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LAVENDER HILL

by

Sydney Wright

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Major: Creative Writing

The University of Memphis

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For Memaw

ABSTRACT

Lavender Hill is a novella that centers around one Texas town, where four different characters cross paths that are affected by Somatic Symptom Disorder (SSD). This mental health disorder is diagnosed by looking at the consequences of the patient's abnormal thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. The characters in this novel are all facing different mental stressors – running away from past mistakes, failing relationships, struggling to form genuine relationships, and coping with big additions to your identity that shake your foundation. These characters are either forced to make changes that lead to a healthier lifestyle, or they continue in the direction of falling under the grasp of SSD. This novella is about raising awareness of a disorder that can stem from more common mental health disorders like anxiety and depression. It's about fighting against the darker entities present in our lives, that aren't always visible to the naked eye.

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“There was something she didn’t know. Something about the breath of this town wasn’t sitting well in her lungs.”

Iris

Lavender Hill, Texas. Winter 2018

Clearly, this was a parting gift from Phillip. Iris Howard observed the side of her neck in her parents' hallway mirror. An Two weeks she'd been in Texas, separated from her boyfriend Phillip. ...Ex-boyfriend. It still felt strange to think about. They'd been together for over eight years. Always together. Maybe stress had brought this on, she thought, rubbing her fingers across the hot, marooned skin. The bumps weren't that big, more like rough sandpaper.

Before she'd left Phillip in Chicago to come live with her parents for the rest of the summer, he had developed a little cluster of moles along his chin. Maybe they weren't just moles. Her mind went to infidelity. Maybe it was something he'd gotten from someone else... doing things. She swallowed the thought and let it squeeze uncomfortably down her throat. Infidelity was the last thing she wanted to think about right now. Guilt fought to weigh in on her. She straightened her back and shoulders to shake it off, but didn't leave her place in front of the mirror.

The rash didn't itch. Her skin just felt hot, like she'd just finished an hour-long hot yoga. Iris decided to schedule an appointment with her gynecologist, just in case. And if that gave her no answers, she would visit her primary care physician. She'd have to visit her old one from high school, but that didn't matter. She just wanted to get some answers so she could stop thinking about Phillip. When she found the phone number she dialed it and chatted back and forth with the nice secretary. Lucky for her they had a canceled appointment that day and could fit her in in

a few hours. Until then, the weight of the unknown would sit uncomfortably on the back of her neck.

Iris watched her tired face in the mirror. It seemed to sag in places that it hadn't before. Her mother had mentioned it the moment she surprised them and walked through the front door. She'd come home on a whim, without any thought or planning. All she knew was that she couldn't stay in Chicago anymore. Now she worried that her parents thought the worst of her, that she had failed terribly with whatever she'd been doing up there. In a way, she had. She'd gotten her degree, but her relationship, well, that was so unsure that it made Iris's forehead pound with stress.

Memories of how she'd left Phillip filtered in quickly -- so tense, so vivid, all pushing at the sides of her mind, but she silenced them. Packed them away to a place that wouldn't make her vision blur with grief. Her eyes glossed over with tears but she blinked until they disappeared. She'd turned off all the lights in the house. The sky was full of light gray clouds, so the house was filled with shadow. The hallway seemed colder than the rest of the house, closer to the front door that always had a cool draft drifting underneath it.

It was hard to look herself in the eyes. She felt like a coward for not giving Phillip an explanation beyond that teaching at Lavender Hill was a great opportunity. And it would only be temporary. They had changed over the years, and she needed space to sort out her thoughts, her feelings. He seemed completely understanding, not angry at all. And now here she was, wrapping a scarf around her neck and going to a new town to try her best to forget her mistakes.

Lavender Hill would be her home for the next year. It was only a short drive from her home town, just south of Austin. She remembered visiting there for her senior pictures in high

school in mid-May, the air still comfortably warm, not yet sticky with humidity from the Gulf. The photographer was obviously irritated with her because she kept lying down between the purple plant bunches where photo opportunities were not present. There was something about stretching out in the small lane of dirt, just close enough to the lavender that the flowering stems would sway right above her head, becoming bright lines between Iris and the clear, blue sky above her.

She remembered that moment so clearly, and it made her skin feel like someone had wrapped a blanket around her that they'd just pulled out of the dryer. That's what the sun felt like on that day. She remembered being so happy, even though there was more than enough to stress over. There was something about being outside in a place that wasn't surrounded by cold buildings with hard lines and brown, trampled grass. The sound the wind made when it rushed through the branches of trees, and the sound the plants made in return, singing the wind's praises for its comforting caresses. This is what Iris craved on the days that seemed especially cold and lonely. Something other than the silence that a room could give someone without care.

Iris had always enjoyed the chance to be in a new place where no one knew her. She could start over without judgement, and that created a freedom she didn't have enough of in her day to day life. Especially with Phillip. Phillip was the type of guy to hold onto a grudge until he felt like letting go, which usually wasn't a brief amount of time. Iris was far from perfect, and she was aware of that, but Phillip seemed to be a constant reminder and it made her feel like less of a person. A person wasn't only their past mistakes. There was so much more to someone, including what they were doing to remedy those past mistakes. She always had to remind herself that she was a good person. Or at least she always strived to be, even when Phillip made her out to be the contrary. Lavender Hill would be freedom.

Her parents had both left for breakfast in town like they did every Sunday before church. Now Iris was packing her few bags into the back of her father's truck that she would borrow to move into her new apartment. The back was already full of second-hand furniture her parents had gifted her, and she would attempt to move in piece by piece on her own. Luckily her apartment was on the first floor. She'd only seen pictures but wasn't too picky when it came to things like that. Phillip had been fussy enough for the both of them when it came to the material things.

As Iris backed out of the gravel driveway and onto the shoddily paved road, for the first time since she'd arrived at her parents' petite house that had held the three of them so well, she began to feel a longing to re-park the truck and run back inside. She fought it, tightening her thin scarf around her throat, her fingers brushing hot skin, and guided the old Ford truck down the narrow street.

Iris rolled her father's old pickup past the university's welcome sign. She would need to drive through campus to get to her apartment complex on the far side. The weather was relatively warm for being so late in the year, only a cool wind reminding everyone that it wasn't Spring just yet. There were students everywhere. Some were talking jubilantly to their friends while they walked. Iris flinched. With some groups, it was like watching someone text and drive. One woman actually ran into a corner bush and dropped her full purse into it. The other girls laughed loudly as she searched for all its contents among the branches and leaves.

The campus was beautiful for being in a relatively rural area of Texas. There was an abundance of trees with thick trunks and hundreds of tiny branches. They lined each sidewalk along with short hedges of bushes. The campus had a mix of old and modern buildings, but what

seemed odd to Iris was the fact that there were so many hills. Tall hills. They rolled beneath the pavements and grass like waves in an ocean, not caring where a building needed to stand or a tree needed to spread. Walking through the campus would prove to be a workout in itself, Iris thought as she continued to push the gas pedal to the floor to get up another hill.

Despite the sun flowing freely through the sky with no clouds to interrupt its shine, there still seemed to be shadows in the strangest places. Iris gazed at the little parks and tall buildings as she drove, turning her steering wheel with a jolt every time she started to veer into the other lane. The sun was at its peak, but the buildings and trees still seemed to cast long shadows that Iris imagined to be very cold. She could visualize herself stepping from the sun and into those shadows. The air would change drastically and quickly, like walking past a window unit air conditioner on full blast in the middle of a Texas summer. The stony ground would feel like ice. Iris didn't stop to find out if her thoughts were true. She knew she'd know soon enough.

After six straight hours of work, Iris had transferred everything from the back of her father's truck and into the cold apartment in Lavender Hill. One wall was made of dark red brick, crumbling in places but holding up for the most part. The other walls were covered in dark green wallpaper. Iris decided to not get curtains. It would be too dark if she did, or at least she would try and find some lace ones. Shadows had never been good to her.

This was the first time she'd lived alone in her life, and she quickly became aware of the silence. She walked to her purse that was shoved between a bulging box and the couch's arm and

searched its contents for her tiny Bluetooth speaker. Once she found it and synced it to her cellphone, she put on her Heartstrings playlist that included the likes of Coldplay and Claude Debussy. It instantly calmed her and lessened her pounding, dehydrated headache. But even though the empty air was now filled with light notes of piano and violin, it still had the affect of heavy silence as her thoughts drifted back to Phillip and that night that held so much darkness. She clutched painfully at the skin on her arms, remembering where Orlando's fingers had travelled, like he had never touched a woman's skin before and hers had become the most sacred thing to him. And in the moment it had felt that way to her. She hadn't touched anyone other than Phillip in so long, and with him it had been at least a month. So when she gave in to the yearning to feel seen, wanted over anything else in that instant, it felt easy. Like sitting in a bare room where your only concern was to breathe.

Her conscious also told her that it wasn't like it was a random. She wasn't great friends with Orlando's fiancée but they studied together occasionally back when Iris was still in college. Those late nights that she did stay over studying, she would sometimes opt to stay in their guest room for the night as the drive to her home with Phillip was close to an hour on the other side of Chicago, and two bottles of red wine split between her and Rosie was enough to caution Iris into staying put for the night. As these occurrences became more frequent with Phillip becoming more focused on getting a promotion, Iris found herself unable to sleep and sitting in the dark at the Fall's kitchen island. She would fill a glass with water and sip despite having no thirst for it.

One night Orlando walked into the dark kitchen without noticing Iris sitting there. When she moved to wrap her sweatshirt tighter to her body, he jumped at the sound as his eyes adjusted to the darkness and registered the small figure. Iris apologized and Orlando waved it off, grabbing a glass of water as well and standing at the other side of island.

That first night they talked as they usually did, exchanging ‘how have you been?’ ‘how’s work?’ ‘how’s school?’. The surface level questions you ask people you aren’t especially close to. But when Orlando strolled into the kitchen the next night Iris stayed in their guest room, they began to have deeper conversations. Orlando began to talk more about his relationship with Rosie and their ongoing issues they seemed to always have. Iris wanted to give him advice, but felt she was in no place to offer it when she was avoiding seeing her boyfriend by sleeping at someone else’s house a few nights a month.

Orlando asked her if graduate school was hard and how she was coping. No one had asked her this but her parents and it caught her by surprise. “Well, actually, it’s been very difficult.” Orlando nodded his head and took a quick sip from his nearly empty water glass. “It’s been very lonely. I’ve tried to meet up with other grad students but I’ve always had a hard time connecting with others in a short amount of time. And honestly,” Iris hesitated, but decided to continue when she saw Orlando’s eyes not wavering from hers, “I’m just a bit overwhelmed. It’s nice to talk to someone about it, though. And for someone to want to listen.”

“What about Phillip? I’m sure you two have spoken about it.”

Iris weaved her fingers together and squeezed them tightly at the sound of his name. “No. Unfortunately. He’s just been so busy with this job thing...”

Orlando didn’t reply, only nodded his head in understanding. Iris could tell he wasn’t speaking up about something. For the first time since they’d started talking that night he wasn’t looking at her face, but rather at the wall where a picture of him and Rosie hung. It made her wonder what he knew that she didn’t. She tried to think of other things to distract her mind from going straight to paranoia.

They're late night meetings continued. Their conversations gave Iris something that she hadn't felt in a while, that her words were being heard, processed, cherished. Sometimes Orlando would come and sometimes it was only Iris staring into the dark until she felt the heaviness against her eyelids that told her she could sleep. Those nights she always felt a tug of disappointment when he didn't come. She imagined him wrapped up with Rosie, holding her tightly against his warm chest, and it made Iris's eyes fill with tears. It wasn't until after that night at Maxwell's party, when Orlando pulled her close to his warm chest, did she realize she may not have been crying for what seemed to be lost with Phillip.

A feeling of panic filled her when she realized what time it was. She was going to be late for her appointment. Quickly she grabbed her purse and keys and headed for the door. Her father's truck was not reliable when it came to speeding, so she ended up being fifteen minutes late, but they still took her after she filled out the proper paperwork.

The appointment went well. Well, at least she thought it had gone well. The doctor examined her how they usually did. Feet up wide in the stirrups, a gentle breeze where it usually wasn't felt. "Relax. Okay, just relax..."

After Iris was allowed to return her legs to a normal position, the doctor was smiling at her. Iris began to finally relax. "Everything looks goooooood..." She was jotting down a few notes on a notepad. "We'll run the normal tests and we will call you when the results come in."

"Sounds great," Iris said. She was a little nervous about bringing up the cluster of bumps, but this was the whole reason she'd even scheduled the appointment.

"Is there anything else that you wanted to discuss? Any questions?"

Iris swallowed hard. “Um, there’s these bumps that have come up on the side of my neck. I’m not sure why... Uh, it’s been a couple days now. I just wanted to make sure it wasn’t an STD or whatever else it could be. Just wanted to make sure.” Iris was sweating. What if it was true? What if it was some kind of thing Phillip had transferred to her? She started to get angry at the thought of him being unfaithful during their relationship. She could feel her forehead wrinkle with tension. But then she began to feel the guilt tremble in. She was the one who had been unfaithful. Maybe she’d gotten it from Orlando? “Jesus.”

“I’m sorry?”

Iris blinked at the woman. She didn’t realize she’d said that out loud. “Oh, I’m sorry. Just thinking of something.” The doctor stood and took a closer look at the cluster of bumps residing on her neck. Iris stretched her head the other way as if she needed to for the doctor to see it clearly.

“Do you normally have body acne?”

“Sometimes, but I don’t think that’s what this is. That’s why I scheduled an appointment here.”

The doctor nodded her head and continued to look at the bumps. “It doesn’t look like anything you should be too concerned about. The skin looks a bit dry in this area as well, some slight inflammation which is normal for acne breakouts. Mmmhmm. Yes, I would try using an acne cleanser on the area and using a dry skin lotion. If it doesn’t clear up in a few days, I would schedule an appointment with your primary care physician. They could possibly recommend you to a dermatologist if it’s needed. Okay?”

Iris just nodded. This appointment was no help, and now she'd wasted her time with someone who clearly didn't know what she was talking about. She drove home fast, pushing the limits of her dad's truck. It rattled like the doors themselves would fall from their hinges at any moment. The sound filled her ears and made her head ache with the echoes. She squeezed her eyes shut as she pulled into the parking lot of her apartment. Iris rubbed her fingertips against her temples, the skin dipping in slightly where her skull gave way. It only added to the pressure pounding behind her forehead.

She tried to even her breathing. The thought of all of this strangeness occurring just when she wanted to start fresh and solid in a new place, caused her chest to feel tight. It was like there was a small ball in her lungs that feeding air through its cavities couldn't quite push through. Like feeling that you needed to pop a joint because it was slightly out of place. It made Iris want to just sleep so she wouldn't have to feel it anymore.

She looked up from her seat in her father's truck. Unease filled the truck as the thought of someone observing her sitting there entered her mind. Iris glanced around, and when she noticed no one's eyes on her, she got out of the truck and headed to her apartment.

A sound chimed through the Bluetooth speaker back in the lonely apartment, temporarily lowering Clair de Lune, signifying that there was a notification on her phone. She felt the long and low buzz in her back pocket. Her stomach seemed to squeeze up through her body and into her throat when she read the words on the tiny bright screen. *I miss you.* From Phillip. And just like that she began to cry. No matter how much she told herself that their relationship was already pretty much over and had been for a while, or he deserved it for the emotional armlength he had held her at for years, she still felt like the worst kind of person. Where was the line for

sacrificing your happiness in lieu of another's? Was it such a bad thing to just want a slight bit of relief, of clear existence in someone else's world? It was easy to let go in the moment, to listen eagerly to the small voice in her ear telling her this is where her happiness would be, and if Phillip really deserved her love than he would make more of an effort to show it. To see that she wasn't happy. Not like they'd been before.

Iris tossed her phone onto the carpet in front of her. She wanted to throw it hard, to watch it break into many pieces against some hard surface, to feel a bit of tension leave her body because of it, but she couldn't. A new phone wouldn't be an option. Instead, she laid on the couch and let her vision leap slowly from stuffed brown box to the next stuffed box. Soon the shadows of naked trees outside her window stretched into the bare room. She imagined them to be long fingers reaching for something against the far wall, ignoring her and slipping silently over her head. Eventually the shadows grew soft, blending in with the darkening night. Iris remained where she was and wondered if she was even more alone now than she ever was before.

Another chime filled the air and Iris's heart beat hard and steady in her chest. The ringing felt as loud as church bells in the cluttered room. Bare branches began to clatter against the curtain-less window, tossing thin shadows against the wall and filling the air with cringing noise that brushed lightly across her skin.

Iris looked at her phone that was laying face down on the carpet. The area around it lit up slightly and she could imagine Phillip's name flashing across the screen, a call or a text message. She wasn't ready to talk to him, but there was a pulling in her gut that wouldn't let her leave that

notification unseen. She stretched out her arm to grab the phone and clicked the side button to light up the screen. There was only one notification, and it wasn't from Phillip.

We should talk about what happened. Phillip hasn't replied to any of my calls or messages. Are you okay? It was from Orlando. Iris wanted to ask him so many things. Did he think Phillip knew about what happened? Had he said anything to him? Did Rosie know anything about it? The thought made her bite her lip until it shot pain down her chin. She didn't want to deal with this right now. She couldn't. It was overwhelming and made her feel like she was going to throw up. She reached up to rub her hand across her neck and touched hot skin, reminding her of the bumps that had appeared that morning. They were still there, but didn't seem to have grown or spread in any way.

Iris got up to dig through one of the boxes, dropping her phone back onto the carpet after powering it off. She pulled a thick, white blanket from the jumbled contents and wrapped it tightly around her. A few steps and she was collapsing back onto the couch, wriggling around until she found a comfortable position. She closed her eyes, doing what she always did to fall asleep quickly.

She pictured herself driving in a car down a gravel backroad. The street was lined with bluebonnet fields on both sides, flashing by Iris's peripheral in bright blue blurs. The windows in the car were down, and her lungs easily took in the fresh, country-side air. It felt like the easiest thing to do, just drive and drive on a backroad that's beaten gravel made a constant crackle under her car's tires. She knew in her mind that the road would never end, and that the bluebonnets would stretch on as long as her eyes were closed and she was steadily breathing in the silence of her living room. She stayed in the car and continued to drive.

The rural wind had a slight bite to it, Fall trying its best to take hold of the Texas air. But the sun bit through it and warmed Iris's arm that rested on the door of the car. It spread through her body like slipping into a hot bath. There was something about driving on a road alone with no one else, with no buildings shoved side by side and no people dashing across the street suddenly. There was something about air being this kind of clean – no whiffs of kebabs or corner pizza shops. It was a smell that couldn't be captured anywhere but in a rural place like this, so full of quiet life that gave the world so much without words. It made Iris feel light.

Soon her limbs seemed to be melting into the couch, sinking into the soft fabric, her blanket wrapped tightly around her arms and holding in her heat. It felt like she was floating into brilliant blue colors, the sky, the flowers. And then there was the pricking sensation she had in her neck, reminding her that everything wasn't in a shade of brilliance, but rather cast over with a weight and darkness that only served to highlight that there was so much ambiguity in her life right now. There were so many things up in the air, waiting to fall down on her when the time was right. And as she focused in on the sensation of tiny needles poking into her skin every second, she knew without a doubt that this was something more serious than she originally thought. It had to be something complex and rare that maybe the doctors didn't see that often. She would go somewhere else for another opinion. They would listen to her and help. They had to.

Wren

Lavender Hill, Texas. Winter 2018

Wren Williams laughed to the empty, frosted field in front of him, trying to convince himself that it was his choice to be alone. He wondered when he would choose company instead of solitude, or if he was even capable of a real relationship at this point in his life. Either way, he promised himself in that moment to try. He had to take control of his situation if he wanted to feel more happiness in this place that still felt foreign to him.

It was the final week of the semester and most students had finished their exams and gone home for winter break. Lavender Hill University was not unlike a rack of bare bones now: frigid and gray, extremely unusual for Texas at this time of year. It was 25 degrees Fahrenheit and the abnormal weather had everyone drawing away into the warmth of their homes. The blackbirds that usually badgered the students for their chips and sandwiches seemed to be frozen to the top of the light posts, their eyes hollow and continuously watching. When the sun sank deep, the birds would gather and swarm, creating snake-like patterns across the sky.

Wren had stayed instead of returning to Wisconsin for the break. His family was scattered across the Midwest, and he wasn't that close to any of them anyways. There were unspoken grudges for him abandoning them for the intrigue of the South when he was just eighteen. And now he was a visiting theater director to a small university in the middle of nowhere, Texas. The South hadn't brought the riches he'd dreamt about, even after a rough

fifteen years of scraping through school and begging for work. “I’m still young,” he said to the vacant quad. But the truth was, Wren felt old. His bones ached with the cold and he imagined if his dreams were to manifest before him, they’d have even darker under-eye circles than he did.

His fingers brushed the thin film covering the pack of cigarettes he’d purchased when he first got into town a few months ago. He didn’t smoke. He hated smoking, actually. His mom had slowly withered away from years of smoking when he was younger. He’d watched it change who she was: from bright, artistic mother to quiet and dismissive figure who was just always there, but not really. She didn’t fight for her health. His father seemed to only be good for working and making sure there was at least a frozen pizza in the freezer. Wren all but sprinted out the door as soon as he was of age. He hated that he couldn’t control what was happening in his house, so his only option was to leave. The air had to be lighter somewhere. He figured the South was a good place to start.

He didn’t plan to smoke the cigarettes. He didn’t even plan to open them. He just had the urge to buy them at the first convenient store he saw, so he got them. They hadn’t left his pocket since. To him, as long as they stayed in his pocket, that meant he was on the right track. That meant he was doing good, and that he was in control of his life. But there was still this odd feeling that things weren’t going as good as they could be, like something was missing.

“You know, I wonder why this damn town doesn’t give more. I’ve given a lot, and I feel like I have nothing for myself.” Wren imagined a man with as much passion about the arts was sitting next to him. Maybe with a thermos of hot cocoa. Or perhaps scotch. “Come to Lavender Hill, they said. We need someone with your vision. We need someone with your amount of adventure and class. That’s exactly what we need. What about what I need! It’s like a black hole

here... Class my ass..." The non-existent man beside him nodded his head in agreement. His eyes were dark and hollow, as if he were the father of the birds. Their beady eyes continued to watch. Wren rose from his seat and began to walk towards his apartment a few blocks away, pulling his coat closer to his body.

Past the food court he could hear the instrumental version of Christmas music playing. The air was filled with the smell of biscuits and chicken, a breakfast no one would have today. A few steps past the food court and the air returned to its hollow smell of pure cold. It was like the clear, blue-tinted film hugging the pack of cigarettes in his pocket was wrapped across his face, making it hard to breathe. The air seemed packed with frozen crystals, pricking at his throat as the haze made its way to his lungs. He pulled the pack from his pocket to observe its wear since he'd purchased it. The cardboard edges were smooth where they should have made a sharp corner.

He turned onto the small street where his apartment was. The building was long and studded with multiple shades of red bricks. Wren had never walked this road with someone before. He was always alone. He imagined, for once, he wasn't. "You know," he said, acting like he was shy, "I had a great time tonight." Now he held in a laugh at the oddity of what he was doing. "Would you like to come up?" His voice was loud in the empty space between buildings, far from the seductive tone he was going for.

Wren pulled the leather glove from his hand to help find the house key folded deep in his coat pocket. It was then that he noticed a shadow on the dorsal side of his hand. Even pushed into the filtered light of the day the shadow remained. Then it occurred to Wren that the shadow was beneath his skin, a bruise. It wasn't tender when he pushed against the translucent

membrane where his blue veins threaded through. It was almost unrecognizable. “Must be from the cold,” he said, and slipped his glove back on.

Three floors of steps and his apartment door was before him. The hallway made the building seem like the rooms would be very nice. The walls were painted a deep, forest green and molded with intricately carved, white strips. The floors were a dark stained wood and usually polished. It always smelled like citrus. The apartment, however, was vastly different. There were drafts no matter the weather. Clusters of black mold spotted the bathroom ceiling due to the lack of ventilation and were uncleanable for Wren because of the texture of the paint. The appliances were outdated. The walls seemed to be extremely thin since Wren knew exactly how his neighbor’s girlfriend liked her morning sex. A bit of hair pulling. No hickeys. But Wren saw no reason to cause a fuss to his landlord. This situation was only temporary, after all.

As he pushed his key into the door handle, someone emerged from the alcove by the maintenance room. Wren’s keys juggled and dropped from his hand when he noticed movement in his peripheral. “Oh, um, Cleo. Hello, I didn’t see you.” He realized that his heart was fluttering, but it made his stomach churn and all he really wanted to do at that point was sit down to try and stop it.

“Hi, Wren. I’m sorry I startled you.” Cleo worked in the theatre department. She was the person who had responded to Wren’s call about a job opening Lavender Hill had been trying to fill for ages. Their previous director had passed away unexpectedly, Charles, a man who had graduated from the university back when it had first opened, and had seemingly never left. Wren originally wasn’t intrigued by the position, but it was only a seasonal spot and it covered room

and board as well, so he could only say yes to Cleo's light and desperate voice over the phone. Wren had seen her here and there during rehearsals, but never here in this space.

He laughed at the thought that tumbled through his mind. "Did you, follow me here?"

Cleo smiled at the question, but her eyebrows were raised in clear amusement. "Actually, I just moved in a few days ago." She pointed to the door beside her. "Last place had roof rats, so I had to get out of there." Her keys were still hanging from the handle. She seemed to assume he still had a questioning look on his face, so she added, "Only temporary. I recognized you and thought I'd say hello. Haven't spoken to you in a while. How's the job going?"

Wren could feel a tightness growing in his chest. He smiled with tight lips and returned to unlocking his door. "Oh, um, it's good it's good. A lot different than Milwaukee but it's good. Sorry about the rats. That's... uh, unfortunate." She nodded and smiled, continuing to turn her key in the lock to go inside her apartment. Wren looked at her fully for what felt like the first time. She wore a long skirt that brushed her shins but hugged her waist. A black turtleneck embraced every curve of her upper body and Wren swallowed the liquid that had begun to pool in his mouth.

"Actually, would you like to join me for a drink? I could really use the company," she said unexpectedly. Wren blinked and realized she was holding her door open for him. He locked his apartment door without another thought, following Cleo into her brightly decorated apartment.

“The fall of man, people! What I’m seeing here is a timid Eve and an indecisive Adam. This is a modern adaptation with a twist, so toss out all that you’ve thought of this story before. Think... think – . Think electric. Think of your first love. You,” he said to a young man standing next to him. “Think of the first time you touched a woman.”

The guy laughed. “I don’t swing that way.”

“Oh,” Wren stumbled for words. “Well, you know what I mean. Think of what your body longs for most. What your heart longs for... What do you crave when it’s dark out and completely silent, the middle of the night and you’re all alone?” For Wren, this brought a sting in his chest rather than a spreading warmth. He ignored this and continued, only fumbling over a few words while trying to clear it from his mind. “Just be romantic. I want to see a passionate Eve and an enchanted Adam. I want to see brave rebellion and blissful ignorance,” he finally mumbled.

