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Cross Fire

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An abstract of

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Abstract

Cross Fire

By Christopher Labaza

Cross Fire is a collection of short stories seeking to examine what it means to come of age for a generation of Southerners bombarded by political polarization, technological revolution, and cultural reckoning. Family, love, and loss, culture, technology, and politics intertwine over the course of six stories as young protagonists try to find their way through the rapidly-evolving crossfire of modern American life. The stories invite the reader to ponder who these characters are, how they came to be, and what they will become.

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Living History

It was still dark when Theo was shaken awake, scooped up in his blanket, and carried down to the car. He felt a cereal bar being pressed into his hand, and he closed his small fingers around it. A figure who smelled like his dad set him in a car seat and buckled him in.

“Dad?” Theo said through a yawn.

“Yes?”

“Where are we going?”

“I want to show you something. You can sleep on the way,” his dad said as he set Theo’s pair of sandals on the floor beneath his seat. He went back into the house, then came out again, a cooler over his shoulder and a coffee mug in his hand. He put the cooler in the trunk and climbed in the driver’s seat.

“Ready?” he said, looking at Theo through the rearview mirror. The boy yawned.

“Mom...?” Theo said, trailing off.

“It’s just us guys today, buddy.”

The boy’s father reached up and hit the button to close the garage door, backed out of the driveway, and, as Theo’s eyes drifted closed once more, pulled out onto the street.

#

Theo awoke as sunlight spilled in through the windshield. He rubbed his eyes and yawned.

“Morning, buddy,” his dad said from the driver’s seat. “We’re here.”

Theo was looking out the window at the other cars parked on a grassy lot, trees surrounding them on two sides. Up ahead, he saw the tops of white tents and a thin column of smoke rising into the sky.

“What’s over there?”

“We’re at a reenactment,” his dad said.

Theo sounded out the four-syllable word, not sure what it meant.

“Come on, let’s put on our sunscreen.” The boy unbuckled his seat belt and slid down, stepping into his sandals. He opened the door and walked around to the trunk, where his dad was rubbing white lotion into his face.

“Do you need help or do you want to do it by yourself this time?”

“I can do it,” Theo said. He picked up the bottle and squeezed a drop into his hand.

“You’ll need more than that, buddy.”

Theo squeezed the bottle harder, and a glob of lotion flew out and fell into the grass.

He bent down and tried to pick it up.

“Don’t do that,” his dad said. “Just leave it. We have more. It’s dirty.”

“But what about the grass?”

“The rain will wash it away. Come on. Hurry up.”

“It’s sunny today.”

“What?”

“There aren’t any clouds.”

“Yeah, so?”

“You said the rain—”

“Come on, let’s get a move on. Here.” Theo’s dad wiped the lotion from his son’s hand and began rubbing it into the boy’s arms.

“Your mom won’t be happy if you get a sunburn. Here, close your eyes.” With a few swipes of his hands, he covered the boy’s entire face.

“It’s cold,” Theo whined.

“You’ll be all right. Rub it in all the way. I don’t want to see any white.”

Theo’s dad looked in the trunk and pulled out the cooler. He slung it over his shoulder.

“Ready?”

“Yes.” Theo was wiping his gooey hands on his shorts.

“This way.”

Together they walked out of the parking lot, past a sign that Theo couldn’t read, towards the tents and rising smoke.

#

There was a man with a gun. The gun was the first thing Theo noticed, anyway. Made of wood and blackened metal, it was propped against the man’s shoulder and had a polished blade on the end. Theo reached for his dad’s leg and looped a finger around a strap on his cargo shorts.

“See that, buddy?” Theo’s dad said. “That’s a revolutionary war soldier. Look at his tricorne hat and belt buckles. Just like a real man from the olden days.”

“Is that a real gun?” asked Theo.

“Yes, it is. It’s called a flintlock musket. It’s very old.”

“Why does that man have it?”

“It’s a reenactment. The people here dress up and relive history.”

Theo kept his eyes on the gun.

“Come on, we need to get our tickets.”

They approached the closest tent, where a woman in a dress and bonnet sat fanning herself with a brochure.

“Welcome,” she said.

“One adult and one kid,” Theo’s dad said.

“Just the two of you?”

“Yup, just me and my little man today.”

“How old is he?” asked the woman.

“Six, or, no. Five, right, buddy?”

“Kids are only free if they’re four or under. That’ll be ten dollars.”

“Oh,” said Theo’s dad, frowning. He reached for his wallet, pulling out a five and then fishing around for the last few ones he had. “There you go,” he said.

“Thank you, sir.” She took the money and handed Theo’s dad a brochure. “Here’s a map of the premises today.”

Theo’s dad opened the map.

“Today’s event is located around the historical site of Fort Sterne, one of the oldest historical sites in the state. The fort’s no longer standing today, but it would have been somewhere around here.” She pointed to the center of the map. “We have a 1750s’ garrison set up here, which includes displays of barracks life, trade crafts, open fire cooking, and historical weapons demonstrations at ten-thirty, noon, and one-thirty. Those will occur in the field here. On the back of your brochure is more information about the fort as well as the skirmish that we are remembering today.”

“Okay, thank you. And what’s this over here by the river?”

“That’s the Indian camp. It’s a little small this year, so it might not be worth your time.”

“Oh, okay.”

“No problem. You folks enjoy your visit.”

Theo and his dad stepped to the side while the next guests purchased their tickets.

“All right, buddy. Where to first?”

“What’s a skirmish, Dad?”

“Huh? Oh, it’s a fight.” He was looking at the brochure. “It says here that a group of Cherokee warriors attacked the fort in 1756 and had to be fended off by the colonists.”

“There was a battle?”

“Yes.”

“Who won?”

“Who do you think?” Theo’s dad laughed. “Sometimes at these things they reenact the battle so you can see what it looked like. I heard it was a hard-won victory, so it should be a good show.”

“You mean they fight each other?”

“They sure do. You remember the soldier we saw. Over there.” He pointed to the man with the gun.

“With real guns? Does it hurt?”

“They don’t use bullets, silly. It’s just pretend.”

“Oh.”

“Come on, let’s go check out the barracks.”

They made their way to the cluster of tents. More people were over here, some wearing historical wool garments and others in plain clothes. Theo stayed close to his dad, looking at the faces of all the people pretending. He didn't know that adults could play dress-up.

A group of them were sitting around a campfire, talking amongst themselves. A man with gray whiskers was tending to a spit over the fire, turning a glistening piece of meat over the flames. The air smelled like rich and fatty char.

"Hello, there," said the man through his whiskers. "You want to try cooking like a colonial soldier?"

"Want to, buddy?"

Theo shrank behind his dad's leg.

"It's real easy, friend."

"He gets shy sometimes," said Theo's dad. He turned to his son. "Are you sure?"

Theo shook his head.

"Not today, I'm afraid."

"Well, that's all right. He's got a few years yet before he has to enlist in the Continental Army." When the man laughed, the buttons on the front of his coat jiggled.

When his dad looked down at Theo, the boy feebly shook his head.

"I guess not today. Thank you, though." Theo's dad smiled faintly. "Come on, buddy. Let's go."

They walked farther into the tents until they saw a crowd gathered around a smokestack.

"What do you think this is?" Theo's dad grabbed the boy's hand and led him towards the crowd. As they drew closer, they heard the plink of metal on metal.

“Gather ‘round, gather ‘round,” a voice said from the center of the crowd. “Woah, not too close there. It’s dangerous over here. Stay behind the ropes.”

“A female? Huh,” Theo heard his dad mutter as they found a view in the crowd. They were looking at a blacksmith pounding a rod on an anvil. She wore a leather apron and gloves with black jeans and a t-shirt underneath. Behind her, a bright white flame burned in her mobile forge.

“Don’t stare directly at the fire, y’all. That’s how you go blind.” She lifted the bent iron rod, examined it for a second, and then plunged it into a bucket by her feet. It hissed as it hit water.

“I’m making j hooks today. I heat the metal, bang it into shape, cool it down, and repeat until it’s done.” She lifted the rod out of the bucket and put it into the fire. “Any questions so far?”

Theo was intrigued. He counted the number of hammers hanging on a tool rack by the fire, each one slightly different than the last. When the blacksmith brought the metal rod to the anvil and swung a hammer down, the boy flinched and smiled with delight. He pressed closer, working his way to the ropes.

“What kind of fuel do you use for the fire?” someone asked.

“This here’s coal. It probably wouldn’t’ve been used back in the 1750s; they would’ve used charcoal.”

As Theo watched, the crackle of the fire and the sound of hammering was interrupted by the sudden techno beats of his dad’s ringtone. Theo felt his dad’s sweaty hand slip out from his grasp as he dug into his pocket for his phone.

“I have to take this, buddy,” he said, peering at the little digital screen. A look of distress washed over his face. “It’s your mother. Come on.” They worked their way out of the crowd and found a shady spot beneath a tree.

A woman in a brown dress and sun hat passed them and said, “What’s that strange contraption you’ve got there?” with a smirk. Theo’s dad scowled at her. He flipped open the phone and answered.

“Hey, Denise ... I told you yesterday. We’re at the reenactment.” He pulled the phone away from his face, covering it with his hand, and looked at Theo. “Just a minute, buddy.”

He put the phone to his ear again. “Bad timing? I think it’s good to get him out of the house while all this is going on.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You know I’ve been planning this trip for months now.” He looked at Theo again, who had crouched down and started pulling up grass. “I’m sorry, buddy, this’ll only take a minute. Why don’t you go wander around a bit?”

“Okay.” Theo stood, dusted off his hands, and walked away from his father.

“Stay close,” his dad called from behind him before continuing his conversation on the phone.

Looking back towards the blacksmith, he saw that the crowd had grown large and impenetrable. He thought for a second, and then remembered the Indian camp. Or the Native American camp, as his kindergarten teacher had taught him to say. He hadn’t seen where the camp was on the map, but he knew it was by the river. So he went the way he thought the river was.

He left the cluster of tents and walked along a field, the sharp grasses poking between the holes in his sandals. This must be the battlefield, he thought. Though he wasn't sure what all that meant. Someone at school had found an arrowhead in a battlefield once.

He crossed the field and came to the forest. Set back in the woods a ways, sitting on the bank of a small creek, was a blue pop-up canopy. Theo saw two figures and a table beneath it. On the table was a small basket of colored fabric shapes.

“Are you lost, child?” one of the figures said as he approached. She was an older woman with colorful clothes, short silver hair, and a face that reminded Theo of his grandma.

“Is this the Native American camp?” Theo asked.

“It is.”

“Then I'm not lost.”

“You're here by yourself?”

“My dad's back there talking to my mom on the phone.” Theo pointed behind him.

“Oh, I see.” The old woman nodded. “You know, I have a granddaughter who's about your age. How old is she now?”

The old woman looked to her companion, a younger woman with a colorful collared blouse and a beaded necklace.

