



**Too Young to Fall Asleep**  
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We're too young to fall asleep  
Too cynical to speak  
We're losing it, can't you tell?

—Radiohead, "My Iron Lung"

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## **EIGHTEEN**

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"They get out of three classes to do that," Libby says.

Catherine lifts her head from her lunch to view the commotion across the way in the Student Commons. Sprawled across a folding lunch table, a group of teens are quietly interacting with a large man dressed in

military camouflage with a shaved head, sitting stiffly behind his own table. The protesters are mostly boys with shaggy, unbrushed haircuts that hide the headphones in their ears, combined with baggy, wrinkled clothes to create the perfect blend of rebellion and laziness. She wonders how long it took them that morning to achieve such a perfectly casual look.

"Counter-recruiting, they call it," Libby continues. "David Leary's dad threatened to sue the school district if they didn't allow for it. But you know what? I know for a fact that half of them are doing it just to get out of a physics test this afternoon."

Catherine nods her head distractedly, spotting a familiar face among the apathetic protesters, her childhood friend Jeffrey. She tries to recall the last time they hung out, and quickly realizes she cannot. It's funny though; he never used to be the kind of guy who went around putting flowers in the barrels of guns.

The recruiting table is being passed by a crush of oblivious students. The man with the buzzcut sits uncomfortably in a chair designed for a child, with various military brochures spread on the table in front of him like perfect little fans. He ignores the girls as they walk by in packs of two or three, each of them slender with iron straight hair. The boys all walk alone. He gets the attention of one of them and asks, "Sir, what are your plans for the future?"

"I'm going to Madison," says the scrawny young boy. "Got my dorm contract set up already and everything."

"Ah, very well then. Good luck with that," he responds as the boy walks away. Looking down, he notices that his camouflage contrasts starkly with the blank white walls behind him. Plaques attained at debate tournaments, choir concerts, and student art shows decorate the hallways at regular intervals. A couple of feet away, trophies are stuffed haphazardly into glass boxes, creating overlit oases of future potential and hopeless encouragement.

"I didn't even know recruiters bothered coming to our school," Meg says, taking a seat next to Catherine and browsing through a fashion magazine while she eats her brown bag lunch. Catherine chokes on her sandwich, decides that she isn't hungry, and saunters over to the protest, sneaking up behind Jeffrey without his noticing. Approaching him, she spots a set of scraggly sideburns he must have grown since she last saw him. He eventually notices her and breaks into a barely perceptible smile. "Hey," he says.

"Hey," she adroitly replies.

Impulsively, he wipes a strand of ultra-straight, ultra-dark hair out of Catherine's eyes. "You get so pale in the winter," he says. "I forgot." She smiles awkwardly, backs up just enough for his fingers to fall away from her bangs. She hands him the half-eaten bag of chips left over from her lunch, which he takes and shovels into his mouth. "Haven't seen you in awhile," he says.

She shrugs. "You going to the game on Friday?"

"Probably. Nothing else to do, really. You and I should smoke up beforehand." She laughs quietly and he says, "Seriously," handing back the now empty bag. "I miss hanging out with you. What happened to our mornings? You used to come to my locker every day before first period. Half the time, it seems like you don't even make it to class on time anymore."

Instead of answering, Catherine dwells on the sight of the big-boned recruiter next to Jeffrey. It reminds her of the fable her kindergarten teacher use to recite about the lion and the mouse. By the end of the story, the two creatures stand next to each other as equals, despite their unequal sizes and strengths, each pleading they can free the other; and now stand the toned recruiter and the pot-smoking pacifist, pleading the same. She watches two students who are now conversing with him; brothers, she's pretty sure, the older one named Colin. They're telling the recruiter about their military family and the five members in three generations who have served.

"They're good men," the recruiter says. "You must be eager to join them."

The two avert their eyes. "Yeah, I guess," Colin mumbles.

Catherine watches them another moment, and then asks Jeffrey, "What would you think of me enlisting?"

He snorts. "Yeah."

"I'm serious." She nudges him with her shoulder. "C'mon, you little activist. What'd be your argument?"

He looks over at her. "I'd say you were seriously screwing up the plans for Champaign next year. Meg would freak if she had to be assigned a random roommate at this point."

Stepping away, she shakes her head. "Really, Jeffrey, aren't you sick of it? Aren't you sick of textbooks? Aren't you sick of white walls? The air-conditioning blowing down on you even when snow is falling?"

"You're upset that they have air-conditioning in the winter?" he says.

Catherine sighs. "It's not natural," she says quietly.

"And, what, you're going to strap a machine gun to your back instead and go running around the desert?" He waves his hand dismissively. "No, this whole discussion is... ." He shakes his head. "You're no killer."

There's a pause while the two watch the recruiter again, then Catherine quietly says, "I could be a translator. They're desperate for translators. You hear that on the news all the time."

Jeffrey quickly turns to her again in exasperation. "Look, Catherine, are you being serious or not? Because you're starting to sound serious." She just shrugs again and looks away. Colin and his brother get done talking to the recruiter, and Jeffrey immediately runs over with his own flyer. "You have a choice, you know," he says to them. "You don't have to continue a legacy of shame if you don't want."

Colin rolls his eyes. "Whatever," he mutters while walking away.

A wiry freshman whom Catherine cannot put a name to runs up to the table, smacking Jeffrey in the shoulder. "Only forty-seven days until Radiohead!"

Jeffrey gets a big smile on his face and pushes the freshman back. "You fucking know it," he happily replies.

"Let's go toke before Simmons."

"Yeah, sure," he says, jumping up from the table. "You coming, Catherine?"

She smiles and shakes her head no, watching the two of them saunter off towards the parking lot, dropping the smile as they turn the corner. *Lion or mouse?* she thinks. *Is there even a difference?* She gets up, swipes a brochure and business card from the recruiter's table, and heads out the door before the soldier has had a chance to speak.

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The stops on the westbound Metra train out of downtown Chicago display a comically consistent transition: the farther away the station, the bigger the surrounding homes, and the lower the rate of violent crime. Glen Ellyn, where Catherine lives, lies in the middle of the ride. Its property taxes discourage most first-time buyers; young couples only fork over the money under the sacrificial notion that they're somehow giving their children the best life possible that way. It is a town where teenage girls crowd the local fitness center at night, where teenage boys have sexual thoughts about their mothers' middle-aged friends. A place where kids fear mall cops more than real ones, where kids get drunk in empty mansions every Saturday night.

The setting sun illuminates rows of identical lots, identical homes, where the only visible difference is the choice of brick or siding. Even if the hulking creations are not aesthetically displeasing, their larger stature hits Catherine with disgust. Each house has a cluttered garage the cars no longer fit in, a pristine living room that no family member ever sits in, shag carpets that no one is allowed to walk on. Looking out at a dormant block, she notices lawns cut so short that the wind barely affects them, a quiet that makes the surroundings almost bearable. With the town muted, she sees it at its most secure. Inside these homes, she knows there are teenagers who lock themselves inside their poster-covered rooms and dream of exploration, not knowing what to do if they actually ever were to find themselves gone and uncomfortable.

During dinner later, Catherine tries remaining aloof and distant by playing with her food; but with nothing else on her plate to toy with besides a pile of mashed potatoes, she must instead look up. She peers out onto the backyard and sees that a puddle of water has gathered on the porch. Her dad decided to build that porch himself one summer when she was a kid, accidentally pouring the concrete unevenly and creating a burrow for the rainwater to gather. She thinks about how many times she's seen this exact scene before, how many times she's sat in this exact seat over the years and watched the rain out this exact window at this exact angle gather in that exact depression. She distractedly tunes in to some of the patter going on between her sisters and mother over the table:

"Billy Klein is ordering balloons to be sent to my locker tomorrow morning. There's going to be a sign attached asking me to prom."

"Won't your boyfriend mind?"

"Well of course I'm going to say no. It's still a nice gesture."

"That's such bullshit."

"Sarah."

"Sorry, Mom."

"It is not."

"I heard you on the phone with Mary saying that if Billy asked first, you'd have to say yes."

"That's not true! You didn't even listen to the whole conversation. I told Mary I'd have to say yes out of politeness so that it'd get back to Jack, so that he'd hurry up and just ask me already."

Catherine silently accepts this logic and goes back to examining her surroundings. The kitchen is colored in a perfect combination of rustic hues, and is equipped with a series of expensive steel appliances.

Landscape paintings of the Italian countryside hang on the walls. A family of five with a table for six, an empty seat exists next to Catherine's place at each meal. Given how obsessed her mother is with balance, the empty chair makes Catherine wonder if it kills her each time she sees it. She wonders if she had actually planned on having four children but stopped after three due to some nefarious reason, growing health dangers or bad stretch marks. Or maybe just realizing she doesn't like kids as much as she thought she would.

