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Sakimirai: A Senior Honors Thesis

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Introduction

A human being is a complex creature filled with tiny, often indistinguishable nuances. Although there are guides and charmers with claims to understand the human mind and one-size-fits-all approaches toward interaction, speaking with more than one person in reality will often present widely differing results, especially when the same approach is utilized. A one-size-fits-all guide cannot work because there is a distinct size for every human being in the world – dead, alive, or not yet existent. A Yiddish proverb states, “We plan, God laughs.” One cannot at any time expect a particular result when interacting with another human because of innumerable factors that make every single person different.

Fiction eliminates these nuances by necessity. Commercial works tend to simplify characters into archetypes and stereotypes, wholly divorced from reality and thus limiting resonance they may have with the real world. Any work that veers off the page tends to deal worse with this problem. Some mediums may focus solely on caricatures while others instead limit themselves through the inability to fully examine a character’s interior. Even those detective noir films, filled with internalization, can only focus on one aspect of a human’s inner qualities.

Fiction provides several unique advantages in making any assertion regarding humanity, however. Essays by nature may lend few subjects at a time focus. There is no home for subtlety or further underlying points because the essay exists to deliver information to its intended audience. The satirical essay evades this rule but falls closer to genuine fiction than to any standard essay. Fiction, regardless of length, provides an inherent advantage by crafting a world rather than a statement. Indeed, fiction often cannot make any singular point, be it within the story’s own confines or some greater moral regarding reality, because each aspect of a piece

carries its own separate weight. Setting, characters, plot, even the intended themes, and lesser (but no less important) literary devices all add more complexities, creating something whose meaning grows exponentially as more goes in.

Fiction, however, provides another advantage. It ideally allows its audience to immerse within its story and wed the state of mind present in the text with existence. Fiction, handled correctly, may allow the reader to experience the same anxiety, delusion, monotony, and catharsis as any given protagonist. Fiction will often focus primarily on a small number of specific themes with other messages interspersed throughout, but most pieces cannot truly serve as a case study on the human mind. Shorter stories especially, valuable as they are in the literary world, will often examine just one or two aspects of a human being's complexity. A longer work, such as a novella, will see a much larger number of factors within the page and thus experience the opportunity to identify more of the human mind than shorter pieces have the space or ability to accomplish.

That's not to say short stories cannot exhibit lifelike qualities or speak on the nature of humanity, either through some aspect or as a whole. Many can and do. However, longer works may be necessary when dealing with a more complex subject. As one of this thesis' intentions is to understand the inner machinations of the human mind, its page length – roughly four to six times that of an average short story – becomes necessary with more subjects to unearth. A collection of short stories under a unifying theme may also be a useful tool, but sometimes, a story may take on a life of its own, and adhering too strictly to that theme will harm the story while straying too far away will instead leave the audience to wonder why this story is included with a group whose members are each more fitting. One long-form piece also avoids the hassle of establishing a new premise to ultimately focus on the same theme. While this novella

constantly introduces new settings and characters, many of each recur throughout, and all serve the narrative or different thematic elements in some manner.

Fiction, lastly, is in need of more characters who are human. Acting realistic is not enough; they must think as real humans and follow the same motivations. This novella establishes two separate motivations for its protagonist, Abigail Crawford, within the first few pages and allows them to guide her and eventually embed themselves within her mind, warping her own views on reality and merging with other pressing matters. While fiction often allows characters to maintain a singular focus as necessary, reality disagrees. Humans are fickle beings, and motivations may merge or corrupt in a short amount of time, never truly returning to their original states.

Before I can discuss the protagonist, this piece's most important point, I must first address how the themes have warped throughout writing. The initial aim of this thesis was to focus on a search for forgiveness and understand redemption in all forms, including rejection. These aspects are still present and form the basis for the first half of this work before they corrupt, instead examining nostalgia, human relationships, desperation, home, and acceptance, in rough order of decreasing prominence. Abigail spends the duration of this work in her hometown –portrayed as a combination of two cities I spent much of my childhood in – working from the house she grew up in – based on my grandmother's house, where I spent more time as a child than my own, as well as my great-grandmother's house, one of the few lingering constants from my childhood at the time of writing – and always experiencing familiar settings and taking note of their changes. Only one of this work's thirty sections leaves the comfort of nostalgia, which I will address later. Abigail's mental state worsens throughout the piece, in part because nostalgia

creates perfect images that cannot be recaptured, and she believes she loses sight of her quest for forgiveness entirely at times, until she's returned to reality.

Nostalgia thus becomes the prevailing theme throughout the story. Abigail finds herself unable to let go of the past as she tries, rarely with successful results, to recreate it. She is happiest in times when she can move forward, but she doesn't feel this way. This piece is not saying to disregard the past entirely, nor does it believe in embracing events that are long gone. Rather, it searches for nuance in an aim for realism. There are good aspects of the past that can be welcomed and even embraced just as there are bad aspects that shouldn't be forgotten, but the understanding that nothing is eternal, as well as the need to move on, rather than attempt to recreate and live in the past, ultimately serves as the key to Abigail's happiness. While the final section ends before her departure, Abigail will only be able to leave her hometown once she's accepted these changes and started living in the present.

There are two other thematic elements that must be discussed before I can finally move to the protagonist and the significance of everything surrounding her, though both pertain to her in different ways. Abigail's mother's status as a mythology teacher means that the former spends her childhood exposed to all sorts of mythological and religious stories; thus, as she grows up, Abigail likens almost everything she encounters to a different tale until she's finally able to enjoy life on her own terms more. The mythology plays a significant role, however, as significant parallels with both the story of Atlas and *Ulysses* guide the narrative in different manners. While *Ulysses* specifically wouldn't qualify as Greek mythology, its thematic overtones and influences over some of the sections allow it to act as a conduit that helps merge Abigail's tale with that of Atlas. There are several overt parallels to *Ulysses*, with, for example, the character Jen acting as Molly Bloom – and thus, Penelope – but these are more than mere

aesthetic. Just as Leopold Bloom experienced Odysseus' journey in his own manner, Abigail experiences her own version of Leopold's journey. As *Ulysses* was set in a location familiar to Joyce, this story draws on specific areas I grew up in (with the stark contrast of avoiding Houston's exterior almost entirely; many specific interiors and one prominent park are borrowed from areas in Houston). Once more, it must be stated that *Ulysses* is neither the only significant work referenced nor the lone parallel. While it exists to inform the reader while subtly guiding Abigail's path, it also allows the other mythologies to work their ways into the story. Without new Blooms, these references would feel distanced and out of place. *Ulysses* deserves to be more than a mere connector, and its strong influence over this story led to the initial working title of "Bloom" before the final decision of *Sakimirai*. However, *Ulysses*, much like most of the myths referenced, impacts the story in such a way that an audience unfamiliar with it will ideally still understand the actions that occur.

Before I return to Atlas, I must discuss the significance of the title *Sakimirai*, a rather unorthodox choice. There are many different mythologies and urban legends referenced throughout this story, including some Japanese tales. Additionally, Jen's last name, Hanamura, comes from the Japanese words for "flower" and "village," emphasizing her role as somewhat of a parallel to Molly Bloom. Thus, when I found "Bloom" to be an unsatisfying name, I decided to continue with a title in a foreign language. As I have recently spent four years of my life studying Japanese, I felt it would be the easiest language to integrate in any capacity. The only other language I felt comfortable with was Hebrew, but there's a nuance in Japanese that allowed me to create this title, one Hebrew wouldn't have permitted. "Sakimirai," written in Japanese, appears as 先未来. "Saki," written in Japanese as 先, is a prefix literally meaning "before," but with a connotation closer to "older." "Mirai," written in Japanese as 未来, in contrast means

“future.” Put together, this title would literally translate to “before the future,” but the prefix “saki” is typically only associated with specific words. While one major component of forming Japanese words is placing kanji characters together, which can change both sounds and meanings, not all kanji fits, and in this case, “sakimirai” is not a word. I found this apt for my title – while a literal translation appears as a paradox, stuffing two unlike things together to create a familiar yet alien object parallels many aspects of Abigail’s journey. I also believe that affixing “saki” to “mirai” helps what encompasses all of Abigail’s story. She is unable to live in the present, constantly attributing most of this story’s occurrences now to events in her childhood. One could say an aim of the story is to shed the “saki” and finally move forward in life, aiming toward the future without ever looking back.

In spite of this focus on the Japanese language, Greek mythology is referenced more than any others, and as previously mentioned, Abigail’s story parallels one interpretation of the end of Atlas’ plight. Greek mythology was a natural fit with the overt influence from *Ulysses*, and while there are thematic similarities with *the Odyssey* as well, I found Atlas to be a more apt comparison to Abigail than Odysseus would’ve been. Just as Atlas struggles with the weight of the heavens on his shoulders, no end in sight for past transgressions he may regret but cannot move on from, Abigail finds herself with knots in both shoulders to emulate Atlas’ pain and enough stress that she feels she also carries the weight of the world on her shoulders. While somewhat of a retelling of Atlas’ tragic fall, this story examines Atlas during his punishment and integrates the oft-ignored footnote that in some versions of the myth, Heracles freed Atlas of his burden, finally allowing him to live a new life.

Before I can finally discuss the main characters in more detail, one final note I would like to highlight is the number thirty, which recurs in this piece in several significant manners. Most

prominently, Abigail is thirty years of age throughout this story, and the present sections were originally set in April 2020 as the first month of the year with thirty days exactly. However, due to the coronavirus outbreak, I realized that no aspects of a story about socializing could realistically appear in this timeframe, and the pandemic was too great for me to ignore, so I made the decision to change the month to February, despite its only having twenty-nine days, as I fully expect the pandemic to continue through June, and I have no idea what the world will be like in September or November by now. With that aside, I wanted to focus on the number thirty because it holds a significance in the Bible as the age when one is considered ready to move forward with a career. Several people become priests only at age thirty, and while Abigail's calling is in a different sector, I found it a fitting enough number to use for Abigail's true awakening into adulthood and the real world.

Finally, I would be remiss not to discuss Abigail and Jen. Abigail is meant to be the closest character to human in this thesis as a case study on humanity. Several areas important to her characterization, such as her refusal to act her own age, her intrusive thoughts personifying and taking on their own identity, her manic episodes in the second half, and her clinging to insignificant occurrences long forgotten, all lend themselves to caricature, but taken together and within the greater context of the story, I believe they instead humanize her more. Humans are flawed beings who often act unreasonable with unfathomable intentions. Her tendencies to hyper-focus on some events and consider resolved problems unresolved draw her out of the realm of socially-accepted norms, but as these drive mistakes as well as learning experiences, in addition to being parts of life for countless people, I consider them to be among Abigail's most humanizing traits.

Jen, though a mostly minor presence for the novella's first twenty-six sections, becomes the second and final protagonist, supplanting Abigail, whose story arc has almost entirely resolved by then. In some ways, Abigail has regressed while in others, she's grown, and the shift away from her creates ambiguity as to the final form her characterization takes, but it's a necessary step as it allows the narrative to depict her from an outside perspective. Jen has previously been introduced as a parallel to Molly Bloom, but she also acts as a parallel to the Molly within this story. Molly and Jen both have four sections dedicated to them, each long enough to form a separate short story, and they follow similar paths in their relationships with Abigail while facing different outcomes. Likewise, Abigail finds herself in differing positions of power between her interactions with Molly and Jen. Throughout *Sakimirai*, Abigail meets other people who've already found their own resolution and are content living their own lives, so Jen's time as the protagonist allows Abigail to experience a new perspective. Here, she meets someone who is not satisfied with life and has had no resolution, but as her character arc has mainly been resolved by now, she and Jen are in opposite situations. Jen, in becoming the protagonist, may now play Abigail's part. For a story centered around reflections, I find it fitting to end on a reflection of the story itself.

This also feeds into the focus on relationships especially prominent within Molly's and Jen's sections. While Abigail's relationship with her mother is a prominent thread explored throughout this piece, most of the remainder concerns Abigail's attempts to rebuild her own relationships. Many different angles across four different times in Abigail's life are depicted, so I find exploring all different forms of a developing human's relationships necessary. Negative relationships, positive relationships, severed relationships, platonic relationships, familial

relationships, and romantic relationships are among the many types that help add another complex facet to the human being.

The ending of the final section concerns relationships more than any other section, save those focusing on Molly, which may appear surprising after other more prominent thematic elements, such as nostalgia and forgiveness, and the resolution may appear at odds with the concept of escaping the past's all-encompassing clutch, but the relationship here as the two protagonists are brought together allows both an attempt to escape the past's murky elements while still embracing the positive aspects that have helped develop them into who they are today.

While the theme of forgiveness as highlighted in the prospectus is omnipresent throughout this story, nostalgia takes a different form, becoming more prominent as forgiveness begins to look a fool's endeavor. Twenty-nine of the thirty sections pertain to nostalgia in some way, be it through a flashback to an earlier time, the comforts of Abigail's childhood home, or the friendships Abigail wishes to reform, among other aspects, but the lone exception, the twenty-ninth section, instead depicts a world where no references to any previous sections are made, save a hobby built on a preestablished trait. This section, entirely devoid of nostalgia, shows a regretful scenario as its protagonist's relationships all crumble away. In addition to critiquing one of Abigail's actions prior to the start of the story, it highlights a fundamental flaw in her thinking by exposing a past similar to one she's experienced and debunking her belief that every action leading to her position in this story was under her control.

The very last thing I'd like to address is the experimental nature of many different sections. Yet another holdover from *Ulysses*, several sections follow different styles. I never wanted to fundamentally alter the prose, so instead, the mediums range from journal entries to social media messages to a section told in chronologically reverse order, among other examples.

The human mind is a frantic, messy creature, and telling a straightforward story would betray that beautiful chaos. Likewise, whenever one relays an anecdote, it'll always have some discrepancies compared to how another would tell that story – or even, perhaps, how that same person would tell the story to a different group or at another time. I do not believe a story attempting to analyze and understand the many nuances of humanity could be told in the same manner for every section. The trio of sections where Abigail imagines and experiences the same event couldn't convey the same meaning if simply portrayed once. In writing this thesis, I often considered how much I wanted to differentiate these sections, as well as which styles added to my goal. For example, I considered telling one section's events under a fantasy lens, or perhaps another akin to a horror film. What if I told one section through a game of Dungeons and Dragons? Ultimately, however, much as these and other ideas appealed to me, I could never see them as anything more than gimmicks – flashy and grandiose but without the substance to justify these decisions.

Many characters and events in this story are based off those in my life, or else the lives of my companions and others I've consulted with. It is still unquestionably fictitious, so while some framing or characterization aspects may have been drawn from reality, everything within this novella is a product of my mind, the research conducted, and, ideally, the logical conclusion of some themes in the works referenced in my studies, listed at the end. I believe this draft seeks an understanding of humanity – particularly, *why* – and the answer, simplistic as it may appear, is nuance. Nothing in this story is presented without nuance. I don't believe there is a single word or sentence that can describe the conclusion I've reached on understanding some aspect of humanity. Instead, I believe this thesis itself is the answer I've formed. I could not seek to enumerate, but instead, I felt I could respond. I believe the many themes presented here are

utilized as well as I could achieve, and the passages seek to answer questions without simply revealing this answer – otherwise, I would've found no use in pursuing a fiction thesis – but taken as a whole, I believe this piece truly seeks to understand humanity and create its own human being as best it can.

February 1st, 2020

Prim, straightened Abigail Crawford departed from the house, holding a cup of water through which the sun's harsh rays reflected. A blue key, rusted, was suspended crookedly behind her in the open doorway. She closed the door at once and spoke, "I will go today." A light, warm breeze moved through the area, sending a slightly unpleasant sensation through Abigail's body. She paused the recording app on her phone and replayed the sound captured, hearing her own sentence recited back. She had never enjoyed hearing her own voice. It sounded strange, artificial and wooden with a tone unique to her, one she had never heard anyone else use. She thought she sounded boring. She would have to change that later, when she had more time.

Her house, situated at the corner of Colorado and Magnolia, had fallen into a state of disarray. She still found it perfectly inhabitable, as had her mother before the hospitalization, but she couldn't deny it was falling apart. The floor creaked and groaned with every step; flies oft broke into the kitchen; half the time, the AC didn't work; and among the peeling wallpaper and misshapen blinds, one could make out many stains, each with a different story. Trophies and pictures of family and friends filled the living room, which Abigail had recently started to appreciate.

The house's exterior, bordered by streets covered in cracks, betrayed its status as inhabited between the overgrown plants by the door, perpetually open gate to the backyard, and stray cats that called the porch home. One advantage of Abigail's stay at home was that she could simply park her car in the driveway and silently proclaim, yes, someone lives here, and she

loves it. La Marque, Texas wasn't known for having state-of-the-art houses, but Abigail's mother's still appeared even more run-down than the others.

Still, Abigail couldn't deny a major shift as she drove into Texas City. La Marque, being more of a stop people took on the way to Galveston, didn't have utilities Abigail as an adult considered integral to the modern world, such as hospitals, apartment and housing complexes, or large supermarkets. Instead, all of these could be found five minutes down the freeway in Texas City. While the two were distinct towns, Abigail had traveled between them so much that she mentally referred to them as one – Lamexas. She loved Lamexas; it contained both the aesthetic of a small, rural town where everyone knew each other and that of a larger, more urban city where she was always bound to discover new paths and locations.

Today, she found herself in the -exas half of Lamexas, walking into a small diner for the first of many meetings she'd planned throughout the month. Almost immediately, she recognized someone sitting at a table as her target, Marco Lopez. Twelve years hadn't changed him much, she wanted to say, but that wasn't true so much as that she could recognize him from social media. The two had once been friends in high school, but after nothing more than a few sparse messages, some of which had been sent mistakenly, they'd stopped speaking. She doubted he cared about or could even recall those messages now, but that still didn't ensure a smooth reunion. Feeling a tinge of apprehension, she moved forward, only to realize she didn't have a plan. She stood still in contemplation, allowing another the opportunity to initiate.

"Abby, there you are," Marco said, sending such a sensation of friendliness resonating throughout Abigail that she immediately forgot her worry and felt a strange compulsion to allow all of her mind's contents to spill onto Marco and the table as they once had. They spoke for approximately two hours and seventeen minutes, but Abigail enjoyed the conversation and

counted every moment solely because she didn't want it to end. They learned about each other's lives – Marco about Abigail's career as an architect (and her preference to be called Abigail, she'd grown out of Abby), Abigail about Marco's family-run sporting equipment shop – and reminisced about high school interchangeably, at times moving to another subject seamlessly.

Still, one thought unnerved Abigail. She had something to do. She didn't want Marco to think that she'd gain something out of this meeting, but there was a topic she had to address. As soon as she detected a lull, she shifted the subject. "Hey, Marco, I, uh, I just wanted to say-" She cut herself off. For some reason, she struggled to let the words out no matter how much they fought. She'd known this would happen, hence her forcing herself to start. Now Marco's attention rested on her, his brown eyes showing concern she normally would've found comforting, so she had to continue. "I'm, um, I don't know if you remember, but back in high school, I was kind of unpleasant to be around, and, and I'm sorry if I ever, erm, said anything. You know, hurtful."

Marco brought his hand up to his chin as if lost in deep thought. Whatever his search's intent, it proved fruitless as he said, "I can't really remember you doing anything like that, so I think you're fine."

There was that absolution Abigail sought, and she immediately felt a physical change, as if some shackles she hadn't even noticed had disappeared. She now felt lighter, nearly elated, as she continued the conversation until their meeting finally came to an end. "I'll message you later," she said as she got up. "This has been so fun."

"I'd definitely love to meet again while you're still in town," Marco responded. "How long will you be here?"

“About a month.” Abigail pulled out her phone. “I can’t stay any longer, or my clients will get mad, and then my boss will get mad, and then I’ll be out on the street. But if that happens, I guess I’ll be here longer than a month.” She quickly laughed, setting the mood for her departure.

2

On the return drive down highway forty-five, Abigail’s tires dug into the pebbles that jutted out of the road, creating a bumpy, unpleasant ride and turning her grey matter into scrambled eggs. When these obtrusions were but memories, leaving a smooth road toward the Lam- half of the area, Abigail allowed her mind to paint an abstract image of her life, her brain veering into the avant-garde. She saw herself on these same roads as a child, driven by her mother to school. She saw all of her former friends, imagining scenarios that had long passed. She saw her departure for college, and then twelve years away, never returning. She had changed incredibly as a person over that time, and while she considered herself much better now, she still saw countless visions from the past, so many regrets she felt compelled to make up for right now. Her mother had grown severely ill, mandating Abigail’s return, and with an old town came memories she couldn’t fight. Rather, she could only hope now to resolve them.

The regrets persisted. Abigail, now feeling a slight pain in her shoulders, hadn’t thought about her life in the long term upon leaving, nor did anything drive her to leave anything behind. She surmised that she simply wished to get through life without a second thought, but that meant a lack of follow-up with those who had once been her friends, even when they attempted to maintain the effort. She was now an architect who could provide for herself and had new

connections through her profession, so she couldn't place why she felt empty, especially during a temporary stay in Lamexas, but a lack of reasoning didn't supplant how she felt. Perhaps this emptiness could disappear by reforging older relationships. After all, if she had regularly spoken to all of these people once, Abigail didn't think she'd struggle now. Marco, Arnie, Chloe, Daniel, among others, and then three people who, at different points, had mattered to her more than anyone else: Jen, Gracie, and Molly. Roughly one week prior to her departure, just after learning about her mother but before she could leave, she'd sent messages out to more than twenty people who were still in town all these years later. Although some had taken their time, most had responded. Ultimately, Abigail found herself with fewer than ten people to speak to across the month, before she'd have to go back home and continue working, but she was still satisfied, especially after the wonderful reunion with Marco, which convinced her the rest of her time would similarly go well.

October 12th, 2005

Long did the laboring student suffer throughout the day, working tirelessly for eight hours with only a sparse, forty-five minute break for lunch. Each class period resembled one of Heracles' trials in intensity, and young Abigail could find solace only in seeing her companions. She started the day sharing two subsequent classes with Gracie and Daniel; at lunch, she ate with Gracie, Dawn, Arnie, and Nora; she spent her days in Chemistry with Jen; she sat with Marco in English; and she saw Molly at the end of the day, just before she went to wait for her mother at carpool. She held a fondness for English the other classes couldn't match, stemming from the

easier class content, the occasional opportunity to write poems for assignments, and its allotment toward the end of the day.