“Six last month,” she said.

The older woman nodded again. “Got any questions for us?” she said, turning to Theo. As he stepped closer, he saw that the women had a quilt with a circular pattern in the center laid out across their laps, and they were sewing.

“Are you—” Theo began.

“Are we what, dear?”

“Are you the Cherokee warriors?”

The women laughed.

“No, we are neither Cherokee nor warriors. We’re members of the Lumbee tribe. I am Marie, and this is my daughter-in-law Barbara.”

“Is that why you’re so far away from everything else?”

“No, no,” Marie said. “We’re way out here because the historical society said our dresses didn’t meet the dress code. Every year they make it harder and harder for us. We almost didn’t come.”

“I think your dresses are nice,” Theo said.

“Thank you.”

“Is that a house on yours?” Theo was looking at Marie, who was wearing a white apron embroidered with colorful shapes and patterns.

“It is. This regalia tells the story of our people in Robeson County, where a lot of us live today.”

“So what’s wrong with your outfits?”

“That’s a good question,” Barbara said.

“They want us to adhere to their ideal standards, but that’s not who we were. Not who we were and not who we are.”

Theo looked at the older woman’s dress, examining the designs more closely, seeing images like a river, a cross, and the same circular pattern that was on the quilt.

“What’s that?” He pointed.

“This is our tribe’s symbol, our pinecone patchwork,” Marie said.

“It doesn’t look like a pinecone to me.”

The old woman laughed.

Barbara reached down and picked a pinecone off the ground. She flipped it to show Theo its bottom.

“See here,” she said, tracing the radiating triangles with her finger. She handed the pinecone to the boy.

“We remember our heritage. We are the people of the pine,” Marie said.

Theo held the pinecone delicately, avoiding the prickles. He saw how intricately the scales spiraled out from the center. Usually he just kicked pinecones or stepped on them to make them crunch. He put this one in his pocket.

“Did you know I saw a gun today? A real one.”

“Oh?” Marie looked over at Barbara.

“The reenactors,” Barbara said.

“Ah, yes.”

“My dad said there’s going to be a battle.”

“No, I don’t think so,” said Marie, scratching her chin. “They stopped reenacting the battle a few years ago.”

“Only after years of protest,” Barbara said.

“Right,” said Marie, shaking her head.

Theo nodded along with her, not quite sure what they meant.

“Oh, who’s this?” Marie said in a lighter tone. She peered over Theo’s head.

Theo turned and saw his dad coming through the woods towards him.

“Theo! I thought I lost you, buddy. You scared me half to death.”

“You told me to wander,” Theo said.

“But why’d you go so far? You should’ve stayed by the settlement.”

“I wanted to see the Native American camp.”

“The ticket woman said not to bother.”

The two women frowned.

“I like it here,” Theo said. “Look.” He pulled the pinecone out of his pocket, some of the scales breaking as he did so.

“What the hell? Why would you do that?”

“Look at the pattern.”

“No.” Theo’s dad took the pinecone and threw it on the ground. “Don’t put pinecones in your pocket, Theo.”

The boy bent down to pick up another. “But look,” he insisted.

“They’re dirty.” Theo’s dad reached in the boy’s pocket and, turning it inside out, brushed out the bits of dirt and debris that the pinecone had left.

Before he was finished, however, Theo squirmed away. Caught in his father’s firm grasp, the boy’s shorts began to stretch and slip down.

“Dad!” Theo screamed, tugging his clothes. His father released his son, who sunk to the ground and curled up in a ball. He dug his hands into the earth and threw clumps of dirt and pine straw at his father.

“Stop it, Theo.”

Theo stuck out his tongue.

“That’s enough!”

“No,” the boy said. He took a handful of dirt and dropped it on his own head.

“Do you want me to spank you?” Theo’s dad approached him, reaching out his hands, but the boy stood and ran behind a tree.

“Kids,” the father said. “You understand.” Theo’s dad said towards the women behind the table, but they had averted their gaze, focused on sewing the quilt.

The man sighed and shook his head.

“Come back here, buddy,” he said as he headed towards his son. “You’re ruining a perfectly good day.”

Theo ran deeper into the woods.

“Don’t make me chase you.” He walked back towards the table. “I’ll wait here until you can control yourself.”

He stood with his hands in his pockets, glancing every now and then from the ground to the women to his son.

“He wasn’t acting like this this morning,” he said. Marie shook her head.

Theo had made his way to the bank of the river. The water looked almost black. It reflected the tall trunks of the pine trees but swallowed almost everything else. He picked up a small rock and threw it into the water. There was a thunk of a splash and little ripples that grew and disappeared. Picking up a stick, he swung it like a sword, hitting a tree trunk until the stick snapped in two. He climbed on a mossy log and walked its length, balancing on it.

He looked back towards the blue canopy that stood out from the rest of the forest. He could see his father staring at the ground and pacing back and forth.

Theo hopped off the log and slowly headed back. He stopped to pick up a pinecone, carrying it with him on his way.

“Feeling better?” his father asked.

“I’m ready to go now,” Theo said, hanging his head.

With a grunt, Theo’s dad turned around and began walking back up the hill towards the settlement. Theo waved to the women before grabbing his dad’s hand and walking beside him.

#

They walked back to the field in silence. When they reached the cluster of tents, they slowed to a stop.

“You shouldn’t run away from me.”

“What’s with that pinecone, anyway?” Theo’s dad asked. The boy still held it in his hand.

“The women said it was their symbol.” He showed his dad the bottom of the cone.

“Oh, yeah?”

“Their heritage.”

“That’s nice.”

“Do we have any symbols, Dad?”

“Umm,” his dad thought for a minute. “The bald eagle, I guess, on the one-dollar bill.”

Theo nodded. His dad was quiet after that. Theo peered ahead and saw a man in the distance, sitting on a stump with a musket resting across his lap.

“They said there isn’t going to be a battle, after all,” he told his dad.

“Really?” his dad said. “Figures, I guess.”

“Are you still mad?” Theo asked.

“No, no. It’s fine. Everything is fine. It’s fine.”

Theo didn’t say anything.

“I guess if there’s nothing left to do here, we should be heading home.” He sighed. “I have our lunches. We can eat them in the car.” He patted the cooler over his shoulder.

Theo still was silent.

“Listen. I shouldn’t have yelled at you. I’m sorry things turned out the way they did today.”

“It’s okay, Dad.”

“No, it’s not okay, but you wouldn’t understand. This was supposed to be one last fun day before things got weird. See, your mother and I ... well, the thing about women is ... actually, I can explain later.”

“Is something wrong?”

“No, no. Everything’s fine. Everything’s fine. Here, do you want a ride back to the car? Don’t drop your pinecone.” He hoisted his son onto his shoulders and turned towards the parking lot. “Come on, buddy. Let’s get out of here.”

Homestead

“Have fun,” Mom called from the kitchen as we stepped out onto the porch, into the pulpy summer air.

It was only a walk. Mom had said it would be good for us. You and your older brother won’t always live under the same roof, you know. You need to spend some time together, she said. Before it’s too late.

The street was quiet and smelled like someone was having a barbeque. Pastel pinks, blues, and purples rippled through the sky, and a golden light limned everything in the neighborhood. Lucy, our 13-year-old rescue, wandered into our neighbors’ yards and sniffed their mailboxes. She no longer pulled like she did when she was a puppy. A gentle tug and she was back on the asphalt. Up ahead, a small shadowed figure was rolling a garbage bin down to the end of her driveway for pick-up in the morning.

“Good evening, Mrs. Newman,” I said.

“Emma! Tyler! And dear old Lucy.” Mrs. Newman bent down and gave Lucy a scratch between the ears. “Wow. Look at y’all, all grown up now. Everything going well?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Everything’s great.”

“Gosh, I can’t believe it. I remember when you kids were this big.” She put her hand at her waist. “Riding your scooters around here and all.”

“I remember that, too.” I laughed.

“Yes. Feels like just yesterday.” She looked between from me to Tyler, smiling. “Well, out for a walk? Beautiful night for it.”

Tyler mumbled acknowledgement.

“Well, I won’t keep you. Enjoy.”

We waved goodbye and continued on.

Tyler set a slow pace. He kept his head down and his hands in his pockets. He was wearing his old hiking boots, the ones he'd had for years. The frayed, untied laces dragged along the pavement.

At the end of our cul-de-sac, I pulled out my phone, pointing the camera at a gap between the houses where I could see the orange sun hovering low in the sky.

“For your Instagram?”

“Maybe.”

“Doesn't that app have enough pictures of sunsets?”

I scoffed, then put my phone away.

We crossed the road to the sidewalk, Lucy pausing on the strip of grass between the road and the sidewalk to pee. A few cars drove by as we waited. Tyler checked his phone. Lucy slowly stood and wagged her tail.

“All done, girlfriend?” I said. “Good dog.”

We walked down the sidewalk, passing one house with the yard that was often littered with an assortment of balls. The family that lived there had moved in a year or so ago, bringing young kids back to the neighborhood. Driving past now and then, I sometimes saw them riding scooters or playing with water guns and balloons. Now they had a table set up with chairs behind it and a cardboard sign that said LEMONADE. Beside it was an overturned cooler with the lid propped open.

The sidewalk curved and ran down a hill that we used to sled down when it snowed and the snow stuck.

We went silently on. I searched for things to turn into conversation. I almost asked Tyler if he remembered sledding, but we hadn't done that in years. The only thing we had in common now, it felt like, was the distant past. We no longer watched TV or movies together or laughed at the same memes anymore. He only texted while I was at college when he needed something.

The present and the future were touchy subjects as well. The uncertainty of his break from school and his possible career paths loomed around us. We were never siblings who told each other *everything*, but we rarely hid things from each other, either. It was probably around middle school, when he joined the soccer team, that I was no longer cool enough to hang out with him. Not that he actively avoided me, he just stopped inviting me to things. We were still friends, but that's when we started drifting apart.

"How was dinner?" Tyler asked, finally breaking the silence.

"Good. Yeah, good. There's leftover macaroni and an extra hot dog on the top shelf of the fridge, if you want."

"Okay."

He hadn't eaten with our parents and me since I'd gotten back from Northwestern a week ago. Dad said that they were trying to give him space to figure things out on his own, after he had dropped out of school last year and was still jobless. There were HELP WANTED signs everywhere, at nearly every fast food place in town. But for some reason he still hadn't even applied anywhere.

That was another subject I didn't feel comfortable discussing with him.

"One thing you missed at dinner, though," I said, "was Mom and Dad's politics. You know how they like to go on rants."

"Yeah."

“They’re worked up about that Civil War memorial in town, as if telling me about it is going to change anything.”

“I’m glad I missed it.”

“They always say how we can have whatever political views we want, but then they lecture me all dinner about it.”

“I know. They can talk forever.”

Tyler stooped to pat Lucy on the head, then kept walking.

