

COLLECTED FICTION WORKS

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Author's Note

Hello! This is a collection of fiction pieces, some flash and some short stories, that I've written through the past couple years. Most were written for workshop, so I'm hoping they're in good shape after editing. My intention with this portfolio is to give a snapshot into my range and abilities as a writer. Though my aspirations center around writing and publishing novels, I love fiction in all its forms and genres. Hopefully my potential future readers can get to know my work through this collection and get excited for more in the future.

If you made it this far, thank you so much! And happy reading!

2026

Your Second Time Running Away From Home

You're an evolved creature now, so you don't leave a note. You wait until night has dampened everything in murky indigo, turn off your location, and just run. Out the front door, no need for dramatics, and down the street, your heart keeping time to the ache of asphalt beneath your feet. Unlike last time, you don't hesitate to painstakingly plan your route. You need to get as far as possible before dawn; it doesn't matter which way you go.

Despite the urgency, you have a bit more room to breathe, to drink it all in. The neon lights of the nearby strip mall and the smokey smell of the gas station on the corner. You're glad you don't have a car yet because \$3.20 a gallon would be hard to manage. Still, you think of how much farther you could go. You enjoy the gentle coolness of the night, the way the wind kisses your forehead more softly than your parents ever did. You revel in your fiery anger towards them. It's something to keep you warm.

You don't hate them, you think. But they're the cuckoo bird always trying to rule over your nest, only they didn't expect you to be hatched when they got there. A flapping thing with wings, clumsy but much harder to push out than a plain old egg.

The last time you ran, they yelled at you before they asked why. You never answered because you knew they wouldn't believe you. Cuckoos never think a baby bird might want to leave the nest of their own accord. That's why they're so determined to shove them away before they learn to fight back.

The air smells like fresh cut grass and the stuffy feeling before it rains, and it reminds you a bit of being a little kid. Of scraping a broken stick of chalk down your driveway as your mother warns you not to go too far. Fuzzy dandelions push their yellow heads out from the damp earth to

watch you as you drag your feet on the sidewalks, purposely avoiding the cracks. It will be spring soon, a time for new beginnings. So why does none of this feel new?

Eventually, a park sign steps out of the darkness to greet you. You shrug at the faded letters and turn down the gravel path that snakes beneath the oak trees. In the distance, you can make out the faint gleam of playground equipment that used to burn the backs of your legs in the summers. You pass by the splintered bench your mother would sit on as you played, talking to the other parents. But no matter how engrossing the conversation, she always kept one eye turned sharply towards you.

Gnats throw themselves against your cheeks, and the back of your neck grows sticky from the humidity. The sky brightens, almost imperceptibly. You wish you were small again. Less threatening.

At last, your legs grow tired, and you settle beneath the tree you always tried to climb as a kid. Your father used to stand nearby as your feet slipped off the trunk and the rough bark scuffed up your palms. He laughed and told you it was impossible. You were too little. The tree was too tall. But you wanted to be there among the birds and you wanted to prove him wrong, so you kept trying anyway.

There's no point in moving anymore, so you stare up at the sky. Gray crashes into pink, holding mourning dove feathers in between them. The cops will find you, and you'll let it happen. Remember, this is your second time around. So you know that come morning you'll want a cold shower. You'll want a warm slice of toast and a grapefruit with honey. You'll want to get to school on time so you don't have to make up that calculus test. And you also know that you'll start wondering. What if you never get to hug your mom again? What if you never get to

tell your dad you love him? You don't like how heavy wondering makes you feel, and so you'll go home. You always do.

As the sun finally breaks through the mourning dove sky, white and clean, a bird chips overhead. Something falls into the grass beside you. An egg, small and chalky. You look up to the mother bird perched on a gnarled branch, but she cocks her head to the side and then flies away.

You pick it up and cradle it in your hands for a moment. Then, you inhale deeply as you crush it between your fingers. Yolk runs over your palm, liquid and malleable. Not yet formed enough to care. You envy it just a little. For being so simple. For never learning to fly.

2025

Honeycomb

A month after Sharon's son died, her house became infested with bees.

She found them in the bathroom, the same place where she'd found Beckett's body. The hive was small at first, nestled in the corner where the bottom of the tub met the wall and floor. The golden exterior glinted at her every time she walked in to brush her teeth or wash her face, and the little holes in the honeycomb stared at her like dark eyes. She never saw any actual bees, so she decided to leave it for the time being.

But as the days passed, the hive grew. It climbed up the wall, still clinging to the corner, and extended tentative fingers out across the floor. Honey spilled from the hive and flowed languidly in the grout between tiles. Soon after the honey came the bees. Small, fuzzy things that crawled over the hive's surface, buzzing loudly. They didn't fly yet. Not even when Sharon stepped over them to use the shower. They simply watched with their beady eyes and yellow striped bodies and legs sticky with honey.

Sharon asked her neighbor about them. He'd removed a beehive from his own yard the year prior.

"How do you figure they got inside?" she questioned. "There aren't any windows or cracks in there."

The man shrugged. "I don't know. And the bathroom is an odd place for bees to settle. You'd think all the movement in there would scare them off."

"Maybe I should call pest control."

"I wouldn't bother just yet," he told her. "Get a can of bug spray and see if you can get rid of them yourself."

So that's what Sharon did. She bought a two pack of bug spray from the hardware store and crept into the bathroom, holding it out from her body so the bees couldn't attack. She sprayed until the can was empty and then switched to the other one. The entire bathroom smelled of chemicals and she couldn't stop coughing.

The bees started to fly.

They buzzed around her head, unfazed by the fumes. She tried to swat them away, but they evaded her reach. By the next day, it seemed like the bees had multiplied rather than died. The hive expanded towards the base of the toilet. Sharon called pest control.

#

One of Sharon's most vivid memories of Beckett as a toddler involved bees. They'd gone to the park where Beckett followed around several kids from his preschool like a baby duck. The kids gathered around something in the grass. Sharon thought nothing of it at first. She figured they'd found a flower or shiny rock that would hold their attention for a few short seconds before they moved on. But then Beckett screamed.

She ran over to him as the kids broke away, yelping in fear, and scattered themselves around the park. Bees buzzed around after them, flying out from the holes in the ground.

Beckett held his arm up, tears streaming down his red cheeks, to show a bump where he'd been stung.

"What were you thinking?" Sharon grabbed him by the other arm, dragging him away from the nest before he could be stung again. "You should know better than to mess with bees."

"I didn't know!" Beckett sobbed. Sharon sighed, fishing around her purse for ointment and a bandaid to put on the wound. "The others... they told me..."

"Told you to what?" Sharon snapped.

Beckett sniffled as he choked out. “They told me to touch it.”

“And why would you listen to them?” Sharon dabbed the antibacterial ointment on the small red patch forming by her son’s wrist.

“I listen to Mommy.”

“Yes, but Mommy knows what’s best for you.” She smoothed the bandage over the sting and pulled the boy into a hug. “Okay? You need to be careful with your friends. They’re just kids, they don’t know as much as I do. Understand?”

“Okay.” Beckett nodded, wiping away tears.

And he did listen. Whether at the park or home he’d look to her with sparkling eyes, always awaiting approval or instruction. Safe, well-behaved, the perfect child.

Sometimes, Sharon wondered where it all went wrong.

#

“It’s all taken care of, ma’am,” the pest control man told her as he exited the bathroom, shutting the door tight behind him. He lifted up the trash bag he’d moved the hive to. “No more bees.”

Sharon thanked him and gave him his money, but she didn’t think to check the bathroom until that night. When she opened the door, the bees weren’t gone at all. In fact, the hive had grown. Part of it hooked over the side of the tub and the rest went halfway up the wall. Bees speckled every surface. The toilet lid, the sink counter, the mirror. She called the pest control company to complain, but they assured her that a hive had been removed.

“It must be a new one,” they said.

“It couldn’t have gotten that big in just a day!” she insisted, but they had already hung up.

She stormed to the bathroom, a pitcher of cold water in hand. If the bug spray didn't work, maybe she could drown them. It might not kill them, but at the very least, she hoped that none of the bees wanted to stay in a waterlogged hive.

Sharon dumped the first pitcher over the bees, watching pieces of honeycomb chip off under the water's force. The bees flew away, their buzzing fast and high pitched. Sharon filled the pitcher in the sink and poured it. Again and again and again.

After the sixth pitcher, a sharp sting spread across the back of her hand. She dropped the pitcher, the plastic crashing loudly against the tile floor. The pain returned again, this time on her wrist. Then her forearm, the crook of her elbow, her shoulder. When she looked down, she found a bee, wiggling desperately to dislodge itself from her skin. It succeeded, tearing out its stinger and falling dead to the ground. Sharon ran from the bathroom, slamming the door behind her.

Stingers were lodged in all five of the stings. Sharon carefully plucked them out with tweezers, wincing every time. After a benadryl and a little hydrocortisone cream, though, they barely hurt anymore.

How stupid, she thought, dying just to sting me a little. They're more hurt by it than I am.

#

The high school called Sharon early one morning, telling her she could come pick up Beckett's things. Apparently, the administration still had his father marked as the emergency contact, even though he'd moved states years ago, and took a while to reach her. They handed her a cardboard box, brimming with notebooks that had pages torn out and demented smears of black ink trailing across the ones that were still intact. Sharon remembered how Beckett used to draw as a kid, filling up similar spiral notebooks. It was the one hobby they shared, sitting out on the back patio in the sun. A pitcher of lemonade, dripping with condensation, between them as

Sharon filled in coloring pages of flowers and Beckett covered his paper with messy, vibrant crayon. The drawings in the box were nothing like the ones she remembered.

The secretary offered her condolences, which Sharon accepted, and the principal told her the school planned to do everything it could to prevent another tragedy in the future, which she ignored. Beckett's death was no tragedy, she told herself. It was a waste, and somehow, that felt even more tragic.

"The school mostly has resources for students," the principal said before Sharon left the office. "But I'm sure our counselors can recommend someone for you to talk to about this, if you'd like. I know child loss is a uniquely difficult struggle to face, especially in your circumstances."

Sharon's shoulders tensed, her fingernails digging into the cardboard box. "What circumstances? Do you think I'm somehow worse off than any other parent because I'm alone?"

The principal furrowed his brow and hastily moved to correct himself. "No, no, I didn't mean anything about your relationships. I just mean that... well, a lot of parents blame themselves when their children commit suicide, so it's—"

"Well, I don't," Sharon snapped, squeezing the box so hard that one corner crumpled inward. "And I'm perfectly fine handling my grief on my own, just like I've always handled Beckett on my own. Thank you very much."

She turned and stormed out of the office before the principal could say anything else.

As she walked back towards the exit, past the students hurrying to their next classes, she noticed a set of eyes on her. A boy, just about Beckett's age, with piercings sticking out of his face and hair dyed a pitch black. He was glaring.

Sharon recognized him as one of Beckett's friends, though it'd been a long time since she allowed her son to bring any such people into their home. They were bad influences. The kind of kids who thought "fucking" could be used as an adjective and disrespecting their elders was "equality". Who dyed their hair in cramped bathrooms and littered their ears with piercings. Who were too quiet when she asked them to speak up and too loud when she asked them not to. They encouraged Beckett to lash out, to spend hours at a time away from home, to break the rules he'd happily followed since he was a child.

They must have been the reason he died, when she really thought about it. They were the ones who turned him against her, the only person who'd always been there for him. They convinced him that every inconvenience, every little thing he disliked in his life, was some great struggle. They made him miserable. If the school really wanted a tragedy to fix, they would deal with kids like that.