From stage left he could feel Cleo grinning at him. It made his palms build beads of sweat. He could still feel the imprints of her warm palms against his bare back from a few weeks before. It was hot and quick, unexpected but welcomed once her lips hit his. They didn’t speak after, even after he got dressed and left. Even in the hallway when they arrived home at the same time on other days. They just smiled at each other, tight lipped, lustful thoughts whirring and whizzing behind their eyes. But somehow Wren knew it wasn’t going to be a one-time thing. Or maybe that was just him hoping. And yet, he couldn’t shake the feeling he had in his chest while they were mashed against each other on her couch weeks before. Like the students’ poor portrayal, there wasn’t any passion between him and Cleo unless they were under that mess of sheets, and only the thought of it got him going. He never felt the urge to ask her about her

family or friends. What were her hobbies? Ambitions? Wren didn't feel bad thinking that he could care less about those details. What they had in the moment was enough for him. What did worry him, was where Cleo stood when it came to their status. What was she thinking?

Wren wondered if Cleo was thinking about it as well while they watched the theater students fail to comprehend what he had in mind for this production. Two students stared with dead eyes, awkwardly two feet away from each other at center stage. The lovebirds. The young man hesitantly placed his hand on the middle of the young woman's back and she squeezed her eyes shut in what Wren assumed was meant to be desire. She looked like she'd just been pinched on the ass.

"No... No, no no. No. This is just," Wren shook his head and pulled a leather journal out of his back pocket, smacking it hard against his palm that made everyone jump at the crack. "You know what? Let's take five. Okay?" The students seemed to visibly relax at his words and shuffled back stage without comment. Cleo must have gotten the hint that Wren needed a moment to think, sort things out, and she followed the students off stage.

Wren smacked his producer's journal against his hand again. The skin there was beginning to turn pink from the impact. He noticed the dark shadows were still covering the backs of his hands, but pulled down the sleeves of his shirt and chose to deal with it later. He pulled a pen out of his front pocket and opened the journal to the first page instinctively. It was never the page he needed to go to, but it was always the page he couldn't pass up. It was full from top to bottom in barely legible, dark inked words. It was about someone he used to know not long ago, from when he first moved to the South. It was about his first real friend, love, whatever you could think of that's what this person was to Wren. Heartbreak. Inspiration.

Madness at times. But those times were over. Now, this first page was a reminder of how creative Wren could really be. This page was the jumpstart to his directing career, to his writing career. It was everything, and it was where he always went when he felt stuck.

This page was about a very specific woman. But on this page, he simply called her G. Wren had first noticed her in the park, where all aspiring theater chaps he knew went for inspiration when they felt like they were on the brink of failure. There was something about the liveliness of the birds there. How the air was always filled with a light, melodic sound in Spring, so there was never that silence that only whispered to you that you are good for nothing and going nowhere.

It was there that he strolled past her sitting on a park bench, going in on a meatball panini. It was there that he did a doubletake and fought with himself internally for only forty-seven seconds before deciding to sit on the opposite side of the bench. It was there that he built up enough courage to ask her, “Hi, miss. If you don’t mind me asking, where did you get that sandwich? It looks amazing.” But in all honestly he couldn’t give a rat’s ass about that panini, and was only thinking that she was the most beautiful woman he had set eyes on to this day.

She was mid-bite, so she smiled with chipmunk-packed cheeks and held up a finger for him to wait just a moment. “Greggs,” she said, and her voice washed over Wren like sliding into a hot bath after walking blocks in a Wisconsin winter. A bright yellow sundress that was printed with darkly outlined flowers of some sort flowed over her body and moved with every slight gust of wind. He could smell the mozzarella on her panini, but he could also smell her floral perfume. Sandalwood? Bergamot? What was that heavenly smell? He felt the urge to ask but quickly

squashed the thought after he realized it would be strange to ask someone you just met a question like that.

That wasn't the last day he saw G. It was fate that they would meet again and instantly hit it off. Sure, Wren had to do some work to get there, but G was worth it. She was worth all of his energy with how she made him feel. And sure, it sounded as cheesy as it gets. That's what they were – cheesy. And he had loved every second of it.

On these pages in front of him, Wren ran his finger lightly across the edge of the page, wondering if he slid his finger fast enough, would it slice through his skin? He knew if he skimmed through this page he would find the words he would need to help him finish this run through of the play. He knew on this page, inspiration was there. The words weren't necessarily true, but Wren liked to think that they were.

That night after Wren met G in the park, he couldn't sleep. He lay in the dark for what felt like an hour, but his mind wouldn't let him rest until he let out what was chirping in his head. So he gave in and went to his desk at 3 a.m. as all writers do at some point in their career, and there he wrote this page. This was who G was to Wren. There was something in his chest that he called intuition that told him this was his truth, and that's all that mattered.

On the page, it began with a vague description of G. Her hair was as brown as the best milk chocolate, and as smooth as it as well. Wren could feel the touch of G's hair as he read the words pressed firmly into the page. She always smelled of something light and floral, or woody, she described it as when he finally gave into his urge to ask. She always wore a skirt or dress when they went outside, always reaching past her knees, but always flowy material that would hug every line of her body when the wind brushed past her. She wore these clothes to remind

Wren what was there, what was waiting for him if he played his cards right. He knew this, felt it deep in his chest, so he wrote in on the page.

She rarely finished a book; claimed she disliked the idea of endings. She never spoke about her family, and even though Wren wanted to ask he never did. But he imagined they had quite a bit of money, not ‘trust fund’ kind of money, but enough that she didn’t need to work at this point in her life to get by. She liked things that were simple, like walking to the park on a 70s and blue skies kind of day, and she always stopped to ask if she could pet any stranger’s dog.

Planning things stressed her out, so she avoided as many adult things as she could that called for that kind of organization. Wren could tell that this was because she’d been let down a lot in her past. People liked how her face looked when it was full of hope, but didn’t bother to stick around to help change the face she made when she was let down. Wren was determined to be the one that was different, so he wrote that down on this page.

G talked softly all the time unless she was upset or frustrated, and then her voice would become deep and clipped, like there wasn’t enough air in her lungs to give full sentences anymore or like she was choosing to restrict herself in this way. Wren knew she thought this could force people to care or take notice that she was hurting. It didn’t work most of the time, but for Wren it would. He wrote it all down.

She painted her own fingernails and toenails a soft pink all the time because she didn’t like people touching her fingers or toes. Wren would win her trust and eventually offer to spoil her in this way, maybe even give her a foot massage if she wanted it. It would just be another special moment that they could connect on a level that Wren never had with anyone else.

Late in the night Wren jotted all of these things down, like it was a colorful story blossoming before his eyes. But there was this feeling deep in his gut like maybe, just maybe, there was truth in these so called assumptions he was creating with his pen. Maybe this is what destiny felt like. So he quickly pulled up Instagram and Facebook, typing in the name that she'd given him when he'd politely asked later in the day, and he easily found her profiles.

There wasn't much information there that he hadn't already learned from her. But there were pictures. So many pictures that hinted at all the information he'd thought up before this moment. They had to be true. Or at least had a great chance to be spot on, and that was enough for Wren.

Before he could finish reading the rest of the page, Wren felt a light hand on his shoulder. "What's this?"

Wren slapped the notebook shut and turned around so quickly it made Cleo jump in place. "Ah, sorry," he said, smiling, hoping that his unexpected actions didn't give any weird curiosity to her. "Caught me off guard. Producer's journal. Notes and such. Everything okay?"

"Oh yes. Just wanted to see if you were okay. You seem a bit frustrated with how things are going." Wren could see that Cleo was looking at the leather journal in his hand the entire time she spoke to him, and she had that look of wonder on her face, when your eyebrows are raised just slightly from their normal place on your skull. "Notes?"

"Guilty," was all Wren replied almost before she could finish her brief question. "A bit of inspiration, too. I think I can turn this rehearsal around. But we'll see. Just needed a moment to center myself."

Cleo nodded her head in agreement, carrying a look of encouragement on her face. “I’m sure it will be fine.” She paused for a moment, seeming to still be eyeing the journal in Wren’s hands.

Wren looked down and expected to see a loose page that she’d read a bit of and his stomach began to tighten in a knot. Then he realized she was looking at the back of his hands, and his stomach carried on with the plan. “Um, well... Honestly I’m not entirely sure what this is. Thought it was from the cold or something, but it’s been like that for a while. I honestly forgot about it until now.”

“How long has it been like that?”

“A couple of weeks?”

Cleo looked at him disapprovingly. “Make sure you get that checked out. I don’t think it’s normal for your skin to look gaunt like that.”

“Will do,” Wren agreed, hoping that would be the end of the topic. He really wanted to finish skimming the page before they got back into the rehearsal. He assumed Cleo picked up on his buzzing state from a majority of his responses being so clipped.

“Good. Well, I think I’ll head home. Thought I’d ask if you wanted to grab lunch tomorrow in the café.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Wren said. Cleo just smiled in response and squeezed his shoulder with her delicate hand. She was thin but not abnormally. Wren did wonder how hard he would have to squeeze her fingers to snap them. They were long and slender, bony. But they were

always warm, and for that fact Wren was always drawn to brushing his fingers against hers like he did now before she walked out of the auditorium.

He watched her until she passed through the far side doors before opening up his journal again. But he didn't finish reading the page. Instead, he turned to a new page. He felt the beginning of that itching feeling, like there was this character forming in his head, this beautiful being that was both intriguing and mysterious. She would be vibrant and entertaining, funny and beautiful. They would have long, slender fingers and skin that was warm to the touch all the time. She would ask if he was okay. She would care about how he felt, how hard times were for him. She would enjoy his company and find comfort in knowing she was stopping the dark shadows of solitude that felt like a rock on his back sometimes. She would be the opposite of loneliness for him.

He wrote down her name as simply C, and waited for that itching to flow through his fingers like it had done the first time. The image was in his head. She was in his head. In his vision. But the details weren't there. They didn't come flowing out like they had before. The itch receded as quickly as it'd come.

The students had returned to the stage and were waiting patiently for Wren to look up from his journal. But there was something at the bottom of his stomach that was telling him to panic, that the creativity was no longer there and that he was good for nothing if he couldn't even write this. He thought of C and their time together a few weeks ago. Her skin flowing across his and her arms wrapped around his torso so tightly he felt swaddled in warmth. But on this clean sheet of paper, there was nothing more to her than that day, than those touches. There was no story.

For lunch the next day they met in the small café inside a wing of the food court. Wren bit into a flaky croissant, leaving fragments of the buttery treat in the thin mustache he'd recently decided to grow. The fragrance of melted swiss cheese and fluffy eggs filled the space around them, and Wren felt warm inside with the perfection of his lunch. Cleo was in full conversation with someone, Iris, as Wren recalled overhearing. An old friend from high school. They'd kept in touch and Cleo sent her word about the temporary job opening.

When Wren asked about Iris, Cleo said that she was from the Chicago area and was having trouble finding a university teaching job in Illinois. They had graduated from the same high school not far from Lavender Hill, so Cleo thought it would be something she would have interest in. He'd listened in on their phone conversations regularly, not being able to help himself from being pulled in with the details of this mystery woman. Sometimes he would hear Cleo talking animatedly in her apartment while he was in the hallway, and he would stop and press his ear to the door, hearing details like 'Oh, so you're still not drinking alcohol, huh? You'll have to go to a bar eventually' and 'Wow, it's been that long? How do you make it through the night? You don't even have a —' Unfortunately for Wren, Iris seemed to have answered the question before Cleo could finish asking it.

"Wren?" Cleo said. "You okay? You've tried to drink from that empty cup at least three times now."

“Fine,” Wren said, smiling. In that moment the tall glass wall beside them that blocked the blistering breeze from hardening their joints, filled with sun rays that stretched through the clouds. The sky almost seemed warm and blue, but it also seemed farther away than usual. “Let’s go to your apartment.”

Cleo didn’t oppose, and they began to gather their things and slide on layers of wool and fleece. “Wait, is that -- ” Cleo’s leather purse slid to the ground and her hand caught Wren’s. He winced in anticipation of her thumb sliding weightily over the shadow on the back of his hand. He’d almost forgotten the strange shadow, which is what he’d come to refer to it as since it never seemed to grow more or less tender, or cause any pain at all for that matter. It had never expanded or shrunk by even a millimeter. He’d searched online for any details that could identify what it was, but to no avail.

“I have no idea.”

“Well when are you going to get it checked out? Does it hurt?”

“No,” Wren said, pulling his hand from hers and leading the way out of the café. “It doesn’t hurt at all. I don’t feel anything. It’s honestly fine. If it’s not gone in the next few days, I’ll have it checked out.” He wouldn’t.

Cleo glared at him through the sides of her eyes. He could tell that she wasn’t completely trusting his words but knew that there wouldn’t be much she could do about it. She took his bruised hand in hers, rubbing her thumb tenderly across the back as if her touch was magic. Wren’s other hand was in his coat pocket, stroking the pack of cigarettes that now had a hole at the top. His fingers would smell like tobacco by the time they reached the apartment.

In the hallway that led to Cleo's place, Wren wondered what he was truly doing with her. He didn't feel how he had felt with G, and that thought alone was taking roots in his mind. It was enough for him to break any preconceived investment in whatever they were trying to be. While Cleo fumbled her keys and eventually got it into her door's lock, Wren's mind was elsewhere. He imagined the hollow-eyed man standing in the corner across the hall. His eyes were even darker where there was no sunlight inside, and the shadows clung to the cold corners. The man nodded at him as if he knew exactly what Wren was considering in that moment, and Wren knew he was right.

Inside Cleo's apartment they collapsed into the couch. The morning had been stressful for them both. Wren wasn't sure if the play was ready to be performed, but there were only a few weeks until they were set to present it. He still wasn't even sure about the ending. Astonishingly, he let himself stress over the play's likelihood of being great. He found himself wanting to get invited back to this quaint, cold town.

The image of hollowed-out eyes was stuck in his mind, but it didn't make him shiver with fright. He felt comfort in the man's nod of affirmation. He needed to trust how he felt and not worry about the logistics of it all. Wren surprised himself with the unexpected question that left his mouth. "What's Iris's last name?"

"Why," Cleo said, laughing.

"I think I may have met her before, when I was visiting Chicago once. The name is just familiar." He lied so easily to Cleo. There wasn't a tense muscle in his body, and he didn't worry if she believed him or not.

“I’m sure there’s more than one Iris in Chicago,” Cleo responded, observing her nails and pulling off a piece of one side. Wren just stared at her, waiting for her to give him what he asked. She got the idea after another few moments. “Howard?”

Wren suppressed a sigh that felt like feathers caressing the inside of his chest and abdomen. *Howard*. “No, I guess it must have been someone else.” He pushed further back into the cushions of the turquoise velvet couch. It smelled of moth balls, or maybe years in a storage unit. Wren’s eyes ached, and he rubbed them with the rough tips of his fingers. He’d spent another long night writing about ‘I’ in his journal. Lots of details. But nothing he could use for the production.

“I think she was supposed to move in today, actually,” Cleo said, and Wren’s heart instantly began to press harder into his ribcage. Today. Would he meet Iris today?

“What’s on your mind, darling.” Cleo’s smooth voice tickled against Wren’s neck, attempting to pull him away from his thoughts about Iris. Cleo’s ashy hair fell across her face like translucent curtains. She was so close he could see clumps of mascara on the tips of her eyelashes, the makeup’s residue scattered across the thin skin right beneath her eyes.

“Just stressed about the next few weeks. I’m tired, Cleo. That’s the simplest way to put it I guess.”

“I know,” she said. Her hand reached to cradle the back of his tension-filled neck, and gently tugged it toward her so she could place light kisses down the side. “I think I know,” she whispered, “what can take your mind off of everything. If only for a little while.” She pulled

back and gave him that smile that always filled Wren's chest with warmth. "Or maybe a long while."

Cleo's kisses quickly turned into small bites that had Wren pulling her to lay on top of him just as swiftly. His eyes fluttered with every touch and tug at his skin. Threads of light flickered past his eyelashes like sunshine through the thick leaves of a massive oak tree. When the caps of his eyes finally stayed closed, his mind traveled to a warm place that smelled of freshly mowed grass and lavender bushes in full bloom. Light and overwhelming. Cleo's fingers pressed into the skin of his torso and trailed down to his waist. Images were flashing through Wren's mind. Honey and curly, dark hair the color of black birds. Bruises and golden skin kissed with heat. Thick eyelashes that framed perfect, almond-shaped eyes. A breathtaking smile... Wren was lost in the warmth of it all. And somewhere in the midst of it all, he had the sensation of an idea tugging at his mind. He wanted Cleo to put her hands around his neck. He hesitated only a moment before letting himself ask.

"What?" she said, instantly ceasing all movement and pulling herself away from him. And then it was all over far too soon. "Sorry, I'm not into that." Cleo was looking at him with wide eyes that he wasn't sure were filled with fright or embarrassment. He decided to pretend like it hadn't happened at all.

After he dressed, he kissed Cleo goodbye and promised to make her breakfast to start the weekend tomorrow. When he arrived in his apartment he walked straight into the bedroom and shut the door. The back of his hands began to itch. He pulled out his journal and began to write about 'I'. He took on the challenge of molding the details of her he'd gathered and created a vision before him.

She had eyes that were brown, but just light enough to cause the desire for honey to hit your tongue and spread like wildfire. Her hair was naturally curly, slightly unkept, slightly frizzy most days. Her hands would be soft like a satin down pillow, and their touch would relax even the most uptight person in the room. She would speak just as softly, and as you'd talk to her you'd wonder how on earth someone as soft-spoken as her could get in front of a classroom of students and be heard, be respected. But she could. She could. Wren knew that there would be one thing about her, just one thing that she'd never speak of. Something from her past that would eat away at him with a consuming wonder. But he'd never be brave enough to ask. He let his sweaty hand rub the skin across his throat, his fingertips clearly feeling his heartbeat through the vein on the side of his neck.

In the bathroom he hoisted the rickety wooden window with royal blue, chipped paint as far as it would go. Before he could stop himself, he was tearing through the clear wrap of the cigarette pack and pulling out one, raising it to his lips and leaving it just far enough into his mouth that it wouldn't fall. His lips felt dry and wrinkled against the white, rounded paper. He pulled in air through the unlit cigarette. The taste of nicotine tainted his tongue and Wren wanted to gag, but he didn't. Instead, through the open window he hung his head over the edge, barely holding on to the old cigarette, and he stayed there until the pressure of blood pooling in his forehead was too much to bear, like someone had wrapped their fingers tightly around his neck. Only then did the cigarette dropped from his lips, and it never left his sight as it fell to the ground.

Erlene

Lavender Hill, Texas. Early Fall 2018

“John, stop smacking that protein bar!”

Erlene was trying her best to suppress a laugh that would not sound at all genuine if it came out. Her friend next to her was slowly making his way through a protein bar, and had an annoying habit of smacking the caramel between the roof of his mouth and tongue while talking.

Today wasn't the day to get on Erlene's nerves. It was her twentieth birthday, and unlike most people's birthday's, this day only brought resentment and misery. Birthdays meant remembering how far you've come, where you've come from, family. But those areas were as murky as muddy water for Erlene, and ever since she was old enough to inquire about her past it had become that way. She still felt like there was a cloudy screen covering her eyes, making the colors not as vivid and the sun not as bright. John alleviated some of that weight.

His slim frame towered over her as they walked, but she was still tall for her age. Her legs were longer than most which made for a good mid-distance sprinter on the Lavender Hill University track and field team. John did short sprints, and they had become fast friends during their first month of practice with the team, which they called Hell Month. There was something about the air in Lavender Hill that began to wear you down gradually, like putting a tiny rock into your bag every day and only realizing how much the weight had increased at the end of the semester.

When they'd first began their friendship, Erlene had assumed John had a crush on her with how much he teased her playfully. Some days it would be witty jokes shot towards her without looking for any type of response. Other days it was just the way he looked at her, like she was an absolute treat to his day. Her eye would catch his, and for some reason she didn't squirm and eventually look away when his gaze didn't falter. It made her abdomen tighten. Erlene was never one to make the first move, or play into petty flirtations, so that was all they ever were between her and John.

But after some time, she began to flirt back and take on his witty sayings with equally witty responses that made him laugh out loud. Before long, the feeling sitting at the bottom of Erlene's stomach that told her John wanted more than friendship began to pass, and they sank comfortably into a concrete friendship, the type that lasted into old age. No matter the physical space that might grow between them after they graduated. No matter how many disagreements that flared up. They could always rely on each other to bring out a bit of happiness on even the dreariest days. And that was something that Erlene had begun to rely on a lot in college. High school was hard, but college was a different ordeal entirely.

"Gotcha, gotcha," John said, bringing Erlene back into focus as he smacked on every word. "Yo, you heard from Coach Smith about a new sprints coach yet?"

"Negative," Erlene said, reaching up to tighten the elastic around the bun on her head. John shook his head and kicked at the loose dirt on the road. The track complex was in sight now, just a few blocks away. "I know. It's ridiculous. How long does he expect us to go through our workouts alone? It's honestly stressing me out. Like, I didn't sign up to go through a whole off-season alone. I'm trying to make top eight at conference this year and that's not going to

happen without a second eye at all my workouts. I could be doing stuff wrong this whole time, creating habits that are gonna take forever to break.”

“Woah, woah, slow your role. You’re not creating any bad habits that are gonna take forever to break. Chill. I’ve gotchu. We may not have a coach yet, but you know you’ve always got me.”

Erlene smiled, knowing that John was telling the truth but still a bit stressed about their lack of a coach. Their previous one had been fired in the spring for something the head coach would never fully explain. Erlene never trusted the head coach. He always seemed to be making deals that would only benefit himself. She wasn’t sure what the benefit was this time, but she would have to settle for slim side eye glances in his direction. He signed her scholarship checks.

John and Erlene passed through the silver iron gates that arched and met with the words *Lavender Hill Athletics Complex*. Most of campus was filled with trees that had been planted years ago, great oaks with trunks big enough to act as back rests to numerous students. This area of campus was different. Most of the trees had been removed to make way for a vibrant baseball stadium, a decent black surfaced track, and a softball field tucked away in a back corner. There were trees hugging each other laced around the outermost fence of the complex, giving it a cozy feel despite the winded hours that athletes spent there. It was the place that Erlene first felt part of something bigger than her couple of friends who were few and far between. It was bigger than her supporters from high school that rooted her on at the beginning but quickly dwindled when things became more challenging for her. It was a place where Erlene felt she’d earned her position, where she belonged just as much as the guy next to her. It was an addition to her pride that she’d never had until now, and it damn sure felt good.

They walked side by side until they reached the facility building that housed all of the athletes' locker rooms. This building held a lot of memories for Erlene, despite her only being there for a year so far. There had been flirtations with the soccer guys, sideways glances (or grimaces) at the football players, confused looks at the baseball and softball players, and Erlene had rarely seen anyone from the basketball team there. They were like celebrities or trolls – hard to spot even in the place they were meant to spend the most time.

Erlene and John passed that building and stepped through a door that led to a wide indoor training room. It was supposed to be a turf room, but it seemed to be too small to earn that title. The turf surface was coming up in places, like an earthquake had come through and pulled ridges to protrude from the ground in various spots. It was about fifty meters in length, twenty in width. Not much space to do a workout, so the track team would use it to warm up, stretch, or do smaller workouts such as body weight circuits or starting block work. The ceiling was high, an attempt to make the space feel larger than it was. It fooled no one who had to spend most afternoons there.

Erlene slipped her back pack off and slid down to sit against the gray cement block wall. John joined her and began to slip off a few layers of sweats, leaving only his track tights and dri-fit t-shirt. Erlene tried not to stare, like she always did. She may not have the urge to flirt with him anymore, but she always felt the pull to admire his body. He was muscular, but not too much that it was intimidating. It was a muscular that made you want to hug someone to feel their strength wrap around you. Erlene dug her nails into the plastic turf that attempted to mimic a grass meant to last a lot longer, and the tiny bits of black rubber popped up around her tensed fingers.

“Happy birthday Erlene!” Her teammate had just rounded the corner from the door that led to the weight room. She was fastening a hair tie around her high pony tail.

“Thank you, Brandy. How was weights?”

“Long,” she said, laughing.

Erlene laughed too, but with a clear tone of annoyance. They had been going through their own weight lifting workout for what felt like forever now. How were they to know if they were doing something wrong? When they snapped their ankle or started to continuously pull their quad because they were putting strain on it from doing the front squat wrong every week? Erlene knew her thoughts were being sassy, but it was incredibly frustrating to want to have a great year in competitions, but that chance being slim because of this shit. “We’re supposed to be going in after your group is done, but honestly I don’t see the point anymore. I feel like I’m lifting weights in the dark.”

Brandy nodded. “Same girl. I feel like I’m running on a hamster wheel, sept even that would add some improvement. Cardio at least,” she laughed again. Erlene didn’t know how she was taking the situation so lightly. The thought of it instantly gave her stress and made her chest tight. Brandy pulled out the string in front of her long tights to tie the bow tighter. “So what are you doing for your birthday then? Party?”

“Erlene doesn’t do parties,” John answered for her. He’d taken out a brush and was running through his short hair from back to front. Erlene let out an exasperated sigh at both his words and actions. They could be running from a tornado and that man would pull out that hair

brush. John noticed her glare and he let a smile spread across his face. “What? If I can’t have a great lifting session, at least I’ll be swimming.”

“You ain’t got no waves!” Brandy yelled playfully, slapping her hand together on every word.

“Bro,” John said.

“Naw don’t call me bro, girl.”

“My bad, my bad,” John said, rising to his feet and placing his hand on Brandy’s shoulders to keep her from walking away. “Girl.” Brandy sighed the same as Erlene had just before, and smacked her hands onto her slim hips. Brandy was a short sprinter like John, and a damn good one. She’d won first place in conference last year as a freshman and was already looking better this year despite their vacant coach position. She just looked like a sprinter – bulging hamstrings, defined arms, abs that were always defined even after a whole plate of pasta. Erlene had to mentally push herself to not be jealous when she saw Brandy and John joking together. Their kids would be so fast. Then she would think, so what if they did get together? Her and John were just friends. Maybe they would let her be the godmother. That would be all right, wouldn’t it?

“No, but real talk. Erlene doesn’t do parties.”

“Why not? You’re twenty-one now, aren’t you? That’s kind of a big deal.” Brandy joined them on the ground and moved her legs out straight, bending over to stretch. She got her nose to touch her knee cap.

“I don’t really celebrate my birthday.” Erlene hated talking about it. Really loathed it. She could already feel herself getting agitated, knowing that this was just the beginning of people not being satisfied with her short answer, and pushing for more of an explanation that Erlene would refuse to give.

“Why?”

