

Yellow Windows into the Soul:
Creative Explorations of Surrealism

By

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Abstract:

My thesis is a collection of surrealist short stories. The inspiration for my thesis came from Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, published in 1915. I drew the majority of my inspiration from the concept of making a normal situation completely abnormal. My stories range from horrifying to humorous to historical fiction, but all are tied together by their surreal elements.

I tend to end my stories on cliffhangers, which are intended to leave the reader pondering what it is that they have just read. Two examples of my stories are, "The Girl With Kaleidoscope Pupils" and "Har Har Ganga." "The Girl With Kaleidoscope Pupils" follows the downward spiral of a recovering drug addict who falls in love with a woman who isn't real. I was inspired to write "Har Har Ganga" when I bathed in the Ganges. This story follows the life of a girl who is plagued by horrible nightmare that prove to be actually happening. I think the best way to know if a story is good is if it sticks with the reader long after it is read, and that is what I hope to achieve with my thesis.

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Introduction:

The focus for my creative thesis came from my interest in surrealist writing. I have always loved Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. Kafka's ability to take a completely realistic situation and make it completely surreal fascinates me. The initial inspiration for my thesis came about in my junior year in the creative writing seminar with professor April Selley, who is my second reader. I wrote a story about two girls trapped in a room, who do not know why they cannot leave. After writing this story I became interested in writing more surrealist stories, and thus my thesis was born.

The universal tie between the seven stories in my thesis is that they are all surreal works. However, each story is completely different and varies in its level of creepiness. Some stories grapple with the issue of why bad things happen to good people, and how often times life can be extremely unfair. I also tend to use eyes in a very symbolic way (two stories out of the seven mention eyes in the title). I think this is because I consider eye contact to be an extremely uncomfortable thing. Looking directly into someone's eyes can tell you a lot about them and depicting this works so well when trying to make something surreal and symbolic. Surrealism is taking something real and turning it upside down, and we are able to see what is real with our eyes so it only seemed natural for me to use eyes as a surrealist tool.

I once had a teacher in high school tell me that every story has already been told. I never realized how true this was until I started writing. I was constantly struck with the feeling that my stories were too similar to other works, and struggled to find what new element I could bring to the genre. This was definitely one of, if not the biggest challenge I faced while writing my thesis. When writing my thesis I needed to have some sense of

inspiration. This was especially challenging when I was not feeling particularly creative. But once an idea came to me I sat in the library for hours not even realizing how much time had passed. I think the surrealist aspect came in when I added very specific details to my stories. For instance, in *Yellow Windows into the Soul*, the detail about dark blue, almost black jelly like substance that the main character starts to secrete, or in *The Girl With Kaleidoscope Pupils*, when Lucy spits out an entire tooth nonchalantly. These small specific details are a thread throughout all of my stories, and are what I believe make them so disturbing.

In the future I hope to return to these stories and perhaps edit them even further. Writing is such a challenging task because even when I hand in a final draft there are always more edits to be made. I would also love to take one of the stories I have written, or be inspired by one, to write a novel one day. I think some of the stories lend themselves to being larger pieces of work and I would love to return to them.

Writing my thesis has been a fascinating experience. I often times questioned myself, and my decision to write this optional thesis, but now that I am done I can honestly say that looking at my completed work is my favorite part. I rarely feel proud of the work I do. But looking at my finished thesis is an incredible feeling.

Trapped

The apartment was an old one. It had a small kitchen filled with unwashed dishes and a nearly empty refrigerator. The living area consisted of a hand-me-down couch from the late 90s, a coffee table made from driftwood, and a thirty-two inch TV. When Kim and Nora had moved in three years ago, after graduating from college, the walls had been an off-putting green color. Kim painted her room a neutral tan, but covered her walls with pictures of friends, family, and the places she had traveled to. Nora painted her room a greyish color and left her walls blank, but had a dream catcher hanging above her bed. The two decide to paint the living area a pale yellow so that when the sun shown in through the one large window in the apartment, the room would seem more spacious.

Over the past three years Kim and Nora had become comfortable in their apartment. The location was ideal. It was only five blocks from Kim's job and only one subway ride to Nora's. The two girls clicked together as roommates. They rarely disagreed and almost never irritated each other, as roommates often do. The closest they got to fighting was when Kim tried to get Nora to do something. However, Nora typically gave up fighting with Kim before a fight could even start.

One Tuesdays, Kim walked in the door at around 3:09 p.m. and asked Nora about her day.

"Hey, what's up? Don't tell me you've been sitting in the same seat I left you in six hours ago."

"Hmm? Oh, no, I was up before. I just sat back down."

"Back from where, your room? Let go out instead of watching a movie; I'm bored."

Nora noticed that Kim was carrying several bags and asked, "What'd you get?"

Kim started laughing to herself as she pulled out an empty fish bowl and neon pink pebbles. She then proceeded to pour the pebbles into the fish bowl.

“I got a fish!”

“Why?”

“Why not? What should we name it? I was thinking Sid; he looks like a Sid to me.

What do you think?”

“I think you’re bizarre.”

“I know that, but what do you think of the name Sid for the new addition to our apartment?”

“It’s a fine name.”

“You haven’t even seen him yet, though. How do you know if he looks like a Sid?”

Kim pulled out a baggie that was filled three quarters of the way up with water. In it swam a nickel-sized goldfish whose eyes took up the majority of its body. As Nora looked at it, and determined whether or not this particular goldfish looked like a Sid, she felt its massive eyes staring back at her.

“Yeah, definitely a Sid,” Nora said.

* * *

Saturday at 9:13 a.m. Kim woke up. She looked up at her white ceiling and thought that she should put a poster or something there. She turned to her side and started to prepare herself mentally for getting out of bed. Nora was still sleeping. Nora never woke up before 11 a.m. on a Saturday. But she had to on this particular Saturday since Kim was forcing her to leave the apartment, and do, in Kim’s words, “Something fun.” Nora tried to

argue that they could do something fun at home, but Kim insisted on leaving the apartment, and Nora didn't have the energy to fight with Kim.

Nora got out of bed and found Kim sitting on the hand-me-down couch sipping a cup of coffee. Kim gestured to a cup on the driftwood coffee table. Nora sat next to Kim and they drank their coffee together.

"So what are we doing today?" Nora asked.

"Whatever you want. We could rent bikes or just walk around. I didn't have anything specific in mind."

"I don't care. We can do whatever you want to do."

"Okay then. I'm gonna check the mail, then get dressed. Can you be ready in fifteen minutes?"

"Yeah."

Kim put on her moccasins and walked toward the door. As she approached the door, she realized it would make more sense to get dressed before getting the mail. So she went into her room and put on a pair of ripped boyfriend jeans and a white V-neck t-shirt. She ventured back to the door, but as she reached out to turn the doorknob, she thought that she should put on some makeup. Kim did not normally bother with makeup; nevertheless, she went into the bathroom and put on some foundation, bronzer, eyeliner, and mascara. As she looked at her reflection, she wondered why she didn't do this more often. She went back out to get the mail and Nora was standing by the door.

"You still haven't gotten the mail?" Nora asked.

"No," Kim said. She was flustered and no longer felt like going out.

"I can check the mail later. What are we even going to do today?" Kim asked.

“I don’t know. I told you to decide.”

“I can’t think of anything. I don’t want to get outside and just stand there thinking of what to do.”

“Okay, then let’s decide on something now.”

The two girls moved away from the door and sat back down on the hand-me-down couch. They sat in silence for exactly twenty-three and a half minutes. Both girls thought random, scattered thoughts to themselves, and assumed the other was brainstorming their plans for the day. After another few minutes, Kim stood up and went to put the coffee cups from earlier in the sink. She noticed that they had fallen behind on the dishes, so she washed them. When she went back into the living area, Nora had fallen asleep. She didn’t want to bother waking her up so Kim went back into her room. Looking around her room she scanned the pictures of her adventures. She had too many pictures to frame them all so she had taped all of her pictures directly to the wall. The edges of the pictures had curled over time with the heat. She placed her hand over a picture of her standing on The Great Wall of China, and she tried to smooth the edges back against the wall. She wondered why she was having such a hard time leaving the apartment that day. Kim never liked staying in one place too long; after a few hours of sitting down, she would get severely jittery and claustrophobic. But today she had an unsettling feeling about venturing outside.

By the time Nora woke up it was past 2:00 p.m., so the two girls decided to go out the next day. But to Kim’s dismay, it happened again. Every time either girl went to the door to leave the apartment, something else would come to mind, or they would second-guess why they were going out. Even the next morning, Monday, when both girls had to go to work, they could not manage to leave their apartment. Both girls did not go to work but

received no phone call asking where they were and if they planned on coming to work. At first Nora was rather calm about the situation. She liked staying in; she felt a sense of solitude in the claustrophobia of her familiar apartment. But after a week of playing hooky and being in the same space as Kim for 168 hours, Nora began to feel disturbed.

Their apartment was becoming too familiar. Sitting on the hand-me-down couch no longer satisfied Kim or Nora. The grainy fabric that once comforted them now irritated their skin. The driftwood coffee table began to look tacky; its beach house vibe clashed with its surroundings. At one time the mishmash of furniture seemed endearing, but after they started at it for so long, it began to look more and more frustrating. And the yellow walls of the living room that once seemed so spacious when the light shown in began to shrink with each passing day.

Kim was falling into a state of depression. After the first 72 hours she began to panic. She could not understand what was happening and why Nora was not more panicked. Kim stopped speaking to Nora after the fourth day of not leaving the apartment and did not speak to her again until the seventh day.

“Have we run out of food yet?”

“I think we still have some crackers in the cabinet, but I’m pretty sure the fridge is empty.”

“What’s going on?” Kim asked with an unnerving tone to her voice.

“I don’t know. And don’t work yourself up again. I don’t think I can handle another one of your panic attacks.”

“If you were more freaked out by this whole situation, I wouldn’t be! Nora, we are out of food. Are we going to die here?”

It was at that moment, when Kim turned to actually look at Nora as she spoke to her, that she saw Sid. He was dead. Neither of them had remembered to get him food. He lay in the filthy half-full bowl, his stomach facing upward and his massive eyes staring down at the neon pink pebbles. Kim began to cry a silent cry that was one of defeat.

“Maybe,” Nora stated in a monotone voice, and made eye contact with Nora for the first time in five days.

* * *

Another three days went by. Ten days and no one had called or texted. Neither girl cared; both were rather grateful. They did not want to deal with the outside world. But as time went on, even Nora was beginning to panic. Kim had fallen into such a deep depression that Nora realized something must be done. She went into Kim’s room and found her lying face down on her bed. Almost all the pictures on Kim’s walls had fallen to the floor because of the rising humidity. Normally Kim would fix things like this. She took pride in the documentation of her adventures and the organization of her room. But all Kim could do now was lie down.

“Kim . . . Kim? We need to do something. When was the last time you ate . . . Kim, answer me!”

Kim turned over so that she was facing Nora. “I had a few pieces of dried apricots the other day, before we ran out.”

“That was two days ago. Kim, we need to go outside.”

“We can’t.”

“If we don’t, we’re going to starve. Come on, Kim.”

Kim stared at Nora with no expression left in her face.

Hungry, exhausted, and afraid, Nora decided she had to take action. She went to the door for the first time in four days. She put her hand on the doorknob and immediately wanted to turn back. She thought she should check the cabinets one more time for food that they had missed, or maybe there were some snacks stored away in her room that she had forgotten about. No. She reminded herself that this was it; she had to go outside. Although every muscle in her body fought her, she turned the doorknob and walked into the hallway.

Nora stepped out the front door of her building. The warm afternoon sun embraced her stale body. She looked around; there were no cars, no noise, nothing. She walked further down the sidewalk and watched the traffic light turn from green to yellow to red. Every door to every shop was closed and locked. Nora realized that everyone was gone, everyone but her and Kim.

She continued down the street, peering into shop windows trying to determine if she and Kim were in fact the last women on earth. Nora reached the Starbucks at the end of her block. She saw no one inside, but pushed the door. Surprisingly it was unlocked. The smell of espresso beans filled the room. Someone must have left the cappuccino machine running because she could hear the hum of the machine as it foamed the milk. For a brief second Nora felt like everything was okay. That life still existed. But as she continued to look around, she noticed empty coffee cups and nearly-evaporated puddles of spilled frappuccinos.

She turned around and looked out the window of Starbucks. The streets were still empty. She continued staring, hoping that if she didn't blink, and if she concentrated hard and long enough, something would happen to assure her that everything was going to be

okay. Her vision became blurry as her eyes filled with tears. Nora closed her eyes tightly, willing herself to stop crying. She rubbed her eyes, and, when she opened them, she saw something. Someone was outside. She pulled the door open, ran outside, and prepared to yell to get the person's attention. It was a man, running, naked. All he was wearing was a pair of running sneakers and he was mumbling things to himself in a panicked tone. He seemed to be running away from something, but there was nothing there.