"Can I help you with something?" she said to the boy, plastering on a smile. His glare only deepened. "It's rude to stare, you know."

"You don't look sad at all."

"Pardon?"

"Do you even care?" he snapped. "Or are you glad to be rid of him?"

Sharon gasped. "You shouldn't throw around accusations like that."

"It's not an accusation. I was *asking*." The boy stood up straighter, gaining a hint of confidence, of defiance, that Sharon didn't like. It threatened her, an incessant buzzing, like those tiny bee wings beating in her ears. She wanted to crush them underfoot. "He hated you, you know. It's all your fault."

Before Sharon could reprimand him, the boy snatched the first few notebooks out of the box and took off down the hallway. He disappeared into the crowd. Sharon considered yelling, trying to get some student or teacher to intervene, but she refrained. She didn't want those books anyway. She had her baby albums and childhood scrapbooks, much better representations of Beckett than the hate that consumed him at the end.

The boy was right, she conceded. Beckett had hated her. But in no world would she ever believe it was her fault.

#

It was towards the end of Beckett's middle school years that Sharon first noticed something wrong with her son. He'd come home with a math test, a big red B- marked at the top.

"That's unlike you," she said. "Is everything okay? Do you need extra help?"

"It's just a B, Mom." Beckett rolled his eyes. "It's a good grade."

"Yes, but this has never happened before," she pressed, frowning at the paper in her hand.

"Are you sure you've been studying enough? You've been out with your friends a lot lately."

"A couple times a week isn't a lot." Beckett snatched the test from her, an unusual bite to the movement. "What? Am I not allowed to have fun?"

"Well, if your grades suffer then-"

"My friends have been *helping* me study!"

"As if!" Sharon scoffed. She didn't like the sharpness in her son's voice, the way he angled away from her when he talked. Defiant. "I've seen the people you hang out with. Do they even go to class?"

“You’ve never even talked to them,” Beckett protested, indignant on his friends’ behalf. She really didn’t like that. How insistently he defended them over listening to his own mother. “I’ll be fine, Mom. It’s just one test. I promise I’ll do better.”

“I don’t want promises, I want results,” she insisted. “You can’t see them until you do better on the next test.”

“That’s not fair!”

“You need to prioritize your studies.” Sharon stood up. Beckett was growing faster than ever, but she still had some height over him. Enough to remind him who was the child and who was the parent. “Do you want to end up like your mom, huh? Unable to go to college? If I hadn’t met your dad, I would’ve ended up working minimum wage my whole life. Do you want that?”

Beckett looked at his feet, mumbling. “No.”

“Then you’ll do as I say.” She walked away from him, to the kitchen to prepare dinner. “It’s only temporary. If you get an A on the next one, you can see your friends as much as you want.”

Beckett did as she said, locking himself in his room on weeknights with piles of textbooks and practice tests. But the next test he brought back was even worse.

“I really tried, I swear,” Beckett insisted. He refused to look her in the eyes as he handed the paper over, his voice shaking with a shame that told Sharon he meant it.

She pressed her lips together into a grim line and placed the test face down on the counter. “As long as you keep studying, I’m sure you’ll do better on the next one.”

But he didn’t. His grades kept getting worse. He would cry to her on some nights, nights when he still wanted her guidance, and she urged him to keep working. All her encouragement only seemed to drain his motivation further. Sharon remembered walking into his room late one

night when he was supposed to be studying. When she cracked open the door, though, Beckett was just lying on his bed, staring blankly at the ceiling. She wanted to scold him for slacking off, but something kept her on the other side of the door that night.

She tried talking to him and handpicked a therapist that he quit after a month. Despite it all, he stopped interacting with her and started sneaking around instead. He became the complete opposite of the boy she'd raised.

Why hadn't anything worked? All she'd ever done was what was best for him, and somehow that wasn't enough.

#

The problem with the bees continued to grow worse. Sharon couldn't enter the bathroom without suffering several stings to her arms, neck, any patch of bare skin. She started going to the gym to use their showers and drinking less water to avoid needing the restroom. Each time she got stung, a small red bump formed as the bee's spiteful corpse fell to the ground. As soon as she tried to show someone the stings, they disappeared.

"It's horrible!" she complained to her neighborhood group, baring her arms for them. "Seriously, they're all over."

The women leaned over her, inspecting her pale skin. And always they said, "but I can't see anything."

"Is everything alright?" one woman asked, a neighbor from across the street that used to watch Beckett from time to time when he was little. "I'm starting to worry. Maybe you should talk to someone, a professional."

"I'm not crazy. This isn't because of Beckett," Sharon insisted. "There really are bees."

Even after they disappeared, the spots remained painful. A sharp jab everytime she moved the wrong way or her shirt brushed too harshly against her arm. They itched at night and burned in the early mornings.

After several days, the stinging became so painful that she grew desperate. She needed someone, anyone, to get the hive out of the house. And so she dialed a number that had been collecting dust in her contacts for over three years.

The voice that answered was tired and laced with annoyance before Sharon even spoke.

“What?”

“Remember when we first bought the house and the basement was infested with spiders.” Sharon went straight to the point, her voice monotone. She didn’t want to give her ex-husband the chance to talk about anything except what she’d called for. To eradicate the bees. “How did you get rid of them?”

“Sharon, what the hell are you talking about?”

“I’m asking how to get rid of bugs. I don’t know about these things. You always did that.”

“Call pest control. God, why are you bothering me for this?”

“I already called them.” Sharon tightened her grip on the phone, knuckles turning white. “They didn’t do anything. I just need you to tell me how to get rid of these bees, Keane. Why can’t you do this one thing?”

“Why should I?” Keane hissed. The phone static rendered his voice rougher, sharper around the edges. Sharon didn’t like the way it stung. “Our son *died*, Sharon. He killed himself. And you haven’t reached out to me once since then. What makes you think I’m going to help you now?”

“I had no reason to reach out,” Sharon snapped back. “You abandoned us, abandoned Beckett. He only started acting the way he did after *you* left.”

Keane scoffed. “Probably because that was his wake up call. He realized you were so awful that your own husband had to run away.”

“Don’t you dare blame this on me! You should've stepped up like a mature adult and co-parented, at least.”

“Look, I regret not taking Beckett with me, but I knew I’d never win custody. And I also knew that if I stayed nearby and agreed to parent Beckett with you, then I’d never get away from your control.” Keane spat each word like a bullet. Sharon dug her fingernails into her palm. “Clearly, Beckett knew that too. Because he thought he had to kill himself to escape you.”

Sharon hung up and slammed her phone down so hard that a thin crack spiderwebbed across the screen. Her skin burned where it had been stung, competing with the fire in her chest, the tightness that pulled on her ribs. If she hadn’t been in so much pain, she would have run to the bathroom, just to have something to tear apart.

Keane and that boy from the school were wrong, she reminded herself over and over again. She did care. But she was an adult with a job, chores to take care of, errands to run, all kinds of things to do. She couldn’t afford to let her grief consume her like a brooding high school kid, just like she hadn’t let her hurt or anger keep her from taking care of Beckett. *She* had stood up and taken responsibility. *She* had done everything she could for him. They didn’t understand.

Besides, she’d started mourning Beckett long before he died, even as she desperately tried to fix him. After his father left and he started arguing at every turn, she tried to be patient, only for him to say she never listened to him. In one heated argument, he’d screamed that it was her fault Keane left. Even back then, everyone was always blaming her. When he started

spending too much time with his rebellious friends, she tried to put him in activities to set him on the right path, soccer and then volunteer work and then the academic team, only for him to say she never supported what *he* wanted to do. When she caught him sneaking out his bedroom window one night during sophomore year, she gave him an ultimatum: apply for a job so he could at least learn some responsibility or stop hanging out with that friend group. Sharon thought it was a fair punishment, one that would benefit him in the long term. But, of course, Beckett found a way to complain about that, too. And when none of her attempts worked, she started to mourn. To grieve the sweet boy who used to follow her around the house like a baby duck, who only ever wanted to sit next to her in restaurants, who looked to her for guidance whenever he needed to do something.

Of course she cared, she told herself every day. But that boy from the school needed to understand; she hadn't been as broken over Beckett's death because he'd already been dying for so long before.

Most nights, she fell asleep sobbing to old pictures of him, back when he was still missing teeth or even those wary middle school days when he first started to change. Sometimes, very rarely, her sadness overtook her anger and she'd wish he could come back, even if he was no longer the son she knew. On days like that, the bees didn't sting.

#

As the days wore into weeks, Sharon grew frustrated. Her entire body hurt, covered from head to toe in invisible bee stings. The bathroom floor was littered with black and yellow corpses that crunched underfoot. She cursed them as she trampled their bodies.

"I won't let you win!" she yelled at them, her voice echoing off the tiles. "I may be in pain, but you're all dead! Who has it worse?"

The hive expanded until it overtook the entire bathtub. Golden honey oozed out of it, making the floors disgustingly sticky. Sharon called several different pest control companies. All of them claimed to remove the hive only for it to appear again the very next day. She dreaded each time she had to use the bathroom. Even if she didn't get stung, the honey and the crawling tendrils of hive made walking in there a nightmare.

One morning, Sharon made herself tea only to find the pantry empty of honey. She considered running out to the store when she remembered the bees. By that point, she could hear the buzzing through the ceiling. It penetrated every wall, haunting her as she tried to sleep at night. If they were going to invade her house, surely she could use them to her benefit.

She crept carefully into the bathroom, moving as slow as possible to avoid scaring the bees. A few still dug their stingers into her skin, but she was used to the pain. She held out a tupperware container and tried to dislodge a piece of honeycomb from the wall. But the moment her fingers touched the surface, a swarm of bees converged on her hand. They stung her all at the once, the pain red-hot and blinding. She jerked her arm away, waving it wildly and screaming as she fled the bathroom. She washed the bees off in the kitchen sink, watching their soggy bodies circle down the drain as she nursed her sore hand.

They were horrible creatures, taunting her with their petty tricks. If they wouldn't even give her a bit of their honey, then they needed to go. It was her house, her rules, and she decided there would be no more bees.

#

Sharon knew that smoke sedated bees, so she stormed the living room with a little tin bucket and started filling it with old papers from her junk drawer. Spam mail, recipes, shopping lists, and the like. Her hand hesitated over the note Beckett had left for her. She certainly would

have liked to burn it. Just one piece of lined paper to deliver his last words and he'd wasted it throwing sharp insults at her. She'd been shocked, but in her grief gave him the benefit of the doubt. His distress must have caused him to say such cruel and ungrateful things, she told herself, or perhaps the influence of his vulgar friends. No son of hers would write a letter like that if he were in his right mind.

In the end, she left the letter in the drawer and set the tin with the other papers in the bathroom. She lit a corner of a recipe and then closed the door, waiting for the room to fill with smoke.

When she saw the thin gray wisps spiraling out from beneath the door, it was time. She burst into the bathroom, hurriedly tearing down large sections of the hive and tossing them in a black trash bag. She tore and tore until nothing was left but some waxy residue, the spilled honey, and the corpses of all the bees that had stung her. She took the trash bag to the backyard and buried it deep beneath the dirt.

That night, she showered without interruption and brushed her teeth gleefully in the sink. She left the cleaning for tomorrow. When she went to sleep, she dreamed of Beckett.

He sat in the corner of the bathroom, where the hive first appeared, with his knees pulled up to his chest. He just glared at her when she walked in, saying nothing. The honey and dead bees were on the ground. Beckett reached down to scoop up a handful of the bees, holding them close to his chest with tears welling in his eyes.

