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Snake Charmer

Farouk Ramzan
Approx. 94,602

“You may all go to hell, and I will go to Texas,”
- Davy Crockett

1

The walls stood in quiet observance of Mrs. Carol's confessions. Mrs. Carol sat on the edge of her off-white plastic chair as her eyes stayed pointed towards the tiles. Waldo sat with his right leg over his left and allowed it to dance as he waited patiently for the gap between his ears and her consciousness to close. It even appeared to Waldo that maybe the fern in the corner was waiting for Mrs. Carol. It's not too unlikely that the entire world was waiting for the, in theory, contemplating Mrs.Carol.

"I'm very terrified of it."

Waldo lifted off his cold palm in surprise. Suddenly, Waldo nodded his head and waited.

"Of not knowing if I'm going to get the PhD... Sure I've studied and I've always been a hardworking girl all my life."

Waldo began to notice the missus' features. Her cream colored skin now seemed older with her solemn face and her brownish-reddish hair seemed sun bleached. Despite this, Carol's subtle beauty was retained. Her lips had an exaggerated plumpness to them that gave Carol's face a youthful appearance. Her eyelashes were dark and suspicious and seemed to be conspiring against Waldo.

Carol turned her head toward Waldo as their two eyes met. Waldo seemed slightly intimidated. He could sense hell in those eyes, a burning ring of fire.

"But you know...I feel like everything I've done in my life up to this point depends on this test. Everything...All the pain...All the.."

Carol moved her head upwards to the ceiling; she was thinking, praying. Waldo noticed her sharp jaw-line and the pleasant red tone of her sweater. Waldo thought that for some reason that sweater was made for a woman with the name of Carol. It seemed fitting.

"Suffering."

Carol moved her head and locked her eyes with Waldo once again.

"Suffering, that's the word."

A thought seemed to be entering Carol's mind.

"You know I feel guilty making my father pay all that money for college?"

"You felt you didn't deserve it," Waldo quickly inserted.

So much energy had been expended by Waldo to allow that comment to fly off his tongue that he felt dizzy and his head numb once Carol had not responded and fell back to thinking.

"I've always been good at school. I listened to my teachers (for the most part)...You know, obedient (for the most part)...I was good at English but but…" Carol tilted her head to the right and shook it lightly as if trying to allow an answer to fall out.

"I hated Math. It's so cold, understand? Absent of emotions..."

Carol now began staring at the floor as if going mad. Waldo nodded in fear of her possibly watching him.

“I hate it so much!”

The slight increase of tone startled Waldo as he shifted in his chair, staring at his grey patterned pants that his wife so lovingly bought for him. Waldo began to inspect his acorn colored coat as he saw threads sticking out, indicative of its pristine wool quality.

Meanwhile, Carol closed her eyes and continued to tilt her head to the bottom right of her neck’s capacity.

“Ann and Charlotte were great at Math…”

To that, she nodded. Waldo stopped playing with his coat in longing for his wife and turned to the missus. It’s safe to say that he was mildly disturbed. The woman was slowly losing the glow of her skin, the foxiness of her eyelashes, and elegance of her arms. Even her voice was slowly eroding. Her head dangled like a coconut.

“They were good girls overall. I mean morally of course, because there’s a difference. A diff--”

Carol seemed to be losing her breath. She sipped air quickly and looked at her friends, the tiles. Waldo began to pay attention more closely.

“They were the neat, respected daughters. I was the morally disgusting one...I did things I wasn’t supposed to, I had fun and they didn’t…”

The mysterious missus shook her neck and locked eyes with Waldo. Waldo was dying to turn his eyes away and run to his sanctuary. To his wife. To his ramen noodles and his wife’s paintings. Mrs. Carol was demanding something from someone. Those eyes. Those eyes! They meant business and Waldo was not ready.

“I want that drive, understand? That drive, this clawing feeling, I feel it in my abdomen. I want this feeling to be represented outside too. I can’t explain it, it makes my heart rush just thinking about it, I feel tingly and stuff. Oh, *there it is*.”

Carol settled her soft fingers on the bottom right of her stomach as she watched her belly as if waiting for Jonah to appear. She then quickly looked back at Waldo, breathing heavier. Waldo had thought he had escaped Mrs. Carol’s claws, but there she was, choking him. Her grey eyes had somehow turned red.

“You’re a man...and my whole problem is men like you. It would be easier if you were elderly. Get it, whenever I need it, and leave me alone.” The enraged missus stared at Waldo contemptuously as Waldo’s feet squirmed and a droplet of sweat began to form on his temple.

Suddenly the tightened areas of Carol’s face loosened as her demonic look vanished and a quick glimmer of hopelessness was revealed to Waldo. She flushed red and bit her bottom lip and pointed her eyes downwards in shame.

“It’s like being naked. I’m so revealed to you.”

Waldo did not want to take part in any revelation of the missus. Now, it appeared to Waldo that the fern in the corner was listening as it blew from left to right. Mrs. Carol’s eyes were dancing, running in all directions that her eye-socket allowed as long as she was staring at the floor. Then, almost mechanically, Mrs. Carol raised her head a little and tried to part her lips.

Suddenly, something possessed her as her eyes rolled to the utmost left side as a small pool of tears collected. She decided rapidly to turn downwards to hell.

"What was that Mrs. Carol?" Waldo asked rapidly, not believing he had said her name: "Carol," a fiery queen, a Yama. Mrs. Carol maintained her reversed praying position.

"Oh...come on...you were thinking of something...You can...tell me," Waldo said. He then lifted his arm, crossed them, and then put them by his side, his whole body itching. Waldo thought he had waged war. Mrs. Carol lifted her head and accepted the invitation as she stared to the left side of the room and into the abyss.

"I wanted to hurt myself, so I started going with men who would hurt me and well…I enjoyed it."

Mrs. Carol's nostrils now began to widen and close.

"I had the satisfaction of being punished for my actions at the same time."

Mrs. Carol closed her eyes as two streams of fire poured down her remains of youth and glory. Her skin burned. Her eyes burned. Her hair burned. She was aging in front of Waldo. She clasped her hands behind her hair and downward slowly did her head descend. Her whole body shook from convulsions, a sign that one was crying from the depths of the soul. Waldo watched Mrs. Carol become a corpse.

2

Waldo's silver, four-seater sedan drove up the hill and into the pleasant neighborhood. Instead of driving right into the more expensive neighborhoods, he turned left. The apartment complex was painted beige and sometimes had accents of red. All around the apartment were erected trees and one large green hill. An affordable apartment in the middle of paradise.

Waldo walked up the stairs, gracious to escape that environment, keys in the right hand, suitcase in the left. He looked like an important businessman as he shuffled in his pocket for the keys. "Ah," there were the keys. He inserted the keys quickly, twisted, and opened the door.

There she was, twisting her green pencil gracefully, striking the creamy paper like a heroine. Her all-too-bright blonde hair was bundled into a bun. A pencil rested on her ear waiting to be used. On the wall hung exquisite creations of mountains, ballerinas, flowers, and vases.

"Hi, honey," Alice said.

Waldo slowly dropped his keys on the table as Alice walked towards Waldo and kissed him and hung her hands around his neck.

"How was your-"

Alice twisted her head to the ceiling and made a questioning look. Suddenly she moved her head gracefully back to Waldo.

“Seventh day at work?”

“I’m not sure, I’ve lost count,” responded Waldo as he twisted a sunny smile.

Alice smiled as she pretended to slam her head into Waldo’s chest. She then looked up as her head rested on his chest and said: “Well I haven’t, want to look at my new piece?”

“Yes, I’d love to,” Waldo responded joyfully. And so Alice led Waldo into the kitchen where on the counter lay the skeleton of a drawing. Waldo raised his eyes in surprise. He was always surprised by Alice’s artistic grace, no matter how many times he had already seen it.

“Wow, I love it,” Waldo said.

Alice turned her face into a self-satisfied frown as Waldo wrapped his arm around her neck.

“I love how she’s standing on her toes and how you made her arms like that,” Waldo let out, waving his hand over the ballerina.

“Eh, it’s all right,” she immediately responded, waving her arms animatedly.

Waldo turned his face to Alice in a comically mocking manner as if saying: “Stop that old trick.”

“What? I’m serious,” Alice quickly replied, her bosom heaving.

Waldo with comical impatience replied: “It’s beautiful, don’t bring yourself down.”

Waldo released Alice from his gentle grip as they both chuckled. Waldo pulled at his shirt collar and loosened it and Alice walked towards the kitchen and looked at her ballerina.

“I ordered Chinese,” Alice announced.

The shades of the balcony were drawn to the sides, allowing the blue light to paint the belly of the room. The two sat on the floor against the bottom of the couch, watching television and eating. Alice sat with both her feet collected to her right as she leaned on her left side. Waldo sat with his feet out in front of him. The two struck the worm-like noodles with their chopsticks as the television colored their faces.

“Wally?” Alice said as she turned her head to Waldo.

“Mm...Hm?” replied Waldo.

Alice took her long yet quiet breath. Waldo had noticed this tendency of Alice’s as she did it every time she wanted to say something that was important to her.

“I applied at the art institute nearby,” Alice said as she shifted her body towards Waldo and her eyes twinkled.

“Oh,” Waldo said, as he remembered Mrs. Carol’s haunting eyes. In the midst of that image, Waldo tried to rouse himself. “Well that’s great..!”

“Yea, hopefully, they will respond,” Alice said as her smile became smaller.

“Yea, that’ll be *great*,” Waldo quickly replied as he looked blankly at the noodles.

The two almost simultaneously turned their heads towards the television set when Alice asked if they could go to the movies. Waldo's "internal biological clock" apparently had told him that it was too late as Alice comically mocked him for being a wimp.

"Alright, let's go," let out Waldo with a smile and sigh.

The fresh couple walked out of the 60's retro theater with Alice's arm linked with Waldo's. Two tall towers stood on the side of the building which glowed neon red and purple.

"You wanna head to 'Johnny's'?" Waldo said to Alice with half-closed eyes.

Alice turned her head and agreed enthusiastically. There at the diner that never closed sat Alice and Waldo on the swollen red bench cushions. The whole restaurant was wrapped in aluminum foil with cone lights dangling from the ceiling. Alice sipped her milkshake through the thick straw from the glass cup and Waldo watched her calmly. Alice stopped her aggressive sipping as a lump became stuck in the straw. She removed her lips in defeat and looked off at such an angle that her eyes were illuminated by the lamp. Suddenly, Alice's veiled beauty became apparent to Waldo. Her excessively blonde hair and excessively green eyes made her look almost animated. The black arcs that curved beneath her eyes as a consequence of sleep deprivation only made her look more charming and youthful.

"So how was work? You never told me," Alice asked with twinkling eyes.

"Oh...Well, it was good…"

"Anything else? Anything interesting?" Alice asked inquisitively, moving forward. Waldo laughed mockingly. Psychology---the gossip of the human condition.

"Well...I don't think you'd handle the story--" Waldo began, looking to the floor.

"Oh come on," said Alice, offended as she narrowed her eyes. Now a glimpse of child-like anger shone in Alice's garden-like eyes. She even frowned a little.

"I can handle it, I'm very interested, you know," she added, her eyes pressing Waldo to speak.

"Well there was this woman who came today. She was---well her name I can't tell you. She seemed to be suffering from guilt. Or jealousy…Jealousy of her sisters," Waldo went, thinking to himself.

"That's it?" Alice replied immediately, as if trying to make a point.

"And now she goes out with people that she knows will hurt her," Waldo continued, as though he did not hear Alice. He then looked directly at Alice and said dryly like the crack of a branch: "It's fun for her." Alice slowly nodded and went back to her milkshake.

Waldo drove the car with Alice sitting in the passenger seat, almost asleep as she slumped in her seat. Waldo glanced at Alice once and then directed his attention to the road.

"Alice?"

Alice turned her head toward Waldo like a weasel.

“Hm?”

“I was thinking, in the future, maybe when you get the job, we can buy a house somewhere in the suburbs,” Waldo said proudly.

“Oh Waldo, that’s a fabulous idea,” said Alice as she stretched her neck out and kissed him on the cheek.

4

Waldo woke up the next morning to sunlight illuminating the gold of Alice’s hair. The flapjacks were flipped, the coffee was sipped, and Mr. Waldo Blazer was ready for deployment. His wife kissed him, asked him if she could make his tie, and maintained her same, effortless smile which Waldo suspected she kept on even in her sleep.

Waldo’s car parked in front of the complex as he waited a few minutes in the car staring through the windshield at what he called “car lot birds.” He counted the birds pleasantly as he appreciated their uniformity, sitting in a line on the wire.

He stepped outside the car, suitcase in hand, and walked towards the building. As he entered the complex, Richard quickly pulled Waldo to the side in a business-like manner.

“Looky here, Waldo,” Richard said as he looked at his sheet, searching for something. “You’veee...got a new client. His name is Jermy.” Richard looked up to Waldo, clearly asking for his affirmation.

“Ah, yes sir, sounds great, Jermy,” Waldo quickly replied.

Waldo entered his room and sat in one of two chairs. He always liked to sit in the chair across from the fern, indicating the only life in the plain white room. As Waldo waited, he rested his eyes on the chair where his last client sat.

Suddenly, the door began to open. Waldo’s heart beated faster as he straightened his back. A man with a small-sized afro walked in with calm strides. Waldo got up on his feet and walked towards the man for their hands to meet. Waldo repeated this cycle with his other clients a total of twelve times until his last client was left.

Mrs. Carol was now five minutes late. Waldo kept swinging his left arm, checking his watch that his wife had bought him. He stared at the chair. Fifteen minutes had passed. Waldo swung his arm again, and looked back at the chair. Waldo had begun to notice that the bar light that hung above his head made a buzzing sound. *Seventeen minutes* passed. As afraid as Waldo was of Mrs. Carol, he now even longed for her. Something deep within him wanted to be near her. He wanted to help her. But why? Waldo could not say.

Waldo got up out of his seat and opened the door. He saw the long hallway and an array of wooden doors, behind which existential conversations were taking place. He walked down the hall and turned right at Richard’s office. Richard was a cheerful and charitable man. It was said

he donated a good amount of his money every year to the counseling company: “Wellness For Me.” Moreover, he took part in humanitarian services in sub-saharan Africa for several years before he settled on running the clinic.

Waldo opened the door and found him placing papers on the corner of the table.

“Yes sir?” Richard asked as he turned in his chair.

“Mrs. Carol isn’t here.”

“Oh.”

Richard turned to his paper and started looking for her name.

“Uhh…Waldo, what’s her first name?”

“Sheen.”

Richard dragged his finger across the long rows of names.

“Ah, there she is, I’ll call her,” he said. “You don’t have her phone number, Waldo?”

Waldo tightened his fists in frustration.

“Oh, apologies sir. I-I never asked her.”

Richard placed the phone against his left ear and shoulder, squeezing the two together to hold it.

“Always ask your clients for their ph---Hello?”

Richard swung in his chair to the left. Waldo now noticed the Buddha figurine that sat on his desk and a long scroll with a waterfall and Chinese symbols attached to the wall. Waldo leaned against the wall as he waited. Richard bit his lip and glanced at Waldo. Waldo began to notice how thick Jeff’s forearms were as he gripped the phone. “A body-builder in his former days,” thought Waldo. Richard responded every five seconds with an “Oh” “Alright” and “Yes.” As Waldo lost his attention and began fantasizing about him hugging Ms. Carol while she’s crying, Jeff slammed the phone on the stand and rubbed his face.

“I’m sorry Waldo...But---Ms. Carol is no longer alive,” Richard let out tiredly, his face displaying the utmost degree of disappointment. Waldo’s eyes dilated and his feet went numb.

That evening, as Waldo entered his apartment, Alice’s kisses seemed irritating. Waldo sat on the floor with his back propped against the sofa as he stared mindlessly at the television. Alice stuck her rabbit tongue to the right corner of her rabbit mouth and sketched gracefully. She then dropped the pencil and shook her wrists and turned in her chair to the direction of Waldo. Waldo looked pale and his eyes hollow.

“Wally, dear, how are you?” Alice asked, worried.

Waldo swallowed hard and managed to say, “I’m---alright, honey.”

“Are you sure?” Alice asked, clearly seeing the pain in Waldo’s eyes. She got up from her chair and walked towards Waldo. She crouched down next to him and glanced at the television and his face.

“Wally?” she said again, looking at him with curious pain.

“Hm? I’m just tired, that’s all,” Waldo replied, feeling irritated by everything. He then laughed at the end for effect. Suddenly, the weight of the world flew off of Alice’s eyelids. She breathed slowly and even smiled brightly in relief. She eased her body next to Waldo.

“Did you get the job?” Waldo quickly asked.

“Oh!” Alice let out with a sudden jolt of energy. “Well---I didn’t want to tell you until now, but---I got it!”

Suddenly, images of the client lying on a blood-soaked carpet flooded Waldo’s brain. He imagined that images of her body were taken with a polaroid so that the flash of the camera made the blood look artificial and the scene surreal. He imagined that the photo-card was dropped somewhere and left to be stepped on in the streets. He wanted to burn the photo-card as fast as possible.

“Isn’t that great?” said Alice with a slightly louder tone than usual. Her voice penetrated Waldo’s brain as he nodded with a grimace. Alice’s heart wrung. She knew that something was wrong.

The next day, Waldo was excused from work and received a sincere call from Richard himself. Richard explained that he had once witnessed a suicide himself and that it was best to practice meditation, read poetry, and drink herbal teas.

That morning, Waldo had joined Alice in the kitchen as the two avoided eye contact. Alice would sometimes look at Waldo in hopes of capturing his attention but failed. Waldo sat on the rocking chair motionlessly. Alice placed the eggs on the table and tried to squeeze letters out of her throat: “breakfast...is...r-ready.” Waldo did not move. Alice looked at the outline of the chair and Waldo’s head and heels with pity. Suddenly, Waldo placed his feet on the carpet and walked towards the table.

Waldo ate only one-third of his plate and placed his fork down and maintained his head down. Alice looked at him as if he’d gone insane.

“Why didn’t you finish Wally?” Alice asked in concern.

Waldo looked at the eggs, pressed his lips, and nodded.

“Are you okay my love?” she said, breathing deeply and tried a couple of times to say something more but restrained herself in hopes of an answer.

“Alice I’m sorry, it’s been rough,” Waldo slowly responded.

“But what’s the problem? Tell me, I can help you,” Alice said immediately, her eyes enlarged with rapt attention.

“It’s just a lot Alice,” Waldo responded. “Work’s been taking a toll on me.” Alice responded by throwing her arms around him.

“It’ll be alright,” she told him. “We’ll go through it together.”

Alice kissed Waldo on the cheek and told him how she wasn’t going to hold her book club that evening so that he wasn’t disturbed. Waldo absentmindedly replied: “Oh no Alice, it’s fine, please hold the club.”

“Are you sure sweetheart?”

“Yes dear,” Waldo replied, feeling warmed by Alice’s generosity.

It was around six o'clock when the lighting of the sun wasn’t so harsh and even pleasant, when the club was to meet. Three women sat on the sofa and one sat on the floor with a girl. Waldo sat on the kitchen chair and even felt a little better by watching the club. The woman sitting closest to Waldo on the sofa wore two golden bangles on her left wrist and had an Indian shawl which contrasted strangely with her pale skin. The woman in the middle of the sofa sat comfortably with her right foot propped on her left knee. Her lips were peachy-pink and her hair, black, straight, and short. To this woman’s right sat a skinny woman with hair bundled into a curled blob and both arms crossed. On the floor were the woman and the girl. The former had a pearl necklace with dark-red paint on her lips. The creases under her eyes and the spots on her hands were indicative of an aged woman.

Waldo felt rejuvenated as he witnessed Alice bounce on her feet as she held *The Idiot* in her hands and spoke with drama layering and enhancing her voice. All the women in the room watched Alice with rapt attention. The only two who didn’t seem to care about the show were the old man, who was now dozing, and the girl who was scratching her fingernails and fanning herself while lightly bouncing her whole figure.

“So...Myshkin finds out that--”

Alice twirled her arms in a circle like a ballerina dancer.

“Nastasya’s body was on the bed.”

Alice had finished her speech and applause rang in the room. The old man continued his sleep.

“So what did you guys think of the book?”

“I loved it, it was---well I loved the landscape of Russia and how we get to experience the aristocratic lifestyle, you know?” said one of the women.

“Mhms” and “Yes” were heard from around the room. Alice nodded her head like a proud parent. The lady in the middle said she enjoyed other works by the author to which the lady on the farthest right begged to differ. The two women argued pleasantly with no sense of aggression until the last few seconds. Alice noticed the heat erupting and quickly dissipated it by asking the woman sitting on the floor a question.

“Well, I think it was a little too heavy for me. Especially the ending.”

“Yes, Laura is right, this may have been a little heavy on some of us, sorry about that, I’ll do better next time in selections.”

Alice winked at Mrs. Laura who nodded back respectfully. The women argued gracefully, the girl typed on her phone, and the man began to wake up. The meeting had now come to a close as the women collected their belongings and walked to the front door where heels and shoes lay on the tiles. The friendly goodbyes were exchanged with each other. As the women talked to each other, Waldo turned his body towards the kitchen with both his elbows on the counter. Laura and the girl walked up to Alice who turned to face them.

“Oh Mrs. Laura, thanks for coming again!” Alice let out with tremendous energy. Alice hugged Laura with the warmth of an old friend as they exchanged awfully polite comments about each other. Alice with fresh eyes looked at the girl by Laura and asked her what her name was. When the girl told Alice her name, Alice complimented it heavily.

“Listen Alice, she’s really interested in shadowing your husband at work, possibly one of these days because she’s all about *psychology*,” Laura said, waving her hands in the air as if talking about black magic. The girl nodded slowly and put on a rigid smile.

“Oh really! I know Waldo would love to have you one of these evenings. Honey?” called Alice. As she turned around, she found the seat Waldo was sitting on earlier to be empty.

“Oh he’s not been feeling well lately,” Alice mumbled cautiously.

“Oh please don’t rush it,” the girl replied with a plain face and ended it with a crooked smile.

Laura and Alice hugged once again while the girl stood on their side with her left leg wrapped around her right. Meanwhile Waldo was in the restroom throwing water on his face, trying to become alive. Laura and the girl finally departed.

About a week later, Alice went to her first day of work at the art institute where she was immediately approved to become a teacher. Alice quickly became popular among the students with her eccentric teaching style and simplistic explanations for things. As a matter of fact, one of the students enjoyed Alice’s class so much, he asked her out to dinner. Alice refused dramatically and went red all over.

Waldo began to ease himself back into work after his short leave. To Waldo’s surprise, there were some patients who were dying to speak to him.

One afternoon, Waldo had a therapy session with a woman named Lexi. Lexi had blue eyes, was small, and had ruffled skin.

“He would do it to me everytime,” Lexi said as smoke went up in the air and she allowed her hand to drift to the side in a crooked manner.

“We would go camping, and sometimes mother and Cheri would say they’re going and I would beg them not to leave, but they would...And then later...He would do it---He even once did it when my friends were over,” said the client as smoke rose from the cigarette.

“Do you see him any more?” Waldo asked, focusing on her eyes.

“No,” Lexi replied. “Well, sometimes, after all, you can’t avoid your father forever,” she added wisely as the smoke now glittered beneath the headlight.

“You could not consider him your father,” Waldo replied quickly, trying to make himself feel as though he were contributing. Lexi looked at Waldo with a relaxed expression as smoke filled the air.

“I could, but that would be hiding from the truth---should probably not do that,” Lexi said as she smiled and put her cigarette into the ashtray.

After the session, Waldo in the snack lounge slammed his fist against the fridge in frustration. Waldo's colleague, Jeff, was standing by him eating a banana.

"Everythin' alright, Waldo?" asked Jeff thoughtfully.

"I screwed up today. I told one of my clients that she should pretend her father doesn't exist. Isn't that stupid Jeff? And she was the one who corrected me!"

Jeff listened carefully and watched Waldo twist and turn. Jeff had been working at the facility for two years now and had lived in Texas his whole life. He had inherited his father's ranch and a large cash prize with it. So instead of opting for an engineering degree, Jeff settled for something that he found enjoyable instead of profitable.

"I don't know Jeff, sometimes I think I'm just not mentally fit for this job."

Jeff moved his heavy body toward Waldo and patted his back. Jeff's warm smile put Waldo at ease.

"Oh come on now Waldo, you'll be alright, you've got plenty of time to learn. We're all like this in the beginning---right Mary?"

Immediately Mary walked in, professionally dressed and in a hurry. She turned around to meet Jeff's question and asked him to repeat it. Jim repeated it. Mary agreed about what Jim said and quickly left the snack lounge.

"Now don't go quittin' on me now Waldo, okay?"

Jeff walked towards the vending machine. Waldo reassured him he wouldn't quit and then continued to mumble to himself as he stepped outside the lounge.

Waldo walked to his car and leaned against it as he stared at the counseling center. The building was white inside out. Such sterility contrasted strangely with the heavenly lavender and peaches of the sky.

As the car drove on the highway and shifted lanes in between trucks, cars, and eighteen-wheelers, Waldo fell to thinking. Waldo had a strong urge to think ever since he was a child. Oftentimes he would think so much that he would think he lost touch of his senses. He fell to remembering his father, his mother, and now Alice. Alice, why was it that he could not talk to her? She was sensitive, safe, and pristine. There was no hope of Waldo confiding his feelings with her; it would ruin her fragility. The sky was becoming dark and his thoughts were too.

At home, nuts were being cracked by Waldo's mouth and nails were being clipped by Alice's hands. A pool of nails were collected on the side of her tiny feet as Waldo swallowed each pistachio deliberately. He rocked in his chair rather comfortably and seemed open to the possibility of having a good time at the bowling alley with Alice and her friend.

Alice collected her toe nails in her hand and swung to the kitchen swiftly. As she walked she said, "I'll lay out your clothes honey." Waldo had stopped resisting Alice's stubborn behavior of laying out his clothes.

Alice's heels clattered on the wooden floor of the bowling alley. There, in the booth underneath the neon lights sat Alice's friend Rose. As Waldo greeted Rose with tamed enthusiasm, he noticed that she was the one who wore the Indian attire at Alice's club.

Rose had a slim pale face, with her cheekbones protruding out and wrist bones cutting through her skin. She had a nose that curved sky-ward with slim nostrils and deep, ink-black hair.

The group sat in the booth as beers were ordered, fries were eaten, and the bowling game had started. As Rose stepped up and rolled the marble ball, she knocked out more pins than Waldo had expected her small frame would allow.

On the drive back home, Alice explained to Waldo how Rose had adopted an eastern philosophy to life. Waldo let his eyes wander on the flashing lights of red and white, shooting past them like an impressionistic painting in motion as Alice quoted Taoism.

After that day, Waldo began to ease more into his job, one could say that he might have even embraced the psychotherapeutic elements of it.

At work, Waldo and Jeff became good friends as they discussed methods of helping each other's patients. Jeff started to prescribe certain books and encouraged him to return to his textbooks from college for further development of thought.

Outside of work, Waldo had instilled a habit of walking along the road near his apartment that led all the way to a military base. Sometimes he would walk far enough to have reached the barracks that kept civilian cars out of the camp.

Waldo also decided to buy a journal. Every night he would write in his journal:

"Work was relatively an easier day compared to the last two days. Wife made a cotton scarf. I complimented her about it. We ate a nice chicken dinner with cranberry sauce. I didn't really like the cranberry sauce. I'm avoiding sugar now. You need to exercise more, walking is fine, but more, other things."

5

The wilderness of east Texas was especially mystical during the night when the wind whispered coldly in your ear and the golden highway fields swayed to the rhythm of the crickets under the spotlight of the moon. Waldo's car parked off to the side of a road, across from a military base that Waldo was amused to discover. Waldo stepped over the sagging barbed fence that encapsulated the island and Alice followed. As Waldo helped Rose cross the fence, he could not help but fear breaking her porcelain fingers, so fragile and pretty.

Rose, Waldo, and Alice all walked into the depths of the woods in the still of night. The wind howling made even the most cheerful of the party feel somewhat intimidated. Waldo had become so absorbed in his thoughts that he had walked a long distance until he was perplexed to find a wooden structure beneath the trees. It was a hut made with logs and the decaying head of a deer on the entrance with its horns shooting up. The site was so bizarre, it would seem only perfectly normal for ancient men to come charging at Waldo to put holes in his body with their

spears. In a fit of excitement, Waldo swung his body to the right to call on the group but suddenly rammed into Rose's body as she collapsed onto the dirt. Waldo, in shock, apologized profusely and helped her to get up. The two looked at the hut in astonishment as Rose held her skinny fingers on the left corner of her skull in pain.

"Alice is getting water by the way," said Rose calmly as she stared at the wooden structure magnanimously.

Waldo had not noticed before, but Rose's physiognomy was pretty. Her hollow cheeks, thin wrists, and peachish-red lips seemed elegant especially under the subtle shade of the moonlight and not indicative of weakness. He could not stop looking at her fingers and thinking how fragile they were. Rose's figure seemed just as mystical as her understanding of the universe on that fine night. Suddenly as he looked up, he felt something touch his hands as his whole body went limp. Waldo wasn't sure what it was that touched him, but it had a profound effect on him.

Waldo began spending more time with Alice and going to places with her after work and on the weekends. They went to the movies almost three times a week, ice cream shops, farmer markets, modern art museums, and other amusements and oddities.

Waldo was also notified that next Tuesday, his in-laws were going to visit. Waldo was terribly awkward around his in-laws and for some reason felt guilty when he last talked to them at the wedding. He had about a week to think up a place in the small apartment for his in-laws to sleep in as there was only one bed. Ultimately, and bitterly, Waldo agreed to Alice's preposition that her parents sleep in their bed and they on the floor of the living room. And besides "they are going to stay for three days anyways."

"When are they coming again?" asked Waldo loudly.

"Six o'clock."

Six o'clock came fast as the in-laws knocked at the door. Waldo, dressed in his favorite navy blue dress shirt and black pants, went to open the door with Alice hugging his left arm. He noticed his shaking hand while turning the knob. The door swung open and there stood an old man with a potbelly and his wife.

"Sir, How are you?" asked Waldo as he stretched his hand out to Alice's dad, who's name he had already forgotten. They shook hands.

"I'm mighty fine and you?" asked the old man as he rested his body on his cane. Waldo told him he was fine and then greeted Alice's mother whose name he remembered clearly: Crystal.

"Well come on in Mr. and Mrs. Haagen," said Waldo as enthusiastically as possible.

The old couple walked in, hand in hand and met the new couple. Mr. Haagen kissed Alice on the cheek so loud that she laughed and hugged him. Mrs. Haagen also kissed Alice and hugged her tightly.

"Look at you, you're a big girl now aren't you?" said Mr. Haagen as he petted Alice's straight hair. Mrs. Haagen winced and expressed in motherly ways how she missed her to which Alice became a little sad and said she missed them too.

"Well, shall I get the food ready, while Alice and you catch up on some things?" asked Waldo nervously.

"Oh no Waldo, I'll get it. Besides *you two* can get to know each other," said Alice as she directed her finger at her father and Waldo playfully.

"Ah yes, come on Wally," said Mr. Haagen as he placed his fat hand on Waldo's back.

"I'll help you with the food dear," exclaimed Mrs. Haagen as she walked towards the kitchen.

Mr. Haagen and Waldo sat across from each other at the dining table as Waldo's head spun and his hair and back became sweaty. Mr. Haagen's cane leaned against the table as he explained how his grocery store in Pennsylvania was now carrying raw milk which attracted a lot of customers. Waldo listened to the story while he nodded with his head tilted to the side so as not to engage in eye contact but also to remain respectful.

Alice interrupted her father's story as she brought a pot with a roasted chicken and placed it on the table with a bang.

"Careful sweetie," said Mrs. Haagen as she brought the sweet-potato and pecan casserole. Other dishes such as green beans, sausage, cheese, and sour dough bread were placed on the table. Mr. Haagen, in response, rubbed his stomach and salivated.

"That looks real good, Alice," said Mr. Haagen.

As Alice and Mrs. Haagen sat down at the table, Waldo picked up his fork and suddenly, Mr. Haagen stopped him.

"Eh, we must do prayer first," said Mr. Haagen in a paternal manner.

Alice glanced at Waldo as he flushed red a little on his cheeks. Mr. Haagen stretched his arms out to Alice and Mrs. Haagen as their hands connected back to Waldo's. Alice felt the sweat of Waldo's palm and looked at him with a confused smile. Waldo could not help but feel all alone in this foreign family.

Mr. Haagen started the prayer as he thanked the Lord for the food, love, marriage, and for "God giving them Waldo." Waldo was warmed at this last mention while Alice's mother lightly touched Waldo's hand. She closed her eyes and prayed so genuinely and serenely. The prayer ended.

"Now you can eat, Waldo," chuckled Mr. Haagen as all four of them dug into their plates. Mr. Haagen tore a piece of the chicken leg, Mrs. Haagen pecked at the potato casserole, Alice dipped the bread in the spinach dip and took a bite, and Waldo sipped his water. Waldo thought

the dim light that hung above made the room feel like a drama stage set up for a scene that was happening in such fluidity it amazed him.

"So...How are Mr. and Mrs. Blaze?" asked Mr. Haagen as he put a lump of chicken in his mouth without lifting his head.

Waldo looked at Alice nervously and Alice looked at Waldo. They stared at each other for a few seconds and Alice, slightly annoyed, finally spoke.

"We are doing great! You know Waldo is a real full-time clinical psychologist a---"

"Is that right?" said Mr. Haagen as he looked at Waldo with paternal pride.

"Yes and I got a job at the art institute and...well I was going to tell you this Waldo, but I also wanted to tell mom and dad this but...I got an offer at the university as a professor."

"Oh sweetie give me a hug!" yelped Mrs. Haagen as she walked over to Alice to squeeze.

"Unbelievable" laughed heartily Mr. Haagen as he leaned back in his chair.

Mrs. Haagen walked back to her chair and playfully tapped the top of Mr. Haagen's hair.

"Ouch...I'll get you back don't you worry!" proclaimed Mr. Haagen jokingly as he shook his finger at her.

"With that back of yours?" sassed Mrs. Haagen.

Mr. Haageen drooped his head like an animated cartoon and turned to Alice who was laughing.

"You see what your mother does to me? First she abuses me and now she taunts me!" and again his hearty chest chuckled.

Waldo smiled and felt jealousy grow in him. He was jealous of why it was that his parents did not get along as well as Alice's. At Waldo's house, a complete moral war would break out over the salt shaker.

Half an hour of graceful forks plunging into the casserole and jolly laughter passed, and Alice's parents seemed very pleased. Mr. Haagen leaned in his chair and stroked his black and white beard a few times and Mrs. Haagen observed Waldo eating from a side-glance almost as if she were administering his performance as a husband.

Alice's artistic eye looked pleasantly at the plates dabbed with orange, green, and white along with earthly-colored crumbs scattered about under which the glossy plate shined. She swung around the table gracefully and swooped up the plates as she observed the modern art pieces.

"These could make beautiful art pieces!" as Alice picked up her father's plate. With an abrupt laugh he responded with a short anecdote, which he was fond of doing, about how Alice always loved doing the dishes when she was younger.

Quickly, Mrs. Haagen excused herself, and joined Alice in washing the dishes. Mr. Haagen's story about Alice's dishwashing as a child had now branched out into a new anecdote as Waldo listened with less tension and more ease. Waldo had then realized that the Haagens were harmless and that they may have even liked him.

Alice and Mrs. Haagen walked up to the coat hangers as they both put on their coats and stood by the door.

“Roger, Alice is going to show me outside, it’s a beautiful night,” sounded Mrs. Haagen as she held Alice’s hand. Alice and her mother both wore beautiful coats of coffee brown and cotton gray.

Waldo looked at Alice then back at Mr. Haagen worriedly.

“Ah shall we join you?” asked Mr. Haagen with a humorous smile.

“Oh no I think Alice and I have some women’s business to catch u--”

“I know I know, I’m only joking, Waldo and I will have a good time here, right my boy?” said the old man.

“Yes,” said Waldo as his heart attempted to escape his chest. Sweat began to erupt violently under his skin. He began worrying about Mr. Haagen, about his sweat, about how he would smell when he would sweat, about how Mr. Haagen would perceive him as a human because of the smell of his sweat, about the topic of conversation that he and Mr. Haagen would converse about and down went the spiral.

The door shut, and Waldo was left with the old man. The man twirled his cane a little, looked down, and then up.

“Well..How are you?”

“Oh, um, well I’m great, how about you sir?”

“Me? I’m good to be above the ground,” said Mr. Haagen with a witty smile.

“Have you and Alice been to church recently?” asked Mr. Haagen with a focused face as he placed his left hand above his right hand on the cane. Waldo began to bounce his feet as he pointed his head downwards mumbling something.

“Well?”

“Yea...Sorry, I-I you know I...No, we haven’t” said Waldo trying to focus his eyes on the floor as if he were talking to a disappointed father.

“I see...I don’t suppose you’re religious are you?” asked Mr. Haagen as he propped his head on his right hand on the table.

“No sir, I’m sorry.”

Mr. Haagen gave Waldo a grave look. He then thought for a moment and spun his cane in a circle.

“No need to apologize...Plenty of folks out there like you...I don’t think it’s healthy for you, by no means, but...it is...what...it is,” he said with a remorseful tone.

“Alice has been drifting from religion too...Ever since she got into these artistic things,” continued the man.“I’ll have to talk to her about that, anyways, how’s Alice?” asked Mr. Haagen with renewed energy that surprised Waldo as he rubbed his sweaty palms.

“Oh she’s lovely, really, sir.”

“I know she’s lovely, she’s my daughter,” laughed the old man in a manner when one hears something so ridiculous that it’s better to laugh than to curse the person.

“But how is *she?”* he asked with bitter emphasis on the last word that contrasted all too strangely with his good-natured smile. Waldo felt a predator lurking beneath that mask Mr. Haagen wore, a snake that crawled inside his mouth, ready to strike any second.

“She’s...good,” said Waldo with a small gasp, hoping with all his might that the answer could satiate the beast.

“Good? Well is that it?” said the man.

Waldo was trying to say something but nothing left his lips. The room was darkening and he felt as if he were leaving his body or that his body had become numb as his brain sunk deeper into his skull.

“Come on boy, don’t be intimidated,” said the man with a chuckle.

“She’s great, she’s happy with me sir and I’m happy with her. I look forward to seeing her everyday after work and same she...We enjoy simple pleasures like...noodles, understand sir, I’m not sure what else to say, I’m sorry,” managed Waldo.

The old man nodded affirmatively as he patted Waldo’s back and told him what a great answer that was. Though, suddenly, Mr. Haagen’s attitude changed as his smile disappeared and he bent forward. He took off his ring and placed it on the table, staring at it as if he were a surgeon performing brain surgery. He examined the crevices and the pristine gold that had been preserved since the wedding day fifty years ago.

“I don’t want to make you feel uncomfortable,” and immediately Waldo felt uncomfortable, “but I really hope you're taking care of my daughter.”

Mr. Haagan glanced at Waldo and then looked back at the table as he circled the inside of his golden ring.

“I’m going to die someday and I want to be confident that someone can take good care of her,” said Mr. Haagen.

As Mr. Haagen rubbed his eyes with his right hand, Waldo immediately realized that he was only a shy old man who dreadfully missed his daughter and consequently all sorts of bizarre thoughts from his therapeutic sessions flooded his mind. “Was Alice the link that kept the marriage of the parents together?” thought Waldo. “He’s having death anxiety and, to make it worse, is lonely because he hates his wife and projects all his love onto his daughter.” Such thoughts continued to taunt him and pry his mind open.

Meanwhile, Alice and her mother walked on the side of the road where Waldo walked every morning. They had pleasant conversation and only diverted to more personal matters once or twice with a consensus that nothing would leave the vicinity of their conversation.

At one point during the mother and daughter walk-and-talk session, Alice became consumed by her wedding memories and how pristinely they still sat in her mind. The air of innocence and freshness of a new sacred and holy couple still existed between Alice and Waldo. There was still a sense of mysteriousness and unfamiliarity between the two as Alice treated Waldo with a respect that one would pay to a higher being.

Alice remembered the purity of her white lace dress that evening and how exalted she felt when she stepped up to her groom with flowers spread across the wooden floor. The incorruptible union.

Alice held her mother's hand and recalled memories before the marriage when Waldo first approached her for a date. Alice that evening walked to her dorm with her sketch pad in hand and a tote bag on her left shoulder. Waldo was leaving his last class of the day in which he participated in a case study of a schizophrenic.

Waldo had walked up the pavement path and continued to walk down the sidewalk as the trees shook in the autumn wind. He felt tired, sleepy, sweaty, and hungry; a type of feeling that can be akin to being beaten up and thrown into a cold river. He limped forward with a soft focus. Suddenly, he noticed a girl.

Alice remembered how he smelled quite funny that evening, almost like bananas, and how he walked clumsily.

"Alice right?" he asked as Alice remembered how he desperately tried to be charming. Alice giggled and turned her face to Waldo and he almost fainted looking at her eyes and listening to her divine laugh. Waldo wished he turned to stone or that something so dramatic happened---like a car exploding---that her attention would be consumed enough by the event that Waldo would have the chance to slip away.

The truth is that Waldo was a very awkward man and always froze up in conversations or began to stutter and sweat. Waldo wasn't a master with talking with members of the opposite sex either; he avoided them for the most part out of necessity of dismissing any "distractions" to his all-too-serious path of becoming a psychologist.

Waldo and Alice walked side-by-side after their last classes for two-and-a-half months and the only conversation Waldo had managed was to ask her about what class she was coming from. Waldo contemplated asking Alice for a drink at the cafe across the street and had been tortured by his conscience for not doing it for two whole weeks. Finally, Waldo had done it.

"Yes? I'm her" as her curved nose expanded and closed from the giggles.

"Listen," he rubbed his hands, looked down and then looked up at Alice as if she were taller than him, "You want to go grab lunch or somethin'?"

Alice now recalled the awkwardness he was displaying so openly to her that she pitied him and thought him a brave man for doing such a thing. She rewarded the awkward kid with lunch the next day. She had become so thoroughly enchanted by his ambiguity and rapid speech rhythm that they continued to meet every day until Waldo proposed.

Alice pleasantly shut her eyes and opened them without realizing that her mother was talking to her the entire time.

5

The large department store had rows of rows upon rows of clothing racks standing as if waiting for someone.

“How ‘bout this one?” asked Alice as she lifted a red dress and turned her face with large shaded glasses towards Waldo.

“Well...I think it’s good.”

Alice signaled the dress to Rose as she ran her fingers on the velvet and approved.

“Alright! Let me go try this on” Alice said as her body swung with haste.

“Oh Rose, you should look for something to try on!” said Alice as she lightly punched Rose’s shoulder.

“Oh I’m fine, I’ve already got plenty of clothes,” responded Rose, lightly laughing.

“Are you sure?”

Rose nodded and Alice departed to the changing room with the two. Rose and Waldo stood awkwardly outside the changing room. Waldo had his fingers in his pants and played a strange game with his feet, rocking back and forth from his toes to his heels. Rose crossed her arms and looked into the depths of the empty store.

Alice walked out of the changing room and displayed the red dress. Rose complimented her and the dress in only a necessary amount.

Alice was already rushing to the cashier counter and began conjuring up so many different ways she could cut up this dress, mend it, hem it, and redesign it.

The three stepped outside the store and walked aimlessly in the open-air mall as dead maple trees smiled like skeletons in the autumn breeze. Alice’s wide-eyed glasses made her face lose the warmth she usually carried, convincing a passer-by that she must be a high profile individual.

As the entourage scoured for something interesting, Alice elbowed Rose as she spotted a familiar ice cream shop and promised her husband that it was magical, bidding Rose to agree with her to which Rose confessed she did not like. Regardless, the three entered the ice cream shop devoid of any life except the employee.

“Are you sure Rose?”

“Yea, I’m vegan anyways”

Alice sighed as if she trespassed Rose’s values and covered her mouth.

“I’m so sorry Rose, I-I didn’t know, I’m ju--”

“It’s alright,” Rose said, diverting Alice’s unnecessary embarrassment masterfully.

Alice slipped her glasses back on over her eyes and walked towards Waldo. Waldo leaned against the rail and watched his ice cream with guilty pleasure and Alice crossed her arms and watched the employee make her banana boat as if she were the owner of the store.

Waldo devoured his ice cream as his brain experienced catharsis for not eating sugar for a month. His tongue tickled and his chest heaved with joy; his sleepy eyes awoke and the roof of his mouth felt glossed.

Alice took off her glasses and Waldo's uneasiness reduced as he saw her warm, green eyes and the dark circles underneath which added a strange charm. A charm that only could be described as a wounded fairy, a scratched diamond, a lioness with a scar on her face; Waldo appreciated that juxtaposition of beauty and pain, inspiring an intense passion within him.

When Alice had her glasses on, Waldo felt as though he were walking with a stranger with a cold, Kantian *disinterestedness* displayed on her face like the models that were plastered on all the walls at every corner in the mall. The truth is, he felt inferior and misplaced with her. He felt insufficient when she looked at him with those glasses, as if she were posing her judgment on him to which he felt he could never live up to. But now, with her glasses off, Waldo could breathe.

"Do you remember Laura?" asked Alice as she twisted her face into a huge question mark.

"You remember right?" she said as she elbowed Rose.

"Mhm, I remember."

"And you, Waldo?"

"I don't recall," said Waldo.

"She was at my bookclub, remember? I even asked you to meet her---oh never mind, you were sick that day," she laughed maturely, which looked quite strange on Alice's youthful resting face. Waldo returned to digging into his ice cream.

"Anyways, Laura has this niece, and she's really interested in psychology and...Laura wanted to know if she could shadow you at work one of these days?" asked Alice as she softened her eyes and held her shoulder in a frozen shrug position that said: "what do you say?"

Waldo silently sipped the melted ice cream from his spoon and lifted his head thoughtfully.

"Yea...I don't see why not?" said Waldo as he sunk his head into the bowl to sip his ice cream soup; he locked eyes with Rose for the first time that day. He thought that she looked scared but dismissed it.

Scattered stars shined brighter than usual as the car sped down the road. The car arrived at the bohemian cafe which stood like a beacon in the dead of night. Waldo didn't bother checking the time as he knew it was late anyways. The interior of the cafe was almost entirely wooden with soft hazelnut wood chairs and dark red cushions. The entire area was riddled with college students, typing away at their computers.

Waldo and Alice sat in the corner booth as Waldo sipped his creamed coffee and watched with suppressed astonishment at Alice's capacity to eat tremendous amounts of food. He

fathomed her robust metabolism by recalling that she had already eaten two croissants, a danish cheese dish, two cake pops, and was sipping fervently on a mocha mint coffee concoction. Waldo also recalled how she had eaten the entire cookie dough ice cream quart in the fridge two days after Waldo brought it. She was also very fond of the cupcakes gifted to her by the culinary sciences department at the college every other week for her to try their new flavors. How she had managed to remain slim despite all this was incomprehensible to Waldo.

"Wally," she sipped again, "Remember...Tomorrow, Laura's niece."

Waldo opened his eyes and became conscious of Alice's nag.

"Hm? Oh yea," said Waldo with a large, primal yawn. Waldo bounced his head positively and rubbed his now cold shoulders.

They walked outside the cafe and stood for a few seconds walking around the cafe and looking into the dark highway abyss as their breaths dissolved into mists. Alice's black coat contrasted nicely to her yellow hair. Waldo's black coat simply looked like a cheap replica of Alice's.

"What's her name by the way," asked Waldo.

"Athena," responded Alice as if she perfectly knew what he was thinking of. "It's a lovely name isn't it?"

Waldo only nodded quietly as a deep and long sleep seized his mind.

6

At the psychology complex, Waldo observed and appreciated the red tie Alice had picked out for him. His first patient came in, it was Lowry.

"Hey Lowry" and the two men shook their hands.

Lowry was one of those miracle patients. He was an aggressive maniac before therapy, who got into fights with strangers very often, especially at bars. He was even once charged for beating his wife. But after prison, when he began counseling with Waldo, his attitude changed dramatically. His family members reported that he was a "new man." All Waldo had done was listen. That thought terrified Waldo. How many people were out there who were hell-bent only because no one can listen to them?

Not before long, Lowry concluded the session, shook hands with Waldo, and left with dignity.

Waldo, satisfied with his first session, rushed to the coffee lounge and made himself a coffee. Suddenly, the front desk lady walked into the room.

"Laura?" she whispered with a vivid question mark on her face.

"Who?" Waldo asked, confused.

"A woman named Laura and I think her daughter is here looking for you."

“Oh that’s right.”

Waldo got up from his seat and walked towards the front desk. The gray seats were arranged tightly in rows against the wall on both corners of the room. Behind the chairs were the windows which became abnormally hot during the summer when the glass would sometimes burn the backs of patients.

On the far right corner stood another green fern which was at least twice the size of Waldo’s fern. Waldo glanced at the fern then turned to the right to see Laura sitting on the chair. The girl he saw at the book club was next to her with her neck bent over her phone.

Laura got up enthusiastically and walked over to Waldo with short and excited steps.

“Waldo! Thank you so much for doing this!” she said as she hugged Waldo.

“She’s really into this stuff and when Alice told me about what you do, I told Athena...that’s her by the way,” she said as she pointed her thumb backward at the black hair and skateboard sneakers bobbing back and forth.

Waldo looked at the faceless girl---as her neck was still bent over her phone---with discomfort. It was all so awkward.

“So, I told Athena and she was *very* excited,” she said with her hands spreading out like a conductor. “And she’s been going through a lot recently, so hopefully this is cathartic for her,” the woman said as her flabby skin crushed Waldo’s ribcage. Waldo reddened. “Thanks again Waldo.” This lady that Waldo had met for the first time in his life was now leaving her niece with him to babysit at work, of course he was embarrassed. Waldo noticed that the lady at the front desk smiled mockingly and whispered something into her colleague's ear.

“Okay, and her father will pick her up, okay?” Laura called out.

“Yes ma’am,” responded Waldo absentmindedly as he thought about Jeremy, his next client.

“Ba-bye, tell Alice I said hi!” she said as she swung her enormous purse and walked out of the building with wonky steps. Her cheap perfume still circled in Waldo’s nostrils.

Waldo stood frozen as he looked at the unmoved girl on the chair, typing furiously on her phone. Suddenly she turned off her phone and slipped it on the side of her gray skirt and threw her hair back. Her sneakers walked towards Waldo. Waldo hardly paid attention to the girl that day as he was consumed by stressful thoughts of doing paperwork and attempting therapy with his next client, who was often difficult.

She walked by his side and Waldo bent his neck down and nodded nervously trying to start a conversation.

“So when’s your next session?” she asked as if they had known each other for a few months now.

“Oh, in fifteen minutes,” he said, looking at Athena. Actually, Waldo didn’t even look at the girl’s face once; he would point his face towards her but would linger his eyes to some other object in the distance or look at the wall.

“Is it okay if I go out for a sec?” she asked.

“Yea, go ahead,” Waldo responded, feeling eased at her disappearance.

Waldo, out of boredom, decided to sit down in one of the chairs and began flipping through the magazines. The front desk lady commented on how she added some new magazines.

A few minutes later, the door swung open and the girl returned. Waldo turned to her with his eyes focusing on the back wall and suggested that they go to his room so that they’re ready for his client. The girl agreed.

“So you’re interested in psychology?”

“Mm-hm” she said blandly.

Waldo opened his door, and the girl walked into the blank room.

She moved one of the chairs into the far corner of the room behind Waldo’s chair. She crossed her legs and began typing on her phone. A mountain cat's head with his nose crunched up and two fangs sticking out of his mouth stared at Waldo on the corner of the girl’s skirt.

Waldo sat down in his chair lazily. He felt a little nervous now that he had a reputation to live up to for this stranger. “I wonder what Alice has been telling Laura about me,” thought Waldo as he caressed his red tie.

“So you’re just going to watch right?” asked Waldo as if he were under an apprenticeship with the girl rather than the reverse.

“Mm hm,” let out the girl coldly and effortlessly without lifting her gaze.

Suddenly the door handle turned and Waldo began adjusting himself in his seat. An excruciatingly thin boy with black hair and white skin with blemishes and acne polluted all over it came in.

“How are you doing Jeremy?” asked Waldo with a smile.

“Oh I’m fine” said Jeremy as he rubbed his shoulders. His eyes wandered on the desk in front of him which separated him from Waldo.

“So, like usual, talk about anything you’d like,” asked Waldo.

“Okay,” said the boy thoughtfully.

“Well…Mother’s been mad at me lately because I tell her it’s invasive of her to lay out my clothes every morning because I’m sixteen now and I told her but she became seriously mad with me and started going on about how I’m just like Dad and that without her I would starve to death and how I’m not grateful and all that. And---” and the boy went to thinking hard. Waldo focused on his facial expressions.

“And, well, she threw an iron pan on the stove and cracked it,” he said as his voice squealed.

Waldo nodded thoughtfully and told him that it’s okay and that he should talk to his mother about the issue when she isn’t mad and engage in a conversation rather than sporadically claim something. Jeremy nodded with his clouded eyes and looked onto Waldo as if he were his father. Suddenly at the corner of Jermy’s eye, he saw the girl sitting in the corner watching with intense focus, her eyes measuring and calculating. Jeremy's face went pale and his eyes

screamed. Waldo noticed Jeremy's expression and turned backward, looked at the girl then turned to Jeremy.

"Oh I'm sorry, I should've told you that she was going to be here, she's just shadow---"

"No...It's fine," mumbled the boy with trembling lips. He glanced at the girl again and turned his gaze downward as his cheeks went on fire.

Waldo looked at the girl, who stared emotionlessly, and then back at the boy; he was panicking.

"Jeremy, do you want her to leave?" asked Waldo as tears dripped down Jeremy's eyes; the more he tried to hide his face, the redder he became. Silence occupied the air.

Upon not receiving a response, Waldo, not knowing what to do, waited until Jeremy said something. Jeremy, unable to move his neck, did not dare look at the girl, afraid he would turn to stone.

After about two-and-half minutes of waiting, Waldo turned his neck towards the girl and signaled her politely to leave. She got up and left with a short sigh.

"Jeremy?" said Waldo, now very worried that he had not moved from his "prey in recognition of predator" position.

"She's gone now, just me and you, that was...completely due to my ignorance," said Waldo apologetically. "She was just here to learn, nothing else...Do you know her?"

Jeremy slowly lifted his head and looked at Waldo with his scrawny neck and fatally white complexion. The acne on his face swelled up and lighted red like the peaks of oil rigs.

"She's the cheerleading team captain for God's sake," he said miserably as he dropped his head on the table.

"I'm sorry? You two...go to the same school?" asked Waldo with a wild look of amazement.

Jeremy didn't respond as the answer was quite clear. Waldo managed to talk him through his embarrassment and rebuild his self-esteem up enough for him to walk out of the room without breaking down.

Waldo came out of the room after Jeremy left, angry with himself. The girl was typing on her cell phone just out in the corner.

The two began walking together towards the snack lounge where one old man was eating a sandwich.

"Did you know that boy?" asked Waldo, annoyed.

"He looks familiar..." without lifting her head. "Also, his mother is the problem, she's *oedipal*, her last hopes are clinging onto her infantile-like child and---let me guess, either the husband is abusive or she's divorced him," she asked waiting for a reply.

"The latter."

"Okay, makes sense. Now, this boy is part of this oedipal conspiracy but now he's rebelling. Of course the mother's not going to like it, her son is the only thing left in the world that gives her a sense of meaning."

Waldo squinted his eyes at the girl curiously who swiped on her phone vigorously.

"I have to go to a wedding, my dad'll pick me up in about fifteen minutes. Tomorrow," she paused dramatically and swallowed, "can you pick me up from school?" She asked with her head raised to Waldo and her whole demeanor becoming a degree warmer. The question was so sudden and blatant that Waldo was taken aback a little.

"For shadowing me? Fo-for educational purposes I assume?" asked Waldo.

"Yes sir," she responded with her fingers midway from typing letters on her phone and her mouth half open as her teeth perked out. Waldo thought deeply.

"I guess," Waldo let out hesitantly. "What's the school's address?" he asked with great caution.

"Here," the girl said as she swiped through her phone. "What's your number?...Alright, I'll text it to you," and she left without a smile. Waldo drooped his neck and stood in the snack lounge for a few seconds.

As Waldo walked into his room, preparing himself for the next psychological war, his phone buzzed and there lay the address of the school as promised.