Abigail had a system for her suffering. She found a quality that made first period okay, acceptable even. Perhaps Dante found some allure in entering the Inferno, she reasoned, as even though the entire journey lay ahead, he entered with full vigor, confident of his aspirations, and still held the waking world behind him. Whereas later circles would prove torturous, with no end in sight but the entrance much too far for him to turn around, he instead began his journey close to civilization, a comforting thought anyone could've harnessed to continue. Abigail thus never hated her first period, regardless of the class' content and teacher. Second and third shared some of that allure, but by fourth, she felt trapped, and in flapping her wings by viewing the clock, she'd only worsen the frozen lake's grip on her perception of time.

Lunch provided relief. Abigail at this time had only just finished a poem, and for once, she allowed herself full immersion in the table's conversation. She was friends with everyone present, but she mainly sat there to be with Gracie, one of her oldest friends. Were Gracie absent, Abigail likely would've sought out Jen, who typically ate in some classroom to get more work done, or Molly, who had her own group of friends – mainly from the lacrosse team. How fortunate Abigail was to have other options for lunch, she thought.

“Gracie, did you ever take care of those ants in the kitchen?” Arnie suddenly asked. “I want to come over again.”

“We called the exterminator,” Gracie replied. “We’re getting it taken care of.”

Abigail now witnessed an opportunity to reply. “Bob? My mother said he’s pretty racist.”

Gracie drummed her fingers on the table. “As long as he gets rid of those ants, does it matter?”

Abigail couldn’t protest with only her mother’s input. Even if she wanted to offer some retort, two obstacles stood before her: she didn’t want to create a divide or, borrowing the phrase Jen liked to use, ‘start something,’ and she also didn’t understand why it mattered if Bob truly was racist. After all, he was nice to her and still did a good job, didn’t he? Finally, Abigail responded, “I suppose not.”

These conversations went on daily, but Abigail enjoyed sitting outside with her friends, and there were still other things to look forward to. In English, she sat beside Marco; despite their dissimilar surnames, the teacher’s strange method of organizing students by alphas led to those in the Bs, Cs, and Ds sitting opposite Abigail, who instead enjoyed time with the Ks, Ls, and Ns (no one in the class had a last name starting with M).

“Did you see *the Office* last night?” Marco asked in the moments before class began.

“People watch that?” Abigail responded.

“It got really good since it started again. So let me tell you what happened.”

“I had to finish reading *Cannery Row* anyway. I’m not a big fan of Steinbeck.”

“There was a fire, right?”

“I know Mr. Silver praised it for its prose, but the language was just plain.”

“And, and I think, you know, Michael’s hilarious.” Marco now gesticulated as he spoke.

“Arnie didn’t like that there wasn’t a plot, but I disagree.”

“And they’re still teasing Jim and Pam. Ugh, just get together already!”

“I appreciate character-driven works, but that wasn’t here.” Abigail neglected to mention that she could recite all of Cannery Row’s residents.

“Dwight’s the funniest character, I’ve never met anyone like him.”

“And one of the characters made me think Steinbeck may be-” She stopped herself just before she could utter the word “racist.” She remembered how she’d almost started something, thanks Jen, at lunch, and now wasn’t going to be the time. She’d always found herself empathizing with Cassandra, but she worried that by saying the wrong thing, she’d instead play the part of Clytemnestra. Regardless, Abigail enjoyed having someone to talk to, and more importantly, wasn’t Michael Scott also racist? And Marco liked him, right? All the more reason not to say anything, she thought.

At the end of the period, Abigail bade goodbye to Marco, who sang to himself about a fire, and moved toward her final class: theatre. Following dismissal, she rushed to the intersection at the front of the school where she crossed paths with Molly daily. Today was no exception, and she met her friend near the water fountain.

“Hi Molly!” Abigail said with a wave, eager to take the initiative.

Molly gave a smile and waved back. “Good to see you, Abby. How was your day?”

“Oh, it was alright. We had a quiz on factorials in Algebra. Did you do anything interesting?” Abigail, so close to the door, had started following Molly, who instead strode toward a locker.

“Mostly just a stupid essay on Shakespeare. Aren’t there already a million of those?”

Abigail, unsure how to respond but not wanting the conversation to die, gave a laugh in response.

“Also, what are factorials?” Molly continued afterward.

Abigail seized this opportunity, saying what she expected to be her magnum opus by way of oral essay in only a few unimpressive sentences.

“Seems kind of fun, but also kind of pointless,” Molly said.

Abigail didn’t care much for math, so she instead nodded before asking, “Is *the Office* popular?”

Abigail now sat in the hospital waiting room. The staff had said her mother needed to undergo some tests, but afterward, Abigail would get to visit, just as she had the previous day. Her goal was to see her mother every day, fitting any meetings she could schedule in between, but part of her worried that work – she had a project to get back to – or a good reunion – there was still hope that she’d reestablish some long-lasting friendships, after all – would impede that.

In the waiting room, however, with only her phone to her name, her options were limited: prepare for that Tuesday’s upcoming meeting, contemplate what she’d say to her mother today, reminisce, and plan out future meetings. She unlocked her phone and decided to scroll through her messages first to ensure she knew how to speak to Arnie. She hesitated above Marco’s name, however, before glancing over their online conversation. Before the scheduling, she could see

two sparse messages, both from 2011, she had sent as a joke. One was a chain message she mentally admonished herself for on any occasion she thought about it, typically in the middle of sleepless nights, and the other was a quick message of apology for a mean-spirited joke at his expense she'd made on someone's wall that she could no longer find. Abigail felt a sense of unease as she worried that Marco hadn't truly forgiven her for these messages and the surly attitude she was confident she'd displayed toward him in high school, but before she could send another message, she decided to spend time mulling this over.

Abigail closed her eyes and envisioned a guide in the form of a teenager dubbed Riley. Whenever her conscience spoke, she enjoyed giving it Riley's form as if she could concoct a spirited debate within the confines of her mind. Riley had never allowed her hopes to die out, and she didn't expect that to change today.

I'm not sure he even remembered those messages or knew what they were talking about until you brought them up, Riley said.

Even so, what if he were lying?

He said he forgives you, Riley said. *Don't you trust him?*

Of course Abigail trusted him. They were friends, weren't they? Abigail even intended to maintain contact with him whenever she had anything to bring up.

Then prove it. He trusted you enough to meet you. Show you earned it by trusting him back, and focus on Arnie instead.

Arnie. That was a problem. Abigail didn't even know where to start.

Be respectful, Abigail. You want to make amends, don't you?

Yes, Abigail did want to make amends.

Did you ever say anything offensive?

To Arnie? Abigail couldn't recall, but she didn't think she would've said anything hurtful to him specifically. She had several layers, each reserved for how friendly she considered herself with others, and Arnie was like an outer-inner layer, or perhaps an inner-outer layer. He had been in her friend group, but he was never one of her best friends, someone she'd shared everything with.

And you'll apologize anyway. Don't make things awkward.

Abigail knew Riley was right. She thanked her guide and decided to scroll through the rest of her messages. Arnie didn't look or sound like the same person she'd once known, and he even had a different name, but Abigail was confident Arnie could be reconciled with her childhood friend. She now had other meetings she could focus on preparing for. Gracie, Molly, Daniel, Chloe, and Jen were all in town and had expressed enthusiasm at the prospect of a meeting, and Abigail didn't want to allow her paranoia to stop her. It was only her second day back in Lamexas, and she felt genuine excitement at the prospect of meeting all of these old friends again; she didn't dare allow any pessimism to seep through.

Not long after this resolve, a nurse came, asking for Abigail. Her mother was ready.

The hospital room where Abigail's mother stayed appeared comfortable but brought with it an air of longing. Abigail recognized one of the reclining chairs from the Colorado house, a

dresser from her mother's bedroom, and several family photos: her as a child with her mother, her in high school with her mother, several college and adulthood pictures, and a few of cousins and other extended family. Abigail recognized one from when her mother had paid her a surprise visit two or three years ago, and she felt a tinge of guilt. Exactly one picture existed of the two of them together from adulthood.

Abigail didn't have much time to linger on this before her bedridden mother, somewhat reclining as a tube ran up her nose, spoke. "You came."

The boundless, utter joy Abigail heard worsened the guilt. Surely her mother was so happy to see her for the second day in a row because they'd met so few times. "Of course I did, Mom." What kind of daughter was she to leave her mother until the reaper paid a visit? "I told you, I'm gonna be here every day. I have to go back in March, but you know you'll be better before then." She was stone-faced, her reassuring tone never faltering, but the sense of culpability wanted to tear itself out, taking Abigail's collected façade with it.

"I'm sorry," her mother responded. "I'm so happy to see you." She gave a weak laugh before repeating, "I'm so sorry."

"Mom, why are you sorry?" Abigail leaned down over her mother, wanting to give a hug but not wanting to crush the woman. "You didn't do anything, don't apologize."

"I didn't want you to see me like this."

Abigail, too, didn't want her mother to see her face at this point, so she leaned in to embrace the patient. She pushed back whatever tears she couldn't wipe on the bedsheets and held her mother until she felt her eyes would be presentable once more. By the end of the visit, she reaffirmed that she would return every day.

April 2nd, 2004

Once the end-of-day announcements concluded, Abigail burst through the classroom door, racing to her locker with the speed of Hermes and packing up her supplies. Gracie always arrived first, so this time, she wanted to be the one to make it before anyone else, but to her dismay, she found that she still lost, and she would have to accept her punishment – staying in the school as Eurydice stayed in Hades while a close companion exited into the living world, albeit only for a few seconds extra in Abigail’s case.

Once Abigail accepted that she’d failed, she decided to take her time at her locker. She had once carpooled with Gracie, but that time had passed. Her mother, unlike previous years, only had to stay after school for about an hour most days, so they figured it’d make more sense for Abigail to stay with her. Abigail would spend most of her time reading whichever books she could find. Jen also carpooled with her, but unlike the previous arrangement with Gracie, this wasn’t reciprocated at the opposite end of the day; Jen simply didn’t have a ride, and Abigail’s mother was happy to help. Jen spent most of those extra hours playing chess with other students in the room, perpetually there for detention or tutorials.

Abigail had grown comfortable with this situation, but as she stood at her locker during that rare apex of time when both Gracie and Jen were present, she decided to capitalize on her good fortune by speaking to them.

“I hate Ms. Horwitz,” she said.

“So I’ve heard,” Jen replied.

“Hey Jen, do you have any graduation plans?” Gracie asked.

“We’re going to go up into Houston and eat somewhere,” Jen replied. “I haven’t asked, but I’m sure you could-”

“We’re just gonna head to Galveston, my family wants to go to the beach.”

“I should report her, she made someone cry today,” Abigail said. “And it wasn’t me this time.”

“Can’t you go to the beach anytime?” Jen asked.

“I saw all of this while walking back from the bathroom, of course,” Abigail continued. “I don’t just wait by the seventh grade hall to watch for her or anything.”

“My family likes to save it for special occasions,” Gracie replied. “My parents usually work late anyway, but they’re taking the day off for me.”

“What do they do?” Jen asked. “I haven’t really thought about that before.”

“My dad’s a chiropractor, my mom has a late shift at a convenience mart,” Gracie replied, closing her locker door. “So where are you eating?”

“Probably somewhere in the Galleria. Place is huge. Or maybe Montrose.” Jen packed some more papers in her backpack before turning to head down the hall.

“What’s Montrose?”

“I think it’s another city a little farther away, like Dallas or San Antonio.”

“She also yelled at me at lunch for taking a while to decide where to sit,” Abigail said, waving at other students as they passed by.

“Does your mom have any cool stories about robberies?” Jen asked. “I’ve always wondered what it’s like working so late.”

“It’s not cool, it’s scary.” Gracie noticed Abigail’s backpack was somewhat open and zipped it closed for her. “It happens sometimes. She just gives them the money, and that’s that. They don’t really hold a lot. So are you going to do anything fun over break?”

“Oh my gosh, Ms. Horwitz is right there,” Abigail said, pointing to a teacher speaking to a student. “Please hide me, I don’t want to see her again today.”

Jen and Gracie both moved to her right so that she couldn’t be seen easily as they walked. “I’m thinking about making a model of the solar system or something. But a cool one, like a projection when you turn the lights off, or maybe a hologram. I also want to attach something about stars, but my brother said that’s boring.”

“I’ll listen to you talk about them,” Gracie said. “It sounds really interesting to me.”

“It is, but it’s also pretty easy. Can I ask if your mother ever sees anything interesting happen?”

“I don’t know, I’m not really too close to her. Can we talk more about your project? It seems cool, I’m just going on a cruise instead.”

“What do you want me to say?” At that moment, Jen reached her destination. “I’ll show it to you when it’s done, I haven’t been able to start it because of another class. Group projects are the worst.” She placed her hand on the door handle. “See you tomorrow?”

“Of course,” Gracie said.

“Hopefully, Ms. Horwitz doesn’t kill us first,” Abigail said.

Jen opened the door, revealing Ms. Crawford’s classroom, resembling a library more than what one would expect in a middle school, with bookshelves reaching up to the ceiling, cabinets lining the walls, and a large table in the center, surrounded by chairs. The standard desks present in the other classrooms instead sat scattered in the corner. A large, green carpet sat beneath the table, and countless posters appeared on the wall. One that stuck out to Abigail, leaving a lasting impression in her mind for the years since she’d first stepped foot into her mother’s classroom, was one of Disney’s interpretation of Hades pouting with the text “**Hades** can’t hold **Persephone** back, so don’t let **anything** hold **you** back” layered over him. Abigail had never understood the poster, and she still didn’t. The offending item included a version of Hades who had never met Persephone and definitely wouldn’t have let her leave. After all, Disney’s Hades was an evil god whereas the actual Hades, like death itself, wasn’t inherently bad but instead was feared as an inevitable part of life. The implication that Hades couldn’t keep Persephone in his realm was also false as he willingly let her leave, Abigail thought. One of her mother’s books had mentioned some controversy over this, but she thought she was right. She also found the comparison inappropriate as Hades loved Persephone while she didn’t love school. However, there was one thing the poster got right, which humored her to no end: it used present tense, which fit with how going by the myth, Persephone would still be active as the seasons continued changing regularly. Abigail had at one point written a poem about her frustration with this poster, but she didn’t know now where she’d placed it.

Abigail picked up a book on yōkai, sat next to Jen at a chessboard, and read for a few minutes uninterrupted before Arnie walked in, taking a seat on Jen's other side. "Hey Abby, hi Jen," he said.

Abigail put the book down and observed the new occupant while Jen messed with the chess pieces, arranging them in nonsensical manners. "Hi."

"I bought a pizza at lunch today," Arnie said. "A big, full box, not just a slice. Twenty dollars."

"Was it good?"

"Jen, set it up. I don't know. It was supposed to be for my friends, but a lot of people I hadn't talked to in a long time crowded around me saying, 'hey, we're friends,' and I guess we were." Arnie grabbed black and white pawns and held the two pieces behind his back, shuffling them before presenting two hands to Jen. "I held onto one slice for myself, but once the rest were gone, everyone disappeared."

"Left," Jen said. Arnie opened up his hand, revealing a white pawn, and Jen flipped the board around as she started arranging again.

"That's how you know who your real friends are," Abigail said. "But if I had the same lunch period as you, I would've protected it."

"Maybe I should've brought the money on a day when I had lunch with more friends," Arnie replied as he moved pieces to match Jen.

"I would've liked to see twenty dollars. I could buy a lot of books. Or gardening supplies."

“I know some good concealer if you want to hide that scar,” Arnie said, running a finger down his cheek.

Abigail felt somewhere between embarrassed and irritated, and normally, she would’ve returned to what she was reading to avoid continuing the conversation, but in truth, she was terrified by some of the yōkai she’d read about and wanted an excuse to avoid opening the book again without appearing conspicuous.

“Go,” Jen said.

Arnie realized it was his turn. “Oh, sorry.”

Abigail spoke quickly, aiming to turn the subject elsewhere. “Arnie, if it’s been twelve years since we’ve seen each other, and you’ve changed and aren’t a girl anymore, but I don’t know how to talk to you, would you understand that I’m only human and forgive me?”

The embarrassment Riley felt from this question tore the entire scene apart, killing the image and returning Abigail to her reality in the present.

Abigail sat by her mother’s bedside, feeling the smooth floor she had nearly tripped on more than once beneath her feet. As she watched the weak woman, who had aged more in a mere five days than she had in a decade, Abigail felt the urge to break down again, so she forced herself to look away, toward the television. “Why don’t I tell you a story, Mom? It’s about a

woman who met with an old friend and tried to mend things before visiting her mother in the hospital.”

Her mother laughed. “I think I’ve heard that one before.”

“This woman, her name is Andreina, she had arranged a meeting with her old friend, Arnie...t, aren’t I a good storyteller, Mom? His name is Kevin. So Andreina wasn’t supposed to meet Kevin today, right? She had to work with a client for her... archeology job. She had to draft an entire *Parasaurolophus* skeleton by the end of the month, and she was already falling behind. Lucky for her, she got to push it aside for later when Arnie agreed to meet at the museum and catch up after twelve years. After all, Andreina had come to visit her ailing mother, who had suffered a rather nasty fall on top of getting sick from something the doctors haven’t detected yet.” Abigail dramatized her story more and more as she spoke, hoping this was the reason her mother laughed and pushing any of her own mixed feelings aside.

“Andreina sounds like the world’s second-best daughter,” Abigail’s mother said.

“She probably could’ve done more, and she probably regrets that she didn’t,” Abigail responded. “But I’m getting off-track. She and Kevin are at the museum looking at big dinosaur bones, right? And they’re both pretty quiet. Andreina is awkward. Kevin seems cheery, almost bustling with energy, when he walks in, but now he’s just as quiet as Andreina is. So finally, Kevin brings himself to say, ‘Hi.’ And Andreina says hi right back. It’s not even small talk, it’s ‘we’re-too-awkward-to-talk’ talk.

“But eventually, the conversation does start in earnest. Andreina learns a bit about what Kevin does. He’s a lawyer now. Ran for representative and mayor a few times too, but those didn’t work out. Andreina tells him that’s too bad, and he says he may try again eventually, but

at least he can help people as a lawyer now, so it's not all bad. And then the conversation dies again, and they just walk around the museum for a bit.

“Eventually, Kevin asks Andreina why she was so eager to get out so fast, and why she never came back. And she's not sure herself. It makes sense, right? If she knew, don't you think she would've opened with it, Mom? I think she would've. But that's not a good answer. She can't say she just wanted to get away because she's not sure that's true. She doesn't think there was any one incident that caused her to leave. And she also doesn't think she had a bad time before she left. It's like someone flipped a light switch, and suddenly she's gone. So that's all she can give, an I'm-not-sure.

“Would you believe the conversation dies again there? They could just talk and talk about anything as kids, but now it's hard. I really didn't expect that – I doubt Andreina did either. And eventually, Andreina decides to address the elephant in the room. In hindsight, maybe she shouldn't have done that. But she wanted to keep the conversation going. ‘Do you hate me, Margret?’ she asks. I'm, erm, not sure if she realizes her mistake here. I kind of forgot what happened next until I read my notes later, based on the texts Andreina sent me, obviously. But it seems like Andreina spent the rest of the day apologizing profusely. She swore up and down that it was a mistake, that she didn't mean to say that. And again, I don't know how Kevin reacted, but going by the messages – which Andreina texted me – it seems like he said it was OK and just wanted to move on. He sent Andreina a paragraph about how he doesn't hate her, he knows it was just a mistake, and he's glad she's doing well.

“And I think that's the worst part of this story, really. He has no ill will. He probably thinks Andreina was doing this for herself, for self-resolve or something, and what can she do to prove she didn't? But they're obviously not really gonna talk again, so that could be his last

thought of her, that she cares more about making herself feel good and finding resolutions than actually catching up. And he's completely wrong, but I'm not sure she can tell him that. So in a way, she took something that was already resolved and resolved it even more, but now it's more open-ended for her. Do you know what I mean, Mom?"

Abigail's mother watched as her daughter told this story the whole time, her smile never fading. "You'll never find what you're looking for if you're always looking for something, Abigail. And neither will your friend." Her smile grew. "Don't try to gain anything out of this. Life isn't an unchanging saga or a Homeric epic. I'm glad you're back in town, but I don't want you to look for anything out of it. I just want you to have a good time while you're here."

Abigail kept these words in mind as she departed, but in scrolling through her old messages with Arnie as she approached her car, she realized that she'd completely forgotten to contact Jackson, one of her closest friends. Jackson Li was someone she had confided in a lot back in high school, and Jackson had done the same; she'd even cried to Abigail over college admissions at one point, something no other friends had ever done. Abigail readied a message as memories of their good times together came flooding back.

Abigail picked up a book on yōkai in her mother's classroom, sat next to Jen at a chessboard on one side and Jackson on the other, and read uninterrupted for a few minutes before Arnie walked in, taking a seat on Jen's other side. "Hey Abby, hi Jen, what's up Jackson," he said.

Abigail put the book down and observed the new occupant while Jen messed with the chess pieces, arranging them in nonsensical manners. “Hi.”

“Hi Arnie,” Jackson said.

“I bought a pizza at lunch today,” Arnie said. “A big, full box, not just a slice. Twenty dollars.”

“Was it good?” Abigail asked.

“Yeah, was it?” Jackson added.

“Jen, set it up. I don’t know. It was supposed to be for my friends, but a lot of people I hadn’t talked to in a long time crowded around me saying, ‘hey, we’re friends,’ and I guess we were.” Arnie grabbed black and white pawns and held the two pieces behind his back, shuffling them before presenting two hands to Jen. “I held onto one slice for myself, but once the rest were gone, everyone disappeared.”

“Pick left,” Jackson said.

“Left,” Jen said. Arnie opened up his hand, revealing a white pawn, and Jen flipped the board around as she started arranging again.

“That’s how you know who your real friends are,” Abigail said. “But if I had the same lunch period as you, I would’ve protected it.”

Jackson nodded. “Yeah, me too!”

