

Bound Fantastic

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GRAY DREAM

Nan hadn't been in New York City for very long, but she had a new apartment, simple yet grandiose, at least compared to the ones she had stayed in prior. She had two rooms, one a bedroom with a white plush carpet that she would certainly dirty before long, and another that could serve as her office. She had never separated her life like that before, but now she would be the one who could. Perhaps that would allow her to sleep better. She was freshly twenty-six years old, and a brand-new place had been a long time coming.

Time always seemed to play tricks on her. The hours seemed to bleed into one another, and all the while she stood in the same spot, staring at herself in the mirror in her new bathroom. It was a gray bathroom, with glittering stone at the sink and at the shower. She knew the stone was artificial, but she didn't care. It was not like her old bathroom, which was all the better. Her old bathroom had had a chipped sink from when she had dropped an inkwell on it; the thin vein of porcelain had forever been stained black. But even in this new white bathroom, she still remembered how the black vein in her old bathroom had stared, stared.

Now, she stood in front of the mirror, and sometimes found herself looking at her own face for hours before tiring of it. She felt her face, and knew she had been crying, yet she didn't remember starting to cry at all. She felt around with her fingers to find a piece of cloth, but realized again that she was in her bathroom, and not sitting at her desk. There was a mirror at her desk also, and more options to cover it with. There were pieces of velvet, maroon like crushed flowers, bits of scratchy brown corduroy, and a

whole ream of denim that she had snagged in the sale bin at Joann's Fabrics before she had moved. Her fingers groped around the bathroom sink before she found a towel, white, new and unused. Her eyes never left the mirror. She fingered the fabric, letting the cloth scratch against her skin. She let the fabric fall around the mirror without another thought and turned away from herself.

She decided then that she might go out and wander around the city. She wanted to dress in the most outlandish of clothes; they often made her quite giddy, the mixing of prints and fabrics, and the addition of a million different baubles. She had worn blankets that she had turned into trendy bustier tops, and had even transformed a pair of large men's basketball shorts into the prettiest of cocktail dresses. Everyone had asked her where she had gotten it, that the fabric was so unique for that kind of dress; no one could ever find anything like it. She especially loved whenever something rough was paired with something smooth. When she had first moved into her apartment, she had made a tunic out of a thrown-out towel that she had found while thrifting, outlined the stencil of a rather unobtrusive looking cartoon duck, and then wore it over a gold organza dress that looked like a full-body veil. She had felt so beautiful when she had put it on. The colors here clashed too; the orangey-yellow of the duck contrasted perfectly with the frail gold color of the dress. She had never felt so perfect.

The first show she had attended was a Marine Serre show, one that she talked herself into by standing outside and showing the man outside her follower count on Instagram. After she had graduated from high school, she started posting short reels of herself sewing on baubles and altering certain things, and people seemed to love what

she did. They called her “kitschy” and “campy” and said that she was their style icon. She didn’t very much feel like any sort of icon, but when she sat at the Marine Serre show, in the very back corner, she realized again why she wanted to do what she did so much. She just had to. So she would sew pieces of printer paper and stick bits of candle wax on her clothes at the last minute, because once an idea came to her, she immediately made the decision to attach it to her person then and there. She felt like a walking art project even though none of it really made any sense at all. Sometimes all it took was terry cloth against organza.

She went over to her desk and her eyes clambered lovingly over the jars and jars of different oddities: an array of buttons, some bright and plastic, some shiny, golden and antique looking; plastic craft gemstones in every shape and color: bits of fabric, varying in size and shape: sequins, buttons, ribbons, bows, safety pins, and anything else that could possibly attach to a piece of clothing. Anything that could be attached to a piece of clothing was attached by her, and she did so lovingly, using her sewing machine or by hand with a delicate whip of her needle and thread. She was into the scrappiness of things, the era of making trash into actual clothing.

Because of this though, sometimes preparing to go out could take whole days at a time before she finally felt ready. She found she had to add certain things at just the right time in just the right place. If she added a row of orange sequins along the collar when the sun was too far along in the sky, it might feel all wrong, and she would have to scour around in the small box beneath her desk for the seam-ripper and tear through all

that she had just done. Sometimes it would take her many different tries to get it right at all, even though there seemed to be no right or wrong with these kinds of things.