There it was. “I just choose not to.” Erlene stood, hoping that would get Brandy to drop it. She hadn’t even given John a clear explanation about why she didn’t celebrate her birthday. It was a place Erlene didn’t like to go. It made her feel sick to her stomach, like she wanted to crawl into bed and stay there until all of her birthdays were over. She hated it. She hated that everyone else’s birthday was their day to be celebrated. Their existence was the focus of the day and people were thankful that they were alive and part of their life. But this day for Erlene was dark. It was just a reminder of how she’d come into the world – abandoned by one of the people that was supposed to love her unconditionally. She never even had a chance to lay her tiny, fresh eyes on his tired face. At least that’s how Erlene imagined his face to be. But even that image switched quickly from wonder to anger.

“Well that’s gay,” Brandy laughed. She didn’t understand, and wouldn’t. It was none of her business. That’s why Erlene had become good friends with John. He didn’t probe. He understood without fully having to understand. He respected the walls that Erlene put up, and somehow he just knew that they were there for a good reason. Brandy was a pusher. “Come on girl!” She moved over to playfully push Erlene on the shoulder. “I just got one of those huge bottles of Jack from the corner store. You have to at least drink. You’re legal now!”

John could see it all over Erlene's face that she wasn't going to budge, and that Brandy was hurting her by pushing. "Yo," he said to her, standing up and walking closer to her. "Just drop it. She doesn't celebrate her birthday."

Brandy still didn't pick up any of the cues. That was the thing about most of the girls on the track team. They always seemed to be ecstatic about something, high on some kind of life that had minimal worries. Or maybe they were just naïve to pain. But Erlene felt it all – the good, the bad, the dark. She wasn't the type of person to let things slide over her head easily. Instead, they sat there above her, simmering, slowly coming to a low boil. She could feel that sensation coming over her now. She tried to focus on something else. She began to do a few drills fifteen meters away from Brandy and turned to do them going back. She'd just got to practice and didn't want to go through the whole day agitated. But she knew if she let Brandy's pushing get to her, her birthday would be more than just dark. A hefty stone of regret or guilt would be added to her backpack, and it would bounce against her spine on her whole walk home.

Brandy still didn't get the message. "Come on Erlene! At least let me get you a drink at a bar or something. A Four Loco at least? It's your twenty-first! I'm sorry, I just love birthdays." She was digging through her backpack now, and eventually pulled out a small compact mirror that she looked into while applying lipstick.

Really? Erlene thought. This is a joke. She never understood why girls wore full faces of makeup to workout. It would just melt off and they'd end up looking like racoons by the end of the day. Who were they trying to impress? And why not try to impress them by actually practicing hard? It seemed like ignorance. And maybe in their minds they had a perfectly logical reason, but Erlene just couldn't comprehend it. She still hadn't answered Brandy, but at this

point she'd lost her control to answer as calmly as she had before when John was here. Really, she didn't want to look out of control to him. But John had run to the restroom, and Erlene's last fragment of restraint left with him. Why was she still putting on that damn red lipstick!

"Just drop it!" Erlene said. "You may love birthdays, but what clearly isn't registering in that empty head of yours is that everyone doesn't have the same opinion as you! If you'd take a second to stop smiling like an idiot, maybe you'd realize people have shit going on that you have no idea about. I don't celebrate my birthday. So drop it."

Brandy's head had hitched back on her neck, like someone had swung for her face and she'd only been able to move her head to avoid the contact. "My b," she said softly and walked away. Erlene knew she'd feel bad about blowing up later that night, but right now her skin felt hot and her head felt like it was full of rushing water. Why couldn't people just leave her alone? Why had she let anyone pull from her what day she was born in the first place?

Last year when John and her friendship had begun to grow pretty tight, he'd coaxed the date of her birthday from her. She instantly regretted it, assuming that with John's personality he would try to make it a big deal. That year he'd tried, and it ended with Erlene ignoring his calls for a few days and staying in her room until he finally came over to apologize. Word had gotten out about the date, but most of the team had gotten the memo that Erlene just didn't like her birthday, and they respected that.

John came back and Erlene could feel him staring at her face as she did an active stretch fifteen times. She only glanced at him, hoping to not see disappointment on his face. She saw the look and didn't know what to say. So instead she began to do high knees to the middle of the turf room. At the other end she stopped to finish her warm up away from John.

“At this rate, you won’t have any friends at all,” she said to herself and pulled up her leg to stretch her quads. She squeezed her eyes shut tight as she counted to fifteen and switched legs. She could feel the water swimming behind her eyes, threatening to make their way through her tear ducts. She fought it as she always did and soon the sensation ended and she carried on with her warm up drills. But her stomach still felt tight, like something other than food would make its way up and out of her mouth. At this point, she just wanted to go home and bury herself beneath her blanket.

After her warm up she walked back over to where John was finishing up his. He didn’t say anything to her at first, and instead pulled her to him for a hug. “You’re good,” was all he said with the lopsided smile he always gave when the situation wasn’t particularly happy, but he was trying his best to turn it around. Erlene could feel a bit of relief fill her, and she returned his smile.

Today they were lifting weights on their own. They started with a simple back squat. It wasn’t a heavy day, but rather an endurance day, which meant lighter weight, more squats within each round, and less rest in between. It seemed easy while it was being done, but Erlene knew she’d be sitting in the back of the classroom tomorrow trying to stretch out the soreness.

She slid a forty-five pound weight onto each side of the squat bar after doing a few warm up rounds without any added weight. Erlene knew this would be a good place to start. She needed to lift it ten times before adding weight, and this weight hadn’t been difficult in the past. She slid beneath the squat bar and let it rest on her shoulders. She lifted it from the rack and let the one-hundred and thirty-five pounds balance before slowly moving down into a deep squat, and shooting up, lifting it as quickly as she could.

There was something about lifting weights that made Erlene feel good. Real good. Not like all of her problems were gone, but like solutions would just pop into her head and she pushed the weight up over and over again. This time, she couldn't help but think of Brandy. Her smug face, like Erlene was the crazy one. Who wouldn't want to take shots and get black out drunk on their birthday? Wear tight dresses in too cold weather, catch some sort of cold on top of the impending hangover that was sizzling beneath their cold skin? And Erlene was the one who always got the crazy looks! Hah!

Erlene replayed what had happened between the two girls in the turf room not twenty minutes before. She could clearly see it – Brandy's carefree smile, gazing at John, flirting, tightening those strings on her spandex. Her obvious fake eyelashes and full face of makeup for a workout. The words Erlene had yelled at the girl ran behind her eyes. But this time, Erlene saw herself lunge for the girl, grab her high ponytail and pull.

Erlene racked the squat bar and moved to add more weight. She put a twenty-five pound plate on each side, making the total weight one-hundred and eighty-five pounds. It was probably too much for how many times she needed to lift it in one round, but she was feeling good. She put the bar on her shoulders once again and lifted it from the rack. She let the weight carry her down into a deep squat position and pushed it back up and fast as she could.

Now in Erlene's mind she was yanking the girl to the ground, still holding tight to her hair. Erlene's eyes were wide with adrenaline, her teeth bared in a smile. Erlene carried the weight down into another squat position and hard-pressed it up again. Now she was dragging the girl across the turf, Brandy's feet flailing and tossing, scraping across the green and black surface, tiny rubber pieces flying into the air.

“Hey, that’s like twenty reps Erlene. You only need to do ten.”

“Oh.” Erlene hadn’t realized. Her legs were shaking. John helped her rack the squat bar and she moved out of the way to take a seat. She looked at her hands. The tips were white and cold, like all the blood had rushed from them to some other place in her body. Must have been from adrenaline or something, Erlene thought, and placed them in between her thighs to warm.

Erlene pushed through the front screen door and into her living room. Her mother was stretched out on the couch, a wash rag hanging across her eyes. She was still wearing her work uniform. She was a nurse at a hospital a few blocks away and had just gotten home from her shift. Erlene knew better than to wake her. Instead, she went into the kitchen to put a kettle on for tea.

In the living room, Erlene sat one of the mugs on the coffee table and waited for the light fragrance to fill the air. It didn’t take long. Erlene could feel her muscles relax as tart citrus and smooth floral surrounded her face. Her mom let the wash rag slide off. One eye squeezed open and a smile graced her. “Hey darlin’.”

“Hi Mama. Migraines again?”

She nodded, wadding the wash rag in one hand and reaching for her tea with the other. Erlene noticed dark spots on the back of her hands for the first time. They were dusty white at the knuckles, dry, wrinkled with time. Erlene found it interesting that Mama’s face didn’t seem to age at all, but her hands always looked so tired. “How was practice today?”

“Fine. Just lifted some weights. Gonna be sore tomorrow.” Erlene took a sip of her tea. The liquid burned the roof of her mouth, but the tingle of citrus soothed it just as quick.

“Sounds reasonable,” Mama said. She put her palms against the cracked leather couch and pushed herself to sit up. Inevitably, every time Erlene saw her mama like this, heavy with exhaustion from trying to make just enough to pay all the bills and cover some of the college fees track and field didn’t, she thought of her dad. How would things be different if he was here? If he knew Erlene? If he saw how hard mama had to work to keep things together?

“Mama?”

“Yes, darlin’.”

Erlene didn’t want to bring it up. She’d done so well since her first questions about her dad had been answered many years ago. She’d smothered those questions as they entered her head, and never let them leave her mouth. But she couldn’t get it off her mind now and it finally fought its way through her closed lips. “Today has made me think of dad, you know.” Erlene could see Mama become completely still. She couldn’t even see her chest rising or falling in sync with her lungs. “Mama?”

She just shook her head.

“Mama. I don’t really know anything about him...” Erlene’s voice had become small, and she wasn’t sure if the sound was carrying all the way to Mama’s ears, but she continued anyways. “I’m just curious... have I inherited anything from him? Do I have his nose? Was he athletic?” Mama was quiet, her eyes staring straight ahead without even a twitch. “Please Mama... At least tell me something.”

“You know all I know,” she said. “I got pregnant. We weren’t happy. When I went into labor, he dropped us off at the hospital and I never saw him again. What else do you need to know? I think that sums up who he is pretty well. Leave it alone, Erlene.”

Erlene could sense Mama was done with the subject, and she decided to quiet her questions. She would never even say his name. There were no pictures of him in the house. Erlene assumed he hadn’t gotten close with any family members because they never had anything to say about him either. But Erlene always found herself wondering what knowing more about him and who he was, would do for who she was. Or who she thought she was, anyways.

“Happy Birthday, baby.”

She gave Mama a soft kiss on the cheek and went into her room for the night.

Iris

Iris was finished. She was done. A large stack of broken down boxes were shoved in the furthest corner of the living room away from where she sat nursing a full glass of red wine. She could physically feel the bags beneath her eyes. Her limbs felt like they were tied to the ground by invisible wires. She'd never been much of a fit person, despite being with Phillip who couldn't get enough of the gym. Iris never hated moving as much as she did in this moment. She'd never had to do it alone. She'd always had Phillip. The thought made her take another long drink of wine.

Her phone rang and she reached across the bar to grab it. It was the gyno. "Hello?"

"May I speak with Professor Howard please?"

"This is her."

"Hi, Professor Howard. The results from your tests all came back negative. If you have any questions or want to schedule your next appointment, just call the office and let us know. Is there anything I can help you with at the moment?"

Iris couldn't believe it. She was so sure it was something. "No, um. That's all. Thank you." She'd have to do a drop in visit to her general practitioner. Surely they would be able to tell what in the hell was going on with her neck.

She stood from the bar stool she was barely sitting on to move to the couch and close her eyes for a bit when there was a knock at the door. She walked over and peered through the peephole. In the hall stood a petite blonde woman, and a taller man dressed in mostly black standing close behind her. He looked worried, one of his hands pinching at the fingertips of his other hands. He was looking everywhere but at her door. Iris stopped herself as soon as she began to think that he was actually quite attractive. She opened the door when she realized who the woman was.

“Ah!” The petite woman was practically squealing, and the sound shook Iris’s quick entering headache like marbles in a jar. “Welcome to Lavender Hill!” Cleo charged through the door and flung her arms around her. She smelled strongly of spiced citrus and uncontainable energy, and Iris instantly felt like she was back in high school. Cleo took no time making herself at home, ushering the man behind her into the room and closing the door behind her. She hugged Iris again. “How are you? Oh my goodness! It’s been so long since I’ve last seen you!”

“Yes, it has,” Iris said slowly.

Cleo looked down at her coral watch that glinted in the late afternoon sun. It cast little rainbow splotches on the opposite wall that flung this way and that with even the slightest movement of her wrist. “Well, we have to catch up soon. You have to fill me in on Phillip and Chicago and all those juicy bits. But right now I have to run to a meeting on campus. Wren here, oh yes, sorry – Iris this is Wren. Wren, Iris.”

“Pleasure,” Wren said, reaching out his hand toward her. Iris just smiled and took his hand in hers. It was slightly moist. There was something uncomfortable about the way he looked at her. No blinking. Eyes the color of dark foggy glass, his irises seeming to be slightly larger

than they should be, like he knew something that she didn't. Or that he wanted her to know and was just waiting to whisper it in her ear.

“Yes, Wren has offered to show you around. He's relatively new to the campus as well. Wisco guy. But anyways. We should meet up for dinner later? I'll take you to this place downtown that you'll love, I know it. Wren –” Cleo touched his waist slightly and Iris felt the urge to ask her if there was something between them, if they were together. She squashed the thought when she realized she had no reason to care. Getting involved in anything even slightly romantic at this point was completely out of the question.

“I'll leave ya'll to it then.” Cleo gave Iris another squeeze and flowed back through the door as quickly as she'd come. The room was instantly filled with an uncomfortable silence. Wren seemed to be looking at her but not truly *at her*. His eyes seemed glazed over, unfocused. Was he on something?

“So, shall we?” Wren turned his hips like a door opening wide.

Cleo grabbed her purse and Wren followed close behind her. As they walked down the street, he was silent until they reached the main parts of campus. Iris couldn't shake the feeling that there was something strange about him. Something off. But maybe it was just because of what was going on with her neck. She was paranoid about everything. Iris tightened the scarf around her neck. It was unusually warm today and she was sure Wren was thinking she was strange as well. She could feel the sweat beginning to form on her top lip.

“So this is the main quad.” Wren gestured to the large expanse of green in front of them. It was scattered with numerous students, some playing frisbee and some laying flat on a blanket

or the grass. “This is where the students come to either act like their being productive or play frisbee. That’s pretty much all you’ll see here.”

Iris laughed at his tone. He sounded like those tired teachers who, when showing someone new around, no longer had the energy to sugarcoat anything about their campus. She began to get somewhat excited about the day. Wren was opening up a bit, now that they had something solid to talk about. She observed him out of the corner of her eye. Cleo had mentioned he was the theater director for the semester. He looked like the average theater buff – black fitted jeans and a dark striped shirt. A journal peaking out of his back pocket. She wondered what he wrote there. Probably acting notes or cues that she had no clue of the meaning.

She could smell his cologne – woodsy and fresh. Not like those overwhelming Axe fragrances that reeked of clothing store catered primarily toward teenage boys. He was looking straight ahead, but she could still see his eyes, even more bright and clear in the day’s light. It gave her goosebumps. She wasn’t sure if it was from intrigue or eeriness. Then Wren turned his head slightly and caught her looking at him from the side of her eye. Iris felt a panic grow in her chest, but it subsided when she saw him smile slightly.

Wren continued to show her around – the campus café, the different department buildings, the secret hole-in-the-wall bar just off campus that teachers would meet in every Wednesday night to talk shit about their students (or brag on them). After all the walking around, Iris’s feet were throbbing. It had been awhile since she’d walked this much and she was still exhausted from all of the lifting and unpacking of her apartment. They looped back around and settled in the café for an iced sweet tea.

The silence easily settled back in. Iris tapped her fingers on the outside of her glass. The condensation clung to her fingertips and she rotated between wiping it on the napkin in her lap and continuing the contact with her cold cup. When all of the ice had melted and her tea was watered down, Wren spoke.

“Are you alright? It seems like something is bothering you. On your mind...”

Iris hesitated. She kind of wanted to tell him. She was already embarrassed from her gyno visit and the lack of answers she had received. Maybe she could tell him a little bit, just for a bit of relief from this pressure on her back. The guilt. The questions. The hot bumps spreading across her neck. An entire new place. It was all a lot for her. Too much. And in this moment, this guy who she'd just met was looking at her like he had some answers. Or at least wanted to listen, and possibly reassure her that everything would eventually be okay. So she answered.

“I'm alright, I guess. A lot has happened in the last few weeks.” She pulled the scarf from her neck and the ends brushed her skin softly, giving her chills that she imagined made the redness of her bumps even more visible. She turned her neck to hide the bumps slightly from Wren's view, but he had already seen them.

“What's going on there?” He asked it as if what he was looking at wasn't alarming, and that calmed Iris slightly.

“I'm not sure, actually. After this I planned on going to the doctor to have it looked at. I'm afraid it's something serious and it's kind of stressing me out.”

“Don't stress,” Wren said immediately, moving to pat his hand over hers but stopping when she looked down at his hand. He rested it on the table a few inches from hers. He was

wearing gloves and she wondered why since it was so hot outside. “I’m sure it’s not as bad as you think.”

“Let’s hope,” was all Iris could respond.

“It’s just the bumps or is there anything else going on?”

“What do you mean? Like symptoms?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh, um…” Iris took a minute to think. “I mean, I’m stressed. It’s been hard to sleep lately, but I’m always like that in a new place. I don’t know. I think I may have picked this up from someone, or something like that? I don’t know. I’m hoping the doctor will be able to give me some cream or something and it’ll go away.”

“I’m sure that’s all it is – something that can easily be gotten rid of with acne or bump cream.” Wren’s next question caught her off guard. “So, are you all moved in? I could help with unpacking things if you need it.” His gaze looked sure that she’d agree to his offer, but Iris had just met him. Being alone with him in the privacy of her apartment didn’t feel right. But she also didn’t want to come off as rude or closed off. After last night she really didn’t want to be alone like that again. She would need to be slightly uncomfortable to build new relationships. Besides, he was friends with Cleo, or possibly more, so surely he was an alright guy. He’d been nice enough to walk her around in this terrible heat all day. The least she could do was offer him a glass of wine and accept his offer to help. She still had some things to hang up anyways.

“Actually, I’ve got a few things I need to hang up if you’re up to it. I’ve got an appointment in about an hour, but if you give me your number I can let you know when I’m back.”

Wren smiled fully for the first time since she’d met him. “It’s a date.”

Iris felt a pang in her chest, like she was cheating on Phillip. But it wasn’t actually a date. Wren was just going to help. Maybe she would invite Cleo over as well. Then they could go to dinner together afterward. Yes, that’s what she would do.

“Okay then,” Iris rose from her seat after downing the rest of her watered down tea. “I should be off. Here is my number.” She scratched it down quickly on a napkin. She’d gotten the sudden feeling that she needed to leave, like she’d throw up on the table if she had to look straight into Wren’s eyes another moment. “I will let you know... later on. When I’m back.” It was as if she’d forgotten how to use words. Iris fumbled with her bag for a moment, the scarf getting jumbled up in the arm strap. When she got it untangled she whipped the scarf around her neck and slid her purse strap over her shoulder. Wren watched her the entire time. She just smiled, waved her hand mechanically, and turned to leave.

The path between their table and the door felt like a mile. She tried not to walk too fast, like she was running away, but she wanted to get outside as quickly as possible. The air in the café felt thick all of a sudden, like it took a lot of effort to get it into her lungs. As soon as she pushed through the door, she let out a gasp of air. Two students who were sitting on a bench to her left, looked at her questioningly. She tugged her scarf closer around her neck and walked briskly in the direction of her apartment. Even across the quad she felt like Wren was still looking at her through the café window.

When Iris got to the place where she needed to turn the corner and walk down a side street to her apartment, she looked back towards the café. She couldn't make out anyone specific through the glass walls of the restaurant, but there was a shadow figure of someone sitting at the table where they had been. Had he stayed at their table and watched her walk across the entire quad? Maybe he was still there, watching her now. Or maybe it was someone else. She didn't want to find out.

When she got to her apartment, she took a minute to grab a glass of water. She gulped it down and sat on a bar stool to catch her breath. She'd power walked all the way down her street. Wren's gaze had stayed in her mind, and she couldn't get herself to forget the feeling of his eyes on her face, or on her back as she walked away. "Maybe he was just looking after me. Guys do that, right? It's polite. I'm new to the campus. He may not have even been looking."

And then Iris's mind jumped to a completely different place. What if the bumps on her body were somewhere else, too? Like on her back or the sides of her thighs? She would have completely left out telling the doctor that. That could make a big difference. She ran to the bathroom and quickly stripped out of all her clothes. She stood in front of the floor length mirror on the back of the door. Normally she cringed when she saw her naked body in the mirror. When she started dating Phillip, he'd made her feel beautiful despite her flaws. She had spots on her thighs from bug bites that she'd itched and that had eventually scarred. He would rub his fingers over the marks and still tell her she was perfect. Of course she knew that she wasn't, but knowing that he still found her beautiful with marks all over her legs made her feel a lot better about them.

She saw the spots now but ignored them to search for something else. Iris twisted her torso to the right and to the left, searching for clusters of red. She pulled the skin on her thighs so she could view the backs. Nothing. And then she saw it. There on her hip right above the bone. A bump. Iris walked up as close to the mirror as she could, pulling the skin so taut that it was painful. She winced but stayed put. This bump, it looked similar to the ones on her neck. But it was alone, sitting on her skin like a hill in the middle of a valley. Out of place. Strange. The longer she looked at it the more it seemed to be growing red.

“Jesus.”

“Well, Professor Howard. This seems to be an acne breakout. The skin is dry here.” Dr. Bee pointed toward the cluster of bumps on Iris’s neck. The redness had significantly reduced since she’d left her apartment for the doctor’s office. “And even with skin that is normally oily like your own, it’s important to moisturize every day. Dry skin can become clogged in your pores and cause breakouts such as this.”

Iris sat quietly in her seat. She couldn’t believe that she wasn’t going to get any answers here either. She didn’t dare mention the bump on her hip. There was no need to strip down if he wasn’t going to give her the information she needed, knew she should hear. “No disrespect, Doctor, but I am sure this has to be more than a breakout. I’ve never had acne that looks like this and I’m getting close to thirty years old. I have a regular skincare routine that has worked since I was a teenager. Why would I begin breaking out now?”

Dr. Bee pulled his short, wheeled chair up closer to where Iris sat on the crinkled white paper of the patient seat. She crossed her legs at the ankle. For some reason, bumps rose on her skin with how close Dr. Bee was. She could still feel Wren's eyes on her. "Professor Howard, I've been doing this a very long time. And from what I know, it doesn't matter how old you are. Your skin changes as you age, and things that may not have been an issue when you were younger can become issues as you get older. All we can do is address the changes as they come."

"Yes, I understand that." Iris threaded her fingers together, squeezing each knuckle hard. "But this isn't normal Doc. This doesn't feel like regular acne." She could sense the frustration in her voice, and she knew instantly that Dr. Bee could as well. He looked at her face with pursed lips and squinted eyes, like he was looking for something behind her.

"Can I ask you a few additional questions, Professor Howard?"

Iris nodded her head.

"Alright. I'll need you to answer them honestly."

Iris stared at him as he looked at his clipboard, flipping a few pages.

"Answer if you're bothered a lot, bothered a little, or not bothered at all by these symptoms."

Iris nodded again but the doctor didn't see it.

"Stomach pain?"

"Not at all. Well, I get a little queasy when I'm nervous." Iris wasn't sure if this was what he meant, but he didn't pause to elaborate.

“Back pain?”

“Not on my back. But the area where the bumps are burns sometimes. Mostly when I remember that they’re even there.”

“Dizziness?”

“Nope.”

The doctor made a note. “Feeling your heart pound or race, shortness of breath, nausea?”

“I mean, like I said about being nervous. Yes, I get nauseated sometimes.”

“How long have you had these symptoms?”

Iris took a moment to think. Sure, sometimes she’d had the symptoms in her past, but they’d been more frequent since she first noticed the bumps. She explained this to Dr. Bee.

“These are just a few physical symptom questions we ask to narrow down any possible diagnoses. Has this irritation caused you any anxiety... or maybe has it been hard to get off your mind? You seem to be in an amount of distress that may not be normal for you?”

“Why do you say that?”

The doctor pointed at Iris’s hands that were white at the knuckles. She unwound her fingers from each other and looked at the white tiled ground.

“Iris, I don’t think is anything you should be majorly concerned about, but I do think we need to run some more tests. I think having those tests results under your belt will relieve a little of this stress that the bumps have brought on, and may give you the answers you’re looking for.”

Iris nodded her head. There didn't seem to be a choice in the matter. Dr. Bee obviously wasn't going to be anymore help that the gyno had been.

Dr. Bee jotted down something on his notepad and tore it off for Iris. "This is Dr. Brian's contact information. He will be the one who runs your next set of tests. He's more specialized in the area that you need and will be able to give you more specific answers. Just call this number and schedule an appointment."

Iris left the doctor's office without stopping at the appointment desk. Her neck felt like it was on fire, but so did the rest of her skin. All her blood was rushing just below the surface and it warmer than it had ever been. Her mind was reeling. When she got home, she turned off the truck and sat there for a while. The air grew stale and she cracked a window. It was then that she noticed someone sitting on the ground next to her doorstep.

"Wren?" She left the truck and he stood when she got closer. He was wearing a different shirt than he had been earlier. It was nicer in quality, like maybe he really thought this was a date. But then Iris noticed it was extremely wrinkled and changed her mind. "What are you doing here?"

"I thought you needed help?"

"Oh, that's right. Shoot, I forgot to text you when I'd be home. You haven't been waiting long, have you?"

"Not at all," he said, smiling. She could tell he was lying. It was the way he said it, clipped and too bright. Forceful. Not wanting to make her feel bad because he had been waiting

for probably an hour. But why was he being so nice to her? Because of her friendship with Cleo? What was really going on with them?

Iris unlocked her door and let Wren into her living room. He looked around like he'd never been here before. "Would you like something to drink?"

"Wine," he answered a little too quickly. Iris could tell he realized this because he added shortly after, "or water. Water is fine, too."

This made Iris laugh. He was really trying to keep a good impression with her. He must have the same kind of mind that Iris did – always wondering what other were thinking, worried about their impression of her, whether or not small comments or answers would change this for the better or worse. It was exhausting, honestly, but it made Iris feel a little more comfortable being with Wren alone to know that he thought like she did. Maybe they had more in common than she originally assumed. He still had that journal sticking out of his back pocket.

Iris pointed out what she needed hung and where, wasting no time for any awkward silences to set in. The room was quickly filled with the smell of Wren's cologne. Iris didn't mind it at all. When Wren moved on to the second picture in the living room, he finally asked the question she could tell he had been wondering since the moment she noticed him on her doorstep.

"So how did the appointment go? Was the doctor helpful?"

Iris sighed loudly. "Not at all, actually. Just referred me to someone else. You know how it goes. I know something is going on. I can feel it. This isn't just acne. It's seriously stressing

me out. What if it's the symptoms of something fatal? And because the doctor was too lazy to figure it out, I'm losing precious time?"

"Why don't you Google it?"