“When Dad pulled up a Fox News article about how America was falling apart one statue at a time, I started tuning them out.”

I kicked a pebble off the sidewalk into the grass.

“Yeah, I get that,” Tyler said. “He’s not wrong, though.”

“I mean…” I began, raising an eyebrow.

“Liberals want to tear everything down.”

“That’s what Dad told me.”

“Erase history.”

We came to a stop sign. Lucy pulled her leash taut before realizing we had stopped. A car drove past. We crossed the street.

“I don’t think that’s what’s going on,” I said.

“Sure it is.” He frowned. I guessed he assumed that I would agree with him, as I rarely shared my political opinions around my family.

“They just don’t want to memorialize or celebrate it.”

“Well, why shouldn’t we celebrate fallen soldiers?”

“Because they were racist rebels,” I said, as if it were self-evident.

“Maybe by today’s standards. Things were different back then.”

“I don’t think that the people fighting to save slavery were the same as those who fought to end it.”

“Not every soldier was a slave owner.” He stopped walking and turned to face me. We stood in the middle of the sidewalk, beneath a street light. Lucy lay down in the grass nearby. “Most were just loyal defenders of their homeland, protecting their faith, families, and rights.”

“They were defending the South’s economic interests in slavery.”

“Slavery may have been important for the elites, but not for everyone in the Confederacy. Mr. Gilman told us that.”

“Who?”

“The social studies teacher.”

“From middle school?”

“He knew what he was talking about.”

“Well, my history *professor* said that just because they weren’t slave owners didn’t mean they didn’t all benefit from it.”

“You mean your professor from your *liberal* university? Sounds biased.”

“No, that doesn’t matter. He’s studied it for years.”

“Libs don’t really understand the South.”

“But he’s a scholar.”

“They just live in their big cities and assume they know what it’s like. And now they’re trying to take down all the statues, thinking they can turn our home into something it’s not.”

“So you’re the expert then?”

“I know more than most people. Especially people who’ve never lived here.”

“Yeah, but we’re not really southern.”

“We were born here, weren’t we?”

“Our parents moved here from New Jersey. I wouldn’t call that a southern upbringing.”

“We’ve lived here, though. And our ancestors on Dad’s side lived in South Carolina originally.”

“You didn’t start saying *y’all* until you worked at that summer camp.”

“So? We’re southern. Maybe you’d rather not be, but, I mean, if we’re not southern, then what else are we?”

I wasn’t sure how to respond. Tyler seemed awfully sure of himself. I couldn’t recall the last time he was so impassioned.

“Whether you like it or not,” he said, “the monument is our past.”

I looked him in the eye and saw that he was dead serious. His earnestness made me cringe.

“It doesn’t really matter, though, since the town council voted to remove it.”

“Yeah, because they’re weak.”

“No, because it’s a symbol of white supremacy.”

“That’s just a liberal buzzword.”

“No, it’s not.”

“White supremacy. Racism. Words that get thrown around so much until they don’t mean anything anymore.”

“They’re not buzzwords. You just...don’t understand.”

“You’re the one who got brainwashed by your history professor.”

“What? You’re literally so stupid.”

“Oh, I see. You’re just upset that I’m right.”

“You’re not right! Everything you say is so dumb.”

“You *are* upset. Ha.”

“Yeah, because it’s impossible to have a normal conversation with you. Everything you say is unbelievably wrong and super problematic.”

“Another buzzword.”

“Shut the fuck up!” Lucy jumped to her feet as I yelled. I wanted to hit him.

“Ok, ok, Jeez. Sorry.” Tyler took a step back and held his hands in the air.

“God. You’re so annoying.”

“I said sorry. What else do you want me to do?”

“Oh, I don’t know, maybe stop spouting toxic rhetoric about how great Confederate monuments are.”

“It’s not rhetoric. It’s what I believe.”

“Then stop believing it.”

“Why? It’s not like you convinced me.”

“Is there any convincing you? You don’t listen to reason.”

“Oh, so now I’m the unreasonable one?”

“Yeah, you are.”

“Maybe if you had, I don’t know, evidence to back up your claims.”

I thought back to an article I had read on the local news’s website. “Ok,” I said. “The memorial... the Homestead memorial was built during the Civil Rights Era, when the South was fighting for segregation, several generations after the Civil War. So its creation was obviously motivated by racial tensions and not grief.”

“Ok... but prove it.” Tyler crossed his arms.

“I mean, I don’t have sources with me.”

“So you can’t prove it?”

“No, I can. Um, we could check the statue.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You think that’ll help your case?”

“It’s the primary source, isn’t it? It should tell us something.”

“Fine, we’ll go to the memorial.”

“It’s kind of far though, now that I think about it.”

“Not too far to walk. Just over by the park. A mile away.”

“Normally, no, but it’s getting dark.”

“Oh, I get it. You know you’re wrong.”

“No, it’s just—” I gestured with my hands, trying to conjure up the words.

“Then let’s go to the memorial.”

“Fine.”

“Ok. This way.”

Tyler led the way down the street. We passed the elementary school where I voted for the first time last November, and we headed into the newer neighborhood. This area had been all trees for a long time. I remembered when they were developing the area, clearing away the woods and putting up new houses. When we would drive past the construction zones on our way to school, I liked to look through the wooden skeletons of the buildings and wonder what might be inside. Tyler and his friends got in trouble for exploring one once.

The lawns here were smaller but better-kempt than the ones in our neighborhood. There wasn’t much breathing room between the houses.

“Homestead is changing,” I mused to myself. I was thinking of the new houses that had been finished years ago but still seemed new in a way, and Rico’s, our go-to pizza place, that closed while I was away at school, and even these neighborhood streets that were labyrinthine and unnavigable for so many years until I got my license and started driving.

I looked down at Lucy, who was panting along. Her back drooped down as she walked, curving like a horse’s. Her shoulder blades poked up against her short brown fur with each step. She kept her head low to the ground, letting her tongue hang out and nearly drag along the pavement. Her age was weighing on her. She walked slower than she used to.

Tyler walked a few yards ahead of us, each step quick and deliberate. His gaze was fixed straight ahead. He wore a bright green shirt that said STAFF on the back, from the Boy Scout summer camp he had worked at all through summer. It was weird to think that he was an Eagle Scout. I mean, not in some regards. He loved the outdoors, whether camping or fishing with Dad or taking his guns to the shooting range at his camp. But I was left wondering what had happened to all the leadership skills that Mom had said the Boy Scouts provided to young men (and now young women).

“Hold up,” I called to him. Lucy had waddled over to the grass again and squatted.

Tyler spun around, half scowling.

I pulled out a plastic bag and scooped up Lucy’s droppings, pulling up a patch of grass with it and folded it into the bag.

“Good girl,” I said to her as I tied off the end of the bag. I nodded to Tyler and he kept going.

The main thing was that I worried about him. Watching the news a few months ago, I realized that the disgruntled, unstable white men in America who took up arms against school,

nightclubs, and churches, were almost all around his age. I couldn't help but wonder, what separates them from him?

But the way he walked now, it was hard to imagine him doing anything stupid like that. He still looked proud, even if that pride seemed a bit misplaced.

#

He waited for Lucy and me to catch up before turning off down the greenway. The paved trail took us out of the street light and into the woods. I swatted a mosquito off my leg and brushed a few others away. Tyler didn't seem to be bothered by them. He had opened his phone's flashlight and shined it ahead.

Ahead, I saw a similar white light coming towards us and heard the yip of a dog.

"No, Lucy," I said, pulling her leash taut as she tensed up and growled at a little white Maltese with a blinking red harness coming down the path. "Be a good girl."

The Maltese yapped at us, furiously shaking its pom-pom of a tail, while the owner apologized.

When we were out of earshot of the owner, Tyler said, "Little dogs are the worst."

"It was cute though."

"I guess."

We walked on.

The park came into view. The trail looped around a field where Lucy liked to play fetch in her younger years. It looked bigger in the dark. Along the path was a trash can where I could throw out the plastic bag. On the far side was a playground and a pond with an illuminated fountain. Down the path was the memorial.

The sun had fallen behind trees in the distance, blurring the shadows and allowing a few dots of starlight to poke through the gray sky.

“There it is,” Tyler said. At the far end of the field, ground lights around a brick pedestal lit the monument. Tyler was drawn to it, leaving the paved path and cutting across the grass. I followed, pulling Lucy along to catch up with Tyler.

The statue was a tall soldier made of bronze. Dressed in a uniform and carrying a musket over his shoulder, he looked off into the dark woods, in mid-step, headed somewhere known only to him.

When I reached him, Tyler had already entered the circle of light. He snapped a picture of it with his phone, then knelt to read the plaque. I joined him a few seconds later, peering over his shoulder.

“In memory of the bravery and courage of our young men in the face of oppressive Northern forces,” Tyler read aloud. “See, there’s nothing about slavery at all.” He looked up at me, grinning.

“Of course, they aren’t going to write ‘slavery’ on the monument. Look here.” I pointed to the small engraving near the bottom of the plaque. “Erected by United Daughters of the Confederacy, 1961.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t prove anything.”

“The Daughters of the Confederacy were one of the leading organizations spreading the Lost Cause Myth, basically rewriting history to be pro-South.”

“I don’t really believe you, though.”

“What?”

“This isn’t really proof.”

“Then why the fuck did we come all the way out here?”

“I wanted to be sure that you were full of shit.”

“What?”

“It’s the liberals who are rewriting history.”

“Why the fuck would you... walk all this way.” I was already drenched in sticky sweat, but I felt my face and ears getting even hotter still. “I knew I shouldn’t have gone on this walk with you. You’re literally the worst.”

“Emma, you—” But I wasn’t listening. I started to go.

“Come on, Lucy. You poor thing. We’re going home.” She had splayed herself out on the dark grass. Her chest was rising and falling rapidly. She didn’t look like she could make the walk home.

With the dog cradled awkwardly in my arms, I stomped down the path, but stopped when I noticed that Tyler wasn’t following me.

“Are you coming?” I called.

“I think I’m going to stay here a bit longer.”

“Fine.” I continued walking.

“I can take Lucy if you want.”

I kept going.

I was trying to make sense of everything he had said and done in my head. Trying to see if it made any sense at all. I wondered how much of it he actually, truly believed. He had to see that it was all a myth, right? I knew that, at summer camp, he once bought a knife with the red, white, and blue of the rebel flag printed on its handle. He was just a kid then, though. It didn’t

really mean anything. I wondered if anything that I had said had gotten through to him, or gave him a new perspective. I shivered as the night grew darker and colder. Back home, Mom was probably wondering why we'd been gone so long.

Halfway around the loop of the path, I peered back across the field towards the memorial. Squinting, I saw Tyler in the ring of fluorescent lights. He was crouching down or kneeling. He could have been praying or perhaps tying his shoe.

