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Settling In

By Audrey Black

An Honors Thesis

Presented by

Audrey Black

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Day One

1. *Share your name*
2. *What you're working on*
3. *Your high and low*
4. *State the emotions you are feeling and/or share any coping skills you've used recently*
5. *Today's ice breaker :)*

The notes on the white board were a daunting sight. Margaret cringed at the thought of answering any of them in a crowd. The board took up an entire wall, but she could see splotches of dull green paint peeling off at the corners. The rest of the room was empty, save for a few beat up chairs and a screen projector. Margaret stood across from Rachel, the social worker she'd met moments before, and stared at her blankly. Rachel was short and stout, and the only evidence that she took care of herself were her delicately painted red nails.

“Think about your answers to the group questions, hon. People will be arriving soon. We're always happy to get someone fresh out of inpatient,” Rachel chatted at her, stacking papers into an overstuffed binder. On the front of the binder was a logo that glinted in the fluorescent lighting: the words “Dallas Behavioral Health” superimposed over a silver flower.

Margaret was quiet, unsettled by the stale, air-conditioned air and the bleakness of the room. She shoved her hands into her back pockets, trying to ignore the roughness of the denim against her skin. While in inpatient, she had adapted quickly to the hospital gown. Returning to her usual clothes for partial hospitalization was an adjustment. She wondered why anyone ever bothered to wear skinny jeans, almost missing her open-backed medical gown. There was something freeing

about walking around in a glorified poncho and underwear. The benefits of losing your mind: you don't owe anyone anything, not even putting on shoes.

She wandered over to the plastic chair that looked least likely to collapse and slouched into the seat.

“Move over, honey,” said a voice from above her head. “That’s where I sit.”

Margaret looked up from her shoes to find a large woman with greasy black hair and a chapped mouth. Over one shoulder was an oversized, grimy tote bag full of what looked like old receipts. The woman wasn't wearing any makeup, saved for thick eyeliner along her lash line. The pigmentation looked more green than black, and was faded in an unnatural way. Margaret wondered if it was tattooed on, like it was trendy to do in the 90s.

She got out of the chair and gestured for the woman to take it. “Oh, sorry, I didn't know we had assigned seats.”

The woman settled into the seat. “We don't. I just like to sit across from the door.” The seat was exactly diagonal to the half-open door.

Margaret didn't respond, tired from the social interaction already.

People began to filter in. A middle-aged man in slacks and a dress shirt took the seat across from Margaret. He greeted her with a polite smile and she glimpsed deep bags under his eyes before he looked down to type something on his phone. A large woman who looked about forty walked in after him, a latex glove over her right hand. She took a chair far away from the rest of them. The circle of chairs wasn't even half full, so Margaret picked a new seat, leaving an extra between her and the woman.

“I’m Brenda,” the woman said loudly, as though Margaret wasn’t sitting in the same room. “I’m here because my husband killed himself and my daughter is a heroin addict. What’s your deal?” Brenda adjusted the straps of her ill-fitting tank top as she waited for a response.

Margaret shifted in her seat, avoiding Brenda’s scrutinizing eyes.

A young man sauntered in with his hands in his pockets. He looked like he was in his teens, like her. He was short, but still taller than her, and his clothes would be considered preppy if they weren’t so ill-cared for.

“Hey there,” he said. He smirked at her, revealing a front tooth that crossed over the other. “I’m Landry.”

His beard was scraggly, though she couldn’t tell if that was his usual style or if he’d just been in inpatient too. No sharp things meant no shaving razors. Margaret herself could feel her leg hairs prickling beneath her pants.

Landry pointedly took the seat next to her, slinging his arm around the back of it. “I’m a drug addict. Why are you here?”

“I was just asking her!” Brenda said, leaning forward to join the conversation.

Margaret shrugged, not sure how to deflect their questions. She couldn’t tell if they were making fun of her or not.

It’s one thing to be the new kid at school, it’s another thing to be the new kid at the hospital. What if no one wants to eat lunch with me? I can’t eat alone in the bathroom if I’m not allowed to be unsupervised.

The slam of Rachel shutting the door behind her startled everyone. Rachel strode to the center of the room. “Welcome, everyone! Let’s begin with our usual openers. For newcomers, follow the talking points on the board as you share. We spend our mornings on check-ins and then we will have a lesson in the afternoon on a topic like coping skills or healthy boundaries.”

There were six people, including herself and Rachel. Everyone certainly looked like they belonged in a mental hospital: lots of eye bags, wrinkly clothes, and sunken cheeks. Margaret hadn’t looked in the mirror in a while, but she knew she fit in perfectly.

Brenda was seated the closest to Rachel, which seemed to be her queue to go first. “Hi everyone, I’m Brenda.”

“Hi, Brenda,” everyone but Margaret replied in unison.

I guess this is like AA is in the movies? Except, we’re in a circle instead of facing one guy? In the movies, it’s always one guy with a microphone talking. This wasn’t like inpatient, where they hooked her up to IVs to give her nutrients and wouldn’t let her pee alone. This was the opposite problem—it wasn’t isolating, it was collective.

“I have Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Major Depressive Disorder.” Brenda said, as though she were listing items on a grocery list. “My high is I spent some halfway decent time with my daughter and my low is I trusted someone and I shouldn’t have, and now I want to drive to his house and punch him in the face.”

Margaret watched Brenda’s foot tapping nervously in her platform flip flop, hitting the tile floor with every syllable she spoke. Flakes of dead skin hung off the sides of her feet. Her toenails, though, were freshly painted in a bright shade of red. They matched her fingernails.

Women in the South above a certain age typically refuse to paint their nails a color other than red, regardless of their background, and Brenda appeared to be no exception.

“What little looks I have left are fading more and more every day, and I've just about given up hope. But I tried online dating and I actually met someone.” Brenda slowed down a bit here. Earlier, when she had told Margaret about her husband, she had seemed numb to the point of casual, but this felt different.

“We texted for three weeks and made plans to go out. We finally planned our first date now that I'm out of inpatient. I was genuinely excited. I took a shower, and my daughter did my nails and hair.” Brenda took a deep breath.

Brenda stood on her porch for twenty minutes before George arrived, wringing her hands. The air was heavy, making her sweat. At least, that's what she told herself. It was the April humidity that was making stains grow underneath her arms, not her nerves.

“Is he still not here?” Heather shouted from the kitchen.

Brenda scowled. “Does it look like he's here?”

She went back inside, slamming the door behind her. Heather was sitting on the countertop in her cut off shorts and bralette, glassy-eyed, swinging her legs. Brenda rolled her eyes at the sight and motioned for her to get down. Twenty-five is too old to be sitting on furniture like a child. Heather rolled her eyes back but obliged. This was about the politest Heather ever was in response to Brenda's mothering.

Brenda tapped her fingers on the table, toying with her phone in her other hand. She opened her preferred dating app, reading and re-reading the most recent message: See you tonight!

Clicking to the profile, she smiled. George, 45, dog person, accountant. Loves drive in movies and Italian food.

The doorbell rang and Brenda jumped. Heather beat her to the door.

“Mom, he’s here!” she shouted in the face of the startled man.

Brenda hurried over, her heartbeat quickening. As soon as she was within five feet of him, her excitement melted into dread.

George grinned at her, a toothy, too-wide smile. His pants were hitched up to his armpits and his glasses were so thick he looked bug-eyed. He looked like the grandfather of the man from his dating profile. Brenda didn’t hate the way he looked, but she hated that she’d been lied to. Made a fool of. In front of her daughter, too.

She was so shocked at the difference in his appearance, she couldn’t even manage a proper greeting. He waited expectantly, his hands over his midriff with his fingers in his belt loop.

“So, did you go on the date?” Landry asked.

“Well, yeah. If you could call it a date. It started with me getting angry with him for lying about his age and ended with him asking to see my tits.” Brenda looked sullen, at first, but then she started laughing. Her cackle was infectious. Margaret and Landry started to giggle.

“What’s the point of having nights off from the hospital if I can’t even get a boyfriend?” Brenda said. She phrased it like a joke, but there was obvious truth in it.

“So, you wouldn’t have wanted to be with him anyway, would you?” Rachel said.

Brenda shrugged.

“It’s one guy,” John said. “There are lots of nice guys—”

“One real pervy guy!” Landry stepped on the end of John’s sentence.

The woman with the latex glove spoke up. “You deserve better than a liar, Brenda.”

I guess this is the “group” part of the therapy. Margaret looked at her hands, not sure where she should be looking or what she should be doing.

Rachel returned to her pep talk. “Just because it didn't work out with this guy doesn't mean you need to give up. And when you think about it the fact that you met someone, got to know him a bit, and even left the house is a lot of progress for you!”

“I... I guess,” Brenda conceded. “I did wash my hair.”

There was a general murmur of praise from the circle.

“I guess that is pretty good. For me,” Brenda said.

Margaret wasn’t used to this amount of sharing from strangers and the sudden intimacy made her skin crawl. She felt sorry for Brenda, though. She was not an attractive woman, especially with her greasy hair and stained clothing. Perhaps she would be more attractive if she were better kept and not in a hospital. *But who looks their best in a hospital, after all.*

Everyone’s attention moved clockwise, to Landry.

“Hi everyone, I’m Landry.”

“Hi Landry,” everyone said in unison. Margaret spoke for the tail end of it, the “dree” of his name.

Landry wiped his nose with his sleeve, sucking in mucus noisily. “I’m working on staying clean. My high is that I’ve been clean for seven days. My low is that my mom’s up my ass about everything now because she thinks I’m going to ring up my dealers and go get coked up any minute,” Landry paused, looking for sympathy, but Rachel gave him no reaction. The other patients seemed to empathize with his mother, if anything.

“Okay, so, coping skills. Oh, yeah, I got one,” Landry said.

His mom was bitching at him again. “What do you expect to do about your finals? You need those credits to graduate.”

She pursed her lips as she drove, making eye contact with the road instead of her son.

“I don’t know, Mom. Probably wouldn’t have passed them anyway, so who cares? It’s not like I am going to need to know random physics equations or who shot who in the 1700s when I’m in the real world.” Landry pulled apart his cloth bracelet as he spoke, fraying the ends.

His mom tapped her ring finger against the steering wheel, making a clinking noise.

“You won’t make it in the real world at all if you never graduate high school. I don’t know what I’m expected to do with you. Do you know what the other moms at school are saying? What the neighbors are saying? Ever since they saw the ambulance leaving our house, everyone’s eyes have been on us. I—”

Landry clenched his fists, the bracelet still in his palm. His nails, which he kept forgetting to cut, dug into the soft flesh of his palm. He opened his mouth to fire back, then paused. He then leaned forward to turn on the radio. He turned it to 104.5, a hip-hop station. His mom continued talking, so he turned up the volume until he could barely hear her. He rolled down his window

and stuck his head out. Now he couldn't hear the radio hosts transitioning to the next song, much less her. The wind hit his eyes until they watered, but he didn't flinch.

“I looked out the car window until I calmed down,” Landry said. “I did do it in the middle of her talking, which she wasn't too happy about, but it's better than going off on her,” Landry looked to Rachel for praise.

Rachel attempted a blank, neutral look, but Margaret saw her mouth twitch in amusement.

The man with eye bags introduced himself as John and went on to describe his impending divorce and estranged children. Margaret zoned in and out of the conversation, feeling tired and lightheaded. The next to go was the woman with the glove, who introduced herself as Eunice. She asked to skip her turn. Margaret was glad to know that was an option.

The “icebreaker” was everyone listing their favorite movies. John apparently did not watch many movies, but he did watch a lot of live sports, which he began to tell everyone about in great detail. Rachel let them out for a break right as Margaret was about to excuse herself, overstimulated by all the talking.

She wondered if Rachel was headed to have lunch with the other social workers. Did they spend their breaks talking about their patients' breakdowns and idiosyncrasies? Or did they chat about politics or reality television?

Brenda motioned her over. “We're going to go to the cafeteria, you want to come with?”

Margaret wasn't hungry, but she didn't want to be left alone, so she nodded.

All the patients went to the cafeteria besides Eunice, who stayed behind. Margaret saw her pull out the other latex glove and baggies of food, which she didn't open until she worked hand sanitizer into her gloved hands.

The cafeteria was a gray, dingy room full of nurses and doctors on their own breaks. No one paid them any attention as they walked through the line, despite being a strange-looking collection of people. Landry picked out a soggy looking burger, Brenda got a chicken sandwich, and John got sushi.

Hospital sushi, what could go wrong? Margaret settled on a Caesar salad.

When she walked up to the cashier, John waved her aside. "Lunch is on me," he offered to everyone.

Margaret protested, not sure what the etiquette for the situation was. Brenda hushed her, and gave John a thumbs up.

He chatted with the cashier as she rang them up.

Is this a business lunch to him? In his head, are we like, in a boardroom?

