

BLONDIE: A NARRATIVE EXISTENTIAL INQUIRY

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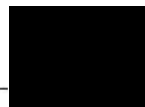
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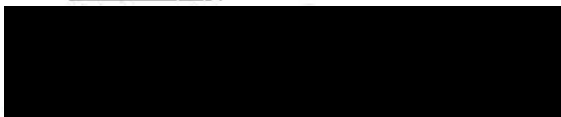


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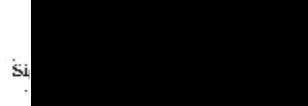
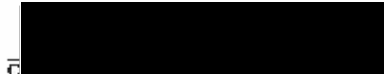
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## Abstract

Accessible mental health treatment is more important now than ever. In Canada and the United States, mental health challenges have been steadily increasing over the past several years, particularly among young people (Twenge et al., 2019). Arts-based inquiry, including narrative, autoethnography, and fiction, have gained considerable recognition in recent years as effective research methodologies across a range of disciplines (Leavy, 2018b). This investigation took the form of an epistolary Bildungsroman titled *Blondie*, a fictional story of self-development as a potential way to explore and understand the complex layers of mental illness and its treatment. A set of existential and narrative philosophies and therapies are employed as both methodology and praxis and are woven into the emotional unfolding of the bildungsroman: (a) existential therapy, focusing on the essence and meaning of self; (b) integrity therapy (Lander & Nahon, 2005), focusing on the client-therapist relationship, including Buber's (1970) I–Thou dialogical relations; (c) narrative ontology, exploring a storied co-creation of reality; (d) narrative therapy (White, 1995), focusing on the reimagination and re-writing of one's personal story; and (e) bibliotherapy (McChord Crothers, 1916), focusing on the reading of fiction as therapeutic. The current work is a creative, reflexive, immersive and interactive inquiry. It does not intend to answer any one question, but to open new pathways to understanding and knowing in the fields of education and mental health. *Blondie*, the novel, aims to be a transformational experience for interlocutors, providing an example of how a work of fiction might be written to illuminate the complex layers of mental illness, and to exemplify one's navigation toward self-discovery, authenticity, and therefore mental health. I wrote *Blondie* with the intention of being provocative. It is irreverent and disturbing and perhaps disgusting at times, covering serious mental health issues in a raw and very honest way. Readers should be warned of its explicit content and topics covered such as abuse, rape, drug and alcohol abuse, smoking, eating disorders, body

dysmorphia, reckless behaviour, mania, depression, anxiety, drug dealing and other crimes, and harsh and offensive language.

**Help Hotlines:**

Call 1-888-668-6810 or text WELLNESS to 686868 for youth

Call 1-866-585-0445 or text WELLNESS to 741741 for adults

## **Definitions**

### **Millennials**

The generation born in the 1980s or 1990s.

### **Generation Z (Gen Z)**

The generation born between the late 1990s and 2010.

### **Dirty Realism**

A term used to define an American literary movement in the 1970s. Writers in this subcategory of realism are said to depict the seamier or more mundane aspects of ordinary life in spare, unadorned language.

### **Arts-Based Inquiry/Research (ABI/ABR)**

A mode of formal qualitative inquiry that uses artistic processes in order to understand and articulate the subjectivity of human experience.

### **Bildungsroman**

A novel dealing with one person's formative years or spiritual education.

### **Bibliotherapy**

The use of books as therapy in the treatment of mental or psychological disorders

### **Integrity Therapy/Model**

An existential psychotherapy asking deep questions about the nature of being, mental health, working to empower an individual for agency, and self-help. Integrity therapy focuses on the cultivation of meaning and purpose by unearthing values and authenticity.

### **Narrative Therapy**

A style of therapy that helps people become an expert in their own lives. There is an emphasis on one's damaged personal story and 'rewriting' it for improved mental health.

Narrative Therapy works on the premise that 'you are what you tell yourself.'

## **I-Thou Relationship**

A relationship between two people characterized by mutuality, directness, presentness, intensity and ineffability. The space between I and Thou is described as a bold leap into the experience of the other while simultaneously being transparent, present and accessible.

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Thank you all, from the bottom of my soul.

## Introduction and Background

Arts-based inquiry (ABI) has gained recognition in recent years across a range of disciplines (Leavy, 2018b). With its general ease of access, literary forms of ABI, including narrative, autoethnography, and fiction, have become widely accepted as effective research methodologies (Leavy, 2018).

Fiction as methodology is a creative and reflexive process for researcher and interlocutors, providing a deep level of engagement for both. By filling the spaces between points of data, stories allow for a rich, textured, and colourful examination of lived experiences. Readers are drawn into the psychic space of characters in powerful ways, allowing for the growth and development of self through the evocation of emotion and imagination.

In its general format, the Bildungsroman follows an archetypal hero struggling along a quest to overcome challenges within a defined social context. As research, the bildungsroman as a methodological approach is not based on traditional data in the qualitative or quantitative sense—there is no data collection before the act of interpretation.

*Blondie* is a story of fictional truths informed by my own personal and professional life experiences and as a researcher and mental health therapist. This work of fiction is an act of creativity drawn from an understanding that life itself is narrated, and is built upon the idea that the very way we think and interact with the world is through storied representations of self, others, and our environments. The act of writing and reading fiction is a relentless reflexive process, and deeply and wholly engaged in the co-construction of a shared reality. For the current study, this process is used to provide a holistic and embodied examination of mental health phenomena and its inquiry, and to provide an example of one's process of self-discovery.

*Blondie* is unconventional in the sense that it employs a unique combination of creative writing, theory and praxis. As a novel, it works to weave philosophy, theory, therapy, and a portrayal of struggle and perseverance into the lives of fictional characters as a way to inform, inspire, and understand mental health difficulties. The existential and narrative philosophies and therapies used (i.e., existentialism, the integrity model, I-Thou relations, narrative ontology, narrative therapy, and bibliotherapy; Buber, 1970; Lander & Nahon, 2005; McChord Crothers, 1916; White, 1995), all act synergistically for mental health and educational inquiry and praxis. A central theme of this work is reflexivity and is replicated across all theoretical positionings and methodologies.

The study's integrative approach to mental health is described by a reflexive, forward-cycle motion of poiesis, representing a generative and hopeful premise for ontological and epistemological positionings, and for one's individual agency for self-sustainment. Creative writing further supports this interactive process through its pared-down style, which limits descriptive language and interior dialogue for greater imaginative engagement.

A set of psychotherapies are woven into the story as an integrative approach to inquiry and praxis: (a) integrity therapy (Lander & Nahon, 2005), which includes Martin Buber's (1970) I-Thou dialogical relations, focuses on the interaction, authenticity, honesty, responsibility, and disclosure of both therapist and client, aiding in the discovery of self and purpose; (b) narrative therapy (White, 1995) compliments this process by helping people rewrite the narratives of their lives; and (c) bibliotherapy (McChord Crothers, 1916) promotes the reading of fiction as a method of self-development, personality growth, and mental health treatment.

## **Purpose**

The current work is a creative, reflexive, immersive and interactive inquiry. It does not intend to answer any one question, but to open new pathways to understanding and knowing in the fields of education and mental health. *Blondie*, the novel, aims to be a transformational experience for interlocutors, providing an example of how a work of fiction might be written to illuminate the complex layers of mental illness, and to exemplify one's navigation toward self-discovery, authenticity, and therefore mental health.

## **Statement of the Problem**

Accessible mental health treatment is more important now than ever. In Canada and the United States, mental health challenges have been steadily increasing over the past several years, particularly among young people (Twenge et al., 2019).

This widespread mental health phenomenon has been referred to as a mental health crisis (Gunnell et al., 2018; Kruisselbrink-Flatt, 2013; Xiao et al., 2017). The widespread coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) lockdowns in Canada, the United States, and across the globe have exacerbated a crisis already under foot. In Canada, this has more than doubled the rate of depression, and quadrupled the rate of anxiety (Mental Health Research Canada, 2020), while depression has increased three-fold in the United States for all age groups (Ettman et al., 2020). Prolonged isolation left many people with feelings of loneliness which is linked to depression and anxiety (McQuaid et al., 2021).

Access to pre-pandemic resources for mental health concerns was already in peril, with university counselling centres and government funded therapies struggling to keep up with increasing demand (Lipson et al., 2019). Ten years of data collected between 2007–2017 from a sample of 155,026 students from 196 campuses in the United States revealed that rates of

treatment seeking increased from 19% in 2007 to 34% by 2017 (Lipson et al., 2019). More than 95% of counselling centre directors reported that providing treatment for students with significant psychological problems was a growing concern on their campus (Mistler et al., 2012).

Stressors resulting from isolation and social distancing measures brought on by the pandemic have applied even more pressure to an overburdened and limited mental health care system. Available services are not adequate to support the increased volume of treatment-seeking through conventional services, such as face-to-face counselling (Mental Health Research Canada, 2020; Strudwick et al., 2021). There is a growing need for adequate alternative options for care (Wiens et al., 2020), which is further intensified by the minimization of face-to-face interventions due to social distancing and other correlates of the Covid-19 pandemic (Mental Health Research Canada, 2020; Strudwick et al., 2021).

## Literature Review

### Sustainability and Self

The increasing rate of mental health difficulties experienced by young people is alarming. How can a sustainable future be built on such instability? As framed by sustainability discourse and literature, global climate change, biodiversity loss, and resource scarcity are significant existential threats to humanity (Evans, 2017). An important piece is missing, one that is effectively foundational to what is found in the literature—the individual ‘self’ has been largely overlooked. It is the position of this research that the health and stability of individuality and self stand as prerequisites for the health of society, political systems, the economy, and the environment. Inevitably, healthy minds create healthy spaces, which in turn create healthy minds—a synergy that will be key to understanding and developing a sustainable path forward. This research focused on the sustainability of self as foundational to sustainability in all other domains.

As minds and bodies synergistically shape, and are shaped by their surroundings, a person’s sense of being is interdependent and tightly interwoven with the interactions and perceptions of others. These social phenomena have acted as a mechanism for self-development throughout history and have been naturally selected for the survival of our species. We are evolving, and at an unprecedented rate. The nature of self is a phenomenological construct. Who we were in 2012 is worldly different than who we are in 2022, and who we will be in 2032, and beyond. Place and time dictate one’s lived reality, as do the familial, social, political, and paradigmatic structures that they encompass, with each structure embedded in the next. The health outcomes of the pandemic are but a component of a larger growing issue—the modern demoralization of the individual self. This can be seen as a three-pronged phenomenon.

## ***Familial***

Indulgent or helicopter parenting has been a growing trend over the past three decades (Clarke et al., 2014; Doepke & Zilibotti, 2019). This refers to a heavily involved, time-intensive, controlling child-rearing approach that is not only focused on supervising and protecting, but a total immersion in every aspect of a child/adolescent/emerging adult's life (Cui et al., 2019). Indulgent parenting has a profound impact on an individual's self-development, their ability to take on adult responsibilities, and to live an independent life (Cui et al., 2019; Doepke & Zilibotti, 2019). A significant relationship has been found between indulgent, helicopter parents and psychological problems of emergent adult children, with depression, anxiety, and emotional dysregulation topping the list (Cui et al., 2019).

Other parenting styles can produce similar outcomes. Neglect, childhood abuse, and violence exposure have a profound impact on adult behaviour and physical and emotional health. Negative health outcomes of neglectful and abusive parenting have been well documented in the literature (Anda et al., 2006; Greene et al., 2020; Hughes et al., 2017; Norman et al., 2012; Widom et al., 2012), which include increases in the rates of post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, substance use, obesity, risky health behaviours, perceived stress, difficulty controlling one's anger, and other mental physical health problems.

Indulgent and neglectful parenting styles fail to instill a healthy locus of control (LoC) in children and emerging adults. LoC refers to one's perception of the driving force behind their life events, and is one of the most widely studied personality variables in psychology, with over 5,000,000 hits in Google Scholar (Nowicki & Duke, 2016). There are two types of LoCs: (a) an *internal LoC* is the belief that one has the will to control their own destiny, and (b) an *external LoC* is the belief that one's destiny is controlled by an external force beyond the self (Rotter,



1966). A parenting style that strikes a balance between the opposing ends of this spectrum has been shown to produce a healthy and adaptive internal LoC. Parenting that fosters an Internal LoC allows a child the freedom to experience real behaviour outcomes and communicates warmth, support, and feedback when children fail. This continues to be critical in the development of competence beliefs, adaptive coping, and appropriate self and mental health development (Carton et al., 2021; Groth et al., 2019).

### ***Social/Political***

Determinants of self-development and mental health, including LoC, can also be related to social and political factors. While LoC has been widely attributed to the sole individual as a personality trait, some studies have highlighted the role of cultural/societal norms on control beliefs (Testé, 2017). Historically, Western societies have been aligned with individualistic norms and internal LoC beliefs while collectivist-oriented societies are generally aligned with external LoC orientations (Cheng et al., 2013; Spector et al., 2004; Testé, 2012, 2017). Research conducted in the West has shown that the expression of internality, versus externality was positively viewed as a valued behaviour (Beauvois & Dubois, 1988; Testé, 2012, 2017), fitting the West's normative conception of the person and the individual, and therefore the self.

Alongside these positive attributions, humanness was also studied in relation to control beliefs in the West. Humanness is described as the ascription of mental states and capacities that communicate complex understandings and beliefs about self and reality (Testé, 2017). From a social-psychological perspective, in Western society, individuals expressing internality (vs. externality) are seen as more fully human by others (Testé, 2017).

In more recent years, there has been a shift away from traditionally liberal, individualistic democracies toward collectivism and identity politics, which can pose a challenge to individual

mental health. Historically, the ideological and psychological underpinning of liberal democracy has focused on the individual, whereas collectivism focuses on the group. This shift threatens to negate the self by promoting group affiliation over individual sovereignty, freedom, choice and responsibility. This is not to say that traditional, longstanding, and value-homogeneous collectivist societies are somehow wrong, inhuman, or prone to mental health challenges. It is within the shift itself that lies the problem, where conflicting messages and widespread disparity of values can create a clash and confusion between valued individuation and collectivism.

In the West, the current reframing of individuals into categories of race, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, or gender can position youth as at-risk and lead to pathologizing and marginalizing. Group affiliation views individuals as intersectional, with a tendency toward an ethos of vulnerability. When these categories of vulnerabilization continue to expand into various psycho-emotional spaces, it is crucial to ask whether we regard these changes as progressive (Brunila & Rossi, 2018). As it is widely understood and accepted in the psychological literature that unpredictability, instability and maladaptive control beliefs (LoC) are main precursors to mental health challenges (Carton et al., 2021; Glynn et al., 2019; Groth et al., 2019; Ross et al., 2016), our societal shift and the proliferation of widespread anxiety, depression, and maladaptive coping in the West can be viewed through this lens.

Another societal shift has emerged through the steep rise in the use, and reliance on, smartphones and social media. This has paralleled the growing mental health crisis—a connection that has been well-established by a wide range of longitudinal, cross-sectional, and empirical studies that show a sharp increase in mental distress, self-injurious behaviour, and suicidality alongside the widespread use of these technologies (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015). More than a few hours per week spent on electronic media correlates negatively with happiness, life-

satisfaction, self-esteem, and a healthy body image, while increasing the rates of disordered eating and other maladaptive coping strategies, suicide ideation and attempts, and worsening of mood and feelings of envy (Dwyer et al., 2018).

Now more than ever, our increasing use of, and integration with, technological innovations is redefining reality. While “all technologies have the forceful and fabulous capacity to create a different world, the worlds that appear do not automatically lead in any progressive direction. These technical realities are necessarily different, but not necessarily ‘better’” (Bunz, 2017, p. 191). One of history’s most renowned existential philosophers, Martin Heidegger (1977), wrote, “[Technology] belongs to bringing-forth, to poiesis” (p. 12), defined in philosophy as an activity in which a person brings something into being that did not exist before. Being human, itself is poietic, bringing-into-existence and creating order from disorder as we progress through time. Heidegger (1954) felt technology was constricting our experience of things as they truly are, eroding the essence of our very nature (see also Blitz, 2014). He believed that this was a sickness of society that was intimately linked to our forgetting of Being, urging not for its disposal, but for each of us to fully understand ourselves in it (Blitz, 2014; Heidegger, 1927).

As technologies continue to redesign the landscape of social interaction, an increase in the number of daily connections and incomplete exchanges can threaten the self (Hoffman et al., 2009). Such multiplicity of frivolous connections produces a self that is perpetually under construction and reconstruction without adequate time for introspection, analysis and self-integration (Hoffman et al., 2009).

### *Philosophical/Paradigmatic*

These new familial and social/political (including technological) realities are embedded in our Post-Modern ontological paradigm—a pluralistic, relativistic, and constructivist positionality that problematizes any notion of an invariant reality—where Western normative understandings of a coherent, separate, and contained self are disrupted.

Michel Foucault is credited with philosophical postmodernism, which acts to disrupt widely-accepted rationalism, conceptions of self, and clinical psychotherapies. Foucault (1970, 1980) denounced Liberalism's individual rights and representative democracy, inciting skepticism and suspicion toward reason and morality, and argued for an acute sensitivity to the role of power relations in a modern world (Fox, 2014). Foucault's negation of objective moral values was championed by other notable figures. Jean-François Lyotard (1984, 1988) further disrupted the underpinnings of social cohesion and the self, denouncing grand- or meta-narratives and the rationality of reality. Jacques Derrida (1976) questioned language itself. He maintained that any attempt to establish truth through reason or rational means will inevitably undermine itself (Fox, 2014). Derrida thought that objectivity of a text is hopeless because there could be countless interpretations of meaning. He thought that since everything in the world is a "text," it is impossible to assert anything as truth, including scientific discovery and objective reality (Fox, 2014).

Post-modernism and the works of these 20th century French philosophers belong to Relativism, an ontological perspective that rejects materialism. Existence is thought to be wholly relative, subjective, and chaotic in an ever-evolving reality. Contrarily, Realism is the viewpoint that describes an independent reality outside of human perception. Those belonging to the realist ontological camp have long been at odds with the relativists described above.

This investigation approaches its research from an integrated ontological positionality—an entanglement of self-in-space where we act, and are acted upon (Barad, 2007; Hoffman et al., 2009; Rosiek, 2018). Here, individuals and mental health are seen as partially constructed, and as a creation of the interdependent synergy of perception and matter. The growing mental health crisis is viewed as a product of society’s maladaptation to the nature of the individual and the environments in which they live. As it is understood that a whole and coherent sense of self is foundational to health and wellbeing (Lander & Nahon, 2005, 2008, 2010), this study views and advocates for an existential positionality of self that is stable, autonomous, authentic, and values-driven, requiring structure and stability to thrive and grow.

There are as many existentialisms as there are existentialists (Frankl, 1967), and while not literal, distinctions have been made. The importance of individualism, for example, is not an idea shared by all. In line with existential philosophy, psychology and psychotherapy outlined below, this study focuses on one’s coherence and authenticity of self as a necessary prerequisite for sustained mental health. Central tenets of existentialism reflect this view, with a focus on individuality, consciousness, freedom, choice, responsibility, and authenticity (Lander & Nahon, 2010; Yalom, 2020). Being authentic entails a reclaiming of self from automatic conformity to environmental demands, and instead living in alignment with one’s innermost values and true nature (Heidegger, 1960).

Humans respond reflexively to their surroundings and to others; we are inextricably linked to our historical place and time. According to Heidegger (2014), this is part of our ontological and epistemological structure. Each of us acts, and is acted upon, creating and bringing-into-being. This poietic process of identity-making is found in the interaction between

self and one's social, political, and familial environment. Sanity, then, could be seen as a product of a healthy and functioning social structure.

While environments help to shape us, existential philosophy views our individual role in this interaction as paramount. We each have autonomy and capacity to act through will, and the freedom to create a meaningful and purposeful life; it is, in fact, the responsibility of each of us to do so (Lander & Nahon, 2005; Yalom, 2020). This is a highly optimistic lens for the treatment of mental health, particularly for those maladaptations most commonly presented within our (post)modern realities.

### **Existential Therapy**

Existential therapy grew from the work of philosophers in the 19th and 20th centuries. These works emerged as a reaction to the devastation and demoralization associated with the Second World War, which was largely driven by collectivist Marxist dogma (Frankl, 1985). Existentialism focuses on the essence and meaning of self (Lander & Nahon, 2005).

According to existentialists, people are responsible for making meaning in their lives—both as a subject of experience and object of reflection. It is through this reflection and questioning of mortality that one can learn to live—Who am I? Is life worth living? Does it have meaning? What does it mean to Be? Coming to terms with these questions allows us to discover who we are and to decide what we become (Lander & Nahon, 2005). Central concerns for the vast majority of people experiencing mental distress are individual issues of choice, responsibility, mortality, life purpose, and identity—many of which are clinically diagnosable by today's standards as anxiety or depression, yet are in fact masking existential crises (Lander & Nahon, 2005).

The breakdown of one's identity is often associated with demoralization. This is described as one's experienced helplessness, hopelessness, confusion, and subjective incompetence when faced with life's challenges (Frank & Frank, 1991). Widespread demoralization can emerge from pathological environmental conditions that cannot be avoided, such as those resulting from the re-configuration of familial and social interactions, the upheaval of Western values and norms, or a world pandemic with widespread economic and social lockdowns. As an existential disorder, a demoralized self is disoriented and lacks meaning and purpose in a chaotic, uncertain world. These existential crises often manifest in the individual as anxiety, depression, and other mental health challenges and maladaptive behaviours (Lander & Nahon, 2005).

The integrity model (Lander & Nahon, 1993, 2005, 2008, 2010), an existential psychotherapy, asks deep questions about the nature of Being and its connectedness to the nature of mental health. In understanding the meaning of human experiences, integrity therapy works to empower the individual for agency and self-help. This psychotherapeutic approach focuses on the cultivation of meaning and purpose by unearthing one's inner-most values and therefore one's authentic self. Mental health challenges result from a misalignment between values and behaviours, encompassing an overall self-mis-conception. Here, the degree of distress and symptomatology reflects an individual's violation of their personal value system by blindly adhering to social proscriptions (Lander & Nahon, 2005; Mowrer, 1966).

Unlike the vast majority of therapeutic models, Integrity therapy focuses on both therapist and client. With its deep existential roots, this approach to treatment stresses the authenticity of this relationship as the source of illumination, affirmation, growth and change. integrity therapy follows Martin Buber's (1970) I–Thou dialogical relation, describing the

authentic and engaged interaction between two people in the here and now. He referred to the relational dimension held in the space between I–Thou as the “between” dimension that becomes greater, and more powerful with each individual contribution. The I–Thou relation is highly contrasted with an objectifying I–It orientation. The ‘It’ is nothing more than an object to be used, exploited, or as a means to an end—an interaction which requires little explanation in a modern age. The I–It orientation is seen as depersonalizing and demoralizing, lacking the between space within the wholeness of I–Thou. When I–It becomes socially ingrained, the result can be further objectification and fragmentation of self. Existentialists, including Buber, felt that we are losing connection with the ‘Thou’, and ultimately ourselves. Buber cautioned against inauthenticity, “To yield to seeming is man’s essential cowardice, to resist it is his essential courage” (pp. 77–78). Inauthentic masquerading of self and culture-wide negation of the ‘between’ has the potential to be a source of considerable distress, particularly in the realm of identity politics, post-structuralism, and technology mediated interactions. Both I and Thou and the space between continue to be eroded by this new, emergent reality.

It is the position of this work that the self, the ‘I’, is the axiomatic principal agent of creation—drawing in the world and bringing the new into being. The accelerating shift toward an I–It relation dominance in modern society is of great concern to self-sustainability where the self becomes stripped of its agency.

### **Narrative Ontology**

The notion of an interactive and integrative merge of ontologies churning out reality has been studied at-length by many great minds, from a diverse set of disciplines. Much like the ‘between’ introduced by Buber (1970), other philosophical thinkers have developed similar processes, such as Heidegger’s (1977) *dasein*; Dewey’s (1934) psycho-physical, Merleau-



Ponty's (2004) embodied perception, and Barad's (2007) agential materialism. These ideas, which relate to the very nature of reality, have found themselves in a relatively new narrative paradigm. Narrative offers a shared, between space to construct self through one's interaction with story. Like existentialism, narrative ontology, epistemology, therapy, and inquiry all describe the co-creation of reality, knowledge, health, and discovery. There are two camps of thought: some theorists conceive of narrative as an instrument of knowledge and understanding, which acts to impose meaningful order in a material world—a narrative epistemological position. Others would consider narrative to be an ontological category that describes a way of Being in the world that is constitutive of human existence—a narrative ontological position (Meretoja, 2014). It is the position of this paper that these viewpoints are not diametrically opposed, as each understands narrative to be significant for the construction of self. To say narrative is “merely a cognitive instrument that enables us to come to terms with the disorder of the real is not ontologically neutral: it is based on a certain conception of the nature of reality as a nonnarrative flux of events onto which meaningful order is projected” (Meretoja, 2014, p. 91).

Existentialists have historically disseminated their ideas through narrative and the writing of fiction literature. Jean-Paul Sartre's (1964) philosophical novel, *Nausea*, for example, suggests that we are deeply narrative in our thinking and to create storied explanations of the world.

This is what fools people: a man is always a teller of tales, he lives surrounded by his stories and the stories of others, he sees everything that happens to him through them; and he tries to live his life as if he were recounting it. But you have to choose: to live or to recount. (p. 61)

*Nausea* (Sartre, 1965) depicts a world in which there is an obvious psychological need to narrativize experiences, and suggests that these experiences themselves are void of story (see also Meretoja, 2014). However, it is the position of the current work that this epistemological account of narrative is only half the story. We draw pre-storied raw materials from our experiences into a shared space between I–Thou/I–It, then project further narrative explanations onto them. These new understandings will shape all future narratives related to those experiences, in a perpetual act of co-creation.

Sartre’s words are in fact prudent and optimistic for human growth and potential. It is up to each one of us to create meaning from our experiences through self-narrativization. Existential in essence, this can describe the development of one’s identity. Like Sartrean observation, a narrative perspective suggests that the stories people tell and hold on to shape how they see and express themselves (Madigan, 2011). Importantly, it is only what they focus on as meaningful that will integrate with the self (White et al., 1990), reflecting one’s powerful agency to produce meaningful change. After all, we are what we tell ourselves. Recounting then, is important to shape a healthy narrative for an authentic and meaningful life. What Sartre’s protagonist gets wrong is that we must in fact recount before we can truly live. Without a whole story, the self can only partially exist.

## **Mythology**

We have to know who we are to know where we are going. This is the essence of the classic archetypal journey, where the hero embarks on a quest to the underworld, encountering hard truths, tragedy, and the grueling feats and failures of self-discovery. Many philosophers and practitioners alike have agreed on the importance of mythological stories for the healthy development of self (Hoffman et al., 2009). Rollo May (1991) would suggest the eradication of

myth in Western society was what led to the development and need for psychoanalysis. He believed myth provides structure to our lives; without it, we suffer a loss of values. The resulting self-fragmentation is the main source of social problems. May (1969) felt that it was our loss of myth that was leading to societal dysfunction:

Psychotherapy reveals . . . the immediate situation of the individual's "sickness" and the archetypal qualities and characteristics which constitute the human being as human. . . . It is the latter characteristics which have gone awry. . . . The interpretation of a patient's problems . . . is also a partial interpretation of man's interpretation of himself through history in the archetypal forms of literature. (pp. 19–20)

Myths are healthy, necessary, and growth facilitating while providing structure for the development of meaning in one's life (Hoffman et al., 2009). We each live inside a story (Jung, 2014), which is a way of being that evolved to reflect the structure of reality and all its patterned manifestations. A Darwinian-like feature of humanity, mythological interpretations of the world transcend history and have proven to be the most effective path to survival. There are standard occurrences in daily life that are portrayed and acted out universally. It turns out that the stories we tell have exactly the same structure, or core elements, that we see in Western mythology and the classic archetypes (Brunel, 2015). These have been developed as a way to deal with a world that is complex beyond comprehension, and one that often shifts in unpredictable ways.

In these times, the problems people face are often relegated to their intersectional and oppressive group affiliations yet, it is the position of this investigation that one's challenges can be more effectively approached from an individual, psychological positionality. Structure, story, and predictability are a necessary prerequisite to guide the self through the eradicable complexities and accelerated entropy of a postmodern age. Our sanity is in large part a reflection

of our environments and others, and we look to those who have persevered life's great challenges for guidance. This inevitably takes the form of story.

## Methodology

*Blondie* adheres to nine guidelines outlined by de Freitas (2003b) adapted from Barone and Eisner (1997) and Cole and Knowles (2001) to legitimize and validate the use of narrative as inquiry. These include (a) suspension, (b) messy structure, (c) accessibility, (d) intentionality, (e) knowledge claims/insights, (f) interpretive play/theoretical potential, (g) empathy, (h) translucency, and (i) authenticity.

The narrative is written in a creative, dirty realism style (Buford, 1983), telling the tales of a past life through simplified language and narrative gaps. This approach to writing alters the Bildungsroman's traditional style and allows readers to readily acknowledge the content while opening up space for new meanings, insights, and reconciliation of an authentic self.

A set of psychotherapeutic modalities are woven into the narrative as an integrative approach to mental health treatment. First, integrity therapy focuses on the therapeutic relationship itself, and the honesty, responsibility, and disclosure of both therapist and client. It posits that only an authentic connection can aid in the discovery of self and purpose and, therefore, mental health. Second, narrative therapy compliments and supports this process. It views the self as stemming from the stories we tell, and therefore helps individuals 'rewrite' their lives. Finally third, bibliotherapy promotes the reading of fiction as a method of self-development, personality growth, and mental health treatment. Identification with story characters allows readers to release emotions, gain new understandings of self and life, and to explore new ways of interacting through vicarious learning and empathic understandings.

The methodological structure of this investigation is heavily influenced by theory and the paradigm(s) in which its ideas are embedded. Specifically, the measures employed are unique and multidimensional in nature in that they can be viewed simultaneously as theory, method,

and/or praxis. These have been carefully selected to work together as a novel integrative approach to mental health inquiry and treatment. In the tradition of existential philosophers and scholars, *Blondie* explores a modern mental health crisis through the writing and reading of fiction.

### **The Arts-Based Research Novel**

The novel can be a vehicle for communicating research in a dissertation, providing a level of engagement and deep connection that can provide evidence of high-quality research in education. It is my conviction that this form will enable research participants to move into the psychic interiors of readers and researchers in powerful ways. This would seem reason enough at this juncture to embark on this journey to create a work of fiction/research that enables us to see things “anew.” (Dunlop, 2002, p. 215)

Narrative forms of inquiry are a relatively new Arts-Based approach to the doctoral dissertation. Rishma Dunlop (1999) pioneered this movement over 20 years ago as the first scholar to have her Bildungsroman, *Boundary Bay*, accepted as a doctoral dissertation in a Faculty of Education. Its novel methodology explores important areas of investigation linked to education, including creative approaches to research and praxis. As an arts-based qualitative study, Dunlop (1999) demonstrated the art of fiction is an extension of human experience and can become a premise for epistemological and ontological positionings. Her ground-breaking approach sheds light on the vital roles that literary fictions play in our everyday lives and within specific contexts through the development of fictive characters. Her doctoral investigation has helped to reveal that fiction literature does not represent the unreal or opposite sides of reality, but are conditions that enable the creation of possible worlds (Dunlop, 1999). *Boundary Bay* is a story of one woman’s personal quest for self-development within a defined societal context.

Through this work, Dunlop (1999) opened new methods of understanding for self, education, and other disciplines whose boundaries are integrated within the text.

David Culkin's (2016) *A Need to Heal* is an autoethnographic Bildungsroman exploring how mental illness, self-awareness, and lived experiences affect one's identity development, asking how an adult learner can make meaning from, and develop through experiences of mental illness and spiritual awareness. As an existential quest, Culkin explored dominant social structures, traits, and self-development using archetypal forms in story. Through the eyes of his hero, Culkin creates new understandings of adult development and explores one's many possibilities of 'self' when constructing a sense of identity.

Beth Sorichetti's (2005) doctoral dissertation, *A Novella Approach to the Philosophies of Adult Education: An Arts-Based Exploration*, sought to inspire and inform adult learners, teachers and the broader public on educational philosophy and the power of the arts in research. Her dissertation takes the form of a philosophical/educational fiction novel of an adult learner's journey of self-development. The hero encounters philosophers from the past who help her to eventually construct her own philosophies on teaching and learning—an existential quest aided by the guidance of literary archetypes. Her creative methodology effectively explores how philosophical/educational fiction can be used by educators, researchers, and practitioners, alike.

Pauline Sameshina's (2006) *Seeing Red: A Pedagogy of Parallax* is a doctoral dissertation written in the form of an epistolary Bildungsroman. Through this award-winning work, Sameshina showed how this methodology can attend to learning holistically with attention to: increasing receptivity and openness; fostering skills of relationality; modeling wholeness-in-process in reflexive texts; layering multiple strategies of inquiry, research experiences, and presentation; and acknowledging intuitive resonances.

Douglas Gosse's (2005b) award-winning novel *Jackytar* is another Bildungsroman serving as inquiry for a doctoral dissertation, entitled *Breaking Silences, an Inquiry into Identity and the Creative Research Process* (Gosse, 2005a). *Jackytar* is a fictionalized narrative of one man's journey home to confront issues and people from his past. This self-transformative story serves as a platform to examine intertwining identity markers of self in society. Helping to pave the way for arts-based methodologies, Gosse (2005b) interpreted research and education as creative, reflective, and interactive. His understanding of his readers as interlocutors, rather than mere spectators is reflective of this, better suiting the interactive nature of an arts-based creative process. *Jackytar* not only contributed to a body of research and understandings of education and other disciplines, but was successful in reaching a broader audience through its accessible language and wide publication in Canada (Gosse, 2005b).

### **Bildungsroman as Inquiry**

What are novels for? . . . Are they supposed to delight or instruct, or not, and if so, is there ever a conflict between what we find delightful and what we find instructive?

Should a novel be . . . about how one ought to live one's life, how one can live one's life.

. . . Or how most people live their lives? Should it tell us something about our society?

Can it avoid doing this? (Atwood, 1982, p. 217)

*Blondie* is on an existential quest toward meaning and purpose, focusing on the protagonist's growth through struggle and adversity. On her journey, she is faced with repeated conflict between her impulses, mental health, and true self within the realities she finds herself. She goes on to discover and reflect on her own creation and destruction. While the Bildungsroman typically concludes with an instillment of the spirit and values of the social order (Dunlop, 1999, 2002), the prospective work moves beyond this tradition. The protagonist's



discovery of self-authenticity will signify her hero status as she overcomes the psychologically damaging effects of her mental illness.

Much of the hero's self-development is attributed to the archetypes she encounters on her path to self and identity. Two archetypes in particular are central to her successful journey—the Sage and the Shadow. The Sage is a seeker of truth and wisdom, representing one's psychological attributes of reflection and insight on their path to self-development (Jung, 1939, 2014). She encounters two Sages who encourage and guide her until she embodies this knowledge and integrates with her Shadow. The shadow represents one's weaknesses, repressions, desires, instincts and shortcomings—what is unaccepted by one's own persona. This archetype resides within the unconscious mind, containing latent dispositions that are present in us all (Jung, 1939, 2014). According to Jung (1946), one must not reject their shadow, but incorporate it with the self, allowing for individuation, actualization, and mental health.

### **Plot**

The story follows Bets Trent “Blondie” through her struggle toward mental health and an authentic identification with self. She has a long history of trauma and self-destruction, manifesting as anxiety, disordered eating, substance abuse, emotion dysregulation, tumultuous relationships, and criminal behaviour. The story acts as a dialogic between Blondie and her psychiatrist. Stuck in the space between her past and future, Blondie reflects on her search for self, success and mental well-being. *Blondie* is a mythological battle fought between the hero's inauthentic alter-ego, manifesting Sage, and latent Shadow. She must reconcile these to find her self and purpose.

## **Writing Style**

The current work's Bildungsroman-as-methodology uses creative writing to encourage active reading and emotional immersion within its carefully constructed world. The specific and purposeful writing style compares and contrasts the past and present, and the main character's opposing selves. A dirty realism creative style tells the tales of a past life, characterized by the use of simplified language and narrative gaps. This allows readers to readily place themselves in the text and opens a space to construct their own realities with new meanings and insights within it.

### ***Dirty Realism***

Theoretical reflections and mythological representations are explored through thrilling, adventurous, criminal scenarios and fast-life contexts as a way to target Millennials and younger generations and to make sense of intended meanings. The stories of the heroine's seasoned past are exclusively written in a dirty realism (Buford, 1983) creative style. Popularized in the 1970s, this literary genre became a trend in American fiction, characterized by frank consideration of the underbelly of society, the mundane over the privileged and the realities of lower-class, or seedy lives (Hornby, 1992).

As Dobozy (2000) noted, the genre "chooses entrapment as its natural habitat" (p. 249), as story characters often have little hope of escaping their dismal realities. They find themselves caught in a pattern of existential loneliness and meaninglessness. There is a disparity between characters' lofty dreams and bleak existence, underpinning the hypocrisy, defeatism, and tragedy that characterize the dirty realist plots (Dobozy, 2000). While aligned with these elements, *Blondie* goes on to challenge these disparities and develop a bridge between two worlds.

Dirty realism extended beyond literature, becoming influential in music and film with a depiction of the underworld of modern life with a disturbing detachment and comedy in an understated, ironic, savage, but insistently compassionate way (Buford, 1983). Bukowski was an infamous poet and novelist and is considered the godfather of the movement, known for his excessive drinking, gambling and womanizing. The narrative structure of all his works is a reflection of his own lived experience.

Importantly, dirty realism is characterized by the use of simplified language, with little use of adverbs, internal dialogue and flowery language. This approach creates narrative gaps for the reader to fill in with their own imaginations, encouraging active/imaginative reading. Emotional immersion is facilitated by the style's intentional ambiguity which is built into the very structure of the text, allowing interlocutors to construct open interpretations that are guided, but not proscribed by the narrative. When readers are given this opportunity to co-create the story, they can gain a much deeper understanding of its meanings, identify with story characters, and reflect on their own lives. With its honest examination of unsavory contexts, and intentional ambiguity, dirty realism and Bukowski's (1977) style in particular, serve as inspiration for the writing of *Blondie*.

Jean-Paul Sartre (1948, 1964), a key figure in the development of existentialism and phenomenology, was one of many who wrote a fiction novel as a way to disseminate his philosophical and psychological ideas. *Nausea* (Sartre, 1964) remains one of his most famous books, and is widely recognized as one of existential philosophy's foremost texts. Deeply rooted in phenomenology, Sartre's (1948, 1964) belief was that stories can accurately convey knowledge and lived experience, having equal value to more objective measures of natural phenomena (see also Baert, 2015). The decision to write his novel from the existential

perspective and imagination of a single character reflects his overarching worldview, in much the same way as the inherent philosophy of *Blondie*.

### **Fiction Research Guidelines**

An authentic connection can be created between readers and story characters (de Freitas, 2003a). Fiction cultivates empathy by allowing access to the inner lives of characters, where readers can “connect the private troubles and social issues of the novel’s world” (Watson, 2016, p. 6). Intentional gaps are left by writers of fiction, allowing space for readers to inject their own interpretations, to draw from personal experience, and to engage, learn, and develop empathic connections (de Freitas, 2003b). An entertaining story is not enough—“knowledge claims must be made with sufficient ambiguity and humility to allow for multiple interpretations” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 127).

The following criteria have been created for assessing the internal value of the current work and have been adapted from guidelines outlined by de Freitas (2003b), based on the work of Barone and Eisner (1997) and Cole and Knowles (2001).

### ***Suspension and Immersion***

The reader is welcomed into a new world and to embrace the reality of the fiction in such a way that suspends disbelief. This sort of immersion is essential for learning and connection, as the narrative is sufficiently compelling to draw the reader into a story with the same commitment and persuasion as its characters. The narrative pulls the reader from their own reality and onto a landscape that feels as real—believability and situated immersion are essential for the story’s therapeutic impact.

### ***Messy Structure***

Emotional immersion is facilitated by intentional gaps and ambiguity built into the structure of the text, where the reader constructs open interpretations that are guided by the narrative. This must be both sufficient to assist the reader toward thorough understanding, and sufficiently messy enough to force active reading. Interlocutors are given the opportunity to be imaginative and co-construct the story through it, giving them the opportunity to gain a deep understanding, identify with story characters, and reflect on their own lives.

### ***Accessibility***

This refers to the relatability and readability of a text within a set population of readers. While *Blondie* is accessible through its limited use of ornate and descriptive language, the narrative is also carefully crafted, allowing for young adults to see themselves as active agents in the story's shock-and-awe contexts.

Theoretical reflections, and mythological representations are explored through thrilling, adventurous, and criminal scenarios as a way to target a population with a perhaps natural fascination with 'fast-life' contexts, and to make sense of intended meanings (Zuckerman, 2013). The narrative's existential message is represented by the necessity of struggle and pain for growth and fulfillment and acted out within the above context. The stories of characters' lives follow in the tradition of the classic archetypes, and focuses on the hero's journey of perseverance and self-discovery.

### ***Intentionality***

*Blondie* is written in such a way to open the reader up to a sense of the moral, philosophical, and psychological imperatives behind the narrative without being 'beat-over-the-head' with it. The blending of fact and fiction for an authentic narrative can be sensed by the

reader, allowing for a healthy skepticism of these intentions. The breaking of literary ‘rules’ and disrupting norms through the lives of story characters can be highly valuable for vicarious learning, philosophical and theoretical meanings, and general psychotherapy. Readers have the opportunity to undergo a transformation in their current and future understandings of self and their place in society through the trials of the story’s archetypes—the Villain, the Hero, the Shadow, and the Sage. As a writer, researcher, therapist, and Millennial, I have been challenged with the task of depicting characters’ struggles, resistance, and change in such a way that is relatable and impactful.

### ***Knowledge Claims and Insights***

Knowledge claims are traditionally seen as replicable “truths” or “certainties” in scientific inquiry, albeit influenced by researcher foci and biases. Arts-based research moves beyond this tradition to include and embrace the lived experiences of both researcher and subject. In fiction research, interlocutors have the opportunity to identify with the hardships and triumphs of characters, social problems and related phenomena. *Blondie* takes an integrative approach, working to examine how quantitative and traditional knowledge claims of *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV; American Psychiatric Association, 1994) diagnostic criteria can present and interact within fictional, yet relatable lived experiences.

The story’s philosophy, themes, and psychotherapies are woven into the text in such a way that their thematic meanings can be readily extracted by readers. A holistic comprehension of these, and their implications, can therefore be understood and integrated within the space between I–Thou, providing psychological treatment and closure. This research is creative, and therefore not replicable in the traditional sense, yet has the power to provide insight and knowledge that could not be achieved through quantitative explorations of mental health.

### ***Theoretical Potential***

Themes of light and dark, good and evil, and tragedy and comedy are made evident to the reader through various narrative structures—the plot and setting is split in two: past and present selves expressed through different time-periods. Psychological closure of the narrative reflects freedom and resistance to both inner and external forces and achieves plausibility by addressing its limitations. The ending is suggestive yet anti-conclusive, which encourages readers to sense their own agency through the protagonist’s mental health and existential crises and reconciliations, and recognizes the narrative as a comment on specific issues related to lived experience.

### ***Empathy***

Empathy for story characters and their various human conditions are necessary to produce an immersive, therapeutic experience—revealing strengths and weaknesses while connecting with reader emotions. Identification with a diverse set of characters avoids the demonization of protagonists and antagonists. This has been a careful consideration in the writing of *Blondie*—its edgy, disruptive, and unsavory storyline has been balanced by identifiable characters and lived experiences. Much of this is achieved through the story’s archetypal forms—implicit storied representations of self-development that have spanned human history. The reader acts as voyeur to the main characters’ pursuit of the plot, feeling their anguish and their striving for freedom. In many ways, the protagonist Blondie is unlikeable yet, as the story unfolds, the reader is led to develop empathy for this challenging character. This adds another layer of complexity and disruptive contradictory reactions. Developing empathy for those you disapprove of allows one to self-reflect and build compassion for their own, and

others' indiscretions and weaknesses. The reader's care for characters allows for the story to successfully unfold.

### ***Translucency***

The form and purpose of the narrative and research as a whole (i.e., growth, self-development, and mental health) is evident and persists as open issues throughout the text. It has been crucial for these to not be totally transparent as the aesthetic quality would otherwise be jeopardized. Instead, these integral elements have been highlighted to achieve a high degree of translucency. The story's heroine functions as a constant reflection/refraction of a diverse set of variables and issues that surround mental health research and treatment in modern times. Her struggle with form and purpose remains partially unresolved to honour the fluid nature of existence and the research that investigates it.

### ***Authenticity***

*Blondie* is intended to be an authentic piece of writing that communicates my own understandings with fictionalized lived and professional accounts of the subject matter. The text is meant to preserve a rawness associated with artistic expression, giving credence and paying tribute to my own individuality and self-understanding. The story does not unfold as too predictable and its concluding moral message is therefore disruptive as a way to produce significant meaning.

### **Procedures**

My own personal and professional experience as a practicing mental health therapist lends support to the investigation's overall design with a thorough understanding of the mental health crisis and the population most harshly affected. The way in which the following psychotherapies are integrated into the story and the lived experiences of its characters—past,



present and future—has required expertise in terms of implementation and process of administration. The following psychotherapies are used in combination and woven throughout the story.

### ***Integrity Therapy***

Carl Rogers (1957), famous for his development of client-centred psychotherapy, believed that at its core, mental health therapy should emphasize the practitioner's genuineness and secure sense of self. A therapist's personal identity carries extreme significance in the therapeutic relationship and therefore, an examination of her personal identity may be valuable (Gibson et al., 2010). The hero in *Blondie* is a fictionalized, composite character who is not a psychotherapist, however, the engagement of interlocutors with the text acts as a therapeutic relationship in itself. Psychotherapies and other modes of guidance are written and woven into the intra-actions of characters and situations, as well as within the psychiatrist-patient dialogic. The hero's personal identity, morality, and less integritous behaviours are confessed and analyzed through an existential lens.

As readers identify with, and ultimately learn from the hero, it is important that an authentic connection be created between them. Unlike the vast majority of therapeutic models, Integrity therapy stresses the relationship between therapist and client as the source of illumination, affirmation, change and growth. It is the challenge of the therapist to behave with integrity and authenticity herself, acknowledging that she, too, is on the road to recovery (Lander & Nahon, 2005). The therapist, and in this case, the hero, must truly be able to speak with the voice of "walking the talk" (Lander & Nahon, 2000, p. 38). This is achieved through self-honesty, disclosure, and confession—she owns her past, her distance travelled, and embodies the model herself to a significant extent (Lander & Nahon, 2005). In the absence of this, the chances

of the therapy being of benefit are considerably diminished, “there has to be a response to the model that contains a recognition of its meaning on a ‘felt’ rather than an intellectual level” (Lander & Nahon, 2005, pp. 168–169).

### *Narrative Therapy*

In many ways, narrative therapy (White et al., 1990) lends its support to the process of integrity therapy, viewing each individual as responsible for authoring their own life tale. Within a narrative frame, human problems are viewed as arising and being maintained by the one’s dominant life stories. According to White et al. (1990), issues arise when the way in which people story their lives does not significantly fit with who they are. This is in line with the integrity model, where the misalignment between values and behaviour is the cause of one’s problems. Both perspectives appear to view mental health challenges as emerging from a violation of self.

Narrative therapy rests on the assumption that stories are not representations of identities, lives and problems, rather, they are constituted by them (Madigan, 2013). Therefore, the reauthoring of personal stories changes identities, lives and mental health difficulties. *Blondie* weaves a narrative therapy framework into its pages, continually calling into question the hero’s identity and story. Externalizing questions, a main feature of narrative therapy, act to place individuals as audience members, seeing their own stories through the eyes of others (Epston 1992; White et al., 1990). This opens space for the story’s characters and readers to reconceptualize and reauthor past, present and future.