Nora stood in the street for another few minutes. Then she took a deep breath and walked home.

Don't Fear the Reaper

I am initially drawn to Wade Warren because of his incredible ability to grab people's attention. The first day I approach him is after the pep rally. No one has paid much attention to Wade. The few people I know who have interacted with him think he is a weird kid. They say he thinks of himself as the son of God. But before the football game starts, Wade grabs the microphone and officiates the funeral for the opposing team. At first no one pays any attention to him, but as his eulogy progresses, he manages to capture the crowd in a way I didn't know is possible.

"So we say farewell to the Wildcats. They were a respectable opponent, but they were no match for us Braves. No one is! We the Braves will prosper. We will reign for eternity with God on our side."

Even though the concept he is preaching seems absurd, every person in the crowd is cheering him on.

As he stands behind the podium, I take Wade in for the first time. I have seen him around school before, but never really looked him over. His odd behavior always stopped me from actually appreciating how handsome he really is. He is tall, with broad, demanding shoulders. As he stands in front of the whole school, he reminds me of Atlas, as if he could hold the world on his strong shoulders. He is dressed in all black: black pants, a black button-down shirt, and a black blazer. This wouldn't have been quite so weird if everyone else at the pep rally wasn't decked out in our school colors, red and gold. His dark black hair is slicked back in a way that would normally have come across as greasy, but looks erotic on him. But the most striking thing I notice about Wade is his penetrating

blue eyes. They look into the sea of students almost as if he is able to pull everyone in and spit them back out with each blink.

I don't think the words coming out of his mouth matter. His stage presence is so commanding we all would cheer him on regardless. When his speech is over, he waves at the audience, and puts on these dark aviator sunglasses. I can't see his eyes anymore, but I swear I can feel them on my body.

I have to go talk to him after that. I see him standing alone next to the bleachers, and I introduce myself.

"Wade? Hi, my name is Paige. I really enjoyed your speech."

"Why, thank you, Paige, and thank God for allowing me the opportunity."

I am slightly taken aback by his comment about God, but he continues speaking.

"You know, Paige, God works in many different ways. I do not think that God will help our pathetic football team win today; he has more important things to do. But I do believe that God has taken a special interest in me and allowed me to give my speech today. God made that happen today."

I can't help but be drawn to him. His overly confident demeanor and his authoritative way of speaking grabs me and I need to explore this attraction. I want to make a connection with this fascinating man and push that connection as far as it can be pushed.

* * *

He says goodbye to me before he leaves for college. I admire his ambition; he is going to study to become a doctor. He tells me stories of how he will save those he deems worthy of saving. I admit that I am worried that he will charm some other girl, and they

will fall in love. That some other girl, like me, will be magnetically drawn to his presence. This fear consumes my thoughts, I constantly write to him, and call him. I even visit him once. When I see him in his academic setting, I am all the more attracted to him. We spend the whole weekend in his dorm room. He reads to me from his biology textbooks, and even though I am not interested in the material, and do not understand it, Wade manages to get me hooked. I find myself inching towards him in anticipation of what is to come next as he reads to me about infectious diseases. I am able to stay in Wade's room only because his roommate had moved out. I am disappointed; I had been looking forward to sharing a bed with Wade, but he insists I sleep in the spare bed.

When he returns from his first semester he comes home and proposes to me. I cry, and say "yes." We decide to elope. The ceremony is quick and I see Wade rolling his eyes at the priest because Wade knows he could officiate our wedding better. He takes me to his dorm room afterwards, where he has pushed the two beds together.

"Now that we are married we may share a bed together."

In this moment our entire relationship, from the day we first met at the pep rally, over a year ago, feels like years of teasing foreplay. I can no longer contain my attraction to Wade. I start aggressively kissing him. As I forcefully direct his body to the bed he pulls away from me. He looks at me as if he cannot believe this carnal desire is coming from me. Then he seizes me with both of his hands, digging his fingernails into my shoulders, and tosses me on the bed, and I give into Him.

Soon after our wedding, Wade decides to pursue a career as a Catholic priest. I think this is an excellent idea. Little do I know this will be the start of it all.

* * *

Wade ends up finishing his undergraduate studies; he gets his degree in theology, and then becomes an ordained priest. He is now working at a small congregation in the town we call home. However, he is beginning to find flaws in Catholicism. He doesn't think the members of the church are dedicated enough. And though he will not outwardly admit it, I know he does not believe that Jesus is the Messiah . . . he thinks he is, and part of me believes he is too.

On Tuesday he comes home from work and tells me that he is leaving the church to form his own. He is calling his new religion the House of Believers. About forty of the members of our previous church have agreed to follow him. At first I am upset. It seems that he has been planning this for some time. Why hasn't he included me in the planning process? But I must admit: convincing forty people to leave their homes and uproot their families gives me a rush. He claims to be a descendant of God, and that it is his responsibility to save all those who believe in the *truth*. Being near the power Wade holds over others gives me a contact high. It is almost as if he has the ability to get up in front of these people and have them believe anything he tells them. I remember laying in bed with him after he had given what he deemed his most successful sermon to over two hundred people who now call themselves his followers.

"We are going to need a bigger church if you keep attracting more followers." I say to him. My voice is soft. I feel as if I am speaking to my idol, and I don't want to come across as too eager.

"Yes. We are. But I want more followers before we make the move."

“More? How many more? You already have over two hundred people who listen to everything you say.” This time my voice is filled with lust. I am so attracted to his ambition and his desire to gain even more power.

“Paige, we need to preach to as many people as we can. The world needs to know the truth.”

I don't think much of this statement at the time, but I probably should have asked what the truth is. Honestly, looking back at everything that has happened, I'm not even sure what Wade was preaching. He could be telling people anything and they would blindly follow him.

* * *

Two years later, the House of Believers now has over seven hundred followers. We need to relocate. He has me looking into large plots of land in Utah or California, but, one day, Wade announces in his sermon that we will all be moving to Honduras. At first I am offended that he didn't tell me before telling his followers. My opinion matters, and he doesn't even ask me what I think before making such a big decision. I am beginning to question if Wade still views me as his equal, his partner. But as he stands on his podium with his dark hair slicked back and his now even darker tinted sunglasses, I know I will follow him, and I know everyone else will too.

Over time I realize that Wade wanted to leave the country because he thought someone in America was out to destroy his religion. Right before our move to Honduras, a congressman started to pay particular interest in Wade's work, and Wade did not like this at all.

On *May 3rd 1977*, we arrive at the compound. The heat hits me like a brick wall. The camp is not what I had imagined. I pictured moving to a tropical paradise; an Eden where Wade was Adam and I was his Eve. But in this Eden Wade is God and we are all his children who need discipline. The camp is set up like a prison. The sleeping quarters are square cement rooms with two bunk beds. The rooms are meant to sleep four comfortably, but Wade squeezes six to eight people in each room. Everything looks uniform, except Wade's hut. His hut is fit for a king. It is elevated on stilts, so that he can sit on his porch and watch over all of his followers. His bed is draped with a canopy. It is there for practical reasons, to keep away mosquitos, but it adds a regal feel to the room, and yet another reason for Wade to feel more like a demi-god. As I lie in bed with him, I too feel above everyone else. Laying next to Wade, knowing that my lover is so powerful is an intoxicating feeling. I do not believe in magic or miracles, but Wade must have something superior in him. Maybe his is a descendant of God. Maybe he is God.

This feeling of being drunk on life lasts until Wade decides it would be best to separate the men and women. He claims that he is doing this because he wants us to remain pure. But I have figured out the truth behind this new rule. Wade is becoming increasingly paranoid that his followers are conspiring against him. He knows the families will not try to escape if they cannot do so as a family, so he separates the men, women, and children. That night I go back to our room, and he asks why I am there.

"What do you mean?" I ask, as I giggle at what I assume is a joke.

"You cannot stay in my room with me, Paige. You must go sleep with the other women."

"But I'm not like *them*. Wade, I am your wife."

He doesn't say anything — he said his command and I must obey. He does not repeat himself; he waits until I leave, because he knows I will. Yet I cannot believe he is treating me as he treated all the others. I am not merely one of his obedient followers. I am his partner.

* * *

On *November 17, 1978* Wade's paranoia that someone is out to get him has reached an all-time high. I am beginning to fear for his well-being, but I only care for him out of obligation now. The power he once had to command people is beginning to dwindle. His requests of us are becoming more and more irrational. Just last week he tested us by telling us to drink an unidentified liquid. When we asked what it was he told us it was poison and that, if we were truly loyal to him, we would drink the liquid. So, we all drank the liquid. As we waited for death, he announced from his loud speaker, out of sight from us all, that the liquid was not poison. He was merely testing our loyalty to him.

There are rumors circulating that some followers want to go back home, that they no longer want to be a part of the House of Believers, but Wade will not let them leave. Some families come to me asking for help, but I no longer have much contact with Wade. No one does. He stays secluded in his hut, and sometimes, when I walk by, I hear him preaching to himself. But everyone stays away from his hut because there are now armed guards surrounding it. He has chosen six of his most trusted followers and has them stand outside his door with guns because he is now convinced that there is a traitor among his followers, and someone is trying to kill him. Where he got these guns I do not know, but I can confidently assume that they were not obtained legally.

I decide to go for a walk outside the walls of the compound. Even though I do not live in Wade's hut, I still have some privileges. The other followers must request permission from Wade before leaving the compound, but I am allowed to leave to go on walks whenever I please. On my way back from my walk I see a man hovering over something. I walk closer and realize that it is Wade. Though his back is turned to me I know he knows I'm behind him. I stand next to him and see what he is observing so intently: a dead iguana. This is the biggest iguana I have ever seen. It looks like some larger animal killed it, but why didn't it eat it too?

"Peaceful."

"I'm sorry?"

"Peaceful. It looks at peace. It no longer has to suffer in this jungle surrounded by predators. It has left and gone to its true home."

"But, Wade, something killed it."

Wade's eyes, that could chew up a crowd and spit them out with one blink, now fill with fearful tears.

"What are you doing out here? Why would you leave the compound?"

"I wanted to go for a walk."

"Paige, you are like everyone else here; you cannot go on walks outside the compound without my permission. I need to know where everyone is at all times. Especially you, you *are* my wife. Am I understood?"

I understood him. But I don't believe the words coming out of his mouth. I stare at him and see a man I do not recognize. After taking a deep breath in an attempt to compose myself, I walk away, back towards hell.

* * *

The next day, I am going about my daily routine when Wade makes an announcement. At first I try to tune out his voice, but then I realize he is not addressing us from his hut. He is standing on the podium from which he used to preach to us. His hair is thinning, and the humidity does not allow him to slick it back successfully. And his tall frame is now hunched over and twitchy. But his voice still has a hypnotizing quality to it.

“Hello, my Children. I am very pleased with the work you have done and have decided it is time for a reward.”

I hear whispers in the crowd; maybe we can go home.

“If you would all please follow me.” His guards surround him, as he leads us out of the compound, past the cement and barbed wire walls and into the jungle. Typically, when one enters a jungle, it is considerably cooler because of the shade provided by the greenery. But the deeper we walk, the hotter it seems to get. After walking for over thirty minutes, Wade stops in a large opening. The ground is moist and smells of rain. The trees that form a circle around us are covered in vines, and I hear exotic birds singing songs to each other. The only sunlight that shines through the trees is shining on Wade. He stands under the light, and, for a moment, I truly believe he is some sort of a God.

“The time has come, my children. Our time on this earth has expired and we must leave. You must all drink the liquid I am providing you with and prepare yourself for our journey. There are people on this earth who do not understand the truth. But we know the truth! We are not accepted here, but we will be where we are going. So, cheers to you all. I will see you soon.”

And with that final statement, Wade raises his glass, but, as he goes to take a sip, he notices not everyone is following his lead. He lowers his glass, and I see his left eye begin to spasm.

“This is not an option, my children. I am your leader. You all must drink. We all must leave. We do not belong here anymore. Drink!”

His guards point their guns at us, and we all drink the liquid — all seven hundred of us. A man tries to run and is shot in the foot. The entire crowd of us pulses at the sound of the gunshot and from an aerial view we probably look like a beating heart. Wade stands watching all of us, making sure we are drinking. He paces among the crowd until he sees every single person fall to the ground in agony. He stops near me and waits for me to drink. As I take a drink from my cup I hold the liquid in my mouth, postponing the inevitable swallow I must take. My eyes begin to fill with salty tears and my mouth fills with the taste of iron. I close my eyes tightly, like I used to do as a girl when I got scared of monsters in the closet. As if closing my eyes tightly could now save me from death.

While I wait for the poison to kill me I look around and see spouses blaming each other for coming here. I see the man who was shot lying on the ground clutching his wounded foot. I hear mothers consoling their scared children, promising them that it will all be over soon, and that if they just drink the liquid, then they can go home.