Hours passed with her in this state now, as stooped over her desk, seam-ripper in hand, buttons and stray bits of fabric splayed all around her. She had almost every kind; thrifted cotton sheets, old cashmere, splays of silk from a bunch of curtains she had found at a garage sale, a jar of spare shoelaces, all different colors. They all took up far too much space in her sewing box, so she had moved them into a plastic bin that was supposed to be kept under her bed, but ended up being shoved, oftentimes upended, by the chair at her desk.

She realized all too suddenly that she had sewn far too much onto one of her favorite golden tops, but pushed the thoughts from her mind and dressed, slowly, in the bedazzled gold, taking great care not to disrupt any of the freshly sewn baubles. For pants, she decided on a pair she had fashioned from an old puffy quilt a few years ago; the pattern was lime green with pieces of a darker green fabric swirled through. They stuck out underneath the golden top, but by the time she had dressed in everything, she was far too tired to take them off and try again with different pieces. It always crossed her mind to add something else onto the green pants and the gold top, but she wasn't sure this time. As it was always pretty cold in the city, she selected her dark blue velvet coat, the one that hung almost all the way to the ground. For shoes, she chose plain white sneakers, because by this time, she was almost far too tired to go out at all.

She looked at her bed as she neared the door. All she wanted to do was sleep. To sleep with absolutely no dreams at all seemed like such a wonder to her. After hours of sitting hunched over at her desk, it had become pitch black out. It had become a complete night. It was at her old house that she shared with her parents that she used to do this and take all day to get ready only to have to creep about in the night like some loner, someone who didn't have any purpose.

The stairs were rickety and old, but she knew the air outside would make her feel fresh and excited again. The air inside the interior of the apartment complex was damp and stale, and it had taken her up until this point to not gag every time she let herself out. There was not a mail room, but instead a pile of packages thrown on a spotted brown chair in the hallway by the elevator. It was an old elevator, one that didn't have a door but instead a cage, one that had once been gold but was now a rusted bronze. She never took the elevator, but she liked looking at it over her shoulder when she was leaving and seeing it again when she came in. There were two doors that separated her from the inside to the outside, and she patted her pocket where she felt the outline of her single key against the thick green swirls of fabric as she went through them both.

At first, she thought she would walk straight to central park. When she had gone to the park a few times before, she had found that she quite enjoyed the grass, the sunshine, the occasional squirrel or bird; sometimes a gray dove, sometimes a gray-green pigeon. She had enjoyed watching them fly into the sky, only to fly back down and peck at a piece of moldy bread between the cracks of the concrete.

But now it was completely dark, and summer had gradually given way to autumn, a cold and wet one at that. Now, there was nothing around except for her in her overly large coat and pants. She scuffed her shoes against the grit in the sidewalk and tried to count all the black spots that she walked over. Next, she tried to count all the lines on the sidewalk. She saw a glint of something, and stooped over to pick up a dingy penny, only to realize it was on tails. She put it in her pocket anyway, and thought if she were to have bad luck already she might as well make something of it. If she could figure it out, the penny might make a nice addition to one of her shirts. Maybe she could cover an entire dress in pennies. It would be an awfully heavy dress, but that way she could make sure every single coin was flipped to heads.

The penny and the key in her pocket jangled together as she made her way to central park. Upon arriving, she realized there was no way to get in. A sign nearby said that there were no visitors allowed in the park from one a.m. to six a.m. She wasn't sure what time it was.

She felt refreshed by her walk despite this, and decided instead to go to a laundromat she knew was nearby. It was a hidden laundromat, and she thought it was a great secret. She loved to look into the different machines and see what she could find. There seemed to be a lot of great clothes at this laundromat to look at and wonder about. The constant whirling and bubbling of the clothes all mish-mashed together often gave her the most radical ideas for designing, especially at times like now when her brain seemed to not work very well.

She had only been to this laundromat one time before, and there was normally no one in there besides her and the masses of whirling clothes. Tonight, as she let herself in, she noticed a small child curled up in the corner next to a few old folding tables. She stopped and squinted her eyes to make out what the kid was doing, and more importantly, what the kid was wearing. The kid was a ratty thing, a little girl with her hair cropped close to her head. Nan wasn't close enough to smell her, but she assumed the girl was unhoused, an orphan. She was wearing what looked like a potato sack; brown bits of cloth, scraps.

Immediately, she was interested in where the child had gotten the clothing. Those days, looking ratty was considered chic. Nan definitely understood that, but a child alone in New York City might have a more practical use for clothes than what she was thinking. Thrifting and vintage-shopping was extremely popular, especially in New York, so maybe this kid was just some rich parents' attempt at styling this new zero-waste post-apocalyptic substyle.