“We write ourselves as we read” (Dunlop, 1999, p. 22). What is suggested here is that a synergistic co-creation between reader and story opens a space for readers to develop fresh perspectives and begin to rewrite their own damaging personal narratives. Carl Jung (2014)

believed that we all live in a story whether we realize it or not, and it is up to each of us to write it, otherwise we end up with a bit-part, living out the malevolent tragedy of someone else. When our personal story has been denied or rejected, mental health challenges emerge. Healing, then, requires the reintegration of story and self.

### ***Bibliotherapy***

It could be said that a good work of fiction more accurately portrays reality than does the truth (Leavy, 2018a), otherwise, it has no staying power. Fiction is distilled reality—it extracts the patterns of lives and living that transcend time. Much of what has been discussed rests on the idea that reading fiction is therapeutic. Bibliotherapy is widely recognized as an effective mental health treatment (Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 2019) and generally refers to the use of literature to help produce effective change and promote self-growth and development (Lenkowsky, 1987). People identify with literary characters similar to themselves—or who they think they could be. We look up to those who seem to live authentically and in a heroic manner, and we tend to learn from, mimic, and follow their lead. This association helps to release emotions, to discover new directions and ways of interacting (Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 2019).

Bibliotherapy aligns with narrative ontology as it views a readers' interaction with literature as performative. Reflexively, the reader can become a co-creator and an integral part of the unfolding emotional process. The therapeutic process is interactive: by engaging emotionally with a text rather than engaging in one-on-one live therapy, an authentic relation can nevertheless be made. Here, positive self-discovery and change is made possible as the reader learns how to be the hero of their own tale.

Bibliotherapy can be tailored to a specific population, problem or set of problems. A novel or story can provide people with psychoeducation about an issue or disorder that they are

challenged with, as well as the tools for self-help (Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 2019). Readers' active participation with a text promotes a stronger sense of personal responsibility for their lives. In fact, many people find relief in the honesty of characters' life struggles and how they may have coped with, or overcome them, reducing feelings of isolation (Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 2019). Bibliotherapy can open a reader up to new insights into self, personal characteristics and values, and the highly complex nature of human thought and behaviour.

Character personalities and symptomatologies, as well as locations are entirely fictional. The story is in some ways inspired by entertainment that I personally enjoy like the works of Charles Bukowski (1977) and shows such as *The Wire* (Simon et al., 2002–2008), *Californication* (Duchovny et al., 2007–2014), and *The Sopranos* (Chase et al., 1999–2007).

Characters and situations are also inspired by my own knowledge and education in mental health including peer reviewed works, book chapters and the courses I've taken throughout my university career. Much of the characters' personalities have been developed as a reflection of symptoms and diagnostic categories found in the DSM-V (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

These diagnostic symptoms are laced into every interaction and situation in the story to give readers context for how these criteria can manifest in real world settings. Symptoms and contexts are pieced together thoughtfully, and constructed from a practitioner positionality. In research, fictionalization is commonly used as a way to alleviate concerns of confidentiality of research participants raised by research ethics boards. Cain et al. (2017), in their review of the literature, outline three purposes for fictionalization: (a) protection of the identities of participants, (b) creation of distance between self and experience, and (c) a way to engage in

imagination that enriches inquiry spaces and research understandings, all of which have been adhered to in the writing of *Blondie*.

## BLONDIE

Dr. Garlick's gray office stared back at me. She wasn't the first psychiatrist I'd seen and it had never gone well before. She had a wooden smile and short tousled hair and we sat at opposite sides of her desk. She rummaged through files and clicked about with her mouse and keys while I waited.

"Your primary sent over your referral," she said to her screen. "I'm just trying to pull it up."

I nodded. The room was cramped with stacked files and books. There were coffee stains on white sheets of paper and down the front of her shirt.

"Here it is," she said. "So, it says here that you've had a recent overdose. Is that correct?"

I nodded.

"I just want to make sure that I have all of your information here. Elizabeth Trent, date of birth, January 15th, 1983?"

She glanced up and I nodded. "Yeah."

"What do you do, Elizabeth?"

I shifted in my seat. "Nothing right now. I'm on a leave of absence from school."

Her fingers moved fast across the keyboard. She didn't look up from her screen. "What are you taking?"

"Medicine. At Columbia."

"Columbia?" She raised a brow. "Impressive. And what's your current living situation?"

"I live alone."

"How do you support yourself?" She kept typing.

"My savings," I said.

"Mhmm." Her brow dipped. "For how long?"

“Close to a year now.”

“Some kind of savings,” she said. “Can you tell me a little more about why you came to see me?”

“I dunno,” I said, “I . . . my friend died last spring and . . . I’ve just not been myself since. But, that makes sense, right?”

“Maybe, maybe not,” her smile turned gentle. “Would you say that you’re depressed?”

I took a breath and sat back. “Yeah, you could say that.”

“And how would you describe it?”

“I’m sleeping all the time. I feel like I’m made of cement or something.” I tried to laugh. Garlick had pictures of her kids taped to the wall beside her desk. They looked happy. “I used to be so motivated . . .,” I shrugged and shook my head. “I think I’m just recovering still.”

She nodded and looked back at her screen. “So, I’ve been asked to do an assessment. Have you had one before?”

“Sort of. Well, yes,” I said. “A few times, actually.”

“How many times?”

I counted. “Three.”

“Can you tell me about that?”

“I have an eating disorder.” I picked at the side of my chair. “One doctor saw me just the once. The other two a few times. They put me on medication.”

“What medication?” Her fingers hovered over the keys waiting for my response.

“The first one was Ciprolex and the other was Prozac.”

That keyboard was taking a beating. “And did it help?”

“Made me worse,” I said. “They said it would get better after a couple of months but it was just hell.”

She nodded. “Can you describe what you mean by hell?”

I exhaled, puffing out my cheeks. “Just . . . the anxiety, I couldn’t sleep. My mind was spinning. I couldn’t be around people at all. It’s like I hated everyone and everything. Like everything was irritating, you know?”

“Both drugs had that effect?” she asked without looking up.

I nodded. “With the Ciprolex, I remember seeing myself with these dead eyes hanging from a tree. Scared the shit out of me.”

“I can imagine,” she said. “Have you tried any other medications, or just those?”

“Just those.”

“OK.” Clickety click. “Have you ever been hospitalized for a mental health concern?”

I shook my head. She looked up from her screen for my answer. “No,” I said.

She kept typing. “Have you ever had those feelings without medication?”

“Maybe, but not as bad.” I thought about it. “Mostly when I was having a drug come-down.”

“What kind of drugs do you do?”

“I don’t. Well, I had a relapse in the summer, but I quit about four years ago. Drinking, too.”

“Would you say the death of your friend was what led to the overdose?”

“Yeah.”

“What kind of drugs have you done?”

“Everything,” I laughed.

“Crack? Heroin?” She looked up.

“No no, sorry. I guess not everything, but everything else.”



“Can you list them?”

“Ecstasy, coke, ketamine, mescaline,” I counted on my fingers, “DMT, weed, mushrooms, acid, perks, GHB, quaaludes, speed, benzos . . . that’s probably it.” The walls felt tight, like a vice. Dr. Garlick nodded, typing. The window behind her faced a solid wall. Probably the side of another ward. Maybe the looney bin. I should probably be over there.

“How often were you using?”

“Drinking was everyday. Drugs were kind of on and off. The longest binge I went on was ecstasy, ketamine and coke for about a year.”

“How did you stop?”

I shrugged. “Don’t know, really. I’d just go and go and one day I wouldn’t want to do it anymore.”

“That’s interesting,” she said.

“Interesting, how?”

She sort of shrugged. “Just not typical, is all. Did you find that with alcohol, too?”

“That was harder, but yeah, pretty much. The eating disorder was different. It was always there.”

“What was your formal diagnosis? For the eating disorder, I mean.”

“I kind of went back and forth between anorexia and bulimia.” She really needed to open that fucking window. I was melting in my seat.

“OK, we’ll come back to that, she said. “These drug and alcohol ‘binges’ as you called them, how long did they usually last?”

“Weeks, sometimes months.” *That fucking clicking.*

“Would you say that you were more energetic during those times, needing less sleep than usual?”

I thought about it. “Yeah, but that was probably the drugs.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” she said again. “Have you ever felt euphoric, high or uncharacteristically agitated for an extended period of time when you were sober?”

“Um, yeah. I guess.”

“Other than longer periods of ups or downs, would you say that you sometimes have rapid mood fluctuations throughout the day?”

I nodded and so did she. I cleared my throat and sat up straight. I could at least try to look dignified. Garlick stopped clicking to search a cabinet. She pulled out another form and continued typing. Her eyes shifted back and forth from it to her screen.

“Would you say that you have a pattern of intense or unstable relationships?” She looked up.

I exhaled. “Yes.”

“During your binges, do you also engage in other risky behaviours, like unsafe or promiscuous sex, driving fast, criminal behaviour . . .? Her fingers were fast and the clicking was grating.

“Yeah,” I nodded. My palms were wet. I wiped them up and down my tights. “All of the above.” I forced another laugh and she sat back in her seat.

“Can you tell me about that?”

“Where do you want me to start?”

“Wherever you want.”

## **PART I: Lando**

It was a two hour drive to meet the Duck and I'd been up for days. Jess and I lay stretched out, side by side on the smooth rock, baking our skinny bodies. I could feel a mist from the breaking waves. The Point had become a favorite place to recover, to take a mid-bender breather before cranking things up again. Lando was paid in E for his last cuff, a bag of 300 blue pills, each stamped with the letters 'SKY'. I don't know what kind of chemical genius dreamt these things up but holy fuck they got you high. He said they came from the bikers but nothing that good ever came from the bikers.

You were the centre of attention when you had the drugs, and everyone knew Blondie. By mid-afternoon we'd really begun to attract a crowd. A few guys set up a spin table and speakers. House bass bounced off the water and carried through the trees. It was me, Jess, Viva, and Lando. They were my teamers, and so far they'd managed to keep up.

I checked. It was 2:00pm and the Duck was waiting. I'd have to get a fresh E into me for the drive and I still had to pick up the cash. Jess was up for it, she always was. She was tall with dark curls and a raspy voice and she partied and ate for free. She came from a family of Gypsies and that's all I need to say about that. Lando picked up Viva at the bar and for now they were a package deal. She was stunning with long jet black hair and caramel skin.

"You guys comin'?" I said, now standing, squinting in the knifing sun.

"Where? The city?!" Viva looked up at me. "Yeah. My friend's friend is throwing a warehouse party on the east end. Last one was insane."

"You're driving?!" Viva looked at Lando and Jess.

"Don't worry. She's a machine," Lando said, shoving things in his backpack.

Jess' eyes were wide. She nodded and smiled.

They waited in my Lincoln while I ran inside. The SKY was kicking in and my jaw swung back and forth. I grabbed a bag and threw in clothes and makeup then dug to the back of my closet. I opened the safe and grabbed a tightly wrapped brick of cash, ran to the car, threw it all in the trunk and slammed it shut. We hit the road and the highway was hot and bare. A green, brown and blue smudge hung at our sides. I was safe under my giant hat and sunglasses and my hands were tight fists on the wheel. Lando and Viva were in the back, Jess in the front, and she called the Duck.

“Tell him we’re coming up to the junction,” I said.

“Yeah, he says meet at his place.”

“Alright, twenty minutes.”

“Why do you guys call him the Duck?” Viva said from the backseat. The rest of us continued talking.

“Does he have any K?” Lando leaned forward between the seats.

“What do you think?” I said.

“Nice! He sat there, thinking, chewing his cheeks.

He looked back at Viva. She was on her phone. “Remember that crackhead down on Crescent I was telling you about?”

“The one with the neck tattoo?”

“No no. This guy’s older. Like 40. Kinda tall, has a twin?”

“Oh. Right, ya.”

“He drives transport across the border.”

“Really?” I said.

“He owes me large. Been signing over his checks.” He lit a cigarette next to my face.

“Dude!” I cracked the window and checked Viva in my rearview.

“Says he can bring back booze for cheap. Sixty ounces.”

“Do it!”

“Do we want the booze or the money?” he asked.

“The booze! We can sell it.”

The Duck lived in an old brick high-rise downtown, rammed full of old furniture and things with barely a path snaking through. The four of us squeezed into the tight maze and the Duck was there at the end, cutting lines on a serving tray. He was small with a square jaw and bristly stubble. He had a dragon tatt on his chest that was poorly done and always showing.

“Blondie!” He set down the tray and got up to give me a wet kiss, needling my cheek with that stubble. He lifted me up, tight in his arms. “My little ‘E-tard!”

I laughed. “Put me down you crazy bastard.”

“How much of that shit you guys do, anyway? Sleep yet?”

“Not a chance,” I said.

“Well you’re in for it tonight,” he grinned. The Duck always knew of the best parties.

“Got any water?” I said.

“Ya, hun, fridge.”

I opened it. Seven bottles. Five upfront, two in the back. I’d once taken a long hard swig from a bottle back there. It was clear and thick and burned like hell. It was GHB. A tiny cap-full of that stuff was enough to put you on your ass and I’d taken a lethal dose. I ran, tripping past all

that stuff to the bathroom and shoved my fingers down my throat. I shuddered, closed the fridge and joined the others.

Viva was going through the Duck's CDs. He had a collection of house and bass that shook your insides. I tossed everyone a water and sat across from them. "Viva, whatever you do, do *not* drink from anything without a label in that fridge!"

"So what's the plan?" Lando interrupted.

"DJ doesn't start till after midnight," said the Duck. "You guys hungry? There's pizza in the fridge. Have some, it's gonna be a long night."

The Duck did a bump of K, made a little quack sound and passed the tray to Lando. I passed SKY in the other direction.

"Who's spinning tonight?" said Jess.

"Pink," said the Duck.

We'd partied a few times but I never really knew him. Actually, I never saw him again after that night.

"Really? Sweet!" Jess smiled, tossing her hair and sitting back in her seat.

"Ohhh right, I forgot about you two," the Duck smiled. They'd hooked up at our favorite afterhours club last time we were there. It was a place for serious partiers. Pitch black, low ceilings and bone-pulsing bass. It was where the living dead went to feel alive and I usually ended up there.

"You slut," I teased, pinching my nose after a giant bump.

"Like you're any better," she shot back. I shrugged and passed the tray.

"My buddy's warehouse is in that industrial area," the Duck said. You know where I mean?"

“Not really, but go on.” I looked down at my hands. They were strangely small. So were my legs and my feet and arms. It was good K.

“Anyway, the party is supposed to be like an art installation. Like, with artists painting on E or something.”

“That sounds awesome!” Viva looked back from the CD deck. She was putting on one of Pink’s mixes. He was actually pretty good.

“Girls, go get ready,” The Duck said after a while. He looked at Lando. “High chicks are the worst.”

We took our drinks to the tiny bathroom and Jess and I started on Viva. She had a big ass but could squeeze into my red spandex. I painted her big Angelina lips to match and colored her eyes black. Jess and I swapped dresses back and forth until deciding on tight and blue for her, and tight and black for me. Mine covered just what it needed to with frills at the bottom and an open back.

“I’m so jealous of your body,” Viva said, putting her hands around my waist. She looked over at Jess, fluffing her dark curls in the mirror. “I know,” she said with a face.

“What’s the deal with you and the Duck?” Viva said.

“He wants to fuck her but she doesn’t want to,” Jess said. No one knew that we actually had.

“Why not? He’s cute,” Viva said.

I was on the side of the tub, zipping my shiny thigh-high stilettos with a lit cigarette in my teeth. “It’s not like that.”

She admired herself in the mirror for a minute then turned around. “OK, be honest with me, is Lando a player?”

I bounced my eyes off Jess, squinting through blue smoke. I took a hard drag, “shit, I don’t know,” I said, blowing out a cloud and admiring my boots, “Jess, is Lando a player?”

She hesitated. “He’s a real sweetie . . . ,” she said.

“Are you guys fucking ready?” The Duck’s head floated by the doorframe. “Ohhhh wait, wait, wait. . . . Look. At. You.” He crept his way over and put his hands on my hips.

“Alright, alright.” I patted his dragon and walked out.

We did a bump for the road, snaked through the clutter, and stepped onto the busy sidewalk. There were hipsters on bikes, bums on grates, and girls tripping on heels. Men dragged cigarettes and stared at asses. I’d done just enough K for the world to lose proportion and just enough E to keep me on my feet. We got a taxi to the far side of the city and stepped straight into the underworld. I recognized Pink’s hard-bass as soon as we walked in. There he was, with his pointy hair and pointy face, bobbing behind the turntables. The place was full. I had to step away from a guy swinging a fiery chain, and painters and their canvases lined the walls.

Most people carried water bottles but there was a small bar set up in the corner. It was dark and the floor pulsed beneath our feet. Jess and I signaled each other to the bathroom and I stood fussing in the mirror and talked to her through the stall door. People came and went, men, women, laughing, joking, disappearing behind the graffitied doors to do their drugs. There was no such thing as ‘men’s’ or ‘women’s’ toilets, no one cared. A handsome couple walked in, holding each other and smiling through beautiful teeth. She wore a Marilyn Monroe dress and he wore a cinched suit with an open white shirt. I sat them on a velvet bench next to the lady handing out towels. I clicked their picture over and over with my disposable camera, rewinding with my thumb between each one. “Gorgeous,” I said.



Jess was still talking when I got back to her stall. She'd been in there forever. I knocked and she let me in.

"I have the E pees," she said. "I have to go so bad but nothing's coming out."

"Girl, you can't sit there all night. You can try again later."

I pulled out a bag of K and scooped a bump with a long nail. I served her first and did mine and it shot like a bullet to the back of my throat. I squinted and quacked like the Duck. Jess laughed and fell against the stall with her panties around her ankles.

"Let's get out of here." I said. "You talk to Pink yet?"

"Not yet."

"C'mon, let's go, he's been eyefucking you since we got here." She gave up and followed me out through the colorful crowd. We passed the Duck leaning against a wall with a cigarette drooping from his lip. He fumbled in his pockets in painful slow motion, checking them over and over and over. I stood in front of him and he looked at me, glazed.

"You've been smoking rock," I said.

He said nothing and started patting his pockets again. "Dude, that's not for partying." I reached in, pulled out the little baggy and left him there. Jess and I squeezed through the crowd of giant pupils. Pink had a record in his hand and his eyes were on Jess.

"Oof, look what you're barely wearing," he yelled over the music at her tight dress. He looked at me, and nodded, "Blondie." I nodded back and lit a cigarette. He was a fast talker and wore a loud shirt. "I'm done my set." He looked around and tippy-toed over our heads, "got any . . . ." He tapped the side of his nose.

"Lando has it. He's here somewhere with his new hotty."

"And the Duck?"

“Back there,” I nodded over my shoulder. “He’s all quacked out.”

“What?” he yelled and leaned in closer.

“He’s a mess!” I yelled back. “We’re gonna go smoke. Meet us out there?”

“Cool.” He winked at Jess and disappeared into the crowd.

“He’s so cute,” Jess yelled, following me outside. I pushed hard on the heavy door and we lowered down the steps with bare legs and tall stilettos.

“I *love* your outfits!” a girl called out to us. She was a cute little thing with a voice and hair to match.

“Thanks hun!” Jess said with a big smile.

“Very cool,” the girl said. She was with a group of guys. “Come sit with us!” We sat and she leaned over to introduce herself and the table and we introduced ourselves back. I crossed my legs and ran my fingers back through my hair. The guy next to me had broad shoulders with green eyes and a straight smile.

“Is Blondie your real name?” he said.

I laughed, lit a cigarette and smiled at his perfect face.

“I’m Drake.”

“Hi Drake.”

“Wait a minute, you know the Duck, right?”

Jess was busy chatting.

I nodded toward the door. “He’s inside.”

He took my cigarette for a drag. “There’s someone I want you guys to meet. He’s throwing a party. It’s a killer place on Linden Trail. You should come. Bring the Duck.”

“Yeah, we’re down. When?”

“We’re leaving here soon,” he said. “You guys have wheels?”

“Yeah, we can get there.” Drake was hot and my cheeks were red. I got the address and hours passed before we rounded up the troops and piled high into Pink’s Denali. We were loud and rowdy and Jess tripped up the truck’s high step. She fell back, ass-first onto the pavement and her dress pulled up around her waist. I fell out laughing at her.

“You crazy bitch!” I laughed, crawling over to help.

“C’mon ladies!” Pink yelled with his arm out the window. “If you’re gonna make out, let’s do it already, otherwise, let’s go!”

Jess and I wobbled back up on our heels and climbed in. It was now 6:00 am, 54 hours without sleep and we were climbing the west hill to meet God knows who. Jess and Viva were the first soldiers down and they passed out in the backseat.

“So what’s the deal with this guy?” Lando said with gated houses flying by our sides.

“The party’s probably dry.” I turned in my seat to face the Duck. “You good?”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah,” he said. His eyes were half shut, “All good, baby.”

“Fuck, look at this place,” Pink said as we pulled through the open gate. The guys and I got out and left the girls in the back to sleep.

“Hey!” Drake was outside waiting. “You made it.” He flashed me a perfect smile and led us up the front steps.

‘Pepsi’ met us at the door. He was a striking Asian man with his balls tucked into a red lace teddy under a long sheer dressing gown. His makeup was impeccable.

“Girl, you are looking fierce in those come-fuck-me heels!” His eyes widened, “. . . and look at you, *Robert Downey*.” He stepped back for a better view of the Duck. “Mm. Come,” he said,

motioning for us to follow. Pepsi linked arms with the Duck and led us, chest up, hips swaying, through the brightly coloured crowd. It was a long walk to the back of the house. He talked endlessly past antique furniture and his gaudy collection of art. He caught me looking up at a gold framed painting and stopped us. “You like it?”

I studied the naked bodies reaching out to each other for eternity. “It’s beautiful,” I said, but I knew shit about art.

“It’s my favorite.” His perfectly manicured hand was pressed to the side of his face. “My guardian angels.”

I glanced at Lando and Pink. They looked high as hell and Pepsi clapped his hands. “You, come with me,” he said, pointing to the Duck. “Drake, honey, be a doll and take everyone in for a drink.” They disappeared and Drake led us to a wide open kitchen and went to take a call. Everything was white. White walls, white counters, white paneled appliances. I lit a cigarette and sat down at a marble island and dangled my throbbing feet above the floor. House bass vibrated through the walls. Lando sat next to me, he looked like shit.

Pink went straight for the booze. “That guy’s a trip,” he said, pouring a whisky.

“Which one?” I did a bump of coke to wake up.

“What do you mean, which one? The tranny,” he laughed. He handed me a whiskey and I waved it away. “You think he wants a sample?” he asked.

“Yeah, I think so,” I said.

“They’ve been in there forever.” He double-fisted the whiskeys and took a sip from one. “You think they’re fucking?” he laughed.

I laughed, too. “Probably! He’s pretty fucked up.” I looked at Lando for his reaction. He was out cold with his head on the counter.

“*Thanks doll!*” Pepsi’s singy voice clicked past us. He was tucking a baggy into his lingerie and the Duck came to join us.

“So?” I said, “what were you girls up to?”

He steadied himself against the marble slab and pulled out a bag of white powder. “He took a ball of coke to try it out,” he said, shoveling a heaping key up a nostril. He had lipstick smudged on his face.

“Dude, I have the coke! You gave it to me in the car. That’s K!” I said. This was a disaster. One’s an upper, one’s a downer, one the antidote to the other.

“*WHAT THE FUCK!!!*” From down the hall, the voice was loud and shrill. “*He’s OD-ing! Do something!*”

My stool screeched across the floor and I ran for the living room. Pink was two steps behind me. I rounded the corner and saw Pepsi slouched in a neon armchair, pigeon-toed, and now very much *untucked*. The cute girl from the rave and a sparkly-winged fairy panicked at his side. The fairy held his head. “*Call 911!*”

The crowd was buzzing, “. . . *laced coke . . . who? . . . I think they’re in the kitchen.*”

I pushed through them. “C’mon hun, sniff up.” I shoveled a heap of powder up Pepsi’s little nose.

“Get off him!” The cute girl grabbed my arm and I elbowed her away. The fairy pulled back on my long hair. I grabbed her by the wingstrap and swung around with my fist. It connected with a crack and she held her nose. It bled through her fingers.

Pepsi was coming to. I tucked the baggy in his bra and Pink called me from the front door. We were on the homestretch to the truck when I heard Drake’s voice.

“Hey! Where you going?!” He lowered his phone and the party spilled out behind him. I dove in the backseat and Lando and the Duck were already there.

“Blondie!” Drake called and the crowd swallowed him up.

“Go!” I yelled at Pink. A sparkly shoe hit my window.

“What do you think I’m doing?!” he yelled. The engine roared, glass bottles thumped and shattered against bumpers and panels. We were out the gate and down the hill and ready to call it a night in the afternoon sun.

We made it to a hotel and the guys fumbled with arms and legs, lifting the girls like ragdolls onto baggage trolleys. We wheeled them down the hall and into our top-floor suite. I locked myself in a corner room and on the second day, I peeled off sweaty sheets and joined Lando in front of the TV. He was laying on the sofa with a leg stretched off the side. I lit a cigarette and it cut my throat like a knife.

He heard me and glanced up “S’up, Bets?” He only called me Blondie around other people.

“What are you watching?” I said.

“A Bug’s Life,” he said.

I laughed. “Where is everyone?” I scanned the room and took another harsh drag.

“The girls are at the spa or something. The other two went home last night.”

“Any beer around here?”

“Should be some left in there.” He nodded toward the mini fridge.

There were four left and they were ice cold. I grabbed two, cracked them both, and sat back down.

“Alright, it’s Tuesday, right?” I said. “You have to be back with the drop by tomorrow night.”

“Yeah, gonna leave first thing in the morning.” He didn’t look up from the cartoon ants on the screen.

“You have a car lined up yet?” I took long swigs. The cold beer felt good.

“Yup, all set,” he said. “Grabbing the coke from the Duck after that.”

I started on the second bottle and stretched back with my feet on the glass table. “What about Viva? You can’t take her with you.”

“No . . . .”

“I can take her back with me and Jess,” I said.

“Yeah, cool, thanks.” He rubbed his eyes and sat up. “So what the fuck happened at that house?”

“Oh shit!” I held out my bruised hand and laughed.

“Fucking Duck,” said Lando. “He’s been smoking a lot of rock lately. It’s not good.” He shook his head. “I hear he’s pissing off the big guy pretty bad.” He meant the Dentist. He was the Duck’s connection for that pure Colombian powder and he scared the shit out of all of us. We called him the Dentist but I’m not sure he ever really was one. I didn’t really want to know how he got that name.

**“So you were dealing drugs then?” Garlick asked. “Cocaine?”**

**“Yeah,” I said. “Not exactly proud of it.”**

**“How long ago was this?”**

**“I was about 20.”**

**“Got it.” Her fingers were lightning across the keyboard.**

Anyway, the next morning we went home and didn't hear from the Duck for days. Thursday I got a page from a number I didn't recognize. Lando and I were invited to Sunday dinner and were told someone would drive us. This guy named Walsh showed up in my driveway in a '95 Fleetwood. It was loud and throaty, just like him, and the inside was thick with exhaust. He'd rebuilt the engine, "400 horsepower to the wheels," he said, raising his voice over the sound of the engine. He loved to talk and ear-fucked us the entire way. He told us he'd been a Green Beret, shot five times during a training mission. Once in the chest, three times in the gut and another through the thigh. He said his unit was running a plain-clothes drill near a small rural town out east. But shit went wrong, he said when their special ops team was ambushed by a couple of elk hunters. They didn't know it was fake and shot two of his guys dead and severely wounded two more. He'd been in court for years fighting for a settlement. Lando and I sat silent for most of the ride. I nodded and made the appropriate expressions but I was more concerned with what the hell we were doing there. An hour later we turned down a steep driveway and my stomach twisted and burned. Lando and I made eyes as we got out of the car.

"Welcome!" the Dentist said from his front stoop. He waved us over with a smile. He had a snifter rested in his palm and an orange sun hung low behind him. He was in his seventies but you wouldn't have guessed it. He was spry and light with a crinkly tanned face. We shook hands and followed him in. A pretty young woman greeted us with dark eyes and a Spanish accent.

"This is my beautiful wife," he said and put his arm around a little girl, "and my little one."

"Hi," I said.

"Hello," said Lando.

The Dentist said they wouldn't be joining us and we followed him into the kitchen. Walsh cut by us to season a tray of thick ribeye and the vegetables were already prepped on the counter.



“You know he was a cook in the army?” the Dentist said. Walsh fixed us our drinks and the Dentist insisted he give us a tour. We followed, room by room, listening to stories of his travels to South America. Trinkets and carvings filled the walls and lined the surfaces of heavy wood furniture. He went on and on about the history of each piece, its significance, and how spiritual and special it all was to him. We stopped in his office and he lifted a book from a hardwood desk. “*Dostoevsky*,” he said in his best Russian accent. He looked down at the cover and held it with both hands. “*Crime and Punishment*,” he said. “I finally finished it.” He looked proud and returned it to an empty slot on a shelf. Below it was a blown up portrait of his young wife, dressed in a sailor’s suit. She was tipping her hat with a cheeky smile. “Gorgeous, isn’t she? Fifteen here.” My eyes were wide. He flipped the picture forward to reveal another behind it. There were several. “Ah, I love this one! Such a polite young lady,” he said. It was a studio shot with a white backdrop and professional lighting. She sat in the centre of the frame in a pleated skirt, knee-high stockings and a collared top. Her hands were folded neatly on her lap.

The Dentist looked back for our reaction.

“Very nice,” I said and Lando nodded.

“This one is more recent, two years ago I think, on my boat in the Keys.” She stood behind the captain’s wheel, as if to skip the craft, in a one-piece suit and pink rimmed sunglasses. His young wife wore less and less with each doll-like portrait, and he looked back for validation of each one.

“She’s lovely,” I said.

We’d seen them all and he straightened up to face us, “I’m going to tell you a love story,” he said. “But not here, outside,” he motioned us out. We followed him down the stairs and out the door to a warm breeze and the steady sound of the river below. The house was built up the bank

with a wrap-around deck and a view of the channel's rapids. Expensive boats and houses lined the shore. Walsh flipped steaks on a heavy barrel grill and we took our seats at a set table. He moved quickly back and forth from the kitchen, in and out of a squeaky screen door. My stomach lurched with every squeak and slam and our host went on talking. "This here is an estuary. See that line over there?" Lando and I sat up on bent knees to look down the mouth of the river. There was a line of breaking white water that stretched from bank to bank. "Brackish they call it. It's where the sea and freshwater meet. Can you see it?"

"Interesting. I've never seen that before," I said. I finished my drink and looked around. "You have a gorgeous spot here."

The Dentist gave a shallow nod and went on, "I was going to tell you a love story." The screen door squeaked and slammed and Walsh brought over our plates.

"Ah, here we are." The Dentist smiled at the food. "The wine," he sniped at Walsh. Walsh already looked drunk off his ass and he teetered his way back into the house. Lando and I started on our meals and I managed some slow bites.

"My love story, you must hear it," the Dentist's eyes lit up.

*Squeak, slam!* Walsh poured us each a cabernet and walked off. *Squeak, slam!*

"I met my love in Colombia when I used to travel to Medellin," he said. "Her family is from Narino. Have you heard of it? It's a very poor place," He sat back with his wine. "Very poor. I saw her playing with her friend, skipping over the cracks on the path to the shore." He took a sip. "Right beside the Amazon River. Can you believe it? With the beasts that live in there." He looked at our plates. "How's the steak?"

"Very good," I said and Lando nodded.

“I couldn’t take my eyes off of her,” he went on, “she was like nothing I’d ever seen. We were drawn to each other in ways I cannot explain.” He stopped to cut his steak with a shiny serrated blade. “Of course, I had to wait a couple of years. Her father gave us his blessing but I insisted she was too young. He was happy for us. We were so in love.”

I poured myself another red then topped off Lando without looking at him.

“You know, I never even knew she had a body?” he said. “She always wore baggy clothes but one day she revealed herself to me. She was in her little bathing suit and I . . . I couldn’t believe it.” His face was bright and alive. “She was finally ready, my true love, a ripe young lady.”

I glanced at the empty wine bottle. “That’s beautiful,” I choked. “You must be very happy.” We finished with our plates and Walsh opened us a fresh burgundy. His face was burgundy, too and he swayed back and forth as he poured.

The Dentist didn’t seem to notice. He waited for him to finish. “Now, let’s talk about us, shall we?” He looked at me and lit a cigar. The sun was nearly gone and pale yellow lights lined the docks below. I lit up too and waited.

“The Duck’s gone,” he said, changing his tone. “He couldn’t be trusted.” He puffed on his cigar. “So you tell me, can you be trusted?”

I nodded. “Yes.” Lando nodded, too.

“I never would have dreamt of dealing with a woman, a *girl*, really. Don’t make me regret it.” We held eyes and my stomach twisted around my careful bites of steak. “Bring me those pagers!” the Dentist yelled over his shoulder. *Squeak, slam!* Walsh handed Lando two identical pagers and a small piece of paper. It had numbers on it. “The first one is the drop. Days of the week are 1 through 7. The time follows. Sunday at 8 is 720. Got it?”

We nodded.

“The other is for meetings. Days and times are done the same. There’s another number at the end. Locations are 1 to 5. You have them there. If you need anything, call the number below. Walsh can take care of you. Lando handed me the paper. “Memorize that and give it to Walsh before you leave. . . .” He then smiled and softened his tone, “did you save room for dessert?”

It was late when we got the hell out of there. We somehow survived a drunk Walsh behind the wheel and I passed out until late the next afternoon. I carried myself from my bed to the sofa and stopped for a beer in between. I finished it, lit a cigarette, and flicked on my 65” tv. That thing weighed a ton and had to be dismantled to fit through the door. The guys still complain about how much of a bitch it was. I stretched my arms and my legs so hard that they shook and I was suddenly thrown into *deja vu*. The ex and I had bought that monstrosity together and it was the only thing I still had from our townhouse. It got raided the year before and he was still in jail waiting for his trial. I remember it well. We heard the door fly off its hinges and the SWAT team’s footsteps were heavy up three flights of stairs. It was 6:00am and we were in bed. Taz ran out of the room and I froze and waited.

“POLICE! THIS IS A RAID!” they yelled over and over as their boots got louder. They spilled into the room and stood at the foot of the bed, long-guns drawn. There were more officers clearing the other rooms. “GET ON THE FUCKING GROUND!” they barked. I hesitated. I was naked and hungover as hell. An AR-15 stepped forward and pointed at me. I knew him. We’d made eyes at the courthouse before. “I SAID, GET ON THE FUCKING GROUND, SWEETHEART! FACE-DOWN!” I pulled off the covers and put my hands in the air. I slowly slid off the bed to face them. Full frontal. A few guys in the back snickered. *Fuck sakes*. “ON THE GROUND! FACE-DOWN!”

I did what I was told. They cuffed me and left me there while they did their search. It wasn't long before they found what they were looking for. A few guys came back and lifted me by my cuffs like a duffle bag. They got me on my feet and into the walk-in closet. One cop grabbed a pair of jeans off a hanger and knelt, eye-level with my bare vagina. The others stood watching, laughing and bro-broing. The officer held each leg out for me to step into then pulled a shirt down over my body. The armholes hung lifeless at my sides. They led me down all those stairs and the battered door lay sideways at the bottom. It had a basketball-shaped dent in the middle. We walked past it out the front door and I counted six cruisers in our small courtyard. The same number of nosey neighbors stood around whispering to each other in housecoats. Taz was leaning against a shiny black S.W.A.T. van and two officers and a German Shepherd stood guarding him. They all watched me step into my very own paddy wagon and for whatever reason, a smile crept across my face.

We got to the station and a lady cop with spiky gray hair told me to undress. She had me stand like a starfish, feet and arms up and out to the sides. She stuck her fingers in my hair, and in my mouth and up my asshole. When she was finished, she snapped off her gloves. "OK, you can get dressed. The detective there will take you to where you need to go."

The hard cold cell had a steel bed and a toilet to match. There was no mattress. "Can I have a blanket or something?" I said, turning back to his blank face.

"Sorry," he said and slid the heavy door shut and walked away.

I dropped my pants and sat on the cold toilet. I'd been holding it for hours. "Ahhhh." I sighed as I got the stream going. I scanned the blank wall that stood behind the bars and spotted three shiny cameras pointed right at me. "Great," I said aloud and covered myself to wipe. I stretched out on that hard metal slab and tried to get comfortable but it was impossible and the only thing

to do was think. The night before, this real sketchy guy, Jer we called him, showed up at our door. He was strung out and dodgy and his face was dotted with open sores. He wanted to buy a bag, he said.

“Are you fucking stupid?” I said with my head poked out the door.

“C’mon, girl. Where’s Taz?” He tried looking around me.

I saw his beat up Cavalier parked down the street but couldn’t make out the girl in the passenger seat. “Leave,” I said, closing the door.

It was nearly shut when Taz pushed me out of the way. “Get inside,” he said taking my place in front of Jer. “Dumb fucking cunt!” he called back over his shoulder. I climbed the stairs to the first landing and waited. He let Jer in the house and they walked out soon after.

“BLONDIE!” he yelled.

I stopped in the middle of the stairs.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” he said.

“You told me you wouldn’t keep drugs in the house,” I said.

“You’re a whiny little bitch, you know that?” His face and the tattoo on his neck glowed red. “Get down here!” He lunged up for me and pulled my ankle forward. My head pounded back against the hard stairs and I slid down to him.

“Don’t! Taz, I’m sorry!”

“I say who comes here! Got that?” I was now at the bottom on cold tile and Taz leaned over me. “You know how much I do for you!?” He reached down and picked at my shirt. “How much did this cost?” He’d given me a stack of 20s the week before to buy new clothes, the ones I had were hanging off of me. I lost a pile of weight after he rode me for months about being fat. “Fucking bitch,” he said and pulled me by my hair to the kitchen. He rummaged like a madman

through drawers and cupboards, slamming each one when he didn't find what he was looking for.

"You're an ungrateful cow," he said, finally finding a large pair of scissors. He cut off my shirt first, from navel to neck and I begged him to stop. He held it up and cut it to pieces. The fabric fell like confetti. The shorts were next, then the underwear and bra. When he finished, he stood me up.

"Turn around," he said.

I did and he looked me up and down. "You need your lips snipped and your tits are running away from each other," he said and left the room.

### **Garlick stirred in her seat. I went on.**

I had a shit sleep in that cell and the next day I was led to a small room with a phone on the wall. "If you want to make a call, you'd better do it now," the officer said. I waited for him to close the door and I picked up the receiver. I knew our lawyer's number by heart, the 'Gaff'. His assistant patched me through.

"Blondie. What took you so long?" He had a low booming voice that commanded attention.

"We were raided, and. . . ."

"I know. Don't say anything. The only words that should come out of your mouth are, *I'd like to exercise my right to remain silent.*"

"OK."

"Keep your shit together. I'll have you out by the end of the day."

My deja vu trailed off and Jerry Springer was walking back and forth across the giant screen, feigning empathy for his idiot guests. There I was, watching it. I heard a tapping on the backdoor glass. *Tap tap. Pause. Tap. Pause. Tap tap tap.* It was my driver, there for our weekly rounds. Every Monday we picked up money from the people who sold for us. I let him in, All 6'4 of him. He was a big dumb oaf with crazy eyes and black rotten teeth. He said he had acidic gums but we all knew it was the drugs. I kept myself on edge around him.

“What’s good, man?” I said. He walked past me and sat at the table. I locked the door.

“Coffee?”

“Nah.”

“Beer?”

“Nah, I’m set.” He leaned back against the wall and stretched a muddy boot out on the tile. I sat up on the counter across from him.

“Lando’s guy,” he started in his gravelly voice. “Been chasing him for a week now. He came up short again last night.” He folded his hands across his stomach. His knuckles spelled out “Thug Life” in jailhouse ink and the “i” was in the shape of a bullet.

“Who?” I said.

“Crackhead transport driver,” he said.

“Right. Yeah, he mentioned him. He says he can bring booze up across the border.”

He switched legs and I stared at the pile of dirt on my clean floor. “He has a twin,” he said. “Guys look exactly the same, like two fuckin’ ghosts all cracked out. Paranoid as hell in a tiny house with blacked out windows . . . peeking out the blinds and shit. What’s his name. . . .” He looked up at the ceiling. “Shit. . . .” I waited and he got distracted by flying chairs on Springer.

“Anyway,” I interrupted.



“Anyway, he smoked a huge rock and fainted or something. Just fell over with the pipe in his mouth and broke the coffee table with his head. I guess he knocked over the ashtray and lit the couch on fire,” he laughed. “There’s still blood everywhere and the couch is burnt to shit.”

“What?! When was this?” I said.

“Couple weeks ago.”

“How much is he into Lando for?”

“Six ounces.” He sat up straight and cracked his tagged knuckles.

“So, like \$9k, then?”

“More.”

I stood up. “Alright. I’m gonna get changed and we’ll go.” I shut the door behind me and found a pair of wrinkly jeans that were half kicked under my bed. They were baggy around my shrinking waist. My driver was kicked back on the sofa when I returned and it was now Ricki Lake’s guests embarrassing themselves on the screen.

“\_\_\_\_\_,” he said as I came back into the room. I stopped to think and Garlick waited. I couldn’t remember his name.

“What?” I scanned the counter and table for my purse.

“The transport driver. His name is \_\_\_\_\_.”

“Poor bastard,” I said. “Ready?”

The air was cool but the sun was warm. “Getting nice out,” I said as we made our way down the drive to my Lincoln. I scanned the street for parked undercovers. He grunted and spat on the grass before getting in.

Our last stop that day was The Emerald Room. It was a strip club where we moved most of our coke. There were only a couple dancers there in the afternoons, and only a few lonely bastards day-drinking in the dark. We came in the back door, through the kitchen and past the fat cook sweating over the fryers. That giant man would sweat over ice. My driver went to the changeroom to collect from a dancer and I went to say hi to the owner. He was a short little thing, always in an oversized suit that bunched around his ankles. I found him unloading a tray of steaming glasses.

“Blondie!” Aren’t you a ray of sunshine!” he said, fumbling a tray. The plastic bounced on the hard floor and he scrambled to catch it. He leaned it upright against the wall and walked over to kiss my cheeks. I really hated having my cheeks kissed and everyone seemed to do it.

“Hey you.”

“You should’ve seen the catfight last night!” he started.

“Oh yeah?”

“A couple of the new girls got into it. You know the Russian chick that just walks back and forth across the stage?” He shook his head. “No talent these days.”

“Over what? What happened?”

“Who knows, you know how they are,” he said. He had a white ring around his nostril.

We talked for a while and I heard that big dumb oaf from down the hall. “*We’re good!*” he called and the Emerald’s heavy backdoor slammed.

“Well, keep livin’ the dream, buddy,” I said. The owner kissed me again and I went back out to the pocky lot.

“You get all of it?” I said.

He spat to one side. “Let’s go.”

The next day I got a call from Drake, the guy from the party at the tranny's place. He wanted to know if I'd have dinner with him, Friday, 8:00 pm at the Mansion. It was a steakhouse, uptown. "I'd love to see you," he said.

I laughed. "I'm surprised, after what happened."

"Fuck what happened." He paused. "I have some good news."

"Yeah, and what's that?"

"You have to have dinner with me to find out."

"Fine," I rolled my eyes and smiled. I was pacing.

"I'll pick you up," he said.

"I can meet you there."

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

"Alright, alright. See you then, gorgeous."

Friday night came and Drake was outside the Mansion waiting for me. I'd forgotten how handsome he was. "Wow," Drake said as I walked up. "You look great!" He put his arm around my little satin dress and kissed my cheeks. I said nothing but a raised brow and a dimple. I'd never been to the Mansion before. Diamonds and emeralds and other shiny things dripped off the earlobes and wrists of the old-money crowd. The women scowled and I was a fish out of water. The waiter pulled out my chair and draped a linen across my lap. He handed Drake the wine list and flitted away with a clenched ass and his nose in the air.

"Beringer?" Drake asked, looking up from the list.

“Yeah, Cabernet is good,” I said and our prissy waiter returned.

“We’ll take the bottle.” He came back and showcased the red before uncorking and pouring a taster for Drake. “It’s good,” he said and I wondered if anyone ever said it wasn’t. The waiter filled our glasses and floated away. “So,” Drake said with a crooked smile behind his wine glass. “What’s new in the wild adventures of Blondie? Started any fist-fights or all-out brawls lately?”

“Yes, nightly,” I said. “I have an addictive personality.”

“Well, then tonight can be your intervention.”

“If you’re lucky.” We were definitely going to fuck.

“So you’re funny, too.” He leaned forward. “I was kind of upset when you took off last weekend. You’ve been on my mind ever since.”

“I’m sure you were . . . and I’m sure you have.” I sat back for the waiter to set our meals down. Drake had ordered for me. I waited for our waiter to buzz off. “So what’s the good news you threatened to tell me?”

“Believe it or not, you made an impression that night.”

“I don’t find that hard to believe,” I laughed.

“Don’t flatter yourself too much,” he said, digging in. “Pepsi likes your product. He wants to work something out. The only catch is no Duck. Just you and Lando.”

“No problem there,” I said.

He held his fork with his left and had a Rolex on his right. “Good then, it’s a date,” he winked. “I’ll talk to him and set something up for next week.”

“You’re sure there won’t be an angry mob waiting for me?”

He laughed and I pushed my food around my plate until our waiter returned. “Finished?” He appeared out of nowhere.

“Hmm?” I looked up. “Oh, yes, thank you,” I said and he left with my half-eaten steak.

Drake leaned forward, “I saw cheesecake on that menu. You in?”

“Not for me, thanks.”

“C’mon. I can’t sit here eating it by myself.”

“No really, I’m pretty full.”

“Two cheesecakes,” he held up two fingers to a passing waiter.

“Ugh!” I said. “You’re killing me.”

We finished, Drake paid, and I went to the bathroom to throw up my meal. I closed the stall door behind me and bent over to empty my stomach. The toilet next to me flushed. I heard the tap turn on and off, then the hand dryer, and the door open and close. It opened again.

“Miss, is everything OK?” A woman’s voice called through the stall. I flushed and wiped my mouth and took a deep breath before walking out. She stood there in a crisp white shirt, black pants and sensible shoes. I smiled at her and went for the sink. She looked puzzled and scanned the floor under the bank of stalls. “Was there someone else in here just now? A lady told me someone was sick.”

“I don’t think so,” I said casually, soaping my hands.

“Huh,” she said and left. I rinsed my mouth, chewed a piece of gum, and reapplied my lipstick before wading back through the bitchy faces.

**“How old were you when the bulimia started,” Garlick asked.**

**“About fifteen, I think.”**

Anyway, Drake was waiting by the front door.

“Sorry, I had a call,” I said. He put his hand above my ass and led me out to his car and into his bed. He had a good cock but didn’t know how to use it. I faked it and got a taxi back to my car.

My phone woke me early the next morning. *HELLO MOTO!* I jolted. I really need to change that ring. It was Drake. He’d wasted no time.

“Good morning, beautiful. How’d you sleep?”

“Not sure yet . . . who’s this?” I laughed.

“Oh, so she’s funny in the morning, too. Another reason you should have stayed over.”

“So tragic,” I said.

“Hmmm.”

“Hmmm.”

“Listen, our friend is game for Thursday.”

“Sure, that works. You have a time?”

“Noon. Need a ride?”

“I’m good. I’ll go with Lando.”

“Sure?”

“Yeah, thanks though.”

“OK babe,” he said and we hung up.

Thursday came and Lando drove. We pulled back through the familiar gate and parked in the same spot.

“This is fucked, right?” he said.

“So fucked!”

A big bear opened the door and invited us into the foyer. He was tall and wide with hair all over. “Well, hello!” he said in a soft lisp. He kissed my cheeks and shook Lando’s hand. He was a conundrum.

“Pepsi’s out back,” he said over his shoulder as we followed him past the gaudy furniture, and gaudy art, and back through the tall white kitchen. “Don’t mind the mess,” he flipped his hand toward the island. It was spread wide with long-stem flowers. “I’m refreshing the bouquets around the house.” His eyes were bright. “The garden is in full bloom!” He slid open the glass doors and we stepped back into the thick air. The deck stood tall above colorful gardens that stretched and wrapped around a large winding pool. Pepsi stood up from his perfect view and smiled wide. He was in pants and a collared shirt tucked-in around his narrow waist. He’d lost the makeup and the lingerie but he still had a way about him. He was handsome as both a man and a woman.