"Surely you've heard to never Google your symptoms... Surely you've heard that!" Iris was laughing at the absurdity of his suggestion. That was the worst advice she'd gotten all day. "Besides, I think it's spreading. I found it somewhere else this afternoon."

Wren paused what he was doing. Iris could see bits of his bare torso as he extended his hand to hang up the clock she'd given him. It was much paler than the rest of his skin, like it had never seen the sun. She felt the muscles in her jaw clench. It'd been so long since she'd touched someone there.

"Where?"

Iris paused. She'd been reaching for another piece to hang, but then she thought about where the new bumps had popped up – that place on her own torso right above her hip bone. That place where she loved Phillip to touch her. She put her hand there now. When she looked over to Wren his eyes were there where her hand was. She struggled to swallow the tightness that had grown quickly in her throat.

There was a tug in her abdomen and Iris instantly began to feel guilty. Wren obviously could sense this and made a move to walk closer to her. "Um, I think we're good here." Iris couldn't even look at him. She suddenly could feel Orlando's hands on her and her stomach began to gurgle uneasily. "I can finish this up another time. I'm not feeling too well all of a sudden. Please tell Cleo that I can't make it to dinner tonight but I will text her. Okay?" She was

already walking behind Wren, directing him towards the door despite his hesitation. When she finally had him on the other side of the threshold, she said, “Thank again for all of your help. I’ll see you around,” and shut the door firmly, pushing the deadbolt lock into place.

It was 3 a.m. and Iris was so far from sleep she thought there was no use in laying in bed. She tried praying. She tried playing some classical music. She tried counting to five hundred. She tried melatonin. Nothing worked, and despite her efforts to distract herself, it felt like the place just above her hip was throbbing as constant as her heartbeat.

And then she heard something that erased any progress made toward slumber. Iris couldn’t quite make it out, but it sounded like metal jiggling. And then she thought about the front door. She held her breath until the sound came again, filling the dark room. It came louder this time and she imagined someone on the other side of her door, shaking at the handle. They were trying to get inside. The rattle seemed to grow more and more frantic, like whoever was on the other side was getting more and more frustrated. Frustration could easily translate into determination, and this made Iris feel like she was going to throw up. She didn’t have anything to protect herself with. Where was her phone? Where had she left it?

Iris crawled from bed as quietly as she could, planting one foot on the floor at a time to try and keep it from creeping loudly. From what she could remember, the last place she’d had her phone was in the living room when she was playing the classical music through her speaker on the bar top. It was there. She was sure. Walking in that direction, she held her breath until the

pressure was too much in her chest. Slowly she let the breath escape before holding it in again. With every step she placed one toe at a time against the cold floor. She didn't even have any knives in the kitchen yet. Maybe she could grab a lamp. That could be her only option at this point.

Once she turned the corner out of the hallway and into the living room, she could see the front door. The jiggling had stopped, but she could feel that something was there. Her phone was there on the bar top next to her portable speaker. If she could get to it before they got through the door, she could at least call 911. Then she would just have to make it a little while longer, fend them off until someone could get here.

Iris was just a foot away from her phone when she heard the noise again. But it wasn't coming from the door anymore, it was coming from the window behind the couch. She could see through the curtains from here. There was a large street light right outside of the window and it illuminated the moving shadow that was causing all the commotion. Iris ignored her phone and began to take steps toward the window. She imagined as she got closer that she would see a dark-clothed figure with misty gray eyes that glowed in the street light. But up close she clearly saw what it was. What she couldn't see clearly was what it had.

It was a cat. It was fumbling around with something. Iris pulled back her sheer curtains and looked down at what was resting on her windowsill. There were feathers everywhere, somehow sticking to the outside wall's brick pieces. It was like the cat was playing with a shadow itself, but Iris finally noticed the wings and beak. It was a bird and it was dead. The cat pushed at the body with its paws like it was a new toy. Iris felt sick.

She returned to bed, embarrassed. Fooled. Even with the piece of mind that she was safe, she couldn't shake the image of that cat pushing at the bird that was long gone and helpless. She placed her phone on the bedside table for only a moment before it vibrated with a message. She picked it up to see it was from her newest contact.

“If you need anything, just let me know. Goodnight x”

Iris pulled her blanket over the top of her head, wrapping the thick cotton tightly around her body like a newborn. Even with her eyes closed, it still felt as if eyes were on her. And she could see them.

Wren

Wren stood outside of Cleo's door. He could hear her on the phone, her voice light with excitement. He could picture her walking barefoot across her thick rug. She would stop every now and then to clench a tuft of material between her toes. It was to strengthen her feet and prevent injury, she said. A good habit to get into.

She was talking to Iris, Wren knew it. His mood instantly brightened at the thought of her. That night he had gone to his computer to do some research. It began as simply looking up reasoning for light bruising on appendages, but Wren's thoughts easily drifted to reflections of Iris. Maybe it was her name -- a title that radiated royalty, conjured inspiration for Monet and van Gogh, reminded Wren of elegance and life. He needed her.

So as he was typing into his laptop late at night, *health condition causes for hand bruising*, he couldn't help but hold the backspace button and replace those words with, *Iris Howard – Chicago*. Her LinkedIn profile appeared, along with her Facebook and Instagram account. He clicked to her social media page and her face appeared brightly on his screen. There she was. She was holding a coffee stained, white cup with Chicago skyscrapers surrounding her like giant red oaks in a forest. Her smile was perfect, her skin dark and smooth, easy on the eyes and heart quickening. Wren clicked on the picture to enlarge it and left the tab open. A few minutes later he would close his screen, feeling slightly guilty, but also slightly at-ease. He woke up three separate times that night – once to use the restroom, and twice to see her face again.

Now Wren stood at Cleo's door, his body and mind heavy. He'd woken up feeling the complete opposite of how he had a few hours ago. The last few weeks hadn't felt serious at all between them, but he couldn't shake the feeling of shame. Like he was cheating on Iris. But they weren't together. The words he'd written onto that page that was hers felt all too true, like even if the story wasn't true in this world, it was true in another world, and that made it true in Wren's world. It all made completely sense.

The world attempted to add to his worries -- his hands had begun to ache. Both hands were now painted in light bruising and Wren had contemplated scheduling a doctor's appointment for the next week, but with his lack of insurance he decided against it. The winter wind seemed like hands itself, clutching tightly to the long bones of Wren's hands, squeezing, almost crushing. His leather gloves were on even though he was inside.

He knocked, and Cleo answered a few moments later wearing her usual smile. The curtains of her living room were open letting in the Winter sun, but it wasn't warm inside. Wren could nearly see his breath before him. Her apartment smelled different today, like metal or rust. He wondered if a mechanic or plumber had been in here recently for some reason. He didn't care enough to ask.

Cleo ended her phone call. "Breakfast?"

"Actually..." Wren began, his voice coming out unstable like a cart moving across gravel.

Before he could continue Cleo grabbed his hands forcefully, sliding off the gloves and causing him to wince in pain. "What's going on here?" Her actions surprised him, but when he

considered it a bit more he was no longer surprised. Cleo liked to do what she wanted without thought. This gave Wren an uneasy feeling, like he had no control. It also made him anticipate that being honest with her wouldn't end very well.

“I don't know. It's worse today. I scheduled an appointment.” Lying to her seemed as easy as telling the truth.

Cleo dropped his hands and walked into the kitchen to grab an apple. She bit into the dark red skin before replying. “Good. I was worried I'd have to do it for you. Just got off the phone with Iris. Sounds like she may be interested in staying a bit longer than we originally planned. I'm really having to sell it to her, but I think she's beginning to cave. I'm so excited for us all to hang out –”

“Who said I'll be back next semester?”

“Oh, darling!” She walked peppily up to his face and grabbed it with both hands, pressing in his cheeks until she touched the bones. “I got you another gig. You didn't think you'd get away from me that easily, did you?”

“Well I guess –”

“Of course not. The department has yet to find another director, so I suggested we keep you on until they find someone more permanent. I've got some pull with them. Small school. Local. That sort of thing. I assured them you'd have no problem returning.” The way she pointed her eyes at him after saying this confused Wren completely. Was she daring him to challenge her? Or was she nervous that he would?

Wren sat back onto the couch and Cleo joined him, placing her hand on his knee and clutching it tightly. He stared at her face, so bright and positive. So innocent. It wasn't that he was scared to be honest with her, it was that he didn't feel like dealing with her pushback. He could feel it in the air, static and thick. She wouldn't like what he had to say. "Cleo, I don't know about us." Wren blinked at her and her eyes seemed to lose their light with a thin shadow, like slender clouds filtering the glow from the sun. She laughed and it came out unsteady. The walls of Wren's throat seemed to be caving in but he swallowed incessantly until it went away. "My mind has just been elsewhere. I'm —"

"You know..." Cleo's voice was light again, and this made Wren even more uncomfortable. Her hand was still clutching his knee, but now it was like parchment, transparent. "I really went out of my way to get you this job. They were leaning toward someone else, but you know what? I told them there was something about you. Something about how you looked on paper, and how your interview went. I knew. And so I swayed them. I assumed you'd be grateful, that we'd celebrate. Was I wrong? Do you have a better offer back in Wisconsin?"

Wren stared at her hand on his knee. There was no more warmth, and what he really wanted to do was tell her to get a life. He would give credit where credit was due. He never asked for any favors from her, and he'd be damned if he let her hold an employment opportunity over his head. He blocked his mind from imagining his hands around her throat. This wasn't the situation for that. But before he could say anything, he thought of Iris. She would be here next semester as well, most likely. Maybe things could be different then. At the very least he wouldn't be alone. At the very least he'd be able to pay his bills that had piled up so quickly. Maybe he could make this work in his favor.

“You’re right,” Wren said, laughing. He grabbed a lighter that was on the side table next to a candle and began to turn it over repetitively in his hands. It looked like one that you’d pick up from a corner shop. It was neon pink with a frumpy cat face on it. The words, *it’s not me, it’s you*, covered the back. “I’m just under a lot of stress with the show. And this thing with my hands —” He was still laughing but it came out intermittently and strained between his words. “Why not? See where this goes. I need some air.”

Wren left Cleo sitting on her couch with a look of satisfaction, but he didn’t care if she felt triumphant in that moment. Wren felt dominant for the first time in a while. He was looking forward to something, finally. Even if it was something he had yet to understand the meaning of. As he pushed through the apartment building door and into the cold air that instantly grasped the tip of his nose, he pulled the worn cigarette pack from his pocket and retrieved one. He balanced it between his lips like he had done the day before, but now he raised the lighter to the end and watched the flame quickly turn the paper to ash.

Wren’s theater students all stood scattered across the dimly lit stage like gargoyles. Their faces were set with closed lips and scrunched brows. Some limbs were frozen mid-air, like they were terrified to move even an inch to be in a more comfortable pose. Wren was standing at the front of the stage with his journal rolled like a pipe between his hands. His jacket was in a clump on the floor next to him, and his cheeks were sucked in tightly between his back teeth.

“So, what seems to be the problem then?” he asked the students. Their eyes all seemed to grow slightly wider, like they were terrified to speak, but also terrified of what would happen if no one answered him. One of the backdrops creaked slightly from behind, breaking the silence with a long *cracck*. The young man who was playing Adam spoke up.

“Um, Mr. Williams... I’m not sure we understand the story? Like, the purpose of this new ending? Why does it need to be different than the original?”

Wren sighed loudly and smacked his book across the backs of his shadowed hands. They were covered in leather gloves like they had been for the past few days. He knew he should go to the doctor but he just couldn’t be bothered. It had to be serious, though. He’d been healthy his entire life, for the most part. He’d heard of some unorthodox treatments that were cheaper and would still do the trick with skin things like this. Mostly what he assumed to be dramatic gossip passed around his old colleagues in Wisconsin. Wren never thought he’d ever consider taking on that gossip as a solution. It was a better option than going to the doctor. They never knew what they were talking about, only cared about getting their money’s worth. And today he was hoping he would meet up with Iris instead, to see how things had been going with her. “Look, Adam!”

“That’s not my –”

“Adam,” Wren interrupted. “Do you remember what I told you guys when we were going through the first act?” The room was quiet. “It’s like talking to a group of damned babies. Listen!” Wren began to pace between the students. They stayed frozen with only their eyes following his roaming figure across the stage. Wren kicked the rolled paper vines that lay on the floor as he walked. “This is a new adaptation of the original story of the *introduction* of sin into humanity! I am only changing the sin to something more relevant to modern time. You.” He

pushed Adam closer to Eve who was slightly shaking and had her hands wrapped tightly across her abdomen. Her hair was tied into a long braid that ran the length of her back, down to her waist. “Yes, you love her, but she also drives you to sin. Do you understand? You can’t tell me you don’t relate to that!” The students still stood quietly. “Geeze. Okay, you are all actors and actresses, yes?” Finally the students nodded in reply. “Right. Then all I’m asking you to do is fulfill the purpose of your presence on this stage. I want you to act out what I’m asking you to act out. Adam.”

Wren grabbed Adam’s hand and placed it in the air to hang in front of Eve’s neck. Eve’s eyelids fluttered like she was going to pass out. Wren bent down slightly to where his head was level with both students. He could see the large vein on the side of Adam’s neck as he swallowed air and it made its way down his throat. Wren slid the gloves off of his hands and only took a moment to notice that the dark shadows that had clung to the backs were still there, before grinning even wider and continuing on with his demonstration. His stomach was folding in on itself with the thoughts of what on earth these shadows on his skin could mean.

“Okay, listen closely.” He could see the students were a little freaked, but they needed to be able to do this scene well, so he continued. “Eve, you are furious at Adam for blaming you for him partaking of the fruit. He didn’t have to listen to you. He chose to, right? So you go for him. You try and hit him, stab him, whack him with anything that’s in reach. You’re sick and tired of him always thinking his opinion is true, is fact. And Adam, you defend yourself. She’s crazy. She’s gone off the deep end.” Wren threw his right arm up and watched as Adam followed his pale hand with his eyes. “So what do you do?”

Adam stared at him. Wren could see it in his eyes that he knew what he wanted him to do, but for some reason, Wren just wanted him to do it without having to explain it. Follow your instincts, he thought. Just follow it, no matter how crazy it may seem. Adam's hands were still hovering near Eve's neck, and slowly he lowered them until they were lightly touching the skin there. Wren couldn't stop the smile from spreading across his face, and he nodded gleefully, flexing the fingers in his own hands.

“Yes, that's it. Now you don't *have* to apply pressure. Remember, we're just acting. But, listen.” All of the students were quiet. You could hear a janitor's cart rolling down the hallway from the back of the auditorium. Wren's whisper felt like he was speaking into a microphone. “Pointer finger and thumb on either side...” Wren licked his lips. “And when you feel that urge, like this is the moment, this is where it needs to end, you apply the pressure. And you –” He nodded towards Eve. “You? This is when you'll die. And that will be the end. And also the beginning.”

Erlene

“How do you define your identity? Who are you? How do you want people to see you?”

Erlene’s mind was a blank slate as she gazed blurry eyed at Professor Howard walking slowly across the front of the small auditorium. How could she ask something like that? Something so big? The woman had hair the color of wet cinnamon sticks, and her skirt was so long you couldn’t see her ankles. She always seemed to wear clothes that picked up in the breeze and flowed behind her every step. Things with moons and bursts of stars on them. Sometimes elephants – those days were usually the best days for some reason. Professor Howard was new, and it had been easy to pick up on her habits and moods. This was a modern literature class, and they had been talking about the way character’s express their identity in a story.

Erlene considered what identity meant to her and a few things popped into her mind: history, family, upbringing, likes, dislikes. When someone is first introducing them self to a class, teachers usually ask them to state your name, where you’re from, your major (or favorite subject), and maybe a favorite food or hobby. Was that all it took to get a good look at who someone was? Their identity? She imagined raising her hand and answering with these words. The class would mumble. A few girls sitting in the back row would laugh, covering their mouths to suppress the sounds.

Erlene kept her mouth shut and let the quiet stretch across the air. She had too much on her plate to think about something like this. College was supposed to mean some kind of freedom for her, a place where she could start fresh and create a new path for herself, one where

her past wasn't always in her peripheral. And like a lot of students were, Erlene was juggling a lot with less freedom than she would have liked. She was taking five different classes, trying to graduate early so that she could get a good job and alleviate some of the financial pressure from her mother. She was on Lavender Hill University's track and field team where she was a sprinter. Whatever they told her to do was what she did. They were giving her a partial scholarship, after all. This was her second year with them.

She didn't have many friends (one) because too many people made her anxious and tired. She'd grown up in a single-parent household. She was young (twenty-one). She strived to avoid thinking below surface level and was rarely late for any appointment (except on Mondays). Her deepest fear was the unknown, not knowing what to expect or what would come next, but her most treasured habit was wondering what was known by strangers around her. What did they know that she didn't? What were they thinking about right in this moment?

Ms. Howard popped the dry erase marker top off and on again, scanning her eyes across the small auditorium until each student was squirming in their seat. "Okay, let's try this again." She walked to the white board and drew three big boxes. After, she walked to the lady Erlene knew as Arial and handed her the marker. "In the first box, write the first thing you think of when you hear the word identity." Ms. Howard handed three other markers to students, and after some gentle coaxing, each went and wrote four words in the first box: religion, nationality, race, and family.

Ms. Howard stared at the words on the board written in blue and green, and nodded while the class sat quietly. "So we would all agree that our identity has roots within our past. Whether that's your immediate past, or before you were even born. Agreed?" The class was still silent

aside from rustling papers, a few football players in the back trying to pack their bags, and Erlene tapping her pen on her desk. She had no thoughts. None she would say out loud, anyways.

“Okay,” Ms. Howard said with a loud exhale. “Homework then.” Erlene could hear a few of the football players say *come on, man*. “Four pages.” She began to write the prompt on the white board. “I want to know who each of you are. What do you consider to be your identity? I want in-depth paragraphs, detailed history, more than just what pops into your head. Talk to your family, ask your friends their opinions, go to the library. Reference some of the books we’ve read during the semester or ones that you find on your own. Do the work. I think you’ll be surprised with what you find. Due next Tuesday. Have a great weekend.”

Erlene pulled her bag strap over her shoulder and shuffled behind the crowd of students trying to get out of the one exit. She wondered how on earth she’d get four pages of writing about her identity. It felt like pebbles were being poured into her chest when she thought about family. It had only been her and her mother all her life. Whoever her so-called father was had never been in the picture, her parents divorced a few months before she arrived. Once Erlene got to college over a year ago, her time became filled with track competitions and school work. It had been easy to erase from her mind the dark spot where her father should have been. But this identity thing had the spot flickering like a light bulb not screwed on tight enough.

Erlene and John walked to practice even though they’d be an hour early. She’d fought with herself while picking up something light for lunch on campus. Talking to John would probably make her feel better about the whole identity thing, but it was personal. More personal than she’d ever dared to dive into with John. How would he react? She wasn’t sure she was

ready to find out. But nonetheless she asked if he would walk to practice early with her, if only to give herself the time to muster up the strength.

It was usually a beautiful walk. The hills on either side of the road seemed to roll on forever. It looked like you could reach out and touch the still wet canvas paint the hills were spread on. The lavender wasn't vibrant like it had been back in June, even though the weather in Texas wasn't too far off what it had been then. The previously purple plants were now an earthy brown, and green in some places if you were lucky enough to spot it. Erlene took a deep breath, letting the fresh air saturate her lungs, as well as what felt like roots of the sun itself. She could still feel its rays even though there was a brisk breeze to couple with it. That was a Texas 'winter' for you. Despite the stress of classes, today felt like a good day, and in that moment Erlene decided it was so.

"I was so surprised when you were on time to our spot this morning. You're usually late. I'm a little disappointed, actually. It makes my day to see you sprinting around the corner like that." Erlene was watching the road for cracks to not trip over, laughing at the image of John doing his usual thing. She usually looked up from her phone just in time to see him flying around the corner, holding his pants to keep them from falling, even though they were always tight enough to not drop. It was hilarious. And it wasn't lost on Erlene that John did this to make her smile. Every time.

"Ha-ha," John said. He looked over at Erlene's bag and snatched the loose sheet of paper she had been writing on before, which now had a few dark lines crisscrossed through it. "What's this?" He read out loud:

African-American. Sprinter. Student-athlete. Dog-lover. American (not sure I want to put this in the essay. What would I say?). Texan. Religion? Southern Baptist? Non-denominational? Not really a devoted Christian. Only go to church on holidays. My past? Family. Mom is only child. ~~Don't have a dad.~~ Grandparents passed away a long time ago. No siblings. This assignment is stupid.

“Just a stupid assignment for writing class. That’s just a brainstorm type thing.”

“What’s it about? Maybe I can help.”

“Doubt it,” Erlene said, shoving her paper into her bag, letting it crumple in-between two text books. When John kept staring at her without blinking like he always did when he was determined to get his way, Erlene continued. “It’s supposed to be about identity.”

“Ah, that’s cool. I’d write about Nigeria then. Everything about my identity pretty much revolves around that. Maybe write about Texas? There’s plenty to say.”

“Yeah, well, I like Texas and all, but I don’t feel like it’s my entire identity. Plus, we’re supposed to write about our history and how it impacts our identity. My family is just from here. But I guess my ancestors are from Nigeria. Maybe I can write about that, then.”

John’s chest rumbled as he tried to keep in one of his loud laughs. “You African-Americans are always trying to find your roots in Africa. Even if you did find what tribe or village your ancestors are from, how does that reflect who you are now? You grew up in Texas. This state is more a part of you than Africa ever will be. No offense,” he added, patting Erlene’s

back hard which made her stumble a little. Erlene knew John meant well, but his words were no help. They only worried her more. What was she going to write about?

She wished the answer was as clear to her as it was to John. When people ask about someone's roots, they're usually talking about your family or where you grew up. But what about Erlene, who felt like she didn't belong where she grew up? She'd always felt like she was just trying to get through the day, on to the next step in her life that would hopefully be better than the last. And it usually was, but it didn't rid her of the feeling that something bad would be right around the corner. It had been a cloud that followed her most of her life, from the day she'd first noticed other kids had two parents, and the day she first asked where her father was. From that day she'd learned there was a hole in her life, and she wondered what she'd done to deserve it. But no matter how hard she worked to get to a better place, her history would always be a dark spot she was trying to forget. There was no way she would write about that.

She'd kept herself distant from others. And when she didn't, they usually distanced themselves eventually when they assumed she was keeping things from them. She never invited anyone over. Not even John. And really, she was just completely embarrassed and ashamed to share her history with anyone. No one would understand. So they would just wonder what was wrong with her before eventually getting tired of her shadiness and gradually dropping her from their lives.

John and Erlene were nearly to the track now, and she was already tired and ready to go home from the scramble of thoughts that wouldn't leave her mind. The steady stream that had been brought on by this assignment was making her feel all out of sorts. There were only three days left to write it. Not even an hour ago she'd decided it would be a good day, and already her

mind was squashing any chance of that following through to be true. She tried to set the thoughts aside until training was over for the day.

When they reached the point on the sidewalk that they could view the track where the sprints group usually gathered before the start of practice, they noticed something different. There was a tall man there who looked pretty fit. He wore a University of Lavender Hill hat pointed backwards and an all-black sweat suit. His stance screamed ‘I’m new to this’: feet placed more than shoulder-width apart, arms crossed tightly across his chest to push up his biceps, pecs puffed out.

“Who’s that?” Erlene asked.

“Ah, I heard about him last night. He’s our new coach, supposedly.”

“New coach?”

“Yeah. Coach Phil, I think?”

As they approached the group, the other early athletes were in their usual places. A few were slumped against their backpacks that were packed with extra sweaters and sweatpants just in case they were told to run outside. They had their headphones in and were bobbing their head to music, focusing for whatever limits they would need to press against that today. Others were standing up, close to the new coach. He looked over just as Erlene and John entered the group of athletes. “Hey guys, I’m Coach Phillip. You can just call me Coach Phil.” He laughed loudly with his white teeth glinting in the bright air, like his words were part of a belly-aching joke. He shook each of their hands.

When Erlene was close enough to his face to get a good look at him, she noticed a few moles on his chin, but they were red like they'd been exposed to the cold for too long. There was a lot of unshaven hair there as well, she assumed from being afraid to bring a blade too close to the raised skin. Her eyes lingered a bit too long and she could feel his eyes staring at hers for a bit too long as well. When she finally looked away from the moles and to his eyes, she instantly got an uncomfortable feeling at the top of her stomach. He was still smiling.

“Hey Coach Phil. I’m John, and this is Erlene.”

Coach Phil only looked at John briefly before returning his gaze to Erlene. She crossed her arms against herself, pretending that it was to prevent the breeze from traveling up her jacket. As she moved her hands from her pockets to across her chest, she couldn't help but notice her fingertips were ice-white in the sun. They had been in her pockets for a majority of the walk here, and didn't feel cold. In fact, they felt warmer than they did when she was inside with them outside of her pockets. This caused panic to rise in Erlene's throat like sickness. But she didn't have a chance to panic any further, because Coach Phil was signaling the beginning of warm ups. Everyone had arrived.

Erlene was on her last rep of sled pulls. She had stripped her shirt off, leaving her torso covered only by her sports bra that was now lined in sweat. That day's the sun was providing a warmth that in turn made the cool breeze feel refreshing. The sky was clear and blue with only a white cluster of clouds moving in the distance. She was towing a forty-five-pound plate for forty meters at a one hundred percent sprint. Coach Phil was standing at the halfway point, his whistle between his lips, eyes on his stopwatch. “Ten seconds left!”

Erlene walked to the starting line, pulling the rope taut that was between her and the sled. She leaned forward, the whistle blew, and she took off driving out. With each drive of her knee she felt the rope try and jerk her backward, but she pushed hard against the track and propelled herself forward, gaining speed with every step. When she crossed the finish line, she took off the belt around her waist and threw it to the ground. Erlene let herself fall to the track with her knees pulled to her chest. Her butt felt like it was on fire. Not a good workout *I can handle it* burn, but an actual flaming burn. She could hear Coach Phil laughing as he waited for the next athlete to run. Every time Erlene felt like she was dying, Coach Phil seemed to be laughing. It was a thing she thought she'd only see in movies. Though she did admit to herself that it was nice to finally have a coach around. It alleviated a bit of pressure.

“You good girl?” John asked. She could hear the tremor of humor in his voice, but she was still breathing hard from the sprint and couldn't think of a witty response.

“Yeah,” she said, squeezing her eyes shut.

“Here.” Erlene felt a hand on her arm, gently tugging until she moved to stand with her hands on her head. “You've gotta walk or your legs will lock up.”

“Thanks,” she said, smiling at him. He was drenched in sweat, parts of his dark grey shirt even darker around his neck and stomach.

“You know, I was thinking more about that essay of yours.” This was the last thing Erlene wanted to talk about at the moment. Everything seemed to be making her feel sick today. “Maybe you could write about being an athlete? It's basically a fulltime job and a big part of who you are.”

“Yeah, I guess I could,” Erlene said. She wasn’t sure, though. “I don’t think that would be as fun to write about. Besides, how would I write in stuff about the books we’ve read in that class. None of them are about sports. Books in class rarely are.” John just shrugged his shoulders.