Her dad, a wiry and balding man, sits to Catherine's left, silently smiling and simply listening to it all too. In college he was the lead singer of a band with a small following; her mom takes pride in being responsible for taming the man, but Catherine wonders if he ever had any real desire to live recklessly to begin with. He always seems so content, she thinks, eating a routine dinner with four women as estrogen dominates the conversation.

"Jenny Louis really gained weight this winter."

"Yeah, all in her chest!"

"Helen!"

"Sorry, Mom."

"She must have grown two cup sizes."

"I bet Billy Klein will ask her to prom once you turn him down."

Helen, now officially two months away from getting her driver's license, started wearing makeup the same year Catherine had picked up mascara; she started fighting with their mom about going to a tanning salon at thirteen, while Catherine hadn't realized such places even existed until high school. She spends most evenings with Jack, her boyfriend of four months. On the other hand, Sarah is a modest beauty, plain in dress, and possesses an underlying fierceness, a result of dealing her entire life with three stubborn women all older than her. Making first-chair violin in the student orchestra next year dominates most of her idle thoughts. The two of them sit across from Catherine, arguing about Mrs. McHugh's panic attack during school earlier that day.

"You weren't even there, Helen."

"Yeah, but everyone heard about it. Mrs. McHugh had to put her head in between her knees and do breathing exercises after some kid gave her attitude. Didn't you hear about it, Catherine?" Catherine silently shakes her head no.

"It wasn't just some kid. It was Danny Sanders. He's spent more time at the dean's office than science class. Mrs. McHugh *prays* for him, I heard her say once." The sisters conspiratorially chuckle. "Did you know

that she used to teach gym about ten years back? I find that funny. Mrs. McHugh, the conservative lady who dresses in '80s sweaters every day, teaching gym."

Catherine's mom notices her quiet tone and says, "And how was your day?"

"Same old," she replies, staring down at her plate and making another half-hearted attempt at playing with her potatoes. "A military recruiter's been on campus all week. Jeffrey and a group of others have been protesting him."

"Oh, Jeffrey." Her mother smiles. "Why don't we ever see him anymore? He always reminds me of that one actor I used to like. You know that movie, where the two boys get famous in their parents' basement, sitting on a couch and doing their funny television show?"

"*Wayne's World*?" Catherine looks at her mom incredulously.

"Yes, that's it! Every time I watch that and see Wayne's little sidekick, it reminds me of Jeffrey."

"Shwing!" Helen yells.

Sarah rolls her eyes and says, "Every time you watch the movie, mom? How often do you watch *Wayne's World*, anyway?"

As her sisters giggle to themselves, Catherine just sighs and continues, realizing that she can't put it off any longer. "Anyway, while Jeffrey was protesting," she stammers, looking down at her plate, "I ended up signing up."

"Signing up for what, dear?" her mom says distractedly, helping herself to another chicken breast.

"The army."

Her sisters burst into laughter, and even her mom gets a smile on her face. "You signed up for the army?" she asks.

"I guess."

"You guess," her mom says dismissively, now picking up the gravy.

"Well, I signed a thing called a Delayed Entry Promise. A D.E.P. It basically means I have up to a year to go through basic training, while I take classes that teach things like the chain of command and rank names. Jeffrey says that technically I can get out of it, if I want to go through a complicated court battle, but in reality I'm pretty much signed up at this point. So, um. Yeah," Catherine says, focusing on the Italian sunsets on the wall. A hush had fallen over the table; she looks up now to see a silence from the rest of her family, her mom still holding the gravy ladle.

"And why in God's name would you do something like that?" she asks.

"I don't know," Catherine again mumbles.

Her mom violently drops the ladle into the gravy bowl. "You don't know," she says, anger creeping into her voice.

"It made sense at the time."

"It made... " Her mom sighs and pinches her nose. "Do you know what you... You just chose to sacrifice your life, Catherine. Jesus, you don't even know what that means."

"It'll pay for college."

"God damn it," her mom suddenly blurts out, "*we* can pay for college. That's the whole point. It's poor people who join the army so they can afford college." She takes a breath, gains her composure a bit again. "I'm not saying it's unimportant, Catherine. It's a very important sacrifice those people are making. I agree with that. It's just that it's a last choice, sweetie. It's the thing people do when they don't have any better options."

Catherine lowers her eyelids and stares angrily at her mom. "I can't believe you would actually say something like that."

"I'm just saying, honey. You have so many better things in store for you. Why would you want to throw all that away?"

"Fuck you." With a loud scraping noise, Catherine forcefully pushes her chair away from the table, then runs off to the stairway and her upstairs bedroom.

"Don't you dare talk to me that way!" her mom yells, but she is already gone. "Catherine!" she yells again to no avail, then throws her hands in the air and looks at her husband. "Don't you have anything to say about this?"

He shrugs confusedly and remarks, "Nothing more than you do."

Upstairs, Catherine lights some candles and listens to the opening of *OK Computer*. She has the entire start memorized, yet the music still hits her unexpectedly, comforting her in the most humbling way. Yorke moans, "In an interstellar burst, I am back to save the universe." Repeating it, she sings along quietly to both the words and melody, staring out her window a bit, calming down again. She eventually takes out a beat-up spiral notebook and starts writing.

*I wonder what the cool kids are up to tonight. The ones with the tattoos, the hangovers, the ability to reference the chord progression of every Clash song. They must not hear the silence when they fall asleep in dingy apartments, living life as art. They must not notice the air-conditioning vent humming its own song, the inanimate objects in the room that reveal the lack of existence in a big,*

*empty house. They must not stare at the shadows, creating a human from pure imagination and coincidental lighting.*

*They probably converse about America's drug policies, saying, "Legalize marijuana and we can get this country out of debt." Or they talk of moving to New York City or Prague. Most likely, they just say 'turn it up' with a bottle of wine in one hand, raising the volume of the stereo, listening to the beat linger on in its continuous rhythm. That's how the illusion all starts. They look in the mirror, wondering what to do with their hair when they haven't showered for days. They sit, questioning what to talk about after they realize they have everything in common. They listen to lyrics that sing about love when all they want is sex.*

*It hurts when the music stops.*

There's a quiet knock at the door, and then her mom comes in with a warmed plate of leftovers. "Hi, honey," she says, slightly smiling, coming over and putting the plate on Catherine's bed while she sits down with her. "I wanted to apologize for getting angry earlier. It's just... this is a whole lot of information to take in all at once."

Catherine eats a forkful of food, touching her notebook a moment and then looking out the window again. "You really want to know why I signed up?" she half-asks. "I had that recruiter's card for days, not knowing what to do with it. And then this morning, I was eating breakfast and reading the paper, and right on the front page was this story about the new safety features being installed at my old elementary school. Metal detectors and truck blockades, Mom. Truck blockades for the edges of the playground during recess." She sighs. "It just suddenly made sense, all of a sudden. It just felt right to sign up."

Her mom touches Catherine's cheek tenderly, on the verge of crying. "We'll talk about this later, sweetie, okay? I know you're upset. We'll get this all sorted out later. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Okay." She smiles again and starts to leave. She stops at the door one more time and says, "You know, there are lots and lots of things you can do about all this once you're at college. There are committees. Fundraisers. My friends and I built a shantytown on our quadrangle during college. Did I ever tell you about that?"

Catherine laughs weakly. "Yeah, Mom. You've told me about that."

"I just want to remind you that there are all kinds of other options if you want to help. You don't literally have to go over there and get yourself killed. Okay? Just think about it."

She leaves, and Catherine goes back to the window-staring, listening to Yorke sing and sing.

— x —

*My friends have two common traits: they like to drink, and they like to discuss indie films once drunk. I know the difference between the Brian Mueller who's been drinking Busch Light (sloppy and sad) and the Brian Mueller who's been drinking ouzo (clumsy and giddy). I know that Chris Klein can down vodka, shot after shot, but throws up after two swigs of whiskey. I know that red wine makes Meg Boyle confess embarrassing details about her relationship with Kyle. I know that Leah Hill forgoes lunch and dinner on party days, so that there'll be enough grain points left in her diet that day to have all those beers. Well, plus because skipping meals gets you drunk faster.*

*They cannot help but keep thinking of schoolwork even on the weekends. They smoke cigarettes when they're wasted, regret it in the morning, do it again the next Saturday night anyway. None of them want to believe in God, but many do nonetheless. Most are desperate to have sex, but deathly frightened to lose their virginity. They cling to their confusion, embrace it, looking for answers in junkie poetry and snotty movies knowing subconsciously that they'll never find them there.*

*I wonder sometimes if the questions posed in one's youth are ever answered, or just forgotten.*

— x —

Up on the second floor of the party, Catherine accidentally walks in on Chris Klein feeding Mary Shepard mushrooms. She closes the bedroom door again quickly, catching a glimpse of Mary giggling in hesitation, picking up one of the dried fungi and holding it in the air like a rare jewel, turning it in the light. Walking back downstairs, she wonders again just how long she'll be able to tolerate it here tonight, how long she can hold out before finally having to face home again for another long night. Brian's parents are out of town, up at their lakehouse in Wisconsin, leaving him nervously running around behind belligerent teenagers alone in a house full of expensive artwork, smoking cigarettes in the dining room. Someone eventually ashes in an antique piece of crystal and he gets pissed, so shuttles everyone off to the basement and backyard.