7

"Turkish Delight Cafe" the sign radiated in mystic purple and royal red. The restaurant had been converted from a mexican fast food joint into a Turkish dining oasis in six months. The walls were decorated with Persian rugs of red and blue and photos of holy mosques with delicate arcs and complicated geometrical designs.

Rose sat in front of Alice on the four-carrying capacity table. The pillows underneath were a relief to Rose's skinny hips and an anomaly to Alice as she studied the pretty designs on the cloth. Alice was most delighted by her rosehip tea served in a red porcelain cup with an elegant saucer underneath and "three cute little sugar cubes!" placed on it.

Rose had dark red lipstick on with two golden earrings and golden bangles around her wrist. She sat with her arms crossed on her lap and listened quietly. That was something people loved about Rose, how she can listen no matter what the situation.

"Well? How was the snake char-ming?" asked Alice as she put her hand on the table expecting to touch Rose's but found only the table.

"Oh, it went well," responded Rose tiredly.

"Okay, tell me about it," as she crossed her fingers and put it under her sharp chin.

"Well, there were a lot of people and I played the flute and charmed the snake as they say," she said and smiled weakly.

Rose had actually been charming snakes for a month now under the supervision of a former charmer. The teacher was astonished at how easily she had learned the art. Rose would

practice hours everyday playing the flute and, when possible, would test her abilities with the snake in the ring with the teacher close by. She had become so proficient that the teacher thought that she could finally perform. The teacher also wanted Rose to learn other maneuvers and tricks with snakes. Rose agreed to some of them, and now she was working diligently towards mastering them.

"Where did you perform?"

"At a carnival"

"Oh my, where?" said Alice quite loudly.

"Oh...going south, near Pearsall," responded Rose, startled by Alice's fluctuation in volume.

Alice nodded and bit her bottom lip.

"Did I tell you about what happened at work?" asked Alice, perfectly knowing that she had not brought up the topic.

"No."

Alice then proceeded to tell Rose her bizarre encounter with the old woman at the workplace. Rose hesitated and thought for a few seconds, then something clicked in her mind as she placed her fingers on Alice's.

"It's okay Alice, that lady was just having a bad day."

The touch was strong enough to convince Alice to uncover her eyes and look solemnly at Rose's fingers.

Rose studied Alice's facial expressions as they became more expressive of pain and suffering, something she had assumed Alice was immune to. Alice was always lively woman who no one could fathom her expressing any other emotion besides happiness or mania.

"I'm sorry Rose, I called you here today just to tell you that because I can't talk to Waldo about it," as she placed her forehead on her right hand and shut her eyes so tightly that creases formed.

Rose watched Alice in amazement, she *is* hurt.

"Oh Alice, don't say that, I'm here for you. Besides, I have nothing better to do," replied Rose calmly.

"Do you want to go to the baklava store?" Rose tilted her head maternally and waited for a response.

"No. I just want to sleep," responded the stubborn child as her eyes darted downwards.

"Come on let's go," Rose proclaimed as she got up and grabbed Alice by the arm.

The baklava store was next to the hookah cafe and a block away from the middle-eastern grocery store. The whole complex was occupied by Arabian stores and restaurants. Around this time, dusk, the complex would become lively, as the food trucks would come out, the lights would turn on, and the Indians, Jordinians, Saudi-Arabians, and Palistianians would freely walk about, talk, and smoke.

Rose and Alice walked across the parking lot and felt the temperature drop as the sky was turning orange, as the sun retreated. A man in the taxi was talking loudly in a language that was foreign.

They stepped inside the baklava shop. Two men with long black mustaches sat in the far corner of the shop with their legs crossed, talking in rich accents about the election. Rose immediately felt self-conscious, like an imposter, as she saw a woman on her left wearing the traditional shalvar pants and a red hijab over her head while she cradled her baby.

Rose reddened a little like a rose and walked to the front counter with Alice who was ordering sweets. The owner of the shop smiled his silver teeth wildly, pleased to see two fair skinned ladies in his shop which was a rarity in the neighborhood.

"You two live around here?" he asked as he put on his latex gloves over his fat fingers.

"Oh no," said Alice as she laughed. "You have a nice shop sir."

The shop owner trying to impress Alice and Rose told them the story of how he collected enough money to open the store and how the sales have been booming ever since. Alice listened, nodding and yesing to his heroic tale while Rose glanced at the woman in the corner as humility grew in her heart. She felt bad for the woman. "Is she poor? She seems sad? Am I the cause of her distress?" Each thought that entered Rose's mind inspired more and more pity for the woman who looked distastefully at the floor as she cradled the baby. Her dark and round face seemed soft and mushy, like made of clay. The baby silently looked at Rose and she, as an attempt to reprimand some sin she thought she commited smiled at the baby but the baby did not smile back

Alice paid the seemingly large sum for sweets and walked out joyously with Rose out of the shop as Rose pondered.

"Thank you Rose, I love you," said Alice as her voice fluffed, hugging Rose from the side of her body. Rose managed to endure it. They walked a few paces and Alice let go.

The sun was settling for good, and the night was creeping from the underworld. Rose forgot what was bothering her but didn't forget that she felt bothered.

8

Waldo's old sedan creeped up to the drive-through window. The lady handed Waldo his coffee. He drove off to work anticipating the long Wednesday at work.

He parked the car in the parking lot the same as usual, and walked into the building.

"Hey Waldo!" called Jeff grabbing some papers from the front desk.

"Hey Jeff, I didn't see you yesterday."

"Oh yes, my wife actually gave birth to our son," announced Jeff charmingly.

The front desk staff had their mouths left open as "ahh"'s and "ooh"'s were sounded across the room. "What's his name?" several of the ladies asked, with softened eyes.

“David...Daawuud Cross,” responded Jeff as he clicked his boots.

“Well that’s so great Jeff,” said Waldo as the two now began walking down the hallway toward the lounge.

“Yes, I’m a little nervous and I’m not sure how the whole father role---you and Alice have kids?”

“Oh no,” said Waldo as if Jeff had uttered something sacrilegious.

“I think we agreed on no kids,” let out Waldo, knowing that he had never discussed such matters with Alice.

They entered the lounge and Waldo followed Jeff to the coffee maker as he sipped his own coffee.

“Really? Ah that’s too bad,” chuckled Jeff.

“Eh.”

“You’ll see.”

The coffee started pouring.

“Listen, you want to get lunch again today around three?” asked Jimmy.

“Oh no, sorry, I have to pick up this kid from school who’s ‘shadowing’ me.”

“Oh heard about that, how’s that going?” said Jimmy as he now added a packet of sugar in his coffee.

“Oh well I barely know the kid. She made one of my clients cry yesterday,” chuckled Waldo.

“Oh geez, did she analyze him that hard?”

“No, I think the kid knew her, small world.”

“Damn right,” said Jeff as he stirred his coffee and turned around, sipping alongside Waldo.

“I’ll see you around, okay?” cracked Jeff.

“Yea, for sure.”

One aspect of psychotherapy that Waldo noticed early on was how time slows down dramatically. The ups and downs, through the heavens and hells, in the deepest corners and crevices of one’s life, that’s what the conversations were like—and they were long. Waldo’s “easiest” sessions were uncomfortable, but usually terrifying. Digging through the lives of these “ordinary” people, Waldo would often uncover not-so-pretty—and sometimes murderous—secrets about his clients. One could call the psychologist an archeologist of the mind.

Despite the seemingly long hours, Waldo’s phone began to buzz in the middle of a psychotherapy session. Waldo was delighted to divert his attention from his client who was state-mandated to attend therapy. Such patients rarely intend to change their way of being, and so they waste everyone’s time.

“Is there anything else you want to talk about?” asked Waldo, throwing his arm lamely onto his knee.

The bald man lifted his head and grunted “no.”

“Well then, I’ll have to let you out early today, sounds good?”

The man nodded, and Waldo escaped.

Waldo walked down the hall and fished his keys out of his pocket. He informed the front desk lady that he was off and would return soon.

“Okay Waldo, see you!” sounded Kate, the new front-desk lady.

“Downtown, I haven’t been here in a while,” mumbled Waldo curiously as the car entered downtown territory. The tall towering structures, the carnivals, the farmers’ market, and the visitors’ attractions. Waldo liked that feeling, to be introduced to his city as if he were a visitor; it thrilled him to act like a stranger.

The car drove down a lane packed with beautiful, colonial-styled mansions and homes. These houses were built when architecture was seen as a form of art, a form of incorporating beauty, not of eradicating it for utility.

The strong built bodies, the subtle carvings on the edges, the pleasing colors to the eye molded all around; the symmetrical chimneys, the clean cut lawns, the maintenance of trees older than the city right on the lawn, the durable windows, the masterfully cut door with tiny greek-like patterns on the metal doorknob all for the sake of beauty *a priori*.

Just about every lawn had a proud American flag flying above, each star knitted precisely and with *real* fabric unlike the flags Waldo was so accustomed to seeing. Whatever this place was, Waldo liked it very much. The more Waldo absorbed the gorgeous details of this seemingly restored ancient neighborhood, the more he slowed his car. He smiled at children spraying each other with their gigantic water guns. Even their water guns were more elegant! In the next house, two women were sipping wine on their white painted porch.

Waldo looked forward, and through the narrow neighborhood, and could see the tall bricked structures standing next to glass structures as conservatism and progressivism fought their battle in the middle of the city.

He rolled down the windows and allowed the sunshine to perk in. Suddenly, disrupting Waldo’s bliss, his phone buzzed. A message from an unnamed contact: “Wanted to remind u about picking me up.”

Waldo drove his car into the grand entrance as a brass mountain lion stood erect with his paws pointed upwards and teeth showing.

He drove a few more feet and stopped at the “checkpoint” where a security guard with a strange emblem on his shoulder asked Waldo who he was going to pick up.

“Athena.”

The thin bar was lifted on the command of the guard as he gave Waldo a warm wave. Waldo drove over the bump and stared at the campus in awe. Children, big and small, walked,

stood, and slept on the luscious green grass. The teachers sipped from the mugs and walked to-and-fro.

The enormous black and gold football field stretched from one end of the field to the other with a megascreen, flashing the school mascot. The enormous plotted buildings stood pale as marble with large greco-roman pillars on all four sides, making it look similar to the capital.

Waldo's car crept slowly and slowly behind the line of cars. Next, Waldo's eyes traveled to the double story gymnasium with a large painted motto in black and gold: "Dignity Before All" along with a muscular mountain lion crawling beneath the letters.

Waldo then focused his eyes on the golden ball that stood on top of the clock tower, towering so grandly behind what looked like a church. The cars crept a little further, making Waldo fumble and drive forward.

The chapel's stained windows were vivid and detailed as they stretched narrowly from the bottom of the building to the top, underneath the wooden roof that stretched to heaven on which a large golden cross rested.

The car drove a few more paces, and Waldo's eyes indulged in the Texas roses that were planted all around the sides of the entrances, and the bricks around the flowers painted black to maintain school colors.

Finally, the car reached the mouth of the school, and Waldo was stunned. He felt intimidated by it all.

His phone buzzed again as he quickly pulled it out and read the girl's message: "What color is your car?" Waldo quickly typed back, giving more than needed description to find the car.

Waldo peered out the window and saw the girl poking her head up and down like a weasel with her hand acting like a visor. The girl snapped with familiarity and started towards the car with a bag carrying an instrument in her left hand and a black backpack hugging her back.

He waited a few more moments and her silhouette began to become more clear. She had dense, fluffy, black hair that bounced at every step. As she came closer, the sun revealed the violent brown hues of her hair which made it look iridescent, shining rainbow, complimenting the rich blackness of the unlit strands. Her skin was deathly pale, with light brown confetti spread about on her cheekbones and midway between her nose and cheek.

She opened the car door and sat down in the seat as she swung over her instrument in the back seat and took off her backpack.

Her now abyss-like black hair in contrast to her extremely pale skin made a striking appearance. The paleness stretched all across. Her jawbone was sharp and her lips were cherry-red lips that almost mocked any woman who didn't have lips as red as hers. She moved her left leg up so that her heel touched the base of the leather seat. She turned her head to Waldo and dropped her right leg to the floor.

“Hello, my name is Athena, nice to meet you,” she said as she stretched her right hand out. Waldo noticed the plumpness and muscularity of her forearms, which were also sprinkled lightly with freckles, as he squeezed her hand. And then his eyes accidently locked with hers. It was an abyss: pure emerald, with crevices in between, the mandela teasing diamond blue and a black ink stained in the middle. She dilated them a little like a kaleidoscope.

“You look at me like a stranger—we met yesterday, remember?” she said as she looked out the window.

Waldo, unable to say anything, simply began to drive the car towards the exit of the paradise.

“I swear, Texas is bipolar, one second it’s as cold as winter and the next, my skin is burning. I can’t wait till I'm out of this hell,” she said bitterly, staring out the window with her elbows on the edge of the window.

Waldo noticed how her voice sounded as if she were sick or had a nasal congestion—it was such a unique sound, he waited until she would speak again.

As the car sped down the road, Waldo turned to Athena and asked her to put on her seatbelt. Athena responded rapidly.

The car drove down the ancient street as they passed by bookstores, green-house coffee shops, record stores, and other cultural landmarks.

“Oh, turn here, they have good stuff,” demanded Athena as her annoyed face broke a half smile. Her voice kept boggling Waldo as he turned into a small parking lot crowded with beautifully painted food trucks and mini shops.

Athena’s voice sounded like mice darting about on the floor as her voice’s tone fluctuated delicately up and down. It was quite the phenomenon and something that continued to baffle Waldo. What was more baffling was how he had not noticed these things yesterday.

The sun illuminated the microscopic diamonds in her now brunettian hair and her skin stayed sickly white despite the sun rays trying to crisp her.

“Let’s go, you’re looking at me like a stranger again,” she pronounced as her arms crossed and eyes darted at the ice cream stand.

They walked across the parking lot.

“That’s the cactus shop,” pointed Athena to the white colored wooden shack. Inside was a woman dressed in bohemian, watering rows of cacti in pretty vases with a spray.

“And that’s the CBD shop---hey Rick,” she waved at the small but long wooden shack on the left. The inside was totally dark except for the several neon lights that hung on the back wall.

“That stuff’s good for you,” she said with unmoved eyes and chin high.

“Oh, she’s got some environmentally friendly clothing,” nodded Athena towards a long transparent tube filled with racks of stylish clothes and soft music playing.

Waldo and Athena bought ice cream and sat on the bench. The wind blew her hair into the melted droplets of pink cream on her stick causing a great struggle between Athena and Aeolus.

Waldo sat on the other side of the picnic table and licked carefully looking at the cars drive by only a foot away from where they were sitting. The growling and speeding of the cars irritated Waldo and even made him fancy that one of them might fly into them and strike them dead.

Athena shifted around on the bench with her legs raised and faced the traffic.

She unbuttoned one of her shirt buttons, took a few more licks of her resilient popsicle, and fanned herself, bouncing lightly like a lolling dog.

"People don't come around this time, if you're wondering why it's empty," she said as if she were defending the place. Indeed the place was completely vacant, devoid of any people besides the quiet shop-owners. "It's packed towards the evenings."

She turned around on the bench so that the wooden plank was in between her legs and faced the ice cream truck and the clothing store; the left hand fell in front of her to support her body as she licked the popsicle with her spare hand and leaned forward.

Waldo rubbed his forehead and continued to lick his green popsicle feeling foolish, like a child in a candy shop. In acceptance of acting like a child, he rested his left elbow on the table and leaned lazily.

"I hope they tear that place down," Athena said as Waldo noticed pure and quiet rage filling her eyes.

"What place?" asked Waldo, now intrigued.

"The animal murder shop, of course," she said as she pointed to the buthcher shop.

"First we burn the planet, then we kill the animals," she said as she looked down, letting her voluminous hair drop down slowly producing swirls like Arabian quicksand.

"Just give the planets to the animals for Christ's sake, they deserve it more." She looked down at her popsicle and observed the drops falling on the wood.

"What makes you think tha--." Not allowing Waldo to continue, Athena struck him like a snake.

"What? It doesn't take a genius to see how the world is going to burn because of *us*," she said, not moving her eyes from the ground, her face looking as though she had eaten something bitter.

"Overpopulation, greenhouse gasses, the arctic poles melting, you name it we've destroyed it," and her mouth remained frozen in the pronunciation of the last word.

"What good have we done for this planet...ever?" She turned her face and looked at Waldo with askance eyes then looked down again.

"So? Tell me…"

"Well," said Waldo uneasily as he dropped his right hand on his lap limply and sighed.

"Exactly, you can't think of a single thing, me either," her voice said with hypnotic fluctuations as if she were tapping her throat while talking.

"So, the proper, *rational* solution is to do away with us as fast as possible, restore mother nature back to her pristine state...That's the least we can do anyways." She then shook her head

like an enraged mother, her eyelashes and eyebrows becoming satanically darker, adding a strange charm to her physiognomy.

Waldo opened his car door vigorously and collapsed on the seat waiting for Athena who lazily opened the door, swinging her spare hand, grasping her beloved phone.

Waldo sped to the “wellness center” as the time ticked.

The front doors swung open, and the entourage arrived to work. The front desk crew eyed here-and-there humorously.

“Waldo? Mr. Rodriguz came in and left,” said Kate, the new receptionist

“Yikes.”

They approached Waldo’s room and Athena twisted her torso, slipping her phone on the side of her grey skirt. The door unlocked and the sessions laid ahead.

The day went pleasantly, there were no interruptions and breakdowns with the exception of the schizophrenic patient who asked Athena to leave in a schizophrenically polite manner.

Throughout all these sessions, Athena would steady her eyes on the patient and study them like a tiger, watching each twitch of the cheek and noticing all the so-called *Freudian slips.* Athena, upon noticing something of psychological import, would tap Waldo on his calf and whisper her thoughts into Waldo’s ear.

Waldo was thoroughly amazed at Athena’s knowledge of psychology and so were the clients; one client even requested for Athena to be in the room for the next session.

The dreadful evenings full of tales of woe felt a little less damning with Athena sitting behind Waldo, and with her soft breath sometimes touching and cooling his heated neck. There was something illuminating about her presence; it inspired a desire to be more *civilized* in the savage patient.

For example, Hernandez, a “state-enfrocee,” who came out of prison for drug-selling and child abuse, broke out of character as he talked politely and with a kind manner in contrast to his usual fondness of vulgar language and slurs. Having a kid in the room (and that being a female one) made everyone in the room feel responsible for their actions and even tender.

“Is that one of your parents?” asked Waldo suspiciously, eyeing the enormous diesel truck.

“Just a friend,” Athena responded, opening the door and leaving the building. She stepped up the dirt covered metal grills and opened the door to the tank. Waldo watched the truck roar out of the parking lot as the sky dyed itself peach.

That morning, Rose was dressed in full indian dress with shalwar kameez and a beautiful top. The shalwar were bright red and the top was black with silver angel wing patterns running

across her chest. On the cuffs there was a single thick golden stripe with silver stripes on the borders.

Alice had insisted that they pick up Rose from her house, so there they were. Waldo had never seen Rose's home and was not much stimulated by the bland, conventional look of picketed fences, clean cut grasses, and sprinklers running in the neighbor's yard. Actually, Waldo detested the house, he could not stand the suffocating atmosphere of the repeating style of all the houses with only slight variation of brick color, garage size, and mild-adjustment of the angle of the walkway all intended to create an illusion of difference. At the heart, Waldo knew, all the abodes were of the same blood.

Rose's leather slippers stepped on the floor of the back seat. She sat down while adjusting her puffy pants that disguised the body underneath. As Waldo slid down in the front passenger seat, he noticed Rose's infant-like feet.

"Are you sure you don't want to sit in the front seat?" asked Alice.

"Oh it doesn't matter. I'm fine here," said the stoic.

The car arrived at the trail-head; they opened the doors and walked the rough terrain. Tall trees erupted from the surface, its roots reaching to hell.

Uneasiness settled in Waldo as he walked in between Alice and Rose. Alice continued to blabber useless things that were repelled by Waldo's ears, but Rose, as usual, listened and nodded every now and then and smiled weakly if Alice was trying to impress her with her plan of a new artistic endeavor.

Something bothered Waldo about Rose's mysterious quietness today. What was it? Did she know something about him that he didn't even know?

She walked by him like a disappointed older sister; each swing of her arm and twitch of her cheek made Waldo shameful. Waldo all of sudden wanted to abandon everyone and everything. He began to envision how idyllic the crib lifestyle is with no troubles of adulthood. A wave of melancholy choked him as they walked into the heart of the forest as birds sang their war songs and flowers struggled to break through the earth.

Dinner was eaten at one of the new, gourmet burger restaurants. Naturally, such an anomaly would require about thirty minutes of wait just to step foot in the restaurant. A row of human bodies, neatly organized like dominoes stuck out of the main entrance. How so many people can fit inside a tiny restaurant was a mystery.

Waldo ate the blue cheese buffalo burger, Alice the american cheese burger, and Rose ordered a salad with italian dressing which was surprisingly eaten to the last leaf. She didn't have breakfast.

Waldo arrived home with his wife tired and the sky's belly turned inside allowing its contents to shine. He sunk on the sofa and allowed Alice to make them rose-hip tea. The porcelain cup kissed his lips in synchronization with cotton blankets in the sky uncovering the moon's glow.

"Wally, I'll be having book club here tomorrow, if that's okay with you?"

Book club. The words sounded so pleasant, he felt like plopping a small chocolate morsel in that cute, infant-like face of Alice's.

Sunday arrived, and the book club was in session as Alice hopped around the carpet reading Dante. Rose was there sitting in a t-shirt and black, puffy bags on her legs and henna on her right hand.

Waldo's eyes scanned the room hopelessly. He didn't know what he was looking for, but his hope was crushed. He limped in his chair and heard his wife pronounce the seven layers of hell. He then heard Rose's deep voice, the first time he heard her speak voluntarily at the club meeting.

Waldo chewed gum and gave in to the Sunday blues. He knew he was searching for something but did not bother to investigate further. A thought tickled his cortical tissue and enticed him, but he suppressed the temptation.

Rose looked at Waldo from the couch and stared at him longer than usual. It felt like the weight of the room was collapsing on Waldo. In Rose's eyes, he knew that she knew something.

The weather was humid and "sticky." All of a sudden, all of their winter clothes now seemed a waste. "At least the weather in Boston was predictable compared to this," thought Waldo. Suddenly, the word 'bipolar' stuck in his throat. Where did he hear that word?

He played with the thread of his t-shirt, pulling its tail as he unconsciously walked the trail to the side of the military base. A chime bell announced a message in his pocket as he slipped the phone out. The screen displayed a foreign phone number.

I've got cheer practice tomorrow pick me up at 6, thanks showed the blue bubble on his screen. He composed a response, then deleted, then composed again and finally sent it.

The sedan entered the flat-landed greco-roman styled school. *St. Nicholas Academy* in black letterings with gold on the edges, carved into the marble. Waldo's was the only car there.

There she was, walking on the lawn, laughing with two other girls. Athena got a glance of Waldo's car and immediately stopped laughing as if startled by his appearance. She told her friends goodbye and allowed them to walk to the parking lot. Waldo observed the other girls getting into striking sedans. Athena, alone in baggy sweatpants, was walking towards Waldo.

The door opened, the back-pack swung to the back seat, and her legs crossed as she sat with her back arched.

"How was practice?" asked Waldo.

"Hm? Since when were you into cheerleading?" She raised both her eyebrows sarcastically and squeezed her lips.

"Well, I thought I might know what yo--"

“Exactly,” she said as if she had made a plausible argument.

“Excuse me?” Waldo loudly whispered in shock. His eyes lingered on her in disbelief. She continued to look out the window in silence.

The car drove on the highway and by now, the landscape had become so pretty. The sun was festering with pink, giving its viewer a last glance at its glory before it had departed. It was sufficiently dark enough so that the car lights glossed the asphalt and the pink of the sun looked like a flower petal in a mud-stained pond.

“How come you don’t drive?” Waldo asked.

She sighed at hearing a very familiar question. “Cus’ my Dad won’t let me till I’m eighteen.”

The sun burned its last lights and Waldo drove towards the therapy complex to knock out the clients that still remained.

“By the way, I only have about two clients left.”

“Yea it’s fine,” she said. “How do you open this window---for chrissakes, this is an *old* car?” she added

“Turn it the other way,” said Waldo as he stretched his body across the car to help her, but she managed to roll down the window. Athena reached for something in her back and took out a mysterious object Waldo couldn’t make out in his periphery.

A few seconds later, he glanced at Athena and saw her lighting a stick. He quickly turned his head to Athena. She had her legs propped on the dashboard, right over left, with her head bobbed back, hair flowing through the headrest, down the seat and smoke coming out her lips, getting sucked by the air through the window opening. Her forearm sat on the window pane as she tapped the butt of the cigarette to allow some burnt tobacco to drop down.

Waldo pretended like he saw nothing as he steered the car. He was terrified to turn to Athena or speak to her---what was he to say or do? Condemn her? Was it his responsibility? Despite his anxiousness, the smell of the cigarette was also slightly thrilling as Waldo had never smelt it so near before.

She stretched her left hand to Waldo with one Marlboro dart sticking out of the box with her head facing the window.

“Want one?”

Waldo practically went cold, they really *were* cigarettes.

“I don’t smoke,” shook Waldo’s vocal chords.

“You don’t smoke, wow, you don’t smoke, alright,” she mumbled as her voice dwindled downward.

“Do your parents know abou---”

“What is it chief? Are you going to tell my aunt?” she said as she turned her head and stimulated all her features, igniting a glow in the fast-approaching darkness that made Waldo almost choke.

“Well---”

“Okay then, just drop it then.” She then licked her lips like a lioness after dinner and put the end of the stick in her mouth. The car arrived at the “Wellbeing Center.” The sky was quite dark, an indication of the fast approaching winter with its short days and long nights.

Athena waited until they reached the front of the building where she crushed the end of her recreational stick into the ash and tossed it into the bucket. They entered the deserted center.

“Hey Athena!” said Kate, the new front desk receptionist, to Athena.

“Kate! How are you?” She responded as she bounced her sneakers towards the front desk; Waldo lingered behind and eventually made it to the woman and girl talking as if they’d known each other for ages. Actually, Kate and Athena quickly struck a friendship. In between therapeutic sessions, Kate and Athena would snigger and whisper to each other. Kate, who was stern, became a teenage girl again when talking with Athena.

Kate was telling Athena a story about her “stupid” boyfriend until she interrupted herself and remembered her duties.

“Oh, Waldo, you’ve got one more, ummm...Bob.”

“Alright, well, I guess we’ll knock this last one out then,” said Waldo.

In the room, Athena sat in the corner where she always sat and played with her phone. Waldo sat watching the arms tick on his watch meditatively. Everything was so relaxing now that nobody was there. He thought about Jimmy and assumed he left already and mused about other things.

Athena heaved her chest ane let out a sigh as she dropped her hand with her phone into her lap.

“He’ll be here any minute,” Waldo reassured.

“It’s not that...You know those girls you were staring at earlier?”

“Excuse me?” Waldo reddened.

“You’re excused. Anyways, I hate them all, seriously, they’re all so pathetic. Hysterical! That’s the word, I need a Sigmund Freud on my hands to get a hint at what they’re saying, you know? Freud, ha, they’re hysterical. Carey’s always bothering me about this and that---can never clean her act---it’s stupid, maybe a shot of whiskey might help---though there’s more affective methods if you know what I mean. Anywa--Carmen? Yea, I hate her too. We’ve always been best friends, we both cheerlead. But ever since I’ve been the captain, she gets mad at me for no reason,” Athena rampaged through.

Combine her fast pace with her seemingly nasally congested voice, Athena sounded like she wasn't even speaking but producing random, subtle sounds. By the end of Athena’s rant, Waldo was embarrassed to not know what to say or how to react. He tried to say something, and for the first time, Athena looked at him curiously as if he were going to say something that mattered. The air blew out of his body, and he just mumbled.

“Moral? I hate these squeaky clean girls,” she said as she tilted to the side and looked at the floor with a disgusted face.

“But aren’t you a ‘squeaky clean girl’?” grinned Waldo.

Athena looked at Waldo with a vicious look as if she were digging for alternative motives embedded in those words.

“Oh shut it, you don’t know me a bit.”

“Well tell me,” smiled Waldo.

Athena's eyelashes blinked and her eyes shone from the reflection of the light hanging above. She squinted her eyes cautiously, still searching for something suspicious in Waldo’s attitudes. She looked at his knuckles and gelled pep-boy hair.

“Well, the hell do you want to know about me?” she said as she scooted her chair up. Waldo caught a glimpse of *real* emotion in her.

“Why are you doing this...Shadowing me. Why the study of the psyche?”

Athena smiled a little as Waldo expected an insult but instead, she ripped open a gum wrapper from the side of her skirt and chewed.

“I once read (chew, chew) um, what’s his name? Oh yea, dustu something, well his book was a seller for me, though I think the main character’s submission to Christianity at the end was comically cheap of the author, have you read it?”

“No.”

“It was Freud that sealed the deal though.”

“Freud?” Waldo looked funnily at Athena.

“Yea. And if all these softies---like you by the way---treated your patients like Freud did, you’d actually get some results instead of talking about how you went to the park with grandma for chrissakes,” she said as her voice inflected up and down even more, adding a chaotic charm.

“That doesn’t seem so realistic, you’re aware that many of his theories were scientifically wron---”

“Am I aware? Of course dimwit, everybody is, that’s not the point. Since when did therapy have much to do with science anyways? Just pick a method and run with it. Freud’s is the best because it doesn’t assume that we’re all born good and tidy like your Mr. Carl Rogers who practically became a hippy and ran in the California fields with Joseph Campbell, dripping acid on their tongues and talking about *mysticism* and advocating for ‘world peace.’ I can do that! I’ll just come up with a strange phrase and yell it at the top of my lungs and act like I’m doing good. The government doesn’t c-care, nor the world. If that’s s-scientific, then I don’t know what is.” Waldo grasped onto key words that he heard her viper tongue spit out and got lost in the rest of the madness. He then laughed heartily as his chest shook. Athena felt mocked as she crossed her arms but smiled a little, convinced that she was humorous.

“But the hippies advocated environmentalism,” rebounded Waldo

“So what? The Nazi’s advocated for the cleaning of factories and tuberculosis scanning.”

Waldo with a pleasant smile on his face adjusted his body in the seat, his face still recovering from the humorous remarks.

“What do you have against Rogers?”

“Rogers?” Athena said with her eyes ripping wide open, uncovering uncut gems. “Well the idiot proposed—not proposed, that was the Catholics—he believed that we’re fundamentally good-oriented and that evil is only the absence of good. How ridiculous of a claim is that? If anything, man *is* evil by birth. It doesn’t take a lot of cognitive power to observe tribal warfare, the gas chambers, the kulaks, psychopaths, serial killers, school shooters, the works! We kill each other like no other animal and best of all, we *enjoy it*,” she said as her mouth and tongue took the angle of a snake’s mouth. So much bitterness settled on her palate, she could practically taste bile in her mouth.

She chewed on her gum viciously and stared at the floor. Waldo thought Athena looked manic as her facial expression would change from sternness to aggression to joyousness as thoughts entered the theater of her imagination.

“And let’s just say you tell me: ‘Oh Athena, you’re wrong my dear, you are too cynical about the nature of man.’ I’d say: ‘Well honey, you’re a naive darling aren’t you? Oh alright, I’ll give it to you. But what shall we do about the meaning of man? Because the meaning of man does not exist. Understand? Where are we to go from there? Because the only stable form of knowledge, science, rejects that there is another world, and God. And what do you suppose people’s ‘meaning’ was for the last twenty centuries? God and some after-world paradise! Well then, now he is dead, what do we do? Nothing, let him remain in his coffin for making the world suffer for his causes and let his corpse rot. May we never see him or his likes again for it is because of him that all of world history was filled with warfare, ignorance to the truth---which, by the way, the church so adamantly claimed it cherished----and self-denial. These religious people ‘chastised’ themselves from all things that make this life pleasant—sex, money, food, and drink—so that they can justify their state of serfdom and cling onto the notion of the heavenly paradise, where they can indulge in all their Freudian fantasies that were repressed when they were on Earth.”

Waldo looked at Athena impressed (and even intimidated) at how fast she could think and speak.

“You can still find a meaning in life without religion,” Waldo responded with his right leg over the left. “Can’t you?” he mumbled shyly.

Athena gave Waldo a side glance and laughed.

“First of all, religion was the illusion of meaning. And no, there is nothing special about us and this life. What makes you think you’re any different than a fawn---”

“What’s a fawn?” Waldo interrupted, amused.

“It’s a baby deer. My Dad hunts,” she rolled her eyes. “Okay, where was I?”

“Fawn.”

“Right. So what makes you think you’re any different than a fawn? We are really just an animal that’s been punished with consciousness. And so, to compensate for all the death anxiety, existential dread, and suffering, we construct an illusion to live in. I’ve, by the way, lived in that pathetic illusion---I was the only sane one at church.

“Furthermore, hardcore empirical evidence has told us that nothing exists except *matter*. That’s it, this world is a cold abode of protons, neutrons, and electrons; this universe is an infinitely crushing force that, heavens knows why, hasn’t killed us already and everytime we defy science, only hell breaks loose. So we should probably listen to it.” Athena’s bosom heaved up and down and her aggressive look made her look striking.

“What about your loved ones? Friends and family? They have something to do with meaning,” rebounded Waldo.

“Nope. Another curious invention that conveniently maps on quite nicely to biological necessities of survival. We have to live with people, we’re herd animals, it’s not like you care about people. So, we make up ‘friends’ and ‘family’, exploiting our selfish desire to survive and call it ‘altruism.’ The science is in, we’re all inputs and outputs, essentially machines that sense stimuli and react to them. That’s all there is to it, everything else is madness as a result of consciousness that nature damned us with. Man should become an animal again or kill himself before we cause any more harm,” she said as her gum stopped chewing and silence stood in the room.

Waldo shook his head with a soft smile. He enjoyed her rapture, her fit of passion.

“The way you look at things reduces everything down to nothing. I guess you could justify doing whatever you want to do because everything is useless anyways. What’s that called? Hedo—,” said Waldo.

“You say hedonism as if it’s self-evident that it's bad; don’t wag this Kantian metaphysics at me,” Athena responded annoyed.

“The dominant religions and their followers who so adamantly claim anti-hedonic ideals were *all* hedonists!” Athena had tried to speak loudly, but her unique vocal cords could only allow her a strange yelp like a songbird crying in the mouth of a wolf.

“How so?” chuckled Waldo at Athena’s cute and lively cry.

“Well, what is the end goal of every pious Christian?” Athena asked, switching her legs and crossing them anxiously.

“To be---closer to their God,” Waldo responded doubtedly.

“Oh come on now, be more specific, what’s the carrot on the stick for every religious slave and king alike that gives them the incentive to endure suffering?”

“Heaven.”

“Ah ha!” lit up Athena. “Exactly, and what is heaven? A river of milk and honey, nymphs and virgins dancing around a garden, exotic fruit hanging from trees, and what is it? Non-intoxicating wine will be served as Allah says. If all this does not sound like wish-fulfillment fantasies of a bunch of old middle-eastern men, then I’m not sure what is! The very motive for the religious slave is a *hedonic utopia.* A bunch of damn cowards I tell you,” she said, now her face red like blood on ivory.

Waldo nodded his head, sufficiently impressed by Athena’s performance. Waldo collected the information that was thrown at him somewhere in his head where he could not access at the

moment; all he thought about was how such a girl her age could have already figured out the world and all its complexities. He watched Athena pull her thick hair back as it stood wide behind her neck, as if to initiate the coup de grace, like a lioness who puffs her hair after killing her prey.

Waldo nodded thoughtfully. Athena squinted her eyes a little at Waldo, a strange habit of hers. At that moment, he could see all the details of her face, every speck of beige, gold, red, white, and brown scattered on her cheeks. The purple under her eyes, so common to the tired student, wore on Athena like auroras, glittering on the paleness of her cheeks. Her nose twitched.

"One more question," Waldo asked as Athena looked up.

"Is Athena your real name?" Waldo added with a clever look.

"I'll snap your neck."

9

The door in the corner opened, it was Kate.

"Waldo, Athena—looks like he's not coming," Kate said with a gay smile.

Waldo dropped his hand on his knees and nodded with self-satisfaction.

"Well, there you have it, sometimes they come, sometimes they don't," Waldo smiled. Kate giggled and told them that she was going to leave after finishing some paperwork.

The door closed and the two sat calmly for a few seconds.

"Oh my!" Athena yelped.

"What?"

"It's late." Athena placed her hand on her forehead and began dialing a number rapidly.

"Do you have someone picking yo---"

Athena's phone began to buzz. She talked to someone on the phone and disappointedly thanked the person as she ended the call.

"He can't pick me up," she sighed, annoyed as she got on her firm feet.

Waldo and Athena walked out of the room, her feet kicking in front of her more athletically than graceful.

"Can your dad pick you up?" Waldo asked, bending his neck. Waldo and Athena stopped in the lobby as the lights began to turn off in the back of the room.

"Oh no," Athena exclaimed with a horrid look. "He'll beat me for being so late, I'd rather have it done at home," she laughed.

Waldo felt the pump in his chest squeeze faster. "What was it she said? Was she joking?"

"I don't know how I'll get there," she said curiously as she stood on her toes and looked into the darkness of the parking lot with her phone in her left hand.

Waldo swung behind to see if Kate had heard what Athena had said, but she was too busy packing her bag and turning off lights.

Athena started humming like a song-bird and playing with her feet. Waldo suddenly realized that Athena was probably a neglected child whose father was never home and who, as a consequence, sought compensation from other boys, whom he'd been seeing pick her up every evening after their 'shadowing' session. Pity welled in Waldo's heart as he heard the girl hum and play and laugh when she tripped over her foot foolishly. "Why does no one care for her?" he asked the world.

"Where do you live?" Waldo asked.

"Nowhere and everywhere." She laughed like a mouse. She recovered from her fit and combed her hair back. "It's going North, just hit I-10 and keep going straight, past G---- and B----."

"I'm sorry, I should probably tell you I only moved her from Boston last month."

"Ha, Boston. It's near B-----. You know where that is right?"

"Yea," lied Waldo. "I can take you, if that's what yo---"

"Yes! Alright let's go." She darted to the parking lot as Waldo trailed behind with his key swinging on his finger.

The man and the girl got into the car. The car's interior was lit up as Athena slipped into a crooked posture and typed on her phone. Waldo read a message from Alice and responded back to her.

"Did you leave anything?" Waldo asked as the car began to move.

"Uh-uh."

"How about your bag?"

"Oh shoot." The door opened as she ran inside to get her bag.

It turned out that Athena lived quite far into the countryside of town.

"So you live on a ranch and go to school in downtown?" Waldo asked as he turned under the starry sky.

"Yea I guess I get the worst of both worlds," Athena said as if she were straightening her throat. She had her fingers curled up in front of her phone as the light illuminated her face.

"And why do you go to school so far away?" Waldo added.

"I dunno, my Dad put me there, it's the best school...they say." Athena ran her nails against the flesh of her lips.

"Put on your seatbelt," Waldo exclaimed, seeing how she bent over her phone like an armadillo.

The car drove on the dirt roads then suddenly, enormous houses emerged from the grassy plains like an oasis in the desert. They were the largest houses Waldo had seen since he had moved to Texas. Each house was firmly built and strong-like.

As the car drove along the road, Waldo eyed the navigation on his phone and turned his other eye inward to the thought that bothered him. He thought about Athena's father.

He glanced at Athena and saw her with her legs cramped up against her chest on the seat, in black socks with her sneakers lying on the floor; she was taking photos of herself as the flash illuminated her face. “She’s only a child, poor thing, does he really hurt her?” He felt something in his whole being for this girl, as if he needed to protect her from something whether the threat existed or didn’t.

“Athena?”

“Yea, what's up?” her voice quivered. Waldo noticed a tiny spot of ebony in between her hair. As she lifted her head, her eyes shined innocently, and he felt weak, incapable of asking her such a disgusting question.

“Does---I don’t mean to invade on your priva---”

“Oh you men, ask the question already.”

Waldo was taken aback as he gathered his thoughts again.

“Does your father hurt you?” Waldo asked, not believing that those words flew out of his mouth.

Athena sniggered at Waldo’s trivial question. “Yea, sometimes.” Waldo looked at Athena’s laugh in horror.

“It happens when he’s drunk,” she said, then looked at him curious to see if he was curious. “It don’t matter, I don’t love him anyhow.”

Waldo wanted to say so many things to her, but not a word could creep out from his dry lips. He wanted to tell her that it does matter and that she would tell him every time her father acted up, everytime her father abused her.

“Wow, you’re dead silent, sounds like *you’re* going to get a beating tonight, not me,” Athena said ironically. Suddenly she laughed.

“Is he going to---to do it tonight?” Waldo asked horridly.

“Well, it depends on his mood, if he’s drunk, I don’t see why not. If he’s not, he’ll still do it because I’m home late.” Athena then looked through the window and saw a moving object in the blue-black darkness of the night. “Ah! There’s a fawn, see?” Athena pointed cheerfully.

“Will you be alright?” said Waldo. He wanted to utter her name but couldn’t.

Athena snapped and looked at him with holy annoyance. “Oh my! Have you not seen or heard of someone getting slapped or belted? Jesuschristsakes, no wonder you're so naive. It doesn't even hurt. The worst punishment that man has inflicted on me was shooting Trevor because I slept over at a friend’s who he didn’t like.”

“Trevor!” Waldo exclaimed.

Athena became startled as she fixed herself in the seat with a disgusted look.

“Yea, it was my dog,” and Athena’s expression became slightly depressed, the first time he’d seen her like that.

“Oh,” Waldo said with relief.

“Oh so because it wasn’t a person you feel relieved? That’s shameful, really. Reaal shameful. What makes you think you’re any better than a dog? Oh because nature cursed you with consciousness? That’s why? Idiotic,” Athena said as if heating herself for another debate.

“Yup, here it is,” Athena let out and with a sigh.

The house looked like the Shepardsons’ from Twain, in the colonial design with white-painted wood, a large balcony in the front and in the back but updated with modern technology and principles. The windows were long, and clear cut replacing all the old bedroom windows. The shower window was exposed as Waldo could see the metallic shower head and granite tiles running all along the back wall. The immense field in the back was clouded in darkness. The house was a manifestation of opposite forces of tradition and progression subsumed into one.

Athena jerked her backpack, opening the door.

“Is he going to hurt you?” Waldo asked with shining eyes. He then became conscious of his hand that was holding on tightly to her backpack. Athena tugged at her bag, annoyed. Her eyes sharpened and her lips frowned.

“Get off my back, will you? It’s getting annoying.” Athena jerked her plump forearms back and the bag slipped out of Waldo’s hand as she tactfully swung the bag behind her back.

Waldo watched Athena until she walked into the house, until she walked upstairs and saw the lights turn on, until she settled into her room. He saw a man walk to the sofa downstairs and sit on the couch. Waldo waited tensely for ten minutes, expecting something to happen. Alice called Waldo, worried about where he was. Waldo then decided it was better to leave and that she may have been joking. Waldo drove home that night in a state of perplexion.

Alice’s book club went the same as usual; T.S Elliot was the reading. Waldo searched for Athena in the group of women and was mildly surprised when Laura came. He tensely expected Athena to come in a few short minutes. She was probably still in the car, getting something, thought Waldo. Waldo thought that Athena might walk in with her eyes dried up and bruises on her body, souvenirs of a drunk father. The images stuck in his mind, teasing him.

After the more boisterous than usual meeting had ended, Laura walked to Waldo and talked gayly.

“Oh Waldo, thank you so much for letting Athena come to work with you, it’s been helping her a lot, she says she loves it dearly! Is she causing you any trouble?” Athena’s aunt asked.

“Oh absolutely not, she’s a good kid, I’m happy to help,” said Waldo warmly.

“And she’s learning a lot, I suppose?” Laura questioned with her eyebrows.

“Yes, she's learning the various methods of psychoanalysis, and I can say she knows quite a bit.” Waldo found a strange delight in just talking about Athena. Suddenly though, he remembered what she had told him last night about her father. He didn’t feel sad or gloomy,

instead, he felt invigorated and energized like a colonial preparing to take the next step in a family feud. Yes, he felt lively.

"I'm sorry that I'm not able to drop her off, I've got work at the insurance company," Laura said genuinely.

"Yes we understand, I'm sure Waldo loves doing it anyways," Alice said cheerfully as she tapped Laura's shoulder. "I must meet Athena one of these days Laura!"

"Yes, you must, she's a darling, really!" Laura said loudly.

"And what do her parents do?" Alice asked.

"Father owns a large feedstore, he has good business."

"And...Mother?" let out Alice regretting the insensitive question, or so she thought.

Laura's face darkened and Alice masterfully steered the argument out of site. Laura talked about her job a little bit with Alice as Waldo mused about something. Laura finally left.

"Well she's such a charmer," Alice said as she sat by Waldo on the kitchen chair. "You never told me that you picked up Athena from school." Alice stared at him with her mouth jokingly pried open and her eyebrows twitching with slight contempt.

"Yes, her school is very grand."

"Really? I have to see it soon," Alice said, putting on a large grin.

10

Her mouth was certainly large. Or so it looked when she ate that enormous burger. This time of the day, the restaurant was relatively empty, but nonetheless, the savage play of the children continued in the playground behind the booth where the man and the girl sat. Again, her mouth devoured the side of the burger as she chewed so quickly, and her eyes spun like mad. The man watched her, worried she hadn't eaten anything all day. The sneakers bobbed, every limb of her body was always in motion and action.

"Did you eat lunch at school?" asked Waldo with a slow smile.

"Yes," said Athena, lifting her hand to her mouth.

"What did you eat?"

"Food."

"What food?"

"Idunnoacookieorsomething," she jumbled with food in her mouth.

"A cookie?" said Waldo with unbelief to which Athena nodded.

"You need to eat lunch."

"I had a test and I had to practice…so...none of yur business," her sick voice said, swallowing with difficulty in between her words. She sunk her hand into the cup of fries and dipped the sticks into the honey mustard. Waldo continued with his sandwich.

“I think that woman was a little bit on the schizophrenic side,” Athena randomly inserted as she turned in her seat and watched a child walking in the playground with a shoe dangling on his right foot.

“You think so?”

“Yea,” she said, still watching the child who tripped and began walking up the stairs of the play structure.

“She did install cameras in her husband’s car,” laughed Waldo.

The child walked across the jungle of wire and obstacles, his shoe still lingering at his foot. “What about Jeffrey?” asked Waldo.

The boy clung to one of the monkey handles and allowed his weak limbs to swing. Waldo looked at Athena strangely as she seemed frozen, her back half-twisted, eyes pointed to the playground.

“Athena?” Waldo said frustrated. She didn’t budge. “Athena, what do you think about Jeffrey?” She turned around with blank eyes, her silver retainers shining, lower lip hanging.

“What?” she said, with only a slight hint of derision. Waldo smiled because he knew she was thinking of something.

“Jeffrey? What do you think?” Waldo said.

“Oh...SSRIs. He’s beyond the point of help,” she said with a blank expression, eyes pointed downwards.

“I thought so too, he’s been coming for a long time. Problem is, I need to convinc---What are you looking at?” Waldo said with humor and disdain.

The child climbed into the orange slide and slid downward. After a few seconds, Athena saw nobody come out the end of the tube and watched curiously. Suddenly a cry erupted from the slide and Athena’s eyes sharpened.

“A kid crying can’t be that interesting,” Waldo guffed.

The screaming grew louder and sounded with agony. “MommyMommyMommy” it called. The other children screaming underneath the play structure drowned the boy’s cries.

“Anyways, we gotta head out in a few,” Waldo said.

“MOMMY,” cried the boy monstrously, shaking Athena’s heart unexpectedly.

The raspy voice now settled and sounded as if the boy had aged into an old man. The boy gave a final loud groan, so excruciating, Athena unconsciously put her hands to her ears.

“Peter? Mommy has to leave, come on dear.” A woman at the door stood searching in the mob of children.

The boy walked back slowly, rubbing the side of his head and back.

“Peter, I don’t have much time dear,” the woman said, crossing her arms.

The boy walked up to the woman with his back slouching and followed her out. The woman stared at her phone as the two walked. Athena’s eyes trailed them all the way into their car.

“Athena?” ringed in Athena’s ears. She turned around and exposed her expression. She hated how she felt, especially in front of Waldo who she thought was nothing short of a hooligan.

“Well, are you done worshiping those little devils?” Waldo said.

Athena looked up with hardened features; her jawline now looked sharper; her eyes, greener; her neck, stiffer. That tormented look penetrated Waldo for half-a-second before her expression dissolved and became replaced with her cynical teenagerism. She then broke her witty smile. Underneath that smile, Waldo fancied that some turmoil was turning.

“You look hungry, want another burger?” Waldo asked.

She took the second burger and ate the thing in a few large bites in the car, with the fries in the cup holder and the ketchup in the other. She crossed her sneakers on top of the dashboard. Waldo had become upset the first few times she had done this, but now it didn’t seem to bother him. He may have even grown fond of it.

Waldo glanced at her as he steered and saw a fry wedged between her ring and middle finger as she brought it to her lips.

“Jeez I’m already getting fidgety. I don’t have any Balmains left,” she said as she patted her backpack sitting on the floor. “...I seriously need one of those *vape* things,” said she, squeezing her lips at “vape.”

“Does your father know about this?” asked Waldo.

“My Dad knows nothing about me, and he doesn’t want to. I like it that way,” said she, her voice quavering up and down as she pretended to smoke the fry.

Waldo looked at her terrified. He was burning to say something, anything, but didn’t know how to say it. “Athena?” he dared to say. “I want you to know that you can tell me...you know?---”

“No, I don’t know,” she interrupted.

“Well you see, your father and---”

“Yea what about him?” she snapped.

“I guess I wanted to say that if you ever feel inse--”

“Holy smokes, do you ever get to the point?” she remarked with a disgusted look that allowed her retainers to shine the sun in Waldo’s eyes.

“Well if you let me speak!” responded the now frustrated Waldo. Athena laughed, delighting in her discovery of this side of Waldo.

“Your father, yes, you told me he beats you and I wanted to talk to you about that,” he said, recovering from the steam in his head as his face glowed red.

“My father beats me? I was joking. For crissakes what’s wrong with you?” Athena rapidly responded then forced herself to laugh strangely. Waldo’s gaze fell downwards.

“What? You mean you lied to me, Athena?” he said with such indignation that Athena wanted to laugh in his face.

“Yes!” she said as she pulled out her cellphone and began swiping.

“Athena…” he said, now dully angered. “Athena?”

“Shut up, I’m texting my friends,” she responded. Suddenly, Waldo aggressively grabbed the phone out of Athena’s hand while swerving the car with his other hand. Athena looked at Waldo with such enraged eyes, he almost gave her back the phone. Suddenly she threw her arms at him to grab her phone. Waldo kept the phone situated in his left hand to the very far corner as Athena’s hands reached for the phone.

“Yousomegoddamnheroareya?”

Waldo, shielding himself from the almost wild Athena, swerved the car to the shoulder of the road. Athena was already tightly gripping Waldo’s forearm, her claws sinking into his arm, her knees resting on his lap.

“Jesus! Get off!” he yelped in pain.

“No! Give me my phone, it’s unlocked too, you bastard!” she howled.

Waldo softly grabbed her wrist and tried to calm her down. Her eyes finally settled, as Waldo could actively see the green vanish from her eyes and the blue fill like springs. Her nostrils pumped out less air.

“I’ll give you the phone, once you answer my question straightly,” Waldo said, looking at Athena like examining an animal. Athena then became self-conscious as she lifted her knees from Waldo’s lap and sat in her seat with her arms crossed, looking out the window.

“That was real indecent,” Waldo remarked sternly.

“Ya you should teach me some of your *decency*,” she said scornfully.

“Now, listen—look at me.” She obeyed his command.

“Has your father ever hurt you?” Waldo asked carefully. Cars flew by on the road so fast, the whole sedan shook.

“No! Can’t take a joke, and what’s it to you?”

“See! Answer me with the truth Athena, did he *ever* hurt you, touch you---”

“How dare you ask me those questions you prick,” she said with her mouth hanging dramatically. She tried to grab the phone from Waldo’s hand again but he pulled back in time.

“So, you were joking, Athena?” Waldo said.

“Yes! Yes! Now give it.” She finally snatched the phone from Waldo’s hand (who let his hand loose) and sat down as her skirt settled down in a rippling motion.

“I don’t believe you,” Waldo said quietly, as he put his hands on the steering wheel and leaned his head against it, looking out his window.

“Suit yourself,” the cynic echoed, adding more pain to the injury.

As he shifted the gears of the car, a thought dazzled Waldo: “Of course she won’t tell you. She’ll do everything possible to try to make you believe her father has never touched her. Why? Because where will she go when her father’s arrested? To an orphanage? And that’s only hell to a girl who’s grown up with luxuries like she has.”

He pressed the pedal and came onto the road.

“Besides, she’s probably scared her father will find out she told an outsider about their abusive relationship; In that case, he’ll only beat her more! No, no, that’s not good. Yes, she’s saving herself.”

11

“Hegel. So Hegel believed in a *grand* historical narrative where opposite forces fought between each other on the mass scale, good and evil, oppressed and oppressor, etc. Marx took this concept and ran with it, applying it to the bourgeoisie and proletariat dichotomy and rivalry. So if you’re a Marxist, you are somewhat, inherently a Hegelian.

“Now, at his core, Hegel was a relativist, meaning, he believed that there was no absolute truth. Remember what Kant said about *a priori* truths? Hegel’s point of view was quite contrary to that, he instead rejected the ‘thing-in-itself’ and supposed that the only thing that exists are our ideas and that everything else is our projections of those ideas. Though it isn’t *entirely* true that Hegel believed there aren’t any absolute truths; he did believe that a degree of absoluteness can be achieved when talking about theories and ideas themselves but not the objective world. Now if I---who’s doing that? (Athena’s foot stopped its violent tapping). Anyways---(sigh) where was I?---Ah yes, Hegel and the objective world, so Hegel believed that we *can* form an objective truth! Only it must be formed about ideas and theories and concepts themselves not of the---Athena, what are you doing? (Athena removed the backpack from her face and shrugged confused)---Just, pay attention, alright? Alright, so Hegel...Yes...Well I’m sick of Hegel anyways, let’s go to Marx.

“Marx is an interesting chap, he believed in the redistribution of wealth, remember that phrase it’s key, it *will be on the test,* I’m telling you now before the whole class erupts about it, anyways. Marx, yes. What does redistribution of wealth mean? It meant taking the wealth from the---Athena?” he said now exhausted with blood-shot eyes.

“Yes sir?” Athena said, slipping her phone into her backpack.

“Why were you on your phone?” he asked, now enraged. Two students whispering in the left corner became frozen.

“Oh, my Dad texted me, Mr. Lasch, I’m sorry about that,” she said charismatically and with shining eyes. The possibility of Mr. Lasch becoming mad was very high and he was aware of it, but now, it seemed futile to lash out.

“May I text him back Mr. Lasch?” she said with two, concerning eyebrows raised.

“You may at the end of class,” he responded with a cool tone and ease of gesture that surprised all the students who were awaiting an eruption that Mr. Lasche displayed so often in class. Mr. Lasche would leave school feeling entirely guilty about it and would vow each time to exhibit more “*temperantia*.” Unfortunately, Mr. Lasche was never able to live by his own creed;

by the last period of the day, Lasche was only searching for reasons to become mad and vent all his anger about his last ten years spent between divorce attorneys, visiting his brother in jail, and trying to quiet addictions of cigars, sugar, and movies.

Athena, after a few minutes, took her phone out again and began engaging in futile pursuits: swiping through messages, the news, photos, the media, anything that pleased her twitching fingers.

"And then---wa lah!---the Russian revolution...And that's Lenin (he pointed to a photograph) after the revolution. The most interesting part of the revolution was that---Athena," he said, beaming at Athena with malevolent excitement.

"Are you paying attention to my lecture?" he asked, short of breath. Athena slipped her phone back into her backpack, excited to see how she could make a show out of the situation at hand.

"Do you want my honest answer or the correct answer?" Athena said, now terrified of what she had left her lips.

"I want *an* answer, Athena," he said firmly.

