gospel of truth

The altar was built
by those before me.
Those before me were
also scathed by flaws.

I am not asking forgiveness

The pews once
held me hostage
until they became
archaic oak benches.

Zannah Schorer

STATUESQUE

Looking upon a face not unlike my own
from decades long since passed
I feel a deep-seated longing.
As cool marble calls to me,

I touch my hand to stone
centuries of history fulfill me.

Gazing into her empty eyes,
I'm drawn into the dark caverns.
As we begin a silent conversation,
I can almost imagine life on her face,
burning under the barren slab.

Her pristine marble deserves to be anointed with oils,
her glorious curls pulled from their knots,
her smooth center softened under touch.

She might reach down and seize me with firm grip,
and I would offer no protest,
but simply stand to kiss her carved lips,
letting my breath warm the satin stone.

If she stepped down from her pedestal
and let me take her place,
generations would gaze upon my pallid form,
and I could live in peaceful observance

until someone is brave enough
to place her hands upon me.

Jane Segovia

CARNAGE

I wake in quiet, twisting, agony.
The sun beats down from my curtainless window,
and the life I have constructed,
in spite of all its sex and laughter,
threatens surely to swallow me.

I wake in quiet, twisting agony,
and I remember the psychic
who told me I'd always been alone.
"Earthly orphan seed," she said,
no mother, except my own dry bones.

Tomorrow they say it will pour.
I'm sure *that*
will feel better than *this*.

But with the clean flush of rain,
there will be flooding
in the subways.
So all day I am haunted by
mass
 rat
 death.

There is a man I loved
who kept a praying mantis for a pet.

Love is a hundred little severed bug heads.
(Carnage.)

The great space race is over and only Japan is exploring Venus.

I cry out;
not like a baby,
like a rabid alley cat
—angry.

Jane Segovia

A GREAT BLUE DOG IN BROOKLYN

Today I find myself about the world and I am weary. And I am wishing that no one could see me. And thinking, I could be green and happy. I could be like the grass around me. I could cull sun into body. Yes, today I find myself about the world and I am the dreary joy of airports, grey and happy. Long, smooth pavement, rolling and rolling and rolling on. . . . Where life is a cheerful game of toiling and toiling and toiling on. And Van Gogh is again crouched in the corner, high on turpentine and eating paint. And I am so tired and worthless. I am so blue I could faint. And I am thinking, Maybe I could be blue and happy. Maybe I could dissolve, heavy air, into the sky around me. Maybe I could be blue and happy.

Allie Talavera

ALL THE LIVES WE LIVE

You're sitting on the hood of your candy-colored car as the grease left on your hands touches up your hair. Sometimes when I'm with you I miss the way you make me feel. The way I wish Christmas would stay magical. It's nothing to do with a man in a suit; it's just that I have had a mental illness since I turned fourteen. I can't hear what you're saying. The fibers in my bones are deteriorating. Uncut tape. Pink, all containing boxes. A piece of thread, hanging. I wish I could melt my hands into your flesh and give you the rest of me. You're staring at me now and I guess I should mention I'm not in love with you. But the sky is very beautiful right now. You told me I was pretty. I hope in the next one I will be pretty, at least a little prettier than what I am right now. I think I'm falling in love with the world. This world. Right here on top of this hill, and I can feel how heavy the oxygen is in my lungs and I want to die like this. You ask me what I'm thinking. I think if there's an end to being, I hope to be human. You said I'm waiting for something that isn't coming. I said Christians wait their whole life to be disappointed. I look over at your face; it's a face I used to love. Whatever we are right now, I miss the way we were. Now we're here touching the heat of the sun and you get in your car and you ask me to join. And I seatbelt my heart in the backseat, tell you your smile could freeze time. You ask me to get in the car and I tell you I'm going for a swim. When my skin hit the concrete beneath me, I felt my atoms float back into the sky. I hope they float around like this for a while. Like soft cotton sheets on shaved skin. Until I find you again, hold onto me.

FICTION

Shelby Breen

HOW LONG, NOT LONG

The hot blast of air made the tip of my nose start to burn as I pushed open the glass door to the coffee shop. It was probably glowing red as the frigid skin was shocked by the temperature change. I sighed as I stepped through the doorway and felt the thick air settle over me like a fuzzy blanket. It smelled like burnt espresso, but that was fine. It still made my heart thrum happily.

The coffee shop was almost empty, which made sense since it was nearing five p.m. on a Tuesday. Normal people didn't usually have coffee this late in the night—more concerned with having dinner and going to bed at a normal time. There were a few people scattered through the dining area. A couple sat facing each other, empty cups before them as they chatted excitedly. The girl's hands moved in front of her face at whatever she was saying. Probably sharing a story about her day. She looked like a teacher. He looked more like a personal trainer. A cute couple. They seemed happy together, content with sitting in the warm-toned coffee shop as the sky faded to dark prematurely.

I glanced across the tiny wooden tables and spotted a black beanie. A platinum blonde curl peaked out of the front. I paused for half a second before striding over. A grin pulled at the corners of my lips at the sight of him curled over his phone at our usual table, no matter how unexpected it was to find him there before me. I weaved through the tables with ease, letting my gaze linger over him. I used a frostbitten hand to fix the front pieces of my hair that brushed my eyebrows before patting down the back to make sure no rogue strands were standing straight up. He looked right at home, sitting in the seat against the wall. The light brown paint made his baggy black sweat-shirt and joggers stand out more. His skin was pale, not uncommon for the time of year, but I should probably get him out of his studio more often. I had to make sure we didn't have a repeat of the incident three years ago. Spending Christmas Eve in the emergency room for exhaustion and malnutrition wasn't fun.

“Hi,” I said, finally arriving at the little table. His head snapped up from his phone, his dark eyes widening in surprise. Then his lips spread into a smile, showcasing his sparkling teeth. The front two were slightly crooked, crossing over each other slightly. I wanted to kiss them. His nose wasn’t red; he must have been waiting for me long enough to defrost.

“Hey,” he said. Only one of his dimples made an appearance, and I frowned at that. I missed the other one. I didn’t see them this morning before he slipped out of bed in a hurry to make it to work on time. How long had it been since I’d seen him smile hard enough for both lovable craters to show up? I plopped into my chair before rearranging my face into a smile.

“How long have you been waiting? Not long, I hope,” I said.

He shook his head as he locked his phone, turning it to rest face down on the table. His thin fingers tapped the back of it in a restless rhythm. A new beat he was working on, most likely. It didn’t feel familiar. I don’t think he had played it for me yet. I hadn’t heard anything new from him in a few weeks, but that was okay since he told me he was really busy working on fine tuning an album for some band or another. I forgot the name; it’ll probably come to me later.

“I got out early, so I just came straight here.” His fingers stopped their tapping. Instead, he held them together and his wrists rested against the surface of the table. I wanted to reach out and put my hands over his, lace my own tiny fingers in his lanky ones, but my fingers were still stiff from the cold. I doubted he would like the feeling that much. In front of him was a cup of coffee, definitely black. Unless he got a latte. Then it definitely had an absurd number of espresso shots. He hated tea and thought decaf coffee was pointless. He wasn’t the best sleeper. Stress-induced insomnia, the doctors said.

I glanced down, unzipping my puffy jacket but keeping it on as the chills from outside hadn’t yet faded. I wondered how we looked to the couple. Did we even look like a couple to them? Or did we look like two guys grabbing coffee and catching up? Him in his signature fashionable bum outfit, me in blue jeans and a fuzzy sweater. He liked to joke that my stick-bug body didn’t have enough insulation. It was true. He always ran so much hotter, which could be a product of his broad shoulders and heavy arms that could wrap completely

around me and haul me into his chest. He made me feel small in the best way, politely ignoring the inch or two I had over him. It was his presence that made him feel bigger than me. His confidence, his self-assured perception of his place in the world. When I stood close enough to him to feel his warmth, his strong arm wrapped around my thin shoulders or a hand smoothed big circles on my back. I felt a hint of that— that my place was solid as long as I was next to him. But it had been a while since we hugged, so I forgot what that feels like. We haven't kissed in days. Both of us were hiding from the inevitable in our respective studios, trying to drown it out in our passions that used to flow seamlessly together.

On the table in front of me was a white paper cup of my own. I reached out to circle my hands around it, feeling the warmth seep through the cup and into my fingers.

“Oh!” He sat up a bit straighter. “I got you something so you wouldn't need to go order.” The Sharpie “Jack” on the side stared back at me.

“Thank you,” I said. I fought the urge to tease him about my being a big boy who can order coffee on my own. He was biting the inside of his cheek, and I didn't want him to take my joke the wrong way. He got embarrassed so easily for acting cute—he didn't like being flustered in public. I raised the cup up to my lips and took a sip. It was still warm but on its way toward cooling. He had been here longer than a few minutes. I let the liquid fill my mouth and swallowed as fast as possible. My face screwed up as the bitter taste stuck to my tongue like a disgusting film. I despise black coffee. When the weather was nicer and we got iced drinks instead of hot ones, our cups side by side were the two opposite ends of the spectrum of coffee beverages. His as dark as his wardrobe. Mine barely beige. Our first date at this exact coffee shop felt like this moment, except I watched his beautiful face twist up as he sipped my drink. He hated sweet things. But I love you, he would say as he handed me my perfectly ordered coffee every day. The wrong coffee was sludge in my stomach.