The latest one-hit-wonders blast out of the stereo in the corner, where a group of Catherine's friends are playing beer pong, dancing around to

the thumping bass and joyfully screaming the lyrics at each other. She can actually see the party get out of hand as if in slow motion, as midnight approaches and the volume heightens. It's blatantly awkward to hear the music stop in between songs, hear everyone insulting the melody by screaming above it. Catherine spent the day listening to Yorke inform her, "We're too young to fall asleep / Too cynical to speak / We're losing it, can't you tell?" and all she could answer, over and over each time the song played, was, "Yes, I know — but now what?"

A kid named Nick decides to gather up people to shotgun beers, and Catherine laughs to herself seeing Leah, the class valedictorian, volunteer first. She and five other boys shotgun a six-pack of the finest Milwaukee has to offer, spilling foam all over themselves and throwing their empty cans in the pool. Nick will have his shirt and pants off by the end of the night, choosing to streak with every possible excuse he has to do so. Catherine thinks of the military recruiter while she watches her friends regress, while they suddenly decide around 11:45 that it'd be funny to end every sentence by screaming the word "fuck." She thinks of the recruiter when Mary starts pacing around back and forth, pupils dilated like dinner plates, muttering to herself, "I think I'm freaking out I really do think that maybe I'm freaking out."

There are too many wasted conversations for Catherine to find substance in any of them. Too many embarrassing confessions that no one will remember the next morning, but that everyone will eventually cherish a week later. Too many kids getting to know each other for the first time in their last two weeks of their senior years, after calling themselves friends for almost a decade. Too many promises that once they leave high school, they can finally start living. Jason, a 20-year-old who still makes his way around high school parties, understands how poignant the scene already is, drunkenly trying to hit on Leah while simultaneously extolling the virtues of Lou Reed's *Transformer*.

"You're happy, see?" he's saying to her, his hand resting on her shoulder in order to maintain his balance. He's leaning so far forward that you can see Leah literally leaning away in response. "I know you're happy, because right now you're thinking about your future unrealistically. See, that's what seniors do, 'specially right before graduation. If your lives weren't so stagnant, so mundane" — he punches the air repeatedly with his outstretched finger — "you wouldn't be romanticizing about how you're going to move down into the city and start living like Lou Reed. Truth is, you're all gonna go run off to some collegetown and

do the exact same shit with the exact same people down there that you've been doing here for four goddamn years."

Leah looks into her empty cup. "Can you buy us more beer?"

"Fuck yeah, I can buy you more beer."

Catherine ventures out into the lawn, with its back perimeter that reaches out to some undeveloped woods. She spots Jeffrey sitting on a swing-set and smoking a cigarette, his hair radiating under the sodium lamp lighting up the space. He shakes his box of cigarettes at her, and she sits down on the ground next to him, taking one and lighting up.

"You're bored," he says.

"How did you know?"

"The only time you sit cross-legged is when you're restless."

She looks down and notices that she has in fact done so, not realizing this was even a trait of hers. "What else do you know about me that I don't?" she asks; she means it as a light joke but it comes out sounding more serious.

He sits and contemplates for a moment. "I know that you like to stay in on Saturday nights. I know that you like old vinyl more than you admit." He pauses and then adds, "And I know that your eyes are always vacant in class anymore."

She shoots him a sideways look and then says, "I just walked in on Chris giving Mary mushrooms."

He frowns. "What? She shouldn't be taking 'shrooms."

"I didn't know Chris could even get mushrooms."

"It's from Christmas vacation, when his family went to Colorado. His cousin gave him a giant bag of the stuff to bring back with him. You remember, Jason and Kyle and I did them right when he got back? And Kyle kept freaking out every time the laundry machine made a noise? You remember that, right?" He stops for a moment. "Actually, now that I think about it, that was a long time ago. Maybe they're too old now to have much of an effect."

"Anyway, it was surprisingly awkward. Like I had caught them having sex or something."

"Well, yeah, speaking of awkward — last weekend, she got wasted and told us her mother has lung cancer. Says she's known for months and hasn't told anyone. No one knew what the fuck to say. It was the weirdest thing. She basically said, 'Hey, I'm fucked up but, you know, let's play some flippy cup.'"

"God, does Chris know?"

"No. No one does." He shakes his head. "She really should not be taking 'shrooms right now." They sit quietly for a moment, smoking while Jeffrey rocks slowly in his swing.

"Do you know how bad it is?" she asks.

"It didn't sound too good." He pauses, looking into the sky. "What the fuck is happening lately, anyway? Last year Leah's mom died, then Kyle walked in on his mother attempting suicide. That was so messed up."

She gives him a double-take. "Wait. What did you just say?"

"Yeah, I know. For some reason everyone keeps wanting to come to me and confess all this shit."

"Kyle's mom attempted suicide?" Images of her friend come flooding in — Kyle whose only extracurricular activity is juggling club, Kyle who always ends up talking like a pirate whenever he's bored. Every time she's ever stopped by his house, his mom has always had on the same frilly, old-fashioned apron, even when she was just laying around the couch watching television.

"Yeah," Jeffrey continues. "It's one thing wondering if your friends are fucked up, but when you have to worry about your parents surviving another day or not, that really puts shit in perspective."

Catherine remembers looking at her parents earlier before leaving the house. Her mother, already in her nightgown, was sitting on the couch starting her nightly crossword puzzle. Her father sat next to her with chips and salsa, watching a documentary on cable. She has barely spoken to them since last Tuesday's dinner, finding an excuse to leave the house nearly every night, and each time she consciously stays out as late as she can stand it. There is no official acknowledgment that they are all trying to avoid each other, that conversation in the house has dropped lately to a minimum, but is simply the new reality they have all silently accepted.

She and her friends spend most of their time denying their fear of growing up. They enroll in yet another school where they can put it off yet another half a decade, spend their summers drinking away their meager paychecks from their minimum-wage jobs. Catherine forgets that some of them are being put in situations these days where they have no choice but to grow up. Earlier that day in biology, Catherine read that the liver could rebuild itself after a lifetime of damage. "Let's drink to that," she jokingly thought to herself at the time; but on reflection, now she can't help but wonder how unique a process like that is in the world of nature anyway. The process of rebuilding oneself after a major period of damage. The process of becoming whole again.

"Shit," Jeffrey exclaims, with panic in his voice. She looks up to see a crowd of kids piling out of the basement's sliding back door, the word "cops" suddenly in the air repeatedly. One after another, the partygoers shuffle off into the darkness in random directions; and suddenly she and Jeffrey are off too, because they know well enough not to stick around when the cops show up to a Glen Ellyn party. They take off in a dead run, hopping over a neighbor's fence and suddenly flying across perfectly manicured lawn after perfectly manicured lawn, their stumbling met with chaotic streets and flashing lights around every next corner.

Four blocks out, Jeffrey suddenly stops and pulls them into a spot formed from the intersection of a shed, house and tree. Catherine feels her heart beating in her ears as she tries to regain control over her breathing, hearing shouts and dog barks in the distance as she wipes sticky sweat off her face. Suddenly her cellphone rings. She looks at the caller ID. Her mom. Fuck.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Catherine. I just wanted to call to see how long you were staying at Jeffrey's. Will you be home at one like we talked about, or do you need a little more time?"

"No, I'll be home."

"What's wrong? You sound like you're out of breath."

"You just... the call just startled me. We were in the middle of a movie."

"Oh yeah? What are you watching?"

"Uh... *Wayne's World*."

"Ha ha," her mom says without laughing. "That's funny. That's what that is."

"I'm going to..." Catherine peers out the side of the shed in a panic, with her finger over her phone's microphone as she desperately tries to keep out the noise.

"Sure, sure. Okay. I'll see you later." Click.

The two continue crouching and waiting, not knowing whether it's safe yet to come out again or not; and then suddenly they spy Nick tearing down the middle of the street naked, screaming, "Run free, everyone! JUST RUN FREE!" Catherine and Jeffrey look at each other a moment, then both burst into wild laughter, stumbling over themselves while holding each other up. *This is ridiculous*, Catherine thinks. Sometimes she forgets that. How ridiculous it all is. How only in high school would a night like this be considered criminal activity. How the dizziness makes the dullness more invigorating. How her friends can almost come to

blows during political arguments, yet none of them bother to vote. How they're all losing it for sure. And suddenly Catherine realizes that she can no longer continue leading a ridiculous life herself no matter how much the alternative frightens her, no matter how much it upsets her parents. Because hell, she thinks, stepping out finally and heading back to her car, her parents sleep too soundly at night anyway.