“Hey dolls!” Another double cheek kiss.

“You remember Lando,” I said.

“Yes, yes, I remember. How are you, handsome?”

“Ya, doin’ alright,” he said. That’s usually the most you could expect from Lando. It was one of his best qualities.

“Come. Sit.” We did and Pepsi lit a long skinny cigarette and I lit up, too. The bear came to join us and sat with an ankle rested on his knee. I was hungover, and the sun watered my eyes.

“The last time we met was *eventful*, to say the least,” Pepsi laughed. “Don’t worry, that’s not what this is about, although I do love myself some *drama*!” He sang, and he and the bear shared

a cute laugh. “The bag you left me. . . .” He took a drag and blew it in the air. His eyes widened, “*Honeyyyy.*”

I smiled, “primo, right?” I sat back and crossed my legs.

Pepsi leaned forward. “I had it tested. It’s the real deal.” He took another impatient drag. “So, I want to know . . . how much for a key?”

I looked at Lando. He raised his eyebrows up and down. We’d only ever pieced off a half at a time. “Thirty grand,” I said. Pepsi was now bent with elbows on knees, fingers locked. He looked at the bear then out over his garden. The bear handed me the ashtray.

“OK, love. We’ll take five to start, see how that goes.” *Fucking hell*, I thought and Lando was thinking the same.

“Deal!” I said and they insisted we stay for drinks by the pool. I couldn’t say no. I needed a drink to fix my aching skull. He had a few friends coming over but not to worry, he said, that sparkle-winged fairy wouldn’t be there. “She’s a little bitch anyway,” he winked.

The booze and the E and the K were flowing and Pepsi’s friends were mostly in drag. They were loud and fun and dramatic as hell. They painted my face and glued on heavy lashes and fit me in a bright pink wig. We played dress up for hours in Pepsi’s colorful closet and Lando sat laughing on the bed. They fixed me up in ten inch heels and about the same inches of fabric, and I partied like that the rest of the night. We got trashed and stayed over.

The sun was bright when I woke up and I turned away to open my sore eyes. A fake lash hung in front of me and I peeled it off. Lando was on the bed next to me. Our room was large with heavy glass doors that led out to the garden. Lando’s phone was beeping on the table next to him. “Yo,” I rolled over and pushed his arm. He opened his eyes and squinted. His face was



puffy and lined. “Your phone.” There was a drink on my side table. I smelled it, vodka. I took it outside for a smoke and Lando followed, tripping on the frame.

“Ahahaha!” he laughed at my outfit. “Look at you!” He said and got distracted by his phone. “Twelve missed calls,” he said and put it in his pocket. He took my cigarette for a drag and coughed. He handed it right back. “Fucking hell, Bets. Five keys!?”

“Shhh . . . we’ll talk in the car.”

“Alright, let’s find my clothes and get out of here,” I said, butting out on the grass and downing my warm drink.

“We brought your clothes down with us,” he said, stepping back inside. “Right here.”

“Ah, thank God” I said.

We got ourselves straight and climbed the stairs. It smelled of fresh bread on the main level. We walked past the kitchen and a soft round woman pulled a pan from the oven. “Good morning,” I said. “Could you tell Pepsi thank you and that we’re sorry we have to run?” She said something with an Eastern European accent and Lando I continued down the long hallway. The car was stifling and we slammed our doors shut. I fumbled with the AC.

“Five fucking kilos!” Lando said. “At 30k? This is huge!” He was pumped. “What’s the Dentist giving it to us at, 20?”

“Yeah babe. And the more the better.”

“We could be talking fuck-off-to-an-island-money here, Bets. You know? Fuck, and it wouldn’t take long.” Lando and I had seen plenty of hard cash, but nothing like this.

“Trust me,” I said. “I’m just trying not to lose my head over it. Anything could happen. It’s risky.” I looked over from the passenger seat. “It’s a lot of time if we got caught. I mean, that’s some heavy weight.”

“Don’t you think what we’re doing now is worse?!” He looked at me, then the road, then me again. “We could make some serious bucks. We could get in, get out, and leave all this shit behind us.”

“Good point.” I lit a cigarette. “What do you think about Pepsi? You think he’s legit?”

“He’s nothing to worry about,” he said.

“Yeah, probably not.” I cracked a window. “Know what my lawyer says? He says just cause you’re not paranoid, doesn’t mean they’re not out to get you.”

“Let’s just see how this goes, Bets. In and out.”

I leaned back on the head rest. “Fuck. It’s lot of money.” I thought about it. “Alright, I’ll call the Dentist when my head stops exploding.”

Lando dropped me off and I told him to keep my car for the night. I was in no shape to drive across town. I slept the rest of the day and night and in the morning I dragged myself to the couch with a beer. I flicked the remote. I had to page the Dentist and I needed a minute to get into character. I downed another beer and dug in my safe for the numbers. I’d written them down after our tense ride home with Walsh and he was the one who called me back.

“He’s away until next week,” Walsh said. “What do you need?”

“Another five keys,” I said.

“Shit.” He waited. “OK, I think I can do that for you. It’ll be in your next drop.”

And that was that. Pepsi took five keys the next week, five the week after, and the same the week after that. He asked for more and more as the weeks went on and I was stashing away a mountain of money. I was seeing less and less of Lando. He kept saying he was busy. We’d been inseparable for years and I was now spending my nights drinking alone.

One night I got a surprise call from my lawyer. “Taz’s trial is coming up,” he said. “Come to the city. We’ll talk over dinner.”

“Everything OK?” I asked.

“Best to talk in person,” he said.

His office was two hours away and it gave me time to smoke and think, and to not think at all. His office was in a glass high-rise with shiny floors and mirrored elevators. I rode to the top floor. It was 7:00pm and there were no signs of the day ending. There were receptionists on calls, men in suits, and the steady sound of clicking keys.

“He’s in his office,” his assistant said, carrying a tray of coffee.

“Alright, thanks,” I said. The Gaff’s door was open and there he was behind an oversized desk, scrolling through his Blackberry.

He glanced up, “Blondie.” That baritone voice always rattled me. He was larger than life and I was a clumsy child half his age. “Have a seat.” I shut the door behind me. It was a corner office with a rustic, cowboy feel. Framed pictures of the Gaff and bikers lined the shelves.

“I have it on good authority that you are walking the edge of a big fucking problem.”

“What do you mean?” I put a cigarette on my lip and dug through my purse. He reached over to light it.

“I mean that you’re being surveilled. You were, anyway.” He put down the lighter and leaned back in his seat. “Those dolts at the station failed to redact some of Taz’s disclosure. They have an informant. Two, actually. Do you know a Jerry Anthony?”

“Jer,” I said, exhaling hard. “I knew it.” I sunk my head back and looked out the window. It was getting dark and I could see a woman vacuuming in the next tower. “He came over looking for some shit the night before.” I said, “Taz sold it to him.”

“Yeah, well, that's how they got the warrant,” he said.

I nodded, watching the vacuum. It went back and forth.

“Their hard-on was for Taz but I’m telling you now to keep your nose clean. Just cause you’re not paranoid. . . .”

“Right, I know.” I looked back at him. “Who’s the other one?” I tapped the ashtray. “The other informant.”

The phone on his desk rang. “A woman, that’s all I know,” he said and picked up. “*Shannon, yes dear. Did he sign it? Tell him I’ll feed him his ass if it’s not in my hand by morning. Yes, verbatim. Alright, love. Have a good night.*”

He hung up. “Look at you, you’re disappearing,” he said, “let’s get you some food. I made reservations at the Hazel.” He stood and straightened his tie. The Gaff always wore a three piece suit. “Could you take this, love?” He handed me his jacket, tucked a stack of files under one arm and picked up a fat briefcase with the other. “You get the doors.”

The Hazel was known for its towering marble columns, fine dining, and extravagant rooms. I was dressed for the occasion, I’d made sure of it. My heels clicked lightly beside the Gaff through the grand entrance. The hostess blushed. “It’s nice seeing you again, sir, for two? Follow me.” They held each other’s gaze until she turned in front of us. Her ass cheeks lifted up and down as she walked. We finished our meals, I emptied my stomach, and we moved to the lounge. We sat next to each other and I’d lost count of our drinks.

“What are you doing wrapped up in all this?” He looked good and my heart pumped. “I can’t help but think, ‘one of these things is not like the other.’”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re too good for this shit. Too smart.”

I made a face.

“You know it. Sweetheart, you can’t roll around in shit and not expect to get any on you.” He finished his drink. “Have you ever thought of getting out?”

“Working on it,” I said.

“Come work for me, in my office.” I crossed my legs toward him and ran my fingers back through my hair. “You’re a good girl. This isn’t the life for you.” His eyes burned into mine and we held them there until my stomach flipped and my heart beat and I blushed and looked away. “Where you going?” he said, soft and deep. He cradled my chin and guided me back. He leaned in and kissed me. His salt and pepper beard smelled sweet like leather and I was so horny I could hardly think. “Will you spend the night with me?” he said and I didn’t think twice.

The Gaff was gone when I woke up. He had 9:00am court, but insisted that I stay, order room service, relax. I stumbled out of bed to the bathroom, peed for a million mississippis, then looked at myself in the mirror. My mascara was clumped like tarantula legs and more was smeared under my eyes. The back of my hair was knotted and frizzed. “Oof,” I said aloud. I found my cigarettes and went for the mini bar. They sure didn’t skimp on selection. I settled for a beer and got back into bed. My pager went off. It was the Dentist. 7103, it said on the little screen. Tomorrow, 10:00am, Denny’s. I leaned back against the pillows and took a swig. I thought about what the Gaff had told me at his office . . . but it was a hell of a lot of money. *It’s not like I’m going to do this forever.*

The room's phone rang. It was so loud that I jumped and spilled on the white sheets. It was the Gaff. "I'm standing in front of the judge this morning and all I could think about was my face, buried in your ass. I love the way you taste."

I was up and walking around the room, giggling like a fool. I'd never had a man do that to me before.

"Stay," he said. "I can be back there by 5:00 pm."

"Shit, I *really* want to but I have to be somewhere in the morning."

"C'mon, I'll make sure to get you on the road early."

"I can't tonight."

"Then when?" he said.

"Soon." I caught another glimpse in the mirror. I was girlish and giddy and red all over.

We ended the call and I cleaned myself up for the walk of shame across the lobby floor, past the other guests and a line of smiling clerks. I got to my Lincoln and called Lando. He said he was tied up and couldn't make it for breakfast. He sounded distracted.

"Take the driver," he said.

"It's you or no one." I said. "Plus, he's basically retarded."

"Good point."

"So, where are you anyway?" I asked, "I barely see you."

He hesitated. "The Keys."

"Fancy," I said. "You're getting your dick wet, aren't you?" He laughed. "You'd better settle down on the spending," I said, "cops are gonna be all over you."

"Settle down," he snipped. "Where were you last night? Don't tell me you're banging the lawyer now."

“Whatever,” I snipped back. “He told me some heavy shit. When you back?”

“Couple of days,” he said, “I’ll call you.”

“Alright,” I said. “Enjoy.”

The next morning I went to breakfast alone. Denny’s smelled of coffee and buttered eggs and it was busy. I spotted them in a corner booth. The Dentist sipped coffee from his little white mug and Walsh was like a giant sitting next to him. The booth came up to my shoulders and blocked us from prying eyes. I slid across the green vinyl.

“We’ve ordered already, you want something?”

“Just a coffee, thanks,” I said, pushing my purse against the wall.

The Dentist poked his paper face out in the hall and waved over a waitress. She poured me the bottom of the pot, threw down a handful of cream and walked away without a word.

“What a sweetie,” I said, reaching for a creamer.

“Where’s Lando?” Walsh said.

“He couldn’t make it.”

They gave each other a look. “What was so important?” Walsh’s eyes were like daggers.

My neck felt hot. I lied. “Meeting with a buyer, I think.”

He nodded, studying me. He finally looked away. “We’ve had some trouble with transportation,” he said. “Lost a couple loads at the border. It’ll take some time to get back up and running. You know, you’re burning through more than we expected. A lot more. Fucking hell,” he laughed, “it’s a good problem to have but it’s still a problem.” He waited for a fat woman and her three fat kids to walk by.

“Imagine having that problem?” The Dentist elbowed Walsh and he made a face.

Our waitress came and clunked down their plates. “Two grand slams,” she said, and buggered off.

“The product is sitting there,” Walsh said, digging in. “Just gotta get it here.”

“Where is it?”

“Mexico,” he said through a mouthful of eggs.

“I know a couple transport drivers,” I said, peeling the paper top off a creamer. “They go down all the time. I think they bring back mangoes or something.”

The two exchanged another look. The Dentist had his elbows on the table, hands clasped in front of him. “You think they’d do it?”

I nodded. “Pretty sure. They owe Lando a lot of money.”

“Alright, you and Lando feel it out. If it’s good, I’ll set you up with my guy down on the Mexican west coast. You’ll deal straight through him.”

And that was that. I stood on shaky feet with blood pumping and left them to finish their breakfasts. I wobbled on rubber legs out to the Lincoln.

A couple days later, Lando was back. He said he had to drop off his girl and that he’d come right over. He let himself in and I was on the living room floor painting my toenails.

“The fuck is this?” he laughed.

“You’re next,” I said, without looking up. He dropped onto the sofa and put his feet up.

“How was your romantic getaway?”

“Was alright,” he said, picking up the remote.

“What’d you guys get up to?” I said.

“Just got a room on the beach. Swam, snorkeled, you know.”



“You snorkeled?” I laughed.

“What’s so funny?” he said.

I rolled my eyes. Lando turned on the TV. It was loud. “Mute that for a minute,” I said. “A lot of shit happened when you were away. Lando muted the tv and looked down at his phone.

“Hello?!” I snapped my fingers. “Wake up! What’s with you lately? This is important!”

“I’m listening!” he said.

“My lawyer says the cops had two informants on Taz. Not only that, they messed up and forgot to black out some of his disclosure. One of them was named.” Now I had his attention.

“Remember I told you that Jer guy showed up the night before the raid? It was him!”

“Who was the other one?” he shifted.

“A chick. That’s all I know. Her name was redacted.”

He exhaled hard. “Shit.”

“My lawyer said to be careful.”

“It’s gotta be a dancer,” he said.

“It’s gotta be,” I said. “I think we should cut off the Emerald Room and all the other runners and stick with Pepsi and the Dentist. That’s where the cash is.” I missed a nail and painted the side of a toe. “Shit.”

“Yeah,” he nodded. “Good call. What happened with Walsh and the Dentist anyway?”

“The breakfast? That’s the other thing.” I said. “They’ve had some problems getting the stuff across the border. You think the twins would do it?”

“Wow.” Lando rubbed his face and ran his hands back through his hair. “This is getting heavy.”

“Yeah, really.” I spotted my purse next to him. “Pass me that.” He did and I lit a cigarette and threw him one, too. “What do you think?”

“What’s our cut?” he said.

“We didn’t get too far into details,” I said, “but it’s big. Guaranteed,” I dragged my cigarette with a shaky hand. He wants us to go meet his guy in Mexico if we can get the twins on board.”

“So, I don’t get it. What changed? You were so sketchy about everything before and now you want to dive in even deeper?” he said, “*after* knowing there’s rats?”

“Ya, and you were all hot and horny before and now you’re a sketch bag. Hear me out, this way we wouldn’t even have to touch it. It would go from the twins to our big dumb driver to Pepsi. Plus, it would be insane money! We could get out even faster. We’d only have to do a few loads and then we could just fuck off.”

He blew O’s at the ceiling. “Alright, fuck it. Let’s do it,” he said. “I’ll call the twins.”

“Yes! This is gonna work. It’s gonna be good!”

“Yeah, babe,” he said with a faint smile.

“Sure you’re alright?” I said.

“All good.” He slapped his knees and stood up. “I gotta go. Been a long ass day.”

“Yeah get some sleep, bro,” I said. “Oh, do you have last week’s cash?”

“Uh, I’ll have it next week, was kind of an expensive weekend.” He scratched the back of his neck and walked toward the door.

“Yeah, cool. Let me know what the twins say!” I called and went back to blowing on my smudged toes.

It didn't take convincing. The twins were on board and Lando and I set off to meet 'Charlie' down on the Mexican west coast. A long-ass flight and a layover later, Lando and I walked off a plane in Puerto Vallarta. I calmed my nerves with too much Whiskey the night before and I was sick as hell. The airport was hot and the long line for customs was enough to make me puke. Lando said nothing the entire flight except that I looked like shit. He was a man of few words but he spoke the truth. We grabbed our bags and loaded into a cab for the 40-minute drive to Bucerías. There were old shops and locals and wild dogs wandering the uneven streets. Our host's place was in the middle of it all with a solid fence around it. He came out to greet us. "Hola!" he called, skipping down the steps. He was in a pork pie hat with shorts that cut off above his knobby knees. He was a lot younger than the Dentist, and a lot older than us.

"Welcome to beautiful Mexico." He pronounced the 'x' as an 'h' and smiled with an outstretched hand. "I'm Charlie." We introduced ourselves. "How was the flight?"

"Good, I said."

He motioned toward my suitcase. "Can I take that for you?"

"It's OK, I've got it," I said.

We walked through the front door and we were hit by a cool breeze. Floor to ceiling glass and wide open doors led to a shining infinity pool. Its blue bled into the ocean and sky.

"This is incredible," I said to Charlie. I looked back at Lando.

His eyes were wide. "Nice fucking place, man."

We left our bags to check out the view from the deck. Charlie joined. "Yeah thanks, been here for a couple years now." He thought about it. "Two and a half I think." He looked over.

"How you guys doing? You want to rest a bit? I can show you your rooms."

My insides were burning with whisky. "That would be great, thanks."

We wheeled behind him down the hall. The rooms were modern and minimalist, each with its own ensuite and door to the deck. “I’ll be out tonight but I’ll give you the code for the gate in case you wanna look around town later. There’s a cool little tiki bar just around the corner. They make a mean margarita.”

“Thanks,” I said. We’ll check it out.”

“Thanks man,” Lando said.

“I’ll show you where the transport trucks load tomorrow. Make yourselves at home.”

He left and I ran straight to the bathroom for a painful whiskey shit, nearly mistaking the bidet for a toilet. I slept until dark and Lando and I made the short walk through town for a drink. Charlie wasn’t joking. Those salty margaritas were strong as hell and I blacked out somewhere after the third one. We walked back along the beach and I climbed straight into my clean white sheets with sandy legs and feet. I woke up red and itchy all over and that night I learned my lesson about heavy-handed Mexicans and sand fleas.

Around noon the next day, the three of us drove to the loading area. Charlie showed us around and gave us precise instructions to take back to the twins. “Why don’t you guys stay?” He said as we got back into the car. “I have some friends flying in from Hawaii tomorrow. They’re good shit,” he laughed. “Trust me, these guys know how to party. We’re gonna get a place in Sayulita, it’s not far from here. You can bring down some friends, enjoy yourselves for a while.”

“I’m fuckin’ down,” I said. I looked at Lando in the backseat. “What do you think?”

“I’m in, let’s do it!” he said.

We canceled our flights and called home as soon as we got back to Charlie’s.

“Alright, Jess is a yes,” I said, flipping my phone shut. “She’s looking for a flight.”

“Why don’t you invite the Drake?” Lando smirked.

“First, it’s not *the* Drake. It’s Drake. This isn’t Seinfeld.” I laughed. “He’s a dud. Who’d you call?”

“Viva,” he said, walking out to the pool.

“Wait, what? Is that who you’ve been seeing?” I grabbed my drink and followed him.

“Yeah,” he said and changed the subject. “We should swim. You wanna swim?”

“Hold on!” I said, “why haven’t you said anything?”

“You didn’t ask,” he shrugged.

“OK . . . so now I’m asking,” I said. “How’s that going?”

“It’s great, going really well,” he said, pulling his shirt up over his hard body.

I looked out over the water. Everything was bright and blue, the pool, the ocean, the sky. They faded from one into the next. “Good. I’m happy for you, babe,” I said. “So, what’s her deal?”

He went to answer then stopped.

“What? Now I really want to know!”

“She works at a massage parlor.” He fidgeted with the drawstring on his trunks.

“How do you feel about that?” I said, finishing my drink.

He shrugged. “It’s a job, ya know?”

I nodded. “Yeah.” I lit a cigarette and blew a gray cloud into the clear sky.

“They make stupid money in those places,” he said, reaching for my cigarette and we didn’t say anything for a while. The waves blew into the shore and the wind passed through the trees.

“What exactly do they do in there?” I said, finally. “The girls, in those rooms?”

“They just get oiled up and slide their tits up and down the guy’s back.”

I laughed. “For real?” I took my cigarette back. “I thought they just jerked them off.”

“Not always.”

“Right. I need a drink,” I said standing up. “Want one?”

“Double me up, girl.”

He walked over to the ledge and dove in headfirst.

A couple of days later, we loaded up and drove to Sayulita. It was touristy, full of expats and long-haired surfers. We rented a villa that edged on a steep cliff over the ocean. There were three separate buildings wrapping around a central pool. They were all impressive but the main one was really something. We wheeled our cases across the tile, looking up and around at high ceilings and grand furniture. There was a bank of glass windows and doors to our left that led to an outdoor living area. A banquet sized table was lined with bowls of fruit and bottles and trays of things. We stopped to watch a pair of fake tits get up from her lounge and walk over for a piece of watermelon.

“Oof!” Lando said. “Look at that.” He was struck. The rest of Charlie’s friends stood by the pool.

“Ah, they’re here!” Charlie left his case and walked through the doors. “Come meet everyone,” he called back.

‘Spunk’ was in velcro sandals and a loud-colored tank top. He wore a dark headband and too many bracelets. ‘Bambi’ was the one with the boobs. She gave a weak smile and swung her narrow hips back to the pool.

‘Esha’ was tall with wide shoulders, long swim trunks, and a big nose. He was kinda cute. “Just in time!” he laughed. “You don’t wanna miss out on this bad boy.” He had a pipe in one

hand and a lighter in the other. “Ever blasted off on a rocket ride and talked to aliens?” He had a contagious laugh.

“DMT?” said Charlie, “Nice, brother!”

“We got it all,” Esha joked.

Charlie laughed. “Beasting already! OK, let us drop our shit off first.”

My room was ridiculous. The bathroom alone was half the size of my condo and every inch was a pinkish marble. It echoed with every sound. I changed into my bikini and flowy pants and joined Lando and the others outside. They had blankets laid out about twenty feet from the cliff’s edge. The rumble of waves was steady below us.

“Have you ever done this before?” Esha asked. I shook my head. “OK, inhale as deep as you can, and hold it for as long as you can,” he said, “or you’ll get left behind.” I looked at Lando and everyone else, sitting cross-legged in a misshapen circle. They all looked chill. “Lay on your back as soon as you exhale,” Esha said, “so you can buckle up for the ride!”

There was a gust of wind and my hair went into my mouth and eyes. I wasn’t good with heights and all I could think about was falling off that ledge. Or jumping from it. I watched the bodies sink back until it was my turn.

“Remember to breathe in hard. Three hits,” he said, handing me the pipe. I did it and lay back and was shot through a wormhole at warp speed. There were blinking and flashing and pulsing lights and they were blinding. I was spat out the far end and I was no longer me, and these short little elves with evil little faces tried to distract me. There was a bright light and she was everything, she said, and she tried to reach for me but the elves swallowed me up and pulled me from the stars to the centre of hell. I gave up fighting and they ate my soul.

I was terrified and I couldn't breathe. I scrambled to my feet and tripped on the blanket before making a break for the house. I had a sinking dread and I had to make it stop. Colors and shapes and textures grated over my eyes. I got to my room and rifled through my suitcase for my Xanax. I took three and peeked out my room's sliding door. They were all in the same spot and my heart beat fast and loud. The elves were in the corners of my eyes and they hid when I whipped my head around to catch them. I jogged, barefoot, down the cold marble floors, keeping an eye out the windows to my right. The kitchen was now only a few strides up to my left. I spotted a bottle of rum on the counter and a dark-skinned man stood behind it. He was in a white uniform dicing tomatoes.

I slowed down to a walk and tried to settle my breath.

"Hola," he said, "Señorita, what can I get for you?" He smiled and leaned on the counter. He held himself up by the palms of his hands.

What I wanted was for him to not be there. I checked the bank of windows behind me. The others had migrated to the pool. They were getting closer and the elves were darting behind furniture. I looked back at him with my skin on fire.

"This," I pointed. "Just this," I picked the rum up by its neck.

"Do you want something with it?" he said.

I was already walking away and I broke into a jog halfway down the hall. I locked myself in my room, got into bed, lit a cigarette, and started on the bottle. I was going to hell. I took a hard long swig and a shaky drag and checked the clock beside me. 6:29pm, it said in glowing green numbers. The Xanax would have to start working soon. I sunk back into the layers of pillows. By 6:57pm the elves had fucked off and my existence was less searing.

There was a knock on my door. "Yo! Bets!"



I let Lando in and got back in bed. He closed the door behind him. He was twisted. “That was fucked!” he said. “It was like being shot through space! Everyone saw like, lights and crazy colors and like, machine, or mechanical elves or something doing cartwheels and shit.” His eyes got wide. “But it’s like I know what it’s all about now,” he sat at the foot of the bed. “Like I truly understand everything. This beautiful goddess told me that everything was going to be OK. Well she didn’t actually say it but I knew it, it’s like she said it without having to say it, you know?” I took a drink. “We *all* saw the same shit!” He shook his head. “Fucking crazy! What about you?” He looked around my room and at my blown apart suitcase. “What are you doing in here?”

“I got sick,” I said. “Puked my brains out.”

“Aw man, yeah I heard that can happen.” He eyed the bottle, “that’s not making it worse?”

“Nah, it’s taking the edging off,” I said.

“You’re a machine,” he laughed. “Anyway, the staff are setting the table for dinner, you comin’?”

I hesitated. “Ya, let’s go.” I followed him back down the hall and listened to him ramble on about his amazing trip and sat through an entire dinner of it. I felt everyone looking at me the rest of the night and they looked away when I tried to catch them. I made it to midnight. I fended off advances from Esha and Bambi’s little digs. She’d already decided she didn’t like me and she was fighting a one-sided battle of who was the prettiest. I confused her with kindness and played coy with Esha’s hard-on until I gave up, bowed out, and went to drink in bed.

The girls arrived later the next day. Jess, Viva, and some other girl that the guys invited. She came off as a twat so I mostly avoided her. I didn’t get along with many women and when I did, I usually had to be pretty fucked up.

“Holy shit!” Jess was loud and raspy. Her dark curly hair and Viva’s ass made an entrance. It put Bambi in her place. “Hey Bitch! You weren’t joking!” She looked around before giving me a hug. “Look at this place!”

I laughed and turned to give Viva a hug. “Hey you, long time!” I said.

“I know! It’s so nice to see you,” she said. “I love it here!” This girl was way out of Lando’s league.

“You guys can take the first two rooms on the right over there,” I pointed. “Get your suits on! We’re gonna get fucked up by the pool.” They did, and we did, and that night the Hawaii guys hired a DJ and set up speakers and turntables by the pool. The bass followed us everywhere we went, across the beach, through the yard, up the walks, down the walls, and up through the mattresses. They handed out little squares of acid and said it was from the original recipe of the Grateful Dead, whatever that meant. Their ecstasy was liquid and in little brown bottles. I’d never seen anything like it and it was the best I’d ever had. There was an odd number of us, five girls and four guys and all were linked up but one. It was Viva and Lando, Jess and Spunk, the other girl and Charlie, and Bambi had eyes for Esha, but Esha had eyes for me.

The breeze smelled sweet and the beats ran through us. I could see the music and touch the sky. Esha joined me on a lounge and we looked up at stars that peeked through coconuts and swaying palm leaves. He told me he grew weed in Washington and had a place in Hawaii, and it was a good life. He said I should come visit him on the island. I said I should and told him about me, too. The two of us wound up in my room and we talked and drank and smoked in my bed. He made me laugh. We watched the walls breathe and pixelate and rotate into colorful fractals until we rotated together and rode the rumbling bass beneath us. He fell asleep and I lay there under a blanket of drumming and chaos. I was restless and tangled in a fitful web. I got up for

Xanax and long swigs of vodka and crawled back in next to Esha's steady breathing. I hung in that space between sleep and wake and I fought to stay there. I was heavy and paralyzed the elves tried to pull me down. I tried to scream but nothing came out. I held on tight to Esha's steady breath and I somehow made it through to morning.

We had a catamaran trip booked for noon the next day and it was a hectic, head pounding rush to get myself up and ready. My face was puffy and my eyes and mouth were like sandpaper. I did what I could with a brush and some makeup and joined the others in the shuttle. The DJ jumped in, too, with a bag of Mexican E to make up for all our empty brown bottles. The sky was clear and the sun was hot, too hot. The guys handed out the E, the staff poured drinks, and we set sail. That shitty E gave me the shits and I ran back and forth to the little cabin toilet. The crew gave me a crooked look each time. It finally stopped and I sat propped up against the mast with a drink and my cigarettes close by. Esha joined me.

"There's my girl," he said, plopping down. Beer sloshed up around the sides of his cup. "Last night was hot," he said. He squeezed the top of my thigh.

I lit a cigarette. "That liquid E is so good. Much better than this shit," I said. "And that acid, fuck."

"He knows his shit," he nodded toward Spunk in head-to-toe tie-dye. "Can I borrow one of those?" I handed him a cigarette and we leaned back against the towering mast. The breeze felt good. Three of the girls were spread out on towels below us, bare bums up. Bambi had her top off, hanging upside down, doing tricks with the ropes and wires. The guys watched. She had Esha's attention, too and she was looking directly at me. "What's the deal with your friend Jess?" he said.

"What do you mean?"

He took a drag. “Like, how well do you know her?”

“We mostly party,” I said. “Why?”

“Spunk says she asks a lot of questions. She’s trippin’ him out.”

“What kind of questions?”

His eyes went back and forth between Bambi’s routine and his cigarette. “I don’t know. Just nosey.”

“She’s alright,” I said.

“You sure?”

I looked down at her, browning her bare ass in the sun and thought about the mystery informant. I didn’t know her *that* well. She just sort of clung on to where the action was.

“*We’ll anchor here!*” The captain called out and some of us piled into a zodiac, and some of us swam to the island’s shore. Spunk did a second trip to get a box of champagne he’d brought for the occasion. We got high and most swam and ran around on the beach. Some went to explore but I stayed and third-wheel’d it with Lando and Viva. That shitty E had done nothing for my energy and the sun was relentless. I’d forgotten a hat in my frenzy out the door and it wasn’t going well. An hour later, everyone was back but Bambi and Esha, and Spunk popped champagne corks into the ocean. The two finally emerged, full of sand and holding on to one another. Bambi grabbed a bottle and jumped up and down, bouncing her big bare boobs, and rained champagne down all over us.

By the time we got back I was so sick I didn’t know what to do with myself. My hairline was blistered from the sun and I ran back and forth to the toilet to vomit. It finally stopped and I finally slept.

*I was running through an endless hall. Every door was locked and looked the same as the one before it. One finally opened to a massive room that was packed to the ceiling with garbage. I tried to tunnel my way through but the weight was crushing. Lando was there. He was being crushed, too and he pulled himself forward on his elbows. The bags started to shake and pull apart underneath me. He reached out with his hand but I fell through a crack in the sky. I landed running as fast as I could through a shining gold field. The wheat whipped at my legs and my blonde hair fell out in fistfuls behind me. It swirled and whipped and danced in the wind. I tried to gather it up but it turned to dark curls and slid through my fingers.*

I woke up soaked and the blankets were cold on top of me. I threw them off and ran my hands back through my hair over and over and searched for dry clothes to bundle up in. I felt rough. I was burnt and blistered and the comedown from that E was almost too much to handle. I didn't know what I needed. I got warm then cleaned myself up and took a beer out to the pool. Jess was there on a lounge.

"Spunk says nothing happened with Esha and Bambi," she said, "but she really has it out for you." We were under a cabana and the others finished their breakfasts behind us. The staff moved around the long table with salsa and eggs and coffee. I hadn't mentioned Esha and Bambi's disappearance on the island but I didn't have to. I wasn't the only one who'd noticed.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"I don't know, what can I do?" I shrugged. "I don't have energy to care right now."

"You OK?" she asked.

"I feel like shit," I laughed. "Suicide would be easier."

She laughed, too. "That bad, huh?"

There's only two nights left, anyway," I said, butting out my cigarette.

"True," she said. We lay there silent for a minute. The morning sun was turning hot. "Hey, did you know she's a showgirl in Vegas?"

"That's really not surprising," I said.

"She told Viva she did E for the first time when she was twelve." Her eyes were wide. "Like, holy fuck."

"Wow, that's rough," I said. "Kind of explains a lot."

Dishes clamored behind us and we turned our heads. A little Mexican lady apologized and knelt to clean it up.

"Hey, you know what one of the staff said? They said that the only people who partied harder than us at this place was Drew Barrymore and her friends."

"Seriously?!" I said. "What do we win? The worst chemical hangover ever?"

"Exactly!" Jess laughed. We were quiet another minute. "How's all the other stuff going, like with Drake and Pepsi? Did they end up buying?"

"Know what?" I said, "I really have to go back to bed. My life hurts," I joked. "I'll catch you in a bit, alright?"

"Sleep it off!" she called back to me and I made a break for the house.

The booming bass and debauchery continued for two more days and nights and I stuck to alcohol. I decided to save hell for when I was actually dead. I hung out with Esha mostly, he even moved his stuff into my room. He was exciting and different and we laughed a lot. It was a nice change from the guys back home. On the last morning, Jess, Lando, Viva and I were the

first to leave. I said goodbye to everyone but Bambi and the other girl. Esha stopped me before I got in my shuttle.

“I’m serious, babe, I want you to come to see me in Hawaii.” He was holding both of my hands. “You’ll love it. I’ve got a place right on the shore. We can surf, swim, chill . . . get fucked up,” he laughed. “You’ll love it,” he said again. He leaned down and kissed me and I flew home to set up the crackhead twins.

A few days later, Lando introduced us at their place and it was the first and last time I ever saw them. The house was small and we sat on old kitchen chairs with an ominous burnt sofa off to our side. They were both too thin with hollow cheeks and I felt bad for them. We gave them their instructions. They would haul oranges to San Antonio, drop the load and cross over to the Mexican coast. They’d then pick up their mangoes and make another stop for Charlie’s guys to line the crates with the coke. The plan worked for months and I now had over a million saved in bills in the drop ceiling of Gran’s basement.

**“Who’s Gran?” Garlick scrolled back through her notes.**

**“My foster mom. We called her Gran but she wasn’t really. Me and my foster brothers paid her bills and she looked the other way when we used her place to stash stuff. She was a miserable old sod,” I laughed, “but she loved us.”**

One day I went over to see how she was doing. I didn’t know it yet, but everything was about to turn to shit. “Shut the door, there’s a draft,” she said. She always wore a robe with an ankle length nightie. “I don’t give a rat’s ass to fix myself up,” she’d say. “There’s no one left for me to impress.” I shut the door, made sure it formed a seal, and followed her into the kitchen. Her

place smelled as old as it looked. I sat down at the little two-chaired table and pulled over the ashtray.

“You want some tea?” she snipped over her shoulder. She was already filling the kettle.

“Uh, yeah, why not,” I said.

“To what do I owe the pleasure, dear?” She dropped down into the chair across from me.

“Just wanted to visit,” I said, “see how you’re holding up.”

We heard a car pull into the driveway next door. “That neighbor, there.” She leaned in and pointed with her thumb. “A piece of work, that woman.”

“Why what happened?”

“Her cats have been pissing in my flower pots. I caught one of the little buggers.” The kettle whistled. “Those damn cats! I had to throw out all those flowers.”

“Let me do it,” I went to get up but she waved me off.

“Nonsense,” she said, and tottered over to pour our cups. “Do you know she slept around on her husband? She kicked him out and moved her boyfriend right in, that floozy.” She shook her head. “Those poor kids.” She sat down and slid over my tea. I squished the tea bag to the sides of the cup with my spoon. “How do you know that?”

“Margery goes to the same church as her hairdresser.” She leaned in again, “and I think she’s snooping around my house at night. I don’t know what she thinks she’s doing but she’s damn near out of her mind.” She slumped back and took a sip of tea.

“What do you mean, snooping?” I said.

“I mean I can hear her at night. You don’t listen so well do you? I’ve already got that ghost making a racket, I don’t need her too.”

“No, you don’t.” I took a careful sip, studying her. “How long has she been doing it for?”



“Oh, I don’t know.” She trailed off and that was that. I didn’t stay long. I checked the ceiling for my money and it was there. *Thank God*. I gave some to Gran and left to call Lando from the car. He was the only one who knew I kept my money there.

“Gran’s talking some shit,” I said as soon as he picked up.

“When isn’t she talking some shit,” he laughed.

“She said someone’s been lurking around her house at night. She thinks it’s her neighbour but you don’t think someone could be casing the place, do you?”

“I don’t know,” he yawned. “She’s a crazy old woman who says crazy things.”

“Dude, I don’t feel good about this.”

“For fuck sakes, Bets, she talks to ghosts and thinks everyone’s out to get her.”

I exhaled. The car in front of me was going half the limit. “C’mon!” I yelled at it.

“Everything’s fine, babe. That’s just Gran.” He waited. “The new load is here in the morning. One of the twins called. He said there’s a problem and wants to meet.”

“Shit, I gotta be in the city early. I have to see my lawyer,” I said. The Gaff had called earlier that day and it sounded urgent.

“So you are banging him, then. Daddy issues, much?”

“Fuck off,” I said. “He said he had some information.”

“Ya, like ‘breaking news, I’m horny,’” he said.

“Funny.”

“Blow him off, Bets.”

“Listen,” I said. “You go see the twins, I’ll go see my lawyer, and we’ll talk after.”

“Fuck that. You need to be there.”

“Alright, fine,” I said. “I can be back by late afternoon.”

Lando sighed, “what time?”

“Like, 4:00.”

“Yeah OK, love ya.”

“Love ya,” I said and we hung up.

The Gaff was still in a meeting when I arrived. I waited in the reception area in an overstuffed armchair and flipped through all the *Golf*, and *House and Home* magazines. I was bored out of my mind. I threw down the last magazine and watched people come and go and talk to the receptionists. A pretty woman in expensive clothes walked in with two little kids.

“Hi Anna, how are you?” a receptionist said.

“Hi there, I just want to drop this off for Stephen.” Stephen was the Gaff. She handed over a large envelope. “Would you mind?”

“No problem at all.” The receptionist took the envelope and set it on the desk. “Oh, you haven’t met Danicka, she just started yesterday. Danicka, this is Stephen’s wife, Anna.” The two said hello and other pleasantries and Anna said she was late for an appointment and left. My face was hot. There was a Mrs. Gaff.

“You’re more beautiful every time I see you, how is that possible?” The Gaff met me at his office door. He shut it behind us and kissed me hard. His graying beard needled my face. I really did love the way he smelled. He pulled back and stared into me, “I haven’t stopped thinking about you since the Hazel,” he said and all I could think about was Anna.

“Come have a seat, talk to me,” he said, walking back to his desk. He picked up the phone.

“You want a coffee?”

“Sure,” I said.

“*Shannon, two coffees, cream and sugar.*” He hung up. “How are you, love?” He sat back in his leather chair and rested his arms behind his head. “I’d ask if you were staying out of trouble but I already know the answer to that.”

“Oh? And how would you know that?” I smiled.

“A little birdie told me.”

“You don’t know shit,” I smirked.

“You willing to bet your life on that?” He was serious.

There was a light tapping on the door. “Shannon, come in,” he boomed. Shannon set the steaming cups in front of us and closed the door gently behind her. The Gaff put his elbows on the desk and folded his giant hands in front of him. He was wearing gold cufflinks. “Your informant’s a detective,” he said. “And from what I understand, she busted your boy there, Angelo?”

“I don’t know an Angelo,” I said, searching for my cigarettes.

“She was working on Taz’s case and caught a lead on some other big fish, some dentist over in Clear Water.”

I stopped searching.

“She started dating this Angelo guy and took him down for a hell of a lot of money, and a hell of a lot of drugs.” My heart pounded under my ribs. “It was his second offense.” The Gaff slid over a pack and a lighter. My hands shook as I lit up.

“He rolled, Blondie.”

“Fuck,” I said, sinking my head down into my hands.

“You do know him, then. . . .”

“Lando.” I said, wiping my wet face.

“Yeah, that’s it,” he said. “Lando.”

I took a long drag. “You got a drink?”

The Gaff walked over to the cabinet and took a bottle from the biker wall of fame. He poured the brown liquor into my coffee first. “They want that dentist, but they’ll take down as many of you as they can.”

I looked up at him. “Lando said he wanted me to meet at the drop spot. I’m supposed to be there this afternoon.”

“Yeah, well he wants you standing next to the drugs so they can bust you red handed.” He took a slow sip and set the cup back down. “Do not go.”

I scratched my fingers back through my hair. I was panicked. I couldn’t think. “What am I supposed to do?”

“You have money somewhere, right?”

I nodded.

“Leave it!” He was stern. “Do *not* touch it. They could be watching. Get out of town for a while until we know more. You have somewhere you can go?”

I was dizzy. “Yeah.”

## **PART II: L.A. Woman**

I didn't take much, just the \$20k from the back of my closet and a couple suitcases of clothes and things. I went to the city first to get a fresh set of wheels. The Cuban mechanic drove the 1999 Lesabre around from the back and the wheels stopped about an inch from my feet. It was shiny and clean with soft white leather on 6-way power seats. At least I'd be comfortable for the forty-hour drive. The I-40 stretched on for ages and I killed the time with a bag of blow and a carton of cigarettes. I opened the window to throw out my missed calls and I left it open the rest of the trip. Maybe my nerves would get sucked out with them. I had a new burner cradled in the cupholder and somewhere outside Tucson, I finally used it.

"There she is," Esha said.

"I'm on a little road trip," I said. I'm headed your way and was wondering if your offer. . . ."

"Get your pretty little ass out here," he said before I could finish. "I'm in Waikiki, I can pick you up. Let me know."

We hung up, I exhaled, and scanned the roadside for a shitty motel.

I woke the next morning to voices, car doors, and popping gravel through the single pane glass. Orange numbers on the bedside clock said 8:13am. I looked around at the faded room. It had thick drapes and a heavy 28" Zenith on a brass-legged stand. It was 9:00am by the time I turned my legs off the bed and I sat there blinking on carpet under my eyelids. I stepped over crumpled jeans and socks, pulled out a cigarette and dropped onto a wobbly chair. "Do not pass go, do not collect \$200," the Gaff had told me. More like a million. I was sick about it and I hadn't had a drink since. Lando was back east, doing God knows what. And now what was I? A fugitive? Not a traitor, that was Lando. He was a rat and I had no love left for him. As far as I

knew, the cops didn't have enough on me and I hoped it stayed that way. I needed one for the road so I had a hot shower on limey tile and wheeled my things out to the Buick. I stopped at the front desk to return my key with its permanent marker '35'.

"Could you tell me where I could get a good breakfast?" I asked the chubby Mexican lady behind the desk.

"Two lights," she pointed, then hooked her arm to the right.

"Down there to the right?"

She nodded, hung up my key, and waddled away.

I found a place that was nowhere near what her imagination had cooked up. It looked like a small house, painted blue with flimsy tables on a wide front porch. I sat in the shade and ordered a bloody Mary and a beer and had them finished by the time my overflowing breakfast came. I'd ordered eggs but the waitress was rounding the corner with refried beans, eggs, fruit, thick cut toast, hash, tomatoes and salsa piled high. I finished that too and sat there looking out over the dusty lot. The dry air was uncomfortably hot and my full stomach was stretched out in front of me. I emptied it in a rusty toilet and made the eight-hour drive to LAX. I ran out of coke somewhere outside Anaheim and I was now in the middle of a soul-crushing come-down.

"The afternoon flight is full," the woman at the airport told me without looking up from her screen. "There *is* a 6:00am flight I could put you on." She glanced up.

"What about the next day?" I said. Sweat beaded down my temples. Everyone was looking at me, I was sure of it. I needed a hotel and a stiff drink.

"That, I can do," she said. Her fingers whipped along the keyboard and the sound ricocheted inside my skull.

I was a disaster by the time I got to the front desk of the Marriott. Suspicious eyes handed me a key and told me where my room was. My heart rattled and my face burned all the way up the elevator, down the hall, and into my boxy room. Even the mattress and lamp shades had sharp edges. I cracked open tiny little caps on tiny little bottles and tipped them back, one after the other, until they were all gone and I fell hard and fast into a restless dream.

*I turned left down the dead-end road. There were only four houses and I was going to the last one on the right. It was a group home for bad kids, for fuck up delinquents with nowhere else to go. It looked different when I got inside but it smelled the same. It still hit me sometimes. It transported me back to fifteen years old, sneaking out to smoke weed with my friends. It looked different now but I was there. I climbed the stairs. Landing after landing rounded to a new flight until I finally reached the top. Lando was in his room. The counselors removed his door for bad behaviour and he never did get it back. A door is a privilege, they always said. He sat on the bed with his back to me. "Yo Lando," I said, "wanna go blow this joint?" I held up the pregnant roll-job between my two fingers. He didn't say anything. "Hey!" I yelled to the back of his head and it echoed all around us, but he just sat there. He was a statue. The last room was empty and a tall mirror towered to my right. I was shirtless in front of it and my ribs stuck out under my little boobs. I heard counselors pounding up all those flights and glass shattered and blew out of the window beside me. There was nothing but darkness behind it. I heard a raspy voice, and I looked down at my breast that was sliced along the top and its black rotten teeth grinned up at me.*

**“That sounds like a nightmare,” Garlick interrupted.**

**I shrugged. “My dreams are always like that.”**

**She nodded and typed.**

**“Did you live in a group home?”**

**“Yeah, when I was fifteen,” I said.**

**“And you were with your parents before that?”**

**“Yeah, well, with my mom and my brother. He moved away when he was eighteen and my mom sent me there not long after. “**

**“Can I ask why?” she said.**

**“I was out of control. It was too much for her.” I shrugged. “She moved away and gave me to the State, basically.”**

**“Out of control, how?”**

**“I dunno, I ran away a lot. She kicked me out a lot, too.” Garlick nodded as she typed.**

**“She was just always drinking and yelling at us,” I went on. “Well, not always. There were times when she was really nice but then she’d just explode out of nowhere. You could just look at her funny and she’d slap you across the face.”**

**“Are you in contact?”**

**“With my mom?” I shook my head. “No, not since she gave me up.”**

**“How about your brother . . . what’s his name?”**

**“Brian. And no, it was bad between us,” I said. “It’s like she pit us against each other or something. I was her favorite. Then he was her favorite. . . . One of us was always blamed for everything.”**



**“Blamed for what?” Garlick softened.**

**I shrugged. “Her unhappiness, I guess. She said we ruined her life. Brian left after the second divorce. Every few years she’d just freak out or something and we’d move and start over. Her drinking would get worse and she’d bang a bunch of guys.”**

**“Has anyone in your family been diagnosed with a mental health disorder that you know of?”**

**“No, but I’m sure it’s there.”**

**She nodded. “You said you moved around a lot as a kid?”**

**“Yeah, I went to seven different middle schools and high schools. I eventually dropped out.”**

**“How long were you at the group home for?”**

**“About a year,” I said. “But then I got a foster placement.”**

**“What was that like?” she asked.**

**“It was pretty good, I guess. Gran was cranky but harmless.”**

**“When you say ‘us’, who are you referring to?”**

**“My foster brothers. Lando was one of them. And D, Daniel, was the other. She took us all in. We were really close.”**

**“So,” She finished typing and cozied up with her coffee. “What happened next?”**

Well, I slept all the next day, too and I had more crazy dreams. Most I can’t remember. I left the car in long term parking and boarded my flight to Honolulu. I drank too much beside a middle-aged man who eventually gave up trying to talk to me. Esha was there, on time, waiting

by the luggage carousel. He had a cute smile and he walked toward me with his arms stretched wide. He gave me a bear hug against his warm body.