The four of them sat at the only table not already occupied by stressed people in scrubs.

"So, why are you here?" Landry asked through a mouthful of beef.

Margaret picked at a shriveled tomato stuck in the corner of the Tupperware dish. "Are we allowed to tell each other that? Without Rachel?"

“We’re allowed to do whatever we want when Rachel’s not around. None of us are snitches,” Brenda said, picking pieces of skin off the chicken in her sandwich. “But you don’t have to tell us anything you don’t want to share. Yet.”

“Well, then, why are you here then?” she countered.

Landry seemed excited to talk about himself. “I’m a druggie, like I said. Weed, Adderall, whippets, cocaine, Xanax. I’ve done psychedelics too.”

He gave her a side ways glance, checking to see if she was impressed. Brenda rolled her eyes at him as she took the last bite of her sandwich.

She’s probably already heard all of this, Margaret thought.

“Like a week ago, I’m xanned out at my house, just chilling.”

John looked confused. “Xanned out?”

“On Xanax,” Brenda explained. “On a lot of Xanax.”

“Then my girlfriend fucking dumped me, out of nowhere. She’s like freaking out because she found out I cheated on her with her friends. She’s pretty insecure.” Once again, he glanced at Margaret to see if she was impressed, this time at the notion of him having a girlfriend. She gave him a blank look.

“But I like, don’t want to break up, because I like having a regular hook up. And I was pretty out of it. I’d been high pretty much 24/7 since Thanksgiving,” he said.

November to April. That’s four months straight of being high. Margaret was horrified yet impressed.

“And how’d that work out for you?” Brenda said.

Landry ignored her and kept talking. “I don’t really remember this, but I went and found my dad’s glock. And I sent her a picture with it. It was supposed to be sexy, I was in my boxers.”

Margaret laughed out of pure shock, then apologized. “I’m sorry, it’s just, what? You did what?”

“I thought she’d be into it, I don’t know! But I guess it just freaked her out. She called the cops. They showed up and handcuffed me! It was crazy. I wish I had a picture of that!” He held his hands up and against each other, pretending to be handcuffed again.

Does he think this is a cool story? Does he think he comes across as a hero here?

“The cops took me to the hospital ‘cause they thought I was threatening suicide. Then the doctors figured out how many drugs were in my system and they made me do inpatient. My mom was so pissed when they called her,” he concluded.

Brenda shared a look with Margaret. “His logic there doesn’t make any more sense when you hear the story for the third time, I’ll tell you that much.”

John said nothing as he dipped his sushi pieces into packets of low sodium soy sauce.

When it became clear that neither Margaret or Brenda was going to praise him for his story, Landry got bored. He started talking about the Dallas Cowboys with John, who seemed excited to chat.

Margaret forced a few pieces of lettuce down despite not really wanting the barely seasoned leaves. She’d feel too guilty if she wasted the meal John bought her.

The activity for the afternoon was about boundaries. Expo markers in hand, Rachel put a sentence up on the board.

I feel _____ when you _____ because _____. What I need is _____

“This is an I feel statement. It requires you to explain your own feelings first, rather than accusing anyone. Let’s work through some examples.”

Margaret started out taking notes but ended up doodling over the packet. She crossed out the parts she found irrelevant, but that quickly became her editing the syntax of the sentences. When Rachel saw her notes, she shook her head.

They were dismissed at 4PM. The sunlight stung after being inside since 9AM and she blinked away tears as her eyes adjusted. When they did, she spotted her mom’s sleek silver car in the parking lot, and trudged over.

“So, how was it?” her mom asked. She was in her tennis clothes and smelled salty from sweat. Her women’s league probably just had a match. She must have had to leave early.

Usually Margaret would look at her phone in these moments, but she still wasn’t allowed anything that facilitated communication with the outside world. She felt too uncomfortable to play this odd charade, as though she was getting picked up from school and not a partial hospitalization program. Inpatient had been easier than this, in a way, because she hadn’t needed to pretend to be normal for anyone.

Her mother quickly accepted defeat. They rode in silence the rest of the way home.

Day Two

The next morning, Landry took the seat next to her without hesitation and looked at her expectantly. She waited as long as she could before acknowledging him with a nod.

Brenda headed for the seat next to Margaret, her tote bag full of trash swinging from her shoulder as she strode. “So, how are you?”

Margaret was a bit surprised to be addressed. “I’m all right.”

Landry peered around her to make eye contact with Brenda. “I’m doing good too, Brenda, thanks for asking.”

Brenda settled into the same chair as yesterday with an exaggerated sigh. “Oh, shut up, you cokehead.”

“Hey! We aren't allowed to call me names like that anymore. Rachel says so. I have to stop ‘putting myself down,’” he said, miming air quotes.

“Oh, did she give you that old talk?” Brenda asked.

Brenda was a confident speaker, but her whole body shook when she spoke. She was always tapping her foot against the tiles, even when she seemed relatively calm.

“Yeah, I guess she thinks I have low self-confidence or something and that's why I do drugs. Which is so not true. I'm not insecure. I know I'm smart, and good-looking, and funny!”

Margaret looked at Landry with his unkept scruff and mismatched neon athletic clothes. He gave her a big smile with his yellow, crooked teeth. Brenda waved her hand in the air dismissively.

Brenda looked her up and down, taking in her oversized clothing and thin, sloppily cut hair. “If you don’t share today, you’re going to get in trouble with Rachel...” Brenda said.

This woman must be some kind of old pro at hospitalization. What a thing to put on a resume.

“So.” Landry said, punctuating the single word aggressively. “What’s your thing, then? You a druggie, too?” Landry asked.

“Eating disorder? Psychotic episodes?” Brenda prodded.

Margaret hesitated, playing with the hem of her t-shirt.

Brenda sighed and leaned back in her chair. Margaret noticed that she was wearing the same outfit as yesterday. “We’ll get to the bottom of you. If that’s all right. I like getting to know people, but if you want to stay all shy and quiet...” she trailed off.

A tall woman dressed in various shades of beige walked through the door. A new person. Margaret examined her and sensed Brenda doing the same. The woman was all edges: high cheekbones, a visibly sharp clavicle, and bony elbows. She took the seat next to John, near the front. Margaret briefly made eye contact with the woman, but didn’t maintain it.

When Rachel walked in, everyone settled into their seats, accustomed to the morning routine. At the last minute, Margaret realized she was in the seat closest to Rachel, who was looking at her expectantly.

“Hi, I’m Margaret.”

Everyone repeated her name back to her in a chorus.

Margaret looked out at everyone's expectant faces. She sat on her hands so people wouldn't see them shaking, a trick she had learned after many tense dinners with her parents. "My high is that I am here and not inpatient, because inpatient sucked."

Margaret stretched, then cringed. She'd forgotten about the IV in her arm. The skin was too tender to be moved suddenly.

The walls were a sickly off-white, with small clumps of paint in disjointed spots. Looking for too long made her feel dizzy.

There was a knock on the door. It was the blonde nurse with soft hands.

"Hey, honey, have you been able to eat anything today?"

Still staring at the wall, Margaret shook her head.

The nurse spoke with a comforting twang. "You need to try to get something down on your own, if you can, sweetheart."

Margaret shrugged, then winced again when the tube pulled at her skin. She could hear the nurse make a tsk-ing sound as she moved around the room, cleaning up her trash from lunch and checking her chart. The act of making even the simplest conversation exhausted her and she shut her eyes.

"After even a few hours of inpatient, it felt like the outside was gone and the whole world was my little grey cube. My low is that my parents won't actually talk to me about me being here. They act like I go to summer camp every day, or something. I've been trying to use more 'I feel' statements, does that count as a coping mechanism?"

Rachel nodded.

“I’m working on... I’m just trying to get healthy. And be happier. I am a very unhappy person, and I have been for a long time.”

Everyone waited expectedly, but Margaret didn’t continue.

“I’m going to let you get away with sharing that little for today, but pretty soon you’re going to need to open up in this space. This only works if you share,” Rachel said. She was taking notes in her binder and she paused now to write something extensive down.

It was John’s turn next. Margaret sighed with relief when the attention turned from her. Speaking in front of everyone had exhausted her.

“Hi, I’m John. I’m working on anger management. My high is I’m really hopeful this program will help me improve my behavior, and my relationships, especially with my wife. My low is that as I learn more about how I should be acting, I feel guiltier and guiltier about everything I put my wife through, particularly this year,” John said.

Anger management is a scary reason. What kind of “anger management issue” leaves you hospitalized?

“What do you think influenced your behavior this past year?” Rachel asked.

“My wife and I have always had an outside conflict. Finalizing our divorces to our first spouses, custody battles, my daughters not liking her. But everything has been settled for a while now and it’s as if without an external demon, our internal demon, our relationship problems, reared its head. But I really want to fix things. I’m working on better communication and controlling my temper.”

John hated when Tracy smacked her gum and she knew it.

“How many more days of this program do you have?” she asked. She sat across from him in their living room, a coffee table covered with unread expensive books in between them. Sitting like this, John felt an uncomfortable parallel forming in his mind of the last time he’d sat across from a wife with a table in between them. Here, there was no lawyer and no paperwork. For now.

“I don’t know, honey, as many as it takes for me to get better,” he rubbed his eyes until he saw tiny stars on his eyelids.

She smacked her gum again, looking disinterested. “I don’t know how your work is letting you skip so many days. Don’t you need to go back?”

He shook his head, unwilling to get riled up despite her attempts to needle him.

“I’m going upstairs to lie down.”

“Is there anything else you’d like to share today, John?”

“No. I’m done for today.” John crossed his arms over his dress shirt.

He seemed like the type of man who never wanted to look weak in front of people. Margaret’s own father was similar. It unsettled her to witness a man around the same age being so vulnerable.

Brenda leaned over to Margaret. “He’s definitely getting divorced,” she said in a hushed tone.

Margaret frowned. It felt mean to say something like that. John was nice, just sad.

Rachel moved on to the bony woman in beige.

“Hello everyone, I am Olga. I’m working on my anxiety and PTSD from a car accident.”

Olga was beautiful in a strained way. Her skin looked taunt against her cheekbones, and her fingers were long and delicate. She moved them as she talked. Not her hands, but her fingers, lightly tracing the air.

“My high is that I managed to get here on my own, without having a breakdown.”

Olga stood nervously at a bus stop. The only bench she could sit on was crusted over with old gum, so she settled on pacing as she waited.

The bus creaked as it rolled up. The yellow of the car felt too bright for 8:00AM. Olga shifted her weight back and forth between her feet as the doors swung open.

She swiped her pass delicately, then harshly after the machine failed to process it the first time. The bus driver ignored her.

Shaking, she sat at a seat in the direct middle of the bus, the least impacted by any swerving or sudden motion. She held onto the handle by the seat with white knuckles the entire ride there.

“My low is I haven't been able to sleep in days and I am nervous about my mother visiting me. She is coming all the way from Ukraine, and I’m not sure I’m prepared to host her.”

Olga seemed to grow more rigid when she was nervous. Rachel was listening attentively. She walked Olga through steps to calm her anxieties about her mother’s visit.

“Let’s do an icebreaker activity now,” Rachel said. “Does everyone know how to play two truths and a lie? Each of you needs to make three statements about yourself then we’ll all guess which one is the lie. Who wants to go first?”

Eunice raised her hand hesitantly. “I can go. Uh, let me think. I teach fifth graders, I have six toes, and... I went to pizza college.”

Landry sat up straight, suddenly interested. “Six toes on one foot or all together?”

“You’d be walking around like this!” Brenda said, using three fingers to mime a person with three toes on each foot walking around.

“And what’s pizza college? Does it have degrees in Pizza History, Pizza Art, Pizza-Spinning?” Margaret said, feeling bold for a moment. Her stomach turned immediately after she spoke, and she braced herself for rude comments, but everyone chuckled at her joke.

John frowned, thinking. “I have no idea, what’s the lie?”

Eunice grinned, enjoying the debate. “Do you all give up?”

“I think the lie is the teaching. I want her to be a Pizza Historian with only six toes,” Brenda said.

“I have five toes.” Eunice paused for emphasis. “On each foot.”

“So, you did go to pizza college?” Margaret asked.

“It’s a one-week intensive course at a secret location for people trying to become managers at the Pizza Palace,” Eunice said.

“I actually did pizza college, too,” Brenda said. Turning to Eunice, she asked, “How many pepperonis on a Pizza Palace pizza?”

In unison, the two women said, “Twenty, no more, no less.”

“It’s at a secret location? Why?” Margaret laughed, feeling confident enough about her previous joke that she tried another. “I want to go. I want to be a Pizza Palace scholar.”

“You do not want to go to pizza college. Pizza college is what made me go back to real college,” Eunice said.

The mood had lightened, and everyone was giggling, even Rachel.

“I can go!” said Olga. “My icebreaker is... I play the clarinet, I’ve zip lined in Vegas, and...” she paused, pondering. “Oh, I know. I’ve killed someone.”