— x —

The downtown Radiohead concert finally arrives. As she makes the half-hour drive from Glen Ellyn to the Chicago Loop, the usual chaos arises as she tries to coordinate with the other carloads of her friends. For some reason, Meg Boyle's cousin has promised to house all fifteen of them, and so that's where they all find themselves later that evening, drinking cheap beer on the roof of a Lincoln Park lowrise and still wound up from the show. Walking over to Jeffrey through the rooftop crowd, his profile framed by a distant line of skyscrapers, Catherine drunkenly yells, "Did you see Yorke dance?" He nods, puts an arm around her, feeding her his beer. Laughing, he misses as the beer spills down her shirt. They sit down on an air mattress and simultaneously exclaim, "Everything in its right place!" Laughing at their mirrored comment, Jeffrey responds, "Baby, I will never ever forget."

It stays warm all night, so the group decides to just sleep on the roof. In the early morning, Catherine wakes up before anyone else, stepping over a crowd of passed out kids in an attempt to get downstairs to the bathroom, catching the city in the serene and complicated moment where night ends and day arrives. The air is as fragile as the light from the lampposts, and the streets seem as asleep as the millions who lie in their beds around her that moment. She witnesses how alive a stoplight can be when there's no one around to obey it, how poetic the doors of closed storefronts are, how beautiful it is to catch the world waking up, sprinkling their tired eyes with faucet water, welcoming the intruding sunrise.

Catherine accumulates such perfect moments in her memory, always having stayed up late enough to witness the party die down and catch the simplicity of early-morning air and chirping birds. The fleeting moments when the world slows down and starts spinning less and less to where she can keep up with it. The lamppost is now useless as the sun begins to shine, telling her to get out now. It's okay, she thinks, looking at Jeffrey asleep on the concrete roof. He'll be there when she returns.

"It's one in the morning, Jeffrey," Catherine scolds on the phone, from her pillowed surroundings in her dimly-lit bedroom. Picking up a remote, she mutes the small TV placed on her nightstand and reiterates, "You can't come over now. My parents are sleeping."

"Sleeeeeeeping?" Jeffrey asks, coyly elongating the word. "Oh, I'll be so quiet even you won't know I'm there." In his plea, he stresses the wrong syllables. His tone, drunken, fluctuates from adorably persuasive to cracked, questionably distant.

"Really, Jeffrey, do you have to come over tonight?"

"Ah yes," he says profoundly. "Tonight, we will dance!" And with that comment, Catherine hears a click and a dial tone before she has a chance for a final word. Dragging her body out of her neatly made bed, dressed in panties and her dad's old t-shirt, she turns off the television altogether and opens the blinds of her second-story window. Peering out onto the front lawn, Catherine waits for the disruption in her quiet neighborhood that's sure to soon come. All of the houses in view have their doors closed and locked, their living room lights off, no random engines running on the streets. No tinge of excitement, no sigh of exhaustion. Without a care one way or the other, she just waits and thinks about how he better not wake her mom.

She watches Jeffrey come riding up on his bike. He has on denim cutoffs, basking in the new summer weather, the warmth fresh to his exposed bones. He pedals quickly when first turning onto her street, then once gaining momentum puts his feet up on the handlebars when nearing her house, quickly losing control and tumbling violently into the grass of Catherine's front lawn. She runs down the stairs and out the door, as the wood flooring creaks with her quickened footsteps, kneeling beside Jeffrey and turning him over in the grass, catching a glimpse of his bloodshot eyes. He searches her face for recognition before putting on cheap, plastic sunglasses. Smiling, he yells, "I brought treats!"

"Shhh..." she says, emphasizing the sternness in her voice. She walks him up to her bedroom until finally acknowledging him. "Okay, what treats did you bring?"

He grabs her by the hand, giggling and unresponsive to her inquiry. "May I spin you?"

Dismissing his lack of coherence, she obliges, smiling at his childish desire. He starts laughing as they dance. One of his hands rests warmly

on her hip while the other leads her around the room, the two swaying to the unnatural silence enveloping them. Catherine follows his footsteps and waits for any sense of motion from her parents down the hall.

"What did you do tonight, Jeffrey?"

His skin, unusually pale, hides secrets. "Started a revolution, baby," he exclaims in a breathless whisper, while pulling out a fifth of whiskey.

"All right, fine. Don't tell me. Can you please keep it down?" Catherine watches him tilt his head back and chug the whiskey with closed eyes. She then snatches the bottle from him, and the liquor spills on her oversized t-shirt.

"Don't worry. I'll whisper," he says in a regular pitch. Without time to shake her head to discourage his voice level, Jeffrey walks away. He hits the corner of her bed with his thigh and falls to the hardwood floor. She doesn't run to his side this time. Instead, she turns on her overhead light, and he hisses quietly in mock terror. "Can I just lay here for awhile?" he asks.

"Yes. Yes you can." She sits down next to him, while he rests his head in her lap. "I need to get you home."

"I don't want to. I'm scared. They're coming for me."

"Who's coming for you?"

"Everyone. They want my good looks."

She can't help but break out into a smile. Staring down, she takes in his dusty blonde hair, protruding cheekbones, lost blue eyes looking innocently into her own. She doesn't know if he wants love or betrayal, to be with her or to have someone he can blame his unhappiness on.

While he sits there, her phone starts ringing. The caller ID shows it to be their mutual friend Kyle. She grabs the vibrating machine, hoping Kyle will know better than she what to do with the boy lying in her lap.

"Kyle is calling you?" Jeffrey asks, seeing the name appear on the screen. He takes the phone from her hand and tosses it across the room. She can faintly hear Kyle on the other line asking if Jeffrey had happened to show up there. The tone of the boy in her lap suddenly becomes angered, jealous. "You're sleeping with him, aren't you?"

"What?" she blurts out, offended by the false accusation. "Jeffrey, you know I'm not."

"You are. You're sleeping with him in my house. In my room. You're on your knees sucking his cock, and he's standing there laughing at the pictures of us on my wall."

"That's it. You need to leave," she says in frustration, although knowing that he has no chance of making it home. His eyelids are having

enough trouble even now staying open, and his voice struggles to remain coherent.

"I've always known."

"Known what?"

"That you're a whore," he sweetly asserts. Jeffrey starts kissing her thighs, nuzzling his face through her t-shirt and into her cotton panties. Then, looking up, he touches her cheeks with unfamiliarity, as if questioning whose face he is staring at. It's a look bordering between inebriation and just plain boyhood, thinking he can still get away with being helpless.

"How much did you drink, anyway?" she asks. Rolling around on the floor, he just groans instead of answering. "Jeffrey, can you take off your sunglasses?"

He takes off his black-framed gas station specials. His eyes, red and vacant, stare into hers as he whispers quietly. "I love..." Looking directly at her, he tries again but ends up only with, "I love..."

"What, Jeffrey?"

A long silence develops. She waits for his confession, desperately hoping that the whiskey is creating a more honest Jeffrey, that this pathetic night was ultimately caused by his classic timidity, not his growing self-destruction. His face, resting on her thighs again, feels heavy but perfectly consoling all the same.

"What?" she repeats.

Stammering, he concludes, "I love my mom. Don't tell anyone."

He quiets down, passing out in her lap. She has no choice but to watch her room transform through the night, as she waits anxiously for the sun. The quiet never lets up until the birds finally start chirping on the branches of the elm tree outside her window at the crack of dawn. She basks in the stillness, although never relieved from the body in her lap holding back no weight. She grabs her notebook and spends her hours trying to find the perfect words, but ends up with scribbles and insufficient sentences.

*It's going to be a long night. A long night, blurring into years and lifetimes. A long night that, when the sun sets, I'll sigh and think it'll be okay for now. But I can take a long night because I remember that heartbreak doesn't always show itself in tears.*

*It won't stop. It must stop. It won't stop. It's only a matter of maintaining order – of keeping sanity, of calming him down, letting him use my thighs as a*

*pillow if that's what makes him fall asleep. It's only a matter of acquiring bruises, a sore neck, and paranoid reflexes if that's what will make everything stop.*

Jeffrey wakes up blearily the next morning. Without a word, he crawls toward the nearest bathroom. Meanwhile, Catherine's eyelids burn, drained and aching. She wonders how it is that she was the one who ended up spending the night sleeplessly staring at her walls, but never asks herself why.

— x —

Her mother makes breakfast the next morning, placing a plate of toast and eggs in front of Catherine and saying, "So Jeffrey started a revolution last night, I hear?" Catherine had been wondering how she was going to bring up the discovery of a passed out hungover Jeffrey snuggling up to her naked thighs this morning. Her mother takes a drink of her juice and says, "I heard him yelling some interesting things down the hall last night. Where was he coming from, exactly?"