“I knew you couldn’t resist,” he laughed. “Give me those.” He took my suitcases and threw my pack over his shoulder. “C’mon, baby. Let me show you paradise.”

His ‘68 Bronco was topless and jacked on wide tires and shiny chrome. “Sick truck!” I said, getting in.

“Ya? You have good taste.” Esha threw my bags in the back and we made the forty-minute drive past roadside shops on thick green dips and peaks. He kept looking over and smiling with one hand on the wheel and the other squeezing mine. We didn’t talk and his sandy hair flipped around in the wind. We pulled up to a cream bungalow with a red tile roof and a double garage. The sun was hot and my hair was in knots. I tried to brush it with my fingers while Esha carried my things in. “I’ll give you the tour!” he called back. The sound reverberated off the tall room. His house looked modest from the front but opened up to an echoing main floor with half steps and curved white railings. Thick-trimmed windows looked out over blue waves and heavy furniture sat on cool tile. There was an upper-deck with a pool and a green yard below it that edged a sandy bank. He stopped our tour there and we stood facing the wind.

“What do you wanna do? You tired?” He raised an eyebrow. “We could go lay down for a bit.” He ran his hands up and down my sides then slowly moved one of them down the front of my shorts. We kissed for a while and I followed him back to his room. We stayed there after, smoking and drinking, wrapped in white sheets and soft blankets.

“So, if you’re here with me, who’s taking care of ‘bid-ness?’ Lando?”

I was on my side facing him, propped up on a bent arm. “Nah, that’s a dumpster fire.”

He laughed, “what did you do?”

“Kinda dodged a bullet,” I said, picking at the sheets.

“From which side?”

“Both, I guess.” I shrugged.

“So I’m aiding and abetting a fugitive,” he laughed, turning over to his back. “That’s a new one.”

“You’re fine,” I said. “It was just best to get out of town for a bit.”

“Come here,” he said, reaching for me. He pulled me down to his broad shoulder and ran his fingers up and down my arm.

That night we did K and liquid ecstasy and I danced and spun and ran along the soft ocean sand. My hair lifted up and around in strong gusts of wind. Speakers blared The Doors<sup>1</sup> and Esha and I sang along.

My thin dress whipped in the wind.

I belted the lyrics, and my voice cracked over the crashing waves.

I woke up late the next day and did nothing but drink in bed and binge watch the Sopranos. Esha joined a few episodes in.

“I’ve been meaning to watch that, is it good?”

“It’s *really* good.” I paused the DVD. “Tony is the mob boss of New Jersey and he’s seeing a shrink.” I pointed with the remote. “That’s Dr. Melfi.” She was frozen on the screen, cross-legged in a smart skirt and matching jacket. I looked up at Esha standing by the bed. “Did you know that you can tell a therapist anything and they can’t tell anyone?”

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<sup>1</sup> The Doors (1971).

“Like lawyer-client privilege?”

“Yeah. I didn’t know that,” I said.

“Yeah, I wouldn’t trust it,” he said, stripping off his clothes and climbing in next to me.

I hesitated. “Neither,” I said and pressed play.

I watched Dr. Melfi, stoic and confident. In that room, across from that powerful man, she was the one in control.

“Seems like bullshit,” Esha said. “Like, why would that guy go to a shrink?”

“He’s having panic attacks and he’s depressed. Melfi says it stems back to his mother. She’s a real cunt, but it’s ‘cause she has a personality disorder, or something.”

“A cunt is just a cunt.”

“A cunt *is* a cunt,” I laughed. “Maybe *you* should be a therapist.”

“You’re lucky you’re cute!” Esha rolled over and jabbed and tickled my sides. I laughed harder and pulled away and he pinned down my arms. “Where are you going?” He grabbed me tight with his big fists and threw his heavy weight on top of me. He kissed me hard and forced himself inside me. I kissed him back.

Esha was good to me. He did things for me and told me I was beautiful and always wanted to know if I was OK. He was interested in what I had to say and he talked about our future. We laughed at the same things and liked the same music and we drank and got high every day and night. “I love you,” he told me. “I know it’s quick, but I don’t care. I love you.” I told him I loved him, too and I felt like the luckiest girl in the world.

A few weeks into my Hawaii vacation I finally called home. What happened after I left was a question mark and the only one I could talk to was the Gaff. Shannon transferred me over.

“How’s the land of coconut bras and grass skirts,” he said in that deep voice.

“Windy.”

He laughed. “How you holding up, love?”

“Can’t complain. You should see my view right now.” I sat at the foot of the bed and looked out a bank of tall windows.

“You’ve got a horseshoe up your ass, Blondie.”

I breathed into the phone. “So, how bad is it?”

“They got the twins and 40 kilos,” he said.

I rubbed my forehead and let it sink in. “And Lando? Did they just let him go or what?”

“Not sure, hun,” he said. He covered the receiver and his voice was muffled, “*get me the Chansky file*,” he said and uncovered it again. “They didn’t go after your Gran’s, as far as I know.”

I exhaled hard through puffed cheeks. “Alright, damage could be worse.”

“A *lot* worse. Count your lucky stars.”

I picked at the side of the mattress.

“Don’t you get brave and try for that cash,” he said.

“Nah. Not yet.”

“Take care of yourself,” he said. “Keep in touch.”

“Thank you,” I said, “for everything,” and we hung up.

Esha was in the doorway. “Everything cool?” he asked.

I nodded. “Ya, it’s cool.”

“Alright then, get your shit, we’re going surfing!”

Spunk met us on the beach in front of Esha's. They gave me a ten-minute lesson on the sand and led me into the waves. I got up for five solid seconds on my first try then wobbled and lost my footing.

"Holy fuck, girl. I've never seen that before!" Spunk said, looking at Esha and back at me. We straddled our boards, bobbing around in a lull. There was a monster forming over their shoulders. Spunk turned and saw it. "That one there! C'mon!" He got on his belly and paddled straight for it. I followed, off to his side. He got in front of it and turned his board around. I did the same, and it barreled up behind us. My board lifted and I pushed up with my arms. I tucked in my feet and I stood, too tall, too fast. My board shot forward and I shot back. I was pulled down by my arms and my legs and I struggled under a muffled roar. I fought my way up and caught a deep breath. I whipped my head around to find the guys. Spunk was already chasing the next one. He caught it and crouched against a hanging orange sun and he was a shadow skipping across a cresting wave.

My limbs were jello when we finally rode to shore. I needed a cigarette and a drink and a hot shower. Esha had reserved a table in town, he said, and some of his friends would be joining us. I went to the bathroom with some blow and a cold one and got myself fixed up for dinner. I stood in the mirror fussing with my makeup and Esha was on the phone in the other room. The other guy was on speaker.

*"So you're heading up next month, bro?"* the other guy asked.

*"Yeah, man. The new fields are cleared,"* Esha said. *"The Jimmies are cloned and under lights. Should be ready to plant in a few weeks."*

*"Alright,"* said the other guy, *"How many now?"*

*“About five, maybe six thousand,” Esha said. I could hear him pacing. “We could really use some more cash for the new fields and equipment.”*

*“Man, I’m tapped,” the guy responded. “You know, with the house and everything. The old lady’s out of control with the decorating, the landscaping, and all her other bullshit. Fucking women and their spending.”*

*“You’re missing the trees for the forest, man.” Esha was annoyed. “You were supposed to be good on this. I’m all in.”*

*“I said I’m tapped, dude. I already put in what I could. What about your girl there? You said she’s into some heavy shit, no?”*

Esha took him off speaker. He lowered his voice and walked out of the room.

I finished off my face and some lines and clicked my heels down the driveway to the Bronco. Esha put the top on to save my hair and we rolled back on tall tires into the falling night. He smiled and yelled over the engine’s rumble. “It’s good timing right now. A lot of the crew are here.” He looked back and forth between me and the road. “We all work together, you know, back and forth from Washington. You’ll meet Zeke and his lady, they have a sick place just down the beach from me.” My eyes were fixed out the window. The road was lined with little trucks and Jeeps. Tangled hair and surfboards weaved around them. “You know Spunk,” he went on. And there’s Moose. “He’s a pro surfer, just got sponsored by one of the big guys. He’s a solid dude.”

“Oh that’s cool,” I said, smiling over at him.

He thought for a minute, “Who else . . .?”

“Oh yeah, Bambi will be there. She hangs around sometimes but she’s usually back in Nevada with her sugar daddy.” I nodded and looked back out the window. I adjusted my dress

and ran my fingers back through my hair. “These are good peeps,” he said, “Not like those flopdicks you’re running with.”

We pulled up to a refaced strip that ran along a busy side road. The front of the restaurant was glass and people sat behind it sipping their wine. They chatted and laughed in the candlelight. We followed our host to a private back room and most of the crew were already there. There was a mix of girls and guys. Earthy types, and the women wore little if any makeup. I stood at the head of the table, balanced on five-inch heels.

“Everyone, this is Blondie,” Esha said.

“Hey, I’m \_\_\_\_.” She was Zeke’s lady. I don’t remember her name. I never saw her again after that night. She stood up and hugged me. “This is Zeke,” she said and he got up and hugged me, too. “We’re huggers.”

I wasn’t. “Hi,” I said.

Zeke was broad and cut with dark coffee skin. He had wild thick dreads and stunning gray eyes. She was less impressive. She had a plump round face and mouse brown hair and it hung limp on her shoulders. Esha moved down the table to pat backs and shake hands. I sat beside her and she introduced me to the others.

She pointed. “That’s \_\_\_\_ over there.” She was a free spirit with long tangled hair. I never saw her again either. “\_\_\_\_!” Zeke’s girlfriend got her attention, “this is Blondie, Esha’s friend.” The free spirit gave me a shallow wave.

“Hey,” I smiled.

“Moose! How was it!?” Zeke’s girlfriend called over to the doorway. He’d just arrived. She was loud and annoying.



“Fuckin’ sick!” Moose said, making an ‘OK’ with his fingers. “Caught some big waves.” He was skinny and tanned with a sun-aged face. He wore a fedora and his shorts were bright orange.

“This is Blondie.”

He had a creeping smile.

“She’s Esha’s” she said.

Moose deflated, “Too bad.”

“Wine?” She reached for a bottle of red on the table and filled me up.

Esha pulled out a chair and sat next to me. Spunk showed up and squeezed my shoulders on his way to an empty seat. “You should see this girl surf,” he said to a deaf table. “First time out and got up on her first try!” He took his seat and poured himself some wine.

Esha put his arm around the back of my chair. “How you doing? You have a drink. Good.”

“Aloha.” A little bald man in a white coat was in the doorway.

“How’s everyone tonight?” he said. “Are we ready?”

“How are you, my man?” Zeke said. He was friendly with a magnet smile. “Work your magic, bro. We’ll take whatever you’ve got going. There’s just one more coming.”

Everyone chatted and drank. I mostly drank, and the waiters brought out long trays and stretched them out in front of us.

“Hey bitches!” Bambi made her entrance. Her shorts were too short and she was braless in a tight white tank top that stretched across her big fake tits. Her nipples were hard and cock-eyed. She scowled at me and smiled down the table. “\_\_\_\_\_!” She skipped down to the free spirit chick with her shoulders pulled back.

We ate and drank, and I mostly drank and we packed into trucks and Jeeps to Esha’s beachfront bungalow. Everyone bantered and trampled through the front door and up to the top

deck. The pool lights glowed bright blue and the speakers blared, and I dove deep in the vodka. Esha and I found a seat across from Zeke and his lady.

“How long you here for?” she asked over her drink. Zeke cut lines on the table next to her. He stared up his forehead at my bare legs.

“Not sure, really,” I said over the music. “Just thought I’d check out Hawaii while I’m over here.” Zeke was still staring. “Was going to LA to see a friend.”

“You drove all the way from Florida, right?” she said. That’s crazy!”

I nodded. “Yeah, was quite the ride.”

Zeke did a fat line and handed her the rolled bill. She did one, too. “Very cool,” she said and handed it to me.

“It’s blow?” I said. She nodded, pinching her nose. I did mine and passed the bill to Esha.

“How long you here for?” she asked.

“Not sure actually,” I shrugged. My blood was rushing from the coke. My eyes were pinned open. “Just kind of going with the flow.”

“Right on,” said Zeke, sitting back and putting his arm around his lady. They really were an odd couple.

“I’m gonna get some more cigs from my suitcase,” I said standing. “Anyone need anything?”

“All groovy, love,” said Zeke.

I was good and high going up to the second floor on sticky bare feet. I walked down the long hall and turned my head to look in the rooms as I passed. They were all on one side and every one of them had an ocean view. The master was at the end. It was dark and I tried to adjust my eyes. I ran my palm along the walls to find the switch. There was a figure stretched out on the

bed and I struggled to catch my breath. I found it, flicked it on and exhaled hard. Bambi's flowy jacket was laid out lengthwise on my side of the bed. I stood looking at it for a minute. This girl really felt some kind of way about me and I was getting pissed off. I checked myself out in the full-length mirror. I did a side pose and sucked in my stomach. I turned back and forth, judging each side then grabbed a fresh pack and took it out to the dark hallway.

"Blondie!" The voice came at me.

"Holy fuck!" I jumped sideways into the wall.

It was Zeke. "Oh no baby, shhh, it's OK." He reached out and grabbed my shoulder. "I didn't mean to scare you." Those lips and eyes. They were so close.

"It's OK, it's OK, I just wasn't expecting it," I said with my hand on my chest.

"Shit, sorry love. There was someone in the bathroom downstairs. . . . You good?"

I caught my breath. "Good," I nodded.

Zeke took a step back and leaned against the other wall.

We just stood there, looking at each other. "So, how you liking Hawaii?" he finally said.

"First time, right?"

"Yeah, first time. It's beautiful."

Zeke flipped his shoulder length dreads. "Truly." He waited some more then said, "I hear you met Charlie."

I could feel the bass through the floor. I nodded again. "Yeah, he's alright." I dug into my pack and lit up.

"So," he said. He's still sitting on a load."

He was forward. I blew a cloud at the ceiling. "Hmm."

"It's bought and paid for. Only problem is, he can't get rid of it. You know anyone?"

Man, he was sexy. “What about the Dentist?” I said. “It’s his.”

“Have you talked to him?” he asked.

“Nope, that’s suicide after what happened.” I said. “I wouldn’t fuck with that guy.”

“Who do you think asked for this, babe? Your end would be twenty-percent.”

“Wow,” I said.

His phone beeped and he pulled it from his pocket. “I mean, I can bring it up,” he said looking down at the screen, “but I don’t know any buyers.” He flipped it shut and put it back in his pocket. “The cops hit a dead end at the border. There’s no way they’re tracking it,” he said.

“What do you think?”

“Funny, Esha hasn’t said anything.”

“Esha has his own interests. It’s better to keep him out of it.”

We heard the girls come into the kitchen below us.

*“She’s fucking weird.”* It sounded like Bambi. *“Like, there’s something not right about that chick.”*

*“You see her outfit?”* Another voice laughed. *“Could she be more of a slut? Hey, pour me one, too.”*

*“So what do you think about Burning Man?”* Bambi said. *“Esha has his camper, he asked me to stay with him. You should come!”*

*“Yeah! That would be sick, let’s do it!”*

*“Thanks, girl, holy shit this drink is strong! Is there even any Sev in it?”*

I waited for their voices to trail off to the deck. “My friend in LA,” I said, “I’ll see what he says.”

“You have your phone? I’ll give you my number.” He typed it in. “Alright, baby. Let’s get out of here, my girl will think we’re fucking.”

Zeke went outside and I went for the booze. I finished my drink, poured another and took it back to the deck. Moose and Spunk were at the edge of the pool and the free spirit girl was laid out on the lounge next to them.

“I was thirteen,” she laughed. “Banged him in an orange hippie van.”

“Impressive,” said Moose, puffing a joint under his fedora. “We may have a winner.” He turned to Spunk. “What about you?”

“Sixteen,” Spunk said. “Bathroom at a Slayer concert.”

“Yeah? How big was the guy’s cock?” Moose laughed and turned to everyone. “Did you hear what I just said to him? I called him a faggot.”

Spunk lunged for Moose and grabbed him by the shirt. He hooked his leg and they both splashed sideways into the pool. Moose surfaced, fedora pouring water from its brim and the joint still on his lip. Spunk dunked his head again and the whole party killed themselves.

I laughed, too and walked back to my seat.

Esha was still across from the odd couple and Bambi’s legs were stretched out across him.

I stood over her.

“Oops,” she said, pressing her fingers to her lips. She swung her legs off Esha’s lap and made room for me on the couch. He was now nestled between us. One arm slid around me, the other against Bambi’s leg. He raised a thick eyebrow at Zeke.

“*Fire’s ready!*” Spunk called from the lawn below.

“Noice!” Zeke said. We grabbed our drinks and made our way down the deck stairs, then walked single file through the narrow cut path to the beach. The waves got louder and louder. One after the next, we hopped down the sandy bank and Bambi budged her way past me.

S’cuse,” she said, jabbing an elbow into my ribs. I tripped into the cool sand.

I shot up, “you dumb cunt!” I grabbed her by the arm and cracked her twice. Bambi buckled on her long skinny legs. She stumbled back and held her face. She wailed like a small child. It was like she’d never been smacked before. I found it hard to believe.

“That fucking skid bitch!” she balled.

I watched for a minute then took a fresh beer up the bank. I dropped my ass down on sand-filled grass and looked out over the shining water.

“That bitch is psycho! You hear me? *Psycho!*” The other girls defended that twat. They ran after her to the house and Esha quickly followed.

“Shit,” I muttered, flicking an ash down to the sand. The amber glowed between my fingers. Down the beach below, Spunk and Moose messed with the speakers until they blasted through the thick air. Zeke was there, too. He stared up at me in the firelight with a smirk on one side of his face.

“Where is she?” Esha said, dropping back down the bank. Zeke tipped his beer in my direction and Esha made his way over. He climbed up, sat down behind me, and scooted forward. He wrapped his legs around my sides and draped them off the ledge.

“I hate bitches,” I said.

“No shit.”

“How’s her face?” I looked over my shoulder toward the house.

“You’re fucking crazy, you know that?” he said, pressing his cheek to mine.

I took a shaky swig and nodded. “Yeah, maybe.”

He laughed and fished a little one-hitter from his shorts. “K?” He shook the little canister so I could see it.

“Yeah, give me that.” I took it from him. “I need to come down.” I turned the lid and dropped the white powder into the chamber. I sniffed it back, cranked it again, and did the other nostril for good luck.

“Bye!” he laughed. “Have a nice ride!” he waved. He cranked out his own and we waited without a word. It didn’t take long.

*We slid forward and shot through a tunnel of mud, picking up speed, faster and faster and my head pulled back to his belly. I closed my eyes and we plunged, hard and deep through all that mud and there was no way out but down.*

I woke up late the next day feeling like *I’d* been beaten up. My brain exploded through the sides of my skull and the rest of me had turned to dust. I pulled the covers off and winced. My hand was big and blue, and it throbbed from bouncing off Bambi’s stupid face. Esha’s eyes were propped on the pillow next to me, focused on a little paddle phone with alphabet buttons. He clicked away with his thumbs.

“I think I’m going to need a pressure-washer to wash off last night,” I said.

He didn’t answer. I rolled over to face him. Esha sighed. His foot shook at the end of the bed and it vibrated up through my body.

“You OK?” I said, putting a hand on his arm.

He lifted his eyebrows up and down and pulled away. He kept clicking.

“Did I do something?”

“I don’t know, did you?” he said.

The bed vibrated faster and my heart kept up. He finally set the phone down and rubbed his hands up and down his face.

“Is this about Bambi?” I said. No answer. “I’m sorry, but she’s been fucking with me since Mexico.”

“That was gross,” he said. He really did look disgusted.

“So you didn’t care last night, but now you do? I said.

“Right.” He rolled his eyes. “I didn’t care.”

I rolled to my back and looked up at the ceiling. My stomach fluttered and turned. I reached over and pulled a cigarette from its pack and flicked the lighter with my thumb.

“Don’t light that,” he said. “That’s gross, too.”

I sighed, “ooo-k.” I threw the cigarette and lighter back on the table and we said nothing. I tried to ignore his shaking foot but it made it worse. The shaking finally stopped and he rolled over to face me. He rubbed a hand up and down my breast and then down the length of my body. He pulled my chin over with his big strong hand and stuck his tongue in my mouth. My brains splashed out from my eye sockets. He was rough and punishing and when he finished he left me there in a puddle to take a shower.

“I’ll be back tonight.” The steam followed him out of the bathroom and he trotted down stairs to the Bronco’s throaty rumble.

I reached for my cell and called D.

**“He’s your other foster brother, right?”**



**I nodded. “Yeah. Lando and D. D turned eighteen a couple of years before us and left Florida for LA. He ran a strip club there.**

**Garlick clicked the tall keys.**

He sounded surprised to hear from me. “Bets, what the fuck!?” he said. “Where the hell are you?”

I cradled the phone between my ear and shoulder as I pulled on a pair of shorts.

“On vacation,” I said.

“That’s one way to put it,” he said. Big D was a terrifying mountain of a man with tattoo sleeves and eyes like glass. He was disturbingly attractive despite tall crooked teeth that were rammed in tight.

“Nasty shit that went down,” he said. He already knew. He covered the phone, his voice muffled, “*what are you doing? Get up there! What do I pay you for?*”

“Everything alright?” I said.

“These dumb cunts. Nevermind.”

“I’m coming out your way,” I said, walking around the open room.

“I’d love to see you, girl, but I don’t need any more heat here. I have my own problems, you know?”

“I’m not bringing any,” I said. “Don’t worry about it, it’s over.”

“You’d better be sure about that.”

“You’re fine,” I said. “Plus, I have a good lead on something.”

He laughed. “You always do, Bets.”

I laughed and there was a silence.

“So, Lando . . . ,” he said.

“I know,” I breathed into the phone.

“Fucking hell.” He trailed off and it went silent again. “Talk about it when I see you. When you comin’, you crazy bitch?”

“Few days, I think. I’ll let you know.”

“Alright. Love ya.”

“Love ya.”

I pressed end, threw my phone on the bed, and stood there looking around the room. I caught a glimpse of my half naked body through the bathroom door. I walked over and stood in front of the mirror, pinching at my arms and my thighs, over and over and over. I sucked in my stomach and turned sideways on my tippy toes, then dropped down to my heels and ballooned it back out. I’d become a fat cow overnight. *Fuck*. I rummaged through a pile of clothes and settled on an oversized t-shirt and flip flops and flip flopped my way down to the kitchen. I opened the fridge. There was half a pizza and last night’s leftovers and I stood there, eating, until it was all gone. I grabbed a bag of Cheezies and a two-liter from the counter and finished them off too. I waddled my stretched body up to the ensuite toilet. I filled the bowl over and over, flushing after each forceful heave, and I didn’t stop until my teeth were soft and the vomit ran yellow.

I got back in bed, exhausted and dizzy. My head buzzed and my blue hand throbbed. My heart beat fast against my ribs and up the back of my throat. I lay there until my stomach clenched again in hunger and I drowned it in beer and cigarettes for the rest of the day.

The next morning I joined Esha on the deck with a smoke and a coffee. The air was crisp and the ocean was deep and blue. There was a pad and a pen and three cell phones on the table in front of him.

“There she is,” he said, looking up. He was smiling. “Sleep OK?”

“Uh, yeah, was alright.” I sat down.

“Hey, so I was thinking we could go do the tourist thing today, maybe show you more of the island? It’s a nice drive to the north shore. Lots of cool little spots along the way. Or, we could go to Pearl Harbor. You said you wanted to go, right?” He got up and stood over me. He cradled my face in his hands and I looked all the way up his tall body.

“I’m gonna head back to LA,” I said.

“You’re fucking serious?” He pulled his hands away. “I’m trying to be nice here.”

I sat back and crossed my bare legs. I pulled my thick housecoat tight around me. “Well, you know, it’s been nice here, but I have to go take care of some things.”

“Like what, suck some drug dealer cock?” His smile was long gone.

“OK, *what?*” I scrunched my eyebrows.

“Like you don’t use your pussy to get ahead.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“You think you’re some kind of kingpin or something.” He was getting louder. “But you’re just a slut!”

“This is bullshit,” I said. I butt out my cigarette and stood up. I turned and made a break for the sliding door.

“You think anyone actually respects you?” He called after me. My head spun. “Good, go! Get out! No one wants you here!” he yelled. “Fucking bitch,” he muttered and kicked the chair

I'd been sitting on. It crashed and bounced across the deck. It's metal legs screeched and my chest jumped. I ran up the stairs and down the hall and locked the bedroom door behind me. I stood there listening, breathing and shaking. Waiting, but it was silent. I ran my hands back through my hair over and over, and looked around. I tried to get my head straight but it was somewhere else. I ran around, grabbing up crumpled clothes and makeup and things and rammed it all in suitcases. I ripped off his stupid housecoat and threw it across the room, "Fucking dick!" I said and hopped into some wrinkly shorts.

I was ready. I dialed the operator for a taxi. "Right away," the lady told me. "Ten minutes." I waited on the side of the bed, my suitcases a barrier between me and the door.

Nine minutes later I wheeled down the hall, bounced my suitcases down the stairs and went for the front door. Esha saw me from the deck and came after me. He blocked my way with his large body. "Where are you going?"

"I told you already." I tried to squeeze past but he tightened against the frame.

"Let me through," I said.

"Stay," he said. "I'm sorry, I'm just stressed right now."

"Move." I tried pushing him out of the way but he was a wall.

"If you go, don't even think of coming back. That's it."

"Fine," I said. "Now *move!*"

He did and I skipped down the steps. The cases bounced and turned off their wheels. They dragged and I got them centred again and hurried up the long driveway to the road. Esha was still in the doorway. "Fuck off then!" He slammed the front door and I slammed the cab door and drove off through the dips and peaks and gentle bends to Honolulu. The hotel was a shithole that the driver suggested but it was near the airport and far away from Esha.

I got to my room and flopped onto the squeaky bed and looked around at my tired surroundings. It was a familiar scene. The TV sat blank and I stared at my warped reflection. Should I pick up the Buick? The plates weren't mine. What were the chances that it was being watched? There was a thick phone book on the side table. I sat up and pulled it to my lap and dug through for the airport. The 9:45am and 2:00pm flights were full, but there was a 10:25 pm to LAX the next day. I took it, hung up and walked around the room. My skin crawled and my stomach burned. I needed something. I rummaged for my benzos. There were six left. I took three and slept.

*It was a big box store, I think. I crouched behind racks of things and crept down narrow aisles. They looked for me, faceless, guns drawn, turning over displays and calling my name. I hid behind rows of clothing and I force-fed fistfuls of rotten food in my mouth until my teeth wobbled loose and I spit them all out. Their guns drew closer and I reached for my own, but the trigger was soft and nothing came out.*

It was dark when I finally woke. My pillow was wet and my cell beeped intervals and flashed its little red light. I had nine text messages and seven missed calls from Esha, and one from a number I didn't recognize. It had a California area code. I got up. The little fridge was empty. I needed a drink. I slammed the door shut and carried myself to the mirror to fix my hair and paint my eyelashes. Fuck Zeke and fuck Charlie and fuck the Dentist. I'd take my chances and drive back to Florida for my money.

I shut the heavy room door behind me and passed a group of drunk girls in the hall. A baby cried through the thin walls. I followed the signs and arrows to the hotel's lounge. It was empty and I pulled out a chair in the corner and rested my chin in my hands.

“What can I get for you, doll?” The waiter stood over me with a pad and pen.

I ordered two beers and an ashtray.

“OK. Any food?”

“No.”

“I’ll leave this here in case you change your mind.” He left the menu and I stared out at a dreadful bridge-capped street. If there was a worse view on the island, I wouldn’t have believed it.

“We’re out of Bud Light. Bud’s OK?”

“Yeah, that’s fine.” He opened both bottles, set them down hard and walked away.

I took a long cool drag off the first one, and another from a fresh cigarette. I flipped off my flip flops and stretched out my legs. I slumped low to rest my feet on the chair across from me. I flipped open my phone and clicked through Esha’s messages. He oscillated back and forth between apologies and hatred. I called the California number instead. It was a pager and it called me right back.

“D,” I said.

He laughed. Nothing gets past you.”

“Who else would it be?” I tapped my cigarette on the side of the ashtray. “You good?”

“Golden,” he said. So, what’s the plan?”

“I gotta pick up my car and drive home first. I’ll be back in a week or so.”

“That’s a long fucking drive.”

“No kidding,” I said.

“Why don’t you fly?”

“Gotta pick up some money,” I said. “Can’t fly with that.”

“Ah, OK.”

“I’ll let you know when I’m close. Where am I going?”

“Probably the club. Page me.”

“Alright,” I said. “Take it easy.”

“Be good.”

I drank and slept for another day then went to the airport to board my flight. I moved down the aisle toward the back of the plane. I had three seats to myself for the five-hour flight. A lot of us did, the ones of us traveling alone, anyway. I was about to stretch out but a little old lady plopped down at the end. She was about four feet tall and round as a ball. I stared at the side of her head then stood on bent knees to scan the plane. She’d been sitting two rows ahead with another lady who was just as round. There was an empty bank of seats in front of us.

“Hi,” I said. She stared forward. “Hello!” She gave me a blank look. “Was that your seat up there? With her?”

“Yes.”

“And you came to sit here?”

“Yes.”

I looked again at the empty bank then back at her.

She blinked at me, turned forward and folded her hands on her lap.

“Why would you . . . it makes no sense!” My voice raised and some others tuned in. “Fuck this!” I gathered my things. “Ridiculous,” I said, and squeezed out past her. I threw myself and my shit into the empty row and breathed out hard.

A young drunk group turkey-necked. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” I said, making a pillow with a balled up sweater. I tried to stretch out but one of the arm rests was stuck. It wouldn’t move up. “Cock sucker!” I said.

“Is everything OK?” A stewardess came over and bent toward me from the aisle. She quieted her voice and moved in closer. “Don’t worry, I saw.” She rolled her eyes. “Let me see what I can do. Sit tight until after we take off.”

That, I had not expected.

She returned a half hour later with a small piece of paper. She handed it to me. “You can go here.” It had an aisle and row number scribbled in pencil. The cabin was dark and most had settled in for the redeye flight. I quietly made my way to the front of the plane, squinting at letters and numbers. Fucking hell, she’d sent me to business class. It was a wide-open space with wide open seats and I slept until the wheels hit the ground.

I was groggy getting off the plane and I wound my way through the airport and out to long-term parking. There it was, my big burgundy Buick. I threw in my bags and slammed the trunk shut and slid my ass on the buttery leather. I thought about the forty-hour drive. I didn’t have any drugs on me, none that would keep me awake anyway. I pulled a worn map from the glove box. Fuck it, I’d go to Venice Beach to see what I could find. It wasn’t far and it wasn’t long before I scored a couple bags from a ratty looking thing with stained orange fingers and dirt-packed nails. I bought a couple of tall boys, too and went back to the car. I fumbled with one of the baggy’s tiny zip tops. I peeled it apart with my long pink nails and scooped up a bump. It hit like a gunshot to the back of my throat. That shit burned like drywall but it got me high. I stayed there, buzzing till the sun rose behind me and it sparkled across the open water.



I clunked the wheel's gear shift, pulled in reverse, and I was once again looking down the barrel of the I-40. I made it in two days and nights and I was a bag of shit when I got there. I parked down the street from Gran's and walked up the back step.

"You scared me half to death!" she scowled as I walked through the door. Her face was downturned.

"You know I don't answer the phone after dark, nevermind the door!" she snipped.

"Sorry, Gran. I didn't want to be seen."

"What kind of trouble you up to now?" She looked me up and down. "You're nothing but a twig. I'll fix you something."

"No no, I'm good, thanks," I said, following her to the retro kitchen.

"No, you're absolutely not! You're going to sit, and you're going to eat," she said, pulling a frozen casserole from the freezer. I didn't argue with her. "And where the hell have you been?"

"Vacation," I said, grabbing a seat.

"You be careful in that sun. Gonna look like an old catcher's mitt if you're not careful." She set the casserole on the counter, turned on the oven and I followed her to the living room. I stretched on the sofa and she lowered into her Lazy-boy. She spent most of her time there. One heel on the ground, rocking back and forth.

"Have you heard from Lando?" I said.

"Was gonna ask you the same thing. Where is that boy?"

"I think he's been out of state with a girl." I lied.

She nodded, took a big white mint from a crystal candy dish and picked up a Reader's Digest. I fell asleep and woke up to Gran hitting me with a pillow.

“Good lord, I thought you were dead!” she said. “Casserole is getting cold. I’ll heat it up.”

She limped back to the kitchen. The buttons on the microwave beeped and the fan hummed.

*Beeeeeeep!* “Elizabeth!” she sniped from the kitchen.

“Coming,” I said.

I could barely make it to the couch after I ate. My legs and eyelids were cement. I kept my food down and I stayed the night.

The next morning we had coffee. I fought off breakfast and went to the basement to get my saran-wrapped bills. I grabbed a stepladder from the corner closet and placed it under my first stash. I climbed it, pushed up the panel and moved it aside. I poked my head in. It was empty. The blood rushed from my head to my toes and I nearly fell off the ladder. My heart thumped and my breathing was hard and fast. I felt sick and frantic. I had more stored behind a wall and it looked untouched. No one knew it was there. Lando didn’t know it was there. I raced up the stairs to find Gran. She was in her rocker.

“Was Lando here?” I tried my best to be calm but it was written all over me.

She looked up, “I told you I haven’t seen him.”

“Was anyone here?”

“No. . . . What’s got your panties in a twist?” she frowned.

“You still hearing someone around the house at night?” I tried to catch my breath.

“You know, it’s funny. That stopped weeks ago. I gave that floozy next door a piece of my mind. I put her in her place alright.”

“Yeah, must’ve,” I said. “Good.” I forced a smile. “That’s good.” I left her and went back down the stairs.

*FUCKING LANDO!*

I found the sledgehammer leaned against the hot water tank and took it back out to bust through the wall. *Please be there. Fuck sakes, please be there!* I hit the wall as hard as I could and got a good hole going. There it was, peeking through the drywall. Bricks of tightly-packed bills spilled to the floor as the hole got bigger and bigger.

“What’s going on down there!” Gran called from the top of the stairs.

“Don’t worry about it!” I called back up.

“Goodness,” she said and slammed the door shut.

On hands and knees I scooped the bricks into a duffle and hoisted it up on my shoulder. It was heavy and my breath was shallow. Back to plan A. I could more than double this bag if things panned out with Zeke and Charlie. I’d be set. It would be OK. I stayed till dark, gave a stack to Gran, apologized for the mess, and fired up the Buick.

A million miles and a hundred gas and piss stops later I was bordering LA. I paged D. He’d meet me at the club, he said, I was only about an hour out. I pulled in and stepped out in the hot air. It was only 5:00 pm and there were only a few cars out front. D walked out the door, lit a smoke and came over for a hug. He lifted me off the ground.

“Bets, you slippery little fuck!”

He put me down and I squeezed his bulky wide shoulders. “So, what, you’re juicing now?” I said.

“All natural,” he smirked, lying through his jagged teeth. “Drink?”

I nodded. “Dying for one.”

I followed him through the heavy metal doors to a wide-open space. It had a centre stage and two large bars. It was dark and it smelled of shame.

“Mercedes!” he called to a cute little bartender, “bring us a couple Buds.” We sat at a table next to the stage and Mercedes came and went.

“Looks like you’re doing alright,” I said. I took a pull from the glass spout and looked around the room.

“Could be better,” he said, taking one from his own.

“Could be worse,” I raised an eyebrow.

“So, Hawaii, huh? What were you getting up to over there?”

“This guy, you know.” I waved it off.

“It’s always a guy with you. You have zero balls when it comes to that shit.”

“Anyway. . . .”

“Anyway,” he said. “What the hell happened out there? Florida, I mean. I’ve heard scraps but what the fuck.”

I peeled at the sides of the red and white label. “What are people saying?”

“That Lando rolled and you took off,” he said. He scratched up and down the back of his neck with his fingers. “Doesn’t look good that you’re the only one that didn’t get pinched.” He studied my face. “I mean, it was a kick in the nuts to hear about Lando, but kinda believable, you know? But you?” He shook his head. “No way.”

I gave a weak smile. “Thanks, buddy.” I finished my beer and looked around for another.

“Mercedes!” he yelled. “Two more!” He shook his head. “Bunch of useless cunts around here.” He lifted his huge tatted forearms on the table.

“He stole my money,” I said.

“Wait, what?”

“Most of it, anyway,” I said. “I went to Gran’s. He didn’t take what I had behind the wall. He didn’t know it was there.”

“What the fuck? Where is that prick?”

“No clue,” I said.

“Mercedes!!” he yelled again.

She ran over with our beers. “Wake up!” he said to her and she trotted off. “You see?” he looked at me, “Morons.” He took a swig and so did I. “And, so what, you don’t want to find out?”

“Lando? What difference would it make?” I shrugged. “I have other problems now.” I rested my face on a fist and picked at my bottle with the other.

“OK, so what’s this big plan you were talking on the phone?”

“More of a medium sized plan,” I laughed.

“Ha! I doubt that.”

“Lando and I were working with this old guy, this crazy pedophile they call the Dentist.

“Why do they call him that?” he laughed.

“Use your imagination,” I said. “Anyway, he had the connection down south for the purest shit you’ve ever seen. Me and Lando made a path across the border when he couldn’t keep up with what we were moving. We had this huge buyer. Big money, was taking like forty keys at a time.”

“Holy fuck,” he said.

“Yeah, holy fuck. Anyway, it all fell to shit. You know that already. Lando started dating this girl, months ago. Turns out she was a detective. She got him bad. He gave up everyone. He

called me the night before the bust. Tried to get me there, too. My lawyer got tipped off and told me to leave town.”

“Wow.”

“*ALRIGHT GENTS, WELCOME BRANDY TO THE STAGE!*” It was 6:00pm and a couple of stragglers hooted. Brandy walked up with Windex and paper towel to clean the pole before her routine. She wobbled on ten inch stilettos.

“So now,” I went on, “there’s another load, another forty keys just sitting there in Mexico.”

“Who’s in Mexico?”

“This guy, Charlie. The Dentist wants it moved,” I said. “And another guy, Zeke, will bring it up.”

He nodded. “OK, so they want you to get rid of it then.”

“Yeah.” I finished my beer. Mercedes ran another right over.

“What’s your end?” he asked.

“Twenty percent of wholesale plus the profits from flipping it, which would be yours if you can find me a buyer.

“Not bad.”

“I could really use that money.” I said. “You know, buy a place. Maybe put the rest in stocks, I dunno.”

D sat back and rested a hand on the chair next to him. He tapped his fingers on the table with the other. “You said it’s pure?”

“Like snow.” I lit my hundredth cigarette.

“I have an investor for the new club coming up this weekend. I bought the building already but need some capital for the renos. He sells coke to Beverly Hills,” he said, “uppity types from

Hollywood and shit. He's looking to wash some of that cash flow through the club. Anyway, we have comped rooms at that new Indian Casino not far from here. We'll go, gamble a little, talk it out."

"Sounds like a plan," I said.

The weekend came and Mr. Hollywood met us there. D brought along a couple of girls to make it a fivesome. D's girl was a real beauty, an ex-dancer with a paid-for chest and long black hair that touched her perfect ass. I don't remember her name, she didn't say much. The other one was freckly, with a big nose, big eyes and thick thighs. She really could dress, though. She looked good. Ginger, they called her. Probably because she was one. We all waited out front for Hollywood to make his entrance in a Porsche 911 Turbo. He thought he was a big deal. He was thin and blonde and wore an expensive suit with an open white collar. He handed the valet his keys and his case and walked over to greet us. Big D introduced me.

"This is Blondie."

His eyes met D's then mine again. "How you doing, love?" he said with a wooden smile. "I assumed you were a man."

"Too bad for you, I guess," I said and D shot me a look.

Anyway, those Indians don't fuck around. The rooms were lush and new and I had one to myself. We settled in and made ourselves up and met down on the casino floor. It was early so we decided to play a little before dinner. I'd once been into cards with the guys, way back when, but now I stuck to roulette. You could play a 50/50 game and it moved fast enough to keep my attention. The table was all black so I started with that. I put down \$1000. The wheel spun and the ball dropped. "No more bets," the dealer said and it fell in its slot. "35 black." I took odds on

the next one. It came in, too and I bet the same again. “12 red.” I put \$500 on red and the little ball whipped around and bounced off the numbers until it finally settled. “14 red.” I was up a grand. A 2x. I pulled up a stool and ordered a drink. I won some and lost some over the next couple of hours but I’d managed a 4x by the time D rolled around.

“Hey girl, there you are.” His chick stood there looking around. “Our reso is in fifteen minutes, let’s go.”

“Couple more,” I said. “I’m on a roll.”

“Let’s go,” he said again. “You have all night.”

I didn’t look up from the wheel. “Ten more minutes.”

They waited five, chatting nonsense. “C’mom.”

“One sec,” I said, without looking up.

“You absolute degenerate,” he said.

My last bet didn’t come in. “Alright, alright,” I said and cashed out my ticket. “If you broke my luck you owe me.”

The steakhouse was fancy. Mr. Hollywood ordered surf ‘n turf, D the porterhouse, his beauty the filet, Ginger the same, and I had the scallops. They’d come up easier than steak. Hollywood was into himself and the people he knew. He name-dropped the entire meal and I was first impressed and then exhausted by it.

“Leo, you know, Di Caprio, has this boat, it’s a monster, you should see this thing, the cabin is bigger than this room.” He looked around, “At least. I’ve been on it a couple of times.” He took a bite and talked between chews. “Guy doesn’t do blow himself but he takes a nice bag for his models. Primo shit for primo girls.” He winked at Ginger and the beauty. They lapped it up.



Even D. I couldn't believe it. He was starry-eyed. I guess he'd been in LA too long. Mr. Hollywood was a real talker and he never stopped. A Hollywood type taking centre stage.

"I'll take you out sometime," he said. "I can get you into the exclusive clubs. We'll party a little. Meet some people. Bring your girls," he smiled at the three of us.

"Yeah?" D was dialed in. "You think we could meet him? Leo?"

"Oh, he's a busy guy, but I'll see what I can do."

I was kicked back in my chair, tipping around my half empty wine glass, spying on the other tables. The roulette wheel spun in my head.

"Yo Bets," D got my attention.

"Hmm?"

D nodded his head over to Hollywood. "He asked you something."

"How long you two known each other?"

"Since we were kids," I said. I finished my glass and held it up to signal a waiter. "Hasn't changed much. He was always a big dumb fuck. Now he's just a bigger dumb fuck." I'd had a few too many. D could take it, he dished out a lot himself, but I was edging the line. They laughed. He did too, but he gave me a look that said "calm your tits." This guy was bothering me and D knew it. Hollywood paid and the five of us made our way back to the casino floor. D grabbed my arm and held me back from the others.

"The fuck is wrong with you? You got that look like you've got fiz on the brain or something. I knew better than to bring you to a casino." My heel caught on the carpet and I caught my balance on his arm. "Can you keep it together for five fucking minutes to close this deal?"

"The guy's a douchebag," I said. "I don't trust him."

“He’s fine. You know, you act like I’m not doing you a favor,” he said.

“Right, like you’re not getting a cut,” I said. “You got a bump? That wine is killing me.”

“No shit.” He scooped out a one hitter and handed it to me. I did two and put it in my purse.

“Alright,” D said. “Let’s grab him, go to the lounge, and then you can go get yourself off at the roulette tables.”

We did and the three of us shook on it and I went back to my seat in front of the wheel. I put \$2000 on black. It came in and I lost small on the next four spins.

“Can I get you something from the bar?” A waiter stood over my left shoulder.

“Two Bud Lights and a shot of Jack,” I said without looking up. I put another \$2000 on black for the next four rounds and got it every time. I was up \$30,000. I went up and down \$4000 for five more rounds then got ballsy and went \$26,000 odds. The little white ball raced around. “I can’t look,” I said to the man next to me. “Just say odds or evens.” My blood pumped and the coke pumped it even harder.

“Odds!”

“Fucking hell!” I was on the ceiling, up \$53k, and I was drunk and high off my ass.

I woke up with the sun and I wasn’t in my room. This one was bigger. There was an unfamiliar suitcase in the corner. I’d blacked out at some point and my brain grasped at random bits and pieces. There was someone next to me and I looked down at my naked body. I sat up slow. My stomach turned and my head pounded. One nostril was blocked and I was dry as hell. Shit, there were two bodies next to me. It was Ginger and Hollywood and I felt sick about it. My skin crawled. I would’ve stepped right out of it if I could. Hollywood stirred when I slid out of bed but he rolled over and was fast asleep. I found my dress in the bathroom, my heels and purse

by the couch and I got the hell out of there. I found my room and shut the door behind me and breathed out hard. I downed a beer from the mini bar and woke up hours later to a deafening bedside ring. I picked it up.

“Yeah?” My voice barely worked. I cleared my throat.

D laughed on the other end. “How was your night?”

“Ugh,” I moaned. “Don’t ask.”

“I don’t have to,” he laughed again. “You’re something else, you know that?”

“Hmmpf,” I moaned again and covered my face. I was on top of the covers, my dress was around my waist and I had a missing shoe.

“You up? We’re gonna grab some food.”

“Nah, I’m good.”

“C’mon, just throw some clothes on, we’re gonna hit up that sushi spot downstairs.”

“Even worse,” I said. “You guys go. I gotta wash the shame off first.”

“My man is leaving, he has some business in the city. Just call me when you’re ready.”

“Alright.”

“Yeah.”

I lay there after, fighting off flashes of naked bodies in the jacuzzi, passing around a bottle of champagne. Me kissing a woman. I shook the memory as best as I could and got my cigarettes and cell from my purse. I sank back in an armchair and reread Esha’s messages. They were angry at first then pleading. He wanted me to come back. He was sorry. He’d been a dick and he wanted to make it right. He loved me.

I replied, *I love you too*, flipped my phone shut and took a hot shower.

A few hours later, I was close to human again and I met the group back on the casino floor, minus Mr. Hollywood. It was awkward with Ginger and she smiled at me and I smiled back. I was suddenly laying on my back and she was between my legs and he was running his hands up and down our naked bodies. I shuddered and shook the memory loose.

“They’re gonna go see the show,” said D. “What do you think?”

“Celine Dion.” Ginger smiled at me again.

“I think I’ll try my luck here again,” I said.

We all just kind of looked at each other for a minute then D said, “You two go.” He reached in his pocket and handed his beauty a stack of fifties. “Have fun, I’m gonna play.”

We settled on an empty roulette machine and I put in \$2000 and so did D and the wheel spun. We drank beers and Jack like old times and won some and lost some. I mostly lost.

“Look at this fucking guy,” D said under his breath, motioning to an Indian man, proper Indian, like Eastern, feeding the machine with hundreds. One after the other after the other. He fed in a whole stack from the fanny pack around his waist.

“Remember that skinny kid, Walton, with the long black hair?” D said.

“From the group home?”

“Yeah.”

“Man, what a stupid name,” I laughed. “He was cool, though. I used to smoke joints with him in that alley by the park.”

“You know he killed himself?” D said.

“Shit, really?”

“Yeah, you didn’t know?”

I shook my head.

“Listen to this. He manages to shoot himself front-on with a shotgun, misses, blows his jaw off and survives. So he’s all deformed and shit and spends months in the hospital. He gets out and uses the same gun to complete the job.”

I put my hand over my mouth. I felt a wave crash through my body. “When?”

“Long time ago now,” he said. “Can’t believe you didn’t know.”

“I heard about Lily and Derek, but not Walton.”

“Yeah, Carver, too.” D looked at his screen. “Yesss! 23 black.”

“Yeah, and Carver,” I remembered. I’d just lost another \$500. I was down \$2000 overall.

“Pretty sure he was an overdose, though.”

“Is that different?” he looked at me.

“Good point,” I said, feeding another \$3k into the slot.

“C’mon odds!” D pounded his fist without taking his eyes off the wheel.