Or perhaps the child was just poor, and her mother was somewhere near. Perhaps she lived nearby and her mother had forgotten quarters or the wash and had gone back while leaving the child here. Not a very good mother, either way, Nan thought. But after a few moments she turned away from the child, and stepped up to the first washing machine, where the whorls of soap and color were beginning to hypnotize her. She kept the child in her periphery as the contents of a nearby washing machine glinted as they turned over and over and caught her eye.

The clothes in the machine were explosions of color, full of neons, orange, yellow and a fuschia-pink, but then Nan imagined that within the bundle, there could be some sort of party dress, a cocktail dress. She wondered if the dress was long or if it was short. She wondered about the person that would wear the dress and where they would go to wear it. She imagined a scene where a woman would come down a grand, rickety staircase that was either bronze or gold or gray, and she would spin in the dress, feathers flowing around her shoulders like a cape. Her skin would look like cream as she flounced down onto the floor, where a dozen suitors clapped for no good reason other than the fact that she was a show. There would be gold light spilling in from a chandelier on the ceiling and it would drenched all of them.

She stared at the dress for a few moments longer as the scene faded around her. She found her eyes couldn't adjust all the way due to how reflective the glass was; she could see herself in the reflection after a while, and became distracted.

Grumbling at herself, she moved on to the next washer. In this one, she saw pinks falling over blues, a pair of jeans pressed up against the glass, a string of suds. She inched closer, hoping to see some more variety in the back of the washer. She saw a yellow, lacy bra, tumbling on top of a pair of gray boxers; the more they spun, the more she could tell that the boxers were frayed and worn at the threadlines, whereas the bra looked brand new. She wondered who these clothes belonged to. Were they a couple? Did the same person wear all of these clothes? What did this person look like?

She stepped closer, her face smudged against the glass. She tracked the bra with her eyes, straining as it got lost among the rest of the folds, wondering what it would be

like to wear something like that. In the past, she had indulged in it a couple of times, sure, but never where it really mattered. Her mind wandered, and she imagined what Hollis would look like wearing it. What Hollis would look like wearing it now, the yellow clashing with her pale skin, the moles on her back, the ones Nan had memorized while at the pool, when she thought herself completely unobserved.

She stepped back, woozy all of a sudden, and almost lost her footing. She hadn't thought of Hollis in years. The little child from the corner was now at her side, her small hands clamped around the tough velvet of her overcoat. She looked down in her haze, and felt the child's fingers clutch the hem of her pants.

"Are you alright?" said the child. Nan reached out a hand to steady herself, and was even more astonished when the child caught it and held it, just for a moment too long, in hers.

She recoiled, her body hunched over, and she backed up until she was cowering in front of a humming cluster of driers. The child was really here and so was she. She braced herself and looked up. The child had gone back to sitting in the corner, the same one Nan had found her in when she had first entered the laundromat. It was as if they had never come in contact. She breathed a sigh of relief, flexed her thin fingers, straightened the gold top underneath her overcoat, and then walked to the next washing machine, her eyes flicking back to the child every so often.

As soon as she started to see something among the soap, the child said, "You are a strange woman."

She didn't say anything, but kept her eyes on the rolling bundle of clothes. She didn't know whether she should laugh or be alarmed, but she stood watching the tiny tumult for a few moments longer before tiring of it completely, and turned her head towards the child.

"Why are you here all by yourself?" she asked.

The child didn't answer, so Nan decided to step back in front of the third washing machine. There were a bunch of sheets in there, or blankets, but they looked thin and worn. They were cotton sheets, she thought. She looked at the kid again, and then back to the washer. The kid was not looking at her.

The fourth washer held a bunch of rhinestone-colored clothes, ornamental purple and flashing pink, all tumbling so close together that their colors bled into one another, and formed a whirling ball of brightness. She sometimes would find some sort of inspiration buried in all of this, but now it was not working. The child had destroyed her focus.

"Why are you just staring at the washers?" asked the child, and she realized the kid had moved from her corner and was now standing next to her, watching the contents of the fifth washing machine. "Is there something cool in there?" She flushed and felt pleased that the child thought she was interesting.

"Yes," she said, her eyes following some sort of fluffy purple garment as it spun in the rinse cycle. "I'm remembering, you see. And creating. I'm new in the city, and I've got a lot of work ahead of me." She glanced at the timer above the glass; five minutes until the washing would be complete.