"Kyle's, I think. I never found out for sure."

"Seems like he has a lot of secrets he's hiding from you."

"How much did you hear?" Catherine asks, annoyed by her invasion into any aspect of last night.

"Hardly anything at all. It just appears that he's dealing with some issues. You leaving soon probably isn't helping. In fact, it might be the issue he's dealing with, you know."

Catherine drops her utensils so that they crash noisily onto her plate. "Do you really have to turn this into yet another argument about me leaving?"

"Don't raise your voice at me," her mother says in a sharp voice. "I woke up this morning to find that my teenaged daughter may or may not have slept with a boy in the room right next to mine. A boy who was wasted to the point of passing out, and who I'm pretty sure is stoned most of his waking hours."

"So now this is about Jeffrey?"

Staring at Catherine, her mother says firmly and pointedly, "This is about you making bad decisions."

The hurtful words seem to slip off her tongue so easily. Shaking her head in angry silence, her mother walks out of the kitchen right as her dad enters. Catherine sighs and looks down at the table, feeling sorry for

all the arguments it has been forced to witness over the years, the unreasonable conflicts that have soaked into its wood exterior. She looks around at the kitchen, staring at the never-faltering décor. The inanimate plates, the cookie jar, the toaster and microwave that sit each day in the same position, while her family moves and shouts and stomps all over the space. The objects are necessary, for sure — they make the toast, provide the water, help turn the kitchen into a comfortable oasis of family interaction. But none of the objects help the conversation; they do little more than get in the way and give her something to examine while her mother walks away. Her dad stands in the middle of it, taking his daily medications over the kitchen sink. “She’s just trying to deal with things,” he consoles, always the peacemaker. “Trying to deal, just like you.”

— x —

*The pen was right in front of me.*

*Definitely had too much coffee.*

*Couldn’t even get through a story, couldn’t even read a sentence.*

*My mind bounced from the corners of my antsy mind looking at the objects in my bedroom like they all had faith in me to find that fucking pen. It was right in front of me. I picked up the pen with shaky hands; nothing to do, nothing to do at all and yet my mind kept searching for something. Found it. Found a pen and now still looking, antsier than ever. Closing my eyes produces nothing but blackness. Imagination has never been my strong suit. I want to know what it’s like.*

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## NINETEEN

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Even with everything she’s been through, what Catherine still finds hardest to ignore is the pounding of her eyes. They throb with every slight eruption of sound and sting with every setting sun, regardless of

her pleas to rest calmly. Sighing, Catherine gives up on the idea of rest, leaning up from the collection of pillows scattered across her sterile bed, opening her eyes to discover a middle-aged man being hoisted into the previously empty mattress across the room. Supervising things is the head nurse, an eternally bubbly Hispanic woman named Anita, dressed each day in a different set of brightly colored, Disney-themed scrubs. She notices Catherine, smiles and says, "Look who's up! Catherine, this is Vince, your new roommate."

A man in his mid-forties, she guesses. He wears a cowboy hat with his hospital gown, a bruised face hidden underneath, along with a freshly healing scar running from his right eyebrow to his chin. His hair is graying and stringy, his eyes sunken, and he seems to be smiling, even though Catherine notices upon further inspection that he's not; the quiet sense of joy instead just naturally surfaces from the contours of his slightly wrinkled face. The sunlight from the room's wall-sized window shines directly on him, as he sits there eyeing Anita's ass each time she turns away.

"Catherine's a veteran," Anita explains to Vince. "She just got back from Iraq. How long were you over there?"

Catherine looks at them both silently, then turns on her side and faces away from them.

"Nine months, wasn't it," Anita says, completing the conversation herself. "Just transferred from a specialist VA center in Virginia to be closer to her family, a couple of towns over. Oh, and speaking of which," she says, closing up the folder full of medical files she had been glancing through, "I hate to say it, Catherine, but I have yet more paperwork for you. Let me go grab it now, as long as you're up." She darts from the room.

Vince directs his stare her way. He tips his hat back on his head and smiles wryly. "Coming from Iraq, huh? You look like you should be running late to volleyball practice." Catherine finds the comment disconcerting and gives no reply, which doesn't stop Vince at all. "I bet you got a hell of a story about how you ended up here. All I did was spin out on my bike on the highway."

"Not really," she recites dryly. "I was non-combat. My vehicle hit a land mine during a routine drive one day."

"Oh," he responds, then cheerfully adds, "Well, anyway, welcome to the stump club! We're always glad to have another member."

Anita walks back into the room, bringing a welcome break to the conversation. "Are you trying to sleep?" she asks, taking a handful of blank

forms and placing them on the nightstand next to her bed. "Want me to close the blinds?"

Shaking her head, Catherine murmurs, "It's fine."

"What about you, Vince?"

"I could sleep better if I didn't have to wait half a day every time I want a smoke. How about it, Anita? Will you just let me go have a cigarette whenever the mood strikes me, without needing a babysitter along?"

"Vince, you know better than to ask that," she replies in a tone of mock-condemnation, her perpetual smile still on her face. "Besides, you shouldn't be smoking in the first place."

"Sure. Soccer moms can pollute the air with their SUVs, but I can't harm my own goddamn lungs when I choose to."

While Anita and Vince converse, Catherine looks down at the space below her knees where her lower legs are supposed to be. Throwing the covers over the off-putting sight, Catherine suddenly becomes overwhelmed again with everything it represents. She forgets the annoying yet comforting banter between her sisters, loses the memories of drinking whiskey with her fellow soldiers, unable to think of anything but how her old feminine features are now unrecognizable. As she looks around at the white, sterile walls surrounding her, she grabs the journal beside her bed. She peers outside at a blue, cloudless sky, and summer leaves that rustle against the glass.

*I wish I could be a sound of a chirping bird flying south. I wish I could be the sound of subway tracks shaking a building. I wish I could be the soft clamor of snow hitting the ground. I wish I could be the echo of a car speeding down the open road at two in the morning. I wish I could be a morning conversation over a coffee and a scone. I wish I could be the reverberation of high heels hitting a wood dancefloor, letting rhythm control the body. I wish I could be the sound of a bouncing ball, falling into the street, as a child looks both ways before darting after the tragic loss. I wish I could be a yawn. I wish I didn't have to question my existence but could just acknowledge that it's beautiful.*

— x —

The painkillers the doctors have prescribed for Catherine keep her randomly in and out of consciousness on a regular basis already, so she uses it as an excuse as well whenever she simply doesn't feel like talking. Like now, at the end of another visit by Jeffrey, where she has pretended to

drift off, and is instead listening to the conversation struck up between him and Vince by necessity.

"Are you a friend of Catherine's?" Vince asks, peering from underneath what has turned out to be his ever-present cowboy hat.

"Yup," Jeffrey replies.

"Know her from the military?"

1. "Nah. We went to high school together."

"Is that so? Can I ask you a question, then?"

"Sure..." Jeffrey responds with wariness in his voice.

"I've been to Glen Ellyn before. I've seen the size of the houses and the lines at the Starbucks. I don't mean to generalize, but I can't help but wonder how a girl from a place like that ended up here."

"I'm hazy on that as well, to tell you the truth."

"But as her ex-boyfriend, you must have some sort of clue, right?"

"Oh, we...we never dated," Jeffrey awkwardly replies. "We were just friends."

"But still. Does she have family in the army?"

"No."

"Needed money for school?"

"No."

"Just not interested in academics?"

"No, it wasn't really that either."

"Then why?"

"You know, it's funny, because every time I would ask Catherine why she was going into the army, she'd respond by asking me why I was going to college. No reason I could give her seemed all that legitimate. I kind of concluded that maybe some choices are made more as a reaction to something else. Just mere protest."

"So you're at school?" Vince asks.

"Yeah, just finished my freshman year down at U of I. Home again for the summer." He shrugs.

"Got a fake ID?" Vince says with glee. "Out there raising hell like you should?"

"Me?" Jeffrey responds, flustered by the overly blunt small-talk. "No, I'm not much of a drinker." The conversation falls uncomfortably silent, so Jeffrey continues, "I smoke weed every day, though. That's mostly what my summer's been – go to work, go home, smoke up in the backyard, try not to get caught. A lot like high school, actually."

Vince chuckles, getting a far off look in his eyes; at Jeffrey's questioning reaction on his own face he says, "Oh, you've just got me thinking

about when I was nineteen too." He laughs harder now, specific memories popping into his head. "Forgetting I had a family at all, whenever I'd be on the open road or at random apartments, snorting a shit ton of coke. I bet you have at least a few nights like that yourself down at that college of yours." Jeffrey laughs guiltily and Vince continues with a wistful sigh. "Yeah, when I was nineteen I was automatically resentful of people who made good decisions. That cracks me up now. Thought exhaustion was physical proof that a man was living life right." He looks over at Jeffrey, coming out of his nostalgic haze. "Don't listen to me, though. I'm not a prime example of responsible adult behavior either. As soon as I was out of high school, I went straight over to Europe and fucked around for eight years. I worked hard for exactly six months, enough to buy my first bike, then after that blew every penny I made the moment it was in my hands."