In that moment the air around them turned shades darker, and both athletes looked to the sky. The temperature seemed to have instantly dropped ten degrees. A wide and long, thick gray cloud had made its way to the sun and covered it, immediately blocking its warm rays like wrapping your fingers around a songbird’s throat. Erlene felt the last fragment of optimism for the day trying its best to wriggle its way out of her grasp.

They strolled back to where Erlene had started her sprints and she’d began to catch her breath. She grabbed her water bottle and took a big drink, and after reached to pull her windbreaker from her backpack. “I was thinking about looking more into Africa, you know? You said it’s not part of my identity, but I think it is. It’s where my roots are, and maybe with a little searching I can find out more on where my family may have originated from. I heard Cierra’s grandma got onto that Ancestry.com thing and found out their family was originally from Ghana.”

“Okay,” John laughed. “Name one capital city in any African country.”

Erlene’s mind was blank. She knew some countries: Nigeria, Ghana, Egypt, South Africa... Madagascar... Was that in Africa? “Whatever, John. It’s my essay. If you’re not going to help, then shut up about it.” She tried to keep the bite out of her voice, but she was sure a little had escaped. John’s facial expression didn’t give anything away about his reaction. Erlene’s ears

began to ring, like a siren going off in the innermost channels of her skull. Her muscles were aching, and the ringing wouldn't stop. She could feel herself growing more agitated.

“I'm just saying, you don't know anything about my country. Sure, somewhere way down the line your relatives originated there, but that's where I grew up. That's my culture, my family, my language, my childhood. I may be in the U.S. now for college, but Nigeria is me. It's not you, Erlene.”

“Okay, I get it.” Erlene said, louder than she expected from herself. One of the distance runners locked eyes with her as he ran past and around the track's bend. “But I don't feel like America is my culture. I don't want my roots to be here. What, should I write about my religion then? How I'm a Christian but the only church I've ever gone to is full of hypocrites that make me feel like an outsider because I was the only one with dark skin? I've only been an athlete for a few years, and even with that I feel like I'm not doing it because I love it. It's paying for school.”

“Okay,” John said, nodding down at her. Erlene was sitting on the track now, not able to look at John while speaking. She could feel frustration like it was leaping from the dirt and creeping into her skin. Her heart was still beating wildly from her last run. She let her pale fingertips pull across the track, pieces of rubber breaking free from their place and flying into the air right above it.

“Or should I write about my family? How, besides my immediate family, I don't have a history. I don't know where I came from. Should I write about my deadbeat dad? How I don't even know what he looks like? What's his culture? Are his eyes brown or fucking blue?”

“Hey, Erlene, it’s okay.” John knelt and put his arm around her shoulder, and as he did Erlene could see the astonishment in his eyes. The sympathy. She’d done well to hide her past until this moment, but the fear she’d persistently tried to avoid, the embarrassment, was not there to her surprise. She leaned her head against his chest, closing her eyes and cursing this assignment. He smelled like fresh sweat, sun, and cut grass, a combination that was enticing. “Maybe you should call your mom. She may be able to help more than I can. I’m sorry I got you worked up.”

“It’s fine,” Erlene said, gathering her things to head into the locker room. “I think she’s helped me all that she’s going to.”

John stopped her and grabbed her arm. “Are you sure you’re okay? You don’t look too good. Kind of... pale.” He let his hand trail down her arm to her hand that still felt extremely cold.

Erlene’s ears were persistently ringing. “I’m fine.” She lied, forcing a smile. Honestly, she was beginning to feel sick. Her heart felt like it was banging hard against her rib cage. She just wanted to sit down. Or lay down and close her eyes for more than a night without having to think of any pressing responsibilities. But that was not her life, and she didn’t have that option. She had to finish the assignment.

“Hey, I’ve got something I think you’ll find funny,” John said as they walked into the building where the locker room was. Erlene just nodded towards him, wiping her shirt against her eyelids that were dripping with sweat. “So I was talking with the guys at the gym, mostly about Coach Phil, and they were telling me about Professor Howard, that teacher that’s new? She’s always jumpy and paranoid over something, and people are saying she had to leave

teaching in Chicago because she'd slept with one of her students, and she changed genders a few years ago. I don't know if there's any truth to it, but how bizarre would that be..."

"You know that's a wad of nonsense. Besides, how would Coach Phil know anything? He just got here."

"Yeah, maybe he's delusional. The guys said they heard it all from him, and he said it was a true story. And that *huge* mole he has on his chin is gross. Did you see that? He needs to get it burned off or something. It looked really irritated."

"So why are you helping spread nonsense then?"

"Woah, woah." John put his hands up like Erlene had tried to take a swing at him. "Besides, Professor Howard needs to relax. We know that's not who she really is. Yeah right. They wouldn't let her be here if she had done those things. Right?"

Erlene took a second to respond, fighting the urge to say something snappy that would result in the two friends ignoring each other for the rest of the day until the tension eased. She wondered about who Professor Howard really was. Had that influenced the conjuring of these rumors in some way? Was there any truth to them? Erlene thought about how she'd feel if she heard rumors like that about herself. The thought of someone viewing her in that way, placing labels on her that stemmed from gossip. It made her angry. She squeezed her fingers together into fists and bit her top lip hard between her teeth.

"Okay," she finally said. "And Coach Phil is not delusional. He knows what he's doing. He's a grown man. He just likes the idea of drama. Honestly, he's probably tried to flirt with

Professor Howard and she shut it down, so he's pouting about it. Guys get offended so easily and can't just let things go."

"Woah, woah," John said again, halting his walk. Erlene just continued to walk down the hall, only wanting to grab her things so she could go home. John took hold of her shoulder to make her stop and look at him. "Are you sure everything is alright? You're looking really pale, actually."

Erlene swallowed hard. "I'm not feeling too great." Her tone was clipped. It was as if her skin was prickly with tension and John just wanted to keep talking and talking and talking. "I'm probably just coming down with something. I've got to go home and work on this essay. It's due in two days, so... Don't wait up." She didn't look at John before walking away and into the woman's locker room, but she could feel him watching her.

Erlene saved her shower for home. The walk alone felt like it stretched on forever, the road lengthening further with each step. Through campus the light sidewalk was dimly lit by the illuminated yellow street lamps. It wasn't quite dark, just a little past four thirty, so the sun was behind the buildings but still stretching its rays towards the apex of the sky.

Through her peripheral she could see a shadow every now and then and she would jerk her gaze toward it. It was usually a student as well, fast-walking to get home out of the dark and out of the cold. Three separate times she jerked her head to the left, seeing something flash by the side of her eye. Nothing was there. She took a shortcut behind the café. The dumpsters were

pillling over with damp trash, the smell sticking to the insides of Erlene's nose making her cringe and walk even faster.

She strode past the last university building she'd need to before there'd be a few blocks left until home. But she found herself pushing through the front doors of the building and making her way down the warm hall to the last office on the right. She rapped on the door twice before letting herself in.

The first thing Erlene noticed was the fresh fragrance that filled the air. It was definitely lavender because it felt light and fresh, floral, crisp. There was a rod diffuser on the front corner of Professor Howard's desk, filled with a deep purple liquid. The walls were bare, probably from not being on the campus long enough to fully get into decorating. Professor Howard was staring at her so Erlene had to rack her brain quickly to remember why she'd entered the building in the first place. She shoved her cold hands in her pockets.

"Hi, Professor Howard?"

"Yes," she answered, not completely smiling, but not frowning either. Erlene could tell she was surprised by this student that chose to visit during what was probably way past normal office hours.

"I'm Erlene, from your Lit class. I was wondering if you had a moment?"

"Um, sure. Erlene. Have a seat." She smiled at her now, and Erlene began to slightly relax. John's words of the rumors from Coach Phil ran through her brain and made her blood hot just like the first time she'd heard the ridiculous words. That's why she was here. "What can I do for you Erlene?"

“Well, I don’t really need anything. I just needed to... Well, I heard something today. And I thought if it was me that someone had heard these things about, I would want to know. And I would want to know who had said the things.”

Professor Howard’s forehead was scrunched in confusion when Erlene looked up from staring at her hands. She looked back down and continued. “Look, I’m not trying to start anything up, like tension or arguments or whatever. I honestly just thought when I heard what I heard, that if it was about me I would want someone to tell me.”

“I’m not sure I’m following –”

“I heard a few rumors about you. And I don’t believe that Lavender Hill is the type of campus to make up rumors about their professors, at least from what I’ve experienced since I’ve been here. I mean, the professors are actually really cool here. Like Professor Whitman that teaches A&P. I saw him at a Foo Fighters concert once and he was really into it. Seeing that made me so happy. And Professor Ruby that teaches Sociology? She actually brings a boat load of candy and dresses up for class every Halloween. Like yes, some of our professors may be a little crazy but everyone kind of is when you really think about it –”

“I’m sorry to interrupt, but how does this concern me exactly?” Professor Howard was smiling, completely unaware of what was really going on, so Erlene swallowed a deep breath and told her.

“I was told today that our new track coach had told people a few things about you.” Professor Howard’s eyes grew wide. Erlene blurted out the rest before she could second guess

herself. “He said that you had intimate relations with one of your previous students and got kicked out of that school for it, and that you’d also had a sex change?”

“I’m sorry, what?”

Erlene didn’t respond, but became increasingly aware of how far her chest rose and collapsed with every shaky breath she took. She squeezed her fingers together until she could feel her heartbeat in their tips.

“I’m sorry, who was it that said these things?” Professor Howard’s eyes were practically bulging out of her head with surprise. Erlene understood. She hadn’t even been here for an entire semester yet and already people were trying to paint a picture of her that wasn’t true.

“The new track coach? I don’t think he’s from here, so I’m not sure where he got all this from but, he just started today. Or at least, I just met him for the first time. I didn’t hear him say these things but I was told by other people on the team that he had been telling them that. Not sure why. But I thought you would like to know.”

“Well, thank you for telling me. I appreciate that. I just don’t understand why...”

Erlene shook her head. “I’m sorry.” She bit her lip, wanting to ask a question, but not sure if it would be overstepping. She decided to go for it anyways. “If you don’t mind my asking, and please don’t get offended by this...” Professor Howard was staring at the wall behind Erlene’s head. Her hand was pulling at the maroon, silk scarf tied around her neck. “Is there any truth to what they said about you?”

Professor Howard's eyes moved quickly from the wall to Erlene's face, like a cat who'd just heard a crash in the adjacent room. "Of course not." Her tone was low and even, coming from a place deep inside her that most people in her life probably didn't have the chance to see. It was reserved for special situations such as this. It was that place that crawled to the surface when the darkest of situations came face to face with its opponent. Erlene had been brought to that place many times. And in this place with Professor Howard, she understood her. How hurtful it could be to feel like someone was placing a false identity on you, when you worked so hard to be something completely different. Something completely better.

Erlene didn't want to waste any more of Professor Howard's time. "I'm sorry to have dropped in and interrupt anything. I just wanted to let you know."

"Thank you, Erlene," Professor Howard said in that same, deep tone. She was obviously upset. Very upset. She wouldn't look at Erlene, even as she rose from her chair and slid her backpack over one shoulder. Professor Howard's eyes were staring at her computer screen, very wide, but they weren't moving from one corner of her eyelid to the other like eyes did when they were reading a computer screen. They weren't moving at all.

"Professor Howard?" She looked up at Erlene. "I'm glad to know those things aren't really true. I don't know anything about you, really. But I'm glad I know this much, to not believe those things." Erlene left the office without another word.

When she finally arrived home, the house was dark. Her mother had already left for the night shift. Erlene turned on every light in the house before stripping down and stepping into the bathroom for her shower. She let the hot water run for a few minutes until steam fogged every mirror and the air felt thick. Before she stepped into the tub, she noticed that her fingertips were slightly purple on the ends, no longer white as paper. Her toes were the same way. She pressed the skin on her fingers to her face, but they were warm from the hot steam circulating in the room. “What the hell?” She thought that maybe they were still cold on the inside, and the warm water would return them to their normal color.

After she finished her thirty-minute shower, the tips still had a purple hue, like a plum was beginning to sprout from her bones on the ends of each. It made her stomach twist, the unfamiliarity of what was going on with her body. She was beginning to fear it was something bigger than a reaction to the cold. What if it was some major skin condition that could really harm her? What if it was something genetic, inherited from her father that she knew nothing about? What if while she was running around worried about a stupid essay, or gossip about some professor, her body was withering away from the inside out?

Nonsense, she told herself. And yet, as she dried off, got dressed, and wrapped herself in her comforter to sit at her desk and look through an old journal of her grandmother’s, she couldn’t shake the whirring thoughts. She stood up again and dropped the comforter, removing her clothes slowly and piece by piece like there was an audience of doctors observing her.

First she checked her toes. They seemed to have returned to their normal color. Her kneecaps looked the same. Elbows. Butt. Hips. Shoulders. But her fingers still looked like a white paint was blooming from their center. Erlene felt nauseous again, just as she had at

practice. She quickly wrapped the comforter back around her shoulders as tightly as possible. She sat at her desk's chair and rocked back and forth just slightly and for a moment, trying her best to calm her worries. "I'm sure it's fine," she said to her empty room. "I'm sure I'm fine."

Her mother had left her grandmother's journal on her desk with a note that said something in here may inspire her to write about her history. Erlene took a second to admire her mother. She must have had to go into the dusty, squirrel infested attic to get this. Most of the journal pages were filled with lists of things grandma had done that day, and others were nearly illegible, scribbled so lightly with pencil that it had eventually rubbed off from the years that had passed. You could nearly see straight through the pages some were so worn.

She continued to flip through a few of the darkened pages, like someone had spilled a coke on them some time ago, when a picture fell from them and onto her desk. She recognized her mother in the photo, seeming to be around the same age as Erlene was now. Her hair was shiny and black, curled up high in the front and slicked back on the sides. There was a man standing beside her, his arm wrapped tightly around her waist. She was in a maroon, knee-length skirt with a matching shirt and blazer. He was wearing dark skinny jeans and a black jean jacket. It was then that Erlene realized who he was, and it was then that Erlene realized the man's skin was white. It shouldn't have mattered, but it felt like such a shock, like the ground beneath her feet was shifting. Her hand tightened around the picture, creasing the faded color.

Erlene unfolded the picture of her parents and let it stand against her desk lamp. She turned on her computer and opened a new document, letting her fingers hover across the keys, searching for words that were shifting through her mind as quickly as fuzz moving across a television screen. But the words and sentences were moving too swiftly and none of it made

sense. None of it felt good enough for someone else's eyes to see. She still had that handful of rocks sitting at the bottom of her stomach, growing in weight the more she thought of sharing anything about her past with anyone.

Before she could think on this further, the creak of the front door opening and shutting echoed down the hall. Her mother had arrived home from the night shift. Anger began to rise to the surface of Erlene's skin. How could her mother keep a secret like this from her? How could she say the little that she did, and assure Erlene that that's all she needed to know about her father? But this wasn't just about her father and what kind of man he was. It was about Erlene and who she was. Now she stood and strode down the hall and to the kitchen where she knew her mother would be putting a kettle on the stove for tea.

Erlene stood in the kitchen watching her mother's back. Her shoulders were sagged, her back slightly hunched from a long night of work. Her hairline was frizzy from the nervous sweat that always graced her mother when dealing with hospital patients. So many phrases flowed through Erlene's mind, but none summed up what she wanted to say in that moment. She wanted words that would fit into the space of one or two sentences, and get her mother to feel exactly how she was feeling right then. To understand where she was coming from. But Erlene could also feel that an argument would come on, and she would feel worse going back into her room that night than how she felt now. Either way, she was tired of keeping her questions and statements to herself. She was tired of not understanding what should be such a big part of who she was.

“Mom.” Her mother turned her head, not enough to make eye contact with Erlene or even see what her face looked like, but just enough for her to know she was listening. “I know about dad.”

At this she turned around fully. “What about him, Erlene.” Her tone was low and clipped, telling Erlene that the subject was exhausted and she wouldn’t learn anything new about it. Her mother didn’t understand that Erlene already knew more than she perceived.

“I know about him. I found this.” She pulled the picture out and extended her arm all the way so her mother could see his face. Her eyes didn’t waver, didn’t look away from the man that had caused both her and her daughter so much pain. Erlene could see her lips tightened against her teeth. “Why did you keep this from me?”

Her mother didn’t reply immediately. She looked like she wanted to let out a long, tired sigh. Like the air was building up in her chest but she was enjoying the pressure, would rather have it inside of her than outside. The kettle began to whistle and Erlene’s mom poured them both a cup, adding a tea bag and walking into the living room to sit down. Erlene followed, still angry but slightly less so. She could tell she had her mother cornered. She had no choice but to tell her more.

Erlene’s mom took a sip from her tea and sat it on the coffee table. “I’m surprised you found that. I thought I had gotten them all.”

“Why did you try to hide this from me? What did you think? That I would abandon you and go off searching for him?”

“Of course not.”

“Then what? Knowing what he looks like doesn’t change my perception of him. He abandoned us. He didn’t even give me a chance to be loved.” Erlene could feel her throat swelling. “The only thing seeing this does for me is... I don’t even know. What does this mean? I’ve been a liar my whole life, checking the wrong boxes all along?”

“Erlene, this doesn’t change who you are. You are still my daughter. You are still a determined, hard-working, loving person. You are hurt. By this man.” Her mother said *this man* like she was talking of someone who had massacred millions. “This man, is not your identity. Yes, he helped create you. But he did not help raise you. I only wanted to erase him from our lives. He chose not to be here. That is on him, not me. Please do not get worked over by this. It’s what he would want.”

“How do you know that? Do you even know any more about him than I do?”

“Erlene –”

“Just, no...” Erlene rose from her chair. Everything inside of her was saying to go to her room and cry. To let herself feel every emotion that was bouncing around inside of her chest like sticky coins in a jar. But there was also something telling herself to sit down and listen. That her mother was still her mother, and there had to be a good reason for every choice she had made.

They sat in the quiet for a long while. Only the sound of the tea passing through their throats interrupted the silence. Erlene could see that her mom was thinking of what to say, what to do to help Erlene finally leave the subject for good. To understand where she was coming from. Erlene decided to wait for this for as long as it took. Finally her mother spoke.

“Your father and I were never married.”

Erlene wanted to say something about this, but as she thought of how her mom would respond to her words and silenced them in her mind. She didn't want to hurt her, and she could tell her mom was about to say something else because her lips were slightly parted and shaking.

“We were very young. We hadn't known each other for that long, but I guess I could say we were in love. Or infatuated, at least. We were fresh out of high school, both still living at home until we could figure out our next move. It was a stressful transition, but we found comfort in each other's company.” Erlene's mom's voice cracked on the word company, and she took a moment to sip some more of her tea. She cleared her throat before continuing.

“That continuous company led to you. I guess it was too much for him, with all of the other uncertainties of our future. It was too much, and so he ended things in the hospital parking lot. I was in too much pain from the contractions to fully comprehend that he was really trying to end things. I thought for sure that he would come back. After you were brought into the world I thought for sure that he would walk through that hospital door. That he would say we could do it, that we would get through it no matter how hard it was. But he never did. And after we were cleared to leave the hospital I went home and left you with your grandparents before going to his house. His parents said he had decided to go live with his uncle in Utah, and that it was best if I let him. I was shocked, honestly. I was so hurt and worried about us.”

She reached out her hand like she was going to squeeze Erlene's, but reached up to wipe the bottom of her eye instead. Erlene moved to sit beside her. “Erlene, my love. I'm sorry I withheld so much about your father from you, but it doesn't matter what his name is, what the color of his skin is, or where in the world he is now. He may have helped create you, but that is all he did. He could be a completely different man now. Most likely, he is. We were just kids.

We were so young. We didn't know who we were or who we wanted to be. But as soon as I laid eyes on you..."

Her mom reached over now and squeezed Erlene's leg. Erlene could see that she was crying now, fully immersed in that moment when the nurse had first placed her baby in her hands. Erlene hadn't even heard this story before, her mom avoiding any details of that day.

"As soon as I laid eyes on you I knew you were my world. I knew everything that I would become from that moment forward would be for you. Nothing else mattered. That's why I never went after him when I learned where he had gone. That's why I never mention his name. You are all that matters to me now."

Erlene leaned into her mother and let her arms wrap around her shoulders and squeeze tightly. She understood. Her mother was her world as well. Everything that she'd had the opportunity to become or explore, was because of her mother's hard work. Just because she knew she was more than African American, didn't drastically change who she was. She was not the color of her skin. And she was not just a child who was abandoned by her father. She was the daughter to a woman who had the biggest heart, and that meant so much more than someone she didn't know and didn't want to be known.

"I'm sorry I pressed you, Mama. I don't want to hurt you. I just wanted to understand."

"I know, darling." She kissed Erlene's forehead and squeezed her shoulders again. "I know."

Erlene's fingertips were still faint with violet color, but the worries of it were temporarily not on her mind. Her thoughts flowed freely, and no anxiety stopped them from passing from her consciousness one by one. She wished she could write about her father and the abundance of information she knew about him. But she didn't know where he was, what his profession was, if he had a new family, or even what his favorite book was, if he liked to read. All she had was this tiny picture. From it she assumed he was, or could have been an athlete like she was. He had long, slender legs with toned muscles that strained against the tight material of his pants. His chest was prominent, like he could probably bench press her weight. His jaw turned at a hard angle, and it made him look assertive. She imagined his athletic opponents were usually intimidated by him. Erlene wondered if Mama ever was.

Erlene wished she could write about her ancestors and a culture that she was proud of. In Texas she had rarely felt accepted, but she couldn't say it was because the color of her skin. There was divisions in multiple areas of life, things that separate people into boxes and make them feel like they have to do everything they can to fit into those boxes just to say they belong somewhere. A place they can find comfort and call home. Erlene thought she knew those boxes, even though she wasn't always proud of them. But now, knowing she was mixed and there was a part of her family that she didn't even know, where did she belong? Could she find her father and fill in that gap in her life? Would that make her any more whole? Things would just continue to change. In that moment, Erlene was most sure of it. Her fingertips finally felt weighted enough, and she let them touch keys and begin to form a quantity of unfiltered words on her computer screen.

When searching for what to write for this essay, I looked to my past, my family, my roots. I could write about my mother, how she raised me single-handedly and has done a better job than I ever could have in her shoes. I could write about her heart, and how I want to love the people I care about with a love like hers.

I could write about sports that has given me so much while I have given it so little of myself, or at least not as much as it deserves. I could write about my family's history, though I would have little to tell with little understanding of what I do know. I could write about who I am striving to be, but I'm still not completely sure who that is. And I'm completely sure that it will change with every discovery I make and every adversity that I face.

I could write about being black in Texas, how I don't feel comfortable going to some churches because of the racism that is very much still present out here. I could write about how I've recently found out that I'm biracial, that there's a part of me I wasn't aware of, and I could explore what that means for my identity – what I want it to mean for my identity. So what do you tell someone who asks you who you are, if you have little idea of the answer?

I sit here still searching for how to clearly write who I am and explain it in a way that you can understand, and I realize that I don't understand it myself. All I can write is who I am in this moment because of the people who have loved me well and encouraged me to be my best self.

I am not a quitter, so when I have a family on my own, no matter how terrifying it may be, no matter how hard things may get, no matter what the world says is right or wrong, I will not leave my family, because I am not a quitter. I'm not just the color of my skin, and I will not sit down and except someone treating me as such. I am a brain, a mouth, a heart, a hand, a foot

that is always moving toward something better. My identity is always changing as I learn from those around me and from my own life experiences, so to write it down, pulling myself apart and placing it in tiny closed boxes, would be a lie. Yesterday I was African-American. Today I am more than that, and I've realized that is the truth about my identity. The world may prefer to place groups of people in boxes: British, bi-racial, female, college student, married, unemployed, Latino, multilingual, German citizen, felon, middle-class, jock, slut, goth, anorexic, democrat... The problem with these boxes, is that our identity shifts beneath our feet every second of every day. In America specifically, we have the freedom to change from most boxes to others. This may not be the case for race, nationality, family history, and some others, but what is different about who is placed in these boxes, is that what matters is what we do about being in these boxes. And while our roots may stay fixed, we can choose to grow in whatever direction we want. So I can't write an essay about what boxes I'm confined to, like those that were written on the white board just days ago, because this week I've learned that these boxes will change as I grow, and even my roots are waiting to be grasped in the light.

Erlene walked to school on Tuesday alone. The sun was still rising. The stems of lavender seemed to stretch despite being barren of blooms, and the tattered rows cast long shadows across the dirt. The breeze was harsh on her face.

Suddenly she was veering off the road and walking through the rows of lavender plants with no buds. Before long she was running, and the dry stems were whipping at her calves as she passed as if they were tapping her for something to say. Her bag banged against her spine

painfully, but she didn't stop. When her hamstrings began to burn, she caved and slouched to the ground.

Erlene looked at the bunches of lavender bushes that from a distance looked like long rows, but up close were individual and stacked closely together. She ran her fingertips across a few bare stems and they bowed under her touch. Some snapped and drifted slowly to the cold dirt beneath her. She reached for the stem bunches, where the bundle met the dirt and wrapped her hand around it, her fingers no longer tinged with dark color, only splotches of dirt and broken stems. With a hard tug, the ground released its hold and small clods of dirt fell from the plant, exploding as they landed. The roots were so packed with mud it was hard to see them. But they were there; hundreds of thin roots branching and tangling onto one another, finally exposed from where they had been hiding in the dark.

Phillip

Chicago, Illinois. Summer 2018

There were three things that Phillip Ilara loved most in his life: his girlfriend Iris Howard, his best friend Orlando Fall, and the athletic build that he had worked for since 8th grade. Today he was surrounded by two, and on the best day of the week. Chest Day.

“Yeah man. It’s always something with her. I’m on my phone for a few seconds while we’re watching *Game of Thrones* and then she’s up yelling, cutting off that scene when Catelyn Stark gets killed. It’s the *best scene!*” He tried a laugh to add light to the situation, but it came out as a grunt. Phillip slid down the sweat-spotted weight bench, already pinching his glutes and planting his feet flat on the floor. He wanted to clear his mind and just embrace the soreness he could feel setting into his muscles, but his mind kept drifting to Iris.

Orlando stepped behind the bench to spot him. “But you guys have been dating for so long though. Since high school, eight years? Did all this start popping up now or are you just starting to notice it?” He gripped the metal bar at the same time as Phillip.

On the bench seat next to them, there was a woman lifting on her own. She wore a spandex tank top and tiny black shorts. When she slid onto the bench, her shirt inched up to show her flat, tan abdomen. Phillip glanced over to see if she was watching him. She wasn’t. Surely, he had only missed her gaze.

“Man, I’ve got enough stress at work. I’m so close to landing this AD position with Maxwell, the superintendent. If I have to do temp work for him one more month I’m gonna lose

my shit. I'm gonna bag this job, I can't let anyone distract me. Even Iris. I have to get this." He gripped the bar and squished his eyebrows together.