The screams from the children as they die are the worst, but at least they are the first to go since the poison works fastest on their small bodies. Wade makes his way back to the only area with light. He takes a moment to look up into the light. He smiles briefly, as if he and some being up in the sky have just shared an intimate moment, and then looks down upon me.

“Paige. I look forward to continuing our journey on a different plane.” Then he takes a sip of the liquid, sits down next to me, and waits for death.

Lying on the ground and knowing I don’t have much time left, I inch my way closer to him. I know I am dying, and I don’t believe in this truth Wade is preaching, not that any of us even know what that truth is. He believes what he is preaching is the truth, so to him everything he says is true. Even in my last moments I cannot call him a hypocrite. I do believe that he honestly thinks we will all be reunited in a new world.

“Wade.”

“Yes, Paige.”

“I don’t want to be your wife anymore.”

When this is all over, and we are all dead, I do not know what will happen to us. Maybe Wade is right to a certain extent. Maybe we will all be reunited in some way. All I am certain of is that wherever it is I am going I never want to see Wade Warren again.

Dear Amber

I've only been famous for a few years and I'm already sick of it. I got "discovered" at a coffee shop, when I was nineteen. I was on my gap year; I was trying to figure out what I wanted to do with my life. One day this agent came up to me and asked if I would be interested in modeling. Of course I immediately assumed that he was some kind of scam artist or predator who wanted to take me to his apartment and take my "headshot." But, as it turns out, he was a real agent. In fact he is my agent, and he is good at what he does.

Within one year of meeting him, I had booked over nine print ads and scheduled my first runway show. Don't get me wrong; the beginning sucked. Being paid less than the cost of my first headshots made me question my decision to model. I almost quit multiple times, until I booked my first runway show. Then offers were coming in from everywhere. All the big names in fashion wanted me, and I started getting invited to the swanky after parties. Celebrities were taking selfies with me, and then, before I knew it, the paparazzi started to follow me around.

At first fame was cool: living in my brand new apartment that I never thought I would be able to afford and seeing little flashes of light go off in the bushes. I remember being on line at the grocery store once, flipping through one of those trashy tabloid magazines, seeing my picture, and having to do a double take. But, after a year or so, it got old. I missed my privacy. I can't even go out to lunch in public without people stopping and staring at me, or trying to take my picture without my noticing. I don't mind when a fan comes up to me and asks permission to take my picture, but I miss the days when I could go grab a sandwich, and not have to worry about someone snapping a photo of me mid-chew.

There are a lot of those pictures all over the Internet. I have one of those fan clubs now, and they must have little spy-fans everywhere considering how many pictures they manage to snag of me.

* * *

My name is Amanda Tate, and I am Amber Cruze's biggest fan. I have been following her career since she was first discovered on May 13, 2013. I discovered her three months after her initial discovery, ever since I saw her first big ad for Herbal Essences shampoo, I knew that she was *it*. Amber is the definition of perfection. Her luscious dark brown hair frames her heart-shaped face. Her cheekbones are angled perfectly so that they draw the viewer's attention to her slender nose, and below her nose, lips that could kill. Her perfectly straight teeth, on which she had braces for three years, ages 11 to 14, sparkle when she smiles. But her best quality is her mint-green eyes. Against her dark hair and sun-kissed skin, her eyes shoot you a glare out of the pages of magazines that can penetrate your exterior and look deeper into you than you ever thought possible.

In the past two years I have visited the coffee shop where she was discovered seven times. My love for Amber started out as innocent. Taping magazine ads to my wall, and googling her in my spare time. But as she rose to fame, my love grew stronger. It became clear to me that Amber was not like other celebrities. The world of fame and fortune did not taint her carefree demeanor. She is a relatable woman just like me. The only other time in my life that I felt this strongly about someone else was in college, when I was involved with my Ancient Greek History professor. But this is different.

Now, I have reached the point where if I do not see Amber, meet her, get to know her, I might combust.

* * *

I get to stay in New York for a few months to get ready for Fashion Week. Technically I live here, but I probably only spend a few months out of the year in my apartment. I am a nomad because work has me constantly traveling. I am lucky enough to be able to find plenty of work here to keep me stationary for the time being, but New York feels different to me. I can't quite place it, but there is something new that makes me feel tense.

Normally, New York is a great place to be if you're famous. New Yorkers either play it cool and don't take your picture, or genuinely don't care that you are famous. Don't get me wrong; if I'm out shopping in SoHo, tourists or high school girls will come up to me and take my picture, or ask to take a picture with me, but now . . . I feel as if I'm being watched. Not watched like, "Oh, my god, is that Amber Cruze? It is! Oh, my god!" I feel as if someone knows who I am and is continuously watching me . . . following me. I can't leave my house without feeling unsettled. Typically I look forward to putting a pause on my travelling life style, but now I can't wait for Fashion Week to start and end so I can get on a jet and fly some place far away.

* * *

I found her. She is in New York and I just know we are going to meet soon. I mean, we have to meet soon; we go to all the same places, I see her around all day, and I play it cool. In her interview with *Cosmo* she said how she's always flattered and more than happy to take a picture with a fan but she misses her privacy and ability to blend into a crowd—as if she could ever blend in, famous or not. If we are going to meet, I have to let her know that I respect her. So, when I see her, though I have to contain my excitement, I keep my

distance and admire her from afar. The time will come when I can introduce myself, and I know she will be honored to meet me, and appreciate how nonchalant I have been.

Back when I was with my Ancient Greek professor, I also had to keep things on the down low. He was married so I had to sneak around a lot. We would see each other during office hours, or I would make appointments to go over my essays with him. One day I thought I would surprise him at his house but he called the police on me. I guess he had to cover up his love for me then because his wife was home. Luckily Amber is not involved with anyone, and would never call the cops on me.

But, today, while I wait to see her leave her apartment in Greenwich Village, I notice she forgot to close the door all the way. I wait until she walks a few blocks and is out of sight. Then I run up to the door to close it for her, but cannot contain my curiosity, so I sneak inside. I look at the mailboxes and see that she is in apartment 17D. My fingers stroke the cold metal mailbox that her elegant hands have touched, too. I press my pointer finger against the keyhole and let it leave an impression on my fingertip. There is no doorman in her building; I smile to myself thinking how down-to-earth she must be. She could be living on Park Avenue in a penthouse, but she chooses to live in Greenwich Village, in what she described as her “hippie home” in her interview with *Teen Vogue*. I go up to her apartment; using the stairs and counting each one.

My whole body begins quivering as I get closer. Then, I am outside of her apartment. The place where she lives, eats, sleeps, showers. I grip the doorknob and feel a shock of electricity go through my arm, down my spine, linger in my lower abdomen, and slowly moving down to my legs. I turn the knob, assuming it will be locked, but the door

opens. I enter her apartment, trying to remain completely silent, fearing that I might get caught. I have to hold my breath because I am breathing so quickly that it is audible.

I open the first door I see and enter her bathroom. There is a towel that is still damp hanging from the hook on her door and I bury my face into it. It smells like rain and brown sugar. Putting the towel back, I look into her mirror and open her medicine cabinet. I find her toothbrush and can't help putting it in my own mouth. I do not brush my teeth with the brush; I merely keep it in my mouth like a throat lozenge. The taste of Amber's mouth fills my own mouth with confusion. It is not what I expected. I can't place what I taste, so I suck on the toothbrush harder. Slowly, I approach the shower and see that she left her black lace underwear on the floor. I stare at them for a long time, allowing the tension to build inside me until I can no longer take it. I grab the underwear and hide them in my bra. Continuing my private tour of Amber's home, I decide to venture towards the bedroom, the room where she sleeps and dreams. I wonder what someone who lives the most perfect life dream of?

As I near her bedroom I see clothes scattered in the hallway. I have always pictured her being a little sloppy—I am too — and I could sense that we have that in common. I nudge her bedroom door open and my heart drops. No, it breaks. I run out and down the stairs. I leave the building. How could she? Who was he and why was *he* in *her* bed?

* * *

"Shit," I think to myself as I realize I left my door unlocked. It's too late to go back, I'm already in a cab on my way uptown. I guess it's okay since Taylor is still home. I hate that I let him stay over . . . again. Every time I leave New York, we end things, but being the

nomad that I am, meeting someone new is nearly impossible, and we always go back to each other.

I text him to tell him that there is no need to wait for me to come home, and to please lock the door behind him when he leaves. After what should have been a quick cab ride, I get to the studio and go up to the eleventh floor. Before anyone even greets me, I am grabbed by the arm and tossed into a make-up chair. If you are impatient, do not model. I remember the fifth or sixth ad I did was for some shampoo brand and I sat in a chair for over four hours getting my hair done. After that I told myself that modeling wasn't for me, until I got the check. Today I'm modeling some kind of lipstick. As one flamboyant man contours my cheekbones, a young woman files my nails, a stylist holds colors up to my face, and a hairdresser curls my hair. After two hours and seventeen minutes, I am finally spoken to.

"Amber?"

I blink at the sound of my name, and the man putting mascara on me, who thinks that he is the da Vinci of eye make-up, purses his lips at me. "Yes?"

"You ready to do this?"

By the end of the shoot, I feel sexy and ashamed. For the whole three hours, I had pictures of my lips taken, while the photographer shouted at me to channel my inner dominatrix, virgin, lover, vixen. But, after all these shoots, I always feel a bit humiliated that I dance around and do what I am told. The only reason I get paid to do this is because someone, somewhere, at some time decided that the way *I* look is attractive.

I take the subway home feeling too guilty to spend five times as much on a cab ride, while the other models leaving the building get into their cars with their personal drivers.

When I get home the door is locked and I am relieved that Taylor took my not-so-subtle hint and left. But, when I walk into my apartment something feels off. I go into the bathroom to rinse my face and get the remaining caked-on foundation off of me. As I dry my face I look at the floor for the underwear I had left there the previous night before getting in the shower with Taylor, but they're gone. Maybe Taylor took them, but I don't think he would do that. Most men that I meet are so overwhelmed by the fact that I'm a supermodel, and that is all I am to them. Those are the type of guys who would take my underwear. But Taylor doesn't seem to care that I'm "beautiful;" he seems to like me for who I am, yet I keep pushing him away. I walk towards my room, hoping the underwear mysteriously appear there, but I step on something outside my bedroom door. My toothbrush.

* * *

I keep my distance for a few days. I'm conflicted and I cannot help but question Amber's life choices. Through many phone calls, and favors of fellow fans, I manage to get tickets, good tickets, to the show Amber will be walking in this coming Friday. I am nervous to see her again but know that I have to see her in person. What number one fan would I be if I didn't at least try to work out our differences?

I decide to let her know that I'm coming. After all, this is it. If I see her in this runway show and the spark is gone, if the love isn't there anymore, I'm going to have to move on with my life. But I should at least give her the heads up before she loses her biggest fan. So I take out some stationery, spraying it with Miss Dior, Amber's favorite perfume, and I write her a note. I seal it in an envelope, carefully licking the edges, knowing that her fingers will touch where my tongue has been.

The fashion show is in an abandoned warehouse turned club turned runway. I roll my eyes at the absurdity of it all. Unlike most of Amber's fans, I do not give a shit about fashion. Many love and admire her because she wears trendy clothing, but I love her because she is Amber. I take my seat, towards the end of the runway where the models enter and exit, second row from the front. All the people around me are dressed in overrated clothing and wear a mask of superiority to cover up their insecurity. The lights dim and the music starts. At first the room is completely dark, the sound of violin playing a beautiful song starts to play. Then the beat drops, the lights all turn towards the runway and there she is. Standing legs spread in a commanding way, with her hands on her hips. She starts walking, looking straight ahead of her. My heart beats hard each time her foot aggressively stomps. Seeing her do her job so well, I realize I could never stay mad at her.

* * *

I have a stalker. At first I thought I was being dramatic when my underwear went missing and my toothbrush mysteriously ended up on my bedroom floor, but I felt eyes on me. My stalker was at my last show; I know it. Right before I left for the show I checked my mailbox. I hadn't checked it in a while; I mostly just get magazines and complimentary samples sent to me. But, on my way out, I noticed the corner of a letter sticking out of my box, as if someone had to shove it in without opening the box. The letter stated,

Dear Amber, I know we are going through a rough patch right now. But I have always been there for you, and I am not ready to give up yet. If you want to keep me in your life, let me know at tonight's show. I'll be there, watching you. Love, Your Biggest Fan.

I've gotten fan mail before, but never something this bizarre. There is not a doubt in my mind that someone is stalking me, and whoever this someone is . . . they know where I live.

As soon as I walked onto the runway and the lights went on, I felt the eyes of someone who was doing more than looking at the fashion. I felt eyes on me specifically. The eyes of someone experiencing an insatiable hunger for me. I am so rattled after the show that I only make a brief appearance at the after party. But in the short amount of time I am there I manage to down six drinks. This time I have a car to take me to my apartment. I lock both locks on my door, drunkenly stumble into my bedroom and lock that door too. I keep the lights off, not because I particularly want to, but because I am too drunk to find the light switch. I can still see around my room since my curtains are open, and it's New York; the lights outside illuminate the room enough for me to find my dresser, change into a t-shirt, and get into bed. It takes me longer than usually to fall asleep, but after some tossing and turning, I do. However, I wake up to a nightmare. I was right. I do have a stalker and she is sitting at the end of my bed.