“You forgot the sugar,” I said.

His face crumbled. “I'm so sorry, Felix. I was on the phone with Adam when I was ordering. I took on three of his songs since he had

been sick, and he was asking if I could maybe help him with another, but I needed to finish up the demos for Peter by lunch today. So I couldn't call him back during work. I think I only asked for sugar instead of saying to add five."

I nodded once. He was already so busy with his own projects. I wanted to yell at him about overworking himself. They took advantage of him time and time again; his inability to say no to anyone used to be admirable. I felt bad for him now. Burnt out at twenty-two.

The silence lingered and the coffee grew cold in front of us. His eyebrows slipped out from under his beanie. His eyes were so dark, almost black in the golden light of the coffee shop. When he was tired his right eye got smaller than the left. Sometimes they glittered with stars. That was my favorite, when he would blush and stutter excitedly over lyrics he wrote or praised the choreography I made up or won at Crazy 8's by cheating so he got all of the +4 cards. I couldn't see any stars in his eyes right now though—it was like how the stars were hidden in the city as a result of all the light pollution. You know they are there, but there's something in the way.

For some reason, I felt like I was going to cry. You never forget, I wanted to say. What's wrong? I wanted to ask. Are you okay? How was work? Did your mom call about us visiting for Christmas since we didn't get to go for Thanksgiving? When is your little sister's dance recital again, I promised her I would go watch?

"How long?" I asked instead.

"Not long," he said.

His fingers were back to tapping against his phone. It dinged loudly on the table three times in a row. I knew it was work—his work phone always had the ringer on so he could pick it up and know when to disappear for hours. His gaze flashed to the phone before he dragged his eyes back up to me. It used to bother me more, when we first got together. How I was dating his producing more than him sometimes. I grew used to it the same way I grew used to how he kept the sound of his phone keyboard on. The little bubble sounds were soothing to me now.

He stuffed the escaping curl back under his beanie. His chin was tilted down towards his chest and I pouted at the thought that I could probably count on one hand the number of times I was going to see

his face in the future and he was not letting me see it now. My throat was filled with rocks and my eyeballs stung, but I blinked quickly. Usually, he was the brave one. He asked me out first after a year of dancing around each other. He asked me first to move in last year. I guess I could be brave for once, when he broke up with me first.

I could hear the couple on the other side of the seating area getting up. I looked over and saw the man help the girl put her jacket on. In return, she wrapped his scarf around him tighter. They gazed at each other lovingly for a moment, a few heartbeats. Then he offered his elbow, and they exited the coffee shop, arm in arm. I pulled my eyes away.

I knew he wasn't cheating on me. He would never. There were no massive arguments that drove us apart. We hadn't fought in a long time. Not since the first few months of living together and I found out he liked to keep peanut butter in the fridge. It made it too hard to spread on the bread, and I would end up tearing slices trying to make a sandwich before rehearsal. It was all I would eat during performance season and he didn't like it. I didn't like how he tried to disturb my routine—it was a ritual for me to make a sandwich before dance class when the nerves over step and cues made my stomach twist up so much anything inside it ached. I had been taking better care of myself recently. I hadn't even called him out on his all-nighters and diet of Red Bull and ramen. He was gearing up for another hospital trip, but I was trying not to control him or get in the way of his creativity. I didn't beg him to eat like I used to when we first started dating. I didn't bring him meals to his studio. He told me not to interrupt his flow that seemed to only happen between one and four in the morning. So I stopped. Does he think I don't care about him? I do. I like cold peanut butter now.

"Why?" I didn't really want to ask that, but I figured I should know. For future overthinking. Or when I inevitably called my best friends in tears. They would want to know why, so I asked for them.

"I love you. I always will. But I don't think I'm in love with you anymore." His voice was stuffed. Trapped in his throat. I let my eyes drift up to watch him swallow sharply a few times. He pulled his bottom lip between his crooked teeth and chewed on it. Yesterday, I would have reached out and plucked it away from the torture. That's

not nice, I would have teased and brushed my thumb across the abused skin gently. He would've melted like always, turning into a little puddle of boyfriend goo that I wanted to scoop up in my hands and stuff into every pocket or pour into my kitschy mugs. I loved when his pale cheeks blushed a soft pink and his inky eyes turned into little crescents that glittered with stars and love and happiness.

Why? I wanted to ask. Is it because I'm clingy? Did I annoy you too much last week while you were working, because I was just worried? You hadn't been home in almost forty hours and didn't answer your damn phone. I got scared. You know how much I hate being home alone in the apartment. I told you it was too big when we toured it with the realtor. But you liked the space. For the future, he said then.

Instead, I said, "Okay."

"I'm so sorry. I didn't mean for this to happen. I wish it hadn't." The worst part was that he meant it. His squishy heart that beat for everyone in his life, that was spread too thin and soaked into lyrics for the world to fall in love with, was what made me love him. So how could I be mad at him for it now?

"I know. I am too." I pushed the too bitter coffee away from me. I let my eyes trace his face. He looked heartbroken. I probably looked the same. I was telling the truth. I was sorry because he was hurting. I was sorry because I still felt the love that he didn't. For the way he tugged his dumb beanies so far down on his forehead that it covered his eyebrows and made his head so round it looked like a hard-boiled egg. It was cute. I loved it. I love it. I love him. But no matter how badly he wanted to stay—and I know he does because I know he loves me, just not the way I love him—he couldn't. A relationship was made with two people and couldn't be held together by will, regardless of how strong he is.

"Are you going to be okay?" He looked up at me. I hoped my nose wasn't bright red anymore. It was tingling, but that was probably from the threat of tears rather than the lingering chill. I felt his watery gaze trace my cheeks, brush over the freckles that he counted and kissed late at night after we were left breathless and glowing. My eyes, a few shades lighter than his and infinitely more vocal, begged me to shut them. He always said he could read me like a book, that

I couldn't hide anything from him. But I never want to hide from him. Not even now. I just hoped he forgot how to read me like he forgot to order five sugars in my coffee.

"I'll be okay. Promise," I said. I ignored the words burning my tongue. There was too much I wanted to say.

RUBY

I saw her before I heard her.

She was short and quick paced as she exited the women's health clinic. From a distance her moss green eyes and dirty blonde curls enticed me. Even the crochet sweater and paisley skirt she wore hung off her wiry body in intrigue. The parking lot was desolate and the trees surrounding the gray clinic rustled in disapproval as she walked towards Josh and I. In different circumstances she would've been one of those women I envied. Her gaze met mine and I sank under it.

"Hey, I don't like how you're talking to her!" she yelled at us.

We had been fighting in the parking lot. Josh and I usually didn't argue and when we did, I tended to stay calm. Not this time. My stomach twisted with cramps and I squirmed in my sweatpants and t-shirt. He wanted to take me home, to my grandmother's house. I refused, it was too soon. I thought he'd let me rest at his place, at least for the afternoon. I sobbed. He grew impatient. No one had dared to disturb our loud drama. Except this woman.

"Do you always interrupt people's conversations?" Josh said, slamming his fist against his car. "Can't you leave us alone?"

"Conversation?" she scoffed, crossing her arms and smirking at me, as if to say, *this is how he reacts under stress?*

I found myself smiling back at her, recalling the night I told Josh I was pregnant. He had shattered a wine glass, flung a box of cereal across the floor. *You're seventeen! For fuck's sake, of course we can't keep it.*

"Come on, you don't know her, do you?" Josh demanded, putting his hand on my lower back. I tensed at his touch.

"We met in the waiting room. My name is Ruby," she said. I knew she was lying; I never saw her in the clinic, yet I almost believed her. Maybe it was the rasp in her voice, the way it made everything sound absolute.

"Is that true?" Josh asked, his hands on his hips. A month ago,

I would've poked fun at how comical he looked when agitated and pulled him in for a kiss. But now I seethed, detesting his sweaty brow and mammothlike body that towered over me.

"Yeah," I said, mindlessly joining Ruby's lie as if I was in a trance. "Her and I are friends now."

"How am I supposed to react when I see my friend being cornered by a hysterical guy? You need a minute to collect yourself," Ruby told Josh. Then she turned towards me and I recoiled because I noticed that her eyes weren't green but a deep blue. My vision was playing tricks on me. "I think I should drive you home, honey."

"I'd be alright with that. Where else is there to go?" I whispered, not focusing on Josh or Ruby, but on the beige women's health clinic. I never realized before how straightforward a building could be. It wasn't like one of those pastel, whimsical Victorian homes I've seen in photos of San Francisco. The architecture left no room for imagination. Its bluntness frightened me.

"Oh," he said, shocked at my sudden malleability. I think he was hurt by my spontaneity, my willingness to say goodbye. But what he couldn't understand was that I was unable to refuse Ruby. She stood before me as blank and clear as a mirror. I was nervous by the possibilities of what my reflection could become with her. I could no longer escape in Josh's arms, our mistakes had intertwined, becoming singular. "I guess it's okay if you know her. Take care of yourself, okay? I'll see you soon, baby."

He didn't linger. He jumped into his shiny, gray car and drove away. A lonely breeze followed and I shivered, crossing my arms. This morning the weather had been sweet and humid but now, as Ruby and I stood in the silent lot, there was an unmistakable chill. I imagined Josh's drive and the way he'd speed down the long, continuous country roads. I imagined him rolling the window down, a melancholy indie rock song playing as he smiled at his swell of freedom, at his unscathed body.