“You don’t need to have sympathy for those wretched things,” Sharon scolded. “Put them down and come talk to your mother. It’s been so long since you’ve seen me and this is how you act?”

Beckett said nothing. He just kept looking at the bees, silently crying. Sharon woke up in a bad mood. Her anger turned to pure rage when she walked into the bathroom to find the hive fully returned. No, not just fully returned, but bigger than ever.

The toilet and sink were both unusable, the walls brought to life from floor to ceiling with bees. They attacked her immediately. She swatted at them desperately, screaming.

“You stupid, petty creatures! What’s the point of all this? Of dying just to hurt me? Do you really hate me that much?” She slammed her hand hard against the wall and heard something crack in her wrist, but at least she managed to crush some of the bees. “I’ve let you stay here all this time! You owe me!”

But the bees didn’t stop until they forced her out of the bathroom. She stormed down to the kitchen to find a piece of paper laid out on the counter. Beckett’s note. The same line jumped out at her immediately, as it always did.

Did you ever love me, Mom? Or just the idea of me in your head? The perfect extension of you? I wonder, will you miss me now? I hope this hurts you. I really do.

“Damnit, you’re all the same!” Sharon seized the note off the counter, tearing it into shreds. She threw the pieces with all her strength, watching them flutter pathetically to the floor. “Are you really so mad you’d die just to spite me? You stupid, *stupid* child!”

She stomped across the kitchen, pounding the remains of the note into the ground.

“I am the one who’s still here! What did you get out of this? Nothing! Nothing, nothing, nothing!” She grabbed a handful of the shreds, ripping them into smaller and smaller pieces. “I’ve never done anything but the best for you, but you hate me so much you’d rather die than stay here. Fine! Die, then!”

Dropping the shriveled remains of the letter, she rummaged through the kitchen, grabbing a butcher's knife. Then she rushed back to the bathroom, bursting through the door.

She hacked away at the hive, even as the bees clustered on her skin, stinging and stinging and stinging. She wanted to destroy everything, to crush it and cut it until nothing remained. Honey splattered across her hands, making it hard to hold the knife. Still, she kept attacking. The bees stung her in the neck, the torso, the face. She could barely see through the cloud of buzzing bodies, but she refused to stop until it was all gone. Not a trace of the bees' hideous empire, not a drop of their precious honey that they refused to share with her, not one of their spiteful stingers or hollow bodies sprawled across cold tile. They could hurt her as much as they wanted, but she would hurt them more.

Eventually, all the bees were dead, their stingers gone and no more pain left to give. Sharon continued destroying their hive until her body gave out. Until she fell to the tiles, among the jagged remains of hive and honeycomb, convulsing in pain. Every centimeter of her skin burned. The very blood in her veins felt like bee venom, stinging her from the inside out.

She hated those bees. Hated them more than anything. And she would die hating them.

#

Sharon's last conversation with Beckett had been more of a screaming match. It was a Friday afternoon, the same day his financial aid statement came in the mail. A financial aid statement for the next year, when he'd leave for college. When Sharon had a sneaking suspicion he would leave her forever.

Her stomach twisted over itself as she read the list of scholarships and the final amount. Just enough to be covered by the college fund Beckett's father left behind for him. The account that Sharon kept control over until he turned twenty one.

The parent forums Sharon frequented were filled with stories. Teenagers carted to hospitals with alcohol poisoning their first week on campus, instances of drug abuse, the overdose that left a student dead in his dorm bathroom two years earlier. What would happen to Beckett, so far away and without her guidance? Would he end up just another statistic?

“I want you to pay your own tuition,” she said when Beckett returned from school. He barely even acknowledged her as he took off his beat-up sneakers and hung his backpack by the front door, probably in a hurry to go lock himself in his room.

“With the money Dad gave me? I know. That was the plan from the start,” he replied, unconcerned. Nonchalant, almost. He acted like that often ever since his acceptance letter came in, like he couldn’t have cared less what she said to him anymore. In some ways, it was refreshing to finally be rid of his foul attitude, but it also meant he listened to her even less than before. As if, now that he had plans to move out, he no longer had to abide by her rules. “Just take it right out of the account.”

“No, I mean out of *your* bank account.”

Beckett froze, hovering in the doorway of the kitchen. Sharon stared back at him from her perch at the island, aid letter in hand.

“What do you mean *my* account?”

“The one you opened a few months ago. You should have enough in there for the first semester, at least.”

As soon as he turned eighteen, Beckett had opened up a personal bank account to deposit his paychecks. Before, Sharon had him cash the checks and keep the cash in a lockbox in the basement, but he’d taken the money without her permission and put it all in the bank. Over two years worth of money saved, all where she had no idea what he was doing with it.

“Yeah, I have enough, but I’d have to close out the account if I paid the tuition all on my own.” Beckett stayed in the doorway, one hand grabbing the wall as if to keep him upright. “I’d have no spending money. What if I need to buy something?”

“If I think you need it, I’ll send you money,” Sharon explained, neatly folding the aid letter and returning it to the envelope. “You should be focusing on your studies, anyway. You don’t need to go out spending money all the time.”

“It wouldn’t be all the time. But I’d like to be able to use it when I need it without going to all the trouble of asking for permission.” A little bite had wormed its way into Beckett’s voice. “Why can’t I just use the college fund?”

“Because I think you should have a stake in your education. This will teach you some responsibility.” Sharon stood, face to face with her son, who was now several inches taller than her. She didn’t like the moments when she realized his cheeks had started to shed their baby fat and his stature was no longer that of a fragile, gangly adolescent. She didn’t like looking at him and seeing a man because he wasn’t one. Not yet. “That way you won’t start slacking off or going to parties and getting in trouble.”

“What makes you think I’d do that to begin with?” Beckett laughed incredulously. “I’m not stupid, Mom.”

“No one said you are. But I think this will be good for you.”

“Good for me to lose access to the only money I have direct control over? Do you even hear what you’re saying?” Beckett removed his hand from the wall and balled it in a fist at his side. He stood up straighter. “The college fund is *mine*. Dad said so himself. I already have stake in this.”

“And it’s better to save it for later, when you need to do an internship or to help you get a car after you graduate. You have the other money, so you should use that first. The account from Dad makes more interest.”

“I don’t care! The point is I have no access to it,” Beckett snapped. “Why don’t you get that?”

“Do you think I’m going to withhold money from you? Do you think I’m so horrible that I’d stop you from buying the things you need? Is that it? Huh?” Sharon raised her voice, only slightly.

Beckett looked away, eyes trained on the ground, even as he bared his teeth in a snarl. “I’m just saying it’s easier to have my own account, okay?”

“And I’m saying it’s for your own good to be responsible for your own tuition. You can always open another account later.”

“With what money? I can’t work that much during the semester.” Beckett finally turned his eyes on her, dark and shining with malice. “And you keep purposely missing the point. I was already responsible for my own tuition. The college fund is *my money*.”

“I don’t like your tone,” Sharon hissed. “I’m done with this argument. I won’t pull anything out of Dad’s account. So either pay the tuition yourself or don’t go to college. I don’t care either way.”

“You can’t do that!” Beckett yelled, stepping forward. His shoulders hunched up, his muscles pulling taut, as if he wanted to move somehow but his body stalled. “That’s not fair.”

“Not fair? I’m trying to help you!” Sharon seized the envelope off the counter, throwing it down at Beckett’s feet. “Stop acting ungrateful.”

“See, you always say that,” Beckett scoffed. “You’re trying to ‘help’ me, but you never listen when I tell you what will actually help.”

“Oh, so I’m just a horrible mother then? I’m sorry you think I’m so awful.”

“God, I never said that! Why do you always put words in my mouth?”

“It seems like I always do a lot of things you don’t like. Would you rather I just wasn’t in your life at all? Cause that can be arranged.”

Beckett opened his mouth, but nothing came out. Tears welled in the corners of his eyes. Sharon wanted to laugh. He started the argument himself and now he wanted to cry over it? But before the tears could fall, he turned and stalked towards the front door.

“Get back here!” Sharon raced after him, clamping an hand firmly around his forearm.

“Don’t leave this house when we’re in the middle of something.”

“I’m done with this, Mom. I’m so done with your shit.” Beckett whipped around, roughly tearing her hand off of him.

“Don’t talk to me like that!”

“Like what? Like a human being who’s trying to be honest with you? Yeah, I guess you wouldn’t like that.”

“You can be honest without being rude.”

“Well, that seems to be the only thing that gets you to fucking listen!”

“Don’t you dare curse at me!” Sharon screamed. Beckett froze, eyes wide. The first tears fell down his cheeks. “I’m tired of you always making me the bad guy!”

Sharon didn’t remember everything that was said next. She remembered Beckett screaming, his voice raw and rough to the point of being incoherent. She remembered yelling

back. She said some things she wasn't proud of, but what else could she have done? He refused to listen.

At one point, Beckett punched the wall, not hard enough to break it but enough to tear open his knuckles. The blood smeared across the white paint. When she found him, later, the stain was still there.

In the end, she left to stay in a hotel for the weekend, to cool off. By the time she returned, Beckett was gone.

#

When Sharon woke in the morning, the bees were gone. There wasn't a trace of sticky honey on the tiles, not a stray chunk of honeycomb, not a single black and yellow body crawling over her skin. But she couldn't stand up to celebrate. Her pulse thrummed weakly through her veins. Her skin felt thin, like tissue paper tearing each time she tried to move. Her heart was heavy, painful, laboring with each dull beat. Soon, it would stop.

She thought of Beckett, lying in the same place months prior. Had the tiles also felt frigidly cold beneath his head? Had the walls looked terrifyingly sterile? Did he use his last breaths to think of her, like she thought of him?

She'd put it out of her mind, the startling limpness of her son's body when she found it after that last fight. She wished she hadn't left. She wished she'd stayed and argued. Because even if Beckett hated her, at least he was alive.

He must have been dead for most of the time she was away, because the body had started to rot. She remembered telling the police between sobs that it smelled sickly sweet. Almost like fresh honey.

Venison

She was Trevor's first deer of the season, a fine specimen in perfect health, a young buck trailing her on spindly legs. Trevor hid in the brush, twigs scratching at his face, and took the shot. Clean through the skull. She was dead before her body hit the ground.

The juvenile fled, legs shaking. Trevor paid no mind to it. He'd let the fragile thing mature, grow antlers to harvest and mount on his wall next season. For now, he admired his fresh kill. The clean, dark window of the bullet wound, the glimmering trail of blood tracing the curve of her face, the glazed, beady look of her still-open eyes.

He knelt by the body, fumbling with his cellphone to snap a photo with teeth bared— a sharp white grin to celebrate the successful trip. And then he left the body there, speckled with a pattern of shadow and light from the foliage overhead. He left it to rot, to be consumed by weeds and scavengers, until none of the meat remained. Only bones.

That night, Trevor sat down in his cabin for a hearty dinner. He grilled a fresh slab of beef from the grocery store. His girlfriend joined him.

"Didn't you go out hunting today?" she asked, staring curiously at the steak. "I thought you got a deer."

"Yeah, why?"

"Well, aren't you going to cook it? It's cheaper."

Trevor scoffed, shoving a large chunk of steak into his mouth. The juice dribbled down his chin, the same red as the deer's blood. "I don't eat venison. Too gamey."

The woman frowned, cutting her steak into tiny pieces. "What's the point of hunting then?"