“Maybe I should’ve brought the money on a day when I had lunch with more friends,” Arnie replied as he moved pieces to match Jen.

“I would’ve liked to see twenty dollars,” Abigail said. “I could buy a lot of books. Or gardening supplies.”

“I’ve got gardening supplies if you need any, Abby.” Jackson made shoveling motions.

“I know some good concealer if you want to hide that scar,” Arnie said, running a finger down his cheek.

“Hey, Abigail doesn’t need that,” Jackson replied. “The scar looks cool.”

“Thank you, Jackson.” Abigail felt a sense of relief typically reserved for those who had avoided a grisly demise at the hands of the deadly Kuchisake-onna.

“Go,” Jen said.

Jackson leaned over the board. “Yeah, go, we’ve been waiting for a while.”

Arnie realized it was his turn. “Oh, sorry.”

Abigail spoke quickly, aiming to turn the subject elsewhere. “Arnie, do you think my scar would dissuade a Kuchisake-onna? You too, Jackson.”

Jen couldn’t help but laugh as Abigail mispronounced the yōkai’s name, making it sound closer to ‘kuch-is-sake-on-a.’ “Abby, don’t you know any Japanese?”

“No, I’m in Spanish,” Abigail said, reddening.

“Sensei would be so disappointed. It’s ‘koo-chee-saw-keh-ohn-nah. You pronounce each syllable one-at-a-time.”

“Thank you, wise master.” Abigail bowed because she thought it would be funny in the context of the conversation, but she also wanted to hide her face.

“Yeah Abby, you know they offer Japanese here?” Jackson asked. “It’s so cool, Jen is brilliant. I hope they have it in high school.”

“Can we put on a timer?” Arnie asked, eyeing Jen’s hand, which had been close to a piece until it fell to the table at Abigail’s butchering of a foreign language.

October 12th, 2005

“Gracie, did you ever take care of those ants in the kitchen?” Arnie asked. “I want to come over again.”

“We called the exterminator,” Gracie replied. “We’re getting it taken care of.”

“Good,” Jackson said.

Abigail now witnessed an opportunity to reply. “Bob? My mother said he’s pretty racist.”

Gracie drummed her fingers on the table. “As long as he gets rid of those ants, does it matter?”

Abigail responded, “I suppose not.”

Jackson turned to Abigail as the conversation continued without them. “I think it matters.”

“You do?” Abigail asked. “Why?”

“You’re giving a racist your money, aren’t you? What if you gave it to someone who isn’t racist?”

Abigail placed her hand on her chin. “I suppose.”

“Anyway, have you seen Riley recently?”

“No, why?”

“I wanted to ask about that Destiny’s Child album that’s about to come out, I forgot the exact day. They’re really killing it.”

Abigail opened her mouth but was unable to speak. She wanted to help, but she didn’t know where to start. She’d never listened much to pop music as she found it loud and unruly. She instead held a preference for instrumental tunes, often scouring shops for classical composers or even the occasional movie score whenever she heard a song she couldn’t erase from her mind. In all honesty, she couldn’t even name any of Destiny’s Child songs, or who the artist known as Destiny’s Child actually was. Fortunately for her, lunch didn’t last much longer, so at the end, she said, “See you in theatre,” and she left. She supposed they spoke mostly at the end of the day anyway.

8

February 7th, 2020

Hey Jackson, how’s it going? I just wanted to check up on you and see how you’re doing since it’s been a while. I’m back in town for the month since my mother’s sick, and I’ve been visiting some of our old friends to catch up with everyone. Just wanted to see if you were interested in doing the same. I’ve really changed and matured over the years, and there’s so much I’d love to tell you about. So really, I guess I just wanted to see how you’re doing and know if you’d be interested in meeting up with me at some point. Also, I just wanted to say that if I ever said anything offensive or hurtful, I’m really sorry. It wasn’t my intention to do that at all, but I’m not going to try to make any excuses. I’ve improved as a person and am much

better now than I was back then, and I would really love to get back in touch with you now.

Seen February 4, 9:37 pm

9

February 9th, 2020

Abigail walked along a quiet street, only her own footsteps against the gravel making any noise. With each *crunch* below her soles, she understood her presence among nature, a companion she'd long missed, and decided to force herself to enjoy a quiet stroll around the city. The small complex she explored held identical houses at every turn, but decorations on every lawn allowed each inhabitant some personality. Abigail's favorite on the first street was a colossal, inflatable snowman with a rifle and a Santa hat, as if whoever had put it up had decided to ignore that the holiday season had already ended, the vapid commercialism long gone.

Some trees added to the sparse greenery only the lawns otherwise provided, but the complex's gentrification and homogenous two-story homes on every block prevented any other color or livelihood from shining through. Abigail felt a small ache in her foot and decided to turn, moving to explore another area in the neighborhood. On the next street, she heard screams and chants, originating from children at play on the far side. They tossed a basketball around a small hoop situated in the road and ran around each other. Abigail, happy they enjoyed themselves, decided to watch. They didn't have teams, instead attempting to swipe the ball whenever they could from each opponent, but they occasionally banded together for reasons Abigail could only imagine – alliances, revenge, bullying, humor, and so on.

She imagined life at home for each of the five children. One, the tallest, would probably be pushed down the path of an athlete because of an overbearing father. He played with a rowdy style implying siblings, likely brothers. He had scored the most points because of his height, but he also knew how to play the game better than the others. He was probably the child who loved playing not-quite-sport games the P.E. coaches – did they still have those, Abigail wondered – assigned in school.

The second child had nice, cleaner shoes despite expending as much energy while playing as most of the others, which Abigail attributed to his likely wealthy parents. He displayed an air of arrogance regardless, holding the ball in a way that proclaimed his unknown name as the only one worthy of the ball, its sole inheritor and owner. He almost appeared sad when he parted with the ball to score a point, and relentless anger overtook him whenever another stole the ball. Abigail doubted he had siblings. He probably made the honor roll in school, too. She couldn't stand him.

The third child had a false innocence about him Abigail knew all too well. He was a snake who would turn into a monster as soon as he had opportunity and nothing to lose. Whenever he didn't have the ball, he didn't try hard to get it, instead quivering and walking slowly, but as soon as the ball flew toward him, he seized it as if overcome with a passion Abigail couldn't believe existed. She felt bad for his parents, who were almost certainly at the mercy of this manipulative child, and she doubted he ever experienced a day when he didn't get whatever he wanted.

The fourth stood out to Abigail. His timid posture appeared far more genuine than the previous child's, and he constantly ran onto the lawn or had his back to the house, which made her think this was where he lived. Often, she saw the other children team up to keep the ball

away from him, and no one congratulated him on the rare occasion he scored. Abigail recognized him as the bullied child who didn't have any other groups or friends he could rely on, and she felt pity. All she could hope was that he'd find people who would value him the same way he valued those responsible for his lack of comfort.

The fifth and final child, the lone girl, caused Abigail to freeze briefly. She was athletic and better than most of the other children, only finding a rival in the tall child, but some familiar quality about her made Abigail immensely uncomfortable. Thus, Abigail decided not to linger on her.

Ultimately, Abigail only stood there for a small amount of time – she didn't want to look at her phone and see a reminder of the messages she knew wouldn't receive responses – before one of the children noticed and stared at her. Shortly after, the other children followed, and Abigail, realizing that she was now arousing suspicion, retreated to the solace of her car a few streets away.

On her drive back toward La Marque, Abigail passed the mall at forty-five, filled with all sorts of stores and restaurants. She'd spent a lot of time there as a child since there weren't a lot of places for her to go in La Marque besides Mulligan Park, close to her mother's house, and her friends had never appreciated nature as much as she did. She'd always met strange people from all walks of life, as if this one mall were a crossroad she perpetually couldn't utilize. Something would always stop her, some unseen force, up until she graduated from high school, and now that she was back in town, the force had returned as well, along with knots in her shoulders.

Before arriving home, she decided to take a walk by Mulligan Park to reminisce. The hill she'd once loved to play on remained, and atop it, she saw a family having a picnic. For just a

moment, the image of those three on the hill, presumably two women and their daughter sitting and enjoying themselves, struck Abigail. Even more than all of the other neighborhoods and citizens whose lives moved on she'd passed, this image caused feelings of happiness to well up within her. The adults held genuine joy on their faces, the child curiosity, and during that one moment, Abigail could forget her worries. The project she needed to complete, her anxiety over the upcoming meetings, her left-on-read messages, her mother in the hospital, and even Riley passed on from her mind as the image remained nearly static before her. In her awe, Abigail felt a small headache grow, and something ran down her face, leaving a tingling sensation. For that brief moment, she felt content.

When she arrived home at the end of the day, she moved into the living room, placed her computer on a table, and then turned toward the hall at the end of the living room. The path turned into a fork right and left, and Abigail moved right. What was once the toy room stopped her on the way to the master bedroom, her mother's, and she entered a room she now understood as storage. She had plans to draft for a client by the end of the month, and she wanted to see if any graph paper had somehow lingered from her school years. She also wanted a distraction from both the anxieties of her life and the fact that she'd forgotten to go to the store earlier, so she continued searching even though she knew this would be a fruitless effort.

While she was correct in that there was no graph paper anywhere in the house, she found something else in this room, filled with so much junk that she could barely stand in any one area, much less enter: a folder containing a singular sheet of notebook paper and crude handwriting Abigail recognized as her own. As Abigail had spent enough time tearing through this room and

its two closets that she felt compelled to give up on her task, she decided she could entertain the notion of reading one of her old poems.

*I see it standing there, on the wall,
The poster taunting me
The know-it-all.
Hades speaks there, confidently, even though he
Gets his facts wrong. Is that the true
Motivation? To strive for the real,
The natural, the exact, the glue
Of life, what holds us so that we won't peel?
Hades can't hold Persephone back, so
Don't let anything hold you back?
With everything so wrong, why not throw
It all away, decide to go on the attack?*

Close to midnight, when Abigail finally fell asleep in her old bedroom, she experienced a dream that, counter to what she'd hoped, played much of that day's events once more. Abigail naturally didn't understand she was asleep, so she didn't question her decision to enter her home to meet Dawn Goode, a former friend of hers, but she did think it odd that she could recall some of their previous conversation from earlier that day, now an eternity ago to Abigail. She recalled

that she had run into Dawn randomly during a sudden lunch in Galveston caused by – impulse, a desire to go somewhere else, or another factor, Abigail wasn't sure – and that the meeting hadn't gone well, but she had her second chance now. She could easily resolve this problem and restore their friendship.

“You have your tickets, right?” Riley asked as Abigail entered her mother's home to see Dawn sitting on the couch, watching something expire on television.

“What tickets?” Abigail asked.

“*The Office* musical,” Riley responded. “It's about Dwight, Jackson, and Chloe getting Michael to come back.”

Abigail opened her wallet and pulled out the two tickets. “Oh. Yes, I remember now.”

“Go on,” Riley said, placing a hand on Abigail's back. “Dawn only said that you didn't appreciate her, right?”

“I think she called me selfish.”

“Did she?”

“I might have been dreaming. Yes, I think I was asleep for that one.” Abigail walked toward the couch, and Dawn morphed into Arnie. “Hey, I'm sorry.”

“It's okay,” Arnie said. “I forgive you.”

“What if I'm asleep right now?” Abigail asked. “Then I'll never see you again, and you won't forgive me.”

“This is real.”

Abigail suddenly realized that she was in high school once more, standing in the middle of her theatre's black box, but she now spoke to Dawn again. "Do you want to go see *the Office*?" She noticed several former students who'd taken the class and acted with her, including Jackson, sitting in chairs on platforms.

"I'm not gonna be your friend again just because you're talking to me now," Dawn said. "We don't know each other anymore. I'm a different person now. So are you. I had a bad feeling from the second you sent me that message, and it sounds like I was right. Arnold and Marco might not have seen it, but Jackson or whoever definitely did, and I did too."

Abigail had heard these words before. It was as if her previous dream about Dawn had been prescient. She wanted to react, but already, she was in the middle of the musical, Jackson sitting next to her. The show took place in the middle of IHOP, and several foldup chairs had been arranged for the audience. Abigail's phone started ringing in the middle of a musical number performed by Ms. Horwitz to Ross Geller, whom Abigail had forgotten had joined Dunder Mifflin for a few episodes previously, forcing her to rush out and take the call despite her urge to watch this show. When she ran back in, the show had already ended, the lights were out, and everyone was gone besides Jackson.

"I'll see you tomorrow?" Jackson said, walking by Abigail with a smile.

Abigail tried opening her mouth to respond, but she met some resistance, so she pushed harder, and her eyes opened, allowing her to awaken in her bed. As she tried to make sense of what events she could before they faded, the question that lingered on her mind the most was how she knew who Ross Geller was as she'd never actively watched *Friends*, nor did she intend to. This question, in its refusal to leave, caused the majority of the dream to disappear just as

Abigail tried to make sense of Dawn's role, and all she could recall now was Jackson and something about how they were friends again. As she fell back asleep, she hoped she hadn't been dreaming then and that Jackson – or perhaps Dawn, she wasn't sure – had forgiven and started talking to her again.

February 13th, 2020

13th of February, 2020

Would it be wrong to say that I've contemplated following up? As I write this manifesto, in part to avoid the temptation, I find myself slipping rapidly, repeatedly. Perhaps I should lay bare the facts of this case so I might understand the desire to pursue a path so useless as this.

My meetings with Marco and Arnie went well. Specifically, I've already started messaging Marco again, and while I don't know if I can bring myself to try with Arnie, I have liked one of his new posts, but only one so that he doesn't think anything strange of me. Jackson left me on read. Dawn verbally eviscerated me, which I feel was a little harsh. I still have forthcoming meetings with Gracie, Molly, Daniel, Chloe, and Jen. I'm perhaps most apprehensive for my meetings with Molly, with whom I have a long history, and Chloe, someone I haven't truly spoken to since elementary school. However, Chloe and I did start messaging each other again out of the blue a few months ago, so I'm not too worried about her so much as I am curious. She could very well be a different person offline.

Before I ramble further, as I start to realize I have in some of my messages, I should sort out my thoughts on each person to help me figure out what to do next.

Friends: Marco, Arnie, Gracie, Molly, Daniel, Chloe, Jen, everyone who couldn't meet

???: Jackson

Complicated: Dawn

I have made no enemies yet, and considering how much I've worried that everyone hates me, I consider that a good start. I even compressed the friends list to those I have met or will meet with and those who aren't in town instead of everyone who responded to my messages in March but couldn't work things out. Therefore, I'm in an objectively better position than where I started.

But it doesn't feel that way. It feels like I'm a lot worse off. Maybe I should follow up with Jackson and Dawn. Perhaps even Marco to ensure the messages aren't as big of a deal as I thought. And I'm still worried Arnie's mad with me for using the wrong name – as he has every right to be. And I don't even want to think about what meeting Molly again will be like. Why is this such a difficult situation?

Perhaps I should focus on something else. Wallowing in misery over problems that won't bother me one year from today won't solve them. I have acquired graph paper to draw schematics for my client, but I'm not ready yet. I'm planning on starting on the seventeenth, the day after I meet with Gracie. I don't have a unified idea for what the client wants, but I can figure it out when I need to. This job's much easier when they have complete visions going in, but now I have to come up with the best plan ever by the end of the month, or my job security could be in serious jeopardy.

As much as it pains me to say this, I'm also worried about what will happen to my mother. She hasn't gotten any worse, but if she does,

I can't write anything further on the subject. This memoir shouldn't have strayed from its primary purpose in the first place. With it, I have a written record of how my intentions in these reunions are pure, and I don't have anything to gain from them, nor do I want to. Therefore, to prove this, I will not message anyone until they message me back. This way, I won't intrude on their spaces, and I can show that I've listened to them in their criticisms of me. They'll contact me when they're ready, and I look forward to then.

12

February 15th, 2020

Returning from her morning hospital trip, Abigail entered her bedroom, lay down, and closed her eyes. She had decided to send some follow-up messages after all to a few people she'd convinced herself needed reminders to respond, and now, she thought the best manner in which she could cope with what she read from some people, particularly Dawn, was to stay isolated from the outer world in the room she had once lived in.

While her bedroom wasn't smaller than any other in the house, she still felt as if it didn't hold much space. The bed, situated in the middle of the room against the back wall, left only enough space on the near side for a night stand and access to the closet and for a television on the far side. Opposite the bed, a dresser creating a gap Abigail had effortlessly passed through as a child but now needed to either squeeze through or use the bed to circumvent. Atop the ancient dresser lay a nature diorama filled with clay animals Abigail had created, with help from her mother, in the second grade. Past the gap and to the left of the bed, the old television sat with a dual VCR and DVD player, and opposite this relic, the closet, next to several discarded toys

below the night stand, held enough space when open for Abigail to walk in and turn as necessary. Empty shelves attached to the walls reaffirmed that she had tried to hold books in this room in the past, but once her collection had grown too large, she'd decided to place all of them together in another room.

Abigail attempted to sit still on her bed but couldn't remain in place for even seven minutes before she decided to leave. Perhaps she could still find a method of isolation from the outer world in the outer world itself. She knew the location of a small forest next to forty-five, one where she could keep to herself without distraction. In broad daylight, she pulled her car to the side of the road, closer to Texas City, and exited. Only the sounds of vehicles and tires tearing across the street rang as Abigail walked among the trees. She moved farther from the feeder, allowing the noise pollution to fade, but nothing replaced it; birds didn't chirp, animals didn't scurry, and the wind wasn't loud enough to rustle anything. Abigail at times heard nothing more than her own footsteps, her shoes crushing leaves or burying pebbles.

When she felt she had walked enough, Abigail leaned against a tree. She briefly considered how she'd wanted to run into this forest countless times as a child but couldn't because she didn't want to break her mother's trust. As she stood now, she regretted that she couldn't even feel a sense of peace. The tantalizing prospect of sending even more messages taunted her, but before she could muse on it further, Riley appeared in front of her. Rather than speak, Abigail decided to slide until she sat in the soft mound of dirt below, hoping her worldly woes would perish. She observed the peaceful scene of green and brown as the colors merged and faded into nothingness. Her eyelids now sealed shut, she re-envisioned the image, filled with much more greenery and several of her old friends. On the other end, she could see Gracie, Jen, Dawn, Arnie, Jackson, and Nora together, sitting at a table and having a pleasant conversation. In

the middle of the clearing, Abigail witnessed Molly playing basketball with the children from that neighborhood she had recently observed. Sitting opposite Abigail in the other corner, Chloe, who read a book the former couldn't make out from this distance. Marco, Daniel, and Zoey sat at another table between Chloe and the first, leaving only Riley to accompany Abigail.

Among the chaotic, swirling noises nature provided, Abigail thought she could truly hear conversations taking place, as if her mind had spurred reality. She wanted to open her eyes and observe this beautiful setting, but she knew not to. Rather, she waited until Riley finally saw fit to address her.

"Do you miss them?" Riley asked.

"Of course I do," Abigail replied.

"You know this isn't possible anymore."

"I can still befriend most of them."

"Why, Abigail?"

"Because they're good people. We had great friendships once. I don't want to lose them."

"You have new connections, ones who won't leave you."

"But I can have more."

"Why?"

Gracie approached. "Hey Abby, you look so lonely. Might I sit here?"

"If you insist," Abigail responded. She remained still as Gracie already knew where to sit.

Riley was irate. “Answer my question, Abigail.”

“I’m a bad person.”

“The bees are so busy today,” Gracie said.

Riley floated upside-down, lounging in an unseen recliner. “Of course you’re a bad person. And you’re trying to make up for it with all of this.”

“I don’t want them to hate me. I want to do something to positively impact their lives, even if it’s small.” Abigail stood, causing Gracie to follow. “I can’t make up for anything I’ve done because I’m a bad person, but if we’re friends again, perhaps they won’t think poorly of me.”

Abigail felt unbridled anxiety as she returned home.

13

February 16th, 2020

Abigail envisioned herself entering Gulf Greyhound Park, a location off forty-five between the mall and her home. As a child, she had loved watching the dogs race, but in 2015, the park had closed for good. Abigail, despite her absence of nearly ten years, had been sad upon receiving the news from her mother but didn’t think even a calamity of this caliber warranted returning to town. Fortunately, it had undergone a limited reopening in 2018, and following that success, races now occurred regularly during limited intervals.

Abigail, per her planned meeting with Gracie, saw the two of them reuniting with a hug and quick greetings. “Abby, it’s been so long, how are you?” Gracie would ask.

“Right? It’s so good to see you,” Abigail would respond. “Also, it’s Abigail now.”

“Abigail, huh? Fancy. Sadly, I’m still just meager Gracie.”

“Well, that’s fine. After all, I’m eager to catch up.” Both would laugh at this joke.

They’d enjoy a quick meal – ribs for Gracie, nothing for the vegetarian Abigail – and then they’d head into the seats to watch the dogs race.

“This is just like old times,” Gracie would say. “It’s like you never left.”

Abigail, focused on the dogs as they ran around the track, envisioned the response, “It really is.”

“Why did you leave?”

“Honestly, I don’t know. I don’t think I had a bad childhood. I got over all of the rejection I faced in high school. I’m not sad that I don’t write poems anymore. I don’t hate my mother. It was just as if I’d found a new home, one I felt comfortable staying in, so why leave?”

“But you didn’t stay in contact with us either.”

“I know, and I feel awful. I responded to some messages for a while, but I just realized at some point that without anything specifically keeping us together, there weren’t really any reasons to talk anymore. It happened with plenty of people I knew in college too. I’m hoping I can change that now, that maybe it isn’t too late.”

Gracie would embrace Abigail at this point. “I’m so happy to hear that. I’d accepted that we’d never speak again, but now that we are, I’d love to keep talking even when you go back. When are you going back, by the way?”

“At the end of the month. I can’t stay away for too long, and my mother assures me she’ll be fine.”

“Perhaps I’ll visit her with you if I find time.”

“That would be nice. By the way, I have to ask, what do you do now?” Abigail already knew the answer, of course. What purpose did social media hold besides revealing everything about friends, acquaintances, and former friends in situations identical to that of Abigail?

“I’m a realtor. I sell houses.” Gracie would hold out her hands, waving them frantically. “Oh, but don’t worry, I make sure to get people the best deals I can. I’m not like one of those slimy businesspeople you see in the movies, I’m using my position to help people.”