I bent back on my stool to get a waiter’s attention. “Two Jacks, please.”

They came and we raised our shot glasses. “To Walton,” I said.

“To Walton,” he said.

We played that table all night. He was on a winning streak. I was streaking a solid loss. I had \$12,000 left when he finally convinced me to cut my losses. “Fuck it, you’re still up, let’s go,” D said. “I gotta get back to the city before the club opens.” He stood up. “I’m gonna take a leak. Be right back.” He walked away and I walked to a live table.

I put it all on red and it came in black and we went upstairs to bed.

The four of us left the next morning and we dropped off the girls before stopping at a payphone. I called Zeke and told him everything was a go and he gave me the time and place. He

would meet us there, he said. The phone chimed when I hung up. Cars raced along the busy highway and I dropped back down in the Buick beside D. He filled up the entire passenger seat and spilled over into mine.

“Move over you big beast,” I said. “You need a bus.”

“Fuck you, too,” he said. “What’d he say?”

“He said you need to lay off the juice.”

He palmed the side of my face and I laughed at my own joke. “Maybe you should try it, you skinny little bitch.”

“Right, so we’ll meet Zeke outside San Diego next week,” I said. “I say we cut it a bit first then bring it back to Mr. Hollywood. I can front the money until then.”

D nodded, looking out over the busy road. “Alright, I’ve got a buddy down there. We’ll get a couple of rooms, go out, make a good time of it.”

The next week we were in D’s Suburban headed south on the I-5. It was Thursday and we were meeting Zeke Friday. The rooms were nice and we got in our suits to drink by the pool. The sun was hot. I stretched out on a lounge and let it beat down on me. My stomach was tangled with butterflies. Bass pounded my brain and critters crawled beneath my skin. I decided to kill them with margaritas.

Hours later, D stood over me.

“What time is it?” I said, squinting up at him.

“Time to get yourself glowed up for dinner. We’re leaving in an hour and a half.”

“Do I have to?” I slurred, and he was blurry.

“How many of those have you had?”

“Not enough,” I laughed.

“Let’s go,” he said. “I’ll order some coffee.” I got up and stumbled into his arms. He dropped me off at my room and I passed out hard.

I woke up to pounding on my door. “Yo, Bets!” the voice boomed.

I rolled out of bed, still in my bathing suit and opened the door just enough to hit the little chain. It was D. “Open up!”

“Alright, alright.” I slid it off and let him in. “Fuck, what time is it?” I said, plopping down on the chair with a cigarette. He opened the curtains and sat on the corner of the bed.

“You missed a good night.” He leaned forward, elbows on knees.

I slouched back and rubbed my face, “oof,” I said.

“Maybe slow down a bit, ya?”

“I’m fine.”

He took a deep breath, sat up and raised his eyebrows. “Right.”

“Don’t start, D. I’ve got enough bullshit going through my head,” I said. “And nevermind, you look just as bad as me!”

“Anyway, what time we meeting this Zeke guy?” he said.

“Not till 9:00pm.” I looked at the clock, it was 12:45pm.

I puffed my cigarette and the smoke burned my lungs.

“Give me one of those,” he said. I threw him the pack. “We should leave here by 8, then.” He lit up.

“Cool,” I said and grabbed my cell from the desk. Two groveling messages from Esha. “This Hawaii guy. I don’t even know what to think.” I sat back, still in my bikini, legs spread, arms rested on the sides of the chair.

“What’s the deal with that?” he said.

I puffed out my cheeks. “He just turned straight up psycho on me. One minute he’s fine, the next he’s a total dick.”

“Sounds like your type,” D said walking over to the mini bar. He pulled out two beers, opened them both and handed me one. I took a long pull. “Forget him,” he said. “You need to find someone who doesn’t treat you like shit.”

“He said he was sorry,” I said. “Asked me to come back.”

“If you’re asking for my advice, I already gave it.” He sipped his beer. “It’s still early, c’mon, let’s get some sun. And look at that,” he laughed. “You’re already dressed for it.”

At 8:06pm, D and I got in the car. I was a bit buzzed but I’d stuck to beers and kept my head about me. We pulled up to a low strip mall. There was a busy McDonalds far off to one side. “Watch for a gold Camry,” I said.

“They couldn’t pick a better spot?”

“Hide in plain sight, I guess,” I said, looking around. “It’s pitch black,” I nodded up at the street lamps. “The lights are out.” I clunked the wheel shifter into park and cut the engine. I could feel my pulse in my throat and down through my insides. My hands and legs were vibrating. Car after car pulled into the pocky lot, only to make the broad turn into the drive-thru.

“They know what we’re driving?” D had his eyes glued to the entrance.

“What do you think?” I said, lighting a shaky cigarette.

“Is that them?” He nodded toward a pair of headlights. Its panels flashed gold as it pulled in next to us.

“Now that would be some coincidence, wouldn’t it?” I said.



A thickset man emerged from the backseat and walked over to ours. I unlocked the door and saw the metal of his gun shine off of turning headlights. It was Walsh.

**Garlick cut in. “Who is Walsh, again?”**

**“That guy that worked for the Dentist. You know, the ex-special forces guy who got shot a bunch of times?”**

**“Right, sorry, continue.”**

“Some balls you have,” he said to me. For whatever reason, I stopped shaking. “You think you could get away with this?”

D watched me from the corner of his eye.

“Get away with what?” I said.

“Don’t act cute with me, Blondie.”

“Cute how? You needed a buyer, I found one,” I said.

“Don’t lie to me you little twat. Where’s the money?” I didn’t say anything. “Don’t make me blow little pieces of you all over the windshield. Your little friend Charlie wasn’t so lucky,” he said.

“It’s behind you,” I said. “In the back.”

He reached over the seat, the barrel still pointed at us. He pulled the duffel to his lap and zipped the bag open and shut. “Have a nice night,” he said and left with my money, slamming the door behind him. D and I watched the Camry pull out and disappear down the street.

“What the FUCK, Bets!” D yelled in his steroid-fueled voice. He pounded the dash with his fist. “Are you *actually* fucking retarded!?”

I held my face in my hand. My shakes were back. “I don’t know what just happened,” I said through my fingers.

“You don’t know what happened,” he mocked. “Think! We got set up! If you weren’t so fucked up all the time . . . FUCK!” he kicked under the dash. “What do I tell my guy, huh!?”

“What are you going to tell *him!*?” I yelled. “I just lost all my money!”

He threw his head back to the headrest. “Sorry Bets. I just . . . we could’ve been killed!”

“Now what?” I said. “I’m fucked!”

“Let’s get out of here,” D said. “I’ll drive.”

### **PART III: The Summer of Jimmy**

I spent the next two weeks drunk and high at D's club before I called Esha. We made up. He was in Washington for grow season. I was all in. All on green. I flew to Portland and he picked me up. He was kind and sweet and helped with my bags. He blindfolded me for the long drive out to the boonies. It was best I didn't know where the fields were, he said. Standard practice. He stopped to get us coffees and lit my cigarettes along the way. There's nothing like coffee and a cigarette, except for maybe a beer and a cigarette. I reclined in my seat. We got close and Esha said I could take off the blindfold. I watched the tall evergreens slide by our sides. We turned off the gravel road and drove up to a small cottage that backed onto a reedy lake. The smell of marsh punched me when I got out of the car and again through the front door. The place was shades of wood. Cupboards, countertops, floors. There was a bank of smudged windows looking out to a small deck that sat over the stale water. Insects buzzed like electricity through power lines and ducks and ducklings paddled near the shore.

"I'll start you up in a couple of days," Esha said, cranking open a window. "You'll be filling bags. We'll load up the quad and trailer with topsoil and take it to the first field."

"You haul in the soil?" I said.

"Yeah, the ground is too hard and full of root to punch holes with the auger. Plus, the PH is all wrong. Too acidic for the plants, you'd get nothing but bunk."

"Alright," I nodded. "Bags?"

"Yeah, you grow in them, like soft plastic, about this big." He hugged the air in front of him to show their round size. They have to sit on top of the ground so you gotta stay on top of watering. But, only some of the fields will have those. The others, we'll have to dig holes and fill them with soil and lyme." Esha opened the fridge. "Beer?" He threw me a can. "After we get all

that done we'll start transplanting the baby 'Jimmies'." He saw my blank face. "Babies are cloned from a mother plant and sprouted in these little pucks." He set down his beer and made a big 'O' with his thumbs and fingers. "We have them under lights right now, they'll be ready soon. There's eight fields that will have about five hundred Jimmies each. We all share the work, like the crews rotate the fields for watering and feeding."

"OK, cool," I took a hard swig from my can. "I'm on your crew then?" I gave a little smile.

"Of course," He walked over and put his arms around me, "let's not talk shop right now, babe." He kissed me and squeezed my ass. "Listen, I'm sorry for what happened, let's just hang out, get you settled in for a couple days and then I'll show you the ropes, yeah?"

I looked up his giant frame and put my hands on his chest. "OK."

He picked me up and carried me to the back room. It was small with a king-sized bed and big screen TV. There was a tiny closet off to one side and a door to the deck on the other. He flipped me over and his fingers dug into my thighs. He finished and I took a hot shower in a rusty tub. The water pressure really sucked. I stood under it, staring at grime and mold running along the caulking and I couldn't feel a thing.

Esha went to town to pick up some dinner and I started unpacking my bags. The wire hangers were tangled and they kept falling to the closet floor. I was halfway through when Esha returned. He threw a carton of cigarettes on the bed and sat down next to them.

"I got a couple of pizzas and some cases of beer. You wanna eat?"

"Sure, I'll be done in a sec," I said, lining up my heels on the top shelf.

"Is everything you have trashy?" he laughed.

I turned around to look at him with a dipped brow. "Sorry, *what?*"

He laughed, "I'm just kidding, babe. Don't be so sensitive."

I looked back at my things.

“I’m gonna have to get you some clothes. Like, cargos and boots. You can’t work in that shit. What size are you?”

“Seven for shoes, zero for pants.” I finished and turned to face him.

“Zero!? I didn’t know that even existed. I’ll see what I can find.” He looked me up and down. “You’re too skinny.” he said. “It doesn’t look good.”

We ate, I threw up and we sat on cold fake leather drinking and doing bumps of K. We watched episode after episode of *Chappelle’s Show*. I got so high that I was sucked through the screen. The show played out all around me. I had special powers and could see through the veil of illusion. I lolled in quiet victory.

The next two days were exactly the same, except that Esha brought me ‘bush clothes’, as he called them. The pants were a three and the boots were an eight and my heels slipped up the backs when I walked. On the third day, we got up early and we got to work. We loaded the quad’s trailer with forty-pound bags of soil and stacked them high. Esha strapped it all down and I climbed on behind him. The quad crawled through the brush, over small trees and twigs and leaves whipped at our sides and faces. The trailer bounced and rattled behind us over the grumble of the hot motor. It was a half hour trek through thick trees before it opened up to a deep wide clearing. Roots and small trunks littered the uneven ground.

“Let’s start on the far side, there,” Esha said over the engine, “and then we’ll work back this way.” We parked along the edge of the field and he cut open the first bag of soil. He filled a grow bag about three quarters full. He threw in fistfuls of fertilizer and mixed it with gloved hands before walking it over to the corner of the field. He filled the next, spaced it about four

feet from the other one. “Some plants can get pretty fat, if we’re lucky, so try to put them about this far apart. We need a path to walk between them.”

I started filling and mixing and placing the bags. The sun was hot and my feet slid forwards and back in my boots. My pants slid low on my hips. I folded the top around my waist and stripped down to my sports bra. Horse flies buzzed around the sweat on my forehead and they took turns taking bites. A couple hours later I heard the grumble of another bike and the engine cut at the far side of the clearing. It was Zeke and Moose. Esha went over to hug and bump fists and they talked and laughed and unloaded their own haul. They looked like little green army men from where I stood and Zeke was no longer sexy. I kept my head down the rest of that day, except to catch him peeping from the corners of my eyes.

We finished just after dark and me and Esha followed them down a different trail, through the thick brush, with our empty trailers rattling behind us. “You up for a few beers?” Esha said over his shoulder. I didn’t say anything and we continued on behind them.

Their cottage looked like ours, tucked deep in the sticks. The engines cut and I awkwardly dismounted. I felt a sting from the blisters on my heels and the welts on my forehead throbbed to a beat. Moose built a fire and we sat around on logs and flimsy chairs, beers in hand and white rings around our nostrils. The guys made burgers and dogs and I couldn’t eat a thing. I made small talk with Moose and laughed along with the guys’ banter until Esha decided to go. It was 1:00am and 6:00am came early.

My head pounded and I dragged my body from the bed and into my dirt-packed bush clothes. I washed my face and stood in the mirror, horrified by my swollen Romulan forehead. *Fucking horseflies*. I pulled one of Esha’s ballcaps over it and went to help load the trailer. We got to the

new field an hour later and this one looked the same as the one before. Zeke and Moose, and Spunk too, were already there unloading. We pulled up beside them.

“Hey Jimmy, what’s good?” Spunk said to Esha.

“Oh, you know . . . livin’ the dream, Jimmy.” It seemed everything and everyone was a Jimmy.

“Yeah, right,” Spunk laughed, “‘cause this is balls of fun.” He gave me a smile. “Blondie, how are you girl? I see you’re out with the big boys now.”

Esha leaned forward on the handlebars to talk to Moose, *“figure we’ll be done in a week, week and a half. You bring in the Jimmies after that. The nursery is kinda far from our place.”*

Zeke stood silent.

“Yeah, I’m alright, thanks,” I answered Spunk.

“What do you think?” He took in the scene.

“It’s a bit of a trip,” I said. “But so far so good.”

“Gonna be hot as hell today. You have any deet? The flies will eat you alive.”

“What’s that?” I said.

He walked over to a duffle resting by the tree line. He pulled out a canister and lobbed it over to me. I had to reach to catch it. “Bug spray,” he said. “This shit is lethal. Fucking terrible for you but at least you’ll sleep at night, you know? Keep that, I have a fresh one.”

“Yeah, thanks,” I said, turning the can over to read the label. “Those little fuckers are no joke.”

“Nope!” he said.

“Alright, man, gonna get started,” Esha said. “Catch you on the flip.”

We pulled off and I gave a small wave and we unloaded on the opposite side. The day was monotonous and the sky sprayed the fields with a machine gun sun. I put my head down and focused on the finish line. Our deal was 7% of the final pull. Five hundred plants per field would produce about 250 pounds at about \$1500 each. The math was \$3 million gross, minus initial capital which worked out to \$2,690,000. My cut at 7% would be \$188,300 for 4-5 months of work. Give or take.

That night, Esha left me at the cottage alone. He had some business in town, he said. I smoked and drank and did bumps of K and binged and purged. He didn't get back until after midnight. I woke up when he crawled into bed and I got up, groggy, and walked barefoot to the toilet. Dirt and sand stuck to the bottom of my feet. I lowered myself down to the cold seat, elbows on knees, and sat there peeing for ages. I finally finished, guzzled too much water and felt my way back toward Esha. Moonlight bounced from the lake to the bed and there was a palm-sized shadow hovering on the wall above him.

"Esha?" His breathing was steady. The shadow moved quickly to the left. "Esha, wake up." Nothing. I stood there staring, frozen. "ESHA!"

"Yeah," he mumbled.

"What the fuck is that?!"

"What is what?" he mumbled again into the pillow.

"That! Above you."

"I don't know, turn the light on."

"No, you do it."



“What the fuck babe,” he threw off the covers and flipped on the switch and I hid around the doorframe, peeking. It was huge and the leggy bastard scurried across the wall and down behind my side of the bed. “It’s just a spider,” he snipped.

“Are you fucking kidding me? What kind of a freak mutant spider is that! Kill it!” I shook through my hair and rubbed my neck and arms and all the way down my body. “I don’t want that roid-raged monster near me!! It’s on *my side* of the fucking bed!”

“Relax! It’s just a fishing spider, get used to it,” he said. “Go to sleep.”

“No fucking way!”

“Go to sleep!” he barked and I went to sleep on the couch. But I couldn’t. They were all over me and swarming the floor and up the walls and dropping from the ceiling. They sprinted across my face with long fuzzy legs tickling my lips and I tossed and turned and scratched all night. I must’ve slept eventually. They crept and crittered through my dreams. They whispered in my ears with sideways mouths and bundles of eyes shone in the dark.

It was 6:00am and it was effort. I downed a cold beer, grabbed a one-hit bumper, and went to help Esha hook the auger to the back of the bike. We filled the trailer with bags of soil and set off slow through the trees. I wore my hat backwards and pushed my forehead against Esha’s back to avoid whipping branches and twigs. It was nearly an hour drive to the hydrofield and its skyscraping towers stretched on for miles.

“The rest of the workers arrived today so they’re doing the other fields with bags,” Esha said. “The ground is soft enough here so I’m gonna cut holes. You fill them with soil and mix in the lyme.” He primed and cranked the pull-string on the auger’s outboard motor. It fired up and pierced the air with a throaty gurgle. The giant corkscrew crept into the earth. My blisters were

popped and rubbed in my socks and I pulled heavy bags to the ground. The guys showed up with the same sort of rig. Moose and Zeke spooned on the bike, and Spunk bounced behind them in the trailer. I did a bump of coke in each nostril, swallowed the drip, and I was a new woman. Spunk and I worked side by side, passing the bumper back and forth between holes. He was good shit and he kept me laughing. It drowned in the wake of that deafening drill.

We stopped for lunch midday and formed a circle on the grass, all in green fatigues except for my bright top. The silence pressed against my ears and a small Stesna flew overhead.

“. . . they have to actually catch you in the field,” said Moose. “We don’t have to worry as much now, but when the plants get bigger they can pick them up with heat detectors. Like, if they’re gonna come bust, they’ll do it right before harvest.”

“Maybe rethink that.” Esha said to my red crop top. “It stands out.”

“Yeah, alright,” I said.

“You’re learning the ropes,” Moose said, taking a bite of his sandwich. “So, you had enough of the coke game, huh? Bit different scenery here than you’re used to.”

Zeke and I caught eyes for just a second.

“Yeah, just a bit,” I laughed. “I lived on a farm when I was little, though. I guess it’s kinda like that.”

“Oh shit, that’s cool. Whereabouts?” said Spunk.

“North Dakota.”

“Really? You don’t look like you’re from North Dakota,” said Moose.

“Not sure whether to take that as a compliment,” I laughed.

“Nah, I just mean I wouldn’t have pegged you for it, you know, the nails, the hair.”

I took a pull off my beer and nodded. “Yeah, I guess not.”

“We’ll only get halfway through this today,” Esha interrupted, looking across the hydrofield. “It’ll take another day.”

“Yeah, well the other crew needs more bags,” Moose said, “and we’re running low on soil. Let’s take care of that tomorrow and start back up Sunday. There’s only two fields that need holes after that. We’ll get the guys to come help when they finish with the bags. We’ll be able to burn through it in a couple of days.”

“Yeah, cool, that works,” said Esha. “Alright boys, back at it.”

That little one-hit wonder carried me through the rest of the day but I was good and ready when Esha finally called it quits. We crawled back through the trees for a thousand hours. The brush blocked out the sinking sun and monster mosquitoes fed on us. He cut the engine in front of our cottage and it clamored on in my head. My blisters stung, my left nostril was clogged, and my lower back hurt from bouncing off the back rack of the bike for days. Esha’s body took up most of the seat and he hardly moved forward when I asked him to.

“Wow, I’m sooo tired,” I said, sliding off the back. “Can’t wait to just chill.”

Esha swung his leg off, pounded up the steps, and slammed the door behind him.

My heart slammed, too and I didn’t know what his problem was. I propped myself sideways on the quad’s pleather seat and lit a cigarette. I lit another to erase more time. I finished that one, too and the gravel popped under my big boots with every step to the cabin. I got to the stairs and walked up slow. I turned the knob even slower. I kicked off my boots in the dank air and Esha appeared from the hall. He was dressed, with wet hair. Irish Spring trailed behind him and he fiddled with the clasp of his watch.

“I’ll be back later,” he said.

“Where you going?”

“What do you care?” he huffed.

I squinted my eyes and lowered a brow. “Huh?”

“Why don’t you ask Spunk to come hang out,” he said. “I’m sure you’d both like that.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You two seem to be getting pretty cozy.” The clasp finally clicked and he pushed past me for his keys.

“You’re leaving me here?” I said. “What am I supposed to do? I don’t have a car.”

He pushed past me again and was out the door, in the car, and out the driveway. I stood in the doorway staring, long after he’d disappeared behind the trees.

I finally went in and opened the fridge door. We had plenty of beer and about a gallon of drinking water. There were burgers and pizza and microwave dinners and chips and cookies in the cupboards. I ate until it hurt and my stomach stretched out under my ribs. I could hardly breathe. It took nearly an hour to get it all out, drinking glass after glass of water to loosen it. I’d get fat if I didn’t get it all and I obsessed over my arms and legs and stomach in the mirror. It was finally all gone and I was dizzy and my mouth was dry. My head spun and I flopped onto the couch. My heart took off fast and my skin burned hot. Sweat beaded my hairline. I stayed there until it passed, then cracked a beer and did some K and lost myself inside the TV. I was onstage, Dr. Phil to my right, his guests to my left, and I was tripping balls.

“There’s one thing you need to understand,” Dr. Phil said in his kind southern drawl. “This is not just your problem. This is a family problem.” Two identical girls began to cry. They looked thin and frail. They were weak. “When you are actually doing it, when the two of you are bingeing and purging, do you experience a high?”

They nodded.

“Can you describe it?” he said.

“It’s just like a relief,” one of the twins said.

“What do you think it’s a relief from?”

“Myself,” another choked.

Dr. Phil leaned forward, his tiny clear eyes were open wide. “In most cases, people are looking for relief from pain. Do you think that describes you?”

The girls nodded in tandem, their faces contorted by tears. But then they stopped. They stopped sniffing and curling tissue in their fingers, salt tracks stained their cheeks. Their eyes were on Dr. Phil, but his eyes were on me. “And what the hell are you running from?” he said.

“Holy shit!” I pulled myself out of the screen and onto the couch and fumbled with the remote until they were black and dead and the only thing left was my reflection. Esha stayed away the rest of the night and I hung out with my thoughts and the spiders.

Sometime the next afternoon, Esha crawled in beside me. I’d been hit by a truck and wasn’t planning on moving. I rolled over and he squeezed my shoulders and my neck with his big hands but I was sore and pulled away. He spooned in behind me.

“Sleep OK?” he asked.

“Not really, I need more,” I said into the pillow. The sun laser beamed onto us through the glass doors.

“I thought you would have caught up. You had the place to yourself.”

I scooped off the side of the bed and walked on wobbly legs to the bathroom.

“What the hell is that?” Esha said.

“What?” I turned around.

“On your ass.”

“Huh?” I tried to look down over my shoulder without luck.

“It’s all black,” he said.

I stood on a chair to look in the bathroom mirror. A bruise ran along my lower back and down to my tailbone like a tramp stamp. *That fucking quad.* I went back to the room and Esha was on his back with a boner stuck straight up in the air.

“Jump on,” he said.

We worked straight through to the following weekend and now it was awkward with Zeke and Spunk. Esha hung around us like a dark cloud. The holes were finally cut and the bags were finally filled and it all sat ready for planting. The sun sank and the mosquitos bit, and we set off to our little dank cabin for BBQ and drinks. My tailbone bumped against the metal rack the entire way. I found myself outside alone with Zeke and I centred in front of him.

“Listen, I had no clue it was gonna go that way,” he started.

“Go what way?” I said.

“I was told it was a go. Charlie was trying to pocket it all, I had no idea.”

“Right. I’m sure you had nothing to do with it,” I said.

“Babe, he lied to me, too.”

“Oh, well in that case!” I raised my voice, then stopped. Moose opened the front door and jogged down the steps.

“Ladies,” he nodded with a dumb smirk. Zeke and I stood there silent. Moose grabbed his coat from the back of his bike, jogged back up the steps, and closed the door.

“We’ll talk later,” Zeke said. We never did and I followed him back inside.

I sat with them for a while then took a bottle to bed and drank and smoked until there was two of everything and I passed out.

Esha crawled on top of me in the morning and left to take the quad out somewhere. I chain smoked my way through the afternoon and I was bored to tears. I puttered around the cabin, walked around the marshy shore and cut through paths and the trees. How did I get here? Maybe this was where I belonged, alone, under the strangled light with the dead earth beneath my feet. I kept walking. There was a rusted out truck up the way and off to one side. It was a Ford, must have been from the 60's. It had little round lights and rounded off edges. Its body was chewed out with rust. I pulled hard on the passenger door and it grinded and screeched and flung open. Dead leaves and branches littered the seats and earth and trees grew up through the floor. It was being swallowed up from the inside out. I saw a book wedged in the fold of the bench seat and I pulled it loose. It was yellow with age and the pages were worn. The cover held on for dear life. *Love is a Dog From Hell*, it read. *Poems 1974-1977, Charles Bukowski*. I flipped through the profanity-filled pages. There were titles like *Fuck*, and *I have shit stains in my underwear too*, and *sex*, and *bedpans*, and *the good loser*. This guy was a trip. I stopped on a crumpled page that had a poem called *dog*.

*a single dog*

*walking alone on a hot sidewalk of*

*summer*

*appears to have the power*

*of ten thousand gods.*

*why is this?*<sup>2</sup>

I took it with me, back over fallen branches and stumps that were blanketed with green moss and funny looking mushrooms. They listened to my thoughts and the trees turned their heads to watch as I passed. I couldn't shake the words and they repeated in my mind over and over until they lost their meaning and floated around with the hungry mosquitoes.

"Where the fuck have you been?" Esha was in the driveway. He wore big gloves, army pants and a scowl across his face.

"Just out exploring, I guess," I said.

"Go get ready, we gotta load up the Jimmies for tomorrow.

I did and he led me to a half-sized door at the far side of the cabin that led underneath to a rocky crawlspace. He fumbled the padlock with a tiny little key and pulled the flimsy door wide open. It was blindingly bright and I crouched to look in, blinking away the glare. There was row after row of makeshift tables. Long sheets of plywood that were balanced on the floor's uneven rock and crates. A sea of green leaves held hands under giant hot bulbs and the Jimmies stared back at me. They were like little hostages, tucked out of sight. Like me. Then again, maybe I was more like those mushrooms, fed shit and left in the dark.

"I need you to go in there and start handing them out to me. We have to get loaded and ready for the morning," Esha said.

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<sup>2</sup> Bukowski (1977, p. 123).



I crawled inside and grabbed two at a time and passed them back to Esha's outstretched hands. The space was low and tight and I had to crawl forward on the plywood then scoot myself back, dragging a plant in each hand.

"Watch those lights, they're expensive. You don't want to bump into one of those, they'll blow up," he said and I flattened myself out even more. It was slow and arduous but I was making a dent. On elbows and knees, I scooted back and forth deeper and deeper into the dank space, handing the pots back to Esha. I cleared a wide middle path. The lights were bright and hot as hell and sweat poured into my eyes. I reached for a Jimmy that was off to one side. I dragged it toward me and a scurrying black hand with eight fuzzy fingers darted into the clearing and stopped to look at me.

"HOLY SHIT!" I lurched upwards, my guts in my throat, and cracked my head on a hot globe. The thin glass exploded and shattered all around me. "AGHHH!" I screamed and shot back, scurrying on elbows and knees back to Esha.

"WHAT THE FUCK IS WRONG WITH YOU, YOU CRAZY BITCH?!!" he yelled.

"Steroid spider! Steroid spider!" I was dizzy with fear.

"What did I tell you!? Now there's glass in the plants, you IDIOT!" He shook his head. "It's a spider! Get over it!"

"That's not just a spider," I was shaking.

"Get back in there!"

I went back in, slow, heart pounding.

"C'mon, we don't have all night."

I cleared out the rest, shaking with fear and Esha bitching behind me.

The week was long. The crews hauled load after load of Jimmies from their camps and we took turns transplanting and watering. Each field sat next to a water reservoir with a pump and a hose that ran up from the bank. We filled five gallon buckets and carried one in each hand to soak the soil of each new transplant. “You don’t look good,” Spunk told me on the third day and he took me off watering duty. Esha had been leaving me alone in the evenings and I’d filled the void with eating and puking. I’d barely kept a meal down in a week and I was moving slower each day. I remember carrying Jimmies to the far side of the field and setting them down. And I remember getting down to my knees to dig a little hole, then tipping a pot to slide out the formed soil. It was always hot and I was always sweating but it was different that day. A wave of heat passed through my insides. My heart fluttered and complained and my breathing was shallow. The scorched earth slid sideways and I was out cold.

The ride back through the brush was rough in the trailer and Spunk sat next to me with my head on his lap. We bounced and creaked and the engine was loud. They carried me to a car and stretched me out in the back.

I woke with a jolt and tubes in my nose and needles in my wrist. I was alone. The room was brightly lit and it was dark outside. I stared at the window and collected my thoughts. I tried to piece it all together. The machines beeped to a rhythm and I lay there waiting for ages.

“Hello there.” A nurse finally came and she leaned over me to check the hanging plastic bags. She turned to the machine and fiddled with it for a second then stood back to look at me. She had her hands folded in front of her. “How are you, dear,” she said.

“I’m not sure,” I had to clear my throat, “how . . . what’s going on?”

“Well, you collapsed playing frisbee with your friends,” she said. You came in dehydrated and we’re monitoring your heart. The doctor can tell you more when he gets here, but I can’t

promise it will be soon.” She rested a hand on the bed’s metal bar. “We’re a little short-staffed at the moment. We’ll have you stay the night and my guess is that the doctor will see you in the morning. We have you on electrolytes now so you should be feeling a little better soon. Try to get some rest. I’ll be back to change the bags throughout the night.” She had a kind smile and a concerned look. “You’re lucky, hun.” She gave me a little wink and left the room.

I was in and out of sleep the entire night and was good and ready to hear what the doctor had to say. He walked in with his clipboard and a hollow face and I propped myself up to face him.

“Just relax, I don’t want you straining.” I lowered back down to my pillow. “You’ve had a minor heart event. How old are you? He examined the pages on my chart. “Twenty-one,” he answered himself. “Do you have a history of heart issues? Any family history?” He looked down at me over his clipboard.

I shook my head.

He pulled up a chair and sat on the edge of it, leaning toward me. “I’d like to keep you another day so we can monitor your progress. I also recommend that you speak to someone from our mental health team. The resident psychiatrist is away but I’ll give you a referral to see one in the community.” I thought of Dr. Melfi. “Dr. Brock,” he said. “He isn’t too far from here. I’ll be back to check on you either this evening or in the morning. OK?”

I nodded.

“Good,” he said and disappeared out the door. I could hear him murmuring with a nurse but I couldn’t make it out and I lay there staring at the ceiling.

The next morning I waited and waited to be released. The doctor came and said I’d been discharged, but I had to wait for a nurse to come get me ready. A couple hours passed and I was

impatient. I needed a cigarette and I needed to get out of there. I took the tube out from the needle on my wrist and went to the bathroom. I shut the heavy door and stood in the mirror. I was rough. My eyes looked dull and there were dark bags under them. I stood there examining my face, listening to nurses and people walk by in the hall. They chatted and called out to each other and laughed as they passed. But no one came. Why can't I just leave? I carefully peeled the tape from my wrist and gently pulled out the needle. A long thin tube came out with it and blood pulsed out in fat streams. It sprayed the mirror and the counter and the floor as I scrambled for a tissue. A nurse opened the door.

“What is going on here?!” Her eyes widened at the bloody mess. “What did you do!?” She grabbed my wrist and put pressure on it, then dragged me out to bandage me up.

I got dressed and they brought in a wheelchair and took me to the front. Spunk was standing there waiting. I was handed a little card and told to “call that number to set up an appointment.” I looked down at it, *Dr. Brock, Psychiatrist, M.D., White Salmon Mental Health Center*. I stood up and slid it in my pocket and walked with Spunk to the car.

“How you feeling?” he asked, getting in. “They said you were severely dehydrated. You really gotta keep up on your water out there in the fields.”

“Yeah, I'll have to do that from now on,” I said.

“That was pretty scary. I looked over and you were just slumped to one side with your head on the ground. It was a good hour, hour and a half before we finally got you here.”

“Shit, yeah, I'm sorry,” I said.

“Don't be sorry! Just glad you're OK.” His eyes were kind. “So did they say anything else? You're good now?”

“Yeah, all good. I have a check up at some point, you know, just to be safe, but everything’s cool. All good,” I said again.

“Good,” he said, too.

“I’m dying for a cigarette,” I said. “You got one?”

“Yeah, hun, centre console.” He lit it for me and cracked a window. “I’m supposed to blindfold you going back but fuck it. Don’t tell anyone, OK?”

“Deal,” I said. “Thank you.”

“No worries,” he smiled.

Esha came back late, well after dark, and we didn’t say much. He did give me a hug and asked if I was OK but we left it at that. He had pizza with him and we sat in front of the tv with it and some beers. I kept my food down that night.

He was up early the next morning and told me to stay in bed. He said they were going to work over the weekend to make up for lost time and I should stay and chill. I slept more after he left then got up with a beer and that little white card. Three beers and one shitty daytime show later I flipped open my phone and dialed. It was Friday and I got an appointment for Tuesday morning. I put my feet up and got drunk the rest of the day.

Sunday night Esha was home and I finally built up the courage to talk to him. “I have an appointment in town Tuesday,” I said.

“What for?” He looked up from his pile of papers and numbers and cellphones on the counter.

“The doctor, at the hospital, thought I should go talk to someone.”

“What do you mean talk to someone?”

“Like, a shrink.” I don’t know why I told him.

“You’re serious?” he frowned. “What do you need that for?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Stress, I guess.”

“What the hell do you have to be stressed about? You sit around on your hands.” He rolled his eyes. “You should try being me for a day.”

“I just . . . I think it might be good for me, you know, to sort some things out.”

“Like what? What are you gonna do, tell them you’re growing weed down the road and fuck us all over!?”

“What you say is confidential,” I said. “They can’t tell anyone. Remember the Sopranos?”

“Do you know how much of a pain in the ass you’re becoming?” He shook his head, disgusted. “How are you going to get there? You can’t take the car.”

“Why not? I know where we are now, well, the town anyway. You have no reason not to trust me.”

“For fuck sakes.” He paused. “OK, I’ll send you with Spunk. You guys seem to get along. He’s a useless cunt, too.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“Whatever.” He went back to his numbers.

Tuesday morning came and Spunk and I pulled up to an old brick building.

“Mental Health Center? He said. Is this it?”

“Yeah, it’s just my check up. The specialist works out of here.”

“Ah, OK,” he said. “I’ll see you in an hour. You want a coffee?”

“Sure, thanks,” I said, shutting the door behind me.

I waited for Dr. Brock outside his office in a squarish retro chair. The place was old with wide smelly halls and the chipped walls were painted a pale mint green. Another patient emerged from his door, said an awkward goodbye, and Dr. Brock welcomed me in.

“Have a seat,” he said, taking his own behind a metal desk. The sun beamed in through the window behind him and the air was thick and close. He pulled my file and read from it.

“So you’ve had a scare?” he said without looking up. “Can you tell me about it?”

“What do you want to know?” I said.

“Well, according to this your BMI is below normal, you showed up at the hospital unconscious and dehydrated, and your heart is taking a beating, so you tell me.” The room was hot but he was cold.

“I’m having some problems, I guess, with food.”

“Ya, I guess so,” he said. “Are you purging or restricting?”

“Both,” I said and shame washed over me.

“It’s a dangerous game you’re playing,” he said. “You’re lucky, what happened could’ve been much worse.”

I nodded.

“I’m going to ask you some questions, OK?”

I nodded again.

I had to tell him bits and pieces of my family history and childhood, my alcohol and drug use, and my experiences with depression and anxiety. We sat for nearly two hours picking at my life and I thought of Spunk out there waiting.

“What’s your living situation?” he asked and I told him. I told him all of it. It made sense to tell him the truth if he was going to help me and he went from cold to ice.

“Do you know how many kids I see here who are *psychotic* from marijuana!?” His eyes sliced into me. “Do you know how many lives you’re *ruining*!?” His voice was raised and he was furious. My chest pounded and I could hardly breathe in the thick air. He struggled to calm himself. “Now, I’d say you have a personality disorder of some sort but I won’t continue to see you. He stood up and I stood up, too. “GET OUT!” he barked and I tripped over my chair as I darted for the door. It made an awful screech across the floor. I dove to the knob and I was out the door and running down the hall to the stairwell. The heavy door took its time to close and my legs could no longer hold me. I slid down the wall to my knees and the tears finally came. They were loud. I pushed them back in and pulled myself together and I stayed there breathing until I could walk again.

**I clued into Garlick’s face and her eyes were wide. “That was the first psychiatrist you saw?”**

**“Yeah,” I said.**

**“I bet that was traumatic for you,” she said.**

**I shrugged.**

Anyway, I took the long way out and apologized to Spunk.

“No worries, I had coffee and made some calls,” he said. “Pretty sure yours is cold by now. You want to stop for another?”

“Yeah, I’d really like that. Mind if we stop at a store, too?”

“Let’s do it,” he said.



I bought beer and vodka and chips and chocolate and Spunk took me back to my little secluded cabin. He had to get out to the field, he said, it was still early enough, and I went inside to binge and purge the morning away.

I was on spray duty the next week, and for the rest of the summer. It was the easiest job. I had a plastic canister strapped to my back that was filled with 'food' for the Jimmies. I sprayed the plants with the fine brown mist, through the canister's long gun. It looked like a pressure washer that made no sound. I sprayed the Jimmies, one-by-one, making sure to cover every inch of their leaves.

The rest of the summer was more of the same, Zeke and I ignoring each other, Esha taking what he wanted. Me, alone at the cabin, keeping company with my drugs, and booze, and food, and the toilet. And the mirror. I judged and fretted and measured my body with my fingers, over and over, but it was never enough. By fall, we were ready for harvest. The crops were good that year. They'd had just the right amount of sun and care and they'd grown tall and fat with a half, to one pound of bud each. We crept through the trees on our bikes, with empty trailers rattling and bouncing behind us.

"Here," Esha handed me a machete. "Chop them at the base of the stalk. Like this." He took his own giant blade and gripped with his left, and swiped with his right. The plant broke free after two blows and he placed it on its side in the trailer. The other two crews did the same and we took load after load through the trees to a small deserted road. There were trucks with enclosed backs parked and waiting and we piled the Jimmies high to their roofs. Each trip we made, we came back to an empty truck, and we piled them high again.

“Where are they going?” I asked Spunk. I was in the box, and he passed the Jimmies up to me.

“To dry,” he said, hoisting up another. “We have a farm not too far from here. They have to be hung until they lose all their moisture, and then we can start trimming.”

“Let’s go,” Esha called from the tree line. It was getting dark and the trailers and field were empty.

Each field took a day and when they were finally cleared, we moved shop to the farm. The lane was long and the house was old. There was a barn and a large shed behind it. We hung row after row of twine and plants that dangled by their feet, bleeding out in the dry air. The steady hum of air conditioners and dehumidifiers was enough to drive you crazy and it rattled on through my mind and my dreams.

Drying took ages and I waited at the cabin alone. I was no longer me and I was broken at the bottom of a deep hole. My fingers bled from trying to claw my way out and scratch marks lined the walls around me. How did I get here? I could see light at the top but it only grew smaller. It was now just a pinhole that pierced the sky. I stopped fighting and waited for it to swallow me whole and I grabbed a beer and Bukowski.

*there once was a woman who put her head into an oven.*

*terror finally becomes almost*

*bearable*

*but never quite*

*terror creeps like a cat*

*crawls like a cat*

*across my mind*

*I can hear the laughter of the masses*

*they are strong*

*they will survive*

*like the roach*

*never take your eyes off the roach*

*you'll never see it again.*

*the masses are everywhere*

*they know how to do things:*

*they have sane and deadly angers*

*for sane and deadly*

*things.*

*I wish I were driving a blue 1952 Buick*

*or a dark blue 1942 Buick*

*or a blue 1932 Buick  
over a cliff of hell and into the  
sea.*<sup>3</sup>

Trimming was a job. We were at the farm and it was me and the Hawaii boys, Esha, Zeke, Spunk, Moose, and ten more workers spread across the barn floor. Esha and Moose sat behind funny little tables that had spinning blades under their grated tops. The fan sucked in long leaves while the guys held the stems, rolling and dragging the Jimmies across them. The rest of us sat on chairs and old sofas with spring loaded scissors in our hands. We meticulously trimmed the remaining leaves and we bantered, and bashed, and got good and fucked up. Night after day and day after night. The coke helped me work and the K kept me out of my mind.

“. . . Bush is a terrorist,” one of the guys said. “It’s like the sheep can’t see what’s really going on. You really think 9/11 wasn’t an inside job? C’mon.”

“Yup, people are sheeple,” Moose said over the moan of spinning blades, “they just believe what they’re told and follow the herd.”

“We should never have gone to Iraq. It was always about the oil,” another one said.

“Maybe it would be better to not know,” I piped in. “To be blind. I mean, not just to this, but to everything. Ignorance is bliss, right? I think life would be easier, then.”

It was silent for a time then Esha shot at me. “What the fuck do you know, *Blondie*?”

The room broke out laughing, except for Spunk, and I kept quiet with my guts in my lap.

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<sup>3</sup> Bukowski (1977, p. 131).

October came and the Jimmies were stripped, bagged, and locked up tight in rows of freezers. Esha and I packed our things for Hawaii. I was happy to be back and he flew back and forth to the west coast to sell bags of green. He didn't tell me much. I was mostly kept in the dark. He'd leave for days, sometimes weeks at a time, and he said no one got paid until the last Jimmy was sold. He'd get cryptic on the phone about when he'd be back, then fly through the door in the middle of the night. He seemed disappointed each time he didn't catch me cheating. There was nothing to catch, except for the purging, but he never did notice that.

I spent my days and nights on the computer, pining and obsessing over before and after pictures of women and their breast implants. I scoured them endlessly, shopping for new boobs. I hated my body and I hated my little pointers and getting them done would make me happy.

"What is that, porn?" Esha said, finding me one night in front of the glowing screen. "Hmm, so you like girls, then?" He put his arms around me and buried his face in the back of my neck.

"They're breast implants," I said. "I think I want mine done."

"I like big boobs!" he smiled, watching as I scrolled down the page.

"When I get my money I'm going to call these places." I picked up a note from the table to show him. "They're in Honolulu."

"How much are they?" he said. "I'll just give you the money for it now."

"\$4000," I said.

"Done!" He spun me around on my swivel seat and kissed me, then picked me up and carried me to bed.

The plastic surgeon was in a nice building with a modern look. I told Esha I'd be an hour and walked through the front doors. An old handsome woman was behind the desk.

“I have an appointment for 12:30,” I said.

“Name?”

“Elizabeth.” She searched her screen. “Trent,” I said.

“Ah, here you are. Have a seat. Dr. Short will see you soon,” she smiled.

“Thank you,” I said, and found an empty chair with the other waiting women. I waited nearly an hour before I was called in. Dr. Short shook my hand and we both took a seat on either side of his desk. He was not short at all. He was a lanky man with white hair and a white mustache. He must have been in his sixties.

“So, what can I do you for?” he said.

“I want implants,” I said. “400cc’s. I’ve been looking on the internet and I think that’s a good size.”

“You’re quite thin . . . ,” he said, then thought for a second, “but given your frame, you should have more weight on you.” I didn’t say anything. He went on to take my health history and asked a lot of questions. “Do you smoke?”

“Yes.”

“How many per day?”

“Maybe a pack,” I said.

“You should really quit before the surgery,” he warned. “Cigarettes restrict blood flow, it could complicate things.”

“OK,” I said. He shouldn’t hold his breath.

“Alcohol?”

“Yes.”

“How many drinks per week, would you say?”

I stopped to count and decide on how much to lie. “Oh, probably twenty-five, or so.” I went with the medium sized lie.

Dr. Short looked up with wide eyes.

“Just lately, really,” I fumbled. “I can stop before surgery.”

“Good, because alcohol will slow recovery, too. I’d suggest quitting at least a week before and refraining for at least a week after.”

I nodded, “not a problem.”

“And drugs?”

“I do ketamine sometimes. And the odd pill.”

He sat back in his seat. “I’m going to make the same point.”

I nodded, “no worries.”

He thought for a minute, a long minute, with his hands folded in front of him. “You know, I do use ketamine for surgeries sometimes. It may actually be best to not put you under with a general.”

“Really?” I said. “That’s interesting.”

“Not many doctors do it but it’s a good option for some. Now, we’ll have to talk about placement, whether we go over or under the muscle,” he said. “I’ll know more after I examine you. And we’ll have to decide on silicone or saline.” he handed me a binder of pictures. “I’m out of forms,” he said, scanning his desk. “Take a look through that for a minute. I’ll be right back.” He left and I flipped through. They were all pictures of women’s vaginas and the biggest pussy lips I’d ever seen. The after shots were impressive. He came back waving a new stack of forms. “Sorry about that,” he said.

“This must be the wrong binder,” I said, handing it back to him. “You do this? I never knew this was even a thing.”

“Oh, sorry about that,” he said. “But yes, I do. Are you interested?”

“Actually . . . ,” I said. “Maybe.”

“Alright, well let’s go check you out,” he said and I followed him into the exam room. He fondled my bare breasts and said I should do saline over the muscle then asked me to remove my pants and underwear. He pulled on me, down below, and they stretched and hurt. “Yeah, we could do this, too. I call it tops and bottoms,” he smiled with pride. “OK, you can get dressed. We’ll call you with a quote in a few days and you can take your time to decide.”

Esha was waiting out front. “You said an hour!” he bitched as I got in. “So? What did he say?”

“He said he’ll do it,” I said. “Have you ever heard of labiaplasty? He does that, too. Kinda thinking about it.”

“Like, lip surgery?” he said.

“Yeah.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard of that,” he said. “I know a couple chicks who had it done.”

“Hmm,” I said. “Anyway, they’re gonna call with a quote.

“Groovy,” he said. He was in a good mood that day. “Let’s get some food, ya?”

Dr. Short called a couple of days later and said he wanted \$9600 for both surgeries. He could book me in right away. He agreed to take cash and wave the taxes, and Esha agreed to front me. Two weeks later I was dangling my legs off the side of a surgery table, bare-faced and bare-breasted, waiting for the team to prep the room. A nurse took my hand and wiped it with an



orange solution and slid a needle up through the top of my wrist. She was exotic with black hair and huge beautiful lips. I complimented her on them.

“I do it myself,” she said. “The benefits of being an RN,” she winked.

Dr. Short came into the room and stood in front of me. “OK, so we’re going to put you to sleep with a combination of ketamine and some other anesthetizing agents. The surgery should take about six hours. When you wake up, you’ll be in a recovery room until you’re ready to leave. That should be another hour or so.”

I nodded up at him.

“Also, I’m conducting a study right now. We’ve found that women who can’t achieve orgasm through penetration can benefit from having filler injected into the G-spot.” He talked with his hands. “The idea there is that the muscle and nerve endings are placed too far back. We inject filler to bring it down closer to the vaginal canal. Have you ever had any difficulty in that department? It’s normally a \$1200 procedure but I could do it at no cost while you’re under.” He went on, “You would be interviewed after a few weeks as a participant for the journal article I’m writing. It’s anonymous. You wouldn’t be mentioned by name.”

I agreed to it and they strapped me down and I felt the life pull out through my limbs. I woke up and the room was bright and I blinked in and out of existence. There were talking blue gowns and scrub caps floating around on either side of me.

“I think that’s enough,” I heard, and a little plastic container with something floating at the bottom passed over me. My eyes tracked it to a metal table with little metal tools.

“*Doctor.*” The voice was urgent. “*DOCTOR!*”

“Oh shit.” There was a scramble and then a face looked down at me. It blocked the light, and it’s the last thing I saw.

I woke again, nauseous and confused. It was a big room, with curtains and beds and bright white sheets. “Bathroom, I said to a cute little nurse. My throat hurt. I tried clearing it. “I have to pee.” She agreed after a fuss and the toilet was bright red when I looked back at it.

“You shouldn’t be up, let’s get you back to bed,” she said, holding my arm.

“I feel so sick,” I said and the room waved in front of me.