"It's just a hobby." Trevor shrugged. "Everyone around here hunts deer."

His girlfriend left shortly after dinner. Normally, she washed the dishes, so Trevor abandoned the empty plates on the table and retired to the living room with a can of beer. He sipped at it absently, staring at a baseball game on the television. As the night wore on and his can grew empty, the TV began to flicker. The sound distorted, as if layered over itself. Simultaneously as crackly as the crunch of twigs and as hollow as wind rushing through trees. *Why did you leave me behind?* it called out to him.

Trevor shook his head firmly as goosebumps peppered his skin. *My organs all rotted.* It must be the beer, he told himself. *My flesh gone to waste.* He shut off the TV and walked to the back door, yanking open the screen. *My limbs stiff and mangled.* The air was cool at night, but strangely humid, the kind of damp and stagnant that birthed mosquitos and disease. He paced the patio, rubbing a hand through his hair. *Come back for me.* The voice followed him.

Don't let me rot here.

Look at me. Look at me! LOOK AT ME!

He jerked his head up. The voice came from the trees. In the darkness between the trunks, he caught a flash of brown and white. A beautiful doe, just like the one he'd shot, grazing at the grass. Except this deer wasn't right. Her pelt was shiny, slick and tinged scarlet in the dark. She smelled like copper.

Look at my flesh, she said. *I brought it for you.*

Trevor sprinted for the door, his entire body breaking out in cold sweat. He bolted all the windows, hands fumbling with the locks, and drew the curtains. His pulse raced, his blood straining at the walls of its arteries. He shoved himself into the corner of the living room with his knees pulled up to his chest.

It was then that he noticed the smell.

Putrid and heavy, like spoiled meat. Trevor gagged, coughing up his dinner onto the carpet, under the gaze of the buck's head mounted above his TV. Bile burnt his throat until he couldn't breathe. He stumbled around the house, eyes blinded with tears, to find the source of the stench. It was strongest in the dining room.

Trevor blinked, clearing the tears from his eyes. The abandoned dishes were full again, but not with steak. They were laden with organs. A deep maroon slice of liver, coils of pink intestines, chunks of bloody muscle. And the centerpiece: a half-rotted, still-beating heart. All of the meat lay ovetop an indistinguishable red sludge that spilled out over the table and attracted buzzing flies.

Trevor stumbled back, his head banging against the wall. He pressed a hand over his mouth and nose, but nothing masked the smell. From the kitchen, the clipping of hooves on tile sounded. The deer walked in, staring at Trevor from across the dining table. Blood dripped from her fur, trickling from a dark wound on her temple.

I brought my flesh. You left it in the forest.

“What the hell do you want?” Trevor yelled at the doe. Speaking drew the rancid air into his mouth. He choked on it, unable to get the taste off his tongue. “Why are you doing this?”

I brought my flesh, the doe repeated. Eat.

“Go away!” he shrieked, seizing a fork from the table. He threw it at the deer, the prongs catching in the bullet hole. But this time she didn't fall.

Eat.

“I won't!”

Eat.

“Leave me alone!”

Eat.

Trevor ran for the door, but the doe moved to block his way. He fell backwards into the table, hands slipping in the gore. The deer moved closer, jaw unhinging to reveal gleaming white teeth. Trevor imagined blood trickling down her chin, like the juice from his steak. *Eat.*

The next day, his girlfriend returned to the house with a piece of fresh venison for Trevor to try. But all she found were white bones and clean dishes in the sink.

2024

The Art of Disappearing

It started with Nihil's fingertips.

She awoke as she did every morning and started to make tea. But as she moved the teapot around the kitchen, she heard the distinct clacking of something hard against the ceramic.

Thinking perhaps a bird or rodent had found a way inside, she paced the room, opening each cabinet and window to find the source of the sound. When her efforts proved fruitless, she returned to the tea pot and there it was again. Tap, tap, tap.

Nihil glanced down at where her fingers rested lightly against the teapot's handle. The tips of her fingers had become gray and rough, as if she'd dipped them up to the first knuckle into clay. Perplexed, she jabbed them against the wooden countertop. A sharp sound greeted her ears, rather than the usual soft thud of flesh.

"Niran!" she called. "Narcissa!"

I made it to the kitchen first. Nihil stood by the fireplace, holding her hands over the dancing flames so she could study them in the light. Her brows were creased together, not yet with worry but with confusion. She shook her head, muttering softly to herself.

"How odd... how odd..." She at last heard my footsteps behind her and turned around, shoving her hands towards my face. "Cissy, look! What do you think this could be?"

I took one of her hands in mine and gently pinched the tip of her index finger. The flesh was solid, unyielding. I squeezed harder.

"Do you feel that?"

"No, not at all." Nihil chewed on the inside of her cheek, thinking. "It feels like stone, doesn't it?"

“It does.”

I thought of the statues in our garden, the elegantly carved bird baths and the stone benches that crouched close to the ground. Holding on to Nihil’s hand transported me out there, my palms resting against the seat of a bench. If I closed my eyes, I could imagine I was touching cold, dead rock, not a living, breathing person. Not one of my closest friends. I strained to keep my eyes open, unblinking, to erase the acute image of a statue before me. The effort rendered me equally frozen, overtaken by a familiar indecision. Too absorbed by the problem to consider a solution. My heart fluttered helplessly in my chest, my pulse shuttering weakly through my immobile limbs like the shaking of a rusty machine.

Nihil seemed to sense my discomfort, because concern finally wormed its way into the uncertain slump of her shoulders and the small hitches in her breathing.

“Niran!” she called again. Niran would know what to do. That was what we told ourselves, at least.

Never in the centuries we’d known him did Niran wake early. He stumbled into the kitchen, his dark hair tangled and eyes still foggy with the last tendrils of sleep. He blinked hard several times and squinted as he studied Nihil’s hands, poking and prodding at her fingertips. Despite his grogginess, Niran worked with precision, feeling the faint carvings of Nihil’s fingerprints and the smooth ridges of her nail beds. He led her over to the window, where light was just starting to pour through. Clouds cluttered the sky, leaving the sun’s rays pale and watery as they pooled on the floor and cascaded between Nihil’s fingers. The stone creeping over her skin was coarse, like a rock that had not yet been polished, but it had no cracks or holes. It molded itself perfectly to her form, as if it had always been a part of her.

“What do you think?” Nihil’s voice was barely there, a feather brushing past our ears.

“I’m not sure,” Niran admitted. “It must be some kind of illness, but as of now, I don’t think it seems too serious. You can still move your hands after all, right?”

Nihil bent and flexed her fingers several times, just to be sure. “Yes.”

“You don’t think it will spread?” I felt guilty, voicing the possibility that none of us wanted to consider. But we couldn’t afford to be careless, to let our confidence grow too large. We’d done so before, and even our immortality had barely been enough to save us. I couldn’t allow the same mistakes to haunt us again.

“It’s hard to say.” Niran shrugged, as if to take some severity away from the statement. Nihil forced a small smile, shoving her worry to the back of her mind. “I’ll go to the archives, see if I can find any records of similar occurrences. There’s a cure for everything. Besides...” he looked both of us in the eyes, to give assurance. But his voice lacked conviction. As if he was trying to manifest his words rather than stating what he already knew to be true. “It’s not as if we can die.”

#

The streets of town were empty as a memory. As I forgot the faces of pedestrians, people who were present but not active actors in the memory, they blended into the background. Their shirts became windows, skirts transformed into swishing curtains. Eyes became stains on brick walls, mouths mere cracks in stone. And suddenly the memory was vacant, only the important details remaining.

It certainly wouldn’t be inaccurate, I supposed, to call our town a memory. People no longer filled the houses with laughter and the smell of fresh bread and the undeniable aura of life. Vines overtook the store fronts, crawling through holes in the windows and wrapping around door knobs to lock them in place. The once even cobblestone streets were riddled with divots,

degraded by curious weeds poking their heads above the ground. The air was stagnant, heavy with the scent of mold. Even on windy days, I could barely feel the breeze passing over my skin. It was as if everything that tried to enter the town died immediately.

I tried not to think about the ghost of the town. Some decades had passed since Niran, Nihil, and I taunted fate. Since our people had foolishly put their faith in us. Blood no longer stained the streets. The footprints of gods, ones far more powerful than us and from worlds far larger than ours, had eroded into mere potholes, the edges rounded out. That was the wonderful thing about eternity: it made forgetting so easy and dwelling on regret so difficult.

After Niran retrieved his scrolls from the archives, we sat in the street. None of us wanted to stay in the dark library, overwhelmed by dust. The only things living in there now were spiders and I despised the feeling of cobwebs, the way they clung to my skin but lacked the firmness of something real, something alive.

Nihil dragged her fingers along the road, listening to the scrape of stone on stone. “Have you found anything?” Her anxiety had dissipated somewhat when we arrived in town. Maybe it was the emptiness, the reminder that we outlived all things. How could a little stone hurt us? I had a harder time believing that it could be so harmless, but complacency was easier to fall into than fear, so I allowed myself to relax alongside her. I ignored the relentless weight in the pit of my stomach.

“Nothing at all. I’ve looked at medical texts, legends, just about anything that might be relevant,” Niran sighed, shoving the scrolls aside. The papers rustled loudly, like the dead leaves in autumn months. “Though, if I recall correctly, the other world gods we saw had flesh that resembled stone. Perhaps this is normal for our kind.”

Other world gods was a forbidden term among us, especially when mentioned in the midst of the town, but neither Nihil nor I bothered to snap at Niran, to push away unpleasant memories in favor of empty ones. For once, the misfortunes of the past provided comfort. When I looked at Nihil's fingertips, I could imagine her mobile like a marionette, not stiff like a statue. Or a corpse.

"Then everything will be fine." I needed spoken words, reassurance, a solid statement to grasp if I wanted to believe that. How simple it was, not to question something tangible.

"I'll just look like a rock," Nihil scoffed. "I can't say that sounds too pleasant. Those other world gods weren't easy on the eyes by any means."

"Don't worry, we can paint you," Niran said. His mouth barely quirked up into a smile, but we recognized his jest nonetheless. My chest warmed at the thought of such foolish things. Nihil sat up a little straighter. "Then you won't look so bad."

"The way you paint, she'll only look worse!"

Nihil laughed and then Niran and I joined in. Laughter made me feel lighter, beating wings to carry me upwards and upwards. But beyond the shelter of my mirthful wings, I could hear the sound of my voice traveling outwards, wandering down the empty streets. Try as I might, I couldn't shake the feeling that my joy was hanging dead in the air with the wind.

#

Niran was the next one to be affected. He woke one morning, or rather in the afternoon, to find his fingertips cold and hard and without feeling. By that time, the stone had already rooted itself over the first joint of Nihil's fingers and continued on to the second. She couldn't bend her fingers at those joints anymore.

“It must take some period of adjustment to learn how to move your new body as the other world gods do,” he insisted. But Nihil only stared blankly at his face. She listened to Niran less and less those days, unable to muster up even the weakest faith in his words.

The more the stone consumed her, the more everything seemed to bounce off her. Friendly banter, gentle advice, the raindrops outside, the heat from the stove. Really, I knew it wasn't the stone that built that wall around her; it was fear. I'd seen the same thing happen long ago, when I still visited the elderly people in the town. They would sit in their beds or on rocking chairs, eyes glazed over. When someone spoke, they offered no reaction. They always looked ahead, scanning the shadows for some unseen enemy that, though invisible, they distinctly sensed was inching towards them. They feared it because they couldn't see it. Because they didn't know its face, the sound of its breath, the feeling of its arms cradling their bodies. It could've been gentle, for all they knew, but the uncertainty was enough to make them close themselves off. To guard every part of themselves, even when they knew there would be no fighting back.