The room went quiet. John coughed uncomfortably. “Do you... not play the clarinet?”

“I think Vegas is fake,” Rachel guessed.

“Me too,” said Brenda. The others nodded in agreement. It felt too risky to decide anything else.

Olga clapped her hands together. “Yes, I’ve never zip lined in Vegas. I went but the line was way too long and I wasn’t going to wait around for hours to do that!”

Margaret broke the extended silence. “So...”

Brenda finished her thought. “Want to, uh, fill us in on some of your truths there, then?”

“Oh, well, I have killed someone.” Silence filled the room. “In self-defense!” she added, as though no further explanation was needed.

“Are you comfortable telling us what happened?” Rachel asked.

Olga pulled her thin hair back behind her ears as she spoke. “Sure. Well, I was walking home from my clarinet concert when I was a sophomore in high school, so fifteen or so—”

So, she does play the clarinet.

“This man jumped out at me and tried to attack me, so I stabbed him.”

As though people needed more of an explanation, she added, “and he died.”

“You stabbed him... with the clarinet?” Landry asked, hanging on to her every word.

“I hit him with the clarinet. I stabbed him with a pocket knife.”

“Are you all right?” said John, his brow furrowed with worry.

“Yeah, it was years ago. It used to really upset me, but I found out later that he’d assaulted other women, so I figure, oh well. My main issue now is the anxiety around driving, totally separate thing,” Olga said, waving off their concern.

“Wow, Olga, you’re a badass!” Landry said. This was by far the most interested Landry had ever looked in a story.

Olga smiled nonchalantly, but Margaret could tell she was enjoying their reactions.

“All right, I’m going to give you all a break, it’s been a long morning,” Rachel said. She left to go to the staff break room.

Landry pulled out his box-shaped brown vape to take a hit as soon as Rachel was out of sight.

“Fuck! It’s dead,” Landry said, slapping the box of the vape against his palm to shake out more juice.

“Do you want to go to the 7/11? We have an hour,” Brenda said, already searching through her tote bag for her car keys.

Is that allowed? Margaret wondered. She hadn’t been anywhere but the hospital, her kitchen, and her bedroom in so long.

“Fuck yeah! That would be awesome!”

Brenda held up a keychain with novelty items and lots of keys dangling off of it. “Let’s go. You coming, Margaret?”

The idea of going to a 7/11 had never been so thrilling.

Landry took shotgun without asking, so Margaret clambered into the back of Brenda’s large, cluttered van. Margaret wondered what her mother would say if she saw her getting into this woman’s car. The backseat was covered in old newspapers and empty fast food packages. From this evidence, Brenda’s favorite restaurant was either Whataburger or McDonald’s.

The car rattled as Brenda pulled out of the lot. The nearest 7/11 was directly next to the hospital, so while the ride was nerve-wracking, it wasn’t long. Brenda parked and turned the radio on. Landry and Margaret hopped out as she began flipping through mid-day talk shows.

The store clerk gave them a once over. Margaret became acutely aware of her appearance for the first time in a while. Sunken eyes and bony elbows peeking out of her loose t-shirt. She saw the pair of them through this stranger’s eyes for a moment and realized what an odd pair

they were. Landry in his neon green polo shirt and oversized basketball shorts. Her jeans and big shirt in this too hot weather. *Hospitalization had stolen our ability to dress ourselves.*

The two circled the aisles, looking at the one serving bags of snack food.

“My ex-girlfriend loved these,” Landry said, pointing at a bag of Takis. “One time, one time we went to the store and all we bought were Takis and condoms. The cashier was like, what’s going on here?” Landry mimed a shocked reaction that Margaret didn’t believe for a second.

She didn’t respond, examining a bag what looked like knock-off Oreos.

That was not the response he wanted. “What, does talking about sex make you uncomfortable?”

Margaret gave him a look. “Uh, no, I don’t really care.”

He swung around in front of her and she put the bag of cookies back on the shelf. “What, are you like a virgin, or something?”

She looked down so he couldn’t see her laugh. “That’s so not any of your business.”

“It’s okay if you are. I’ve had a lot of sex, but not everyone our age has to.”

She hid her laughter again, amused by his clumsy attempt to disguise his bragging as concern.

“Why are you being so quiet? Are you just embarrassed? It really is okay to be a virgin.”

She ignored him entirely, moving to a new aisle to examine wine brands. Landry went up to the counter and asked for his brand of vape juice.

Margaret tuned out, reading the headlines on the brightly colored, visually aggressive tabloid magazines. A green lighter with a grinning skull on it caught her eye. She could see her own distorted reflection in the shine of the wrapper.

The cash register dinged and Landry waved at her. As they stepped out of the store, he showed her that he had bought a package of Trojan condoms.

“These are what I used the first time I had sex, on April 8th.”

She stopped in the middle of the parking lot and stared at him. “Landry, today is April 22nd. Do you mean April 8th this year?”

He nodded, looking confused at her reaction. She couldn't hold it in anymore and started outright laughing. “Two weeks ago? You're acting like this ambassador to virgins and you had sex for the first time two weeks ago?”

Landry put the condoms back in his pocket sheepishly. He didn't seem to understand exactly why she was laughing, but definitely knew she was making fun of him.

Shaking her head, she walked towards the car. Landry trailed a few steps behind her despite his longer legs.

Brenda had chosen a re-run of a morning talk show about dating advice. The voices laughed in the way radio hosts do, loudly with a comfortable hollowness.

“You kids got everything you need?”

“Yup!” Landry and Margaret answered in unison, buckling their seatbelts.

As the car swerved out of the parking lot, Margaret felt the cold plastic of the lighter in the waistband of her jeans.

Day Three

Margaret was jittery the whole car ride to the hospital. For the first time in a long time, she was excited to be going somewhere other than her house. Her mother seemed to ignore the shift in her energy. The night before, Margaret had listened to a funny podcast after getting her phone back for the first time in a few weeks and she wanted to tell Brenda about it. Brenda seemed like she'd like podcasts. Though, it was also possible Brenda didn't know what podcasts were.

On her way into the room, Rachel caught Margaret's arm and asked to speak with her. Rachel took her into the break room. Margaret was almost disappointed to see that there wasn't anything special about the room where all the social workers hung out. It wasn't fancy, in fact, it was quite run down, and there weren't even themed posters or signs about therapy. There were a few chairs with dirty-looking upholstery and a broken coffee maker.

"What exactly is your relationship with Landry?" Rachel was holding her clipboard and tapping her pen against it, which didn't help Margaret with her feeling that she was being interrogated.

"We're friends."

"I want to caution you about him, hon," Rachel said. "He's not your type of person. You should know that."

Margaret stared at the floor, resorting to her usual tactic of silence in the face of conflict.

"I'm worried he's going to drag you down with him."

"You don't think he's going to be okay?" *You're the one treating him.*

“He’s a lot less likely to be okay and I’m worried about your relationship with him. The relationships you form in here should stay here. They don’t work well in the outside world.”

Margaret continued to say nothing, feeling her cheeks grow hot.

“You and Landry are going to end up in very different places. Whatever feelings you have for him, you should think twice about, is all I’m going to say,” Rachel patted her on the shoulder with the hand that wasn’t holding her clipboard, then led her back into the room.

Eunice walked in wearing her latex gloves on both hands. She seemed a little twitchier than she had been in the days before. Rachel noticed quickly, and asked her to share first.

Eunice looked up at the sound of her name. “Hello, I’m Eunice.”

“Hi, Eunice,” everyone said in their usual unison.

“I’m working on my anxiety and OCD. My high is my husband made dinner last night, so I didn’t have to. My low is... my low is, I don’t want to talk. I don’t want you all to be looking at me and judging me. But I don’t know how to tell you not to. I’m always such a pushover, but then I get furious with myself,” Eunice’s voice quivered as she grew more frantic. Tears were welling up in her eyes, and her hands shook as she wiped them away.

In a gentle tone, Rachel said, “There’s a lot to address here, but I want to start with something you’ve perceived as truth that might not be. Is anyone here judging Eunice?”

Everyone shook their heads immediately. Margaret was particularly emphatic.

Margaret was starting to get used to this new therapy way of talking, but it still sometimes sounded odd. *“Truth that might not be” is such a mouthful.*

“And what's all this about not being allowed to fail? Eunice, why does Eunice have to be perfect? Would you tell me I needed to be perfect?” Rachel continued.

“No...” Tears fell from Eunice’s eyes each time she blinked. She nodded hesitantly.

“So why do you feel like you have to be? What's the root of that? Do you know?”

Margaret didn’t really understand why this was a conversation they were having in a group setting.

“I don't know...I guess...” Eunice started speaking slowly, then sped up. “When I was growing up, I was the older sister and my dad died real young so I had to be the tough one for my mother and my sister. Before my mother got remarried, we were all she had. And then when my stepdad moved in with us, I had to be as good as possible, so he'd feel like marrying into our family was worth it, you know?”

Her gloves made her co-workers uncomfortable. Eunice could tell.

At first, it had begun as a lunch time only habit. People found it odd, but somewhat understandable. The HR department had a separate schedule from the rest of the staff, anyway, so only her two colleagues witnessed the gloves.

But after her step-father passed, Eunice had begun to carry the gloves with her everywhere. Her husband got her multi-colored ones, not just blue, his concerned way of trying to support her. She had yellow gloves on today.

It had become necessary to carry spares. She would wear one set during the day, to use while typing on the computer. Then another for meal times, so she wouldn't get laptop keyboard germs on her food.

On good days, she could manage only wearing one glove, just for her dominant hand. On harder days, she needed both hands.

“I think in my head that if I stay clean and polite, bad things will stop happening. I think if I sanitize grapes before I eat them or only touch doorknobs with gloves, my mom will stay healthy and my sister will be okay. Then bad things keep happen and I blame myself.”

Landry got up and walked over to Eunice with a tissue box.

“That's rescuing, you aren't allowed to do that, Landry. You have to let people cry.” Rachel said.

“People can cry all they want! I just didn't want her to have to be all snotty.” Landry said. Eunice smiled at him.

“I only want to be good enough for my mother, and my stepdad, and Jesus.” Eunice blew her nose, then took another tissue to wipe away her tears.

“I'm afraid to be rude or harsh. If the earth opens up tomorrow and He asks me if I deserve Salvation, I can't say yes if I haven't been as kind as possible. But then I get caught because I want to be kind, but I want to stand up for my beliefs.” Eunice began to cry again.

“Like, my sister... she— I call it her 'preferred lifestyle'— and I don't want to hurt her, but I can't

support her, going against God like that. I don't know what to do. 'Cause if she lives this way she'll go to Hell, but when I try to tell her she gets her feelings hurt.”

Margaret looked around for someone to share a glance with about Eunice being a homophobe, but everyone was engrossed in what she was sharing.

Rachel looked at her closely. “Elaborate on your relationship with your stepfather.”

“He married my mother and moved in with us and took care of us and I was so young when my father died it was like he was my father, too. He treated me like his own daughter. And he loved me and helped me get through school and go to college and get my first job.”

“I'm sensing a 'but' here.”

Eunice smiled shakily. “He died four years ago, and I can't speak ill of the dead. Especially not after everything he did for my family. He was my family.”

“This is a safe place. Even if a person involved has passed, you can speak your truth.”

Eunice was silent, shaking and staring at the ground. Then she spoke. “I've never told anyone. Anyone. Not even my husband. I can't. The man raised me. And I loved him. He did so much good and the bad... shouldn't count?”

In a quieter tone than before, Rachel asked, “What did he do?”

Eunice finally looked up. “I saw him hit my mother. And when I ran in to stop him, he—he turned on me. But it was only once. I was fifteen. We never talked about it. I pretended it didn't happen for years. The man walked me down the aisle. I loved him! But lately it's been getting harder to shove it to the back of my head.”

“You're struggling with loving someone who hurt you so badly, and dealing with the repercussions of your abuse without disrespecting his memory.”

Margaret could see the benefit of therapy language here. And, sort of, the benefit of talking things out in front of others. Eunice seemed to be processing her words as she spoke.

“It's okay to love someone who hurt you, and it's okay to be angry that someone you love and who has passed hurt you,” Rachel said.

Eunice nodded and blew her nose again, making a honking noise. “I've been trying to use the thought modification structure as my coping skill. Where I challenge the irrational thought in the moment, and say out loud what I'm thinking, and then how I should be thinking if I want to shift my mentality. I think it helps, a bit.”

Rachel nodded approvingly. “Thought modification is a difficult but useful strategy. It takes time and practice to shift your mental framework. Good work, Eunice.”

Landry was the next closest to Rachel, who turned to him expectantly.