"How could you afford eight years in Europe without a regular job?" Jeffrey asks.

"Well, for starters, it wasn't as expensive back then as it is now. And the way I stayed in drugs was by dealing it, and then skimming a little off the top for myself. That plus the occasional odd job was just barely enough to get me through a decade there. That's pre-EU, mind you. Not that I recommend a lifestyle like that." He shrugs. "It is what it is." Looking at Jeffrey, he continues, "Have you ever had a bike yourself?" When Jeffrey says no, Vince groans loudly and says, "Shit, man, you're nineteen! That's exactly what you should be doing with your summer! Not this working at the mall, sneaking around smoking dope in your parents' backyard bullshit. You need to be picking up lonely waitresses at all-night diners in the middle of nowhere. You need to be walking around unknown cities blind drunk, looking for the love of your life."

"I don't like the city much," says Jeffrey with a shrug.

"Then go to Montana! Go out into the desert! You'll never know where your true home is until you visit it at least once." Vince begins to go more into his years criss-crossing Europe, doing most of the talking while Jeffrey nods his head every once in a while, getting more and more into the stories as Vince continues telling them in his twangy baritone voice. Catherine listens along, content just from hearing a sound so familiar.

"Did I ever tell you about the night I hung out with Neil Young?" Vince eventually asks, which almost makes Catherine burst into laughter and blow her cover. In the small time they've been roommates now, he's already managed to bring up the subject on three separate occasions

under three separate pretexts. "I was working at this expat dive bar in Dresden," he continues, "right after the fall of communism, when everything over there was just chaos, just this giant trainwreck, and people who were fluent in English could get jobs like that." He snaps his fingers. "And Neil Young was doing his first post-Wall tour, and hitting all these eastern German shitholes to make a political statement. And so he came to Dresden, and after the show he went looking around for an English-speaking place, and ended up in my bar, which just happened to be almost empty that night. So it was just him and me, drinking and talking all night."

"What did you talk about?"

"Oh, everything. Music. Politics. We talked for a whole hour just about the best women we'd ever been with. I swear to God, it was the proudest moment of my life, seeing that I had a sex life compelling enough to entertain Neil Young."

Jeffrey laughs loudly, then asks, "And what about now? Are you married?"

"Recently divorced, actually. It's, uh... complicated."

"Sorry to hear that."

Now it's Vince's turn to shrug. "Enough about me, though," he says. "How do you like school?"

"Not much. History classes are okay, but otherwise it's been taking me a lot of motivation to get to classes at all, especially with no one around anymore to force me to. I end up skipping a lot."

"You're digging history, though?"

"Yeah. That's about all I do. Smoke weed and read Howard Zinn."

"And what do you think about this war your friend just got back from? Do you think the chance for peace was worth her going over and fighting?"

Surprised by the question, Jeffrey doesn't answer immediately, then after a pause says, "You know, I've never really thought about it from a standpoint like that."

"Here's what I think," Vince says. "I think humans can manage to screw up just about anything. If God Himself came down tomorrow and suddenly gave us world peace, then we'd just sit around complaining about how blue the sky is."

Jeffrey stays silent for a long while, then says, "I guess maybe I believe in peace, but in the same way I believe in love and fairness. They all exist, but you can only experience them in small, specific moments, you know?"

"Sure, I know what you're saying."

"But the question is, are those moments even worth it?"

"What do you mean? Worth fighting for?"

"I guess that's what I mean. But I don't mean combat. I mean fighting as in getting out of bed every day. The fight to bring about even the small moments of peace."

"Well, what's your definition of peace?" Vince asks.

"I'm not sure, but I know it's a lot more than simply an end to organized wars. I see people mentally injured every day. I see words beat down truly happy people. Words that might be honest, but should've never been spoken anyway. And the times that it's me who's inflicting that pain, I walk around feeling guilty the rest of the day, no matter whether I meant to inflict that pain or not. To me, I'd rather be the victim than the culprit. It's a much easier role in life. I'd rather be hurt than hurting someone else."

Vince takes all this in, then quietly says, "Well, if there's one thing I'm pretty sure of by now, it's that sometimes it's the impossible goals that are the only ones to get us out of bed each day. That's my answer to your question."

"My question?"

"If those moments are even worth it."

A young blonde girl in street clothes suddenly walks into the room, and over to Jeffrey. "Hi there," she says, giving him a hug.

"Oh? And who's this?" Vince says in a smooth voice.

"This is Maggie, my girlfriend," Jeffrey responds.

"Nice to meet you, sir," she says to Vince, making him theatrically wince.

"She's from Peoria," Jeffrey continues. "We go to school together. She and Catherine have never met, so she took a week off work to come visit."

Maggie says, "We have to go if we're going to make the movie," annoyingly pulling on Jeffrey's sleeve until he stands up. She looks at Catherine's still prone figure and says, "She fell asleep?"

"Yeah. We'll talk to her another time." He waves at Vince as Maggie drags him out the door. "See you later, man."

"Auf wiedersehen, my little peace warrior," Vince replies, waving back. He remains silent until the two are gone, then says in a louder voice across the room, "And how about you, Catherine? Still feel peace is worth fighting for?"

Catherine slowly opens her eyes and rolls over, catching a small grin on Vince's face. "You knew I was awake?" she asked.

"I had a guess." There's a pause, then he says, "So? How about it? What are the small moments for you?"

Catherine thinks for a moment. "Food. Shelter. A good night's sleep. The time to read a story to a child. Learning how to bite your tongue." She pauses. "That's it."

In a serious voice, he asks, "And is that enough to get you out of bed tomorrow, Catherine?"

She lays there quietly, not answering. Finally she says, "What kind of fucking name is 'Maggie?' That sounds like a dog's name."

Vince suddenly bursts into loud, joyous laughter. It continues for a long time, then he finally chuckles out, "Good night, soldier girl," leaning over and switching off his bedside lamp.

— x —

*It's 1:30 in the morning. I'm sitting on the steps of Jeffrey's basement, away from the small crowd of usual drunks we call our friends. Jeffrey relaxes next to me, strumming his guitar, waiting for praise. I tell him that I'm really terrible at being honest. Jeffrey's parents are sleeping upstairs, yet he feels no need to quiet the lively cluster of people in the other room. They have found a game of "Guess Who?" and have rearranged the rules to only ask risqué questions. Instead of saying, "Does he wear glasses?," Meg will ask, "Did he lose his virginity in high school?" while eliminating accordingly. Someone has just won another round and is voicing their victory.*

*"I'm not afraid of criticism," Jeffrey warns, still waiting for me to tell him what I think of his new song. I continue sitting uncomfortably, instead of confessing that I wish he would stop singing in that melodramatic voice of his, and just strum softly as I stare off thinking of the thread count of his shirt that I rest my head on. I remember thinking I shouldn't have worn jeans; they were too tight, and magnified how uncomfortable I already was. I hold my beer firmly for comfort.*

*"Just play some more. Can't I just listen?" I beg innocently.*

*He continues to play, as his low voice falls out of key. His songs blend into each other, as we both almost forget the other's presence. I rest my head on his shoulder to feel the vibrations, noticing how the comfort of his sweater overwhelms me more than the pitch of his voice. My shamefulness escalates as I mentally hide, resulting in a laugh that so badly roots itself in wanting to cry.*

*"What's so funny?" he asks, slightly defensive.*

*I don't know how to tell him that nothing is funny or comical at all, that my laugh is only an awkward alternative to admitting my desire for his lyrics to be about me. I assure him that my laugh was from thinking of something else, but he puts the guitar down to his side anyway, pretending to succumb to tiredness rather than reveal his vulnerability.*

*The door next to Jeffrey and me remains open, and we faintly hear Radiohead playing in the next room. Katie walks by the stairs. She's a year younger and has an off-and-on relationship with a wrestler who always shows up to practice thirty minutes late, smoking cigarettes just outside the gym. She'll only kiss him when he's not smoking, trying to change his ways. She shows up to his wrestling matches with his mother.*

*Katie always smells like coffee, and is somehow able to pull off outfits that others can't. Right now, she wears purple tights, brown shoes and an oversized black t-shirt that she's cinched into a dress. The giant neckhole shows off one of her bony shoulders, and her braless breasts protrude with a glaring obviousness. Her bronze skin puts my natural summer glow to shame, as her conventional looks only highlight the surprise of her deceptively quirky personality. We could be friends if Jeffrey didn't look at her so longingly all the time. I peer over at him as he peers at her, undoubtedly wondering how her own blue eyes might glimmer if he was to sing her a song he stayed up in his room all night writing.*