It never bothered me to see my townspeople like that, so buried by fear. I'd hated to watch them die, of course. Hated it more than anything. But as long as they still lived, I could be content. For some reason, though, I couldn't stand being around Nihil. Looking into her eyes made my chest swarm with snow flurries and my mind crowd with cobwebs. Associating that kind of fear with her was like defying nature itself. Like standing before the statue gods I'd long purged from my memory.

I will wait until she comes to her senses, I told myself. She'll realize soon enough that there's nothing to be so scared of. Not for us, at least.

#

But Nihil's fear did not disappear, it merely took on new forms. She became panicky, running from the room suddenly or pacing by her bed at night. I'd kneel beside her when she failed to fall asleep and hold her hands, which were fully encased in stone. She'd look me in the eyes, tears streaming down her face, and repeat the same things over and over.

"I don't want to die, Cissy. Please. Don't let me disappear. Please. I'm scared, Cissy. Please help me."

Her words swirled around in my head, bubbling like boiling water. I recoiled from them, as if they burned me.

"Don't be ridiculous," I told her. "You can't die. There's nothing to worry about."

But even as I comforted Nihil, her fear latched onto me, infecting my brain like a parasite. My own fingers were stone now. I tried to believe they would fix themselves if I remained patient, but their weight was too heavy to ignore.

"What if I fall asleep and the rest of me turns to stone? What if I can't open my eyes because I can't move anymore? What becomes of me then?"

That I had no answers to. So I remained silent, rubbing the back of Nihil's hand with my thumb. Unable to feel but far too able to hear the grating of stone against stone.

#

I woke up with the first light of day to find Niran already awake, hunched over our dining table. Dozens of books and at least double the amount of scrolls populated the room, pouring over the chairs and stretching themselves over the table. He used to do his research in the dining room often, in the early centuries after the three of us were dropped into our little world with nothing but the vague notion that we should work together. But back then, he'd been searching for lighter things, better building materials and more efficient farming techniques to pass on to

the townspeople. Trying to develop our world rather than fighting to remain in it. Dark circles looped around Niran's eyes, almost the same color as the stone on his hands. He could barely move them by that point, but he continued his research. It pained me, watching the labored movement as he struggled to flip each page. His once neat handwriting became illegible. He could barely hold a quill.

"There must be an answer somewhere," he muttered, more to himself than to me. "How did the other world gods manage it? How could they still move after they turned to stone? Surely someone knows."

"What if we have to wait until we fully turn, and then we'll be able to move?" I offered, though I didn't believe my own suggestion. It was false hope.

"Well, we can't exactly afford to find out, can we?" Niran shoved his books violently aside and buried his face in his arms. His voice was tight with exhaustion. I couldn't remember when he began waking so early, but it must've been a while. In fact, none of us had slept much. "Once we turn fully, we won't be able to look for answers. I don't want to just rely on my immortality and hope for the best. We both know that never works out."

I thought often, then, of things I'd promised to stop thinking about. When I lay awake at night, when the paralyzing fear ebbed for a moment and I could breathe again, memories filled my mind, refusing to allow any empty space. I thought of the other world gods, the way the ground shook as they stomped into our town. I thought of the pure rage on their hideous statue faces. I thought of the townspeople, crushed under stone fingers, and I wondered how they'd felt. Did they feel the same fear that haunted me? Did they feel as though their hearts had stopped before they even died, as if they couldn't take in breath, as if they were paralyzed by the unfathomable possibilities of what might happen next?

“What do you think happens to people... mortals, I mean, after they die?”

Niran stared at me, his face caught somewhere between surprise that I would ask such a question and fury that I had.

“What does it matter?” he said. “We’re not mortals.”

“I’m just curious,” I lied. Niran knew I was lying. I could tell from the way he shrunk in on himself as he turned away, pretending to look at his books.

“Maybe they retreat to some place, in the back of their brain, and just stay there. Forever.”

“What about when they decompose, when they don’t have a brain anymore? They can’t think if they don’t have a brain. They can’t do anything.”

Niran glared at me. “What are you suggesting, Narcissa?”

I took a deep shuddering breath. I felt faint, as if I might collapse right there on the floor. “What if everything Nihil is scared of is real? What if they just disappear? What if there’s nothing?”

“Nothing? How could there be nothing?” Niran jumped to his feet, shaking with anger. As enraged as his face appeared, I saw a different feeling in his eyes. The same feeling I saw in the eyes of the townspeople, on that day that I could no longer seem to forget. He was a caged animal, nipping at my extended hand in defense, not malice. “I can’t even imagine what *nothing* would be like!”

“Exactly.”

Both of us froze, the weight of that word hanging in the air between us, heavier than our stone hands. *Nothing*. How could we become *nothing*? Simply disappear, not a thought bouncing around our heads, not even aware that we couldn’t think. Just *nothing*.

My knees buckled. My body felt numb. Niran sat back down, staring straight ahead without blinking.

Then a resounding crack sounded out from the kitchen, followed by a strangled sob.

Nihil stood by the kitchen counter, a meat cleaver held loosely in one hand. Her other hand was severed. Or maybe shattered was the better word. Or crumbled.

The bulk of the hand was in one piece, cut at the wrist. Tiny, jagged pieces had broken off. If I hadn't seen the familiar curves of Nihil's fingers, the angles of her knuckles, I would have thought they were rocks from the road.

My first thought was concern. I seized Nihil's wrist, squeezing it to stop the flow of nonexistent blood. Niran ran for the bandages we kept in the cabinets. But then I saw Nihil's hand. The cross section of her wrist, where the veins and bones and cartilage should have been, was solid, a uniform gray color. It looked like a broken off piece of statuary, not a real hand. I dropped Nihil's arm, stumbling backwards. Niran must have noticed too because I heard him gasp.

"I didn't feel anything." Nihil's mouth was stretched into a smile. It was forced, hysterical, as if held in place by pins. Tears streamed down her face, which had grown red and hot. The image of that same face turning to stone invaded my mind. A carving of Nihil, streaked with rain rather than tears. "I thought I'd feel something but I didn't," she laughed. "What happens, do you think, when that happens to my head? When it's solid stone? What happens then, Cissy? What will I become, Niran?"

"Nihil..." Niran opened his mouth, but the words wouldn't come. There was nothing comforting any of us could say, not when we all feared the same thing.

Absently, I walked over to the cabinet where Niran stood and grabbed a roll of bandages. Slowly, mechanically, I wrapped them around the stump where Nihil's hand used to be. I pulled her and Niran close to me. We leaned against each other more so than embraced each other. Like the sticks in a fire, holding each other up as they burned away. Knowing that, sooner or later, one of them would fall. Sooner or later, they'd all turn to ash.

We stayed like that for some time. Saying nothing, doing nothing, looking at nothing. I would never know how we appeared in that moment because I never once lifted my head. But I imagined that if I could see our faces, we'd look like the old people in the town. Each of us watching a shadowed corner, waiting for that invisible foe to finally find us.

#

When the stone reached just below our knees, we clustered together on a bench in the garden. We'd never technically needed food or drink and the elements didn't affect us much, so we figured it wouldn't matter if we spent the rest of our time outside. There we could be comforted, if only slightly, by the smell of wildflowers and the fellow statues around us. Being surrounded by stone gave us the fragile illusion that we wouldn't disappear from the world. We'd simply become part of a different one.

Whether our transformation to statues was death or not, I couldn't say for certain, but I had no other way of categorizing it. I thought at first that it was so odd, so terrifying to me, because I was immortal. Death was a completely foreign idea to my kind. But the more I sat with nothing but my thoughts, unable to move from the garden bench, the more I sympathized with the mortals. Death may have been a given for them, something expected and inevitable, but like me, they had no way of understanding it. Of knowing what it was, and more importantly, what came after. It dangled in front of them, eluding their grasp like how water slips through the

fingers and butterflies flit away on summer days. We shared the same fear. It was not uniquely immortal or mortal; it was uniquely human.

I found my mind often returning to the townspeople. Those long dead mortals, their bodies melted into the earth. I allowed myself to embrace the emotions I'd suppressed for three centuries since that horrible day. Guilt, regret, grief, and the first and only other time I'd been afraid of death.

The world Niran, Nihil, and I watched over was connected with many others. Or rather adjacent to them, separated by walls like rooms in a house. But sometimes, one found a crack in the wall or a room left unlocked or a slit between curtains that they could slip through.

People in all worlds, not just ours, exploited those cracks frequently. They brought back small, but valuable things. Informative texts, expertly brewed medicines, finely crafted swords. I couldn't remember what in particular our people had taken to anger the other world gods so thoroughly. Niran told me later that he thought it was a divine artifact, something sacred to the other world, that had passed over his desk briefly. But at the time, I hadn't thought it mattered; it seemed to me that all us gods were equal and thus permissive of each other. I considered myself immune to the deadly consequences of rage and I hadn't stopped to consider that my people lacked the same immunity.

Niran, Nihil, and I hadn't been able to do anything but tremble and stare when they arrived. Even as our people were slaughtered, as our world was destroyed before our very eyes, we hung suspended in a kind of disbelief, shocked at our own vulnerability. Then, when the other world gods turned their hateful eyes on us, I questioned for the first time if perhaps an immortal could die. It certainly looked like the gods would have loved to kill me.

I'd thought it was brave that I even returned their stony gazes. That I didn't turn away from the sharp planes of their cheekbones or the taut bow of their frowns. I refused to blink as they approached, rocky fists stained with blood. Fighting was useless. Our world was small compared to others, our powers like sticks and stones against those of the other gods, so the greatest service I could do my people was to be their witness, to not let the gods intimidate me into turning away. That was my excuse, at least. A coward's excuse. I held it up as a shield, protecting myself from my own failures, and I continued to cling to it even now. I had to be a witness to my own death as well, it was only fitting.

We were spared that day, to my surprise. But I wondered now if maybe the other gods had known what our fate would be. Maybe, in that split second when their gazes fell on us, they predicted our future, our slow turning to stone, and decided it would be a much more painful fate than crushing us there with our people. They wanted us to have time to sit with death and feel its cold hands slowly constrict around our throats, to fear what might happen when we disappeared. They wanted us to suffer.

I wished I could go back into time and apologize to the people. I would not have been so arrogant, so flippant with life, if I had known then what they all had to go through. I wanted to say I would have fought for them even, but deep down I knew I'd never be so brave. By the time the town was destroyed, it had already been years since I really spoke to the people. Since I made any effort to involve myself in their lives, much less protect them. Perhaps I agreed with the other gods. I deserved every last bit of suffering I endured.

But regardless of whether I deserved it, it wasn't any less terrifying.

#

I spent a great deal of time in silence, thinking. I had accepted, the moment I could no longer stand or feel blades of grass brushing against my ankles, that I was most certainly going to die. But acceptance did not ease any of my terror. I wanted to know what happened after.

First, I assumed it would be like sleeping. How at night time I would close my eyes and suddenly there would be nothing and morning would come. Except there would be no morning, just the nothingness. Of course, that theory didn't last long. Because when I slept there *was* something, dreams that I simply forgot with the light of day.

So then I thought, what if dying was like dreaming? What if my mind kept racing onward, not realizing it had died at all?

But that begged the question, what if I needed my brain to dream? If that were the case, I would no longer be able to dream once it all turned to stone.