"Well, no, because I don't see why I need to, I know all the stuff you're talking about either way. Marx on the means of production and how he thought Capitalism stole the products of the worker and dehumanized them? Check. What else? Hegel and his concept of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, which, by the way, I don't think you even talked about. The amount of time we waste in school is astonishing to me," she said, with her heart pumping. When the students in the corners began to snigger and when Mr. Lasche's jaw was pried wide open, Athena realized the magnitude of her actions. Thankfully, the bell rang as she and the other students quickly abandoned the classroom. Upon exiting, she dissolved into the mass of stampeding students entering from all the other classrooms. Her face flushed bright red and her hands shook. As a friend walked past Athena, she remarked something about a test to which Athena heard only white noise and walked past her.

Despite her rebellious nature, Athena was a preppy girl who cared about her appearances to teachers and maintaining good grades---which she was very successful at. She was seen as a respectful, unusually intelligent, athletic superstar who also happened to have great communication skills; in short, she was the perfect St. Anthony's Student. She was anything but rebellious, except for a short period of time when rumors spread that she had refused to go to the Euherist ceremony. Soon, even these rumors died down as the community noticed that their super-star cheerleader was sitting in her seat at Eucherist like a pious chrsitian.

The school treated Athena like a commodity that had to be held tightly because of the nationwide recognition she had brought to the St. Anthony's Academy by helping her team win national competitions. Now, she was the youngest team captain of the cheerleading team the school had seen for decades, and the seniors weren't so happy about it.

As Athena walked down the stairs, a friend passed by her touching her arm in the midst of the swarming crowd.

"Athena," her friend called. Athena turned around with tired eyes.

"Mm?"

"Did Cross talk to you yet?" she said.

"Cross?" Athena asked surprised, "No, Why?" Her friend smiled and dissolved back into the crowd.

Athena continued to walk down the hall and turned at the corner. Backpacks and sneakers scooted out of their classes in a hurry. Athena walked carefully, confused at why she was alone. "Where's Jessica," she mumbled under her breath, turning her neck in both directions. The push of people behind her caused her to continue walking forward and out of the building. On the school lawn, she smelt the pretty scent of the yellow roses.

The smell of youth, fresh cut grass, and love were in the air; it was close to the time of the ball. For Athena, such an event only meant turning down more boys, so that youth and confidence only smelt bitter to her. Momentarily, she decided to sit on the stone bench just outside the gym. Her hands unconsciously moved in cheerleading positions as her thoughts drifted into fog. She peeked at the painted mountain lion on the side of the wall and imagined how it might be if she were a lion.

Suddenly, a chilling feeling of loneliness washed over her body as she realized that there was nobody to talk to. Despite the severe criticism she layed on her friends when talking to Waldo, she depended on them so that she would never have to allow her thoughts to enter bleak places. With engaging in fleeting discussions about makeup, cheerleading, and music, she was able to keep her hyper-active conscience tamed.

She looked around with searching eyes and saw some of her teammates walking into the building with bags around their shoulders. Athena rubbed her hands uncomfortably and tried to get off the stone many times, but lethargy began to overcome her.

The wind slapped her body and felt far colder than it really was as she rubbed the side of her shoulders. She looked to her left, begging the world to keep everybody away from her and at the same time to send somebody to her. Wild thoughts slowly crept from the depths of her soul, teasing and taunting her. She didn't know where to go and who to go to. Several times, she thought of calling her friends.

She suddenly took off into the gymnasium. Thankfully, the restrooms were empty. She stared in the mirror, into her glowing eyes with reprehension and began tossing hot water onto her face, running her hands along her jaw and the tip of her neck. She slowly moved her fingers down her vocal chords and allowed the heat to cool her neck.

She snatched a paper from the dispenser and dried her skin and then walked out, anticipating a second attack of a flurry of thoughts. The cold wind blew her skirt and hair, making her appear like a ghost in that darkening sky. The school had become entirely vacant,

except for the students who treaded the sides, anticipating their sports' practice. She stood alone, looking at her sneakers as her entire team changed in the locker room.

"Athena?" a voice called.

A tall, red-haired boy stood in the corner.

"Hey Joshua," Athena responded as she pulled her hair back.

"D-do you want...to go to Founder's Ball with me?" he asked, more confident than afraid. Athena had become sick of this question as Athena thought it had a false sense of flattery and honor while underneath, a horrid truth lurked.

She looked into his eyes and saw devotion. Heavens knows how long he spent practicing that little phrase that now sounded so repugnant, so insulting to her. Her whole facial expression displayed to the boy, "I've been here many times, *mon cheri*, and frankly, I'm tired of it." She had chosen not to go to dances with any partner for the past two years out of sheer spite. No, it was not that she did not like anyone enough to go with, rather, it was a matter of principle; she may've even liked Joshua, but her whole being detested the idea of a 'partner.' To put her arms around another's shoulders and allow them to guide her.

Her little tongue lifted and pronounced "yes" while she was certain she had said "no." She realized the answer that left her mouth was incongruent with her thoughts when Joshua's face twinkled with excitement. Why had she said yes? Athena didn't know herself; maybe she was sick of obeying some principle she established and wanted to deviate from it to spite her own way of thinking, to show to herself that she wasn't a slave to values but a human being with freedom, no matter how miserable. But somewhere in the depths of her solar plexus, she hoped that affirming the young man's desire would bring happiness to her, maybe just momentarily. Instead, more dread came over her as she walked into the locker room.

She changed into her practicing uniform and walked into the gymnasium, lined with mirrors, floored with mats. The other girls stared at their master, some with envy, some with joy, and some with reverence.

Athena looked at them firmly and began shouting orders as the coach prepared her material for that evening's practice. Bodies flew, arms shook, and legs stomped as Athena realized why it was that such a sport that borderline drives the mind to insanity and the body to a state of cripple had appealed to her. It was the numbing effect, the effect one feels when the body and mind is burnt to a crisp, exhausted of its fuel so that it can no longer function and only succumbs to the basic, primal needs of food and sleep. Such a simplistic state is what Athena sought.

At times throughout the practice, Athena's voice would display momentary fits of anger, as statements and insults would leap from her throat. All the girls would carefully watch Athena metamorph into a different version of herself as she screamed at them with her arms on her knees, like a disappointed mother contending with her rebellious daughters. The girls couldn't help but ask themselves whether she was putting on a show for the coach or if it really was genuine.

At one point, as a formation was beginning, one of the younger girls had collapsed on the floor. Athena turned around with menacing eyes to see who it was that dared disobey her order. Suddenly the rest of the girls piled in front of the frail body that lay on the ground. Athena lingered in the corner, with shy eyes, not knowing what to say to her hysterical team members and coach.

Athena remembered that that young girl was cheerleading for the first time and how she had developed a religious-like reverence for her team capitan. Once, after a long football game, the young girl lightly tapped Athena's shoulder and asked her if she could be in a photo with her. Athena remembered her soft eyes that looked so innocently to her and then her mother who took the photo as if her daughter were standing next to a celebrity. Athena then remembered that young girl's downward cast when she walked in front of her or her dried lips when Athena confronted her for a mistake in the drill. All this only made her hate the young girl more as her teammates and coach hauled the body quickly to the nurse.

Athena stood alone in the middle of the empty room, hearing only the buzzing of the tube lights and the faint screams and cries of her teammates.

She opened the door and was shocked by the fast approaching darkness. The cold wind did not bother her exposed skin. She had already told Waldo that she was not to shadow that day because of her ever increasing workload. After what seemed a long time, Athena felt a cold hand touch her elbow.

"It's cold!" Jessica shivered. "How are you out here like that?" Athena turned to Jessica with blank eyes.

"Oh it's nothing...I'm hot from the...work," Athena muttered. Jessica rubbed her shoulders and tried to say something but stopped and tried again.

"Sydney's alright by the way," Jessica said softly, worried that Athena had not asked about her or had not come with them to the nurse. "She just fainted."

"That's good," Athena said and attempted to smile after noticing Jessica's worried look.

"And I'm guessing you're waiting for that psychologist guy?" Jessica asked loudly, trying to defeat Texas winds.

"No…" Athena responded with cold lips and was now able to produce a "genuine" smile. Jessica's face beamed at seeing her friend's smile. Suddenly, her smile collapsed and returned to her original expression.

"Your Dad's coming then?" Jessica asked with her voice reducing in volume and her eyes askance.

"No---actually, can you give me a ride?" Athena asked with eyes that glowed in the dark.

"But put on some pants first," Jessica responded.

Athena slipped on her joggers and climbed into Jessica's truck. The truck grumbled along the road and twisted and turned along the valley.

"So…" Jessica said, obviously trying to say something. "Did he ask you?"

Athena looked at Jessica dumbfoundedly.

“Joshua, did he ask you to the Founder's Ball?”

“Yea,” Athena said greyly as she looked through the window again, watching those lines with more focus.

“And?” she said, glancing at Athena. Athena turned around and let out air through her cheeks and sank in her seat and shrugged.

“What do you mean, did you say yes or no?” Jessica asked, her excited dark eyes bouncing in the darkness.

“I said...yes,” Athena mumbled.

“Oh that’s so amazing! Me and the girls were trying to organize this for two weeks now--- ever since Joshua told me--and, I just had a feeling you’d finally say yes this year,” Jessica said, her hands steering more smoothly and her eyes now freed from the strain she carried the entire trip.

Jessica’s whole conspiracy was repugnant and disdainful. She listened to Jessica’s chatter like how a pre-occupied father listens to his children.

The car finally arrived, and before Athena was about to open the door, Jessica tugged at Athena’s bag to ask her to stay longer.

“Joshua’s a great guy Athena, I’m really happy for you. I’ve told Joshua that when he buys the tickets, he add me and Grey on the table. You know I’m going with Grey, right? Yeah, you probably do. Okay, bye!” she waved.

“Thank you,” Athena let out and attempted a smile as she slipped down the truck and walked towards her house. Her feet felt like lead as she walked upstairs without a single glance at her father who was drinking whiskey and watching a football game. Each foot in front of the next until she reached her room and flung the door open.

She immediately opened her computer and scrolled through pages, equations, essays, and articles. Hours passed as every second conspired against her. Her lips quivered as her hand dropped on the side, cramping from writing. Her lips begged for the substance once more, and she obeyed.

She walked down the stairs on her feline feet and secretive eyes, trying not to give away her intention to her father or to disrupt him. As her feet touched the wooden floor, she fooled herself into believing that her father did not see her as she walked to the alcohol cabinet.

“Where are you (cough, cough) going?” her father asked without turning around. Athena’s heart pounded and her lips quivered even more, but not out of fear of being punished or being humiliated by her father—it had happened in the past where Athena’s father caught her and only told her to take a sip and attempted to become mad with her. What Athena feared was not being able to have some drink that her lips desired so badly.

“Just the restroom,” Athena responded casually as she quickly walked to the huge cabinet.

“You got a restroom upstairs for a reason,” her father said louder. Athena stood still in

front of the cabinet in case he would arrive or say anything else. To her delight, nothing was said after. In the cabinet stood luxurious bottles with golden wrapping, translucent glasses, and purple caps. She, without thinking, quickly opened one of the bottles, a new bottle she had been trying for a week, and poured some of the butterscotch liquid. She sipped immediately as her neck vibrated from top to bottom, dispelling the pleasure into her belly as she groaned quietly.

She poured some more into the cup and with great agility, slipped the cup in her right pocket and walked up the stairs.

She placed the cup next to the fish tank and began swiping through her phone, taking photos of herself, sending the copies to multiple people at a time. Her fingers swiped through anything that could keep her occupied. She texted her friends and once in a while stumbled upon a "congratulations" from a friend for accepting Joshua to the dance, which passed over her head like a distant memory. The swiping, 'hearting', and photo-taking went until she caught a glance at the unfinished work on the table.

Her harrowed eyes tried to concentrate on the words written on the sheet but could not. Sleep tempted her. Every now and then her eyes would drift into sleep and then she would jerk her body and open her eyes wide, hoping to escape the fog she hopelessly groped in. Another wave attacked her, but this time she slapped her face as hard as possible and winced while she did it. She then pulled the roots of her hair when the migraine-like headache threatened her left hemisphere with torture.

Athena then opened the window and sat on the edge and stared out into the fields where the crickets were still awake. She flung her backpack onto her lap and ravaged the front pocket. As she took out the red and white case, she miserably reminded herself of how her friends consumed new substances, some she didn't even know existed. "If anything, I'm a traditionalist," she mumbled and laughed as she slipped the cigarette in between her lips and lit it. She crossed her feet in front of her and felt comforted by the chirping of the only other creatures awake with her. The smoke of her tobacco rose to the stars and dissolved into the ever-expanding space.

As her right hand pushed out the window, allowing the cigarette to breathe, she felt momentary peace. She reached for a book sitting on her counter with her spare hand and began to read a few pages in celebration of her new-found serenity. It was by a Danish philosopher who Athena felt more inclined to mock than to praise but read on none-the-less because of his pretty prose. Her eyelashes fluttered, trying hard to concentrate on the letters. Unfortunately, her eyes began to spin or became blurry on each attempt. She would read a page and then rest her eyes and then continue. Suddenly, her solitude seemed blissful. "If I could be left alone like this," she pondered. "What would be the limits to my joy?" She dipped tobacco into her lips and read the Danish philosopher who was now becoming charming to her. She fancied how handsome he was just by the tone of his voice and then imagined her life in the nineteenth century in the small town of Denmark and how interesting it would be if this philosopher were to propose to her.

"Ah, it really was better back then. Things were simple, weren't they?...People dressed and acted better then...didn't they?" she said.

Feeling more relaxed, she took off her joggers, threw them to the side, and curled her right leg up. Her eyes focused on the pages again, delightfully trying to imagine sitting in the same room with this Danish philosopher, fancying how their marriage arguments would simply be philosophical debates. Suddenly, a headache struck her like a brick.

She sat on her chair at the desk, holding her head so it didn't fall into pieces, and watched her fish move slowly in the bowl. She reached her hand to grab her book from the window sill and saw the fish bounce and convulse in excitement. Athena realized that she had not fed the fish all day. She grabbed the food container and sprinkled some pellets. She stared miserably at the fish who was now opening and closing his mouth like mad and bouncing all around the bowl.

Athena rested her head sideways on the wooden table, and watched the feast. Suddenly, she jerked her hands and pulled her hair from the roots. She pressed her abdomen in as if she were bracing to cry, but no tears dripped.

As the fish finished eating those pellets, she addressed him. “Such a pathetic thing, so pathetic...Is that all you want? Is that your only joy? Well then,” she said as her hand reached for the food container to see if the pet would move again. She slowly picked up the container and saw the fish jumping in his bowl. Her heart fell downwards, absorbing the force of sour pity. She detested that albino thread that shined under her table light so beautifully. As the fish viciously devoured the pellets, she caught a glimpse of his eye shining like a man who’s anger has turned into a lust to kill. She dumped every last bit and set the empty can on the table.

“I hate you!” she yelled with a voice foreign to her as she grabbed the crystal cup with warm whiskey. She took a sip and then poured all of it in the bowl. The cup slammed on the counter and Athena fell on the floor in a delirious state. Her abdomen and throat convulsed in expectation of a thunderstorm. Oh how she hated herself, she was in too much pain to even allow the healing act of shedding tears. She curled herself inwards and rubbed her arms.

It was a few hours before dawn and Athena’s father was walking the back fields and inspecting the fence, walking side-long as the false-dawn shone in the sky. There were still many stars as the battle between night and darkness raged on. The jeans stretched as the man turned each leg with agility. He spotted a portion of the fence which was bending inwards, close to being flattened. “Yikes,” mumbled the man.

He ran into the garage and searched for his metal pliers and could not find them. He then remembered that Athena had asked to use them for a science project. He slowly walked upstairs so that Athena wouldn’t wake. The door creaked open as he walked inside. Athena’s father hadn’t entered her room since he last painted it brown, which was when she was a child. The thought struck him as surprisingly remorseful.

As he walked to the counter, his boot pressed into her wrist. She let out a loud shriek causing her father to jump in surprise to find her on the floor.

“Athena?” her father said carefully.

The man moved the curtains only a tad so that there was enough light to see silhouettes of each other. The man then attempted to touch her daughter's hair, but she flinched like a hurt fawn. He managed to slip his fingers into her hair and curled it downwards like lace. Athena could not believe that this was her father. She refused to believe such a ridiculous thing. His graceful touch, soothing tone, and soft breath all represented something that was everything but her father.

"You...slept on the floor?" he asked softly. He then moved his right hand slowly to Athena's face like what one does when he wants to pet a not fully tamed animal. Her nostrils pumped more air and her heart pounded as his hand came to her face. All of a sudden she wanted to embrace his caresses but her face flinched, acting on its own. The father did not give up as he reached further. Athena felt the hard calluses and all of a sudden she fell onto his shoulder.

She wanted to say a thousand words, evil and demonic, lovely and angelic, but none could leave her lips. Her knee pushed up against his stomach as she convulsed. The father's grip became tighter as he combed the thick threads downward then started again at the root of her skull and down again. He turned his neck to her cheek and saw the wet mascara coating the edges of her eye like a pond after a thunderstorm. He kissed the salty cheek and remained still, listening to her purge the inarticulable.

12

"Ah yes, I'm assuming most of us finished the book?" Alice said, with her eyes crunching and her voice spiking. A surprising amount of nods and "mhms" rang around the room. Alice looked on her group proudly and bounced on her tip-toes out of excitement. "I'm very impressed! I'll give the summary and then we'll discuss as usual!"

Waldo watched all the women and the old man curiously, not ever noticing how the tall woman had fiery red hair. His attention was diverted by seeing Laura glance around the room nervously, as such was her habit. Her pearl beads seemed to look dirtier the more Waldo examined them.

"Okay, shall we discuss?" Alice said, impersonating a cossack as she sat on the floor.

The book club ended after an hour of fruitful conversations, and the women grabbed their bags and their shoes. Waldo got up to meet Laura.

"Waldo, how are you?" she said in a subdued voice as her husband caned his way to the exit. Alice caught up to him and began a conversation, lighting up the old man who otherwise seemed to be in a state of eternal slumber.

"I'm fine, how are you?" Waldo responded with a warm smile.

"Well, very good, thank you for asking," Laura said.

“Can I ask you something personal?” Waldo asked, now his conscience reproaching him for taking such a secretive tone. Laura’s surprised face confirmed his conscience.

“Well?” she said, raising her eyebrow.

“Are you Athena’s...father’s...sister?”

“Oh, yes, I’m his sister,” Laura responded laughing with relief. Waldo laughed along.

“Can I ask you another personal question?” Waldo said with fading laughter.

“Might as well!”

“Have you seen him abuse her before?” Waldo asked, moving Laura to the side so Alice and the older man could not hear. Laura’s countenance darkened and her eyes became darkly curious.

“Athena?” she whispered.

Waldo nodded.

“Oh dear, never! He would never do such a thing Waldo, what makes you…” she said, losing words to express her worry and anxiety. “Have...you ever seen this Waldo?”

“No ma’am, I...I had my suspicions,” Waldo said in a dignified tone.

“You do? Well, what are these suspicions,” she said, now offended by Waldo.

“Well, I’m a psychologist Laura, and…something is wrong at home,” Waldo said in a voice professionals like to assume when talking about facts.

“I know your profession,” Laura responded with a socially acceptable amount of irritation. “But what makes you think my brother abuses his daughter?”

Waldo dipped his head down and then looked up. It was then he noticed how offended she was by him but simultaneously intrigued to know more.

“He’s the last man to treat a woman like that, needless to say...his daughter!” she said, raising her voice with a heaving chest. As Laura began to raise her voice, to Waldo’s relief, Alice volunteered to walk the old man to his car as he engaged in his first exuberant conversation he’s had for many years.

“It’s vile, what you say...I’m sorry, but he’s the sweetest person I know, Waldo,” she said, wiping her invisible tears. Waldo watched her like a client in his office. “I’ve seen them together...He’s loved her even more ever since his---God-forbid---wife left him,” she said, as if releasing great tension from her chest.

“His wife, what happened?” Waldo asked with a worried expression.

“Oh, she was borderline manic, and---oh well, she ran off one night, and they couldn’t find her since. They had fights more often than I could count. I suggested to Rick that he divorce her, but...he loved her,” Laura said, now shaking her head. “She once became very angry with me at a dinner to the point that she threatened to hit me with her spatula. It wasn’t very pretty...Oh and of course, she had a habit of throwing things around the house in a fit of rage. Rick once told me that she smashed the electric stove with the tea-pot when they were arguing. Once she was pacified and everything was settled, they had to tell Athena---who was just a kid then---that it cracked from the heat.”

Waldo nodded his head in an analytical way which pleased the now emotionally possessed Laura.

"Oh I remember little Athena, when she would spend time with us. Ford---my husband---would love to have her over. You know, her face was always freckled like that?" Laura said with a nostalgic smile as Waldo listened with delight. "Her pretty hands would always grab Ford's thumb; she would try to pull it off and Ford would---back then he was lively---pretend like he lost his thumb by hiding it underneath his palm and…you know, the tricks of every great uncle," she said with a sorrowful smile.

"Very sweet," Waldo responded, remembering that image of Athena smoking out his window.

"But Waldo, you haven't told me any *real* indications of why Rick should hurt his daughter," she said unconsciously reaching for Waldo's hands, clearly worried.

"Laura…I'm only telling you because Athena told me herself," Waldo said, forcing himself to appear dangerously serious.

"A--Athena...No..She told you?" Laura stumbled with a new layer of surprise possessing her.

"Yes ma'am."

"When? Tell me!"

"I was driving her back home ma'am, and---"

"Why were you driving her back?" Laura asked suspiciously.

"Because her father never picks her up, he's busy working," Waldo responded with a strange smile. Laura listened as if listening to something she was embarrassed to know because she should've known such a thing in advance.

"Oh.." she said.

"And...Well, she remarked how her father will beat her if she comes home late and especially if he's drunk," Waldo said, now feeling embarrassed to embarrass Laura but also strengthened by what he considered "hard" evidence.

"Dear, do you think she was being serious?" Laura asked in a sincere tone.

"Yes ma'am and from my experie---"

"No, absolutely not! I cannot believe your expertise (once again I apologize, but I trust my own brother), she's a steller girl, and there seems to be no reason to hit her! It's preposterous. Besides, I'm sure she said something prior to that repugnant but nonetheless childish and darkly comical phrase that would change the meaning entirely. I know myself that she's quite fond of blatant and dark jokes. She once joked with me about her grandma dying, which almost gave me a heart attack, but I learned to become accustomed to her style the more I spent time with her. I assume it's supposed to be a form of catharsis or heavens knows what, the generations are gradually becoming more sick in the head," she said with her whole figure animated.

“I’m sorry Laura...I felt it was my responsibility to see if she was okay. I spend quite a bit of time with her. She told me she was being abused, so I wanted to investigate it, that’s all ma’am.”

“Oh Waldo, abandon these feeble pursuits of yours, it’ll make you grow old like me,” she said in a motherly tone and pitiful expression.

The door knob opened, and Alice entered the room. Waldo and Laura both smiled brightly as if their discussion was blissful.

“Oh, your husband Ford is a charmer!” Alice said while laughing. “He’s got the greatest stories!”

“Yes, yes, it gets nerve-racking when you live with him,” Laura responded quickly and then laughed with Alice.

As Laura left the room, the door shut and sent vibrations of anxiety through Waldo’s head.

13

“But I got paperwork to do,” Waldo said.

“Oh, so no appointments?” Athena said. “I thought that, that Jewish man was up.”

“Eikhonan? Remember? He said that he was going on a business trip last week?”

“Idan’tknow, his voice bored me ta death,” she said. There was a riddle placed in her voice to discover everyday.

“Now come on, let’s go to the convention, it’s close by, come on,” Athena pestered. Waldo twisted his mouth in a doubtful manner as the car exited the campus.

“I don’t know Athena, I’ve got work, Richard won’t be so---how long will it take?...That’s too long. And a movie? Jesus...Again, even though I got no appointments for a while, I got to be at the office doing something.”

“Oh shut up, I have to go, today’s the last day. Here, I’ll just call Kate,” Athena said while dialing a number on her phone.

“What, what are you calling Kate for?” Waldo said, confused. Athena talked to Kate, whispering in the corner of the car and laughing and then handed the phone to Waldo.

“Kate?” Waldo said.

“Yea, Waldo, I talked to Athena, you’re all good, I’ll tell Richard you’re sick or something,” her lovelier-than-usual voice said through the phone.

“Ah, really? Thanks a lot...Yea...well, you know she’s into art so--”

“No I’m not!” Athena yelped loudly so that Kate could hear. Waldo turned to Athena with an annoyed and blushing face. She enjoyed how much of a fool he looked. When Waldo put the phone to his ear again, he could hear Kate laughing.

“Ah, she’s something,” said Kate, still laughing.

“Can agree to that...So I’m good...You sure?...Well thanks a lot Kate,” said Waldo then ending the call. The car drove through the brick labyrinth into the heart of the city.

“Where is it?” Waldo asked.

“How do you not know where the convention center is?...Oh! You were supposed to go left, you dope. You're worse than Charlie, for chrissakes,” reproached she.

The car spun around in circles, stopped at stop-lights, and passed those structures. Everytime they would pass by a hotel, Waldo would feel as if he were in another place, vacationing. The red velvet carpet that stretched from the golden arched doors of the hotel and the woman in fur coats and men in dress shirts pulling their cargo bags made Waldo feel like he was among the elite, comforted by the other-worldliness, glamor, and luxury. Athena pulled down the window and stretched her sneakers out, resting them on the window-sill, inconveniently blocking Waldo’s rear-mirror.

“Regal,” she said. That was all that needed to be said, and Waldo was satisfied with it.

The car turned into the busy parking lot and parked. They walked to the enormous building that stretched vertically, for a long distance. Composed entirely of glass and bricks, the building was a work of wonders.

Waldo and Athena stepped to the ticket booth and bought themselves two tickets and walked into the building. Waldo was struck by all colors that seemed to be vomited all over the modern palace. Waldo thought he felt Athena’s hand pull his fingers lightly to guide him, but Waldo was too occupied in observing his surroundings to notice.

“Come on,” Athena said flatly.

They walked across the long hall and scrutinized the paintings, drawings, sculptures, t-shirts, lava lamps, origami knife sets, and colored kitchen cutlery. After passing by the most wild exhibitions of landscapes to portraits, Athena stopped at a stall and Waldo returned back to consciousness. Athena bent over and scratched her calf as she stared at the framed photographs and screen-printed shirts.

Waldo was struck by the sheer ridiculousness of the art pieces that now intrigued Athena. Her eyes glittered as she picked up a framed photograph of a urinal. Waldo stared at the obscene thing flabbergasted. The juxtaposition of Athena’s glittering eyes and her pulp arms holding the photograph of a urinal centered in the photograph seemed bizarre, maybe even something to look at further.

“Masterpiece...Really,” she said as Waldo saw something genuine shining beneath her persona, that mask that she wore so stubbornly that it now appeared fused to her face.

“Now, I’m not gonna ask you if you like it, but because you’re going to buy it for me (I’ll pay you later), ‘do you like it?’” she said, fluttering her eyes. Waldo stared at her like a moth to light.

“Well, my honest opi---”

“I don’t care about your honest opinion, just say something,” she snapped immediately.

“I like it,” said Waldo, still utterly confused at what this teenage girl, still dressed in her grey skirt and white shirt, was doing holding a photograph of a urinal, in the middle of scrambling weirdos.

“Duchamp, eh? You like it?” said the man behind the stall with the flick of his open mouth, a toothpick protruding from the corner.

Athena’s skin managed to become paler than it already was, and a dash of rose colored her cheeks. She looked splendid, all her naivete and childishness that seemed to be repressed surfaced to her face at that moment. Waldo watched her with pleasure and looked at the man dressed in the red velvet suit with black slacks and a cartoon-like mustache curling on both sides. He wondered what it was that made such a profound effect on Athena. He scrutinized the slim, flexible man who seemed to exaggerate his accent for affect.

“I can show you some of my pieces if you want?” he said, cleverly snapping his eyebrow.

“Yes…” was all Athena said. Waldo had not seen her this silent all day. The man disappeared behind the curtains and came back with a large framed drawing of an amalgamation of random material, fluttering about in space. The complexity and amount of objects drawn and painted were so immense, it amounted to looking like nothing and everything at the same time.

“How do you like it?” he asked.

“I love it,” Athena said, rubbing her hands.

The man then turned another image. It was an amalgamation of receipts that were stamped together along with disturbing images lurking beneath of people's eyes bleeding ink and walking canes with enraged eyes. Other newspaper images of people were cut, binded, pasted, and wrapped on the edges. People's mouths were sometimes replaced with inanimate objects like fish, the eiffel tower, and black bars. The black & white figures’ eyes were almost always distorted and strange words shot from their mouths. Waldo stared in shock.

“I’ll take it,” Athena said, possessed by what this image represented.

At the table, she ate her spicy-chip flavored, orange, hard-shelled taco with extra hot-sauce on top. Her eyes remained glued to her phone. The mall was still lively as enormous families with fathers whose bellies were threatening the life of their t-shirts to couples who seemed “excessively” trim. The river on the side had floats carrying naive tourists, staring at the mall as if they had stumbled upon a palace. A palace, it certainly wasn’t, but it was almost entirely made of glass and such a feat did turn some heads and raise some eyebrows.

Waldo rubbed his hands and continued to find ways to occupy his time. This was the disadvantage of being with Athena; everytime he was with her, Waldo was actually alone. Athena seemed to exist on another level of existence, free of Waldo and his foolish questions. Furthermore, her eyes never left the glass of her phone.

“Aren’t you supposed to not eat that stuff...for cheerleading or what-not?” Waldo asked calmly, already anticipating a violent answer.

“Oh please,” she said, disallowing him the privilege of even seeing her face.

“So...Which movie was it you wanted to see?” Waldo asked to which he received no reply. Such a thing no longer bothered Waldo as he was now quite accustomed to the disrespectful behavior of Athena. The silence she gave him was like a pardon an adult gives to a child when he pretends that he did not hear his child speak with foul language; in such a manner, Waldo felt more ashamed than enraged.

A laughing fit tempted her again and again. Waldo watched curiously, seeing Athena reveal emotions he hadn’t seen before.

“What could be so funny?” Waldo said, chuckling.

Athena gave Waldo a deathly glance to which she slammed her phone on the table and stared him into the eyes.

“What is it now?” she said as exhausted people say to their spouses, but in this case, the marriage is failing.

“I was just...you almost suffocated, what could be that funny, I’m curious?” Waldo asked.

“What the hell, come over here,” she said with the flick of her head and pulled out one headphone for Waldo to share.

Waldo sat on the chair next to her and put in the other earbud. Athena’s fingernail tapped the glass like a cat claw and the video began. The video was the most disorienting thing Waldo had ever seen. It was a distortion of sound, color, music, people, and everything; there was no progression of plot or sense of stability. The videos shifted and turned from utter useless objects to spaghettified figures. Every once in a while, a psychotic scream would enter into the triple-speed visual rendition; at such moments Waldo would brace himself and look at Athena strangely who had been laughing the entire time, but now, with greater vehemence. A cartoon character would freeze on the screen, glitch, and then have his head cut open into a 4-bit digital representation of his insides; and on the video went, schizophrenically circling in circles inside circles of more circles. By the time the video was over, Waldo’s mind was blank, and Athena was grasping at her abdomen, laughing with pain. She ended with her head turned upwards, staring at the immense ceiling of the mall.

“It’s our humor...You gotta taste of our humor... Disorienting right?” she said smiling.

“Yea...I’m not sure what to make of it,” Waldo said.

“It’s the utter *irrationality,* you know?” Athena said, immediately stopping herself from a hefty exposition. Waldo sensed the impending exposition.

“No, I don’t, tell me about it though?” Waldo said, squeezing his forehead.

She sighed loudly, pretending as if she were doing a duty to Waldo to reveal her intellectual galore. Waldo, however, knew that her blood turned warm and her eyes dilated to simply let her speak about whatever she desired.

“You know...Well, they're beautiful, these cultural artifacts,” she said, then snapping her neck in front of her and getting up from her chair. She then began to walk forward, without a care that Waldo was next to her, though she was certain he would follow her. Waldo, confused,

ran up to her as she already made it to the exit and walked on the side of the river. There were not so many people at this time of the week outside.

"The people in there are like pigs, fat and ugly, probably because they eat all that filthy meat….Bunchaanimalseatingotheranimals," she said impressively faster than normal. Her sneakers strutted in front of her as she walked by the side until she reached a table in front of a restaurant, facing the river. All the restaurants were still closed and were to open at five that evening when the tourists would emerge from their hotels like Gog-Magog on doomsday. Waldo came to her area and found her arms crossed, squinting out at the mall.

"Look at 'em', she said, her arms interlocking even tighter. Waldo pulled a chair next to her and sat down, watching the people with her.

"Now what was...your question?" she said, turning her cosmic eyes to him, in an air of misery that warmed Waldo's heart; he knew she wanted to speak, say something; her eyes begged for fuel to burn.

"That video, it's *incomprehensible* to me," Waldo asked, trying his best not to sound over-the-top.

"Yea, well, *exactly*," she said, curling the corner of her lips in a demonically charming manner. "It's a rejection of everything possible, establishment, society, traditional structure, epistemology, love, ideals, and life itself. It's an attitude that's been accumulating since Luther questioned the church. And so from that day, the soil was tilled…"

"For what?" Waldo asked curiously.

"To what we have now...The antichrist era...From Luther onwards, came the scientific revolution where Newton learned to draw circles and came up with absurd abstractions about unobservable truths. Newton himself was an empiricist who sold himself to the church, same with Galileo, same with Copernicus...They were trying to destroy religion...unconsciously, I suppose. In that case, they weren't so bad; they still posed themselves as pious Christians to compensate for their unconscious heretical thoughts. That's why they claimed they were 'serving and discovering God's truths' not only to appease the church but to appease the little devil within them, sizzling more and more as truth established itself right in front of their eyes.

Well what of it? The enlightenment rolls around and Diderot, my love, establishes the hard reality of truth—no wonder everyone hates him. A good measure to detect how much of a genius one is is to keep a score of how much criticism she receives," she said, controlling the impulse of lifting her leg and resting it on the table. She turned her head upward, seeking for wisdom from the sky then looked downward.

"What's this got to do with your antichrist claim?" Waldo said playfully, poking her enough to irritate.

"Oh well if you let me talk you sunny-boy," she snapped with the amount of irritation that Waldo anticipated. "Besides, I want a rephrasing. Antichrist won't work," she said brooding.

"Why?" Waldo said pleasantly, unaware of the passage of time.

“Well, for one, I *am* the antichrist and I haven’t done anything worthy of world-fame yet so we can’t name this era after myself,” she said, making Waldo laugh tremendously, the most he’d seen himself laugh in front of her.

“I think...hmm,” she said, placing her chin on her hand, brooding. “Well, *Lucifer’s Reign*, how about that?” she said with a clever smile.

“Sounds good to me,” approved Waldo.

“So! The *Lucifer’s Reign Era*, we left off at Newton, right?”

“Diderot, actually.”

“Ah, Diderot, my love!” she said in a humorous tone that managed to disturb Waldo slightly. A couple walking past the table gave Athena a side-long glance.

“Well then, who are our superstars? Diderot, Hume, and Kant. Kant, we shall call him a dogmatist who learned a thing called *rationality.* See, Kant, in order to appease his religious anxiety (like Newton and his brothers) sought to *rationalize* the *irrational*. Synthetic a prior shall go to his rationalized hell, where men and women act according to Kantian metaphysics. Pah! What a joke, Kant was better off sticking to the church.

Who’s next? Hume. I can only give credit to Hume for not falling for the rational trap, only my Diderot is allowed that pristine weapon---”

She was interrupted.

“Why only him?” Waldo asked.

“Oh just wait,” she said, genuinely annoyed. She ran her eyes from left to right as her neurons burned.

“Hume.‘You can’t derive an ought from an is’ he says. I bet Hume thought he was real clever after saying that; but Hume, your theory is inherently *flawed*,” she said, her mouth retracting and her tongue sticking in her mouth..

“Why?” she continued. “Because man doesn’t *need* an ‘ought’, because man *has* no ‘ought.’ He constructs ‘oughts’ to appease that childish laughter in his soul that still chants, banging his hands together and crying ‘free will!’and ‘morality!’ so that he can feel that he is somehow different from an animal, sufficient enough to possess the curse of consciousness. How petty, like pigs rumbling in mud,” she said now her face darkened with something akin to malevolence. She looked at the floor with her eyes possessed and her body frozen.

“Well, and finally Diderot...The only sane one,” she said quietly, trying to formulate her thoughts.

“Why was he sane?” asked the man.

“He was sane because he was correct. He’s right, and they all hated it. He proposed that we get rid of the superfluous, the one thing that has killed millions of people for what? Because my dogma has a different constructed fantasy than your dogma? It’s worse than children! It’s a disease...this...dogma,” she said as her voice regained energy.

“Then...well, the story after the enlightenment is not a difficult one to tell, rather, it’s a comical one. In comes the twentieth century and off with hundreds of millions of peoples’ heads.

Let me ask you something, Waldo, do you believe that evil is...the absence of good, like your Rogerian peers---I'm assuming you're a Rogerian too---or your catholic friends claim?" she said with her eyebrows raised.

"I'm not sure if I subscribe to Roger's methods, to me it seems you have a bizarre hatred for Rogers," Waldo said laughing.

"Answer the question goddammit," she said, lifting her teeth to the sky, shining the retainers.

"Well...I'm not so sure. I guess evil does exist as something on its own," Waldo said calmly.

"Oh 'you guess' huh? How about naked pregnant women being chased by flamethrowers and rifles in the fields of Berlin? Or children raping nurses in the Gulags? Or crushing the testicles of a man during an interrogation? Or watching starving Ukranians eat their own children? Do you believe that that's all the *absence of good*," she said, blood rushing to her face. Waldo did not see hurt in her eyes, he saw *hell.*

"I--I don't know," Waldo mumbled, now genuinely horrified by the mess Athena was becoming; her features were darkening, her voice was becoming coarser, and her neck glowed red.

"You don't know? Of course you don't know! You don't know a damn about man's capacity to commit evil, you're a preppy boy who's all jingly about his new wife, probably sheltered all your life by your mother. You lookup and see heaven, look down and see the same, men like you are only children that have grown large. Go back to your mother, she's waiting for you!" she said viciously as people walking avoided the two like people do when they sense a couple are getting into a heated argument. Waldo watched Athena with pity, he wanted to do anything possible to show her that he would protect her from all the malevolence of the world that was hurting her.

"You don't know evil until you see it with your own eyes, then, well...Pah! Go to hell, why are you making me talk about this?" she mumbled, looking downward. Waldo, without thinking, stretched his hand towards her shoulder to comfort her but suddenly, she snapped.

"Get your hands off me!" she said.

A silence began that was anxiety-inducing to say the least. Waldo watching the girl squirm in her seat, trying to think and feel at same time, made him feel sympathetic but also amazed. He had never witnessed a soul like this.

She rocked in her chair, looked to her left, got up a few times as if about to depart, sat down, then thought again. The fairness returned to her skin as the red subsided. Every now and then she would put her finger to her bottom lip, pull it down and allow it to launch upwards like a rubberband. She crossed her arms then uncrossed them. She crossed her legs, then uncrossed them. Waldo studied her carefully, strategizing when he would dare to speak.

"So, you wanted to see a movie?" Waldo asked tenderly.

“Yes I want to see a movie, why do you talk to me in that voice? I’m not here to talk to you, I’m here to see the movie,” she responded, getting up.

Towards sunset, Athena led Waldo into a sandwich shop located in a dark corner of an avenue, very similar to a subway. They ordered their sandwiches, and as Waldo was about to sit down to eat, Athena exited the restaurant. Waldo chased her outside. She explained to him that they were going to some nice place with “sum nice views.” Athena’s knowledge of the streets proved useful as they walked through the labyrinth of bricks, pavement, concrete, grass, and fences. They reached the top of the stairs which led to an elegant ballroom that stood high. Near the ballroom stood the tall spinning tower where businessmen who wanted to impress their foreign partners dined and showcased their glimmering city as if made for them only. There, at the very top, on the side of a bricked fence, two skateboard sneakers that had never been used for their intended purpose and business casual shoes dangled. The ballroom had large oval glass windows with an interior dressed in darkness. Waldo could faintly see the bar inside.

Waldo looked forward and slowly unwrapped his sandwich, trying his best to suppress his anxious thoughts on whether he had lost his job yet or not. The entirety of the city, its galore and filth all laid itself in front of the psychologist and the cheerleader. On the surface, the two had nothing in common, yet it all felt so common. The red sun kissed the tips of the mouths of exhaling factories; he sizzled the black corridors, alleyways, and streets. Somewhere in the distance, a saxophone wailed, the sound of a jazz virtuoso in a past life, now a king of the streets, dressed as a peasant. Waldo squinted and saw a meager black dog running in a tiny alleyway, chasing after invisible game. The black scum scrubbed against the pavement; the colorful street-hieroglyphics engraved into the red bricks; the abandoned streets and once noisy factories now still, that’s what Athena found charming about downtown. She was fascinated by how the heart of every large city was always the filthiest; it was comforting, it was *real,* devoid of the idealism that ran rancid through the rest of the town, through the homes of the suburbia. Her unconditional affection for this part of town, only the concrete could swear by.

The papers crunched and the mouths crunched. As the saxophone increased its tone every now and then, Waldo felt the tension ease from his body; he existed in the same sphere with Athena for the first time since he met her. He could now see what she saw, even if it was momentary.

Athena’s sneakers kicked against the brick wall and her fingernails drummed against her bag. Waldo looked down, realizing how far up they had reached and how stupid it was for Athena to make them sit on the edge of the wall when they could sit on the marbled floor entrance of the ballroom. Instead, this thought dissolved as Waldo looked with awe upon the wasteland, beaming radiant red, as the blacks and grays conformed and twisted to the sun’s commands.

“You want to continue where you left off?” Waldo asked nonchalantly, biting his sandwich.

“Where did I leave off?...Who?...No, I already talked about him...Oh!...Derrida, of course,” she said, pulling a small plastic bag out of the front pouch. She took a piece of brown, glossy paper and placed it in her lap.

“Well, you can think of the twentieth century as Lucifer finally expounding his wrath on everyone. Derrida, Foucoult, Deleuze, et cetteraa, et cetteraaa, they were all the ones who realized what the rest of humanity never did, morality is only a construct, human nature another slight of the hand used to bound us down to earthly endeavors. Everything is socially determined, it turns out,” she said with a sigh, elegantly sprinkling green cotton onto the glossy paper sitting carefully on her lap.

“And...well, rationality barely exists. Science, empiricism, biology, chemistry? Yea, turns out they’re all useless, just fantasy games to make us feel in grasp of some form of knowledge, some form of...*truth.* How do you think our epistemological structures had ever come about in the first place? Really, now that I think of it...As a kid I never understood how the hell we know what an atom looks like, behaves, the rest. They’re all just feeble attempts at understanding reality. And this is something to think about...we will never achieve an accurate understanding of anything. And to that I say...maybe we were never supposed to anyways...We are animals cursed with consciousness,” she said, now bending the sides of waxed paper. She licked the edges of the paper and enveloped the sides into a small cylindrical shape and twisted the end like a tootsie-roll.

“So?” Waldo said, raising his first objection. Athena looked at Waldo with surprised eyes.

“What do you mean?” she said.

“Well, so what if I can’t measure the amount of protons on my palm, why does that matter?” Waldo asked. Athena’s head ran with thoughts so fast, she felt dizzy. Her heart began to pump faster and her palms became moist. Waldo’s tone of voice reminded Athena of her father when she resisted going to church with him; how he wagged his thick finger in her face, the redness that overcame him.

“Well!...Well, that’s the only form of truth that exists, that’s truth--truth that’s...yes, well...Exactly! You can’t measure or record anything. Our conception of truth itself is only th-there to appease the inevitable...um...existential dread, it’s inevitable! Yes...I say that God isn’t wrong, it was he *and* Darwin who were wrong. If everything is wrong how could there be a truth! You’re question seems very stupid,” she remarked at the end with a shaky voice. She gave another twist to the end of her lap-made joint and placed it between her cherry lips.

Waldo, noticing the more than usual inflection in her voice, turned to Athena and saw the cinder sizzling a darker red than that of the sun from the end of the papered fluff, her white teeth shining every time she pulled her lips from the butt.

“Here, take some,” she said, spitting to her left side. “Oh come on now, you’re sitting next to me, talking to me...it’s weird...just take some,” she encouraged with a bitter look.

“Athena...I...Is that...You shouldn’t be doing that,” he said with his sleepy eyes wide open.

“What? Are you going to rat on me?” she replied with her eyes sharpening a dark green and blue, preparing to attack.

“Well...You shouldn’t be doing it,” Waldo replied weakly and hopelessly.

“I know what *I* should or should not be doing,” she replied. She slipped the joint in between her lips with extra vigor to mock Waldo and his helplessness. Waldo watched sadly and turned towards the departing sun and the celestial bodies that were emerging from the depths. The sweet smell and smoke lifted to the sky, hovering above their heads.

In his car, Athena slept in the corner, seat-belt-less, truly like it was her last nap. Waldo watched on the helpless body, feeling a sense of pride, a sense of responsibility that made his neck tingle. One could hurt her in every possible way. It wasn’t just her father who came to mind, but all the others, whom Waldo thought she may have dealt with and have ultimately hurt her permanently to the point of regression and that sorry state she lay: arms lifeless, legs apart, hair drooping.

When the car arrived at Athena's house, a slender man stood in the shadows of the garage lanterns, watering the lavish grass. Waldo stared at the man, carefully scrutinizing him, unsure what to make of him and unable to believe the fact that that may be *him.*

“Athena,” Waldo whispered without taking his eyes off the figure, pouring water. Athena slowly fluttered her eyelids and scratched her skull.

“Hm?” she said looking confused. She suddenly began to turn around with slight confusion that arises from falling asleep in places one is not accustomed to. She swung her head and saw the man and swung it back to Waldo wildly.

“He’s there!” she said, eyes no longer sleepy. “He’ll smell me, I smell like it don’t I?” Athena said, panicking. Waldo sniffed her. Oh yes she did smell like it, the only thing that was surprising about it was how Waldo had not noticed the scent the entire ride.

“What do I do?” she asked, chest heaving. She looked like a sheep that was about to ram his head into the sides of an enclosure when chased.

“Um, well...I’m not sure,” Waldo said, desperately wanting to help her. “Here, I’ll look for Alice’s perfume,” he added, swiping his hand through the sides of the car, knowing perfectly well that no perfumes were lying around the car. While he aggressively searched for his imaginary perfume, the figure walked towards the car. Athena grasped her backpack tightly.

“Stop!” she whispered. “He’s coming, I’ll get out and walk around, to try to breeze it off,” she said, quickly opening the door, swinging her bag, and taking a wide circle around the lawn, the backpack hanging off her shoulder. The figure continued to water the grass, spraying the invisible yellow patches. He turned around, muttered something. Athena’s pace increased a suspiciously higher amount as she responded with a muffled response. The figure continued to

look at Athena as she got closer to the entrance of the house. His body hesitated forward as if trying to say something to Athena.

"Where were you?" her father asked. Athena knew that it wasn't beneficial for her to pretend like she didn't hear. She turned around, only a few feet from the threshold of the house and looked at her father and Waldo with subdued terror. She scratched her knee and muttered a confused sound.

"I said *where* were you?" he asked, crossing his arms.

"I was ju-just downtown," she said. Waldo now began to feel worried that his car being parked for too long might infuriate the man but he could not let his eyes off the shadowed figure.

"Aight' well, ya ate or not? Yea? Well I gotta eat, let's go," he said, tossing his hose on the velvet grass.

14

The next day, Athena was out for a long and extraneous three hour cheerleading practice. There was certainly going to be numb bodies and heat exhausted brains. Waldo sat in his office, typing away, organizing his clientele, adding notes on their improvement or destruction of social relations, marking particular dreams that made no sense to Waldo but oftentimes forced him to conjure up a mystical interpretation for the client's sake. The technique worked, the client was happy and Waldo was off the hook, what could be so wrong about it? Other things included the client not paying for therapy which happened an inconveniantly large amount of times. As he finished marking his clients, he sat in his chair, enjoying his favorite past-time, musing.

What did he muse about? When Waldo's mother used to ask this very question when he used to day-dream, he would say "everything"; in reality, at that moment, he was thinking of Athena and Athena only. He fidgeted, with a strange pulse running through his hand, unable to discern if it was excitement or nervousness; either response to the situation seemed a bit ridiculous to Waldo as he tried to numb the sensation with his favorite self-reproaches and rationalizations. "If her father is abusive, we'll find out soon," he said, the sensation increasing in his finger; he gave up and labeled it as "feeling cold."

He stepped outside the office, and found Jeff midway to the snack lounge.

"Jeff, how've you been? Haven't seen you in a while," Waldo remarked, joining Jeff to the walk. Jeff had spent the last three days on his father's ranch with his wife.

"I'm alright," responded Jeff.

"How did the trip go?"

"It went well, it went well," replied Jeff. They walked to the lounge and talked a few, sipped a few, and laughed a few.

"Listen, Richard wanted to talk to you about something," Jeff said with a soft smile.

“Richard?” Waldo asked, his face darkening. “Why? Do you know?”

“I think it’s something about you not coming to work,” Jeff said, ironically raising his eyebrows. “Is that true?”

“Oh it’s...well, you know that girl that’s been shadowing me?” Waldo asked, shamefully.

“Yea?” Jeff responded. In the back, outside of the lounge, Richard stood by the window and signaled Waldo to come. Waldo felt little.

“Hey I’ll talk lat---he’s calling me,” Waldo mumbled.

Richard and Waldo walked into his office. Waldo slipped into his seat and waited with his head downward.

“Is everything okay with you, Waldo?” Richard asked with a serious face.

“Hm? Oh yes!” Waldo replied with a shocking amount of enthusiasm.

“Well...Kate told me you weren’t here because you were sick, is this true?” Richard asked. Waldo simply stared at the floor, incapable of lying to a man of his height. The silence grew into an immeasurable distance.

“Okay, fine, you *have* been leaving work midway, what’s up with that?” Richard asked. Again, Waldo did not respond but tried to conjure up the most perfect reply, instead, a silence began once again.

“Is this because of the student who’s shadowing you?” Richard finally let out, narrowing the question to its core. “Huh? You gotta talk to me Waldo,” Richard said with an exhale, fixing his executive tie.

“Well...Yes, I just...I need to pick her up from school and then drop her off after work because she doesn’t have a ride,” Waldo responded stuttering.

“Okay, but you also leave midway through work sometimes, for lunch I presume? Yes? Well, you spend hours out of work, Waldo, lunch doesn’t take three hours! For God’s sake, you had your client waiting for you last week!” Richard said, raising his voice.

“Do you see what I’m getting at Waldo? I have a business to run and clients need to be helped. I don’t care about this girl, whoever she is, she can shadow at some other institute, not mine if it hinders the working environment,” the manager said, interlacing his fingers on the wooden desk. Waldo’s heart sank at that moment. It was such a fragile thought that possessed him. Her voice whispered in his ear and her laughter rang in all corners of his mind; no, any sacrifice shall be given to protect her, she is too precious; it was no longer his choice whether he would take her under his wing, he must, it was for *her* sake. Such was Waldo’s thought process, that he ran in circles, trying to hoard the gold that was quickly fleeing from his arms.

“Sir, I’m sorry, I...Well, you see, I...This is my fault, it won’t happen again,” managed Waldo’s mouth.

“I don’t want to see this again—it happens again? Tell that girl to take a hike,” shrugged Richard with an executive expression. “I’m sorry, but it is what it is, understand?”

“Yes sir, I understand completely,” Waldo responded piously.

“Good, now have a good day...Wally,” he grinned.

“He’s comes home late like *every* day Rose! I text him, call him then he doesn’t respond for a long period. When he responds, it almost always has something to do with Laura’s niece,” sighed Alice, planting her forehead on her palm. She anxiously bit into her cheese danish.

“Everyday?” Rose asked.

“Just about!” she responded.

Rose flicked her elegant wrist and carefully drank her tea, accounting for each drop that entered her body.

“I don’t know why he has to do *everything* for this girl,” Alice continued. “I mean, it’s sweet of him...No doubt, but Rose...He has to give me time...Am I asking for too much Rose?”

“I do---”

“Seriously, what do you think? I don’t think so. But...Anyways...Wha-what do you think?” Alice interrupted.

“I don’t think so,” responded Rose, minimally.

“Okay...But I don’t know what to do, yesterday...Listen to this Rose,” she said, her eyes blaring open, her wrists flying in the air. “He came home yesterday when I was asleep! Yes...He was trying to slip in under the comforts without disturbing me, he knows I’m a sensitive sleeper...My goodness,” she said now rubbing her face, unable to hold back a childish smile even in such a situation. No matter how frustrated and depressed Alice felt, she reasoned that she should not take herself so seriously as these were not problems *fit* for her. Regardless, it was still a bother, a pain, a lump in the throat not being able to see her very own, brand new husband when she returned from the mixed work environment of paint brushes, cheers, hostile remarks, and abstract grading. Everytime she collected evidence to be mad at her husband, she failed and became more depressed than she had originally been; she loved him more dearly than anyone or anything else, and now she felt a distance growing between them.

“Have you talked about it with Waldo,” Rose said, her eyes glaring under the amber light of the post-modern cafe.

“No...That’s what I’m afraid of Rosie,” Alice said, rubbing her thumb-nail against her ring finger on which rested a crystal of grand size.

“I’m afraid he’s going to get mad about how I’m being a pain to the job he’s doing (it’s a very hard job Rosie!) and the extra help he’s giving to Laura...He’s a great man Rosie, I--I just want him to be with me more, that’s all,” added she.

“I understand,” said Rose, clearly and concisely. “But you must talk to him, Alice.”

Alice looked into Rose’s eyes, and saw a sea of ink, filled with depth and complexity, flushing inwards and outwards as they turned slightly left or right. Rose saw in Alice’s eyes an unattainable attractiveness, a fairy tale.

“Okay...I’ll try Rosie,” Alice said, bending her head down, anxious and frustrated but unable to deny the bliss of being next to the second love of her life, Rose. Alice rested her hands

on top of Rose's cold fingers. Rose tried as much as possible to disguise her uncomfort. She managed long enough until Alice removed her fingers. As Alice took a sip from the brown mug, the server with gelled back hair and swift stride returned back to the table.

"Do you want me to get that outta the way? Yes? And would you ladies like anything else to eat or drink?" his charming voice announced.

"Oh, I'll take two more of these danishes please," Alice responded gleefully.

"You like them right?" the waiter asked with a wide smile.

"Yes! I might have to consider taking some to go," Alice responded with an innocent smile that spelled butterflies and rainbows.

"I'll slip you some extra," he winked. "Do you want them warm? Yes? And for you ma'am," he said, turning to Rose.

"Oh I'm fine thank you."

"Really, you didn't order anything to eat! We got lots of pastries, cakepops, donuts, and---"

"Oh but she doesn't eat much of these things," Alice said in a conspiratorial voice to the waiter who felt a little embarrassed, as if a truth was communicated between the two. Rose turned to Alice, breathing heavily.

"Oh...but they're healthy ma'am we make them from scratch here," the waiter added. Rose blushed brightly as she looked downward.

"Here, I'll get you something special," the waiter said, winking, and noticing how nice Rose looked. He then walked to the kitchen. Alice flicked her eyebrows upwards twice and gave a childish smile.

"I think he likes you Rose, you should talk to him!" Alice said energetically. Rose looked up at Alice resentfully. "Alice…" is all Rose managed to say, unable to tell her anything more as her gaze fell downward.

"What? Rose? Oh I'm sorry, I'm so sorry...I ruined it didn't I?" Alice said in a lowly tone.

"No, Can we just...Let's stop this right now," Rose responded firmly, flushing red as the waiter came back with Alice's two (plus an extra) danishes.

"And here's a little something on the house for you," the waiter said, placing an elaborate pastry dish on the table.

"It's a specialty of ours, we bake these every morning, fresh...They're called *Pumpkin Pumps*. Very good," he announced with his charming voice.

"Thank you," Rose responded with crimson cheeks and even rewarded him with a pleasant smile.The waiter walked away feeling accomplished. Rose attempted a few bites, the waiter left the check; they exchanged eye contact.

"Alice, can we leave?" Rose asked anxiously but displaying none of it.

“Why? You didn't even start eating your *Pumpkin Pump,*” Alice said with such shock, it would seem comical to a third-party member. But rejecting that pastry meant a lot more to those two women.