She stepped over to the next washing machine. The child seemed to mirror her movements now and followed her steps. She peered in through the glass, and even though the child was too small to see, she did the same. The sixth washing machine was completely empty. She shook her head and moved over to the seventh washing machine, but she knew it was empty before she even looked through the glass. The child was right next to her, still and unmoving, as if they were both just apparitions.

She moved over to the next washer, and the next, and the next, but they were all empty holes, glaring at her through their empty glass eyes. She started running as if down some sort of terrible hallway, and the washers never seemed to run out, and never did the emptiness. It was an endless continuum, like those number line puzzles Hollis always used to love, except this time Nan was running on time and mental exhaustion alone.

She stopped. The washing machines and dryers whirred. She stared down at the child, who had not moved from her side, who was now clutching her sweating hand in her small hard one. "Did you say something?" Nan asked, but she knew the answer before she opened her mouth. She focused on the feeling of having her hand held for the first time in her entire life. She wondered if this was what connection felt like.

"What's your name?" asked the kid.

"Do you live around here?" she asked the child. The child didn't move or say anything.

“I don’t,” she said, as if she were having a conversation with herself. “I mean, I didn’t used to. I’m from somewhere much different than this.” The child still didn’t say anything.

“Anyways,” she Nan, swinging her body around from washing machine to washing machine. A drier behind her beeped. “I guess my stuff is all done now. My name is Hollis by the way.”

She turned around, and heaped the clothes onto the top of the dryer next to it. She felt bad for lying to the child about her name, for taking the name of her friend. She had always wanted to take her name though, in a different way, and this was her way of doing just that.

Nan turned her attention to the clothes. They were women's clothes, more lingerie, black and lacy. A bra in the shape of a clamshell. A lump formed in her throat. She felt dirty just touching it. Was this really hers to take?

“Oh, how silly of me,” she said, her hands shaking as she shoved the heap back inside the dryer. “This isn’t the dryer I used. These aren’t my clothes. Oh, how careless of me.” She looked over at the child. Her eyes were closed, and she was back in the corner. It looked like she had fallen back asleep.

Asleep. Oh, how I wish I were asleep, thought Nan.

“Perhaps I should go back to California,” she said aloud, but she wasn’t sure if she was talking to the kid or to herself. “Yes. California. I haven’t made a trip out there in so long.”

The kid's eyes opened, as large and round as silver dollars. She peered up at Nan, who felt like a giant by comparison. "Are you from California?"

"No. Yes," said Nan, and looked up at the ceiling. She didn't like looking people in the eyes most of the time. She felt the child's eyes on her and felt more and more uncomfortable. She couldn't bear to look in those eyes. "I have... a good friend who lives there... Her name is Hollis too. It's a... surname, you see."

Nan wasn't sure that the kid knew what a surname was, but before she could say anything, another dryer beeped. Nan looked around the laundromat, but of course there was no one there to claim the clothes. The child's eyes were still on her, but she busied herself with emptying the second dryer. No, she couldn't let it continue on and beep into the night! What an incessant noise.

"I didn't see you come in and put your clothes in," said the kid. "Are those yours?"

She scoffed, and looked through the warm pile of fabric in her arms. "Of course, you silly girl. Don't these look like my clothes?" They were just the basics; some jeans, a brightly colored banana-yellow blouse, what looked like a few pencil skirts. A white silk shirt with a collar. Some sort of professional woman wore these clothes, someone who Nan could be. "In fact, these are Hollis's clothes. I was just washing them for her so I can take them back to California. These are her favorite... bras." Nan turned pink and hoped the child wouldn't be able to see.

"I thought *you* were Hollis," said the child.

"No, no, no," said Nan, shaking her head as she slammed the top of the dryer shut much harder than she needed to. The metallic clunk seemed to echo throughout the

small space. “Surnames... uh, we have the same last name. So actually, I guess I am Hollis,” she said. “And you know, I did just move here, and I wanted to find a good laundromat to wash my clothes,” she said to the kid, who had still said nothing. “I did just move here. I go to school for fashion. It’s all very impressive and everything.” She looked at the kid in the corner, whose body hadn’t moved. But her eyes were twittering all over the place! “I have to go back to California to get my friend. She’s kind of like my sister. She’s just... she couldn’t... she couldn’t come over with me to start our new life here. So... all I have is her clothes.”