We had decided to get the abortion two towns over. It meant a smaller chance of one of my grandma's friends noticing me. It was part of their Sunday morning mass routine. After a breakfast of watery oatmeal and burnt coffee at Pete's diner, they'd march down to the abortion clinic, hungry to preach salvation to young women.

“You should thank me for getting you out of that fight. You had no backbone,” Ruby said.

“Should I?” I asked, skeptical of her assurance of my situation.

“I have a gift for intervening in other peoples’ compromising situations,” she said, beginning to walk over to a little, banged up car, covered with outdated bumper stickers.

“Thank you then,” I said, and I grabbed her arm. I was light-headed and I didn’t want to collapse on the pavement. She opened the door of the passenger’s side and I had to push off empty CD cases before I was able to sit down. She got into the driver’s side and the car engine emitted a sigh as it came to life.

“You’re not from Northville, are you?” she asked.

“I’m from Watervliet, it’s about a half hour away” I said and I blushed, embarrassed she would have to see where I lived. I still hadn’t moved out of my grandmother’s refurbished attic.

“Oh honey, I haven’t been out that way in so long,” she laughed. “I bet you’re cooped up with your parents in a sad two-family house.”

“Yeah, it’s a two-family,” I admitted, my body tensing at her accuracy. Any other day, when my mind wasn’t immersed in fog, I would’ve told Ruby to stop the car. I would’ve called Josh and he would’ve picked me up, brought me home. But I didn’t heed my rationality. It all felt distant in her car: my grandma, Josh, my room, the problem that was no longer a problem.

“I’m gonna get us some snacks before we hit the road,” she said, pulling out of the parking lot. I’m feeling peckish.”

I nodded and Ruby’s hand hovered over the radio knob, but she decided not to turn it on. I leaned my head against the window as she drove into town. Each town in our county was the same. Scattered dairy farms turned into a few rows of streets. Clusters of sagging homes, their porches full of rusted knickknacks. Kids who screamed and played in driveways amidst their father’s pickup trucks. And always a little white church, it’s appearance so innocent I felt compelled to avert my eyes. The mountains, boisterous and significant, surrounded the towns’ silhouettes. It ached a familiarity I had known my whole life.

“I’m the bartender there,” Ruby said and pointed to a bar called

The Knotty Pine. Plaid curtains covered the windows and the plastic sign was cracked. A middle-aged man sat outside the doorway in a plastic chair, smoking a cigarette.

I smirked, envisioning her at work. She probably tossed her golden curls up into a loose bun before her shift, double checking how she looked in the bar's dingy bathroom mirror. I knew her words were sharp, her jabs making the men roar with laughter.

"I'll be back in a jiffy," Ruby said, parking in front of the Dollar store. As soon as the door slammed, I took survey of her car. A green Mexican blanket was spread across the back seats, an attempt to conceal coffee stains and torn leather. A mosaic of dates and nicknames were scrawled in marker across the roof. One person had scribbled in all capitals: *OUR NAME IS RUBY*. I opened the glove compartment and it was full of empty, orange pill bottles. I found that they were for OxyContin. None of the prescriptions were for her. I closed the compartment quickly.

On the floor on the driver's side sat a bag from the clinic. *Why was she there?* I wondered, restraining myself from rummaging through the contents.

"I got you peanut candies. I hope you're not allergic," Ruby said, getting into the car. She stared at me as she buckled, her eyes glimmering in suspicion. My throat tightened. Did she see me rummaging?

"Thanks," I said as she handed me the candies and I tore them open, popping one in my mouth.

"Now, tell me where we're going," she demanded so loudly that I jumped in my seat.

"You're gonna take a left on Main Street and then just go straight."

"Aren't you suppose to have fallen asleep by now?" Ruby asked as she started the car again.

"Am I?" I whispered, a cry digging itself in my throat for the first time since this morning, when Josh picked me up at my grandmother's.

She shrugged and finally turned on the radio. It was the oldies station. Sonny and Cher's "Baby Don't Go" rang throughout the

car's interior. She tapped her fingernails on the steering wheel to the beat. I closed my eyes, trying to drown out the throbbing headache descending on me.

"You know, that guy you were with was a real asshole," she blurted out as we drove out of town and onto the stretch of road where lush, pine trees lined either side. The trees leaned slightly towards the middle of the road. I liked to imagine they were trying to embrace each other.

"Yeah, but he can be sweet."

"What a nice opinion. Hasn't anyone told you there's more fish in the sea?"

"How can you judge a person you barely know?" I asked.

"Because he was screaming at a dazed, young girl! If I can give you any advice, it's to realize now that not everyone is worth the patience. Some people are just assholes."

"I don't know."

"How old are you?"

"Seventeen, graduated five months ago."

"God, didn't they tell you to take the pill in health class?"

"I tried and it made me sick."

I didn't mention my fear of my grandmother finding the pills stashed away in my underwear drawer. It was a scenario that would lead me to being dragged off to confession. Or worse, dragged out of the house.

"And your boyfriend never heard of a condom?"

"We were careful in the beginning. But he said they made his dick itch."

Her cheeks flushed in frustrated astonishment. I knew my naivety was borderline amusement. I hated her for it. Maybe it was my fault though, willingly giving the details.

"Honey, I would've never given him a second chance. Not after trying to pull that shit."

Was there a way to explain my rationality to Ruby? To me, at that moment, she was a vision of an immaculate woman who refused to get screwed over. How would she understand the thrill in me after Josh and I had sex? I'd get dressed, he'd ask me to stay and I'd insist I couldn't, I had to work in the morning. It was a ten-minute walk

home and sometimes it'd be already dark out when I left. It was lonely but I wasn't ever afraid, never hungered for his company. I'd smile, drunk on my newfound independence. It was as if I had dipped into an unknown ocean held within the cavity of my chest.

"Did you know you were pregnant before the missed period?" she asked softly.

"I had a dream," I admitted, wringing my hands together. "I was holding a baby on my hip. We stood in front of a mirror and I stared at our reflections."

"That's some kind of mystical pregnancy sign."

"It was normal too. Smells made me nauseous and I was eating entire tubs of Italian ice."

It might've been the exhaustion, or the fact that I was in Ruby's car instead of Josh's, but I began to cry. My head dropped into my hands. I was unable to ignore the impulse.

"Oh, sweetie, don't cry," Ruby cooed, turning down the radio's volume. "It's happened to most of us. You're only eighteen, you've got so much life left. You gonna go to college after this? Move away to a strange, faraway place?"

"No," I told her in-between breaths. "I've got a full-time job."

"Huh, we're similar then, I should've guessed that. I did the same thing after high school, kept picking up waitressing gigs. Gotta keep afloat, right?"

"We're not similar," I grumbled.

"Jesus," she whispered, suddenly distracted by a small clearing off the side of the road. "Is that the old way to Willow Creek?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Willow Creek?" she continued, obsessively glancing out her window. "It's one of those hotspots everyone used to hang out at when I was in high school. I know you went there too when you were in school."

"I've never heard of it. I swear."

"God, I really think it's there. We're to going check it out," she said, swerving to the right of the road and coming to a halt. "I want to see it again."

"We can't take too long. My grandma expects me to be home soon."

“This is it. This will lead us to the creek,” she exclaimed, pointing to a path overgrown with weeds and wildflowers. “You said you and your boyfriend love Willows Creek earlier, right?”

“I didn’t say that,” I said, sniffing as I got out of the car. There was no logic in my decision to go down that unknown path. But there I was, tree branches scratching at my arms as I followed Ruby. I imagined that the grass would be lush and the water sparkling, a perfect oasis. In reality though, Willows Creek was not beautiful. There were empty beer cans and condom wrappers scattered across the barren grass. The water was not clear but a suspiciously murky brown.

“This is gross, Ruby. I want to go home.”

“Why would you want to do that?” she asked, her eyes widening. “You’re so far from the clinic now, why go back?”

“I never said I want to go back there,” I whispered, the hair rising on the back of my neck.

“Come on, don’t leave yet, you gotta get in the water first,” Ruby whined as she took off her sandals and threw them off to the side. She glided into the water and turned away from me, outstretching her arms towards the sky. In the afternoon sun her shadow just looked like a shapeless mass, not the silhouette of a person. “I forgot how often I used to come here. It must’ve been ten years ago now. Nothing’s changed. The water feels the same.”

“Ruby,” I said, sitting down on the grass and watching as her skirt billowed in the water around her. “Why were you at the clinic today?”

I don’t know why I asked her that. Maybe it was because of the desperation I noticed in her eyes as she waded in the water. It wasn’t different from other adults I knew. Their gazes betrayed their truths—that their youthful ambitions had blossomed into dissatisfaction. I feared those same seeds were beginning to root themselves in me. I had a postcard of San Francisco tacked above my bed at my grandmother’s house. In high school, the illustrated Golden Gate Bridge, the blue waves, and earthy red hills were my motivation. After I found out I was pregnant the postcard transformed for me. It caused so much dread that I ended up ripping it up. My hopes of crossing the country had begun to sour; the idea of being able to go anywhere sounded like a myth.

“When I get to the city, my tears will all be dried, my eyes will look so pretty. . . .” Ruby sang to herself, ignoring my question. She dipped her hands into the creek and before I could realize what she was doing, I felt a cool splash of water hit me. “Join me! It’ll be good for you.”