*The loneliness I suddenly feel is peculiar but easy to explain. It's knowing it won't work out. It's waiting for a call at seven o'clock but not hearing from him until midnight, drunk. It's knowing that you'll never bring it up again. It's telling yourself he's been good to you, in his fashion, and that you should simply try to appreciate that instead of wanting more. It's thanking God he didn't see you at your most vulnerable, thanking God that he will quickly forget most of the facets of you he was only allowed to glimpse. It's how you feel after losing your virginity; where you deem yourself an unforgivable whore, when really you're just a girl who drinks a little too much for her age.*

*It's the kind of unreserved loneliness where you avoid his face, because it reminds you that you're not good enough. It's where you see it coming. It's where you're thankful that even though he didn't love you the way you loved him, at least you felt love at all. It's where he chooses your friend over you, and you find yourself sitting in heartbreak and realizing that you can only deeply hate someone you genuinely love.*

*With this kind of loneliness, you walk away with your back turned because you don't want to see him sing her the same song except with more unadulterated emotion. But mostly you walk away because of a gut-wrenching desire that you daydream about during work and during class and in the middle of Sunday morning Mass: the desire that he will put his guitar down and follow you.*

*This loneliness, pathetic, vain and self-pitying, causes me to disgrace my own natural emotions. I promise myself never to speak to Jeffrey again, only to have the same old lacking conversation with him at school the following Monday like always. "What are you doing after school?" "Should we go to the football game this Friday?" "You wanna go smoke?"*

*Two years later, sitting here with the resonating smell of sterile medical supplies encompassing the dimly lit room, now my days and nights are enveloped with a completely different kind of loneliness, a loneliness absent of any familiarity. It's the kind of loneliness you can experience even when lying next to someone with their warm arms wrapped around you. It's the kind of loneliness that would kill you, if you weren't so preoccupied already with terror for what was to come.*

— x —

Catherine's mom is finally visiting for the first time, and the two are playing a game of rummy on the edge of the bed, a family tradition that goes all the way back to her childhood. She notices that her mom's bangs still brush her eyebrows, with her long brown hair in its usual ponytail. Seeing that she hasn't changed outwardly only magnifies Catherine's isolation. She wonders if her mother will want to interact like her father does when he visits, responding to every question with yet another question that just keeps her talking.

Catherine looks down at her fingernails, noticing the red paint chipping off. Her hands are slowly becoming delicate and soft to the touch again, after the coarse and dry exterior that developed in the desert. They have heightened importance now, of course, and she finds herself thinking about her hands a lot more often than before the accident. Every now and then, she likes to look at them when she needs comfort, knowing that at least they are still useful and mobile.

Catherine deals out another seven-card round for the two of them. Taking a close look at her mother again, she realizes for the first time just how similar their physical traits are. Both of them devoid of makeup today, the looks reveal the same freckled cheeks and narrow eyes, although her mother's nose doesn't protrude as much as hers. Catherine's the only one in the family with that nose, a cosmic fluke that she used to hold a mild grudge about when younger.

"How's Helen doing?" Catherine finally asks. "Been getting A's?" she says, knowing Helen puts grades as a top priority.

"Oh, you know Helen. She decided to stop sleeping for a couple weeks during finals. Ended up at the hospital for a little bit for exhaustion." Her mother shakes her head, looking distracted. "Sarah seems to be holding onto some sanity, though. Or relatively speaking, anyway, given that she's working out plans for after graduation right now."

"Oh, right, the end of her junior year. Has she decided yet what she's going to do?"

Her mother suddenly lets out a small bitter laugh. "You're going to love this. She wants to go to Aspen for a year. Wants to get a job washing dishes at a resort, so she can get an employee lift pass and ski every day."

"A ski bum?" Catherine is shocked, having no recollection of Sarah ever showing any interest in skiing before.

Her mother waves a dismissive hand in the air. "She saw this documentary about 'gap years,' where a teen will take a year off between high school and college. And now she's all gung-ho about living in Colorado for a year and being one with nature."

"Why doesn't she just go to school in Colorado, then?"

"Says it'd be a waste of money, as long as she hasn't 'found herself' yet."

"But we have money to waste!" Catherine raises her voice before quickly quieting back down. She realizes she has spoken nearly the exact same words her mother spoke to her a year ago.

Her mother laughs weakly and tries to dismiss it all. "Oh, you know Sarah. Next week it'll be a whole new thing. It's all my fault anyway, for bringing that documentary to her attention in the first place." She raises another quiet laugh, which quickly dies in her throat. "It's all my fault," she repeats, suddenly lowering her head and putting her cards on the blanket.

"Mom?"

"Oh, Catherine," she whispers, looking up to reveal tears streaming down her face. "It's all my fault, Catherine. It's all my fault." She suddenly bursts into open sobbing, falling to her knees by the bed and putting her head in Catherine's lap. "I'm so sorry," she chokes out over and over between gasps of breath, her entire face now wet with a torrent of crying. "I'm so sorry, Catherine. I'm so sorry. Please forgive me, Catherine. I'm so sorry."

"Oh, mom," she says, stroking her mother's hair. Now, in a bizarre reversal of their usual positions, she starts crying too, although more softly and in much better control of herself. "Mom, I'm sorry too."

The two just stay in this position for a while, crying out their tears, until her mother finally gains some composure again and is able to sit back up. The two daub their faces with Kleenexes, still softly crying a bit and laughing at the same time.

Catherine says, "How about this? How about we go back to continual griping at each other over little things, instead of hating ourselves over the big ones?"

"Do you think that's healthy?" her mom replies, sniffing and wiping her nose.

"It's got to be healthier than this, right?" The two share another laugh then simply enjoy the comfortable silence between them for awhile.

— x —

"What was your mother like?" Catherine asks Vince, desperate to stop thinking about what's underneath her covers. It's the middle of the night, her anxiety is heightening again, and nothing visual in the room can distract her from obsessively reminding herself over and over that she cannot walk anymore.

"She was a beauty queen," Vince says. "I mean, literally, my grandma had been entering her in pageants since she was a little girl." Catherine nods her head, and he continues. "She never expected me to go to college. No big deal. But on my last day before quitting high school, when I just absolutely knew there was no reason for me to be there anymore, I also knew I was deeming myself a disappointment in my mom's eyes. I was now a pile of 'Well, that one got away. I guess they can't all be angels.'"

"Why'd you decide to drop out?" Catherine asks.

"Well, first off, I knew that college was just never going to be for me. I hooked up with a college girl for a little bit back then, actually, and ended up going to her campus a coupla weekends, and realized that the only interesting thing about college to me was the idea of being fenced in with that many good looking girls in that small a space. And that didn't seem like much of a reason to spend all that time and money." He shrugs. "I don't know. I remember walking around town a lot that Christmas. Thinking how hypocritical the festive decorations were on the outside of all the houses, when they were mostly filled with families sinking into more and more despair. I remember wanting to beat the inevitable disappointment to the punch. To burn out in a blaze of glory

instead of succumbing to a life of failed marriages and hateful kids and falsely cheery Christmas decorations.

"So I went to school one day wasted on purpose, because I had already been skating on thin ice there for awhile, and knew that would finally push them over into expulsion." He laughs. "And it still took them half a day to notice, because it was the '70s and half the kids were showing up to school back then wasted." His chuckling dies down. "So then I was herded into a room with the principal and the guidance counselor and my parents, and I was lectured for an hour about how ashamed of myself I should be. And then the whole thing got moved to home, and I spent the rest of the night listening to yet more lecturing from my parents, as they kept getting drunker and drunker and louder and louder, and all my sisters kept getting caught listening at the door except for Laura, the youngest one, who had spent the night crying in bed because she thought dad was going to kill me." He laughs again, more quietly this time.

"And that's when I first thought up the idea of going to Europe and saving up for a bike. And my parents believe it or not thought that wasn't such a bad idea, since we had cousins living over there near London. So they helped me put together a one-way ticket, and I ended up there just in time to miss Reagan start fucking things up here. Of course, Thatcher was fucking things up over there at the same time."

"So how'd you end up dealing?" Catherine asks, fascinated.

He breaks into a sly grin. "Ah, I met a girl." The grin expands into open laughter. "Fiona. I met her at a dive bar. She was dirty and funny. Thought I was an idiot for having a motorcycle jacket and no bike." His look becomes wistful. "Whenever she'd bend down to do a line of coke, her hair would cover her face. And then whenever she'd look up again, her eyes would suddenly have this glittering intensity, like a laser cutting through steel. I fell in love with those eyes." He shakes his head. "So I moved in with her. There were already five kids at my cousins' place, so they weren't exactly going to miss me. And then we started doing a lot of drugs. A whole lot. And soon it just became easier to afford them if you were simply selling them yourself." He stares off into the distance again. "And then I really got in over my head for a bit, and really kinda lost myself. And that... wasn't too good a period. And I kept thinking about my mom, about how the last time I had seen her, she had this look on her face, this look like she knew I was either going to find myself in Europe or die over there trying." He pauses for a long time. "And then through some miracle I finally got my shit together long enough to get

my bike, and I just ended up riding away from the whole thing, just put in a couple of thousand miles until I was suddenly in Italy and swimming every day in the Mediterranean. And that was the start of around a decade I spent there altogether."