“So... but you’re not rich?” said the kid. Nan could hear the thirst on the edge of the kid’s voice. Was the kid homeless? Maybe her parents owned the laundromat. Nan didn’t care much to find out. After all, she had her new clothes, and all she had to do now was go home and transform. Yes... she would uncover all the mirrors, and undress herself, and then try on her new body, her new mask, and then look into the mirrors. Perhaps she would sit down at her desk and look into the mirrors that way, and sew on some things to these new clothes. She smiled to herself. Only a week in New York and already getting things for free!

“Yes, I suppose I’ll go to California,” she said, and gathered the bundle of clothes in her hands. They had now cooled down completely from the time she had stood and thought, stood and thought, and all the while with the child watching from the corner. Who would ever know if the child was homeless? It certainly wasn’t her problem at all. But California, these new clothes... yes, that could be her problem. She glanced at the kid once more, and walked out of the laundromat without another word.

She would make her way back to her apartment, taking the long way to do some more sight-seeing. She knew there must be all sorts of different interesting places to go, interesting places to eat and drink, and to shop, to buy clothes and furniture. She hadn't bothered visiting her school just yet, as she had been there before to visit in the past, when she thought she might like to attend someplace like it. She wasn't even sure now, as she walked across the darkened street, because she didn't know anybody or anything. The only thing she really knew how to do was to use a sewing machine, and even then she considered that skill to be pretty cheap.

And yet she wasn't sure, as she found herself far away from her apartment. Her phone had been dead for the entire day; she always had the hardest time remembering to charge it. She knew she couldn't have gone far and that her apartment building was on 89th Street. She didn't understand the subway systems in the city yet, and hadn't bothered to learn or to ask anyone before she came.

It was awfully dark, except for the street that was teeming with lights. She peered down it, but didn't see any taxis. In fact, it seemed like the entire street and the cars on it had completely stopped. All the lights were off, and as she walked along the road, there was no one sitting in the cars either. Everyone had shut up and gone to bed. She wished she had done that too, instead of going out.

But she had gotten her clothes, and the extra weight kept her warm as she clutched the bundle to her chest. She had gotten herself tonight, and surely that was worth anything. She didn't even know if there were any restaurants open nearby, any shop open that she could go into and ask for directions.

And then there was one; a salon, with blinking white and pink lights. It looked open, and as she pushed on the door handle, she could see a whole bunch of women sitting on the inside. She held her breath. She didn't know what to say to a whole bunch of women. They always made her nervous.

"Oh, are you closed for the night? I'm so sorry, I'll just..." she began as the women all stared at her without saying a word. The place was a bit shabby, and the bright fluorescent lights seemed to show every bit of dirt and grime that was swept into the corners. Nan could see all of it anyway. Everything on the counters looked like it was covered in at least two layers of dust. It looked like even the employees, or whoever these women were, didn't touch anything other than the seats of the chairs, or the ashtray sitting on a small three-legged table between them. Nan wondered how they got any work done at all, but she hesitated in front of them all the same.

"I must look so strange, me and my laundry, but I'm new in town, and..."

"In town? Yeah, I'll say you're new," said one of the women. Her hair was a dull, frizzy red, and it stuck out at the sides of her head. She had lines on her face and turquoise eyeliner underneath her eyes that made the brown in them stand out. Nan couldn't stop looking into the eyes of the woman; they reminded her of someone, but she couldn't quite remember who. "What are you, lost or something?" They were all smoking cigarettes, and they all had to be older than fifty. All of the sitting women were wearing their coats, as if they were going to step out and leave at any moment, or as if they had just come in for a little while, but Nan knew they had been sitting there for some time. The coats were big and puffy, and covered the bodies of every woman almost

completely. They were all relatively plain except for one woman, who was leaning against a dull gray counter. She had pale blonde hair and a mole near her lip; she reminded Nan strongly of someone she might see in a black and white film, not that she had seen many. She was beautiful. Nan's face burned, and she looked away from the woman. The woman was wearing multiple layers, orange-and-gray and then black all stretched tightly against her chest. She had on about a million different necklaces that covered her throat, ranging from actual silver chain-links all snapped together to bunches of plastic pearls. Nan loved the excess of it all, and as soon as she saw the woman, her mind started racing. The blonde woman wore dark-wash skinny jeans and Tory Burch sandals with socks.

“Well, do you want a cigarette? Or are you gonna buy something?” asked the blonde woman. She didn't look up at Nan. Nan looked at the cigarettes. She had never smoked one in her life. Nan bent down, the bundle of clothes still in her arms, and one of the women slid the paper into her lips and lit the end for her. She inhaled, just like she thought she should. The feeling was wonderful. She liked the smell and the taste. It tasted like fire. She held onto it with her teeth, and scrunched the laundry underneath her arm so that she could hold the cigarette, so that she could feel like a real person instead of a mannequin. She knew the clothes would get all smelly from the cigarettes, but that was something she liked. This new person she was becoming, this New York person, would smoke cigarettes.