“No, I don’t want to,” I said, angered she had the nerve to splash me. “I was trying to ask what you were doing at the clinic.”

“None of your business, sweet girl,” Ruby snapped, her bright façade gone.

“Don’t be like that. I told you what happened to me.”

“It’s not the same, I was trying to give you advice. God, how could I not? You’re only seventeen.”

“That’s not an answer. I saw the bag in your car.”

“Oh yeah? What else did you see? A bunch of empty pill bottles?” she cried.

“What? No?” I said, my cheeks turning hot as she smirked.

“There’s no need for you to ask me questions, honey. None of my answers would help you. All you got to know is I’ve been at that clinic a long time and when I saw you something changed,” she said, not looking at me. “God, you should’ve saw how you looked in that parking lot. You got such a lost look to you. Do you know what life does to girls like you?”

I didn’t respond. Instead dread pooled up in my belly and although I felt numb, I stood up. There was something wrong. Ruby no longer fit the projection she cast on the world. Her illusion had shattered and I could see all of the problems, like sunlight spilling in through the cracks. This was not a good revelation. I was scared.

“I have to go now,” I said, trembling as I retreated from the creek and Ruby.

“Honey,” Ruby called out to me. “What are you doing after all this?”

“I have to go home,” I stuttered, turning towards the path out of Willows creek. “I have to help my grandmother with dinner and check in on Josh, make sure he’s alright. I need to be fine by the morning, I have a full day of work.”

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“No, no, no,” Ruby repeated. Before I could get a few feet away from her, she had gotten out of the water. Her arms reached for me and her coffee brown eyes, which I thought were blue, were dilated and frantic.

I didn’t know what else to do but run. My body, sluggish from the operation, protested as I tried to sprint down the dirt path back to the road. My breath was strained and tears began to stream down my cheeks. I almost saw the clearing of trees and the road, when I tripped on a root. I fell face first with my palms outstretched before me. I cried as I tasted the metallic tang of dirt and my hands stung with blood.

Ruby caught up to me quickly. She flipped me over so that I faced her and tilted her head to the side in curiosity, like she hadn’t expected my attempted escape. She wrapped her freezing hands around my neck, her grip slowly tightening. She wept in theatrical agony as I squirmed underneath. I was too weak for any other resistance. My body had betrayed me again.

“Please, please,” I whimpered. “My life . . . I want to go back.”

Ruby didn’t say anything. Instead, her hands released my neck and she laughed hysterically as I gasped for breath. The last thing I remember before I passed out was that she cupped my face in-between her hands, gazed at me with the intensity of a mother looking at her newborn, and whispered repeatedly:

Leave. Leave. Leave.

Chantel K. Watts

SOMETHING AIN'T RIGHT ABOUT 7G

I used to see Poochie almost every day, down by Papi's—you know, that corner store down on Madison Boulevard. Nah, it ain't that far from my building. Like two blocks over, but it's all hill. By the time you get to the bottom of the hill, past all the stoops and everything, you ain't even know you walked two blocks. Papi's, yeah. Right next to the CVS and the Africans, where they be braiding hair. That's where I used to see Poochie, just for a minute, you know? He'd ask about my mom or ask what I'm doing. He ain't all that or nothing, but he was cool.

We knew each other since we were kids, taking baths together when Ms. Natalie used to watch us. You, too? Ms. Natalie watched all the kids on the block, I swear! Yeah, you know this was the late 80s, like early 90s, in the projects. Ain't no mother finna take their kids to daycare. We used to make fun of the kids who went to day care, had nannies—stuff like that. That wasn't us. Poochie and me, from '88 to '92, we were with Ms. Natalie up in 7G.

Me, Poochie—we stayed until we were five—and Poochie brother, Moonie. Moonie older than us by like a few years and when Poochie and I started school, he took the bus with us and walked us into class. But that's how Moonie was—he wasn't hard or nothing like that, but he watched out for us. He told us we had to study and leave da hood. You know all da older kids say that: *Leave da hood. Study hard and leave. Ain't nothing for us here.* Moonie said that to us all da time.

There's a picture with all of us somewhere, naked in the tub. Ion know who got that picture, though. But yeah, we were real tight. Ion know, we became teens and I ain't seen Poochie in school like that no more. Moonie was always in the house. But every day, I saw Poochie down by Papi's. Yes, even in da wintertime.

I'd walk up and he be like: *Ayo, shawty!*

And I be like: *Ain't nobody ya shawty, Poochie!*

That's how we said hi to each otha'. Smiling and all that. He asks where I'm going. We strike up conversation, usually about somebody fightin' or plans for the day. I'd go in the store and get some chips or some fonto or something—and he walk right in with me.

There was this mirror in the back of Papi's, and I be fixing my mini skirt in there, fixing my lip gloss, you know, I had ta look good. Not for Poochie. I mean, he was cool, but he ain't all that. Plus, I could be seeing any and everybody outside. I fix myself up in the mirror before I grab a quarter water. After I pay, I walk out and there he is right behind me.

Usually he be like: *When you gone call me?*

And I'm all: *Poochie, you know damn well you ain't got no phone!*

I'd walk back up the hill to my building. The red one on one-six-eight and Saint Nick. Yeah, right on the corner. But that's how I knew Poochie, you know? We grew up together and talked in front of Papi's.

One day, though, I ain't see Poochie. It was the middle of summer—felt like southern heat but smelled like the five train. I thought he got popped. I know, morbid and shit, but that's what I thought. He be with Nate and 'em from Riis Projects. Yeah, Nasty Nate from over on one-seventy-one. Ion know when he started hanging with them. Everybody and they momma know Nasty Nate the OG and he be pushing. Not just weed though. At least that's what I heard. And he got the kids our age sellin' it for him. Cops out there and they don't do nothing. Just got people's mommas strung out, and if they ain't strung out they just never home cos they working. Ain't no daddies, but Nasty Nate out here buying sneakers and giving jobs. Ion know why Poochie started dealing with him. I mean, I guess I can figure out why, but Poochie smarter than that, you know? I told him before, though, like stop hangin' out with Nasty Nate. Any money you make with him is dirty. Everybody that work for Nasty Nate gets popped. Poochie don't listen ta me though.

So, I was trying to find him, but I ain't see him. I ain't trippin'. He is not my man. He cool, he aight. We friends. It was just weird, you know. Like, you see this person every day, and one day they ain't there. You look for them, and that was me for like a week.

Looking out, just in case. I thought I saw him, too. There was some boy—he had real dark skin just like Poochie. Dark Fade, wearing a white shirt like he do. He was too short, though. Poochie like 6'5" and—no lie—this boy was like four feet! As I'm walking, I notice that the white shirt got stains all over it, holes in his sweatpants. He was smelling funky as hell, too. I went right into Papi's.

Papi was behind the counter, smelling like Axe body spray, heavy. I almost threw up opening the door, but I kept it together and walked straight to the back, and that mirror was gone. Full length mirror just disappears. Got legs and walked out, I guess. I looked around; I couldn't find it. The black cat was peeking out—Ion even like cats like that—but I was staring at it. Ion know, I couldn't look away. It was just a regular black cat—four legs, green eyes, long tail up in the air. Then, I heard the bell from when someone opens up that front door. Like all at once—I swear on my mother—I felt cold air on my neck. I turned so fast but ain't nobody was there. Nobody. I turn back to the cat, but it's gone. I snatched open the glass door to the drinks, grabbed a quarter water, and went up to Papi.

"Where the mirror at?" I put a quarter on the counter. The store? Well, it look like a regular bodega—the counter was real high glass. You can see all da candies in the case. There are rows of all kinds of shit in there—Peanut Chews, Starbursts, gum, Hershey bars, you name it. I had to get on my tippy toes to put the quarter on the counter, that's how short I was.

"Fifty cents, mami." Papi was smiling and I could see his crooked teeth with the bottom row covered with dirty gold grillz. His chest hair was tangled in this chain that seem like he bought it from Halloween Xpress. Ion even remember what shirt he had on, but I bet it's that same filthy black v-neck that was clearly stretched out. All my life, he either wore that stank-ass shirt or no shirt at all.

"You a damn lie," I said, rolling my eyes. "It's a quarter water." I put my hands on my hips.

"Times is hard, mami." Papi leaned forward how he do so he can gawk at you, and it made me feel dirty as hell. I crossed my arms over my little mosquito bites and looked down. I wasn't filled out, you know? My mother called me a *late bloomer*. I mean look at me now,

I'm still small. "What you need a mirror for?" he said. "You know you look good." I opened my little no-brand-name purse and took out the last quarter to my name.

"And you know you look about a hundred years old." I smacked the other quarter on da counter. "You seen Poochie?"

Papi rubbed his gray little goatee and said, "Nah I ain't see no damn Poochie." He leaned back and slid the bottle towards me.

"Watch ya mouth," I said. I snatched my expensive-ass water and left.

When I got back over to one-six-eight, I saw Kendra. Nah, lil Kendra, the one who be in everybody business. I was in front of my building by then, and she was walking by. I got up and went over to her. She saw me coming and crossed her arms, asking what I wanted from her life. Lil Kendra was a little smaller than me—I'm like 5'3" so she had to be 5" even. Her hair was always pulled back in two little puffs. I even know how old she is, she ain't never go to school with me but she had to be close to our age at least. She had a pimple problem though. Always breaking out. I mean, she wasn't ugly, but the pimples ain't help.