“That’s good to know.”

“What do you do?”

“I’m an architect. Mostly just designing plans according to others’ specifications.”

“You’d think you have more control.”

Abigail would laugh, or perhaps simply smile, or maybe even throw her arms back around Gracie if she’d feel daring. She only wanted to indicate that sentence amused her, along with what she knew the next question would be. “Maybe, but it’s nice to get paid for following directions too.”

“Oh yeah, there’s a lot of money in it, right? That must be nice.”

“Actually, that’s a common misconception. I’m firmly middle class, but my pay’s only impressive in this job market.” Abigail decided she’d have to finish strong with an overdramatic

performance. “Oh, how fortunate I am for being one of the few millennials to get a good job without trouble.”

Gracie would laugh, and then the race would end, and Abigail would feel comfortable enough to resume their friendship just as it had once been. She was ready.

14

Abigail pulled into Gulf Greyhound Park’s lot, even more spacious than the actual building ahead, and walked toward the entrance. The lot was almost entirely empty, so Abigail wondered briefly if the park’s reopening would last even through its scheduled finale at the end of the month, but she supposed if she never found out, she could always imagine the park perpetually remaining open. She enjoyed a quiet walk through the lot as the sun’s rays engulfed her in a warmth just intense enough to be uncomfortable before she entered the gargantuan entrance hall. Abigail could see images of herself as a child, winning a big, plush doll of some comic book villain from a vending machine. In another corner, she saw herself, Gracie, and Jen standing below a big screen mounted to the wall, watching the races and trying to understand what the symbols in the results meant.

Her trance soon faded as a name she enjoyed hearing but didn’t anticipate registering entered her ears. “Abigail?”

She turned and found her former friend, once a mere caricature represented through social media, standing before her. “Oh my god,” Abigail responded. She knew she saw Gracie

for the first time in twelve years, but she went still for a moment as if unable to process this. Her mouth remained open, and she tried to form words, but nothing exited her lips.

“Do you remember me?” Gracie asked.

“Of course,” Abigail quickly said. “You’re Gracie. How have you been? It’s been so long.” She weighed whether to follow up.

“I’ve-”

“I’m eager to catch up,” Abigail continued. Realizing she’d cut Gracie off, she added, “Oh, I’m so sorry.” She truly felt remorse, but she also regretted how stilted that sentence had sounded.

“It’s fine,” Gracie replied, a vacant look on her face. “Would you like to go-”

“Yes, let’s.” Abigail cringed. She’d interrupted Gracie once more. “I’m s-”

“Don’t worry, let’s just go.”

Abigail, speaking only when addressed, walked alongside Gracie past the food court and to the ticket counter before the two entered the audience to watch the races. Abigail only realized they would skip the meal once they had moved into the sea of seats, at which point she asked, “Did you not want to eat?”

“Oh, I don’t have time, I’ve got to be somewhere in an hour. I thought we’d just watch a few races together.”

“That’s fine.” Abigail spoke with some hesitation. She could adjust to this difference easily, but she worried more that she appeared off-putting to Gracie in some manner. She needed to correct that at once. “So, what have you been up to?”

Gracie counted out the answers on her fingers. “Let’s see, working, traveling, dating, regular stuff. What about you?”

“Um, yes working, no traveling, no dating. One out of three isn’t bad, right?” She made herself laugh, and to her relief, Gracie joined in. “I’ve just been going through life, you know?”

“Oh yeah, totally.”

Abigail watched a dog race its foes around the track. She settled on this as it had slightly darker fur than the others and a white spot on the tip of its tail. She focused on it, hoping to see it succeed as she searched for words to fill the conversation. Her attention remained centered on the dogs as her favorite pulled to the front of the pack. She finally figured out what to say as her preferred greyhound lost speed and fell back, but before she could speak, she realized that Gracie had been talking and now looked at her in anticipation of a response. “Uh, I’m sorry?”

“I was just saying you’re really into this race. Which dog’s your favorite?”

“Oh, um, number five. So, you know, how has it been since I left? Like, what have things been like?”

Gracie appeared hesitant for a moment before flippantly saying, “The same.”

“That’s not a bad thing, right?”

“Never said it was.”

Abigail felt a tinge of anxiety as she plotted out her next point of attack. She couldn’t tell whether Gracie had always been this nonchalant or if Gracie genuinely disliked her. She hadn’t already said anything wrong, had she? Abigail allowed her eyes to drift to the side, and she saw Gracie looking around with her mouth closed, nothing to say. Abigail thought for at least half a

minute before she said, “I didn’t mean to insinuate you did.” Once more, silence permeated the audience, broken only by the galloping of greyhounds on the hardened dirt track. “But I guess I needed a bit of a change, maybe that was why I left.”

“Oh.”

Abigail couldn’t tell if Gracie had spaced out or was watching the race. She decided to just watch the race too, speaking whenever she could come up with a new conversation topic and then allowing them to die whenever neither she nor Gracie had anything else to say. It didn’t take long before Gracie stood up, referring to an approaching appointment.

“It was great to see you again. Have fun in the world of architecture!”

“You too,” Abigail responded. “I hope you have fun in the soulless world of real estate.”

Abigail noted a slight shift on Gracie’s face, one of confusion – or perhaps discontent. Perhaps her joke hadn’t landed. No matter. That was all it had been, a joke, and Abigail didn’t imagine it would cause any problems. Still, something pushed her to continue. She felt some excitement. After all, she’d gotten everything she wanted: she’d caught up with Gracie, and she now had the opportunity to rekindle their friendship.

“It was so great to see you again.” Abigail had to raise her voice as Gracie had started walking away. “I’ll message you later.”

Abigail wasn’t sure she heard a response.

Abigail thought that night about what went wrong, what she should've said instead during that conversation. She couldn't erase that image of Gracie's face, that uncertainty – no, indignation. She'd thought it a simple joke – everyone knew realtors were soulless demons who cared about profit and nothing more – but she didn't think Gracie felt the same way. Abigail decided against pursuing further correspondence. She didn't know why she'd even said that. There were countless ways that day could've gone better. The greeting was fine, then Gracie asked if Abigail had remembered her, and everything immediately fell to ruin.

“Of course I remember you,” Abigail should've said. “You're... Chloe, right?” Then a laugh. “It is so great to see you, Gracie. How have you been?”

Then she should've let Gracie finish the response, “I've been doing great! The world of real estate really keeps me busy.”

“I'm really happy to hear that. I'm so eager to catch up, Gracie.”

“Yes, as am I,” Gracie then would've replied. “Would you like to go watch a few races? I'd love to eat too, but I've got somewhere to be soon, maybe we could set something else up soon?”

“I'd like that.”

Walking past the food court, Abigail would've spoken about the ribs she'd never tasted. Perhaps she wouldn't have been able to make small talk, but she didn't need to as long as she enjoyed herself. “So what have you been up to?” she should've asked next.

During their original conversation, Gracie had counted out the answers on her fingers. “Let’s see, working, traveling, dating, regular stuff. What about you?” Nothing about this would’ve changed even were everything going correctly. This was the one thing Abigail had gotten correct: joking. Perhaps she should’ve joked more without making anything Gracie liked a target.

When Gracie would’ve asked which dog Abigail liked, she would’ve responded the first time: “Number five, which one’s yours? I’ve really missed watching these.”

“Me too, I’m glad they’re back.”

The conversations would’ve continued as Abigail had hoped until she realized that even in her ideal scenario, she still had little to talk with Gracie about. She could avoid calling real estate soulless, sure, but as she dwelt on this scenario, Gracie’s face after the offending question striking her and refusing to fade, she started to realize that she and Gracie truly had moved in different directions. The joke may have fractured what little of their friendship remained, but Abigail now felt less and less certain that there was even much to fracture. Some reunions had gone better than others, and she thought she still had potential companionship prospects with some people she had met and had yet to meet, but Gracie would never join that list. Abigail could only wonder whether her joke had caused that, and perhaps part of her hoped that to be true, but a lingering thread of wonder pecked away at her thoughts, carving a small nest that would house some small doubt that they ever truly could have reestablished what they’d once had – and whether they’d see each other again.

March 15th, 2001

A warm spring breeze brushed across the grassy hill, tickling Abigail's skin and scattering the papers around her. This breeze was not unusual and made several visits an hour, on occasion threatening to send either the child tumbling down the slope or the friendly insects an entire world away. All sorts of flowers bloomed atop the hill, sporting wonderfully vivid colors Abigail assumed attracted the bees. Dragonflies too with golden hues mimicking the splendor of Valhöll and streaks dyed red with the passion of the first plague soared around the child with incredible speed, socializing with each other and the foreign presence.

Abigail had been scared of dragonflies once. They didn't buzz, nor did they have fell stingers to secrete foul venoms, but they were numerous, they were common, they resembled their evil brethren, and in the insect world, they were the size of Goliath. Who but a boring adult without an imagination wouldn't fear dragonflies, winged destroyers sent from Gaia to enact her vengeance on the polluters and their species? Only such an adult would tell their spawn rather than allow the child to experience it themselves, which was exactly what Abigail's mother had done. Some of the wonder had disappeared as soon as Abigail had learned dragonflies do not carry stingers, a loss that observation alone didn't make up for. Even the days when she had tensed up and checked to see if these friends were instead deadly bumblebees had disappeared. Only the kids with Ds in handwriting mistook dragonflies and bumblebees.

Abigail's hill, covered in these insects, sat in the middle of Mulligan Park, a grassy plain adjacent to both a playground and what was once Lee Elementary, recently joining the park as Mulligan Elementary. The playground itself, shared by both the students and those who lived in

the area, contained a frictional slide, rusting monkey bars, a plastic rock wall, and two sets of swings, one of which – Abigail’s favorite – was slightly higher than the other.

From the hill, one could see streets stretching on for miles and miles, surrounding the park in all four directions and expanding out of sight, past the trees and houses, including her own, placed around these great paths. Abigail had walked these roads daily and knew their every aspect, from the speed bumps down one way, near the bridge granting access to the next neighborhood, to the giant crack just by the park where she’d nearly tripped and fallen onto the hard concrete and hurt herself on more than one occasion. She had seen that crack bestow flat tires to plenty of cars, and she’d seen other children lose their footing, hit the ground, and cry, but that crack had remained for as long as she could remember, and she now came to view it as something nostalgic, a piece of home.

At this very moment, however, she paid no attention to the crack. Rather, she ran about the hill, wading through the flowers and bugs in search of the papers the wind had dispersed. She held several in her arms, but they were all blank or else contained drawings she hoped her mother would put on the fridge. The one sheet she cared about remained airborne and raced down the hill, toward the empty street.

Today, something was different. Abigail, having grabbed all of the other papers at this point, saw the final sheet hover above the road as a young bicyclist approached. She always woke up early, and even during spring break, the park was barren in the morning, so this new presence, who couldn’t have been that much older than she was, stood out. She dropped her stack in the flower bed and rushed down the hill to grab the last paper as the wind once again scattered the rest. To Abigail’s relief, the paper finally descended to the ground just before the

biker's wheels rolled over it, leaving marks – much better than the alternatives Abigail envisioned, where the paper blinded the rider, or worse, this new person stopped and read it.

In her relief, Abigail failed to pay attention to where she ran and jammed her foot into the great crack in the road, causing her to fall onto the concrete without any protection better than her extended arms. She felt a white-hot pain more intense than the final sensation Evadne felt upon burning up into nothingness sear her face and didn't know whether to scream or cry. She remained still in the street. Most of her body felt fine, but her face, hands, and arms all hurt even more than whenever she needed to get a shot at the doctor's office.

As Abigail lay on the ground, she grew aware that the noise she made was neither a scream nor a sob but instead some unholy hybrid. This noise tired out her throat and left her cut off from the rest of the world, unable to hear any alien sounds. The pain too overrode her other physical sensations, leaving her unable to realize her current state had changed until she opened her eyes to see a hand picking the loose gravel out of her face. She now rested in the grass beside the hill. Through watery eyes, she saw somebody in bicycle gear – helmet, elbow and kneepads, gloves, and even a protective vest, all a jet black and covered in dirt – picking at her face.

“Are you alright?” this new person asked, speaking in a somewhat gruffer voice than Abigail was accustomed to. The cyclist moved mechanically, grabbing a pebble, tossing it, and proceeding to the next, but her motions still felt natural, as if applying care to a process she could've completed without thinking.

The cyclist spoke in such a way that embarrassment welled up within Abigail. She didn't want to respond; her own voice was soft and passive. She felt smaller even listening, sitting

beside this new person, as if she had lost some of her own agency and were regressing toward infancy.

“Looks like it’s just a few scrapes, I get those all the time,” the girl continued. She spoke with a strange warmth, creating a feeling Abigail was unused to. When she talked, Abigail felt at ease, as if her face didn’t feel like her foot that one time she’d stepped on a toy brick left on the rug, missing from a miniature building on her desk.

“I, I’m Abby,” Abigail said, choosing each word separately before speaking quietly enough that the crickets would easily drown her out were it night.

“Oh, so you’re the one who wrote this poem?” the girl asked, brandishing the sheet of paper Abigail had just chased.

Abigail now found herself unable to move no matter how much she wanted to – not that she truly held this desire. She suddenly wished she was back up the hill, only a minute prior to all of this, so that she could tear up the paper, or perhaps stop herself from writing on it. Or maybe it was a better day to stay home. There could’ve even been one timeline where spring break occurred during a different week to minimize the chances of everything that had just happened happening again. Any alternative was better than now, when Abigail imagined her red pallor was her least concerning issue.

“I didn’t actually read it or anything,” the girl said. “I just saw your name and – okay, can I?” These two sentences navigated Abigail into a maelstrom where she simultaneously felt relief and an even worse anxiety gnawing away at her innards. She held an audience, but she didn’t want to share anything. Still, as much as she wanted to say no, something within this girl, some

unseen force, compelled her to accept the proposal. Almost immediately, she heard familiar words thrown back at her.

Roses, lilies, petals, stems, petunias, daffodils, daisies, chrysanthemums,

All desire nectar, crave that sweet substance.

And every day, I feed away, in spite of the peril it presents

So Mister Bee, please don't sting me,

For I am the one who waters your plants.

Abigail had spent the morning writing the poem, and she still felt unsatisfied with the result, but she was close. Something needed to change, but she had no idea what. Hearing her own words once again only reinforced this feeling of inadequacy. She felt a ceaseless emptiness within as she considered how much her audience must have hated the work.

"I like it," the girl said. "But why doesn't the last line rhyme?"

Abigail scanned the paper again. She wanted to explain that she had considered ending with the word "honey" but couldn't form a sentence with a rhyming ending that sounded good, that her mother had helped her put this poem together in the first place and even suggested it didn't all need to rhyme, that she thought it sounded better ending the way it did, but like Sisyphus' boulder, whenever she thought she was ready to say something, she couldn't figure it out and had to start over.

Before she could figure something out, the girl plucked another piece of gravel from her face. "Whoops, missed a few."

Abigail lived alone with her mother in a four-bedroom house. As two of these rooms had gone unused for the first few years of her life, one had been converted into a computer room, the other a toy room. Abigail found no shortage of enjoyment in this house, from running through the hall at night, envisioning some great avian giving pursuit, to spending hours at a time creating scenarios for all of her toys, particularly the plush animals her father had apparently purchased for her when she was born. At night, she would retreat to her bed, remove one of her Shel Silverstein anthologies – or something from Roald Dahl whenever she felt daring – from her bookshelf, and read the poems in the as yet futile hope that Hecate would eventually allow them to seep into her dreams. Failing that, she just liked the poems, so she still benefited.

Upon arriving home, a simple five-minute walk from the park, Abigail's mother, horrified by her daughter's face, had barred access to any entertainment – even watering the flowers, Abigail's favorite chore – until Abigail could ensure nothing like that morning's fall would happen again. However, Abigail still turned the conversation in a positive direction, now speaking of her new companion to her mother, who metamorphosized from distraught to elated just as soon as she'd heard the phrase "new friend."

"She said her name is Molly, and she also wants to go to Kingridge for middle school," Abigail said. "I told her we should both take your mythology class in eighth grade, but she said that's too far away to think about right now."

"I'm just glad you've made another friend," Abigail's mother responded. She sat at the dinner table located in their pristine kitchen and looked over several papers strewn about before her. "What else can you tell me about her?"

Abigail hesitated. What could she say about Molly? They hadn't spoken for long before Molly had departed, leaving her to return home alone. "Um, her hair's dark, and she has brown eyes. She also has a blue key, but she wouldn't tell me what it's for." Would that suffice? She wasn't certain what else she could add. She had only spoken to Molly for a short amount of time, and she didn't want to tell her mother she had more fun talking to Molly than to most of her other friends, even Gracie and Jen. After months of questioning on what happened to Chloe and suggestions to talk to her again, Abigail had learned only to tell her mother when she made new friends, not when she lost old ones or when they became mean.

"That's nice, Abby," her mother said, looking away from the papers with a somewhat worried expression. "Listen, I am really happy for you, but I have to grade these papers by tonight, would you mind turning on the sprinkler for me? If your face is still hurting tomorrow, I'll take you to the doctor, and you can tell me all about Molly then, alright?"

And lo, Ms. Horwitz was cast into the fiery pit, the rest of her existence to be spent in the agony of the blazing inferno. She would suffer with the other sinners – Tantalus, Caesar, Izanami, and Chloe, and all of the other vile creatures in human skin Abigail was too impassioned to recall. Ms. Horwitz would live in a special section dedicated to bad science teachers and filled with bees. Abigail wrote several more sentences before folding the paper several times and placing it in her pencil bag. The last thing she wanted was for her teacher to walk by and see her channeling the Bard instead of solving the math problems in front of her.

She didn't need another poor conduct score, not when her mother had already warned her to stop acting up. Fortunately, the principal's voice began to sound throughout the room as if delivering a mandate from the heavens, and Abigail found her salvation from these mind-numbing equations had arrived.

Once the announcements concluded, Abigail burst out through the classroom door, racing to her locker and packing up her supplies. Gracie had beaten her, as usual, but took her time organizing her backpack, and Jen arrived shortly afterward but left almost as soon as she appeared with a quick wave. She couldn't miss the bus.

"I hate Ms. Horwitz," Abigail said to her lingering friend.

"You say that every day," Gracie replied.

"But this time I mean it." Abigail closed her locker and fiddled with the combination lock attached to the door.

"Adam told me she's great if you visit her in eighth grade."

"Great, only half a year to go." Abigail watched as the other students passed by, waving to anyone she knew as they left.

"Abby, it'll be alright. Everyone hates her. I promise you're not alone."

"She's lucky I'm nice, or I'd go report her."

Gracie stifled a laugh before patting Abigail on the back. "Just try to think about something else. How is your *Midsummer Night's Dream* project going?"

Abigail started walking toward the front of the school, where her mother undoubtedly already waited. “I didn’t like any of the poems I wrote for that collage, so I decided to just memorize the ending monologue instead.”

“That’s boring, everyone’s doing that,” Gracie replied, her backpack now resting on her body. “Why don’t you, uh, um, mix a speech with one of your poems? Or maybe write something in the same style?”

“I want to, but I still don’t get iambic pentameter. What does stressed even mean?”

“Wait, that wasn’t a joke?”

When the two reached the carpool lane outside, they found Gracie’s mother waiting at the front of the line as expected. During the drive home, Gracie invited Abigail to come over and work on homework together, but Abigail declined as she had plans for Elysium. Neither Gracie nor her mother knew this, but Abigail had given her hill in Mulligan Park that name due to both the flowers and the joy she experienced there regularly.

Every Thursday in seventh grade, after school, she would visit with Molly, and the two would do some activity like run around or toss a football, usually whatever Molly wanted. The two shared no classes or lunchtime this year as they were in different houses at Kingridge – Jen liked to brag that she and her friends were in the gifted house, but Abigail didn’t think house distinctions were necessary at all, not when she had friends in the other houses – but they had been in PE together the previous year, and Abigail had enjoyed every second of it. The first week they’d started meeting, Abigail had told her PE wasn’t the same. The second, she’d tried concocting some scheme to end up in the same class as Molly. The eighth, she’d finally given up and accepted that Thursdays were better than nothing.

On this day, which felt especially dry despite the dark clouds looming overhead, Abigail stood before Molly's dismounted bike just above the spot in the road where there had once been a large crack. Molly stood still, staring out down the road, while Abigail watched her friend. There was an internal warmth that came with Molly's presence, one Abigail had grown accustomed to, and today was no exception.

"How was your day?" Molly asked, turning to face Abigail. That friendly, genuine look in her face, the tone in her voice as she expressed actual interest in Abigail, even something about that short hair she sported all reinforced Abigail's decision to spend the afternoon with Molly, not that she doubted it any.

"It was normal, you know, what about yours?"

"More of the usual. Monday was fun though, I won a knockout tournament in PE. I wish you could've seen it."

Yes, Abigail did too. "That's great, I'm so happy for you." A brief part of her wondered why Molly had mentioned PE. She missed when they shared that class too, didn't she? "I didn't get very far, but I tried my best." This was a lie. She never liked working with basketballs. She could handle anything else, but the moment she found a basketball in her hands, she felt as if she'd fall into pieces like Osiris. Perhaps the balls were slightly too big or too heavy, or perhaps there was just something off about Abigail she couldn't understand, but she abhorred holding those basketballs.

"So, are you ready?"

"Ready for what?" Abigail asked.

“You’re learning to ride a bike today.”

Abigail simultaneously felt as if she’d been shot and as if a great weight within her body had disappeared. “What?”

“You said your mom never let you learn, right? Well, looks like she isn’t here.”

“You want to teach me?”

“Of course, dummy. Now are you getting on it or not?”

Abigail examined what lay before her. Molly’s mother had suggested they ride bikes together weeks ago, but Abigail’s had said no. At the time, this had come as a relief to Abigail. She didn’t care for activity like that when the alternative, simply taking in her surroundings wherever she was, was so much more peaceful and appealing. For how much time she’d spent in Elysium, it still hadn’t grown old to her. She thought she could sit and enjoy her surroundings for the rest of her life, no bike needed. Parts of her also worried about speed and balance. It was a thin vehicle, and she was terrified of falling.