“Who are you?”

“Amanda Tate: I am your biggest fan.”

I calm down a little bit, assuming that if she's a fan, maybe her objective isn't to kill me. I always assumed if I had a stalker it would be a man. “Amanda, did you write me that letter? How do you know where I live? How did you get in here?” I say as I try to keep my cool.

“I followed you home after the show. You did such an amazing job! I've watched Youtube videos of you before, but seeing you in person was just incredible.”

I think of what I can say that won't insult her, but will get her out of my house.

“Thank you. Why don't we exchange numbers and meet up sometime when I'm not, you know, in my bed.”

Her eyes fill with tears and her face begins to turn red. "You want me to leave? You're trying to kick me out. But I'm your biggest fan!"

"And I really appreciate that, Amanda, but you broke into my house. If you don't go, I'm afraid I'm going to have to call the police."

"The police?" Her voice is filled with panic now. "I don't understand. Amber, I love you. This is not what people who love each other do!"

"You love . . . I don't even know who you are!"

"I AM AMANDA TATE; I AM YOUR BIGGEST FAN!"

* * *

I am so angry right now that I am losing sight of why I came here. We need to work out our differences, but I see Amber, and she looks like a volcano right before it erupts. All the built up pressure of her difficult career and the stress she must be going through. I go to touch her on the arm to sooth her, but she yells,

"THAT'S IT! I'm done. I don't even like doing this. You follow me around and think that you love me all because my life seems so great? Well, you're wrong! And this, no, not this, *you*, are the final straw. I quit! And I'm calling the police."

How is this happening? Why is this happening? Amber and I are supposed to have something amazing together. I just know it after the way she walked on that runway, the adrenaline rush I got from watching her strut, and the scandalous pleasure I got from knowing that *I* was wearing her underwear as she passed by me. And now this beautiful creature is threatening to call the police on me. She can't quit. I can't be the reason she quits. It's entirely my fault. This is not how our first meeting is supposed to go.

I have a horrible flashback to the day it all ended with my Ancient Greek professor. After he called the police, I went to his office the day after; he questioned my motives. I told him that my intentions had been clear all along, just like his, and that he should really consider leaving his wife for me. This was when things got weird and he freaked out; acting as if we were never dating. Then I received a restraining order in the mail and was forced to transfer schools because it hurt too much seeing him and not being able to be with him.

I think I'm yelling but I am also unaware of my surroundings; the room is beginning to get blurry, and, before I know it I pass out. I wake up in the hospital. The nurse tells me that I had panic attack, and was out for over ten minutes. Amber did call the police but not on me, *for me*. She does care. I ask if anyone has come to visit and the nurse says "no." I was sure Amber would have come to check on me.

Shortly after I am admitted into the psychiatric ward. I am diagnosed with a personality disorder which the doctor said led me to suffer from severe delusions. I go through the treatment and I am now able to acknowledge that my relationship with my Ancient Greek professor was not a relationship, and my love for Amber was not love, but an obsession. Hopefully she is off starting her new normal life, and maybe now I will be able to continue on with my new, well-adjusted life. After three months in the hospital, and future scheduled weekly counseling, I am discharged.

As I exit the hospital, I picture Amber in her new life. Perhaps our paths will cross again and we can be friends now. But I will leave that for the universe to decide. As I am walking pondering all of this, I am not paying attention to where I am going and I bump right into a man walking past me.

“Oh, shit! I am so sorry; I didn’t even see you there. My bad.”

He stretches his arm out to help me up. His dark brown eyes lock in on mine, I feel a shooting pain in my stomach, and I blush.

“That’s okay. I wasn’t paying attention either.”

“You sure you’re okay?”

“Yes. I’m sure.”

And then he nods and takes off. I watch him leave, waiting until he’s a good enough distance away. Once I think he is far enough ahead, I follow him.

The Girl With Kaleidoscope Pupils

I met her on a Tuesday outside of a 7-Eleven. I was feeling pretty good about myself because I had officially been sober for one year. I was addicted to hallucinogens for a while. After doing a pinch too much PCP, I had the worst trip of my life. It was straight out of a Hunter S. Thompson novel. I thought that everything around me was morphing into reptiles. I could feel their forked, bumpy lizard tongues licking in between my toes and fingers. I started freaking out; I ended up cutting my wrists and almost bleeding out. I guess that was my wake-up call.

Anyway, she was leaning against the building smoking a cigarette. I did that thing when you stare at a person for too long and then you make eye contact, and you can't look away because that person knows you were staring. Usually that person will say something—you know, ask you to stop staring or make an obnoxious face at you—since society deems staring to be impolite. But, strangely enough, neither of those scenarios played out. It was as if she was used to being stared at, so she just let it happen. She was leaning against the building, facing the street, and I was facing her. We stood in silence for almost two minutes. Two minutes may not seem like a long time, but think about just staring at a total stranger for a hundred and twenty seconds without saying a word. It should have been uncomfortable, but neither of us seemed to be bothered by it.

I broke the silence by asking for a drag. Without speaking, keeping hold of our intense eye contact, she handed me her cigarette. I took a long drag and noticed a ring of pink lipstick on the cigarette. I kept staring at the lipstick ring, and it seemed to start

puckering, as if it were blowing me a kiss. After I handed it back to her, she took a shorter drag and put it out.

“I’m Jarrett,” I said.

“Lucy,” she said coolly and put her hand out for me to shake. Even though she was a petite woman, her handshake was firm, firmer than I expected. I could tell that she could tell I was taken aback. Whenever I shake a woman’s hand, I never go for the full official firm handshake because most women just limply take your hand in theirs in that feminine way. But Lucy immediately asserted herself. She smirked at my reaction; she had a clear sense of pride, not only in her handshake, but also in her ability to do something that wasn’t expected of her. When she smirked, I noticed a dimple on her left cheek and couldn’t contain myself from smiling. My smile was not the cool, casual, sexy smirk that Lucy had on her face. Mine was a full, ear-to-ear smile, and I looked like a creep. I’m still not sure why she didn’t walk away from me, or at least roll her eyes at me as most women would do when some strange creepy man lingers near them for too long. Instead she remained propped up against the building even though she had finished smoking her cigarette.

Everything about Lucy screamed sex. She was wearing these relaxed fit jeans that had holes around the knee, and even though the jeans weren’t form-fitting, you could still tell that she had thin legs and a firm ass. She had on a loose, black tank top with a picture of Buddha meditating on a blooming lotus flower, and underneath her tank top was a lacy purple bra that she clearly intended to be seen.

She had the most interesting face to look at. Her bottom lip was so full that the more I looked at it the more I wanted to bite it. She had these little light brown freckles under

her eyes and over the bridge of her nose. It looked like someone had flicked a wet paintbrush near her face. Her septum was pierced too — that hoop that goes through the middle of your nose, like on a cow. Normally I'm not really into piercings that severe, but on Lucy, it was just another addition to the beautiful labyrinth that was her face.

Her dark brown, almost black, hair against her peaches-and-cream pale complexion made her turquoise eyes pop out. She also wore heavy top eyeliner that made her lashes appear jet-black and extend several inches away from her eyelids. This made eye contact fascinating because my attention was drawn to her eyes, and I could tell every time her pupils dilated. The black of her pupils against her turquoise irises looked like ripples in exotic bodies of water. Then I blinked and her eyes seemed to change to violet. I blinked again and they went back to turquoise.

It seemed that the longer we held eye contact, the more her pupils enlarged. The thought crossed my mind that the reason her pupils were dilating was because she was attracted to me. Then, of course, my mind wandered to mystical musings of having sex with a woman this mysteriously seductive. To have her perfect pale skin touch my bare skin. The longer I thought of this, the more her pupils seemed to dilate, and, before I knew it, my fantasy started playing out. She was actually kissing me, and she tasted like American Spirits and watermelon Jolly Ranchers.

She pulled away and I lingered because I didn't want her to stop but also because everything was moving so fast that I wasn't fully sure what was going on. Lucy didn't move. She held eye contact with me, and had that smirk of pride on her face because she knew she had caught me off guard. Lucy embodied everything that I wasn't, but wanted to be. She

did what she wanted, when she wanted, and she didn't give a fuck what anyone else thought.

"Thank you," I said, like the dumbass that I am.

Her smirk reappeared on her face in response to my asinine comment and she replied, "You're welcome."

I tried to think of something else to say but couldn't. I just thought to myself what a stupid fuck I was for saying "thank you," and she could tell exactly what was going through my mind so she kindly broke the silence.

"Tell me something interesting, Jarrett."

Fuck. "Um, I've always thought the fact that fish sleep with their eyes open is really interesting." It was not humanly possible for me to have said anything more random and uninteresting.

"It's actually not that they sleep with their eyes open. Fish don't have eyelids, so, I guess they couldn't sleep with their eyes closed, even if they wanted to."

Somehow Lucy made my random thought sound like the most interesting conversation two people outside of a 7-Eleven could ever have. I started to realize that whatever I did, whatever I said or didn't say, was the right thing. My attraction to her was only increasing with time, and, apparently, I could do no wrong. So, I attempted to be more like Lucy, and I did what *I* wanted to do. I kissed her again, just as she had kissed me — without warning.

I eventually pulled away to make sure she was still there and that I wasn't imagining all of this. I looked down at her, and was relieved to see that she was in fact still present. She was biting her full bottom lip in erotic contemplation. After a brief pause she asked me

to go back to her apartment, which she said was just down the street. We started walking into what could only be described as the sketchy part of town. I wanted to hold Lucy's hand as we walked, but she would constantly change her pace. One second she'd be leisurely strolling, at an almost annoyingly slow pace, then she'd speed up to long graceful strides as if she were dancing. As I looked around at the different dilapidated stores, I noticed that Lucy had begun whistling to herself. I turned to her, expecting her to be embarrassed and stop. Instead she started to whistle louder and grabbed both of my hands. She continued whistling what I think was the song "Young Folks," while she led me down the sidewalk until she stopped in front of a filthy pet store that reeked of wet dog.

"If I told you things I did before, told you how I used to be, would you go along with someone like me?" She sang quietly enough so that no one else on the street heard, but loud enough to make me uncomfortable. She stopped singing and waited for me to finish the duet, but I couldn't remember the words.

"I was in this pet store last week," she said.

"This pet store?" I asked, with blatant judgment in my voice.

"Yes," she said, acknowledging my judgment, but smiling because she didn't care. "I went inside and opened all the bird cages. But only one bird left the cage. The rest must just like captivity. To each his own, I guess."

She abruptly began walking again, going only a few paces until she proclaimed, "This is my apartment."

As soon as I walked through the door, which had these sparkly green and blue beads dangling from it, I was immediately the scent of incense mixed with marijuana. Lucy offered to roll a joint, and I instinctively said no, but she started rolling it for herself

anyway. As I watched her slender fingers go to work, I started second-guessing myself. She sprinkled the ground-up weed into the rolling papers in a manner that appeared choreographed. Then she began to lick the rolling papers, and, at the sight of her tongue, I could feel myself begin to salivate.

“Actually, yeah, I’d love some.”

* * *

Looking back on my relationship with Lucy, I can now acknowledge that she was the kryptonite to my Superman, the arrow to my Achilles heel, the ring to my Gollum. Not only did she use me, but she also got me using again, and my attraction toward Lucy soon became an obsession that I mistook for love. I only went to her apartment that first day. After that we never went back. All I can remember is that it was a one-room apartment. I don’t remember seeing a kitchen or anywhere she could cook or eat. But I do remember tapestries, seductively draped everywhere so that no part of the walls could be seen. They made the room seem smaller — but not in a claustrophobic way, in an intimate way.

In the far left corner of the room was a mattress that didn’t have a frame or a box spring. It just sat there with the tapestries draped on it and over it. Lying in her bed was as close as I had felt to tripping since the last time I had actually tripped. The tapestry over her bed had a huge mandala on it. Looking into the center of the mandala, focusing on the one dot in the middle of its complicated design, made me feel small and insignificant in the grand scheme of things.

After smoking I felt guilty that I didn’t feel any guilt towards ruining my one-year sobriety streak. But that guilt soon went flying out the window because, in a blur of passion, I somehow ended up on the tapestry-covered mattress with my body intertwined

with Lucy's. Our faces were so close together, I swear for a moment I was looking up through her at the tapestry. Then I was on top, looking into her eyes, and her irises took on the shape of the mandala. Slightly aroused and slightly disturbed by this, I sealed my eyes shut and allowed myself to succumb to the intense pleasure of being with Lucy.