I asked her if she seen Poochie, and she had a lil' attitude. She always had a thing for Poochie and take it real personal when anybody asking for him. Poochie wasn't never looking for her, though.

"Why you wanna know where Poochie at, Niecy?" She uncrossed her arms and her knock-off Burberry dress was wrinkled. She put her hands on her hips like she was waiting for me to answer.

"First off, Kendra, take all that bass out ya voice." I stared at her, and she dropped her hands off her waist. "Second, I ain't see him today, that's all."

"Yeah, okay." She folded her arms again. "Y'all got something going on?"

"No, we don't!" I said, rolling my eyes harder than I probably ever gone roll my eyes again. "He cool, aiight?"

"That ain't what I heard," Lil Kendra said as she started to walk past me.

"Yeah okay, Kendra." I took a sip of my water and turned around. "You ain't even gotta let him know I'm looking for him."

Kendra turned and swayed her little hips. "I'll let him know."

I sat on the black benches in front of my building with Monica and Queen. They been my friends as long as I known Poochie. They half-sisters—got the same momma—but Monica dark skinned and Queen is a light bright. Other than that, they look the same—same button nose, same dark and tight curly hair, same thin frame. We called them ghetto twins cos they exactly one year apart, and they dressed alike—baby tee, jeans, and flip-flops.

Monica popped the grape lollipop out and handed it to Queen. "You sure he wasn't at Papi's?"

"Nah, he wasn't there," I said and took a sip of my water. "I on know where that fool is."

Queen stood in front of me. "Why you care, though?" she said as her eyes, the color of walnuts, stared into mine. "He ain't ya man."

"Okay, but he my friend." I crossed my bare legs. "I'd wanna know where ya'll at," I said, shrugging.

"We always here," Monica said, putting a handful of sunflower seeds in her mouth. Monica always had the snacks. "Where we finna go?"

I tapped her arm and she handed me the bag of seeds. "That ain't the point," I said, popping a handful in my mouth. Sometimes I hate talking to them, like, they don't understand nothing.

Monica pushed her lips forward. "Well, here he come," she said.

I saw Poochie coming out the building and straight for me. I got up and met him at the ramp that led to the front door.

"I heard you was looking for me," he said, smiling that stupid ass smile.

"Who you heard that from?" I said, leaning against the rail of the ramp.

"Hi, Poochie," Queen and Monica sang.

"What up?" Poochie put his left arm up, his gold chain bracelet shining. I ain't never seen that chain before. That's when I noticed he was wearing black. Like, all black. Nah, Poochie ain't never wear black. Always a white t-shirt and sweats.

With his eyes back on me, he said, "Lil Kendra told me. You know that girl mouth run like water."

“Why you wearing all black?” I asked. “It’s like a hunnid out here.”

Poochie sucked his teeth. “I’m chilling. You was looking for me?” He smiled stupid again.

“I wasn’t looking. I just ain’t see you.” I looked him over and noticed his eyes—they were bloodshot. “Where you was at?”

Poochie took a step back. “Handling business,” he said.

“Since when?” I looked this fool up and down and saw brand new Jordan Elevens. I pointed at his feet. “You still dealing with Nasty Nate, huh?”

“Like I said, handling business.” Poochie looked around like he was searching for somebody. When he ain’t find them, he looked down at me. “Yo, what you doing tonight?”

“Handling business.” I stuck my tongue out at him.

“Oh, you got jokes?” We both laughed. “Come through. Tell the ghetto twins to pull up, too.”

“What we finna do?” I looked back at Monica and Queen. They was arguing and calling each other bitches. I sighed and turned back to Poochie.

“Just come through. 7G. Like 11.” Poochie licked his lips and hopped up on the railing to sit.

That’s when it clicked. “7G?” Poochie nodded his head and I said, “Ain’t that where they found Ms. Natalie—”

“Yeah.” Poochie checked his sneakers. “It’s cool now though. Pull up.”

“Aiight, we’ll see.” Poochie ain’t look back up at me. “Bye, Poochie.”

“See you later, Miss Niicy,” Poochie called after me but I was already walking. Like I said, he was cool. Or whatever.

Monica, Queen, and I walked into 7G at like midnight. Mad heads was in there. Like, literally, everybody and their mother. Moonie was in the kitchen, glowing off the overhead light. Moonie had a dark complexion like his brother, but he was way shorter than Poochie. They had the same thick eyebrows, low cuts, and round noses. I really ain’t see Moonie like that no more. Everybody knew he stayed in the house like his life depended on it. I saw him that night and he just seemed—Ion know. Gone. Like there was something he

was staring at that only he could see. I stood there just watching him until he saw me. He waved at me when we caught eyes, and I smiled before I saw Lil Kendra was in there, too, and she stared at me like I killed her cat or something. Same dress on. After like two mins I seen Poochie rolling up by the window. I turned behind me to tell Queen and Monica, but I saw them slip into a room. I went ova to Poochie.

“You always late like this?” he said, smiling again, but this time I saw how white his teeth were. I glanced back at the crowd. Everybody was grinding on each other to somebody’s mixtape. It seemed like a sea of plastic cups, arms, and girls’ butts. I sat on the windowsill next to a hookah. I couldn’t find anything that used to be Ms. Natalie’s. There wasn’t no cross, no nothing. The only homely thing was a grey couch pushed against the back wall.

“You allowed to stay out late like this?” I asked, playfully. “I’m finna ask ya momma about all this.” Poochie frowned. I remembered his Momma left—Lil Kendra said she said she was finna come back around July, but it’s August. I felt like shit, you know? Ain’t nobody looking out for him. Yeah, I mean, we are adults, you right. But we something they call, pre-adults, you know? Like we eighteen, nineteen, but we ain’t no twenty-five. We still figuring this adult shit out at that time, and Poochie ain’t have no one to really talk to. “My bad, Poochie,” I said.

He looked down at the L—you know? A blunt? No, not a crack pipe. Weed. Yeah, so he looked down at the blunt and he said, “It’s cool. You tryna smoke?”

“Duh.” We lit up. By the end of the L—blunt—I was feeling nice. Ion know where Queen and Monica went but I was vibing. Poochie started talking about how we took baths together and how we was mad close when we was little. We laughed about how Ms. Natalie would send us to get her cigarettes, and we snuck one to see what it was like but we ain’t have no matches.

“So, we just passed it back and forth, pretending to smoke.” Poochie and I was in tears. “The good old days, man.”

“Deadass,” Poochie said, gazing out the window. “The good old days.”

“Poochie, what’s wrong?” I moved closer to the edge of the windowsill until my ear was by his mouth. Not that I wanted to be

close, but it was loud. It was a party, you know? I couldn't hear him. "What's up with you?"

"Nothing. I guess I just—"

Then, we hear arguing. I stood up to try to see who it was but there was too much smoke and people surrounding them. Poochie and I stared at each other, and I could tell that he was annoyed. We went a little closer. Just to see who it is, you know? We push our way through and we see Nasty Nate and Moonie in each otha face.

Moonie like: *Ayo, back the fuck up before it's a problem.*

Nasty Nate like: *I'm packing! What's good, bro?*

Before I knew it, Poochie was walking towards them. Nasty Nate and Moonie both like 5'8" so they just yelling in each other's face, eye to eye. Nasty Nate's light bright face was turning red and his blue veins was popping out his neck. He had on all black, and I turned to Poochie. They got the same thing on. Same bracelet chain, same black sweatpants. Moonie is looking at Nasty Nate, but also, like, beyond him. Like his beef—whatever it is—ain't with Nasty Nate but he just in the way.

The thing is though, Nasty Nate carries guns. So does all the people he be with. He moves the whole block, and everybody know if he says he packing to move out the way. Then it clicked, like, why am I still standing here? I needed to move. I started moving back but Poochie ain't move like me. Poochie always felt like he had to save his brother. We be in school and lil' ass Poochie smacking the older kids who picked on Moonie. He always been that way. You can't blame him. Ain't nobody looking out for them. But I couldn't let him do that.

I took, like, one step. One step! And all I feel is hands on my arms pulling me back. I grabbed Poochie—or tried to anyway—but he was out of my reach. Before I know it, I was behind the crowd. I pull my arms free and turn around—of course, it was Monica and Queen. I rolled my eyes.

"Niecey, are you stupid?" Queen spat at me.

"Or are you dumb?" Monica tugged on my arm. "Come on, let's go."

Queen pushed my back and they dragged me to the windowsill. "You know Nasty Nate don't play," she said.

“Ya’ll,” I screamed. “We gotta get Poochie—” That’s when we heard something explode. It felt like the whole room was moving but still at the same time. I just kept screaming for Poochie, but Queen and Monica pushed me out the window onto the fire escape. They kept saying to go, but like five, ten people ran out right behind me. I don’t know how many, really, but it was a lot of people. I fell into a corner and just stared at the window until I heard it again. I screamed for Poochie, but I couldn’t see him. I just saw people running and shit. Everybody screaming. I don’t know where he went. He was right next to me, you know? He was right next to me and then he wasn’t. The room exploded again, and I saw two hands pull the window shut. I ran down the fire escape and ain’t stop till I got home.

I ain’t seen him after that, you know? I asked lil Kendra every day if she saw Poochie, but she was no help. One day I was sitting with Monica and Queen, again, in front of the building. I asked Monica and Queen if they saw Poochie.

“Why do you keep asking about him?” Queen sat up on the bench and turned her head. “He almost got us killed.”