“OK, sweetie, I’ll add an antinauseant to your IV. You’ll feel better soon.”

Dr. Short finally came. “The surgery was a success,” he said, and he gave me a long list of instructions. “Wear a pad and a girdle for the first few weeks. The nurse will give them to you on your way out. It’s important that you sleep with your pelvis elevated, you’ll have some swelling.”

It was no joke. My bottom ballooned over the next two days. I’d been sleeping and resting with the blood rushing to my head but it wasn’t helping. My first check up was scheduled for the next day but I caved and called anyway.

“I’m so swollen,” I told the nurse. “I look like I have balls!”

I was freaking the fuck out and she was fighting back a laugh. She said to come in right away.

Esha was God knows where so I took a cab and waddled my way through the office doors.

Dr. Short checked me out in a huff. “Oh boy,” he said. “Are you following the care instructions?”

“Yes.”

“Are you eating? Drinking water?” He continued prodding me down there. “We don’t want you hemorrhaging.”

“Is it going to get better? Am I stuck like this?!”

“No no. I’m going to send you home with a strong NSAID. Follow everything in your care booklet and I’ll see you in another week.”

Recovery was slow. I had a hard time keeping my food down and the dark hole I was in got deeper and deeper. Esha was sexually frustrated. He made sure to complain about it and my pain dragged on. Each week I took a cab to the office, and one time Esha came along. We both stood in the exam room, me bare-breasted with Dr. Short squeezing my breasts in the mirror, showing Esha how to massage them. “It’s important to do this three times a day,” he told him. “We want to make sure the implants stay soft in the pockets. “You try,” he said, and Esha did his best to mimic him. I stood there watching them in the mirror.

“That guy’s fucking weird,” Esha said on the ride back to the shore. “Is that normal?”

“I dunno, probably,” I shrugged. “He’s a doctor.”

At ten weeks I was given the green light for sex and Dr. Short called me back in. He wanted an update on the other procedure so he could include it in the write-up of his study. We were in a different room this time and he instructed me to lay on a gold-coloured recliner that looked like a dentist chair.

“Just relax,” he told me. “You know I’ve done this for women who’ve had their clitoris removed at birth? They do it in a lot of African countries,” he said, sliding two fingers inside me. “I helped a Guinea woman in her twenties achieve her first orgasm. Do you have any pain here?”

“No,” I said.

“OK, just relax,” he said again, and rested with one cheek and a bent knee beside me on the leather. “You can’t tell your boyfriend about this, OK?” He began moving his fingers in and out and pushing on the muscle inside me.

I stayed quiet, paralyzed. What the fuck was this? I tried to relax like he told me.

“Let me know when you’re close,” he said, and continued fingering me.

He was trying to make me cum! The minutes passed and I didn’t feel a thing and he tried harder. More minutes passed and I wanted it to end so I managed a moan. He pulled out his fingers and he was angry.

“You know, you don’t need to fake it! Get yourself dressed,” he said and stormed out of the room. I never saw him again and I never told anyone.

**“It’s good you’re talking about it now,” Garlick cut in. Her eyes were different. “How are you feeling?”**

**“I’m fine.”**

**“Elizabeth, that was rape. I have to report it if you were abused by a health care professional.”**

**“Are you angry?” I said. She looked angry.**

**“Yeah, I am. I’m fucking pissed off. You were in this man’s care and he violated you in the worst possible way. And Esha, he’s another one. We need to address this.”**

*Garlick swore. What the fuck?*

**She tapped her finger on her desk and took a breath.**

**“Did I do something?”**

**“No, I’m angry at what happened to you! Aren’t you?”**

**“I don’t know.” I searched her stained carpet. “I guess not.” *That’s cause you’re empty.* The words rolled inside of me. *You’re not a real person.* “I try not to think about it,” I said.**

**“He’s a piece of shit,” she said. “They both are.” Her eyes burned into me and I began to believe her.**

**“What difference does that make?” I wanted to make a break for the door.**

**“If you push down your feelings, they’ll come out in other ways.”**

**I picked at the side of my chair.**

**“Are you ready to talk about it?”**

**“I don’t think so.”**

**“OK. Can you tell me what happened when you left?”**

I went home, showered, and drank by the pool for the next three days. I watched the ocean below crash and swirl in the strong wind. Little dark figures with their boards and wetsuits came and went from the beach. The sun traveled across the sky and dipped into the water each night. Esha joined me on the fourth day and we lay in the heat on our sunbathers.

“These fucking guys, I’m telling you,” he said, typing away on his paddle phone. “Gonna take a hit on some of the bags.”

“What do you mean?” I said, lighting my millionth cigarette. The ashtray overflowed beside me.

“I *mean*, I’m getting stiffed on \$500 a pound. It’s taking a huge bite out of the final numbers.”

“What are the final numbers?” I said.

He shook his head and kept clicking with his thumbs.

“Do you think we’ll get paid soon, then?” I shifted my body to face him. The side of my boob was tender. I adjusted to take the pressure off of it.

“Yeah, it’s being washed right now, but I have your \$10K.”

“\$10K!?”

“Yeah, your cut.” He put the phone down. “What were you expecting?”

“More, obviously,” I said, my eyebrows dipped.

He laughed. “You’re joking, right? You’ve been living for free and you have a pair of new tits. What’s the problem? Look where you are!” he said looking around with his palms up. “How about some appreciation for everything I’ve done for you.”

“That wasn’t the deal.” I said sitting up. My phone rang beside me. I left it.

“Yeah, well, things change. You really are an ungrateful cunt, you know that!?” He now stood over me and he was yelling. “Why do I even bother with you? You’re a shit lay and you’re fucking useless. And look at you, you’re a fucking drunk!” He stormed inside then quickly stormed back out. “Here! Here’s your fucking money!” He threw a wrapped stack at me. I covered my head and it bounced off my arm. “I’m done with you! Take all your problems, and all your *bullshit* somewhere else!” He fucked off and slammed the sliding door behind him.

I sat back, lit a shaky cigarette and checked my phone. It was D. We hadn’t spoken in weeks. He’d wished me good luck before my surgery and said we’d catch up soon. “Maybe we can go visit Gran together when you’re better,” he’d said. I called him back and a woman’s voice answered, “Bets?”

“Yeah, who’s this?” It was D’s beauty. She was crying.

“I . . . D, he . . .”

“He what?” My heart pounded.

“He’s dead.”

There was a long silence. The deck slid sideways and I went with it. “He’s dead?” The sky and the clouds and the ocean shred to pieces around me.

“I’m sorry, I found your number in his phone, and. . . .”

“What happened!?” I couldn’t breathe.

“It was an overdose. Someone gave him a pipe. There was fentanyl in it. We didn’t know, Bets. He just dropped . . . we’d done so much blow . . . we didn’t know,” she said again.

My throat knotted. “When?”

“Saturday night. I’m sorry for taking so long to call, I just haven’t been able to,” she cried harder. “If I only . . . we didn’t know!”

“It’s OK, it’s OK.” I choked. “I’m coming. I’ll grab a flight.”

“They’re sending his body back to Florida for the funeral,” she said. “It’s next week.”

I shut my phone and sat looking at it. It was blank and so was I. I managed to stand on heavy feet. I made it in the house and up the stairs. I gathered my things into suitcases and thumped my bags down the stairs and out the front door. The Bronco was gone. I called a taxi and he took me back to that familiar airport shithole. It was a different room and I dropped my things and paced. I couldn’t think straight. I sat on the bed and again, I lifted a heavy phonebook to my lap. I called the airport. I booked the first morning flight, drank myself to sleep, then drank away my hangover in the packed cabin to LAX. I wound back time through the busy airport and back out the doors. There she was, my burgundy Buick. I wish it was a blue 1932 Buick, Bukowski said, and I drove it straight to Venice Beach. I got my bag of blow and a couple of tall boys and set off east, rewinding the past down the I-40, back to the Orange State. I’d never seen Gran cry before.

She was always stoic and cold but her cheeks were now wet and she held my bones tight. “You damned kids,” she cried.

I guess we did get to see Gran together one last time. Me and D. It was an open casket and his skin was porcelain and his lips were pink. D’s broad shoulders were tucked in tight and the padded walls pressed against his smart navy suit. He looked peaceful, whatever that meant. I squeezed his stiff hand and said my goodbyes and his beauty was hysterical walking up behind me. I kissed her cheeks and sat down beside Gran. Lando wasn’t there.

We buried him the next day, in a deep hole in the ground and now his sky was gone forever.

**Garlick’s eyes were wet, mine weren’t, and I searched her face for something to say.**

**“Are you OK?”**

**“I’m sorry,” she said, shaking her head, like she was trying to erase the moment. She forced a smile and reached for the Kleenex box. “It’s just. . . .” Garlick took a tissue and looked to the ceiling for her words. I don’t think she wanted to say anything but it was too late now. “I lost a brother in much the same way.” Tears fell from the sides of her eyes and she tried to catch them.**

*I should be crying. That’s normal. I’m not normal.*

**“I’m sorry,” she said again. It’s inappropriate.”**

**“It’s OK,” I softened. “When did it happen?”**

**She hesitated. “A very long time ago.” She smiled through her tears. “I think about him all the time, but every so often, you know, it all rushes back.”**

**I lowered my eyes and sat back in my chair. “That’s probably healthy,” I said and looked for her response.**



**“Yeah, it probably is.” She took a deep breath and looked at her screen. “We’re nearly out of time,” she said, clearing her throat, “but I’d like to continue this next week.”**

**The following Monday I walked the long halls with a coffee in each hand. The hospital had a smell to it. It was subtle but it was there and I recognized it. I saw Lando in his room and stared at the back of his head as I passed. My stomach burned and the walls collapsed in behind me.**

**“Elizabeth?” Garlick poked her head out the door. “C’mon in.”**

**I put a cup and mound of cream and sugar in front of her and took my seat.**

**“How was your week?” Garlick smiled.**

**“Pretty much the same.” I scooted forward for the cream. “Still flailing around in hell.” I stirred it in, sat back and took a sip.**

**“Thank you for the coffee,” she said, “that was very thoughtful of you.”**

**“It’s OK, I was going anyway.”**

**“It’s a nice gesture. I do have to say, however, that I can’t accept gifts from patients.”**

**“It’s a coffee.” I blew on mine and took another sip.**

**“I know, but it’s still considered a gift.”**

**I raised a brow. “I don’t think you’re supposed to cry in front of patients, either, but you did that.”**

**Garlick exhaled and folded her hands on her desk. “Would it be better if I showed emotion?”**

**“I don’t know, maybe.”**

**“Why is that?”**

**“Well, if I wanted to talk to a wall, I could do that at home.”**

**She nodded. “And what about you?”**

**“What do you mean?”**

**“Do you think it would be better if you showed emotion?”**

***Check fucking mate.* “It’s not that easy.”**

**“No, it’s not.” She shifted in her seat. “You know Elizabeth, I see a lot of myself in you.”**

**“Doubt that.” A frog was forming and I swallowed it.**

**“Well, you don’t know what you don’t know,” she said with the kindest eyes. She waited. “Just know that it *is* possible to create a better life.”**

**I had nothing but questions but I left it.**

**She did, too. “So,” she said reaching for the sugar. “What happened after Daniel’s funeral?”**

## PART IV: Mr. Chu 楚

I stayed there with Gran, in my old room, and I slept, and binged, and purged, and drank the days and weeks away. Esha called and I ignored it. I was frozen in time and the world went on without me.

“What are you going to do with your life, my dear?” Gran finally said one day, handing me a tea. “You can’t mope around in that bed forever. You have to get yourself moving. Why don’t you start by cleaning up that mess you left in my basement?”

I let it sit for a few more days then lowered myself down the creaky stairs to a ripped up wall and crumbled drywall at my feet. The sledgehammer was still off to one side. It lay there lifeless while I gathered up the pieces. I swept the rest into a dustpan and got in the Buick to buy supplies. I took the instructions from the hardware guy, the mud, the putty knife, the tape, the drywall, the measurer, the saw, the screws, and the drill back down the stairs and mixed the thick white solution. I cut a board to size and walked it over to the studs. It needed more off the top and I turned to cut it but shiny cellophane caught my eye. It was wedged behind the stretch of unbroken wall and I reached for it, on hands and knees. I hooked its edge with my long nails and pulled it toward me. Another \$10K! I exhaled hard and finished the job with a smile on my face.

I stayed down there after, admiring my hard work on the old flowered couch, smoking and drinking cold beer. I kicked my feet up on the coffee table, next to the money, and looked around the familiar room. We used to hang out down there, sneaking in booze and friends. We would imagine what our lives would be like. No more peddling and petty crimes. We would be rich, big dogs in the game. We would move away, far from this place, together. On the other side of the room there was a large cabinet with a row of boxes. *Daniel, Elizabeth, and Leonardo*, they said in thick marker. I opened D’s first. There were assessments from social workers and parole

officers and other state documents. His mother was on drugs and turned him over to the State when he was only seven. There was no mention of his father. I dug to the bottom and found old report cards and suspension letters from principals. There was only one picture and I sat with it in my lap, cross-legged on the cold floor. He couldn't have been more than twelve there, smiling up at me. Tears crept up the back of my throat and I swallowed them down. D had been a chubby kid with big pillow cheeks that swallowed his eyes. The other kids teased him then, they called him thunder thighs until he started with the weights. He built himself into a mean motherfucker and after that, no one messed with him.

I put the heavy folders back in the box and started on my own. Mine were more of the same and I flipped through them. I'd been fifteen and my mom didn't want me. I was just too difficult, she said. I was a runaway and fuck up. I ran from the chaos and yelling and blaming, and I ran from the hitting and choking and humiliating. I was a little slut and I'd ruined her life, she'd say. She took off to another state and I dropped out of school and ran with the bad kids. There was a brown journal staring up at me. I flipped through the little girl handwriting and judged every bit of it. I used to write a lot. I used to *love* it. My report cards were there, too. Grade 6: *Science 97%, Social Studies 90%, Math 91%, History 86%, English 85%*. Grade 9: *Biology A+, Chemistry A, English A-, Math A, History A-*. I swallowed again and pulled ribbons and pictures and plaques and trophies from the bottom of the box. I'd been an athlete, before the divorce, before it all fell apart, before the pieces all spiralled, and I spiralled with them. Before I dressed sexy and wore dark makeup. Before I had fake nails and could no longer throw a ball. I looked happy in my picture. I was bright and blonde with cute baby cheeks and dimples when I smiled. I could eat and not hate myself then. No paining and obsessing over my strong curvy body. I packed it all in, put it back on the shelf, and Lando stayed there with it.

I walked around the room after, aimless and alone. My phone vibrated. It was the Gaff.

“Blondie. How are you, love?”

“Living large,” I said.

“A little birdy told me you were in town,” he said.

“How many little birdies do you have?” I laughed. “Do you know everything?”

“I try my best.”

“Been staying with my Gran the last couple of months,” I said, still pacing.

“What happened to Romeo?” he said.

“You don’t wanna know.”

“Does that mean I can see you? I’m going to be out your way a little later. Have a drink with me.”

“Not sure that’s a good idea,” I said, lighting up.

“Why not?”

“Your wife,” I said. “That’s not really my thing, you know, homewrecking.”

“Who told you I was married?” he said.

“A little bird,” I said. “Actually, I saw her last year, at your office, with your kids.”

“Love, we’ve been divorced for over a year. Separated for two.” I didn’t say anything, I put one careful foot in front of the other, stepping between the lines on the cheap linoleum. “Now will you see me?” he said. I’ll get us a room. Meet me at the Santana, 8:00.”

“The one with the casino? I said.

“That’s the one.”

“Alright, I’ll see you there, I said.”

And there he was, handsome and broad in a white button up and pointy shoes. I clicked up to him in five-inch heels. We hugged and kissed and smiled into each other's eyes. He was warm and familiar.

"These are new," he said looking down at my chest. I laughed. "C'mon, let's go fatten up that little round ass of yours. He took my arm and we caught up over steaks and wine.

"So, how are you, love?" he said, his voice deep and serious.

"I don't know," I shrugged. "Things haven't been easy. It's all a big mess, really." I pushed tiny butter-soaked carrots around my plate.

"Talk to me."

"Not sure what to say," I said. "Not sure . . . I don't really know where to go from here, you know? . . . but . . . I'm gonna have to do something," I separated my potatoes from my meat and rolled the carrots off to one side.

"Have you thought about going back to school?" he said.

"That's funny," I managed a shallow laugh. "I didn't even graduate from high school."

"Yeah, well, do a GED, then," he said. "You're smart, Blondie, that seems to be obvious to everyone but you. You gotta start using your evil powers for good."

"I'm not so sure of that."

"Yeah? Who doesn't think so?" He challenged me.

"I know how people see me."

"Not everyone, hun," his eyes were glued to me. I didn't say anything. I didn't know what to say. "Get your diploma, it wouldn't take long, then get yourself into some college classes and come work for me. I'll help you get into law school," he said. "You'd make a great lawyer, trust me."

I smiled a little and cleared a tear from my throat. “How are things with you?”

“Same old shit. Cops and robbers. They all start looking the same after a while.” He stopped for a sip of wine. “Speaking of double agents, I hear your friend is doing time.”

“Who’s that?”

“That Lando kid. He got eighteen months in minimum security. I gotta say, it was a hell of a deal. Place is like a country club.”

“Good for him,” I said, rolling my eyes and looking around the dark restaurant. Handsome couples sat across from each other, eating and sipping in silence. I looked back at the Gaff. He was old enough to be my father.

“Just passing information along, my dear. Thought you’d want to know.”

“He’s dead to me,” I said.

“Can’t argue with that,” he said. “How’s your food? You’ve barely touched it.”

“Yeah, it’s good.”

“I don’t know how you eat your steak so rare, you’re gonna get mad cow disease or something.”

I laughed. “Sounds like an adventure.”

“Go back to school,” he said. “There’s your adventure.”

We finished our meals and another bottle then walked, arms linked to the casino floor. I had half the cellophane stack in my purse. I went straight for the roulette wheel and I was drunk and ballsy. I was up \$4000 and then down 5, then up \$6000 and then down 1, then down 3, then down 4, then the dealer and the Gaff exchanged a look and he pulled me from the table. I was deep into the vodka and it was never a good thing when I drank vodka. I stumbled with him up to our room and I blacked out sometime after.

My head pounded before I could open my eyes and the Gaff was still asleep beside me. I rubbed my face and my temples with no relief and slid off the bed to the bathroom. I started the shower and sat on the toilet. My mind floated with puzzle pieces and I fought them apart. I got up and went to get in the shower but stepped back out instead. I needed my bag from the other room. I wrapped around a towel and saw the Gaff sitting up, awake. He looked startled.

“Have you seen my bag?” I said.

He covered his phone and motioned to be quiet. He moved his hand away. “It’s nothing,” he said. “I turned on the TV.”

“No, I’m not,” he said. His eyes bounced off me and he turned his head. “You’re being paranoid. I’ll be home soon. Yes . . . I’ll be there soon, just wrapping up . . . OK, I will. . . . Love you, too . . . Bye . . . I will . . . Bye.” He hung up and looked at me. “It’s not what you think.”

I passed by the bed to pick up my bag and walked it back to the bathroom. I had my shower and fixed my face as best I could and when I opened the door, the Gaff was gone.

The humidity punched when I walked through the lobby doors. It was already a scorcher. Happy people chatted and laughed on their way to the pool. It was even hotter in the Buick and I opened all the windows and lit a cigarette. It tasted awful but I puffed on it anyway and when it was done, I lit another. My hangover was fierce and I needed a place to hide. I clunked into gear and set off back to Grans. A right down Palm, and straight up memory lane. The houses were all alike, small post-war bungalows, except for a few new-builds that towered over the rest. Gran’s little place was up on the left. I crept along the quiet street, past a frail-looking man with a bag in each hand. I watched him shuffle in the rearview. He was small and Asian with worn clothes that hung from his thin body. He walked slowly with those bags until one of them tore out the



bottom. Groceries spilled down to the sidewalk. I stopped the car and dumped out my bag in the backseat.

“Can I help?” I said, jogging over, barefoot, with the empty bag.

He didn’t say anything and reached down to stop his rolling fruit.

“I got it,” I said, crouching low in my tight little dress to gather up his things. I finished and stood, with the bag on my shoulder. “Those plastic bags are so thin,” I smiled. “I’m Elizabeth.” I put out my hand.

He waved it off. “Elizabeth?” he said, in a thick Chinese accent. “Mr. Chu. You can call me that.”

“Well, it’s good to meet you,” I said and turned to look up and down the street. “Can I take you somewhere?”

He nodded and followed me to my car. I helped him in and followed his directions. It was only a block further down from Gran’s. I pulled into the drive and looked up at the large house. It was definitely new. Must’ve went up when I was out west. I helped him out of the car and we walked up the step.

She looked startled when she opened the door. She was tall, standing in the grand entryway. “Thank you for helping my dad, I really don’t like him going to the store alone but he insists.” She was a respectable woman with a strong presence. I stood at her feet.

“Oh, no problem,” I said. “I just live down there, at the end.” I pointed. “423.”

“Elizabeth,” Mr. Chu said, introducing me.

His daughter gave a half smile. She looked me up and down. “Well, thanks again,” she said, closing the door.

“Of course. Enjoy your day.” I smiled, half-waved at Mr. Chu, and trotted down the steps and to my car and straight to bed.

It was a couple days and a couple hangovers later when I heard hollering outside my window. “Elizabeth!” I ran down the stairs and out to the stoop and there stood Mr. Chu. Baggy pants and a sweater hung from him in the stifling heat.

I hesitated. “Hi, how are you?”

He was holding a plastic bag, “This is for you.”

I walked down the steps and he handed it to me. “Bitter melon,” he said. He had a toothy smile and it was genuine. He had me hold the bag open and he reached in to show me. “Very good for you. Very nutritious,” he said, and closed the bag with my hands and waved me off. “Go. I get my paper,” he said, and shuffled away.

I put the bitter melon on the counter and sat looking at it. “What’s that?” Gran said. She was across from me with a tea.

“Bitter melon,” I said.

“What?”

“I think it’s some kind of Chinese vegetable,” I turned to look at her. She took a careful sip, looked at me blank, and waited. “I drove a man home yesterday. His groceries were all over the sidewalk.” I leaned back against the wall. “He just called me outside to give me that.” I looked for her reaction.

“Well good, maybe you can start putting something other than beer into that skinny body,” she scowled. I left it there. I didn’t know what to do with it and it watched and judged each time I opened the fridge door for a cold one.

I spent my days in the basement, smoking and drinking in front of the old TV, and the evenings with my head in the toilet. Jail or dead, they always said. That's where this life would lead you. Right so far. I took a long pull off the glass spout, with D and Lando on the shelf beside me.

A week had passed since my run in with that curious little man. I woke up in my jeans, on top of my covers, and the heat billowed through my open window. I was a sweaty mess and my stomach turned something fierce. I ran to the toilet and shat and barfed into the garbage and the smell was just as nauseating. It finally stopped and I brushed my teeth, shed my clothes and did a faceplant back into bed.

"ELIZABETH!" I heard from outside my window. Actually, it sounded more like 'ERIZABETH!'. He struggled with my name. I rolled to my back with my arms stretched out wide and waited in agony.

"ELIZABETH!"

I rolled out of bed and stuck my head out the window. "Hello?"

Mr. Chu stepped to the side of the house so he could see me. He held a newspaper in his hand and pointed at the page, "You take me here," he said.

"OK," I said. "Give me a minute." Fuck. I washed my face and quickly fixed my eyelashes and threw on shorts and a tank top. I jogged down the stairs.

"You're up early," Gran said, rocking in her chair. "Where are you going?"

"Not really sure," I said, closing the door on her puzzled look.

Mr. Chu and I climbed in the Buick and he pointed to the address on his paper. It was on the other side of town and the traffic was heavy.

"Where do you go to school? he said. We were stuck in dead gridlock.

“Oh, I’m not in school,” I said, clearing my throat. I turned to look out the driver’s side window. The other side of the highway was open and clear and cars whizzed by. Lucky them. I cranked the A/C.

“You have to go to school,” he said. “What else can you do?”

“Yeah, I’ve been wondering the same thing.”

“I have three kids. All successful. All went to university.” His ‘alls’ were drawn out. “You should, too.” He went on, “two doctors and a lawyer. Very successful.”

I felt like shit. I nodded.

He nodded, too. “You go, you see.”

It was an hour in traffic before we found it. The low brick building looked lifeless. It had red Asian lettering with ‘Sunny Market’ in English beside it. I tried to help Mr. Chu out of the car and he waved me off and motioned toward the door. We walked slowly side by side and I felt his eyes on me. “Too short,” he said to my top and shorts. “Longer is better.”

The store was old and smelled of fish. Pungent, really. Mr. Chu squeezed mushrooms and fruit and smelled the bottom of pineapples. “Smell is strong when ripe,” he told me. I followed along behind him, pushing our full cart down aisles with jars and things I’d never seen. I helped lift a heavy bag of rice to the cart. “Fragrant,” he said, “very good.” I was the only white person and people looked as they passed. Me in my little outfit, him swimming in sweaters. We rolled on to the pork counter. It smelled of dead shit and Javex and the back of my neck dripped with sweat.

I looked up and around on tippy toes. There was the sign, *Restrooms, This Way*. “I’ll be right back, OK? Right back.” I left the cart and had to jog when I got close. My insides rumbled and kicked. The stall door didn’t lock and I said fuck it, and I emptied my guts with the door swung

open. Another toilet flushed in my shitty frenzy and a cute little lady walked up to the sink. There I sat, with my shorts around my ankles. She peered over silent, expressionless, soaping her hands. I nodded and waved in utter defeat and she finished and left without a word.

I found Mr. Chu haggling with the man at the fish counter. He pointed to his paper and the mens' voices were raised. The white fish was on for \$2.99/lb and the guy was trying to charge him \$3.50. Mr. Chu won and I pushed close behind him down another aisle. We stopped in front of gallons of canola oil, they were on half price, and I slid them onto the cart's bottom rack. My stomach gurgled and complained. We were finally ready, and we wheeled up to the front. I piled our heavy load high on the belt and Mr. Chu waited with an envelope full of hundreds. He argued again with the cashier, she had made a mistake on another sale price. He got his way, and we got the hell out of there. The traffic was now on our side of the road and we crawled along the hot pavement.

“Always check,” he said, holding up the receipt. “People always take advantage.”

We didn't say much else for the hour long drive and we finally pulled up to his towering house. There was a lot to carry and I followed him in with the heavy bags. Load after load, I brought them in and set them on the granite countertops. The place was deep. The kitchen opened to a grand room, with a tall cathedral ceiling and a fireplace.

“Dad?” His daughter rounded a corner. “We have groceries already.” She glanced at me and checked the bags. Just ask and I'll have Maria take you. . . . Sorry,” she said to me. “He gets these crazy ideas when he sees fifty cents off soy sauce, or whatever.” She rolled her eyes and turned back to her father. “What are we going to do with all of this?”

He waved her off and walked me to the front. I said goodbye and he only nodded and went back in the house. I exhaled hard, started the engine and drove the ten seconds to Gran's. My insides emptied angrily once more and I slept the rest of the day and night.

The next day he showed up again. He was on his way to get his Chinese paper. He had another plastic bag, and he stood waiting on the front lawn.

"What's this?" I said, carefully lowering down the steps.

"Congee. Stir fry vegetables," he held up the bag. "For you. You eat this, it's good." He handed it to me. "Very nutritious," he said. "Too thin," he pointed me up and down. "Not womanly." That was it, and he continued on his way. I took the bag inside and put it on the kitchen counter. The containers of food were heavy and full of curious things and I recognized them from day before. That night, I managed to keep some of it down and my stomach writhed and bloated.

I took Mr. Chu each week after that, on Tuesday mornings for groceries, and he brought containers of his cooking each time. Sometimes we had lunch, or a walk around the neighborhood. He talked a lot about his kids, his suffering and sacrifice, and I stopped drinking on Mondays. Mr. Chu started calling me throughout the week and we would stay on the phone for hours. He was slow with his speech and he told me about his journey to the States. He was fifteen, he said. His cousin had a restaurant and he worked bussing tables and everyone who worked there slept upstairs. He learned enough English to read the Financial Times and stashed and saved as much as he could. In the 70s, Mr. Chu began investing in stocks, he told me. Little by little, he held more and more, and by the late 90s he'd done very well. "Patience and sacrifice, that is virtuous" he'd say. He asked about me and I stepped over as many landmines as I could.

“I didn’t know my dad,” I told him. “I lived with my mom until she left, too.” Mr. Chu and I were in the Buick, having lunch from plastic containers before we did our shopping. I picked at mine. Everything I held down hurt.

“Ohh,” was all he said and he looked out over the parking lot.

I hesitated and went on, “I was kind of a bad kid. I was sent to live with Gran. She was my foster mom.

He nodded. “Embarrassing.” Mr. Chu had no filter and now I looked out over the lot. “Your father, he never paid for you?”

I shook my head.

There was gai lan in his teeth and rice in the corners of his mouth. “Shameful,” he said. “How you not pay for your daughter? He is not a man.”

“No, I guess not,” I said and we packed our containers and went inside.

One day he called and said his friends were coming, some were here from the old village, and some were coming from different States. They were going to meet at a restaurant for Dim Sum lunch and he wanted me to drive him. We took ages finding a parking spot. It was Saturday and the streets were full of regular people doing their regular things. I walked him up the stairs to the second story restaurant and turned to leave.

“No, you come with,” he said, taking my arm.

The restaurant was packed, too and servers pushed around carts of steaming little pockets. I was the only white person there and Mr. Chu and I were the odd couple. Plates and cutlery clanked and clamored across the busy room. The tables were big and round and we walked up to meet Mr. Chu’s friends. There were fourteen of us, in total. Every one of them smiled and some

got up to shake my hand and we joined to complete the circle. They visited mostly in their language and the only things I knew were chao fan, gai lan, and chashu. It didn't get me far. There was a lady, about Mr. Chu's age, with beautiful features and soft smooth skin. She and Mr. Chu were cousins, she told me. They grew up together on the countryside before Mr. Chu came to America.

"You are friends?" she asked. She was kind.

I nodded. He was my *best* friend. He was my *only* friend. "Yes, he lives down the street from me."

"He speaks very highly of you," she smiled. "So, what do you do, Elizabeth?" Half the table got quiet and waited for my answer.

My face was hot and surely red and it spread to my neck and my chest. "Not a lot right now." Their silent eyes were on me. There I was, blonde and small, a wretched pile of shit. "But I'm going to school soon," I blurted and I generated some smiles. Mr. Chu's was the biggest.

"That's very good," she said. "What will you take?"

"I don't really know yet." My teacup was nearly empty and I swished around the soaked leaves. "I've thought about law."

"Impressive," she said. "I wish you success." It was genuine.

We finished, and Mr. Chu paid from a stack of hundreds and we all went our separate ways. We didn't say a word the whole way home, but we didn't have to. Mr. Chu was glowing. I went home and got drunk in the basement and passed out on the couch. I stayed down there the next day, walking around the cold floor for hours, drinking and smoking my hangover away. I stopped pacing and grabbed my keys and drove, blurry-eyed, to a pawn shop. I used to sell to the



guy who owned it, Beans, they called him and who the fuck knew why. The door bells chimed when I walked through the door and he was there behind the partition.

“Blondie!” he said. “Where the fuck have you been?”

“Oh, you know,” I said. “Listen, I’m looking for a computer. Nothing expensive, just want to use the internet.”

“Yeah, alright. I think I have something for you.” He walked out of his booth and led me down a cluttered aisle. It was full of old useless shit and car stereos and speakers and things. “So how are you, girl?” he said over his shoulder. “It’s been a couple of years, at least.”

“At least,” I said. “I traveled for a bit, came back to take care of my Gran.”

We stopped at the back wall in front of towers and monitors. “I got this one a couple of weeks ago, the guy never came back. He was an itchy motherfucker,” he grinned through a missing front tooth. He pointed up at it. His hands looked dirty. The monitor was all black with ‘Dell’ written on the front of it.

“Yeah sure,” I said, “as long as it works.”

“It’s good, I had the hard drive wiped and got ‘er all cleaned out.” The sign below it was bright and green with \$399.99! scribbled in marker.

“I’ll give you a hundred and fifty.” I said.

He looked at me, “C’mon, girl, it’s like new. The best I can do is \$300.”

“Fuck off. Don’t you still owe me?” I said. “Here.” I handed him two hundreds. “Can you take it to my car? I’m parked right in front.”

He gave up and shrugged and took it piece by piece to the counter. I waited outside smoking. “Thanks, Beansie buddy,” I said after he’d loaded it.

He walked over to me on the sidewalk, scratching the back of his neck. He looked up and down the street. “You think you could hook me up?”

“Nah, I’m not into that shit anymore,” I said, walking to my driver’s side door. I gave him an exaggerated shrug with my palms to the sky, “sorry,” I said and drove off.

The phone company came a few days later to install the cables. Their drills were loud and they wore their boots in the house and it ruffled Gran and her nerves. I was finally all hooked up and I sat in the basement with a beer, browsing colleges and universities. Without a high school diploma, it wasn’t an easy search. I found an adult program nearby. I could take what was called a high school equivalency exam and enroll in regular classes. There were prep courses for it, in the evenings, and I chewed on the idea for days. It was June and the registration cut-off was coming up.

Another Tuesday came and Mr. Chu brought me food and I clunked the shifter into reverse. He had a different plan that day. He pulled an advertisement from his pocket. It was a warehouse sale for smart clothing. Women’s blouses, slacks, skirts, and sensible shoes. There was a men’s section, too. “OK,” I said and that’s where we went. I had a hard time finding my size. Rows and rows of business attire hung on plastic hangers and the racks ran up and down the concrete floors. I flipped through women’s extra smalls and Mr. Chu wandered off to a far corner. I picked out some things and tried them on. They were OK and I took them with me to find my friend. He was sharp and dapper in a crisp dark suit and he turned around to show me.

“Very handsome,” I said, and the sales guy agreed. I wasn’t sure where he’d wear it. I doubt he’d bought anything for himself in years.

“You’re together?” The sales guy said with a weird look.

“Yes, he’s my husband,” I said, and that fucked him up and it’s the only time I heard Mr. Chu laugh.

He insisted on paying with his stack of hundreds and we fucked off to shop for our groceries.

A couple weeks later I pulled the trigger and registered for school. It was expensive and I paid from my dwindling stacks. Prep classes were to start at end of summer and my drinking and purging were like a piano dangling above my head.

“We’re late on the electric bill,” Gran said, creaking her way down the stairs with a basket of laundry. “And it reeks of cigarettes down here!”

I had my feet on the coffee table with a beer in my lap and empties all around. Two of her loaded the washer. I had just enough for that month’s bills and to get through another couple of weeks. I stumbled over with the money I kept under D and put it on her folded clothes.

“I’m going to school in the fall,” I said. “Did I tell you?”

“Well, it’s about time you did something with yourself. Idle hands do the devil’s work.” She shook out a large sheet and I grabbed the other side and walked it towards her. She folded it a few times more and dropped it in the basket. She tucked it under her arm. “It’s a good thing, Bets. School. Stick with it. You were always such a bright girl.” She creaked back up the stairs and slammed the door and it was the nicest thing she’d ever said to me.

I stirred in that basement for hours before I did myself up with black eyes and tall shoes. I took a taxi to The Emerald Room. It was late and I ducked through the back, past the fat cook and the fryers and went straight for the owner’s office. The door was closed and I knocked.

**“This was the strip club you sold drugs in before?”**

**“Yeah.”**

“Jackie!” That was his name. “You piece of shit!” I rapped on the door.

“One second!”

A minute later a dancer emerged, she wiped her mouth and Jackie zipped up his pants.

“Nice,” I laughed.

“Blondie! Back from the dead,” he said. “Come. Sit. Talk to me.”

“I need a job,” I said. “I don’t want to dance or anything, but maybe I could bartend or something.”

“Whoa, back up. You want to work here?”

“Yeah, you have anything?” I said, crossing my bare legs.

“I need to process this for a second! Shit.” He opened the top drawer of his desk and pulled out a mirror with cut lines. “You want?”

I took the mirror and did one in each nostril and they blasted to the back of my throat.

He did his and sat back in his chair. “So, what the fuck . . . yeah, I mean, if that’s what you want. You going straight or something? What’s the catch?”

“No catch. Just need a job for when I go to school.”

“Shit. Wow. Well, good for you,” he said. “Huh,” he thought for a moment. “Alright, well I think you’d be best on the floor, especially with those,” he nodded at my tits. “You’ll have those guys drooling and throwing money at you. Means more booze sales for me.”

“Good. When can I start?”

He puffed out his cheeks and thought about it. He reached for his schedule. "Come next Thursday. I'll have one of the girls show you what's what and you can start the next day."

"Done," I said. "Have a drink with me?"

"Let's go." He tucked the mirror back in its place.

We went out to the floor and one by one people came over to say hi. Some wanted blow and others stayed to chat. There were a lot of new girls and some were the same. They were the 'lifers'. The bass was loud and the drinks were free and when the club closed, we moved the party to Jackie's. We partied there late into the morning, and then late into the next night, and I finally went home to recover. I had my shopping date with Mr. Chu on Tuesday.

When Thursday rolled around I swallowed my pride and walked through the front doors of the Emerald. It was 11:00 am. The bartender's name was Julie and she showed me how to pour liquor from a machine and how to use the fountain gun. Special drinks I'd have to get at the bar, she said, but basic liquor and beer were in the waitress station. We went over how to cash out and record sales and how to work the finicky dishwasher in the back. It took a couple of hours and I was ready for a smoke but first we went to find a uniform.

She rummaged through boxes and fished out a skirt. She held it up to my waist. It said The Emerald Room across the ass with a woman that belonged on a mud flap below it. "This is the smallest we have," she said. "I'm sure you could take it in." My ass had plumped some since meeting Mr. Chu but not quite enough. I took the skirt home and handed it to Gran.

"You think you could hem this for me?"

She held it up. "What exactly do you want done with it?"

"Take it in and up a good inch or so," I said.

She flipped the black skirt inside out to check the seams. It had built in shorts and there were white stains in the crotch.

“This is disgusting! She threw the skirt at me. “Go wash that filth first,” she said and all I could do was laugh.

The next night I was geared up and went to take my first orders. I was clumsy at first but got a good beat going. Jackie was right, I sold a lot and made a lot. Men grabbed my ass and put their faces between my breasts and begged for dances in the back rooms. I declined. By 2:30am my feet throbbed in my heels and I sat at the bar with my paperwork. I’d made over \$500 in tips and more in free drinks. It wasn’t a million and it wasn’t six figures but it was good. I paid some twenties to the door men and the bartender and drove myself home, tired and half drunk.

I woke up with the sun beating through my window and my head beat with it. My legs and feet were stiff when I stood up and my shoulder was tight from the drink tray. I’d never had a real job before and I had to be back there for 6:30. It was already 3:00. I limped down the stairs and met Gran in the kitchen.

“So? How was it?” she said.

“It was work,” I said. I poured a stale coffee and flopped into my chair.

She moved around the kitchen in a printed house gown. “That man came looking for you last night, before dinner. He brought you some food.” She sat down across from me. “What’s the deal with the two of you, anyway?”

I shrugged. “We’re friends.”

“That’s a weird friendship.” She raised a brow. “But, I have to say, he’s doing you some good. When do your classes start?”

“Couple of weeks. I’m taking those prep courses Monday and Wednesday, and going to the bar Thursday, Friday, Saturdays.”

“Well, you have a full plate, then. That’s good.”

“I’m going back to bed, I said. “I feel like shit.”

I woke up at 5:00 pm, painted my face and dragged my mudflap ass for the next eight hours. I slept Sunday away. Monday, I fought hard against my beer cravings. I circled back and forth from the basement to the fridge then back again, stopping myself from opening it each time. I won and woke up fresh the next day and picked up Mr. Chu for our weekly shopping. He wanted to teach me about money, he said. I had to learn about the stock market. He talked about investing the whole way to Sunny Market, and continued up and down the aisles, squeezing and smelling fruits and vegetables. I was studious and listened along behind him. Buy low, sell high, he said. It seemed simple enough. When others were fearful, it was time to buy. When they were greedy, it was time to sell, but it was best to hold on. Accumulate assets. There was a convention next Wednesday, he said, and we were going.

We finished up and I loaded the car and lifted our groceries to the granite. I ignored a weird look from the maid and took the MoneyShow pamphlet home with me. *‘Delivering the highest caliber advice, actionable recommendations, and profitable strategies from knowledgeable, experienced experts’*, it said.

I spent the next day with D in the basement, what was left of him, anyway. I sat at my Dell with beer and cigarettes, scrolling through equities, and prices, and meanings, and definitions of acronyms and terms. It was a lot to take in and the next day I was back in a dark underworld of perky tits, coked-out strippers, and hungry-eyed men. I didn’t say much to the other women

there, but they had a lot to say about me. “The other girls are trying to push you out,” Jackie said.

“Yeah? What the fuck did I do?”

“Nothing.” A white ring circled his nostril. “This isn’t my first rodeo, doll, you’re getting all the tips and attention. Just ignore it. You sell more booze than any waitress I’ve had.” He held up a mirror with cut white powder. “Line?”

“Nah, I’m all set,” I said and went back to my customers.

I walked around like I owned the place, with shoulders and tray and cleavage held high. The VIP was mine and that’s where the money was. I massaged egos, hung out and flirted. I took numbers and threw them out. There was a rapper there that night with his groupies. He had his seven foot security stand at the entry with his arms crossed in front of him. He was a mountain of a man and black as night, eyeing down the girls and opening the red rope for the hot ones. I waded back and forth through the scowls and sneers, hoots and hollers, with Hennessy and Heineken balanced on my shoulder.

“Sit down, have a drink with us,” the rapper said. There was an empty couch off to the side. I set down my tray and lowered myself onto it. My feet throbbed hard. Moving through that crowd was a workout.

“*Noo!! Not there!*” two of them yelled and reached out to stop me. It was too late and my mudflap ass was wet. I shot back up.

“What the fuck?!” I wiped my bottom and they laughed through clasped hands. The laughing got louder. “WHAT?!” My eyes were wide.

“One of the ‘rippers just squirted all over that!” one guy said.



*“Noooo!”* I ran to the back and scrubbed my hands and my skirt and wore it soaked the rest of the night. I pulled nearly \$1000 and drove myself home, drunk. I could never sleep after a night at the club. Bass rang and rattled and images flashed across my busy mind. I took pulls from hard liquor beside me. There was a pool of bright colors shining under my eyelids and a slow snaking figure cut through it. The colors mixed and swirled off to its sides. It had no head and it had no tail, and it slithered on through the nights.

**“It sounds like you were straddling two worlds,”** Garlick said, **“Elizabeth by day, Blondie by night.”**

**“Hmm,”** I sat back and looked out the window. It was bright and I adjusted my eyes on her. **“I never thought of it like that.”** She was a dark smudge and I blinked her back into focus.

**“Perhaps Mr. Chu was your guiding light.”**

I nodded, **“yeah, I guess he was.”** This woman had a shit haircut and thick thighs and her office was as disordered as my thoughts. But she knew her shit. I could give her that. Actually, I was beginning to like her. I looked around the still office and there I was. Every inch of it sat quiet, watching, listening. Waiting, but nothing came. It was just me and her, and there we were. A wave crashed through me.

**She smiled. “Continue.”**

Well, Wednesday came and I laid out my new clothes for the convention. I wanted to surprise Mr. Chu with my smart new look. I clipped my hair up in a twist and went easy on the makeup. I slipped on a pencil skirt and a pressed blouse. I wore a short heel to match my bag and

stood in the mirror to take it all in. I could pass for respectable and I was uncomfortable. Mr. Chu wore a sweater zipped over another zipped sweater, and his classic brown slacks. The lobby was packed with other smart people and their dark pressed bottoms, and white collared tops. The convention room was even busier. It was lined with booths with practiced-to-death pitches. There were other speakers, too. They stood on stages with little microphones next to their chins and they moved their hands around when they talked. We found a seat in the crowd and listened. The whole thing was gimmicky but it wasn't the point and when it was over, Mr. Chu took me for congee.

"You don't have a bank account?" he said over a giant bowl of rice porridge. He scooped some into my bowl. I told him I didn't, and after he paid, he directed my driving to a long downtown strip. I clunked the gear into park and we were greeted with smiles at the teller.

"Mr. Chu, how are you, sir?" The manager came right out and brought us to a back office. We opened an account, my first one ever, and I learned how to buy and sell and manage stocks on my computer. Every month, I topped it up with my tips from the club.

It was nearing the end of summer and it was time for my prep courses. I sat with the other dropouts in front of a clumsy instructor and decided I'd just skip it and go straight to the exam. I drank away my nerves the night before. It was easy and I went on to choose my classes. I'd done well in natural sciences and math in high school. When I was actually there, anyway, before I left only a few credits short. I had to take another placement exam for upper-level math and aced that too before I settled my timetable. I didn't know what I wanted to do so I decided on a mixed-bag. *Precalculus, History of Political Thought, Intro to Biology, Discovering Physics, and Intro to Psychology.*

One Monday morning I was in a large classroom theater. “*The line of good and evil runs through the heart of every man,*” our Psychology professor read. He was in his 50s I think, strong, with salty hair and silver-rimmed glasses. He stood at the front of the room, onstage, with our seats sloping down to him. I thought of the Dentist, standing on his deck, looking down at that brackish crest. “It’s a quote from Dr. Viktor Frankl,” our professor said, and he brought me back. “Does that not beg the question, where do we draw the line between mental health and evil?” He was philosophical and unconventional and I was drawn to him. “Turn to page 87,” he said. The sound of flipping pages reverberated off the walls. *Personality Disorders*, it read at the top, from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, IV*. The words danced around in front of me. *An enduring pattern of inner experience and behaviour that deviates markedly from the expectations of the individual’s culture, is pervasive and inflexible, has an onset in adolescence or early adulthood, is stable over time and leads to clinically significant distress or impairment.*

At the end of class, the professor had us come down, one-by-one, to retrieve our first exam grades. We squeezed past each other in the narrow aisles and down the short awkward steps to the front. The rest of us sat with bated eyes. He called out the highest grades, and mine was not one of them. 78 it said on the top left corner.

“Is this percent?!” I said.

He nodded, then called over my shoulder, “*Calli Hetherington. 90%, very good!*” I passed Calli on my walk of shame back to my seat.

I stopped doing drugs at the club after that and my name was called every time. *Elizabeth Trent, 87% . . . Elizabeth Trent, 93%, Elizabeth Trent, 95%, wow, bravo!*” he said and it got me high.

I didn't talk much to the other students, we had nothing in common and I continued to drink hard at the club on the weekends. I got drunk with my customers and they stroked my ego and I stroked theirs, and the dancers fought, and the staff stole, and the bouncers bounced. There was always action. Blood and teeth flying in the front, dirty condoms in the back, and police and flashing lights in the parking lot. I smoked my cigarettes in the side lot, balancing my drunk ass on heels. An officer rolled up one night with his window down. "If it isn't Blondie," he said. He was young and fair with big round biceps. I recognized him. He'd raided me years earlier, laughing and bro-broing with the others. I stood still, one bare leg crossed in front of the other, one arm propping my orange amber.

"Keeping the whores greased up?" he said. "C'mon, how much you moving in this place?"

I blew my smoke up to the night sky. "Not moving anything," I said and he rolled his eyes. "I'm going to school now."

"Right." He rested an elbow on the cruiser door and put a thumb to his chin. "You dancing?"

"Waitressing," I said.

There were strippers huddled at the back of the club behind him, bitching about some thing or another. He checked his rearview, looked me up and down, and raised an eyebrow. "What you doing later?" I gave him a look, flicked my cigarette, and turned to pull on the long door handle. The bass spilled out behind me.

"Slut," he muttered and drove off. The metal door slammed hard and I went straight to the staff bathroom and locked the door. I stood in the mirror and leaned in close. I looked in my eyes but they wouldn't look back. I was somewhere else and God knows where. I took a deep breath and waded back through the black-lit crowd. My tables were thirsty and empty glasses

and bottles were littered in front of them. I cleared them off and took their orders and elbowed my way back to the station. I was knocked to one side and my tray went with it. Glass smashed and scattered across the floor.