Still, if Molly wanted her to, she wasn’t going to say no. She couldn’t place what separated Molly from her other friends. There was a kind of charm about her they didn’t have. Even if they were just as nice to her and knew her longer, it felt different talking to Molly. As Abigail mounted the bicycle, she found her fears returning. She shivered – although that may have been from the cold front that migrated into town from the depths of Niflheim – and placed one foot on the pedal, moving onto the uncomfortable seat.

“You’ll want to grip this tightly,” Molly said, taking Abigail’s hand and wrapping it around the handlebar. “You wouldn’t want to fall before you even started.”

Abigail did as instructed, taking the bike and peering out at the road ahead. A quick glance to Molly, who gave her a reaffirming smile, showed a new cut on her friend's face, one that hadn't been there the previous week. Abigail had missed this initially, but seeing it now, she felt something change within her and reaffirm that even if she didn't want to ride this bike, she still wanted to make Molly happy. With Molly's instruction, she started moving forward, not noticing when her friend released the bike, allowing her to move on her own, until she had already reached the other end of the park. She probably could've even biked back home, not that she wanted to go that far. Thoughts raced through her head as she continued her locomotion, and she wished at that moment, she were sitting in Elysium to write them down instead of circumnavigating the gates on a wild Cerberus.

Fast, fast, very fast, it's all

A blur, nothing I know in sight.

No home, no hill, can't see the end of fall

Just lines, and cold, a fright.

But at the end of all of this,

I do it for her, so does that

Justify losing my comfort for that wheeled hiss,

Seeing no flowers, insects, not even a cat?

As she cycled back around, the wind biting her face and disorienting her, she glanced toward her hill, longing to return there. She considered how she would thank Molly for riding the bike before returning it when the front wheel hit a snag and sent her to the ground, skidding across the freezing concrete.

As her great and terrible dream ended, Abigail planted her arms on the ground and tried to pull herself up, leading Molly to run over and help. “Abby, are you alright?”

Abigail’s face hurt too much for her to respond. She let out something between a groan and a whimper as the pain built up, leaving her unsure what to do. She needed it to end right now, but she worried if she moved, it would worsen.

Molly immediately started tending to her face. “I’m really sorry Abby, I thought you’d like it.” As Abigail didn’t respond, she continued. “Did you hit your head?”

Abigail shook her head just enough for Molly to see.

“I realized once you were already gone that I forgot to give you my protective gear, but it looks like you only really hurt your face. I’m so sorry Abby, I won’t ask you to do this again.”

For the second time in her life, Abigail had to sit still as Molly removed gravel from her face. She worried about how her mother would react when upon learning she had a cut that didn’t want to disappear. She worried she’d messed up other parts of her body when she fell in the event her jacket and pants weren’t protection enough. She worried people would make fun of her for not riding a bike anytime soon. She worried the pain would never go away, even if she knew that was irrational. She worried she wouldn’t have her homework done for the next day now. And she worried she somehow had hit her head and wouldn’t write her poems the same in the future. However, despite all of her concerns as she stood there, she was with Molly. The two had shared another experience Abigail didn’t want to forget, and being in Molly’s presence now made her happy in a way she couldn’t quite describe. There was a kind of toughness in her friend, some distinct, nameless quality none of her other friends shared, and once the pain finally

subsided the next day, Abigail decided that even if she was never going to do it again, she was glad she'd ridden the bike.

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March 14th, 2006

A noise rang throughout the school, but it wasn't a bell. Everyone called it that – teachers, counselors, assistant principals, whatever you wanted to call the other people working in the offices, and even the other students, but it wasn't a bell. Abigail had heard the not-bell ring close to twenty times a day for more than a year by now, and she still refused to call it that. At age fourteen, she simply refused to refer to it, but she now understood as a mature fifteen-year-old that that was impossible and felt comfortable with the moniker of not-bell. She couldn't tell anyone else why the misnomer bothered her so, but it was just one of many small occurrences at Dignam High that irritated her and no one else.

Gracie had made fun of her for this, so she'd stopped quickly. Gracie had laughed at Abigail's little idiosyncrasies since they'd met in the first grade, and Abigail couldn't help but laugh with her friend. She knew she had these little quirks, problems no one else did, but laughing with her friends seemed like the simple solution. Today, however, the not-bell held more urgency than its normal warning to get to class.

"You finish your poem?" Gracie asked as lunch started. The previous year, the two, along with the rest of their expansive friend circle, had as freshmen scoped out a table out in the courtyard, one in Abigail's favorite spot, surrounded by all sorts of flowers and in the cusp of the shade and sunshine. The heat never felt overbearing here, even in August, and the outdoor

acoustics the courtyard provided lent the atmosphere a relaxing feeling, one that allowed Abigail's friends to talk while she basked in her one peaceful place.

"Almost," Abigail said, pulling out her lunchbox and spilling its contents out before her. "I need an ending." She eyed the crackers and pack of apple slices that fell onto the table. "I'm not sure what to do."

"Can I see it?" Gracie asked.

"No." Abigail hesitated before adding, "Not yet. I need to finish it first."

"It's due today at the end of school, isn't it? When are you going to have time to work on it?"

"I'm not going to miss my chance," Abigail said. "This can be big for me. If I win, my poem gets published in the yearbook. Then, years later, when I'm trying to make a career, they can find this and say, 'Wow, even in high school, they knew she was a talented poet.'" Abigail had explained this to Gracie several times, but she always enjoyed hearing herself say it, legitimizing the possibility further. "I'd just really like to keep doing this. I feel like there's something really special about poetry, something you can't replicate in stories."

"If you're having trouble, why can't I help you?" Gracie asked.

"I already promised Jen she could." Abigail reached down into her backpack and pulled out a sheet of paper. "And I just don't want anyone else to see, alright? This stuff's kind of personal to me."

"Can I at least see it when it's done, then? After you've submitted it?"

“I suppose,” Abigail said before turning her attention to the paper before her. She stared at every blank corner of the page, avoiding the words until she had mentally prepared herself. A soft breeze blew past the thin sheet, causing it to rustle in Abigail’s hands, but she maintained a firm enough grip that it remained rooted in place. However, the wind’s intensity increased, and the gusts created several creases she had to smooth out. She placed the paper down, briefly noticing the word “emerald,” and decided that at this point, she needed to read, finish, and submit it.

*On the cloudiest of days, when the sun struggles to break through the clouds,
Its efforts remain in vain, and this celestial giant cannot pierce that protective shield,
But why won't it stop trying? Why, great emissary, do you persist?
The past is the past. The future is the future. Today, life goes on.
Birds chirp, sapphire streams carve their paths through emerald hills and grassy knolls,
And forests sing that sweet song of soothing, a spot where one may rest, hide away,
Merge their consciousness with the natural state, relax, appreciate that today, we live.*

Abigail still hated it. She had painstakingly crafted this poem, paid meticulous attention to the words used, reached deep into her soul for something romantic and idealistic even when she felt occasional bouts of uncertainty and emptiness, and even referred to Robert Frost, Sylvia Plath, and C.P. Cavafy, not that she wanted to use other poets as guides for anything more than stylistic decisions, and she’d ended up with something she could barely stand to look at. She didn’t want anyone to read this and think it was her true self. Besides her mother and the faceless yearbook staff, there were only two people she could bring herself to share this with. Perhaps Jen would help her figure out an ending. If not, then-

“Did any of you see the lacrosse game yesterday?” Abigail suddenly asked her lunch group.

“Does anyone actually watch lacrosse?” Gracie asked. “Like I’ve seen pictures, and I still don’t know what it is.”

“I’ve gone to every game this season,” Abigail responded.

“Oh yeah, I remember when you invited me now,” Gracie said. “I love hanging out with you, but like, it’s lacrosse.”

“Hey, didn’t Molly have a great showing?” one person in the group asked. “She almost won us the whole thing.”

Abigail wanted to respond, but as the name ‘Molly’ reached her lips, she found she suddenly felt uncomfortable speaking. She opted instead to play with her fingers and think about her poem while the others conversed.

In Chemistry class, roughly three hours before the not-bell would dismiss the other students and inform Abigail that she had run out of time, the teacher, some middle-aged man with a biology degree, recited notes from the projector while Abigail sat in the middle of the room, on the side far from the door, with Jen and another friend she’d met in middle school. Abigail had made a habit of using the class to pass notes around, and as the teacher never took his eyes off the projector, she got away with this easily. As class begun, she spared no time in resuming her routine.

heres my poem, please tell me what you think, she wrote, passing both the unfinished verse and this new note to Jen, who read them while Abigail pretended to pay attention to the lecture. She couldn't concentrate enough to actually take in the lesson. She wanted Jen to finish reading the poem and help come up with a satisfying ending, but she also worried Jen wouldn't like it, in which case she'd be stuck with a terrible poem without an ending to submit. How long had the teacher been on that same slide? Too much time had already passed. It felt like she'd given up her poem hours ago. Her eyes darted to the clock. It had only been a few seconds. Already, the wait had become mind-numbing, and she started to scribble another note, one telling Jen never mind or asking to be nice about it or-

Abigail stopped writing. A thought struck her. Why did she care?

She knew why. She had to finish this poem because it would look good on her résumé, and she'd get to brag to her friends and look impressive, and-

So what? What did that actually change? How was that going to help her career?

She had not yet found an answer before Jen slid the two papers back. Quickly, Abigail seized the note and read.

what r u going for with this, Jen had written.

what do you mean, Abigail wrote back, returning the note.

like whats the theme, whats ur intention, Jen responded.

Abigail looked up from the paper and at Jen, watching the lecture and taking actual notes. Jen had been one of her best friends since they were children. Jen didn't write, but she was always the smart one, so Abigail felt comfortable conferencing with her. Jen had looked over

Abigail's poems and given commentary before, but this was the first time Abigail actually felt any sort of pressure. She didn't understand how Jen, hidden behind those foggy glass frames, could know everything without any effort. Ridiculous as it sounded, their test scores only confirmed Abigail's belief. Not that she was jealous. Jen had long hair while she had short hair, so there was no reason to be envious, not with hair that just weighed you down and got in the way of everything and took forever to take care of. This quality easily superseded grades. Abigail also had perfect vision, just in case she ever needed a second thing to hold over Jen's head.

However, these thoughts didn't write a response, so Abigail started scribbling. *just nature, the world wont always be like this, so appreciate the moment, spend time in the present, you know.*

Abigail prepared to pass the note back, but something stopped her. She eyed the paper. She did have something else she wanted to ask her best friend. She didn't want it in print, as if to turn this idea into something real and tangible, but before her common sense could stop her, she found herself writing, *also im gonna ask Molly out after school today wish me luck.*

Abigail still spoke to Molly daily. They didn't go to Mulligan Park or the smooth roads surrounding it after school anymore, nor did they have class together, but they did walk past each other after school, so Abigail always had a few minutes to talk to Molly if she wanted to – but she spent far more time thinking about Molly. Perhaps she could acknowledge that now, that her thoughts always involved Molly in some manner. She had envisioned Molly and thought about every last action Molly had made far more than they'd spoken, but that made the times when they did speak feel even more fulfilling.

two ways u can end it, either emphasize that it wont always be like this or just focus on the now like u already have, honestly there isnt a lot to add, i like it, Jen responded. Abigail felt a pit in her stomach for the brief seconds that she thought Jen hadn't acknowledged the rest of the note, but she found that what she wanted appeared elsewhere, the word "congratulations" entirely capitalized and followed by a seemingly endless string of exclamation marks.

Shortly before the school day ended, Abigail read over her the final new lines in her poem and submitted it at the yearbook classroom.

*And whatever comes tomorrow may not be the same,
Maybe birds won't chirp, maybe streams won't run,
But today, they do, and all I can ask
is that while we can, we live.*

Abigail locked her door with a blue key and checked the time on her phone as she approached her car. The screen briefly reflected her face, which stress had not yet taken, and a small scar untouched by time. She still had an hour for what was to be a thirty-minute drive across a rough road filled with cracks that had bestowed many a flat, but she was fine with getting there early and waiting. She wore a nice suit and held a briefcase – typically for her architecture meetings, but as she was on vacation, she figured she could get a better use out of it – when she walked into the restaurant, a five-star steakhouse she had seen countless times as a child but never entered. She didn't feel entirely comfortable actually entering one of those fabled

restaurants where patrons had to pay two hundred dollars for an inch of beef made from an obscure species in Sudan that went extinct just for this meal, then sautéed in the waters of the Nile, but the person she was to meet had insisted, and offered to pay, and Abigail couldn't say no to that.

An oppressive atmosphere permeated the restaurant. Everyone spoke quietly, and Abigail had been seated at a waiting table with water and appetizers, something she had never before experienced. The restaurant had terrible lighting, and even the patrons at the bar nearby acted just as politely as everyone else. Abigail was no stranger to manners and even appreciated them at times, but by entering this restaurant, she felt as if she'd intruded on another world, one with no quarter for her.

After roughly forty-five minutes of waiting, not that Abigail counted, she saw her companion, clad in an elegant dress, enter and scan the area. Something about the dress stuck out. Abigail had brief flashes of another meeting the previous week, one where she'd unintentionally humiliated herself. She had to remember things were different now. It had been a long time since she'd left, since she'd seen any of her old friends. She'd needed something new, she'd decided at the time, and to a younger her, that meant cutting off all ties with her childhood too. Only after college, several years into her new profession, did a sense of loneliness she couldn't understand appear, crushing her with the guilt of tossing away a group of friends once dear to her for reasons she still didn't understand.

"Abby?" the woman in the dress said, holding out a hand, which Abigail quickly seized to respond with a shake, only to realize immediately afterward that it had been an attempted hug. Quickly, Abigail rescinded her hand before wrapping her arms around her old friend while silently thanking the bad lighting for hiding her reddened face.

“Molly, how long has it been?” she asked, but she already knew the answer: twelve years. They’d even gone to colleges in different states. “I don’t think I’ve seen you since high school.”

“It’s so good to see you,” Molly replied. “It would’ve been impossible to meet outside of summer, you know? And then I just got so busy, and-”

“I never came home after I left anyway,” Abigail said. Quickly, she scanned the area for a server. She didn’t want to linger on yet another thing she’d done wrong. “Now, shall we?”

Once the two sat at an actual table – far larger than the waiting table, but the accompanying chairs were less comfortable – Molly seized the conversation. “What have you been up to, Abby?”

“Oh, just architecture,” Abigail said. “It took me a few years of college to learn that was my true calling. It doesn’t really pay as well as you’d think, but I can take care of myself, which is what matters. And please – call me Abigail.” As she spoke, she tugged at her collar. She was worried she would come off as too awkward, but she also still found Molly’s apparel off-putting. She thought back to when she’d seen Gracie, how she’d tried acting like those ten years hadn’t happened, how an insurmountable rift now existed between them. She wanted to avoid that and had to consider her sentences carefully.

“That’s interesting,” Molly’s voice and demeanor, more rhythmic and almost soft, were nothing like Abigail’s memories of them. However, time had passed, and Abigail remembered only that they had been great friends. Even after that one occasion Abigail didn’t want to think about but couldn’t stop envisioning, following some profuse apologies and a desire to preserve their friendship, they had still talked regularly, and something had already changed.

“How’s the world of talking heads?” Abigail asked, aiming to regain control of the conversation and ignoring the sudden pain in her shoulders. “I don’t really watch sports, but it seems like you’re pretty big.”

Molly laughed and flicked her wrist. “Oh, it’s nothing impressive. I just have to look good for the camera and not flub my lines, and the station handles everything else.”

A server arrived to take orders for drinks and appetizers. Abigail requested only more water and an order of steak fries, quite possibly the only item on the menu with a price in the single digits. Even if she wasn’t paying, everything else on the menu looked far too daunting for her to even consider.

“So you don’t have any creative control?” Abigail asked once the server left.

“Not really, but I don’t think I need to,” Molly replied. “I’ve been making a lot more ever since I started reading scripts. I get to travel all over with my husband, and money really gives you a lot of freedom, you know?”

No, Abigail thought, she didn’t. However, she knew that would immediately ruin the reunion, so she instead laughed and responded, “Of course.”

“Do you still write poetry?” Molly asked.

“Not in a long time. It was a fun hobby, but nothing more.”

“Aw, that’s too bad, I really liked your poems.”

“It’s alright, really. I’ve got plenty of other hobbies now, it’s not like I just sit around on my days off trying to force myself to be productive. Things could be much worse.” Abigail quickly gave a laugh, hoping Molly would join in.

“Do you remember the one about the bird?” Molly asked as if Abigail hadn’t just spoken. “I loved that one, how did it go?”

It took her a moment, but Abigail remembered the poem. Something about Molly’s behavior bothered her, but she had to remind herself to follow the conversation, not lead it. Leading it had caused her to make fun of Gracie’s profession without realizing. Leading had caused her to exhaust conversation subjects as soon as it was clear they weren’t the same people. Leading had ensured the two would likely never speak again. This still had the chance to be different. She thought back to the woodpecker piece. It had been one of the final poems she’d composed while still writing regularly – before that hobby had grown sparse in college. The poem was probably long gone, but Abigail still thought she could recite it – or at least try. She closed her eyes and spoke, “Every morning, at the same time, I hear a tap-tap-tap. I look around, but I see nothing. But I know that up there, in the trees, this bird protects us, watching over our abode, guarding us from evil creatures. But their duty isn’t to us. The trees benefit more. We humans, magnificent creatures, can protect ourselves, but our wooden friends don’t have that luxury. The woodpeckers, nature’s unsung heroes, only ask that we relay their songs.” She opened her eyes. “That one, right? I think I got it?”

“Woodpecker, that’s what it was.” Molly snapped. “I guess I remembered less of it than I thought. It’s still beautiful.”

“If only I still had the original sheet. I may have gotten some of it wrong. I didn’t back anything up back then, and my mother said she couldn’t find it months before she got sick.”

“How’s she doing?” Molly asked, a look of concern appearing on her face.

“Not well. That’s why I came back. They still don’t know what’s wrong with her. It could be nothing, but I want to be by her side if it isn’t.”

Molly’s eyes moved down to the menu. “I looked the menu up before coming, they serve lion meat here. I don’t even know if that’s legal, but it can’t be beat. Have you ever had any?”

Abigail felt part of herself wither away. Wasn’t Molly interested in reconnecting? Why had she suddenly changed the subject? Molly had to know she didn’t care about these sparks of trivia or platitudes when she was talking about something important. The specter of Gracie lingered on her mind, but she didn’t care now. This was already different. She wanted to have a nice conversation and reconnect, and she would force that to happen no matter what. “Can’t say I have. But moving back, my dad died when I was very young, before I could remember, so I never really felt anything about him. But I really want to hope she’ll be okay, you know?”

“Yeah, I hope so,” Molly replied. Then: “The turtle juice looks interesting too. I didn’t even know they have that here.”

Abigail couldn’t discern her intentions. Did she not want to speak about Abigail’s personal life? Was it an aversion to any heavy subjects? Was Abigail simply an excuse to splurge on some expensive food? A server arrived to announce the special and take their orders, but Abigail held a finger up.

“Molly, can I ask you something? Totally unrelated.”

“We should probably order first,” Molly replied.

“I haven’t decided yet,” Abigail said to the server, who departed at once.

“My mistake, I probably should’ve told him you haven’t had time to look at the menu.”

“Do you remember, back when we were sophomores, when I submitted ‘Today’ for that yearbook contest?” Abigail asked. Her shoulder pain felt devastating, but what good would complaining about it do, especially when it had been present for some time already?

Molly placed her hand on her forehead. “I think? It’s been a while, and I remember you wrote a lot of poems, I don’t know if I could tell you which one ‘Today’ is without more info.”

“It was the day before I asked you out.” Abigail felt no shame in saying this. She had expected this to come up at some point, but she’d wanted it to be more natural. Perhaps Molly’s behavior had forced her to act early, as if she knew there would not be another opportunity unless she created it herself. Besides, it was a shared part of their history, so could she truly ignore it in trying to reconnect?

“I might remember a poem around then? It’s honestly kind of hard to tell. I do remember you were sad the next semester when they didn’t pick you.”

“Listen,” Abigail continued. “I just – I just have a question. Did you ever feel anything for me?” She suddenly realized what she’d asked. She hadn’t meant to go that far. True, the question had weighed on her mind for so long, but by allowing it to materialize and become the focus of the conversation, she had entered a point of no return. She felt warm, but no longer in an embarrassed way. Thoughts swirled around her mind in a whirlwind. They may have both been the same people, but something had changed, and Abigail felt her demeanor shift, but she hadn’t yet contemplated why.

“What?” Molly appeared genuinely confused, as if Abigail had suddenly asked her to recite trigonometric functions for the first time since high school.

Abigail had to keep going now. “The way you talked to me, the way you were always sitting next to me when we had classes together, how nice you were, did any of that mean anything?”

“Abby, where did this come from?”

“Abigail.” Calmly as she spoke, she seethed. Below the table, she pinched her own leg as hard as she could.

“Right. Sorry.”

“I thought you felt the same way about me, or else that you were at least willing to-” She cut herself off. She wasn’t certain anymore that Molly had even listened until this had come up, and now, she didn’t know how to finish her sentence. She knew she was angry, but why? What exactly was she angry about? What was she accusing Molly of? She hadn’t been misled so much as mistaken, so why did she feel so warm and impassioned? Moreover, why did she allow this meeting to go so poorly as well, only a few minutes into actually reuniting? What was she even doing?

“That was a long time ago,” Molly said. “Did, did you just set this up to ambush me about something that happened while we were kids?”

“No, of course not,” Abigail said, attempting to remain composed. “I’ve tried to meet with a lot of people. Gracie, Jen told me she’s free next week, and a bunch of others you probably don’t know. I did want to reconnect. Really. I still do. And-”

And what? Did she want to apologize? That was the word she was about to use. For what? Whatever Abigail had thought existed between them was in the past. Moreover, she still

felt justified in her outburst after Molly's own rude behavior, but she was furious with herself for allowing it to happen. Perhaps this would've gone differently if she'd remained silent, a follower, as she'd originally wanted. Whatever Abigail's intentions had been in organizing this meeting, she knew their friendship wouldn't exist again as it once had. Following her disastrous reunion with Gracie, perhaps that was something she should've accepted earlier. Abigail suddenly shivered. She felt a gust blow across her and looked around the restaurant, but all of the windows were closed, and Molly appeared unfazed. It must've been her imagination, or perhaps the air conditioner or a fan. She pushed the distraction aside and told herself to just enjoy the night and truly try to catch up, even if there was now an impermeable barrier between the two of them – if that hadn't truly always existed. Abigail didn't know whether it had. Maybe she had misread Molly all those times as a child. Why did that still bother her? Why couldn't she move on? She couldn't undo the twelve years, but she also didn't have to make it worse than it already was. Even if Molly would never be anything more than another person she'd occasionally see on social media, perhaps there was still room for Abigail to make the following hour or so as pleasant as she possibly could even after what had already transpired.