I kicked the dirt in the little patch of grass next to us. “You know it was all Nasty Nate fault.”

Queen stood up in front of me. “You ain’t hear, huh?”

“Don’t seem like she did,” Monica said, standing next to her sister.

I looked up at them. “Hear what?”

“Poochie was the one with the gun.” Monica popped her gum. “He told Nasty Nate to chill and when he didn’t . . .”

I started laughing. “Poochie don’t carry no gun.”

“Oh, it’s funny,” Queen smirked. “Why you think Nasty Nate been walking around for the last month with his arm in a damn sling?” I stopped laughing. “Poochie tried to shoot that fool for messing with his doped-out brother.”

“Ain’t nothing funny, now.” Monica folded her arms while popping her gum again. “Listen, Poochie a dead man walkin’.”

“Moonie don’t even do drugs,” I said. We all the same height but I felt small, you know? Like I had something to prove to them. “That’s how I know y’all lying.”

Monica and Queen looked at each other and sat back down.

Monica sighed and was like, “Well you wanna be all up on that dead man, go ahead.”

Queen joined in: “It don’t matter where that boy is, Nasty Nate sure gone find him.”

I turned my back on them and started walking. “I’ll be back.” My face was so hot. I was convinced they ain’t know shit. Even if Poochie did have a gun, he wasn’t stupid enough to do something like what they was sayin’. I knew it.

“Where you going?” the ghetto twins sang.

I kept walking until I got in front of Papi’s. I ain’t know if Poochie was finna be there, but I went. Then I heard him.

“Ayo, shawty.” I turned and saw Poochie at the end of the block.

I walked up to him. “Ain’t nobody ya shawty, Poochie,” I said, sizing him up. He was wearing black again, and I ain’t dumb, you know? There had to be a reason he was still wearing it. I felt like it had something to do with Nasty Nate. Maybe the ghetto twins were right. “I thought something happened to you.”

“So, you lookin’ for me again?” He stays smiling. I rolled my eyes as he hugged me. Normally, I wouldn’t let him touch me like that, but I was scared, you know? I really thought something happened to him, and then with Monica and Queen calling him *a dead man walking*. I needed answers. When he let go, he just frowned at me, like he knew I was disappointed.

“See, I’m aiight. No holes.” Poochie pulled up his shirt. His abs were there, and no holes like he said.

I sighed. “What happened that night? Monica and Queen saying you—”

“You listening to the ghetto twins?” Poochie laughed and pulled down his shirt. “You finna pull up again?”

“To 7G? Ion know,” I said. I put my hands on my hips. “Is my life finna be in danger?”

“You ain’t gotta worry about that no more.” Poochie ain’t look at me.

“And why is that, Poochie?” I turned his face to me, and he still looked away. “Poochie, the fuck did you do?”

“I took care of it, alright?” Poochie jerked his head from my hand.

Something told me not to ask any more questions. I said I'd pull up, and I did. I tried to get Monica and Queen to come through, but they said they wasn't with it. They said I must be stupid and dumb not to know something sneaky be happening in 7G. They said that at the party they got pulled into a room with mad guys. The guys wouldn't let them leave either, until they heard Nasty Nate arguing. Besides, I must've been out of my mind to hang with Poochie, knowing what he did. I just thought they were odeeing, you know? Not that they knew what was going on, they was in a room anyway. They said they was scared, but I ain't them. I can hold my own.

So, I pulled up. Alone.

I got to 7G at like 9:30 that night. The door was open when I got there like they was expecting somebody at any moment. I closed the door behind me and locked the top lock. I looked to my left to see Moonie was back in that same spot in the kitchen. The grey couch moved to the middle of the large living room. I still couldn't see anything of Ms. Natalie's there; it's like they just wiped her clean of the place and trying to start fresh. Ion even know how they got the place. To this day, I still don't know.

Poochie was sitting by the window in that same yellow chair. I walked up to him, sat down. Right on that same windowsill. "You ever sleep?"

"What you mean?" Poochie licked the edge of a blunt closed.

"Every time I see you, you wide awake. It's 9:35 right now, and you still as awake as when I saw you earlier at noon." I reached over and took the blunt from his hands and lit it.

"Yeah, I be sleeping and shit." He licked his lips. I felt a tingle, I'm not gonna lie, but I shook it off. "But right now, I'm chillin. You look nice."

I took in my baby blue Bodycon dress with no sleeves and my white Air Force Ones through my reflection in the window. I handed him the blunt. "Not as nice as you, Mr. Jordans."

Poochie laughed and took a hit. I crossed my legs. The place was different without the strobe lights and smoke. It still smelled like weed, of course, and something foul. Like something burning, or like something was burning and the smell was lingering. I watched

as Moonie moved from the kitchen to the couch, flopping down like his body was weightless.

“Ayo, Poochie, who place is this?” I reached to take the blunt back.

“Moonie’s.” Poochie exhaled dark grey smoke. “You like it?” I rolled my eyes, and Poochie laughed. “Oh, Ms. Niecy bougie now, huh?”

“A blind man could see this ain’t it, baby boy.” I took a hit. “Ms. Natalie had this place together. I’m scared to see the bathroom down that hall.” I laughed and pointed at the dark hallway. If you ain’t know the place before all this, you wouldn’t even know the hallway was there. It opened up just enough to get someone through and led straight to the bathroom and one of the bedrooms. The other bedroom was by the kitchen, and the kitchen led out to the living room.

Poochie and I locked eyes. “Why you chilling with me all of a sudden?” he questioned. “You know you been dissing me since we was thirteen.”

“Boy, I say hi to you every day,” I exhaled.

“Yeah but I been trying for three years to get you to chill with me.” Poochie leaned back in his chair. His black t-shirt rose up and there was a cloth with blood on it. Poochie caught me staring and pulled his shirt down quick.

“What happened there, Poochie?”

“Nothing.” He lit the blunt again and inhaled deep.

“That wasn’t there before.” I couldn’t look at him. I didn’t want to. I thought about Queen and Monica. *There ain’t something right about 7G.* What did happen that night?

“It’s nothing.” Poochie took another hit and passed it to me. “You gone answer my question, tho?”

I was quiet because I wanted to ask more about the blood. Instead I said, “You should have said you was lighting me up.” I laughed. Poochie ain’t tho.

I stared at Poochie in his dark eyes, for maybe a couple seconds, and this fool kissed me! I pushed him back and the blunt dropped to the floor.

“Fuck is you doing?” I screamed.

“Why you chillin with me if you not with the shits?” he screamed back.

“Fool, you think this is some movie shit? You light up someone and you kiss ’em?” Poochie put his head down. Moonie ain’t move the whole time. “Look, you cool, or whatever, but—”

“I get it, Niecy,” Poochie stopped me and peered out the window. Like how he did before; like he’s searching for something. He got this real sad face on, so I asked him again.

“Poochie, what’s wrong?” I stood up and crossed my arms.

“Nothing, Niecy, damn.” He ain’t look at me. Ion know why he talking to me like that either. It was just a kiss. I ain’t gonna pretend to like it if I don’t. “Why don’t you just go?”

“Poochie, it’s only . . .” I stopped when Poochie waved me off. Yeah, just like that. My momma ain’t raise no beggar, so I let it go. I said bye and I started to leave. He ain’t get up. I kept on walking.

I get to Moonie and I stood in front of him. He ain’t move. All I’m thinking is, this fool don’t got no manners just like his damn brother. I got closer to him, leaning, and started waving in his face. That’s when I saw the needle in his hand. His eyes were closed. Poochie was still looking out the window.

I left.

I decided to stop at Papi’s for a smashie—you know, those hot sandwiches with ham, cheese, and mayo. It was like 10:30 now and I was starving. I just finished smoking—I was hungry. Papi was there of course, no shirt on, smoking a cigarette. I picked up a quarter water and went back to the counter. Papi ain’t have nothing to say to me, which was weird because he always was saying something. I ain’t complain, though. After I paid, I walked back down the block, into the back alley, behind Poochie building. I was just high and strolling. I ain’t expect to see it, ya know? I was just going home. I was high and hungry. I wasn’t even seeing where I was walking, and to be honest, if I ain’t trip then I wouldn’t have even noticed him.

But there he was, just lying there, you know? His blood was everywhere. I couldn’t believe it, like I just was with him. I ain’t see nobody. Nobody was outside, and nobody was on the fire escapes. I ain’t know what to do so I held him, calling for help. Screaming

Moonie name, maybe he could hear me and come outside. Help me, you know?

Yeah, this the same night that heroin took Moonie. I know, same night. But I ain't know that until later, so I screamed for him over and over. Moonie! Moonie! It's your brother! But he ain't come.

Poochie was there. I held him, rocking him. Like what do you do, when you see someone on the ground like that? Ion know CPR or nothing like that. Ion even remember if I cried, but I mean who don't cry? Not cos I loved him or anything but because he was cool. He was my friend, you know? So, I held him, and I probably cried. They had to peel me off of him, the ambulance guys. I ain't wanna let go, I left him once and this happened.

Nah, I don't know who called. But I know they came, and I was holding on to him so tight. They peeled my fingers one by one, and I just lost it.

My momma say the dead bodies you see become haints. Haints? They like these ghosts but people who know you. They watch you—don't let you forget that you saw them dead. They gotta make it to heaven or hell but until then, there they were. Ion know. I ain't wanna think of Moonie and Poochie like some haints. I want 'em ta be angels, watch over me. Ion know. Ion want them to be no haint. I ain't seen 'em since, so maybe they found their way.