Phillip lowered the heavy weighted bar down to his chest and pressed it back up. "After I've bagged that, we'll have everything we've ever wanted – house in the suburbs like she's been talking about, I'll get her that little Audi A3." Orlando helped him rack the bar and Phillip rose from the bench to switch spots. He wiped the sweat from under his eyes and on his nose with his already soaked t-shirt. "That's the best way I can think to make her happy. I'm at a loss for any other option. That's what you and your fiancée have. You're happy?"

"Yeah, man. Me and Rosie are happy." He didn't sound convincing. "But maybe it shouldn't be this hard. Maybe you should just call it quits. It's not like you'd be alone for long anyways. I'm pretty sure Janice in the main office will never stop trying to hit that," Orlando said, causing a few people nearby to laugh. Orlando lowered the bar to his chest with puffed cheeks. Sweat rolled across them in streams and got caught in the outskirts of his frizzy beard. Phillip noticed the beginnings of a unibrow between Orlando's eyes.

Phillip was tired of thinking about it all, but Orlando's comment got him thinking. He sounded like he was bringing up something he'd thought of before. The words had flowed out so easily. Were him and Rosie having problems? Orlando had always been so supportive of him and Iris's relationship. Why would he doubt it now? "You know I'd never be into Janice," was all he said. "I'm tired of talking about it. Let's just move some iron."

Phillip would usually finish these final four sets on the bench, take a quick body shower in the locker room, and stop by the bar to grab a beer before going home. It had become a simple cycle. Work. Workout. Drinks. Possible argument with Iris. Possible make-up sex. But every once in a while, there would be nights where they were perfectly in-sync, reminding Phillip of

how easy their night had flowed when they first met. Thinking of their last argument made bumps rise from Phillip's skin. But thinking of their last make-up made him want to skip grabbing a bear tonight and go straight home to her. He pushed his tongue between the side of his teeth, pressing down just enough to feel pain on the way to the locker room to shower.

“Naw man, breaking up isn't an option. No matter how much we fight, I still love her.” He scratched at his chin and it tingled in response. He must have clipped it on the barbell while they were doing power cleans. Phillip glanced over the shoulder-height shower wall at Orlando's face.

“Just a thought,” Orlando said, shrugging his shoulders and squeezing the shampoo out of his black hair. Orlando felt... off today. Orlando was the conditioning coach for the football team at Eastview Highschool, and they had become friends easily from the first day they were introduced three years ago. There was something he wasn't saying, but Phillip didn't have the energy to address it. Maybe tomorrow, he thought.

Phillip stepped out of the communal shower with a towel wrapped around his waist. He walked past the floor length mirror and doubled-back, twisting his torso so that each abdomen muscle popped beneath his skin in the reflection. His body seemed to be the only thing he could control these days. He'd thrown all his frustrations into creating the hardest workout programs he could tolerate.

He smiled and stepped in closer to the mirror, running his fingers through his damp, curly hair, and pursing his lips to make his cheeks angle. He shivered as his dad's voice echoed in his mind. *You can be weak at home.* And then he stopped. The place where he had scratched in the shower was red, spreading across his chin like webs. The skin throbbed, but not enough to make him worry too much. He had definitely clipped it on something.

Orlando held the door open for Phillip as they stepped out of the gym lobby and into the busy mid-afternoon foot traffic of Chicago. “So, what’ve you guys got planned tonight? I’m assuming Maxwell’s bash if you’re vying for that promotion. Perfect time for some ass-kissing.” He struggled to zip up his jacket as the wind shook the light material. The day had started out with bright blue skies and light wind. Now it was as if the whipping wind was grey itself, heavy with the swelling moisture in the air.

“Shut-up man. But yes, there will be ass-kissing tonight, the same as the past three years. And Iris is probably gonna moan about how we never go out and do anything as we’re going out to do something.” They walked down the block and across the street to the parking lot. The dark downtown buildings cast shadows across the sidewalk that looked like fat fingers reaching from curb to curb. Phillip unlocked his car door and paused before getting in. “Orlando!” he called. He was unlocking his door on the other side of the lot now. “See you tonight!”

Phillip climbed into the front seat and revved the engine, checking his reflection in the rearview mirror. The mark on his chin was growing dark, like the prop blood you’d see in movies. He hadn’t had acne since high school. “What the hell?” he said, pushing against the sensitive skin with his rough fingertips. It didn’t look like an ingrown hair, but it was another imperfection to fix, and that bothered him. It looked to be happening under his skin, the top layer smooth from his recent shave.

His reflection in the mirror began to blur, shifting like a disturbed pool of water, and he blinked his eyes steadily until his vision returned to normal. It took a few seconds and he could feel a panicked pressure growing in his chest until it did. Strange, he thought, before shifting the car into reverse with faintly shaking hands.

Chicago, Illinois. Summer 2018

“Baby!”

Phillip tossed his keys on the kitchen counter and his gym bag on the floor. He opened the refrigerator to grab his post-workout protein shake he took every day, but they weren't where he usually found them. Instead, the row was filled with Greek yoghurt and those antioxidant drinks Iris always drank to keep from getting sick, and usually got sick anyways. Her car was in the driveway, but the house was silent.

“Baby!” he called again. “Where'd you put my shakes?” He walked through the hallway and into their bedroom where Iris wasn't. Her lavender robe coated the leather armchair in the corner beside the bed, and there was a book on the bedside table. Phillip saw the title and sighed: *Six Steps to a Better Sex Life*. He flipped through its pages before tossing back onto the table where it hit the edge and tumbled into the trashcan. Phillip couldn't help but let the memory of the previous night invade his mind.

“You're tired of arguing? We argue all the time?” she'd said, standing in front of where he sat on the edge of the bed with his head lowered. “Phil, fighting isn't fun but we have to be able to talk things through. You think I like to argue? I don't. But I'm not just gonna keep quiet when something isn't working or I don't agree with something's that going on. We're getting older and growing as we go, so our relationship has to change along with it.” Iris was in nothing but her lavender silk robe, her hair still dripping from the shower. She reached to tighten the sash around her waist.

Phillip understood what she was trying to tell him, but he'd been at work from 6 a.m. to 9 p.m. being told what to do: put that away, file these documents, no, not like that, do it again, scan this for me, will ya?, no, you forgot to do this, get it together Phillip, I needed those copies an hour ago. It'd beaten him down and he was out of energy to do anything more today.

She'd sighed, signaling to Phillip that she was done talking with her voice raised. "I just don't understand. You're out helping kids all day to get them where they want to go. But when you get home to the person you're in love with, it's too much to listen for even a moment." Her voice was soft like her skin, and it made Phillip's chest feel tight. He loved Iris. She brought out the good parts of himself he didn't know existed. As far as he was concerned, everyone else was out for themselves. Iris was different. Every day he had to focus on making sure other's saw him as strong, but with Iris he used to be able to just relax. Lately he needed to be better at everything for everyone, and it was overwhelming. The AD job would give him more space to breathe and would fix everything else along with it. It had to.

"I'll try harder," he'd said, kissing her on the forehead and taking her hand in his. He let his callused fingers drift over her smooth palm, and before long she was leaning heavily into him. He knew their fight was over for now, but it wasn't finished.

Phillip walked into the bathroom to take as long of a shower as the hot water would allow. He stripped down and stepped into the steam-filled space, turning around to let the water sting the back of his neck and tumble over his forehead. He knew Iris was going through a hard time. She wanted to teach at a university but was having problems finding someone to accept her. She'd mentioned something about applying to a program to teach in Texas for an academic year. He couldn't remember the details, only that she didn't seem confident she had a chance to get it. If he got this AD job, then he could get her a job with the high school. It wasn't a

university, but at least they'd be together. She'd promised that if he got the job that she would stay in Chicago. And Phillip couldn't imagine a day where Iris wasn't with him; where she was gone. That possibility seemed like falling down a hole that had no bottom, that constant feeling pitted in your abdomen of free-fall. He had to get this job. He had to.

With the dark thoughts hovering over him of potentially being separated from Iris, Phillip found his shakes stashed away in the spare refrigerator where they kept a lot of their fresh fruits and vegetables. He wandered back into the bedroom, breathing in the sweet, cool silence of the house. He hadn't been in an empty house in a few years. The last time he could remember was in high school when his dad was away for work; he was a traveling PT at the time. And his mom had left his dad when Phillip was twelve. She had a new family in Arizona, and he hadn't seen her except from her new daughter's Instagram posts that he stalked every once in a while. He remembered hating being home alone. The silence made the air seem too thick to breathe in, so he'd walk the few miles to the high school where his coach had given him the keys to the weight room, and he'd lift until he knew he could go home and go straight to sleep.

Phillip took another mouthful of his shake until the last bits of fruit that hadn't completely blended passed to the back of his throat. He sat the cup on the bedside table. Iris' sex book was in the silver trashcan on the floor next to it. It made him think about last night, what had happened after their argument. He'd come out of the bathroom, still damp from the shower, and she was laying across the bed still in her lavender robe, the book on the comforter next to her. She'd let it slip open, revealing the skin reaching from her toes to her hip bone. He hardened without thought.

"I have a surprise for you," she said, her voice gentle. Bumps raised on his skin. He bit the inside of his lip. "Come here." He walked closer to her and she didn't move. He stared at her

big, brown eyes. She looked so innocent, but he knew the bite her words could hold. She was far from innocent, and yet she was still so attractive to him. He reached out and let his hand run up the back of her neck, his fingers tangling in her curly hair. He tightened his grip and her head leaned back, her slightly open mouth gasping in air.

Then he was picking her up, her lips on his, their hip bones pressing against each other, and he was dropping her onto the white comforter and stripping off his shirt. She was wrapping her legs so tightly around his waist there was no space between his stomach and hers. When they were like this, Phillip couldn't help but think about the connection they had. It was unlike anything he'd experienced before. He had never been so comfortable with someone, and even though they fought sometimes, it was moments like this that caused him to recognize the passion was still there. That their love was still there.

Iris lay with her head on Phillip's chest, a thin layer of scattered condensation between her cheek and his skin. "I love you so much," Phillip said. The words came out so softly he wasn't sure if she'd heard him. For the first time that day he felt relaxed. He wished they could stay like this and not have to go anywhere. Not to Maxwell's, not to school, not even to the gym. He wished they could stay like this and not worry about promotions and degrees. He wished they could stay like this, Iris' dark, curly hair scattered across his arm underneath her head, and his arm around her waist pulling her as close as he could.

"Maxwell's tomorrow night?" Iris asked, peering up at him. Phillip just nodded with his eyes closed, trying to take in every second of these stress-free moments. She sighed deeply, and Phillip sat up.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

“I’ve just been doing a lot of work for school. I thought maybe we could have a relaxing night in. Or maybe a movie or something...” She had that annoyed look on her face, ears and eyebrows raised, eyes glossed over and unfocused.

“You know I’m in the running for that promotion. I have to take advantage of every opportunity to build myself up if I’m going to get it. I’m tired of just getting by, Iris. If I get this promotion we can get a bigger house. A new car. We can have a better life.”

Iris rolled out of bed. She took her robe from the chair and slipped into it. “Okay, yeah. Makes sense.” Her tone sounded less than excited.

“There a problem?” Phillip could feel himself getting annoyed. He could also feel an argument coming on, but every time this happened he couldn’t seem to stop it from coming. He was trying his best to create a better life for them, but Iris never seemed to get it.

“No,” she said with a clipped tone. Phillip got up to follow her into the bathroom. “I just wanted to spend some time with you. Just me and you. But I guess that can wait. Promotion, and all.”

“Seriously, Iris.” Phillip grabbed his toothbrush and a tube of toothpaste from the second drawer. He squeezed the tube too tight and paste tumbled onto the counter. He left it, shoved the toothbrush into his mouth, and began to brush as if it were a race. He shot a mouthful of spit and mint paste into the sink. “You’re still in school and can’t have a fulltime job. I’m just trying to make sure the bills get paid, and we can eventually get out of here to something better. I’m not the bad guy. And honestly, I’m tired of being treated like one.”

Iris let out a short laugh. “I don’t treat you like you’re a bad guy, Phillip. I just.. I just –” She was staring at herself in the mirror now, and Phillip couldn’t tell if she was looking at him.

Her lips were turned down at either end, and it made his chest feel tight. He was torn. He just wanted to take her in his arms and pull her back into bed. But he knew he couldn't do that. And he knew he needed her to come with him to Maxwell's party.

He felt frozen, staring at her in the mirror, like the first time he'd saw her at the concert in Austin. But now he looked at himself and noticed the dark red inflammation taking over his chin. It was only on the right side, but it was itchy. He looked back to Iris's reflection, and he couldn't help but think she was staring at his chin. She still had a disapproving look on her face, and all he could think was *great, now she has something else to dislike.*

"Never mind," Iris said, and walked back into the bedroom. "Look, I'm just gonna meet you there tomorrow night. Me and Rosie planned a girls' night, so I'll just crash there. I've got a few appointments early tomorrow."

"Okay," Phillip said, wanting to say more but not finding the right words if there were any. He brushed his hair before walking into the bedroom. Iris had already gone. Her robe was laying across the crumpled comforter and he could still smell her sandalwood perfume lingering in the air. As he stared at the robe where he could still see images of them clutching onto each other just an hour ago, his vision began to blur. He rocked, putting all of his weight against the pads of his feet. Finally he collapsed forward and let himself relax against the edge of the bed. He squeezed his eyes shut, opening them to the presence of black spots blinking in and out of his vision. His chin began to itch. Phillip drew in thick breaths of air in quick succession, and the room was loud with silence.

Phillip sat alone in a lilac coated waiting room. The thinly-lined chairs were plum and the wide glass lamps were amethyst. He flipped through a Sporting News magazine and tried to avoid looking at the surrounding area. It was making him queasy. A man in a matching track suit was seated next to him and launched into a coughing fit every few minutes, tapping his foot nervously, loud against the carpeted floor.

“Mr. Illara? Doctor’s ready for you.”

Phillip followed the petite nurse to a back room where she asked him to wait until the doctor arrived. This room was plain white, to Phillip’s liking, and smelled like antibacterial spray. Phillip’s eyes became glued to the red, plastic container stuck to the wall with a hazard sign on it. His stomach flipped a bit. The nurse returned and did a quick physical assessment. The doctor entered shortly after she left.

He shook Phillip’s hand. “Phillip, pleasure to meet you. I’m Dr. Marion. What can I help you with today?”

Phillip pointed to the angry red spots that had grown darker since the drive over. “This. I don’t know if it’s an allergic reaction or what. But it seems to be getting worse.”

Dr. Marion took a few steps closer and motioned for Phillip to lift his chin. “Hmm,” he said. “When did you first notice this irritation?” The doctor picked up the clipboard he’d brought in and flipped through a few pages.

“Yesterday at the gym. I thought I’d just clipped it on a bar or something, I figured it would bruise if that was the case. I don’t even remember hitting it, honestly.”

Dr. Marion nodded and took another look. “And you say you’re not allergic to anything? Do you normally have breakouts of acne or cysts? Moles?”

“No. Not since I was eighteen. I’ve got a few moles on my back but I thought that was normal?”

The doctor pulled up a chair and flipped to a clear sheet of paper on his clipboard, not answering Phillip’s inquiry with anything more than a slight nod. “We’re going to run some tests, but first I’m going to ask you a few questions and I want you to answer them honestly, okay? Just let me know if you’re bothered a lot, bothered a little, or not bothered at all by these symptoms.” Phillip nodded, sliding his hands between his knees. He felt like a little kid.

“Stomach pain?”

“Not at all.”

“Back pain?”

“Not at all.”

“Dizziness?”

Phillip thought of how he’d felt in the car just yesterday. “Hmmm... Maybe a little.”

The doctor made a note. “Feeling your heart pound or race, shortness of breath, nausea?”

“Actually, yes,” Phillip said hesitantly. “Why?”

“These are just a few physical symptom questions we ask to narrow down any possible diagnoses. Do you have any of these symptoms regularly before you first noticed the irritation on your chin?”

Phillip took a moment to think. “I had some of them, but not so much that I would think it was a problem. I’m just worried about my chin. I’ve got a big event I need to be at tonight and I can’t have this here like a police siren.”

“I understand Mr. Illara,” Dr. Marion said. “Has this irritation caused you any anxiety... or maybe has it been hard to get off your mind? Is it a distraction from your normal, everyday schedule?”

“Well, yeah,” Phillip said like it was obvious. “It itches sometimes, but it’s only been there for a day. I only came here to try and take care of it before it becomes a bigger problem. I have a lot riding on how I present myself tonight and I can’t have this thing sitting on my chin. So, prescribe me some strong salicylic acid cream or whatever and I’ll be on my way.” Phillip’s breathing had become deeper and quicker in rhythm. He tried not to let himself get too worked up, but Dr. Marion was obviously trying to get something more out of him than was there. It was just a pimple or rash. It had nothing to do with what was on his mind.

“I’d like to schedule an appointment to take a few tests, Mr. Illara. Don’t worry,” Dr. Marion smiled. “We’ll get this taken care of.” The doctor said to schedule an appointment with the nurse at the front desk, but Phillip had no intention to. The doctor was no help and clearly just wanted to get some extra cash out of his health insurance. Phillip decided he would take care of it himself. He called Iris to let her know, thinking she was just as worried about it as he had been when he told her he was going to drop by the doctor before the party at Maxwell’s. Her tone seemed flat, uninterested. But she listened, and Phillip said he would meet her at the party later that evening. She hummed a reply to his ‘I love you’ and hung up the phone. It only stung Phillip a moment before he put the car into reverse and headed toward home.

Phillip's phone buzzed with a text message from Orlando. He was wondering where he was because Iris was already at the party alone. Phillip didn't respond immediately, and instead strolled into the bathroom to take a quick shower. He got dressed and was brushing his hair in the mirror when he finally thought to respond.

"Time to please," he said to his reflection. His eyes looked tired, dark beneath like shadows cast on the grass from the clouds in the sky. He typed to Orlando that he was on his way as he shrugged into his dark grey sports coat. In the bathroom mirror he did a final check on his outfit. His maroon tie was smooth and in shape. Every hair seemed to be in place. But as he leaned in to get a closer look at where he had clipped his chin at the gym, he noticed two small dark spots. He ran his fingers across them and felt their raised form. An itch moved down his jawline and he resisted the urge to scratch it, knowing he would look like a fool if he walked into Maxwell's with an enflamed chin. The doctor hadn't prescribed him any medicine. He'd just said to put some acne spot cream on the area and that should hold him over until his 'next appointment', that he had no attention of scheduling.

Phillip drove. His headlights cut through the rain easily, but the sun had set an hour ago and the darkness seemed as thick as muddy river water. Maxwell lived in the farthest corner of a northwest Chicago suburb, and Phillip was beginning to miss the assistance of the city lights. In the distance he could see the outlines of the storm clouds glowing pulse with every flash of lightning. The moles on his chin weren't itching anymore, but it felt like someone was constantly rubbing the tip of a feather against them. He had grabbed some itch cream from the drugstore and slapped it on thick. After staring at his chin in the mirror for a good ten minutes, he took a

dime size drop of Iris's concealer and dabbed it on the moles. They weren't visible anymore, but it felt like his entire chin was tender. "Out of sight, out of mind. Come on, Phillip. Tonight's your night. Make you or break you."

When Phillip arrived at the party he sat in the silence of his car for five minutes. Inside that maroon painted front door was a pressurized atmosphere that he'd have to navigate expertly. His image was everything tonight. "Hi, Mrs. Claire, how was your trip to Bali last week?" Phillip spoke to himself. "Yes, Dr. Pasley, Iris's doing great. Thanks so much for asking." He wondered what Iris was doing inside, if she was enjoying herself, and if she was setting a good foundation for him to come in and impress.

He'd been to his boss's house a few times before for holiday parties, and every time he arrived it still felt surreal. The house towered before him: chestnut colored brick layered for three stories and windows that looked like glowing yellow eyes. In the dark you couldn't tell where the house began and where it ended. Phillip sent Iris a quick text asking where she was before he pushed through the tall wooden front door and into a bustling foyer.

As soon as he entered, a glass of something amber was placed in his hand by a waiter passing by. He sipped it, letting the liquid burn down his throat, and for the first time in the past couple of hours his chin was the last thing on his mind. He scanned the room and didn't notice Orlando or Iris. He spotted Maxwell and slipped past a few talking pairs before introducing himself to a couple not far from where his boss was asking for a refill from a waiter with a silver tray.

The house shuddered slightly from thunder, but it was hard to hear the storm that had finally landed over the small talk and business chatter. Phillip had wandered into the living room

where a fire place that was taller than him gave the room a warm ambiance. He wanted to chat with Maxwell but thought it would be better if he waited until he finished his drink. He was a better smooth talker after his blood had thinned out a little.

He looked down at his phone. No messages. His stomach began to turn and he felt slightly nauseous. Probably wasn't the best idea to down a brandy after having only a protein shake in the last twelve hours, he thought. A waiter strolled in front of him with a tray of tiny crackers covered in some sort of cheese or meat. Phillip grabbed three and shoved two in his mouth, chewed a few times and swallowed.

Maxwell was still in his peripheral, but he wanted to wait a little while longer before striking up a conversation. Phillip wondered how long it had taken Maxwell to get into a house this extravagant. It wasn't outlandish, but it was definitely full of nice things. He laughed once he noticed the opposite wall was full of high school football trophies, and a few college plaques.

Phillip spotted a couple he'd had an interesting conversation with at the last party that Maxwell had held, Rebecca and John. He walked up behind John, "how the heck are ya?" he laughed, shaking John's hand and touching Rebecca's shoulder when their eyes lit with recognition. "How are the kids?" Then Phillip noticed Iris across the room talking to a woman he didn't know. They made eye contact and she winked without smiling. She crossed her legs at the ankle, her shoes strapped with deep gray leathered material. Her dark hair was pulled back into a loose bun, and curls fell free from its grasp here and there. A silver pin that was shaped like a thin lavender bunch pinned some of the shorter curls to the side of her head.

Phillip could feel his hands starting to sweat, yearning for her touch. He fought his mind to not start imagining what they would do to each other once they got home. He just wanted to make up and hold her in his arms. Then get a call from Maxwell saying the job was his.

After an hour of talking, Phillip surveyed the room for Iris since she wasn't where he had seen her before. She hadn't returned his text. He was beginning to get worried. "Excuse me," he told the couple before wading through the room that was now buzzing with alcohol, and into the quiet hallway. He dialed Iris's number and after three rings it went to voicemail. When Phillip looked up, he saw Maxwell directly across the room. No one was speaking to him, and Phillip knew it was time. "Come on, Phillip," he said, wading through the buzzing crowd to where Maxwell stood in a fresh black suit with clean lines. Before Phillip could reach him, he felt his phone buzz. He pulled it from his pocket expecting to see Iris's picture on the screen.

"Mr. Illara!" He heard his name and recognized the voice to be Maxwell's just a few feet away.

"Dr. Maxwell, hello." Phillip slipped his phone into his pocket and walked over to firmly shake his hand. It felt like it was completely calloused over. The entire palm. "How are you?"

"Great, my man," Maxwell said. He was such a peculiar looking guy, Phillip thought. He was pear shaped, and every time Phillip had an interaction with him his pants rested three inches from the tops of his shoes. He walked with his shoulder blades pinched together, but that could be because of his belly. He was relatively tall though – a successful college linebacker in his day. "I see you've been living in the gym lately."

Phillip laughed as Maxwell lightly punched him on his deltoid. “Yes sir.” They talked about weights, Eastview Highschool, and some interesting student interactions Phillip had had lately. Everything seemed to be going well until Phillip felt his phone buzz again in his pocket. It was time to get this conversation out of the way so that he could deal with the other immediate stressors in his life.

“This may seem very forward, but I’ve been thinking about this for a long while now. I have worked very hard for you and Eastview for almost four years now and I enjoy my position, but I truly believe my talents would be better suited in a role with more responsibility. More leadership. I know Eastview is looking to fill the athletic director spot and I would be honored if you’d consider me for the position, Maxwell. I really would.” Phillip felt out of breath, but the look on Maxwell’s face only had his heart beating harder. His furry, grey eyebrows were scrunched in either deep thought or frustration, but he was smiling, and that’s what Phillip was more concerned about.

“It’s true I’ve been looking at you to move up the ranks, but there’s also someone else who’s deserving. You know Orlando, from the football group? A fine young man.” Phillip could feel his jaw clench and the tops of his teeth grind roughly against each other. “I’ll think it over and let you know,” was all Maxwell replied, reaching out to shake Phillip’s hand before calling out to Rebecca and John a few feet away, and moving over to talk with them. Phillip looked over again to where Iris had been, but there was only a waiter with a bored look on their face, holding a half empty tray of bruschetta.

Phillip dialed in Iris’s number without looking at his notifications. He scanned the room and began to drift up the maroon carpeted stairs to the second floor where the bathroom would

be private. The phone rang. The window at the top of the stairs was dark, and then illuminated with the lightning that crossed the murky sky. He scratched his chin.

Then he heard a laugh. A woman's laugh, he thought, coming from the bathroom. He wondered if it had drifted up from the party downstairs, but then he heard a man whispering. It sounded like Orlando, actually. Phillip walked over to the door and knocked. "Orlando?"

It was quiet for a moment, and Phillip felt his chest grow tight. "Yeah man, I'm just sobering up a little. I'll be down in a few minutes." Phillip could feel his stomach turning. He was unsteady on his feet.

He didn't hear the woman anymore, but he wouldn't put it past Orlando to be in there with someone. Orlando hadn't had a serious girlfriend until he met Rosie. Maybe it was her in there with him, but Phillip was surprised that Orlando would pick this time and place to fool around. "Cool. I'll catch you downstairs then. I've got something pretty important I need to talk to someone about when you're free." Orlando didn't answer with words, but instead an *mmhmm*, clipped at the end with a light laugh. Before Phillip turned away he noticed a flash of silver in his peripheral. He bent down, retrieving the object that was sticking out from under the wooden door. It was a shiny pin; a thin bunch of lavender. He slipped it into his coat pocket, squeezing his eyes shut as his head began to feel foggy. The alcohol was setting in.

The house shook again as Phillip walked down the hall to another bathroom to wash his hands. He turned the water on hot, letting it rush over them and tinge the skin pink. The silence of the room seemed to mock him – *all that work for nothing. Orlando's going to get that raise.* The moles were poking through Iris's concealer at this point, but he didn't care. He should have gone to find Iris and left for home, but he couldn't shake what Maxwell told him. Phillip dried

his hands and made his way back to the party. When he entered the main room, he immediately noticed Iris. She was breathtaking, wearing a smooth maroon dress that gathered around her neckline, but hugged her waist and thighs. Phillip's fingers tingled, wanting to run themselves down her frame to the hem of her dress that lay above her knees. He walked over to her, but she didn't wink when she saw him. She didn't smile either. He noticed that the pin in her hair was gone and his hands stopped sweating. Instead of walking towards Iris, he searched for where Orlando was. He found him and briskly grabbed a handful of the back of his suit, pushing him until they were in the hallway.