“Okay, I guess it's me now. Hi, I'm Landry, I'm working on staying clean, and, um... okay, my high is that I've been reading this book NA gave me, it's like the official Narcotics Anonymous book, and on every page I'm like *whoa*, that's me. It's making a lot of stuff make sense. And my low... okay, I know my low, but I don't really want to talk about it.”

Rachel looked at him sternly. “Now, you know that's not how this works.”

“I'll come talk to you one on one I just... don't really want to...”

Rachel narrowed her eyes, tapping her pen against her binder. “You sure?”

“Actually, you know what, fuck it. I relapsed yesterday. I fucking relapsed. I'm back to day zero.” He opened up his NA book and showed everyone where he had been keeping track of his sobriety in the margins of the first page. A row of marks had been scratched out and replaced with a lone tally.

“It was so stupid. It was a fucking Uber driver. My mom couldn't come pick me up so she called an Uber.”

Landry had opened his phone to play a game as soon as he got in the car. He took shotgun because he preferred to be able to look out at the road. Backseats made him feel claustrophobic.

The driver said hello gruffly and Landry nodded in response. Several minutes passed in silence, minus the occasional ping from the game Landry was playing. The goal was to slingshot animated fruits at moving targets.

When he looked up from his game, having successfully landed a watermelon in the bullseye, he noticed his driver had something familiar in his shirt pocket.

“Dude, do you have a dab on you?”

The driver tapped something on his phone maps then looked at Landry. “Yeah, you got an issue? Or do you want any?”

Landry frowned. “No, man, I shouldn't.” Landry began playing his game again, but he couldn't focus. The pings started to irritate him and he started biting his dirty nails. He ripped out a piece of skin accidentally and his pointer finger started to bleed at the cuticle.

“Actually, I... yeah, sure, dude.”

The driver shrugged again. He was not a particularly expressive man. He handed Landry his pen with a grunt.

Landry took a short hit and breathed out. He could hear his heartbeat in his ears. He took another hit, this time much longer, feeling the vaporized smoke fill his lungs.

He handed the pen back to the driver as he let out his breath. The man pocketed it silently.

For the rest of the ride to his mom's office, Landry tried to play his fruit game, but the colors were too aggressive and made his head hurt. He was sweating, which he made fun of himself for internally. Two hits and you're losing it? he thought. Weak!

When he arrived at his mom's office, she buzzed him in without coming down to get him. He trudged up the stairs, feeling lightheaded.

“Then I was fucking high at my mom's office. It didn't even feel good, it felt like shit.” His knuckles turned white as he clenched his fists.

Rachel looked at him with sympathy. “Well, let's think this through. Most addicts do relapse after they begin recovery, and it doesn't mean you can't continue on the path to recovery. And yes, it's disappointing, but it sounds like it was unpleasant enough that you know better what you'll feel like if you relapse again,” Rachel said.

“Yeah, I guess. I just feel so fucking stupid.” Landry surreptitiously wiped away a tear, then, less surreptitiously, sucked back the snot in his nose. “I'm just this fucking drug addict.”

Rachel frowned while making a note in her binder. “See, that kind of language and attitude is such a huge part of what holds you back. Practice speaking about yourself in a more positive way, okay?”

Landry frowned back at her.

“Thanks for sharing, Landry. Does anyone have anything to add?”

“May I add a comment? I have something I've been thinking about,” John asked. Rachel nodded and everyone turned their attention to him.

“It's actually something I've been doing because of Landry. The way he thinks of his sobriety, the idea of being a certain number of days clean, it's how I've been thinking of my anger issues. Every day I go without blowing up is another day clean. So, I'm six days clean. I don't quite know why but quantifying it like that really helps. So, thanks, Landry, I guess. That's all.”

Landry smiled his crooked smile at John, looking slightly less miserable.

Landry, Margaret, and Brenda fell into step automatically as they headed outside for a break. Eunice, Olga, and John trailed behind them. Brenda lit a cigarette the moment she left the building.

The outside of the hospital was a parking lot, with a circular area where people could be dropped off. To the side and then further behind the building was a grassy area with a small pond. Rachel had scolded Brenda and Landry for leaving cigarettes in the nicer area before, so everyone headed over to the curb of the drop off, facing the parking lot. There was a bench,

which Brenda, Olga, and John sat down on. Landry and Margaret took the curb, and Eunice stood away from everyone else, wary of the smoke.

“You’re always welcome to take a drag, by the way,” Landry said, offering Margaret his bulky, beat-up vape.

John frowned at them. “Explain this whole vaping thing to me, again?”

Brenda snorted. “Just the latest teenage nonsense.”

“All age nonsense!” Olga said. “I’ve got one and I love it. It’s breaking down a bit. Not sure if I need to get a better one.”

“Fuck. I’m out again,” Landry said, shaking his vape.

“How much are in those things? You going through a pack a day?” Brenda asked.

“More than.”

Eunice was standing a distance away, eating orange slices out of a plastic bag with her gloves on. “Lord.”

“Want one of mine? It’s better than me having it,” Brenda said, holding cigarettes out to Landry.

“Totally!” Landry grabbed two, then handed one to Margaret, who took it hesitantly.

Eunice frowned at her. “You smoke?”

For some reason she couldn’t begin to explain, she nodded.

Looking her up and down suspiciously, Brenda said, “Didn’t peg you for the type.”

Margaret awkwardly held up the cigarette so Landry could light it for her. Not sure what to do, so she sucked in too fast and started coughing.

“Is this the kind of thing you get up to, Margaret? Really?” Brenda looked at her from the bench, a thoughtful frown on her face. Her unwashed bangs were stuck to her forehead, while the rest of her stringy hair blew in the wind.

Margaret didn’t answer.

“We’ll get it out of you,” Brenda said.

“Some things you don’t have to say.” Landry’s tone made it clear that he thought he’d been particularly clever. He nodded towards her legs.

“I’ve been meaning to about the cutting.” Brenda said.

Still several feet away but listening to every word, Eunice chimed in. “Oh! You shouldn’t do that!”

“Why do you do it?”

Brenda didn’t ask the question the way people usually do. She put the emphasis on the word “you” instead of “why.”

I could just tell them, Margaret thought. But explaining it would mean telling them so much.

They had met at their usual spot, in the third-floor bathroom. It was the only place Victoria would see her on campus. No one ever used this bathroom during school hours, so it was safe.

Even though it was springtime, Victoria was wearing the long-sleeved version of the uniform shirt. Her plaid skirt was rolled up to reveal her athletic thighs. She cringed when Margaret moved to kiss her hello.

“I’m just not in the mood to be all gushy today, okay?” Victoria slid down the wall to the ground and rubbed her eyes with her hands.

Margaret sat down next to her and waited. She was used to dealing with Victoria’s mood swings.

“My mom and I got into another fight. Over stupid shit. She wants me to take Alex to prom. She wants us to date, or whatever, because he’s ‘from a good family.’ And then she was mad about the dress I wanted to wear. She called me shitty names. I’m just going to have to take him, I guess. I don’t want to. I want to take you.”

Margaret tried to hide her involuntary grin. The idea of Victoria wanting to be with her gave her butterflies. The idea of going to prom with her was tantalizing. She couldn’t imagine being out in public and holding hands. Posing for pictures together. Talking to each other’s moms. Acting like actual girlfriends.

“Alex is such a handsy creep. Mom only likes him because his dad is a big deal lawyer and his mom is in her church group. It just sucks. She said I looked fat in my dress. Like a streetwalker! She always says that. Like we live in the 80s.”

Victoria was tearing up. Margaret reached out to grab Victoria’s hand but she jerked it away. The sudden motion pulled up her sleeve and Margaret saw thin, bright red lines along her wrist bone. Victoria pulled down her sleeve quickly.

“What did you do it with?”

“A thumb-tack. My mom took everything else out of my room.”

Margaret moved closer slowly, like she was approaching an animal. She pushed Victoria’s sleeve up gingerly to examine the wounds. They looked like tally marks along the skin of her wrist.

“Does it help?”

“Yes. It’s the only thing that does.” She pulled her sleeve back down.

Margaret snapped out of her train of thought, realizing Brenda was still waiting for an answer.

“I just started doing it, I don’t know. Hoped it would help.”

“Did it?” Brenda said.

“No!” Margaret said, with a laugh that started bitter but became genuine.

“Oh, leave the poor girl alone,” said John.

I wonder if he’s so nice because he can’t talk to his own daughter. Margaret felt bad for the man. Though, maybe he did something to really deserve them ignoring him.

Brenda lit another cigarette. “Well, whatever you do, it’s not worse than what my daughter is doing.”

“Tell us another funny Heather story!” Landry said.

“Oh, god,” Brenda began, waving her hands in the air to catch everyone’s attention. “Just yesterday, you know what she did? She lost her phone in a Taco Bell because a crackhead was chasing her, and she ran out quick. She realized she'd left the phone behind, and that the crackhead had it. Which meant she had like thirty minutes before it got pawned away for crack.”

“Why was a guy chasing her?” Margaret asked.

Brenda got up from the bench and moved in front of them, taking center stage to continue her story. She was shaking, like usual, but she slowed when she spoke.

“She needed to go to the nastiest part of town. I don't want to buy her a new phone or leave her phoneless and have no way to call her when she's living in the dumpster, so I take her. We roll up in our shitty car, and it's this dingy parking lot filled with pimps and drug dealers and prostitutes.”

Margaret saw Eunice shake her head disapprovingly, still listening from a distance.

“I tell her before she gets out of the car to be quiet, not cause a scene because that *might* kinda piss off all of the pimps and drug dealers and prostitutes. She's all ‘Yeah, Mom, I know, God’ and gets out.” Brenda does a mocking voice in imitation of her daughter. It was mean, but funny, particularly to Olga, who snort-laughed.

“I pull out my Sudoku, expecting her to be a few minutes. Thirty seconds later I hear yelling.”

Margaret and Landry were sitting on the edge of the curb, hanging on to every word. In the brief moments Margaret diverted her attention, she could tell John and Eunice were uncomfortable. Olga looked captivated. She was even clapping her hands at the good parts.

“I look over at the source of the yelling and sure enough, there’s Heather, threatening to fistfight a bunch of grown men. I panic and start yelling at her to get back in the car. She listens to me, for once, and runs towards me. But then the men start chasing her! She jumps in the car at the last minute and we speed away.”

Eunice was shaking her head with disapproval as Olga giggled.

“So, I tell her I’m sorry that we couldn’t get her phone and she pulled it out of her pocket! She had gotten it immediately and then started a fight with random men! Can you believe that?” Brenda ended her tale triumphantly.

Landry laughed and took a hit of his vape. “That’s sick! You’re a badass, Brenda.”

John checked his expensive-looking watch.

What does he do for a living that he can afford that stuff? Margaret thought.

“We should probably head back inside,” John said.

Complaining, the smokers put out their cigarettes, but they obliged.

Rachel drew a circle on the white board with a fat green marker. “Let’s say this is your circle of those closest to you. Who goes in this circle?”

“Your spouse,” said John.

“Your bros!” said Landry. He was sitting backwards in his chair with a smirk across his face. Margaret had begun to envy his confidence, however misplaced.

“Your family,” added John.

Rachel had clearly been waiting for someone to say this. “Ah, but all members of your family?”

Brenda scoffed. “No!”

“So not your extended family, maybe. They'd probably go here.” She drew a second circle around the first. “These are your casual friends. You have different boundaries with people in this circle than in the first, yes? You might talk about your life somewhat honestly, but you probably wouldn't share, say, your marital or financial issues with people other than the people you're closest to.”

Rachel tapped the second circle of the board with the capped marker. “This is also where a new romantic or sexual partner would fall. Someone you're being honest with and getting to know but not confiding everything in or relying on for emotional support.”

She drew a third green circle around the others.

“Now, who might go in this third circle?”

“People in the grocery store?” John sat up straighter when he answered, adjusting the cuffs of his sleeves.

For a grown man, he sure is a suck up. Margaret imagined that being classmates with him would be grating.

“Yes, exactly,” Rachel said, pacing in front of her drawing. “Those people in the checkout line talking about personal things loudly on the phone, or outright telling the cashier? Those people aren't following good boundaries.”

Landry chimed in. “And they're really annoying.”

“This circle is for acquaintances. These are people you maybe say hello to, but you don't tell them secrets or have sex with them,” said Rachel, tapping the board with the marker again.

Olga piped up. “Why not?”

“Well, because you don't know them,” Rachel said.

“But that is how you get to know them!”

The responses were staggered as each person realized the implications of what Olga was saying.

“Olga!” Eunice gasped.

The woman blushed, grinning ever so slightly. Even Rachel looked shocked, her calm demeanor disrupted.

The room burst into giggles, led by Landry and Margaret. It took several minutes for Rachel to manage to get them all to focus on her lesson once more.

As she had done the two days prior, Margaret headed to the lobby at the end of the session to wait for her mom to pick her up. Landry trailed behind her down the hallway.