The "if's" came to me in waves. They crashed and broke against me, continuing feebly to shore where they melted into the sand. Each one was inconclusive, uncertain, horrible. They filled my mouth with the bitter taste of salt and left my skin stinging and raw. I wanted to be brave, but bravery was such a hard thing to manage when I didn't know what exactly I was afraid of.

Most likely, I expected there to be nothing. I expected to fade into the world, like the people in my memories. Except they hadn't really faded, had they? I pulled myself away from them, all of us did, and steadily washed them from my mind. I killed them long before they actually died. Nothing was such a hard concept to understand and left me too paralyzed to enjoy what little I had left. So I chose not to think of it as often as I could.

When the fear subsided, however briefly, nostalgia overcame me in its place. I gazed over the walls of our cottage, the worn dark wood covered in soft moss. The building had been there

as long as we had— a few thousand years, I thought, but I'd long ago stopped keeping track. None of us knew where it, or where we, came from, but it was a calming presence, in much the way I assumed parents were to mortals. It was our sole source of solace, aside from each other, when we were young gods, our shelter when we were unsure of how to navigate the world we'd been thrown into.

Those younger days had been marked with so much fear, so much uncertainty, but also the constant presence of excitement. When did I lose that lightness in my steps, I wondered? That awe at every new corner of the world I encountered? It all came back to me as I watched the cottage, my home, the four sturdy walls I'd taken for granted. I missed the mundane, the simple things that used to be so thrilling, so deeply that my chest ached.

I missed the heat of Nihil's spiced tea on my tongue, easing me from the comforts of sleep every morning. I longed for the crackle of the fireplace as Niran and I sat with books late into the night. I fondly remembered the voracity of our minds, when we were still new to the world. When we would skip through the streets and linger among the townspeople. When we would ask questions and hoard the answers in our brains like jewelry in a chest. We mourned friends after they died and lamented old cultures as they changed with the centuries. It was painful, the mourning, but we endured it nonetheless. We lived and loved more freely, before we lost our interest in ephemeral things. I found myself missing the frustration and the heartache that I once hated as much as the joy and small pleasures of life. I found myself even missing the feeling of cobwebs clinging to my skin.

As the stone climbed steadily over our chests, I spoke frequently to Nihil and Niran. Our arms and legs were immobile by that point, and our shoulders pressed flush against each other. In

lieu of the physical contact we all truly craved, we allowed the sound of our voices to engulf us, gently like a hug.

“Remember that one girl? It must have been, oh, what? A century and half ago? We met her by the river, just on the other side of town,” I said one day. We recollected old memories to distract from our limited ability to make new ones.

“Willian, right?” Niran said, nodding. “I remember. She always hopped across the stones on the river. Her mother warned her not to because the currents were strong.”

“Why do you bring it up?” Nihil asked.

“I was just recalling that one day when she *did* slip into the current. We were there with her. She always liked to hop across when we were there. To show off or something of the sort.” I closed my eyes and breathed in deeply, imagining the whoosh of water rushing by. Inhaling the scent of the reeds and basking in the cool spray that flung itself against my skin. And then I heard a scream, shrill and sharp. I saw Willian’s pale, blurry face among the waves. “She was so fearless, so sure she wouldn’t be hurt if she ever fell. She knew we weren’t supposed to interfere, to come between people and nature, and she flirted with danger anyhow.”

Don’t interfere— that was a rule that gods across all worlds agreed on. To keep the people from expecting too much from us, we said, from thinking of us as their servants. But it all felt so arbitrary looking back. Our people had never taken advantage of us. At some point, we’d grown tired of mourning them and started to distance ourselves under the guise of noninterference. Maybe the rule wasn’t for the people; it was for the gods, to keep us from becoming too attached. Detachment had done us no good either, though. No good aside from destroying the world we were meant to look after.

“Because when the time came, we did save her.” Nihil’s eyes widened, just as they had the day at the river when Willian slipped under. “I remember. I jumped in recklessly, too scared of letting her die to care about interfering,” she laughed lightly. “It was foolish of me. But Niran, always the smart one, found a branch nearby. You two helped pull Willian and I out of the water.”

“She was smiling, when we finally got her back to shore.” Niran stared at the tall garden grass, leisurely swaying in the wind. Some patches had grown brown and brittle, fading out with the summer season. “I wonder, how she was still so unafraid after she’d nearly drowned. It seems so unbelievable now.”

“Because she had faith in us, in our ability to be selfless,” I whispered. Nihil shook her head in disbelief. We’d all been pondering over the same things: guilt, self-loathing. Selflessness felt all too frail a concept in the face of such broodings. We hadn’t interfered when it really counted, when our entire world was at stake, so what did one moment of kindness matter?

“Seems we lost that ability a long time ago.”

“I don’t think so.”

Niran and Nihil’s eyes rested on me, caught off guard by the softness of my voice. The tender love and deep sadness that rolled off my tongue, breaking across our icy hearts for a moment like a ripple across a lake. “I think if you weren’t kind people, I would’ve tired of being with you both long ago. But you weren’t bad company, not in the least bit. Maybe that’s why Willian wasn’t afraid. She knew that if she died, she’d die surrounded by people who cared. In their memories, at least, she wouldn’t disappear.”

We sat in silence for a long while, relishing in the breeze on our faces and studying the crimson poppies that poked their heads up around the garden. The sun shone a yellow so pale

that it rendered the world gauzy, like I was peering through the tufts of a feather. For a moment, the world was a dream. One that couldn't be ended, even by stone.

When Niran finally spoke, we could scarcely hear him. But his words were undeniably there, a last wish and regret wrapped up into one, hanging like sweet music in our ears.

“I wish I could have spent more time with you two.”

#

It started with Nihil. The end of it all.

Her jaw locked long before mine, so I continued talking to her. Reliving memories, commenting on the scenery, saying anything and everything that I thought might offer her some comfort. Niran did the same, while he could, telling old stories from the books he read.

One night, I looked over to see Nihil's face streaked with tears. They glistened like little gems in the moonlight, rolling over the seam where her soft tan cheeks transitioned to cold gray stone. Niran soon noticed as well. His head was stuck days prior, turned in our direction.

“Nihil, what's wrong?” I asked, urging her to tell me with her eyes what she was experiencing.

Her gaze was cloudy and incoherent with fear. Her pupils were small, darting back and forth between Niran and I as if to grab onto us in the way her arms could not. Then, I did not yet understand what she was feeling. The steady climb of the stone through her veins, becoming her flesh. The gradual fading of her senses, the dimming of her mind. The desperation to hang onto the view of our faces, the garden, the cottage, anything that was real and known. The horrible descent into the uncertain. Into nothingness.

I don't want to disappear. I don't want to die, her eyes seemed to tell me. I'm scared.

There was nothing Niran or I could say to comfort her at that point. We couldn't tell her that everything would be okay because we didn't know that it would be. All we could do was cry with her, the sensation of warm tears on our faces disappearing as it reached the stone.

"We love you," Niran said, choking on his words. "If you know nothing else, know that."

"And we'll be here with you." I looked at our statue feet in the grass, our hands resting against the bench. Our dying bodies, sitting side by side. "Even when we aren't...when we aren't *here* anymore, we'll be together."

Nihil's fear did not lessen. She did not give in easily to the stone as it took her nose, her ears, her eyes. She was not at peace with her end. But at the very least, Niran and I had the comfort of knowing we'd given her something to hold onto, something to grasp with desperate thoughts, something to carry with her as she slipped away.

#

Niran's condition progressed just as quickly near the end. I told him all the same things I'd told Nihil. *I love you. I'll be with you. We're not alone.* My own fear grew overwhelming with each day I passed without them. I rarely entered a moment where I could think clearly. My heart would have been racing constantly, if it weren't made of stone. It was a kind of torture, this sitting side by side with inevitability. Marching towards a future I knew I didn't want, but had no power to fend off.

When the stone reached just above my lips, I knew it was almost over.

I could feel it. A straight line, like a thin wire cutting through my head. It moved upward, disconnecting my senses from everything beneath it. I never realized how strong my sense of smell was until suddenly it was gone.

Panic slammed against the walls of my mind, with nowhere left to go. I wanted to stand, to run, to punch the stone bench. I wanted to scream or cry or hug the statues that my friends had become. But there was nothing I could do. Nothing but think.

I didn't want to become nothing. I didn't even know what nothing meant. I knew, rationally, that I wouldn't even be aware that I had disappeared. But perhaps that was the part that scared me. I was so attached, more so than I ever realized, to the little voice inside my head. To the expansive world my thoughts could create. If I could no longer have the real world, I at least wanted that much, but I could already feel the stone claiming it. My thoughts becoming dimmer, slower, more labored, with each passing moment. Disappearing.

I wished an other world god would come then. Smash my skull between their marble fingers, an instant death. The end result would be the same: nothingness. But at least I wouldn't have to sit with my fear for so long.

I kept my eyes trained on the house. I pictured Nihil, Niran, and I running through the grass outside or cleaning the windows with soapy water or lounging on the front stoop with books and cups of tea in hand. I transported myself back to the good times, of which there were so many and too few. Faint whispers, ghosts of my friends' voices, swaddled around me like a soft blanket. I was still afraid, but I had something to hold me as it all came to an end.

My hearing went next. The chirping of birds faded and I was left only with the fuzzy noise of my thoughts.

I don't want to disappear.

Then it was my eyesight. I expected pitch blackness, like looking at the back of my eyelids as I tried to fall asleep. Instead, there was incomprehensible nothingness. I couldn't make sense of what I was, or rather *wasn't* seeing. I grew dizzy with panic.

Why is this happening?

Then I could no longer move the muscles above my eyes. Then my forehead. I couldn't feel the wind brushing against my hairline.

Please, please, don't let me die.

And then my mind started to dim.

There's still so much I want to do.

And then I could barely understand the words of my own thoughts.

I'm not ready. Please.

And then I could no longer picture my friends, my family, clearly.

I don't want to be nothing.

And then my brain could only sputter a few incoherent words.

I don't... please... I'm scared...

And then I could hardly think at all.

And then one last image flickered out in my mind. Of my friends and my house and my beautiful town.

And then there was a sharp stab of fear as I sunk into a vast, empty sea. I didn't want to disappear. No one does.

And then I felt nothing.

And then-

2023

Toy Trains

I pushed hurriedly through the hallway, head down and fingers frantically tapping on my phone screen. I wanted to finish the email before I could psych myself out, before my mind could be tempted to break its resolve. It had been a wavering thing for several weeks now, a choppy lake where I continually bobbed my head above and under the water. Up and down. A little breath and then tiny bubbles released through my nose. Again and again. But the winter weather seemed to have finally frozen me beneath the surface and treading water left me too tired to break the ice.

“Hey, Bailey! Have you seen Jayce recently?” Norah raced up to me, her little wedge heels clicking loudly on the tiles. I tucked my phone into my pocket as I turned to face her, the email announcing my resignation from the daycare still flashing on the screen.

“Jayce Thomas?” I asked, slinging my backpack over my shoulder and speed-walking to keep up with her.

“He’s been helping me with notes for our econ class, but I can’t find him,” Norah whined. She shoved a notebook toward my face, nearly jabbing me with an acrylic nail in the process. Messy pencil strokes scrawled across the page, barely reminiscent of writing. “I can’t write fast enough to keep up with the professor. All my notes end up looking awful. *Please* tell me you know where he is.”