“Alice, I’m sorry, but my stomach won’t agree with pastries,” Rose said. After much back and forth, they left the cafe with Rose’s victory and Alice’s defeat. None-the-less, Alice’s love did not waver for Rose as they walked in the parking lot of a department store that was torn to pieces and had not been repaired ever since. A few windows were replaced with wooden boards and orange paint on them. The inside of the store had displaced shelves, cans rolling about on the floor, and metal bars protruding from the roof.

“A riot,” mumbled Rose, examining the store.

“Really?...Hum,” Alice felt compelled to add. She then sat down underneath the parking light tower, resting her back against the yellow base.

“Sit down Rosie,” Alice said and patted the concrete. Rose sat down next to her, still staring at the disjointed store.

“I’ll talk to Waldo today...I will, I need to,” Alice said, re-assuring herself. “I miss him dearly, most nights I’m alo---enough, I have you right now.” Rose, feeling agitated, gave a small shove to Alice. Alice became surprised at the force but discounted it as a trivial gesture. The sky began to stir darker and darker and the wind became colder and colder. Crystal droplets landed on the ladies’ skin. Alice leaped at the sheer cold heat of the sky’s tears.

“Well I should be leaving now Alice,” said Rose.

“Bye my love,” Alice smiled.

The anxious woman crossed her arms and watched the rain patter. The rain slowly increased its vehemence until layered patterns of thick rain could be seen, fluctuating in the dying sunlight. The woman would rest her weight on her left hip then shift the weight to her right hip every few seconds, running through her thoughts. “What do I tell him? I should...Well...I should…” Suddenly, she heard the door creak open; it was her husband.

“Waldo! It’s raining hard isn’t it?” Alice said in a gay voice.

“Well..Shou---Coffee?” she sputtered.

“What?” Waldo responded with a strange crack.

“No, sh-should I make coffee?” Alice asked again, unable to control what it was that was controlling her. “Coffee. I thought it be nice with the rain, or I don’t know,” Alice rambleed, bouncing her tongue, sponging up the water in her mouth.

“Sure,” Waldo said, taking off his coat while preoccupied with a thought.

“Oh okay, sure, I brought some danishes too!” Alice added brightly, walking up to Waldo and kissing him delightfully. Waldo brought on a warm smile; it cheered Alice to a state of almost complete mania as she turned to the kitchen and began shifting glasses and mumbling to

herself, inadvertently trying to destroy the suffocating silence that threatened her every second. Waldo went into their bedroom and changed for the restful evening. When he returned to the kitchen, the coffees were being prepared.

"How much sugar?" Alice asked, with two ears perked up like a rabbit. Waldo looked at Alice and displayed a confused smirk.

"Two, like always?" he said and then walked to the couch, turning on the television and relaxing. Alice glanced at Waldo over and over again, her heart about to jump out her chest as she wet her lips. She brought the coffee mugs, handing one to Waldo. He bit his nails and thought about Richard's terrifying threat. It was such a grand threat, it made Waldo feel as though Athena was part of the conspiracy, racking weapons with Richard against him. He then remembered the sweet, dog-urine smell of cannabis in the car and that frightened look on Athena's face. Then he remembered the slender figure with his hardened limbs walking across that lawn and finally how the door shut. "He'll tear her apart," something whispered in the recesses of Waldo's mind.

Alice on the rocker this time, sipped her coffee and watched Waldo with an intense gaze and her features all lighted up. Waldo simply observed the steering of the coffee. Alice continued to stare upon Waldo, hoping that he would look up but then realized that it would be better to bring "it" up if he was looking downward. Her lips quickly became dry again as she moistened them. She looked around the room then outside the balcony slide-door window.

"How was work, Wally?" she smiled widely.

"Oh good Alice, how about you?" Waldo responded.

"Good!" she said, crossing her legs, straightening her back, and interlacing both fingers above her knee. Waldo nodded quietly and sipped. Alice stared curiously at Waldo's brooding eyes.

"What are you thinking of?" Alice asked, producing a smile on her face that would've made her shriek had she seen it in the mirror. Waldo looked at her and saw a small demon who had snuck into paradise.

"Oh...Well," Waldo said. "About work, I've had a lot of filing to do lately."

Alice smiled again and sipped quietly.

"Waldo?" she said, her mouth left half-open and her eyes gazing at the floor askance.

"Yes?"

"Oh well..Ohh...I feel that...Well, I'm so tired!" she said, getting up from the rocker and sitting next to Waldo and snuggling her head into Waldo's shoulder. Waldo carefully wrapped his arm around his wife.

"You'll be alright, just...rest," said he. Alice sensed the life-lessness in his tone but shoved it out of her consciousness.

"I...Well...Waldo, I wanted to...Oh never mind," she stuttered. Waldo looked at Alice curiously.

"What?" he said, gaining his attention. She was delighted by the shift in his tone of voice.

“I--I, see...I don’t know Wally,” she said, throwing her head back. As close as she felt towards him by the human touch, she felt terrified of what was to come if she told him about how she felt lonely, tired, and frustrated with him coming home late every other night because of some favors to a niece of a vague family member. It all sounded so vile in her head and the response from Waldo, even viler. She imagined he would look at her with a lowly gaze that would say, “I am only trying to work and now I am doing favors for an unfortunate girl whose mother is no longer with her and you tell me that I am not doing enough?” The response made her shudder.

“Are you sure?” Waldo said dryly. As Waldo pulled the hook away, Alice burned, desperately wanting to tell him everything.

“I don’t...can you give me a sec, one…” she tumbled. She had worked so hard to make it that close to him, to gain his attention and now she stumbled.

“Hm?” Waldo hummed with a mysterious smile. Alice’s eyes trailed and she kept her mouth half-open. She snuggled more and remained wrapped to Waldo’s shoulder as he sipped his coffee. The rest of the night was spent like that, the TV glowing figures on their faces and the walls, the rain pattering sometimes hard sometimes soft, and Alice feeling a purple lump burn like cinder in her throat.

Alice’s favorite thing to do in morbid situations was to latch onto one thing she looked forward to in the future and bet all her chips into this one thing, hoping that it would bring salvation to her for the struggle she was facing at the moment. That evening, the topic of her euphoria was Rose’s snake performance the next morning. She mused about Rose, her heart swelling and desiring to be next to her. She squeezed onto Waldo’s arm, unconsciously thinking it was Rose for a few moments.

15

The constrictor crawled on its belly across the princess’s pale skin. It wrapped underneath and over, looming over its patterned body. A thin tongue would stick out lightly, wetting the princess’s skin. He then crawled around the trunk of her neck pressing his muscles firmly against her thin neck, ready to be destroyed any minute. To the faint of heart, to the troubled mind, to the weakened liver, one would assume that the creature was trying to intimidate the princess with his power, threatening her with death. No, there was a deeper bond between the serpent and the princess; they were involved in the act of the eternal, an endless mouth to the tail, wrapping around indefinitely; delicately balancing the fragile body of the princess and the deadly muscles of the snake as they meditated together. One flinch or uncertain thought could lead to the extinguishment of that balance. The creature crawled down onto the white shawal, wrapping

around her rib cage, licking at her heart again, testing his fair princess on whether she still trusted him. He wrapped harder and harder, the princess clenched her fists softly and bit her lower lip.

The creature was not satisfied, he braced and crunched her lungs tighter, certain that this would stop her. The princess closed her eyes and maintained her arms outward with tremendous force. The serpent squeezed so hard, the poor princess began to convulse quietly for air, making sure that no one was to find out their secret. She felt the cold scales rub against her skin as he made his way down to her belly. As he escaped her chest, she sighed quietly so that her prince could not hear her discontent; oh how terrible that would be! The serpent now looked at the girl with eyes askance. He wrapped tighter and tighter to his princesses' belly, certain that by now the girl would give up and so he would return back to his cage to wait for another girl who could qualify as his princess. But no! He wrapped so tight, the princess's silhouette showed beneath the dove-colored shawl. She pressed her teeth against her lips until they had left an imprint. The stomach and its fluid being crunched to the back of her spine, oh how familiar of a feeling this was to her. It could hardly be called a test, it was instead a familiar sensation to which she no longer was bothered and even had grown a strange affinity for it. The snake untangling its greasy body worked down her leg and to her ankle. The princess's stretched out arms were growing numb and two crystals were forming at the edges of her eyes; all she needed was a few more moments. She begged her devil and angel to quicken his test, but she knew that rushing such a procedure like soldier boots sloshing through mud or a man devouring his meal was not only sacrilegious but a sin. The snake took pleasure in crawling up the trembling leg as he made way for the princess's arms, knowing that this is where her weakness lay. His tail moved across her chest and wrapped heavily around her arm. He constricted her lotus skin, trying to destroy the bone into shards of ivory. She breathed heavily through her nostrils as her face flushed red, maintaining the weight of the thick creature on her sullen arm. The snake licked his tongue along the arm and moved one last time to the heart, preparing to kill her if necessary. The pretty patterned rope managed to enter the garden of the princess's life and love, pain and misery, all what must have been in the creation since man was not man. The heart bounded so tiny. The serpent acknowledged the strength of the feminine as he gave one last hard contraction to everything that his princess called life. She winced, afraid she had betrayed signs of uncertainty and fear. The serpent did not notice. Instead, he, surprised, crawled up to her neck wrapping around the left-over limbs, twirling around the fair yet frail beauty. And there, he finally reached those dear lips, his tongue zipping forward and backward, trustfull of his fate. The princess opened her mouth and allowed the final act of dark faith; she grabbed the creature's thick head with her teeth both at the mercy of each other. The serpent trusted that those teeth shall not clench down and splat his brains and the princess that the beast would not enter down into the abyss and rip about all her organs. That serpent and that princess, her lotus-colored shawl now wavering in victory; the deadly head resting beneath the clench of the feminine and the body trusting the devil at the gate of paradise.

The snake slithered off and was put away into another abode to rest in. Rose finally allowed her arms to drop by her side, her shoulders feeling the sensation of internal bleeding. The clapping and cheers rang rampant from all sides. Alice, who could not believe that that woman was her dear friend, cheered like mad.

In the changing room, passing women heavily complimented. “Oh my, Rose! You’ll be great in no time,” sounded from different women of different sets of talent. When the silk shawl came off, Rose examined the black marks across her shoulders. She turned around and saw a purple river running down the spine; she touched the surface, feeling proud.

She quickly changed and walked out of the room and immediately walked into Alice’s hugs. Alice’s excitement could not be expressed better than an enormous kiss on the cheek which surprised Rose so thoroughly, her eyes tore open and her cheeks blushed.

“Oh my Rose! I--Oh I loved it! I don’t even know what to say,” Alice rambled, her sunglasses shifting about on her nose. The dust in the carnival was sifting around.

“Yes, it was great Rose,” suddenly slipped out of Waldo’s mouth as Alice turned to him. Rose glanced at Waldo with a familiar look then focused on Alice.

“Okay Rose, show us around!” said Alice.

They began to walk around the thriving dead-light desert. Rose’s performance had made a great enough impression on Waldo so that his respect for her grew higher than it already was.

Waldo watched Alice, passionately spill her enthusiastic opinions on how the disposable and on-the-move carnival was oh so “state of the art.” Rose bobbed her head up and down, her leather sandals hovering above the sand then returning back then hovering once more. Waldo focused on that pace and out of sheer boredom tried to match her pace to which he was unsuccessful. As he watched her hair flow backwards from the wind, an image of Athena flashed like a polaroid in Waldo’s mind. Suddenly, everything came rushing with it. Oh how he *burned* to see what that man had done. He was going to confront her father in front of Athena to show him what a fool he was for laying hands on an innocent girl. He conjured up images of Athena sitting legs crossed, blood dripping from her injured forehead, a mark left from the raging rifle butt. He saw her unconscious in a hospital, recovering from the immense blows of her very own father. He imagined how she would raise her head and point her eyes with misery, pain. The ruffled hair drooping on the blue hospital blouse; the flowers on the wallpaper; her delightful, rarer than the fruits of the amazonian voice, fluctuating between the honey and milk rivers. Waldo could no longer help it, he submitted himself fully to those fantasies he fought all his life against. Where he, his wife, and her friend went, he maintained these images, lived in them and indulged. However, now, Waldo seemed to be approaching the barrier where these images no longer brought guilt he was so accustomed to but only self-righteous pleasure. No image could or should be omitted, each placement of Athena’s hair had to be the way the theater wanted it to look or the manager would object and destroy the image; the angered look of her father’s face must be nothing short of the devil’s proclamation of evil, a dostoevskian smile with boiling lava

centered in the retinas. All the images produced the warmness in the abdomen so viscerally that Waldo could not believe such emotions could arise from the mind only. Oh how he struggled with the guilt and shame of enclosing himself in that cave, devoid of the world. Rose's glances at Waldo, as they walked in cafes, cosmetic stores, and restaurants, peered in this cave. Yes, this was it! Rose's quiet looks had frustrated and perplexed Waldo for this reason alone.

16

As Waldo's car crept forward into the traffic circle along with other parents who were tired after long hours of administering patients for physical therapy or defending large agricultural firms against lawsuits. Waldo no longer knew what he was hoping for but knew with certainty that he was hoping for something. His eyes scanned the wide grass lawn of the campus, a husky boy in shoulder pads and helmet walking towards the football field. There on the field, boys collided into each other, some squirting water in their mouths, others lying on the floor, exhausted from the sun's wrath. He impatiently tapped his fingers against the steering wheel, feeling that cold sensation pulsate through his fingers, shifting his eyes all around, looking for her. His heart pounded when he saw Athena's backpack facing him; she was talking to a tall, red-headed boy. As Athena turned around and approached him, suddenly he felt his body perspire.

"Well?....Drive now, I don't need a ceremony," she said, even her frown adding an acidic tang like lime on cheesecake. And so the car drove on as Waldo looked at Athena hesitantly.

"Take me to one of them burger joints, I'm starving," she said, curling her eyelashes in the reflection of her phone.

"Where?" Waldo barely managed to whisper.

"The one on the corner, where else? They have plant based patties."

They arrived at the black painted building, an enormous fish stamped outside the wall, music playing inside.

They walked in, grabbed her burger (Waldo decided not to eat lunch that evening), and walked back to the car. As they walked back to the car, Athena turned to the live band and explained to him how she was friends with the leader of one of the local bands who performed there on Sundays.

In the car, she ate. Waldo finally gathered enough courage to fully inspect her skin for lashes, marks, gashes, and darkened color. Such an act had been resting on his mind like an anvil, teasing him ever since Athena entered the car. But now, he finally ran his eyes across her arms, face, and legs. He had become so thoroughly disgusted with himself for doing such a thing that he wanted her to vanish into thin air.

“Hey, can we pick up my friend too?” she asked, swallowing her last piece of food. She then turned to Waldo when he didn’t respond. “Can you do that for me?” she said, rubber bands in the back of the teeth now exposed.

“Athena, I don’t know if we’ll have enough time, we still gotta get to work, understand?” Waldo said in a cautious voice.

“Oh, so you’re scared of Richard? That bastard---Here let me call Kate, she’s got us covered,” said Athena, dialing on her phone.

“Wait wai---” said the psychologist. The woman and the girl talked on the phone, Athena giggling like talking to her most sincere friend. She would look at Waldo sometimes, indicating to him that they were talking about him. The conversation took about five minutes when Athena ended the call with a gracious “thank you.”

“Well monsieur, Richard isn’t back at the office till’ 5:30,” she said, with a French accent married to her distinct voice that sounded like an entirely new language. She waited as Waldo pondered hard.

“Okay, I need to pick her up before her parents come home, so what’s it gonna be?” she asked.

“What’s her address?” asked Waldo. Athena already had navigation activated on her phone. In thirty minutes, the car arrived at the marble mansion. Athena’s head swiveled right then back to her phone, telling her friend that they were here to rescue her from boredom. It was then that Waldo noticed a pale scar on top of Athena’s head.

Suddenly, a girl emerged from the palace in shorts and a t-shirt, phone in hand. It was Jessica. She approached the car and waited for Waldo to roll the window down.

“Thank’s a lot sir, should I get in the back?” Jessica asked with such a refined manner, it made Athena proud of her.

“Oh get in the back!” Athena said, the two giggling. Waldo drove on, taking the two teenage girls wherever their hearts desired. What else could he do? He felt his energy stores so depleted, he *needed* someone to tell him to do something.

“Oh Jessica shut up,” Athena said, the two girls playfully arguing.

“Where are we going?” Waldo asked in the least charming voice imaginable. Jessica and Athena mumbled to each other, negotiating where to go.

“Uh, take us to that new Japanese tea place, it’s to your left, keep going down and then….left?” said Athena.

“Oh no, right,” a pleasant, warm like hot buns voice sounded from the back. The voice contrasted very interestingly to Athena’s nonchalant, trembling, fluid, and cynical voice. Jessica’s voice, instead, produced a feeling of genuine care, respect, and love. Waldo adjusted his mirror to see if her face matched his image of her face. It did, and it did perfectly.

The car arrived at the small wooden cafe by the side of a cut hill, the limestone showing. Waldo got out of the car and waited for Athena and Jessica who were hyper focused on Jessica’s

phone, watching a video and laughing hysterically. After Waldo had waited a long enough time, he lightly knocked on the window. The girls snapped out of their transe and opened the doors.

"Sorry sir, we got a little carried away," Jessica said, with an upraised chin, touching her wheat-brown hair lightly, sensing for any imperfections. The girls walked to the door and led the way into the Japanese cafe. Waldo, upon entering the cafe, was taken aback by the aesthetic perfection and renovation. From floor to ceiling, the entire store was paneled with wooden planks, its smell entering the nostrils of each customer. Along the windows, small bamboo plants were arranged neatly.

Athena looked to her friend for advice on the foreign beverages and ordered accordingly.

"Do you want anything sir?" the cashier asked, pointing her eyes to Waldo.

"Oh I recommend the taro root tea, cold," said Jessica, abandoning the side of Athena. Waldo took up Jessica's suggestion and ordered the purple beverage.

They walked outside and sat on the benches, each plastic cup sitting on the fresh-smelling wood. Jessica and Athena's head were bowed inward, the edges of their heads touching as they stared at Athena's screen, who was taking photos. The two girls would freeze into elegant sculptures for a few seconds, snap, and would resume their swiping, sometimes giggling. Waldo noticed that Athena loved to make a certain face when she was taking photos of herself, it was a pose of cleverness, an eyebrow lightly plucked up, her lips left loose, and her eyes disinterested. Click! Went the photos into the abyss of the internet.

"Do we have cheer practice this Saturday?" Jessica asked.

"Yes, of course," responded Athena, offended.

"I was just asking," responded Jessica with a good-hearted laugh.

Waldo watched the high schoolers, vaguely remembering his days in high school which were spent in restless hours of work and, if work wasn't there, imaginary work. Waldo was a sickly child then and could not, consequently, participate in many sports. The only sport he tried, on the first day, he collapsed to the ground in an asthma attack and finally went unconscious. Moreover, Waldo would often experience migraines which would cause him to stay home many days at a time, half blind, unable to vomit.

Regardless of the miserable condition, Waldo, for the most part, missed that certain feeling of vigor that high school brought on him. It was the people in particular, those girls and boys who seemed almost magical, out of a fairy-tale, able to do things he did not know kids could do, looks of girls that were astonishing, strength of boys that intimidated him to the point of despair. He hated it all, but also cherished it, and tried to absorb all of it. He would feel his neck tingle every time he watched a touchdown at the football game; all the cheerleaders performing unbelievable maneuvers in their glittering costumes, the students on the side going wild, taking off their shirts, banging the benches, and screaming their hearts out. Waldo never took part in this atmosphere of youthful craze, instead, he observed from the sidelines with

strange, obsessive curiosity and delight. He would go to every football, basketball, and soccer tournament simply to *observe* the symphony of high schoolers on fire. And now, as he looked onto those two girls---gossiping away about prideful girls and stupid boys, school skirts blowing in the wind, one taking out a sheet of chemistry equations---a nostalgic yet solemn feeling invigorated him. A feeling of not fearing but knowing that one missed out.

"Here, give me your pencil," Athena said with an exhale and began writing numbers quickly on Jessica's paper. After a few minutes of Jessica deeply scrutinizing her paper, she looked up at Athena, impressed.

"She's really intelligent," Jessica said, responding to Waldo's surprised look.

"Oh ya ya, it's calculus, all that stuff is just a bunch of abstract representations of nothing," Athena dismissed, as she crossed her legs, straightening her skirt, and swiping through her phone.

"She says math is not real, I don't even know what that means," Jessica said laughing, her brown eyes becoming browner. She had a very pleasant and fully mature laugh that made quite an impression on most people who met Jessica for the first time.

"She says a lot of things aren't real," Waldo added, smiling.

"She does, doesn't she…" Jessica responded, pleased to hear Waldo joining the conversation.

"Oh you two quite blabbing, ya'll don't know...Oh never mind," Athena said with a bitter look.

"Oh no, please enlighten us, Athena," Jessica said with a sarcastic tone. Athena lowered her phone suspiciously and saw that Waldo and Jessica were in good and ironic moods.

"Oh you guys are retarded, especially him," she said pointing to Waldo. Jessica looked at Waldo with wide eyes, surprised at the blatant insult.

"Athena!" Jessica whispered like an angered mother.

"What?"

"It's alright, she's just joking," Waldo chimed in, easing Jessica. Jessica scrambled her eyes in confusion, in embarrassment, but after half a minute of seeing Waldo's relaxed expression, she was convinced that he was okay with her horrid behavior.

"Alright, but why don't you tell us why math is 'fantasy' as you say?" Jessica said, poking Athena's elbow.

"Oh cut it, I already had to explain to him other things because he wouldn't stop bothering me, and now you?" she said in a restless voice.

"Oh she told you her 'theories'? We can't get a word out of her! How did you do it?" Jessica asked, laughing hysterically, holding her abdomen.

"Stop it Jessica, you're acting like a, like a," Athena stuttered at the end, carefully glancing at Waldo then resuming. "You're just...acting ridiculous." Athena tilted her chair backward and adjusted her feet on the table, her eyes still focused on the screen, but every other sense alive and listening.

“Okay, well then tell us why math is fake!” Jessica repeated with a deliberately annoying tone of voice, her finger poking Athena’s stiff neck. Athena dropped the phone in her lap, her eyes turning dark green and blue. She looked at Jessica with great fury boiling in her bosom. She could tear her apart right there and Jessica sensed it. As Athena cooled down, she blinked her eyes and opened her mouth.

“Okay, well...You wanna know? Here it is. Math is not real because it’s only an abstract representation of what’s *actually* real, which would be the physical world, what you can see,” she said, in a tone of voice that surprised Waldo due to its subdued nature, knocking on the wooden desk.

“See, whenever she speaks, everything flies over my head,” Jessica said to Waldo with a simple-minded giggle.

“Tell me about it,” Waldo responded, laughing with Jessica.

“And then you complain about how I don’t talk to you about these things? It’s because y'all don’t want to listen, keep blabbing about cheer practice or makeup,” said Athena. Jessica raised her eyebrows ironically and rubbed her mouth.

“At least he *listens* and can comprehend some of the stuff I’m saying,” she said, pointing to Waldo. Waldo perked his ears and felt a sense of bulletproof pride. “You, Lexi, Chloe, and...oh the rest, if I mumble a word, you won’t understand and laugh like you’re hopping through lily fields, carrying buckets of strawberries.”

“Okay, I’m sorry, continue,” Jessica said laughing again, and Athena’s mood moving in a downward spiral.

“Jessica, I’m not a laughing-stock for you, just leave me,” she finally said with raging eyes, somehow still controlling her anger. Jessica turned to Waldo, unbothered by Athena’s rude behavior.

“So you and Athena do what?” Jessica asked. “I know it has something to do with psychology.” Waldo explained to her the whole procedure of free association and how he allowed Athena to sit in on real therapy sessions on permission of the client. He explained further of the “client-centered” technique and how it functioned in therapy sessions. Athena would add off-hand comments on the ineffectiveness of certain methods in psychotherapy just to spite Waldo and Jessica. The two remained unfazed as Waldo felt gay to be able to explain his career to someone who felt more interested in it then himself. In general, Athena had helped Waldo renew his enthusiasm for psychology as her scope of knowledge was so large, it matched or even exceeded that of a clinical psychologist. With such a breadth of psychology and philosophy packed into that pale skull of hers, Waldo felt thrilled to learn from *her* and was thoroughly humbled in her presence. Even more, Waldo felt a desire to pursue psychology and other disciplines too with the same vehemence and passion that Athena did herself.

“That’s very interesting,” Jessica said, nodding with a curious expression. “Athena, you never told me you do all this!”

“Wow, surprise surprise,” Athena replied sarcastically, bending her toes against the table, making the chair rock.

“Anyways, she doesn’t hang out with us that often like she used to. You’ve been keeping her away from us!” Jessica said jokingly.

“Oh please, he’s not keeping me from anything, it’s a choice.”

“Oh whatever you like, Athena. Anyways, Athena is also the cheerleading captain,” Jessica said, smiling at the angered Athena and leaning her body on the armrest of the chair.

“Is that so?” Waldo replied. “You’ve never told me Athena?” Waldo said gayly. Athena maintained a hardened look, staring at her phone. Jessica and Waldo both scoffed in a mutual understanding of Athena’s behavior.

“Oh come on, talk to us, get off that thing, you’re always using it,” Jessica said, poking Athena once in the cheek. She settled and waited for Athena to react and tried to poke her freckled skin again.

“Won’t you stop it!” Athena snapped. Jessica flinched and launched back into her seat. Waldo and Jessica’s laughter paused momentarily. After a few minutes of silence, Jessica decided to break the uncomfortable verbal gap.

“So...Athena told me you guys have a football game next week?” Waldo asked.

“Oh yes!” yelped Jessica, her skin lighting up. “I’m excited!...But they're exhausting...I mean, that’s a given but still...It’s something to account for,” Jessica said loudly then slowly drifting into mumbling while Waldo nodded. Suddenly a thought possessed Jessica as she pressed her wide lips together.

“You know Athena is a Curry Scholarship recipient?” Jessica told Waldo in a clever manner as if she were telling Waldo, “I love her but what a thing she is! She’s got everything but still complains.”

“Really? What is that?” Waldo asked curiously, looking back at Athena with a new layered lens.

“She has a *full-ride* scholarship to one of the most expensive schools in Texa---”

Athena interrupted.

“Jessica, can you pleaase shut your mouth? If not, you can go talk to your new boyfriend over there,” Athena said, staring with blazing stern eyes. Jessica’s cheeks turned bright red and her features lost their vibrance. Waldo uncomfortably tried to comfort Jessica but could not find the appropriate words; instead, he pitied her embarrassment which showed so obviously.

“Why don’t you tell me about yourself,” Waldo said cautiously, trying to show Jessica that he disregarded Athena’s grotesque comment.

“Oh...Me? Well, what do you want to know?” Jessica asked, the red disappearing from her glowing skin, and her previous confidence returning.

“Anything...Do you play any other sports besides cheerleading?” Waldo asked.

“I do track & field during the spring,” Jessica replied, an inkling of warmth returning back to her voice.

“I did sprints freshman year,” said he, remembering the asthma attack he had the first day which rendered him unable to play in any sports.

“Oh, wow,” Jessica said in her warm voice.

“Alright, date’s over,” said Athena, sighing at the end to show that she needed patience to handle Waldo and Jessica. Waldo looked at his watch surprised at the quick nature of time.

“I need’a get back to work,” Waldo said as if he wasn’t even sure if such a thing was necessary.

“Well she’s coming with us,” Athena said plainly, Jessica glancing at Athena, wondering if this statement was reconciliation.

“Oh no Athena, he has...to work,” said Jessica, hoping that her statement would be rejected. Athena looked at Waldo with a plain face as if asking him: “Really? You have to work?”

“We’ll get late and Richard’ll be mad at ya. She lives far,” said Athena.

“Well...Alright then,” said Waldo, tilting his eyeballs to the right corner of his sockets.

“Are you sure sir?” Jessica asked and received a nod. “Oh how lovely, I finally get to see what you do that gets you running out of class at the end of school. Isn’t *that* neat?”

17

On the drive to the “wellness center,” Waldo thought about how he already had a hard time keeping one teenager with him at work, so much so that his job was on the line, and now he had to contend with two. Good news was that Athena loosened into a less aggressive mood and even considered dipping her toes into highschool gossip---something she adamantly detested---with Jessica.

Upon arriving inside the building, Kate greeted the ladies with a wide grin, excited to meet what she guessed was Athena’s friend. Athena leaned her firm forearms on the table and crossed her feet backward.

“And who is this?” Kate grinned.

“I’m Jessica, and you are?” Jessica said, surprising Kate with her mature way of moving and speaking. The two became acquainted within a few seconds as Athena smiled her half-bitter and half-jolly smile. The three ladies talked while Waldo returned to his car to get his car keys. Upon returning, Waldo observed the full-fledged conversation the triad were having.

“I’ll have to watch one of you girls’ performances!” Kate said, smacking her overwhelmingly lipsticked lips.

“Actually, next week, just before Founder’s Ball, we have a huge pep rally, all friends and family are invited,” Jessica said, keeping her attitude just in between it being over and under of whelming. Just then, Waldo walked behind Jessica and Athena; like a tired father returning from

work, he smiled with his coat on his left arm. Kate quickly mouthed to Waldo that Richard had come and then returned her attention back to Jessica.

"Well, where is the pep rally?" Kate asked, smiling largely.

"Oh it's at St. Nicholas Hig---"

"Dear, you ladies go to St. Nicholas? It's an expensive school! My cousin graduated from there. And so you say it is at St. Nicholas?" she said, surprised.

"Yes ma'am...Athena's been working very hard every day. She's a great captain," Jessica said, smiling at Athena who was curiously looking at Waldo's office.

"Well...How lovely," Kate said, smiling slightly and shrugging her shoulders.

As Waldo ran his eyes over Athena, he sensed her cynical attitude transcending that of usual. She seemed irritated and uneasy the more Jessica spoke. What could it mean? Something certainly *was* bothering her and the chances that it had something to do with that shadowed slender figure Waldo saw two days back certainly existed. Though no marks showed on the surface, there may be marks beneath. Such was the hook Waldo hung on to to survive work along with Jessica's homely presence and curious questions, keeping him occupied and feeling like a hero until Athena would reign on his parade, falsifying his claim or insulting him.

After the ladies exchanged a few remarks, Waldo followed Athena who had known from memory that it was John's session that was to start in ten minutes. Jessica stayed on Waldo's right, asking him questions, delighting the intelligence he possessed. The rest of the evening was spent with Jessica in the coffee lounge as most clients could only tolerate one teenager. Some, however, had developed a dependency on Athena's presence to which Waldo noticed very quickly. Days that the psychology queen did not arrive to her throne, some clients would revert back to their aggressive, non-compliance policy. They would refuse to answer Waldo's questions or even sometimes threatened to leave him and turn to a different practitioner. But as soon as Athena arrived, her mere presence would assume tenderness and compassion in this breed of clients so as not to displease Athena's judgemental looks, stares, and piercing comments. Athena, as a habit, would turn off her phone and maintain such tremendous focus on the client that he could not help but feel her gaze like a spotlight on him. She was never afraid to ask the uncomfortable questions that Waldo or the client could never ask on their own. In this manner, Athena had become increasingly indispensable, a middle-man who functioned as the "dirty worker"; the main analyzer and Waldo as someone who was only a representative of her. Sometimes Waldo fancied that without Athena, he would no longer maintain his job at the firm; this thought was relieving.

In between sessions, Jessica would peek into the room and ask Waldo and Athena how the session went, bringing joy to that cold and sterile room. Waldo would explain how the session was completed in slightly embellished language as Athena scoffed in her seat, swiping through her phone.

And so the night came so swiftly. The clients sweeped in and the clients sweeped out. At times, Jessica would become restless and walk to the front desk where Kate stood with her fair

hair pinned back, files neat in her fingers, and eyes scanning the vacant desert the room had become at night. Somewhere in the distance, across from the parking lot, the purple neon lights of a bar glowed. Jessica traced her steps in boredom until she reached the waiting area.

The car finally set in motion and Athena's drowsy eyes seemed to tolerate the bright light of her phone. Jessica, on the other hand, desperately tried to finish her homework as she pressed the sheet against her right knee and wrote viciously under the faint car light of an old sedan speeding down a highway. Athena would glance with flattened eyes, forgetting how Jessica had ended up by her side. She drifted into that limbo state, where the living and the dead were no longer distinguished; where the luna and solis had become one entity. As Jessica saw the time on her phone, she wrote with greater vehemence, disregarding the neatness of her writing style. She finished victoriously and slipped the paper back into the bag, not fooled that she still had a bottomless pit of worksheets to complete. Jessica then picked up her phone and was delighted to see a text-message.

"Tyler said he's going to pick me up in his Dad's car for Founder's Ball," Jessica said, her mouth left half-open as if waiting for something. "Oh my lord, look at the car, Athena," she said, obviously excited but trying to shroud it in motherly disappointment. Athena gleaned at the car: seductive curves and a glimmering red paint all over.

"Oh Tyler, why, he's going to attract so much attention with this!" Jessica said, no longer able to suppress the excitement in her voice. Jessica turned off her phone and the reading light. Before she turned off the golden light, she saw a glimmer of Athena's blank and miserable face.

"Oh I'm so excited for the pep rally," Jessica said, hoping to put some life into Athena's features.

"Yes, you've said that already," mumbled Athena. Jessica looked at Waldo then out the window then brought her eyes back to Athena.

"So, have you talked to Joshua about the ball?" Jessica asked.

"No."

"Why not?" said Jessica, now worried. Athena only shrugged and rested her eyes on the passing cars, the front-lights lighting her freckles and eyes in strobe patterns. She reached for her bedraggled hair and rubbed sleepily.

"You haven't talked to him ever since he asked?" Jessica asked, her mouth opening wider as the silence gained the upper-hand in the "conversation." Athena rested her chin on the window sill and watched the stripes running, splitting, and cutting.

"Athena?"

"Yes."

"Where are you going to eat with Tyler?" asked Jessica to which Athena shrugged.

"Athena, you need to know where to eat at least!" responded Jessica with furious whispers. "I understand you haven't been to the ball with anyone for years, but...Well there are certain traditions and what-not. And you know them quite well," ran Jessica's tongue. Athena's

silence was one of a child who early on in the parent's reproachment decided not to allow the words to affect him.

"Oh Athena, you must be going to the ball *with* him. Right?" Jessica responded, her eyes stirring wide open in the darkness.

"I don't care about your traditions or...whatever. I'm not going to eat out with him *or* go to the ball...with him," Athena responded.

"Athena! What's the point of going to the ball if yo---"

"Good point, I *won't* go to the ball then," interrupted Athena with her cold and demonic voice.

"Oh stop it! You *will* go. I only ask you to eat out with Joshua and then go to the ball...In fact I was going to invite you and Joshua to come with us at the new french restaurant at Broadway*,"* she said quickly, scared she was going to lose her friend's attention.

"Nope. I'm not eating out with him," Athena responded plainly.

"Athena! You're very frustrating---"

"Well then don't speak to me," Athena responded with such utter nonchalance to Jessica's growing frustration, it tipped the boiling point for Jessica.

"Joshua has been waiting months for this! He was so shy to even ask you to the dance. Athena, you should've seen him afterward, how happy he was, and he's been that happy ever since. If he finds out you don't want to eat out with him *or* go to the ball *with* him...Oh dear, you're...Wow! " Jessica said, herself choking up. At this point, Waldo turned his mirror in the direction of the subdued argument he was beginning to hear.

"I'm tired…If it weren't for you and Carmen...and oh well all the other loose girls you hang with like a bunch'a…I wouldn't be going to the damn ball. So...shut," she said like a drunk who purposely exploited her condition in order to avoid an uncomfortable conversation.

"Well, where will you…Wh-Where? How a-are you going to get to the ball?" challenged Jessica, her confidence slowly breaking to the force of nervousness.

"I'll eat at home like a *good* girl and he'll drop me off!" Athena said, raising her voice and pointing to Waldo.

"What's going on?" said Waldo, clueless as to what the subject of the argument was this time.

"Sir, she needs to go to the ball with a boy she said she would go with but refuses to," Jessica said in her cordial manner but now tainted with worry.

"You're dropping me off," said Athena, resorting back to her state of indifference as she looked out the window.

"Sir, I don't know if you understand but there's a hundred and twenty year's worth of tra-tradition into this once-in-a-year ceremony, and well, she's refusing to take part in the culture of St. Nicholas and...Joshua, the bo---"

"Can you just shut your mouth *s'il vous plait*?" Athena said, her carnivorous teeth shining.

“Why do you have to use French? What does that mean! I just want you to---”

“Ladies, relax! What’s the problem?” Waldo interrupted.

“There *is* no problem. You’ll be dropping me off at the ball next week and you’re picking me up. Oh ya, you can come to the stupid pep rally too,” Athena said loudly, breaking her sleep. The thought of attending a pep rally made his spine shiver as he remembered those occasions, how wild and fantastic they were in his days. “Are they still like they were?” Waldo asked himself carefully, like a child who’s approaching something too delightful to be true, let alone real. “Maybe they’re *better*,” arose in the depths of Waldo’s head. Oh how redemptive this feeling was!

“Sir, she needs to…” struggled Jessica, realizing that he could do nothing to improve the situation. “Athena? Why do you have to be this difficult?”

“What are you, my mother? Just...Waldo, it’s next Wednesday, I need to be there at four,” said Athena.

“Are you even going to ask him if it’s okay with him!” blared Jessica, disgusted and shocked by the calm illusion of gaining a solution to an issue which was only, in reality, growing larger.

“Is it *okay* with you my dear Waldo?” Athena said with such vigor and exaggerated sarcasm, Jessica felt like ripping her hair into shreds. In no possible way could Waldo say “no” and so he said “yes.”

“But...But, Joshua will be very disappointed...And, and we all sit at the same table. Sir! I-I, well…And he paid for her ticket! You’re acting vile, Athena. But sir,” she stumbled, still somehow managing to sound so highly and respectful.

“So what, I *am* a vile human,” Athena responded with pleasure pulsing through her veins.

“Ladies, knock it off please. Come to some resolution here,” Waldo said, surprised at the amount of confidence and control he could muster.

“Sir, it’s very much wrong of her to treat a boy like that,” she finally managed.

“Athena? You’re going with a boy?” Waldo asked, suddenly realizing that fact. Athena turned her head in a psychotic manner to Waldo.

“Oh so what? Are you going to join her too? I’ll jump out this car right now,” Athena said, twisting a bizarre smile that made Waldo and Jessica slightly afraid. Waldo twisted his body and tried to steer the car and speak with the two girls.

“Okay, everybody relax,” Waldo said, pushing air downward with his hands. “Athena, why don’t you want to go with the boy?”

“I don’t want to,” she responded with suppressed fire.

“Okay, you want *me* to drop you off at the ball?” Waldo asked, inadvertently assuming the voice he uses for his patients when they seem on the verge of indecent or destructive behavior. He knew something was deeply disturbed within her.

“Yes, I already told you that,” Athena responded back in a dull and tired voice as she looked out the window.

“But,” Jessica said, stopping upon seeing Waldo’s hand, signaling her to remain quiet.

“Is there a reason you don’t want to go with…” said Waldo, looking at Jessica questionably. She whispered in the blank: “Joshua?”

“Why do you have to drill into me? I told you I don’t want to! I wasn’t even supposed to go with him if it weren’t for missus *I-enslave-myself-to-other-men* over here who set the whoole thing up...the whooole thing up,” she said, dragging her words as Jessica looked at Athena with quiet sadness.

“Are you sure? Joshua seems like a good guy by the way Jessica was describing him earlier,” lied Waldo. He had heard nothing of their earlier conversation; he was only trying to please Jessica, who was looking at him meekly, begging for support.

“Waldo, if you say anything more about it, I swear I’ll jump out,” she said, gripping the door handle and breathing heavily with wild eyes. A primitive maze saw Waldo in those terrifying eyes. Oh how much she enjoyed it all! The twisted looks of Waldo and Jessica, the way she made herself look insane, inhuman, this all delighted her. Waldo slowed down the car and brought it to a halt on the side of the highway.

“Okay, why don’t we step outside for a moment?” Waldo said calmly to Athena. Athena, not having enough energy to argue with Waldo's foolish attempt to soothe her, stepped out of the car. She patted her skirt and leaned against the car with her arms crossed, her chin turned toward the wasteland that stretched out for miles.

“Just relax Athena, take a few breaths,” Waldo said. The words went into her ears and came out immediately, ringing nothing in her mind. The large western lands that stretched out into the darkness looked so beautiful to her. An inarticulable thought possessed her, and how imprisoned she felt unable to express it. No means of expression would validate that vague feeling.

“Are you done?” Athena asked, shaking off that momentous feeling. Without anything being spoken, they both went back into the car. The consensus was obvious, Athenian victory was gained, and the car drove on. Jessica glanced at her friend like a stranger, having never seen this side of Athena.

Jessica opened the door, her conscience beginning to put shame on her. The shame was translated into her meek gait. Waldo lowered his window and smiled.

“Thank you sir...for everything,” said Jessica, smiling with her wide lips. Waldo replied politely back and she left to her house, glancing back at Athena disappointed.

“No problem Jessica,” said Waldo quietly, his right eye finding Athena drowsily staring at her school patterned sock.

As Athena sat in the passenger seat, Waldo inspected her face a few times and drove on. Athena closed her eyes and slipped into her seat. Waldo risked stretching his arm across the seat and pulling the seat belt over her body. Athena jerked and mumbled inaudible insults but then

gave up as the belt clicked. The fire from the outside seemed diminished, but inside, somewhere deep, it was growing. The more Waldo glanced at Athena and then back at the road, the more *the* thought encroached on his mind. His fingers became moisty as he realized that something important might be slipping from them. He gripped tighter onto the wheel and began to assault his thoughts violently with counter-thoughts, trying to supress the beautiful images that arose in his mind with horrific, vile images in hopes of repelling it's opposites. As the assault occurred in his mind, the skirt to his right ruffled. Athena stretched her forearms, her fingertips touching her shoulders. Waldo looked onto her hopefully, inspecting those dark rings beneath her eyes. They opened.

"You're up," said Waldo. Athena, without responding, itched her ankle and took her backpack from the backseat. Her fingers grabbed a folder and slipped a paper out of the side. She began writing furiously, using her knees as a support.

"Homework, now?" Waldo asked.

"Yup," she responded calmly. The car stumbled on a small pothole, breaking the nip of Athena's mechanical pencil. As she wrote, *the* thought began to obsess him. "That's when he does it to her, when she can't think straight," continued Waldo, imagining how cruel a man could be to lay hands on his own daughter when she was in such a condition. He was able to raise the temperature of his blood and the pace of his heart by the thought alone. With a sense of responsibility, he opened his mouth.

"Athena?" Waldo asked in a light and careful tone. Athena sensed the petty switch in his tone of voice, raising suspicion in her as she looked at him. Waldo glanced at her, shocked to see the red that was corrupting the mandalas of green and blue.

"Did...He do anything---your father of course---did he do anything to you when he smelt you?" Waldo asked.

"What?" said she, obviously annoyed with another round of Waldo's antics. Waldo, resenting the fact that he had to repeat the question and be more specific, tried another attempt.

"Did your father do anything to you, like get mad when he smelt you that day?...When you were smoking," Waldo asked, glancing at her sidelong with an intense gaze.

"When was this?" said Athena, becoming more awake and interested in Waldo's question, perking her eyebrows up.

"Hm? Oh…ummm...Two days ago?" Waldo said.

"Two days, eh?" she said. "And what about em'?"

"Did your father get angry or *punish* you for smelling the smoke off your cl---"

"Ohhh, that time?" she said lazily, smiling. "By the way, all this talk about smoking is getting me hungry," Athena said, pulling her backpack over her lap and slipping out a pre-made roll from the front side of the bag, hidden inside a pencil case along with her lighter. "Can you slow down, there's nobody here," she said. Indeed, the roads were vacant and almost always were like that. The only traffic ever was roadtrippers and eighteen wheelers, looking for a way to

get out of the endless green deserts. The waxed green fluffs were lit and the window was rolled down. She stretched her right arm out and put her feet on the dashboard.

"Jeez, Jessica is such a preppy kid," she let out, nodding slowly. A sudden sense of euphoria washed over her as her lips sucked on the glossed end, blew out, and rested her forearm against the window-sill. That feeling of being in a movie elevated the act of smoking beyond it being a recreation but an activity of the active imagination.

"What was it you were saying?" she said, surprising Waldo with her interest in the question. Waldo---trying not to make it obvious that he rehearsed the question in his head many times---rephrased the question.

"Pah! No, he just looked at me strange and told me to shower, nothing else was made of it," she said cheerfully. Waldo looked at Athena desperately for any signs of hesitation or discomfort; he looked for her eyes and found them. Nope, they weren't running to the corner. He looked for her fingers and found them. Nope, they were relaxed. She leaned forward and put her elbow on her knees with the elbow flicked to one end, blunt sizzling.

"Can I help you mister?" she said playfully, pretending to be a mistress. Waldo only smiled weakly and looked into the depths of the road. Athena smiled at the passing cacti, blowing them a kiss. Waldo looked at her and felt heavier sadness weigh on him. The car arrived at the wide metal gates. Athena hopped off her seat to type in the code and returned back. As Waldo's car got nearer and nearer to the front of the house, Waldo felt tremendous dread choke him. Was this it? Was everything he thought of for those few months only a false mirage?

"Mmmm! It's so...It tastes so much better. It's chocolate flavored, wanna try?" she said in such a gracious tone. Waldo refused.

"Don't forget, next week at three," she said, even sucking her lips together and lighting her eyes redder just for Waldo. She tossed the blunt onto the floor and drilled the toes of her sneakers into the stick, not forgetting to pick it up and place it on the side of her skirt. She turned around to Waldo with primordial eyes raging on fire. Athena had transcended everyone and everything; she was indefectible. She felt untouchable, unknowable, forever a phantom of a distant reality. Dust spiraled into the night sky where a bull and a matador dueled. Waldo gripped his steering wheel in frustration and hurt.

18

Alice perked herself from bed and looked at Waldo sleeping with his mouth open. She suddenly felt disdain for that hideous mouth, dropped open like a dog salivating for his bone. The feeling gripped her and she tried to snap herself out of it. And then the thought dawned upon her that they had only been married for a month and she was already having such vile feelings for her own husband. Alice walked into the kitchen, prepared breakfast with her body becoming

more sluggish than usual. As the coffee poured into the ceramic mug, Waldo's mute steps awakened Alice from her half-slumbered state.

"I put some hash Wally," Alice said, putting her chin on her fist. He thanked her lifelessly as he lifted the spoon and stuffed the cut potatoes. How lonesome she felt even next to him. She wondered if this is how all marriages become after a certain period of time, but oh how fast it came to theirs! As she glanced at her husband, she saw that he wasn't happy, and therefore she thought that he wasn't *enjoying* the idea of leaving her alone every night. This was how she reconciled with her sadness. Such a thought made her feel softer.

"Wally, do you want to go to watch a movie this evening...after the book club meeting of course?" Alice asked, knowing how ridiculous it was to ask such a question first thing in the morning. She began to blush from the thought of Waldo trying to reject her plan as nicely as possible.

"Sure."

The affirmative had excited Alice so much that she did not notice Waldo's drooping back, inanimate eyes, and dark countenance. And so she danced in the kitchen and around the living room like that drawing of the ballerina that hung on the wall. A few short hours passed with Waldo sitting on the couch, drearily watching the television screen, his mind a tabula rasa.

"So ladies *and* gentlemen," Alice began, her chin raised and eyes pointed to the sheet in front of her. "This week we read Anton Chekov's *The Darling* and *The Grasshopper* and...Well, did we enjoy it? Yes! Great! And I thought I might invite Dr. Sullinger to give us a professional insight into Checkov's life and literature. Please give it up for Dr. Sullinger!" she said, becoming overbearingly excited. What was supposed to be a thirty minute summary turned into an hour and fifteen minutes analysis of Russian literature and its philosophical significance, something that managed to make Waldo feel even more lethargic. He leaned in his chair and tried his hardest not to close his eyes but to think of something pleasant. He searched and could no longer find anything. The speech ended. Alice thanked the professor warmly and his wife as they walked out the door with the rest of the women.

Waldo suddenly remembered the last conversation he had with Laura and all her devoted insistences on the angelic nature of Athena's father. He, out of desperate curiosity, sought for Laura in the crowd. There was no Laura. He walked to the door and looked above the people to find no one. He returned disappointed. He wanted to convince Laura that there was something wrong with Athena's father, but the more he thought about it, the more the evidence for such a presumption began to vanish away like a beautiful farm field being swept up by a black sorcerer of the winds; each wooden plank being snatched so quickly and cleanly that an invisible skeleton would stand with only the imaginary silhouette of a once existing house which the brain tries to grasp onto like a vanishing memory.

Waldo stretched his feet in front of him and tapped his fingers on his left hand then got up to search for Laura in the departing crowd. No luck. He returned back to his recliner even more defeated.

“What time do you wanna see that movie?” she asked as if she were in love with him all over again.

“Hm? Anytime you like...sweetie,” he said, filling his mouth with air.

“Alright, five it is then,” she said, looking at him. “I also reserved a booth for us at the new Italian restaurant,” she said, kissing him on the neck. Waldo under the pressure of her gaze responded back by pecking her head.

Alice had gotten the idea of having a surprise date of resparking life into her marriage from the jazz teacher at the university, Ms.Williamson. Alice thought it a brilliant idea.

After an hour, Alice walked out of the bedroom in a sea-blue dress and a golden necklace hanging down her neck. How beautiful she looked all of a sudden. It was best for her not to utter a single word thought Waldo, as he rushed to his bedroom to change. He walked out and looked at Alice in amazement.

“I can’t believe we’re going to the movies like this,” she said. “I should change into something more casual for the movie, at least,” she said quickly walking to the bedroom. Waldo stopped her with his arm. “No,” he said. “You look beautiful.”

Those words were enough to brighten Alice’s face further.

As the movie played, Waldo blankly stared at the floor of his feet recalling the Egyptian theater and how Athena curled up in her seat and watched with such rapt attention.When the movie ended, Alice pulled Waldo by his arm and directed him to the car.

By the time they arrived at the restaurant, and the waitress arrived---who eyed Alice and Waldo as if they were aristocrats---the sun began to settle, turning wheat golden. The interior was beautifully decorated to imitate an Italian courthouse. The waitress, in white gloves, arrived holding a bottle of white wine.

“Alice?” Waldo said, amazed.

“Yes hun?” she said, smiling a rich woman’s smile. It was then that Waldo noticed how well she was fit for high society.

“This is very expensive,” Waldo said, picking up the wine glass.

“Oh don’t worry about it!”

“No, I feel bad, I’ll pay for i--”

“No! I arranged this Wally and I will pay,” she interrupted, certain on her will. Waldo relaxed in his seat and stared at Alice. Alice stared back, certain that he was all to her now.

“So, how’s work been?” Waldo asked, curiously staring at the menu, glancing up at Alice.

“Tremendous Wally...I think I might want to teach art history next year,” she said

“Ah, art history,” Waldo said blandly. He looked up and saw Alice resume her smile quickly. After a few minutes of Waldo scratching his nails and Alice smoothing out her dress and observing the party of people entering the restaurant like mobs, the food arrived.

“So...How has *your* work been,”Alice asked with narrow eyes.

“Oh the same. Nothing seems to change,” responded Waldo, smiling weakly. He sensed further questioning and braced himself.

“Oh,” Alice said, looking as though a brand new thought entered her mind. “What about Laura’s niece? How is she?” said she, with curious eyes and a hushed voice, as if she were gossiping about a high individual.

“Oh...well, she’s a natural really,” Waldo said.

“How so?” Alice said with an ironic turn of the head.

“Oh she...just runs the whole thing!” Waldo said in a fit of excitement that terrified him when he saw Alice’s surprised expression. Waldo reddened and sipped his wine.

“Wow! Does she actually sit with you in the therapy sessions?” Alice asked, exaggerating her smile.

“Well of course, that’s the best way for her to learn---through experience,” said Waldo, looking at the waitress bringing a refill of the garlic bread. Alice nodded warmly, ignoring the waitress and the bustle of the Sunday evening.

“I suppose you’re doing her a great duty considering how her mother is no longer with her,” Alice said, assuming a meekish smile.

“Oh well...I don’t know...just doing,” was all Waldo was able to mumble, afraid of what Alice was attempting.

“You drive her every night too! Lucky girl!” said Alice, quickly sipping the wine glass, flecking her wrist inward. Waldo looked at Alice suspiciously.

“Well, yes, who else will?” Waldo said, trying to look as calm as possible. Alice smiled and nodded.

“I want to meet her someday *for real.* I’ve seen her once---she’s a pretty girl!” said Alice, raising her chin. Waldo looked around, trying to allow the fumes of the conversation to disappear into the air.

“So,” she said while chewing. “How’s her school?”

“Beautiful,” said Waldo. Suddenly, Waldo pleasantly remembered the pep rally that was coming up. Then he remembered this “Founder’s Ball”; how strange, how foreign! He imagined women in silk dresses and men in creamy tuxedos, champagne bottles and large checks. Expensive cars, leather purses, and polite society’s etiquette. A Gatsbitian ball with drinks, finery, and Babbitian speeches.

“What’s her school named?” she said, screwing her eyes into Waldo’s face, which now glowed like a halo.

“St. Nicholas. Matter of fact, they are having a pep rally this Tuesday,” said Waldo, not sure what the repercussions of telling her were. “And on Wednesday there’s a ball,” he said.

“Wow, I didn’t know *balls* are still something that are organized! How lovely,” Alice said, her teeth glistening. “Are you going to the pep rally or ball?” she asked, unintentionally sounding jealous.

“Well no, I can’t go to the ball, at least I don’t think,” Waldo mumbled.

“And the pep rally?” Alice asked, raising her eyebrows and deciding not to sip her wine.

“She did ask me to go, I have to check with my calendar to see if I can,” said he. Alice stared at him, waiting for the tail of the conversation to arrive. Waldo chewed his food and lightly nodded, sometimes glancing to the birthday that was being celebrated to his right. Alice waited patiently until she felt as though she were choking from the inability to speak. She lightly opened her lips then closed them.

19

That particular morning, Athena was frustrated with her companions, who all acted so sensitive by walking beside her, lowering their voices, and sometimes risking a tap on her fingers as if she were a fragile doll. Jessica had told them about the incident in the car. Some of the girls, in the hall, would whisper to each other, concluding that Athena was suffering melancholy over her lost mother. Nobody knew what “lost” meant, but that’s all they knew about the girl’s mother. In all her classes, she felt the gazes at the back of her head, the warmth of whispers, and the sly glances. She felt an uneasiness in her own skin, a strange feeling of unearned victimhood.

In her chemistry class, Jessica would look at Athena’s hardened expression and back at the teacher, trying to comprehend the contents of the class but also trying to decipher the internal processes of her friend. Jessica had forgotten completely of Athena’s rebellion against the traditions and norms of Founder’s Ball and instead sought repentance as she spilled her sins during her weekly family confessions. Jessica was impaired by guilt and was not sure what type of apology was appropriate for the occasion. In between classes, Jessica felt comfort in knowing that the mute Athena at least allowed her to walk by her side. As the two girls walked, Jessica observed the emotionless expression Athena carried since the beginning of the day. Athena only thought of running away from the hideous herd of boys and girls, sick of seeing those babbling and crackling pigs.

That evening, she wasn’t particularly fond of attending the mandatory bible class. In the circle, organized like a therapy session, sat the boys and girls with the chaplain in the middle. Athena walked into the room that was decorated every inch with various crosses: some of wood, others of metal, and others of leaf. She swung her backpack onto a chair and walked into the restroom, the only place that was silent. It was so quiet, she felt that silence had been turned in on itself. She stared into the mirror, adjusting her clouded vision. Suddenly the door swung open and she quickly departed to the classroom. Athena sat down in her chair with her back arching and her chin on her palm. Her cheeks deflated lazily, causing threads of hair to toss back and forth.

“And the symbol of Jesus is not only a *collective* symbol but a symbol that is unique to each individual. To me, Jesus represents kindness,” the chaplain said in a warm tone of voice and

friendly smile, a smile that entranced all people. “Love of one’s neighbor...Equality...Suffering for *our* sins...And the universe itself...Really, the universe! And you Georgie? Why don’t you tell us what Jesus means to *you* individually.”

“Just...the same things you said,” said the meek Georgie.

“Alright, how ‘bout you Hannah?” the chaplain asked.

“Jesus represents love of the highest degree to me. He’s the embodiment of *radical* love...of...of..I don’t know...It’s difficult for me to say,” said Hannah, blushing and putting her palms against her cheeks and chuckling nervously.