“Wanna hang out?” He ran a little to catch up with her. “I have my car today, you know.”

He held up a keychain with one key on it. The base of the car key was bent and the logo was almost scratched off. Margaret hadn't done anything purely social in so long. Her heartbeat quickened at the idea.

Landry flashed his crooked grin at her. “We can just make sure Rachel doesn’t see us get into a car together. She’s busy gossiping with the other therapists anyway.”

“Okay, let’s do it then,” Margaret said, surprising herself. She got out her phone to text her mom: *Therapy ran late today!! Will just Uber home later.* Then she clicked on the gray settings app and selected “hide location.”

The heaviness of the late afternoon air hit them both as they slipped out the revolving hospital doors. Landry texted on his phone as he walked, mumbling his own texts out loud as he wrote them. Margaret walked with an extra skip in her step, the adrenaline of breaking the rules getting to her.

The car was low to the ground and poorly cared for. The window was broken, left open a crack, which might have been for the best, because it became quickly apparent that the AC was just as broken. When she sat down in the passenger seat she could feel crumbs underneath the bare skin of her thighs. She buckled herself in, trying not to imagine just how unclean the seat belt was as it touched her.

Landry plugged his phone into the aux and started swiping through music. He settled on an album that had been popular a few years prior. Margaret hadn’t heard that album since at least the past summer and found herself humming along.

He pulled out of the lot wordlessly. They were on the road before Margaret realized that they hadn’t decided on a location.

“I pass an antique shop on the drive to the hospital every day. Maybe it would be fun to check it out?”

He was vaping with one hand and steering with the other. “Yeah, I’m down for whatever. Map me.”

She pulled out her phone to give directions, but the place wasn’t far—a straight shot down the main road, no turns needed until the turn into the actual lot.

The place was sandwiched between an empty storefront and a head shop. The signs in the door welcoming them in were homemade, with lettering done in markers and colored pencils. One even looked to be painted with watercolors. A soft bell rang when they opened the door. The woman at the checkout booth looked up briefly and smiled hello, then went back to reading her book. The cover had an illustration of a shirtless man embracing a long-haired woman in a red dress and the woman seemed entirely engrossed.

They began roaming the aisles. Landry went to check out the sports gear. In the first aisle, there were decorative dishes and pots. One immediately caught Margaret’s eye: a red-cheeked, pot-bellied frog cookie jar. The top of the jar was half of the frog’s mouth and the bottom of the jar was the rest of the mouth, so that when you opened it, it looked like the frog was eating. Or talking.

She picked it up and brought it over to Landry. “Look at this guy!”

He immediately had the same thought she had been having. He opened the mouth and said in a funny, childish voice: “Feed me!! Feed me... worms?” He turned to her. “What do frogs eat?”

“I don’t know. Uh, other frogs? I had tadpoles when I was little, and all I remember is that they ate each other.” It had been a gruesome sight for eight-year-old Margaret, waking up to

see translucent frog skeletons floating in her fish tank—the largest frog perched smugly on one of the tank decorations she'd bought for them.

“They ate each other? That’s kind of awesome, dude.”

She held the ceramic creature in both hands. “Should I get it?”

“Yeah, totally. We should get cigarettes and put them in this guy's mouth. And then he’ll be like—” Landry began speaking as though he had smoked every day for sixty years, “Pass me a lighter, kid! Ribbit. Come on! Ribbit.”

Margaret giggled despite herself, feeling goofy and lighthearted for the first time in a while.

They made a few more rounds around the place, picking up knickknacks and creating more characters, but Margaret’s heart was set on the frog. She bought it for \$3. The cashier looked up from her romance novel only for the exact amount of time she needed to ring them out. Margaret carried her new finding out of the store proudly.

“My friends are saying they’re hanging at a burger place nearby, wanna go?”

“Oh! Um, I don’t know…” Margaret’s good mood soured. Meeting new people sounded like too much for what had already been a long day.

“Aw, come on, dude, it’ll be chill. And I’m starving.” Landry rubbed his belly and looked at her with pleading eyes.

She caved and nodded. He grinned and clapped her on the shoulder. “My friends will be happy I’m bringing a girl, those losers!”

Margaret had been pleasantly surprised by his driving earlier, finding it not as nerve wracking as she expected it to be. But this time she was too anxious, expecting disaster at every turn. She was relieved when they pulled into the parking lot of the Whataburger.

They walked in together, Landry outpacing her. He was more energetic than she'd ever seen him, taking two steps for every one she took. It was a lot, even given their height differences.

Three teenage boys were seated at an orange plastic table by the front, empty wrappers strewn around them. Landry made a beeline for them. Margaret could feel his nervous, excited energy. These boys did not seem as excited to see him. Upon closer inspection, they looked glassy-eyed and sleepy.

When he reached the table, they all stopped to dap him up. They didn't seem to know what to do with her, so they didn't greet her at all. It was rude, but a relief at the same time.

The first guy had dark brown hair that flopped over his acne-ridden forehead, while the second was a blonde so blonde his skin looked pink. The third boy was wearing a polo shirt and basketball shorts, which struck Margaret as an odd combination.

That's a bold fashion statement, though who am I to judge? Margaret looked down at her oversized t-shirt and cut off shorts.

"Who's your girlfriend, Landry?" the polo shirt guy asked.

"I'm not his girlfriend," Margaret answered for him. It came out a little more aggressive than she meant it to.

"She's not my girlfriend, guys," Landry confirmed.

“You got a boyfriend?” the boy with acne asked.

“No, no. I— no, boyfriend.” Margaret knew immediately that she was protesting too much. She hadn’t interacted with people in so long, she couldn’t remember how to keep up the pretenses of fitting in.

The polo shirt guy and the acne one smirked at her. The blonde guy looked too out of it to follow the interaction.

“I’m gonna grab a burger. You coming, Margaret?”

The idea of eating beef was nauseating. “I’m okay, I’m full.”

Landry looked confused. “You didn’t eat at our lunch break, either, dude. How are you not hungry?”

She just didn’t respond. He got his wallet out of his basketball shorts and headed to the counter. Margaret took a seat at the table, feeling hyper aware of all her movements.

The boys eyed her silently. She sat on her hands to hide how much she was shaking.

“What the fuck is that?” The blonde boy pointed at her shoulder.

Margaret realized she had mindlessly put the shopping bag from before over her shoulder and her new frog cookie jar was poking out. It was badly painted, with a mouth that looked melted. She could see how from their perspective, it would look a little horrific.

“Oh, uh, it’s a cookie jar!” She pulled it out to show them as Landry was walking back up. “It’s actually kind of cool!”

Margaret opened the mouth and closed it a few times so they could see how it worked. They stared at her blankly.

“You can do voices for it, it’s fun.” She regretted saying it as soon as the words left her mouth.

“Dude, who is this girl?” the boy in the polo said to Landry.

Margaret’s heart started racing and she felt cold sweat pooling underneath her arms.

“A friend of mine, Blake. Be chill.” Landry unwrapped his burger swiftly and began devouring it. There were already mustard stains on his shirt.

For the next twenty minutes, the guys spoke very little, snagging the occasional french fry from the other and staring into space. Even the employees of the place could tell they were high. Margaret watched Landry’s excitement waver as his friends barely responded to his inquiries. They didn’t ask a single question about him or his hospitalization.

I wonder if they even know. Would these guys even notice if their friend didn’t show up to class? Did Landry ever go to class?

To get some space, Margaret went to use the bathroom. Looking in the mirror, she smoothed her hair part down with water. In this fluorescent lighting, she could see her acne scars more than usual, along with the general sallow tone of her skin. The lack of fat on her face and body in general made her hazel eyes look even bigger. The same with her mouth. When she did smile, it took over her thin face, in a way that was both unsettling and alluring. Margaret had read online once that tears make your eyelashes grow—maybe she should quit wasting her

money on mascara. Not that she paid for her makeup products. Most of what she had, she had stolen with Victoria.

When she went back to the table, the boys were snickering about something, Landry included.

“Can we go to like, a park, or something?” Blake asked. “And can you drive us, Landry? We got dropped off earlier so we need a ride.”

Landry nodded.

The guys got up in unison, which Margaret found eerie. She followed them out, a step behind, her frog tucked away in her bag. The boy with acne took shotgun, even though she had been there first. Margaret had to take the seat in the back next to Blake, who smiled at her in a way that made her stomach turn. Without making it too obvious, she leaned away from him, pressing her body against the car door.

Landry drove even more recklessly with his friends in the car, blowing through stop signs and speeding through intersections. Only five minutes passed before he parked alongside a small playground. No one was there, probably because school had let out.

They all got out of the car so Margaret followed. It suddenly hit her that she was alone with boys she barely knew, in an unfamiliar place. She pulled out her phone surreptitiously and saw she had two missed calls from her mother.

She looked up to see the boys nodding at each other. Before she could process what was happening, they took off, racing each other to the car and giggling. She didn't even try to catch them.

The car tires squealed as they drove away.

What the fuck.

It was getting too dark to waste time. She used the little battery on her phone left to text her mom a needlessly detailed explanation about group therapy running late and then order an Uber.

It wasn't until she was in the Uber that she broke down. Her driver said nothing as she sobbed the entire way to her house, clutching her ceramic frog.

Day Four

Margaret walked in late so she could make sure to take a seat far away from Landry. He had taken the seat next to Brenda, so she had to sit far away from both of them. Brenda gave her a questioning look that she brushed aside.

The woman next to her was new. She looked to be in her late sixties, with ribbons in her waist length, gray hair. Her hands and neck were covered in turquoise jewelry and her rings clanged as they bumped against the beads on her skirt. She smiled warmly when Margaret sat down.

Unlike the previous few days, the room stilled without any chatter. Brenda looked quizzically between Margaret and Landry.

After a few minutes of silence, John spoke. “By the way, everyone, I’m getting released today. I’ll go ahead and say goodbye in case anyone leaves early.”

“John, we’ll miss you,” Brenda said, not insincerely. “Are you going to do an outpatient program?”

“Yeah, I think so. I want to keep working on all of this best I can.” He twisted his wedding ring around his finger.

“I hope things work out with you and your wife,” Landry said.

Margaret cringed at the mention of John’s wife, remembering how likely Brenda thought him getting divorced was.

“We’ll miss you, really,” Margaret said.

It was true, in a strange way. She didn't care that she'd never seen him again yet she did, in a way. *How many days will pass before I forget his face? Or will his dress shirts and gray hair stick in my memory?*

“Oh, and Eunice, I've been meaning to tell you, your story reminded me a lot of my mother's own life. After you spoke the other day, I called her and told her how much I love and respect her. We talked for hours and it was just really meaningful. All because of you,” John said, then paused awkwardly.

The group had gotten used to his fumbling attempts at kindness.

“I'm glad to hear that, John,” Eunice said, sitting down slowly, wincing as she moved. She appeared to have at least one bad knee.

Rachel dropped a binder full of worksheets onto the desk at the front and John jumped at the noise. There were sweat stains growing underneath the arms of his white dress shirt.

“Let's start with a round of check-ins today. John, how about you start us off, it's your big day!”

“Sure, Rachel,” John said, always polite and professional. “My name's John, I'm working on controlling my anger. My high is that I am getting back into the real world, my low is that I'm going straight back to work. I am not sure I've had enough time to process everything. My old self. My old behaviors.”

“Why don't you tell us more about that, John?”

He smiled weakly. “It's really not me at my best.”

Tracy was late, again. She'd been out with her friends, even though it was a Wednesday, and she'd promised to be home by 10. John slouched in one of his uncomfortable living room chairs. They were from some French designer that Tracy adored, and they had cost an arm and a leg, but she'd insisted on it. They weren't even comfortable.

The sound of the door opening reverberated through the hall. John hoped the girls were far enough away in their bedrooms that they wouldn't wake up from the noise.

Glassy-eyed, Tracy walked in, stumbling in her heeled sandals.

"Are you kidding me, Tracy?" John said. "I have been waiting for you for hours. Where the fuck have you been?"

She brushed him aside and walked into the kitchen. "Out."

"Out? Out! With who? Doing what?" John stood, towering over his 5'1 wife.

Tracy plopped her purse down on the kitchen table, then peeled off her tight shoes. She let her thick brown hair fall into her face to avoid his eyes.

"This is a level of disrespect I cannot tolerate. This is my house, you're my wife." His voice rose with every word.

Tracy didn't react, and John moved suddenly, grabbing her arm firmly. "You can't be lying to me about where you're going."

She looked up at him with disgust in her eyes. She thinks I'm pathetic, he thought. He felt pathetic. The skin around his fingers started to turn white from the pressure. John let go.

Shaking out the sudden pins and needles in her arm, Tracy took a few quick steps backwards. Then she scoffed at him.

John's eyesight tinged red. Without thinking at all, he opened the china cabinet and took out a plate. A gift from his first set of parents-in-law, he had ended up with the nice china. He sensed her disbelief. She didn't think he would do it. In one swift motion, he wound up his arm and sent the plate hurling at the wall behind her head.