I dragged myself up our porch steps, setting Lucy down. She licked my face. I was soaked in sweat. I raised my arms above my head and filled up my lungs, gulping in the heavy air.

Above me, moths fluttered around the porch light. After a few more minutes, I opened the door and went inside.

Lucy slogged over to her water dish.

"How was it?" Mom said as I entered the kitchen, looking for a glass of water. "You were out longer than I expected."

"Fine," I said.

"I see you wore Lucy out." Lucy was splashing water on the floor with her tongue.

"Yeah."

"Where's your brother?"

"He wanted to come back separately."

"Oh," she said. "I see." There was disappointment in her tone.

Kingsnake

He walked along the weed-stubbed shoulder of the road, carrying a paper sack with two cans of sweet corn and a dead rat. His shoulders slumped in towards his chest, and moonlight fell on the budding hunch of his back. Though the sun had long retired behind the white pines, the heat had yet to dissipate, making his hairline and armpits damp with sweat. This was summertime, when the air stayed hot all night, like a simmering broth of molten lead, any breeze nothing more than a ladle that stirred the heat around. This was Georgia.

He was still wearing his tan visor and apron, with its little plastic name badge that read *Wade's Good Friend* EARL. His name wasn't really Earl. But Wade—of Wade's Food and Grocery, a short balding white guy in his late fifties who wore oversized knock-off Jordans—had misheard him when he'd said, "Pearl." That, or he wanted to keep the "P" their little secret.

Pearl didn't bother to look as he crossed the quiet street, knowing nobody would be out this late. Nonetheless, he half-jogged across the asphalt until he reached the weedy gravel of the roadside. A little farther down, he turned left at the stoplight that blinked hypnotically above the empty intersection.

The thick rubber soles of his shoes found the sidewalk and dragged against the coarse concrete. His legs were sore but remained locked in perpetual motion after his double shift. Working fifteen-and-a-half hours wasn't strictly legal, but there wasn't much *strictly legal* about Wade.

"If you make me happy, I'll be good to you, boy," he had said, a certain look in his eye, when he handed over the freshly-made name badge.

"Yessir," was all Pearl could reply.

Now, after three months of working at the store, Pearl realized that Wade always had some certain look in his eye—a spark of giddy, puerile delight that time had not wiped from his aging face.

Pearl's pace quickened as he turned once more, this time into his apartment complex. Even in daylight it didn't look much like a "complex": just a small cluster of shabby, single-story units built around an amorphous stretch of unmarked pavement that was both road and parking lot. His was the fourth door down in Building 5C, the one farthest from the road, sunken back into the surrounding woods.

On his doorstep, he removed his visor and apron, neatly wrapping them together and tying it with the apron's cord. He dug into his pocket for his keychain. There were no lights, but his fingers easily found the keyhole and the door clicked open.

Inside, Pearl stepped out of his shoes and crept through the dark, aware of the sound of his breath brushing through his cracked lips and the squish of his sweat-soaked socks on the vinyl floor. The place was small and the walls were thin, too thin for the discordant sleep schedules of his family. There was also a chance that his mother was still awake, but encountering her this late never led to anything good. When he reached the kitchen, he slowly uncrinkled the top of his paper bag, pulled out the two cans of corn—careful to avoid the rat—and left them on the table. One can had a few dents in its side, but free food was free food.

"You're a skinny little shrimp, aren't you," Wade had observed one day while Pearl loaded boxes of chicken nuggets into the freezers. Startled, Pearl turned to see his boss leaning against the glass a few doors down. His eyes watched Pearl's body as it worked.

Before Pearl could respond, Wade continued, "If you're hungry, you should eat." He gestured to the frozen pizzas with a grin, winked, and left.

Since then, Pearl no longer had to pinch dimes from his mother to pay for groceries. Even when she had been working three jobs, there never seemed to be quite enough money for food but always enough for beer. He didn't take much from the store, and what he did take was either expired, rotting, or damaged goods, but so far it had been enough.

He crept over to the couch, a few feet away, eyeing the lump of blankets under which his little brother slept. Squinting, he searched in the darkness, the only light the green glow of the microwave clock, until he saw his school-issued iPad tucked under the five-year-old's arm. With a sigh, he reached down and lifted the boy's wrist carefully, holding it by the tips of his fingers so as not to wake him, and slipped the tablet out from his brother's grasp. As he turned to go, his toe struck something soft. Peering down, he saw that it was Mr. Buttercup, Jamie's old teddy bear. Pearl picked it up and placed it in the empty cradle of the boy's arm.

When he reached his room, he took out his keychain once more and unlocked the door. He flipped on the light, temporarily blinding himself for a second, and then checked to make sure everything was the way he'd left it: his twin bed, sheets tangled, twisted, and draped on the floor; crumpled cans of Red Bull, assorted clothes, and flattened cardboard scattered here and there; a broken, long-forgotten pull-up bar in the corner. Relieved, he set the iPad down and hurried to the large tank on his little desk.

"Hey, Vanilla Bean," Pearl whispered, tapping the glass with his fingernail. "I brought you a little snack." There was a slight rustling of shredded newspaper. A tiny white and black-speckled head appeared, its two tiny eyes mesmerized by the movement of Pearl's bony finger. Without looking away, he reached into the paper once more, this time pulling out the dead rat by the tail. He dangled it in the air, and the snake flicked its tongue.

“Look, buddy,” he said, lowering it into the tank. The rat was dried out and odorless after being out in the sun all day, but Pearl hoped there’d still be some meat on it.

He had found it in a little nook by the dumpsters where some of his coworkers liked to smoke. Not a smoker himself, Pearl had hoped for some relief from Wade’s gaze for a few minutes while he ate dinner. He sat on the curb, eating, and watched the sun turn the sky pink and gold. But halfway through his bologna sandwich, the bald man’s puffy head appeared around the corner.

“Thought you could escape me, did you?” Wade said as he trotted over. “Here.” He held out a cigarette.

Pearl feebly took the gift and stared at Wade’s feet. His shoes were two sizes too big, he noticed. Wade was wearing two pairs of socks. Pearl looked past the faded red and off-white sneakers, and that’s when he spotted the rat, laying in the small slit between the dumpster and the brick wall of the store.

Wade stepped closer, shooting jets of smoke from his nose towards Pearl’s face. Pearl knew better than to wince or cough.

“I like you, kid,” Wade said with a sigh. Pearl looked up. The dying sunlight gave the man’s bright red face an eerie glow, casting harsh shadows on his round features. “Even if you are a little scrawny and pale. You could lose the piercings, too.”

Wade paused, looking Pearl over. “Not perfect, but I like you.”

Wade was slowly closing the distance between them. His cigarette fell from his hairy fingers and he laid his sneaker over it.

Suddenly he was standing over Pearl, towering above him despite Wade’s usual short stature. His fingers were brushing through Pearl’s blonde hair.

Pearl's body tensed. He tried to swallow. The smell of Axe Body Spray and tobacco seeped into his nose. He didn't move. He couldn't breathe.

#

Vanilla Bean slithered out from under the newspaper to examine the rat as Pearl lowered it into the tank. Pearl smiled as he watched the curious little head bob up and down, the beady eyes sparkling and the tiny tongue flicking out from under the nose. Two black splotches on top of his head almost looked like a little hat. Vanilla Bean's long, speckled body shimmered in the dim light. When he reached the carcass, he turned back again and dove beneath the newspaper shreds, as if repulsed by the offering. But Pearl knew he'd eat it eventually.

Although California kingsnakes were usually fast eaters, Vanilla Bean was not. Even as a hatchling, the snake had always taken food reluctantly. Pearl and his cousin Chloe—who'd secretly given him the snake in the first place—used to drop frozen pinky mice into opposite ends of the little snake's tub and watch intently as the snake took its time considering both, laughing with glee when he finally ate one or the other. That was a long time ago, before Chloe and her parents stopped coming around, cut off contact completely, finally took that job offer on to the West Coast and moved away—all on account of Pearl's mother.

"You're going, just like that?" Pearl had heard his mother say from his room. "You're leaving me and our home?"

"The truth is, we've put up with you long enough," his aunt said. "You know, this place might be bearable if it wasn't for people like you."

"You mean people like us."

"No, people like you."

"I'm your sister, bitch!"

“Are you?” His aunt paused, then yelled, “Chloe, say goodbye, we’re leaving.”

A Few weeks after they’d gone, Pearl found his mother on the porch.

“Can we go to California, too?” he had asked.

“Oh, Pearly. You know we can’t do that,” she’d said, sipping something dark and strong.

“Just to visit?”

“There’s no leaving this place, Pearly.”

“Please.”

“What did I just say?”

That was a long time ago, and things hadn’t changed.

Now Vanilla Bean was fully grown. He was Pearl’s pride and joy, and his big secret.

Neither Jamie nor their mother had ever seen the snake, and Pearl always locked his door to keep it that way. If his mother ever found it, found out where he’d gotten it, she’d surely lose it, drunk or not. And that would be the end of it: Vanilla Bean and a lot more. And if he told his brother, Jamie’d tell their mother.

Pearl stood and wiped his hand on the seat of his pants. He emptied his pockets, dropping his driver’s license, the cigarette, and a wad of cash onto the desk. He eyed the money, hesitant to touch it but eager call it his. He hadn’t looked at it for more than a second when he’d first found it in his break room locker earlier that night. He knew what it was, what it was for. And if it hadn’t been clear enough, someone had written “HUSH HUSH” across the face of the first bill with a fat black Sharpie.

Pearl picked up the wad and slowly leafed through it, laying each bill on the desk and counting as he went. There was \$70 in all; the bills were still crisp. He looked down at the money for a minute, losing himself in the richness of the patterns and linework, the variety in

fonts and scripts, the subtleties in shades and color—so many details he had never really considered. Money usually left his hand as soon as he got it. But looming over the intricate designs were those thick dark words “HUSH HUSH,” a black stain. The handwriting reminded Pearl of the blocky way Jamie wrote his name.

He sighed and collected the money into a single stack. There was a slight, pleasant heft to it. Reaching behind the snake tank, Pearl pulled out a small tin box covered in stickers of dolphins in sunglasses and dogs under beach umbrellas.

It was empty except for a short message written on a sticky note that had lost its stickiness:

Hey Pearl!

I miss you!!! I ask my mom every day if you and VB can visit, and she said she'll think about it! I'm so excited! You will love it here. Our house is right next to the beach! I picked some seashells for you. Hopefully see you soon!!!

Your Cousin,

Chloe

Pearl read the note over a few times and couldn't help but smile. He had no idea where the seashells were now, or where Chloe was now, for that matter. Still, he couldn't help but smile, which soon faded.

“Why do you want to leave me?” Pearl's mother had said when he'd told her about the note—leaving out the part about the snake. “And our beautiful trees? The mountains? Why do you want to leave us?” She had been sitting outside in a plastic chair, talking to someone on the phone. She gestured to the mountains, barely visible over the roofs of the apartments and the gas

station sign across the street. But there they were, the blue ridges poking out above the lush green treetops. Maybe his mother was right: they were beautiful, in a way.