“Oh shit, I’m so sorry!” A tall guy with broad shoulders was crouched on the floor with me, gathering the sharp pieces. “I didn’t see you.”

“I got it,” I said. “It’s OK.”

“No no, it’s my fault,” he said, piling up my tray.

I stood and he stood and I looked all the way up his towering body.

“Bets!” He had to yell over the loud room. “What the fuck! You work here?” It was a kid I went to high school with. Kyle McCluer, but everyone called him Mackie. He was chubby then, we both were, and he’d always had a thing for me. He looked good.

“Mackie!” I gave him a hug with my tray off to one side and his large hard body swallowed me whole.

“Well, this is embarrassing. I’m not wearing my perfect outfit,” he joked. “I feel so unprepared!” He always made me laugh.

“Where the hell have you been? Come here.” He took my arm and we went to the front of the waitress station where we could hear each other. “Where’d you go?” he said. “You just kind of disappeared.”

“Yeah, I moved around a bit,” I said. Damn he looked good. My stomach flipped around.

“I tried calling but it said the number was out of service or something.” He smiled down at me. I barely came up to his shoulders. “We should hang out. You know, like old times.”

“Yeah,” I said. “We should.”

“Well, give me your number, girl.”

*“Mackie!! There you are, bro!”* Two guys rolled up from the crowd. *“Dude, this dancer just gave Andy head for a 20!”* They were drunk and annoying. *“Cab’s waiting man, we’re hitting up the afterparty.”*

Mackie looked at me with a red face. “I’ll call you,” he said. “Answer! Don’t go changing your number, I know where you work.”

I laughed. “We’ll see.”

“I mean it!” he called back through the crowd. “You can’t get away now!” he said and I walked on air the rest of the night.

He called the next day. It was Sunday and I was contemplating whether to stay in bed or get a coffee and cigarette into me.

“You’re coming to the XRoom with me tonight,” he said.

“The arcade?” I was groggy at best.

“Yeah. You afraid I’m gonna kick your ass?”

“Definitely not.”

“It was really cool seeing you last night,” he said. “I always wondered where you went. You never said goodbye. How rude.”

“Yeah, well, you know. . . .” I laughed.

“I do,” he laughed. “You’re always chasin’ something. Glad you’re back in town, though. You think you’ll stick around?”

“Mhm, for a while, yeah.” I sat up in bed. “I’m doing a four year degree here.”

“Good for you! And, well, good for me, too.”

“Oh, ha.” I was blushing.

“So, where are you now? I’ll pick you up,” he said.

“It’s OK, I’ll just meet you there.”

“Let me pick you up, *Ice Queen*. Make it a proper date.”

“It’s a date?”

“Isn’t it?”

I was now pacing. Glowing. “OK, we’ll do it your way. I’m back at Gran’s. On Palm, still.”

“Cool. How is she, anyway?”

“Still grumpy.”

He laughed. “Remember when she kicked us all out of the basement? She was so little, but so scary!”

“She hasn’t changed!” I laughed. “She always did like you, though. She thought you were a nice boy. Nicer than the rest.”

“So I’ve already won her over, then. Now I just have to work on you.”

“I’m unbreakable,” I said.

“You think you are, but I know you better.”

“OK, well, this just got deep,” I said.

“Good. My plan is working. What time can you be ready?”

“What time you want me to be ready?” I said.

“Nope, I asked you.”

“Umm,” I had a hangover and all my favorite clothes were crumpled on the floor. “7:00 pm?”

“OK, I’ll be there at 6:00.”

“Noo!” I laughed. “I need more time!”

“Joking, I’ll be there at 7:00.”

“You’re a dick,” I teased. “OK, see you then.”

“Later, Ice Queen.”

We hung up and I fretted for the next few hours. I did laundry, and shaved my legs, and my armpits, and down there. I washed my hair and fussed in the mirror and the more I fussed, the worse it looked. I tried on everything I owned, mixing and matching until I finally ended up in the first thing I’d put on. Jeans, heels, and a belly top. I painted my face and fucked up my eyelashes. They kept clumping and I missed and jabbed myself in the eye. I needed to settle the fuck down. I poured a drink and had a smoke and tried again.

Mackie was there at 6:50 pm and I watched him pull up in a giant boat. It was an old faded Chrysler that sounded like the timing belt was gonna rip a hole through the hood. He cut the engine and walked up the step with an overflowing bouquet.

“This really is a date,” I said, getting up my tippy toes for a kiss on the cheek. “I love lilies, thank you.” I’d never been given flowers before.

“You look nice,” he said with his speckled green eyes. His giant frame stepped through the door and I went to the kitchen to find a vase. Gran was on her rocker in front of *The Price is Right*.

“Mrs. Delphi, how are you?”

“I’d complain, but who would listen,” she said without looking up.

He laughed. “Do you remember me? Kyle, I went to high school with Bets.”

“I remember you, you little brats got into my booze.” She rocked back and forth. *Come on down!* The TV blared. “How’s your mother?” she asked.

“She’s good, you know. Still working at the garage.”

“Well, give her my best,” Gran said, rocking, her finger hovering over the remote.



I finished with the flowers and cut back to the living room. “Ready?”

“Sure, we can go.”

“I’ll see you later,” I said into my purse, making sure I had all the essentials.

“It was nice seeing you, Mrs. Delphi.”

She nodded, eyes still glued to the screen, and we were out the door.

“Sweet wheels,” I teased.

“Ha ha, you’re a dick.”

“What? I love it! It sounds like a train. I like trains.”

“You laugh now, but wait until I slaughter you at the X, missy.”

I sat back in my seat and crossed my legs. “We shall see.”

“Did you eat? I was thinking we could go to the Irish. We could go now, or after I school you.” We stopped at a red and he shifted in his seat. “You really do look beautiful.”

“Thank you,” I said. I adjusted my top and ran my hand back through my hair.

“So, food, before or after?”

“Let’s go after, we’ll have beers.”

“Done.”

I hadn’t been to the X Room before. It was huge like a Wal-Mart, with games that ran thick and deep to the back. Mackie bought us a pile of gold coins and we looked around the giant room.

“Where do you want to start? Loser picks.”

“Funny.” I pointed at the air hockey table. “That.”

He put in some coins and the puck dropped and I really sucked. I paddled the puck off the sides, trying to get the right angle. It ricocheted back and forth in a straight line. Mackie shot it straight into my goal, over and over.

“Time out!” I said. “I need to get my game face on,” I laughed.

“Oof, here she comes. Shit’s gettin’ real.”

I rolled my shoulders and stretched my head from side to side. “Alright, game on!”

I stuck to defense, moving my paddle from side to side, pinging and blocking every one of his hail marys. I finally found the sweet spot and fired the puck at a 45 into his slot.

“Booyah!” I found the angle six more times and Mackie called a time-out.

“Time! You’re whipping me. Damnit!”

“Damn straight, baby!” I yelled from across the table.

“Fuck, you’re competitive!”

“It’s a sickness,” I laughed. “Let’s go, Nancy.”

I beat him, five games to two and we moved on. We were neck and neck through every game. Car racing, whack-a-mole, target throwing, hoops and zombies, and every other kiddie game they had. He made me laugh every inch of the way. Three hours in, Mackie conceded.

“Alright, call it a tie, then?”

“Count your tickets, cheater.”

I only had three more than him, but it was enough to declare victory and rub it in. We cashed in for a stuffed turtle and I hugged it close all the way out the train. Mackie fired it up and we set off for the Irish and the car threatened to blow into a million pieces. “Woo Woo!” he yelled, pulling down an imaginary horn under all that racket, and I died in my seat.

The pub was packed. It smelled like beer and mahogany and Mackie and I got deep into the Guinness. I don't remember ever laughing that much, before or since. I'd forgotten how well we got along. We sat drinking our thick beers in a long wooden booth.

"So, tell me about the adventures of Bets. I've heard some wild stuff," he said over his glass.

"What have you heard?"

"I heard you got involved with some crazy fucking people . . . and I hear your brother flipped. Is that true?"

"How do people hear about this stuff? But, yeah it's true. I haven't talked to him in like a year and a half." I slumped back and looked around the room. He waited. "I went out to Hawaii for a while after that," I finally said. "Then LA, then Washington, then Hawaii again."

"Hawaii? Fuck, that's sweet! I'm jealous! Why'd you come back?"

"D's funeral, and then just decided to stay. . . ."

"Wait, what? Like, your older brother, D?"

"Yeah." I stared at my half-empty glass, turning it slowly with both hands on the shiny wood surface.

"Shit, I'm so sorry." he said. "Wow. What happened? When?"

"Overdose." I signaled the waiter for two more. "Last spring."

"Are you OK? You were all so close."

"What are you gonna do?" I shrugged. "So, what are you doing now?"

"That's it? No more about you?"

"Your turn," I said.

He studied my face and dropped it. "Stone Masonry," he said. "Remember Josh, from school?"

I exhaled and puffed out my cheeks. “No. . . .”

“Kramsdén,” he said. “For fuck sakes Bets, we all hung out.” We both laughed and I was lost. I forgot a lot of people, their names and faces. Maybe each one got replaced with the next. “Annnyway, his dad hired me on. It’s awesome working with Josh. Nothing but jokes. I’m hoping to open my own company eventually. . . . What about you? What do you want to be when you grow up?” He smirked and waited for my answer.

“Not sure, actually. I thought I wanted to be a lawyer but I’m starting to really like my psychology classes. So, I dunno, maybe I could be a psychiatrist or something.”

“Oh shit, that’s cool. Maybe you can figure out what’s wrong with me.”

“I gotta figure out what’s wrong with me, first.” I raised a brow over my beer.

We stared at each other all cute, with rosy faces until it was broken up by our waitress. She clunked down our full mugs. Fresh head slid down the sides.

We were absolutely sideways by the time we stumbled out the door. I leaned against the outside brick, smoking and looking up at him. Damn, he looked good. He leaned in, put a hand behind my back and pulled me in close. His lips were soft and he was gentle. I kissed him back. I lost myself there. Or maybe I found it. My body tingled and for the first time, I was right there in that moment. With him. We made out in the back of the cab and I spent the night at his place.

The next morning, Mackie rolled over and cuddled me from behind. I was uncomfortable, claustrophobic. “I wish I didn’t have to work so we could just stay like this all day,” he said. He squeezed me tight. “You were hilarious last night.”

“Who, me?”

“Yeah, you,” he gave me kisses on the back of my neck, and my ear, and my cheek, then back to my ear and stuck his tongue in it.

“Aghh!, donnn’t!” I rubbed at it.

“I gotta go.” He sat up then flopped right back down. “Holy shit I think I’m still drunk. How you feeling?”

“Like I drank a gallon of Guinness.”

He pulled himself up, “I think that’s pretty accurate,” he said, searching the floor for his clothes. I got up and did the same. “Where’s my car?” he said, now bouncing around with one leg in his pants.

“The Irish, I think.”

“Shit, OK, we can get a cab there and I’ll drive you home.”

“What time do you start?”

He looked at the time. “In like, twenty minutes,” he laughed.

“Oh shit! I’ll take my own cab, you don’t have time.”

“You have class, right?” He was in the bathroom now, calling out to me through toothpaste. I was still searching the floor.

“Fuck that, I’ve already missed it,” I said. “I can catch up with the class slides online.”

We said goodbye at the door, and he came back twice for hugs and kisses before his cab disappeared down the street. Mine showed and I went home to drink and purge. It was the same after every time I left there.

Mackie and I saw each other every chance we could between classes and work and my outings with Mr. Chu. He introduced me to his friends and they were alright, but they were better when I was drinking, which was almost always. By the new year I’d done well in my classes, some better than others despite my habits, and in February Mr. Chu invited us over for Chinese New Year. I introduced Mackie at the door and we made our way to the grand room at

the back of the house. There was a long table, beautifully set, and it stretched long across the wide open room. A side table held a double row of bowls and trays of different Chinese dishes. Some I'd seen before, a lot I hadn't. It smelled amazing and the room was full of family and friends. Some were from our dim sum lunch. Mr. Chu walked us around the room. They were all doctors and lawyers and pharmacists and professors, every one of them educated, and all the children well-behaved. I'm not sure they knew what to make of us, but they were warm and welcoming. We loaded our plates and took our seats and Mr. Chu sat at the head of the table. It was the first time he had everyone together and he was glowing.

"My family," he said, reaching out his arms, and I was a part of it.

We stayed for hours. Mackie listened to Mr. Chu's wisdom and I was deep in conversation with one of his cousins. She had been a nurse before she retired, she told me. Late in her career she worked alongside a surgeon who specialized in sex-change surgeries. She was bubbly and fun and I was glued to her stories of the operating room. It got late and Mr. Chu walked us out. He handed me a red envelope with raised gold script. It was full of hundreds.

"Mr. Chu, I can't take this," I said.

He waved me off and went back in the house and I invested it all the next day.

Spring came and it was final exams and I studied all day and drank myself to sleep. I actually couldn't sleep without it. My thoughts would swirl and I'd toss and turn until I drowned them with one hard liquor or another. I was consumed by fear and I consumed it back, and by the last stroke, of my last exam, I was sick as hell. My muscles were stiff, locked up tight. I couldn't turn my neck from side to side and I could barely swallow or breathe. Mackie forced me to the hospital. He picked me up, buckled me in and walked me through emergency room doors. He waited out front while I dangled my feet from a paper-lined bed. The doctor finally came and I

stiffened. He felt around my neck and my face and shoved a popsicle stick to the back of my throat until I gagged and pulled away. Laryngitis, he said. My swollen throat had just enough room for air to pass. We left with antibiotics and clear instructions to stay in bed and Mackie stayed with me as much as he could. He made me tea and brought me soup and cuddled in close behind me.

“I love you, Bets,” he said, and he meant it. I faced the wall and he held me tight. I didn’t say a word and he rolled me over to face him. He wiped my tears and kissed me soft, and with those giant hands he ran his fingers along the top of my ear and down through my long hair.

“Are those tears? Am I melting the ice queen?” he teased.

I laughed and buried my face in his chest.

“You hold so much in, it’s OK to let go, you know.”

“I’m too damaged for you.”

“I doubt that. I want to know everything about you.” He lifted my chin to look at me.

I looked away. “OK, what do you want to know?”

“I dunno, whatever happened to your mom? You never talk about her.”

I rolled onto my back and propped my arm behind my head. I hesitated. “What’s there to say? She didn’t want me so I went to a group home. I did a lot of dumb shit, though.”

“That’s not really an excuse,” he said.

“We were too much for her.”

“‘We’?”

“Me and my brother. He’s older. He left when he was eighteen.”

“Oh, wow, I didn’t know that. Do you guys still talk?”

I shook my head. “No.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, still playing with my hair.

“We moved around a lot. I went to so many new schools” I exhaled. “Some cause we moved, some cause I got kicked out for not showing up. It sucked to always be the new girl. The other girls always hated me. Didn’t help that I was always hanging out with the dudes.”

“Yeah, the chicks definitely hated you at our school. You’re like a guy in a girl’s body.”

I laughed. “Yeah, no kidding.”

“I remember coming to pick you up at that group home, we were like fifteen. I can’t believe you lived there. That was pretty fucked up.”

“Yeah, I ran away from there a lot too,” I laughed. “The kids were so messed up. They stole all my shit. Even my clothes. I had to boost new ones from the mall. God, I got in so many fights. Remember Ally?”

“Yeah, she got it bad! Remember when you used to steal CD’s from the Record Lounge and sell them at the pawn shop across the street?”

“Oh yeah! Then I’d go to Burger King. That shit tastes amazing when you’re hungry enough, trust me.”

“Why didn’t you come to me?”

“I dunno. It was embarrassing,” I said.

“It’s not right that your mom left you, Bets. It’s not your fault.”

“I dunno, I was a bad kid. I just wanted to drink and party, you know? But it was weird, she kept saying I was addicted to drugs but I never actually started smoking weed until after she left.” I shrugged. “No one believed me.”

“Get back over here. He hugged me. “How you feeling, anyway?”

“I think the antibiotics are helping. Like, I’m rough, but definitely not as bad as I was.”



“Good. Imagine I didn’t take you? You could’ve suffocated in your own pride.”

“I hate doctors,” I said.

“I think you’re just stubborn.”

“Yeah, maybe,” I said. We fell asleep like that and when I woke up he was pulling a shirt down over his wide shoulders. “I gotta get to work, baby. I’ll check in on you later.” He leaned down and kissed my forehead. “I love you.”

I loved him, too, and when he left, I drank and smoked and passed food up through my sore throat.

It was now the end of August and Mackie bought us tickets to our favorite band at a bar downtown. It was the last party of summer and there was a large group of us going. I teased my hair and painted my face. I put on a strapless top and tight jeans and we started the night early at Mackie’s. He had a bag of pink pills and we all took one and waited for them to kick in. It was a mashy ride up and I had cold sweats and wet feet. I was alone on the couch watching their group of friends laugh, and reminisce, and do what friends do. I didn’t like any of them. My drink was empty and my E finally kicked in when I stood for a refill. The high was hard and fast and his friends weren’t so bad after that. The girls stuck to their E and I did bumps of K and drank too much with the guys. I remember the concert, for the most part. The line up to the bar was a million deep and Mackie and I squeezed through the tight crowd. We made it to the counter and did some Jägerbombs and he led me downstairs to the men’s bathroom. We found an empty stall and he faced me against the wall. We did it right there and afterwards we kissed and giggled and adjusted our clothes. We spilled out the door and there was a guy taking a piss at the urinal. He looked back and forth from Mackie to me and a smile crept to the corners of his mouth. I put my head down and made a play for the door and Mackie trailed behind me.

“Dear diary, jackpot,” he said, penciling the air, and the three of us burst out laughing. Mackie and I darted up the stairs with tears in our eyes.

The afterparty was packed and the band was there, too. I only have flashes from that house, mere clues and hints of my wild debauchery. I remember my top malfunctioning and the bass player pulling it up for me; my top malfunctioning again, Mackie pulling it up for me; my top malfunctioning yet again and people giving up and letting them hang. I remember falling backwards into an empty tub while the lead singer hit lines with us in the bathroom, surely with my tits out; having a lighter in my mouth, trying to light it with another lighter, thinking it was a cigarette; speaking absolute gibberish and Mackie intervening; someone saying, “I’ll have what she’s having” and getting laughed at, a lot; trying to fuck Mackie in the back of a cab in a McDonalds drive thru; getting kicked out of that cab and having to call another. . . .

I woke up with a burger on my pillow and fries stuck to my arms, and it was the hangover of all hangovers. I would have blown my head off right there if I could. Hopefully I’d have better aim than Walton. I’d really done it this time. If people were looking for something to talk about, they sure had some juicy material now. I tried to push the damning thoughts from my mind but they won. Mackie was a sweaty mess beside me. He opened his crusty eyes and they looked directly into mine.

“Jeesuss,” he said. “You were out of fucking control last night!”

“Don’t tell me. Please!” I said. “I remember enough to know that I don’t wanna know any more.” He started to fill me in. “Stop! I mean it. If I don’t remember, it didn’t happen.” I covered my face with my hands. I was humiliated and I’d done it to myself. I got my things and fired up the Buick. I made it home and climbed into bed and I hated myself more than ever.

Classes started and the world collapsed on me. I hadn't had a drink in ages and I felt worse than ever. Cold sweat seeped from my shorts to my seat and my thoughts spiraled deep through the floor. I was in *Abnormal Psychology*, how convenient. The room was bright with humming lights and I watched the other girls whisper and giggle in clusters and pairs. I wondered what it would be like to be them. To have a stable past, and parents. Is that where sheeple came from? I envied those girls. I bet they never sold coke or grew weed or puked and drank themselves to sleep at night.

*"Group three is Elizabeth, Rachel and Tara . . . Group four will be Jake, Tyler and Samantha . . . group five. . ."* I looked around the room, searching for what the hell was going on. Rachel was at the front getting a sheet of paper from the prof. *"Presentations are twenty minutes long,"* he said. *"You can decide who does what, but there will be group evaluations,"* he announced, handing sheet after sheet to approaching students. *"We'll take the last few minutes of class to get in our groups."* I hated group work and presentations. Why couldn't we just do the work alone?

I gave a weak smile to Rachel and Tara and continued my journey downward. I wasn't normal and everyone knew it. But I could change that, right? I'd feel better. I'd *be* better. It was in me and I knew it, and all I had to do was get my hands around it. I could use my evil powers for good, as the Gaff always said. I wondered if he'd done that. I wondered how evil he must have been before he came to that conclusion. He'd settled on law but that wasn't me. I'd finally decided on science as my major in the days before. I found power in predictability and safety in numbers. There's little, if any, room for interpretation. Yes or no. Red or black. Odds or evens. 1-18 or 19-36. I sweated through my next class, too with all eyes on me and I shifted and fidgeted in my seat. I loved physics but my mind wasn't in it. There was a girl sitting next to me

and her thighs looked smaller than mine. I hated my thighs. A drink would be nice. Just one. Maybe I could just cut back. I'd have one a day. Maybe a red wine, that was supposed to be healthy. Research said that. Something about flavonoids, I think. No, I couldn't. That's for the weak. It had to be cold turkey. I had to prove everyone wrong. That would be my fuel. I'd be successful and bask in quiet victory. But they'd all know that Blondie had always been the smartest in the room, they just didn't know it yet. They'd see. Fuck them. And fuck this bitch's thighs next to me.

I went home to a dry house and fought off my urge for a liquor run. Instead, I barricaded myself in the basement with my food and the toilet and one binge bled into the next.

The week was long and I stayed sober. My skin itched and burned down the aisles of Sunny Market and it took everything I had to hide it from Mr. Chu. He knew something, he always did, but he kept it to himself.

"How is school?" he said. Our bags were packed high in the back of the Buick and he studied me from the passenger's seat.

"It's good," I said. "I've decided to do a bachelor of science. I'm doing pre med courses. Not sure I want to be an actual doctor though. Maybe I'll be a psychiatrist or something. We'll see." I glanced for his reaction. He sat there, proud and silent the whole way back to Palm and directed us past his place to Gran's. He wanted to teach me how to cook, he said. He followed me through the door, the heavy bags bouncing off my sides, past Gran in her rocker. She looked up this time. This show was surely more interesting. I lifted the bags to the table and Mr. Chu and I got started. We trimmed chicken fat, sliced scallions and chives, and sizzled ginger in hot oil. I followed along and did what I was told. He was methodical and precise and when it was ready, we sat down with our steaming bowls and salted duck egg. The markets were in trouble,

he told me with food on his chin. The major banks had failed, one after the next and the Dow crashed hard the day before. Down nearly 800 points. He reached in his pocket and fished out a scrap of paper and slid it across the table. It was a list of tickers. They were stocks I should buy, he told me, and now was the time. The next day I drove to the bank and sprayed and prayed with everything I had.

“What’s going on? Are we OK? I’ve barely seen you.” Mackie had blown up my phone for days and he now stood on my front step.

“Yeah, it’s just school.” I squeezed the back of my neck. “I really have to tie down this year.”

“You need a break. Come to the beach with us. I have a cooler packed. We’ll swim, have some drinks, get some sun.”

“I have an assignment due.” I lied. “Then class in the morning and work at 6:30. I switched shifts with that redhead at the club.” He wrapped his arms around me and kissed me soft. I could smell the vomit on my own breath and pulled away before he could smell it too. “I have Friday off,” I said. “Wanna go to a movie or something?”

He put his hands in his pockets and shrugged. He turned to look down the street, then at the train and back at me. “Alright. Fine,” he said. “Friday. Is there anything you want to see?”

“Not really,” I said. “You choose.”

“You’re sure you don’t wanna come to the beach?” His eyes pleaded and he held my hands.

“Sorry babe. Friday’s better,” I said and he kissed me again, trotted down the steps, and the timing belt screeched and spun down the street.

When Friday came I was in no mood but I forced myself in the shower and some cute clothes. I climbed in beside Mackie.

“You wanna see *Igor*?” he said, bright-eyed.

“What’s that?”

“Some kiddie cartoon.”

I shrugged. “Sure, why not.” We stopped at a red and I looked at the car next to me. The windows were up but I could see the couple laughing. He was red-faced and his head and hands swung around in the air. His mouth moved in still silence and I couldn’t hear a thing. The light turned green and I turned back to Mackie.

“I’m so happy,” he said out of nowhere and I didn’t know why I wasn’t.

“Where’d that come from?” I softened my face.

He squeezed my hand. “You just make me happy, is all.”

“Same.” I squeezed back.

Mackie bought a giant soaked popcorn, with butter layered halfway through. I said I didn’t want any and sat through an hour and a half of bad comedy. The punchlines didn’t land but Mackie laughed through fistfuls of popcorn. Kernels bounced down the front of his shirt to the floor. Igor was an unfortunate hunchback who was enslaved to an evil scientist. His dream was to break free, to become evil himself, and have the most evil creation of all. But his plan is derailed when he creates Eva, a sweet and caring female monster. The movie was shit and when it was over, Mackie begged to keep the night going.

“I’m having some of the guys over for pre-drinks. We’re gonna hit up that new club downtown. You comin’?”

We walked across the dark parking lot. “I have some homework to do tomorrow,” I said. “I can stop by before work?”

“Are we ever going to actually hang out?” He said, unlocking the car doors.

“We’re hanging out now,” I said.

“Barely.”

“What do you want?” I said, “I have to study. I’m trying to make something of myself.”

“Unlike me, is that what you mean?”

“I never said that,” I scrunched my brows.

“All the success and money in the world won’t make you happy, Bets.”

“OK, that’s bullshit. And who said anything about money?”

“That’s all you give a fuck about!” He raised his voice.

“So, what, you want me to work at a strip club my whole life? Pretty sure I wouldn’t be happy with that!”

“Whatever, I just think that family is more important.”

“I don’t want a family!” I snapped back.

“OK, well this is news! So you’re just gonna graduate and fuck off to medical school or something? Are you even planning to stay here? What about us?”

“I don’t know.” My arms and legs were crossed in the passenger seat. I looked out the window and I was done with the conversation.

“Hello!?! You can’t just shut down when you get uncomfortable with something.” He looked back and forth from me to the road.

“Oh yeah, I fucking can.” We pulled up to Gran’s and he threw it into park. I wondered how many Mississippis I had to sit through before I could make a break for the house and the cupboards. I really wanted popcorn.

“Do you love me?” he said.

“Of course I do.” I did, but I didn’t know what to do with it. I wasn’t sure what it meant.

“Right, but there’s an expiration date on it.” He leaned back on the head rest and rubbed his forehead.

“That’s not true,” I said, but maybe he was right.

“How is it not true!? You just said you might fuck off.”

“Well, if that ever happens you can come with! Whatever, we’ll figure it out.” I wanted out of the car. “I’m gonna go in,” I said, with my hand on the door handle. “Just, go have a good night and I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Fine,” he said.

I leaned in to kiss him and I rested my forehead on his. “It’ll be OK,” I said. I wanted him, but I didn’t, and he was the only love I’d ever felt. I watched him back out then went in and did my thing. I sat in the basement afterward, buzzing in a cloud of smoke with Led Zeppelin IV. I listened to *When the Levee Breaks*<sup>4</sup> on repeat.

I went down hard and fast. I passed out on the manky couch, snug in my perfectly formed ass groove.

*There was this house. It was small with no windows, just a door in the front. It looked like it had been there for years, grown-in and alone. My forearm reached for the handle and the lock was off its hinges. It tapped against the frame in the wind. It was all dust inside and footprints ran through it. I followed them to the back. They were big and my feet fit inside of them and I crept like a cat, retracing its paw prints in the snow. I’d been here before. Maybe as a kid. It was familiar but not and the footprints slid under a door. Mackie was there, behind it. He said*

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<sup>4</sup> Led Zeppelin (1971).



*to be careful. His eyes were wide. "There's torture chairs," he said, and he nodded his head to one side without looking. "God only knows what's happened in this house."*

I didn't have time to look. I woke up. It was early and I poured a coffee and got to my school work. I had to spend long hours studying. I had to retrain myself to read and remember and to understand, but it was getting better with time. I lost myself in front of my Dell, using my class notes to navigate my new stats software. It was a necessary purchase and the campus store raped me on the price. It was already 3:00 and I'd nearly finished. I left it and got ready for Mackie's and work. He was right. I had been stiffing him lately and he was good to me and I'd not been good back. There was no answer when I called but I drove over anyway. I clunked into park and eyeballed a couple of empties on his walk. I passed them to the door and knocked. Nothing. The train was there. I pulled my phone from my purse and called again and it rang twice and went to voicemail. Must have been a long night. I'd crawl in and cuddle him from behind and bury my face in the little patch of hair on his back. He'd be warm and soft and I would soften, too. I'd tell him I'm sorry and it would be OK. I stepped through the door and it was dark. There were beer bottles, and ashtrays, and empty baggies, and a couple of stragglers passed out. I walked past them to Mackie's room. It was even darker in there and I saw two lumps under the covers. I flicked on the light. Blonde hair spilled down the side of a pillow and Mackie lay next to her. I must have blacked out. I felt my eyes shift and a fuse short. I tore off their blanket and pulled the hair and its naked body to the floor. The loud thump and cry woke Mackie. I don't remember what I said, or screamed. I was racing. He stumbled and tripped his way after me, past the losers in his living room and out the front door to the Buick.

"BETS!" he yelled but I was already gone.

I called in sick on my way to the store. I was drunk with anger and I loaded up on beer and whiskey and sped home to get fucked up with D. I went six feet under, again. Back in my hole. The claw marks were gone and heaps of earth fell on my head. I stayed there for days, in the same spot, mouth to bottle, bottle to mouth, face to toilet. I avoided everything. Class, Mr. Chu, work, calls and texts, and knocks on the door.

I kept myself drunk for the next couple of weeks. At work, in classes, and next to Rachel and Tara at the front of the room, but no one said anything. I walked through campus with my guts in my arms. I'd received a letter that said I was behind on some fees. News to me. I wound through students, doing their student things, toward the finance office. It was behind floor to ceiling glass and a long counter ran the length of it. There were mostly women, some sitting, and some walking around with files and coffee.

"I'm here to pay an outstanding fee," I said with elbows on the tall counter. Bright lights gunned down on my pale skin and the dark wells under my eyes.

"You'll want to speak to Prina," the gray-haired woman said. "I think she's with another student right now. Take a seat and I'll let her know you're here."

I found a chair in front of the glass with a stack of bills in my purse. I crossed my legs and looked around. Imagine working here, day after day with these women. Shuffling files, scrolling screens and clicking mouses. A tall man emerged from the back. He wore a suit and a British accent and his yellow teeth bucked out to the front. He had a skip in his step and he worked the room, joking and chatting to each and every one of them. This guy was unjustifiably happy. He was dramatic, over the top, and I grew increasingly bothered by it. He was that type, you know? A self-anointed man of the people, shaking hands and patting backs, carrying on loud enough so everyone would know it. There was a staircase off to my right and I watched him trot up it with

his pants in his crack. He got to the top and did a skipping turn and reached for a door handle with a leg kicked out. He'd mastered the move and he knew it. He was the gold medalist for corner-turning efficiency and I cringed in my seat.

Prina came out and welcomed me to her office. "So you have some outstanding fees? Let's have a look," she said and pulled up my file. She had a brightly colored scarf draped around her shoulders and she looked at me sweet with deep brown eyes. She told me the amount and I pulled the stack from my purse. I felt her eyes widen as I flipped through the wrinkled bills with my thumb. I slid them across to her. "We can't accept cash," she said with an uneasy smile and an awkward laugh. "You can pay by card in the front," she said and it was the first time I ever used it.

Everything was grating and everyone was happy but me. I fell behind in my classes and I finally burned out. "I'd like to make an appointment with Dr. Shelly," I said into the phone with an exploding head and a week's old shirt. There were food stains down the front. I scratched at them with a nail.

"Do you have a referral?" the receptionist squeaked. She was high-pitched and irritating.

"My doctor faxed it over. Elizabeth Trent."

"One second." She put down the phone and shuffled around with one thing or another.

"Found it. He can see you on November 16th," she read. "No, sorry, that's a Sunday. Can you do Tuesday the 18th?"

"What time?"

"10:00am."

I'd have to reschedule with Mr. Chu. "Sure, that works." I hung up and went on wallowing in my filth. I struggled with my school work for the next two weeks but I managed to do it. I had to succeed and at least I had that.

Dr. Shelly's office was old with stained carpet and his receptionist looked just as she sounded. I waited thirty minutes before I was called in. There was a woman in there, too. She was bland with an unremarkable face.

"This is \_\_\_\_\_. She's a resident completing her placement," Dr. Shelly said as a matter of factly. "Do you mind if she stays?" I shrugged and sat down and he waited for a real answer.

"Sure, I guess." I *did* mind. It was bullshit. She sat through the entire assessment, scribbling notes and avoiding eye contact. I left out the drug dealing but there was still enough to make her shift in her seat. We finished and Dr. Shelly raised an eyebrow.

"It's pretty tough to give a real diagnosis until you've abstained from drinking, drugs and other habits for an extended period of time." He had beady eyes and a balding head with tufts of white hair that hung on for dear life. "I'm going to recommend an antidepressant," he said. "Ciprolex. It's relatively new but it's been shown to help with compulsions." He reached for his prescription pad. "It should help with impulse control. Give it time. It will take a few weeks to build up in your system. You may have some side-effects but they should reside so don't give up on it. Take it every day at the same time with food." He ripped off the little sheet and handed it to me. The writing was messy and I couldn't read it. I didn't know how the hell the pharmacist was going to, either. "Make an appointment out front for one month from now and we'll reassess."

I stood up with my purse on my shoulder. The resident gave a fake smile and I got out of there. I drove straight to the pharmacy to get my pills and went home. Were they going to

change my personality? I was a mess but I didn't want to lose myself completely. I took them anyway and he wasn't joking about side-effects. I was fucked and not in a good way and I dragged myself around campus and the strip club. I sold less drinks and made half the tips. I mean, who wanted to flirt and throw money at a miserable cunt? I stopped drinking again but the purging got worse. There was no energy for anything, but I hated it all anyway, and I sunk deeper and deeper. I couldn't even masturbate my way out of it. Cumming was impossible and I gave up tired and defeated. A special circle of hell carved out in my mind and anxiety and anger multiplied inside it. I couldn't sleep and I lay there each night with my pulse in my throat for hours until morning.

Dr. Shelly called three weeks in. "How's the medication working out?" he asked.

"I feel worse. Much worse," I said. Maybe I should get off it."

"I suggest waiting a little longer," he said. "Maybe it's because of the bulimia. Are you vomiting after taking them?"

"No."

"OK, let's wait a few more weeks. Reschedule our follow-up with reception. I'll patch you through."

I did, and did what I was told.

Everyone stared at me, worse than before. I caught them from the corners of my eyes. I focused on my thighs and winced when I walked in front of people in the halls. I wanted to disappear. I hung from a tree one night, limp-necked with bulging eyes and by the time I walked through Dr. Shelly's door I was edging on going through with it. He took me off the Ciprolex and I never saw him again. I guess that's one way to deal with spiralling depression. Make it so

much worse, so unbearable that you beg for your original despair. That tufty twerp probably planned it.

**“When we started you mentioned that you were tried on Prozac at one point. Can you tell me about that?”**

**“Yeah, right after I moved here.” I tried to laugh. “It’s like I’m a magnet for fucked up situations.”**

**“What do you mean by that?”**

**“I randomly chose a doctor from the phonebook. I’d called around and they all had a long wait but I found one who could see me right away.” I sat back and crossed my legs.**

**“Dr. Kim,” I remembered. “There were cats roaming the waiting room and perched on the reception counter. I should’ve clued in then.”**

**Dr. Garlick scrunched her brows.**

**“Two young Korean women led me in to see him. There were three flimsy chairs and a hospital bed with the doctor laid out on it to my left. I didn’t know what to think. I was told to sit and I did and the two women sat across from me with pens and pads like nothing was wrong. Like there wasn’t a giant paralyzed elephant in the room. They smiled at me sweet and Dr. Kim piped up.**

**“How old are you?” he asked, unable to look at me. I answered. Then he said, “have you ever had an abortion?” I didn’t have time to answer before he started seizing or something. One of the women, I think they were his daughters, ran to his side. I got the impression that it was a regular thing.” I shook my head, leaned back in my seat and shrugged. “I don’t fuckin’ know.” I tried another laugh. “Fucked up stuff, but I thought,**

**‘who am I to judge’, you know? He could have been the best doctor in the world for all I knew, so I stayed.”**

**Dr. Garlick’s fingers moved frantically across her keyboard. “Where was this exactly? Do you remember the address?” Her face was contorted. Maybe in disbelief.**

**“It was near the Empire State Building. In Koreatown.”**

**“Is he still there?”**

**“I don’t know, probably.”**

**“And so he prescribed Prozac, you said? Do you remember the dosage?”**

**“60 mg.”**

**Her eyes widened. “Prozac should be given at 10 mg.”**

**“He mentioned that, but said 60 mg was shown to be effective for bulimia.”**

**“Right,” She nodded. “There has been some evidence of that. And you said it didn’t agree with you, is that correct?”**

**“It was similar to the Ciprolex, but I had even less energy. My mind raced but my body could barely move.”**

**She nodded.**

Anyway, so after the whole Mackie thing, I had no one left but Mr. Chu. Well, and Gran but she was mostly useless. I spent more time with him, Mr. Chu, and I kept my food down most days. I started at the gym but hell was deep and it seemed to grow with every positive change. I managed to press on through my classes despite it. *“If you’re going through hell, keep going,”* I’d heard once before and I wondered if there was ever going to be an end to it. In the spring of my final year I waited for acceptance letters from med schools. I’d applied to four of them and

when they finally arrived, I read *Congratulations!* at the top of each one. I decided on Columbia in New York City and prepared for my move. I shared my victory with Mr. Chu and he sat alone in the audience, smart and dapper in his crisp dark suit as I walked across the stage. He had a party for me that night, at his home with his friends and family, and it was all for me. I was welcomed with warm faces and home-cooking and Mr. Chu sat me next to him. He was proud of me, and he loved me, and I loved him, too. He walked me to the door at the end of the night and handed me leftovers in plastic containers.

“You’ve done good,” he said with a toothy smile and he turned to go back in the house.

I swallowed a lump and said “see you Tuesday,” but Tuesday never came.

Mr. Chu died in his sleep two days later.



## **PART V: Garlick**

Dr. Garlick slid over a box of Kleenex and folded her hands on her desk. “He was very special to you,” she said. “It sounds like he was a powerful force in your life.” My body shook and my voice got tangled with the tears in my throat. I nodded and twisted a mascara-stained tissue in my lap. It was the first time I’d worn makeup in months and it was burning my eyes.

“Would you like a break?” Her eyes were wet, too.

I was already broken. I shook my head. “I’m fine.” She waited and I swallowed hard. “Are you going to be able to help me?” The levee broke and my tears flowed and it was the first time I let them. She gave me a gentle smile. I couldn’t hold her look and turned to the rolled tissue in my fingers.

“Yes,” she said. “You’re going to get the right help.” She was sincere. She pulled her arms off the desk and returned to her screen. “I’ll have a full report ready for you next week, but we can discuss my initial thoughts and recommendations now, if you like?”

“Please,” I said. I’d been trying to surface for years with a foot on my head and I was desperate for an answer.

“In my opinion, I would say that you have borderline personality disorder. Do you know what that is?”

The gray room tilted on its side and I caught myself on the armrest. I’d studied some psychology in school but could never quite fit myself into any one category. “That’s the worst one!” I was nauseous and my ass was sweating in my seat.

“Well, no, not necessarily. We used to think it wasn’t treatable,” she said, “but a significant body of research suggests otherwise. We now call it emotional dysregulation.” My guts were in my lap. “The hallmark was always thought to be emotional outbursts and outward rage,” she

went on, “but we now know there are different types. Introverted borderline is when the rage is mostly turned inward. She sat back, crossed a meaty thigh and folded her hands in her lap. “So, instead of lashing out at others, a person will hold it in and beat up on themselves. I think this can better describe your situation. There are some highly effective medications and psychotherapies available.” She waited and I said nothing. She took a breath. “And, based on your poor reaction to antidepressants and lengthy highs and lows, I think you may have some bipolar tendencies, as well.” My stomach jumped. “The symptoms of the two disorders can be difficult to tease apart. There’s a lot of symptom overlap.” Garlick sat up and opened a tightly packed drawer. She flipped through with the tips of her fingers. “Here’s some information that may help,” she said, sliding two booklets across to me.

My blood pumped to my face and my neck and I went somewhere else. Maybe the ward on the other side of that window. The loonie bin. Maybe I’d have to go there, after all. Is that where my story ended? Drooling in my seat like Nicholson in *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*? Sad fucking ending. No, not sad, embarrassing. No blaze of glory there.

“We’re almost out of time,” Garlick cut in. “Elizabeth? Are you OK?”

“Hmm?” I tried to focus on her face.

“How are you feeling?”

“Not sure.” I tried to process what the hell was going on but I was floating away.

“I’m going to recommend medication,” she said and it brought me back. “Lithium would be most effective but it can come with some uncomfortable side effects.” She studied me. Still analyzing.

“Like what?”

“Headache, dry mouth, upset stomach, acne, weight gain, hair loss. . . .” she rambled them off but I was stuck on weight gain and hair loss. “Rare, but more serious could be hand tremors, difficulties with balance, and a condition called diabetes insipidus. But again, these are very rare and can be mitigated by blood monitoring.”

“No way,” I said. “Fuck that.” I’d rather be psycho than bald and fat. “What else you got?”

“Unfortunately, most antipsychotics can cause some metabolic and appetite changes.”

*Antipsychotics!?* “I don’t see how that’s going to help my eating disorder!”

“True,” she said. “Another option is an anticonvulsant. Lamotrigine has been shown to help with both bipolar and borderline. There’s no weight gain associated with it, but it may not be as effective.”

*Why the hell didn’t she say that one first?* I’d settle for getting only a little bit better if it meant not becoming an ogre. “OK,” I exhaled. “Let’s try that.” She pulled up to the keyboard and the clicking rattled my insides. Did she not have air conditioning? It was hot as hell in that tiny room. My hair was wet. *At least I have hair.* I needed out of there, back to the safety of my dark apartment. I needed to run. I was good at that. It always worked before. Well, no it hadn’t. What I was doing wasn’t working and I needed help. I needed off the couch and out of my head and back to school.

“With this medication, we’ll have to increase your dosage slowly over the next several weeks. Taking it all at once can cause a life-threatening rash. Again, that is quite rare, but it’s best to be cautious and titrate slowly.” *Life threatening rash?* I was dizzy. “You’ve already done a lot of the work,” she said, “on your own. It really is remarkable.”

“Yeah, well, a lot of good it did. I feel worse than ever.”

“Don’t discount how hard you’ve worked, Elizabeth. You’ve been self-medicating an underlying mental health condition. So, now that you’ve pulled off the layers, we can treat the real problem.” She looked sorry for me and I hated it. “We’re out of time, but I’d like you to come back for an hour each week.” She nodded at the booklets in front of me. “Read that. Getting some clarity will help.” She handed me my prescription and my ass suction-cupped off the seat. I stood on wobbly legs. My purse hooked the knob on my way out the door and yanked me back against the frame. *Fuck sakes.*

I couldn’t find my way out of the building. I blacked out. I needed a cab but wound up in underground parking. A voice echoed off the cold cement walls. She was stout and round and I blinked her into focus. Her uniform read ‘Security’ across the front. “Are you lost?” she said and I was, in every possible way. I must have followed her. Up the elevator and down the busy halls, like a mental case who needed antipsychotics to navigate her way through life, and a building, apparently. I was a freak. It was official. I obviously knew there was something wrong, but borderline *and* bipolar? I don’t know why it hit me so hard. I guess I’d thought of myself as normal with some handicaps and now I had to reassess who I was and every interaction I’d ever had. I’d been walking around blind and everyone could see but me. What did Bukowski call them? Right, the *masses*. *I can hear the laughter of the masses*, he said. *They are strong. They will survive. They know how to do things.*<sup>5</sup> And I didn’t. Clearly.

I didn’t remember stopping for my pills but there they were on the table in front of me. I took one and fell fast into a twisted dream.

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<sup>5</sup> Bukowski (p. 131, 1977).

*A snake ran the length of the room and disappeared out of sight. There was a man. He looked to be in his fifties with salt-streaked hair and silver rimmed glasses and they shone at me in the dark. We were in that dusty old room and there he stood, where Mackie had been, years earlier. "This here is an estuary," he said. It echoed all around us and I turned to the sound metal on porcelain. Mr. Chu was there in the corner. He sat with a single dim bulb hanging above his head and he didn't look up from his congee. I saw a door off behind him with slim slivered windows and I opened it, slow. It was shrill and it was too bright to see and I took careful steps on soft ground. I heard a river rushing below my feet and I free-fell, weightless, and drowned in it.*

I stretched my arms and my legs and rubbed my salt-streaked cheeks. It was dark in there, it always was. For months I'd lived like a mushroom in a mound of shit and now I could see it. I sat up slow and looked down at a stained sweater and crusty sweats. I saw my long-jagged toenails and chewed fingernails. My skin was pale and void of life. My apartment was just as fucked. It was a mirror image of me, inside and out. I cleaned, frantically. My hair, my face, my body, my surroundings. I scrubbed toilets and countertops and dust-packed baseboards. I soaked hardened pots and plates and scraped out the oven. I dismantled the pile of garbage at the front door and made trip after trip to the chute. I did loads of laundry and scoured and obsessed for hours on hands and knees, chairs and sofas, and lifted to clean under them. My heart pumped to the backs of my eyes and bass pumped along to the beat. I finished and sat to settle the fuck down. I hadn't felt like that in years. I eyeballed the pill bottle, laying on its side. *It must be placebo, I thought, but I'll take it.*

I called Gran.

“Elizabeth! I thought you were dead!”

*I was.* “Sorry, just been busy with school,” I lied, pacing around a fresh living room.

“I haven’t heard from you in months,” she said. “I’ve been worried sick with you up there in that God-forsaken city! Do you ever think of anyone but yourself?”

*No, I didn’t.* “Sorry Gran,” I said. The call went on like that and I told her I’d send her some money.

I hung up, sat down, and looked around my big city apartment. I’d rented it furnished, sight unseen. I ran after Mr. Chu’s death, as fast as I could and as high as can be. I showed up like that, with a powdered nose and booze on my breath to Columbia’s med school orientation. The Dean of the Vagelos College of Physicians and Surgeons stood at the front. “You are the Crème de la Crème,” he told the starry-eyed room and I blacked out sometime after. I collapsed, actually. I made a fool of myself once again. I went back to cold turkey after leaving the hospital but I couldn’t resurface. There seemed to be no way out but down. Columbia finally gave me the name of a psychiatrist and a medical leave of absence. I took it and here I was.

I showed up early to see Garlick the next week. I’d been up and down for days but it was better than all down. It was a long walk to her office. The halls were wide with a fluorescent hum and they watched and judged as I passed. White jackets hovered and clean sneakers squeaked. They were Non-Player Characters in a twisted game and I was nearly out of lives.

“It’s not exactly typical to feel marked improvement after just one dose,” Garlick said with a raised brow, “but everyone’s system is different. If it’s working, that’s all that matters.”

I was clean and I sat a bit taller. “Felt like I woke up from a bad dream or something,” I said. “Like I could see colors again, you know?” I crossed my legs. “I’ve had a couple of rough days, and I’m up and down like a fuckin’ yo-yo, but something’s happening.”

Garlick smiled and I felt it. “It will take time to balance out as we increase your dose over the next several weeks. It’s important that you keep coming to our appointments. We call it a two-pronged approach,” she said. “Medication combined with therapy.” She sat back, crossed a meaty thigh and linked her fingers. We stared at each other for uncomfortably long until she finally said, “So, what is the meaning of your life?” and waited for my response.

It was an odd thing to ask a person, even in that fortress of insanity and I didn’t have an answer. She was fixed on my shallow face and I searched the floor. The silence went on for ages. Minutes actually, and Garlick let it go on and on. The carpet was empty and I gave up. “I don’t know, maybe you can tell me.”