Ion know how Poochie ended up like that. I just kept screaming for Moonie, but he ain't never come. Moonie ain't never come. When the ambulance left with him, I was covered in Poochie blood. After that summer, my momma sent me to live in Virginia with her mother. That's how I ended up here—in Virginia. I ain't seen Poochie or Moonie since.

Poochie was cool, you know? He was my friend. We took baths together. We talked every day outside of Papi's. Ion even know if I believed the ghetto twins that it was his gun that night because I know him—he ain't finna hurt nobody. He ain't never hurt nobody. Ion know what happened to him. All I know is he ain't deserve all that. He was left there like an animal in the street and ain't nobody spoke up and said they saw anything. Poochie was my friend, he ain't deserve all that. He was cool. Rememba that while you finish

this—what's it called again? Oh, right. Documentary. Well, rememba that. Your daddy was cool.

CREATIVE NONFICTION

Frankie Kavakich

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS & DADDY ISSUES

I was sitting at the dining room table in my friend Marchy's house in the summer before my junior year of college when I got the text from Mother: "Dad flipped out broke J's phone J ran out of the house."

Surrounded by my close friends, getting ready to play *Dungeons and Dragons*, I didn't know how to take that. Suddenly the beige walls, the beige ceiling, the dull wooden table, golden hour streaming through the window, and, from out in the living room, the whistling snores of Marchy's dog Lucky feel like too much, too soon. There's no living in sepia tones when your mother tells you your abusive father has struck again.

Across from me sat Marchy himself, tan and lithe and grinning at a small figurine of his character, and next to me sat my best friend Ciara, who curled a strand of thick, light brown hair around her finger while scrolling through Facebook on her phone. Her eyeliner could poke my eye out. Patrick, or Pat, who sat opposite Cir, quietly sketched his character, far too focused to notice me at all. I could see myself in his pitch-black hair. Icy cold, tombstone-shaped anxiety plummeted to the pit of my stomach.

"What's up, Frunk?" Marchy asked, his thick eyebrows knitted. The silly nickname they had bestowed upon me barely registered. I tensed and relaxed my jaw in an attempt to hide any expression I might have made.

Marchy had proven a scary kind of empath, one who could feel the vibe of a room shift at the drop of a dime. He's smart enough to hold solid conversations about all eleven dimensions (which, apparently, exist) and that somehow crosses over into being good at figuring out someone's emotional state. My friends and I supposed it was just his perceptiveness; he was good at studying things. I smiled as I usually did, all teeth and no tact, and reached over to scrub my

fingers through his spongy brown hair. “Mom needs me to call her; nothing major. Where’s Ty?”

“On his way,” Cir said, staring at me with those all-seeing eyes I hated and loved. “What’s Mom want?” She spoke of my mother as her own, as per usual. Most summers she and I would spend every night in my basement, just talking, and from there she would sleep over. She was almost like a second sister in that regard, though she was spared my father’s abuse.

“I don’t know; that’s why I’m calling her, yeah?” I laughed. Cir flicked her wrist and glanced back down at her phone. I took the opportunity to push away from the table, round the wall that separated the dining room from the tan-tiled kitchen, and thump quickly down the stairs to the side door that led out into the balmy New Jersey summer. The reek of cut grass and boiling asphalt assaulted my senses. I was calling my mother before I even hit the end of the pock-marked driveway.

“Frankie?” she said, her voice tight like it always was after she watched movies about true love or dying children. “Have you heard from your brother?” The brother in question was Johnnie, a.k.a. J, a.k.a. the middle child of the Doe brood. He was my opposite in every way: an athlete, a boyfriend, a realist. People say we look alike, though he has at least five inches on me. At least I had three years on him. We shared the same thick, dark hair, glossy brown eyes, and pouty doll lips. I only wish I could take his luscious eyelashes and expressionless face for myself.

“How could I? You said Dad busted his phone. What happened?”

“Dad got Johnnie a cake and you know him; he’s a teenager and he was acting,” her breath caught and she lowered her voice, “like an ass, you know, and Dad wasn’t having it. He tried to grab him and when J didn’t let him, he grabbed his phone and threw it at him, and J ran out of the house and we don’t know where he is.” Her tongue tangled up as she rushed through the story. Johnnie had turned seventeen that day, August 12th, and of course my father had to go and ruin it, of course.

“Where’s Dad?” My fists were white knuckled. I walked up and down the sidewalk as I listened, witnessed by the arriving Tyler, who waved to me as he got out of his silver car and passed boxes of

miniatures and dice to Ciara, who must have come out to help. Those boxes contained many of the trinkets needed to play our game that day. I forced another smile for the two. They walked inside without interrupting my call.

“Your father is laying on the couch now,” said my mother.

“Is he going to do anything about it?”

“Of course not.” She laughed. “Of course not.”

“Should I come home?” I was in Nutley, twenty minutes away from my lopsided box-house in Little Falls. Fifteen if I leaned into my true nature as a New Jerseyian. My mind raced, and I asked, “Have you called anyone in the neighborhood? Where’s Cayce?” Another bolt of panic seared through me as I imagined my little sister, who was still only eleven, seeing this outburst.

“Cayce’s out with her friends, honey. No, no, don’t make a scene; your father is already in a mood just—can you text Nick for me?” She mumbled. Nick was our neighbor, two years my junior, and one of Johnnie’s best friends—if Johnnie went anywhere within the general vicinity of our neighborhood, it might have been to Nick’s.

“Sure, duh.” I tried to sound like I was smiling despite my skin feeling as though it were covered in centipedes. “Love you, text me if he comes home?”

“Yes, yeah. I will.”

She hung up and I stood there, phone still to my ear, staring out across the street at the viridescent trees that lined the curb. The summer gargled around me. I glanced back at Marchy’s house, a tan-colored suburban nightmare, and focused entirely on the out-of-place porthole window next to the glossy, disused front door. No one can see me, don’t freak out, don’t emote, hold it in, I told myself. I sucked in a deep breath and felt my face contort into a mask of unease, but I still walked back to Marchy’s home, slipped in through the side door, and wandered quietly back into the dining room.

Tyler, with his shiny hair and lanky frame melting in the wooden seat, smiled as I approached the table. I saw Tyler kill himself in a local playhouse’s production of *Spring Awakening* and it was so shocking I decided to write a story based on the experience. Aside from that, I think he could be quite uninspired in his creative endeavors—if anything, he is just a “by the book” type guy.

“Finally joining us, huh?” he teased. I gave him a smile or a grimace and sat down. As the others set the table for the game and chatted about their days, I looked down at my phone and let my nails tap against the screen, thinking of what to message Nick.

I bit my lip and texted him: “Hey bud, Johnnie and our dad had a fight and he ran out of the house have you seen him?”

Waiting for the text back would have killed me. I locked my phone and sat straighter just as Tyler rose to give his starting spiel: “So, we return to the land of Faerun, outside the cave of the Mad Necromancer. . . .” My eyes focused on the hand-me-down mini my father gave me when he passed on his old *Dungeons and Dragons* gear to me. Miniatures, also called minis, are the little figurines that mark our placement on the boxed-out maps. You move them in combat to signify any change in where you are standing. The one my father gave me was a male wizard with a long, white beard, a star-spotted cloak, and a glass orb—he was a stand-in while I waited for the mini I ordered to be shipped out. My character was a woman, a young woman at that, and had no use for glass orbs or star cloaks. Staring at it, while my hands tightened around my phone and my knee bounced, reminded me of him.

My father, John Doe, was a coal-town kind of man. Born and raised in Bentleyville, Pennsylvania, by two cold, Slavic parents, my father was the youngest of four sons and would never live that down. His mother, my late grandmother Janet, was a coal miner turned judge, and it was at her funeral that I saw my father cry for the first and last time. He raised my siblings and me like he was raised: loudly and sternly, all covered up by a blanket of conditional love for whichever child achieved the most that week. Words never worked for John Doe—if you were upset with him, he would happily buy back your affections with a new game system or movie that strained the family finances. This transactional love, paired with badly hidden anger issues and a habit of guilt-tripping even the youngest Doe child, evoked righteous hatred within me. To top it all off, Father even has a “cop voice” he used with us when he thought he’d catch us in the act of doing something we weren’t supposed to be doing. I still find it hard to look him in the eye without feeling like I’m lying to him somehow.

I am no longer choked by his oppressive smog, mostly because I have learned how to hide in my own house. Mother says I'm adaptable. I taught myself to know his mood by the weight of his footsteps and the harshness of his sighs, as though he were an apex predator. I crawl into my burrow when he is at his loudest and placate him in the open with cheek kisses and "I love you's" when he calls out for them. Johnnie and Cayce, on the other hand, still don't know how to avoid the brunt of his rage. Not yet. They set him off over the smallest things: a sock out of place, dust on the stairs, four dishes left unwashed. I suffer in the knowledge that I can barely help them through it without throwing myself into the fire. My mother once called me selfish for that, and I know she was right.

"Frankie," Tyler summoned, tapping his pen against the table, "what're you going to do?"

"Hm? What?" I glanced down at the tan, dry-erase mat depicting the map of the Mad Necromancer's cave and found myself alone in a marker-drawn room. Everyone else's miniatures made it to the room ahead of me, and the path was blocked by a massive cave in, brought to life by a few haphazardly placed dice.