He folded the stack of bills in half and put it into the box, secured the lid, and tucked the box back behind Vanilla Bean's enclosure. The snake followed the motion with his head, then settled back down into the newspaper shreds.

"What do you think, little buddy?" said Pearl. "Do you think old Wade has more than fives and tens in his wallet?"

The snake stared blankly back at his owner, unblinking, unmoving.

"You're right," Pearl said. "Let's not talk about that stuff." He shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts. An icy chill ran down his back, and his breath drew shallow.

He checked the time on the iPad. It was just past three. He unlocked the tablet, closed the game Jamie had fallen asleep playing, and checked the notifications. There was a new message from Professor Keeley, the woman who taught online Graphic Design classes at the technical college nearby. Pearl only took one class at a time, but he was hoping to eventually get a degree in web site design.

REMINDER: Assignment #4C is DUE on Friday, June 12th @ Midnight.

He sighed and rubbed his eyes. It could wait.

Leaving his room, he tip-toed to the bathroom, where he pissed and undressed. He ran cold water from the faucet and used a rag and the bar of soap to wash himself at the sink, showers being too loud at this hour. He started with his bleach-singed hair and scrubbed all the way down to his feet, trying to get rid of the dirt and the sweat, the smell of Wade's Food and Grocery. The smell of Wade himself.

The cold water on his skin reminded him of the way the beads of sweat had dribbled off Wade's hand and run down his spine, leaching into his flesh. He had done his best to control his breathing, to remain still.

"Relax," said Wade from behind him, massaging Pearl's neck and shoulders with his meaty palms. Pearl opened his mouth to protest but nothing came out. Wade stretched out Pearl's collar, digging down past the lean muscles into bone.

But before Wade went any further, an eighteen-wheeler rumbled around the side of the building. Wade instantly drew back and walked away as if nothing had happened at all, waving to the driver as she went by. Once she began to back into the loading dock, Wade turned to Pearl and flashed his signature smile, then disappeared.

Pearl sat in a daze for a few minutes, unable to think or move. He heard the truck's engine die and the voices of the driver and one of his coworkers, but he couldn't tell what they were saying. Everything was faint and blurry, the shapes of the building and the dumpsters and trees oozing into the bloody purple of the sky. After one last, deep breath, Pearl stood, leaving his half-eaten sandwich on the curb, and began to walk back inside. He moved shakily at first, doing his best to compose himself. Pulled his shoulders back, held his head high, and mustered his dignity.

He'd gone back later for the rat.

#

After drying off with a hand towel, Pearl slipped into pajama bottoms, double-knotting the drawstring. He returned to his room and dropped his dirty clothes into a pile on the floor. He looked into the tank, but Vanilla Bean still hadn't eaten. Pearl shook his head.

“Come here, you,” he said. He reached into the tank and rustled through the shavings of newsprint until he found his scaly friend. “Let’s get you out of there.”

The snake wriggled as Pearl lifted him out of the enclosure but then relaxed into Pearl’s grip, wrapping around his wrist.

Moving to the bed, Pearl switched off the light. He lay down on his back and set Vanilla Bean down on his bare belly. “Roam free, little guy.”

The snake took a moment to untangle itself, then slithered across Pearl’s skin, exploring the plane of his abdomen. When he approached an edge, Pearl instinctively lifted a hand to corral the snake back towards the center of his body.

He closed his eyes and let his chest rise and fall with ease, feeling the motion of the snake like one long muscle across his stomach. Pearl’s flesh tingled slightly as the scales passed over it, soft and cool and fluid.

His mind wandered. He imagined the ocean, deep and blue, waves gently crashing in tune with the rhythm of his lungs. He could almost smell the salt and hear the seagulls. There were surfers relaxing on the beach and sailboats gliding across the water. A light breeze across his face, swishing through palm trees. Cloudless skies. The warm glow of the pleasant San Diego sun.

Light chatter on the boardwalk, the sound of running feet, and, what was that? Laughter? Yes, laughter. A group of guys, kids his age, were coming up the walk. Tossing a ball between them. Smiling. Gym sharks. Rainbow swimsuits. Muscles.

He felt Vanilla Bean bump into his waistband, and he lost his concentration. The scene started to fade. Faded to black.

Out of the darkness, the face of Wade appeared. Wade at home, asleep beside his wife. He was a snorer. She was hogging all the blankets. A dog—a German Shepherd?—was curled up at the foot of their bed.

Down the hallway to the individual bedrooms of Wade's children. Pearl knew their faces because sometimes they came by the store at the end of Wade's shift. Now they slept in their beds. Peacefully.

Pearl could tell they were Wade's family because they all had that little smile on their faces, that glimmer behind their eyelids. They slept peacefully.

It was clear, in Pearl's mind at least, that they didn't know the whole picture of what went on at Wade's Food and Grocery. How Wade marked his money.

Pearl felt a slight twitch in his cheek.

What would Wade's wife do if she knew? Leave Wade? Kill him? Kill Pearl?

Pearl's face was getting warmer.

No matter what, something had to end.

His heart beat faster.

What was he complicit in? Any of it? All of it? He saw Wade's face, an indiscernible, ever-changing expression: delight, shock, anger, pain. *She's left Wade.*

Pearl no longer controlled the cadence of his breathing.

Delight. Shock. Anger. Pain. *She's killed Wade.*

He squeezed his eyes tighter, trying to go back to the beach. He wanted the sea. But all he saw was Wade.

Delight.

Shock.

Anger.

Death.

She's killed Pearl.

Vanilla Bean was writhing around on Pearl's chest, his collarbone, his throat.

Pearl grabbed the snake right below the head. He whipped it into the air, and it thrashed back and forth, flailing at both ends. But it couldn't escape Pearl's grip.

Pearl fought to keep himself from clamping his fist shut. The snake was strong, but he knew he was stronger. Strong enough.

A sharp sting shot through his hand. His fist shot open, and Vanilla Bean fell to the floor. He almost yelped out in pain, but he caught himself, glancing sharply at the door. He jumped out of bed and hurried to the light switch, clanking through the cans on the floor.

His eyes watered at the sudden burst of light; he let the tears fall.

When his vision cleared, he was peering down at a red ring on the back of his hand. He knew the bite wasn't venomous, but it still hurt. It hurt to move his fingers.

Pearl wrapped his hand in a shirt and searched for Vanilla Bean.

"I'm sorry, buddy," he said, "I wasn't thinking." He repeated this over and over. "I wasn't thinking. I wasn't thinking." To the snake, to himself, to the empty room.

#

By the time he found Vanilla Bean, coiled in the back corner of his closet, his shirt was soaked through and heavy with blood.

"You got me good," he said. "But I deserved it. Sorry." He held out his clean hand and waited, waited for a long time, for the snake to come to him.

Returning Vanilla Bean to his tank, Pearl noticed the dead rat on the shredded newspaper. He sighed. He knew that it would be eaten by morning. Knew that the bleeding should stop soon, that his hand would be fine. And he knew that Wade's money could save them all.

Cross Fire

It's six-thirty on a Sunday and like, honestly, my head is about 90% memes at this point. Sitting on the edge of my bed, a permanent kink forming in my neck, I've been on Instagram for honestly god knows how long. I throw my phone against the wall. It pops out of the case and falls to the floor. When I stand up and stretch, shock waves erupt through my nervous system. I pick up my phone, put it back in the case, and check the screen.

It's six-thirty-four, and I'm still waiting for Peter to text me back. He said he wanted to meet up while we were both home on break. He's romantic like that. I'd say I got lucky that way.

When I first met him, he was trapped inside a dating app—nothing but a torso on a screen, a name and age, and an invitation to *ask for snap*. I usually have a rule against fucking with DL guys, but what can I say? He looked good. But beyond that, looking past the abs I saw a gentle soul looking for someone to love. Like literally, there was a blue teddy bear in the background of the photo, propped up on his bed, and it called to me.

// Show me your smile / I texted him after adding him on Snapchat. *// Aww, so handsome /*

He told me he'd played lacrosse in high school. I said I wasn't a sports guy myself but that we could be gym buddies if he showed me how. He said sure, and I said it was a date, but that made him nervous, so I eased off a bit. He said he was worried about making anything official because he had just graduated and would be leaving for college in August, just like me. Though I was headed over the mountains and he was headed for the coast.

A month later, he was typing out *paragraphs* of text, practically professing his *love* for me (if not using that specific word) like a Victorian nobleman writing handwritten letters to a distant lover. But over Snapchat.

We met once before he moved in at ECU and I set out for Vanderbilt. We met at a froyo place and then walked around the Target next door, eating and talking.

At six-forty-five, I'm halfway done with a second coat of black nail polish when I hear a knock.

"What," I say.

"Matthew." It's my sister's voice.

"It's open."

The door opens and Hannah's head pokes inside.

"We're heading to Mass now."

"Okay. I'm busy." I hold up a hand and show her the wet paint on my fingertips.

"Where'd you get nail polish?"

"... The store."

"Whatever. Anyway, Dad wanted me to let you know that we're leaving."

"Okay. Have fun."

"Okay." My sister starts to leave.

"Oh, Hannah."

"Yeah?"

"I'm going out tonight, so can you make sure the door is left unlocked for the morning."

"Don't you have a key?" I hear my phone buzz. We both look to where it sits on my dresser.

"Not anymore. Mom needed it for...something, I forget."

"Okay. Yeah, I can unlock it."

“Thank you!”

Hannah closes the door and goes downstairs.

I carefully unlock my phone, keeping my drying nails away from the screen.

// heyyy /

I text back: *// !!! /*

In the time it takes me to apply a top coat and let my nails set, Peter responds: *// so what we doing? /*

Me: *// Your house? /*

The blinking three-eyed ellipsis stares at me. I wait. The dots disappear.

Downstairs, I can hear my family getting ready for Mass. The clinking of plates from dinner as Mom loads them into the dishwasher. The jingle of keys and my sister saying “found them.” My dad’s heavy-soled dress shoes on the wooden floor.

One by one I hear them—Hannah, my mother, finally my father—head for the garage.

“Anyone else coming?” Dad calls from the threshold, knowing that I’m the only one left in the house. He says it every time, ever since I stopped going to the cathedral with them. One time at dinner, he randomly announced that anyone could return to the Church when they felt lost. “The Church always welcomes back sinners,” he said. Like okay, Dad. I get it. You don’t have to call me out like that. I’m guessing he just misses my singing voice. I know how to belt a hymn. Maybe that’s why Dad pauses so longingly at the door every Sunday: he needs me to carry the tune.

I used to be a little angel in the Church’s eyes, if you can believe it. I could do no wrong. Mrs. Carter, my Catholic school theology teacher, told me I was the 9th grader most likely to

become a priest. She gave me a gold-trimmed certificate and everything. The worst part is I was kind of proud of it.