"Tell me it isn't true," Phillip said, the words coming out rough like thorns had grown in his windpipe. "Tell me... I'm crazy! Tell me you wouldn't take away what I've been working so hard for."

Orlando's face began to flush and he fumbled for words. "I mean... Man, I'm sorry. It just happened. I promise I didn't even initiate it. Well, I kind of did..."

"You've already got everything, Orlando! A fiancé, a huge house... You make plenty of money. Why do you have to mess things up for me? I thought we were friends?"

"It wasn't just me, bro. I promise. Iris cornered me in the bathroom and things just escalated. I was going to pretend it never happened –"

"Wait, wait... what?" Phillip could feel his face getting hot like an iron left over fire. The muscles of his back tensed. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the lavender pin he'd found outside of the bathroom. Iris walked into the hallway and saw them staring at each other in realization. They stayed like that for what felt like forever, the air getting heavier with every

second that passed. Phillip turned and in one swift movement, threw everything he had into his fist connecting with Orlando's stomach. Orlando crumpled automatically and began coughing.

"Phillip, what the hell!?" Iris yelled. She didn't move. Instead she clutched her bag to her chest, squeezing and rotating it in her hands. Phillip felt nauseous. His eyes seemed heavy in their sockets. His hands and mouth were dry, but he wouldn't let Orlando see that. He wouldn't show any weakness. He had lost all respect for Orlando, but he would be damned if Orlando didn't realize that Phillip would expect nothing less for himself.

"Let's go," Phillip said to Iris, walking towards the front door without waiting to see if she'd follow. She did, and they were soon in the car that moved slowly over the winding driveway. The ride home was silent. It was as if the air had been sucked out of the car. The rain grew to a steady downpour, making the road only visible a few feet in front of the windshield.

"I got the job at Lavender Hill University. I'm going to Texas in a few weeks." Her voice seemed buoyant, without much emotion hanging onto the words, like nothing was floating around in the dark space behind her eyes. No worries. No ailments. Phillip popped his fingers, taking one hand off of the steering wheel at a time. For the first moment in two days, his new irritating moles were the last thing on his mind.

"So, you'll be gone for a while then," Phillip said. She nodded, keeping her eyes unfocused on the floor in front of her. "Will you be able to visit?"

"Probably not. I'll stay with my parents until the semester starts. I think we just need some... space. Can we talk about this at home? I'm tired."

“I’m sure you are,” Phillip said evenly, gripping the steering wheel and wanting it to snap under his skin. He felt calm. He could sense Iris was already gone, but this didn’t cause him any panic. He was confident he could fix this. He would get the promotion, she would get her degree, and they would be happy. Everything he was working towards, he would get. And Iris would respect that, she would understand that everything he’d done, he’d done for her. For them. She had to. She still wasn’t looking at him and Phillip’s chin began to tingle, the beginnings of an unbearable irritation.

The room was dark and filled with a silent noise. The opaque space seemed to dance with threads of black as the trees swayed from the storm’s wind outside. Phillip blinked, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. He could hear Iris’s slowing breaths. She began to mumble something incoherent and he knew she’d finally fallen asleep.

They had talked, though Phillip hadn’t said all that he wanted to. He wanted to fight. He wanted to say she was selfish for not asking about how the conversation with Maxwell went. She was selfish for what she’d done. Did he cross her mind at all? Did she think of him when Orlando was kissing her neck, gripping her thighs, unzipping her dress? How far had it gone? He wanted to shake her, to ask her why.

Phillip’s chin tingled, but the itch had subsided when they’d gotten home. He cupped his chin in his hand and bit the inside of his lip until he felt the smallest sensation of pain. He’d told Iris that was fine, that they could pick up where they left off when she got back, but he didn’t

believe it. He didn't need to, because he knew he'd see her a lot sooner than a year from now. He turned away from Iris's still figure to face the small bedside table. On top of it was an old fashioned analog clock that Iris had found at a garage sale in high school. Beside it lay a silver pin that glinted with every flash of lightning reaching through the window. The storm filled the room with darkness and then light, and Phillip lay motionless, replaying the look on Iris's face when she reached to unpin the lavender brooch in her hair to find nothing. Phillip had to fight the urge to throw the pin at her.

He climbed from the bed and walked to the living room where his laptop sat on the kitchen counter. He grabbed a glass from the cabinet and filled it with water, gulping it down just as swiftly as the water had hit the glass from the tap. He opened his laptop, keying in the name of the fellowship Iris had received. "Lavender Hill," Phillip said. His words felt loud in the calm of the house as he read the details of where she was to teach for a year. "Lavender Hill."

Iris

When Iris got to the building she was after, she slowed her pace. Was this considered a date? No, weren't he and Cleo a thing? Maybe. She'd never mentioned it and Iris could only assume from the way they were always together and how she looked at him. She didn't want to date Wren. Not romantically. He seemed to always be around the corner, which she found comfort in. She didn't necessarily enjoy being alone at this time in her life. But she also didn't want to lead Wren on in any way. Was it already too late for that? She pulled her scarf tighter around her neck.

Iris placed one hand on her flowy skirt to keep it from flapping up in the wind. It was her favorite skirt, the perfect sky blue specked with tiny white spots, but it always caused her an annoying amount of trouble on days like this. Her purse nearly dropped from her arm when a large gust of wind threatened to morph her into a modern version of Marilyn. Blindly she pushed through the café door and bumped into someone entering. "Excuse me," she mumbled, turning to see who'd collided with her.

"Klutz," the stranger said, not even making eye contact before continuing on his way. She stood there in awe of his rudeness. So much for small town charm. The students today seemed strange, like the professors had all scheduled every exam to be held today and the students were boiling over with bitterness and stress. Wren was sitting in the far corner of the café, sipping on a glass of water with no ice. He was wearing all black as usual, and Iris wondered if the artist's cliché color scheme was actually no cliché at all.

“Hi again,” she said, sitting down across from him. He looked stricken, like he’d seen someone get into a car wreck or something. The skin on his face was pale, particularly under his eyes where deep, dark circles sat. “Is everything alright?” When he didn’t answer she added, “Tough day? I know mine has been. No one warned me about how ruthless these students could be. I’ve never had to deal with this before.”

Wren gave her a quick smile, one so quick she asked herself if there had even been a smile or if it’d been a twitch in his lip. “How has Lavender Hill been treating you?” He asked her as if she had just arrived. He sipped his water and she raised an eyebrow. Hadn’t she just kind of told him? What more did he want to know?

“Fine, I guess. Adjusting has been a little rough.”

“In what way?” he asked her.

“Well, there’s already ridiculous rumors circling about me. Apparently started by a grown person! Can you believe that? Maybe the students really started it and are only blaming it on someone else that’s new. I have no idea.”

“Who is this man?”

“I’m not sure. The new track coach?” Iris became aware of the pulse in her neck as the name left her mouth. Who was this person? It would be easy enough to find out, but there was something about identifying this person who seemingly wanted to hurt her, that made Iris hesitate. What could she do when she found out? It was just words, but they still felt like a deep prick to her skin.

“No clue,” Wren said casually. To Iris, he didn’t seem very interested in what she had to say. He was running his finger along the outside of his glass, letting the condensation gather on the tip of his finger and run down his hand. This gave Iris the itch to reach over and wipe it up with a napkin.

“What’s on your mind, Wren? You seem distracted.”

At this his eyes finally met hers. They were so wide with some kind of underlying excitement that it made Iris’s heart beat quicker. She wasn’t sure if it was from fear or delight that he was this animated about whatever it was.

“It’s the play. I’ve been struggling with the ending lately, the last act. But over the past few days it has all just come to me and it feels genius, Iris. Just genius.” He latched onto her hands on top of the table. His fingers were warm and slightly moist. Iris resisted the urge to pull her hand away from the clamminess. It was a normal bodily reaction. She didn’t want to make him feel ashamed for something normal. Wren continued. “It’s a reenactment of the first sin, right? And that sin is supposed to be disobeying God’s instruction to not eat a specific fruit from a specific tree. But what I thought was, that’s not the only sin, right? There’re so many other sins out there, so what if they committed a multitude of sins? And what’s more, what if it was a sin of love gone rogue, that some may consider just or provoked or even sexual in modern times.”

Iris didn’t understand. “Okay, yeah,” was all she said aloud. His words were coming out so confidently that she didn’t want to squash his enthusiasm, but his story seemed all over the place, like he was trying to fit all of life’s emotions into two hours of production.

“So, in the end, Adam does partake of the fruit. But after they fall and are banished, he blames Eve for everything, trying his best to salvage the little pride he has left. This infuriates Eve, and she goes for him. She tries to take him down with everything that’s in reach. Adam, well, he takes his hands –” At this point, Wren lifted his hand, reaching across the table to where Iris had her scarf tied. She leaned back slightly before decided to rest against the back of her chair so he wouldn’t think she was recoiling from him. She forced a smile.

“He takes his hands and applies the pressure right around her neck. Maybe not to kill her. I actually haven’t decided on that yet. But the point is that we as humans have a tendency to follow our instincts. Whether that’s going against what someone has instructed us to do or not do, or running with our anger. It leads to sin. All very interesting to explore.” Wren looked away again, trailing off his sentence and grabbing his water. He was looking out the window, distracted all over again. Maybe he was just wrapped up in the details of the production. It was his job after all, Iris thought.

Wren looked tired but based on what he’d just relayed, he was probably in as good of a place as any, so she decided to say what had been on her mind since the last time they had met. “Wren?” A noise left his throat that said he was paying attention, but he still was gazing out the window.

Right outside there was a boy and girl – the boy aiming a camera at the girl while she posed in different positions for each click of his finger. Her stance looked uncomfortable with how far she was arching her back, trying to exaggerate things that weren’t naturally there. “So... I may be way off here, but I just wanted there to be no mixed signals or misleading.” This got Wren’s attention. His fog-colored eyes aimed at her. Iris swallowed the ball of moisture

collecting in her throat. “I just got out of a very serious relationship... Or rather am on a break from it. I’m honestly still not too sure about it all. Anyways, the point is, I could really just use a friend right now. Is that okay?”

Wren didn’t answer immediately, and Iris tried her best to not fidget while under his unwavering gaze. A few moments later he smiled and looked down at the bottom of his glass. “Of course. I understand completely. I’m with Cleo, actually. Kind of.”

“Of course!” Iris repeated. “Of course, of course. I just wasn’t sure and it’s been so weird and difficult getting in the loop of everything on campus. I didn’t mean to jump to conclusions.”

“No worries,” was all that Wren replied, finishing off the water in his glass and continuing to smile at her. “To be honest I wasn’t sure about it at first. She’s very pressing.”

“That she can be,” Iris laughed lightly.

“But she’s a good person. I wouldn’t be in Lavender Hill without her.”

“Well, thank goodness for Cleo then,” Iris said without thinking. She was looking at the small hairs sprouting from the back of her fingers when she noticed Wren had become quiet. When she looked up he was watching her. She pulled her lips taut against her teeth before turning away and racking her brain for a topic to divert to.

“How’s your neck?” The question caught her off guard. He was staring at her throat with his lips slightly parted. When he saw that she noticed, he gave her a tight lipped smile and adjusted his jacket.

“Um, it’s the same actually. Haven’t gotten the answers I’m looking for from any doctors. Apparently you can’t even trust trained professionals to do their job properly. Just trying to forget that it’s even there, honestly. Failing,” she laughed lightly, though there was no lightness in the tone.

“I understand,” Wren said. He was caressing the back of his hands with his own fingertips, and Iris couldn’t help but notice that the skin looked incredibly soft, and she wanted to touch it. It looked like his skin was covered in a dark gray film, though. Like he’d rubbed ash on them and it had stained his skin. His sleeves were pulled down past his wrists, so it was hard to compare it side by side with the skin of his arm. He interrupted her thoughts before she could think any further on it. “Just don’t stress about it. Who knows, maybe its not as serious as you feel it is. Trust me. Most of the time that’s the case.”

He didn’t look convinced of his own words. His eyebrows were scrunched just enough to showcase he was worried deeply about something himself. Iris only nodded. He didn’t understand her situation. Her history. She knew that some diseases or infections could go undetected for months. This could be the case for the string of bumps across her neck now. It hadn’t been bothering her as much lately, but that was only because she’d been distracted by the news from Erlene, that student who had randomly popped into her office one evening.

Iris planned to walk the long way home, past the track and field complex right after lunch with Wren. He gave her chills sometimes, but other moments he gave her a comfort that she hadn’t felt in a long time. Like she didn’t have to worry about him wanting her around. He seemed avid to have her company, even when his mind was completely wrapped up in something

else. Just having someone around was better than being alone where she would do nothing but worry about her students or her neck or Phillip. Wren was a welcomed distraction.

“I appreciate your advice,” Iris told him now. “I should get going though. I have something I need to do quickly before heading home to get work done. Tell Cleo I will text her to schedule a breakfast sometime soon. She’s overworked. I’ve rarely gotten to see her since I got here.”

Wren stood abruptly as Iris did and awkwardly leaned toward her as if to give her a hug. He backed away at the last moment and Iris pretended not to notice. “I will tell her. I don’t mind it though. Being the mediator between you two.”

“I don’t mind it either,” Iris said, turning towards the café exit. “Goodbye Wren.” As she pushed through the café door, she glanced back at Wren. To her surprise he wasn’t watching her. Instead, he was watching the man who had bumped into her when she first got there. There was a look on Wren’s face that she hadn’t seen before. His mouth was in a hard, straight line, all except for one place where it rose just slightly. But that one place seemed to hold so much tension, like someone had dropped a touch of cocoa powder to his tongue and the bitter recoil was channeled all into one place on his lip. Iris couldn’t help but think that his glassy, gray eyes made his face so endearing to look at, but that tiny touch of cruelty was enough to wash it all away.

The day was bright, but the wind was bitter with cold. Any exposed skin began to hurt after several minutes, and Iris felt an intense longing for her dear Chicago. She wondered why

this pain had conjured up her yearning for the windy city, but didn't let herself think too much into it before switching out the emotion for worry. It wasn't a long walk to the track, but it was plenty of time for the crease in her back to bead with sweat. What would she do if this person decided to confront her? The thought frightened her, but not putting a face to the rumor creator was even more frightening. She needed to know who she was dealing with. Maybe even speak them. Maybe it was a misunderstanding, that they mixed up Iris's.

She was getting closer to the track now, close enough that she could see athletes jogging around the long oval. When she neared enough to the figures that the faces were recognizable, she pulled her jacket's hood over her head and wrapped her scarf loosely around her chin. The area around the track was completely open with no trees to dash behind. Her heart was beating hard. Her neck was growing hot. What if the person had some agenda? What if they wanted to hurt her for some reason unknown to her? She was alone. They could hurt her and no one would know for days.

Iris could tell who were coaches and who were athletes because the coaches radiated energy, while the athletes looked to be dragging their limbs from place to place. A few athletes noticed her standing there staring at them, but only paused for a moment before continuing their exercises. Iris's eyes flicked back and forth from one person's face to another, searching for nothing in particular. It was only then that she realized she wasn't entirely sure what she was looking for. Unless she buckled up enough courage to confront the group of athletes, she would never find out who exactly had spread the rumors. The thought of walking toward those staring faces made her feel sick. She couldn't do it. Maybe the girl, Erlene, had gotten it wrong.

Iris waited another minute before turning to make her way home. She kept her eyes on the ground, the path she'd taken to the track memorized in her mind. The smooth pavement beneath her feet turned broken in parts, transformed into loose gravel. Soon she was walking across the large quad, the damp grass detaching from the ground and sticking to the sides of her black leather loafers.

She could hear the soft caw of the crows that always seemed to be perched on the dim light posts lining the area. Iris found comfort in the light noise. If it was completely silent, she imagined that she'd hear the crunching of every footstep of anyone walking nearby, and it would sound as if it was echoing right next to her ear. She would be tempted to run. Lately, noise had become her worst enemy. It was always there, making her believe there was something present that had yet to be true. Even with Phillip. For Iris, there were traces of him always in the corner of her eye or right outside her ear. His laugh. His hair. His frown on someone else's face.

At first she believed it was just new town jitters. The effects of her living alone for the first time in her life. But these bumps that had grown to be a part of her, hugging her neck, had caused her to always have an underlying urge to be on edge. Erlene's news had only fueled that edge, and these sounds pushed her to always be on guard. She tried her best to always expect the unexpected, but this had all caught her completely by surprise.

Now as she neared the end of the quad and the turn she'd make to walk the final stretch of road to her apartment, she wondered why she had left her comfort in Chicago. If Phillip wasn't aware of the betrayal she'd done, she could have kept the secret. If it meant she'd at least have the comfort of him on the other side of their bed at night, it was worth the lie. Wasn't it? It was worth not waking up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat, not waking up afraid that the

scratching branch at the window was instead an intruder. Iris was tired, and for the first time since she'd left Chicago she missed everything that she had there. Even though there was a bit of turmoil and frustration, a bit of loneliness and miscommunication, there was still a place where she knew she could call home. A place that she was entirely familiar with and didn't feel as if someone was watching her or trying to deliberately hurt her. She missed her Phil.

Phillip

She had not seen him. Iris had not seen him, but Phillip knew it was time. He had created the rumors and they were beginning to spread around her, and he was sure she was feeling the loss of their relationship as strongly as he was. She had to be feeling alone, like there was no one she could go to. She had Cleo, sure, but that woman was so busy, Phillip didn't even have to worry about distracting her from comforting Iris. She was exactly as she had been in high school. So he would show up to her apartment, and Iris would run into his arms. They would go back to Chicago together and everything would return to normal. He would forgive her for everything she had done to him if it meant they could get back on track with their life plan.

But then there was this Wren. Phillip had seen them together in the café. He had watched from a corner of the quad, dressed as a Lavender Hill athlete, wearing thick sunglasses and a large brimmed baseball cap. They had never noticed him. But there was no way Iris would move on so quickly with another man, would she? Phillip hadn't even thought of being with another woman. Since the moment they'd began dating in high school to this moment now, all he could think about was Iris.

He craved her touch. He wanted to hold her hand and run his fingers over the skin on the back. He wanted her to lean into him, to feel her weight rested against him. He wanted to take care of her. He wanted her to know that he understood now. That for the past few years, he wasn't being there for her like he should have. That's why she'd had fallen so easily into

another's arms. Things would change. They already had, and now it was time to tell her it was time to come back to him.

Now he was posted up just a block from her apartment in a small park with enough trees to block him from view. She would be coming home soon. When she arrived, he would call and invite her to talk things through. She may find it odd that he was in Lavender Hill, but Phillip knew at the end of the day the stress of her life there would be enough to draw her back to him. He'd made sure of it. The crazy rumors that he'd placed into the student athletes' ears was easy enough, and of course students that age were more likely to spread juicy news like that rather than just shake it off. He'd made them believable enough. There was something about figuring out what was strange and weird about someone new that people ate up so readily. Most wouldn't even take the time to figure out if it was true or not. Iris didn't need to know about all of that, all she needed to know was that Phillip still loved her and wanted her back. And maybe she'd find it endearing that he cared enough to come all this way, that he hadn't given up on her despite her mistakes.

And now he sat wrapped in his thickest coat, tapping his foot on the ground at a quick speed to try and keep himself warm. "She'll be home soon," he said aloud. There was no one else in the park. It had been a strange day for Phillip. When he woke up to find that the bumps on his neck were still there, he knew it was a sign that he may need to wait to speak with Iris, to end the strangeness that had been the last few months. He'd taken to shaving around the mole-like growths, leaving a few stray hairs that made him feel like everyone was laughing at him when they noticed. He'd done some research and found a place in Austin that would treat the strange moles. The treatment seemed crazy, even disgusting when he really thought about it. But Phillip

would do anything to be his best self for Iris, even when she hadn't been her best self for him. The thought of her betrayal still made his chest ache. Phillip had begun coaching the Lavender Hill track team to stay close to Iris, even though he had no intention on staying long term.

“Iris.” Phillip said her name low enough that it stayed in the air near his lips. She was there at the end of the street, making her way towards the front door to her apartment. She was wearing the plum pea coat Phillip had bought her for Christmas three years ago. It brought a smile to his face, and hope to his mind. He pulled out his phone to call her, dialing in the number he knew by heart and watching her as she pulled her buzzing phone from her pocket. But as she pressed her finger against the screen and slid it back into her coat pocket, Phillip had to swallow the anger that tried to rise in his chest.

“Fuck, Iris. Why are you making this harder than it needs to be?”

A few moments later he understood. Wren walked around the corner and Iris immediately gave him a hug, smiling at him in a way that Phillip knew should have been reserved for him. He let his fingers grow into a rough ball, feeling the thick fabric pull harshly against his skin. Sure, Iris had male friends before, and it was never a problem for Phillip. But this guy, this theater guy who had a strange air to him, like his gaze lingered a little too long on places that it shouldn't, Phillip didn't trust him. He shouldn't be around Iris.

Phillip continued to watch the two lingering outside Iris's front door. Every time Wren made a move to get closer to Iris, Phillip felt his muscles tense. He wished he could reach out and punch him in the throat, let him know that he wasn't welcome around Iris, ever. With or without Phillip being around. Iris was not interested. She couldn't be.

His heart began to bump hard when he realized they were continuing to walk down the street towards the park where he sat. “Shit.” He hopped up quickly from the bench and strode quickly to the closest building where they couldn’t look up and see him. But if they walked all the way to the park, they’d be able to see him squatting behind the building for sure. Where would he go? If Iris saw him she would definitely freak out. He wouldn’t even be given a chance to explain himself. She’d never talk to him again.

Phillip ran as fast as he could to the other end of the park. At least there were trees with larger trunks there that he could stand behind. He wouldn’t be able to hear what they were saying, but he could watch and make sure Wren didn’t try anything suspicious. Until then he’d keep trying to call Iris. He’d invite her to dinner, a reserved space where they could talk uninterrupted. A place that Wren didn’t know about. Today Phillip would mend things with her, and soon everything would be as it was meant to be.

Round Rock, Texas. Summer 2002

Phillip Ilara opened the door to his father’s black Audi, pulled a towel from his backpack to lay on the leather seat, and climbed inside. The air was heavy with the scent of leather and the dead grass fragrance coming from outside. Phillip didn’t look at his dad. He shifted in the seat, making the leather squish awkwardly. He did what he always did – retrieved a large, navy journal full of mostly empty pages and flipped it to the first clear sheet.

“Strengths today?” his father said.

“245 on bench –” he began to write immediately.

“Average.”

Phillip blinked quietly for a moment before continuing. “And 425 on squat.” His voice felt loud, bouncing against four windows, trying to escape.

Phillip’s father didn’t say anything at first. He gripped the steering wheel like it would give under his grasp. He looked tired, the whites of his eyes tinged pink and corners of his mouth drooped down toward his chin. Phillip couldn’t help but feel guilty, like he’d missed the winning shot of a game. But the game hadn’t even begun for Phillip. And it probably never would. He wasn’t good enough to become a professional athlete. And honestly, he didn’t want to. He loved the feeling of getting in a good workout, the way his body released stress like skin released sweat. Easily and efficiently. He felt ten pounds lighter after every session. But the work it would take to become a professional wouldn’t be the same as simply working out to release tension. It would be more stress, and Phillip understood that, but he didn’t believe he was passionate enough about athletics to push himself that hard. His father had a different plan.

“Look, Phillip... I don’t know how many times I can tell you this. *Let it hit home*. Your success is your image. You beat those scrawny boys in the weight room every day or be weak. ...but that reflects on me too, and God knows I work too hard to be disrespected like that. You ain’t gonna be satisfied doing what you’re doin’. This is your last year. Your last chance. What do I always say?”

Phillip bit his lip, not wanting to say the words but knowing if he didn’t, his father’s hand would soon connect harshly with the back of his head. “You can be weak at home.”

“That’s right,” his father said, nodding his head and starting up the car. “You can be weak at home, as long as everyone else doesn’t see. God knows I don’t wanna see it. And that’s the only way people will respect you.”

If Phillip’s father had said this with even a hint of happiness, Phillip may have believed him. But his voice sounded just as tired as his face, and all Phillip could think of was the day he’d leave for Chicago for college in just a few months. He’d gotten a small athletic scholarship and lots of academic money. He’d find his happiness in his own way. And one thing he knew for sure, was that it would be with Iris. He could already imagine the plan – graduate in four years, land a good job, work hard for four more years, buy a new house and car, have a son that Phillip could raise to be just as responsible as him. He’d teach him to set a goal, and work his tail off until he reached it. He would raise him to not let anything or anyone break him down, or make him lose hope or motivation. Phillip would raise his family to find strength in those that loved them, and simply disregard those that only worked to tear them down.

Phillip had only met Iris just months ago at an indie concert in Austin. Phillip’s father thought he was on a college visit with a friend. Instead he’d driven into Austin with his father’s too-big Chevrolet truck. The concert was small. There was no more than fifty people, but it felt crowded. People kept bumping into his shoulder and back and Phillip could feel himself growing irritated. A stringy-haired singer was rocking back and forth at the front of the stage, grinding up and down on the microphone stand.

Phillip skimmed the crowd, looking for familiar faces but not expecting to recognize anyone. There was a woman leaning against the wall on the opposite side of the room. Her image blinked in and out of the dark as the colored stage lights hit her face, purple and blue lenses of clarity. She wore thick eyeliner and had her hair up in princess Leia buns. She was wrapped in a

lacy black shawl, and Phillip saw hints of a leather skirt peeking out between the stringy bits along the bottom. Her eyes were glued to the stage, her head bobbing up and down in cadence with the bass.

Then she turned and locked eyes with Phillip. Normally he would look away embarrassed, but it was like he didn't have a choice this time. He smiled and expected her to flip him off, labeling him as a creep right from the start. She surprised him when she smiled back. His stomach felt tight, knees locked.

The band finished the song they were playing and immediately started up a fast-paced one. Soon Phillip's line of vision to the woman became broken as the crowd began to jump around desperately. It would be a lost cause to try and fight his way through. He imagined trying to talk to her, yelling in her face and trying to be audible over the music dashing from the speakers a few feet away. She would stare at him wide-eyed like he was crazy. Phillip stayed put until the set was finished.

Once the band exited the stage and the room was quieting, Phillip looked over to the wall for the woman. The space was empty, and he let himself feel the weight of disappointment. He let the slow shuffling crowd carry him out the door and onto the warm street. And there she was, leaning against the dark wall, now wrapped in a thin leather jacket that looked older than her. "Hey," she said. Her voice had a raw sound to it, like she'd been smoking since she was six, or like she was the screamer in a metal band.

"Hey," Phillip repeated.

"Iris," she said, crossing her arms and pushing her hands beneath her armpits.

"Phillip."

“Alright Phil,” she said, smiling at the sound of a new name on her lips, “Are you gonna ask me to get some food or what?” They sat in a raggedy, red leather booth at a late-night pizza place around the corner. They sat like that for hours until Iris suggested they get some fresh air, away from the spice-filled, smoky air of the diner. Phillip drove Iris down to Lady Bird Lake and they sat in the bed of his pickup for a while. The moon was beginning its decent and threads of warmth were beginning to stretch through the fabric of the sky, giving everything a slight glow.