To describe the sex I had with Lucy as the best sex of my life would be a massive understatement. As a former drug addict who frequently chose drugs over sex, I can confidently say that sex with Lucy was better than any drug I had ever taken. When our bodies meshed into one mass of flesh on flesh, I felt as if I were transcending reality. There was no feeling I could possibly crave more. And that's when I realized I was fucked. Not just literally, but fucked because I knew if I stayed around her I would start using again, and I also knew I wasn't going to stay away from her.

* * *

The next time I saw Lucy, she came over to my apartment. Before even saying hello or commenting on my common couch and coffee table set up, which drastically differed from the bohemian den she lived in, she pulled out a vial and shook it in front of my face.

"You down?" she asked in a way that was so confident it wasn't a question because she knew my answer was "yes." We both knew I'd do anything if she was involved. So we smoked crack. This drug binge continued for the next several weeks. The two of us consumed enough drugs to tranquilize a fucking elephant. We lay on my white sheets, the comforter was resting on the floor — we must have kicked it off during sex, or maybe we got too hot because we did do MDMA at some point and got disgustingly sweaty. Lucy stared at the ceiling with that elusive smirk across her face, and I stared back at her; my eyes focused on her ever-dilating pupils.

I can now acknowledge that there was no substance to my relationship with Lucy. We rarely talked or shared intimate details about our lives to each other. I wanted to tell her everything about me. I wanted her to know that when I was ten I stole a Snickers bar from a convenience store, and no Snickers bar has ever tasted as good as that one. I wanted her to know that in my junior year of high school I got an “A” in history because Sally Carter would always cheat off my tests, and I really liked her so I wanted to give her the right answers. I also wanted to know more about her, but she never opened up to me, and I never had a chance to open up to her.

My desire for Lucy was more than a mere desire. It was a hunger. I craved her presence, her body, and her drugs. If I went too long without seeing her, my chest felt as if it were one heartbeat away from bursting open, leaving my insides scattered across my living room floor. Once I was with Lucy my appetite for her only seemed to grow. She would be near me, and I felt that if I did not instantly possess her, I might lose my mind. I would let the starvation for her build until I could no longer contain it. We would have passionate, somewhat violent sex. One time when I woke up, Lucy had left in the middle of the night, but my hands were full of her hair. I realized I must have pulled too hard and ripped her hair out the night before in a fit of passion.

Her hair wasn't the only thing she ever left behind. Another time I dropped my keys and had to crouch down to pick them up. Next to my keys I found a full, black-painted, fingernail. I picked it up to inspect it. I couldn't tell if it was one of those fake nails some women wear, or if Lucy's real fingernail had completely fallen off. I placed the fingernail on the tip of my tongue. It didn't taste artificial; the fingernail was, in fact, her real fingernail. I thought about throwing it out, but put it in my pocket instead. A different time, when Lucy

decided to spend the night, she was in the bathroom brushing her teeth. I was standing in the doorway, leaning my head against the doorframe, in utter bafflement as to how this woman could make me want her while she brushed her teeth. But as she rinsed her mouth, she spit out a tooth. I shot up off the doorframe, and rushed to her side to make sure she was OK. Lucy was completely unfazed by the tooth in the sink. She didn't even seem to notice that I was concerned. She merely wiped her mouth with a towel and walked past me to get into bed. And all I could do was stare at the full tooth, roots and all, in my sink.

* * *

Sometimes Lucy would stay the night, and I loved those nights for two reasons: first, it was nice having someone there; just feeling another warm body next to mine was a comforting sensation. Second, it was even nicer to not have to wait to see if she would come back the next day to get high again. Lucy was mysterious. She would stay and leave of her own accord. But she never stayed away for too long. It almost seemed like she'd always come back just as I was starting to unhealthily crave her presence.

It was a Thursday when I woke up after shooting up the night before, and Lucy was gone. Any traces of her in my apartment were gone too. All that was left was the needle on my nightstand. This wasn't anything new. She left all the time, but she would always come back within a day or so. She didn't need me like I needed her, and, as a result, her level of concern towards my feelings was essentially nonexistent.

Three days later and I still hadn't heard from her. I wanted to call her but realized I didn't even have her number. I went back to the 7- Eleven where we met and tried to retrace my steps back to her apartment building, but couldn't find it. I passed the pet store and asked the man behind the desk if he had seen the girl who tried to free the birds, but he

just looked at me as if I were crazy. I was beginning to get so nervous that I started to sweat through my clothes. I got to a building that I could have sworn was hers, but it was condemned. After pacing up and down the street for over an hour I gave up and cursed myself for getting so fucked up those past few days . . . or weeks . . . let's be honest, it had probably been months . . . that I couldn't even remember where she lived.

I got home and started panicking. I went to the bathroom to splash some water on my face to calm myself down. Gripping the edge of the sink, I looked up at the mirror on my medicine cabinet. I locked eyes with my reflection, and felt my stomach drop. I was starting to experience withdrawal symptoms; whether it was withdrawal from the drugs or from Lucy I didn't know. I never did drugs without her, so it had been three days without anything to take the edge off. I opened up my medicine cabinet and decided to take a cocktail of sleep aids and an anti-depressant to help me calm down.

As the pills started to do what I abused them to do, I began to relax. A few minutes later I heard a light tap on my door. She was standing in the doorway with an irritated look on her face. Her lips were not in her alluring smirk; instead they were pursed in a way that made her lower lip look smaller than it actually was.

"Where have you been?" I asked her.

Then she slapped me right across the face, and that seemed to snap me out of my high.

"You're such a fucker. I knew you couldn't wait for me to get high."

I was still in a state of utter confusion, and mild pain from where she had hit me.

"You really are hopeless, aren't you? Honestly, I'm just sad for you. Get your shit together, Jarrett. No one likes a fucking drug addict."

Truly lost in the commotion that was occurring around me, I managed to speak, “Lucy. Where is this coming from? What are you even talking about?”

Her response was the worst response I could have ever imagined. She laughed at me. And not in her sexy smirking way, but in a malicious way that was intended to hurt me, which it did, but it also scared me.

“Jarrett, you can’t be serious.”

At that moment I hit my breaking point. I couldn’t listen to her anymore, but I also couldn’t think of something cruel enough to shout at her to hurt her as much as she was hurting me. All I could manage to say was, “Fuck you, and get out of my house!”

“You’re kicking me out?” She asked, still laughing under her breath.

“Yes! Get the fuck out. I never want to see you again!”

Now deliberately laughing, not to upset me, but because she could not contain her laughter she said, “Jarrett. You took those pills to see me . . . How have you not figured it out yet?”

“Figured what out? You’re not making any sense, Lucy!”

“You really are fucking pathetic,” she said in between spite-filled cackles. Then she got very serious. She positioned herself so that our faces were only a few inches apart and our eyes were level. Then she began to move around me seductively. Her fingers brushed against my chest, and down to my waist. Suddenly she wrapped her arms around my neck from behind me. I flinched out of confusion and anticipation over what she would do next. She slowly tilted her head so that I could see her face from my peripherals, and positioned her lips so I could feel her breath on my left ear, and her bottom lip grazed my earlobe as

she spoke. With a straight face, and zero emotion in her fully dilated pupils, she whispered into my ear, "I'm not real."

Immediately after she said this, I felt blood bubbling in the veins under my skin. She's lying, I kept telling myself. She had to be real. How could she not be? I must have sat down at some point because this was all too much for me to handle. I looked up at her, and saw her stupid smirk. She was relishing the fact that I had hit rock bottom.

Then, without thinking, I did what Lucy would do — I did what *I* wanted to do. I pounced up from my seated position, and I wrapped my hands around her throat. She writhed in pain as I dug my thumbs deeper into her trachea. I could tell she desperately wanted to fight back, but my rage had possessed me: there was nothing she could do. My grip must have been especially firm because before I could successfully strangle her, I felt her neck snap between my hands. As I watched the life drain out of her eyes my eyes filled with pride for what I had just done. I released her and watched her body flop to the ground. I lowered my head to hover over hers. We held eye contact on last time, her pupils permanently dilated staring lifelessly back at me.

Overcome by what had just happened, by what I had just done, I grabbed the needle that was on my nightstand and shot up. After I went to lie in bed, and as my eyes closed for the last time, I saw her smirking at me, and my mouth filled with the taste of American Spirits and watermelon Jolly Ranchers.

Nobody Reads Melville Anymore

“Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off - then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can.”

“I hate when you quote Melville; you come across as pretentious.”

“I’m not good at expressing how I feel. Every feeling has been felt before and other people have expressed those feeling better than me.”

“So what’s your point, Emily?”

“I feel like knocking people’s hats off today.”

“Then I guess we better get to sea.”

* * *

They say drowning is a very peaceful death, and our marriage was drowning. We’ve hit the unconscious phase. We are underwater, the panic has ended, and we are just calmly and unknowingly waiting for our marriage to die. At least this is what I thought until one day Richard actually acknowledged my emotions. He doesn’t seem to care if I am happy or sad anymore. At one time we used to express empathy for each other, but now we merely coexist. Once we started falling out of love he stopped caring about my feelings and made me feel invisible. But one day he took notice of me, and asked if I wanted to go away for a weekend. At first I want to say no because I do not want to have to spend an entire

weekend alone with him, but then I assume he is doing this in some sort of attempt to revive our marriage. So we took off for the rest of the week and went to his parents' old cabin by the sea.

The cabin is small, but comfortable. From the outside it kind of looks like a shack, but the inside is filled with old-fashioned lampshades, and sturdy hardwood floors that are covered with sun-bleached rugs. The chairs are upholstered with evergreen velvet, which seems odd for a cabin by the water, but I can picture Richard sitting on the rugs playing when they were still rich with color, while his father sat in the chair smoking a pipe and reading Faulkner. The room itself still smells like tobacco and sea salt, and, once we light the fireplace, the room fills with the scent of damp, burning wood. The October chill blows intermittent salty breezes through the poorly insulated windows.

But the best part of this cabin is the amazing collection of books. The walls are covered from floor to ceiling with beautifully-bound classics, trashy beach reads, encyclopedias, anything and everything. When I first married Richard, this is how I pictured our home would look. We met in a bookstore. When I was in college I would get out of class on Tuesdays and sit in the same bookstore for hours reading my assignments or pulling a classic from the shelf and immersing myself in it. Then, one Tuesday, this guy came into the bookstore right after me. It took him four Tuesdays to speak to me, and, when he did, I placed my finger on my lip and pointed down at my book to let him know I was reading. My mildly rude attempt to get this intruder out of my sacred palace of books did not work. He laughed at me and then walked out. The next Tuesday I grabbed the book I had been reading from the shelf and in it was a note asking me out to someplace we could talk instead of read.

The beginning our relationship was like a sigh of relief. There are times in people's lives when they don't think they will ever meet their one person. The loneliness is all consuming, and the fear of dying alone only increases with age. So, when I met Richard, and we started dating, everything was going so well, and I sighed with relief that I had finally found my person. The first few years of our marriage were perfection, but, by the end of the third year, something had changed. I started getting bored, and I could tell Richard was too. We both wanted something else, something the other person couldn't give us, but we also didn't know what it was that we wanted. There was just something missing. If we spent an extended period of time together, one of us would do something that would piss the other one off, and we'd end up fighting. The fights were always over irrelevant and inconsequential things, like which Chinese take-out place delivered faster. That particular argument ended in Richard's storming out of the apartment, and my crying on the couch. That's usually how our fights ended: his giving up and leaving, and my crying because I wanted to fix it, but, after countless unresolved fights, it's starting to look as if our problems can't be fixed.

* * *

We walk into the cabin together and he immediately goes to the bedroom to unpack his things while I go to the kitchen to unload the groceries. Somehow, though neither of us spoke of it, we both know that this week will determine whether or not we are going to stay married. And now that we're here, we don't know how to proceed. Since he was the one who initiated this outing, I decide it's my turn to make a move and try to save our marriage.

"Want a cup of tea?"

“No, thank . . . actually, yeah.”

Subconsciously we are both trying something. Maybe that’s all we needed to do — try again.

“What kind?”

“I’ll have whatever you’re having. Want to drink it outside? Go for a walk on the beach?”

I am not prepared for this much effort. I don’t answer for a while; I just stare at the teapot and realize that my answer to his question could determine the fate of our marriage.

“Emily?”

“I do.”

* * *

We walk along the water, barefoot, letting the sand get stuck between our toes. Every once in awhile, the tide washes up a little higher than we expect it to, and our feet get splashed with cold water. The first time it happens, we both tense up and run up the beach, but it soon becomes a game, and Richard picks me up by the waist and swings me around, trying to dip my feet in the cold water. I laugh as I haven’t laughed since the last time I was happy, which was a long time ago.

After we turn around and head back, we decide to sit on a small sand dune about half a mile away from the cabin. As our bottoms sink into the sand, I lean my head on Richard’s shoulders and he puts his arm around me. When we first started dating, his touch would send sparks down my body, but now I just feel comfort. I guess that’s not a bad thing. Silence ensues for another twenty minutes or so, and then Richard starts to head back inside. I hold my hand out for him to help me up, but he has already started to walk

towards the cabin. Using my hands, I push myself up and catch up with him, leaving behind the teacups.