“Sort of. He-”

“You’re out of luck, Nory.” Another classmate, Ethan, appeared on Norah’s other side, throwing an arm over her shoulders. He lowered his voice into a conspiratorial whisper. “I heard he killed himself. Jumped off his apartment building.”

Norah gasped, her eyes widening in horror.

“He’s not dead,” I assured her quickly, glaring at Ethan. “He dropped out and moved back home. I know *you* know that.”

“Okay, okay!” Ethan threw up his hands in surrender, a smirk stretching across his face. “I may have twisted the truth a little bit, but he did *try* to jump. A buddy of mine said that the night before he dropped out, Jayce went for a ride on the Nowhere Train.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You shouldn’t make up stories about him when you don’t even know what he was going through.”

“It’s not like *you* know either. You weren’t friends,” Ethan scoffed. We exited the building, stepping into the snow-dusted courtyard. My thin jacket barely shielded me against the January cold, but I couldn’t bring myself to care about the icy burn along my arms or the tingling of an oncoming cough in my lungs. “Besides, everything I said is true.”

“Wait. I’m confused.” Norah held out a palm and watched the snowflakes drop onto it, melting against her warm skin. “What’s the Nowhere Train?”

“It’s a story that’s been circulating the internet for a few months,” Ethan started to explain, but I cut him off with an irritated huff.

“It’s a dumb urban legend that everyone’s obsessed with recently. They say that-”

“The Nowhere Train is where people go when they want to die,” Ethan finished the statement in retaliation. “And it takes you to a ‘station’, which is probably Hell in most of our cases. It’s pretty stupid.”

“No, it’s sad.” Norah frowned. We stopped at the school gates, glancing over our shoulders to see our footprints in the snow. They were already fading, filled in by the fresh flakes. If only it were really that easy to disappear. “Tell him it’s sad, Bailey.”

“It is. And it’s a cruel way to mock people who are actually suicidal.” I clenched my hands into fists, scowling at the snow as if it had been the one to start the rumor. “I wouldn’t want to come back to school after something like that only to hear everyone turning my pain into a fantasy story.”

“Someone’s mad today.” Ethan scooped a handful of snow from the gate and sprinkled it onto Norah’s head. She yelped, swatting him away. “Is it that time of the month?”

I bit down on my tongue until I tasted blood, straining to hold my composure. Normally, I could tolerate Ethan’s immature taunts, but my sanity was stretched to its limits, fraying more with each passing second.

“I have to go.”

“Already? It’s Friday!” Norah froze part way through smashing a snowball into Ethan’s face. I silently cursed my timing. I would have loved to see him get a taste of his own medicine one last time. “Don’t you want to grab a coffee or something?”

“I’ve got homework,” I lied. Or maybe I couldn’t call it a lie. I *did* have homework, but I had no intention of doing it. “Go have fun without me.”

“But everything’s more fun when you’re there,” Norah pouted. But she was used to me turning down invitations, so she put up no resistance as I walked towards the dorms. She merely smiled and waved. “Let’s do something tomorrow or Sunday then! See you later!”

I didn’t respond. I kept my head straight forward, as if my spine were a metal bar. The water churned unpleasantly around me, the ice softened by her warm words, and I knew that if I turned back I’d be too tempted to join her.

The sun peeked over the horizon to catch a glimpse of me trudging back to my room before it set for the day. Fading light glinted off the fresh snow, creating a white so blinding that I

squinted my eyes to see where I was going. Cold pricked at my nose, causing it to run. I pressed a tissue to it, breathing in the dusty scent.

The confines of the dorm hall were a welcome relief. The ice melted from my limbs little by little as my frozen fingers fumbled with the key. Norah was my roommate, and an uncharacteristic silence filled the cramped room in her absence. The furniture stood still and watchful, like the shed cicada skins that clung to park benches in the summer. I shivered under their gaze, cautiously settling onto my bed as if it might swallow me whole or crumble to dust under my weight. I didn't know which would be the better alternative.

I had no intention of staying in the room, but the warmth from the heater in the corner kept me there longer than I'd planned. Or maybe part of me wanted to stall, just like a part of me still wanted to run after Norah, pounding my fists against the ice. I sent my resignation email to the daycare, squeezing my eyes shut as I hit "send". Then all I had left to do was sit.

Muffled voices pounded at the walls as other students trickled into the building. Their voices were joyful— clear and spirited like jingle bells. Everyone was still riding the high of winter break, but the excitement would taper off in a few weeks. The sweetness of hot chocolate would stop wafting through the vents and the colorful lights would be stripped down from doorways. The holidays had an uncanny ability to erase the world's problems for a few weeks, but once the illusion faded, the bleakness of February and an unhealthy dose of seasonal depression set in.

My eyes traveled to the dresser and the simple silver picture frame atop it. I stared at the girl in the photo and my eyes teared up from not blinking. At least, I told myself the tears were from not blinking. The girl held my gaze, smiling in the hollow way that all photographs smiled. When I first placed the picture on my dresser, hoping it would help get me through the days, I

quickly found that photos were a cheap substitute for real life. The people in them never looked as radiant or as delighted or as loving as they did in memories. I searched through photos to find solace and instead received another stab to my bleeding heart.

As much as the picture pained me, I didn't look away. I kept staring at the girl's brown eyes and curly pigtails. I could look in the mirror instead, but that would be even more painful. The girl and I appeared mostly the same, but I was a sorry replacement for her— an empty shell. If I turned to the mirror, I'd see her smooth, dark skin, except cracked and ashy from the dry winds and lack of proper care. I'd see her thick lashes, framing eternally tired eyes. I'd see her mouth, curved into a frown rather than a smile.

It had been four months since I'd seen that girl. I thought maybe I could bear it— get by with photographs and hazy memories— but the pictures weren't enough. I could barely pull through those four months. I knew I wouldn't be able to last the rest of my life. I didn't want to remember my sister for longer than I'd known her.

When darkness blanketed the room, a black velvet curtain falling over the sky, I finally forced myself to get up. I retraced my steps through the dorm building and out onto the street, thankful that Norah hadn't returned yet. I didn't want to lie to her about where I was going, and honestly, I wasn't sure I could.

The snowflakes shone just as brightly in the darkness, drifting from the void of the sky and settling gently on the ground. My feet sunk into them, the wetness seeping through my boots. After a couple of blocks, my toes went numb and my fingers prickled with pins and needles. A cacophony rose from the city streets: sirens, slamming doors, chattering voices. The most unbearable was the sound of the cars. I hated the way the air whistled by them, caressing their sleek metal forms. I hated the way their wheels splashed in the slush coating the road,

sending it upward like a frigid fountain. I hated their eardrum-bursting horns, startling me each time they screamed. At first, I walked as far from the road as possible, but I found my feet carrying me closer to the edge of the sidewalk. I got close enough to feel the rush of cold air as cars zoomed past. Exhaust burned my nose, the acrid taste building up in my throat and stinging my lungs. I imagined another day, another girl walking far too close to the street. And I imagined the dip in the pavement that she would trip on.

As I neared the imaginary crater, another sound caught my attention. It wasn't exactly a sound, but a lack of one. No more cars left tire treads in the snow. No more people strolled past the storefronts. The street I walked on was completely deserted.

And a few paces ahead of me sat a train station.

It reminded me of the waiting areas at amusement parks, saturated in bright colors. A pattern of flowers danced across a pink and blue awning. Snowflakes dropped onto the petals only to disappear, leaving no water stain to indicate that they'd melted. Twisty golden poles supported the awning, like the kind that held up carousel horses. Three seats rested beneath it, molded in the shape of mushrooms.

It looked like a place made for children, but there I was, a grown woman, standing among the toadstools and daisies.

By the time I noticed the tracks running to my side, the train had already arrived. It pulled up silently, the wheels slowing quickly and steadily. Unlike the "station", the train had a mature, old-fashioned appearance. Steam billowed out from the front car, sending the snow swirling away in an elegant spiral. The cars wore shades of charcoal and ash white, with door handles and window frames gilded in gold. My mind immediately went to the toy trains that my family circled around the Christmas tree. On snowy days like that one, my sister and I would lay on the

carpet, the fireplace warming our backs as we watched the train go round and round. I pinched myself, but the train was no dream.

A door slid open, as quiet as everything else, and a girl dressed in a crimson jacket and matching hat stepped out. My breath caught in my throat when I noticed her familiar curls and dark eyes.

“Hello! Do you have a ticket?” My heart ached as her saccharine voice rang out.

“Um, no. I-” I said when the initial shock faded. “I don’t.”

“Then what’s that?” She pointed towards my hand. I lifted it to find a simple sheet of black paper with curling white script.

Nowhere Train. Passage to Station 221.

I gaped incredulously at the paper in my hand. I couldn’t tear my eyes away even as the girl took it from me and punched a hole in the corner.

The Nowhere Train. For whatever reason, the story I’d been ignoring for months had shown up to haunt me. I’d never believed in urban legends or monsters under the bed. I’d never cared for fairy tales or internet fads. But if I wasn’t dreaming, then what was happening?

“Your name?” the girl, an attendant if I followed the storyline, asked. Any comfort her appearance brought me melted with the snowflakes on my skin, replaced with skepticism. She may have had the lively glow that my photographs lacked, but that couldn’t erase my distrust.

“Is this some kind of sick joke?”

“Pardon?” The girl cocked her head to the side, an innocent gesture that sparked anger in me.

“You heard me! Is this a prank? Is Ethan behind this?” I whipped my head around, searching the empty streets for my classmate or a figure lurking in an alley, waiting to leap out and shout “got you!”. I found nothing.

“I assure you that everything you're seeing is real.” The attendant extended a hand for me to shake, which I ignored. “My name is Dabria. I work on the Nowhere Train.”

Dabria. She was one of the two attendants in the Nowhere Train story. People said that anyone who rode the train would speak to both of them, Dabria and Anastasha. But in the versions I heard, they appeared as young women or angels, not ten year old girls.

“I think that would be against child labor laws,” I said, wishing I had a more mature response. My brain stalled, scrambling to piece together an explanation. Anything that made sense.

“There are no such laws where I’m from,” Dabria smiled. “Please give me your name and enter the train. I promise there’s nothing to worry about.”

“I don’t believe you.” I took a step back, rooting my feet more firmly in the snow.

“Well, if you decide you’re dissatisfied with the train’s accommodations, you can always get off.” Dabria turned, sliding open the door. She looked at me over her shoulder. “But I think you’ll like what you find at your station.”

Dabria stepped into the train, and as if in a trance, I followed her. Maybe I was feeling particularly reckless. Or maybe Dabria’s appearance comforted me more than I cared to admit. Either way, my feet wouldn’t stop moving no matter how far I dug them into the snow.

“Ah, so you joined me. Will you tell me your name now?” Dabria led me down an aisle. I feared my soaked shoes might stain the cream colored carpets, but they hardly even left an indent.

“Bailey Mendez,” I offered begrudgingly. Dabria stopped before a seat labeled BM 221. I sat on the black velvet, running my hands over the fabric. The numbness in my extremities began to dissipate in the pleasant warmth of the train car. It smelled strongly of pineapple and coconut and fruit punch, a taste of summer in the depths of winter. Summer, when everything was okay.

“Alright, Bailey. Is there anything I can get for you? Something to eat or drink?”

I paused, staring at the swirling wood grain on the tray table in front of me. I pictured Norah’s face in the lines, smiling as she bought us morning coffees even though she preferred tea.

“Citrus green tea with honey,” I recited an order that wasn’t mine, but I’d heard enough times to commit to memory. “If you even have that. And if it’s not poisoned.”