Phillip learned that Iris was from a town not far from his. They played them in football every year. He told her about getting into a university in Chicago. She said she didn’t care where she went after high school, as long as she was surrounded by people that she cared about and that cared about her. This surprised Phillip. She didn’t mention if she wanted to go to school, or what career she wanted to pursue. And for some reason, Phillip didn’t feel the need to ask.

Iris rose from their relaxed position in the bed of the pickup with a look on her face like she’d just realized she’d left the stove on at home. Except, there was a light in her eyes like she’d done it on purpose. “Hey. I’ve got a fun idea.”

Phillip smiled at her and nodded his chin towards her. Her curly hair was flat in the back from laying down, pushing around either side of her face like a beautiful mane. It made Phillip’s stomach go tight. At that point, and adding in the slight delirium that had set in long ago from lack of sleep, Phillip would have done anything that she suggested.

“Follow me,” was all Iris said, grabbing his hand and dragging him from the back of the truck. He had just enough time to swipe his keys from his jacket and shove them into his jean’s pocket. She ran down the hill toward the river. For a moment, Phillip thought her idea was to jump into the water, and his heart began to race at the idea. He did not want to get into the water. Was she going to skinny dip, like they always did in the movies?

Iris finally slowed beside a bridge as the sky turned the kind of bright that signaled the sun was just below the horizon. A dark cloud grew into a swarm of black pores in the sky above them and Phillip's eyes grew wide at the sight. He then realized what particular bridge this was. The black cloud began to tunnel under Congress Bridge, the Mexican free-tailed bats making their way home for the day.

Phillip instantly threw his hands over his head, waiting for the droplets that always rained down beneath the bats as they surged across the sky. After the last of the bats disappeared beneath the concrete structure, he turned to Iris who was laughing at him. "What?" He began to laugh with her. "What? I've seen the bats before. Don't they usually pee all over you if you're underneath them?"

Iris nodded, still laughing. Her laugh was beautiful, light. Not just in the visual way, but in a way that made you forget your troubles, if only for a little while. It was a welcomed distraction for Phillip. "I guess we're just lucky," Iris said, grabbing Phillip by both sides of his shirt and pulling him closer.

Phillip's heart was hammering steady in his chest now. He hadn't kissed a girl in a while, to be honest. Between his dad's strenuous demands, athletics, and school, he was too tired to flirt with the girls at his high school. He would be rusty and probably scare Iris away if she kissed him right now. But man, did he want her to. He really wanted her to. She leaned in towards him, letting her lashes fall heavy toward her cheeks but not closing entirely. Phillip began to do the same until she moved to press her lips firmly against his cheek. Her lips were warm, smooth, and soft.

Iris laughed when she backed away and saw the look on his face. “What? You thought I was going to kiss you full on?” She tapped him lightly on the chest and started to jog back towards his truck. “I just met you! Who do you think I am?”

Her feathery laugh floated through the ribs of the vast bridge above. Phillip stood watching her shadowed figure bounce lightly up the hill towards his truck. Her hair was bobbing and floating behind her. It made him want to run as well. She made it look fun, not like the running he’d done for his father just two days before, and many days before that. He ran and finally caught up with her right as she turned to see if he’d followed her.

“I should be getting home,” Iris said, breathing heavily.

“I’d rather stay,” Phillip said.

Iris allowed herself a half smile and reached over to peck him on the cheek again. “I’ll see you again soon.” And Phillip believed her without a doubt.

Pruning Away

“You’re telling me, you want me to help you plan a party?”

“Yes.” Erlene sat on a bench on the far side of the quad of Lavender Hill’s campus. She’d texted John to meet her here at noon when it would be warmest. She wanted to meet on the quad because they’d have some privacy. It had taken her all night to convince herself this is what she needed to do. This was her next step to taking control of who she wanted to be, and letting people know who she really was. She was tired of letting her past control her present, especially since she’d had no choice over her past. But she had the option to control this moment, and she’d decided this was what she needed to do.

Whatever was causing her toes and fingers to take a purple hue had faded overnight. Maybe it had just been stress, but the condition was no longer there. It hadn’t worried Erlene but when she had first noticed it. It seemed like another thing to add to the list of her already mile long concerns. But the essay and the news of her father had distracted her entirely, so her mind didn’t wander to it until the following morning when it was nearly gone.

“Okay... Why the change of heart?” John looked so confused, but Erlene knew he would help her. He always did. He gave her courage in a way that she hadn’t realized until the night before. John was so proud of his past and his culture, despite any of the darker parts, and Erlene wanted to feel the same way about her past and culture. She wanted to embrace and explore what

it meant to be biracial. Even if she never found out who her father was, she would always have a part of him in her blood. She couldn't change that. So why let it hold her back?

“I spoke with Professor Howard about the rumors. It felt good to know that they weren't true, and that's not who she really was. I want people to see who I really am. I'm not a super angry person. I'm not anti-social. I've just had all of this on my mind, like, it's so wrapped up in everything I do and I've let it affect me so much...” Erlene paused. She could feel her throat growing tight. She didn't want to cry in front of John, but it felt so good to get it all out, to let him know about everything that she'd been struggling with for a majority of her life. And she didn't feel the need to stop or get ashamed of what she was saying, because she knew John cared about her. She could trust him with anything. “I recently found out some stuff about my father. Not his name or where he is, but just that he's white. And at first I was angry because I felt like this made my situation with the essay so much more complicated. And for my life, so much more complicated. What does it mean for me to be bi-racial? I don't know. But I do know that it's okay to not always know, and to accept these changes as they come.”

John wrapped his arm around Erlene's shoulder, supporting her as she leaned into him. She felt physically tired but relieved at the same time. “Of course, I'll help you. I'm sorry. I didn't feel like I was much help when I was just unloading my identity on you. But just know that it isn't always clear cut. No one's is always that way. We go through a lot of stuff throughout our life and that changes us, if we let it. There's some blurred lines about my identity too. We can't be put cleanly into all these separate boxes and then lid them for our entire life. Cause most of the time those things change. Even though race usually isn't one that changes, and

so I see how that can cause some frustration and confusion, that doesn't change your identity completely. It is just one box of many."

"Thank you John." Erlene was crying now but the tears stopped flowing as quickly as they started. They were only tears of release and happiness. Erlene could see that things would be brighter now. And that she wasn't alone through any of it. Her mother had not abandoned her when she was born, despite knowing how difficult it would be to raise her alone. John was so supportive even though Erlene was moody and complicated a lot of the time. He took her hand in his and squeezed. She had a good support system, and for this she was thankful.

"So you have these... outbursts? Like you get upset over small things?"

"They're not small," Wren said. "They're never small. And they're not necessarily outbursts. More like in-bursts? I don't know. It's like this town brings out the worst in me, know what I mean? Like... I don't know. Maybe it's just all in my head, but I always feel rubbed the wrong way. Even with my cast and crew. I can't be around them for long or I'll start imagining that I'm strangling them. Is that weird? I have never had this problem before coming here. I love theatre and everything about it. And now that's changed and it's incredibly frustrating."

"I see." Iris nodded her head. The times that Iris had conversations with Wren, she always left it with conflicting thoughts. He always seemed so confident in what he was saying, that Iris felt wrong to question if it was entirely truth. But there was just something about his

tone or the way he looked when he spoke. His eyes were always so animated and intensely glass-like, but his lip would quiver with every word or he'd reach up and tug at his ear every few seconds. Always something that made Iris wonder if it was all just a story. What she didn't know was why he would lie. They'd just met, after all. What would he need to hide from her?

“Well, if it makes you feel any better, I haven't been feeling like myself lately either. I'm so paranoid. But I have no one to blame but myself for that one.” The two walked slowly down the tattered, cement road towards a park at the end of the block. It seemed to be vacant, which Wren was thankful for. Lately, he hadn't been able to shake the feeling of wanting to be alone. But Iris would always be an exception.

The trees' leaves seemed darker than usual, soaked through from the night's heavy, cold rain. Their branches drooped low and were spotted with the blackbirds that seemed to always be there. Every few moments one would ruffle their feathers, causing droplets to trickle down from the branches and onto the ground below. The effect made it sound like it was raining, when really the sky was a light gray, exhausted from raining all night and done for the rest of the day.

Wren rubbed his fingers against the cellophane wrapped around the old pack of cigarettes in his pocket. Since he'd opened it, tiny pieces of tobacco had made their way onto the bottom of the hole in his coat. He silenced the worries of someone catching a whiff of it and mentioning it to him, not long after he'd noticed the bits caressing his fingertips for the first time. “You don't need to be paranoid. Usually people are paranoid when they're in a new place and don't know anyone. But that's not the case for you. You've got me.”

“I guess I do,” Iris said, smiling briefly. She liked Wren’s company, especially since Cleo seemed to always be bailing on any plans that they had made to catch up. Things hadn’t changed much since they had been acquaintances in high school. They had the potential to be good friends, but Cleo’s mind always seemed to be elsewhere, focused on her next meeting or what other move she needed to make to move up in business. Wren was sort of similar in that way, and so Iris understood why they had gotten so close. But Wren just always seemed to be there, and in a place where Iris was still establishing roots, it was nice to have someone just to be there.

He was an easy distraction from Phillip as well. Iris couldn’t deny that she still loved him. She never expected her heart to be able to discard those feelings easily, and there were undoubtedly still there. She would see glimpses of him in places and it would make her heart ache. The rumors that had her wondering if he’d really followed her here, made it more difficult for her to clear him from her mind. Some days she didn’t want to get rid of his image behind her eyes. She would sit in a quiet place and let herself remember all of the times that they were actually happy. And then, along with those brighter memories, came the darker ones. And she would remember why she’d left in the first place.

“I’m happy to have a friend,” Iris said, squeezing Wren’s forearm.

Wren decided not to comment on this, and instead changed the subject to what was bubbling in his mind. “What have you really been paranoid about? Just new town jitters, or is there anything else? Other than that thing on your neck.”

Iris looked at him in surprise. His words seemed harsh all of a sudden, like he was completely focused on getting the answers he wanted and not so much on how his questions

would make her feel. Honestly, Iris wasn't sure Wren was the type of person to think too much on what he wanted to say. Another reason why him and Erlene probably got along so well.

“Well, there were those rumors as well. I actually went to see if I could find out who it was. But then I realized I didn't know if it was a he or she or what their name was. So it was a bit of a failed mission.”

“Oh really?” Wren's voice became lighter than before, which surprised her since what she'd just admitted to was actually creepy.

Iris took a moment before answering. She wasn't sure how honest she wanted to be with him. It was nice to liberate herself a bit from the anxious thoughts that had plagued her the last few months, but Wren was still relatively new to her life. She'd shared some things with him since she'd gotten to Lavender Hill, but she'd yet to delve into her past. Her immediate past that was still heavy with pain and regret. “It doesn't really matter. It's more so the ludicrous rumors that bother me. How do people come up with these things?”

“What's the truth?”

“What do you mean, what's the truth?”

“Is there any truth to the rumors?”

Iris let out a laugh that grew in loudness until it filled the entire park. All of the birds seemed to begin ruffling their feathers, and the sound of water drops sang like music. “You're joking.”

Wren watched her. “I’m sure they’re not entirely true. But is there any inkling of truth in them at all?”

“Why did you come here in the first place?” Iris needed to shift the focus from her. “You’re from Milwaukee, right? That’s close to Chicago. Plenty of theatre opportunities there, I’m sure.” The sky had grown lighter now as they made their way around the park. The sun behind the clouds had surely neared its apex in the sky.

“Fair enough.” He laughed. “I left Wisconsin because I felt like there was something missing. I just didn’t feel right there, like no matter what I did or what I accomplished it was never enough. And maybe that’s just life and there’s no escaping it, but I’d never been away from Wisconsin. I thought I’d at least search for something better once before giving in. Turns out Lavender Hill was a blessing in disguise. I’ve felt more creative here than I have anywhere else.” His eyes seemed glazed over, unfocused, far away. Iris couldn’t look away and her heart quickened. There was something so attractive about Wren when he spoke of his passions, his goals. It made Iris feel slightly nauseous when she realized the fascination.

“I know what that’s like, to think you’ve found the ultimate plan. This perfect plan that will bring you the most happiness, but turns out it brings the opposite. Or something happens to throw your plan way off, and you’ve got to scramble for some sort of solid ground.”

“I just wanted to get far away from there. Guess we’re on the same page.”

“Guess we are.”

The two were nearing a park bench now and when they were close enough, Wren stretched out his hand for her to take a seat. Their thighs were just an inch apart. Iris had to look and see if they were actually touching. His proximity made her mind feel hazy, like in this space it would be impossible for her to really think clearly. She wasn't thinking about what would happen in a few minutes. She was still worried about her past, but she couldn't focus on what the future would be like, and if Wren would even be in it.

"You intrigue me, Iris." He moved closer. The inside of her head felt like slow moving quick sand. She felt brave, and it wasn't from the crisp air that felt nice against her cheeks.

"I do," Iris said, not moving away. She felt her phone buzz again and her chest grew tight. Phillip had tried to call her earlier. He'd only sent text messages since she'd left him. She couldn't shake the feeling that it may have been an emergency, but she also didn't like the tight feeling that grew in her stomach at the thought of facing him.

She pulled out her phone and looked at the dim screen. Wren was close enough that he could see it too if he glanced down. Iris let herself see if he was, peeking at his grey eyes and long, dark lashes. He was looking. She couldn't bring up the courage to ask him to look away. Surely it wasn't anything too explicit, anything that would tell Wren what all she'd done to Phillip.

It was another text from him. That made a consistent message every day from him since she'd left Chicago and she'd said her final goodbye. It was the same: *We can work this out. I love you. Talk soon.* How he still had such an optimistic tone even after two and a half months of being separated, she had no idea. He was such a good liar. She could see him sending the text in

a faintly lit room. His thin fingers would brush the screen as he thought about what to say this time, something slightly different than the last but still always the same; he wanted her back and wouldn't give up on them and their future. Talk soon.

“Who’s that?” Wren’s question took Iris by surprise. She expected him to sneak a glance at the message, but not prompt her into giving him more information on it. The look on his face made Iris guess that he was actually truly interested. His eyes weren’t wandering around the park, they weren’t looking up at the bird’s perched on the tree branches that were grasping on to their last few leaves. He was looking straight into her face, almost through her.

He was so close Iris could feel the light prickles of his warm breath against her cool skin. It was hard for her to focus, but she knew she wasn’t going to answer his question truthfully. Before she could think on it any further he was standing and digging for something in his coat pocket.

When he noticed her wide eyes watching him, full of question, he said, “Sorry. I need this.” He pulled the pack of cigarettes from his pocket and a lighter just as quick. Being that close to her neck made Wren want to do things to Iris that he knew she wouldn’t allow. She wasn’t the girl he’d written about in his producer’s journal. She could be, but he needed time to get her there. If he acted on it too quickly, he would lose her like he had lost his first love. He wouldn’t let that happen. So he pulled back, vying instead for a welcomed distraction from the pulsing in his abdomen. He turned away to slip off the glove from his hand so that he could press his thumb against the ridged gear to produce a small flame. He didn’t have time to light it because the figure of a man was quickly approaching where Wren stood, and Iris was rising from the bench. “Phil, what –”

“Hey, stay away from her, okay? What is this?” Phillip was disgusted. This guy was lighting up a cigarette right next to Iris, perfectly fine with blowing the ashes on her and filling her lungs with second-hand smoke. He attempted to smack the cigarette from Wren’s hand and Wren jerked forward as if he was going to hit Phillip. Phillip didn’t budge until Iris pushed herself between them. She could feel the aggression in the air like thick wavelengths that pushed against her skin painfully.

“Stop it! Jeeze. Phillip, what the hell are you doing here?” She had so many other questions, but they were all jumbled in her mind and it didn’t feel like the right time to ask them. Wren was still pushing his flat chest against her outstretched palm.

“Who’s this guy?” Wren asked.

“This is Phillip, my... um, ex —”

“Bullshit!” Phillip said before she could finish. “Iris is my girlfriend and you’ve been getting way too close to her. And now you’re threatening her health?” Phillip tried to weave himself around Iris, but she stopped him by shoving her shoulder into his torso. Her face was close to his and she could see that the moles were still there, bright red from the blood now rushing to his face from anger.

“You know what? Who cares what either of you are to me! This is ridiculous! Are we kids in a freakin’ schoolyard? Are you going to take his lunch money?” Iris was looking at Phil, because she honestly doubted that Wren would have a chance against Phillip. Just the thought of one of them hurting the other made her heart hammer hard in her chest. It was like it was beating so fast that each pump wasn’t actually pumping out any blood. Her head began to feel light.

Wren had taken off his gloves and thrown them onto the ground. His hands seemed purple from the corner of Iris's eye, but her head felt like her eyes were shaking in their sockets, her neck growing in warmth that seemed to be spreading down and across her chest. Her eyelids began to flutter like she'd been drugged and was falling into a heavy sleep. Her skin around her neck felt as if it were tingling, like how the fuzz on a TV screen felt on your fingertips. She slumped sideways onto the grass and Wren rushed down to her side.

“Hey! Iris!” He grabbed her shoulders, trying to move her heavy body to lay on her side. Was this what he was supposed to do? No, that was for if someone was throwing up. But what was wrong with her? Should he dial 911? Wait, wasn't he supposed to do something first before he did that?

Wren didn't have another moment to think on it. Phillip was shoving him out of the way, causing his cigarette to fly to the cement and quickly go out with the dampness of the ground. “Call 911,” was all he said. He moved Iris with ease onto the wet sidewalk and onto her back. Wren fumbled to pull his cellphone from his pocket, first reaching into the wrong one and jamming his fingers into the nearly empty cigarette package. He threw it from his pocket before finding his phone and dialing the correct numbers. As Wren yelled directions into the phone, Phillip was running his hands up and down Iris's arms. She was trembling.

“Baby, it's okay. You're okay. You're going to be okay.” Her eyes were twitching beneath her eyelids and Phillip felt like he was going to pass out now. He focused on his breathing and staying close to her. She had to be okay. They were going to be okay.

“Is she dead?” Wren’s heart was beating so hard. All that his mind could process was wondering if she’d be fine. He couldn’t help but wonder if this was his fault. He rubbed the backs of his hands incessantly until the skin turned from a grayish tint to streaked with pink. Had he pressed her too much to be who he wanted her to be? Had he pressed her too much to answer questions that were really none of his business? He continued to rub his hands and shift uncomfortably in the blue hospital waiting chair.

He and Phillip were waiting for the doctor to let them know. Phillip ignored Wren’s question. He didn’t know him, but was confident that this man was completely ignorant to Iris’s condition, whatever that turned out to be. Phillip didn’t even want to speak to him. Why was he still here? He had to push himself to ignore his presence all together. There were already so many other things to worry about, and Phillip didn’t want to lose focus. He didn’t come all the way to Lavender Hill to babysit some theater guy. He was here for Iris, and nothing else.

Her heart never stopped beating, and she never stopped breathing, so Phillip knew there was a high chance that she’d be okay. But he didn’t know if she’d be the same person he knew in Chicago. Would that be from what she’d experienced without him in Lavender Hill? Or from this? He wasn’t sure, but he was certain that either way they would work through it. He reached up to itch the moles that he could tell were beet red by how hot his face was. His muscles felt tired, like he’d just lifted weights for four hours straight. He just wanted to hold her and let her know they would be okay. That she would be okay.

“Phil?” Iris’s stomach felt like it was shriveling into the size of a raisin. He was hovering over her and she was sure that she was dreaming. Was really in this strange bed that felt cold with crisp sheets that smelled like bleach? Wren. Where had he gone? She glanced over and he was not there. The room was empty besides Phil standing next to her. Then Iris remembered that she had been walking in the park with Wren before she’d ended up on the ground and then here. How had she ended up on the ground? “What happened? Am I okay?”

“You’re fine, darling. You’ll be fine. The doctor says you’ve had a panic attack. But you’ll be able to check out by the end of the day, and then we can go home.”

Iris just closed her eyes and tried to focus on pulling in as much air as she could. It was difficult, like someone had stuffed cotton in her throat while she was sleeping. Her scarf was gone, and she could raise her hand to feel the bumps that seemed to be swollen in size now. Had she scratched at them in her sleep? Why had they grown? She could feel her heart begin to pulse harder and she squeezed her eyes shut, letting the dew that had accumulated begin to make its way down her cheek.

“I do want to go back to Chicago.” She could see Phillip physically relax, a smile beginning to spread across his face. “But I’m not going to.”

“What do you mean you’re not going to?”

“Phillip.” She rarely called him by anything other than his nickname, but this moment felt so serious to Iris. She took a few seconds to calm her breathing and slow her heart before continuing. “Why are you here, Phillip?”

He sighed. “I had to follow you here. Do you honestly think after five years I would just give up on everything we had to look forward to? What about Chicago, huh? What about the boy and girl we were going to have, huh? I had to come here and get you to see that this world is dark, and you need me, Iris. You need me to help you get through it. I need you to help me get through it.”

It hurt Iris to hear Phillip’s words. She believed them, but in this moment, she knew she couldn’t just act on feeling alone. The past few months had given her time to think. She’d been so uncomfortable being by herself, like she could never feel okay unless someone was there. She’d relied so heavily on Wren to fill that gap, but even with him she felt like she couldn’t trust him entirely. He was always so wrapped up in whatever was going on in his head, she felt like she had to really fight to get his attention, or just be content without it.

Iris was tired of settling for environments around people that weren’t good for her, that made her sad, or made her wonder if there was something wrong with her, if she was enough for them. She couldn’t be around that anymore, and she knew that wasn’t how life should be. But she would have to stand up for what she wanted, and stay away from the things that had become toxic in her life. She needed to stick with taking time with herself to find her identity outside of someone else. And if that meant being alone, she would do it. She could do it.

Phillip got on his knees in front of the hospital bed, grabbing on to her thighs a little too tightly. The front of his jeans were soaked around the knees from being in the mud when he helped Iris when she’d fainted. Iris flinched. “I don’t want a new plan. I want you. I’m so sorry, Iris.”

“Right now, sorry isn’t enough to just fix everything.” She reached for Phil’s face, and he brought it nearer to her until she could touch his chin where the moles still were. She caressed it, knowing that there was still so much love for him despite his flaws, despite the parts of themselves that seemed to clash continuously. “I promise we will talk, but right now I need you to let me go. I know that I’ve done hurtful things to you and there have been things that you’ve done that make me feel like I have to pull away. But I forgive you. And I hope one day you will forgive me too.”

“I forgive you now –”

Iris let her hand brush across his lips and he closed his eyes, stopping his words to bask in the feeling her touch gave him. He had missed it so much. He couldn’t understand why she was so adamant on putting space between them. In his mind, it was like avoiding the situation all together, and that would only put them behind even more on their life plan. Their goals. Why was she doing this?

The doctor came in before they could speak on it any further. “Ms. Howard, how are you feeling?” Iris just smiled and nodded her head. Phillip could tell she was exhausted in more ways than one. “Okay, well you have had a panic attack. I would like to ask you a couple of questions about how you’ve been feeling, what stress you may be under lately, things of that sort.” The doctor looked to Phillip now. “This will need to be private, I’m afraid. Ms. Howard will be discharged later this evening if you’d like to come back then.”

“I’ll be here,” Phillip said. Iris looked at him in a way that made him feel completely sad. He knew she didn’t want him there, but he would be anyways. She was just stressed about everything that had happened. She would feel differently once she got some rest.

As he walked through the door, Phillip could hear the doctor asking Iris about something they’d observed on her neck and hip. The questions didn’t seem to have anything to do with what he’d mentioned before Phillip got up to leave. He didn’t remember anything on her neck or hip. What if what was on his chin had been given to Iris? What if this was entirely his fault? He needed to get this thing on his chin fixed before going back to Chicago with Iris. They needed to start over with a clean slate, with no life-threatening ailments that even doctors couldn’t diagnose correctly. He would take care of it today.

Phillip sat on the bench beside where Iris had fainted not long ago. Where he had felt her touch for the first time in months. She was the only image in his mind that kept him positive in this moment. Not even an hour before now, he’d done something he never thought he would do. The sensation of pricks in his face still lingered as he watched the blackbirds sit on their posts surrounding the empty park. The wind felt colder now across his cheeks, so he tugged his jacket up to block the vigorous breeze.

When he’d left the hospital, Wren mentioned that he knew a place that could help with the spots on his face. At first Phillip kept walking, ready to get away from this weird stranger. But the pressure to have the bumps taken care of by the time Iris was ready to be with him, made

him turn around and listen. He ended up following Wren to a small specialist clinic that apparently worked wonders for most skin conditions. Before he knew it, Phillip was extended out in a small office and a doctor was extracting blood from his arm. He left a came back not long after with the same tube of blood, now separated into a large red section and a clear one.

The doctor explained that he was going to numb Phillip's face and then inject the plasma back into his skin. This would encourage scar reduction, correction of sun damage, and minimizing fine lines and pores. Then he would do microneedling, which would involve pricking numerous tiny holes in the skin to generate new collagen and skin tissue. The doctor informed Phillip that none of these seemed to be skin issues for him, but Phillip made it clear that he didn't care what the doctor thought. At this point, he would try everything if it meant getting Iris back. Wren was in the same clinic getting something done to his hands. Phillip thought he was completely ignorant. His hands looked fine to him, just a bit purple from the cold.

And now he was sitting in the park with a face that was not only red where the bumps had been for months now, but all of the skin on his face was splotchy and various shades of red. Wren sat beside him for a few minutes, and Phillip felt so emotionally drained that he didn't protest. Wren's hands were covered in gloves, so Phillip knew whatever treatment he had undergone, the results, if any, were still imperceptible. Before long Wren was rising from his seat, murmuring "Well, I have a show to put on. Wish me luck." Phillip said nothing, only watched Wren's retreating figure until he vanished around the corner of a building, rubbing furiously at the backs of his hands.

He pulled his cap down on his head to block the sun that was trying to break through the gray clouds. He couldn't help but raise his fingers to his face, hoping that the bumps had

vanished from the treatment. They were still there, and still felt soft and swollen under the tips of his fingers. Heat began to swirl in his chest and he could feel himself grow from calm to fed up and furious. “What else do I have to do!” he yelled to the empty park. Spit flew through his teeth and his breathing intensified, his chest hammering against his ribcage over and over. Then he was rubbing at the bumps, imagining the skin pulling away cleanly, leaving a smooth surface underneath. But really his nails were digging into the skin, cutting around the bumps, causing blood to seep from his pores first slowly, and then in a steady trickle. His head felt full of warm air that was pressing against his forehead, his face hot to the touch.

He’d pulled the bumps from his face, the skin now stuffed under his fingernails, and it felt like there were tears running down his neck. He was crying as well but he knew the fluid that stroked down his neck was not tears. There were no movements made to wipe anything away. There was no one around. He was alone. Phillip sat his phone on his lap for when Iris called him to take her home. Until then, he would wait.