"Fucking bitch! Answer me!"

Tracy's shout was delayed, almost in slow motion. Perhaps it was the sheer shock or the alcohol dulling her reflexes.

All the blood had rushed to John's temples and his head felt light. He barely heard her cursing back at him. He reached for another plate, then froze.

At the top of the stairs to the second floor were his daughter and step-daughter, wearing the matching pajamas he'd bought them for Christmas, staring in horror.

"I tried to apologize and make things right, but the damage was done. My daughter still won't look me in the eyes. My step-daughter won't come to my house." John slouched down in the hospital chair. It was the first time Margaret had seen him deviate from his usual perfect posture. "But I've been telling them I'm doing the work. I have. I don't want to be that kind of man anymore."

There's no way that's the whole story. He must have done something awful. Margaret looked at the man, slumped in his creaky plastic chair. *I don't want to know what.*

"I wish they'd get over themselves. They should respect me a little more, for all I do for them. I'm the man of the house," John said.

“Thank you for sharing, John. Remember, the work doesn’t get done on its own. You have to keep coming back to treatment,” Rachel said.

If Margaret was Rachel, she wouldn’t be so cordial to a man who threw things at his wife. She wondered what Rachel really thought about all of them and their weird, terrible lives.

The person next in the circle was the new woman, who put on a pair of multi-colored reading glasses to see the questions on the white board. When she turned to look, Margaret noticed from the back of her head that her hair had been dyed at least three colors. She could see brown, blonde, and gray. Maybe even a little red, though that could just be the way the fluorescent lights were hitting her head. She wondered if it was stylistic or an accident.

“My name’s Amber.”

“Hi, Amber,” everyone replied in the usual unified chant. Margaret noticed that John said nothing. He seemed shaken from sharing.

Amber was wearing so many beads, she rattled when she moved, and she talked with her hands. “My ‘high’ is that I finally got myself out of inpatient. Those guys were too far up my ass. My ‘low’ is that I still haven’t seen my daughter since I got put in here.” She used finger quotes around the words high and low. Amber spoke with a more traditional Texan twang than any of the others.

“I’m working on myself right now. Just trying to get better after a hard time. I’m struggling with urges.” She waited a moment. “Homicidal ones.”

The room froze as everyone took in what this tiny, colorful woman had just said.

She's certainly come to the right place. Seems like in this crowd, she could work out a mutually beneficial deal. Margaret felt bad about the joke immediately.

“Not towards any of y’all, calm yourselves, sweet Jesus. I got it out for a young man that hurt my son.” She didn’t say anything after that, and Rachel seemed to accept her answer.

She looked to Margaret next. “Margaret, it’s about time you shared a little more with us.”

Margaret winced. She didn’t want to share ever, much less in front of Landry right now.

This is probably why you’re not supposed to socialize with people you meet in a mental hospital outside of the mental hospital.

“I’m Margaret. I’m working on my depression and anxiety. My high is that I’ve gotten to miss so much school. I hate school. My low is that awful people are everywhere, not just in high schools.” She tried not to make her comment sound pointed, but Brenda definitely picked up on it.

“A coping skill I used recently was the grounding exercises Rachel taught us. I was crying because... of a fight with my mom,” Margaret lied. “And I used it to calm down.”

Rachel regarded her with suspicion, but didn’t prod her further.

Sitting on the other side, Brenda was next in the circle of chairs. As everyone’s eyes turned to her, she laughed bitterly. “Have I got lots to update y’all on!”

“All right. Brenda, what’s going on?”

“You know my daughter? The one addicted to heroin?” Brenda spoke quickly, sarcasm coating every word. “She’s moved back in with me. She was living in a dumpster for a while, but

now she's decided to rejoin the civilized world. It's so flattering, knowing someone would rather live with you than *in garbage*. But the heroin—here's a shocker—messes with her head.”

Margaret imagined that in a different life, Brenda would have been a great comedian or actress. She could hold an audience in a unique way. Even an audience of zoned-out crazy people.

“She thinks everyone is out to get her. She screamed at me in the car last night because I wouldn't buy her \$7 cigarettes. We don't have the money to waste on cigarettes! She yells at me, and all this shit, even though if I wanted to I could literally throw her out with the garbage. Then she decides to be an adult and she gives me the silent treatment. Then, ten minutes later, we're getting home. Our apartment cops—like mall cops, basically—just got these giant lights and were dicking around with them. My daughter starts freaking out. Because, heroin.” Brenda rolled her eyes.

Everyone waited expectantly.

“She straight up starts yelling at me, ‘Park the fucking car! He's going to see us! Parking the fucking car before he comes over here! Fuck!’” Brenda started doing her imitation of her daughter. It was, as always, harsh but funny.

“I turned to her and I shouted, ‘Oh god! What will we do? If he comes over here we'll, we'll, we'll have to tell him that our parking space was taken and we usually go over there but now we're over here and, and, oh shit, what will we do? Fuck!’ She jumped out and ran away.”

Brenda acted out all the parts, and despite the subject matter, the group was laughing. Margaret and Landry made brief eye contact, then immediately looked away.

“She ran away?” John asked. Margaret felt uncomfortable seeing him so concerned, as if he were a better parent than Brenda.

“Yeah. She’s pouting. She’ll come home from the dumpster when she gets over herself.” Brenda crossed her arms over her chest and frowned, a challenge to anyone with an issue with her methods.

“So, do you talk to your daughter like that often?”

“No, I really don't. But I cope with humor. And it's really shitty that my only daughter is such a nightmare.” Brenda shrugged her broad shoulders. “Sometimes I just need to laugh about it.”

“What other sorts of things do you do to cope?”

“Okay, listen, I don't do this kind of thing a lot. Really. But... all right. So—this one is pretty recent, a few months ago—she'd moved back in with me, under the condition she wouldn't do heroin in the house. I come home a few days into her living with me and there's blood on my kitchen counter. I call her in, I say, ‘Heather, Heather get in here quick!’ and she rushes in thinking I'm on to her. I'm like, ‘Listen, we don't have much time. This amount of blood could be a critical loss if we don't find the victim quickly. Judging from the trajectory of the blood, the victim was dragged that way.’”

“Making a joke every once in a while is cathartic for you, clearly,” Rachel said in her therapizing tone.

“Yeah. Anyway. It's funny, but fighting with her puts me so on edge. So. That's all for me, for today.”

Rachel looked at the digital watch on her wrist. “Why don’t we take our break now?”

Amber turned to Margaret. “Do you want to take a walk, dear?”

Margaret was relieved to have an option other than hanging out with Landry. Without waiting for much of an answer, Amber linked arms with her, patting her forearm with her ring-covered hand.

Amber steered her to the pond outside, past the dumpsters and the yellow grass that people weren’t supposed to leave cigarettes in. The pond was surrounded by sun-baked trees with peeling bark. Margaret found the way Amber’s jewelry jangled as she walked soothing.

“How long have you been here?”

The woman was leaning on her with every step and Margaret could feel the fragility of Amber’s body.

“It’s been about a week for me. How is your first day?”

“Oh, much better than inpatient. I hated inpatient. Always being watched.” Amber gripped her arm tightly and leaned in. “Can you keep a secret? A big one. I’d get in trouble. I’d get kicked out of the program!”

I don’t want to make assumptions, but, it can’t ever be good when the homicidal patient has a secret. Margaret waited for Amber to answer, sensing already that this woman would do whatever or say whatever she wanted.

Without waiting for her to nod, Amber pulled her in and whispered, “My sister came to visit me when I was in inpatient, to check on me. And she brought me contraband.”

The two had already managed a lap around the small pond and they started another. Margaret spotted cigarette butts in the unkempt grass.

“She brought me my vape! Even though we aren’t allowed to have nicotine in inpatient,” Amber threw her head back and laughed. “I would keep it in my bra and sneak hits all day! They never noticed!” She pushed together her breasts in an exaggerated motion, then cackled again.

Margaret found herself laughing alongside Amber at the ridiculousness of the situation. Giggling as though they were peers and not decades apart, the two circled the pond until it was time to go inside.

Landry was waiting by the door for her, looming with his usual poor posture. She attempted to brush past him, but he stopped her.

“Listen, Margaret, I had to seem cool to my friends and they don’t like hanging around with girls all that much.”

“Fuck off, Landry.”

“I knew you could Uber home. And I hadn’t seen them in forever. I still think you’re cool, they just don’t like girls outside of parties or whatever.” Landry reached out his hand to her and revealed a clump of baby dandelions, still yellow. He must have ripped them out of the ground before they grew enough to turn white. Margaret used to love finding white dandelions and blowing on them to make a wish when she was little.

He looked at her earnestly and she resisted laughing at the strange gesture.

He really thinks that’s an acceptable apology, she marveled.

“You put me in a shitty situation. You damaged the progress I’m making here, the one place I’ve felt okay—no, not just okay, happy and safe, too—in months?” She waited, arms crossed over her chest.

Margaret felt icky being so vulnerable with him. But the desire to weaponize making him understand how much he hurt her was stronger than her desire to never admit any weakness.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry Margaret. You’re like my best friend here. And right now, in general, I guess. I can keep making you feel happy and safe.” He peered at her with big, watery eyes.

Margaret had to resist laughing again. *He thinks he’s the sole reason I feel better here? Is that how his brain filters the things he hears, to be all about him?*

He waited expectantly for her response. She could tell he was trying to appear more confident than he was, furrowing and unfurrowing his brow. He rarely closed his mouth all the way, usually resting with his lips slightly parted, but right now his mouth was pursed.

She gingerly took the flowers from his hand. The awkwardness of his apology and the seriousness in his eyes made her ire fade. *He’s cruel, and awful, but above all else he’s just sort of stupid.*

“Whatever, Landry. You can’t go around treating people like that.” She side-stepped him back into the group therapy room.

He followed after her silently, tripping over his own feet.

Margaret took her seat next to Amber again and continued to avoid Landry's eyes. This time, however, she didn't feel like she was hiding away. She was making the choice not to focus on him, for now, because he had broken her trust.

I can just... do that. I can just say someone's not allowed to treat me like shit, and then they have to stop or lose me. The thought was revolutionary, in a way.

Brenda looked the two of them up and down, but said nothing, for once.

Day Five

Her mother's bottle blonde hair glinted in the morning sunlight. She was wearing another tennis outfit, this time a salmon pink one.

The schedule for today: drop daughter off at the psych ward, then head to toss the ball around with the girls! Margaret chuckled at the absurdity of the situation.

"What's so funny?" her mother asked.

"Nothing, Mom." They rode in silence for a while longer.

"I'm going to be glad when I don't have to drive all the way over here anymore," her mom said. Margaret resisted the urge to point out that she too could drive, if anyone would let her. Just because she was in a mental hospital didn't mean she forgot how to operate a vehicle.

"The doctors said you'd need only a week, a week and a half or so in this program. Has your therapist said anything about when she thinks you'll be ready?"

Margaret picked a flake of dried skin off her lip then cringed. She had pulled regular skin off with it too, and it stung. "She hasn't mentioned it."

Her mom pursed her lips. "Well, ask today, why don't you? They don't tell us anything because you're eighteen. You're still a dependent, I don't know why they don't understand that."

As per her usual strategy, Margaret did not engage. She pressed her forehead to the glass of the car window.

Margaret sat with Brenda and Amber, with Landry on the other side of Brenda. A compromise between sitting directly with him or ignoring him all together. The morning passed quickly, with everyone sharing and chatting. Without John there anymore, the room was full of women, which made Margaret feel more comfortable.

She spent the break outside with Amber walking around the little pond again. She enjoyed the older woman's chaotic yet soothing energy.

When they returned, Margaret realized that Rachel had kept Landry behind during the break.

Maybe she's giving him the reverse of the speech she gave me, Margaret thought. Telling him I'm too good for him.

Olga asked to share first. She waved her long, delicate fingers in the air as she spoke. "Hi, I am Olga, I'm working on my PTSD. My high is that my mother is visiting me from Ukraine, my low is that she does not believe in this program. She is a traditional woman, she does not think mental illness is real."

Ruslana always looked nervous. She tapped her fingers incessantly, touching on every surface she got near. She shivered constantly, especially when she was upset. As a child, Olga had thought her mother was perfect. Her first realization that she wasn't stemmed from the realization that the woman was always anxious.

Searching in her kitchen for something her mother could eat, Olga almost didn't hear her change topics in her usual string of complaints.

“And when do you get out of this program, dear? The program for your mind?”

Ruslana’s disapproval was clear in her tone.

Olga didn’t answer. She had already answered this question countless times. She had suggested her mother postpone the trip, but the woman had come anyway, insisting that surely Olga would be better by then.