That was a moment of spiritual weakness for me, to say the least. That was before the pope said that us gays would be turned away from the priesthood. Not that I wanted to be a priest, or “felt called to the vocation,” as Mrs. Carter would say. But I liked to have the option. Like, if I’m not allowed to marry or have sex or so much as think about loving a man, you could at least let me be celibate. And priests, they have those fancy clothes and the ceremony, the theatrics. Not to be stereotypical, but that was a lifestyle I could’ve gotten behind. But no. Not even an option.

I wonder if Peter is going to ghost me. Sure, I had him practically wrapped around my finger, but I feel like anyone could be a snake from behind a screen, lying and pretending this whole time.

Some fall break this is turning out to be. Stuck back in my childhood bedroom—that’s what you get to call it once you leave for college—wasting away on a Sunday night like a corpse. I never liked this room much anyway, to be honest. I never felt like I could express myself in it. My parents didn’t like the idea of putting nails in the wall, thinking ahead to when they’ll retire and sell the house. The furniture is all cheap Ikea stuff that doesn’t match. The decor—Sherlock Funko Pops, a novelty mug from Disney World (with pens in it), a massive Lego model of Hogwarts, and the like—are from fandoms I no longer care for. Even the color of the paint on the walls, a particularly moody robin’s egg, is consistent to the upstairs and not unique to my room. But alas, I’ll be out of here for good soon enough.

I hear the sound of the garage door open and the ignition of the car. I make my way to the window and peer down at the street to watch Dad's car pull out and disappear.

Indie filmmakers would love this view. Picturesque suburbia unfolds below.

The first few leaves of October dot our shady lawn. A rusty basketball hoop stands guard in the driveway. Dad optimistically put it up before Hannah or I were born. We've maybe used it three times. Past our lawn is the cracking sidewalk and then the sinking street. A red car quietly rolls by. I look to our neighbors' yards. To an untrained eye, they all look exactly, idyllically the same. The perfect place to raise a family, it seems. So long as you don't look inside any of the houses.

Listen, if you don't romanticize the suburbs, life around here gets real dull real fast.

I sigh and search for my phone again. I see that it's in my hand.

Peter's responded and I hadn't felt it vibrate:

// no.

let's go out somewhere

sorry lol /

I frown, then type: *// Ok, where? /*

// u like cook out? /

// Sure lol / I actually do not like CookOut.

// the one off western blvd, b there in 30?? /

I send a kissy face emoji and a car emoji. Cheesy, sure, but Peter eats that stuff up like Lucky Charms. And I like to keep him charmed.

I wander to my closet, wondering what kind of evening it will be. I recently thrifted this cheetah-print vest that's absolutely hideous. Over a black cropped turtleneck, it's low-key kind

of hot. I also have these jeans that I cut so short that my ass hangs out when I'm not careful. I get changed. I add a studded belt. A silver ring. Eyeliner to make my raccoon eyes look intentional. It's the little things that pull a look together.

Before sliding the closet door closed, I peep the polo shirts that hang in the corner. Those were from a previous era of my existence. We all have style journeys. What I used to think was Catholic school chic was actually more like ... a crime against fashion. Everybody makes mistakes.

I check the mirror on the way out. It's a fit alright. Peter's going to be stunned. The last time he saw me I was still wearing those polos, dressing like an extra in someone else's movie. I grab a pair of oversized sunglasses and my overnight bag before closing my door.

I hunt down the keys to my parents' Volvo and head to the garage. There she is, the piece of shit car my sister and I named Bessie because we found a puddle of milky white fluid leaking from her underside. That and the horn sounds like a moo.

On the road, I put on the Spotify playlist that Peter sent me. He entitled it Thinking of U, which would be cute if he didn't have the same music taste as my parents. I skip through the first four songs, nearly missing a turn, before I find something worth listening to.

I leave the neighborhood and stay on the outside of town. Homestead is a strip mall and commuter town, but it's home.

I pull onto the highway, heading towards Raleigh. There's little traffic. I let my foot sink down into the gas pedal, leaving the speedometer in the spirit's hands. I relax into the soft seat, feeling free.

#

Peter's dad's pickup truck is cooling off in the parking lot. He's waving through his window as I pull in next to him.

"Aww, baby. Give me a hug," I say as I get out. He glances around and then embraces me. "I've missed you," I whisper into his ear.

"You hungry?" he asks as he pulls away.

"Yeah."

We make our way to the window where you order. He examines the big menu board while I try to wiggle my wallet out of my tiny, tight pocket.

"Don't worry about it," he says. "I'm buying."

"Oh, thanks. What do you normally get here?"

He tells me his order, a basic burger, double fries, and a shake. Strawberry cheesecake flavored.

"Sounds extravagant. I'll get that, too."

He orders and I order and he hands the cashier his debit card.

The cashier looks me over while she punches buttons on the computer. I wink from behind my sunglasses. Peter doesn't seem to notice.

"Chilly night," Peter says while we wait.

"Yeah," I say. "It's usually warmer this time of year."

"Maybe if you put more clothes on."

"Hey." Hoes don't get cold, I think to myself.

"I'm just kidding," he says. "You look good."

"Thanks." I smile. "Maybe I'll get a big fur coat someday." (Preferably vintage; faux if necessary.)

We get our food and head to my car, where we sit in the front two seats with the Styrofoam containers on our laps and milkshake cups between our knees. I set my sunglasses in the cup holder on the console.

“Tell me,” he says, eating a French fry. “What was the inspiration for this new look?”

“I’m inspired by lots of things. Right now I’m very obsessed with monsters and play girls.”

“Are you quoting Lady Gaga to me right now?”

“Whoa. Not you immediately getting a reference from an interview in 2009. Okay.”

“What can I say, I’m a cultural connoisseur.”

I snort with laughter.

“What?” He spoons milkshake into his mouth.

“I just wasn’t expecting you to be a Little Monster. A Gaga stan.”

He gave me a bashful look. “I can know things.”

“You’re cute,” I say.

“But seriously. I’m curious. You didn’t dress like this before.”

“Ew, don’t remind me of high school me.”

“You were very handsome back in August. But now, you look so different.”

“It’s called a glow up. Vanderbilt changed me. I discovered a whole new world where no one cares how you dress unless you’re extra.” I take a bite of my cheeseburger, the juices dripping down my arm. “Dressed like this, I feel authentic.”

“I guess that makes sense.” He squeezes a ketchup packet onto his Styrofoam lid. “But what if you get, like, funny looks?”

“That’s kind of the point. Love me or hate me, people notice me.”

“Well, I definitely noticed. And I like it, in case that wasn’t clear.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

“You look ... aesthetic.”

I chuckle.

“What did your parents say? I mean, when they noticed you?”

“Oh, they’ve never cared about my appearance. As long as it isn’t a piercing or a tattoo.”

“Okay.” He nods. “I got a tattoo. Have I told you that?”

“No, where?”

“On my side, under my arm here.” He points.

“What is it?”

“Here.” He sets his dinner down on the dashboard and lifts up his sweatshirt, exposing the muscles of his chest. A few inches below his armpit is a simple crowned lion head.

“Ooh,” I say. “Does it mean anything?”

“Yeah, actually, it comes from my family crest.”

“That’s cool. A family crest.”

“Yeah, my dad’s side is Scottish.”

“That’s cool. Crown, like royalty?”

Peter shrugs. “I don’t think so, but maybe.”

“Hang on, I wasn’t done looking,” I say as he lowers his sweatshirt. “You been working hard at the gym?”

He blushes and pulls his sweatshirt down all the way. “Yes, actually. I joined the club volleyball team, and we take it pretty seriously.”

“Oh, fun. Maybe I can see you play sometime.”

“Yeah. I’m not that good though. Not yet.”

“That’s okay. I’ll just be staring at your ass the whole time anyway.”

He shakes his head. “So, how’s your college been?” he says, reaching down to get his clamshell from the dashboard.

I tell him about my eccentric philosophy professor and my tutoring job while he eats.

“Wait, I thought you said you were going to study biology and, like, do premed?”

“So, I was, but I didn’t get a very good schedule this semester and wound up taking all gen ed requirements, and I think I like philosophy. I thought I texted you about this. Maybe not.”

“No, I hadn’t heard. Well, that’s ... exciting.”

“It is.” I describe the classes and the few faculty members that I know, as well as my friends who got me into it. Peter nods along.

We continue to make small talk. It’s a cute little moment, I think. One that you’d see on a couple’s Instagram page. One that I will remember. The warmth of our dinners on our laps. The rising heat between us. First it’s small talk, then it’s sharing our hopes and dreams, building a future together.

As time goes on, however, he seems more drawn in by his burger than by what I’m saying.

The sun sinks lower. Through the windshield before me, daylight circles the drain and the blue of the sky deepens into something naval and oceanic. Below is a sea of trees, dark and brooding and no longer green. As it rises above the treetops, I can make out the buoyant and boisterous dome of the cathedral, miles away. Its bronze shell shines with the last light of day.

I pick the strawberries out of my milkshake, leaving the rest to melt.

Peter yawns, audibly.

“You getting tired?” I say.

“A little, yeah. I think I should head home soon.”

“Already? You haven’t finished your food.”

He grabs the last of his fries and crams them in his mouth. “Yes I am,” he says, chewing.

“All ready to go.”

“Well, what if I come to your place with you?”

“Oh ... uh. I don’t know.”

“Please.” I try to sound cute. “I won’t get to see you for another two months after this.”

“Yeah, but...”

“But what?”

“I just don’t think it’s such a good idea.”

“Why not?”

Peter doesn’t respond.

“You said your parents would be fine with meeting me and everything.”

“I mean, yeah...”

“Then I don’t see a problem.”

“It’s just...” He sighs. “Let’s not.”

“Okay, well ... what if we just...” I reach my arm towards the passenger side of the car.

“Matthew, no. There are people around.” The glint of headlights in the rearview mirror illuminates his face.

“Come on, baby. I haven’t seen you in forever.”

“Matthew, seriously.” He removes my hand from his knee.

“You’re no fun, you know that?”

“I’m sorry, it’s just... I don’t know. There are certain things I can’t do yet.”

“We could drive somewhere else if you’d be more comfortable with that.”

“I told my parents I would be home soon.” He pauses to check the time on his phone.

“Sorry, I know that’s not what you want to hear.”

“They can wait, can’t they?”

“Matthew, please.”

“What about just a kiss?” I pucker my lips.

“Matthew, listen.”

“Just a little one?”

“Listen. The You’re very sweet and nice. But, see, the thing is ... I just don’t think that I’m into you anymore.”

“Wh-what?” I cock my head in shock and confusion. This is coming out of nowhere.

“You’re a really great guy and all, but it’s like I don’t recognize you anymore.”

“You said you liked my outfit.”