"What do you do?" Tyler prompted again. I stared down, mind caught between fatherly trauma and dastardly dungeon traps. My friends and I, called a "party" in the game, were currently delving into a dungeon, which could best be described as a collection of rooms containing various puzzles and encounters. It was the most board game-like part of *Dungeons and Dragons*, the most static thing in its construction.

"Can I see my friends at all?" I asked. My character, Wren Mooncrest, was supposed to be a prodigy wizard, so I had plenty of spells to fix my current situation. Her backstory also included daddy issues, funnily enough. Plagued by the guilt of bearing a deaf, strange-eyed daughter, Wren's father went out into the night and never returned, leaving her mother and her to fend for themselves in the treacherous alleyways of Waterdeep. When I look back on many of my stories and characters, most of them do, and most of them also had the means to easily fix them. I wish magic could solve *my* daddy issues. All I had was a set of dice and a desperate, shuddering wish to forget they even existed at all.

“Roll for me, survival,” Tyler requested. Survival was a skill meant to see if characters within the world of *Dungeons and Dragons* would be wise enough to see or understand what the player might be trying to act upon. Wren, as a wizard, was both intelligent and wise. My chances were great. I picked up a purple twenty-sided die and rolled high enough to gain some new information from Tyler: “There is a crack between two of the larger rocks; you can see into the other cavern through it. What do you do?”

“I cast Misty Step to enter the room,” I said. The spell itself is simple, you can move to a spot you see within a certain distance, like teleportation. Tyler grinned and described my character vanishing into a puff of purple-tinted smoke and reappearing between Marchy’s wizard, November, and Ciara’s rogue, Ladon. Pat’s barbarian, Dayton, clapped me on the shoulder, and I jerked my arm in real life to articulate the action, then forced a smile and a laugh. They spoke to me in character, all over-blown accents and specific inflections and jokes you just *had* to be there for. They were entirely other people. I was too caught up in myself to join them.

“You all continue down into the cavern, tip-toeing through the dank, dark rooms, wearier than before as the last trap nearly separated all of you. Distantly, you hear manic laughter. Someone is close.” Tyler stood, his hands waving over the map, his voice dreadful and meant to fuel our anxiety. I shifted in my seat and glanced down at my phone in my lap. Nick had responded. My jaw creaked and set. I tried so hard to look calm, look bored. An ocean of emotions was building within me, and I didn’t have the means to swallow it back down.

I could feel Cir’s eyes on the side of my face, but I ignored her and opened my messages to see Nick’s text: “Haven’t seen him, no. What happened?”

“Gotta run to the bathroom,” I said to the table, standing up too suddenly. My fingers urged me to respond now but, at the same time, I was close to tears. I couldn’t cry in front of my friends. I knew Cir wanted to say something, ask a question. I couldn’t deal with her advice right now. I just wanted to be angry, to overthink or spiral or float away. I wanted.

What did I want?

I turned and walked away from the table, into the living room which glowed gold in the setting sun. The large television that set in a chocolate brown TV case shrunk next to the large teal couch. The stairs were pressed into the far wall, which was decorated with blue and brown wallpaper. Lucky was curled up behind the couch, wheezing in her sleep. An old mutt, she had coarse white fur and a big black nose. When I walked past her, she woke up, looked at me like a frazzled grandmother, and I wanted to spill my guts to a damn dog. I shoved the urge down. Dog therapy came later, of course. I couldn't afford to get caught crying into an old dog's side; my reputation was at stake.

I ascended the steep wooden staircase into the dark second floor of Marchy's home. The windows upstairs were shuttered, and little light permeated the oppressively small hallway that was more doors than wall. The bathroom stood at the top of the stairs, a pitch-black rectangle of uncertainty. I used my iPhone's locked screen to light my way like some intrepid explorer diving into the unknown. Excelsior.

Once I entered the bathroom and shut the door behind me, I opened my phone and typed out a message to Nick: "Fuck. Dad messed up his phone and he ran out before anything could happen. If you're not busy could you keep an eye out for him?"

A mere thirty seconds later, he wrote back: "Can do. I'm gonna check the neighborhood. I'll call if I find him." Bless his heart.

"Thanks so much, really. Thanks," I typed. I turned and found my reflection in the flat mirror over the porcelain sink. I was thinner than usual, blessed with a jawline and visible collarbones, thanks to a year of twenty-minute walks to school and a lack of appetite which Cir still swears was me starving myself. My skin was tanned from the summer sun, but my short dark hair always made me seem paler, weaker. The shark eyes, framed by sleep deprivation and dirty glasses, didn't help me look any healthier. The single bathroom fixture above cast me in a ghoulish yellow light, as it did the rest of the Mediterranean tiled room. Everything smelled like bleach. The shower and tub combo and toilet stood in complete silence, just barely reflecting my figure in their polished sides. The floor beneath my feet was cold enough to suck the heat out of me, and when I glanced down I could, again, see the smudgy echo of myself looking back up. So many me's,

and yet I wasn't truly there. I had become a 3D image of a person—looking at my reflection, I could tell some part of me was just three inches too far to the right while my physical body remained in place.

I licked my lips and remembered the time my father sat me down at the dining room table to talk about a high school report card. I had received another D in math. That wouldn't do. The black granite table-top, always cold, cut into my side as I leaned forward with my head in my hand, trying to look uninterested.

Much like my brother, I had blandly spoken back to my father, said something along the lines of, "What does it matter, not like you were the perfect student?" and got rewarded with a sharp slap to the face. My head rocked, but I staved off the urge to cry and turned my head to meet his gaze. *Fuck you*, I thought. My ears burned and my brain was filled with thousands of ringing, banging, screaming bells. Something hot trickled down my chin. Blood. My top lip had caught on my braces. I couldn't even feel it.

Father's expression had wavered. He gave a crooked smile when he said, "Look what you made me do."

I pressed my forehead against the mirror. Breath flew out of me, quick and unnatural. I rarely let myself spiral so spectacularly at a social gathering, but that day, with my brother somewhere alone and my mother alone at home with my father, I couldn't help but fall into my own head and fester in memories. The sink creaked beneath me. Thoughts to go home came and went. I wanted to stay and have fun. I wanted to get over myself. I wanted to avoid this. I wanted my brother home safe. Out of habit, I turned the sink on as hot as it could go.

I don't cut myself, though sometimes I wish I could. It would have made things less complicated, but I'm afraid of wrists and veins and looking pitiful. To compensate, I take showers or wash my hands with the water turned too hot. I did that then, staring right into my own eyes as the water in the sink began to steam up the mirror. It was never hot enough to leave marks, only to turn my skin lobster red, and as I plunged my hands under the spray, I felt my memories wash away. My blood roared.

In the ruins of my near-panic attack, in front of a mirror that wasn't even mine, I considered if this was me worrying about my

brother or me just feeling sorry for myself. Johnnie and I rarely spoke about our home issues; our mutual understanding of each other's personalities was often enough. We were both quiet beings, more at ease in the dark than a dining room table. Whenever we did speak about our father it was late at night, whenever I was up seeking food to binge eat and he was getting home late from hockey practice. There, on the wood floor of our kitchen, while dad was still at work, we would talk in hushed whispers about how we hated him, how school was too hard, how people were too complicated. I thought, *If he doesn't come back, who will talk to me about things like that?* But I knew he would come back. Johnnie was a reasonable boy, even if he was still teenager-stupid. He couldn't leave Cayce and Mom and me behind. What did we have if not each other in that house?

I dried my hands with a teal towel hanging on the bathroom door and exhaled. My fingers closed tightly around my phone and with a final sigh I opened the door, shut off the light, and descended the stairs. I passed Lucky, who was snoring louder than an opera. I squeezed past the couch, around the coffee table, and slid into the dining room. I ruffled Ciara's fluffy brown hair as I passed behind her chair and settled into my seat with a coy smile. All tact, no teeth.

"Have you all died without me yet?" I asked, poking my miniature.

"Not yet, we were waiting for you before we entered the final room. What took so long?" Marchy asked, leaning forward.

My fingertips were still bright red. I balled my hands into fists. "Had to call Mom again, it's whatever. C'mon, let's kick this Necro-bastard's ass," I said, grinning. When I tried to hide my hands under the table, Cir reached out and took one in her own. She squeezed tight, holding me steady, grounding me. Tyler stood tall and ready to wax poetic about another gray-stone cavern and a man whose face remained cloaked in shadow. Marchy and Pat leaned in, nodding and cracking jokes between each booming line of dialogue, and it felt normal, oh-so-normal.

"Please roll me some initiative, everyone," Tyler said. We all picked up our twenty-sided dice and rolled them to determine who would go first. Somehow, it was me.

I joined Tyler standing up, cast my hand across the map until

I found the miniature of the Mad Necromancer, and I said, “I cast Magic Missile!” The fight began with three decisive bolts of pure magic to the chest of our enemy. My friends all nodded their heads and prepared for the next round of combat. I was finally ready to fight for something.

The incident with my brother ended just as it had begun: without preamble, with no lessons learned or climaxes in sight.

An hour deep into an explosive magical battle, my phone buzzed once. A text from Nick stood out among notifications from unused applications: “Johnnie came back, he’s all good. Going to come over to my place. We’ll see you?”

I unfurled my fists and, finally, found myself able to breathe.

Contributors' Notes

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