“Could you tell me about the lion meat again?” Abigail asked, looking down at the menu.

20

February 22nd, 2020

The Tale of Two

Once, there were a mother and a daughter. They lived together after the tragic death of the father in the daughter's early years, too distant for even the realm of memories. In the

summer of the Gregorian year 2000, the daughter felt a great pain nibble away at those worthless, harmful tools known as feelings. The daughter experienced the mother's undying love, imbued with the unbridled passion of raging tides, and she formed the cornerstone of her companions' foundation, but these pesky, perturbing feelings allowed all of that to vanish under the past's silhouette.

The past: that awful, terrible, nauseating, reprehensible being who inflicted untold suffering through a weapon given the moniker eternal. The events that had once transpired could in no scenarios be revoked; and only one chance existed for each of the billions, perhaps trillions, of choices in one's life. As desirable as the opportunity to wade in reverse through the streams of time and undo one's permanent decisions was, the daughter understood this to be an impossibility.

Regardless, despite that ceaseless, numbing sense of isolation, the daughter was not truly alone. The mother organized an excursion up north, past the rural silence and desolate landscapes of the tiny, nameless cities that existed as nothing more than fodder here, locales hosting civilians who commanded their own stories. Perhaps they felt the same needs and desires as the mother and ached, tearing themselves up with the daughter, or perhaps their lives existed in isolation, a void removing their agency and allowing limitless complacency. The daughter on occasion mused such thoughts as these, never answered.

Today, however, such thoughts weren't present. The daughter had no tears to cry, her eyes graciously empty, but the pain lingered, festering and damaging her without harming her physical presence. She looked up at the mother, who sparsely granted her the privilege of sitting in the front seat as she could on this occasion, from beside an armrest and spoke, her voice so soft that she needed to repeat this query: "Where are we going?"

The mother didn't answer with such simplicity. She was a brilliant presence, a shining light spawned from an eternal flame with tiny cinders that could never truly hope to extinguish this radiance, even lifetimes away. Her responses, too, illuminated the daughter's mind, brightening those dusky, dusty spaces in the child's head. As the unknowable spoke in riddles, so too did the mother, who responded, "The pure."

Solving riddles typically served as one of the greatest joys in life in the daughter's mind. Today, she felt otherwise. After all, she would learn the answer soon enough. Still, some small section couldn't help but wonder. What was pure? The scholars Homer, Virgil, and Lennon couldn't agree on an answer to such a question. The lack of knowledge grew more and more, expanding rapidly within the daughter's small head, but she masked it, instead saying, "I still miss her. I want to go see her again."

"I know," the mother responded, her silky voice soothing the daughter. "You always will. No matter how much time passes, some tiny inkling of you will regret what happened. You'll feel remorse, even though this isn't your fault. You'll wonder until the end of time whether a different reality without this pain exists, attainable in any form. And that's okay. As long as you accept this pain – don't fight it, allow it to become a part of you – then you'll grow stronger. Don't reject it, don't turn it away, for the pain, lashing out, wanting to be heard, will multiply tenfold, hurting more and more and consuming your mind until nothing remains."

Some time after the mother's words terminated, the daughter finally drifted off to the realm of the subconscious, allowing her pain to manifest and in brief even deny reality. Here, the daughter and the friend were once again companions, walking together through Elysium, forging an unbreakable bond. A brief apology from either side, and then they acted as if the incident

hadn't truly occurred. By the daughter's awakening and return to miserable reality, the mother had parked at the arboretum, a nature reserve in Houston.

Even in times of melancholy, the mother's love and compassion allowed the daughter to forget her earthly obstacles and instead lose herself in the trees, the insects, the snakes, the pond, the ducks, the turtles, the greenery, the peace, the quiet.

21

February 23rd, 2020

9:37 PM

Abby lay in her mother's bed with a package of chocolate chip cookies under her arm, allowing game shows to run on the television beside her. This room, the house's master bedroom, held a somewhat different air than the rest of the building. The decrepit feeling didn't exist; rather, it was kempt enough that Abby didn't feel any level of embarrassment here. There were even two closets – one walk-in across from the bed, and one, much smaller, near the restroom and opposite the television.

Here, Abby wanted to imagine Riley's shade reclining beside her, perhaps patting her on the back with the assurance that everything would work out, something she now understood to be false, a simple placebo to placate the mind and convince the afflicted that whatever blight ailed them was temporary, an isolated occurrence, and, most importantly, only cosmetic, something that changed nothing.

However, Abby was alone. She knew Riley didn't exist, and at thirty, she was far too old to play with imaginary friends. Nothing here could comfort her. This house had at one point – perhaps even this very month – been a tool for nostalgia, but now, it instead resembled a prison. Sure, Abby could leave at any time, but where would she go in a town she'd grown beyond? Every corner of this house reminded her of either her mother or some aspect of childhood she thought better repressed.

Abby slowly reached for her phone, fighting through the piercing pain in her shoulders. There were many things she was hesitant to do – most alarmingly, shower – and even unlocking her phone felt a Herculean task, but this was necessary. She looked over her calendar and eyed the last two meetings: Chloe and Jen. Abby considered deleting their entries. Nothing would stop her. Chloe had reached out to her again recently, but she didn't think dropping social media contact with someone was difficult. There were any number of reasons Abby imagined Chloe could justify it.

Perhaps that was the ideal. Cut off all ties to Lamexas and slink back up north to a life of quiet architecture. Abby still had her current life waiting for her. Lamexas hadn't been solely an experience of misery and woe, but Abby couldn't help but wonder if the proper solution was to simply leave, destroy what she could of the past while ignoring the rest, and continue her life unimpeded from the mediocrity it had already been.

7:14 PM

Abigail looked at the drinks on the table; hot chocolate for her, water for Daniel. She sat in silence, waiting for him to speak. Previously, she had indicated some displeasure that he'd

only asked for water, but she didn't know if that had spurred the silence, if her peculiar order of hot chocolate on a surprisingly warm February evening in Texas had done that, or if the culprit were instead one of the many things she'd said to him she now assumed off-putting.

Daniel broke the silence, previously only disturbed by the others crowded throughout the café. "Look, I don't know what you expected to get out of this – well, no, I think I do. Just stop, ok? Do you understand?"

Or perhaps Abigail could trace the silence to the outburst Daniel had just given, outlining how terrible and selfish she is, that all of her worst fears held some sort of grounding in reality, that self-satisfaction for personal resolution only distanced others from their own peace, or however he had put it.

"Yes, I understand," she said, outwardly chipper.

"There it is," he replied. "You have this fake personality you put on whenever anyone calls you out, you're using it right now. You really haven't changed a bit from when we were kids."

"I really don't know what you're talking about." Abigail stood, making sure to grab her hot chocolate and take a sip. "But if you want me out of your life, I'll go." She left without evoking another word from anyone besides the other customers who noticed something had just happened.

Daniel looked as if he had far more to say, but Abigail continued walking. Once she reached her car, she drove until she reached a different parking lot and sat still in the front seat, freezing air blasting her face while she tried to force herself to stop thinking about everything

Daniel had said.

4:53 PM

The sun's rays filtered through the shades in the hospital window, casting light into the otherwise darkened room. Abigail's mother lay in bed, her head elevated as her daughter entered. "Abigail," she said, "I'm so happy to see you."

Abigail held a notebook to her side and dropped it next to the window in the recliner, her mother's favorite chair, before giving the bedridden woman a brief hug. "Of course, Mom. I told you I'd be here every day."

"Did you bring another story? I really liked the last one you wrote."

Abigail's eyes darted toward the notebook. She'd kept a record on her thoughts and occasionally tore out sheets to write flash fiction for her mother, but she didn't like this; writing took a great deal of effort, and while Abigail enjoyed the pen occasionally, she saw no benefit to taking up writing as a hobby. "I haven't had time. I'll try to get you another one tomorrow or the day after. Sorry, I'm a little behind."

"You have nothing to be sorry about. Seeing you is enough."

Abigail felt a small hole, numbness overtaking her. She didn't deserve her mother. She was a terrible person, she thought. There was no way she could make up for refusing to visit. She was terrified to start this next conversation, but she knew she had to press on with it. The longer she'd wait, the worse this would be. "Mom?"

"Yes, Abigail?"

“I have to go back soon.”

“I know.”

“I’m so sorry. I don’t have a choice.”

“That’s okay. Your job is more important than you being here.”

“I really feel like I need to stay with you.”

At this point, Abigail’s mother gave a wry laugh, almost off-putting to her. “I’m not going to die, Abigail. But even if I were, you don’t have anything to regret. You’ve done nothing wrong.”

Abigail forced herself to turn away. She couldn’t face someone showing her this much compassion. “I feel like a bad daughter.”

“You aren’t.”

“I don’t know why I haven’t come back, why I didn’t visit.”

“It’s okay. I visit when I can, don’t I?” It was true. She had once visited for Thanksgiving, Christmas, Abigail’s birthday, and the rare occasions when she could spare a few days, typically extended weekends, and while those had decreased in recent years, Abigail knew financial difficulties were the cause there, not their relationship. Regardless, the two also spoke on the phone nearly every day, but to Abigail, this wasn’t remotely adequate.

“I just feel like you deserve better.”

“If anything, I deserve worse than a daughter like you. Now tell me, how are your little reunions going?”

“Not well. I’m hoping tonight’s will be different. I guess I got everything I’ve wanted so far, but I don’t think they have.”

“Listen, Abigail. You shouldn’t worry about them or me or anyone else. You need to worry about you. Think about what you want.”

1:14 PM

The smell of burnt cheese seeped through the warm kitchen as the house’s lone inhabitant watched an unmoving, backlit screen. The software before her displayed an empty schematic filtered under a navy blue tint. She had walls and windows in place, but nothing more filled the image, and what few structures existed appeared only in the form of lines. Typically, Abigail worked with strict instructions, her most creative moments coming when she had mere suggestions and nothing more. Today, her reference was so vague that she longed for the suggestions’ return. She needed a fully developed plan for an office building with brutalist aspects – no other guidance whatsoever – and she had no idea where to begin.

So she hadn’t begun. Abigail sat at the counter in her kitchen, computer running in front of her, and ate pizza out of the box while alternating almost at a whim between opening the book next to the computer and watching videos online. She wanted to work – and she had to with her deadline only six days away – but no matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t. She had many demotivators, each more crushing than the last: that she’d failed to keep to her own schedule, allowing internalized feelings of anger to fester as she wasted precious time she shouldn’t have needed to lend this; that she grew more nervous about that night’s meeting with each passing second, wondering what she could say to Daniel to avoid her previous mistakes; that she’d acted

like a child and humiliated herself during her reunion with Molly; that her own life appeared to slip from her grasp; and that she'd paid no consideration to her other until it convenience her.

Even when Abigail tried to focus, she found herself unable, instead seeking distractions while the calendar grew more foreboding. She always found new ways to occupy her time when opportune moments of freedom arose. This had grown worse in recent days as a torrential downpour of thoughts brought her to that chair in the kitchen, pizza in hand and a video analyzing the presidential election playing, her schematic hidden away, minimized in another tab on the computer for Abigail to presumably return to later. How could she work on it now, with so many distractions?

9:26 AM

Sitting in her old bedroom, Abigail alternated between scribbling a spider web of notes on paper and typing some brief phrases on her phone. The phone held simple notes, references to stories she could tell and major conversation points to hit in case she forgot. The paper was more complex, appearing as constantly divulging paths of conversation subjects depending on how the next reunion, with one Daniel, also from high school, would go. She knew not to overstep her boundaries like with Gracie, not to dig up old problems she felt long resolved as with Molly. To avoid repeating what she'd said to Arnie, Abigail would choose each word carefully, and she understood now to let Daniel speak to understand his views on the conversation, unlike with Dawn.

The most important thing Abigail had to do, she realized, was apologize. She didn't know how she'd wronged him – or whether she had at all – but she was positive there was something

to apologize for, and she needed to open with that – just after the small talk she imagined would start the conversation. This would show Daniel how genuine she was. Her second most important strategy was to present herself as in a better situation than she was. Sure, concretely, she was fine, but a lot was wrong, and Daniel couldn't know that. Abigail didn't think she cared much about her outward image, but she didn't want Daniel to think she was attempting to latch onto him because of previous failures. He probably wouldn't – she clearly wasn't, after all. Still, she wanted to be certain.

For once, Abigail felt confident about the forthcoming reunion, life and vigor filling her as she wrote.

22

February 11th, 2008

The worst days of school, Abby felt, were those when the air conditioner and heater didn't work properly, and today was one such day. While Abby had entered her first class period with only that sense of relief that upon graduation in an ever dwindling number of months, she could finally bid that archaic machinery farewell, this thought meant nothing to her while she sat in her fifth period Astronomy class, feeling every hair on her arms stand up as she slowly froze, presumably to death, because she had forgotten to wear heavy clothes after several days of normalcy.

Jen, sitting behind Abby, had taken the necessary precautions and covered every patch of skin on her body – save the face, which she attributed to the school's ban on any sort of headwear. She handed the shivering Abby her gloves before sticking her hands in her pockets

and waiting for instructions. Abby's favorite part of Astronomy class was how lax the teacher was, allowing the students to talk and work together regularly and usually starting class a little late as everyone trickled in from lunch.

Abby's interests had shifted as she'd grown older, and when she'd learned of the ability to decide among taking any science courses offered in twelfth grade, rather than having a set requirement as with each previous year, she had chosen astronomy immediately, turning away geology, anatomy, natural science, and more advanced levels of the classes she'd already taken. Space now interested her more than anything else. Among the bleak darkness, the freezing throughout the inky, starlit backdrop, and the apparent absence of all life, Abby held some wonder, constantly curious about what awaited out there.

"Did you finish the homework?" Abby asked Jen.

Jen focused on Abby, watching with some intent that quickly faded to a vague look as soon as Abby turned her attention toward Jen. Abby didn't know how long Jen had held this look during their conversations, but once she had noticed it the previous semester, she hadn't been able to unsee it. "Yeah," Jen replied. "Not sure about number four though." She handed Abby her paper, allowing Abby to quickly copy her answers.

Abby liked Astronomy, she thought as she leaned back. The class was informative, she had several companions, including one of her best friends, in it, and the teacher's curves were so great that she never had to worry about her test performances. While she copied down the answers, Abby's eyes darted across the room, past the teacher, setting something up at the board, and Nora and Zoey and the others until they rested on an empty seat, which had remained unoccupied since the beginning of the semester. Its inhabitant, due to illness, had stopped

showing up to class a lot toward winter break and had only made it for a few days in January before vanishing. Everyone liked this student and hoped for a full recovery, which was one of the many things that made this specific class feel closer, almost like a family, than any of Abby's others.

Her chair fell just far enough that she couldn't regain her balance and right it, but Jen's hand pushed her back up, averting pain, shock, and, worst of all, disappointing the teacher. Abby didn't need to be the favorite, but when a teacher liked her, she felt she had higher standards to meet, lest her teacher's image of her shatter. Fortunately, he still focused on the white board; she was safe. Abby looked down at the desk to get her supplies out when she noticed a sheet of paper with a drawing of a noose next to several spaces: hangwoman.

Abby drew a pencil and scoped out her target. The subject: *space stuff*. Beside this sat a cluster of five letter spaces with another eight one line below. She started with an 'S' and handed the paper back to Jen.

When it returned, the noose now held a head. No matter, she had time. Jen's women weren't easy to kill. The next letter: 'E.'

Success. One lone 'E' waited in the second space of the second word. Abby tried to think to what the next test would cover, but she had no idea. She had fully embraced her status of second semester senior and didn't care what happened next as long as she graduated. However, she did care about the teacher, who took a longer time than usual to start class, instead standing by the board and trembling slightly at times.

Before Abby knew it, she'd filled out almost the entire phrase, leaving only spaces for what she presumed were 'A's. "Lph Cent-uri" didn't have a nice ring to it. She thought Jen had

fine penmanship, taking time to draw a swinging astronaut whose face felt purple despite the lack of color. Her face missed only the helmet that would seal her fate, however hanging an astronaut worked, but today was not the day. Jen's test prep with an easy solution ensured a life would be saved as Abby solved the puzzle, sending it back to her friend.

When it came Abby's turn to create a phrase for the woman, the teacher finally turned around. The sunglasses on his face obscured his eyes, but it didn't take Abby long to find out why.

"Hey guys," the teacher said, clearly making every effort he could to sound stoic. "I've got some bad news." Abby immediately looked at the empty chair in her peripheral vision as if she knew what was coming. "Riley's no longer with us."

Abby sat in her seat, pencil mid-stroke, and tried to process what this meant as the teacher talked about the school's counseling service and asked if anyone had any stories to tell or anything else to say about Riley. She had known Riley for several years, but they hadn't spoken too much. She considered Riley a friend in the same way she considered everyone she could have pleasant conversations with a friend. Riley's empty seat had been a depressing sight, and this didn't change as Abby came to understand the chair wouldn't fill again. Speechless, Abby could only return her attention to the front of the room and await the oncoming lesson.

Abby reclined in a smooth chair with several patches, exposing its innards and occasionally spewing something out whenever someone sat in the chair. An ancient computer,

probably from 2002 or 2003, rested on the desk before her. There had been dust on the device prior to Abby's return, but she had gone on it once, earlier in the month, for nostalgic purposes. She and her mother both had much faster laptops, but there was something about this ruin, a computer that had once used dialup, Abby found appealing. She couldn't use it for anything serious today – it was much too slow, naturally – but its presence still comforted her.

Nothing else comforted her. The more Abby rested in this chair, its wheels meeting resistance against the stained, carpeted floor, the more her own failings shouted at her, louder and louder, enough that she couldn't bring herself even to leave her seat. Abby could only hope to disassociate as her past atrocities recurred. She'd been a terrible student for some of her professors in college, particularly the one who taught her Intro to Philosophy seminar. She couldn't recall any specific transgressions, but she knew she had missed so many classes that she'd eventually stopped emailing the professor in advance. She thought she'd also stated some controversial opinions the professor may not have appreciated.

That wasn't Abby's only fault. She had been a bad roommate too back in her first dorm, never communicating and, upon moving into a single-bed apartment with help from her mother, departing suddenly with only a note left behind. In early elementary school, at the end of recess, she'd kicked over a sand castle one friend had made with someone else out of jealousy. She'd borrowed and lost books, requiring the original owner to buy new copies as replacements; she'd shown people her terrible poetry; she'd jeopardized friendships over political disagreements; she'd yelled at her first-grade teacher; she'd apparently hit a peer on the head with a book in kindergarten, not that anyone besides a vengeful, unfamiliar third-grader in summer camp could corroborate that; and she'd betrayed the trust of – how many people? Molly for certain. Perhaps Daniel, Arnie, and Dawn too.

Of course, she'd committed far more wrongdoings, but the further she dwelt on this, the worse she felt. She'd gotten angry at well-meaning friends for outrageous reasons: interrupting her, succeeding in opportunities where she failed, less than stellar reactions to her work, never asking what was wrong when she did her best to physically display that there was some sort of problem, perceived exclusion, and genuine exclusion. She'd neglected to give money to panhandlers whenever the light turned green, or she was too far away, and on the many occasions when she had no change, she simply declined. Even in conversations, she wondered if she'd been a killjoy. People had discussed whatever made them happy, typically pop culture or sports, but her utter disinterest in either had kept her from involving herself in any positive way.

Longing for an object tied to an abstract to which she could project her thoughts, Abby scanned the room. To her right, a closet concealed behind sliding doors. This closet had at one time held many relics from Abby's younger years, including children's books, VHS tapes, and stock photos of animals, flowers, blades of grass, and the sky Abby had taken from the covers of the many disposable cameras she'd lost. Opposite this closet and past a stand holding a dictionary so great Abby had never braved even a full letter's section, a desk, once belonging to her great aunt's study, sat just below the window and spread from wall to wall, allowing ample room to work now over clean wood, untouched by dust. A lamp whose shade resembled the upper half of a green, translucent cylinder stood beside the window, a redundant design decision Abby only now noticed – previously, she had transfixed over its resemblance to a traffic light.

“Some things you never notice without looking from a distance,” Riley said.

Abby didn't respond. She knew Riley to be the identity she'd assigned her internal monologue and nothing more.

“This isn’t inherently good, nor is it inherently bad.”

Abby’s consciousness’ dilettante conjecture repulsed her so that she almost forgot why she focused on the lamp rather than her final two meetings. She didn’t know why she hadn’t cancelled the parley with Chloe, but stuck three days from an appointment that had been scheduled much longer than three days prior, the time to cancel had passed. Abby’s mind drifted to Riley, and she felt pain well up in the back of her shoulder.

“A mockery.”

That’s what Riley was.

“An indictment.”

On Abby’s character.

“Greed.”

Selfishness.

“What would I think?”

The real Riley?

“Touched.”

Or shocked.

“Grateful.”

Or offended.

“But you’re-”

-a bad person.

“And I’m-”

-not a person.

“Yes.”

Yes?

“You are a bad person. But not because of what you’ve already done, not because of me. Because of what you’re doing right now, because of you. You’re not doing anything right now. How can you be a good person if you’re not working for it your whole life? Compassion is the first step, but if you put in the effort, eventually, you won’t be a bad person anymore.”

Abby dwelt on this shortly before, when thinking about Chloe, she once more contemplated cancelling. If nothing else, this meeting would take time she wouldn’t use productively regardless.

Riley lingered, now in a different pose from the previous conversation. “It’s important to get through your work. You can’t procrastinate any longer.”

“Riley, I-” Abby stopped almost immediately as she understood she was alone, as she’d always been.