“Yeah, but it’s not about the outfit. It’s like you’re a completely different person. Not who I thought you were.”

“You’re not serious, right? Like, this is a joke? One of those TikTok pranks? Where’s the camera?”

“No, Matthew. It’s not a joke.”

“Seriously? Just like that?”

“Listen, I’m sorry. I should go.” He reaches for the door.

“What the fuck!”

“Please don’t yell, Matthew.”

“I’ll be as loud as I fucking want. You’re fucking *breaking up* with me.”

“Matthew, please.” Peter raises his hands, trying to calm me down. “We weren’t really even a thing yet, were we?”

“Bitch!” I grab the cup in my lap and let it fly across the car. The chunky pink liquid splashes onto everything, coating just as much as me as Peter.

“What the fuck, man?”

“Get out.”

“God dammit.” He wrenches the door open and steps outside and tries to brush himself off. It’s all over his sweatshirt.

I reach across the passenger seat and slam the door shut.

He gets in his truck—his dad’s truck—starts the engine, and drives off. I watch through the mirror as he leaves the parking lot.

#

I sit in the parking lot. The sun is on its knees now, genuflecting to the distant dome cast in golden light. Twilight twinkles in the sky.

I don’t feel like moving, but I’m not sure why. It feels like there’s a gaping cavity in my chest, but I’m not sure why. I’m not sure if that’s my gut, my intuition, confirming what I fear: that this was the end. I wonder if that’s that. All things considered, odds are he never texts me again.

I breathe deeply, trying to cool down. De-redden my face and ears.

I don’t bother wiping off the ice cream. It’s already soaked into my clothes and gotten all over the car.

I had forgotten that crying is painful. That you feel it in your chest and in your face and that, with every sob, you feel it even more. The tears are like fire. I wonder if that's why men don't cry. Because it hurts.

Fuck Peter. The most interesting thing he's ever done is ordered a strawberry cheesecake milkshake. Yeah, fuck him.

I grab the steering wheel in front of me, just to have something to grab.

Gazing off into the night, I can't see much anymore. Only the streetlights of Western Blvd., the illuminated signs for dry cleaning and tattoos and auto repairs and more fast food.

The car smells like fry oil. I feel gross. I want to cry some more, in the way that a child does until their mother asks *why are you crying* and lifts them up into her arms. But I feel exhausted.

Everything is too much. Honestly. I need a break from it all. My head's started to hurt. My ass is sore from sitting for so long. I'm in my flop era. Honestly.

I check the time on my phone but don't pay enough attention to read it. It's late; I know that. I want to sleep, but the thought of going home scares me. Hannah isn't expecting me until the morning, and I my parents can't see me like this. Where do you go when you don't have anywhere to go? I don't want to move, but I don't want to stay here, at the place of my defeat. My Waterloo.

In the end, I act. I turn the key and take the car out of park. The car, Bessie, drives. I steer, but I'm not sure where I'm going. Bessie takes me along the road. It's a blur. We roll down the hill and up again. I know there are several stoplights, but I can't say if they were green or not. We turn right.

I can feel it before I can see it. The Holy Name of Jesus Cathedral stands before me, limned in silver moonlight. I slide into a parking spot, unaware of where the white lines fell below.

“Why have you brought me here, Bessie?” I say, mainly for dramatic effect. But I think I know.

I scan the parking lot, half expecting to see my father waiting there for me, a told-you-so look on his face. The parking lot’s empty. My family, the parishioners, the priest, they’re all long gone.

I get out of the car, feeling soggy and sticky. Feeling foggy. My feet find the sidewalk, then the gravel path, and then I’m up on the stairs leading to the three massive doors. Part of me wants to throw myself on the steps like I’ve seen in some movie once, but that might be overdoing it. I’m not here to soak up the limelight. Besides, only God is watching me now. He’s sitting on one of the wispy clouds up in the sky, on the edge of his seat, wondering what I will do next. The suspense is the only thing keeping him from smiting me with a lightning bolt.

“Don’t fuck with me, God,” I say. “It’s been a long day.” I wonder if that counts as praying. Probably not. Back in Mrs. Carter’s class, the prayers always started in “Dear Lord” and ended in a Hail Mary or perhaps a Glory Be.

Now and at the hour of our death, Amen.

It’s not enough just to stand here on the steps. I step forward, carefully, as if walking on hot coals. The cold October night lashes out at my exposed skin, from the ankle to the thigh and the midriff.

But I am not cold. Hoes don’t get cold, remember. Seriously, there is a warmth within me. I know you think I’m lying, but I’m not. Something like a fire. It fuels me onward.

I reach a hand forward. One of the last things it touched was Peter's knee. Why the fuck does my brain think like this? Jesus.

I grab the metal handle. It feels like ice. I pull. But the door is frozen in place.

I should have figured it would be locked. Everybody locks their doors at night. Even churches. Especially churches. I hurry back to the car, where I want to hide forever. I actually am cold, I admit, despite the nature of hoes. I'm shivering. My teeth are chattering. I'm fucking cold, and I don't like it.

I climb into the car, turn on the heater, and crank it up. I wish I had a big fur coat to wrap myself in and disappear. Any fur is fine at this point. Cruella De Vil-style Dalmatian pelt if need be.

Rubbing my arms with my hands, I warm up again. I relax. I was overreacting earlier, wasn't I? I was being extra. That's a bad habit of mine. Maybe I should try therapy. Who knows? For now, I relax back into the seat, feeling my weight sink into the cushions, and I find peace. Good old Bessie. Old reliable. I settle in and drift off to sleep.

#

I hear a tap on my window and nearly jump.

"Come on, buddy. You gotta go. You can't stay here."

A man in a uniform leans towards the window and shines a light in my face.

Squinting, I start to open my door, but the police officer puts his hand on the door and shakes his head.

"I'm not homeless," I say through the glass. "I'm not homeless."

"Go find a shelter or something. You can't stay here."

“I’m not. I’m not homeless.” I repeat it again and again as I start the car, “I’m not. I’m not,” as I pull out of the cathedral parking lot, as I drive back to my parents’ house.

Friday Night Light

It had been raining all day but there wasn't anything to do outside anyway. Kiwicat (15/f/NC) sat in her room, at her desk, hunched over her laptop; heels bouncing on the floor, headphones on, hands on keyboard, hardly blinking, hardly breathing, she was focused on one thing and one thing only: killing.

“Heads up, I think I saw some coming our way.”

She furiously clicked her mouse, letting out a burst of gunfire on the screen.

“Got 'em!” she said as the small figure in her sights dropped to the ground and disappeared.

“Nice.” That was BlueBoy28 on the other end. She calls him BB for short.

“The north side is clear.”

“Cool. I'm heading to the ridge. I think the last two are camping in the bunker up there.”

“Kay. Meet you there.”

Kiwicat's character jogged along a dusty path, stopping every few seconds to crouch and survey the landscape of dirt-textured roads and photorealistic trees. She was looking for anything that moved.

She saw the gray roof of the bunker that was set into the grass. It was built into the ground. Kiwicat crouched, crept over to the trap-door, and shuffled through her inventory until she found a flashbang.

“Where you at?” BB said through her headset.

“Outside the roof entrance.”

“Cool. Ready to breach?”

“Say when.” Kiwicat’s finger hovered over her keyboard.

“Go.”

She let the grenade fall down the trapdoor and braced for the white light and ringing that filled her screen and headphones. Muscle memory took her down the ladder and into the bunker. She crept along the passageway as the screen cleared and the ringing ceased.

“Clear up here.”

“Same here.”

Kiwicat made her way through the halls of the bunker, darting behind crates and checking for mines. She made her way into a large room stacked with rows of wooden crates and metal barrels. Climbing atop one of the crates and peering through her scope, she saw the familiar green glow around BB’s character.

“Hmm,” she heard him say, “I’m ... not ... seeing ... any—”

“Behind you. Behind you!” she shouted. An explosion boomed across the screen.

“Fuck!”

She threw herself back into her chair and tore off her headphones. Rubbing her eyes with her palms, illuminated by the dim red screen before her: Defeat.

She stood up and stretched, shaking out her aching limbs and cracking her knuckles.

She squeezed her eyes shut and blinked several times, adjusting them to the darkness of her bedroom. Before she saw it, she heard it—rain on her window; the storm was getting worse.

Something moved in the corner of her eye. A fly, climbing out of an empty box of raisins. Buzzing. Now landing on a half-eaten peanut butter and pickle sandwich. *Ugh, Dad must’ve let a fly in again.* She picked up her phone to text him, but it was dead. She plugged it in and tossed it on her bed.

“I thought you said you were good at this game,” Kiwicat said, readjusting her headset over her ears and settling the mic beside her cheek.

“I am,” BB said. “I almost had ‘em.”

“Sure.” She was back in her chair now, scooting up to her desk, scrolling through the post-match stats and rankings.

“I did! And it’s not like you did anything, either.”

“Bro, what? I carried the team! See, thirteen kills. How many did you get, two?”

“No, like ... five.”

“Pfft, you suck.”

“Fuck off.”

Kiwicat rolled her eyes. She picked up her sandwich and took a bite. The fly had flown away.

“New game?” BB said.

“Yeah.”

“Cool. I made a new room.”

Kiwicat clicked the JOIN ROOM button and her cursor turned into a spinning circle. After a few revolutions, it turned back into an arrow. She clicked the button again, and again, but the same thing happened.

“Ugh, what? I’m trying to join, but it’s not loading.”

She didn’t hear anything on the other end.

“Hello?”

Nothing.

She closed the window on her computer and checked her wi-fi—NO INTERNET AVAILABLE. She let out a grunt of frustration that was swallowed by a clap of thunder.

By now her phone was back on. She unlocked it and saw that it was only using data.

She opened her text messages.

// dad the internet is broken againn /

Two minutes later she received:

Dad: *// ? /*

// The wifi's down!! /

Another pause.

// I'll be home in an hour or so. /

// ugh

cant you fix it now?? /

// I'm working.

I'll be home as soon as I can. /

// ur leaving now?? :) /

// In an hour or so. /

// >:((/

To BlueBoy:

// sry for dropping my wifis out /

// fr? damn /

// yea storm ://

// lmk when it comes back, ill still be on /

// cool /

Kiwicat closed her laptop. As she did so, the fly buzzed out from behind it and into the air. Kiwicat grasped for it, clenching her fist in the air, but when she opened her palm, it was empty.

She sighed and scooted her chair out from her desk. Taking her phone, she left her room and walked to the living room to find the router. She flipped the light switch, but the lights didn't turn on.

"Great," she said to herself.

She unlocked her phone, using the glow of the screen to find her way to the kitchen.

"Candles candles candles, where does Dad keep the candles?"

Creeping along the hardwood, Kiwicat searched around the room. She saw that the sink was still full of dishes and a basket of half-folded laundry sat on the table.