“This country has filled your head with such ridiculous things. Mental health. What is that about? And leaving your husband? My god. Aleksander was a fine man and he provided for you. Now you’re choosing to provide for yourself? Nothing good about a woman living on her own, nothing good at all. Things happen! Like your car crash. If Aleksander had been driving, he would’ve taken that turn so quickly.”

Ruslana tapped her fingers on the kitchen counter in a rhythmic pattern, not waiting for any answers to her questions. Olga didn’t give them. She had given them all before, to no avail. Aleksander was a cheater and a drunk. The car crash wasn’t my fault. In America, adult women can live alone. And I’m better off alone, she answered in her head.

Olga settled on making her mother a peanut butter sandwich and got out white bread. Perhaps once she was full, she would not be so critical. At least if she is eating, she is not complaining, Olga thought.

“I love the woman, she is my mother. But she does not understand my life,” Olga told everyone, moving her delicate hands in the air as she spoke.

Margaret could relate. Her mother didn’t seem to hear anything she said to her, either.

“Being a mother is harder than you think!” Amber said.

Margaret jumped, shocked to hear such a harshness from the usually calm woman.
Brenda looked intrigued at her shift in attitude.

Rachel eyed Amber. "Do you want to explain that comment to us a bit more, Amber?"

Staring down at the rings on her hands, Amber shrugged. Rachel waited.

"I miss my son, Dakota. He was so handsome. Such a good boy. A poor decision maker, but a good boy." She didn't look up from her hands.

She had never mentioned a son before. Though, now that Margaret was thinking about it, Amber hadn't mentioned much about herself at all.

"He kept getting into trouble. Terrible trouble. He was in with a bad crowd. I was so worried for him."

The slam of the door closing woke Amber up. She had fallen asleep waiting for Dakota to come home again.

She had left only one of the living room lights on before napping on the couch, so she could see her son only faintly before her.

"Where have you been?" she whispered loudly at the shadowy figure.

"Mom?" he asked loudly.

"Quieter, please. Cassandra is sleeping." She had read her daughter a bedtime story hours before. Cassandra needed to go to bed promptly at 9PM every night. Routines were important to Cass; all the doctors had said that when she had first been diagnosed.

"Mom?" he asked again, louder this time.

“Dakota, please!” Amber didn’t understand why he sounded so confused. He must have been out drinking with those awful boys again, she thought. They always drink too much, and all the way to last call, too.

She let the knitted blanket she had fallen asleep under fall to the floor as she got up from the couch. Fumbling in the poorly lit room, she finally twisted the knob of her old table lamp enough times for it to turn on. It illuminated the room with red-tinged light through its multi-colored shade.

Amber screamed. Dakota stood before her with blood dripping down the side of his face and two already forming black eyes. His shirt was soaked in red and she could see blood mixed with the dirt underneath his fingernails.

“Mom?” he cried out again, his voice ragged.

“He and his scummy friends, they’d been getting into fights at bars, and they hurt some guy real bad. The man came and found Dakota alone. My boy didn’t stand a chance. The man beat him so badly he burst his left eye. Cracked his teeth, too. He’d been so handsome.” She paused here, getting choked up. She nuzzled herself deeper into her woolen shawl.

“The recovery was hard. He refused to stop hanging around those awful men, and the drinking and drugs got worse. I tried with him, I did, but in three weeks he did more heroin than my sister did in her entire two-year drug bender. I had to kick him out. I have a daughter with disabilities and he was endangering her.”

Landry kicked his feet against the chair. Margaret was surprised to notice him clenching his fists and jaw. She couldn’t tell if his eyes were glassy from anger or sadness.

“But I told him I'd still support him. After a few weeks, he started talking to me again. I helped him look for jobs. He started dating a real sweet girl and slowed up on the drugs. I had hope for the first time in ages.” Amber’s eye make-up smudged, leaving a black trail down her cheeks.

Landry picked up a box of tissues and brought it to her from the across the room. Rachel didn’t scold him this time. Amber paused to wipe her eyes, then took a deep breath, steadying herself.

“His girlfriend was in the house with me. We were making BLT sandwiches for him and Cassandra. She went out to the garage to ask if he wanted anything else to eat. The next thing I heard was her screaming. I ran in and there he was. I tried to save him. He was declared dead upon arrival at the hospital.”

Brenda was crying to herself, softly. Landry was staring at his hands. It looked like he was trying not to cry.

“The men I want to kill are the men he ran around with. They’re the ones who got him into fights. This never would have happened without that crowd.” Amber composed herself and continued speaking. “He saved five lives, though. He was an organ donor. A tissue donor! He donated everything he could. He signed up only months ago. Five lives. Five people are walking around that wouldn't be, walking around with pieces of my boy.”

Hot tears fell from Margaret’s eyes when she blinked. They left her cheeks feeling warm as they rolled down to her lips. Her mouth tasted salty. She hadn’t realized she was crying.

“Thank you for sharing, Amber,” Rachel said. She looked solemn, but unphased. She must hear this stuff constantly. *She must’ve lost patients before, too. How does she do it? How does she listen to all of this all day?*

Amber wiped her tears away and smiled, softly. “Do you want to see the medallion they gave me? When they took the organs?” She pulled out a gold mesh bag, opened it, and held up the medal inside. Tied to it was a lock of dark black hair.

“They put his birth date, his death date, and the day they harvested the organs.”

Amber passed the medallion to Olga, who admired it reverently. The medal continued its way around the circle. Eunice didn’t seem to know what to do with it and her eyes darted around with discomfort.

“I decided for his tombstone, when we bury him, I’ll have them write his date of birth and the day he donated his organs.”

Brenda held the medal gently. She breathed deeply and her shoulders shook less. She had changed her shirt for the first time in a while, but her hair still looked unwashed.

“When was this, Amber?” Olga asked. She sat on the edge of her seat, listening intently.

“A month ago.”

“Oh, Amber,” Eunice said in a single breath.

“The funeral will be this Sunday. I painted my nails for it, too. White, because it was his favorite color.” Amber held up her fingers to display her nails.

The medallion made its way to Landry.

“Can you still be an organ donor if you're all fucked up inside from drugs?” he asked quietly.

“Yes,” Brenda answered. “Your lungs will regenerate,”

Amber shuddered, as if she was expelling all that she was feeling. “Motherhood is hard,” Amber said. “I did my best with what I had.”

Landry stayed behind when they were dismissed. He was usually the first out the door when Rachel said they could leave for the day. Curious, Margaret stayed behind to talk to him, even though she knew she shouldn't.

“Is something wrong?”

He avoided her eyes, still sitting in his chair. “No.”

She felt the awkwardness of her body looming over him. “Do you want me to go?”

“You probably don't want to stay.” He began playing with his ratty bracelet. “I'm no fun to be around when I'm like this.”

She took the seat next to him as a way of responding.

“Rachel told me something right before break ended and... I got upset. Angry. Not at her, just at everything. It's not even that bad. Well, it is. It's big. Just maybe not bad? I don't know.”

He paused. “She says they've diagnosed me as bipolar.”

Shocker. Margaret waited for him to say more.

“Being a self-centered druggie asshole is almost easier, cause like, I tell myself I could stop if I wanted to.”

Looking at him, slouched in his chair, picking the dirty rope on his wrist, she felt sorry for him. Some of her anger evaporated, seeing him so miserable. It was hard to stay mad at such an unwell person.

“I don't get how I'm bipolar. I'm not happy then sad then happy or whatever. And Rachel acts like I must be super insecure but I'm not. I know I'm funny and smart and good-looking, just like you know you're pretty.”

“Sure...and funny and smart,” Margaret prompted. He didn't seem to notice.

“The only time I get the kind of sad you get,” he paused to gesture in her direction, “...I don't know. I used to fight with my dad and I cared a bit then. But I don't care about much. My last girlfriend... I have no idea if I even liked her. Drugs numb the feelings out of you. So, I don't get how I could have the mood swings symptom.”

“What do you mean by ‘fight with your dad’?”

He began to play with his shoelace instead of his bracelet. Margaret got the idea that more of this had been a conversation with himself than with her.

“We used to get into fist fights and shit. Not often. But more than once. But he went to anger management school or whatever.”

For a moment, Margaret imagined Landry's grown up self. In many ways, he was just a younger version of John. Her stomach turned at the thought. There was a very tangible reality in

which he would go on to hurt people in the same ways he had been hurt. *Hurt people hurt people, just like the therapy books say.*

“I want to be okay.”

Margaret patted his arm hesitantly. They hadn’t ever touched before and she felt awkward trying to comfort him. She hadn’t touched anyone in a while, actually. “I think you can be.”

“I hope so. I hope you can... deal with your stuff, too. You really should share in the group, you know. It helps me, at least.”

She was a little ashamed at the thought of him being a more responsible patient than her. *It has been a while since I shared anything real,* she thought.

He nodded towards her legs, visible in her cut off shorts. “Why'd you do that?”

“Doesn't hurt so much as people think. And I don't really know. First time, it was just scratching. Now I do it in different ways. It sort of escalated from there. As a way to shock myself back into reality.”

“Does it work?”

Margaret laughed. “Not really, no. And now I have all these ugly scars.”

“They aren't ugly. I mean, they aren't pretty, either. They're just there, you know?”

“I don't like people being able to know something so personal about me just from looking.”

Landry held out his wrist, where Margaret could see a line of raised skin. “I did this but for different reasons, I think. I burned a fork and stuck it here. Got burned pretty bad. Told people I was coked out of my mind. But I wasn't. I was pretty sober. Just trying to feel something.”

“I guess we're all either trying to feel something or we're trying to feel less.”

Landry leaned over suddenly and hugged her. The movement startled her. She was rigid in his arms for a moment, then she relaxed and hugged him in return. His hair smelled like shampoo. Probably a two-in-one his mom had bought him. She tried not to think about how prominent her spine must feel underneath his arms. The two stayed like that for a while, without saying anything.

Day Six

When Brenda walked in, Rachel had already started the session and Olga had already shared. Brenda made her way to the empty seat next to Landry, the familiar sound of her flip-flops slapping on the tiles comforting Margaret. She had been worried about Brenda's absence.

The next in line was Margaret, who sat up straight. "I'm Margaret. And I'm working on my self-esteem. I got here because I didn't respect myself enough to set boundaries and I got hurt."

Rachel seemed excited that she was speaking. "Do you want to tell us a little more about that, Margaret?"

She swallowed hard, thinking about Landry's advice.

Margaret's phone pinged. It was Victoria, again.

Margaret

Please text me back.

Margaret

Margaret

Margaret

With her hand that wasn't holding her phone, Margaret unlocked her locker and got out the books she would need to complete her AP US History homework.

I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

She sighed and put her phone back into the waistband of her plaid uniform skirt. It stuck out against her protruding hip bone.

She didn't have time for this. She needed to go home. It had been a long and terrible school day. Victoria's friends had pushed her into a water fountain while she was drinking from it only an hour earlier. Her shirt still wasn't dry. Margaret closed her locker and put her bag over her shoulder, then paused. She'd moved too fast and gotten light headed. She sank to the floor quickly so the feeling would pass.

She checked her phone again.

Can we talk? Please?

She sighed and replied. I already left campus.

Her phone pinged with an immediate response.

No, you didn't. I know you didn't.

She ignored the message and got up off the floor. She had stayed late to avoid the horde of senior girls giggling and gossiping on their way to the parking lot, and now the corridors were abandoned. The freshman lockers still had posters on them from way back in the fall, when their senior buddies had made them. The posters were the only spots of color in the beige hallway.

The sticky Texas air hit her firmly in the face as she left the building. She was glad she had worn the thinner of her two long-sleeved uniform shirts. She checked her phone again for more messages, but saw none. She breathed a sigh of relief.

Ever since she'd broken up with Victoria, the harassment had been non-stop. Victoria had no shortage of mean-spirited friends who had never liked her, for obvious reasons. They didn't know why Victoria was suddenly encouraging them to bully her former "friend," but they didn't seem to care. If only they knew that the reason they finally have a pass to pick on the school lesbian is because their best friend is just as gay as me.

"Margaret!"

She jumped at the sound of her name.

Victoria was hanging out the window of her Jeep, staring directly at her. She had pulled her car across the back of Margaret's parking space.

"Talk to me!" she shouted from the window, her long brown hair swinging alongside her. "You can't keep ignoring me!"

"Watch me!" Margaret shouted back. I can't deal with this today. I broke up with her so my life would be less dramatic, not more.

The two stood at a standstill, eyeing each other. Victoria's energy frightened Margaret, though she tried not to show it. She seemed more unstable than usual.

A month of not being able to push me around whenever she wanted really broke her, Margaret thought. As though she were approaching a wild animal, Margaret started slowly walking towards her.

Margaret caught a glint of silver in Victoria's hand. It looked like the pocketknife with the black handle that Margaret had stolen for her. Victoria only enjoyed stolen gifts.