December 11th, 1998

The snow that heralded the coming of Ragnarök alerted both young Abby to a new weather condition to which she was unaccustomed and the principal of Lee Elementary to the threat of incoming cancellation, evidenced by a letter Abby took home from school. This paper creased and folded in her hand as she marched down the endless, torturous path, braved only whenever Chloe appeared to lend her power to help illuminate the darkness. They shared everything, whispering gossip even the gods envied, regularly.

“Gracie had to put her lizard to sleep,” Abby had said on Monday. “I don’t know why everyone was so sad about a nap.”

“I couldn’t do the mental math, my pencil snapped,” Chloe had said on Tuesday, brandishing the still-unsharpened pencil.

“Lonnie’s dad won a big award for something he wrote in the paper,” Abby had said on Wednesday, watching the surrounding bikers brave the harsh wind and sleet.

“And then Eli and Morgan both invited me over this weekend, and I said yes to both of them, but I think I wanna go to your house instead,” Chloe had said on Thursday as she exited the school with her friend.

“How was today?” Abby now asked on Friday as, struggling with her heavy backpack, she met Chloe by the water fountains in the entrance hall. Normally, the door’s clear windowpanes allowed Abby to stare outside at and bask in Ra’s shining rays, but more clouds had congregated over the warmth in the sky over the week, with smaller payoffs through rain and sleet that ultimately culminated in today’s peculiar weather condition, the legendary snow Abby

had previously experienced only through the page and television. Such a bizarre occurrence, one she knew to be real but thought to be mere myth down in Texas, plucked every last drop of awe from Abby's body and displayed it for the other students to see – if they too weren't interested in the outdoors.

“What?” Chloe asked. “It's just snow.”

Abby, clutching the principal's note and now understanding its significance – of course school would close on a snow day so that the students could have time to play in it – responded, “It looks wonderful.”

“It's not. Dad says you can't drive anywhere in it.”

Abby stood outside briefly, enjoying each individual flake and pretending she could see the differences in them before realizing she had to trudge home in this freezing temperature. Visibly shivering, Abby took each step as if she could feel her life ebb away with each movement.

“Here, Abby.” Chloe, who had come to school adorned in a coat so heavy-looking Abby had expected her sweat to produce another great flood, removed and wrapped it around her lighter-dressed friend. Abby found so much comfort in its thick sleeves and fuzzy hood that Chloe offered to bestow the clothing temporarily, until they met again, which Abby readily accepted.

Their plans for a playdate the next day fell through as the snow worsened, and to Abby's joy, school followed the playdate's path for the entire next week, starting a premature winter break. Her mother spent much of that time watching the same show about a lot of people in suits talking, culminating in a vote she didn't understand. Whenever she found her mother watching

this same show again, she expressed her boredom, but nothing could change the channel, so she eventually gave up and, at times when there was nothing else around the house to do or read, imagined these televised debates to be much more fascinating. What if these men were angels, judging humanity's worth of receiving divine grace and passage into heaven? Abby couldn't understand most of what they said, but when they voted yes, she felt relief knowing humanity had been spared, perhaps even through her own efforts. How else could she celebrate this but by wrapping the coat's arms around her neck and running around with it as a cape?

Abby returned the coat the next time she saw Chloe, at the start of the new semester. At first, she believed nothing to be wrong with the coat belonging once more to its proper owner. She thought she'd left it unstained too, a fate even the coat of many colors couldn't meet. Still, when examining what suddenly caused a shift in Chloe's demeanor, Abby could find nothing besides the coat. Maybe that they hadn't played throughout the entirety of winter break?

Whatever the reason, an initial hunch eventually turned undeniable as Chloe, over the next year and a half, made more harmful remarks as asides, no longer initiated conversations with Abby, ceased the emotional support once provided, and, following roughly eighteen months, finally delivered a speech that granted Abby solace by permitting the pain of Atlas dominating her shoulders to dissipate as it confirmed the fears that had cast a shadow over fourth grade.

February 26th, 2020

A sterile smell, one that somehow personified the concept of “too clean,” seeped into Abby’s nose, forcing her to grow accustomed as if a filter covered her face. Although she traveled light, entering her mother’s hospital room without a bag of any sort, the knots encumbered her, preventing her even from lowering her shoulders and trying to force relaxation. Seeing her mother in bed once more, the pain flared up, and she started massaging her back. It never worked, but she hoped she could convince herself to lessen the agony if her synapses believed she was trying to alleviating it.

“Abigail,” the patient said, sitting up. “You didn’t visit yesterday. Is something the matter?”

Knots. “I’m sorry, Mom.”

“No, I’m not mad, just concerned.”

Abby thought briefly about unloading her burden. Immediately, she decided. “I’m not going to finish my project in time. I haven’t started it at all, and I need to have something presentable the day I’m back.”

“That’s in just four days, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. There’s a little time, and I could probably knock it out in a day, but I can’t focus.”

Her mother frowned. “Why not?”

The knots tightened. Abby pounded her fist against her back several times before she felt ready to speak. “Mom, I’m sor-”

“Abigail, please, enough with the apologies. I told you, I’m going to be fine. I already feel a little stronger. You need to focus on you. Go home and finish that project.”

“But-”

“No more speeches about how you’re a bad daughter. You’re not.”

“I’m leaving before you’ll be out of the hospital.”

Her mother clapped and let out several energetic laughs. “Good. I knew you had to go, so I scheduled packers to come in on your last two days here.”

“Packers?”

“I’m selling the house.”

Abby heard these words and must have processed them, for how else would she have not known how to react? She could only stare, but that wasn’t quite right either as she didn’t look at anything. Briefly, she felt a disconnect as if time had frozen, the scene melting away, so she could process this information – that soon, the final relic of her childhood would be gone forever, transformed into an unrecognizable space where she wasn’t welcome. She eventually grew aware that her mother was now saying her name, discussing the details of this sale, expressing surprise that she cared so much about a house she hadn’t visited in a decade, bringing up the costs of maintaining such a house and the health risks of living unassisted.

Yet Abby could only shut her own mouth. Jackson and Daniel and Arnie and Dawn and Molly and Gracie and Riley and the knots and her unfinished project and everything else she’d done wrong and now the house threatened to burst out of her, but her sick mother didn’t need to hear this. These endless weights were hers alone. She contemplated what to say – perhaps

nothing, that seemed ideal – and finally found the words she sought when her mother spoke again.

“Abigail. Listen to me. I want you to stop saying you’re a terrible daughter. It’s not enough that I’m telling you you’re not, so you can’t come back until you tell yourself that. If you want to stay here, or if you want to come back tomorrow, the next thing I need to hear out of your mouth is how you’re the best daughter anyone could ask for.”

Abby knew tears were coming on. She felt warm, her breathing both intensified and grew shallow, and her mind collapsed into a scrambled mess. She didn’t know what was going on, but she needed to find somewhere to sit alone immediately, until she could recover. She truly didn’t think she could speak, which was perhaps for the best as it was unlikely she would’ve been able to repeat her mother’s words genuinely. While she was there, she didn’t think she could truly say anything short of exploding. Abby hurried out of the room, rounded a corner, and collapsed into the first bench she could find. Several staffers passed by, each offering her some help, but she declined every time. She needed to be alone to calm down. She had to take her mind off these stress sources. As much as she could muster it, Abby relaxed.

Now within the comforting confines of a home that would soon no longer be hers, Abby sat before her computer once more. She worked at an abysmally slow pace, configuring the layout piecemeal while doing her best to avoid those tumultuous thoughts that only worsened every second. She thought about her mother’s words. She appreciated that someone could be supportive, but her mother didn’t know the full scope of this story, and she didn’t think that needed to change.

What had she done in previous times of strife, when the crushing weight of her problems had proven unbearable, like after her fight with Chloe, or when Molly had turned her down? Abby had always looked forward to the future, when she would surely feel better. The problems she'd once faced appeared eternal, but surely, that wasn't truly the case? There were no futures when she truly reestablished these old friendships. Perhaps that was fine. Why would she want to form a relationship with those who didn't care back? They had once been her friends, and to see those doors closed permanently still hurt too much for her to think about, but as much as Abby tried to avoid thinking about these problems, she could only reach the conclusion that her mother was the lone person in Lamexas she could call a friend. Maybe once she'd leave and return to her true, permanent home, she'd start to feel better. Her suffering wouldn't last much longer if she could follow that path. There was nothing she could force. For this brief moment of revelation, Abby felt satisfied with her personal sense of resolution.

However, the knots remained, and soon, as those feelings of elation dissipated, Abby understood that she couldn't simply will away the pain she felt.

A cool breeze morphed into a strong gale that bit Abby's face, leaving a glacial trail of air to melt around her, dispersing the frosty sensations across her forehead, eyes, cheeks, nose, mouth, chin, each silently begging their host to cover up. Abby had considered wearing a mask or scarf, but she enjoyed these sensations as they formed a distraction from her inner tempest.

Abby had braved low temperatures before, but as she sat on the swing near Elysium, an adult in the middle of an empty playground, she hoped in part that so mundane a threat could fell her.

Abby wasn't certain when someone joined her on the lower swing, but she eventually grew aware that she wasn't alone. Someone sat beside her, the ropes stretching and groaning every few seconds. A quick glance revealed another adult, dressed in light clothing just like Abby, also swung without a word. There was almost nothing recognizable about her, but it was still clear who this new presence was.

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

Abby's thoughts never once turned to the coat as they spoke. The conversation carried passion, fury, and above all else, a true desire on both ends to reconnect, for something new – not a lingering remnant of old times but a brand new companionship, forged on this cold day and, breakable or not, genuine. No grudges appeared, and though Abby wondered at one point what had caused such a change in her new and old friend, she never felt compelled to ask. Some people moved in different directions, she felt, and some could never let go of past transgressions, but at their core, they were all still human beings, and those who understood this would experience rewards as their relationships flourished.

Whatever awaited in the future, isolation or desperation, there existed allies. Not everyone expected to stay during trying times would, and those true friends there to restore amends could appear from nowhere, an unintentional stain on an empty canvass, but even when plans couldn't be fulfilled – and oftentimes, fulfilment was never truly a possibility – one could stay and wallow in ever-worsening despair, or, as she learned, one could move forward and live.

October 17th, 2001

Yes, the notebook said Abby Crawford on the front. There was no mistaking that name. Jen had no idea what it meant, but the handwriting was so clean and distinct that it couldn't have said anything else. She wanted to return it to whoever Abby Crawford was – Crawford probably needed it – but how could she? The school day had ended an hour ago, and all of the teachers had to be gone by then. She couldn't bring it to the office, not when she'd be wasting some administrator's time with something so trivial.

The abandoned notebook sat on the floor, staring at her. It looked so sad, so desolate. But she couldn't give it a home. What if Abby Crawford needed it the next day, and Jen was sick? Or what if the appropriate faculty would find it and know what to do with it? She liked the prospects of letting a janitor decide more than someone the administration would recognize and develop a grudge against. She'd known someone in elementary school who had gone to the nurse so many times that they'd learned his name. She didn't want to be the next student down that path.

The notebook faded from her mind at first, but a week after this event, its frame appeared in her mind, pristine as ever. After class, she asked her World Cultures teacher, "Do you know Abby Crawford?"

"Yes, I know Abby Crawford," the teacher said.

"A week ago, I saw her notebook on the floor."

The teacher scolded her for this useless information, and suddenly, her thought that doing anything would've helped faded, replaced by the realization that this knowledge indeed would've been more important at the time.

Jen didn't hear the name Abby Crawford again that semester, and the notebook faded from her mind once more. She had more important priorities, like sneaking the camera into school to take pictures at lunch. She was never caught, by family or faculty, but even if she were, she would've just found a way to do it again. Whenever frames entered her mind, she had to find a way to immortalize them. Over winter break, without any other plans, her mind met the notebook's assault once more. This time, she tried replicating the pose she'd seen it in with her own for the camera, but nothing could recapture the pathetic image she'd once witnessed.

The next semester started, and Jen found herself in a new class due to scheduling conflicts. This class held assigned seating, and Jen, with the surname Hanamura, found herself at the intersection of G and H, right next to someone she'd soon learn was named Gracie Gutiérrez. Unlike Jen, Gracie was a talker, and soon, the former found herself with her first friend in middle school.

With the schedule change came a new lunch period for Jen. She had always isolated herself at a far, empty table, but a few weeks into the new semester, Gracie ended that. "Hey, we have the same lunch period."

"We do?"

"Yeah, I saw you sitting alone yesterday. I kept waving and calling to you, but I don't think you noticed."

"The cafeteria's loud."

"You should come sit with me!"

While Jen enjoyed solitude, the cafeteria couldn't provide that, so the choice was easy.

"Oh. Sure."

Lunch arrived, and Jen found Gracie's table quickly. Only two people sat there: her friend and a stranger, someone Jen had never seen before. She took the open seat next to Gracie and unpacked her lunchbox.

"Hi!" Gracie appeared almost bursting with energy.

"Hi," Jen said. Some brief hesitation, then: "Thanks for letting me sit here."

"Of course." Grace beckoned to her friend, who scribbled across loose sheets of paper on the table. "This is Abby."

Abby gave a quick wave without looking up, and Jen spoke in return. Once more, she recalled the notebook, but she neglected to mention it. What would that tell Abby, that Jen may have inconvenienced her once through inaction? That even though they'd never met, Jen knew her name? Even as Jen's bond would deepen with both girls over time, the notebook was a strange occurrence and, now, an amusing coincidence – nothing more.

The television displayed an image of David Schwimmer, who recited a joke Jen found off-putting, but the unseen audience laughed, and it disappeared from her mind. That show was always on when her parents were home, and she worried now that part of it would rub off on sweet, pure Abby, who sat on the rug next to her. Before them, a scattered collection of papers

and photographs. They attempted to make several matches, but whenever Abby thought one image matched her poetry, Jen held back.

“If we put these together, then you could say the poem’s explaining the picture,” she said.

“There should probably be something thematic,” Abby responded. “What about this one with the dog?” She brandished a photo displaying a German Shepherd sitting in the grass, its tongue halfway out of its mouth. “Even if it doesn’t fit with ‘Henry,’ I think it’s saying the same thing as ‘Rivers of Paint.’”

“I didn’t say it doesn’t fit with the dog one, but-”

“‘Henry.’”

“Right. ‘Henry.’ A poem about a dog. With a picture of a dog. Not my thing. But-”

“It’s not just about a dog.”

It was about a dog. Abby had relayed an encounter with a terrifying beast in the park, referring to it as the church grim, but the next day, Jen remembered learning that this terrifying mongrel was actually an overly-friendly Great Dane named Henry. Still, seeing a distressed Abby saddened Jen, who quickly relented.

“I think ‘Henry’ is great. Really. But it’s just not what I’m going for with mine.”

Abby stared at Jen for a moment as if lost in thought before turning her attention to the photos once more. “You should really name these.”

“Names tell people what to look for, boil endless thematic meaning into a brief summary. They don’t have names, they just are.”

Abby shrugged, followed by a yelp as she moved her hand back and forth between each shoulder. “I think you put a little too much thought into it.”

“Something bothering you?”

“No.”

Shoulder pain flared up whenever Abby was nervous about something, or else stressed in another way. Jen had noticed it all the way back in sixth grade, and while her friend never brought it up, she had little trouble understanding when something was wrong. “Here.” She scooted closer to Abby and started massaging her friend. Once, Abby had flinched at physical contact and even retreated, but Jen had eventually convinced her to allow the massages. She had her own chronic knot in the neck, so she understood Abby’s woes.

“I’m sorry,” Abby said as she tried to relax with Jen’s hands on her shoulders.

“Too late. I charge a hefty price for this stuff. You’ve gotta tell me what’s up.”

Abby hesitated for a moment. Jen could only imagine what she thought – it had to be something deeply personal. Jen knew not to prod, but her curiosity was tangible. Finally, Abby spoke. “You haven’t seen it yet, but I’m entering a poem in that yearbook contest.”

“Oh. Do you want me to read it?”

“When it’s ready, yes. Please.” These were big knots. A contest wouldn’t cause them, but if Abby didn’t want to speak, Jen wouldn’t make her.

Not long into the massage, the two heard a ring at the door. They’d ordered pizza, which had finally arrived. Jen and her family enjoyed putting everything they could on pizza, but they’d ordered one that was just cheese for Abby. She was the only person Jen knew who never ordered

any toppings, and she tended to ask for cheese in a way almost begging for someone to notice, complain, call her boring, criticize, anything, really. Ordering just-cheese pizza had turned into an art for Abby, and Jen found that hilarious and endearing.

When Abby left later that day, Jen gathered her pictures and returned them to the binder in her room where she kept them. She'd never shown Abby this binder because the front cover held a poem Abby had written in middle school before abandoning it. Jen remembered fishing through the garbage and uncrumpling it just because she felt it deserved a better fate, but she didn't think Abby would appreciate learning she'd kept it. For Abby's thoughts on titles, this short piece held none.

Down the street,

The lights dim,

Only you

There,

A woman

Scissors

Mask

Scissors

Nearby, a crawling

Sound, something

inhuman in noise

and appearance

Sail away,

Across those beautiful waves

Each particle of water unique.

But how could you? Your ship – sunk

And then you.

Jen didn't think there was anything special about this poem's content, but Abby had written it, and as a child who still saw the world idealistically no less. Wasn't that enough?

March 14th, 2006

Jen sat in Chemistry class, binder open to take notes as the teacher gave his presentation from the projector. She never took adequate notes in class, which meant she had to study extra hard. She'd been happy to learn that she shared a class period with Abby at the beginning of the semester, and while she still was, she at times wondered if it was a hassle. It couldn't have been, she figured, since she would've eventually said something to Abby, and she still had a high A in the class, but part of her wondered how sustainable their note passing was in the long term. Still, it wasn't going to change today, especially as the poem she'd promised Abby she'd read was due today.

heres my poem, please tell me what you think, scrawled in Abby's handwriting and passed to Jen with another, mostly filled sheet of paper.

Jen scanned the piece and felt a sense of regret. She liked it. What could she say about it? She loved helping Abby with poems, but she was also no good at analyzing them. She was touched that Abby still went to her for every single poem, but she never felt qualified to evaluate them, so she responded in the only way she could, writing, *what r u going for with this*.

what do you mean, Abby wrote back, returning the note.

like whats the theme, whats ur intention, Jen replied. After she passed the paper back to Abby, she returned to her notes on the lecture, but now she had a space missing. Jen had to make a mental note to ask someone else to fill her in later since she couldn't bring herself to accept the other possibility – that whatever the teacher had said would be lost forever.

She heard Abby write for a moment before stopping, but the paper didn't reach her binder, so she remained focused on the lecture. Even without the knots, she knew something was wrong; Abby always acted like this when it was important. Eventually, she received the note, confirming her suspicions.

Abby had written, *just nature, the world wont always be like this, so appreciate the moment, spend time in the present, you know. also im gonna ask Molly out after school today wish me luck.*

Jen didn't know Molly as more than a lacrosse player who'd gone to the same middle school, but she knew Abby was good friends with Molly. Abby spoke about Molly regularly, and Jen had wondered if there was a reason behind this, so she wasn't shocked to see her suspicions confirmed. Detached, she wrote back, *two ways u can end it, either emphasize that it wont always be like this or just focus on the now like u already have, honestly there isnt a lot to add, i like it.* She then added the word "congratulations," entirely capitalized and followed by several exclamation marks. She was happy for Abby without a doubt, and she hoped that Abby would find happiness in return, but as the knot irritated her neck, she couldn't deny that deep down, a part of her felt pained.

May 2nd, 2011

A long hallway with several rooms on either side and two large, looming doors at the end, nothing between there and the camera. Slow, controlled steps closer and closer. A few trembles that may have been from the hands holding the phone but fit perfectly with the looming terror the video presented. Just as the doors finally filled the entire frame, the handles just out of shot, one opened and slowly swung back with a horrid *creak*, endless darkness beyond.

Jen stopped the recording on her phone and rewatched the video. The quality wasn't the best, but it was all she could afford with her college budget. After a few more recordings of herself opening the door, she retreated to a desk in the library nearby and pulled out her laptop to get to work. She'd taken plenty of videos around campus as well as some surreal stills and frames she wanted to bring together. It wasn't Lynch or Kubrick, but it still brought her joy. There were plenty of independent film festivals around, so perhaps someday, she'd have something ready – but she also wasn't confident she wanted to enter any of her work. What if they liked it, and she became known for her films, and then the hobby lost its allure as it turned into a task, perhaps even a job? The widest release Jen could ever imagine would be uploading a video to some corner of the internet for someone to hopefully discover and try to figure out years later, all traces of the creator long gone.

However, she couldn't move too far ahead of herself. After she'd transferred the morning's videos to her computer, she had a gargantuan essay to work on. No one in high school had expected that Jennifer Hanamura, the kid who couldn't take notes, never talked to anyone, and seemed more interested in simply cruising through life without a care about anyone besides

herself would major in Philosophy, but somehow, for all of the papers, discussions, and readings she'd endured, this major was the only place she'd ever felt comfortable.

Family and friends had begged her to major in something in the STEM field or even Photography, but Jen didn't think now that she could've made it through any sciences without losing all drive in life and fading into the crowd, another mindless human dissatisfied with decades of service in a highly competitive industry, and she'd enjoyed taking photos – and later making films – too much to ruin them. She understood the lack of job prospects in Philosophy, but that had never bothered her. It interested her most as her field of study, and wasn't that what college was supposed to be about?

According to many people she'd spoken to, no. College was supposed to be about fun, sports, partying, dating. She thought her films plenty fun, and there had been countless enlightening lectures hidden beneath the paperwork, but sports had never interested her, the few parties she'd attended were among the most boring events in her life, and dating had been another story. Jen had no idea what her preferences were, but she only ever met two people she felt any sort of attraction to in college, and because they were both her closest friends, she didn't want to risk alienating them or ruining a relationship she enjoyed. It helped that one was in a committed relationship, the other almost constantly with someone new, but Jen, if nothing else, was happy they were happy, and for all the pangs of loneliness she felt, she didn't want to ask some random person out on a date once.