She opened drawers and cabinets, looking for the candlesticks her father set out at Christmas, or the tea lights they used for Halloween. Birthday candles. A lighter. Matches even. Anything.

Passing the refrigerator, she paused. Her eyes were drawn to a painting she had done in elementary school that still hung there years later. In the near-darkness, the colors formed rough silhouettes of Kiwicat and her parents. They were holding hands and smiling in front of their house. In the corner she had written her name in all-caps: KAYLEE. Her gaze lingered on the painting for a moment longer than she would have thought, eyes absorbed in the crooked letters and the wavy smiles. Long enough that her phone auto-locked, plunging her into darkness.

She frowned, switched on her phone's flashlight, and kept searching for candles. Moving out of the kitchen, she came to the linen closet down the hall. Pushing aside towels, she found an

old cardboard box against the back wall. She opened it and saw three pairs of hiking boots of different sizes. Though they hadn't been worn in years, they were still caked in mud.

Behind the box, leaning against the wall, Kiwicat saw the cardboard backing of a picture frame. Dust covered her fingers as she turned the picture around and clicked on her phone to illuminate it. She saw her mother smiling back at her—it was the portrait from her funeral, the one that made her father cry every time he looked at it.

Kiwicat frowned and then smiled.

Returning the picture to its place and sliding the box back into the closet, Kiwicat went into the living room, knowing that her father stored things under the couch. She dropped to her hands and knees and reached below the couch, grabbing onto a flat plastic tub and pulling it out. When she lifted the lid, she heard a faint jingling. Hoping it was the Christmas decorations, she aimed her phone into the box and turned it on again, but the screen stayed dark, only showing the dead battery icon.

She set the phone down and used her hands to feel the contents of the box. Sequins, small bells, something soft. She knew what it was. It was the costume her dad had made her for the middle school play. She'd played a fairy. She didn't know that he'd kept it. The super-glued seams appeared to still be holding together as she tugged gently at them.

Kiwicat slumped down onto the floor, clutching the costume. That had been a hard year; the year that Kiwicat's mother ran out of her prescription medication and hit the streets. She didn't know why her father had held on to such a silly thing. He had thrown it together the night before the show. Kiwicat didn't have a big role in the show, but her father insisted on going to every performance. Alone. With his video camera so that he could record it for her mother, who had just entered rehab.

It was a shitty costume, really. Even under the stage lights, it barely sparkled. And Kiwicat didn't even like fairies. She hadn't cared about that stupid play. She hadn't even had any speaking lines. And yet she was surprised to see she was still clenching the costume. She was holding it against her face. She was standing up and trying to step into it.

She pulled it up to her waist before the seams gave way, but that didn't stop her. Kiwicat tugged, wiggled, and tore her way into the outfit. The bells jingled as she moved.

"Look at me," she said to the empty room. She lifted her arms and spun. She spun and spun. As she moved, the costume began to break away from her body and fall to the floor.

"Look at me," she said again.

Dizzy, breathing heavily, she collapsed to the floor. She buried her head in her hands.

She closed her eyes and felt the beating of her heart fill her entire body. Rapid at first, it gradually slowed and settled. She wasn't sure what else to do, so she stayed where she was. She imagined what she looked like, crumpled on the floor, showered in a downfall of sequins.

The room filled with light. She let it shine on her back for some time. Eventually, she raised her head.

Her dad was leaning in the doorway.

Startled, she jumped to her feet and said, "How long have you been here?"

"Oh, Kaylee," he said.

She blushed, attempting to subtly hide the scraps of sequined fabric that surrounded her.

"I'm sorry, Dad." She began to tremble, waiting for anger, an explosion.

But her dad spoke softly. "You're out of your room," he said, in almost a whisper.

"I'm sorry," she said again, unsure if he had heard her. "I'm so stupid. It doesn't fit anymore."

“What are you doing out of your room?” he asked. A smile breaking across his face. He walked towards her and scooped her up in his arms, the way he had when she was young.

“You’re not listening,” she said. He tried to kiss her forehead, but she ducked out of the way. “I’m not a child anymore.”

At this, her dad paused and stood up straight. His brow furrowed and he exhaled slowly.

“I know, Kaylee,” he said. His words were separated by long pauses. “Things are different now. A lot has changed. But we’re still a family. We’re still here.”

Kaylee didn’t know what to say.

“Have you eaten dinner yet?” he asked with a change in tone. He turned for the kitchen. They hadn’t eaten together in a long time.

When You Die

After bathroom breaks and pre-packed lunches at a rest stop near the South Carolina-Georgia border, you're on the road again. It's spring break again, the very last spring break of your college career, your last chance to do something as a family. So instead of road-tripping across the country, flying to New York, or partying with friends in the tropics, you've found yourself reassigned to the middle seat of the rental car, sandwiched between your twelve-year-old brothers who couldn't keep from pinching each other during the first half of the nine-hour drive down to Florida. "Don't bother your sister now," your dad told them. Now the twins play a word game back and forth across your lap.

One says something like, "When you die, you'll be bald and ugly." A second later, the other responds, "Well, when you die, there'll be a party." They giggle.

They've been at it for half an hour. You've tried to drown them out, but setting your music loud enough makes your ears ache. Your legs are crumpled up and there's nowhere to lay your head, so trying to sleep is impossible. You have no choice but to look straight ahead and listen.

Alex says, "When you die, they'll put you in the slop trough and feed you to the pigs."

Ethan: "When *you* die, you'll be in the slop trough, too, but the pigs won't want you."

"Why don't you kids talk about something more pleasant?" your father says from the passenger seat. "What do you want to do at Disney World?"

"Find Donald Duck," Ethan says.

"And throw rocks at him," Alex finishes the thought.

They both giggle again.

You wonder if that's what you thought was funny when you were twelve. Their naive morbidity may have been funny once, but not to you anymore. Not after a pandemic has killed nearly six million in the last three years. Not after you recently googled *top Russian nuclear attack targets in U.S.* with earnest concern that World War III is already taking shape. To you, one crisis looms behind the next. Public health. Humanitarian. Environmental. Political. And there's nothing you can do but maybe wait for the desensitization to set in. Maybe enjoy the Magic Kingdom while you still can.

Your brothers, however, are back at it.

"When you die, the government will take all your stuff."

"When you die, they'll bury you in the wrong hole."

How distant is this anticipated end date? In your brothers' minds, you imagine, it must be far-off and forgettable. But how distant is it really? For you? For them? For everybody?

Your mother slams on the brakes. Traffic has slowed to a crawl. As you peer out the window, you can see the static line of trucks and cars worming around a curve in the highway, a mile at least, maybe more. The GPS reports a major collision and recalculates for a detour, but there is none.

You're stuck in the jam, and your brothers go on and on.

"When you die, the angels will see you and be disappointed."

"When you die, everyone will forget your name."

You admit to yourself, though, that they are certainly creative.

You'll probably miss them, eventually. But for now, everything about the future is unclear. You have no plans for after graduation. Or, more precisely, your plans so far have not panned out. You don't know what you're doing, where you'll be living, or how you'll make a

living. Odds are, you'll be back home in Homestead, NC, living with your parents until you figure things out. Which would give you more time to get annoyed by the twins.

"When you die," Ethan says, "I'll go to your funeral dressed up like the grim reaper."

"When you die, I'll give the speech in Pig Latin," says Alex.

"It's called a eulogy."

"Eulogy then. And no one will be able to understand it."

"Except-yay e-may."

They laugh again, which this time dies down into silence.

For the first time all trip, you realize that your parents have been listening to country music. You nestle your earbuds into your ears and lean your head back. The headrest behind you is too short, leaving your neck strained, but it's a good kind of hurt. For the time being, you are unaware of what your brothers are doing.

You close your eyes.

"Who wants snacks?" your father says as you pass the WELCOME TO FLORIDA sign.

"Julia, there should be a box of granola bars somewhere back there."

You find them beside the bag of spare face masks, hand-sewed by your mother, the fabric printed with Mickey Mouse heads. You pass one up to your father, take one for yourself, and offer the box to your brothers. They both grab it, pull hard, and rip the box in two. Granola bars fall into your lap. They each take one and leave you to clean up the rest.

"I want one," says your mother from the driver's seat.

The car fills with the sound of crinkling wrappers and chewing.

"Hey, guys," you say.

“What?” says Ethan.

“What are you actually interested in doing at Disney World? I got this app that will schedule your day for you.”

“Nothing,” Ethan says.

“Yeah, nothing.” says Alex. “It’s all for babies.”

“That’s not true. There are roller coasters and food and things.”

“We’re not babies.”

“Yeah, we’re almost teens.”

“What about the Star Wars area? That’ll be cool. Light sabers, Storm Troopers.”

“Everything’s fake there.”

“They just pretend.”

“I know, but…” You realize there’s no convincing them. “I think I want to go to Space Mountain.” That’s the only thing you can say. When they team up against you, there’s nothing you can do.

The car is silent once more. Your mother turns up the radio. The country music plays. It’s getting dark outside. You were supposed to be there before sundown, but the traffic is terrible. No doubt your father will say as much to the clerk at the hotel when you arrive.

It’s always surprising how tiring a day in the car can be. Even if you’re just sitting in the back, doing nothing. Even if you sleep for the whole ride, it wipes you out.

The fun starts tomorrow, you think, daunted by the idea of waking up at six-thirty, getting to the park by eight.

Your brothers have fallen asleep. They’re resting their heads on either of your shoulders. They rarely touch you, except to bother you with a pinch or a poke, to lean into you when the car

takes a sharp turn, but now you don't mind. They're peaceful and innocent again, the way they were when they were babies and you thought they were angels. Back when you couldn't imagine ever disliking them or anything they could possibly do. You keep still, not wanting to disturb them. The car pulls off the highway and the red of a stoplight floods in through the windshield. You're almost to the hotel.

A part of you wishes the car would never stop. Sure, you're cramped and tired, the bones in your butt and back aching, all your muscles tight. The music, the rental car smell, the tiredness of it all.

The future remains uncertain. The twins feel disillusioned, and you worry that you'll have to drag them from park to park. They're too old; they've lost the Disney magic. But then, why haven't you?

It's a process, you realize. Growing up. The process that begins once you see that everything at Disney World is all pretend. This step makes you feel smarter than everyone else, distinguished from the pack. But the next step takes you further, when you see that everyone else already knows what you know. And yet, they carry on.

Why would they continue to flock here? Why waste hours in lines, spend wads of money on something fake?

Maybe it's for their children, who still believe. Or for themselves, the children that once were. A return to innocence. The world may be dark and grim, but not at Disney. It's the happiest place on earth, even if we must lie to ourselves to make it so.

That, you might say, is the real magic of Disney. Everyone pretending together. Making by making believe.

Your brothers will, in time, learn this for themselves. For now, the sign of the hotel comes into view. Your parents both let out sighs of relief. Disney World awaits. And it'll be here until you die.