We lie in bed together — we still haven't spoken — but I have a strong feeling in the pit of my stomach that we had some sort of break through tonight. But the feeling is unsettling; I am not sure if I am happy that our marriage may have been fixed or if maybe some part of me wanted it to be over. I lie in bed wanting to talk, to expressive my thoughts, but Richard is asleep, and I don't wake him up. I fall asleep, and sleep so soundly that, when I wake up, I feel reborn, until I look over and Richard is gone.

* * *

I wait for him for the whole day, but he never comes back. I walk up and down the beach calling his name. First, I call his name like someone calling the dog in — in a cheerful manner, as if calling his name is all it takes to bring him back. Then, as I get more worried, I call his name like a mother calling for her lost child, panicked and incapable of doing more than screaming, "RICHARD!" As I walk back to the cabin to see if maybe he has come home, I stub my toe on the teacups we left there the night before. I bend down to pick them up, and I inspect Richard's cup, thinking that maybe the answer to where he is will be at the bottom of his sandy teacup. But there is nothing; I hold the cup up to my mouth reminding myself that his lips had been there last night. Then I scream his name one last time. This time I call it out as a lunatic screams the name of his worst enemy. And as I exhale to catch my breath after screaming his name with utter loathing, I toss his teacup as hard as I can into the sea. I miss the water by several feet and the teacup hits a rock. I watch its shattered pieces get pulled into the sea with the next wave that washes ashore.

* * *

A year has gone by and Richard is still classified as a missing person. There is no evidence that he is alive or dead. I spent the first three months after his disappearance obsessing over where he could be. Some nights I would have the most overwhelming feeling that he was dead, and I would stay up all night crying and mourning him. But then I'd wake up and sense his lingering presence and *know* that he was still alive. However, I couldn't let his running away from his problems and our marriage stop me from living my life. Exactly three months and five days after he disappeared, I had an epiphany. I had to try to move on with my life. If Richard was dead, he was dead, and there was nothing I could do about it. If he were still alive, then fuck him for leaving me with no explanation, so I start to acclimate to actually living my life again.

I start spending more time with friends again. Once you get married, you tend to lose touch with your single friends. It just makes more sense to spend time with other married couples. But now that I am alone again, I have gotten close with my co-worker, Jess. We've always had offices directly next to each other, but I never really talked to her outside of work. Shortly after my epiphany, I reached out to her one day. We got drinks and became friends almost instantly. Spending time with Jess takes my mind off of Richard, which is why we have dinner plans for tonight.

It's late in the afternoon, and I call Jess.

"Hey, Emily."

"Hi, Jess. I know we have plans tonight, but I just have so much work to catch up on, I don't think I'm going to be able to make it."

"Emily, it's fine; I totally understand. You must have a lot on your mind today."

"Yeah, this case is taking up all my time."

“The case?”

“The client is just being so demanding. He calls me at least three times a day. I should charge him for that time, too.”

“Emily, do you even know what today is?”

“Um, yeah,” I look at my phone to check the date. “It’s October 4th.”

I now realize why Jess is being so understanding that I canceled our plans at the last minute, and why she is confused about me still complaining about my stupid case. It has officially been one year since Richard disappeared.

I thank Jess for her sympathy and tell her I have to go. Then I stare at the wall for a while and wonder what it is I’m supposed to do. Without any mental deliberation, my body moves independently, I grab my car keys and start driving out to the cabin. After the three-and-a-half-hour drive, I reach the cabin. I sold it over four months ago, so I cannot go inside, but the beach is public, so I start walking along the edge of the water.

I reach the spot where we had left our teacups and sit down. Swirling my fingers in the sand, and digging my feet into the ground and burying them so they stay warm, until my left big toe hits something. I dig it up and giggle to myself because, after a whole year, my teacup is still here. I hold onto it, filling it up with sand and then pouring the sand out. I keep pressing my feet into the sand and my right big toe hits something else. I pause for a moment. What could it possibly be? I throw Richards’s cup and watched it shatter. But as I slowly dig to retrieve what my toe has hit, I uncover exactly what I expected: Richards’s teacup.

“Emily.”

No, this is impossible.

“Emily, you came back for me,” Richard says to me as he stands directly in front of me.

I’m hallucinating.

“You’re not seeing things, Emily. I’m really here.”

I stare at him as if he is a ghost, because he *is* a ghost. He has to be. Then after taking him in, and blinking repetitively, testing to see if he will disappear or not, I realize he is here. “How?” is all I am able to ask.

“That’s not how this works, Emily. I am here, and you can’t ask me questions. You have to learn how to appreciate a miracle when you are presented with one.”

I cut him off, “But . . .”

Then Richard cuts me off. “No. No questions. Just appreciate that I am here now.”

I want to hit him, yell at him, burst into tears, kiss him, or just go home. It has been a year and I thought I was getting over him, but seeing him reminds me how I wanted to save our marriage, and maybe this is the opportunity I need.

In the end I cave, and I run into his arms and he embraces me. He takes my hand and leads us toward the cabin. He senses my reluctance and informs me that the new owners only stay here in the month of July so we have it all to ourselves. Once we get inside the cabin, I want to ask him so many questions. How is this possible? Is he alive or dead? But I remind myself that I can’t ask questions and he can tell that I want to, so he starts a new conversation.

“Remember when we first moved in together?”

I look up and instinctively smile at the thought of the memory. “Yes.”

“I remember wanting to ask to move in with you about three months before I got the nerve to actually ask you, and when you said, ‘yes,’ I had to bite my lip I was so excited, but I didn’t want you to think I was being too sentimental.”

“I could tell you were biting your lip. You do that whenever you don’t want me to know how you’re actually feeling, but I always know.”

“You always knew everything.”

“Not always.”

“You always knew everything about me; I never really got a chance to know you.”

“How could you say that? In the last year of our marriage we barely had a whole conversation. You shut me out, Richard.”

“You never let me in, Emily.”

“You never tried to come in.”

* * *

It is now November. I assume it’s November because it started snowing yesterday. I’ve had no contact with the outside world. It’s just been me and Richard, in our own world, in our cabin by the sea. I’ve been living off non-perishables. I went to the local market the first week I was here and stocked up on canned soups and other unpleasant foods. But it’s all okay because what I lack in nutrition, I am making up for by having the marriage I always wanted. People are probably looking for me, but I don’t care. The fact that no one has come here looking for me is proof that no one in my old life ever really cared about me. I had texted Jess to take care of my cases while I was gone, she asked how long I would be gone, and I said I didn’t know. But I’ve been here for about a month now, and I’ve started missing little things, like going for a run in Central Park, or saying “hi” to the homeless man

outside of my apartment. I wonder what will happen when the owners of the cabin come. Whenever I bring this up, though, Richard stops me and reminds me, “No questions.”

Even though I am finally feeling happy again with Richard, and feel as if we have fixed our marriage, I begin to realize that although our marriage may be fixed, I have lost all other aspects of my life.

“Richard?”

“Yes.”

“Let’s go back to the city.” I specifically make a statement and don’t ask him a question.”

“No,” he says, not even looking up from the book he’s reading.

“But, Richard, it’s been months. I need to see my friends and family . . .”

He cuts me off. “What about our marriage?”

“What about it?”

He takes a deep breath, and says, “Emily, we have to stay here.”

“But I don’t want to stay here anymore.”

“So you don’t want to stay with me?”

“You know that’s not what I mean.”

“But you know that leaving here would be leaving me.”

“Come with me!”

“NO.”

Startled by how forceful his response was, I am stunned for a moment but then reassert myself.

“YES. Just come with me; everything is better now.”

And then he closes his book and it makes a big clapping noise. I flinch, but before I can get my composure back, he tosses the book across the room and it hits me on my right temple, knocking me out. It is a big book, *Moby-Dick*.

* * *

I wake up and there is a police officer knocking on the door. I look around but see no signs of Richard. I rub my temple and go to open the door. The police officer asks my name and I tell him. He looks as if he is about to start reprimanding me for trespassing but then stops and looks at me. I hear him say something into his walkie-talkie. And the rest is a blur. The book hitting my head gave me a concussion, but, once I regain full consciousness, I am informed that I have been missing for a week. I assure them I have been away longer than a week, but they show me a newspaper and the date is October 11th. Exactly one week after the one-year anniversary of Richard disappearance.

“So people were looking for me?” I asked.

“Yes. We got some phone calls about a potential trespasser on this property. We couldn’t reach the owners, but found out you were the previous owner, so we tried contacting you. We were able to get in touch with your friend Jessica. She said you ran off without an explanation a week ago and stopped answering your phone.”

I take a deep breath and smile. The police officer probably thinks I’m mentally unstable, but I don’t care because I can finally move on now.

Richard’s marriage and mine was drowning. It did drown. I wasn’t ready to drown. Yes, drowning is said to be a peaceful death, and life is so strenuous, why shouldn’t we have a peaceful death? But I find more peace in struggle than in quitting, and Richard didn’t. He vanished that night, maybe I pushed him away, but I know he never really came back to me.

He drowned, and when I didn't follow him, he tried to pull me with him, but I'm the type of person who feels like knocking people's hats off at times, so I swam up to the surface.

Har Har Ganga

March 17, 2016

“I was bored. I liked to think of myself as a leader, not a follower, but I realized that I was on the ‘conveyor belt of life.’”

“What do you mean by the ‘conveyor belt of life,’ Felicity?”

“We are raised to believe that we can grow up and do whatever we want but that’s not true. We are all on a conveyor belt, being mass-produced with the belief that we have to do well in school, get a good job, find a spouse, have babies, and only *then* can we be truly happy. I’m only twenty-five, and I felt like I just couldn’t do it anymore.”

“And that’s why you left?”

“Yeah. I felt like I’ve been living my life the way other people wanted me to. And, when I thought more into it, I realized that I needed to live the way *I* wanted to live. But I didn’t know how I wanted to live.”

“You mean you didn’t know who you were? So that’s why you went to India? You were seeking in a sort of self revelation?”

“Exactly. I needed to go somewhere where I could see things I could never see here. But now I’ve seen things no one should ever see.”

December 1, 2015

I step off the plane into the airport and out into New Delhi. The air is thick with smog. Everyone I pass stares at me. Overcome with fear and second-guessing my impulsive decision to drop everything and go to India, I somehow manage to get into a cab

and explain the location of the Airbnb I plan on staying in. The room is better than I expected — not as clean as a room would have to be in America but still perfectly fine. As I begin to calm down, I decide to take a shower, but the cold water feels like needles repeatedly stabbing my bare skin. I decide to go to bed instead. I wake up at four in the morning, jet-lagged. I lie in bed staring at the ceiling, wondering how long I'll actually last here on my own.

After I eat breakfast I cannot decide how to proceed with my day. Sightseeing seems like too obvious a choice, but I hail a rickshaw anyway and ask to be taken to a tourist attraction. I have no intention of staying in Delhi for more than a day or two; I only came here because flights into Delhi were more frequent and less expensive.

My life flashes before me on the ride to what my rickshaw driver tells me is the largest mosque in all of Asia. When there is a traffic jam, which happens every fifty feet, my driver mounts the sidewalk and loops around the cars. I grip the bar near my seat; with no walls to protect me, I feel the smoggy air slapping me in the face as we speed past traffic. But the worst is when our rickshaw can no longer finagle its way around traffic and comes to a halting stop and I nearly vomit.

I did my research before the trip — not extensive research, but enough to assume that Delhi would be an urban setting. Yet, even though I knew this, I still thought I would see something that I came here to find. Not that I even definitively know what I am looking for. I came to India expecting natural beauty and spirituality, and I start to realize I will not find these things in New Delhi. That night I book a train ticket to my intended destination: Haridwar, the location of the holy River Ganges.

December 4th, 2015

When I arrive, the sight of the Ganges takes my breath is taken away, both figuratively and literally. I am actually holding my breath, and I do not know why. The sun is just starting to rise, and I watch it cascade into the sky. Its rays cast light into the river, making it sparkle like the glitter kids use for arts-and-crafts. I never had any intention of going into the water — it is severely polluted — but the water near where I am standing seems crystal clear. Slowly, I find myself questioning my decision to remain dry.

Then a man, an American man, comes up behind me, “Ah, another white person. What brings you to the mighty Ganga today? Got some atoning to do?” he said with humor in his voice. My body tenses up at this strange statement.

At first glance, I do not think much of this man. He is not particularly tall — only a few inches taller than me — and I’m only 5’ 3”. His hair is slicked back and he has some intentional-looking stubble on his face. He has black eyes, small, but noticeable because they are the same black as his harsh eyebrows, which move with every word he speaks. He is wearing jeans, a t-shirt and a navy-blue zip-up hoodie, which he starts to unzip and take off. I am confused by his presence because, for no reason in particular, staring at him instills fear in me, and I do not know why.