“Thank you,” she said to the women. “And yes, I did want to buy something. I'm thinking about switching up my look. Do you have any...?”

“Nothing that a new hair color can’t fix,” said the woman with the turquoise eyeliner. She patted her own head. “This is a new color we just got in this week. I decided to try it out. Looks pretty good, huh?” she said. “Not too shabby for a beauty school dropout.” All the women nodded, and sucked on their cigarettes.

“Okay,” said Nan, as she inhaled and exhaled. “I’ll try the red hair dye.”

All the women grunted as the blonde woman leaned over and extracted a white bottle from underneath the register. “So, you one of those new rich hipster transplants? Wanna support local businesses or some bullshit like that? Wanna eat the rich or somethin’?” said the blonde woman from beneath the table. She stood up and slapped the bottle on the counter so hard that the shaky, splattered wood looked like it would fall apart under the added weight.

“Oh, give it to her for free, Junie,” said the woman with red hair. “She can be one of our models for the new color. Just say that Queen’s Salon gave it to you.”

“Queen’s Salon?” she blurted out before she could think about it. “Is that...?”

The women all laughed, and looked at her like they felt sorry for her. “Yes. We’re on 87th. This is 87th.”

87th? So she was near her apartment after all. She had walked all the way there not knowing one direction from the next, but it hadn’t mattered at all.

“Oh. Right. Well... thank you all.”

The women gave her a big plastic bag to hold all her stuff, the new clothes and the single bottle of dye. She hoped it would be enough to color her entire head, and after telling this to the women, they let her have another bottle, just to make sure. Nan was

sure she would never get such kindness again in her life. She felt like the luckiest girl in New York, all except for the fact that the blonde woman still wouldn't look up. Why wouldn't she look up?

Nan's cigarette had blown out all the way to the stump, and so she put it in the glass ashtray the women were sharing and they gave her another one. She said her goodbyes and went outside the shop, puffing on the cigarette all down the street until she reached the corner. Now she felt like a real New Yorker. Now she felt like a real person. She looked up at the street signs and walked until she found 89th. She turned the corner.

She found her apartment in less than ten minutes, two after her cigarette had burnt out. She let herself in, threw the bag of clothes and dye on the bed, and then went out to a corner store for another pack of cigarettes. She wasn't sure which ones to buy, so she just chose at random. She lit them with her candle lighter, and stamped them out one by one on the top of a jar filled with plastic buttons.

That morning, as the sun came over the horizon, she colored everything she owned red with the dye. It was in her hair. It stained her body, the floor, her new clothes, the furniture, the uncovered mirrors. She found that she couldn't see straight. The plastic shower-curtain insert she had gotten from Wal-Mart was a mosaic of dripping red glass.

She decided to leave the water running cold and stepped outside the bath, water streaming in rivulets, all tinted the color of blood. It clouded her eyes, it blotted out the moon. Water and hair dye covered her eyes as she danced outside the bathroom, naked

except for her own agony. The scarlet dye clumped in her still-wet hair, despite her attempts at scraping it from her scalp. She thought it would be great fun to be blind, if only for a moment. Perhaps she should've stayed at the night salon and let the women dye her hair for her.

She was a stumbling mess, smoking cigarettes, and dropping them on the ground as she walked around the apartment. She neared the window, and flung it open, not bothering to cover up her body. Who was she anyway? Who would try to expose her? Someone walking by in the early hours of the morning might look up and see her, but they might think it was just a mannequin, a doll of some sort. They would look and look, perhaps for a few minutes even, but then they would turn away and think what a strange place the world was.

BROOD

I found myself as I tidied up the apartment. Putting things back in their places from the hard-cover yellow suitcase laying beside the bed, upturned and gutted. The clothes hung out like intestinal tubes, twisted against each other. My Balenciaga sneakers were just a gift someone had sent me after they'd seen my Instagram. They thought my scrappy excessive upcycling warranted a pair of them. And I thought they did look better with my outfits. It matched my new life in New York, after all. Hollis had gotten a pair of knock-offs in high school, and I had always wanted to be just like her.

A blue hairbrush, thimbles of hair delicately strung along, snagged against the teeth. I placed it on the bathroom counter. It was a white, white bathroom with a glass shower, and I felt as if I'd walked into the place for the first time all over again.