“It’s not my job,” she said. She switched legs. “But, it *is* my job to help you discover that for yourself.” I exhaled and waited and so did she. “You know, we’ve talked a lot about your past, but not so much about feelings.” She seemed to soften.

I tried a shallow laugh and picked at the armrest. “I guess I’m not really the touchy feely type.” I looked around the room. Her kids’ smiling faces were frozen in time. I judged them and she judged me. “I’ve been dreaming a lot again,” I said, finally.

“Anything you care to share?”

“After I saw you last week, I had this dream . . . there was a huge snake,” I started, and by the time I finished I was red with embarrassment. It sounded crazy and I braced for confirmation.

“Hmm. Sounds rather symbolic. What do you think it means?”

“Not sure, really. The man, with the glasses. He was one of my professors back in Florida. Made me think of a quote he read us. Good and evil runs through everyone’s heart, or something.”

Garlick nodded. “Interesting. You know, dreams can be very telling. Some say that dreams represent our wishes and fears. If I remember correctly, you’ve dreamt of a snake before.”

“Yeah, a few times, actually.”

“Why do you think that is?” Her brows dipped.

“Not sure. . . .”

“Mm, well, the snake can be a symbol of healing.” She looked to the ceiling for her words. “Like, the shedding of one’s skin for rebirth.” She shifted her eyes back to mine and smiled.

*She’s crazy, too*, I thought, but she had my attention.

“It can also represent the dividing line between our light and dark sides, or, like in your quote, the good and evil parts of our personalities.” She stopped to let me click in.

“I don’t think I’m that deep.”

“You never know.” Garlick shrugged. “You said you’ve studied some psychology in school. Did you cover any of Carl Jung’s work?”

“Um.” I sat back and took a breath. “A bit. Not really in any depth, though. He was the spiritual guy, right? The Freudian?” Garlick nodded along. “I always thought he was kind of confusing.”

“His writing certainly does command attention,” she said, still lounged back in her chair. “Jung believed that we all have a shadow lurking in our unconscious. A dark side that’s been repressed.”

“I think I’m dark enough,” I laughed.



“Well, dark doesn’t necessarily mean bad.”

“Hmm.”

“It’s kind of like having an alter-ego,” she said. My ass pinched in my seat and I shifted to the other cheek. “So, for example, a person’s loving nature could be repressed in childhood because it was discouraged by the people around them.” The room was like an oven. *There once was a woman who put her head into an oven*, was all I can think, and Garlick went on. “Jung believed that the shadow needs to come to light in order to become who you really are.” Her eyes were soft and she was kind and I was uncomfortable. “The dark and dusty room in your dream, where do you think that is?”

“Um, I’ve dreamt about it before, I think I told you about it. It’s in that old deserted house where Mackie said there were torture chairs.” My face was hot and I picked at my chair. “Mr. Chu was there this time. Don’t think it’s a real place, though.”

“Do you think it could be a place inside of you?”

Time skipped a beat. “Inside of me? I never considered that.”

“And the river. Where’s that?”

“The Dentist’s, I think.” I tried a laugh. “I was drowning in it.” I shifted again and crossed the other leg. “Doesn’t exactly have a happy ending.”

“Well, maybe it’s just part of the process.”

“What, dying?”

“Falling and getting back up.”

A moment passed and I went somewhere else. I lost my words and my thoughts and myself. It slipped through my fingers and there was no catching it.

“Elizabeth?”

“Hmm?” I couldn’t see. I was gone and so was she.

“Where’d you go?”

“I don’t know. I forgot what we were talking about.” I tried to blink back into existence.

“We may have stumbled across something.” She rummaged through her bag and handed me a cold can of Coke and told me to hold it with both hands. “Plant your feet flat on the floor and breathe. Take your time.”

I did what I was told and sat there, erect, clutching a fucking Coke can with an antipsychotic gushing through my veins. *I wish it was real coke.*

“How are you feeling?” she said after some time. She wore kid gloves and I hated it.

“I’m OK.” I set the can on her desk and scooted back in my seat.

She was now leaning forward, elbows on her desk. “Do you know what just happened?”

“It’s fine,” I said. “I just kind of blank out sometimes.”

“Why do you think that happens?”

I shrugged. “Overwhelmed, I guess.”

“Mhm.” She nodded. “The next time it happens, if it does, do the exercise we just did, OK? It’s called grounding. You can use anything cold. Something frozen may be best.”

I nodded. It sounded crazy but then so was I. I stared at the wall behind her. The one on the other side of the window. The dividing line between me and the institutionalized.

“Would you like to proceed or would you like more time?”

“I’m OK.”

“Sure?”

“Yeah. Let’s keep going.” I turned up the corners of my mouth but I didn’t feel it.

She tread softly and studied me as she spoke. “We were discussing your dream,” she said, “and the shadow.”

“Yeah,” I nodded.

“The shadow is thought to be one of many archetypes that make up our personalities.” I scrunched a brow and she went on, “like, the villain, the hero, the wise old man . . . that sort of thing.” *She must be insane.* “They can show up in dreams when we’re trying to make sense of ourselves. Your dream, can you think of any archetypes there?” She took a sip from a stained mug.

I took a minute and breathed out through my nose. “I guess Mr. Chu would be the wise old man.”

She nodded, set down her mug and returned to me with soft eyes. “And who’s the villain?”

“Me.” *Obviously.* I fought down a lump.

“Hmm. Maybe, maybe not. Who’s the hero?”

“Not sure.” I went back to the carpet.

“Could that also be you?” I continued searching but nothing came. “Hero how?”

“Well, what does a hero do?”

I exhaled through puffed cheeks. “He fights monsters and dragons.”

“Isn’t that what you’re doing?” My eyes welled up and Garlick slid over the Kleenex.

I took one. “Yeah, but he wins.”

“Not without a fight. It’s what makes the hero’s journey. He sets off into the unknown, battling his way through great feats and challenges. In the end, he’s victorious, and he finds himself in the process.” Garlick waited and I couldn’t speak. “And where’s your shadow?”

I thought about it, and thought some more. “I don’t know.”

“Do you think it could be hiding in the light?”

*What an absolute mind fuck!* I was high off it.

“We have to stop now.” Garlick shuffled through her files and handed me my report. “For your records,” she said, “and to submit to Columbia should you choose to do so.”

.....  
I held it tight against my body and found my way out of the building. The streets were busy, they always were, and I got lost in the chaos. There were sharp dressed people bustling on their phones. They were confident and upright and I cowered beneath them. They were all going somewhere. Surely someplace meaningful. The air was cool, a far cry from Florida’s heat and I pulled my sweater tight around me. I don’t remember the ride home or my ride up the elevator. My apartment was full of nothing at all and I lay on the couch thinking about Garlick. I trusted her. I searched for reasons not to but nothing came. Even worse, I was looking forward to our next session. I didn’t know what to do with myself. *A drink would be nice. A cigarette would be even nicer.* I hadn’t craved either in months. I got up to open the sealed envelope instead. The words strung off the page in front of me. I threw it across the coffee table and it slid off into a heap. That seemed to sum it up. Was there any *me* to be found, or was I merely a collection of symptoms? I didn’t know who I was but I guess I never did, and it tormented me until our next session.

*a single dog  
walking alone on a hot sidewalk of  
summer  
appears to have the power  
of ten thousand gods.*

*why is this?*<sup>6</sup>

I recited the poem I'd found deep in the woods and looked for Garlick's reaction. I came across it the night before, bookmarked with Mr. Chu's red envelope. I wasn't handling it well.

"It's an insightful poem," she said over her mug. "What do you think it means?"

"I was actually hoping you could help me with that."

"Well," she set down her coffee on a white sheet of paper, "the dog is unleashed. He's free to find his own way."

"I think he's lost and scared," I said.

"Probably. But it's part of what gives him his power."

I ran my thumb along the gold raised script. "I don't see how I can just erase the past."

"And you shouldn't. It will always be a part of you. You know, Jung said that no tree can grow to heaven unless its roots reach down to hell."

I looked up at her.

She smiled. "Maybe he was onto something."

"Yeah, maybe he was."

I spiralled through the earth for weeks after that, coming up for the odd breath of air while Garlick tinkered around with my insides. We pulled them apart, and emotions poured, and it hurt like hell. We polished each piece before setting it back in its rightful place and she was right there with me. She stayed, and I resurfaced, and for the very first time, I was at peace. At the end of summer, I sat across from the Dean and was permitted to start classes in the fall.

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<sup>6</sup> Bukowski (1977).

You know how you can have the same dream over and over?

*I was back in that big box store, crouching in the aisles and behind low racks, listening for drawn guns and careful steps. They called my name, but it wasn't Blondie this time, it was Elizabeth, and when I drew my weapon, the hard trigger blasted me awake.*

I lay there after, thinking about my dream, and thinking about thinking of nothing at all. I crossed the room to my Dell and the words purged and poured onto the screen.

*August 21, 2011*

*It was a two-hour drive to meet the Duck and I'd been up for days. . . .*

It was our last session and I sat tall behind the driver. He was on his phone and he spoke in a language I didn't recognize. I watched cars and people and buildings pass by. The sun was bright and the air was crisp. I paid and looked up at the faceless hospital. *New York State Psychiatric Institute*, it said in unremarkable letters and it was cold and dead and full of life. The halls were bored and I was bored of them, too. I stepped into Columbia University's Department of Psychiatry, and I waited for my turn. Garlick was late and I searched little square tables for something interesting. They were spread with random shit and stacks of pamphlets. Each had a stamp of a sword with wings and a snake that coiled around it. A smile crept to the sides of my face.

"Elizabeth?" There was Garlick, coffee stains and all, peeking out at me. I took my seat across from her. It was time to say goodbye.

"How was your meeting with the Dean?"

"I start in a couple of weeks!" I was glowing and I could feel it.

She was glowing, too. “Congratulations!”

I was going to miss her. This woman, this unsuspecting powerful woman, had brought me back from the dead.

“Thank you,” I said and my heart was warm and full of light, “for everything.”

“You are very welcome,” Garlick smiled. “It’s been a pleasure meeting you. If you’re still interested in psychiatry when you’re finished your courses, I’d be happy to write a letter of recommendation. I think you’d make a great psychiatrist.”

“Thank you, I’d like that,” I said and when it was over, I stood tall in the doorway.

“For what it’s worth, Elizabeth, for everything you’ve been through, your story is inspiring. It could really help other people,” she said and it was good.

“Who knows,” I smiled back. “Maybe I’ll write a book about it.”

See the *Nutshell* lyrics (<https://g.co/kgs/WVvJJz>).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Alice in Chains (1994).

## **Analysis and Discussion**

This narrative existential inquiry is novel, and is designed to be creative, reflexive, immersive and interactive, opening new pathways to understand and describe knowledge in the fields of education and mental health. *Blondie*, the novel, is designed to be a transformational experience for readers and to provide an example of how a work of fiction might be written to illuminate the complex layers of mental illness and to exemplify one's navigation toward self-discovery, authenticity, and therefore mental health.

*Blondie* is an entirely fictional account of the internal and external realities of severe mental health challenges. These are not only witnessed within the main character, but also within the social structure in which she finds herself. The following areas of interest explored by *Blondie* lend support for its overall intentions.

### **Storytelling and Creative Writing**

#### ***Dirty Realism***

*Blondie* is an integration of the hallmark features of dirty realism. Its pared-down style examines the dark underbelly of society and the mundane in a tragically comedic, irreverent, disturbing and morally insightful fashion, yet it veers from this style at its conclusion. Rather than depicting an inescapable reality, it is a story that develops into one of accomplishment, self-development and resilience while maintaining its disruptive intentions.

#### ***The Bildungsroman***

*Blondie* is an epistolary Bildungsroman, a fictional story of self-development, which acts as the current work's methodology for both research and praxis. It is a research investigation that provides a self-help approach for personality growth, development and mental health treatment. The novel's main character is followed through her battle toward finding her true self. She



begins her story as Blondie, a young woman living an inauthentic life plagued by abandonment, alcoholism, drug abuse, mental illness, and organized crime. As the story unfolds, Blondie straddles the line between two worlds—the dark underbelly of society and that of an honest and integritous existence. She gradually sheds her inauthentic layers of self and finally finds Elizabeth, her true self, and her path to health and well-being. She battles many monsters on her existential journey to authenticity, those both internal and external to her. The narrative gives an honest and often disturbing look into the realities of this quest, filling the spaces between the symptomatology of mental health conditions outlined by the DSM-V (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). This allows for textured and holistic psychoeducation for readers and professionals. While characters' experiences and mental health symptoms represent the data points of the study, they are connected by reader interpretations and emotional engagement with the text.

### ***Symbolism and Metaphor***

Connecting-the-dots can be effectively achieved through symbolism, metaphor, and, ultimately, the read-between-the-lines content and philosophy of the story. This allows for topics and issues to readily resonate with interlocutors as they engage in an authentic experience through co-creation, adding their own unique and personal interpretations of the narrative. While there are far too many examples in the story to include here, as they are sewn into each and every page, a few are worth noting.

A central theme of light and dark is consistent throughout the novel, and is also depicted in the form of good/evil, heaven/hell, Shadow/Villain, mental health/illness, and Elizabeth/Blondie, with a purposeful navigation from the latter to the former. Perhaps the most

explicit example of this is Blondie's damning Dimethyltryptamine (DMT) trip, in which she meets God in the form of a bright light before she is dragged to the underworld.

"Remember to breathe in hard. Three hits," he said, handing me the pipe. I did it and lay back and was shot through a wormhole at warp speed. There were blinking and flashing and pulsing lights and they were blinding. I was spat out the far end and I was no longer me, and these short little elves with evil little faces tried to distract me. There was a bright light and she was everything, she said, and she reached for me but the elves swallowed me up and pulled me from the stars to the depths of hell. I gave up fighting and they ate my soul.

Another example occurs at a drug kingpin's house. He speaks of his true love, her in his seventies, her a mere child in her teens. He brings her to America from her home in Narino, Columbia, and shows Blondie picture after picture of the girl, underage and barely clad. He studies her face for approval of every one, perhaps for permission and redemption for his indiscretions. He picks up a book he is reading, *Crime and Punishment* by Fyodor Dostoevsky (2001), a tale of good, evil, and morality. It is a staple in existential literature that begs an age-old question of existence before essence, or essence before existence, concluding with the latter. He seems oblivious to the irony, the juxtaposition between his own immorality and the story he holds in his hands. They leave the book and stand on his deck over an estuary. He points out a brackish crest which represents the division between good and evil, and Elizabeth and Blondie.

"This here is an estuary. See that line over there?" Lando and I sat up on bent knees to look down the mouth of the river. There was a line of breaking white water that stretched from bank to bank. "Brackish they call it. It's where the sea and freshwater meet. Can you see it? They don't mix."

As the story progresses, Blondie becomes increasingly depressed. She finds herself in a cottage alone where she has lost all control. The man she is with leaves her there, trapped and tucked away out of sight. Her mental health worsens and she spends long hours in the company of her substance abuse and eating disorder. She walks through the trees with dead earth beneath her feet, wondering if she should be down there with it. She finds an old rusted car getting eaten from the inside out, much like her. She finds a ray of light inside, with the implication that there is one inside of her as well. It is a book of poems (Bukowski, 1977, pp. 29, 209, 254, 269, 272), and the one that stands out to her is existential to its core.

Its body was chewed out with rust. I pulled hard on the passenger door and it grinded and screeched and flung open. Dead leaves and branches littered the seats and earth, and trees grew up through the floor. It was being swallowed from the inside out. I saw a book wedged in the fold of the seat and I pulled it loose. It was yellow with age and the pages were worn. The cover held on for dear life. *Love is a Dog From Hell*, it read. *Poems 1974–1977, Charles Bukowski*. I flipped through the profanity-filled pages. There were titles like *Fuck*, and *I have shit stains in my underwear too*, and *sex*, and *bedpans*, and *the good loser*. This guy was a trip. I stopped on a crumpled page that had a poem called *dog*.

*a single dog*

*walking alone on a hot sidewalk of*

*summer*

*appears to have the power*

*of ten thousand gods.*

*why is this?* (Bukowski, 1977, p. 123)

I took it with me, back over fallen branches and stumps that were blanketed with green moss and funny looking mushrooms. They listened to my thoughts and the trees turned their heads to watch as I passed. I couldn't shake the words and they repeated in my mind over and over until they lost their meaning and floated around with the hungry mosquitoes.

The poem describes Blondie's quest toward a true self, alone and bewildered in a dangerous world, yet it foreshadows her eventual unleashing and the empowerment of her journey, speaking to the philosophical underpinnings of the book as a whole.

There are many dreams in the story that reflect the main character's wishes and fears through both latent and manifest content. These are purposely vague and left open to reader imagination and interpretation. In the following excerpt, Blondie has been introduced to love for the first time by Mackie and it terrifies her. Her heart has been locked up for years, since she was a child, and she doesn't know how to love herself or anyone else.

There was this house. It was small with no windows, just a door in the front. It looked like it had been there for years, grown-in and alone. My arm reached for the handle and the lock was off its hinges. It tapped against the frame in the wind. It was all dust inside and footprints ran through it. I followed them to the back. They were big and my feet fit inside of them and I crept like a cat, retracing its paw prints in the snow. I'd been here before. Maybe as a kid. It was familiar but not and the footprints slid under a door.

Mackie was there, behind it. He said to be careful. His eyes were wide. "There's torture chairs," he said, and he nodded his head to one side without looking. "God only knows what's happened in this house."

The house here represents a place lost deep inside of her, perhaps her heart or within her unconscious mind, which has been broken into by Mackie. She recognizes it, but doesn't and retraces her steps through time. Mackie is horrified by the hell he finds inside of her.

In another dream, Blondie is running from dangerous figures who are hunting her, with the implication that she is running from her own demons.

It was a big box store, I think. I crouched behind racks of things and crept down narrow aisles. They looked for me, faceless, guns drawn, turning over displays and calling my name. I hid behind rows of clothing and I force-fed fistfuls of rotten food in my mouth until my teeth wobbled loose and I spit them all out. Their guns drew closer and I reached for my own, but the trigger was soft and nothing came out.

Here, Blondie attempts to quell her inner pain and fear with food which represents her bulimia. In dream analysis literature, it is well-known that having your teeth or hair fall out and failing to defend yourself is a sign of anxiety and a deep lack in confidence. This symbolism is found in many places throughout the novel. Toward the story's conclusion, the story's main character realizes that she has now become Elizabeth, having the same dream but with an empowered ending.

You know how you can have the same dream over and over?

I was back in that big box store, crouching in the aisles and behind low racks, listening for drawn guns and careful steps. They called my name, but it wasn't Blondie this time. It was Elizabeth, and when I drew my weapon, its hard trigger blasted me awake.

The songs, lyrics, and artists found in *Blondie* have been carefully selected for their symbolic content. The first song introduced is *L. A. Woman* by The Doors (1971), which gives the chapter its name. Blondie is high, dancing on the beach in the wind. The first verses closely

describe her experiences to that point in the story, yet is nevertheless open to reader interpretation.

The last lines of the selected lyrics foreshadow Blondie's efforts to better herself, to keep on "risin'." She yells them out over the great unknown, over a deep ocean filled with turmoil and danger. Jim Morrison, the lead singer of *The Doors* was well-known for his drug use which he eventually died from. "Mojo Risin'" is an anagram of his name and he believed it to be his alter ego, much in the same way that Blondie is Elizabeth's, and one that she is working to leave behind. Perhaps she must do this in order to escape the same fate as Morrison.

The last song of the book is called *Nutshell* by Alice in Chains (1994). It sums up the story's philosophy in a nutshell, describing a life that is not worth living if it is inauthentic. Two band members of Alice in Chains died of drug overdoses—Layne Staley, the writer of the song, and Michael Starr.

Depression is also described and explored symbolically and metaphorically as a way to help readers place themselves in it, and perhaps to superimpose their own deep feelings and experiences onto the text.

I stopped drinking again but the purging got worse. There was no energy for anything, but I hated it all anyway, and I sunk deeper and deeper. I couldn't even masturbate my way out of it. Cumming was impossible and I gave up tired and defeated. A special circle of hell carved out in my mind and anxiety and anger multiplied inside it. I couldn't sleep and I lay there each night with my pulse in my throat for hours until morning.

The writing of these mental health challenges is greatly focused on physical sensation and symbolism rather than cognitive ruminations and inner dialogue, which allows readers to make sense of it themselves.

I was no longer me and I was broken at the bottom of a deep hole. My fingers bled from trying to claw my way out and scratch marks lined the walls around me. How did I get here? I could see light at the top but it only grew smaller. It was now just a pinhole that pierced the sky. I stopped fighting and waited for it to swallow me whole and I grabbed a beer and Bukowski.

## **Philosophy**

### ***Narrative Ontology***

The ontological perspective of this research is integrative, combining two camps of narrative thought. Narrative epistemology takes a position that we use narrative to impose meaningful order in a material world. Narrative ontology describes a way of being in the world that is already storied. The current investigation is built on a foundation that combines these two positions. This can describe the act of engaging with a text, where the reader takes in the pre-storied material and combines it with their own in a meaningful, continuous and reflexive act of cocreation. It is at the junction of these two ideas where learning and experience occur. As outlined above, *Blondie* is written in such a way that leaves sufficient space for this process to occur with its pared-down style and use of symbolism, metaphor and vague description.

This integrative ontological position is also held by existential philosophy where each individual is challenged with the task of using the raw materials they have in front of them to create meaning in their lives. This requires one to live in accordance with their inner values—an authentic way of being as a prerequisite for mental health, purpose, and a life worth living. We all begin life at different places, some with a head start, some less fortunate than others, but ultimately, we are the authors of our own lives. *Blondie* showcases this philosophy in many

ways. The main character navigates her life with many handicaps and many gifts. Her story is a process of sorting these out, overcoming her misfortunes, and “using her evil powers for good.”

### ***Existentialism and the Archetypal Journey***

We learn, grow, and understand our own stories through the stories of others, something Carl Jung (2014) believed to constitute a collective unconscious, one that is shared by all. Stories and mythology in Western culture evolved to have a common structure that is made up of the classic archetypes. This could be thought of as originating in the Christian bible at the intersection of good and evil, where malevolence stands in opposition to the hero’s journey. Archetypes can be found not only in our earliest texts, but also in our daily lives and the stories we tell. Many of these can be found in *Blondie*, such as the Villain, the Wise Old Man (Sage), the Shadow, and the Hero. Much of Blondie’s development is attributed to these archetypes as she encounters them on her path to self and identity.

The book has many Villains, perhaps every unsavoury character from the past, and within Blondie, herself. Blondie’s villainous persona developed as a protective layer from the many tragedies of her life, and houses many maladaptations—drug and alcohol abuse, disordered eating, criminality, anxiety, depression, and borderline personality disorder, all of which are largely environment-driven. Her Villain status is contrasted by her Shadow, which encompasses her repressed loving nature and unconscious desire to bring it to light. The Shadow archetype resides within the unconscious mind, and according to Jung (1939, 1946, 2014), it must be brought into consciousness and fully integrated with the self to achieve individuation, self-actualization and mental health. When it is not made conscious, it happens outside as fate—where the world must act out the conflict and be torn into opposing halves. Blondie is in conflict with her loving-natured Shadow, which she must bring to light in order to achieve her Hero



status. This is foreshadowed in Part IV: Mr. Chu, when Mackie and Blondie go to the theatre to see the movie *Igor* (Leondis & McKenna, 2008).

Mackie bought a giant soaked popcorn, with butter layered halfway through. I said I didn't want any and sat through an hour and a half of bad comedy. The punchlines didn't land but Mackie laughed through fistfuls of popcorn. Kernels bounced down the front of his shirt to the floor. Igor was an unfortunate hunchback who was enslaved to an evil scientist. His dream was to break free, to become evil himself, and have the most evil creation of all. But his plan is derailed when he creates Eva, a sweet and caring female monster. The movie was shit and when it was over, Mackie begged to keep the night going.

Here, the evil scientist represents Blondie's Villain and Eva, her Shadow. The fact that Eva is also a monster is suggestive of Blondie's eventual integration of her conflicting selves to achieve individuation. It is purposeful that the movie annoys her. The literature outlining Jung's work describes this as self-projection, where the personal attributes of others that bother us the most are often an indication of what is lurking below the surface (Zweig & Abrams, 1991). Blondie goes home to binge and purge after this experience to alleviate her discomfort.

It is not until Blondie meets the Wise Old Man archetype in her story, Mr. Chu, that she begins the process of bringing together her Shadow and Villain to find her authentic self. This is the ultimate goal of a Bildungsroman, and of Western literature in general, with few exceptions. This common structure is widely relatable, transcendent, and existential to its core. It is a quest toward self-development where one must battle many monsters and slay a dragon to become the Hero of their own lives. Mr. Chu has been successful with his own children and takes on Blondie as his final mission. He aids her on her journey, imparting his wisdom and guiding her through

the hell that she finds herself in. He does this until she begins to embody this knowledge, herself. The story is purposefully non-linear, as is life. The main character continues to uncover her serious mental illnesses, representing the dragon in her story, with every inauthentic layer she sheds. The encouragement and guidance of Mr. Chu has helped prepare her for her final battle and he passes away when he has completed what he set out to do. Following his death, Blondie moves on with fresh armour to fight her dragon. At first, she fails but is introduced to a new Sage, Dr. Garlick, who provides her with the figurative sword to take down the beast. This gives her the power to find her true self, Elizabeth, and successfully move forward as a Sage, herself.

Toward the end of the story, in a breakthrough session, Dr. Garlick unpacks Blondie's dream that houses all of her inner archetypes and helps her to understand herself in it.

A snake ran the length of the room and disappeared out of sight. There was a man. He looked to be in his fifties with salt-streaked hair and silver rimmed glasses and they shone at me in the dark. We were in that dusty old room and there he stood, where Mackie had been, years earlier. "This here is an estuary," he said. It echoed all around us and I turned to the sound metal on porcelain. Mr. Chu was there in the corner. He sat with a single dim bulb hanging above his head and he didn't look up from his congee. I saw a door off behind him with slim slivered windows and I opened it, slow. It was shrill and it was too bright to see and I took careful steps on soft ground. I heard a river rushing below my feet and I free-fell, weightless, and drowned in it.

Garlick's analysis of the dream is largely explicit in the story, with the naming of archetypes and explaining the symbolism of light and dark. The snake is described as the dividing line between these two sides, and perhaps as a representation of healing. In mythology,

the snake can also be seen as synonymous with the dragon—the one Elizabeth successfully slays. She recognizes this before her final session.

Garlick was late and I searched little square tables for something interesting. They were spread with random shit and stacks of pamphlets. Each had a stamp of a sword with wings and a snake that coiled around it. A smile crept to the sides of my face.

The estuary is recurrent in the novel, first at the Dentist's, again in her undergraduate psychology class, and finally in the unpacked dream. The brackish crest where fresh and saltwater meet represents the line between protagonist's Shadow and Villain, and the light and dark sides of herself. Elizabeth integrates these through her writing, and it is implied that what she writes is *Blondie*, the book the reader has been reading all along.

I lay there after, thinking about my dream, and thinking about thinking of nothing at all. I crossed the room to my Dell and the words purged and poured onto the screen.

August 21, 2011

It was a two hour drive to meet the Duck and I'd been up for days. . . .

## **Psychology**

### ***Mental Health Disorders***

*Blondie* provides an example of resilience and recovery in which readers can find themselves and identify with a broad range of symptoms, challenges, and situations. This speaks to its implications for knowledge mobilization both in and out of academe. The story covers many mental health challenges. The main character battles bipolar disorder, borderline personality disorder, and generalized anxiety disorder as well as their associated maladaptations, symptomatology, and lived realities. These include substance abuse, eating disorders, depression, mania, anxiety, hallucinations, delusions, abuse, rape, plastic surgery, violence,

gambling, criminality, suicidal ideation, body dysmorphia, impulsivity, reckless behaviour, and harsh/offensive language. Her diagnoses were carefully selected as a way to widen the scope for reader relatability.

The following section was removed from the final cut of the story as it interrupted flow and appeared too heavy and jargon-intensive for the target audience. However, it is an important summation of the protagonist's mental health diagnoses, taking the form of information booklets for both bipolar and borderline personality disorders (adapted from the DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013), as well as her final psychiatric assessment from Garlick. These provide a thorough description of Blondie's dragon.

### ***Information Booklets***

#### Borderline Personality Disorder:

- Fears of abandonment and rejection which can lead to self-isolation.
- Intense but short-lived bouts of anger, depression or anxiety.
- Emptiness associated with loneliness and neediness.
- Paranoid thoughts and dissociative states in which the mind or psyche “shuts off” painful thoughts or feelings.
- Self-image that can change depending on whom the person is with.
- Impulsive and harmful behaviours such as substance abuse, overeating, gambling or high-risk sexual behaviours.
- Suicide (about 10% of people with bpd take their own lives).
- Impulsive and emotionally volatile behaviours.
- Difficulty interacting with others and relationships that are unstable, confusing, difficult, and extreme.

I feel empty and lonely, sometimes like I don't exist at all, and saying my name feels like a lie because I know there's nothing inside. I play roles, try to be who I'm "supposed" to be, and I'm good at being anyone but me. I fill in the space with what's appropriate—my goals, careers, values, it's all based on the situation. I want to feel something, anything other than nothing. I go from okay to suicidal in an instant and don't even know why. But one constant is a sense of worthlessness that spills over into a desperate need for self-destruction. (A client, as cited in Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, 2009, p. 14)

#### Causes:

A genetic component has been noted, although Borderline is generally thought to be associated with the following environmental factors:

- Childhood trauma, including physical or sexual abuse.
- A parent or close caregiver with borderline personality disorder.
- Separation from a parent or close caregiver, death of a parent or close caregiver, or parents or caregivers who were not consistently present because of substance use or other mental health issues,

#### Bipolar Disorder:

The symptoms of bipolar disorder can vary. An individual with bipolar disorder may have manic episodes, depressive episodes, or mixed episodes.

#### Manic Episode:

A period of at least one week when a person is extremely high-spirited or irritable, possesses more energy than usual, and experiences at least three of the following changes in behaviour:

- Decreased need for sleep
- Uncontrollable racing thoughts
- Irritability
- Distractibility
- Increased activity
- Increased risky behaviour
- Disorganized thinking, false beliefs, and/or hallucinations, known as psychotic features.

#### Major Depressive Episode:

- Intense sadness or despair
- Loss of interest in activities the person once enjoyed
- Feelings of worthlessness or guilt
- Fatigue
- Increased or decreased sleep
- Increased or decreased appetite
- Restlessness or slowed speech or movement
- Difficulty concentrating
- Frequent thoughts of death or suicide

#### Mixed Episode:

Characterized by both manic and depressive symptoms simultaneously, marked by extreme irritability and agitation.

#### Conditions that can co-occur with bipolar disorder:

- Psychosis, such as hallucinations or delusions.

- Anxiety disorders, such as generalized anxiety disorder (GAD).
- Misuse of drugs or alcohol.
- Eating disorders, such as binge eating or bulimia.

### ***Psychiatric Assessment***

Patient: Elizabeth Dawn Trent

Date of Birth: January 15, 1983

Date of Visit: April 11, 2011

Psychiatric assessment following drug overdose.

History of Present Illness (HPI): Patient presents with anxiety and a depressive episode related to bereavement. She reports past trauma and has an ongoing eating disorder with anxiety related to body-image. The patient has an intense fear of weight gain. She reports having social anxiety and worries that people are judging, staring, and talking about her. The patient reports self-critical thoughts, rumination, as well as panic-like symptoms such as sweating and shakiness. She has a lifetime history of mood fluctuations with relative highs, intense irritation, anxiety, and depressive lows. The patient has a long history of anxiety-induced dissociation with infrequent periods of psychosis, including paranoia, delusions, and visual hallucinations which may be related to substance use.

ID: Elizabeth is a 28-year-old female. She lives in New York City alone. She is a student at Columbia University in Vagelos College of Physicians and Surgeons, on a medical leave of absence.

PREVIOUS TREATMENT:

Ciprexol, Prozac with activation effects. Exacerbation of eating disorder behaviour.

Possible mixed episode.

#### SUBSTANCE USE HISTORY:

The patient recently quit smoking. She was a smoker of 15 years. She has also been sober from drugs and alcohol for 4 years, with two notable relapses lasting approximately one month each. Previously, she was a heavy binge drinker since a teen. She has also used a variety of drugs since her teen years, including ecstasy, cocaine, mescaline, dimethyltryptamine, marijuana, psilocybin, LSD, opioids, gamma hydroxybutyrate, tranquilizers, amphetamines, and benzodiazepines.

#### PAST MEDICAL HISTORY:

Breast augmentation

Labiaplasty

IBS

Hospitalization due to a minor cardiac event as a result of dehydration and electrolyte imbalance

#### FAMILY PSYCHIATRIC HISTORY:

Maternal - Alcohol abuse and a possible personality disorder

#### CURRENT MEDICATIONS:

N/A

#### MENTAL STATUS EXAM:

The patient appeared her stated age and was pleasant and cooperative with the interview, although some anxiety and dissociation was noted. She maintained appropriate eye-contact. Her speech was of normal volume, rate, and rhythm. Her mood was euthymic and her affect was reactive with full range. Her thought process was logical and linear. In terms of thought content, there was no paranoia or delusions. She denied suicidal or homicidal



ideation. No perceptual disturbances were noted. Her cognition was grossly intact. Her insight and judgment were also intact.

#### PERSONAL HISTORY:

The patient has a history of life trauma, anxiety, eating disorders, and emotion dysregulation. Long-term issues with a very chaotic life plagued by periods of severe depression, alternating other times with an agitated “high” in which she shows poor judgment. These episodes last from weeks to months. She also shows a pattern of intense and unstable relationships. The patient entered State custody at the age of 15 and lived in a juvenile group home, followed by foster care. At this time, she started developing symptoms of first anorexia and later bulimia, substance abuse and sexual promiscuity. The patient was also involved in the sale and distribution of illicit drugs for a period of approximately 7 years. She denies any self-harm or suicidal attempts.

#### DIAGNOSES:

Anorexia and Bulimia Nervosa with fluctuating evolution

Polysubstance Abuse Disorder in remission

Generalized Anxiety Disorder

R/O Bipolar Disorder II (with possible rapid-cycling); and/or

R/O Borderline Personality Disorder

#### TREATMENT PLAN:

1. I would recommend that the patient be treated for her anxiety, eating disorder, and mood difficulties. In terms of a psychopharmacological approach to treatment: it is important to take into consideration the patient’s poor response to antidepressants in the past, with possible activation of manic and mixed episodes. I am cautious about

using an antidepressant with this patient. Alternatively, she may respond to a mood stabilizer, such as Lithium, Divalproex, or Lamotrigine. Given that she has significant body-image and weight gain concerns, Lamotrigine might be the best option for this particular case. Lamotrigine can be started at 12.5–25 mg per day and can go up to 200 mg per day, not increasing faster than by 25 mg every 2 weeks.

2. The patient would also benefit from psychotherapy addressing her mood, anxiety and eating disorder concerns. I also recommend a follow-up to review her state and treatment.

### ***Integrity and Existential Therapy***

The integrity model of psychotherapy (Lander & Nahon, 2005) is braided into each and every page of *Blondie*. It is an existential approach to mental health treatment that works to empower an individual for agency and self-help through a process of unearthing authenticity. Mental health challenges are seen to be driven and/or exacerbated by a misalignment between values and behaviours which leads to self-mis-conception. Here, the degree of distress and symptomatology reflects an individual's violation of their personal value system by blindly adhering to social proscriptions (Lander & Nahon, 2005; Mowrer, 1966). The story is a dialogic between the protagonist and her psychiatrist, which works to illuminate and analyze Blondie's inauthentic and often repugnant past. Blondie is caught in a life of chaos and self-destruction, wearing a villainous mask that she has constructed to successfully navigate her world. This persona houses her many maladaptations and feeds the severity of her mental illnesses.

The integrity model stresses the importance of the intersection between client and therapist—the between relationship of 'I-Thou' outlined by Martin Buber (Lander & Nahon, 2005). This shared space must be authentic for illumination, affirmation, change, and growth of

those seeking treatment. This is most importantly found in the relationship between the story of *Blondie* and its interlocutors. The story here acts as the therapist or guide which, according to the integrity model, requires confession, genuineness, and a secure sense of self that has emerged from one's own existential journey. In an authentic relationship, the between is the location of growth, connectivity, and discovery, and it is the challenge of the therapist (and in this case, the story's protagonist) to behave with integrity and authenticity herself, acknowledging that she, too is on the road to recovery. She must be truly able to speak with the voice of "walking the talk" (Lander & Nahon, 2000, p. 38). *Blondie* achieves this through honesty, disclosure, and confession—Elizabeth owns her past, her distance travelled, and finally embodies the model herself to a significant extent. In the absence of this, the chances of the therapy being of benefit are considerably diminished. "There has to be a response to the therapy that contains a recognition of its meaning on a "felt" rather than an intellectual level" (Lander & Nahon, 2005, pp. 168–169).

The integrity model is also exemplified by the client–therapist relationship between *Blondie* and Garlick. Trust between them is built through the exchange of emotion, honesty, and confession. Garlick models a healthy expression of emotion to help *Blondie* learn to express hers. Garlick does this first by showing anger toward *Blondie*'s abusers.

"Are you angry?" I said. She looked angry.

"Yeah, I am. I'm fucking pissed off. You were in this man's care and he violated you in the worst possible way. And Esha, he's another one. We need to address this."

*Garlick swore. What the fuck?*

She tapped her finger on her desk and took a breath.

"Did I do something?"

“No, I’m angry at what happened to you! Aren’t you?”

“I don’t know.” I searched the stained carpet. “I guess not.” *That’s cause you’re empty.*

The words rolled inside of me. *You’re not a real person.* “I try not to think about it,” I said.

“He’s a piece of shit,” she said. “They both are.” Her eyes burned into me and I began to believe her.

Garlick goes on to show great sadness and bonds with Blondie over a shared loss. Garlick confesses that her brother died in much the same way as Blondie’s and it is the first time she witnesses a healthy expression of pain .

Garlick’s eyes were wet, mine weren’t, and I searched her face for something to say.

“Are you OK?”

“I’m sorry,” she said, shaking her head, like she was trying to erase the moment. She forced a smile and reached for the Kleenex box. “It’s just. . . .” Garlick took a tissue and looked to the ceiling for her words. I don’t think she wanted to say anything but it was too late now. “I lost a brother in much the same way.” Tears fell from the sides of her eyes and she tried to catch them.

*I should be crying. That’s normal. I’m not normal.*

“I’m sorry,” she said again. It’s inappropriate.”

“It’s OK,” I softened. “When did it happen?”

She hesitated. “A very long time ago.” She smiled through her tears. “I think about him all the time, but every so often, you know, it all rushes back.”

I lowered my eyes and sat back in my chair. “That’s probably healthy,” I said and looked for her response.

This marks the beginning of their I-thou relationship which is further developed by the drawing of therapeutic boundaries.

“It’s a nice gesture. I do have to say, however, that I can’t accept gifts from patients.”

“It’s a coffee.” I blew on mine and took another sip.

“I know, but it’s still considered a gift.”

I raised a brow. “I don’t think you’re supposed to cry in front of patients, either, but you did that.”

Garlick exhaled and folded her hands on her desk. “Would it be better if I showed emotion?”

“I don’t know, maybe.”

“Why is that?”

“Well, if I wanted to talk to a wall, I could do that at home.”

She nodded. “And what about you?”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you think it would be better if you showed emotion?”

*Check fucking mate.* “It’s not that easy.”

“No, it’s not.” She shifted in her seat. “You know Elizabeth, I see a lot of myself in you.”

“Doubt that.” A frog was forming and I swallowed it.

“Well, you don’t know what you don’t know,” she said with the kindest eyes. She waited. “Just know that it *is* possible to create a better life.”

It is insinuated that Garlick has fought her own demons, further establishing trust, responsibility, and respect. Blondie begins to move past her predominant I-It orientation and become present within their shared space.

. . . I was beginning to like her. I looked around the still office and there I was. Every inch of it sat quiet, watching, listening. Waiting, but nothing came. It was just me and her, and there we were. A wave crashed through me.

Blondie feels Garlick is walking alongside her on her path to healing, which is integral to the integrity therapy process.

I spiralled through the earth for weeks after that, coming up for the odd breath of air while Garlick tinkered around with my insides. We pulled them apart, and emotions poured, and it hurt like hell. We polished each piece before setting it back in its rightful place and she was right there with me. She stayed, and I resurfaced, and for the very first time, I was at peace.

### ***Narrative Therapy***

Narrative therapy is in many ways existential, aiding in the process of individuation by allowing interlocutors to author their own authentic tale, and in this case, through the engagement with another's. Mental health problems are seen as arising from one's damaging personal narratives, resting on the premise that we are what we tell ourselves. These life stories need to be re-written in order to develop fresh perspectives and overall mental health. As "we write ourselves as we read" (Dunlop, 1999, p. 22), *Blondie* has created a space where readers can see themselves through the many struggles of the story's characters and begin the re-authoring of their own tales. The story allows readers to view their problems as an external examiner, or as audience members, and to see their own stories through the eyes of another (Epston, 1992; White et al., 1990). Here, the reader is opened to understanding themselves as a by-product of understanding Blondie, Elizabeth, and other supporting characters.

## ***Bibliotherapy***

Bibliotherapy maintains that the reading of fiction itself is therapeutic (Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 2019). People identify with literary characters similar to themselves—or who they think they could be. *Blondie* is a rendition of this premise as readers have been offered a wide range of identifiable symptoms and situations, and can contribute as a co-creator and integral actor in the story's intellectual and emotional unfolding.

Bibliotherapy can be tailored to a specific population, problem or set of problems. *Blondie* is a story of recovery, and while it can be relatable and impactful for anyone, it is geared toward Millennials, Generation Zs, and those either contemplating or currently embarking on their own wellness journeys. *Blondie* works to engage readers in active participation, allowing them to gain a stronger sense of personal responsibility through the main character's resilience and tenacity. The story is disturbing and grotesque at times and does not hold back when exploring the realities of severe mental illness. This is done with the intention of drawing the reader in and reducing feelings of isolation.

## **Fictionalization**

*Blondie* is a story of fictional truths. It has been developed at the intersections of personal, professional, and educational experience and understanding. Character personalities and symptomatology, as well as locations and times are either entirely fictional, or constructed from fictionalized composites.

## ***Story***

Mental illness and diagnoses found in the story have been selected carefully. Those challenges belonging to the main character have been constructed to reach a broad audience, with borderline personality and bipolar disorders encompassing a near inclusive range of clinical

symptoms. Most notably, these include substance abuse, impulsivity and reckless behaviour, emotion dysregulation, disordered eating, mania, hallucinations and delusions, depression, and anxiety disorders, as well as their contributing factors such as lifetime trauma, neglect, and sexual, physical, and emotional abuse (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). These diagnostic symptoms are laced into every interaction and situation in the story to give readers context for how criteria from the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) can manifest in real-world settings. Symptoms and contexts are pieced together thoughtfully, and constructed from a practitioner positionality.

### ***Characters***

The characters in *Blondie* are entirely made up. It is a point-of-view story, where supporting characters and their personalities are scarcely delved into, yet are consistent. This purposely leaves them open to reader imagination and interpretation. Much of the information given about characters is focused on symptoms outlined in the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Many of the story's characters have mental illnesses themselves, which can be understood as a typical scenario for those existing in such a reckless world.

### ***Time, Setting, and Location***

A considerable amount of research has gone into creating entirely fictional, yet believable settings and timelines. For example, the settings and locations chosen for drug cultivation (i.e., White Salmon, Washington), distribution, transportation and their specific pathways (i.e., Narino Colombia, the Mexican West Coast, Texas, and Florida), and transport truck hauls (i.e., oranges and mangoes), have been entirely constructed to be believable and realistic. Timelines have also been thoughtfully laid out in a sequential fashion, such as real-life events



like 9/11, the stock market crash of 2008, and the release of the movie *Igor* (Leondis & McKenna, 2008), and are all fictional yet accurate in terms of time and place.

*Blondie* is a glimpse into an unsavoury world with equally unsavoury characters and is set in a context that many people have never experienced themselves. This has been done purposefully as a way to hold reader attention and to draw them into continual discovery. The story is action-packed, disruptive, tireless and relentless. This is intentional as it is a way to appeal to younger generations who, perhaps as a result of modern technologies, may not have the attention span for a comparatively dry, or slow-paced story arc.

## Limitations

This arts-based inquiry was designed to target a Western population and may not be generalizable to those with differing cultural norms. It is geared toward Western ideals of individualism, and historical mythological structures and their Judeo-Christian underpinnings. However, this is appropriate given that the current mental health crisis is predominantly a Western phenomenon.

The general disposition of the study's target demographic, including Millennials and Generation Zs, could pose another potential limitation. Who reads anymore, anyway? Social media, Netflix, YouTube, TikTok, and the like, offer a steady stream of instantly gratifying entertainment. Near-endless options have the capacity to erode attention span, and companies often compete by appealing to the most primitive of human brain regions (i.e., the dopamine hit). *Blondie* is written as a fast-paced, action-packed point-of-view story with twists and turns and disturbing scenarios. This has been done with the intention to hold reader attention and unfold more like a movie than a novel to combat these realities. However, it remains a considerable challenge to encourage young Westerners to pick up a novel in the first place. My aim is to publish the novel publicly and market on social media platforms in an attempt to mitigate this.

Rigour is often called into question concerning a new wave of arts-based inquiries. The research novel in particular is a scarcely-chartered methodological approach. This study works to contribute to an emerging and growing body of literature examining the effectiveness of such methodologies for accessible knowledge mobilization, research and praxis.

Members of the academic community, and others could very well see this work as distasteful, and not “get it.” It is a work of art, after all, and heavily relies on subjective interpretations of its value. Personal preference for what one finds entertaining and/or useful will

be a major factor for determining this work's utility both in and out of academe. Generational and phenomenological factors, and those relating to stature and the experiences of those belonging to various communities of practice are also heavily weighted when determining utility.

*Blondie* covers a range of symptomatology associated with the realities of those suffering with mental health challenges which could be disturbing or offensive for some. The raw and honest exploration of drug and alcohol abuse, rape, and eating disorders, for example, could be potentially triggering. However, I feel that this is offset by the therapeutic value of such raw honesty, and its capacity to reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness. *Blondie*, the novel, is in fact a story of perseverance, resilience, and recovery from such hardships and this is meant to be the story's ultimate "take-home" message. I believe that with great honesty, comes great value.

## Conclusion

Is a good story enough to be educational research? Not quite, but it is my belief that a story *must* be good to be educational research. For a work of fiction to be transformational for readers and to help mobilize knowledge, it must be engaging, relatable, and immersive. *Blondie* explores the complexities of mental health through story, intending to open a shared, authentic space for its interlocutors, allowing for illumination, affirmation, change, self-discovery and actualization.

This shared space is replicated across the philosophical, theoretical, and therapeutic underpinnings of this investigation (i.e., existentialism, mythology, narrative ontology, I–Thou relations, integrity therapy, narrative therapy, and bibliotherapy). Importantly, it is found between (Buber, 1970) the reader and the text, Blondie and her environment, Blondie and Dr. Garlick, and Elizabeth and her world. The story follows Blondie’s process of becoming, from an I–It to an I–Thou relationship with herself, her surroundings and others—it is her process of becoming Elizabeth, an authentic, self-actualized, and whole individual. This is also represented by her integration with her Shadow (Jung, 1939, 1946), signifying her hero status, individuation, and therefore mental well-being.

Blondie’s act of becoming, from I–It to I–Thou, Villain to Hero, dark to light, and Blondie to Elizabeth, provides an example of this process where interlocutors can learn to engage with the text from a meaningful I–Thou relation orientation, creating an authentic space for positive growth and change.

*Blondie*, the novel, has been written for wide consumption and intends to be published publicly. Will the story be a transformational experience for its readers? Does it provide an example of how a work of fiction might be written to illuminate the complex layers of mental

illness and provide an example of one's successful navigation toward self-discovery, authenticity, and mental health? Perhaps, like the story itself, that is open to interpretation.

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