"And why'd you come back?"

"My ma got cancer." He sighs and bitterly smiles. "Boy, that was a hard time. She thought she was imposing on me. She died without ever understanding how much I wanted to be there, how much I wanted to help her. I learned a lot about myself that summer. Realized that my life on the road at that point was no longer doing it for me, and that this didn't necessarily mean I was settling, just letting go of vain expectations. I was getting older, meeting more and more people who seemed to have a kind of contentment I'd never known, even when their whole life consisted of staying in one place and sitting around reading all the time. So I got my GED just in time for her to see it, and I've been in Rockford ever since, trying to make an honest go of it."

Vince looks over at Catherine and says, "Thinking back on my life, I find it funny how one thing leads to another. Being desperately bored at school, I ended up at class drunk, which led to me riding around Europe for a decade. I divorced my wife of fifteen years a month ago, then ate asphalt for the fourth time in my life a week later, and I swear to God, the most important lesson I learned was that that motorcycle is my only deep and true love. It's a solitude you can't get anywhere else. When I ride so fast that I start flying, every thought escapes me. My mind is blank. Completely fucking blank. It's pure meditation, and I just lose myself. I don't know why that appeals to me so much, but it does. I felt that way once with drugs. People live for that shit."

He turns on his side, wincing. "Ah, maybe I look back too much. But really, I'm not obsessed with my youth. I like to talk about those times, but I think my mom ultimately knew I had moved on. We were both always on the verge of death, and I think that's what connected us. We both didn't feel the need to internalize our struggles. It's perfectly normal to be fucked, wherever you are." Vince stops talking, takes off his cowboy hat and looks up. Catherine can make out in the darkness a rush of tears that fall down his scarred cheeks. Trembling, he mutters, "Fuck, I need a cigarette."

Back in the day, when her body parts were in the correct formation and only muscle covered the vital connections, she strapped on the 9mm and searched for the best way to express the weight that hung on her. The uniform and all its gear presented an annoying pain, but even more irritating was the inability to put the weight into metaphorical terms. All she could come up with was that it was like a set of dumbbells sitting on her shoulders, pushing all force downward. The weight felt like a literal weight. Frustrated, twenty years of language lessons learned in two months, she's starting to think she's disproving the basic theory that practice improves performance. Her words were falling short but the weight was still hanging on.

Climbing into the humvee, clichés wire her thoughts. *Day in, day out, the grass is greener but you don't know until you've tried.* That kind of thing going through her mind over and over. The man in front puts on heavy metal, informing the vehicle full of soldiers that it's actually Christian Rock. She cannot think about words anymore with the noise now present. She thinks of what a cop-out these guys take in their lives, believing in the idea that screaming can express everything.

Miles and miles of sand absent of multiple hues ride past her still body. Trying to tune into the scenery, she still hears the trained laughter from the soldier up front saying "Let's fucking do this thing" over the god rock and roaring engine. Trying harder, she carries over her thoughts from the night before when she had laid in bed, determining whether or not she believed in ghosts. The kind of ghosts that resemble spirits – the kind that, if they existed, would prove that the body and soul weren't in fact one. Because if ghosts were not real, she'd have to accept as a fact that her mind wouldn't allow her to fall asleep, even though she could not escape being tired.

And then a sound erupts that masks her questions, a screaming from first the CD player and then the humvee itself. First heard at the bottom of her spine, the shock races up to her corneas then is recognized by her ears. It's a jarring sound that she had feared many nights would wake her and, in effect, she had spent the past year desperately avoiding. Her eyes, wide awake. She now looks sideways at pieces of the humvee, which lay in front of a bearded man and a burnt banana from his grocery bag.

The explosive sound of the IED falls flat, only to be picked up by the more familiar melody of gunshots, uncontained in every direction. She pleads for the men to stop, mostly to discontinue the noise so she can understand the words the man across from her is mumbling. Over and over

again, she makes out the motions of his lips, determining that he's praying in Arabic. Then she glances at his long, brittle beard, brown eyes, protruding nose and skin that has no wrinkles, but whose color is fading fast.

A soldier from the vehicle behind her runs to her side, his face unfamiliar. He crouches, unaware of the man she lies next to. He assures her, "Don't worry. You're going to be okay." Then quickly back to his feet. Bam, bam, bam just like little boys in their backyard; even now, she faintly hears them giggle.

The setting orange sun blasts in the background, illuminating the dying face of a man who knows this sand like she knows the mowed lawns of her subdivision. Raised from the dust, blowing in the wind, she hears a voice that asks why, again and again, until complexity starts surfacing.

No ghost in sight. She thought she heard the whisper coming from a voice.

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Vince notices Catherine's body jerk when she opens her eyes. "What were you dreaming of?" he asks, as she slowly comes to recognize the white walls in comfort.

"I get flashbacks of a civilian I laid next to when I was hit," she responds. "Every time I close my eyes. It terrifies me."

Sitting up, she looks toward Vince, staring at him. Her eyes connect with his and then she's far too uncomfortable to look any other way. Blinking, nodding, she starts to ramble, "I used to be innocent, you know. Just a year ago. Thought I was a badass for drinking beer, staying out late. Now I feel old. And no offense, but looking at you only disheartens me, knowing I have so many more blows to take." Vince laughs quietly, and she continues.

"It's funny. My life didn't suck before. At all. But I wanted it to. Now, I think I might love my best friend, while he looks at me anymore like I'm a stranger. I've come to realize that my mom was right the whole time about me leaving, and that I told her to fuck herself in response. I'm nineteen and I..." She exhales loudly. "I have no legs." Catherine says the last line slowly, surprised to find that anger motivates each word. She continues, all the while staring in Vince's direction. "I made mistakes that left people dead. Sometimes I no longer care if peace is even possible. I'm learning that there are at least two legitimate sides to every argument. I'm concluding that life sucks."

Vince stays silent for a long time, then says, "Welcome to being a grown-up."

No response, just chirping birds.

"Vince?"

"Yes?" he says clearly.

"What do you do once you realize how unhappy you are? What do you do when you make a conscious effort to turn everything around, and you still find yourself far away from any sense of contentment?"

He bites his tongue, masking his real answer, and responds, "You wait. And in the meantime, you listen to a lot of Neil Young." He waves his hand in the air. "Or, you know, that whiny heroin-looking guy you like so much."

She chuckles to herself, then lays back down in her bed.

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She could live off government money, and barely get by. Perhaps she could take up an administrative job, one that would keep her sitting down all day with minimal treks across the office. Perhaps a comedy act will be her next move, a one-woman show about her time in Iraq. Or she could get specialized prosthetics for athletes, a move that conjures up images of her at the finish line of a track with her parents clapping on the sidelines. Or write a memoir. Take all of her old journal entries, call her exaggerated feelings poetry and sell it to the self-imposed despairing kids she used to resemble. Inform them that you can't really escape life-altering occurrences, that she still doesn't quite understand why she went looking for them in the first place.

*First the crash, a tumble, and then a fall, she writes. And now, irrefutably stagnant. It's like Vince mentioned, about how one thing leads to another. How it all ends in a collapse that forces you to sit back and figure out how these events randomly existed in such a particular accordance. Searching for comprehension until you realize all you have now is a response, an apology to yourself and a career as a motivational speaker, informing teenage misfits that progress lies in listening to the advice of adults from time to time.*

And that's when she chuckles to herself about always asking who, what, when, where, and why, as images of her first-grade teacher surface, the twenty-something woman dressed in a muumuu, reciting the interrogative pronouns to the class. Out of all of them, it was the "why" that Catherine always got hung up on. Deeming it in her head even then as the most important, the three-letter word has kept her up at night ever

since, posing grand hypothetical questions about human beings and their nature, their desire to justify their actions, their search for grander meanings.

Looking out the window at a dawning summer day, Catherine's mind veers as she contemplates the touch of a breeze to unarmored skin, an earthly smell awakening the nose and a continuation of days, each one warmer, brighter, more respondent than the next. She picks up her journal, flipping past pages of incoherent, late-night writing to the familiar sight of blank space, noting for the millionth time its pristine natural beauty over all of the previous scribbles. She thinks of her former self, before she went into the army, the thought process of that girl's rationale, and writes, *I used to not need any reason why, but now it's the only question I ask. It brings me back to motive. Everything. How the things we do without reason make us who we are.* She leans back a little in her bed, settling in for more. With a small sink beside her, she turns the knob for fresh cold water. Invigorating to the touch, she brings the water to her face and splashes her tired eyes.

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