“Oh no, it makes absolute sense. There are no wrong ideas because I’m asking for your subjective image of Jesus. And sometimes, that image cannot be expressed by words as you showed us Hannah,” said the chaplain in a mysterious tone of voice. The whole affair disgusted Athena as she stared at the floor, prepared for the end of class and not the least prepared for her turn to speak.

“Alright, Julia, how ‘bout you dear?” the chaplain said, looking at her with fatherly eyes. Before Julia began to speak, Athena noticed her suspicious eyes, shifting from her to the chaplain.

“Oh, ‘what would Jesus do’ I guess,” said Julia as the chaplain nodded proudly. “He represents a role model that I must try to...follow?”

“Very nice, so now we have *love,* an *ideal to follow*, now Sherman, why don’t you add something on to that list.”

“Hmm…” Sherman hummed as he pondered. “Jesus Christ represents a leader that’s led once and now will continue to lead us even today,” he concluded.

“Very good! Now, we have love, an ideal, and a leader! Let’s see what Charlotte has to say,” the chaplain continued. Athena felt the heat of the conversation shifting slowly towards her seat. Usually, Athena would feel her heart pump intensely when she would anticipate speaking in class, but this time, she felt nothing. How strange yet freeing this new-found reaction was to Athena.

“Jesus is Jesus. I’m not sure what he means to me, but to tag along with what everyone else was saying, I would like to add faith. He represents faith,” said Charlotte politely, bringing her heels together.

“Yes! Faith, love, ideals, and leadership, brilliant! And you Jeremy?”

“Just life,” blurted the boy out with utter confidence as if he were wanting to say that since the beginning of class. “Everything about existence, every living thing from...from ants crawling on the ground to birds in the sky...to...well us, humans, homosapiens. He’s the embodiment of the universe itself...It’s very profound and...beautiful just to think about,” said the boy with a steady gaze.

“Wow, thank you Jeremy. Jesus is something larger than existence itself for you. Very interesting...So we have love, faith, leadership, and the universe itself. These are all the things Jesus is and can be for each individual!” the chaplain said. Athena felt the gazes slowly point to

her as the chaplain shuffled in his seat to face her. “And you Athena, what does Jesus mean to you, even if you don’t---also folks, if you don’t *believe* in Jesus, he can still mean *something* to you. So, Athena, what does he *mean* to you,” he asked, interlacing his fingers onto his knees. Athena glanced up at him with her crossed leg bouncing, her chin on her palm, and back arched. She waited for her heart to beat faster as it was accustomed to, but again, it refused to respond. She blinked slowly and continued to gaze at the tiles, wondering how it would feel to dissolve into them. She did not dare to look up and parted her lips.

“I think Mary should’ve gotten an abortion.”

For the rest of the day, Athena sat in the corner of the dean of students office crossing and uncrossing her legs, becoming uneasy everytime a man or woman with an important position in the school passed by her. She knew that the whole office knew of the incident by the way they avoided looking at her and talked in low volumes when near her. Athena’s talk with the dean of students was embarrassing for both of them. For one, the dean of students had always favored Athena and had expected great things from her. She always prioritized Athena in showcasing the campus to new families and being a guide. Now, the dean was shocked by such unexpectedly erratic behavior and felt as though her judgment failed her in favoring Athena. Athena felt this sense of regret and disappointment echoing from the dean’s face. The least Athena could feel in that moment was shame for letting down that poor woman. “Dammit...she’s just trying to do her job,” thought Athena miserably.

“Athena...You’re the cheerleader team *captain.* You’re highly intelligent, to the point of me suspecting you of being a genius. But all this means nothing if you can’t maintain *character.* You’re a *role model* for all girls---and boys---at this school. If you say things like you said---I don’t even want to dare repeat the phrase you said---not only do you destroy your character, the school also begins to appear as uneducated and wild,” she said, while Athena stared at floor, not daring to see what her face had to say. “Worst of all, you say this reprehensible stuff *in* bible class during *Holy Week!* Athena...you have to *lead* the pep rally tomorrow and attend the ball the day after. The way you are currently acting can easily ruin all these events for me and you my dear,” said she, with a disappointed and motherly expression.

When the dean left Athena looked at the dean’s photos on the desk of her children, a drawing on the wall, a bible quote, and a Ph.D degree in economics. “She could’ve done something in her life with that degree. Instead, she settled to teach at a catholic high school where half the kids don’t even care for the words she babbles in class and prioritize teenage vices over the contents of the course...Her marriage’s probably falling apart too...And now she has to contend with someone like me,” she pondered. The longer she sat in that grey room and scanned the room, the more she felt relieved to be alone. As lunch time arrived, she found herself enjoying the peaceful company the walls provided her as she ate her mashed potatoes.

Soon, a slender man arrived at the front desk and was directed to an office by the dean. All Athena was able to see was the back of the man when he entered the office. She ate her cheese crackers and struggled to not reach for her phone which would remain with the dean for the next three days. After a longer than expected period of time, the man emerged from the office and the dean signaled to Athena.

"Your ride is here," she said solemnly. Athena glared at Waldo with disgust and walked by his side with her head drooping. Waldo concluded that Athena's silence was due in part to the guilt and shame of her actions. The girls at the corner, as Waldo and Athena walked on the lawn, whispered and suggested different theories as to what this man named "Waldo" was to Athena. Some suggested that he was just a therapist to her, others that he was a teacher, and others had more malicious ideas in mind. Athena swung her backpack into the car and slammed the door.

"Drive out of here as fast as possible," she whispered looking out the window. Waldo followed the command and kept a steady gaze on his fingers, aware of the embarrassing situation.

"Why did they talk to you? Are you like my second father now?" she asked, curling her knees on the seat, her body facing the window.

"No. They said that they had never met your father and wanted to talk to me instead," said Waldo. "Also, I'm not sure why you would *want* to let your father know that you did something like that," he said, certain he had pressed a button in Athena. He got a dab of delight when she didn't respond. Athena slowly ran her fingers through her hair and stopped midway as if caught by a thought.

The car drove away from the infested hive and Athena felt that momentary relief from the corrupting influence of the school. She knew, though, that such a relief would not last long; that there were pom poms to be shaken under the glittering lights to please all the viewers, that she was to be dressed like a doll for a ball and a boy and a culture she resented, that she was to pretend as if the world wasn't burning while she suffocated from the smoke.

Waldo kept quiet and Athena did too. He was wise enough to sense the strange meekness that had overcome Athena though she veiled it by launching curses every once in a while. Waldo glanced at her with a knowing face.

"Oh, was it so bad?" Athena finally blurted out, feeling anxiety trickle down her fingers, who begged for stimuli. "They had to take my phone?" she said.

In a few minutes the car arrived at the wellness center. Kate noticed the solemn air that Athena carried as she approached the counter. Kate dropped her smile and shuffled the papers slowly.

"Athena, I'll be coming tomorrow," Kaie said, hoping for the terrible resting expression of Athena's---which Athena wasn't aware of herself---to disappear. Athena, skillfully smiled.

"That's great, I'm a little nervous about it. I reckon hundreds of people will be there," Athena said, Waldo clearly aware of the artifice Athena was able to craft; it sounded more disingenuous then it usually sounded. After a few chuckles were exchanged, her face dropped to

its previous state as she lazily walked to Waldo's office. She knew the drill just as well as Waldo did and so they prepared and ran through all the patients. In between sessions, Athena would begin sketching lines and circles in her history notebook. She would then tear the paper into pieces then turn them into balls and would attempt to throw them in the trash can.

"Almost there," Waldo said when she missed her shot.

"Shut up."

The day ended like it always did, and Waldo, this time around, felt a sense of disappointment in dropping off Athena at her father's home. Where was he to go to now? The goals of each day seemed to become narrower and narrower the more time he spent in his office alongside his partner. Slowly, everything outside the borders began to look misty and murky.

In the car, she bent her body forward and tapped her fingers against the dashboard with an increasing interval of aggression until even Waldo had had enough.

"Could you please stop that?" he said.

"O-o-o-o...Whatever, this...It's frustrating," she said with eyes that had become manic. She decided to toss her head back and forward instead.

"Oh my, what's wrong with you?" Waldo asked, breaking a smile as he saw her retainer and freckles shine from the incoming headlights of cars.

"Ex-act-ly!" she said laughing, bending back and forth. "Ah, I hate those whores," she let out. Waldo looked at Athena with surprise. "All of 'em' are exactly that. Every. Single. One," she said with a victorious smile. "You know, one thing I've learned from psychology is to accept the fact that we all have dark thoughts, right?" she said. Waldo steered, hoping she would continue without his response so as not to disrupt her flow. "Well, here's mine: I would love to see that school burn down!" she said giggling like a child. "And I'm out of blunts," she mumbled venomously as her fingers gnawed into the insides of her bag.

The car arrived at the front door and Waldo looked at the windows with a clear intent in mind.

"Why don't you meet him? You seem to be obsessed with him," Athena said.

"What?" said Waldo, his heart pounding and his skin becoming pale. Athena looked at him as if she knew what he was thinking of and made an expression that said, "You're quite the fool for trying to fool me."

"Come on let's go," she said ironically, even pulling Waldo's arm.

"I'd rather not Athena," said Waldo.

"Oh come on! You worship the guy, I see you peeking into the windows everytime we come here," she said, smiling dismissively, enjoying the punishment she was inflicting on him.

"Athena...I...just," stuttered Waldo as sweat began to erupt on his skin. Athena stepped down from the car and began to walk forward when she suddenly stopped, surprised not to see Waldo by her side. She turned her head and indicated for him to come. Waldo, with shaking fingers, opened the door and followed his guide.

“He’s probably drinking a beer right now,” said Athena with a malicious smile. The large wooden door creaked open and allowed a golden hue to form a triangle on the floor. Waldo stood by her side, completely frozen.

“Athena! You’re milking the cow tonight, I’m tired, whole body’s swollen,” sounded a voice that had become raspy.

“Alright,” she said, her voice morphing into a southern accent, adding such a strange twist to her already exotic voice.

“Alright, I gotta milk, bye,” she said, completely unaware of Waldo’s existence as she began to walk away from the door.

“Athena!” a voice yelled again.

“Yes?”

“There’s somebody there with ya ain’t there?” the man said.

“Sure,” Athena responded, unconscious of the southern influence on her vocalizations.

“Well take her with you, four arms beat two, especially yours,” he said.

Athena turned to Waldo and mumbled asking him if he wanted to milk the cow. They walked to the back and entered a metal shed where a huge bucket was kept. Athena picked it up with ease and carried it towards the pen. Waldo watched Athena with amazement at how much ease and finesse she had in handling the animals. She steered one of the cows and lured her into the pen with pellets in her left hand. Once the cow came in, she ordered Waldo to close the door. He struggled with the bolt. Athena came to help, lifting the gate up and sliding the bolt in.

“You see, you’ve got to push up *then* in,” she said with such sobriety, Waldo was taken aback. The pale was set beneath the cow.

“I hate doing it so much,” she said with genuine pain on her face.

“Why?” Waldo asked. She stood up, ready to orate.

“ ‘Cus we’re stealing the milk from the babies,” she said pointing to the cow. “Meek things,” she said with such hatred, spit landed on the floor. “We’ve even managed to corrupt *them*,” she said with a cynical smile.

“Then why do you do it,” Waldo asked.

“Didn’t you hear him? I have to suck the milk out of her for his breakfast,” she said, squatting down, staring resentfully at the udders. She stroked each udder twice and placed the metal pail. Her forearms went to work. Waldo, scared of the cow’s legs, stayed off to the side and observed Athena.

“Ah!” The cow brought its hind-legs forward, threatening to topple over the pale of milk. She swung the bucket quickly, and settled it on the rough ground.

“Come on, you’re here to help not stare,” she said. Waldo squatted down and began to stroke downwards, futile in his attempts to allow milk to come. She sighed, and brought her fingers to the udder that Waldo was working on.

“You have to *squeeze* then stroke downward,” she said, illustrating her words as a sharp jet of liquid shot into the pale. The cow called for her children who were standing at the gate.

Athena looked up and became chthonic. She looked at the milk with strange eyes and then looked at the children mooing from behind the gate.

"Go to hell," she said as she knocked down the bucket, causing the liquid to form a small, Kawtharian river. She walked to the door and unlocked it for the baby bull and the elder female. They ran to the mother and began sucking on the udders wildly, causing foam to erupt from the sides.

20

Alice, in pajamas and a loose grey t-shirt, sat on the couch. Rose elegantly descended the sofa with two porcelain cups and placed them on the table. She placed her hands on her lap modestly, with her back erect. Alice, on the other hand, sank back into the cushion with her hands lying on the side, loose and dead.

"We went out for that date I was talking about," she said with a sigh then smiling when she turned to Rose.

"Oh, how was that?" Rose asked in her own specially cheerful manner.

"It certainly *went* well," Alice responded, her eyes drifting to the floor. Rose then noticed something deep below bubbling to the surface. Alice's features began to twitch and her smile permanently looked twisted.

"What's wrong," Rose asked, carefully. Alice convulsed once, hoping for Rose to hug her, convulsed again and finally accepted the defeat as she allowed the tears to stream down. She turned to Rose, staring at her lovely cheeks. Rose got up to fetch a tissue-box. She felt cold from her spine to her toes and desired warmth. After pity had paralyzed the entirety of Alice's body, she collapsed onto Rose's fragile body. Rose, held her breath and spread her fingers wide.

"He didn't ask me to go with him to the...school," she howled.

"What?" Rose asked bewildered.

"Laura's niece! He's going to her thing---the cheerleading show...He didn't care to ask me if I wanted to go with him..." Alice said, as the tears wetted Rose's pretty gown. Rose looked at Alice with pity but could not help the disgust that accompanied it. Alice clawed onto Rose's bony wings, making her feel utterly uncomfortable. "He told it to my face Rose! To my face!" Rose began to feel a sense of anxiety crawling at the back of her skull and sensed its venom like a viper about to strike.

Rose, out of frustration, nudged. Such was enough discomfort to cause Alice to relieve Rose's tiny body. Alice sat with her hands folded, recovering from the storm.

"Are you okay?" asked Rose. Alice smiled weakly.

“Rose...I feel tired and and…feel like I’m suffocating,” she mumbled. Rose, out of sheer sympathy, moved closer. Alice looked onto Rose with surprise and her heart began beating from the excess love and hate that boiled within it. Alice touched Rose’s frail fingers and rubbed them.

“Sweetie, you need to put on weight. I can feel your bones,” Alice said, smiling. Rose sensed the love, took no offense, and nodded in agreement with Alice. Alice wiped the remaining tears, trudging down her cheek with her sleeve.

21

“What is this for?” Richard asked tiredly.

“For a friend, I need to visit her party,” Waldo said shyly, uncrossing his legs. Richard crossed his fingers and bent forward.

“You’ve got to tell me what this party is about? Isn’t Kate going too?” Richard asked with clear annoyance in his tone. Waldo was slightly surprised, forgetting that Kate had agreed to come as well.

“Oh well..Yes,” Waldo said, pointing his eyes to the carpet.

“Well? What is this *party?*”

“It’s not really a party, it’s more of a school celebration,” Waldo said with a hesitant smile. Richard stared at Waldo with a look that said, “I’m not interested in your antics this evening.”

“This is about the girl again...isn't it?” Richard asked.

“Hmm? Wel--”

“Yes it is, Kate even told me. Now look Waldo, I have no problem with Kate leaving because she comes to work and *stays* at work everyday of the working week. You, on the other hand, we both know have had problems with this latter requirement of the job,” Richard said with stern eyes. “And this girl, for christ’s sake, who is she to you, a niece or something?”

“No sir, just a family friend,” Waldo responded back, trying to remain as calm as possible. He stared at the back wall focusing with all his might, desperately hoping for a miracle to occur. Oh how badly he wanted to see that youthful stage of drama! It felt so necessary to attend this brawl of youth that if he didn’t, life seemed to feel so grey, so distasteful and bitter. Richard spun his head around then looked at the poor Waldo. He could see subdued disappointment in his eyes.

“Well, if you don’t come back on time this time, Waldo, there will be *serious* repercussions, understand?” he said with a firm finger.

“Yes sir,” Waldo replied, his feature lighting up more than he intended.

As Waldo walked to the exit, he contemplated running to the car but decided that it would be stupid to do such a thing. It was too much a manifestation of an excitement he felt guilty of.

He allowed his hands to guide him to the magical kingdom of “beauty, excellence, and academics” as it said on the entrance in bold black and gold. Waldo shifted his eyes among the cars and found the whole lot packed with glistening windows. His fingers tingled to the sound of a faint bass playing. The large field enveloped itself to Waldo like a kingdom. The children, adults, and in-betweens crowded the bleachers with food; some with their faces painted black and gold. Waldo sat down on the bleacher, scanning the field for Athena or even Kate. One boy, his body painted entirely gold, stood erect and began yelling a chant to which that portion of the stadium responded. Waldo watched the fellow in deep awe.

In the mirrored room, Athena adjusted her black and gold glittering gown. “Mountain Lions” was etched in silver varsity letters across her body at a tilt. She fixed her hair and stared for a long minute when a friend tapped her on the shoulder. She walked towards the corner where everyone was huddled. Jessica and the other girls quietly eyed Athena. Athena kept her gaze forward.

“What do you have for us Athena,” the coach asked proudly, as if trying to mask the uncomfortable atmosphere. The small girl who had fainted a few weeks back, looked onto Athena with glittering eyes.

“This is your day ladies,” Athena started off, staring at the floor and crossing her arms. “Don’t let them down, they're expecting you...They’re expecting a *show*...Maintain those fluid motions and allow yourself to sync in...That’s all there is to it,” Athena said, shrugging. The little girl looked upon Athena seriously, she saw something solemn in Athena’s face.

The little girl turned to the right and saw her mother in the corner with a brown bag. The girl’s tiny heart began to pump as she stared at her mother in annoyance. “And remember to be always moving or el---” said Athena, stopping midway seeing the little girl making signs with her fingers and whispering vehemently. She saw the mother and smiled at her.

“No, that’s okay, come on in,” Athena said with a weak yet gentle smile. The little girl turned to Athena in disbelief, turning as red as a lobster. The girl’s mother ran to the glittering girls with short and wonky steps. She excitedly pulled out glittering bows with each girl’s name written on it in black. The girls took their presents with great excitement and glittered the woman with compliments.

“Oh don’t thank me, it was all Sydney’s work,” she said, handing a bow to Jessica. She nodded and smiled, having another girl pin it in her hair.

“Oh here’s yours, Athena,” the woman said, handing Athena the bow. “Oh Sydney talks about you all the time!” the woman said with a wide smile and ironic sigh. The little girl tugged at her mother’s trousers, now fluttering dark red from embarrassment and anger. “And she’ll go on about how Athena did this in practice so now *I* have to practice it…” said the woman passionately. Athena smiled, finally realizing what she had meant to this little girl, something she ignored like a passing fly. Athena thanked Sydney’s mother and walked to Sydeney.

“Can you put it on me?” Athena asked, lowering her voice. The girl looked at Athena mistrustfully as her skin returned to that initial fairness. Athena carefully handed the bow to the

girl so as not to inspire a new embarrassment in her. Athena bent her knees until they touched the floor. Sydney, with shaky fingers, tried putting the pin through Athena's luscious hair but failed.

"That's okay, keep trying," Athena said, still taking extra precaution to avoid the eyes of the other girls. She felt the little girls' fingers maneuvering with frustration until the pin snapped in place. Athena raised herself from the floor and looked to Sydney with a serene smile.

"Thank you," Athena said, with such poise.

"Alright, ladies, let's go out there," the coach said, walking out of the room with the team behind her. All the girls discussed, quarreled, and laughed in the halls while Athena walked on the side with her hands on her hips. One of the girls, Isabella, asked Athena if she were okay. "Fine," she responded back without looking at her and continuing to play with her hair as if she were doing something so important, she could not look at her own team.

The group of girls walked out as smoke shot out on both sides. They walked to the front of the field as the voice announced that fifteen minutes still remained "before the beginning of the show." Athena, with quiet confidence, stood in a prayer-like state, her fingers pressed together and eyelids shut. Waldo spotted her from his seat, curious as to which god she was praying to. Suddenly, she snapped out of her trance and took a few steps forward and snapped the entirety of her body backwards. She flipped onto her wrists and sprung backwards into the air and returned to the floor and back into the air repeatedly. Waldo was amazed and the team quietly watched Athena. Athena slowly walked to the circle where the girls were stretching, not betraying any signs of pride or joy on her face. Waldo, watched Athena in disbelief that he would be driving this very same girl back to her home and going to work with her the next day; and the event hadn't even started.

"Welcome to St. Nicholas's very own *Holy Week*. Let's give it up for your mountain lion cheer girls!" the voice announced. Suddenly fire flamed from two bases into the day sky that was becoming destroyed by night. The figures moved in a military-like fashion, constructing different formations. In a few seconds, two glittering bodies were tossed into the air shining to the diameter of light and fire. Athena's distrust of the crowd would leak once in a while beneath her persona which she put on so effortlessly. The way she smiled so perfectly, shining the ivory beneath the cherry and turning her jaw at precise angles and strutting both arms in the air.

Jessica, while breathing heavily, prepared for the final move. The girls circled with Jessica and two other girls in the middle. Athena stood in the front of the formation, completing her impressive solo. In a blink of an eye, Athena flew into the air, touched both feet with her arms, and landed on her toes perfectly. Jessica and the others shot up three bodies in the sky, each one flipping backward and snapping their feet like soldiers snapping their rifles. The crowd was now raging wild as people started slamming the bleachers and throwing things.

"Let's not get too rowdy," the voice mumbled worriedly, losing its charm. Waldo watched the animalistic passions coming alive, inspiring a flurry of emotion within him. Those boys and girls lost their minds for once. Waldo watched the antics of one boy who took off his shirt and climbed to the top of the bleachers with a blare horn. Waldo watched him in awe, now looking

here and now looking there for any signs of someone ready to take the prince away. No, the masses proved stronger as they formed a barrier, bodies flowing in between the benches, a distinction of people and places dissolved. Gold and black rained everywhere as a mountain lion shot t-shirts and begged the crowd to be louder. The crowd at some point had become so loud, Waldo was prompted to close his ears. Suddenly a boy tripped on Waldo and collapsed on him. Waldo groaned and tried to get up but cheering voices shouted and even more bodies collapsed. More tossed, wrestled, and fell. Waldo, afraid of his back snapping in half, gasped for air and tried to claw his way out. After a few minutes of torture, he managed to escape the grasp of the wild teenagers. A mother gasped loudly. Everyone got up as if it were an accident and continued with their unravelings. Waldo fixed his coat and desperately smothered his brown hair in place.

The music changed tones and suddenly the girls aligned themselves side by side. Two flames shot up.

"Pleeeeasssssseeee give it upppppp for your St. Nicholas's very own cheerleader team captain, Athena!" the voice announced. Athena molded her face into a buyable one as she stepped forward and waved her left pom pom to the crowd, where cheering infested the air. Athena stepped back and flames shot once more.

"And your mountain lion's co-capitan, Jessica Smith," he announced. Again the crowd went wild. Waldo watched Jessica curiously, at last recognizing her. Waldo was impressed by how well esteemed Jessica was in the community as he heard her name being called and yelled from across the bleachers---though certainly not as much as Athena's. The rest of the team was called and Waldo watched Athena assume that bitter frown. He watched her carefully, looking for the threat. Upon his investigation, he saw Jessica glance at Athena from the side multiple times, as if she were expecting something from Athena.

"Alright folks, the cheerleaders have one last act, and I can assure you, it's the best one they've got," he announced. The girls aligned into a new formation. Athena and Jessica stood in the middle with the other girls around them in a circle. The music sounded in an exotic beat, pounding the sound of native drums. The boys and girls were dancing and anticipating the final act. A mountain lion roared from the speakers. The drums increased their beats. The school was prepared for its nightly ritual, their skins glittering under the lights and stars of the stadium lights and young night. Suddenly, four girls ran from the circle to the front of the bleachers on Athena's command. The girls stomped each foot once and motioned their hands like those of a lion and roared. The crowd followed their ritual, each person stomping their feet. The drum beat increased its pace to the point of it causing a sense of impending doom. Waldo felt his heart rate increase to the utmost degree as he saw that everything in his sphere was running wild. Pure chaos. Boys and girls now collided into each other, the mascot threw beads, the bleacher leaders roared louder than ever. Waldo felt that he might implode from excitement. His palms were becoming clammy, his entire back was covered in pools of sweat, and his hair was shriveled into a mess.

Athena and Jessica stood in the middle of the clockwise turning mandala. Jessica meekly looked at Athena; so much was in her that Jessica did not have. Jessica liked to tell herself that it was "friendly competition," but at times her heart would burn from resentment, not knowing why things had to be arranged where her friend would be the carrier of qualities she desired. Physical superiority, unmatched beauty, and intelligence were all things Jessica possessed and everyone knew it too, but Athena had *more* of it.

As the circle ran in a steady stream of glitter, suddenly Sydney came to Athena and Jessica. The crowd at the upper regions of the bleachers began to cheer wildly. The lower half joined in blind excitement. Waldo looked desperately for the source of excitement. He tried with great effort to climb a few steps to see what was happening. He saw that a small girl with bleached blonde hair stood.

Athena squatted low and began to walk around Sydney, forming her own circle within the circle. Jessica looked at Athena confused as to what she was doing. The other girls, trusting Athena's rifts, continued their movements. Athena walked around the girl, producing loud roaring sounds. Jessica stared at Athena, terrified as to whether this was part of the act or if she had lost her mind. The crowd, upon hearing Athena's primeval cries, had lost themselves as they began banging louder and screaming their vocal chords into nothingness. Athena continued to walk with her legs far apart, throwing her paws forward, threatening her prey in the middle. Her roaring was now brushed with a masculine layer. Sydney in the middle looked onto Athena with such terror, her legs shook and her entire face turned red. The meek girl was afraid of the vicious crowd. Jessica stood limply, unaware of what would appease Athena.

Suddenly, the drumming pattern switched to double drums. On the switch of the beat, the girls inversed the direction of the circle. As Athena continued to stomp around Sydney, she pulled her hair back and walked to Jessica. "Don't screw this up," Athena said, her mouth foaming. Jessica's heart almost dropped by one glance of Athena's eyes. "Oh..oh no, is it's it's time?" she mumbled. Athena walked to Sydney and kneeled down. Jessica, in shock, found that she had no desire to continue the ceremony. She placed her left knee close to Athena's. Sydney gave her right foot to Athena, trusting her safety to Athena and Jessica. Athena looked to Jessica with her blazing red eyes; "Don't *ruin* it!" she said. Jessica, on seeing a more defined image of Athena's Medean-like features, felt trembles run down her spine. Athena and Jessica both raised Sydney in the air and the cheerleaders inverted the direction of the circle once more. The crowd began whistling now and the drums beated faster. Suddenly, Athena sensed the near coming of the maximum capacity of those drums. She looked at Jessica and saw the poor girl's disturbed smile. "Now!" yelled Athena and the two squatted low. The drums had come to stop, the cheerleaders halted and created a stagnant circle, and the three girls disappeared under the shadows of the circle. In that silence, everything felt so precious, so delicate and tempting to collapse like walking on a frozen lake. With the sound of a loud roar from the speakers, Athena and Jessica exerted such tremendous strength upwards, Jessica fell on the floor grasping onto her wrist. The body flew into the air, reaching heights that didn't seem achievable. The coach

watched in shock, putting her hands on her head. Sydney did as Athena always told her to do. She flipped forward continuously. Stillness possessed the crowd as they witnessed the astonishing little girl, gracefully twirling her body to the dimension of gravity. Athena stared at the stars, her arms looking swollen and her lion dress shining like a beacon. Everything in Waldo's eyes was so perfect, he could live in that moment forever, and such was an aspiration that seemed reasonable at the moment. He lasered in on everything, greedily consuming all the sensory inputs. Two more girls ran to the middle of the circle as Athena and them organized themselves. Suddenly, Sydney began to fall downward to the circle and into the arms of her mothers. The crowd returned to its natural tendencies as two flames shot up. Athena suddenly felt a misnomer in their organization; she moved her head down and saw Jessica getting up from the floor in tremendous pain. "Hurry the hell up now!" she screeched at Jessica who had tears running down her cheek. With that screech, the two other girls hesitated, moving backwards. The body sped downwards. In the moment, as Jessica got up and the girls moved back, Sydney's foot kicked Athena's head as Sydney fell backwards, crushing her precious, milky wings. Athena got up from the ground in a haze and heard screeches coming from all around her. Immediately, then, she saw her girls running to the school building. Athena spun her head around and found the little girl unconscious.

Jessica ran in front of the girls, exerting whatever stores of energy that were left in her body. She rushed into the nurses office, wiping tears.

"Yes, sweetie?" the nurse asked, flabbergasted. Jessica mumbled, stuttered, and finally made out that someone was hurt outside. By her side, two other girls appeared. The nurse commanded them to take a stretcher and a wheelchair, in case her injury was something that could be handled by the school. Jessica quickly ran into the restroom as the girls and the nurse rushed out the building. There was yelling and fast-paced steps. She leaned against the sink and watched the door, terrified somebody would come in, even more terrified that it would be Athena. She shed her tears quietly, wanting to disappear.

Meanwhile, outside, the nurse need only see a glimpse of the girl's mangled body before dialing for the ambulance. The screams and running continued to and fro on the grassy lands. Slowly, a faint circle began to form around Sydney and Athena. Athena came off her knees and brushed the dirt from her hair. She stared around the mumbling circle that was growing in volume with red eyes. The nurse kneeled down with another woman as they called Sydney's name. Athena continued to run her fingers through her hair as grass and dirt fell out. She heard her name in faint mumbles of boys and girls who looked cautiously at her. Athena, with hesitant steps, walked to Sydney's body and kneeled down with the nurses. She looked onto Sydney with regret—who had allowed the fall of such a pure thing? Then rage filled Athena's lungs as she heard those gossip-mongers continue to mumble and whisper as if they were observing ghosts. She got up on her legs and turned to her audience.

"Come on, give her some room!" she said with a heavy voice that only commanded obedience. She waved her hands as if trying to swat flies. The circle moved out, creating

Athena's desired space. She kicked her sneakers into the grass and spit venom. "They need to get here quickly, she's internally bleeding," the nurse said to her assistant as she lightly touched Sydney's face. Athena had not noticed that Sydney's mother had arrived and was already weeping by her daughter's side. Athena studied that pretty and pure face, still trying to solve an uncomfortable question.

"Come here dear," the mother called. Athena, as she walked to the mother, felt her lungs swell. She kneeled down and felt the middle-aged woman's arm grasp onto her. The mother mumbled and even insulted Sydney, reproaching her for ever joining the cheerleading team. She then launched insults at Athena for ever thinking of recruiting her daughter in such a blasphemous sport. Suddenly, the mother saw Sydney open her small eyelids. She became so excited, she tossed Athena to the floor and leaped onto her daughter. The nurses tried to stop her from unintentionally hurting her own daughter. Athena got up from the dirt and crawled to Sydney's face.

The ambulance drove down the slope, the red-blue lights reflecting violently off of the girls' black-gold gowns. The men took the little girl into the ambulance. In that half-hour, as the lights blinked onto the trembling cheerleaders, they all seemed to be reduced to kittens waiting for their mother. Athena monitored all corners, not allowing anyone to fall out of their place. No one spoke but the mother and the ER men. Athena, after pacing for a few minutes, decided to hunt down Jessica. She looked onto the girls with red eyes.

"Where is she?" she asked. A melting pot of emotions were aroused. "Well, *where is she?*" Athena asked again, her chest heaving and eyes dilating.

"Athena, she's afraid you'll get mad at he--"

"She's afraid I'll get MAD AT HER?" Athena yelled so loud, the men returning to the ambulance were startled and looked at Athena. Her voice had become hollow. "Yes, she thinks I'll be mad at her? She killed Sydney for the damn, mother--, I…" she said, deciding to quit. She walked up the hill towards the nurse's office, hoping to find *her.* In the building she opened the locker room and walked into each corner, inspecting the restrooms and showers. She then walked out, opening the janitor closets until she reached the bathroom. She slammed the door open and found the whimpering Jessica on the floor.

"Athena, I'm so sorry, please don't---" her sentence was interrupted by seeing Athena charging at her like a bull. "ATHENA! MY GOD I'M S---" she screeched until she felt a peppery slap across her cheek. The slap was so hard, she felt her left ear go deaf for a few seconds. Her eyes opened wide as she looked ahead in disbelief.

As Athena walked out, she felt an impulse to tell the girls off and insult them, but she found them leaving on their own. One of the girls lingered for a few seconds.

"I'm sorry, Athena," she said, with a faint smile. Athena continued to look at the floor and as the silence began to become larger, the girl felt uncomfortable and began to walk away.

"See you, Beatrice," Athena managed out of a troubled conscience. The girl looked back and smiled as she walked away.

The ambulance was now rolling up the hill, its throbbing lights diminishing into the night. In the dead of the field, Athena stood on her numb toes. She shook her right leg so softly and patted her mane. She watched the wavering grass, hoping to join them in their simple movements---*left...right...left*. She then looked up and her eyes again became frustrated.

"You like the show?" she called at Waldo. He sat with an intense gaze, his head resting on his crossed fingers, recovering from the drama that had unfolded before his eyes. The world no longer seemed real to Waldo, or, at least, as real as the event he had witnessed. He only desired to watch the show to its entirety like consuming the dregs of a leftover drink, both bitter and sweet.

"So," she said, crossing her arms and leaning. "Did you have fun?" she asked, irritated. The light from above contorted to her body; every freckle and scar turned pallor. The Athenian complexion reflected a deathly candida and her eyes assumed a strange sharpness.

"Did you enjoy that?" she asked again, walking closer to the bleachers, her whole body becoming more rigid. "I bet to hell you did!" she said yelling loudly and leaning against the metal rails. Waldo slowly got up from his seat and walked down the steps. Each metal plank creaked in the silence along with a few crickets. After a few uncomfortable seconds, Athena turned towards the parking lot and walked. Waldo lingered and walked behind her, making sure not to come close.

"D-do you want to see her?" Waldo asked.

"No, I hope she dies," Athena responded immediately.

Waldo after a few seconds, pulled down the lever and drove out into the road. How strange it felt to Waldo to have Athena so quiet and still. Her hands were folded in her lap as she sat with her lifeless eyes looking out the window. She spoke no words, bodily or verbal.

"Do you want to get a burger?" Waldo asked. Athena looked out the window silently. Waldo continued to drive and then turned the car into the burger shop off the road. The parking lot was bustling with cars even at that late hour. Athena sat in the corner, stubbornly pledging not to go inside. Waldo stood by the entrance of the restaurant and was surprised not to see her by his side. His senses told him to wait a few seconds and proved right. There she came out of the car and walked toward the restaurant. She unconsciously patted her bow and walked into the restaurant. Suddenly she saw a group of girls and boys in the corner. She swung on her heels and returned to the car. Waldo didn't question and bought her usual order and returned to the car where she was lying flat, as if trying to hide.

"Drive, now," she commanded, unwrapping the burger and sitting up straight.

"Who're you hiding from?"

"Not your concern," she responded firmly. And that was the last time they spoke before they arrived home. She got up and slammed the car door.

Athena opened the door and found her father on the sofa, enjoying a tub of ice cream. He looked onto her unimpressed and even disgusted. "Why're you always late?" he said roughly, then coughing after, mumbling about a certain cedar tree. "I had a pep rally," she responded with

more anger than annoyance. “Well then! Why didn’t you tell me?” he said, looking hurt. She stared at his face with such disgust, she thought spitting into it wasn’t so unreasonable. “Since when did you care?” she said, with a demonically ironic smile. “What do you mean! I used to go all the time with your mother to all your functions...ever since you were a little girl,” he raised his voice. “Athy...Don’t try to one-up me you hear? I don’t know what’s gotten into you,” he finished..

“Where are you going?” he asked surprised.

“I’ve got homework so if yo---”

“So homework is more important than your father?” he snapped. “Athena, I’m hurt that you don’t invite me to your events anymore.” After a few more shrugs of her father’s, she went upstairs. She sat by her windowsill, not bothering to change from her starry outfit. She reached into her bag and searched for something and was disappointed to find nothing. She walked to her bed and lay flat on her belly, hoping that nothing would disturb her position. Her hands and legs hung from the side.

22

“Oh,” Alice said in a self-deprecating tone when she opened the passenger door and found the littered chocolate milkshake, cookies, and fries on Waldo’s seat. “That’s odd,” she mumbled coldly.

“What?” Waldo responded, not seeing the cause of her distress yet. “Oh, that was just food from last night.”

“Okay hun,” Alice said in a voice that was like a bitter treat waxed in honey. “Well I’ll clean it,” Alice said dreadfully, as she picked up the material from the seat and walked up to the apartment. As she climbed the stairs, the image of the crushed up wrappers and cookies began to smell and look utterly detestable. “A filthy alley-way restaurant,” she thought as she read the wrapper. She tossed the material into the trash and returned to the car. She sped down the stairs, forcing a smile as she approached the car.

“Where to,” Waldo said in a cool and unusually enthusiastic tone. He had even opted to wear sunglasses when the sky was entirely shaded by clouds of puff. “To dance class, remember?” Alice responded. “Oh yea,” Waldo responded slickly as he reversed the car. “I don’t have to do it right?” Waldo asked, even tempted to agree to joining them if Alice insisted. Instead, Alice responded with a childishly frustrated “no.”

Soon they arrived at the post-modern styled building. They walked upstairs, Alice guiding the way. The industrial windows on the second floor towered above the downtown grocers, restaurants, and vagabonds. Soon, Waldo saw Rose walk into the room, she glanced at Alice with a suspicious look then accidentally met eyes with Waldo to which she quickly pulled

out her phone. Alice spotted Rose as she cried her name in merriment and hugged her. Rose smiled faintly and adjusted her loose shirt. Soon the men and women aligned into a formation and the dancing routine began.

The residues of the pep rally rested in Waldo's mind comfortably, painting everything of that day in a new light like one does when he's dreamt an artful dream. The sensations themselves were more pleasant and delightful, everything amusing Waldo. The thought of the injured girl surfaced to Waldo's mind, curiously remembering the details. He then remembered Athena's heartless comment concerning the girl. Waldo let go of the thought and looked at his watch patiently, planning for his departure. Oh yes, *the* departure was waiting for Waldo in a couple of hours. What was it about this departure that gave Waldo such tremendous joy? The ecstasy of seeing those dresses, those champagne bottles, and those golden laces. The joy of simply delivering Athena to the ball had another source of ecstasy, deeply embedded and hidden in the depths. A completely irrational joy it was, a joy that Waldo did not want to know. If he were to pry into his brain with a rational screwdriver, he knew he would find defects, defects that might even swallow him up entirely. Soon, Alice came out of the dancing room, sweat glistening on her silky skin and Rose panting hard by her side.

"We're going to get a shower and change," Alice said, picking up her bag and walking away with Rose by her side. In a few minutes they returned and the three walked down to the car. This time, Rose had volunteered to be the driver of the day as everyone climbed on board. Waldo relaxed his legs enjoying his solitary backseat. Alice and Rose exchanged some words to which Waldo was deaf and Alice turned around.

"Wally, we were thinking of driving to that German town up north," Alice asked, almost demanding an affirmative answer.

"German town?" Waldo asked, taking a curious tone that almost seemed exaggerated.

"Yes! Rose knows the way," Alice quickly rebounded. "They've got museums, little antique shops, and all that."

"Okay…How far is it?" Waldo asked, frantically looking at his watch, seeing that it was already past one, realizing he had only a few hours left until he had to pick up Athena.

"About an hour away," Rose responded. Waldo bit his lip.

"Oh... but I'll be late," Waldo mumbled. Alice saw the disappointment in Waldo.

"Oh...Well, shall we do something else then?" Alice suggested in a meek voice. Rose noticed the strange change of attitude in Alice's facial expressions and Waldo's tone of voice. It was as if the air was deflated out of the room. She sensed a peculiar situation like a rabbit sensing a wolf nearby.

"Oh, but we won't stay for long," Rose objected, making a firm face. Alice looked to her friend, surprised by her support.

"But Waldo has to leave," Alice responded in a self-defeated tone.

“What time do you have to depart,” Rose asked, turning her little head to Waldo. He felt her deepest of black eyes point to him like a gun. Waldo looked up, ashamed of the situation he had created.

“Three thirty,” Waldo responded, mumbling something inaudible afterwards.

“Well then, you can still come with us. Just drive in your car. You can leave whenever it’s time,” spoke the woman. Alice looked to Rose, having trouble containing her love that was outpouring from her soul. Rose saw a glimpse of childish bliss on Alice’s face, such was enough to indicate to Rose that she had done her job.

Alice upon coming out of the car exclaimed as to how beautiful the town was. Waldo nodded aggressively.

“Show me the chocolate factory,” Alice said, holding Rose’s fingers in between hers. Rose led the ravenous woman and Waldo to the chocolate factory.

“Rose, I asked you to take me to the candy store, not heaven,” said Alice, shining her teeth. When Alice stepped up to the counter, she found that her friend and husband stayed behind.

“You two don’t want anything?” Alice asked, looking at Rose and Waldo. Waldo was sitting on the bench, his head pointed downwards, daydreaming. Rose stood next to him, rubbing her arms, attempting to warm herself. The scene itself gave Alice her response. She, regardless, ordered her bounty and walked to the bench.

“Waldo? Try one, please,” she begged. Waldo, in his bliss, did not notice what entered his mouth and nodded in satisfaction. Rose, out of fear of Alice forcing her the sweets, turned the other way. They then walked outside among the maple trees who were shedding their crisped skin. Alice sparked her all-too-common monologues to which Rose was her faithful listener. After the crew had lounged at various parts of the old town, Waldo looked at his watch and delightfully recognized that it was just about time for departure.

“I should be heading out,” Waldo said, pointing his wristwatch at the woman. Alice produced a shy smile. “Alright honey, enjoy,” she said, kissing Waldo’s cheek with warmth. The heat quickly dissipated off of Waldo’s skin as he saw Alice’s lovely eyes simultaneously wishing him love and begging for an indication of reconciliation. Waldo ignored the premonition and jogged to his car. He shifted the car in reverse, smoothly gliding the car out of the parking lot then shifting back into drive.

As the car sped down the highway, Waldo imagined the dresses people would be in. How Athena’s dress would be. Would it be black? White? *Gold* perhaps? He imagined how each sew was stitched and how it would flutter. Now and then the anxious thought would haunt him, threatening him with vicious despair: “What if she does not want to go?” Such a thought chilled Waldo. “She didn’t even tell me yesterday if she wanted to go,” Waldo contemplated, his foot easing off the gas. “She is very sporadic,” Waldo said, continuing down the chain of thought. “And if I arrive at her house and she doesn’t want to leave and her father’s there, then what will happen to me? What will happen to *her?* In front of me!” Waldo thought, a darkness lurking

above and below. Waldo took the next exit and arrived at a gas station to only sit in his car, trembling from anxiety. “Should I go back to Alice and Rose?” Waldo contemplated. To return back to his wife and her friend’s judgemental eyes, that seemed anything but pleasant. It seemed a reversion back to the grey. Waldo rubbed his hair, despairing, unable to act. Flashes of a dress, of night skies and other substances flashed before his eyes. “No! I got to at least try,” he thought as he reversed the car.

She stood by the mirror in a satin dress. She bounced the tips of her curled tresses, showcasing volume to an invisible audience. She then turned and looked over her shoulders, disinterestedly watching the fall of the glistening fabric. She then dipped the pen into tar and spread it along the bend of her lashes, her eyeballs turning upward as if being captured by a demon. Placing the pen back into the jar carefully, she picked up a black lace and slipped it over her head---watching carefully for any misalignment of the hair---and stretched it on the pale tree trunk; it wrapped around elegantly. She stood in front of the mirror, modeling herself with the new additions. The red and gold wallpaper along with the dim lighting of the room made it obvious that it was built for a queen. A large granite hot tub stood erected from the floor by her side with petals sitting in a crystal goblet. The golden lighting made her skin unnaturally vibrant as she now twirled in the dress, staring at every detail with indifference. She had done the same routine so many times, it had become a circuit of activity that could be accomplished without conscious intent. Though, no matter how much she tried to fool herself into believing that she found it detestable to pamper herself up like the daughter of a Russian tsar, there was childish Antoinettian joy she found in refining her features, blackening her lashes, and twirling in the finest of silks. She walked out of the dressing cabinet and into her bedroom, nervous, her fingers tingling. On the corner of her window sill, she saw the black and gold ribbon sitting. All of a sudden, the memory of Sydney crashing to earth flooded her mind like a nightmare. She sat on the window sill, her black heel resting lazily on the floor and her other leg stretched on the sill. She twirled the bow in her fingers, the glitter rolling off onto her fingers. Her eyes were directed to her name and number, evidently placed by the tiny fingers of the child. Her heart warmed from imagining how much excitement the little girl might’ve had gluing on the letters of her name the night before. Looking out from the window, she watched the serene hills rolling across for thousands of acres, small ranches littered here and there, while her hand navigated for something on the table. When she didn’t feel the object of her liking, she turned to the table and grabbed a red packet from the drawer, flicking a stick and smoking away. It was when she heard a car driving up from the distance, she assumed it was Waldo. She got on her feet and blew a few smokes, her left hand resting on the hip with the palm facing skywards. She greedily took more blows, carefully watching the smoke exit the hole. Suddenly, she heard her father cry about a stranger on their property. She quickly put out the cinder of her cigarette and tossed it into the trash and walked down the spiral staircase, the heels clicking rapidly.

“Someone’s out there and---,” the man said, stretching his mouth with annoyance paused upon seeing the glowing figure standing in front of him. His features became tamed and even curious.

“Well, well, where she going? Founder’s Ball?” the man said, raising his eyebrow. She simply nodded. “Well then, don’t get so rawdy.”

Waldo nervously drummed his fingers against the steering wheel and with a growing anxiety watched his unresponded text to Athena. The blue bubble floated in silence. He turned his neck in both directions, waiting for only a sliver of a figure to show before he ran his car out. Suddenly the door opened, her neck turned to the right with that all too familiar look of youthful annoyance of elderly oppression. The girl turned to Waldo and all of a sudden, her eyes sharpened a husky blue, oppressing the garden green they usually possesed. She walked across the red sand, not worried about staining her glossy heels.

“Why are you trying to text me?” Athena said, spotting the phone open with a text sent to her, in a judgmental tone.

“Hm? Oh I just wanted to let you know I was her---”

“They took my phone away, remember?” she said, looking out the window. “Okay. Well what are you waiting for, a blizzard? Let’s go,” she said, glancing worriedly out the window.

They arrived in front of the ball room just when the sun had decided that it was wise to at least begin its journey towards rest. They goggled the pristinely dressed men and women walking in and out of the twelve feet tall gold-gilded,white-painted doors. Athena sunk in her chair as she saw more and more boys and girls congregate, hugging and kissing each other. Cheerful noises of laughter and exaggerated compliments aggravated Athena’s ears. Waldo turned to Athena and watched her hyper-real features express complicated emotions.

“Let’s go, it’s too early,” she whispered, her neck shaking.

“What, really?”

“Yes really.”

“Where?” asked Waldo.

“Anywhere just get me out of here,” she whispered again, her eyes not coming off the pretty women and handsome men. The car moved out of the atmosphere, leaving behind the smell of raspberry perfume, leather boots, silk dresses, and gelled hair. It was after a few minutes of driving in the city of concrete that the memory of Sydney bit Athena like fangs. She commanded Waldo to take her to the hospital. Why? “Just drive.”

The heels clicked against the floor. Waldo lingered awkwardly. She spoke with a woman and they sat on the chairs, under the light that made one’s skin sickly. After a few minutes of waiting, the nurse pointed to a room and they walked away. Athena stood by the window, her eyes widening as she saw a glimmer of Sydney’s face. She turned to Waldo and gulped. She controlled herself from saying something that might betray her fear, but one can control the

features only so much. Waldo saw it in her eyes but pretended like he didn't. Athena pulled her hair back and twisted on the heels, the tar-black silk dress bending light.

Athena finally opened the door and walked in. Sydney moved her head to the door like an old man. Her eyelids struggled to open until they finally did—and wide. Sydney flushed deep red and began to breath heavily. The machine behind the bed began to beep at a faster rate. Athena's lower lip was left limber as she walked slowly to the girl. Sydney watched Athena approach her in that dress, fully indulging in this dream. Sydney's heart wanted to leap out of her chest. Athena bent her knees slightly. A strange feeling arose in her as she saw the black arcs beneath the tiny eyes.

"How did you know I was here?" she said, smiling with such excitement.

"A friend," Athena murmured, smiling. Sydney adjusted herself in bed and opened her mouth for air when a sharp pain arose in her back. Athena's eyes dilated as she instantly reached for the bed, seeing what she could do to alleviate the pain. Realizing she was holding onto the bars that encaged the patient, she let go.

"Did I do well?" Sydney dared to ask.

"Yes!" Athena exclaimed, Sydney's eyes humbling themselves from unconscious pride. "You were brave...You're a tough kid," Athena said, sitting on a small stool by the bedside looking at her like an aunt. Athena gulped and tried to hold in the disturbing feelings that were surfacing. Sydney then stretched her left hand to the side and left it limp, as if asking for something. Athena saw the gesture but could not understand what it meant. Sydney felt her arm naked until Athena finally overcame something within her and touched Sydney's fingers. She rubbed small circles with her thumb into that precious hand until she felt a dangerous pang of emotion. She pulled her arm back and took something out of the side of her dress. A coin.

"This was given to me when I made the all-state team last year," Athena said, smiling retrospectively. Sydney stared at the coin as if it were an ancient relic. Athena then carefully placed the coin in Sydney's hand to which she turned downward and when she looked up, Athena saw the most painful tears in her eyes. Athena felt her heart constrict and inadvertently pulled back. "It would be nice to get rid of these extraneous sensations that collide against my nerves," she thought. Sydney, overcoming her shame, latched onto Athena's exposed elbow. Athena bent downwards, feeling uncomfortable and even resisting. Athena, so as not to hurt the girl, patted her on the head, even running her fingers through the golden threads a few times.

"Thank you," she managed to whisper.

"Did you have a date?" Athena asked, her eyes and jestful lips now showing a new coolness. Sydney looked onto Athena terrified, blushing a deep red. She wanted to give a response that would satisfy and delight Athena—but she didn't know what that would be.

"No," she murmured. Athena giggled a little. "You're too young," Athena remarked with a smile that slowly faded away. She got onto her heels and waved to her dear friend, possibly her only friend. Sydney waved back, unable to accept her as a friend.

When Athena arrived at the door, she accidentally bumped into Waldo, startling herself. All of a sudden the dreamy haze that filled her eyes and the soft love that mixed in her blood all boiled and evaporated from the surface of her skin.

"Jesus, you look like a creep!" she blurted louder than she expected.

23

Waldo drove back to the ballroom, not having forgotten the path. The car stood by the curb, as mass storms of people entered, a magical air filling the entire hall. Waldo watched in amazement and his partner in disgust.

"Drive somewhere else," Athena said, bending her voice into something bizarre.

"Why?" asked the driver, confused.

"They're taking photos right now," she responded.

"And?"

"Well I don't want to take them" she raised her tiny voice, strutting her arms downward. "I hate this whole thing, all of it, and you're making it worse," she said, calming her voice down and watching people walking by askance, realizing the window was open.

"Why would you leave the window open?"

Waldo closed the window.

"If you hate it why do you g--"

"Waldo!" she yelped, then rubbing her forehead and even covering her eyes; she groaned slightly. The groan reverberated in Waldo's head as he told her that it was no matter and that they would drive to the nearby park until she felt she was ready.

Athena sat in the car, splitting her hair ends, as Waldo stood outside feeding the geese food. Waldo signaled Athena to join him, but she pretended not to notice his gesture. Athena nervously coated her nails with her sweaty fingertips, wanting to escape the torture that was awaiting her. "They're all filled with venom! Stuffed with it!" she whispered with poignant rage. Meanwhile, Waldo was chasing a goose. Once the golden outlines of buildings began to print their mark on the concrete, Waldo walked back to the car sweating and breathing like an old man who tried a senile exercise routine.

"They're so beautiful!" Waldo exclaimed like a boy. Athena, playing the angry mother, crossed her hands and looked to the right, searching for something in the distance. Waldo drove the car back to the massive ball room, parking it and looking at Athena. Night was fastly approaching and it seemed that the exterior of the building was mostly empty, with the exception of a couple sitting by the fire pit outside. Waldo turned his neck to the girl by him who was shrinking by the minute as she stared out the window.

“You should leave now,” Waldo muttered. Athena shook her wrist and then opened the door. Her heels clicked and she got up on her strong legs. Athena turned swiftly to the ballroom, and stood in the middle of the road pointing her head downwards. Athena made both her hands into fists, bit her lip, then walked to the front door.

“Where is she?” Joshua, Athena’s date, glanced nervously.

Jessica looked at Joshua nervously. Joshua repeated the phrase, blushing, hoping for someone to respond.

“She should be here soon Joshua,” Jessica said in a warm voice that had the magic of taming Joshua “I can’t text her because her phone has been taken away, but she does live far,” said Jessica. Though this was the truth, something about it made Jessica feel as though she were lying. Tyler shook his head and smiled.

Jessica turned to Tyler who presented her with a corsage. Jessica opened her mouth in mature gaiety, shining her teeth and lavishly thanking Tyler. There were dense rumors indicating that Tyler and Jessica would soon approach a more romantic relationship.

Joshua looked onto Jessica and Tyler with slight envy but even more curiosity. He looked at his own corsage that sat in his lap, and the seat by his side, empty. He read the postcard that stuck out from a metal stand and had a mountain lion stamp on the top. “Tyler Wiggins and Athena” listed together. He read the card a few times to confirm that it truly was that she was on their table. After this satisfaction, suddenly, a thunderous sound of bass sounded from the corner. A group of men in black suits blew into their golden pipes, creating magnificent vibrations. In the middle a master sat, playing his piano without a sign of strain or worry. A man in a velvet suit stepped to the glass podium and tapped the microphone. He tested the sound and spurted out a witty comment about the current state of politics to which everyone in the room could agree to and laugh.

“We will be starting here in just ten minutes folks,” the man said.

The lights dimmed and men came around quickly lighting each table's candles. Joshua worriedly turned to his table and saw that Tyler and Jessica were conversing with each other in rapt attention. He then turned to Alex and her partner John, Laila and Luke, Elizabeth and Kai; all seemed engaged in their own silly discourses. All the couples discussing and engaging made Joshua excited for the potential that awaited him but as he looked to the seat on his left, his heart wrung tight. Jessica, who was so deeply engaged with Tyler, who this afternoon had become her only love, still made time to look askance at Tyler and worry about Athena and pity him. Jessica turned her eyes to Joshua and rested her toffee gold fingers on his hand. “She *will* be here...I promise,” Jessica said with such poise and confidence, Joshua felt something stir within him as his eyes met with Jessica’s.

“I’m gonna use the restroom,” he announced to the table, to which everyone nodded and affirmed in a joyous manner. Joshua walked along the vast black and gold carpet that stretched

across the hall. He stared at his dress shoes depressingly, something he had purchased the day before simply to impress his date. He walked slowly and opened the doors of the dining hall and found that the line of men, women, boys, and girls standing in front of the photo booth was becoming thicker and longer. He reflected on the fact that he would not be able to take a photo with her if she came late. His aspiration was one of a hunter who has finally shot down his deer and now poses with the deer's ivory in his hands to show to his friends and family. In such a way, he desired to flaunt his victory to the nay-sayers and unbelievers that indeed, he did dine with Athena. He reflected on the reactions of his friends who days before discovered that he was going to the Founder's Ball with her. Most accused him of joking and did not believe him even after Joshua insisted stubbornly. "She hasn't gone with *anybody* for as long as I can remember," one friend in particular told Joshua. All these exclamation points made Joshua feel like a conquering Napoleon.

Joshua was disturbed from his thoughts when Lucas, a fellow lacrosse player, waved to him and greeted his date.

"Well, is she coming?" Lucas asked.

"Well...Hopefully," Joshua said, not being able to hold in his anxiety for long.

"Oh don't worry, Athena's just been having a rough week," Lucas's date, Mary, said, twisting her wrist and bulging her rouge cheeks. Lucas looked on to his date proudly, further brewing a steady resentment in Joshua. Joshua examined Mary's dress simply to spite himself further. She wore a dove cloth that cut low and her golden heels glistened.