Instead, she had been the recipient of a near-identical situation. A peer of hers who'd shared a few classes asked her out toward the end of sophomore year. No matter how much she tried to look for any sort of attraction, she'd found none, and though she accepted in the hopes that she could eventually find something, Jen could never envision a life where the two of them

were together while she was also happy. After that, she'd decided not to pursue any romantic relationships, even if she sometimes felt tempted to speak to her friends. She could never understand the thought behind dating someone she either barely knew or didn't know at all. Who would want to spend their life with some random person seen on the street or at a bar? Perhaps this was a good thing. Peers or professors, entertainment or articles, everything was always about sex in some manner or another. It disgusted Jen for reasons she couldn't fathom – those same unknowable reasons everyone else was so interested in it. Humans had evolved past mere animals, yet this one act defied evolution and intimacy, instead denigrating them to but another non-sentient species. Thus, as long as Jen's relationship prospects wouldn't progress, she'd never have to worry about ruining them with the sex question.

Regardless, she didn't need to focus on that. Midterms and spring break had just passed, which meant she already had to prepare for finals and papers with how condensed the spring semesters were. She made little progress on her current essay, instead simply laying out some thoughts she could hopefully later materialize into pages. After class, she met with Skyler, the head of her department in the campus paper and a personal friend. To make money, Jen had joined a year prior and now wrote opinion pieces, occasionally conducting research and interviews for the actual reporting. It hadn't helped much with the crushing college debts and cost of living, but she'd needed to start somewhere.

The first year had been another part of that fun college experience. Jen had learned a lot while on the ground and working with others, and she'd felt like part of a team, as if the others working with her all had the same stakes and passion for this paper. Jen didn't know why, but that had changed this year. Skyler's boyfriend Noah had never been a hard worker, and the rest

of the team hated him for it, but recently, he and Jen had started clashing, leading to a meeting between Jen and Skyler to resolve these problems before they started harming the paper itself.

Walking into Skyler's office – and hoping deep down that she'd get an office someday, maybe even next semester after Skyler's anticipated graduation – Jen had one hand on the back of her neck. She sat down, facing her boss and friend across the desk. Skyler was one of the two close friends Jen felt attracted to, but of course Skyler didn't know that – and never would. Jen had already moved on too, now merely seeing Skyler as a close friend and trusted boss.

“Hey,” Skyler said. She'd turned away, so Jen saw only her back, but she sounded devastated as she spoke.

“Uh, hey,” Jen replied.

“You know, I just wanted to talk about the headline.”

The meeting hadn't solely been about Noah. Jen had recently come into conflict with Skyler over some creative decisions, including the headline for their next opinion piece. Jen didn't realize her own distaste for the headline – she was the only one who made a case against it during their last meeting, and she thought it was a good argument even if no one else cared – as well as some other remarks she'd made on the general direction had hurt Skyler, but then Noah had accosted her, almost violently.

In preparation for this meeting, Jen, not thinking their creative disagreements had reached a conclusion, had thought of more arguments to use when speaking to Skyler. She had a plan to discuss some of Skyler's decisions, made without the rest of the team's input – ‘why even have a team, then’ was the phrase Jen had readied – and in preparation for this meeting, she'd also made it clear to Skyler just how much she'd felt left out lately, how something that had been fun for all

of them once had brought back a stress knot she hadn't felt since high school. Not because of crunch, she wanted to emphasize, but because Skyler had made it clear Jen didn't need to be there. When there was an op ed, maybe Jen could say something, but her input on anything else – even what she personally had worked on – didn't matter. Perhaps, Jen thought, she shouldn't have told Skyler how depressed this situation had made her and that she'd contemplated leaving. At one point, she and Skyler had had a close relationship, and she truly felt like the next in-line for Skyler's position with how much they collaborated.

But now, that was gone. Skyler outlined how Jen's opposition to the headline had hurt, followed by a small remark about the creative disagreements. Jen had said at one point that a small joke referencing a current internet phenomenon wasn't set yet – she didn't even understand why the editor had pushed for it when she thought they were all supposed to be taking this paper seriously. Was only she? Had that been a mistake?

“It really hurt when you said it wasn't guaranteed,” Skyler said.

This was ridiculous, Jen thought, and absolutely not worth getting upset over, but Skyler was her friend, and she could tell how depressed Skyler was over this, so she said, “I'm sorry, really. I didn't mean to hurt you. I really didn't think there was anything wrong until Noah attacked me, but now-”

“That's between you and Noah,” Skyler said.

The knot worsened. Jen massaged her neck harder as she continued speaking. All of her arguments fell away as she understood everything was set in stone – true to Noah's words. Noah had acted based on a private conversation and would now receive no comeuppance, Skyler had thrown out their entire friendship based on a disagreement and a misunderstanding, and yet Jen

felt she could do nothing but apologize again and stop fighting it. If Skyler was so hurt, even with how she knew she'd hurt Jen too, then there was no point fighting this.

That night, Jen, immensely saddened, tendered her resignation letter. She went back and forth on whether to send it, her hands shaking and her neck screaming, before she ultimately deleted the email. She couldn't leave the paper in the middle of the semester, not when crunch was about to worsen. She'd be needed, and however much even thinking about it hurt her, she had a task to accomplish – whenever she didn't have essays, readings, or studying to focus on.

Still, as she worked, even though she had other friends in her department, she felt a sense of isolation worse than any she'd faced in the past.

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February 29th, 2020

Jen handed her boss the tool needed and took notes as he spoke about each patient's tooth, constantly referring to a picture she'd taken before his much anticipated appearance. The job was tedious, and she hated every second of it, but fate had spun her down the path of the dental assistant, and as long as she could sustain herself, was that not enough? She still had her passions, hobbies, and interests.

Like her interest in pets. She kept a rabbit in her apartment. Pets weren't allowed, but that rule hadn't stopped anyone previously, and she didn't intend to become the first. Every day, including this one, as she returned from work, her top priority was always to monitor her roommate.

“Lagomorph is eating normally again,” Jen said to herself as she jotted down notes on her clipboard before eyeing a small area where Lagomorph’s fur had creased in the other direction. “Looks like an eruption on nineteen.” She didn’t know why, but the term eruption had always amused her, ever since pursuing the path of the dentist’s office. It was a benign word just used to indicate emerging teeth, but it still felt so out of place whenever it came up.

She always lingered in the tiny living room, not wanting to leave the caged creature alone, and lay upside-down on her couch, staring at the few collectibles she’d gone after in college: a poster about some cheap horror movie involving underground monsters, a superhero graphic novel and its controversial sequel, a few figures from some fantasy series, and ancient VHS tapes, now coated in dust, of a thriller miniseries she’d adored during her early adult years. They were fun as mindless entertainment, but they never spoke about life in a way that resonated with Jen. She was always thinking, and these mediums weren’t about thinking. She wondered briefly if there was a timeline where she didn’t think as much about things and could be much happier.

No, that’s not possible. Multiverse theory’s a fallacy. The idea that there’s a separate universe for every decision anyone or anything could ever make doesn’t hold up under any actual scrutiny. If there is a universe for every single decision, then why are we in this one? We’re not in the absolute worst timeline possible, that would be one where life doesn’t exist – or it does but is wiped out completely, probably by fascists. But there have been so many terrible, unchallenged decisions that led us here that we’d definitely be in a really bad timeline. The odds that we as a collective have consciousness in this timeline, as opposed to a more neutral timeline or any good one, are so astronomically low that even equating them to zero wouldn’t be comprehensible. It’s got the same odds as time travel happening at this point.

Time travel. That was another thought she loved to obsess over, one fiction never understood.

The question isn't whether time travel is possible or if we're capable of it. There are all sorts of studies about pathogens and other biological aspects that would make it impossible, and time paradoxes would keep it from ever initiating in the first place, but even if it were something humanity could someday understand, that day won't come. Time travel doesn't exist because humans don't get that far. This really is it for us.

This led to her oft-repeated decision to question her own mortality.

That's the real question. How will I go out? Climate change might get me when I'm old, or I could get cancer, my family has a history of heart disease, and there are plenty of other unpredictable aspects too. What if there's a pandemic? Is anyone even capable of handling that, much less the aftermath? Any of these could get me, or something else could, but it's guaranteed I'll die young. People who think a lot die young, there was a study on that. Maybe it's one of the many ways I've already thought about. Maybe it's a freak car accident. But I don't have a much time as normal people. What impact can I leave with the time I do have?

Of course, death always turned to the afterlife.

It's such a comforting thought, that of an afterlife. Seeing family and friends and pets again – not Lagomorph though, he'll live forever. But it's not just that this is it. If there's an afterlife, then it stands to reason there'd probably be some sort of judgment. What if you could argue your case? Like you kill a ton of people, but they're all bad people who would've caused even more devastation if you hadn't? That's much better than letting one presence or some panel be the sole arbiter of everything. Obviously, there are objectively good and bad things, but

typical afterlife systems hold no room for nuance. The afterlife in general avoids nuance. The idea that everyone who's ever wronged me will be punished while I'll be rewarded for what I've suffered through because the exact opposite happened in life is so tantalizing. I understand why it brings people comfort to know their mortal enemies are suffering for all eternity. I hope it's true too. But eternity is a long time. And what if good people are wrongly punished? There's no after-afterlife, so what then?

Good and bad people, a subject clear to Jen, but not one any of her coworkers ever understood.

It's like you flip a switch as soon as you have a read on someone. You like them, you have an invisible green aura, you hate them, it's an invisible red. Every single person is just waiting to be sorted into that aura. Like pretty much every boss I've ever had. They may have been green at first, but if I see them, the red aura instinctively kicks in, and my mood's ruined. But my friends? I see them differently, feel much better. It's as simple as looking at a picture of someone. Your immediate emotional reaction determines the aura. I wish others could understand what I mean, it's not hard.

Jen had other thoughts, but a ring at the door broke them up. She opened it immediately and saw her landlord. Red aura.

"Jen, we've had more complaints about the smell," he said. The portly man attempted to peer over Jen's shoulder, but when she blocked his field of view, he pushed past her and stormed in before pointing at Lagomorph. "I knew it!"

"Wasn't it obvious?" Jen asked.

"I want you out this week."

“What about all of the other pets living here? Why am I the exception?”

“There are other pets?”

“I don’t know how you missed it with the barking every morning and the smell, but I’ve got a list. You don’t evict me, I’ll spill.”

The landlord grunted. “We’ll talk later. You’re in serious trouble.” He stepped toward the doorway, stopping to say, “I want it tonight,” and he was gone, pushing past another woman who approached, stopping at the open door.

“Um,” this new woman started.

“Oh, don’t worry, Alana, I only listed the people who don’t have pets.” Jen realized she wasn’t speaking to a neighbor midway through the sentence but couldn’t stop herself. Somehow, the shock of seeing Abigail, despite messaging her the address less than an hour ago, caused Jen to freeze.

“Can I come in?” Abigail asked.

“Y-yeah,” Jen said, gesturing to the couch as she ushered her new guest in and closed the door.

“Nice place,” Abigail said as she took her seat.

It wasn’t nice. There were stains everywhere, most of the appliances didn’t work, there were only two real rooms, and Jen’s memorabilia probably looked pathetic. “Well, I hear gunshots every night.”

“Oh. Uh. Well, it’s still nice.” Jen could tell Abigail had trouble finding the words here. Jen was embarrassed. Abigail had suggested meeting at a restaurant, but Jen had instead

recommended the apartment because Lagomorph had used up her dining budget for the month, and she was never going to ask Abigail to pay.

Jen spent a lot of time thinking about how to speak to Abigail. She didn't understand why this was so difficult. They'd been friends once, and now she felt warm and awkward. It had to be the embarrassment she felt from the apartment. "It's nice out, do you want to go for a walk?"

"That sounds wonderful," Abigail said. "I don't really do evening walks as much as I'd like."

As they moved outside, Jen shivered. She didn't have much in the way of heavy clothing, whereas Abigail had a huge winter coat on. However, she did her best to hide her discomfort. The apartment complex held several paths, places to sit, and even a pool, but Jen felt only embarrassment as she walked alongside Abigail for the first time in twelve years.

They were both silent for a long time. Jen was terrified, endlessly wondering what Abigail was thinking while her own mind went in every single direction, ranging from this being a setup for Abigail to propose (ridiculous) to this being a murder scheme (plausible). As the silence persisted, Jen started to wonder if it was fear or a general sense of awkwardness. She wasn't positive at first, but Abigail's aura was green. It was faint, almost nonexistent, when she'd entered, but Jen could tell now that Abigail was a friend, and despite the lack of any communication besides brief messages, Jen thought she trusted Abigail enough that even if this was a ploy to walk her into the woods and dismember her, she'd at least be happy that it was Abigail killing her and not someone else from her past she couldn't stand, like Molly or Noah.

Abigail eventually broke the silence, but Jen wasn't positive if it had been after minutes or hours. "So, you gave your landlord a fake list?"

“Uh. Yeah. Screw him. Let people do what they want, pets are great.” That was definitely too much. Jen had intended to start soft and work her way there if Abigail showed signs of agreement, but she supposed she couldn’t help herself. It had to be the aura.

“That’s smart though,” Abigail replied. Somehow, the aura turned greener. “I didn’t get a good look, but you have a rabbit?”

Jen nodded repeatedly, perhaps too much. “I do. His name’s Lagomorph.”

“Lago...morph?”

“It’s basically a science-y word for rabbit. I thought it sounded cool. And he’s like my little lab assistant.”

“He’s adorable,” Abigail said. “I love that name. Lagomorph. Lagomorph. It’s so fun to say.”

“He’s gotten me into a bit of trouble, but I couldn’t ask for a better companion.”

“That’s what I’m worried about. What if you’re evicted?”

Jen shrugged, a gesture which reminded her of something to keep in the back of her head. “What if I am? I’ll figure something out.” Abigail looked as if she were about to speak, but Jen didn’t want the conversation to be too one-sided and focus on where she was in life, so she continued. “You don’t have any pets, right?”

“How’d you know?”

“It’s like an unspoken rule of social media, all pet-owners must post pictures of their animals and nothing else.” The tension Jen felt as she spoke slowly disappeared, and she

experienced boundless comfort while the conversation progressed, marred only by the dropping temperature.

“Hey, Jen,” Abigail eventually said, “please take this.” In one swift movement, she removed her coat, handing it to her friend.

“No, you need it,” Jen said, shoving it away.

Abigail looked as if she were weighing her options regarding something before she seized Jen’s arm and put the jacket on with a soft, forceful movement.

“Did you really just do that?” Jen asked.

“I, I’m s... You’re cold, I had to.”

Abigail’s assertiveness shocked Jen and caused her to start laughing. “Wow, you’re a good friend.”

“Don’t say that.”

“Because you haven’t spoken to me? I haven’t spoken to you either. If you’re gonna give me this weight, at least let me help you with it.” Jen rubbed her neck, but in the cold, she couldn’t tell if it was out of habit or her knot acting up again. Seizing the opportunity as this brought her previous thought to the forefront of her mind, she continued speaking. “Hey, how are your shoulders?”

“My shoulders?”

“Yeah, back when we were kids, you had some real shoulder problems. I really want you to tell me you’re better.”

Abigail rubbed her face as she thought. “To be honest, they’ve been bothering me again lately. A lot. But they’ve been getting better. It helped when I finished a project that’s been eating me up all month, and then after I saw someone else a few days ago. And ever since you sent me that message earlier, they’ve, erm, they’ve been gone entirely.”

Jen struggled to process this information. She was truly one of Abigail’s pillars if even just sending her address had helped. Perhaps Abigail had a world of problems to face – not that Jen knew as the conversation still hadn’t turned toward her time in La Marque – but if Jen had somehow freed Abigail from her burdens, allowed her brand new freedoms from whatever of the past held her down, then that had to be a success.

“So, you’re going back up north tomorrow?” Jen asked as the conversation eventually turned in that direction.

“I have to leave. There are good things here, things worth embracing, but I can do that while still living in the present.” Abigail appeared excited as she added, “I didn’t even give the packers any weird looks when they finished up with my mother’s house today.”

“If you got what you needed down here, then I’m happy for you,” Jen said. “That’s really what matters.”

“What if you’re evicted though?” Abigail asked. “Where will you go? Do you need help?”

“Help?”

“I have space. You can stay with me.” She hesitated upon finishing the sentence before realizing what she’d said and hastily adding, “At least until you’re back on your feet. You and

Lagomorph,” Abigail said before shaking her head and rubbing her temple. “Oh, but it’s back up north where I am. If my mother weren’t selling the house, then I could ask her, but-”

“You know what, Abby Crawford? I’ll think about it.”

Abigail’s face lit up. “Really? I don’t want you to overburden yourself, Jen. But you always have a place to stay, for however long you need. I promise, no matter what happens, I’m here for you.”

Of course, Jen didn’t want to commit to leaving everything – or perhaps what little she couldn’t place in a suitcase, carryon, or Lagomorph’s cage – behind, even with her dissatisfaction with her job, and perhaps the cold influenced her, pushing her to consider and even humor this offer as it pierced her despite the heavy wear, but at least for that moment, while she considered the prospect of a new life that slowly grew more and more appealing, she thought back to the notebook that lay on the floor, the one she left alone. She hadn’t once brought it up to Abigail – she never even learned if Abigail had gotten it back – nor did she think it was something she needed to address by now, and it had ultimately made no impact on their friendship, but she was confident she’d never forget October 17th, 2001 as the first time she’d heard the name Abby Crawford.

Works Referenced

Asimov, Issac. *I, Robot*. Ballentine Books, 1977.

I, Robot's final short story ends with the revelation that robots have taken over humanity, but life is unchanged for the humans, who instead stave off a paranoia about the incoming takeover. In actuality, the robots have not formed an authoritarian government that subjects humans to horrors as feared, but the humans have grown so reliant on the robots that they have no ability to function on their own, and society would collapse without the robots. The paranoia of a situation that either has already occurred or will not occur drives Abigail's characterization throughout the duration of the novella.

Brown, Charles Brockden. *Wieland*. H. Caritat, 1798.

In Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland*, much of the conflict stems from the refusal of the main characters to form dialogue with and listen to each other. In particular, the protagonist Clara, when presented the truth about the situation ailing her, ignores this because it clashes with her perception of reality.

Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. Vintage Books, 1990.

Much of the story's structure is based on that of *Ulysses*, and other references abound as homages and to form parallels. The use of different storytelling styles in most sections also takes inspiration directly from *Ulysses*.

King, Stephen. *The Dead Zone*. Viking Press, 1979.

The Dead Zone's second half concerns its protagonist's struggle to adjust to a town and life that have changed ever since his awakening from a coma. While Abigail is at no point comatose, she

attempts to rebuild an old life and likewise struggles to adjust, owing to *the Dead Zone* as inspiration.

Orwell, George. *Politics and the English Language*. Horizon, 1946.

While the main intent of this essay is to criticize politicians who purposely speak vaguely to allow contradictory actions that don't directly betray their words, Orwell examines double meanings and true intentions behind seemingly innocuous phrases to expose holes in the English language regular people use daily. Throughout the story, Abigail thus wonders about the meaning of several conversations, some of which do have deeper implications while others don't. These, in turn, impact many of her actions.

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Alfred A. Knopf, 1987.

Beloved places a strong emphasis on changes of perspective, especially toward the end as the mystery is revealed. The prose changes with perspectives, emulating the feeling of being in the head of an entirely different character. The differences in narration between Abigail among each time period, and especially Jen's sections at the end, directly attempt to mimic *Beloved* in a more subdued manner.

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Dover Publications, 1992.

Hamlet places a strong emphasis on its titular protagonist's internal conflicts. While Hamlet faces much stronger pressure than Abigail throughout the play, he spends much of his time onstage pondering his options as well as the play's events. Abigail likewise spends many pages inside her own mind contemplating the events surrounding her.

Steinbeck, John. *Cannery Row*. New York: Editions for the Armed Services, Inc., 1945.

One of the ninth section's primary influences, this novel's focus on the citizens of the town

Cannery Row formed one of the two baselines for this section as it gave Abigail something to observe and an overall style for the section to follow.

Baudelaire, Charles, and Jonathan Mayne. *The Painter of Modern Life: And Other Essays*.

London: Phaidon, 1964. Print.

The concept of a flâneur as described in this essay is followed in the ninth section, forming its other prominent inspiration along with *Cannery Row*. Abigail plays the role of the flâneur throughout, almost as an escape from her normal life.

A Silent Voice. Directed by Naoko Yamada, Kyoto Animation, 2016.

This film concerns a childhood bully who grows up and starts experiencing the consequences of his actions, thus spending the runtime seeking forgiveness, which he gains at the end. While this thesis was conceptualized entirely separately from the movie, several moments of emotional catharsis are used as references whenever Abigail experiences some self-perceived success.

“The Fire.” *The Office*, created by Greg Daniels, season 2, episode 4, Deedle-Dee Productions and NBC Universal Television Studio, 2005.

While *the Office* in no way influenced or inspired this thesis, it is referenced more than once by name due to being a pop cultural phenomenon in the mid-2000s, when certain sections of the story take place.

Crane, David and Marta Kauffman, creators. *Friends*. Bright/Kauffman/Crane Productions and Warner Bros. Television, 1994.

Likewise, *Friends* appears solely as another example of a pop cultural phenomenon from the mid-2000s and thus sees two references in this story.

Destiny's Child. *#1's*. Columbia Records, 2005.

As with *the Office and Friends*, this album is only used as a pop cultural phenomenon referenced by the time period in which one section takes place.

“The Betrayal.” *Seinfeld*, created by Larry David and Jerry Seinfeld, season 9, episode 8, West-Shapiro Productions, Castle Rock Entertainment, and Sony Pictures Television, 1997.

Although not a direct influence, “the Betrayal” was my first exposure to a story told in reverse chronological order, so the 21st section can be attributed to it.

“INT. SUB.” *BoJack Horseman*, created by Raphael Bob-Waksberg, season 9, episode 8, Tornante Television and DeMar-Mercury, 2018.

This episode depicts a therapist telling a story with changed names for comedic effect, allowing it to form some of the basis for the sixth section. However, rather than a direct influence, the section instead goes in a new direction with a similar premise.

Lewis, C S. *Prince Caspian: The Return to Narnia*. New York: Macmillan, 1951. Print.

Prince Caspian, as my first true exposure to framing devices in literature, serves as the other basis for the sixth section.

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