“Listen to me, please. Hear me out.” Victoria’s voice cracked at the end of her sentence.

She was now close enough to see that Victoria was crying. Her lips were pursed and her knuckles were white. She seemed to be tearing up out of anger if anything.

Margaret didn’t respond, and Victoria’s eyes got wilder.

“Talk to me right now or I’ll hurt myself.” She held up the knife so Margaret could see it. It definitely was the pocketknife, the one with a beer bottle and wine opener.

“I love you, I do.”

Margaret froze. Victoria saw her hesitation and pressed the edge of the blade into her forearm.

“Get back together with me.” Now she was really sobbing, her broad shoulders heaving with each breath.

She applied more pressure. A thin line of blood appeared on her wrist.

Margaret turned and ran towards the building, hoping to find a teacher, a dean, a nurse, anyone. Only a few steps in, she was too dizzy to continue. Spots appear in front of her eyes. Margaret tripped on the curb and fell hard onto the concrete.

The world spun for a moment, then went black.

“I fainted and hit my head. A chemistry professor saw the whole thing happen from far away. She ran over when she saw me collapse. She was the one who called 911,” Margaret said, recounting what she had been told about the incident.

“When I got to the hospital, they ran a bunch of tests and realized I wasn’t eating. The doctor told my parents I was severely malnourished. I had been too depressed to eat for so long. I didn’t realize how sick I was, it had all become normal to me. Victoria made me feel like I was something to be ashamed of, so I shrank myself. My parents didn’t realize anything was going on until the school contacted them. The headmaster said I had to get help from a medical professional before I could go back. So now I’m here.”

The room sat in silence. Landry picked at his bracelet, Eunice fiddled with her latex gloves, Olga and Amber looked at her with concern. She expected Brenda to look happy that she had finally shared, but Brenda was looking off into space. At least Rachel seemed pleased.

Eunice was the last person she looked to, scared of the reaction she would get. But Eunice didn’t look angry or disgusted, just sad for her. Not in a pitying way, either. Just in a kind way. Margaret breathed a sigh of relief she hadn’t realized she’d been holding in.

“I want to say something, Margaret,” Amber said, adjusting her shawl. “I’m a firm believer that when I think of a compliment for someone, I should say it, because too many unkind things are said, and too many kind things go unsaid.” She reached out and put her hand over Margaret’s, which was definitely against the rules, but Rachel didn’t say anything.

“In the few days I’ve known you, I have come to believe you’re a kind and smart person. I know I’m not seeing you at your worst, but I’m not seeing you at your happiest and healthiest, either. And you’re still fun to be around. I’ve greatly enjoyed your company these last few days.”

“Yeah, everyone in this room thinks you’re great,” said Eunice.

“Plus, think about all the super shitty people who aren’t insecure. Why should they be confident while you hate yourself? You’re not shitty at all,” Landry added. He caught her eye and smiled.

Margaret laughed a little and broke eye contact with the floor. She waited hopefully for an approving comment from Brenda, but still nothing. Brenda always shook and twitched during group, but today was much worse.

Rachel seemed to pick up on the same energy that Margaret was noticing, turning to Brenda quickly. “And how are you doing, Brenda?”

As everyone looked at Brenda, her nervous ticks became more prominent. She tapped her left foot on the floor and bit her chipped red fingernails.

Rachel and the rest of the room waited as Brenda stared at the ground. The silence stretched on, but everyone knew they shouldn’t speak.

After an entire minute, Brenda began to cry. “I’m falling to pieces. My life is already a puzzle without any corner pieces and with every day more pieces go missing. I have to take care of my ridiculous daughter and she’s so ungrateful. I feel so alone. I stopped washing my hair again. I can’t take care of myself. I’m barely functioning.” Brenda was sobbing at this point, barely getting the words out.

Rachel stood up. “You know what, I think we may need to consider you for inpatient. How does that sound?” she said gently.

Without looking up, Brenda nodded, clearly uncomfortable to be crying in front of everyone.

“Brenda, why don't you come with me to talk to the people up front? Everyone else, you can take a break now.” Rachel gave all of them a look, then beckoned to Brenda.

Brenda got up slowly, then followed Rachel. Her flip flops slapped on the tiles, somehow making the room feel more silent.

She paused at Landry's chair and reached down to pat him on the shoulder. He sat stiffly, his eyes growing watery. Brenda only waited for a moment before moving on to Margaret. She squeezed her shoulder gently.

“Thanks for sharing today,” Brenda said, her bitten fingernails and ripped cuticles still resting on Margaret's shoulder. Before Margaret could respond, Brenda walked to the front. She ducked under the arm Rachel had outstretched to hold open the door, and then she was gone.

Margaret turned to Landry, a lump forming in her throat. “What just happened? Was that goodbye?”

Amber leaned over from the other side of her. “I think so, sweetheart.”

“But we didn't get to say goodbye.” Margaret wasn't looking at anyone in particular. It felt more like she was speaking to herself.

“That's how it works here,” said Landry. He looked surprised to hear his own voice trembling.

Furious at Rachel for taking Brenda away so quickly and furious at the world in general, Margaret stormed outside. Landry tried to follow, but she shooed him off. He didn't take much convincing.

Margaret sat down on the yellow ground by the pond with a thud. She began pulling blades of grass apart until the tiny bit of liquid inside them leaked on to her fingers.

She was wearing the same pants she'd worn the day they went to 7/11 together. The lighter was still in the pocket she had left it in, stuck between her butt and the ground.

Blinking back tears, she pulled it out, flicking it on and off a few times. The heat was unwelcome in the humidity but it helped to have something to do with her hands. She brought the flame closer to her left arm, singeing arm hairs.

She examined the skull on the little green lighter.

This is what I must look like to people. Thin skin stretched over cheekbones, balanced precariously on a bony body. She felt kin to the scowling face. Drawn to it.

The momentary relief that she knew touching the flame to her skin would give her was beyond enticing. She drew the lighter nearer, feeling the uncomfortable warmth on her skin. Then she stopped.

This wasn't how Brenda would want her to handle this.

Shaking slightly, she got up, brushing the ripped-up pieces of grass off her pants.

On her way back inside, she stopped by the smoking spot by the dumpsters. Staring at the frowning face, she saw her distorted reflection in the plastic shine again. Her bug eyes and jagged cheekbones peered back at her.

Margaret opened the dumpster's grimy cover, cringing at the thought of how unclean it was, and tossed the lighter in.

Day Seven

The room felt empty without Brenda. Margaret missed her laughter and her harsh, motherly presence. Landry didn't say anything, but she imagined he felt the same way. He played with his ratty bracelet for most of the morning and didn't make a single comment about anything at all.

The first person to share was Eunice. She was eager to share with the group, volunteering to go first even though she wasn't the closest chair to Rachel.

“My husband sat with me while I ate an orange with bare hands. I figure, it's inside the peel, how dirty could it be? My husband sat with me the whole way through.” She beamed, looking around for everyone's approval.

Margaret and Olga gave her warm smiles. Landry continued pulling the thread of his bracelet apart.

Rachel clapped her hands together with excitement. “Fantastic work, Eunice. You've made so much progress here.”

It was nice to hear good news for the first time in a while.

While Landry was in the bathroom and Olga was sharing, a nurse Margaret had seen around in the lobby asked to see Rachel outside.

Maybe Brenda's already back, Margaret hoped. That thought dissipated quickly.

Rachel poked her head back in the door and beckoned to Margaret to come outside into the narrow hallway. Margaret got up quickly, intent on finding out what was going on.

When she closed the door behind her, Rachel looked at her with a stern sort of pity.

“I know we were planning on discharging you tomorrow, but I just got word that your insurance won't cover today or tomorrow because there's no urgent clinical need. You need to leave today before our afternoon session begins or you're going to get billed.”

“I— okay.” Margaret clasped her hands together to quell the shaking.

“Another day would've been better, but you're okay to be discharged today. I've gone ahead and signed all the paperwork you need to go back to school.” She handed her a manila folder with loose papers inside.

If I do something really crazy, will they let me stay? Or send me back to inpatient? But then maybe I could see Brenda.

Margaret took a moment to respond. “Back to school? Wow. I— am I allowed to go say goodbye to everyone?”

“Yes, quickly. You can wait in the lobby for your ride.” Rachel touched her shoulder the way a coach would pat one of their athletes. “I’m glad you finally shared. You needed to get all of that out.”

Margaret nodded, her thin hair swinging in her face.

Softening, Rachel said, “You're a smart, charming young lady. Don't let anyone, especially yourself, take your bright future away from you.” She grabbed Margaret with one arm in a quick side hug.

“Thanks, Rachel,” Margaret replied. She wished she could say more, but she felt too dazed.

Margaret went back into the therapy room. Everyone's eyes were immediately on her, waiting for an explanation. She felt like she was stepping on to a stage.

"I just found out I'm getting discharged. I'm leaving early today. So... I wanted to say goodbye."

"Oh, no, we'll miss you," said Eunice, clasping her gloved hand with her non-gloved hand.

Olga reached to hug her. Margaret's eyes were level with the tall woman's clavicle. "It is sad to say goodbye. It has been very nice knowing you," Olga said into her ear.

Amber took Margaret's hands in hers, looking solemnly into her eyes. "No matter what you face out there, you can always know that you came here and in just a few days all of these strangers loved you."

"Thank you. I'm going to miss you all."

The women embraced.

This is probably a very strange looking tableau, Margaret thought. She imagined what a bystander would think, seeing these middle-aged women holding her.

Margaret broke the heavy silence. "I have to go wait in the lobby now or they bill me extra."

Amber gave her a final hug, wrapping her up in her arms. She smelled like incense and laundry detergent.

Waving awkwardly, Margaret headed out the door to wait for her mom to pick her up.

After a few minutes, Landry burst in to the lobby, startling the assistant at the desk.

“Hey! You’re leaving right now?” he said, out of breath.

She tried not to seem too emotional. “Yeah, insurance issues.”

“Cool, I’m leaving too,” he replied, hands on his knees as he tried to catch his breath.

“Man, I am out of shape. I was worried I wouldn’t catch you.”

She did a double take, looking at him, then back in the direction of the group therapy room, then back at him. “What? How?”

“I heard you were leaving. I told Rachel I was good to go, too. I’ve already completed the amount of days I had to do.” He shrugged, as if this was nothing. “You waiting for your ride?”

“Wow, okay, damn. Yeah, I’m not allowed to drive myself here. My mom is on her way, I just texted her.”

“Sweet, we can wait together.” Landry pulled out his phone to play his fruit-throwing game.

What’s he waiting for? His car is here, isn’t it? Bemused, Margaret watched him play and lose several rounds of the game. He cursed loudly with each loss, which made the assistant at the desk scowl at him. He paid her no mind.

Margaret cleared her throat. She wanted to use this time to say something, anything, but she didn’t know what. “It’s weird that it’s over.”

He didn’t look up from his game. “Yeah. Probably more for you.”

“Yeah?”

“Fuck!” he said. He’d lost another round. Putting his phone back into his pocket, he continued. “You’re a bit more into this than I am. Plus, everyone loves you. That’s what it should be like everywhere, though. Your school is full of idiots, if they’re being so mean to you.”

“It’s what I get for being a freak.” She was uncomfortable but flattered by the sincerity. “But thank you, Landry.”

He gave her a muted version of his usual crooked grin.

“I think you’re going to be able to stay sober, I really do. You’re stubborn enough, I really think you can. I hope you can,” she said.

“Hey, we’ll see,” he said in a cavalier tone.

Margaret’s phone *pinged*.

“Oh. My mom’s here. I have to go.”

She stood awkwardly with her hands dangled at her sides, unsure how to say goodbye.

Landry saw her standing and stood himself. “Oh, well, bye!” He paused, then leaned in to hug her.

There was something childish about the way he swung his arms around her shoulders. Despite her being much shorter, it felt more like she was holding him than the other way around.

“Hey, if people start messing with you again, me and my dealer, we’ll go beat them up for you,” he said, his arms still wrapped around her.

“Oh, good.” She paused. “I’ll miss you.”

He let go of her. “We can chill. Do something other than drugs. I've got to figure that out, anyway.”

“Yes. We'll hang. And do non-inebriated things.” As she was saying it, she knew it wasn't true. They weren't people who could be friends in the real world. And it didn't seem like it'd be long before he went back to his old friends. But for a moment, they could both pretend.

“Cool.” He grinned at her, this time showing his full smile. Now he was the one standing awkwardly, his hands dangling by his sides.

She started walking backwards towards the door, waving her hand slightly. “Well, bye.”

“Hey, I'll see you around!”

Her mom had incessant questions for her about what was going on, but she zoned out as soon as she got in the car.

As they pulled out of the circle drive and then out of the parking lot, she caught a glimpse of Landry in his car, texting as he vaped. The last she saw of him, he was laughing, surrounded by a cloud of smoke.