"And I've heard you are a good basketball player, hmm?" said Mary, twitching her eyebrow and smiling ironically. "She's clever," Joshua told himself as he glanced at her shoulders and then to her lovely almond-shaped eyes. Joshua responded back unconsciously as he examined her figure, looking for defects. He felt humbled yet enraged when he found none.

"Yes, Lucas tells me about you a lot," said the girl, scrunching her nose and raising her hands limply. As she allowed her date to speak, she put her fingers through her black hair, layering the threads through her fingers. "She's trying to reel me in," Joshua reminded himself. "And when I respond by staring at her with even a hint of desire, she will become offended." In fact, Joshua had predicted his own fate. He stared at her with a soft light, watching her play with her hair like a child drunk on beauty. Mary accidently caught Josuha's eyes. She responded instinctually with confused flirtation. Suddenly, a blackness appeared on Mary's face. She tugged at Lucas's arm and whispered something in his ear.

"Alright Josh, we'll talk at the table, we're on the same table right? Awesome," he said, shining his teeth. Joshua felt himself drunk on love again. Suddenly Mary turned her back and walked arm-in-arm with Lucas swinging her purse onto her back. Joshua inadvertently turned to Mary, watching her walk by. "What has gotten into me," Joshua exclaimed to himself, as he walked down the hall to the bathroom. There, midway, a marble fountain stood. He sat on the edge and clasped both hands together. He felt his immune system upset from the pendulum swings he felt. He watched the floor and flicked his watch, observing the golden arrow. It felt

like an eternity as he sat there, watching the aristocrats of St. Nicholas school congregate and rush into the dining room.

In the dining room, Jessica felt uneasy by Joshua's prolonged absence. Jessica properly asked to be excused from the table and Tyler came from behind to pull the chair back for Jessica.

Joshua felt a warm and familiar voice in the hall. He turned left and saw Jessica approaching him. “Dazzling!” he exclaimed to himself. Her caramel shoulders moved at a steady gait, bare and pretty. The crystal earrings and dress shined beneath the chandelier, making an unreal contrast with her dulce de leche skin. And the three grain colored hair tied up behind her head shined like a rusted gold coin. With this advantage, there was perhaps some wish deep in Jessica for Athena not to come to the ball. Besides, Athena had made her into a fool a night before, slapping her cheek hot in the restroom as if she were a child. There *were* reasons for Jessica to wish for Athena’s absence at the ball—but she knew this was wrong.

Joshua anticipated her like a mad man, but he knew that he must act calm and indifferent. He looked forward, pretending as though he had not seen Jessica. She walked to him and even sat by him. “I’m sorry Joshua...But Athena may not come...She’s...Well she’s quite not feeling right at the moment as you may already know,” she said warmly and with such compassion, Joshua forgot all his sorrows for Athena. Now all she needed to do was to look him in the eyes an---

“And I’m sure you’ll get more chances to ask Athena out,” Jessica said, lying clearly. “Come on dear,” Jessica said, flipping her hand. Joshua got up like a dog obeying his master. He followed her and greedily tried to walk close by, bumping her hand on accident twice. On the second occasion, Jessica looked strangely at Joshua. Joshua took note as they walked to the table where he met eyes with his new enemy, Tyler.

“Five more minutes,” the charming host announced. The jazz band started up its music. Joshua, this time, sat grudgingly with Jessica whose body was turned to Tyler. Joshua brushed his hair then watched for what it was that Tyler possessed that he didn’t. He felt an uneasiness arise in his body now as he turned to his left. It was Mary. She looked at him and smiled artificially. An immense dread began to haunt him. Jessica patted her left side, feeling for a purse. None was to be found. She quickly got onto her feet, and, of course, dismissed herself respectfully from the table. She walked quickly and found her purse sitting on the fountain seat. As she grabbed it and turned, she saw someone familiar in the corner of her eye. She stopped in the middle of the hallway. It was Waldo. Her eyes widened. She waved and Waldo waved back.

Jessica smiled so widely and Waldo replied back. Jessica glanced to her right and felt her heart stop when she saw Athena’s pallor skin. Jessica looked to Waldo with a bizarre smile and walked away quickly, as if in a hurry. Waldo watched her until the shades began.

Jessica rushed to her seat, her heart pumping so hard, it blocked the music, Tyler’s voice, and the chatter. Tyler noticed how Jessica seemed in a daze, lost in a complicated feeling. Tyler asked her if she was okay and immediately, Jessica turned to Joshua.

“She’s coming,” Jessica said with alarmed eyes. Joshua lost his eyes in Jessica’s and had misheard or all together neglected what she told him. Suddenly, a black betta-fish entered the dining hall of the rich and religious. Joshua's wandering eyes accidently found Athena walking down the aisle. Everything in his body paused for this girl. She creeped slowly. Athena dropped into the velvet chair. She managed a half-genuine smile and began eating the salad, glad to have found a way to keep herself distracted. Joshua began eating his salad and could not help but glance at her every now and then. Athena kept her glance down, especially when she felt the weight of Jessica and the other girls staring at her. Joshua then finally turned his neck completely towards Athena, anxious to hear her speak.

“Perfection,” he thought as he saw her eyelashes flutter. Athena finally turned to him.

“Hi,” she managed, pretending to be shy. Joshua enthusiastically responded back. Jessica felt warmed when she heard Athena respond back to Joshua and carefully watched the two. Indeed, Jessica even noted how a higher beauty bar was established in the room now that Athena was there, looking like one of a royal breed.

“Athena!” exclaimed Mary, on the left of Athena. Athena raised her head with a polite smile and nodded. “You kind of disappeared on us, glad you’re here!” she said, smiling wide with her rouge cheeks, something that was Joshua’s obsession moments before Athena arrived.

Athena felt as though she were choking on the leaves upon hearing Mary’s voice and seeing the other girls’ conspiratorial glances. She thanked goodness when the guest speaker stepped on the podium and all the boys and girls turned towards the man.

“And now folks, we will be discussing the history and values of religion, education, and athletics with one of our greatest alumni, Mr. Todd Lawrence!” announced the host.

“Great. Another greedy oil seller,” sighed Athena as she rested her elbow on the table. Joshua glanced back at Athena and looked forward, terrified that she might have seen him. Athena looked carelessly at Joshua, forgetting to play the role of the date. As the entirety of the crowd listened with rapt attention to the oil seller, Athena was able to greedily examine the dresses and suits of several men and women. One woman wore crystal earrings and a crystal dress, reflecting light into a rainbow. Athena then, like a bored little girl, turned her head upwards, counting the bulbs on the enormous crystal chandelier. Once the tale of life struggles and oil mines was over, the entire ballroom got up from their seats and began applauding so loud, it startled Athena from her daze. Suddenly she launched herself from the seat and joined the crowd. They all sat down and immediately, the servers brought hardy plates of beef ribs. Joshua eyed the ribs with saliva in his mouth. Athena looked onto Joshua with disdain. The table began eating and Athena stared at her plate with hatred. She focused her attention on Jessica, who cut the meat with her elegant wrists and chewed it off the silver fork like a spring doe. Athena’s resentment went to new heights. “That sound!” she exclaimed to herself as she heard the savage chewing of meat pounce her ears.

“Is there something wrong?” Joshua asked carefully, trying to look into her eyes. Athena avoided the gesture and smiled.

"Oh no, I'm just vegan," Athena responded.

"Oh," Joshua said with great surprise and called over a waitress, telling her with great dignity that his date was vegan and demanded vegan options for her. Athena, embarrassed, asked the waitress for another salad. Joshua looked onto Athena proudly when she began eating the second salad. Joshua thought of things to tell her, things to compliment her on—however, all the options seemed ridiculous. Everybody knew she was the best cheerleader at school and one of the best in Texas; everyone knew she was the prettiest creature; everyone knew she was frighteningly intelligent, with border-line genius tendencies—then what was left? Joshua hopelessly looked onto the girl, not knowing what phrases or words to use to confirm a victory over her heart. And the depressing possibility dawned on him that she wasn't even interested in him. "But how? She finally chose to come here with *me* after all those years of coming alone," reasoned Joshua.

Throughout the lively dinner, Jessica had felt her soul twisted in many directions. One second she would feel so infatuated with Tyler, she prayed he would kiss her when they would dance, another, she begged to disappear when she sensed the boiling hatred in the circle of silence where Athena sat.

Mary kept mischievously whispering something into Lucas's ears to which the two would chuckle. Joshua navigated through these couples and noted details. "See, those are all ways to gain control. To make it obvious that she is with *me* tonight and---" thought Joshua until he was interrupted by a friend on the table behind him. He walked over upon the group of boys calling for him. He bent down and listened.

"You're here with Athena?" the boy whispered. Joshua replied with a hesitant yes.

"You'll dance with her right?" the boy asked with a mischievous smile.

"Sure," Joshua responded, feeling the strain of now having to ask Athena to dance.

Joshua returned to his seat, his eyes askance on Athena. Behold! The hour had come, the host announced that the dancefloor was now ready to be trodden on by youthful heels. The lively people and their partners gathered quickly onto the dance floor. The pianist stretched his hands and a man in a blue coat stepped to the microphone.

The couples on Athena's table got up with a jolt of excitement. Jessica rested her hands limply in Tyler's cold and skinny fingers, finding a strange beauty in them. Slowly they danced on the floor, swaying to the rhythm.

Athena stood frozen by her table, as she observed her friends dance with ease. She felt Joshua's gaze upon him. She walked towards him, slowly losing feeling in her body as she neared him on the dance floor. She was waiting desperately for him to deny her the dance out of sheer cowardice as Athena knew she had the capability of doing just by the flick of her judgemental eyebrow.

Joshua scratched his neck and looked at her. He wanted to stall that moment for as long as possible but suddenly, he saw Athena dissolving into the crowd. Athena felt relieved that it was possible for her to escape.

Joshua worryingly searched for her. “I have to ask her now!” he exclaimed to himself. Suddenly, in the middle of the sea of fabrics, she stood staring upward as if trying to escape into the air. As he approached her, she turned around.

“Would you like to dance?” he somehow managed.

The phrase was so reprehensible to Athena, she couldn’t even pretend to smile this time. She simply glanced at him and then looked to her sides, hesitating, nervously twitching her eyebrows. This last gesture invigorated Joshua even further, praying she would accept. “It’ll last a minute and I’ll leave,” she told herself as she stepped close to him. Joshua looked at her questionably as to what she meant. But as Athena neared him and the feminine skin shined in front of him, an unquenchable desire possessed him. Suddenly, she felt two warm hands rest on the small of her back, the thumbs rounding her slim waist. Athena’s eyes dilated and Joshua’s heart pumped violently. Athena saw the boyish innocence in Joshua’s eyes---which she had previously pitied miserably---usurped by a malevolence. She saw the look and felt a black anxiety crawl in her throat. She shifted her waist in his hands, suffocating from that stare. She winced as she attempted meekly to escape his grip, failing. She made weak attempts, comforting herself that she could rip from his grip if she so desired. She kept her gaze down as the piano played. They danced a few more paces until Athena looked at her date one last time. Suddenly, Athena’s heart began pounding. She ripped herself from his arms and felt the cold sweat on her spine and shuffled backwards, unable to speak. Joshua looked at Athena, terrified that she would leave him. He approached her like a skilled hunter trying to capture a small animal; never so haste or slow. As Joshua neared her, Athena launched out of the ballroom, bumping and escaping the oppressive sea of perfume. As Athena escaped the dancing couples, Jessica patted Tyler’s shoulder to spare her a few moments to see what was happening. Soon, Jessica saw a boy walking towards the dashing girl. It dawned upon Jessica that Athena was not going to leave the ballroom without causing chaos.

“What’s going on?” Tyler asked worriedly, seeing anxiety grow in Jessica’s warm eyes.

“Nothing yet,” Jessica whispered to herself as she began walking towards the ballroom door.

Joshua managed to get into the hallway fast enough to see Athena pressing her head against the large window. She turned to the middle-aged woman next to her, nervously then back to the window. She dialed again and brought her shaking hand to her ear. Joshua watched Athena amusingly.

“Are they not answering?” the woman asked Athena. Athena said something, but her throat was so dry, it sounded foreign. As the phone hummed against her ear, she stared out the window with full vigor, as if concentrating would make Waldo appear out of thin air. As the line went cold, Athena winced like a girl. She handed the phone slowly to the woman. Just as Athena was relieved at the thought of at least escaping the building, she found Joshua standing in front of her with that same, boyish smile.

“Is everything okay?” Joshua asked in a glossy voice. Athena stared at his tie, heaving her bosom with warm air. She moved her eyes all the way down until she saw the lights reflect off the black gloss of those despicable shoes. Joshua continued with his warm and romantic speech, apologizing if he made her uncomfortable and even carefully slipping in compliments. To Athena, the noises of the crowd had become one static sound. She dazed and prayed, hoping for her savior to come. The glimpse of the demonic look flashed in her mind again, causing her to move backwards, prompting Joshua to move even closer to her. Athena was so close to the breaking point, she thought she would faint. Suddenly, she saw Jessica walk into the hallway, her arms crossed, squinting at Athena as if she were a stranger. Athena turned on her heels, but Joshua swiftly grasped her wrist. When Athena felt the pull, she turned her waist to him and stared in shock. Joshua stared back with a still face. He slowly walked back toward the ball room, attempting not to hurt her. Joshua felt heroic when he felt her body yield to his force. Jessica watched Athena in grave disappointment.

When Athena locked eyes with Jessica, she planted her heels on the floor. Joshua felt the resistance and turned to her.

“Well, let’s go now,” Joshua said, growing impatient. Athena looked up to him slowly, her jaw shaking with rage.

“Let go of me,” she whispered coldly. Jessica opened her eyes wide, guessing correctly what she said from the distance she stood. Joshua chuckled lightly and yanked her wrist, as he turned to the doors, but Athena planted her feet into her heels. Joshua turned to her again, his eyes simultaneously filled with anger and nervousness. As she glanced to his left, Joshua accidentally spotted Jessica’s shocked face. He humiliatingly waved to her, trying to play cool. Jessica responded with a nervous smile that really looked like a frown.

Athena tried shrugging again and whispered cold and hushed curses. Jessica quickly turned to get Tyler to help Joshua tame her, but Tyler was already walking towards her.

“What would you like to do?” Joshua asked, remembering that anger was not a way to deal with a girl, especially one who had such power. Suddenly, Joshua felt her precious body press against his. At that moment, everything vanished. He felt complete, utter, raw, nirvanic, bliss. The whole delicate form was in his possession for that entire second. However, in less then a second, she latched her chest off of his and pulled with such vigor force, her hand came flying from Joshua’s grip and caused her to fall backward. A few voices screeched from the photo booth as they saw Athena fall.

Joshua bent over her, reaching to help her, telling those around him that it was an innocent trip of the heel as is so common with adolescent girls at dances.

As Athena twisted her neck back, Joshua momentarily saw her red eyes before she launched a guttural spit into his eyes. It hit dead center. Suddenly a loud shriek sounded, and in a blink, Athena saw Tyler clutch onto Joshua as they collapsed onto the floor. Joshua pried his fingers into the floor, escaping Tyler’s grip, attempting to unleash his rage on Athena. Athena could see no longer, a mass of bodies formed around the two boys as she walked drowsily

backwards. More and more people launched onto the boys until it was a people wrestling amongst each other.

Athena stood in sedated shock as she saw a jacket ripped to pieces, and even one girl on the floor in the mass of black and white chaos. Athena's fingers grabbed the handles of the door, ready to escape but she could not move her body. A sickening numbness spread across her limbs as she stared at the crowd of wails and screams. Out of the mass, Joshua came rushing towards Athena full speed.

"Get over here!" he howled

Before Athena could think, she launched out of the building, running skillfully on her heels to hide behind the gas station nearby, perhaps. She, however, saw Waldo's car, resting by the curb. The silver of his car now looked so sweet to her.

Waldo stared at the window in complete terror. He saw that bleeding boy reach for the handle, ready to run towards her, yelling indecent curses. But before Joshua was able to cross the threshold of the door, Tyler launched onto his body and threw him on the ground as they continued the wrestle. Waldo out of sheer adrenaline got out of his car and stood completely pale, partly from the horrid squeals of that bloodied boy on the floor, but mostly by how unaffected Athena walked carefully and steadily towards him, her green-blue eyes stretching to the size of ostrich eggs as she came closer.

As Waldo stood in the cool blue breeze, he saw Jessica fainted on the floor and her date on his knees, stroking her hair back and yelling something at her face; the boy who had launched indecent curse at Athena now was being calmed by an older man, and other boys and men were coming off the floor. Women in the corner cried hysterically and their dates stood by them, equally in shock. One man decided it was wise to at least collect the pieces of fragmented glass on the floor.

Waldo turned his eyes to Athena and detected an uneasy silence in her as she came closer to him, not the least moved by the hell she was leaving behind. Waldo breathed heavily as he saw the boy escape the grip of an older man trying to tame him and reached for the door. Joshua let out bizarre curses. Athena continued to walk silently and Waldo felt somehow violated by the curses.

Waldo felt his heart strung when she finally arrived a finger's distance away from his body. Her eyes were wide open, staring at Waldo with childish curiosity as he breathed heavily and glanced in all directions, stammering, stuttering, scratching, damn near a nervous breakdown.

"Is everything alright? Of course not! What's going on Athena!" he raised his voice as his eyes widened, seeing the boy collapse on the floor from heat exhaustion. Nothing. She stood staring at him with complete indifference.

"Athena, say something! What is going on!" Waldo asked in a desperate tone, seeing now that slowly, the entire hallway was facing him and Athena. One by one, each individual turned

towards them. Waldo's bosom heaved heavier. By now, even Jessica was watching with sullen darkness over her face.

"What did you do Athena? They are all now loo---" Waldo said, his speech being interrupted by a strange phenomenon. He felt two cold lips pressed against his. She came back upon her heels and stared at him pale-cheeked and then walked to the car. Waldo stood in front of the people. All those eyes stared at him, most baffled, some with contempt, some with jealousy, and some with disgust. He wanted to vomit.

Athena threw her heels and ripped the ribbon off her neck and reclined her seat until parallel with the floor. Her charcoal dress swayed side to side as she pretended to sleep the entirety of the trip.

PART II

1

Alice stood in front of the tree, hanging ornaments; her favorite was the one gifted to her by the astronomy department at the university. It wasn't long before the entire apartment was filled with lights, colors, drawings and paintings of her own.

Waldo had begun coming home early. Alice had delighted in this victory until she realized the utter greyness that possessed Waldo. It was the negative fate of Waldo's that the next day after the ball room incident, Richard had called Waldo into his office and had announced to him that the girl was no longer allowed in the facility due to her "negative and counterproductive influences" on Waldo. Little did the business manager know that she was very much responsible for maintaining and increasing clientele for the business. Of course, Waldo could not say this as a teenage girl excelling a professional psychologist at his job was not only embarrassing but unrealistic.

After Waldo had been given the blow, he sat in his car with sorrow growling in his belly. All he could remember was that cold peck that made him want to obliterate himself. He despised her for being so reprehensible, so utterly sacrilegious.

And so he entered the apartment and greeted his wife with the same prearranged smile. Alice responded with a delicate smile that had dark mistrust beneath it. They had plans to visit stores to exploit sales that took place around that time of the year. Alice had decided on purchasing a camera from one of the stores. Upon Alice asking Waldo's opinion on what he thought, Waldo nodded and mumbled something barely audible. Alice smiled then frowned. They walked out of the store with a new camera. The camera sat on the shelf as the two ate pumpkin pie and turkey, using the television to fill the silence that would otherwise be oppressive and glaring.

Every day and night slowly resolved to sameness. It wasn't long until he began to worry if she was still alive. Wild thoughts of Athena's father killing her would emerge within him, exciting his blood.

Black despair was all he had. He missed her presence by his side. Her unflinching pessimism. Her judgmental lashes that stared at him, picking up all the flaws in his character and physique. And of course, her squeaky voice, each turn like a laser cutting through a diamond.

But then there was the act she had committed that night. He thought Athena was nearly mad. The memory dreaded him to bitter self-reproach until it had become even difficult for him to see himself in the mirror without cringing. There were days he hoped her disappearance would allow himself to establish the respect and dignity Athena stole from him.

At work, between him and his client, a strange coldness settled between them; the empty chair beside them produced an uncanny feeling.

When Alice, Rose, and Waldo now walked, a new silence had settled among the three. Alice would attempt to speak but would no longer get Waldo's assurance, comments, and

remarks as he did in the past. Now, she would bring up a topic of discussion and both, Rose and Waldo, would simply keep their heads down and walk among the falling leaves.

2

Rose walked in the hallway. The walls were draped with persian rugs of silk. In all the cages stacked against the walls, snakes slithered about. The orange lamps had been installed in most of the cages in response to the cooling weather. Rose noticed that Mercurius, a cobra, had been dressed in a christmas sweater.

"I'll check the schedule for you Rose," the master announced as he walked into the office full of flies and a light beam dangling from the roof. Rose carefully stepped towards Mercurius's cage and slipped her delicate fingers between the bars. Out of all the snakes, Mercurius was one Rose feared and consequently cherished the most. Everytime she charmed him, she felt a degree of pleasure that was unsurpassable by any other activity.

"On Christmas eve, you have a performance," the master said, stroking his whitening mustache. "I think I want you in a full gown this time."

Rose turned to him and nodded. The master joined Rose to their walk out of the hallway of cages. They stepped to the porch and stood in front of the sky full of planted lamps.

"You are very good Rose...Not too many like you," the master said, squinting his aging eyes. Rose glanced at him and looked forward.

She drove home slowly that night. As her car approached the curve, she saw another car in front of hers. It was Waldo. He stepped out, embarrassed as he shuffled his feet. Rose came out and stood in front of him.

"I'm sorry Rose, I was thinking of calling you but I thought I might just come by," Waldo said, in a muted tone. Rose saw his cheeks flush red. He then began rubbing his elbows from the cold.

"Come in," she said. Waldo followed her in and sat on the familiar sofa.

"I think I just wanted to come by simply for some silence," Waldo blurted out, as if confessing a dark secret. Rose's eyes narrowed.

"Well, is that all?" Rose asked politely.

Waldo put his head in his hands and bent over his knees. She stared at him like a father who pitties his son after a mischievous incident he took part in. Waldo rested his chin on his fingers.

"I have trouble simply waking up," Waldo said, shaking his head then twisting a smile.

"No," Waldo said laughing. "What am I doing, she's a teenager! I keep blaming her for this," Waldo said, pausing. "I *am* tired of work, Rose. I can no longer do it... She would help me

before...I'm tired of the apartment. I'm tired of the bed. I'm tired of the mirror. Of the car. Of Richard. Of them all. I want to leave somewhere for a while. " It wasn't long until Waldo realized that he had spent an hour in Rose's house and she had not even spoken one word.

"Well, I'm sorry Rose...Everything'll be fine, I just needed to speak with you because Alice is busy all the time and I hate to disturb her," Waldo said. Rose sensed the disingenuousness in his tone. She did not lift her head and continued crocheting which she had begun earlier in Waldo's monologue. After the silence had become long enough, Waldo looked at her, now curious.

"You're hurting Alice," Rose muttered without looking up. Waldo pretended like he did not understand what she said and looked to the right in embarrassment.

"She's deeply hurt."

Each word was like a dagger in Waldo's abdomen. He continued to stare at his right side as though he were unaffected by Rose's words. The tension began to take a toll on Waldo.

As Waldo walked to the door, he turned around and found Rose still staring at him quietly and cautiously like a mouse. Her eyes widened when his did, they stared at each other. Whatever they told each other in those moments was enough to leave both of them satisfied.

As the weeks passed, Waldo had slowly begun rejecting food at the breakfast table, then the lunch, and finally the dinner table. Alice, like a worried mother dealing with a troubled child who's love she still kept deep in the bosom, despite it not being obvious anymore, tried various ways to get him to eat.

Consequently, he had become strikingly thin. It wasn't long until Waldo could see his ribs in the mirror. Every evening at the dinner table he complained of having a sour taste in his mouth, eating only a few slices of the chicken and a few sips of the soup. Alice would watch her husband play with string beans like a little boy.

One evening, at the dinner table, Waldo looked particularly tired as he pointed his ringed eyes at the carpet. Waldo carefully lifted the soup bowl with his trembling hands to his crusted lips. Alice simply had her cheek resting on the glass counter. As she saw Waldo lift the bowl, her heart began to pound violently and tears suddenly rested in her eyes. She, instinctively, leaped to her feet and latched onto Waldo. Alice caressed his hair and rubbed her cheek against his. Such obvious affection had not been exhibited between the two for what appeared to be a long time.

3

Waldo sat in the corner of the room with his hoodie over his head as Alice read Goethe. Waldo each day had slowly felt his body become colder and colder. There were times when he could not rise from his seat in fear of dissipating the heat he had strenuously collected. Rose had

glanced over Waldo and looked at him surprised. He had lost his healthy white complexion and had become skinnier. He rubbed his elbows and leaned against the corner like an old man.

When Alice had finished her Goethian passage and discussed its significance, the group separated and engaged in conversation and gossip. Rose slowly slipped out of the crowd and for the first time felt an urge to speak to Waldo. It was curious to her that everyone in the room had accepted Waldo's degenerating condition as "normal." As she approached him, his glance at her was almost paranoid.

"How are you Waldo?" she asked carefully. Waldo turned to her with childish mistrustfulness.

"Fine."

And just like that, the conversation ended. Rose sensed everything she needed to and walked out to the stairs where the rest of the women were congregating. Just as Alice finished hugging a woman with a signature gay laugh that always irritated Rose, she began to return back to the apartment but was pleasently surprised to find Rose still remaining.

"Rose! Are you staying my dear?" Alice asked playfully.

"No," Rose answered dismally. "I wanted to talk to you about something." Those words had made Alice's cheerful smile twist into a grey and artificial one. Alice nodded, giving her permission to speak.

"Is Waldo okay?" Rose asked in a slow whisper. Suddenly, Alice raised her eyebrows in disbelief. Since the beginning of their friendship, Alice had never seen Rose this precisely concerned about a matter. She had never seen her friend be worried enough to confront her and speak about a matter; it was always Alice who would be confronting Rose. Suddenly, this made Alice feel as though she were talking to a stranger. A bizarre feeling stirred in Alice's belly as she saw Rose's nervous glances and half-open lips, an expression she had never seen before.

"He's having some troubles with digestion," Alice responded with a dismal voice but a bright smile, offering a disturbing dichotomy.

"With digestion?" Rose asked, looking at Alice with suspicion. "Have you taken him to the doctor?" This last comment was enough to make Alice exhale with frustration.

"What about the doctor?" Alice asked, resuming her smile.

"Alice, he's starving to death!" Rose said, raising her voice. Alice blared her eyes in surprise. Alice continued to stare at Rose in self-righteous disbelief, as if trying to shame her. Finally, Rose blushed and looked downwards, shifting her eyes across the floor. Rose, sufficiently embarrassed, shrugged then walked away. Alice squinted her eyes at Rose's thin figure walking to the parking lot.

Alice climbed the stairs, Rose's gestures and phrases tumbling in her head. When she opened the door, her eyes rested on her frail husband, sitting on the porch, his cold figure greedily absorbing the sun's heat. As she approached Waldo, her veil of ignorance dropped. There he was, a skeleton.

That night, Waldo changed into his pajamas and went to sleep at a strikingly early time as he had started doing since his joints began feeling stiff from the cold he shivered from. Waldo would go to bed so early, Alice would have two and sometimes even three extra spare hours to paint and draw alone in the kitchen, accompanied by music playing on a low volume, hoping not to disturb Waldo. Sometimes, she would walk down the corridor and slightly creek the door open and peep into the room. She would find Waldo curled up into the ball with the blanket covering his entire body, leaving only the face naked. Alice's heart would tingle with sympathy and pity as she would return back to the kitchen in a delight that made her feel motherly.

One night, Waldo had crawled out of bed complaining of his body burning. Alice quickly ran from the kitchen to the room and got on her knees. She helped Waldo on his feet and quickly turned on the faucet in the bathtub. She then viciously threw ice cubes into the tub then frantically helped Waldo undress. By the time Waldo's feet were dipped into the freezing water, he began to vomit.

This evening, however, instead of Alice stalking Waldo's room, hoping she could find a way to help, she walked near her phone that rested on the counter. She remembered Rose's animated expression and how it had shocked her. "Perhaps Waldo did need the doctor?" This question haunted her. She stared at the phone. Perhaps she knew what was the correct thing to do. Alice picked up the phone and as she dialed the number, she felt her heart sink as the phone rang. She suddenly ended the call. She exhaled complete freedom. She was so overjoyed, she went to bed early. Alice attempted to sleep with a faint smile. Sleep, Alice knew, would not come to her. She replayed all the strange scenes in her head in an eternal loop as if she were suffering from a fever dream. When she thought of Waldo in a white bed with white walls and nurses dressed in white, she frowned.

4

The truck went flying across the freeway that was inserted in between two wide open fields. The tip of Jeff's boot kept pressing at the pedal at a constant speed. The truck had finally arrived at the ranch. Waldo stepped down from the truck and sniffed the fresh scent of cold grass.

Jeff walked to the trunk and lifted the two rifles and headed towards Waldo's direction. Waldo had a week prior accepted Jeff's invitation to go hunting on his ranch. Now, Waldo held the heavy rifle in surprise. He rotated the killing machine in awe, and then brought the scope to his eye.

"Whoa!" Jeff cried out, lowering the barrel with his palm. "We're hunting deer, not men," said he, laughing heartily. Jeff put on his gloves and other camouflage hunting gear. Waldo

weakly stood in his jeans and a black t-shirt. Jeff patted Waldo on the back and told him to follow him.

As they walked across the field, Waldo was pleased to hear silence. It wasn't long until Jeff had found a good spot by a large tree to hunt. They set their rifles pointed towards a small golden hill and waited patiently.

"And so you've never been huntin'?" Jeff asked.

"Never."

"Unbelievable," Jeff responded, turning his head back to the scope.

Jeff noticed how peculiar it was that Waldo had his eye buried in the scope for almost half an hour without moving. Minutes turned into a few hours until Jeff had decided that changing their hideout was necessary. So the two men walked along. This time, Jeff decided that hiding in the golden stocks would prove a more interesting position. And so now they waited in the fields.

As the hours again began to pass, Jeff would glance at Waldo and find him completely absorbed in the scope. Sometimes he would find Waldo staring at the ground or running his hands through the wheat. Jeff would scratch his nails and flinch every now and then when he saw the grass fields shaking. "False alarm," he would whisper dismally to himself.

Finally, he let go of his rifle and his sense of urgency as he rolled on his back and crossed his boots. He stared into the swirl of crowds, the sun throwing its warm light onto his skin. A thought struck him as he smiled slightly.

"Waldo," said Jeff, waiting for Waldo to attend to him. "What ever happened to that girl who used to come around the office?"

"Waldo?" Jeff recalled, laughing and realizing that Waldo was hardly conscious.

"Oh...I have no idea…" Waldo said slowly.

"Didn't Richard kick her out?" Jeff asked casually.

"I hardly remember," shrugged Waldo. Jeff got off of his back and looked out the opposite field. Waldo suspiciously gazed at Jeff. What was within Jeff that caused him to think of that forbidden human? Did he like her presence at the office? Was he still thinking about her and why? All these questions filled Waldo's mind. Of them all, Waldo felt a strange pleasure in knowing that Athena existed and was alive in their thoughts for those few moments. Perhaps she was alive as long as Waldo thought of her—but this seemed faulty. After long periods of solitude and tribulation, one begins to wonder if the person they are thinking of is even real. So Waldo had the same anxieties: was she any longer real? Was she ever real?

"Oh well," Richard sighed, allowing the memory to float along with the wind. Richard then smiled again.

"Waldo, how 'bout you get me my magnum from the truck," said Richard, smiling grandly. Waldo looked at Richard confused. "It's a gun for chrissake! We got nothing to do so might as well shoot some rounds...Haven't done so since I bought it," laughed Richard.

"Oh...Sure I'll get it," Waldo said, resting his rifle on the grass and getting up.

“It’ll be in the gun safe beneath the arm rest. The key is in the glove compartment,” Richard said. And with that, Waldo flew to the truck. He opened the truck door lazily, still contemplating delicately as to why Richard had mentioned her name.

As Waldo arrived back at the hideout, Jeff raised his body and smiled largely, seeing Waldo with his revolver.

“There she is!” Jeff chuckled.

Waldo bent on his knees and carefully handed Jeff the revolver. He then laid on his back and watched Jeff carefully rotate the revolver.

“I bought her only two days ago,” Jeff said, smiling as he looked at the revolver. “Why don’t we try her out on that?”

Jeff got on his left knee and pointed the revolver at a wooden post. He adjusted his muscular forearm and clenched his jaw. Bang went the revolver, blasting the post into splinters. Waldo watched in awe. The sound of that glorious metal was that of a stampeding stallion. Jeff rolled on his back and began laughing hysterically. Waldo stood up and stared at the smashed pieces of the colored wood and then looked back at Jeff with a child-like smile.

“Ain’t it a thing!” Jeff screamed gayly. Waldo knelt down next to Jeff and held his hand out. Jeff placed the revolver lazily in his hands. “It sure is,” Waldo responded as he twirled the metal in his hand. Waldo, as he handed the revolver back to Jeff, looked out the field and felt more strength in his legs and arms and even felt warm. As the two walked back to the truck, Waldo mused about something. As they entered the truck, Jeff carefully placed the revolver in the safe and locked it. The truck drove off onto the asphalt as Waldo kept glancing at his heroic friend then back to that endless road.

5

Alice sat on the sofa with her hands folded modestly, waiting for her friends to join her for the book club’s Christmas dinner. Alice had promised the group that such a dinner would take place many months back when she had only founded the club with a few members. Now, Alice even contemplated canceling the dinner, but enough comments of her friends on the anticipation of the dinner had swayed her from doing such a thing. So she sat obediently and waited for the rotisserie chicken to bake in the oven, quitely glancing at the oven then back at the blank television.

Out of boredom, Alice walked down the hallway and into the bathroom. She studied her jawline and made sure her eyelashes were properly curled. She then returned back to the sofa and sat with her legs close together and her hands on her lap.

She perked her ears when she saw Waldo awake. She smiled weakly as she noticed a bunch of hair threads sticking upwards from his scalp.

"They should be coming in half-an-hour," she said, plainly and deliberately avoiding any terms of endearment.

"I'll change," muttered Waldo as he went back to the bedroom. Alice stared at Waldo's ghost until knocks came at the front door. Alice shook her face in surprise as her bosom heaved. She got up, patted her blue dress down and walked to the door. Upon opening the door, a woman stepped in. A few knocks later, the room was filled with merry laughter of women in decent to spectacular dresses. After Waldo had changed, he stayed in his bedroom and took some delight in hearing the women's gossip. One talked about her miserable husband and another about a clothing sale. As Waldo heard thick laughs and delicate whispering and gentle words, he attempted to hear Rose's voice. Out of all the voices, he could not detect even a glimmer of her deep voice. Waldo then realized that Rose rarely spoke even---and especially---around those of her liking. Waldo found one woman in particular more interesting than the rest. She stood firmly on her heels and spoke loudly to his wife, cracking that merry and affluent laugh that makes one think they are in the company of a celebrity. She had cherry-colored hair and a sharp nose. Waldo stared at this enigmatic woman for a few seconds and then sought Rose in the mini crowd that now developed.

Finally, he found Rose sitting next to another woman. It was obvious that they were strangers to each other as each threw out a word or sentence in the attempts of getting to know each other. Soon, a line formed for the wine that Alice was pouring. When the line had shortened, the woman accidentally glanced at Waldo. Waldo's heart dropped.

"Well hi there!" she said, turning to him with tremendous joy, throwing her red threads back. "I'm Jeanina," she said, raising her hand out to Waldo. "And you must be Alice's husband?" Waldo squealed a response and immediately began reviewing better alternatives and ways of phrasing his response.

By the time the small group of Waldo, Jeanina, and the other woman had reached the kitchen counter and had their glasses filled with wine, Jeanina turned to Waldo.

"I work in the mathematics department and your wife and I didn't meet too long ago...She invited me to her club meetings but I seem to be occupied almost every time!" she said with expressive eyes and a news reporter voice. Waldo sipped his wine and nodded many times.

"At least I've managed to make it today," she said as she smiled cleverly and kissed the edge of the glass with her fluffy lips. Waldo shuffled his feet and turned his neck left then right uncomfortably.

"Alright, Waldo, nice meeting you!" she said, stretching her neck in front of Waldo's face with her body already leaving in a hurry. Waldo nodded politely. With that intimidating woman off his neck, he slowly crept towards the couch and found Rose sitting, her legs crossed, swiping through her phone.

“No wine?” Waldo said as he sat carefully by Rose, startling her. She dropped her phone in her lap and looked at Waldo. His sullen, black eyes. His protruding cheek bone. His pallid skin. How awful it looked to Rose. So much of that wretched face reminded Rose of herself. Waldo had never seen more emotions than a few minor quirks of frustration with Alice and momentary smiles when meeting friends, but now Rose was frowning.

“I don’t drink,” Rose responded and turned her eyes to the ground. Waldo felt her solemn expression and struggled to show her his care for her.

“Can I get you something other than...wine?” Waldo asked in his sickly voice, coughing terribly into his jacket sleeve.

“How’s work?” Waldo asked, wanting her attention. Rose looked at Waldo and blinked her small lashes and shifted her lips from left to right, a small gesture Rose did inadvertently when looking at someone; a gesture that made one’s heart soft when speaking with her. The gap between Waldo’s question and Rose’s response was beginning to make Waldo worried.

“How’s work been Rose? How do you like your new position?” Waldo asked, terribly worried that she would not respond. Rose suddenly snapped her head and looked Waldo directly in the eye.

“Why are you wearing a jacket indoors?” she asked with controlled aggression. Her narrow, curved nostrils enlarged and her bosom heaved with nervous anger. Waldo was so surprised, he wanted to laugh.

“I feel cold quite quickly,” Waldo said, then chuckled silently. As he laughed, Rose saw the flesh beneath Waldo’s eyes jiggle, sufficiently disgusting her to go to the restroom.

Alice and the other women had finished placing the last dishes on the dinner table along with silverware and glasses for wine and a separate one for water. Alice scrambled nervously, placing her fingers above the dishes to ensure all the food was warm and ready to satisfy her guests.

“Alright everyone, dinner is ready,” Alice let out. Suddenly the women, the old man, and Waldo turned towards the table. There were so many people, some would have to sit on the sofa and eat. Everybody scrambled and began murmuring as to who would sit on the sofa. Suddenly, a round, middle-aged woman along with her old husband volunteered. It was Laura. Waldo’s eyes suddenly became sharp.

In a few moments, order was restored at the dining table as everyone was seated, eating merrily, and laughing graciously. Waldo attempted as skillfully as possible to sit with Rose. As he tried to do this, he kept his eye on Laura. He was waiting for the right moment to corner her and interrogate her about the only thing he thought of.

They began eating collectively, and all Waldo could hear was that woman with the flame licked hair talking and commanding the room with her loud and expansive voice.

Waldo had sufficiently become bored and now even irritated by Jeanina’s long adventurous stories. He turned to Rose who made it obvious her attempts to ignore him. He then looked at Laura, ecstatic to know that a person who knew Athena sat right before his eyes.

“We,” Jeanina let out. “Shall dance!” The ladies all abruptly came off their chairs and slipped off their heels, tossing them to the side. Energy ran in the room, electrifying all the ladies. Alice’s strange melancholy was lifted for the time being as Jeanina began playing music. The ladies barefoot danced in their dresses, taking pleasure in feeling like school girls. Waldo relaxed in his chair alongside the old man, Laura, and Rose. He had gained enough stupid confidence to poke Rose’s shoulder to which she responded with a wholly surprised snap of the neck.

“Why aren’t you dancing?” Waldo asked, immediately cowering in response to Rose’s anger. Rose turned her head forward and crossed her hands.

“What’s her problem?” the old man said, shrugging Waldo playfully and chuckling. Waldo joined him and laughed nervously. Laura encouraged her husband to not touch or speak with Waldo. The old man responded with a dismissive guff.

The women first danced lightly and then more rapidly upon seeing Jeanina do so. Alice shyly moved with her red-haired friend. Jeanina eyed all the women as if to make sure they were dancing properly and then looked over at the table where Waldo and Rose sat idly.

“Rose!” Jeanina cried, sounding unpleasant to both Rose and Waldo but for different reasons to each. “Come over dear!” Rose waved at them and murmured excuses, but eventually, it had become necessary for her to join the rest of the women.

“Waldo!” the paper bland voice shouted as the music became slow. Waldo turned his head to Jeanina with surprise. “Come, dance.” Waldo got up, and walked towards Jeanina. As he stood in front of the woman, he realized anxiously that he had never danced with a girl before. How many times he attempted to ask a girl during his high school years to the dance, each time failing. Each time he would approach this girl at the end of class or the start of lunch, he would feel his head spin and tongue tighten. He would watch the same girl come to the ballroom most years without a partner causing Waldo great disappointment in himself. Finally, he asked her one year and was politely rejected. The final rejection had at least settled Waldo’s habit of watching her dance alone.

The dance was utterly uncomfortable, Waldo praying it would come to an end some time. The dance came to an end and Jeanina let go of him. Waldo released his hands in relief.

The dance ended with all the women in their pretty finery raiding the sofa. Alice regained a springtime glee in the middle of winter and sat next to Jeanina on the couch, her legs gathered to one side and her other almost leaning on Jeanina. All the women talked graciously and Alice thought it was a great time for tea. Alice returned hastily to her seat next to Jeanina after distributing the tea to all her guests.

“Where did you go for Winter?” Jeanina asked, for the first time feeling fatigued from talking. Alice bobbed her head up in shy excitement.

“Oh, we did not leave out of town,” Alice answered lightly. “Waldo hasn’t been feeling the greatest.”

“Oh,” Jeanina responded sympathetically, grasping Alice’s hand. Alice felt goosebumps erupt. “Where would you fancy to go for summer?”

“Oh I don’t know!” Alice said with a childish gasp.

“You look like the French type,” she said quietly. “They would love you there. I’ve been there many times, it’s more lovely than they say.” Alice opened here eyes wide and nodded excessively.

At the table, Waldo waited patiently until it was the right moment for Waldo to speak to Laura. The longer he delayed the confrontation, the more excitement and delightful anxiety flowed in his veins.

The quiet blonde who Rose was speaking with excused herself. Rose, again, was left alone. She quickly departed from the social group and made sure to not glance at Wado as she did so.

Jeanina, after whispering something to Alice, stood up and announced that the party would continue at her house. One or two women excused themselves while the rest felt a surge of youth as they ran to their heels and grabbed their purses, their conversations intensifying and their eyes glittering.

Waldo watched the women run out, him sitting there with a faint smile. The image of Rose slowly slipped out of his head. Suddenly, he saw the old man get up with Laura. His heart dropped as he saw them walking toward the door.

“Good night old man,” the old man cracked to Waldo as he got up, Laura guiding him anxiously. As the door shut, the silence oppressed Waldo. Suddenly, the door opened and Laura had returned. She began peering in corners with squinting eyes and a hardened forehead. Waldo got onto his feet and followed her eyes. She was obviously ignoring him.

“Can I help you?” Waldo asked.

“I...I think I lost my purse,” Laura mumbled. Waldo began to search everywhere restlessly. She watched him, losing some of her guard as she noticed his vigor to find her possession. Finally, Waldo found the purse sitting beneath the dinner table by the chair foot. He picked it up with a large smile and handed it over. She could not help smiling largely and thanking him.

“No problem ma’am, I enjoyed talking with your husband. Please, remind me, what is his name?” asked Waldo, knowing well that the old man had not given him his name.

“Ford,” she muttered, allowing the smile to return to neutral as if remembering something. As Laura hesitated her shoulders, Waldo stopped her.

“How is Athena?” Waldo asked. Waldo was exploding with blood. Suddenly, Laura’s face darkened as tension appeared around her lips and her neck jingled.

“She’s fine.”

“Is she still going to the same schoo---”

“Never go near my niece again,” Laura snapped, in a firm and rigid whisper that communicated anger more aggressively and potently than the loudest cry. Waldo frowned.

"You've ruined her," Laura continued with her head shaking violently and turning ripe like a rotten apple. "Those idotic psychologists she reads all the time, who is it? Freud? Jun-g? They've all *corrupted* her mind," she said, pointing her finger to her head like a worried mother. Waldo bounced on both of his feet, now feeling himself reinvigorated.

"Her whole room is filled with volumes upon volumes of those perverse people's books. All of them are written in such language, Waldo," she said, now looking helpless rather than angry. "Her father and I had to sit there for many hours, trying to understand the dirt she's been feeding to her mind." As Laura's monologue became more infused with passion and vigor, she began to sway from left to right. Waldo squinted his eyes tremendously, exploding with energy, attempting with all his might to conceal it.

"We found *her* writings. All she talks about is awful things, bizarre things, things she's heard in your madhouse!" Laura said, now raising her voice to an unexpected volume. Waldo flinched, now terrified of the unexpected words and emotions being communicated.

"If she ever steps foot in your clinic or if I ever see her with you, I'll get a restraining order," she said, her eyes wide open. "She was a pretty, nice, and happy girl. You've made her into a *monster*."

When Laura left, shutting the door behind her, Waldo collapsed on the sofa breathing heavily. Now he felt that very strange sensation he had only once before felt during his school boy years when his parents were called to discuss his behavior. Waldo, sitting in the grey chair with his hair plastered back with gel that his mother had applied the morning before, awaiting his doom.

6

Waldo started the exposure therapy by simply placing a needle on the table for the man to see. The man jumped in pain and looked the other way. Waldo retracted the needle and began explaining his methods and how they would go about reducing the fear of the needle by slowly exposing him to more situations with the needle. The man nodded rationally and understandingly, however, when the needle was shown, both these virtues were thrown out the window.

The day extended as more and more patients came in and Waldo bolstered himself to attend to all of these men and women, boys, and girls. Waldo, in between sessions, noticed a purple circle erupting beneath his eyes in the bathroom. He examined the circles in great shock.

It was during a therapy session when Kate came to the door, peered through the window uneasily, and left. Waldo noticed the peculiar gesture and continued the conversation with his patient. This time, the patient was a recovering alcoholic from Florida. The session prolonged

further than Waldo had expected, but he concluded quite pleasantly with the man. After the man left, Waldo opened the door and found that it was dark already. He rushed to the front desk.

"You needed me?" Waldo asked Kate.

"Yes!" Kate said, raising her head and lifting her eyebrows. "Jessica---do you remember her?---came in the office and wanted to speak with you."

"Jessica!"

"Yes, she was here for 'bout an hour...poor girl...I told her to come back tomorrow," Kate said, putting her chin on her hands, talking slowly as if to tease Waldo.

"What did she come for?" Waldo asked, narrowing his eyes and paying attention to each gesture and movement Kate made.

"No idea. Said it was very important." Kate then started stacking papers and arranging items. She got up and and flattened her skirt and clicked her heels out of the front desk.

"Well, let's leave now," Kate said to Waldo jokingly as she tugged at his shoulder. They both went out of the office together and into the darkened parking lot. Kate kept watching Waldo's face display different emotions. They departed and Kate mused about what the two would talk about or do the next day.

Waldo returned to his wife in a hazy and tired state. He sat on the sofa and rubbed his eyes rhythmically.

The next day, Waldo approached his desk in caution and great anticipation. A few clients later, one elderly man came into the office. Waldo recognized that it was George. He greeted him and began what was usually a pleasant session. Time, however, began to drag on longer and longer as he waited.

When sufficient time had passed, Waldo became disappointed, regretting not leaving the office yesterday when Kate looked searchingly at him.

The old man talked about his recently passed away wife and Waldo nodded understandingly. He looked at his wristwatch and flattened out his coat. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Kate in the square window. He quickly turned to her. Kate nodded.

"Could you give me one second sir?" Waldo asked desperately.

"Certainly!" the jolly man responded. Waldo got up thanking him quickly. He walked down the hallway breathing strangely and unconsciously buttoning his coat. Once he arrived at the waiting room, Jessica sat waiting for him. She got up with cautious eyes and walked up to Waldo with deep relief and joy.

"Jessica?" Waldo asked as if not expecting her at all.

"I need to speak with you," Jessica said firmly. They stepped outside in the cool weather. Waldo looked at his feet and plunged his hands into his pockets.

"Athena---" Jessica said and immediately Waldo pulled back.

"I'm sorry but I don't want anything to do with her," Waldo said, waving his hands in disapproval. Jessica looked at Waldo understandingly but disappointed. A silence began between them and when it had been long enough, Jessica thought it appropriate to speak again.

“She hasn’t been at school for two months now,” Jessica said solemnly. “From my understanding, she hasn’t been to *any* school for two months.” Jessica looked at Waldo to see if this had made any effect on Waldo, but he looked at his feet in the same expression.

“I’ve tried to contact her, her father, and aunt,” Jessica said, hoping Waldo would understand what she was hinting at. Waldo wiped his face slowly and remembered something. His heart beat a little quicker.

“I don’t want to get tangled in this.”

“Waldo,” Jessica said in a deep, trembling voice. “You’re the only one that could possibly get a word out of her mouth...None of us have seen her...If I go to her, she’ll poison me before I leave.”

“Do you think her father did something?” Waldo asked, his eyes now zooming out.

“What do you mean?” Jessica asked with eyes askance. Waldo simply continued to look at the ground.

“Waldo, please!” Jessica exclaimed, her eyebrows pointing upwards. “She’s been my friend since we were in grade school, having her disappear like this is agonizing.” Waldo looked at Jessica with eyes he consciously hardened. He reverently put his hands on his hips, brooding like a general about to go to war.

“The cheerleading team has become nothing without her,” Jessica added, moving closer to Waldo as if this would convince him. The many voices in his head swirled and made him dizzy. Waldo then realized that not only Jessica, but the entire school had seen what Athena had done to him. He nearly went sick as he sat down on the bench next to the smoke tray. Jessica saw the expression and also remembered the night. At the time, she was so sufficiently disgusted with Athena that she called her horrific names like a mother does to a misbehaving daughter. Now, all that Jessica cared about was Athena’s well-being.

“Please think about it,” Jessica finally said in a closing tone. “It all depends on you.” Jessica then walked away. She sat in her car and waited for something to happen. When nothing happened, she drove away unhappy.

Waldo, coming into the office the next day, became disoriented from thinking. It was about mid-day, lunch time. Waldo avoided the lounge room deliberately to avoid Jeff and simply remained in his office. The ringing gorgeous last words that Jessica said yesterday impeded Waldo to get up and walk out the hallway. He walked slowly in case somebody stopped him and shamed him for acting the way he was. Instead, Kate called him over with suspicious eyes. She leaned close to him.

“Are you going to see Athena?” Kate whispered.

“No,” Waldo responded. Kate’s expression flattened into disappointment. The expression added more fuel to the fire that was now becoming momentous in Waldo. He walked out the building and then ran to his car. He could feel his hands shaking as he drove off into that Texan wilderness.

The car arrived at Athena's house, a house that very much resembled the Sheperdson's home from Huck Finn. The gate was left open as he drove inside. The vast fields stretched on both sides of the house. Thoughts whirled in Waldo's mind like mad as he approached the enigmatic door. For the first time, Waldo noticed the brown engravings of rose petals into the brown door. He knocked carefully and then felt his stomach go sick. He stood frozen, listening to nothing but the tones of the grass shuffling and leaves whisking on the floor.

But behold! Something clicked and clacked from the other side of the door. Waldo flinched and moved back, breathing heavily, focusing his eyes on the door. He watched the door handle half-turn downwards then up. Waldo's concentration grew as the door knob shook more like one does when he becomes aware that he is in a dream. Suddenly, the door opened.

Waldo carefully inspected the figure, discovering a purple blob on its right eye. The tortured thing stood, hovering behind the door, maintaining that same old bitter face that Waldo recognized as a disinterest in everything and a self-affirming disregard for her own well being. It blinked its lashes carefully and moved its pale jaw slowly. Its sullen and sunken eyes made such a stricking appearance. Finally, it twitched its freckles and began to close the door. Waldo immediately stopped the door with his hand and grabbed her shoulders. She looked at him like an animal that had become accustomed to visitors so that it expressed no danger, excitement, or emotion except for slight annoyance.

Waldo pressed his thumbs tighter and tighter the more he examined her features. The eye swelled and she felt it pound inwards and outwards. Suddenly, she straightened her neck and heaved her bosom, and her lips trembled.

"What?" came the words from the cherry lips that were now spoiled and purple, her nostrils flaring, and eyes blinking weakly. Desperate, burning, and tearing pity tugged at Waldo's heart.

"He hit you?" Waldo asked, focusing on her green-blue eyes. She looked down and puffed air out of her mouth so that strands of her hair flew back. She swayed back and forth with childish boredom.

"Athena," Waldo barely managed. "We need to get you away from here."

"To where?...you scumbag," she murmured, shifting her jaw.

"Come on," he said, automatically grabbing her wrist and pulling her towards the car. Surprisingly, she allowed Waldo to pull her close. They walked to the car, Waldo's grasp remaining firm. Waldo opened the door for Athena in a panic and glanced at all angles, searching for the father, sweat now erupting on his neck. He gestured to Athena in a panic to get in the car and without looking if she would get in or not, he ran to the driver seat. When he looked up, his heart melted knowing that she sat there like she always had done. He waited for Athena to curl and place her feet on the dashboard. Instead, she looked at Waldo tiredly, and the full shock finally hit Waldo. The purple rings were turning plump, black, and swelling into a monster.

Waldo breathing heavily switched the gears and raced out of that ranch. Along the path, Waldo watched the landscape like a hawk, his shirt now filled with sweat. The car slowly drifted

on the path and when the car arrived on the highway, everything washed clear from Waldo's mind and body. He drove with a newfound clarity.

In his mania he glanced over at Athena and saw her painfully trying to scroll through her phone, her right eye blinking only slightly and growling with pain, her back bent over the device, and her left leg curled on the seat.

The car arrived at the parking lot of the apartment and Waldo opened the door for her in freightened excitement. Waldo glanced everywhere as if her father would come and take her away. Athena came out of the car and stared at her phone in a haze. She opened, then closed, then re-opened the same application, not in the slightest aware why she had done so. Waldo began walking and Athena followed grudgingly. The whole time she kept murmuring a melody she had remembered from grade school.

When they arrived at the front door of the apartment, Waldo stood and took a deep breath. All of a sudden, Waldo came to the realization that Alice also lived in that apartment. How would she take Athena? Pleasantly, of course. She had always loved meeting new people and Waldo could also imagine how much delight she would take in helping a person. Waldo opened the door and told Athena to wait outside. He cautiously searched for Alice but could not find her.

"Okay, come in," Waldo told Athena.

"What, are you hiding me from your wife?" Athena said, not expecting a response. Not hearing her, Waldo told her to sit on the couch. On the couch, Athena stretched her legs and exhaled, holding the phone in front of her struggling eyes, the other now bloodshot.

Waldo paced the room nervously and could not function from the overwhelming sensation. Everytime he could not believe it, he would glance over at the girl lying on the couch, clutching at her skull with one hand and scrolling through the media with the other.

When Waldo took a short trip to the restroom, Alice swung the door open with groceries in her hand. When the door swung fully open, her eyes shot wide open and she breathed heavily. Athena didn't even bother to look up from her phone. Alice was not sure how to act. Waldo casually came out of the bathroom, mumbling to himself what he would do for Athena. When he looked up, he saw Alice's confused expression. Waldo walked to her, looking solemnly at her. He then carefully grabbed her shoulders like he did Athena's, but the effect on Alice was profound. She looked afraid but enthralled. Waldo leaned over and whispered, "She's hurt." Alice looked at the girl with a new expression.

"Athena, this is my wife," Waldo said. Alice winced, not knowing if it was because of Alice's horrid eye or because of the name her husband had uttered.

Alice rushed towards the refrigerator and grabbed a pack of green beans. Athena watched the chaotic Alice with tension erupting in her forehead. When Alice approached Athena, she took a pillow and doubled it and placed it beneath her head. When Alice rested the girl's head, she

caressed the threads out of her eyes and smiled. Athena looked at Alice with discomfort. All of Athena's muscles tensed and when Alice brought the ice pack to Athena's eye, she flinched but then allowed the woman to place the pack of ice.

"Poor baby, what happened?" asked Alice. Athena only swallowed and closed both of her eyes. Suddenly Alice looked back at Waldo for a hint. Waldo solemnly shook his head.