To be polite, I giggle in response, and say, “No, just sightseeing.”

“What? You came all the way from America and you aren’t going to go in and wash your sins away?” he says with a somewhat seductive smirk.

“How do you know I’m from America?”

“I can just tell.”

“How?”

“You’re a bit uptight. No offense. You’re probably on some kinda gap year looking to find something. You’ve never been to a developing country. From the looks of it I’d say you’re from the Northeast . . . Long Island or Westchester? Am I right?”

I am rattled by how much he can guess just by looking at me, but I am also intrigued. “No. Greenwich, Connecticut. Why are you here?”

“I come once a year and bathe in this holy water.”

“Are you Hindi?”

“No, I just sin a lot,” he says, and then he winks at me, takes his t-shirt off, and steps into the water.

He walks over to a deeper part of the river, inhales, exhales, and plunges his whole body into the water and out of it three times. Once he is done submerging his body, he takes a handful of water and cups it in his hands, holds them up to the sun, which is now considerably higher in the sky, and cries, “Har, Har Ganga!”

In that moment I realize that I will probably never have another opportunity to wash my sins away in this holy water. I do not feel as if I have any sins that need to be washed away, and I do not believe that this water can actually cleanse me, but I realize that this is a chance for an adventure, and I cannot turn it down. Like a little kid afraid of jumping into a pool of cold water, I inch one toe in at a time. To my surprise, the water is pleasantly warm. It makes me feel empowered, as if the energy from the water is transferring to my body. I walk next to the man and plunge my body in three times, just as he has done. On the first dip, my body is very tense, and I keep thinking that I have to keep my mouth sealed shut or I might accidentally drink some of the water and get sick. But with each dip, my body becomes more and more relaxed. I complete each plunge and then

cup the water in my hands and shout, “Har, Har Ganga!” Smiling uncontrollably, I look to my left to acknowledge the man, but he is already gone. I turn around and see him walking away, pulling his hoodie back over his head. I never got his name, but I will be eternally grateful to this man.

December 31, 2015

I have already been home, in Connecticut, for over a week, but I am still sick. Some days are better than others, but I am in this horrible cycle of having no appetite and not eating for a day, then waking up the next day, ravenously hungry, binge eating, then throwing up. But my stomach is the least of my issues. From the minute I got home, I started having insanely vivid nightmares. I specifically avoided taking malaria medication while in India because I feared having such nightmares, but the dreams I have been having are worse than anything I could have ever imagined.

Every few nights, I am transported into what can only be described as the wild fantasies of a lunatic. I never see myself in these dreams — it is almost as if I am the person seeing what is going on, and doing unspeakable acts — and each night they get worse and last longer. Last night I slept for over twelve hours and dreamt that I was stalking a twenty-something-year-old woman.

As I follow her I admire her long, straight blond hair and the way her low-rise jeans hug her slender waist and follow the curve of her feminine body. She turns to see who is behind her, whipping her head back when she makes eye contact with me. She turns left and I follow; she turns around again, and picks up her pace, I follow suit. Then she darts right and starts running and the chase begins. I am sprinting after her, the feeling of

adrenaline rushes through me, and I begin to feel the most incredible high. I don't know what I am going to do when I catch her, but the thrill of chasing her and the fear I sense in her is the most pleasurable feeling I have ever experienced.

Eventually I catch the girl. I straddle her and aggressively brush her blond hair away from her face so I can see her tears. There are no new tears on her face, just the moisture on her face from previous tears. I hold her hair in a makeshift ponytail and pull at it harder, and she screams out in fear and pain. Now her face contorts in complete and utter fear. I begin laughing, and she starts to scream so I clench her cheeks and squeeze them so her mouth is held open. I yell at her to open her eyes, and when she won't, I lean closer to her, put my lips against her ear and whisper, "Open your eyes." She still won't, so I squeeze her cheeks harder with my left hand, then pry her teeth apart with my right, and I spit into her mouth. Then, I wake up.

The dream is so realistic, and that is what makes it so terrifying. I wake up soaked in sweat. I hate admitting it, but in the first second after I wake up, my whole body has a feeling of tension and then release. I'm filled with a warming sensation, inching its way from my head all the way to my toes.

I am afraid to tell anybody about these dreams for fear that they will think I am losing my mind. Maybe I am, but I have this bizarre notion that there is some explanation for why I have these dreams.

January 14, 2016

I am still unable to find a job because of my crippling nightmares, which now last exactly fourteen hours, every time. On nights when I have these nightmares, I fall asleep at

9 p.m. and wake up at 11 a.m. I had planned on living on my own by now, but I am still living with my parents. They think it's because I am having some issues getting my adult life started, but it's really because I'm afraid to live alone with the nightmares I've been having.

I come downstairs for breakfast. My mom doesn't work, so she still makes me breakfast sometimes. She gives me grief about sleeping so late, but she doesn't dare try to wake me up anymore. The last time she tried to wake me up, while I was having one of my nightmares, I apparently bit her. I didn't believe her until I saw the bite marks on her left arm.

She not so inconspicuously left a newspaper open with job and apartment listings circled. I close the newspaper and go to move it away from my spot at the table. That's when I see his face on the cover of the *New York Times*. His black eyes stare at me, and I swear I see his eyebrows move in the picture.

My mom asks me, "Felicity, are you okay?"

I want to answer, but all I can do is breathe heavily to make sure oxygen gets to my lungs because I feel as if someone has just knocked the wind out of me.

"Did you hear about that while you were in India? Seriously disturbed man—I don't know how it took this long to track him down; it's not like Connecticut is a big state."

"Who is he?" I say louder than I intend to.

My mom jumps back, startled by how I have just yelled at her.

"Andrew Scott. He's the man who killed all those young girls."

March 17, 2016

“So you, claim to be having these nightmares in which you kill young women.”

“It’s not just nightmares.” I say. “Have you been reading the papers? You heard about Andrew Scott, right?”

“Yes, of course, his trial is all that’s on the news.”

“Well, my nightmares aren’t a product of my subconscious, doctor. They are real. When I fall asleep, I see what Scott sees . . . it’s like I’ve been killing those girls too.”

“Felicity, you’ve been ill for quite some time, and you were alone in a very foreign country. There is a logical explanation for your nightmares, and we are going to figure it out together.”

“No! You don’t understand. I saw him, Andrew Scott. He stood next to me in the Ganges, and something happened. I don’t know what, but something horrible happened, and now I see the horrible things he does.”

She stares at me and I can tell by the way she is staring that she doesn’t believe me.

“Felicity, I don’t think I can be much help to you anymore. You aren’t making much progress. I am going to refer you to a different doctor who specializes in lucid dreaming. Perhaps that will be more effective for you.”

I’m not having lucid dreams. I know I’m not. But what’s the point in arguing anymore? I take the number of the new doctor and toss it on the ground as I walk out of the office.

January 19, 2016

I cannot stop replaying that day in the Ganges in my head. What happened to me there? Andrew Scott is a murderer, and I went into the water right after him. I did

research on him, once I realized he was the man from the river. He's being tried for killing two women, but they speculate that he's killed more; they just don't have enough evidence yet. The images of his known victims come up on my Google search, and I recognize them. They are the same girls I have been chasing in my dreams. But I've had more than two dreams. I need to tell someone. I know he's killed more women. I was there; I saw him do it. Well, I saw what he saw, but, still, I know there are more victims. As I realize the severity of the situation I start to panic. I panic even more when I realize no one is going to believe me. People will think I'm a lunatic.

Ever since he was arrested, I haven't had a nightmare, though. So, maybe it's over. He'll be found guilty and will never be able to kill another girl again, and I will never have another nightmare. But what if he isn't found guilty?

April 27, 2016

I'm beginning to wonder if my nightmares were just coincidentally linked to the murders Scott committed. Maybe he wasn't the man in the river. My whole trip to India seems like some strange, distant fantasy. I was having some kind of weird quarter life crisis; it's over now, though, and I'm ready to start living again.

"Felicity, are you going into the city today to look for a job?"

"No, mom. I'm looking at an apartment today."

"Shouldn't you get a job before you get an apartment?"

"I really think it would be best for me to get used to being on my own, before I throw myself into work."

“Okay. But I bookmarked some job listings in the city for you on your laptop; take a look.”

I open my laptop and click on Firefox. My home page is CNN.com, and when I see the headlines the color immediately drains from my face,

All charges dropped against Andrew Scott.

The ability to think rationally escapes me, and I start hyperventilating and sobbing hysterically. I lose all control of my body and feel myself falling to the floor. I think I’m writhing around, but everything quickly starts to fade away.

“911, my daughter is having panic attack. Please send an ambulance! She’s not breathing!”

April 30, 2016

I wake up. I was unconscious for eighty-four hours, and in those eighty-four hours I saw everything he did.

Five girls. He killed five girls, and this time I didn’t wake up. I saw him kill them. I saw what he saw; I killed those poor girls.

“Five,” I have to gasp for air. “Five girls are dead.”

“Felicity, what are you talking about?”

“Mom, five girls are dead. Andrew Scott killed them. I saw him.”

“You’ve been unconscious for almost four days. What . . .”

“MOM! I need you to just trust me. Call the police. He *is* a murderer! “

* * *

“Felicity? Hello, my name is Inspector Collins. I have some questions I’d like to ask you.”

I explain it all to him. I know he thinks I’ve lost it, but my description of the five missing girls is exact without his showing me the pictures that haven’t even been released to the public yet. Inspector Collins is looking at me in complete astonishment. My eyes involuntarily begin to fill with tears because everything I am saying is the truth, but what use is the truth if no one believes it?

After he finishes questioning me, I’m left feeling defeated. He’s going to tell the nurses I’m crazy. But then, he doesn’t. Instead, he gently touches my hand, stares me directly in the eye, and says, “I believe you.”

They find Scott and bring him in for questioning, but they can’t hold him because there’s no hard evidence against him. All they have are my accounts of my nightmares, so Scott walks again.

That night, they release me from the hospital, and I go back to my parents’ house. It’s late, so I decide to go to bed, but I fear what will come of my sleeping tonight. Maybe being arrested tonight was the scare that Scott needed. Maybe he will take tonight off, and I can sleep peacefully for once and wake up tomorrow to start collecting evidence to convict him and rid myself of this curse.

It takes me over three hours to fall asleep, and once I am asleep, I enter Scott’s mind. My sleep-ridden body twitches, trying to escape the nightmare that I know is actually happening somewhere. I am going to watch another girl die tonight, and there’s nothing I can do about it.

From Scott's point of view, I see a dark road lit by headlights. He must be driving. He turns onto a side road, and I begin to recognize the scenery. He is close to my neighborhood. He's going to kill someone I know. I need to wake up, but I can't. I need to let him kill her. Only then will I wake up. He continues driving and parks his car less than four blocks from my own house. He starts hopping fences, inching his way closer to his target. My heart is racing; I know that, when I wake up, I will be soaked with sweat. As he nears his target, my adrenalin starts to pump as the thrill of this chase increases. I hear a noise; it sounds like two windows opening at the same time. I realize it is the window in my dream and the window in my room. I see Scott grab the shoulders of a girl fast asleep, and I feel his arms. I see him shake her till she wakes up, and then our eyes meet.

Yellow Windows Into the Soul

Punctuality has never been a strong suit of mine. As a kid I would always sleep late and miss my school bus, I'm late for plans that *I* initiate, and I've been late to work so many times that, if I weren't such a good employee, my boss would probably fire me. So, in the past, when my period was late I never thought much of it. I've had an irregular period my whole life but this particular time it is alarmingly late. I should have gotten it two and a half weeks ago, but I haven't had a single cramp or anything to insinuate that it is planning on coming any time soon.

I've had my fair share of pregnancy scares, four to be exact. The first two were with my high school sweetheart. The first pregnancy scare is always the worst. I was seventeen, and what scared me even more than the thought of being pregnant was the fact that my lacrosse-playing, beer-chugging, seventeen-year-old boyfriend was thrilled, and he assumed I wanted to keep it too. The second time I thought I was pregnant with his baby I didn't tell him. I waited the anticipation out on my own and got my period sixteen days late. The third time was my sophomore year in college; some frat boy made up some bullshit excuse not to use a condom, and I was drunk enough to see reason in his logic. That time, my period was eighteen days late. And the last time was the year after I graduated college. I was still interning, trying to get experience before applying to jobs, and I was seeing this law student named Jeff. I was only thirteen days late and had gotten so used to pregnancy scares that I handled the whole situation like a pro.