“Trust me, I have no reason to poison you,” Dabria laughed. She walked to the end of the car. The other seats obscured her from view for a minute and then she returned. She wasn’t gone long enough to make tea, but to my surprise, she held a steaming mug in her hands. She placed it in front of me. The water vapor rose to my face, sticking to my skin like humid summer air. I glared at the liquid, debating whether or not it was safe to drink.

“You look so unhappy to be here.” Dabria perched on the seat across from mine, her ankles neatly crossed. At least she sat differently than my sister. Brylee had awful posture.

“Normally our passengers aren’t so... disbelieving.”

“I don’t think most people are eager to believe in a magic train.” Deciding that I didn’t care if the tea was poisoned or not, I lifted the mug to my lips. It was sweet and fruity, exactly the kind of drink Norah would like. I’d never liked sweets all that much, but I had to admit Norah had pretty good taste.

“Maybe *hesitant* is the better word. Most people on the Nowhere Train are eager to get to their stations. They don’t normally refuse to get on the train to begin with.”

“Well, it’s hard to be excited when I don’t know where I’m going.” I put the tea back down. “What even is my station?”

“The stations are wonderful places,” Dabria explained, her eyes lighting up. I got the impression that she said those words often. “They can be anything you want, *have* anything you want. So tell me, Bailey. What is it that you want?”

“What do I want? Like immediately or future goals?” I leaned my chin on my hand, tapping a fingernail of my opposite hand against the mug handle. The *clink* distracted me from the soundlessness of the train. “I don’t know what you mean.”

Impatience flashed across Dabria’s face. “Is there perhaps someone you want to see?”

My hand stilled, my index finger still resting against the handle. I could see Dabria in my peripheral vision. A knowing smile stretched across her face and her gaze pierced right through me, as if it could cut into my skull and view the contents of my brain.

“I heard...” I started cautiously, “that everyone on the Nowhere Train has their own station. So even if there was someone I wanted to see, I wouldn’t be able to.”

“But didn’t I just say you can have anything you want at your station? Think of it like this train but on a larger scale. I don’t always know what each passenger is feeling, but you can get any food or drink you want, the air probably has a scent you like, and,” Dabria batted her eyelashes, “I imagine I look like someone you know.”

I stiffened, my fingers flexing and my shoulders scrunching up towards my ears. Dabria seemed to take pleasure in my discomfort, her smile stretching wider.

“Someone I *knew*,” I whispered.

“You can see anyone you want at the station. They’re truly wonderful places. In fact, I’m a little jealous of you.” I didn’t doubt her words. I could see the green flames of jealousy flashing behind her eyes, at odds with her soft demeanor. “I never leave this train.”

Before I could respond, a bell rang through the train car. *Ding, ding, ding.* Dabria stood as the bell chimed, staring at a watch on her wrist.

“We’re at Station 210 right now. I must be on my way,” she said with one last smile. For a moment, she looked so much like Brylee that pain flooded my chest. “Another attendant will be with you soon. Enjoy the rest of your ride on the Nowhere Train.”

Just like that, she was gone. I sat, watching ripples disrupt my reflection in the tea, with an oddly empty feeling in my chest. The sensible part of me said to stand up and walk out the train’s door, but I couldn’t force myself to move.

A mysterious station where I could see my sister again. Not a photograph or a memory, but the real person. The idea sounded too good to be true, and yet the less sensible part of me clung to it.

“You look deep in thought.” The sudden voice didn’t startle me, but the pitch of it did. It was the high, sing-song voice that had woken me up every morning for the past two years.

I glanced upward to find shining hazel eyes and a halo of light brown hair. Norah’s doppelganger wore the same red jacket and hat as Dabria with little flower hair clips, the kind they sold in the jewelry shop by school, holding back her bangs.

“I’m Anastasha,” she continued. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“I-I’m Bailey,” I stammered. Anastasha let out a laugh like glass wind chimes.

“I know.” She sat in the spot where Dabria had been moments before, folding her hands in a very Norah-like gesture. “So what are you thinking so intently about? Surely not the color of your tea?”

“No, not the tea.” I pushed the mug aside and turned to face the new attendant. “I’m thinking about my station.”

“That’s... understandable.” Anastasha’s eyes darkened. “And I’m afraid I can’t tell you all that much about it.”

“I figured. Dabria was pretty vague.”

“She normally is,” Anastasha sighed. A moment later, the gloominess faded from her eyes and her smile returned. “But enough about the stations. I want to know about you.”

“To know about me?” I raised an eyebrow. Maybe it was because she had Norah’s face or maybe because the softness in her eyes wasn’t hiding anything, but I felt compelled to answer this attendant. “There’s not much to know. I’m a college student, an education major. I work part-time at a daycare- well, not anymore. I quit.”

“You quit. But why?” Anastasha watched me with genuine curiosity. “Did you not like it?”

“No. I loved it. I used to take care of my little sister when I was younger, and I decided that I wanted to take care of kids as a career.” I turned my head towards the window, which had nothing but darkness beyond it. I thought at the start of the ride that it had been painted to obscure the view, but I was starting to feel less sure. “I quit because I didn’t want them to deal with all the trouble of calling me when I don’t show up tomorrow.”

“But you could still show up tomorrow,” Anastasha insisted. “If you love it that much, you shouldn’t give up so easily!”

“Well, it’s too late for that. I already quit. Now there’s nothing left in my life that I really care about.” In my heart, I was confident that my words were true, but when I looked up at Anastasha’s face, *Norah’s* face, guilt flooded through me. Muttering, I added, “Or maybe not *nothing*. But I don’t have much going for me anymore. The only family that cared about me is dead, I quit the job I loved. What’s the point?”

“Hmmm. I see what you mean.” Anastasha drew her eyebrows together, deep in thought. “But would that family you mentioned want you to join them so soon?”

“Of course not,” I scoffed. “But I didn’t want her to leave me so soon. That’s life. Things never work out how you want them to.”

I could tell Anastasha was getting frustrated. Impatient. She tapped her foot on the ground. Every time the bell rang out, she flinched and tapped her foot faster.

“Tell me something.” I leaned forward, locking eyes with the attendant. I tried to be intimidating, to challenge her, but somehow it felt like I was looking into a mirror. I couldn’t shake the nagging feeling that I was also challenging myself. “Can I really see my sister at this station? Was Dabria lying to me?”

“Well, yes. But it’s... it’s...” Anastasha trailed off, not as if she couldn’t *find* the words but as if she couldn’t *say* them.

“But it’s not what I think it is? It’s not worth it? It’s *what*?” I pushed. The bell rang again. Anastasha shifted uncomfortably in her seat. “Is this place supposed to be like heaven?”

“That’s not for me to decide.” Anastasha regained her composure, her expression stony.

“Do *you* think I should go?”

“I can’t tell you that.”

“Stop lying!” I lunged forward, as if to grab Anastasha by the collar, but froze. She stared back at me with wide, innocent eyes, Norah’s eyes. Suddenly, I felt both guilty and afraid, as if I were the one yelling *and* the one being yelled at. I settled back into my seat, staring at my hands. “I’m sorry. I just can’t do this. I can’t keep waking up knowing that she’s dead. I can’t keep pretending I want to live.”

“Then don’t pretend,” Anastasha said. I almost laughed at how easy she made it sound. What did she know? She didn’t know what it was like to be so tired, so cold, so miserable that drowning seemed easier than breathing. “You can keep living without wanting to. You need to get through the difficult times if you want to reach the good ones.”

“The good times are gone.”

“Do you really believe that?” Anastasha reached over and grabbed my hand, a sweet smile on her face. For a second, I wavered. I thought of waking up in my dorm the next day, Norah smiling over me. I thought of warm coffee on my tongue as we strolled down the snowy streets. And for a second, I wanted that future. But that second passed as quickly as it came.

“Yes,” I said as resolutely as I could. Anastasha wilted, casting her eyes downward. She withdrew her hand and stood up. The bell rang again and she began to walk. After pacing the train car several times, she stopped in front of me, taking a deep breath.

“How did you feel when your sister died?”

The question caught me off guard. Anastasha asked it bluntly, with an authoritative tone that demanded a response. The bell rang out a couple more times as I struggled to find an answer.

“Like everything good in the world died with her,” I said, nearly choking on the words.

Anastasha’s eyes were firm, shedding their softness as they bore into mine. “Would you ever wish that feeling upon anyone else?”

“No.” I shrank in on myself, that nagging guilt stirring the waters once more.

“But don’t you think the kids at the daycare will feel that way when you’re gone? Don’t you think your friends will feel that way?”

I nodded, my voice having fled my body. I pictured Norah, alone in our dorm room with her sobs as the only sound or sitting in the cafe across from an empty seat. I pictured the sweet little toddlers at the daycare begging their teachers to tell them where I was. I pictured the teachers, struggling to lie to them. I even pictured Ethan, wreaking havoc with no one to put him in his place.

And above all, I pictured Brylee. I pictured the disappointment on her face as I stepped off the train. I wanted to see something other than a photo of her, but at the same time, I wanted to see her happy. She wouldn’t be happy if I went to my station.

Suddenly, it was hard to muster the air of intimidation I’d summoned earlier. It was difficult to keep resisting. It was near impossible to look at Anastasha, a mirror of me and Brylee and Norah and everything I cared about in the world, and say with confidence that I wanted to see my station.

I wanted to die, but I also wanted to live. I wanted to see Brylee and finally be free from the misery that had haunted me for so long, but I also wanted to see Norah’s smiling face. I wanted to cry until I couldn’t breathe and then hug her as tightly as I could. I wanted to go to the daycare and protect those kids in all the ways I couldn’t protect my sister. Maybe I was only meant to kill the part of me filled with grief and anger and sadness while the rest of me lived on. Maybe that’s what Anastasha had been trying to tell me the whole time. Maybe that’s what I was trying to tell myself.

“Can I get off the train?” I asked, my voice cracking with desperation. “Please?”

“Of course you can.” Anastasha relaxed, her shoulders drooping and her eyes flooding with relief. “We haven’t reached your station yet.”

I didn’t wait for the train to stop. I didn’t wait for Anastasha to say goodbye or walk me out. I bolted down the aisle and tugged open the only obstacle between me and the life I’d tried to leave behind. As I ran, I saw the windows light up. I saw the cracked sidewalks of my hometown, painted in summer sunlight. I saw the streets that Brylee and I used to race down as I raced to the door.

A harsh wind blew across my face and slush sprayed onto my skin. It took me a moment to realize that I was back on the sidewalk, a mere few centimeters from the street, and a car rushing past had caused the wind. I stumbled backward and fell into the snow, inhaling deeply like that first gasping breath after being underwater too long. The station and the train were nowhere to be found, and across the street stood a familiar cafe.

“Bailey? Why are you in the snow?” a sing-song voice called out behind me.

“I’m making a snow angel,” I laughed shakily. Norah smiled, extending a hand toward me. I took it and let her pull me to my feet.

“I don’t think the sidewalk is the best place to do that- Oh! Your hands are freezing!”

“I forgot to bring gloves.”

“Well, that won’t do.” Norah frowned. Her eyes darted between me and the cafe across the street, lighting up with joy. “I already got a drink, but you can never have too much. Do you want to grab a coffee?”

“Yes! I would love to,” I answered without hesitation. I couldn’t say I no longer felt the rough waters lapping at my sides, trying to suck me back down, but I dug my nails into the ice. I

reached out for Norah's hands, hoping that together we could reach the shore. "And while we're at it, do you know how to unsend an email?"