"Keep it on," Alice said, getting up and walking towards Waldo with great hurt on her face. They both sat in the bedroom to give Athena privacy, discussing what they were to do next for her recovery. Never once did Alice ask Waldo what had happened to Athena despite the question burning within her. They remained silent in the room talking and thinking for half an hour. Waldo paced his room anxiously.

"Poor thing, she's quite young," Alice said, disrupting Waldo's chain of thoughts, making him frustrated. "Very pretty too."

Finally, Alice came out of the room to prepare dinner but found that Athena was no longer on the couch but standing behind the sliding door, leaning against the rail that looked at the dusk-filled sky. Alice with soft feet walked behind Athena and leaned against the rail with her.

"How's the eye?" Alice asked. Athena nervously glanced at her and hesitated then murmured something.

"That's good," Alice said wisely, smiling widely for Athena. The latter glanced at Alice awkwardly then looked outward. Alice lingered hoping to strike a conversation but could not find the words to do so.

When dinner was ready, Alice anxiously called Waldo, whispering to him to hurry and then carefully returned to Athena on the porch where she was sitting on the chair, playing with her phone.

"Dinner is ready," Alice murmured sweetly.

The dinner table was hauntingly quiet. Alice swiveled her head between Waldo's sweaty forehead and Athena's freckled cheeks, hoping either would say something to reassure her that a dismal future did not await the lot.

Athena forked the food crudely and bit with her left side of the mouth while tilting her mouth in that direction. Waldo continued thinking, planning, and strategizing for something.

"Did you want any pecan pie?" Alice asked shyly, seeing Athena's judgemental eyes glance at her. Athena nodded quietly and barely, her green-blue glittering softly beneath the amber light. Athena and Waldo put all the dishes in the sink and cleaned the table. Athena departed from the table and set her eyes on her phone again as she layed on the sofa. When the couple were done cleaning, Alice approached Athena nervously.

"You'll be sleeping in our bed," Alice said warmly. "Did you bring any clothes dear?" Waldo came behind Alice and stood behind her proudly. Athena lowered her phone and suddenly the words registered in her head.

“Oh,” Athena said meekly, her eyes wide and alert. “I won’t...won’t need that,” she managed.

“No dear, I insist,” Alice said, walking close to her, trying to exploit her first opportunity of speaking with Athena. “You need rest and---”

“No, I’d like to sleep here please,” Athena said firmly, looking at Waldo nervously. Alice looked at Athena disappointed then at Waldo for help.

“It’s okay Alice, let her sleep where she wants,” Waldo finally said.

Athena slept that night in her jeans, a detail both Waldo and Athena had missed in their daze, anxiety, excitement, and sorrow. Alice sat on the edge of the bed contemplating after Waldo came out of the shower.

“She’s got such a dearly voice,” Alice mentioned. Waldo smiled irresistibly, delighted that someone else had noticed this too. They turned off the lights. Athena remained awake all night, drifting between sleep and consciousness. Tired of that annoying state, she sat up and watched curiously to see if anybody was out there on the road. A few trucks zoomed past. She leaned against the sofa and watched the lone riders on the highway drive in the black.

7

It was one of those rare days in the middle of winter when the sun had decided to reward the inhabitants with his rays. Waldo had awoken late, and was delighted to find Athena out in the sun in a new set of clothes. Alice had awoken earlier to the horror that Athena was not given new clothes or given a chance to shower. Immediately, Alice gave Athena shorts and a blue shirt and whispered some things into her ear to which Athena nodded.

Athena had her hair tied into a messy bun with the hump in the middle of her nose now becoming more obvious, making her seem like an enchanting witch. Her lips opened then closed as her eyes scanned the pages so stoically. How peculiar Waldo thought it was for Athena to be this silent. Waldo had never seen this sober side of her.

Alice came to the porch and greeted Waldo and immediately kneeled by Athena with a rag. Alice told Athena that she was going to apply an ointment on Athena.

Athena picked up a book, squinted her eyes and began reading a few lines. Waldo then went inside to change and when he returned, he found Athena still reading, bobbing her head slightly left then slightly right.

“What are you reading?” Waldo asked. Athena did not respond. Waldo thought it not worthy to ask again.

“Is it hurting?” Waldo asked, his head feeling a little dizzy. Athena rested the book, crossed her arms, and let out air.

“Can you let me read?” she said, looking the other way. Waldo nodded calmly and walked away from the porch.

In the house, Waldo and Alice hugged for longer than usual. She was departing to a sculpting workshop, something Alice was very much interested in taking up now. Alice then walked to the door and hesitated, looking out at Athena.

“For lunch, you can try making her something from the fridge, but I expect to be back by then,” Alice said in a hushed tone. Alice then squeezed her eyes, seeing Athena drop her book on the floor and with trouble, trying to pick it up. “Poor girl.” And with that, she left.

Waldo stayed inside, working on case reports on some of his clients, typing in recent family issues, individual concerns, dreams, and phobias.

Many hours went by and Athena switched from the book to the phone, typing away madly. Waldo went out to the porch, realizing that it had been well past her school lunch time.

“What would you like for lunch?” Waldo asked, standing with his hands crossed behind his back.

“Nothing,” she said, barely audible. Waldo asked again but she did not respond each time, so giving up, Waldo returned inside. When Waldo sat down on his computer to add data into client reports, he realized he left his clipboard with evaluations in the car. As he told Athena he was leaving to the car, Athena thought it a great opportunity to sneak into the bedroom where her clothes lay in a paper bag. She quickly pulled out a plastic bag with three cigarettes in it and tiptoed back to the porch. She had sticks sitting in her sock that day and had quickly hid them in the bag Alice gave her. She sat down on the chair with such delight, twisting the stick between her fingers. Suddenly, however, Athena realized that she did not have a lighter. She almost cried out of helplessness, but she quickly ran to the kitchen to find a lighter. Athena’s eyes dilated as she ran her fingers through all the drawers, opening them like mad.

The second Athena found a lighter, Waldo opened the door with a metal clipboard in his hand. Waldo was too intrigued to see her come in on her own accord to be suspicious of her motives. Athena quickly slipped the lighter into her pocket and began rubbing her forehead in annoyance.

“What are you doing?” Waldo asked, with a refreshing smile. Athena threw her hair back and closed her eyes and took a deep breath in.

“Hungry?” Waldo asked. Athena nodded. As Waldo began looking through the fridge, Athena walked to the porch quickly and laid down on the chair.

“Just in time,” she muttered as she stuck the stick in her mouth and lit the end as the sun began to set. The first smoke let out all the pain from her body. Suddenly, she slid deeper into her chair and closed her eyes in bliss.

Waldo returned with the sandwiches and almost fell backwards upon seeing the smoke come out of her mouth. Waldo began saying something in a condemning tone of voice but Athena looked back at him viciously with volatile eyes.

Waldo slowly placed the sandwiches on the round table and sat by her. Athena let out smoke from her lungs with her chin pointed up and then quickly fed her lips with the butt. The sky was turning apocalyptic red.

“Why did you kidnap me?” Athena said, with her chin still pointed to heaven. Waldo rubbed his hands and looked at her. He remained silent, knowing that she was trying to accuse him of something vile. Athena took another blow and let her arm fall to her side.

“He got drunk,” Athena began. Waldo turned to Athena.

“He found out about the time I said Mary should’ve gotten an abortion in theology class!” Athena said, laughing in her sickly-sweet voice, her purple eye weakly scrunching with laughter, pulling a chord in Waldo’s heart.

“He said I was out with boys and called me vile names,” Athena said, smiling ironically. “Some I’ve never thought a man of his age could still use.” She took an extra long sip of tobacco and let go with a feline wince as she moved her legs. She then looked to her right and stared at the red sun. Waldo suddenly began to become impatient as a silence began between them.

“Did he hurt you?” Waldo asked, sounding stupid to himself. She cursed something under her breath and turned to Waldo.

“Well?” Athena said in an ironic voice. She hesitated and kept her eyes lingering on the floor.“I said something back to him that made his blood boil like hell. He pounded me once on the eye and I fell. He almost began to cry when he saw me on the ground,” Athena said, now glancing askance at Waldo to gauge his reaction. He looked simultaneously enthralled and terrified.

“For some damn reason, I was conscious even after such a blow,” she said, nodding and smirking. “I got up and spit on him. And so there he went, grabbing me by my hair and taking me up the steps. He took a belt from somewhere, can hardly remember where, and just lashed me like mad. I felt the marks all over,” Athena continued, bobbing her head from side to side. Waldo did not move an inch and even caught himself holding his breath.

“He cried so much the next morning it was embarrassing,” she said. “He grabbed me and held me there for so long, my shirt became damp. But,” she said, now her voice quivering. “I remembered something he told me that night when he came home from the bar, it was so twisted. Something about my mother and then he gave a look that made the hairs on my arms stiff.”

Waldo was burning with so much love and hatred, he brought his arms around her to hug her. Athena immediately gave him such a mighty shove, he fell back from his chair.

“You think you’re a French hero now? Eh?” Athena said loudly so that the neighbors could hear, her bosom heaving dramatically. Waldo came off the floor in humiliation and sat by her carefully.

“I won’t let him touch you ever again,” Waldo said, heavy, deep, and blue. Athena was about to burst out laughing, but she thought it wasn’t worth the energy to display so she kept looking out at the sun, blowing at her cigarette. Then, a clever thought entered her brain. She wanted to play with Waldo.

“Thanks, Waldo,” she said, smiling ironically. Waldo straightened up and came close to Athena and lightly touched her hand. Athena with great effort erased her reckless smile and turned to Waldo.

“He’s not your father,” Waldo said, now looking at her so seriously, Athena was only an inch away from erupting into laughter right in front of his face. “I’ll take care of you,” he said. Athena felt tickled on her skin, taking so much delight in the game. She nodded, purposely trying to look more childish and hopeless than she was. She even made circles on the top of Waldo’s hand with her thumb like a daydreaming child.

All Waldo could think about that evening was in what ways he could protect and keep Athena secure from that “monster” as he called Athena’s father. During dinner, as Alice passed around all the plates, Athena was in a dangerously playful mood---perhaps the pill?---prompting her to rub Waldo’s leg with hers. Waldo felt the feline hairs against his and stared at Athena strangely. She kept bouncing lightly in her chair and gave Waldo a wild look, her eyes all dilated and freckles dancing on her skin. Alice smiled at Athena’s refreshed expression, thinking it cute and lovely.

Waldo that night could not sleep and kept thinking about what he was going to do for Athena, how he was going to deal with her father. His thoughts ran in loops, eternally recurring like a fever dream.

A few days after the day Athena arrived, Alice had come to the realization that Athena was not attending school. One evening, Alice approached Athena carefully who she thought to be shy as she never spoke when Alice was around, perhaps because she was mistrustful of Alice’s extreme love and care. Athena had once admitted to Waldo that “your wife’s voice rattles my gottamn brain.”

Alice studied Athena’s eye from the side one morning before departing for work and asked her politely to show the inner side of the eye. Athena dropped the phone impatiently and looked at Alice. The eye had been improving. It was no longer plump in the middle, however the rings around had become deeper and now were a mixture of pitch black and violet. Athena returned to her phone and Alice hovered about her uncomfortably.

“Do you plan on going to school dear?” Alice asked, folding her hands in her lap while sitting next to Athena on the couch.

“I don’t need to,” Athena quickly replied, never detaching her eyes from the screen. Alice looked at the teenager with great concern.

“Athena, I love having you here, but you must return to school at some point,” she said, looking back to see if Waldo was awake or not. Waldo wasn’t. “Waldo told me you haven’t for a month now.”

“I know,” she responded back quickly. Alice lingered a few more moments until Athena’s discomfort was becoming somewhat apparent. Alice departed disappointed.

Waldo sat beside Athena that morning and studied that empathy-less face, the glow of the screen lighting her features like the shadows in Plato’s cave.

“Can you take me to a friend’s house?” Athena asked, crossing her feet, in the same pair of jeans she had worn the day she arrived.

“For what?” Waldo asked in an amusing voice.

“Something,” she bluntly replied. Waldo frowned and sighed.

“Athena, you have to stop this habit,” responded Waldo. Athena put the phone in her lap and all of a sudden the stone face ignited in emotion. She knew that cursing and mocking Waldo were not going to work this time.

“Why not?” Athena asked, her eyelashes blinking zenfully and bottom lip shifting to the right. Waldo grabbed his forehead and began to squeeze it.

“I won’t do it in front of Alice,” Athena said with a sudden spurt of energy, her lashes pointing to the sky and her mouth open. Waldo held his head in his hand disappointed and disgusted with himself. Athena bounced her leg impatiently, begging Waldo to respond. Waldo’s conscience began haunting him, reminding him that he had let a teenager do such horrid things in his own car and home.

Athena had become so desperate, she leaned slowly onto Waldo’s shoulder and rubbed her head into his neck. Waldo, surprised, watched her moan and felt the silk of her hairs.

“Please Waldo, I don’t want to tell you the things I’ll do without it,” she said, attempting so hard to shed a few tears as her eyes twinkled innocently. Waldo moved back from her and looked at her bizarrely.

“Ok,” Waldo responded miserably. She leaped onto the sofa and sighed.

“Thank you,” she said, looking him directly in the eyes, making sure to reward him. Her eyes were rich, vernal green. Waldo smiled and walked towards the door, ready for work.

“And when can I start coming with you?” Athena asked, her voice so polite.

“Richard said I can no longer bring you,” Waldo said, not so disappointed as he once was. She cursed Richard and the two laughed. Waldo went to work and still could not stop thinking of how to make sure Athena was entirely safe. His brain plotted so many things, it often interfered with his therapy sessions.

Alice had returned home before Waldo had today, and it appeared she had cooked something for Athena already, as the latter was eating a sandwich on the dinner table, looking at Alice suspiciously when the latter declared to Waldo: “she’s so lovely, look at her!” Waldo nodded with an ironic smile.

Waldo and Alice exchanged hugs and kisses, and Waldo went to change. When Waldo came out, Alice was drawing lines on a sketchpad next to Athena who was still eating. Athena gave him a firm look, reminding him of his task.

A few hours passed and Waldo brushed up against Alice. He told her that Athena wanted to see a friend and that they would be back soon. Alice nodded with tight lips. Athena saw the gesture and walked towards the door and so she departed with Waldo. They arrived at the friend’s house.

Athena hopped out of the car and upon stepping close to the door, a boy came out. Waldo could see from his rearview mirror that the boy was shocked. He stepped close to Athena and began touch her eye. Athena flinched back defensively. The boy looked at her suspiciously and mumbled some things to which Athena responded back. The boy then went back inside with a slouched posture. Athena crossed her arms and glanced at Waldo's car. The boy then returned with a mint box and a small bag. She stuffed the bag and held the box in her hand. Athena gave him a few bills and rushed to the car.

"Pizza?" she said gayly, opening the metal box and picking out a brown roll. Waldo quickly rolled the windows and glanced at Athena worriedly. She lifted her legs and placed them on the dashboard, exposing pajamas that Alice had bought for Athena on a trip to the department store. On that trip, Athena spoke so sparsely, Alice thought her to have hearing issues.

"Alice said she was making dinner," Waldo said, glancing at Athena nervously.

"Eh, we'll eat hers too," Athena said in an amusing voice.

Athena devoured an entire vegan pizza, stealing many of Waldo's slices.

"Chrissake, too good," she said in gaps and gasps, stuffing herself. The manager, who was sweeping debris, remarked how he had not seen the two in very long. He then noticed Athena's purple eye with concern. Waldo laughed in surprise, now becoming aware of how many visits Athena and him had had at this very restaurant. How many other places had solidified the image of him and Athena? How many other managers sat behind the counter and thought "it's the man with the girl again" when they entered the restaurant? The thought made Waldo feel so happy.

Athena, after finishing the pizza, ordered banana pudding. The manager told them that it was on the house and Athena smiled for him. Waiting for the desert, she bounced her feet and looked casually everywhere, her entire body bouncing hyperly, something Waldo was accustomed to seeing.

"What's with this sending-me-to-school garbage?" Athena said loudly in a bitter voice. Waldo raised his eyebrow.

"What?" Waldo responded.

"Your wife told me I *must* attend school," Athena said, looking to her right, and staring at the mirror plastered across the wall, all of a sudden becoming cognisant of how bad her eye really looked. Waldo began to rub his face nervously and looked back at Athena.

"You're not going anywhere, you need psychological rest or you will break down physically and menta---"

"Ya ya, blah blah, just don't let her take me to school," Athena responded, turning her face to the ceiling.

"I won't," Waldo started nervously, swallowing. "But it's for proper protocols in trying to recover from trauma in the sphe---"

“Please,” Athena said with great disdain, lifting her fork and plunging it into the dish. “Let me enjoy my pudding.” Waldo stopped short and now felt embarrassed and annoyed. Athena swallowed quickly and they left with a tip and arrived home.

Waldo rushed up the steps to find Athena walking very slowly. He ran back to her and they both rushed up the steps. Athena was fumbling with another roll in her fingers as they ran up the stairs. They finally arrived at the top of the steps and stood in front of the door, the sun already well down.

“Pack that stuff away so she can’t find it,” Waldo said in a hurried voice as he glanced at Athena spinning a brown stick between her fingers. Athena stuffed the metal box and bag full of green shrubs into her pocket.

“Athena!” Waldo whispered loudly, turning to Athena on a dime. “If Alice finds that stuff, she will have you out on the streets in a blink of an eye.” Athena looked at Waldo seriously for a few seconds, trying to uncover the source of anxiety and madness in the psychologist. The psychologist tried to figure out what it was Athena was trying to crack within himself as her eyes flickered in strange patterns.

“Hide it well or I’ll take it away,” threatened Waldo. Athena did not take her chances. Alice opened the door and Athena ran to the restroom. Alice looked questionably at Athena and then looked at Waldo confused.

“She needs to take a shower,” Waldo responded casually. Athena heard and so after she opened the screws of an electrical outlet with her nails near the shower curtain and stored the box and bag in the hole in the wall, she stepped into the tub and took a shower.

Waldo stood awkwardly and stared at the dinner table piled with uneaten foods except one seat where Alice had eaten alone. Alice went and sat on the couch. Waldo told Alice they were sorry for being late and that they ran through some complications. Alice did not respond.

Athena came out of the shower, quickly slipped her clothes on, and walked down the corridor. Alice glanced over the corridor in response to the sound of Athena’s paws.

“Oh dear you’re wearing the same clothes,” Alice said ironically, with an expression that made Waldo tense and suspicious. “Let me get your clothes from the washing machine,” Alice said, enunciating each word strangely with something lurking beneath. All Athena could think about was her substances stowed away. All Waldo could think about was how irritating Alice was now sounding.

“Here you go dear,” Alice said, tossing Athena new clothes. Athena quickly changed in the room and came out, glancing nervously on all corners of the room. Waldo and Athena both locked eyes momentarily and communicated something between themselves. Alice sat on the kitchen table with her cheek on her hand.

“Dinner’s on the table,” Alice said with such serenity, it sparked suspicion not only in Waldo but Athena as well. “I’m going for a walk,” Alice whispered, opening the door, then slamming it tight.

Athena's wet hair dangled in black clusters for the rest of the night as she looked at her phone and ate a bag of chips on the sofa. Waldo sat across from her, rubbing his head from the tremendous headache he was experiencing.

It had been an hour since Alice had left for her walk and Waldo now began to worry. He asked Athena if she thought she was okay. Athena responded with a lifeless "yeah." Waldo rubbed his shoulders, warming himself from the shivers of loneliness. He told Athena goodnight and looked at her for a few long moments before proceeding to the bathroom to brush his teeth.

It was only a few minutes after Waldo had brushed and went to bed to read a few news articles when Alice had opened the door and sat on the sofa. She looked at the floor in a dismal yet aggressive mood.

"What school were you attending?" Alice asked firmly. Athena glanced up at Alice and sensed her tone of voice and sat up.

"Saintnicholas," Athena responded so quickly, Alice could not make out what she said. But no matter, Alice was simply finding a way to come back to the topic.

"Here's a list of schools in our zone, pick one for now, when you return…" and so Alice continued, placing a piece of paper on the table and looking at Athena with all of a sudden such mature womanly eyes. Athena searched for Waldo in the background helplessly. Waldo listened with so much anger boiling in his chest, he almost stampeded out of the room.

When Alice had finished brushing her hair down and taking off her makeup, Waldo waited to confront Alice. Alice entered the bedroom and Waldo, unable to control his expressions, just allowed whatever existed on his tongue to be released.

"What are you doing to her?" Waldo asked so rapidly, Alice was surprised and even a little scared.

"What?" Alice responded, clutching onto the wall as Waldo took one step closer to her.

"You're trying to send her to school? Have you nearly lost it, Alice?" Waldo said, his throat becoming dry.

"Waldo, she needs to go to school, she hasn't done so for over one month," Alice said, her hard face now falling to pieces, and that innocent look now returning.

"She needs to rest!" Waldo blurted out, realizing that it had been over two months since Athena had not attended school. "She's been jabbed in the eye and dragged by the hair by her own father, if you were considerate, you would allow her to at least rest!" Alice felt her heart squeal with this last statement as she stood frozen, unable to think. For the first time, Alice had seen genuine anger in Waldo's eyes. He was protecting the quickly fleeting treasures of his life, and she was the thief. Alice stood with her fists clenched and her eyes boiling. Waldo suddenly realized his raised temper. He approached Alice and grabbed her hand.

"I'm sorry Alice but we need her to stay here...you take good care of her...she doesn't need stress...I'm a psychologist...I know these things," Waldo muttered. The entire time, Alice eyed Waldo with anger, her fingers clenching harder than ever. However, suddenly, an image emerged in Alice's mind. One afternoon, returning from work, Alice had opened the bedroom

door and accidentally intruded upon Athena who was changing. Alice flinched and moved backwards and apologized profusely and nervously. Athena herself did not care enough to even turn around to see who had come in. Alice, however, remembered a disturbing image of Athena's pale skin, lashed with leather marks, criss-crossing on her skin. That image was enough to make Alice passive and conforming for the rest of the night. However, the sadness she felt that night, sitting alone on a table with two empty plates and only hers full, would never go away.

8

Waldo one morning awoke to find Athena with straightened hair lying kittinishly on the floor while reading a book. Waldo was now spending roughly seventy dollars for books every two weeks. She was consuming books faster than she had ever done in her life, and in a way, they were changing her life. She was more subdued, calm, and satisfied in those minor moments of solitude, reading at early in the morning, when the crows were asleep and the stars were awake. Athena had thought on certain occasions of extreme passion when reading that perhaps she was approximating something close to *peace*. There were even nights when the book replaced her rolls and cigarettes sitting behind the wall. Other nights, however, Athena ran to the restroom and opened the box carefully with her nails and rushed to the porch to smoke a roll to the tune and rhythm of the dancing stars and howling winds. Always a proponent against anything holy, she perhaps changed her mind in those moments when the false dawn slowly outlined the sky and the Texas hills, behind which one could even see hints of desertous terrain, and when the stars faded into dimmed devil rocks. Nothing could soothe her except those moments. And discovering them was a kind of prayer.

"A friend is coming over," Waldo said to Athena. "Her name is Rose and we might go places," Waldo said, sounding terribly excited.

Athena glanced at Waldo and half-nodded, too absorbed in her book to acknowledge what Waldo had said. A few minutes later, however, she realized what he said with discomfort. Soon Rose arrived and Alice opened the door eagerly for her. As Rose entered inside the apartment, she stopped in her tracks and stood frozen, staring at Waldo sitting next to that girl with a purple patch on her eye. Waldo did not know Rose was there until Alice came back from her bedroom with a gift in her hands for Rose. Waldo looked upwards and saw Rose's face full of surprise. Waldo studied it with humor as he rarely saw emotions on that tabula rasa physiognomy.

"This is Athena," Waldo said, controlling his nerves. Athena nodded to Rose and the latter introduced herself with a faint smile. Alice shifted her glances between the three nervously and blurted out loud that she thought it would be nice to go to the mall especially since Athena

needed more clothes. Waldo enthusiastically got on his feet and tapped Athena on her elbow to which Athena narrowed her feline eyes on him until they became demonic. Rose saw the expression and almost laughed at how animated and unreal Athena seemed to her.

At the mall, Athena was interrogated about her waist size as Alice frantically searched for clothes, Rose helping her. On the bench near a clothing rack, Athena had switched over to the phone as the book lay by her side.

Once Rose and Alice had collected a few pants and shirts and even one skirt, they asked Athena to try them on. Athena stared at Alice and Rose blankly for a few moments and then began trying to convince them that she appreciated the clothing and did not need to try them on. Of course, Alice pleaded until Athena grabbed the clothes and changed quickly. Alice exclaimed how nice she looked. They bought the clothes and returned home.

As the wind howled outside, with temperatures entering forbidden numbers, Rose gladly accepted the invitation to dinner and spending the rest of the evening with the family. Alice was cooking dinner and Waldo and Athena sat on the floor against the sofa and Rose across from them on the rocking chair. Waldo pointed to something in Athena's book and asked her what her marginalia said. Athena initially gave Waldo a glaring look and mumbled to him a threat to move then glanced at Rose nervously. However, as Waldo's eyes remained glued to the page and his eyes squinted as if seriously trying to decipher the message, Athena dropped the book in her lap and sighed.

"Here," she said, giving Waldo the book and crossing her hands and accidentally locking eyes with Rose for a few moments. Waldo squinted harder and tried pronouncing the words in gibberish.

"Oh for chrissake, I was writing fast," Athena said, rolling her eyes and even crackling her little laugh. Such an expression made Waldo's heart melt with ecstasy. How youthful, flowery, sweetly-sick, and rebellious that laugh was! He turned to Rose to see if the short crack had the same effect on her. It did.

"Well read it to me, I'm interested," Waldo responded cleverly. Athena crossed her legs and threw her hair on the couch and looked at Waldo with mistrustful eyes that were slowly turning sly and playful.

"Fine," she said, snatching the book from Waldo's hand and raising it to her eyes. Athena then glanced at Rose, becoming self-conscious as she spoke.

"Truth itself is never fully determinable...because of the multiple narratives that are spun by different people at different times and places...there is always an equally opposite opinion and claim therefore the truth itself becomes stagnant, stuck between two opposites," Athena read. Waldo noticed how her voice sounded compressed, perhaps because she was shy. Athena placed the book on her lap and rested her neck on the couch.

"You sound like that guy you always talk about...what's his name?" Waldo said, falling to thinking tremendously hard and even looking at Rose as if she would have the answer. "The french one---"

“Deleuze?” Athena said, losing breath from her bosom and rolling her eyes. “Yes!” Waldo said, laughing hard.

“Oh shut up, you haven’t read a page out of a book other than those government issued psychology textbooks.”

“You haven’t read a page out of a book other than those pretentious Frenchmen,” Waldo responded back.

“That’s the only word you know god dammit!” Athena said, shoving Waldo and shaking her head with laughter. “Pretentious this pretentious that!” Even Rose laughed quietly. Rose and Waldo looked at each other with such warmed summer faces, the cruelness of winter no longer existed. Waldo had never seen Rose this refreshed and alive in her features. Still, however, she concealed her joy and kept a relatively stoic expression.

“Dinner,” Alice’s sore throat squeaked.

Waldo tapped Athena on the elbow as he got up to go to the dinner table. Athena shrunk back after Waldo tapped her and stood frozen for a few moments then got up. Rose observed the gesture with great curiosity.

On the dinner table, Rose was able to get a closer look at the purple mark on Athena’s eye. Athena would stop midway in her long rant to discover that Alice was looking at her with concerned eyes, eyes that seemed to say, “I cannot believe where you get these ideas from but even more, how you refused to speak to me all this time, pretending to be this quiet little girl, but in reality, you are a fiery young lady who’s tongue doesn’t stop running.” Waldo was looking at Athena with amusing eyes, taking pleasure in simply being able to hear her bark intellectual jargon like a rabid dog; and not only this, Athena was doing this in front of Alice and Rose. Something about this made Waldo feel prideful, as if he were displaying a talent of his to his wife and friends.

“Ah what am I kidding, I have no idea what I’m saying,” Athena said quietly, after seeing that Alice had not changed her expression of disgust.

“She finally admits it,” Waldo said under his breath. Athena turned to Waldo with sharp eyes and Rose chuckled quietly. Both Athena and Waldo looked surprised to hear the mute make noises. Alice now felt betrayed by Rose indicating her acceptance of Waldo and Athena’s antics. Rose covered her mouth and bit her lips as if she had done something impolite. When Rose turned to Alice, she saw the gravest of expressions and felt confused.

“It’s expected to snow tonight,” Alice said quietly, then smiling weakly when looking at Rose.

“It is?” Waldo asked, looking around the table in surprise to which Rose nodded and pointed to the window where now flakes were floating in the air.

“Swear to God, the weather here is bipolar,” Athena said under her breath as everyone headed towards the balcony. Everyone except Athena threw on some coats and stepped outside to witness the Southern Texas miracle.

They stood outside in the freezing cold. Everyone was stuffing their hands into their pockets and turning with stern bodies. Athena desperately tried to slip her hands into her shorts that cut about her thigh. Rose looked at Athena in shock as to how she was withstanding the cold.

Alice, feeling lonely, walked to Rose and tossed some snow on her. Rose nodded awkwardly and Alice began talking about something new yet trivial nonetheless. After a few minutes of them freezing in the snow, Waldo saw that Athena's fingers were turning cotton candy blue. Alice just in time announced firmly that she was making hot cocoa inside, leaving the trio outside. The three followed Alice. Athena picked up another book and sat by the couch, Waldo sitting next to her. Waldo began poking a finger at a few words with a mischievous expression. Athena let out a sigh and shoved the book against his face, causing him to fall back. Athena's hardened expression softened after Waldo chuckled and even she lightly laughed, shaking her head. Rose put on a bright smile, watching the two laugh in that warm room with white powder coating the outside. Briefly, Waldo and Rose stared at each other and for that moment, both were so happy.

9

Waldo arose that morning from bed with the most delightful sensation running through his body. He looked over to his wife, each emotion that he was feeling now more deeper than usual. The pity that he had for Alice was now as complex and layered as the rings around her eyes. Waldo threw the covers and walked carefully to find Athena sleeping on the floor. He hadn't woken this early, and Alice this late, for a few months now. As Waldo sat on the sofa, his feet rested next to the curled up Athena. Suddenly he grabbed his nose. He turned quickly to Athena and sniffed her a few more times and thought carefully. Suddenly, something possessed him.

"Athena," he murmured with great determination as he poked her shoulder. Athena opened her eyes and perked her ears.

"Hm?" she said lazily.

"You smell very strange," Waldo whispered. Athena narrowed her eyes on Waldo. A minute had passed before she realized Waldo's serious expression. Athena sniffed herself and tried to concentrate but could not make out anything. It was when Alice, who came from bed and walked to the blinds to uncover them, made a peculiar face and suggested to the group that a strange smell was coming from somewhere. Athena's eyes dilated as she looked at Waldo with horror. When Alice wasn't looking, Athena slipped as inconspicuously as possible to the shower. When Athena was showering, Alice remarked under her breath that the reeking smell was

coming from Athena as if to spite Waldo. Waldo pretended as though he did not hear. Athena vigorously rubbed off the new strain she had tried last night.

"And there's book club in an hour," Alice told Waldo, walking to the pantry. That comment struck Waldo with anxiety. His heart fluttered with fear and excitement. Athena had come out of the shower and changed as fast as her body could manage and walked towards the deck to dry her hair beneath the sun in the already melting snow. However, Waldo stopped her midway towards the balcony.

"Listen, Alice has her book club in a few minutes," Waldo said nervously.

"Very excited to spend my evening listening to a blonde pseudo-intellectual," Athena said with a humorous face. Waldo smiled back and watched her walk out to the deck. Wado kept thinking with delight what Laura's reaction would be, her niece sitting by his side with that prophetical black eye! It wasn't long before knocks came thundering at the door. Waldo ducked his head out of the sliding glass door and told Athena with a pounding heart that the guests were here.

"Oh let me dry my hair a little more," Athena replied, annoyed. Waldo nodded his head and paced the room. All the women had come. Waldo bent his head and searched for Laura but could not find her. The meeting had begun and Alice began reading a story from Joyce's *Dubliners.* Meanwhile, Athena, who was sitting outside, was combing her hair down to rinse out water. When she heard Alice read, she perked her ears with delightful surprise.

"Joyce eh?" she said to herself. "What do any of them know about Joyce?" Athena said to herself, as she turned around in her chair to look at the group of women. Rose was the only one to notice Athena's gesture with a soft smile.

Waldo restlessly walked around in the kitchen until he decided that there was no point in worrying over it. He sat and listened to Alice's voice. He noticed with remorse that her voice was no longer as fluffy and vibrant as it had been. It was slowly being repressed and hardened.

Closer to the end of the meeting, a knock came to the door. Waldo waved to Alice that he'd open it. When the door swung open, Laura stood there. Waldo's eyes widened as he welcomed her in. Suddenly he looked outside to find Athena walking in, done with her hair drying. Athena walked towards Waldo and the two of them sat on the kitchen chairs. Athena did not care to look once at the group of women, one of which was her aunt. Athena's neck bent downwards at her phone. When Laura sat down on the couch, she had not noticed Athena. However, in a few moments, Athena out of the corner stuck out. She was then shocked to find her there by Waldo's side. Waldo sensed Laura looking at Athena, causing him to cross his arms and straighten his back and look at her phone as if he were observing and taking care of her. The shock was heightened to an exponential degree when Athena lifted her head to throw her hair back exposing the blackened eye to Laura.

Once the meeting was over and the women rose to leave, Laura rushed to Athena, her breath becoming short.

"Athena?" Laura asked, as if genuinely not knowing if the girl was really her niece.

“Laura how are yo--” Athena said but was cut short as Laura aggressively grabbed Athena and held her to her chest. Athena thanked heavens she took a shower. Laura then released Athena and held her face in her hands and looked at her with great pity. Athena scratched her arms uncomfortably, feeling violated.

“What happened?” Laura said, looking at Alice and then Waldo. Neither answered and so Laura looked back at Athena with a hurt face. Once everyone had left and it was now only Alice, Waldo, Athena, and Laura, Waldo told Laura.

“It was her father,” Waldo said with great conviction, stepping close to Athena. Laura looked at Waldo with great hatred and then at the swelling ring around her precious niece’s eye.

“Waldo, I don’t want to hear a paranoid’s account of this,” she said quietly. Waldo signaled Alice to leave, but she only walked a few paces back into the kitchen.

“Athena, tell your aunt how your father lashed you,” Waldo said with determined eyes. Athena nervously gulped and looked at the floor. All of a sudden, she became a helpless girl who felt trapped between the politics of the adult world, something she was so accustomed to that now it was plain old repetition, like rehearsing the same act of a grey play. Athena’s mind went to that same, metallic, blank. Laura looked at Athena for any signs of reassurance that Waldo was fabricating or lying. When Laura lowered her gaze on that injured adolescent face, her heart squeezed with maternal terror.

“Well then,” Laura said slowly and wisely, changing her mood about the situation and spinning her eyes in mad circles. “I can take her with me.” Waldo’s heart almost fractured into two.

“I’m sorry? You were denying the fact she had an abusive father this entir---Alice can you please leave?---this entire time and now you ask to take her with you?” Waldo said, his eyes bulging. Never in his life had he ever stood up for himself to anyone. He was the kid at school who would pretend like it was okay for another kid to steal his food during lunch. He would always say “yes” to favors and circumstances that would at times boil him from the inside.

Laura flushed red and narrowed her eyes onto Waldo with great vigor. She began to scan Waldo from head to toe, trying to understand his motives.

“My lord, I am her aunt!” Laura began. “I’ve taken care of her and raised her, been a mother to her when she needed it the most. I *love* her. Alice,” Laura said, looking at the sullen Alice. “I love you my dear, but I cannot leave Athena with him, he’s corrupted her. I am her aunt and have a right to her. Would you agree?” All of a sudden, Waldo turned to Alice with big red eyes. Everyone except Athena was looking at Alice. Alice’s numbed state was being disturbed by Waldo’s near-terrifying expression. She kept glancing at Waldo then back to Laura’s worried face. Without Alice willing it, her head shook positively. Waldo clenched his teeth so tight, he thought they’d shatter.

“Laura, she is staying here until she’s better, you have failed to be the guardian she deserves, who knows how many times she’s been beaten by *your* brother,” Waldo said, stuttering

from panic and affectual confusion. Laura fluttered red with her eyes bulging out. She could not believe Waldo had dared to be so abrupt in front of her own niece, his own wife.

"Athena," Laura said, turning to Athena with full force. "I'll be back with child protective services to get you." And just like that, with a blow to Waldo's solar plexus, she left the apartment building. It was a miracle that the apartment did not collapse to pieces. Athena did not glance once at Waldo or Alice as she exhaled and fell on the couch, burying her face in a pillow.

10

Waldo paced the kitchen and Alice carefully washed the dishes so as not to wake Athena. "We can't have Laura back here again," Waldo said, walking and mumbling warmly and nearly, as if Alice was now an accomplice in Waldo's plan, both working together to maintain Athena in the house until the end of time. Alice kept her dull gaze on the glare of the dishes.

"If Laura's back, she'll try to take Athena back and...well, she'll end up at the…the *devil*'s place again," Waldo said, thinking himself clever.

"She said she would keep Athena at hers as long as she needed to," Alice responded dully. Waldo spun on his heels, his eyes twitching.

"Do you *want* her to leave?" Waldo asked, looking at her with misery. Alice placed the dish down slowly, and suddenly, she heard a voice in her head, telling her that it was the perfect opportunity to speak her mind. She turned around and instantly, her bland, emotionless expression that she carried now-a-days began to twitch into a human face.

"Waldo, she can't stay here forever, she needs to go to school," Alice began, making sure she was not so hasty so that Waldo immediately exploded. "Laura said she lives near a high school and that she would enroll her there for now."

"You spoke with Laura?" Waldo said quietly, with anger boiling within him. Alice saw it and proceeded cautiously.

"Yes, she called last night many times, I had to pick up," Alice said apologetically. In reality, Alice felt relieved that there was someone determined to take care of Athena and spare Alice of her misery. Waldo turned around and put his hands behind his head, remembering Laura's terrifying threat to get the state involved. Alice saw genuine anguish.

"Waldo, I love Athena but it's just getting overbearing," Alice said, stopping, not sure if what she said was appropriate. Waldo looked slightly over his shoulder so that Alice could only see the outline of his face.

“Alice?” Waldo said, now turning towards his wife. “Are you jealous of her?” Alice’s mouth was left wide open and cold and trembling. She was searching for words but none seemed appropriate to use.

“That’s it, this is about *you*, you feel threatened by her,” Waldo said, taking pleasure in finally having countered Alice successfully as she stood frozen. “She’s staying here Alice, it’s not about you, it’s about *her.* Now be an adult and take care of the poor thing!” Alice made a displeased face and then saw Athena rising from the thin blanket. She was throwing her arms off to the side while finally giving up on trying to raise her body. Alice squirmed, trying to tell Waldo, “hush, you're waking her!”

Waldo then turned to Athena. Anxiety churned in his belly seeing her. Time itself was taking a toll on Waldo’s nerves. The more he looked at Athena, the more the voices resonated in his skull.

“What can I make for you dear,” Alice said, blushing bright red, swallowing as if she had cried a hundred tears. Athena sat back and stared at the two curiously, sensing a strange energy between them.

“Just oatmeal,” Athena said, as she rubbed her eyes.

“I’ll take eggs,” Waldo said as Alice began opening boxes. She turned around in surprise. He never ate breakfast this early, in fact, he sometimes skipped. Athena was even worse, she would go some days with eating nothing but a few cookies, fries, and a burger. Alice, however, had worked the discipline of breakfast into the young girl. Athena only complied to stop hearing her chirp every morning about it.

Waldo sat so close to Athena at the dinner table that their elbows touched as they ate. Athena kept a quiet gaze, saying nothing and answering in nods or shakes as she did around Alice. However, today, Waldo detected that Athena was going to pretend to be a mute for whatever reason she felt like at the moment.

“What’s your plan for the day?” Waldo asked. Athena kept eating slowly, scooping the thick oatmeal and shrugging dispassionately. Waldo exhaled with frustration. Alice made herself a bowl of a smoothie-granola concoction. She then walked out to the patio and shut the door tight. The silence accompanied Athena and Waldo. She was once a girl with those cocainic shuttering of the eyebrows, tongue quicker then a viper, and body that was electrified constantly, incarnate with Eliotian chaos and poetry. Now, Athena seemed tired, burnt out, emotionless and as dull as his wife. Waldo was getting very much on edge, feeling as though he could do something very mean to anyone.

“Athena,” Waldo muttered, hoping she’d mock him, ridicule him, and run that lovely tongue. “What’s the matter with you?” Athena looked at him, weakly flexing an eyebrow, assuming a familiar, clever face. Suddenly, she realized that she was letting go of her guard; Waldo, the sleek psychologist, had detected that something was wrong. She imagined the batteries he would make her complete, just her and Waldo sitting alone—what a terrifying thought!

“I got a right to feel tired when I wake up or what?” Athena said, trying to play the fox and taking a sip from her glass of milk. Waldo rubbed his hair and watched her with infinite curiosity.

“You want to take a spin?” Waldo said, invigorating some childish excitement. Athena lazily scooping her food just shrugged. Waldo stared dismally at the floor, hearing the ticking of the clock.

“Actually, I have to get some books from a store downtown,” Athena said suddenly and firmly like a war strategist. Waldo looked at Athena with some regained energy.

After the dishes were put away, Waldo and Athena were off. He drove extra slow that day, trying to squeeze some abstract pleasure out of all of it. Once they arrived at the bookstore, Athena darted in and Waldo quickly came after. The purple mark on Athena’s eye was still evident and produced looks of worry on the lady at the front desk. She even looked at Waldo suspiciously, making him feel self-conscious and even guilty.

Athena had picked up two books and quickly rushed to the front desk. Waldo pulled out the wallet mechanically and paid the amount and the two rushed back. Waldo wasn’t so sure what Athena was running from but her movements were hasty.

As they drove down that familiar street, Waldo recognized the spot where the two went the first time he picked her from school. It was the popsicle stand, used clothing store, and cactus shop.

“Popsicle?” Waldo said, smiling and looking at Athena. He found her reading the book he had bought for her. She answered a faint “no.” He drove on disappointed.

The dinner that night felt like a last supper. It was dismal and miserable. Waldo felt crushed by how Athena twisted her wrist or how her legs bounced incessantly or how her mysterious eyes darted to random points on the table or floor. Alice laid her head on her hand and felt relaxed that evening.

Waldo sat on the edge of the bed, rubbing his head. Alice saw the deep expression of sorrow on Waldo’s face, prompting her to sit next to him with a similar expression on her face.

“Did you tell Athena?” Waldo asked, with glittering red eyes, turning his head slowly. “That she needed to leave?” Alice spread her eyes open and only stared quietly, hoping something would stop him from looking so terrifying.

“I only told her what Laura wanted me to tell her,” Alice said slowly and then stopped short. Waldo noticed that Alice was holding back.

“Well…what was it?” Waldo asked, his eyes running wild.

“About her mother,” Alice said carefully. “She’s been gone since Athena’s been a child,” continued Alice, Waldo listening with his face pointed away from Alice. “I showed a photo of her mother to Athena, that was the first time I’ve ever seen an expression on that girl’s face.” Waldo thought about how crude it was for Laura to use such a ploy on Athena. Waldo began to feel ill.

11

Athena, Waldo, and Alice all sat in a burger joint, where Athena was the only one who awkwardly ate her burger. The adults nimbled on the fries and pretended to eat their soggy patties. The night was more oppressive than beautiful. Alice had excused herself to go to the restroom.

“Remember this place?” Athena said, turning around, looking at the children’s playground with a faint smile and warm tongue. Waldo felt his blood cool and muscles relax. When Athena turned around, her smile vanished and she continued eating her burger, deep in thought, and even drowsy with sleep.

“Has Laura tried contacting you?” Waldo said, asking a question that he knew would yield him an unsatisfactory response either way. Athena mumbled a “no” and continued chewing while watching the janitor mop the floors to her right. Waldo smiled faintly at seeing her dangle her legs like a child and look so peaceful for once. For a second, Waldo had been happy enough to see her so tranquil and wise, everything else seemed unnecessary, vain, and disgusting. If she was okay, the rest would take care of itself.

He was so mellowed with sleep and fatigue from a long day of work, it almost felt like he no longer cared what happened with Athena or Alice or himself. Waldo then turned his eyes askance, realizing on a very real level that Athena experienced this bashing perhaps regularly. And who was to say what really happened every time?

That night, Waldo was kept awake very late. The television screen casted moving dim shadows that rose and shrunk. Athena was acting bizarre again. As she lay on the floor, she twisted her chin up and bent her neck at an arch as if she were possessed.

“Man, you must want *made*?” Athena said mischievously. Waldo turned his eyes to Athena with great confusion. He studied her bent figure and twisted smile. Waldo had no desire to part his lips.

“Right?” she said louder. Waldo glanced nervously and told her to be quiet, reminding her that Alice was asleep. Athena got up from the floor and sat on the couch next to Waldo. She threw her head back and closed her eyes. When Athena lifted her head back normally, Waldo could see genuine remorse in her eyes.

“Since you're so inquisitive about him, this was what he told me that night,” Athena said with a freakish smile. Waldo’s eyes were wide even though he had no idea what she was saying.

“What?” Waldo asked with shallow breath and a penetrating excitement striking his chest. Athena then suddenly grabbed Waldo by the side of his face and began whispering. Her lips were so close to his ears, the moisture was palpable. When she had let go of Waldo’s head,

Athena sat there with a wicked smile and lightening lunatic eyes. The next day, Waldo bought a gun.

Waldo had payed a significant sum to buy the revolver from Jim, the same one he had allowed Waldo to shoot during their hunting trip. He held the metal in his hands religiously, twisting and turning it immediatly after work. He quickly stuffed the gun in the glove compartment when he saw clients walking by his car and drove home.

He put the gun in his briefcase when he came home and thought of storing it the entire evening. He looked to Athena with a wide grin to see if she could read his thoughts. She could not. She had returned to her bitterness. Waldo was relieved in light of the unresponsiveness she was showing earlier that week. He thought of the words she had said carefully last night. He wished she could reveal more reprehensible things about her father. He ate his food quickly and went to the sofa and waited until everyone was asleep. Of course, Athena would be the last. Alice had departed to bed after whispering something to Athena about school admissions. Waldo did not hear or care what she had said, he was only concerned about one thing.

Athena, laying on the floor, eating bags of chips. Waldo stared at her red and orange tainted lips. It wasn't long until Athena had fallen asleep on the floor, not even having bothered to change from her day clothes. After seeing this, Waldo ran to the restroom with a screwdriver he picked out of the drawer and began unscrewing an electric box beneath the cabinet. Waldo was in such a hurry, he dropped the driver on the floor and scared himself. He cursed himself and picked up the tool. Athena, upon hearing the sound, lifted her head. She was awake the entire time, or at least enough to register what was happening around her.

That night, Waldo slept in tremendous anxiety. The next morning he woke up and began doing pushups, the first time he had done so since his high school days. He then went for a run that felt like an eternity. Alice was surprised to find Waldo showering so early in the morning.

And so it continued, every morning, Waldo woke up and executed more pushups than he did the day before and ran a longer distance too. He felt himself becoming more orderly and a sense of accomplishment began to paint Waldo's ego. When he rested in between sets on the balcony, he would gaze at the near-dead Athena on the couch with her hand limp on the couch.

One evening, when Waldo was returning home early, he opened the door slowly and with hardened eyes in case Alice was home early. He stepped inside with ease, seeing that the kitchen was left without change since breakfast. He threw his bag to the side carefully. But when he looked up, he saw the most horrid thing in his entire life. His heart squeezed so hard, he thought he would faint.

The mouth of that platinum revolver pressed against Athena's temple as she possessed the wildest and most playful grin. Waldo's hands shook violently as he approached her with his hands in front of him, trying to warn her as much as possible in his shock.

“Athena,” Waldo whispered with such horror. “Put it down now,” he added, not being able to speak louder than a whisper. As he approached her, her smile became larger and freckles danced on her skin in waves. How much enjoyment she derived from seeing Waldo like this.

“Frankly my dear, I don’t give a damn,” Athena said, laughing to herself and walking tactfully backwards and swaying slightly from left to right, enjoying her victory stance. Athena slowly lowered the gun and in that moment, her eyes blanked as if she were thinking of something. Waldo confused the look as contemplative, but really, she was distracted by the moth that was floating behind Waldo. Suddenly, she threw open the revolver and twisted the chamber a few rounds and shut it, all while looking at Waldo wildly.

“Athenian Roulette?” she said, twisting her eyes as if inviting Waldo. Waldo’s blood went cold all over. The very sight of Waldo’s eyes enlarging and his skin going as pale as Athena’s prompted her to put the gun to her head and...click! Even Athena, who thought there was nothing in the gun, shook violently, scrunching her neck, and face. She opened her eyelids humorously, as if being surprised that she was still alive. Waldo was only a few seconds away from vomiting.

“Oh poor thing, you love me that much?” Athena said, as she opened the chamber. Suddenly, her smile diminished. She saw a golden nugget sitting snuggedly in the silver hole. Waldo had left a bullet the night before in case he needed to use it. She looked up with a horrified and fiery expression, her nostrils expanding to the rhythm of her now exploding chest. She dropped the gun.

“You filthy piece of scum,” she said, walking backwards, stumbling on the feetrest and recovering. Waldo approached her carefully, stepping over the gun. Waldo brought his soft hands to her face, trying to comfort him, but she escaped from his grip with contempt and walked to the porch, lighting a cigarette and leaning against the rail. Waldo carefully approached her from the back. He saw her entire body trembling terribly. She barely managed to put the cigarette in her mouth.

“You deserve that bullet,” she whispered in a cold, uncontrollable voice. When Waldo stuck his neck out, he saw her bleeding red face. Athena glanced at Waldo from behind her shoulder for a second and Waldo saw that her eyes were boiling red. She blinked quickly and looked forward. Waldo leaned against the sliding glass door and watched Athena smoke quietly. Her body never really stopped trembling. It only decreased. He picked up the gun from the floor, now with shock realizing that she had found the gun somehow.

Waldo took the gun to the sink and for some reason began cleaning it with water. As he looked into the mirror, he saw that his skin was still freakishly pale. He went to his car immediately after and left it in the glove compartment, locked and secured.

When he returned back upstairs, the sun was setting and Athena was still out on the balcony, leaning against the rail, with no cigarettes this time, her now weak and pale body swaying in the wind. How silently she suffered there. He asked Athena if she wanted something to eat twice, but both times she gave him no answer. Waldo went to bed early that night, not bothering to eat dinner. An image of Athena’s fractured skull spewed with red tortured him.

When Waldo was dead asleep, Alice returned home, later than usual. Alice sat at the living room table and gave Athena a pamphlet of the private and public high schools she was allowed to visit. Of course, Alice told Athena that if she were to stay longer at the house---which she told Athena was “no trouble at all and more of a delight” ---she would have to go to the public school in their school zone. Athena nodded quietly to Alice’s realistic explanations. Athena’s heart pumped irregularly that night.

12

It was the next morning when Waldo awoke, surprised to see Alice not in bed. He assumed she was in the living room or taking a walk outside. Feeling like he wanted to implode with energy, he finished his workout and paced the room and rubbed his hands like a mad man. When he thought he had spent a sufficient amount of time thinking, he came out of his room. He stared with disbelief when he saw that the living room was empty. He felt his heart sink as he ran out the apartment door and towards his car. He sat in the car and thought as to where Alice and Athena could be. Suddenly, it occurred to him that he could see precisely where Alice was with his phone. He marked the location on his phone and drove rapidly towards it. Waldo wasn’t sure why he was going there or what he was expecting to find, all he knew was that he could no longer take any chances. One wrong step, and everything would fall apart. He drove rapidly until he came upon a small rectangular building on the side of the road. Waldo gripped his steering wheel when he saw the sign advertising school uniforms.

He opened and shut the door aggressively and took even more aggressive strides towards the store. He opened the store door and found that Athena and Alice were the only customers in the store. They were in the very back of the sea of navy blues, khakis, and greys. Waldo walked with tremendous haste towards Alice who stood outside the changing room. When Waldo reached her, Athena came out of the changing room in a khaki skirt and a white shirt. Alice glanced slightly at Waldo without caring for his existence and continued to look at Athena.

“That seems to fit you, Laura will be excited to see it, she says that this school is better than the one you attended,” Alice said, deliberately trying to make Waldo even more mad then he was. Waldo stepped in front of Alice with worried eyes.

“Well what is going on?” Waldo asked, knowing exactly what was going on.

“She needs a uniform for the school she’ll be attending,” Alice said calmly. “And she will be moving in with Laura tonight.” Waldo without panicking began to plot. He stared at Athena and she after some nervous glances stared back. She sensed what he was thinking.

The three lingered for a few minutes as Waldo breathed slowly and thought with concentration. They walked across the back wall. Suddenly, a woman entered the room.

“Laura!” Alice let out with extra excitement. “We found the uniform.” Waldo swiveled his head towards Laura. She stood there calmly receiving Alice’s words. She then turned to Waldo with none of the malice Waldo was expecting.

“Did you bring your stuff with you?” Laura asked Athena. Athena pointed her eyes away from her, crossed her arms loosely, and nodded.

“Great, well I am very thankful for you taking care of Athena,” she said with genuine gratitude as she hugged Alice. It seemed she was about to cry.

“And thank you as well, Waldo,” Laura said with the tears now becoming apparent. She was about to hug Waldo, but he stepped back.

“Laura,” Waldo said calmly with a firmness he had never felt before. “She’s going *nowhere.*” Athena darted her eyes up with surprise. She was hoping for a miracle. Laura who was sick with gratitude now was slipping into despair.

“I’m sorry, what?” Laura said, now looking at Alice as if she had done something wrong. Alice looked more disappointed and vulnerable than irritated. Alice stepped close to Waldo.

“Wally, don't do this to us,” she whispered. “She will be OK with Laura.” Waldo stared at Alice with utter disappointment.

“Alice, she is not going near her father or his sister,” Waldo responded firmly. Athena stood there, feeling as though Waldo was her only supporter right now. She tapped her foot violently, wondering when it was she could return to her couch and resume a treatise on politics by Locke or recite poetry to herself.

“Waldo, I am sick of this, she is leaving with Laura and she is going to attend school next week,” Alice blurted loudly, thinking herself brave to do so. She looked at Laura for affirmation, but she was boiling with tremendous emotion and focusing on Waldo.

“Waldo, I think you are a great man to take care of her, but now it is my turn to do so,” Laura began with a sympathetic and vulnerable voice. “I love her, I’ve raised her like a daughter. I need her to be with me now, Waldo. You’ve done your part, let me do mine.”

Waldo stared at the two women with no emotion, scanning them like trivial matters. He then looked at Athena and locked eyes with her. Her habit of blinking rapidly and always tapping her foot made her figure a lively, shaky thing. The Parian skin with littered freckles shook all over, from head to toe. Athena then shifted her eyes and prayed that she could escape the suffocating atmosphere.

“She’s ready to leave with Laura, we brought all of Athena’s stuff!” Alice said, her face turning bright red. The employee stood behind the desk, listening curiously.

“She’ll be just fine with me, Waldo, she’ll be attending one of the finest schools in South Texas,” Laura said calmly and even with a weak smile.

“Athena needs to attend, Waldo,” Alice said, her face burning red. Waldo looked at the floor then at Athena again. She was looking at the door, her arms crossed nimbly, and her right foot over the left. He could see that she was feeling particularly irritated.

“Why don’t you ask her what she wants?” Waldo said, nodding towards Athena. Athena snapped her head forward, glancing at the adults, nervously knowing that she had to speak. Alice blared her eyes wide open, not caring if she appeared hostile.

“Go ahead,” Laura said, with a confident voice. “Tell us what you want.” Waldo stared at her with so much intensity, hoping she would turn to him so that he could remind her what she really wanted. She knew what she wanted. She wanted to stay for the rest of her days among the thinkers, talkers, and writers of the past, where she flirted with existence in her cove of ideas. Never had she ever felt so deeply connected to anything in her life and at so much peace. Even if Waldo’s efforts would stave off school for a short duration, it was still worth it.

“I don’t want to leave,” Athena said shyly. Waldo walked close to her and tapped her wrist and told her to follow him.

“Waldo, I thought you would be helpful with this, but you are proving more and more of a difficulty,” Laura began with the tone of a strict school teacher. “I will now involve child protective services.”