I spent a few minutes plucking each thread of hair, my hair, out from the hairbrush and put the strands in the trash can underneath the sink. It was a silver trash can, metal; its solid weight was something I wanted for my new apartment.

After each hair had been removed from the brush, I went into the bedroom. It was the only other separated room in the place. It had a neat duvet cover spread along a wide, wide bed. It seemed so big, one large bed like that, and all for one small little person. The duvet was blue, with a big white and yellow daisy at the center.

I don't want to unpack my suitcase because I don't want to see what's at the bottom. The bunched up bolts of orange fabric I smuggled away, just because I gave the guards money. That I was just like her sister, so they had to let me do something that reminded her of home. I was more than her sister, but what did that mean? It sounded

like I was pleading, notes in my voice that I didn't even recognize. But I would never return it. Instead, I would use it. Here I sat, somewhere far away, with the crumpled orange prison uniform, wrinkling as I squeezed the fabric in my balled up fists.

Hollis was in jail. She'd been in jail. She had needed me, and I let her down. I had moved across the country, away from her, and she needed me, but I hadn't been there.

The day after I saw her, I booked a plane ticket as soon as I had woken up. I packed my suitcase with the uniform at the bottom. I didn't touch it and I didn't look at it as I piled my life on top of it, zipped it closed and wheeled it out the door. It had been so easy to leave.

But to this day, I still don't know how I left like I did. The first time I saw her on the other side of a thin plastic screen seemed so familiar; for some reason, this is how I had always seen her, through a thin veil of something else. There had always been a barrier there. It always felt like I was speaking past her instead of to her. And as I sat there, opposite her crumpled form, so beaten down, I was for once, glad for that disconnect.

I picked up the phone and almost cringed at the sharp, ringing noise the metal made as it bounced off the holder. On the other side of the screen, Hollis didn't move. I raised the speaker to my ear and said, much too normally, "I moved to New York."

I knew she wanted to ask me why I was here in the first place. I knew she wanted to talk about herself. She should've known better. I already knew everything. How she wasn't showing up to her court cases, how she wasn't following the first parole she had gotten, and why she was no longer being kept at the county jail. She said all of this with her eyes, and I understood it all in the instant she looked up at me.

"What?" she said, her voice raspier than you remembered. Older. Where had the time gone? I tried to ignore the voice, itching at the back of my skull. She had always owned me.

I didn't see her reach for the speaker phone, and I tried not to look at the veins running through her arms. I wondered if I looked any different to her.

"You look so different," she said. And smiled. Her under eyes were so dark, I wondered if she was getting any sleep. I'd always worried about her.

When I didn't respond, she said "It's a good different!" Her heaving breath rattled through the speaker phone.

"You don't look too bad yourself." A joke, and then, she laughed.

Before I couldn't stop myself: "I really miss the old days, you know." Even though I didn't.

"Yeah." She leaned back in her chair, the metal grating against the roughness of the gray cement floor. "Man, we had some great times." I didn't respond.

"So, fashion school?" she said, and I realized she wasn't just trying to keep the conversation. She knew. She knew.

I straightened, crossed my legs and looked her straight in the eye. “They said it was some of the most revolutionary work they had seen in years.”

“You know, I can never tell when you’re being sarcastic or not,” she said, smirking at me. It reminded me so much of how she used to smile at me. She seemed to have perfected it though, and this new smile looked like she had used it on hundreds of women. Men. I wondered if I’d been the first one, and how many others had followed suit. But I wouldn’t let her see my thoughts, so I just looked away.

“Yeah, well. I got in, didn't I?” I said. “You’ve gotten yourself into something too, huh?”

“Ahh, well you know,” she said, leaning forward.

I was about to say something, but she continued, “You on the other hand. Look at you. I’m so proud of you.”

I wished for just a moment that she could see how she had destroyed me. By letting drugs and other charges control her life, she had taken control of mine again. She had tried to fill her arms with whatever she could. She had written bad checks. I had figured it all out by piecing it together like a puzzle, online, by making some calls. It had broken my heart, but I still left and flew across the country to where she was being held, somewhere in San Francisco.

This would be goodbye.

The whole conversation only lasted fifteen minutes, and before long she was being pulled away by a beefy man all in white. Before I could stop it, my fashion brain made a mental note to start working on something so stiff and so cold. The uniform

seemed to speak to me as if it were its own entity, like it had separated itself from Hollis. It was all I could do to make sense of the situation.