But this time isn't a scare. It has officially been twenty-one days and nothing, not even a measly cramp. I wake up and drive to the CVS that's closest to my apartment. I arrive in only seven minutes and buy a Clear Blue pregnancy test. I get home and pee on

the stick. Leaving the stick in the bathroom, I go into the kitchen to make coffee in an effort to distract myself while I wait for the results. As my coffee brews, my mind wanders to a random Saturday when I was fifteen. Nothing seemingly monumental happened that day, I just vividly remember sitting in my room, with my lavender-painted walls, lying on my lavender bed staring up at the ceiling. I had been thinking about how alone I was in that particular moment, but I wasn't sad at this thought. I remember having this epiphany — that being alone isn't necessarily a bad thing — not fully realizing how monumental this realization was at the time. Remembering this, I realize that over the past few years, the more I focus on my career, the less time I focus on myself. I start to realize that the confidence I had once been so proud of is no longer present in my adult life.

I go back into the bathroom and check the stick: positive. Even though part of me knew that it was going to be positive, I'm still surprised. I rip the extra test out of the box, and take it again. This time I am too anxious even to attempt to distract myself, so I sit on the toilet and wait for the results to show up. Negative. A tsunami of relief swells over me, but that quickly goes away because the original test was positive. I grab my car keys and get to the CVS in less than three minutes. I buy two of every other brand of pregnancy test and rush them home. I chug four glasses of water and proceed to pee on all sixteen tests. I am left with a total of nine tests saying I'm pregnant and nine saying I'm not.

I call my OB-GYN and schedule an appointment. I tell her it's an emergency and she squeezes me in for two days from today. So for the next forty-eight hours I am on edge to say the least.

* * *

I leave work early on Wednesday to go to my ultrasound appointment. Dr. Frandina pushes on my abdomen as a routine procedure and I flinch in pain.

“I’m sorry about that. Have you been experiencing a lot of cramps lately?”

“No, none at all.”

“Okay, I’m going to put the ultrasound gel on your abdomen. It may be a little cold.”

It is cold, but then it’s warm. She applies the blue gel across my lower stomach and I get chills from the top of my head all the way down to my toes. Dr. Frandina begins the ultrasound and an image appears on the screen. I have no idea what the image is, but I am not an OB-GYN. However, as I look over at Dr. Frandina, I notice that her face is just as confused as mine is. She has no idea what she’s looking at either.

“Is everything okay?” I ask.

“This is just rather unusual.”

Panic starts to set in. “What does that even mean?” I ask nervously.

“It’s nothing to be alarmed about. It does appear that you definitely are pregnant. I am not sure why so many of your tests appeared as negative . . . when did you say you think the date of conception was?”

With all the stress of not knowing whether or not I was actually pregnant, I completely spaced out about the *how* I got pregnant part of it all.

“Um, about six weeks ago.” Her eyes widen at my response.

“Six weeks?”

Irritation starts to set in now. Why is the doctor asking me to repeat myself? I was perfectly clear and this is not the time to irritate me. I compose myself and try to answer in

my least irritated voice. “Yes, six weeks ago,” I say on an exaggerated exhale, trying to remain composed.

“And you’re sure it was *that* sexual encounter that resulted in your pregnancy?”

Does this bitch think I’m some dumb slut? Of course I know which sexual encounter resulted in my now shitty situation. “What do you mean?” This time my irritation is not masked at all.

Taken aback by the way I snapped my question at her, Dr. Frandina says, “Well, by the looks of the sonogram you are about twenty weeks along.”

“That’s not possible,” I bark at her instantly.

She seems to be intimidated by how progressively mean I am getting, and asks me in a very timid voice, “Are you sure?”

And then I lose my cool. “Yes. I had sex for the first time, in over a year, six weeks ago. I hadn’t had sex in over a year, and then I had sex SIX WEEKS AGO.”

There was a long pause. Neither of us could think of anything to say. None of this made any sense.

* * *

Three days after my OB-GYN appointment I am beginning to relax. The stress of being pregnant stops persisting once I schedule an abortion for two weeks from now, and the thought that this will all be over in two weeks is a huge relief. Yet, little things are making me think of what my life would be like if I did have the baby. For instance, sitting alone in my kitchen thinking of what I want for dinner, I wonder what it would be like if I also had to think about feeding my baby. I think about if I would breastfeed or choose

formula. As I imagine my baby, sitting in his or her high chair next to me, having a baby doesn't seem like the nightmare I've been making it out to be.

I am struck with a sharp hunger pang. This pain brings me back to reality and my warm thoughts of having this baby dissolve immediately. Raising a baby right now is simply not an option. My stomach twists in agony again and I realize that I haven't experienced any side effects of pregnancy yet. Maybe I'm experiencing my first craving. I open my fridge and look at everything I have at my disposal. To my dismay everything in my fridge utterly repulses me. I get so nauseated at the sight of grilled chicken, pasta, and yogurt that I have to rush to the bathroom and I throw up.

Once my stomach is empty, my cravings increase to unimaginable intensity. This craving is unlike anything I have ever felt before. I feel like if I don't eat something right away my stomach will start to consume itself. I venture back to the kitchen, but just thinking of the contents in my fridge makes my stomach twist in a very painful manner. Feeling desperate I check the freezer. And there it is. My eyes lock in on a frozen pack of chicken cutlets. I don't know why this chicken speaks to me more than the perfectly fine cooked grilled chicken in my fridge. I don't think much of it, though, because I am just so relieved to have found what my body seems to be craving. I take the chicken out of the freezer and put it in the microwave to defrost it. I watch it spin around, and as the frozen parts begin to melt away the white fatty parts around the edges start to bubble with juices, and my mouth fills with saliva in anticipation. But, as I pull the pan out to cook the now defrosted chicken, I feel what can only be described as a forceful kick from the inside of my stomach. Can the baby even kick yet?

Then my body begins to move independently. My arms begin to bring the raw chicken closer to my mouth. Something inside me is craving the raw chicken, and no matter how much my brain tells my hands to stop moving the meat towards my mouth, I can't stop. Once the soft fleshy meat touches my lips, the cravings cease to exist and my body is filled with gratification. Somehow I finish all six raw chicken cutlets and fall asleep feeling more satisfied than ever before.

* * *

Another two weeks pass and I drive back to my OBGYN's for my scheduled abortion. However, after performing another ultra-sound on me before the abortion, upon my request, Dr. Frandina puts her equipment down.

"Layla, I know you said the baby could only have been conceived about eight weeks ago, but this fetus is fully developed. It appears to have grown rapidly in the past two weeks alone."

The lack of knowledge this "doctor" seems to have is really starting to irk me. Every time I come here there is yet another strange aspect to my pregnancy that she cannot explain. But, with everything that has been going on, yet another strange occurrence doesn't really shake me. That is, until Dr. Frandina says the one thing that I never imagined as a possibility.

"I'm sorry, Layla . . . But I can't perform the abortion. Your baby is too far along."

I go through the rest of my day in a haze. Dr. Frandina explains to me that obtaining an abortion at this stage in my pregnancy would be illegal in most states. With the baby as far along as it is, I am perplexed as to why I haven't gained any weight, but this is apparently not uncommon. I rack my brain for an explanation as to how this fetus could be

so developed when it was only conceived about eight weeks ago. Then I realize that if the baby is that far along, I can find out the sex.

“Is it a boy or girl?” I ask, trying to hold back tears that seem to be forming involuntarily.

“You’re sure you want to know? You don’t want it to be a surprise?”

“I want to know.”

“Let me check.” She turns on her swivel chair and looks at the monitor. Her already pale face turns an off-putting shade of pink, in what can only be described as a mix of fear, embarrassment, and confusion. As she looks at me, I can see what appear to be tears forming involuntarily in her eyes as well.

“I can’t tell. It doesn’t seem to be a boy or a girl.”

* * *

When I get home I pull my planner out of my bag and go back to twenty-six weeks ago when Dr. Frandina said the baby was most likely conceived. But according to my planner, twenty-six weeks ago I was away for work. I am sure this baby was conceived eight weeks ago. There is no doubt in my mind. Eight weeks ago was the first time I have had sex in over a year. A girl remembers when she ends a drought. It has to be him.

I never got his name. Realistically, he definitely told me his name, but over the course of the night I got more and more intoxicated and forgot it. I remember seeing him at the bar and being struck by his perfect bone structure. “Chiseled” was the best way to describe his features. It was as if Michelangelo himself came back from the dead and carved this man out of a flawless block of marble. But what surprised me the most was the fact that he came over to my group of friends to talk to *me*. I remember relishing the fact

that he chose me; while I don't consider myself a particularly self-conscious person, this man was so insanely beautiful that even the thought of me saying "hello" to him seemed impossible.

I had a conversation with him. I don't remember what the conversation was about because all I could focus on were his eyes. He had what would be categorized as hazel eyes, but they were more . . . *yellow*. And as my level of intoxication increased, my inhibitions decreased. I brought him home with me and had what was probably the best sex of my life, but when I woke up he was gone.

Consumed by fear and anticipation, I realize I cannot handle this alone. I call Adeline, my coworker and closest friend. Our friendship really developed one night after work, when we went out to happy hour and ended up staying at the bar until 11 p.m. Adeline got too drunk and started crying uncontrollably. I took her to my apartment, tied her hair up, and stroked her back as she threw up in my toilet. When she woke up in the morning and found me in the kitchen, we just looked at each other and had a mutual understanding that she didn't need to tell me why she had cried, and just like that our friendship began.

"Hey, Layla, what's up? Why did you leave work early? Is everything okay?"

"Adeline . . . I have to tell you something."

"Shoot!"

"I'm pregnant."

There's a long pause. "Is it that guy from the bar?" She said with a tinge of jealousy in her voice.

“Yeah, but there’s something weird about this pregnancy. We only went out and met him eight weeks ago, right?”

“Yeah, like two months ago.”

“But the baby is fully developed. I can’t get the abortion.”

“Oh, Layla. How is that possible? Should you get a second opinion, maybe your doctor is wrong . . . I’m so sorry. I’m being insensitive but . . . What are you going to do?”

“What do you mean? I have to have the baby.”

“No, I mean are you going to keep it or give it up?”

“I haven’t even thought about that. I’m just so confused. Do you remember anything especially weird about that night?”

“Um . . . I just remember seeing that guy . . . What was his name again?”

“I don’t remember either.”

“Hmm, well, all I remember is that he was beautiful, and he came up to us to talk. Oh! I do remember that he smelled amazing. I couldn’t place what it was, but I remember being like hypnotized by how good he smelled. Then I lost interest once he obviously wanted you and not me.”

I recall that after I woke up and realized he had left in the middle of the night, my sheets smelled incredible. I didn’t wash them for another three weeks. I often found myself lying in bed for hours sniffing the pillow his head had rested on.

“You’re right. I do remember that he smelled really good,” I say.

Adeline attempts to make me feel better, and says, “Yeah, he was altogether the perfect man, a god amongst us mere mortals.”

* * *

According to my sonogram, I am now thirty-seven weeks along, even though the baby was only conceived ten weeks ago. The sex of the fetus is still unknown, but I've decided I want it to be a surprise anyway. Tonight, I go to sleep feeling content for the first time in a while. I am finally starting to look forward to having this baby. Don't get me wrong; I'm still scared out of my mind. I haven't thought about how having a baby is going to affect my life once it's out of me and in the world, but tonight none of that seems to bother me. I am simply content in this particular moment.

I slowly drift into what is one of the deepest sleeps I've ever had, but I am awakened at 3:07 a.m. by sharp abdominal pain. I rush to the bathroom, thinking my appendix has burst. I am hunched over the sink gripping my side as if I will split open if I move my hand away. I manage to take several deep breaths in an attempt to regain my composure. Once I am able to breathe normally again, I look up at my reflection in the mirror. My forehead is covered in tears of sweat. My normally straight hair is either curling upward, or glued to my damp forehead. There are deep dark circles under my eyes. I look as if I haven't eaten or slept in weeks, and I am crying. The tears that stream from my eyes are a result of the inconceivable pain I am experiencing, but the sobbing is a result of the fear that is beginning to take over my rational thoughts.

I look down and notice that my inner thighs are coated in a dark blue, almost black jelly-like substance. I look back at my reflection and a scared, confused face stares back at me. As the pain subsides, I am able to wipe the jelly off and I return to bed. But when I look in my bed I notice that my whole mattress is covered in this blue-black jelly. I should be more shocked, but all I can think of is returning back to a blissful state of sleep so that I can drift off into a dream and forget that this is happening for a brief moment of time.

However, as I strip the sheets, I am hit by another sharp pain. This one is much stronger. I fall to the floor and instinctively start pushing. I must be in labor. As I push I feel myself being torn apart from the inside out. I no longer have any sense of time. I have been pushing for what feels like hours, but it could very well be only a few minutes. The pain is too excruciating to think of anything else, even time.

With one final push I feel the baby exiting my body, and as it emerges I lose consciousness. I don't know how long I was out. Groggily, I sit up and lean against my bed for support. To say I am sore is a massive understatement. I look down to where I must have delivered my baby and notice a mix of red and blue-black liquids. Mixed into the blue-black jelly from earlier is blood, a lot of blood. I am hemorrhaging. I know I have to call 911 or I may bleed out. But as I reach for the phone, I notice something in the far corner of my room. There are two eyes, yellow eyes, glaring right at me.