“You don’t care about her,” Waldo said calmly as he turned towards her. “You care about only you, right?” He then turned towards the door and Athena stood still. Waldo stopped in his tracks and looked back. Athena lingered awkwardly.

“Come on, Athena,” Waldo projected. “Let’s get lunch.” Athena pressed her tongue against her cheek and walked towards Waldo cautiously. Laura and Alice stood in shock. They both got into the car and drove off.

In the car, Waldo drove with stiff arms and his body feeling tense. He dared not look at Athena, as if that would ruin something, as if that might increase the likelihood of her slipping away to Laura.

“Athena, I want you to know that I’m trying my best to keep you safe,” Waldo said with a trembling voice.

Waldo saw that she had her neutral face pressed against the window. Waldo parked the car in the lot and placed his temple on the steering wheel. He recalled the gun and how she had almost died yesterday. The thought made him shiver.

“Athena, how did you find the...*gun?*” Waldo asked, not believing he had said those words.

“You were being loud when you were putting it away,” Athena responded. “So I peeked after you went to bed and---”

“Never go near it again,” Waldo said, looking into her eyes with tremendous pain. She sensed the distress and for the first time even felt distaste in trying to mock him. “Don’t tell anyone, Athena. Don’t talk to Alice. Don’t talk to Laura.”

At home Athena stared at her pages blankly. It seemed to her that in the midst of all the tragedy and all the suffering, the adult world was collapsing first. Ever since she was a little girl, it always seemed to be that way. Athena closed her book and dissolved into sleep with a growling belly.

13

Athena laid on the floor of the withering yet quaint bookstore. She held up Goethe in her hands and read the lines quickly. Waldo stood by her and browsed the shelves, pretending to find something of interest. Of course, all the names sounded foreign to Waldo. By Athena were five to six books, neatly stacked. Her hair was spread across the wooden floor, one leg over the other and the arms extended upward to allow her to read. Perhaps she was a little too liberal in how she conducted herself, thought Waldo. This was not a habit of Athena's in public, but she had come to this bookstore so often, the lady who worked there was like a mother to her. Waldo placed the crumbled dollar bills and rusted pennies on the desk and the two walked out.

In the park Waldo sat on the bench and Athena walked. She touched the flowers, hummed to herself, and even executed half-versions of ballet moves that she remembered from when she was younger. Waldo had rarely seen Athena this engaged with her environment. Usually, she was glued to the yellow pages of Shakespeare or the glass of her phone. Today, however, was a special evening. Athena was waiting for the screening of one of her favorite movies to play in the flash-back theater.

Athena found a strange delight in movies. When those lights went out and the screen came alive, suddenly the world would fade. In that grey area between reality and fantasy, Athena could suspend time momentarily.

As she hummed, her sick-like voice made the melody sound bizarre yet pretty. She walked back and forth on the grey concrete wedged in between two squares of grass. The cool wind was now causing goosebumps to erupt on both their skins. Waldo smiled calmly. If he could capture the moment and hold it forever, he would. That thought alone reminded him of Laura's threat to call child protective services.

Waldo, somehow, shoved the thought out of his head. Once Athena was done doing whatever she was doing, she led Waldo to the inside of a hotel that was once a beer factory. Inside they stood with amber light bulbs hanging above them. Athena's cold skin now looked warm and lively. They walked into the library where large wooden blocks stood fifteen feet high. Athena sat down on the sheepskin carpet and crossed her legs, two converse sneakers pointing out each direction. Her hair was lightly curled like it had been when she was attending school.

Waldo told Athena she could order something but she resisted, insisting that the place was for "rich bastards," laughing as she said it. Waldo chuckled nervously, seeing that an employee had obviously heard her. Finally, Athena agreed to order something. She had ordered a tray of cheese and crackers which somehow managed to result in a hefty bill. She ate the

contents in the matter of minutes and sat there hopelessly pessimistic about pretentious food and their portions.

They went out and walked near the river where Waldo stared down to the depths and Athena mumbled to herself some phrases and moved her fingers. Waldo smiled quietly as he realized that they were approaching the park they went to on the night of the ball.

"Do you want to see your school?" Waldo asked. Athena stopped in her tracks and looked up at him.

The car stood inconspicuously by the fence and the two watched swarms of children come out of the belly of the buildings. Waldo turned to see Athena and he saw a face struck with confusion.

"There's Jessica," Waldo said, pointing to a girl walking with a pack of other girls. Athena glanced nervously and with tremendous attention. She even muttered "where whe-" quietly. Waldo saw a strange paranoia in Athena's movements. Maybe excitement to see her peers again, even if she had detested them all? Maybe terror from having to return to school at some point? Maybe fear that she would be seen by her friends as the one girl who had gone insane and began living with a stranger? The hypotheses rolled on out, but Athena's casual disinterest, for a moment, disappeared.

"Do you miss them?" Waldo asked. Athena looked at Waldo with her mouth half-open, her cherry-red lips somehow glistening even under the shade of the car roof.

"I," she began. "Am so happy to leave those bastards." Suddenly she rolled her eyes, sunk into her seat, and smiled wildly.

They later walked by the theater and the streets like they once did. It was different. There was no more that sense of spring innocence and youthful vigor. It was a state of momentary bliss before mourning. Waldo was so used to the chatter of Athena, but now, even she was quiet.

"We should start heading back," Athena mentioned with caution in her voice, looking at her phone. It was ten minutes before the movie would begin. They started toward the theater. Athena led Waldo, her hands limp and her gait always sturdy and muscular yet delicate and graceful, walking with rigid legs yet swaying in rhythm too. It was in the blink of an eye when Athena felt a tug at her shoulder. Athena turned around; It was a girl in a school uniform. She looked at Athena shyly and then hesitated but remained. Suddenly, the girl's eyes went wide and her lips started trembling.

"Athena?" Jessica said with a crack of the vocal cord. Athena's face went dull. She had a manly look of irritation and aggression. Suddenly, Waldo turned behind Athena and studied Jessica with a curious smile. Jessica looked up at Waldo as though he were as mythical as Athena.

"Athena wha...When are you---"

Athena turned on her heels and pulled so aggressively on Waldo's shirt, he stumbled into Athena's direction. Jessica stood there staring at Athena as if she had seen a ghost. The two

entered the theater and Jessica stood there contemplating if she should go in or not. Her heart fluttered with so many emotions, she felt like fainting.

In Athena's absence, Jessica's love for her had heightened tremendously. She had missed her domineering command and electrifying motivation on the field for cheerleading competitions and practices. She had missed Athena's devilish genius which was always accompanied by a pessimistic remark about the subject itself, adhearers of some ideology to it, and maybe reality itself if she was in that mood.

Jessica recalled times she and Athena had gone to drive-ins after school and stayed there doing their homework well into the evening. Often, Athena would end up sleeping at her house. On one occasion, Jessica remembered, Athena woke up in a cold sweat, from a night terror. Jessica sat by her and Athena simply stared out the window in a blank look as sweat poured down her pallid skin. Athena had stayed with Jessica the entire week. Jessica attempted a few times to ask Athena why she couldn't return home and Athena responded blankly and with a straight face. Jessica and her family provided Athena a home when she needed it the most.

Jessica quickly rushed into the theater and spotted Athena and Waldo walking down the alley toward the theater rooms. Jessica ran in front of Athena.

"Athena," Jessica began with tremendous desperation. "For my sake, listen!" Athena began to move but Jessica grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her close. Athena then realized that to struggle against the hysterical would further cause drama. So, she let her body go numb and she stared at the floor. Jessica began blabbing about how much she missed Athena and how she needs to return back to school and how so many people have thought her to be homeless. Waldo stared at Athena with perplexity. Suddenly, as Athena realized that the movie was beginning in seconds, she yanked her hand out of Jessica's grip with tremendous strength and walked into the theater. Waldo stood in front of Jessica embarrassed, as if he were caught guilty. Jessica stared at Waldo in a manner he interpreted as accusatory. He waved to her and quietly walked into the theater.

Athena stared at the screen with her cold eyes. The encounter had made her bitter and she felt that it could've been avoided with a bit more prudence. Nonetheless, Athena was immediately sucked in by the film. Waldo had fallen asleep to wake up just in time for the end of the film.

They came out when the sun was teasing to set. The two walked quietly back to the pizza joint around the corner. Athena ate the vegan pizza with a ruddy look. She felt invigorated by watching the movie. Waldo saw her eyes shine and smiled along. The smile vanished rapidly, however.

"Athena," Waldo began slowly. Athena as usual was busy with her nails or reading the soda's label. "You know I'm trying to keep you safe, right?" Athena shifted her eyes onto Waldo momentarily, squinted, then looked back to her tray.

“You’re too vulnerable to go to school,” Waldo began. “And Laura, I’m worried she’s going to hand you to your father.” Waldo watched Athena’s reaction with extreme attention. She simply ate, sifted her hair back, and looked at incoming customers.

“Pff,” Athena let out mockingly. “I have martyrs for me at every corner,” she said, bouncing her leg making her head bob up and down.

“What do you mean by that?” Waldo asked carefully. Athena looked at Waldo in a mocking way.

“Are you linguistically disabled?” Athena replied. “You all want to play the martyr, that’s it.” Waldo went deep in thought. Suddenly, Athena ordered that they leave. They left.

When Waldo and Athena arrived at the apartment parking lot, he told her to stay put as he went and inspected the surroundings to see if the prophetical child protective service officers were there. He had instructed Athena to hide below the glove department if he did not return in five minutes and to stay there until he texted her. She nodded blankly as she stared at the words in her book. Waldo looked at her with frightened eyes.

“Athena!” he yelped. She shook in bewilderment. “I *need* you to *promise* me you will do as I say,” Waldo said, clasping his hands together. “They will take you away if they see you.” Athena looked at him curiously. Waldo’s worriment did not strike Athena as anything more than stubbornness earlier, now, however, it was something else.

“Athena, why aren’t you answering?” Waldo said, inadvertently grabbing her hand. Athena looked at the gesture offensively, pulling her hand away from him and nervously looking away.

“Yea, I got it,” she said, looking upset.

“Can you say it while looking at me?” Waldo asked hopefully, his voice trembling. Athena’s lips went sour as she turned to Waldo. She stared with unwavering attentiveness and blinked violently like she always did, glancing in all the directions like a mocking bird’s beak.

“I’ll be fine Waldo,” she said. It was not the response Waldo was asking for but she had said it in such a genuine manner, he was more than satisfied. He came out of the car and slammed the door behind him. Before Athena returned to her book, she wavered for a few seconds.

Waldo walked up the stairs with a head turning in all directions. He reached the door and tried to peer through the window. He could only see a minor slice of the house. A light went on and he leaped back. He took a deep breath and went back to the mirror. The small slice that showed revealed only the floor and the shadow of the counter. Waldo stood on the porch and contemplated. He put his back against the bars and slid down with his hands in his hair.

As Waldo bobbed his head in indecisiveness, he saw animated shadows appear on the kitchen floor. Waldo reached to the window with blaring eyes and saw two shadows. Waldo backed away and began to reach for his phone to remind Athena to hide. As he began to type,

Alice opened the door with a wide smile that slowly withered away as she saw Waldo in front of her.

"Alice!" Waldo yelped with tremendous excitement. He then went and hugged her. Alice, who was caught off guard, innocently squeezed back. Alice was confused at Waldo's amorous gesture, but she smiled nonetheless. As Waldo held Alice in that momentary hug, he searched the background like a hawk. "Where are they?'" he repeated to himself in his head.

"I'm making some tea," Alice said calmly to Waldo, turning behind and then forward. Waldo stood with all his muscles tense. "Where's Athena?"

Waldo quickly began patting his pants, pretending to feel a vibration. He pulled out his phone, putting on a face of genuine bewilderment.

"Give me one second," Waldo replied, sounding awfully polite and animated. Alice stood there as Waldo pretended to speak with someone. The longer she stood there the more he felt he would break from pressure. Suddenly, after it had become apparent that Waldo's "phone call" was long, she walked into the house and began mumbling something to someone inside. "Someone is in there," Waldo whispered to himself in complete silence.

He brought the phone off his ear and began viciously typing Athena's number to call her. He kept looking askance at Alice and tried desperately to see the visitor who was sitting in the living room.

"Waldo?" Alice said.

"Yes?" Waldo responded.

"Tea is ready."

"Now?"

"Yes." Waldo rubbed his head as he stood on the balcony not having the energy to make up another lie. His arms went limp and he wanted to yell at Alice to throw out the officers. He was going to call Athena, but Alice was too near so that she would hear his conversation.

"I'll be back in a second, I left something," Waldo said as he rushed down the stairs. Alice sighed.

Waldo ran down, looking behind him every two steps to make sure Alice or the officer weren't watching him. He made it to the car.

"Athena, I think they're here," Waldo said with a sorrowful voice as he searched his glove compartment where the gun sat.

"What the hell are you talking about now?" Athena responded, her chin touching her chest from the cramped position.

"Athena, they're here to take you away!" Waldo responded.

"I don't care, my neck is going to snap!" Athena responded with twice the vigor.

"Athena, you're making this difficult for us, you need to stay this way until the officer is gone."

"Waldo, you are one sonuva---" and suddenly she came out of the cramped hole, cracked the door open, and came halfway out of the hole.

“Nononono,” Waldo repeated vehemently. Athena looked at him perplexed and even decided to see what he had to say.

“Please stay,” Waldo begged.

“For the devil’s sake, I can’t breathe down there Waldo,” she said reasonably. Waldo desperately began to roll the windows.

“Is that better?” Waldo asked. Athena stared at Waldo with disgusted pity.

“Look,” Athena began as if consoling a child. “Let’s go talk to them or something, I’ll tell them that I’m not ready to leave and that school isn’t the right thin---”

“What! You’re not eighteen, why should they care?” Waldo exploded quietly, trying to muffle his sound, and with sweat coming down his head. Despite the quiet scream, Athena could see the intensity in his expressions.

Waldo then moved the passenger chair back and as he did this, he mumbled consolations to Athena about how there was now more space for her and that the length of her stay would not be long. As Waldo was making his arrangements, he heard footsteps coming awfully close. When Waldo turned around, he stuck his hand in the glove compartment. It was Rose. Athena gazed at Rose blankly. Waldo reddened.

“Alice was calling you,” Rose said. Waldo’s hand came out of the glove compartment limply. Suddenly, Athena came out of her burrough and walked boldly all the way to the stairs and up it. Waldo with shock walked behind her and Rose by his side. She asked about his day but Waldo was too occupied with his worries to give a more complete answer than a few broken words. Midway up the stairs, Waldo gained enough energy to rush all the way up so that he caught up with Athena. He attempted to stop her entering the apartment, but she had stepped in. Waldo followed behind her. Athena saw how scared Waldo was as they stood in that empty room. She almost felt scared herself.

“My dear,” Alice slowly called to Athena, “dinner is ready.” How tensely Waldo and Athena sat together at the table. Athena kept straining her forehead expecting some colossal disaster to take place. However, 5 minutes turned into 15 and nothing occurred. The whole thing proved some fantastical fever-dream that Athena had been sucked into. She was very annoyed. She kept trying to catch Waldo’s humiliated eyes only to discover that they were beaming with victory and relief. Rose, after watering the plants, joined the group at the table. Together, the strange family hummed and mused to his or her own thoughts.

“I haven’t seen a school for about three months now,” Athena told Rose who inquired about her school. Athena felt Alice’s eyes dart at her with tremendous attention.

“But so be it, I’ve learned more on my own in those three months than seven years of public education,” Athena said, replying to Alice’s look and appreciating Rose’s inquisitive eyes.

“The public education system does seem to be not very productive,” Rose responded and suddenly felt oppressed when she saw Alice’s piercing look.

“It is still of utmost importance that somebody with so much potential goes to school to receive *formal* education,” Alice responded, with Athena almost plugging her ears with her

fingers. In the background sat Waldo, calmly listening and conducting the whole symphony, delighted at seeing such different humans coagulate right in front of his eyes.

14

One early morning, Waldo came to the living room to grab milk from the fridge to find Athena lying on the couch reading like usual. She dropped the book and looked at him with weak eyes. Waldo could see black layers beneath Athena's eyes.

"Why was that gun loaded?" Athena asked, as if she had only now come to the realization that she had almost been killed. In fact, the entire night, Athena could not sleep in light of this realization. She would lift her hands and examine them beneath the porch light, disbelieving that she was somehow still alive. Waldo closed the fridge solemnly and came close to the girl.

"Athena," Waldo began nervously while watching Athena's eyes. "I'm going to use it, if necessary, to protect you from your father." Athena's eyes expanded widely.

"Jesus Christ, Waldo, you're not John Wayne," Athena replied. "What are ya gonna kill him?"

"If he tries to do anything to you," Waldo replied with brevity. "Or Alice and I," Waldo added after seeing Athena become uncomfortable.

"Great, I live with a psychopath," Athena said and laid again on the sofa.

"Athena, it's for protec---" Waldo began.

"Go shoot whoever you want, just take care of your damn guns," Athena said, with a slight accent entering her voice. She knew that Waldo was not gutsy enough to even point a gun to another human, let alone *kill* him.

"Okay, listen," Athena began as she grabbed Waldo's hand. Waldo looked surprised at the gesture. "I need you to take me somewhere to pick up a little something dear to me," she said as she winked. Waldo smiled at what seemed like an innocent attempt to convince Waldo to take her somewhere she enjoyed being. Of course, Waldo's smile eroded when he realized what she really wanted.

"After," Athena continued, looking at Waldo's hand with lovely attention as she gripped it tighter. "I need you to drop me off at a restaurant where a friend will await me." Waldo felt moved by Athena's gesture and wanted to tell her "yes" but he knew he had to tell her "no."

"So, is it yes my dear?" Athena asked as she stared with twinkling eyes into Waldo's eyes. Athena saw Waldo's hesitation and knew he was thinking of the ethical nature of the task, so she sought to suppress his conscience.

“Oh come on,” Athena said, rising with her back erect. “Why don’t you just say *yes*,” she said with eyes beaming bright green.

“I can, but I can’t have you buying drugs,” Waldo said in a whisper.

“Wha!” bursted Athena. “I only wanted to buy some candy.” Waldo agreed with great relief and the two set off.

At the first stop, Athena entered the house and came back with a box of muffins and a bag of cookies. Waldo glanced over them suspiciously.

“Why from here?” Waldo asked Athena.

“Well, who makes cookies and brownies better than a neighbor?” Athena replied.

Finally, Waldo dropped Athena off at the restaurant and parked in the lot nearby despite Athena begging Waldo not to be near her when she was eating with her friend.

Athena met Holly at the entrance with great joy and proceeded to sit at one of the booths. Athena had first met Holly at one of her cheerleading competitions where Holly commands her school’s team. It was convenient for Athena to meet with Holly as the former did not (so far) seem to know anything about Athena’s situation. The real point of the dinner was to discuss Holly’s intention to form a political club in which girls could simulate a mock-senate. Athena deeply wanted to work with Holly to make this happen. Athena and Holly had been in touch for a few months now and each shared their interests in politics and government.

“So, the mock senate,” began Holly after the two talked about school and boys, upon both topics which Athena felt uncomfortable and mumbled a few words about. “How available are you during the week to attend meetings?”

“Whenever you need me, I’m there,” Athena responded.

“Awesome,” replied Holly, writing some notes. “How many of your friends do you think will want to join?”

“Oh,” Athena started with a bewildered look. “I’m not sure.”

“Have you talked to them about it recently?” Holly asked, confused.

“Oh yea,” she quickly responded. “I have.”

“Alright, we’ll talk more after,” Holly said with a radiant smile, closing her notebook and sitting back. Suddenly, something came to her.

“Oh! How come I didn’t see you at the nationals, your school was there?” Holly asked, perplexed. Athena shifted her jaw and assumed that cynical look she liked to display to Waldo.

“Oh, did they *drop* you?” Holly said with disbelief at those words, knowing outright that Athena was an all-star cheerleader.

“No,” Athena replied. “I don’t go to school and haven’t for half a year.” Athena had made the statement more heavy than it needed to be as she dropped her fork on the plate.

“Oh,” Holly replied with confusion. “Okay.” The two ate awkwardly for a few minutes, neither wanting to excite anything. Then suddenly, Holly raised her lips.

“Athena, you can’t join the mock senate unless you're part of one of the schools I mentioned earlier,” Holly said with a grave face. “It’s an organization policy.”

“Oh,” Athena said with darting eyes. “I don’t really have to be part of the mock senate, I could help with set up and parliamentary protocol.” Holly saw the desperation in Athena’s eyes.

“I suppose,” she began kindly. “I will talk with our counselors and let you know.” Athena nodded and realized that Holly was only trying to be kind.

They both sat there quietly trying to simply finish the dinner and escape the uncomfortable situation. Athena felt tremendous comfort when she saw Waldo’s car drive towards her.

In her journal that night, she lamented on the “evils of the social world.” “Oh Christ, I’m becoming Thorou by the second,” Athena mumbled to herself as she lay on the chair beneath the cloudy, dark skies of midnight. One puff, a few pencil strokes, eyelids closed. Holly to Athena was her last hope into solidifying something of a real relationship with another. With that gone, she felt a guilty yet immense pleasure in simply existing within the confines of any room and her books.

15

“Laura is coming over today,” were the only words Waldo heard as Alice left for work. Waldo heard these words ring in his head like a metal hammer against a bell for the rest of the day.

It was mid-afternoon when Waldo left the clinic. He, for some reason, opened his glove compartment twice to make sure his revolver was there. He tried memorizing all that was on the grocery list that Alice had left on the kitchen counter. “Bread, butter, jam---” he continued mumbling to himself as the car ran down the road.

Alice organized her pastels around her desk at the university waiting for her last class before the end of the day. She snapped her hands repetitively and swallowed twice. The closer the end of her working day came, the more her belly rumbled.

Waldo walked into the grocery store with tense muscles trying to grab everything he could, swiftly. Jelly, chicken, half-and-half, etc. etc. etc. He had become fully automatic as his cart swung violently in between customers.

Alice swung her hands like she had a baton and stopped often in between to catch her breath, a phenomenon that she had not experienced before when lecturing. The students could see the dark circles around her eyes.

The quicker Waldo flew through the store, the longer the list had become. “Ribeye,” he told the butcher. “How large.” “Any size.” And Waldo waited. Waited. Wai---Immediately he bumped into his neighbor.

“I’m sorry everyone,” she said as she sat down on her chair and all the students gazed down upon her with an air of solemnity. She then stared at her nails as if she was alone.

“Waldo,” the neighbor said with excessive enthusiasm. “Kylie,” Waldo responded with obvious anxiety.

Alice recalled Athena mentioning Waldo owning a gun and then Athena cringing when she realized that Alice did not know.

“Listen Kylie I’m in a ru--”

“No worries, I just wanted to let you know that I saw some people I’ve never seen before standing at your door.”

Waldo’s eyes blared wide open. Suddenly he grabbed Kylie by her shoulders and looked at her with disbelief.

Alice got up from her chair and stood looking at her students in hopeless agony. “I’m afraid my husband is mentally derailed,” she mumbled louder than she expected.

“Yes at *your* apartment only half-an-hour ago!” Kylie responded. Waldo let go of Kylie and rushed to his car with sudden panic.

Laura pressed on the pedal as she swung down the highway. “They should be near, but I think they told me that Athena isn’t opening the door?” Laura texted Alice.

Alice put her phone away in nervousness and attempted to continue teaching. “Slight strokes to the left is indicative of his masuline fingers.”

Waldo pressed on the pedal harder than he had ever done. The tires scorched the road.

Athena hummed to herself as she peered through the blinds, staring at the well dressed man and woman holding clipboards, sweating to the core.

“And that point right ther---”

“We can’t hear you Ms. Blazer” called a student. Alice snapped a viscous look at the kid.

“Gotahell.”

Waldo, feeling a strange exhilaration from the situation, suddenly saw lights flicker behind him. He turned his neck around and slammed his steering wheel and pulled off to the side of the road.

“Hello officer?”

“Gotahell.”

“She’s not letting you in still?” Laura cried over the phone. She pressed on the pedal more, riding up the hill getting closer to the apartments.

“I will take care of this.” She ended the call and clicked on “Athena” on her phone.

“Officer, I’m in an emergency,” Waldo cried.

“And what’s that?” he responded. Waldo looked at the officer with burning eyes.

“Well, I’m waiting,” the officer added.

Athena walked nervously in a circle in the living room, turning off her phone.

“Answer it!” cried Laura as she launched phone calls over and over and over and ove---

As the officer went to his car to draft a ticket, Waldo picked up his phone and aggressively dialed for Alice.

“I’m sorry, I will be louder,” responded Alice, managing to control her anger. But suddenly, her pocket buzzed.

“Hello?”

“You will not throw her in a detention camp,” Waldo cried over the phone. Alice ended the call and ran out of the lecture room. She could see images of guns firing and skulls erupting.

“Here’s your ticket,” the officer said as he handed him the paper. As Waldo took the ticket, he quickly shifted his gear and in an impressive maneuver lifted the car from the dirt and with thrice the force, slammed on the pedal. The engine roared like a jungle cat and as the officer was returning to his car he turned slowly and stared in shock.

Athena began closing all the shades as she saw the man and the woman trying to peek from different avenues. She then heard the lady talking over the phone with the police about a charge.

“Oh come *on,*” she called aloud as she ran to the bathroom and closed the door behind her, unlocking the compartment where Waldo had once kept his gun.

“Yes,” the lady outside said. “She may be suicidal.”

Laura called Alice again.

“Athena is not picking up the phone or letting them in and *I* don’t have the key!” Laura exclaimed.

“Laura, I'm getting there!” Alice cried as she tried opening her car. She realized that the keys were left on her desk. She shifted on her heels and began sprinting back only to trip on her heels and fall onto the asphalt.

The police car sprinted behind Waldo and Waldo continued to watch over his shoulder as he cut between cars.

Athena from the hole in the wall took out layers of twenty dollar bills and stuck them in her pocket.

Alice got up and looked at the slashes on her knees and elbows. Nonetheless, she took off her heels and walked quickly to the lecture hall.

Waldo swung beneath a bridge, turned his lights off and parked as he watched the officer drive on the bridge above him. “Give it 5 minutes,” he told himself as his stomach grinded in nervousness and impatience.

“Alice, there’s traffic here. I believe there’s a cop who’s going there, you might want to get there before he---”

“---charges in. Okay, Athena, honey, he will be charging in if you don’t open up!” the woman in the professional attire yelled.

Alice grabbed the keys off the desk and began running back to the car when she was stopped by the principal.

“Alice, you have to teach this class,” the principal exclaimed looking at Alice with confusion.

“George, I need to leave *now*,” Alice said as she pushed past him and now began sprinting towards her car.

Alice sped down the road as she saw Laura’s alarming message.

Waldo drove out of the parking lot and came closer to the apartments.

“Athena, we’re here to help you,” the man in the suit called at the door.

Waldo, as he drove, began calling Athena’s phone. Athena’s phone remained lifeless as it lay by her side. “Pick up pick up pick up pick up.”

“Athena, are you near any sharp objects?” asked the woman.

“I cut myself!” Athena cried loudly.

“Athena!” cried the woman and suddenly dialed the officer again and began spurting panicked phrases. The man took the phone and began informing the officer of Athena’s attempted suicde.

Athena laughed viciously.

“An officer is coming *right now, Athena*!”

Alice upon being bombarded with phone calls from Laura threw it in the back and sped down the highway.

An officer began speedily running his car down the freeway and eventually came up the hill and entered the apartments. He climbed the stairs tirelessly and found the man and the woman hopelessly trying to open the door and crying random points of consolement.

Waldo came up the hill and as he turned into the apartments, he saw Laura’s car. Waldo grabbed his forehead in pain and cut her off, parking in the handicap lot.

“Don’t do this to yourself Waldo,” Laura mumbled as she found a parking spot.

The officer pounded on the door a few times, and suddenly, Athena came out from the bathroom and quickly dropped the armoire from Alice’s room and with impressive strength, propped it in front of the door. The officer felt the added weight and began to push harder.

Waldo saw the police car directly from him and began feeling the glove compartment and touched metal. He then saw Laura come out of her car and begin walking towards the building. Waldo fit the revolver in the back-side of his slacks. Success. He ran.

Alice drove into the parking lot while hyperventilating. “Wally please,” she murmured in chills.

Bump. Bump. Bump. Crk. Crk. Athena ran back to the bathroom and locked the door, quickly and with determination, found a cigarette from the pack.

Waldo climbed up the steps with cold sweat all over him.

Laura climbed slowly, her ankles suffering from her own weight.

Alice sat in her car, not enthusiastic about watching her world burn over.

"I'm in!" and *crack* the door busted open as the armoire fell and the officer entered.
"Athena? I'm here to help."

Waldo came up to the top of the stairs and went cold when he saw the door cracked open with an officer searching and the man and the woman standing with frightened looks.

Snug between her lips, the cigarette was lit.
"Athena?" now yelled the officer.

Laura made it to the top and stood there staring at the fiasco in disbelief.
"Athena?" she called in terror.
"Ma'am," the officer said, "She cut herself. We just don't know where she is."
"Good Lord!" Laura screeched as she approached the bathroom door, the officer by her side. Laura aggressively grabbed the handle and found it locked. She looked at the officer with a knowing look. Both yelled the girl's name; the officer began pounding the door.

Alice put her forehead to the steering wheel and for the first time since she was in grade school, began invoking the lord through her Baptist prayers.

Bang! Swung the door. Athena pressed the cigarette to the ceiling until a bulb bursted and all the sprinklers went off in a flury alongside the chattering fire alarms that sent everyone's ears ringing.

Waldo stood in amazement and entered the room with rain pouring from the roof. The woman that stood besides the man fainted. The man grabbed her and rested her on the floor and in a confused flurry ran into the room.

Athena slipped between the officer and Laura and ran outside.
"Oh God," Athena called in genuine distress as she bumped into the man and slammed against the rail of the balcony, her whole weight shifting over the bar so that she nearly fell until the man grabbed her by the shirt and pulled her back so that she fell on the floor.

16

The building with cracked windows and a shifting skeleton stood in what appeared to be a desert. Inside, black lights pointed above glass cages, illuminating the scales of the belly-crawlers.

Behind a glass wall was an old office. In it sat an old man with a turban. A caged fan sat on the desk, blowing in a steady sway from left to right. He had become accustomed to the slow droning flies that came and sat upon his head or withering fingers.

Against the wall was a quiet girl who seemed to be meditating as she sat in silence. So calm were her features now. She did not feel the compulsion to speak as most do when they sit with another and no words are launched by either. She felt a feeling of comfortness within one's skin. The quiet and rhythmic crawling of snakes, the droning of flies and lamps, the constant sway of the fan all almost lulled the girl into a wonderful nap.

"When was the last show?" the master asked without looking.

"One week ago," Rose responded immediately. Rose then felt a small surge of thrill when she saw her master's eyebrow twitch upwards, which Rose knew usually meant good news.

"I see that another festival is enthusiastic that you should come," announced the man. Rose blinked and showed her excitement with a small, barely noticeable grin.

"Well?" the master said. "You are not so happy?" smiled he.

"Oh yes I am," Rose said, clearing her throat. "I am very happy." The old man nodded like an approving father.

"Very proud of you," he said gently.

The two then walked along the cages of snakes and peered in each one as they tossed bits of food. Rose had developed a deep love for each one of those snakes, even those who almost bit her. Of the latter category, Rose was always able to save herself by techniques she had learned from her master. What was so deeply gratifying to Rose about those difficult snakes was that she would develop a deeper connection with them. Upon more showings, the snake would develop respect for Rose and her ability to stop its violent action and consequently, these ferocious snakes would become more passive and loyal. Rose had thought such a transformation so lovely.

During work, she mused upon her performance that evening, reminding herself of the privilege every time she felt a little discouraged to complete a seemingly incompletable task.

She drove to the carnival site immediately after work. The hum of the road lulled Rose's excited nerves as she drove to the southern part of the Texas landscape. The carnival was lit with its old amber-colored lights. Rose starred at what appeared to be a small town in the middle of the desertous plains. The coasters screamed and the swings swung.

Rose entered the changing room and put aside her vest and all those garments that identified her as a businesswoman and slipped on those black and red patterned clothes that made her look like a primeval queen.

She watched her reflection in the mirror. Of all things, all she thought of was her snake and how it would feel when he ran along her. Gypsonian eccentricity.

The time had come, she had stepped in front of the crowd, the crowd being far larger than she had ever seen before. A wooden crate stood in front of her. She picked up the flute and opened the crate. The violently patterned beast came out demonically, with his head fixated and the rest of his body moving in malevolent patterns.

In the night, the flute played so graciously and hypnotically that it attracted many more people coming to witness the mystical happening.

The snake slithered and danced in front of the crowd. When the snake crawled closer and closer to Rose, dust came up from the belly. It then made its way up Rose's body as she slowly placed the flute down. The entirety of the crowd was silent, unsure of how to react to such a sight.

Rose, with finesse, began lifting her hands so that the snake rolled over her hands and as Rose switched her hands mid-air, the snake continuously rolled forward. It was obvious now to the crowd that the girl was doing something that should be applauded for. She continued her repetitive motions until she struck a pose and everybody took photos and clapped enormously.

Rose then let the snake crawl around her neck as the crowd sent loud gasps. It began to tighten itself around her thin bones. Suddenly, Rose felt that the snake was becoming tighter than usual. Air was finally cut from entering the body. The crowd could not tell what was happening to the poor girl as she stood like a statue, turning pale. The snake pressed its muscles tighter and now Rose was sure that she was going to faint. But, she decided that she was not going to let it happen. She held the pose.

Finally, after an eternity, the snake gave Rose mercy and slipped off her neck as she stood with her knees shaking. The crowd erupted wildly. Rose drove home in a delighted daze.

17

The room was brewing with black anxiety. Athena sat on the wet sofa, her legs crossed, chin stretched forward. The child protective "caseworkers" as the lady and the man presented themselves. Both dressed formally and spoke very warmly. Athena decided that she was never going to look them in the eye that day.

The room was still wet but not nearly as much as it could have been. The officer was able to quickly shut the sprinklers before the room was rendered completely drenched.

By the time the sprinklers were off, Alice was staring at the floor with deep perplexity. The officer and the caseworkers all scratched their heads trying to figure out how it was that the sprinklers went off. The officer found the cigarette on the floor and upon Alice asking in shock

how the whole room was wet, the officer stretched over and whispered what he believed was Athena's doing. Alice looked at Athena with great distaste and looked back at the officer who slipped the cigarette into a bag and put it into his pocket.

Both caseworkers wrote notes in their pads as they scanned the rooms. The woman scanned Athena's wrist from an angle to see any marks and found none. The caseworkers then pardoned the officers and asked Alice and Waldo to sit next to them as they began questioning Athena.

She sat there not willing to answer any of the questions, not even willing to show her face in case she gave an expression that answered for her. They asked about her smoking habits, if she liked school, what she did for fun, and so on.

Waldo sat near the man and watched the whole thing unravel as he went sick to his stomach. The fact that Athena was being this stubborn, however, sparked hope for Waldo. He did not know how Athena's lack of compliance would help at the moment, but her general attitude towards the man and woman was similar to what *he* felt towards them: a general mistrust of the professionally constructed facade of warmth. Alice, on the other hand, saw the woman as an angel put on earth to end her temporal suffering.

Through the questioning session, which the lady had to do for the sake of procedure, Athena would stroke her hair and peek at her fingernails to see if any dirt lied beneath them—a gesture that belittled the caseworkers.

The woman, after asking so many questions and receiving answers only from the walls, went down to the "critical issues" section of the sheet.

"Did your father ever physically abuse you?" the woman asked firmly and watched carefully. The man even leaned in. Waldo clenched his teeth and held his breath. Athena did not move an inch and only bobbed her leg.

"Athena?" the woman asked firmly and professionally. Waldo's eyes were wide open.

"Did your father," the woman began again, "physically abuse you?" Athena sat in silence. Waldo swallowed twice, looked at the woman and back at Athena in wild surprise.

"Athena," Waldo let out without disbelief. "Just tell the lady what's happening and they'll leave you alone!"

"Athena, once again, did *your* father physically abuse *you*?" And to that, no voice was muttered from the girl's bosom. Waldo erupted.

"Athena for God's sake, what is going on? Just tell her what happened to you!" yelled Waldo as Alice went bright red and sunk in her seat. The woman and the man restrained Waldo and told him that yelling was not appropriate for a vulnerable child.

The woman begged Athena's attention by asking her to look at her at least if she did not want to answer now. She promised Athena that the caseworkers would leave immediately if she only answered "yes" or "no." Athena remained mute. The caseworkers detected the situation and saw that Waldo was squirming in his chair, so they decided to ask Athena to leave to the porch which she gladly did. Immediately after Athena left, Waldo erupted again.

“Guys, she is in that mood right now and she can’t answer any of your questions,” Waldo began. “She was beaten tremendously hard and had a deep purple eye for more than two weeks, she was beaten tremendously so please stop.” Waldo had stopped and breathed heavily. He looked on the verge of an asthma attack.

“Mr. Blazer,” began the lady with a stern face. “It appears that you have taken Athena from her home and harbored her for over two weeks. In that time, she has not been able to attend *any* schooling an---”

“Because she was beaten by her father!” bursted Waldo. Alice looked upon Waldo with disgust. She had never seen him so animated and fiery in her entire relationship with him. Alice then began to brood upon the very fact that they had only been married for a few months.

“Sir!” replied the lady. “Please let me elaborate on that. Her father has informed us that during cheerleading practice, the cheer girls had to move into the nextdoor gym because the volleyball girls were having a game in the gym that they were using. As they switched courts, Athena’s eye was smashed in by a volleyball net pole and---

“So you believe the man that beat her black and blue?” Waldo yelled at the top of his lungs and stood up. The man got up and politely made him sit down. The lady now ignored Waldo’s outbursts.

“We talked with coaches and the nurses and they all confirm that this evidence is true,” the lady said calmly.

“But ma’am, Athena herself told me she was dragged up the stairs by her hair and beaten,” Waldo said in a shuddering voice that was no more shocked than fiery.

“Her father has told us that she’s been under the influence of alcohol before. Add that with sleep deprivation. Add that with her father’s suspicion that she’s consumed cannabis; it’s possible she was not in a regular state of consciousness.”

The woman continued, perplexed to see Waldo’s genuinely distressed face, “We’ve also talked with the extended family of the father, church members who see him every Sunday, and co-workers. They all insist that he would never lay a finger on her.” Waldo glanced at Athena sitting on the chair out on the porch with her hair blowing in the wind. He felt his heart cracking.

“Furthermore, Athena has had many disciplinary issues at school since the first grade, which is as far back as we can go with records,” continued the lady as she moved her finger through the paper citing infractions. “We’ve detected a trend in Athena to deliberately misact against her teachers and other authority figures simply to spite them. Furthermore, she has engaged in sexual behavior with another girl in the restroom during recess in eight grade and has assaulted a peer during lunch in the second grade. She demonstrates characteristically antisocial behavior.” Waldo stared at the woman in disgust and then looked out at Athena, wanting to hug her and take her away from that woman’s oppressive look and grey-colored lips. Far and far.

“It is also noteworthy that all of Athena’s verbal attacks against teachers are sacrilegious and incorporate a moral shock factor. Consider her latest infraction,” went the woman as she quickly searched her papers. “Athena had told her chaplain in the middle of religion class one

day that she wished that Mary---mother of Jesus---had committed an abortion." The anecdote hit Waldo on the head like a bell. He remembered it and recalled a past when Athena would go to the office with him, sorting out all of his patients like a great queen of psychology. His heart yearned for a lost past and now a lost future.

"Waldo, the point is that she is not a normal child," she said with calm and sympathetic eyes. Waldo simply looked outside at Athena who appeared to be only a child. Her hair blowing carelessly in the wind, her knees bent inward, her gaze on the floor. "You are a psychologist and must know that what she has displayed in the past and today with her antics suggests that she has antisocial tendencies and an unusual temperament.

"To fabricate a story about her father beating her to a pulp seems like another tragic example of Athena trying to disparage authority," the caseworker said. "Athena does not feel she can function in the social sphere. I don't know if I disagree with her."

Waldo, with burning eyes, finally turned his gaze from Athena to the woman. The woman saw a hurt, a disappointment.

"So you are blaming the victim?" Waldo let out.

"She is only a victim of her own doing."

"But you haven't heard what she has to say," Waldo replied desperately.

"Why do you think that is Waldo?" she snapped back. "Why do you think she refuses to answer? She knows that her foolishness is coming to a close. It does not benefit her in any way to speak."

Waldo looked at Athena again, but now she seemed a different person entirely. He did not know who he was angry with anymore. He simply shook his head and placed them in his palms. The future looked bleak.

"Waldo, she needs to go back to her father where she will be monitored strictly," responded the caseworker. "The only harm she will experience is that of her own actions if she stays here unmonitored."

Alice nervously glanced between all the people in the room. She felt a rising anxiety within her but anticipated a relief. She even felt empathy for Waldo at that moment. Why Waldo was mourning over losing Athena was ambiguous to Alice, but she had enough tenderness to feel for him.

Waldo gripped his countenance in genuine despair. Suddenly a boiling anger arose in him. A violent impulse to even hurt the man and woman in front of him. A despairful desire to watch everything good go away with Athena. It was possible that the woman said something, but Waldo did not hear it.

He looked at Alice and felt a desire emerge within him to do something as drastic to her as she had to him. Alice kept her eyes downcast, aware that her husband was looking at her.

"So," she said. "What do you think?"

Waldo in that room felt a losing of enchantment, of glory, of youth, of spring, of riches, of beauty, of childishness, of play, of laughter, of all that hops across lilies and lives beneath the sun and dances on the toes.

It was a sacrifice of his soul and all the energy that invigorated him. The eyes that electrified him, the youthful rebellion that inspired him, and form that reminded him of lost opportunities. What was he left to now with the leaving of all this? The stark, cold, and safe world?

Without that youth, the lioness attitude? Without the composition of the beautiful and the distorted, the blessed and the damned, the pale and the dark, the feminine and the masculine, the traditional and the progressive? A thought to shudder. A thought to invoke the dreads of all existences. A cutting off of the water supply to the garden, of the exuberancy, of the energy of the gods and goddesses.

Same old restless nights, gray walls, cubes, boxes, categories, and all the industrial work. The machines grinding, the men striding, the sun rising, the talk of weather and anything beyond a peculiarity. She was the breaking of that, a dangerous desire to play, to love dissent, to dance with thoughts, to challenge the peaks of pyramids, to love pride, to display, to carelessly seek to quench the depths of the infinite. How strange! A daring to speak the language of poetry in the contemporary deserts of meaning. A daring to manifest luster of the human form in a land of resentment. A daring to play with all that is. A daring to strike a lion's glare at those who claim to know what they know by simply knowing. That was the Athenian way of life. To lose Athena for Waldo was to lose all that.

Waldo watched Athena who sat quietly there. Suddenly, he saw her reach to touch her injured eye. She lifted that immensely firm arm towards her face and began poking lazily at the purple flesh. He saw her body shake with pain every time, but she continued. How powerful she was, realized Waldo. Nobody---*nobody*---could touch her. She had become inaccessible. She had the wit of a viper, figure of a lioness, and fierceness of Alexander. Remarkable! Glorious! Is she really such an innocuous being as to need a protector? How blasphemous! Did he really need to stop Athena's father when she could pry her claws into his carcass? Was it not Athena who had taken the route she did alone, without the help of the feeble Waldo? Is not the journey of an Athenian a solitary one? Does not the presence of a fragile being like Waldo corrupt her like Mosses with Al-Khidr? Should not the development happen organically?

"Nobody can touch her," Waldo said amusingly. The caseworkers looked at each other frustrated, thinking Waldo meant he was not going to let Athena leave.

Waldo did not hear the woman's response. All the images of Athena flashed before his eyes in strobes. There were those circles of primal energy on the football field, her asthma-inducing rants, her striking emerald-dyed eyes injecting the soul with wisdom by a glance. There were her feet upon the dashboard. There were many things. But of them all, she was there and would forever. What *was* Waldo protecting? It was nothing all along. An Athenian could never need a hero. She is a hero by temperament.

“You can have her,” Waldo said to the caseworkers with a small smile. And like so, he opened the door and walked out.

It was an act of utmost bravery as Waldo knew he might have lost that epiphany and had succumbed back to that anxious state if he saw Athena again.

Meanwhile, the caseworkers and Alice packed Athena’s clothes into her bag. The lady approached Athena carefully and with a sensitive touch. Athena had no receptivity to this. She had an expert look of disinterest. After much deliberation, Athena looked around and noticed that Waldo had disappeared. Her eyes went wide.

Finally, she went to her feet and followed the caseworkers with a bag over her shoulder and suitcase loosely held in her hands. As Athena stood at the door, Alice approached her; she made an unwavering glare at the blonde woman. It was enough to turn Alice’s smile upside down.

“I hope you're safe,” she managed. Athena stared blankly into Alice’s eyes and managed to half-nod and proceeded to walk away with the caseworkers.

As Waldo walked across the parking lot, his heart swelled with victory and a bitter-sweet melancholy. As he walked further, the images, the paintings, the renditions kept plaguing his mind. They kept reminding him. No matter! He kept walking with firm feet, reminding himself of the strength he thought he had gained. He glanced backwards. His heart choked.

Waldo rushed towards the stairs, and there at the bottom he found her walking by her guards like a prisoner. Waldo’s hurt eyes met with Athena’s phlegmatic ones. It wasn’t obvious which one moved first, but in a matter of seconds, both were in each other’s arms. They both breathed slowly and spoke nothing. The caseworkers watched perplexed and shied away.

Athena’s body convulsed with muffled attempts at sobs, but she couldn’t. She held onto the only one who was at least willing to hear her, to attempt to listen. An attempt was all she really needed and at least he had given her that. And if she had the ability to cry, she would shed tears for returning to that household. To that school. To that miserable desk and pencil. To those miserable, poor people. And perhaps she would reject all of them for the rest of her life, but she could not forget that moment, those brief few months where joy was raw, real, and of connection to a greater thing she never thought existed.

Athena then became self-conscious that she had lost feeling in her whole body and now it was Waldo who was holding her up as she stood dead in his arms. He let go of her and she stood on her feet. The caseworkers came by her side. Before she dipped her head into the car, she gave Waldo a look of such richness that it compensated for all those days when she did not allow an expression of anything besides frustration, anger, or rebellion to him. And off she went, Waldo standing weak on his legs, staring at the chaotic threads of her hair as she disappears from his view. She was looking at him from the distance.

18

At first, Waldo had slipped into chaos. Waking every morning with no one to take with him on a drive while listening to them muse about the intricacies of Hegelian synthesis, or eating in a downtown pizzeria, or watching a bohemian film in an obscure part of town—so many pleasures and treasures seemed usurped from his life. It was dreadful.

Waldo, however, slowly learned to attend to Alice. To treat her and recognize her. They began to eat dinner together every night and learned to love each other in the ways that were organic and conducive to cohesion. Those small gestures, encounters, remarks, and secrets that glue the emotional surfaces of two people.

Of course it did not start so pretty and clean. On many occasions, Alice took delight in calling Waldo a "miserable boy" reminding him of his illusions of saving a girl. She would mock his heroic attempts to his face, a new courage she had obtained.

"For a whole year, you almost lost your career, our relationship, and *both* of our sanities over a delusion about a girl who really belonged in juvenile detention," Alice snapped once, with deep red cheeks. The argument had started because Waldo made a comment about Alice's cooking.

"You've never gotten over her have you?" Waldo responded with feigned disappointment. Alice pretended as though she did not hear a word and continued down her line of reason.

"Every other day out feeding her like she's your daughter. The thing *lied* to us, she made a fool of *you*!"

"You don't know that!" Waldo would snap back now burnt over, and Alice would respond back viciously.

Rose knew that Athena's spirit lingered in the air only during the most heated fights between Alice and Waldo. Once or twice, Rose had noticed that Alice and Waldo had come out of a boiling cauldron and were only bonded together by the presence of Rose. The subtle and sleight of hand comments each made would make Rose feel uncomfortable and uneasy. There were pernicious looks and forceful silences to each other.

But of all, this was part of the healing process. When Waldo, on rare occasions, was asked about Athena by a nostalgic client, he would smile solemnly but even with a degree of victory. "About to graduate now, I think." The smile would last longer than Waldo consciously knew.

Alice and Waldo could at least now *speak* to each other, even if there were frequent fights. Before, it was nothing but silence, and suffering with it. The communication lines, though rough, were being planted.

The two also had their special moments like when Alice found her wedding gown stowed away in a box.

"Look at this Wally," Alice said as she walked out of the bathroom in the dress from bare shoulders to toes. Waldo's eyes opened wide with surprise.

"It's been a year hasn't it?" Waldo said, thinking himself to be a fool to have forgotten. Alice blushed. The fiery love they now suddenly felt for each other made them disregard the superficial fact that they were a day or two off of their wedding anniversary. They went out anyway.

And when they returned from their dinner, Alice opened one of Waldo's yearbooks from high school.

"Ah ha ha!" Alice erupted seeing the photo of the measly Waldo. Waldo came over and looked at his photo in disdain. He had rings beneath his eyes, a dead-eye stare, and bony cheeks. He then looked at Alice's gleaming face with full-fleshed cheeks and riveting eyes. He stopped for a moment and thought, "how could she want to marry me?" The thought haunted him that night and even made him afraid of Alice.

The question never exited his mind that night and made him feel uncomfortable in his own skin. A desire to leave and be alone came over Waldo. Alice noticed it as they drank wine on their apartment's porch and watched fireworks which lit his downcast face.

"What's the matter, Wally," Alice asked. Waldo thought himself silly, a child acting out a movie scene, but he was tormented to the point of despair.

"Why did you marry me?" Waldo asked with shiny eyes. Alice stared perplexed at Waldo, not sure if she was to be offended or take pity on him.

"Because I love you," Alice responded with the certainty of a fiery woman who had been offended. Waldo saw it in her eyes and so they went into each other's arms. At that moment, Waldo knew that Alice really was crazy enough to love someone as useless as himself.

Alice began meeting with her book club again. Waldo would catch a glimpse of Laura who now made Waldo feel so terrible. He would have to walk out in the first few weeks. After a while, it was impossible for Waldo to avoid Laura. They would both shake hands, nod, and walk away as though they had no history between them.

Waldo, upon returning home from work early one day, decided to vacuum the living room. As he did this, he lifted the cushions off the sofa. His heart went soft. There was a lollipop, chips, and other crumbs. But somewhere in the corner lay two books. One by Kant and the other of Kuhn. Relics of the past, how strange it felt to him.

Then and there, he decided to read the books. Waldo squinted and scratched his head as he tried to pretend he understood what either was saying. Athena's marginalia was littered quite literally over *everything.* It was so much that it appeared that she was writing her own book as a response to the author. He would finally finish reading one and think strangely to himself, "she could understand that? And so young too!" And not only was comprehension the impressive

part, Athena was able to critique, re-phrase the writer's argument, and construct her own argument against the author's.

Waldo, however, did not become discouraged; he then went on to read Emerson, Huxley, and Diderot, names he had remembered from car rides with his witty philosopher. He felt more empowered and comfortable, feeling a connection with something large as he read these men and women's now ancient thoughts. Everytime he would finish one of the books, he would regret not making Athena take an IQ test.

Checking the mail one evening, Waldo took the large bundle of advertisements, bills, and coupons to the kitchen counter. Alice rested on the couch and flipped through the channels in attire that spoke Saturday. As Waldo flipped through the bills, he found an odd letter. It was signed by the name *Sappho*. The address struck him as familiar. Upon opening the letter, his entire solar plexus felt a large pulse.

"Dear Useless,

I'm writing to you because I left Kant and Kuhn at your house over a year ago. I have invaluable notes in there that if I should discover that both are discarded, I will have nothing short of a maniac, psychopathic, panic attack. Yes? Well then, you can find me at 2673 T------.

Oh! And bring your revolver. Or I won't open the door.

Best,
Napoleon"

Waldo put the letter on the countertop and stared at it mystically. He read it over a few times, and could not believe that it was *her.* He wished that such a thing did not come to him and to do so as carelessly and passive as it did was further absurd and even sinister. He looked back at Alice to see if she had read his thoughts.

"Alice?" Waldo called with a nervous voice he was trying to mask.

"Yeah?"

"It's Athena, she needs me to drop off books she left beneath the sofa," Waldo said as though indirectly asking for permission to do something he desired.

"It's been very long since she's been here, honey," Alice said, perplexed, maybe even in disbelief at Waldo's words. "Why would she need them *now?*"

“Here’s the letter,” Waldo called. Alice came swiftly and snagged the letter out of Waldo’s hands.

“She’s mentally unstable, Waldo. She’s asking you to bring a gun and is threatening to have a ‘psychopathic panic attack.’ We need to stay away from her as much as possible. They should’ve put her in juvenile detention in the first place,” Alice said in a calculating and worried voice. Waldo seeing her darkened face could not help but chuckle.

“This is funny to you? She’s trying to ruin your life and you find it entertaining?”

“Alice, this is how she always talks. She needs her books and I can drop them off,” Waldo said calmly and with his teeth showing.

“Then why is she asking for your gun!” yelped Alice nervously.

“That is strange, but she won’t have any say over it. It’s my gun,” Waldo replied. He saw her nervous eyes shift. He knew why she was almost about to collapse from nervousness. She was worried that she would lose her husband again to some crazy fantasy of this girl’s.

“It’s going to be fine dear, she needs her books. I will give it to her and come back,” Waldo said maturely, placing his hand on her shoulder. She stared at him with misery. Waldo felt it. She *wanted* to trust him, to love him freely.

“Wally, don’t hurt yourself,” Alice said and Waldo nodded. He grabbed Athena’s books and ran to the car. He drove off, knowing by memory where she lived. “She must be leaving for college in a few months now,” mused Waldo.

The gate was open. She was by the door watering the garden in oxford shoes and that same old grey skirt and tucked in uniform shirt. Waldo sat in his car, waiting for some recognition from her to let him know it was okay to walk out. Athena turned around and struck a wild smile that came off as uneasy.

“Follow me,” she zapped in that old sickly voice. Waldo stood at the door with her books by his side.

“Well? Come on now,” Athena called as she turned. “No one’s home, come in.” Waldo walked in carefully and looked around the wooden castle, heads of exotic deer plastered all over the walls. Athena bounced on her feet lightly and hummed to herself as she went down the stairs.

They entered the basement where a large poker table was set in the middle of the room, a small fireplace in the corner, and a drawer of alcohol. She pulled a chair and sat on it quickly. Waldo followed. Her eyes glimmered with chaos and her whole figure bounced, a state Waldo had seen Athena in many times before. This time however, she was almost twitching from throbs of energy. She rubbed her feet together, bit her lower lip, and darted her eyes like mad.

“Well?” Athena began and then mumbled a long conjoined sentence.

What?” Waldo asked, becoming suspicious.

“*Did you bring the revolver?*” Athena said in such a manner that it made Waldo feel like a fool if he hadn’t brought it. So he quickly pulled it out to prove it to her. Athena immediately

snatched the gun from Waldo's hands. She squinted her eyes at the piece of metal and rested it on the poker table. She walked away and Waldo sat there dumbfounded. She returned and as she sat on the table, she inserted one bullet into the chamber. She spun the metal chamber and locked it into place, her eyes set like a cat's.

"Ready, Waldo?" Athena called aloud, with wide eyes. Waldo in a panic jumped out of his seat and reached across violently, but Athena put the gun against her temple and stood up with playfully threatening eyes.

"What is wrong with you?" yelped Waldo desperately. It had finally come to Waldo the realization that this girl was perhaps only insane.

"What about you!" Athena yelled back like an enraged feline and Waldo stared in shock. "All the damn time staying with your wife, going to the same place, living the same thing, playing the game, pretending to be moral in your little box, and putting everybody else in those little petty little pathetic little..really stupid little squeaky clean boxes. Give me a chance to prove something," she yelped. Waldo saw desperation. He was too stunned to move.

Athena pulled the hammer back as the gun cocked. The chamber turned clockwise. She was nearly about to click the trigger when Waldo leaped onto Athena. They both fell backwards yet somehow Athena still had the gun to her head.

"Waldo, touch me and I promise I'll adjust the chamber appropriately!" Athena snapped with a vicious tongue as they both lay. And…One…Two…Three…Click!

Both their eyes and jaws were tightly shut. As they both opened their eyes, shock hovered in the air. Athena's face twisted into a humorous look that seemed to say, "we have discovered something!"