It was then that I called out for the man leading Hollis away, back towards her cell; he let go of her and traipsed over to me. I could see Hollis' head cocked back, her body half-in the room, until she was roughly pulled in by someone on the other side.

I brought out my wallet even though no one had ever taught me how to bribe. I pushed the money between the man's thick fingers before he said anything and smiled up at him.

"I'm a fashion designer," I said, and stepped back from the man so that he could see my face, the fullness of my body. "I am just so fascinated by the uniforms in here. I don't suppose you'd like to provide me with some sort of sample? It might even make it on the runway."

He paused before responding, as if he didn't quite know what I meant. For a moment, I thought about showing him my Instagram, the follower count, bringing up funding. I started to bring out my phone, but before I could say anything, he said "We don't want any media attention." He turned away. I grabbed him by his shoulder, and was startled when he didn't lash out at me.

"Look," I said. "I just need a sample. Don't make this harder than it has to be. I could... I could..."

"Alright, alright," he said, and wrenched his body away from mine.

"Perhaps hers," I said, and looked into his eyes. They were black and mean.

He nodded, offered a series of several small grunts, and then trudged into the room Hollis disappeared into. The man was back in a few moments, sniffed, and didn't look me in the face when he handed me a plastic bag with the handles tied together. He pocketed the money only after he handed me the bag.

I whispered a thank you to the man, but he was already gone. I was completely alone in the room. I stood still, only for a few moments, gathering myself like the new woman I was even though I could smell the scent of Hollis already as I held the bag. And then I left.

But I felt like a dog.

And I sat here now, feeling the roughness of the orange jumpsuit cut into my cheek as I sobbed into my suitcase, my head buried in its dirty scent.

I let the jumpsuit fall from my tear-streaked hands like a dead thing. Without wiping my eyes, I sat at the new desk I just got. Even my sewing machine was new; it was a white serger, huge compared to the purple one covered in stickers I used when I was younger.

I moved the sewing machine to the side and took out a blank white sketchbook, reluctantly. My hand shook as I held a bit of graphite, but soon I found myself getting lost in the markings.

BOUND FANTASTIC

There is the sound of knocking. It is the sound of bones against wood, a clamoring of some kind. There is a woman asleep in a bed in the upstairs part of an apartment complex. The bed is large and circular and looks like it belongs in a gallery for furniture that isn't supposed to be used but instead looked at. The apartment complex is one where the walls are extremely thin and the doors are all very close together. The knocking is so loud that anyone in any of those apartments might've thought that the knocking was for them. The woman does not stir. Her eyes don't open at all.

But the woman is awake, still. She is plain, with mousy brown hair that might've once been blonde. Her face is hidden behind crinkly gray sheets. She is of average build and size, and has taken up much of the space in the bed, her limbs thrown out across the mattress, her hands splayed against the comforter. She wonders when the knocking will stop, when it even began. She wonders if she had been asleep when the knocking had started, if she had dozed off as it continued.

The knocking stops.

Another woman enters the room. She moves in a slow and careful manner, and has coppery-brown hair that falls just below her shoulders. She is wearing a plain red sweater with nothing on it and loose jeans that are cut severely right before her ankles. Her shoes are black and buckled, as if they had once belonged to a pilgrim. The woman in the bed, pretending to be asleep, shows no sign of moving or indicating that she is awake. She heard the knocking, yes, but she hadn't heard the other woman's footsteps.

“Not up yet?” the woman with the coppery-brown hair says, and disappears around a corner in the bedroom. The bathroom is that way, and the woman stoops to pick up a collection of dirty white towels that have accumulated by the doorway from the bedroom to the bathroom. She then turns again and heads towards the door of the bedroom. As she walks through the apartment, which is rather large, she passes multiple accolades that line the walls; photos, silk scarves hanging in frames, and glossy certificates. There is not even a speck of dust on the floor. The kitchen is stainless steel and industrial looking. The woman passes by it without even looking at it. The dining room, just off of the kitchen, has a table set for two, with a lavish and ornamental-looking vase in the center, sprigs of fake rosemary and bird-of-paradise spiraling outwards. The plates are an atrocious looking lime-green, and the napkins are cream-colored and folded into slim gray rings. Unlike the floor, there is a thin layer of dust covering everything at the table.

After starting the laundry, the woman comes back into the bedroom. She is now carrying two pill bottles in one hand and a small glass of water in the other. The woman walks to the bedside table and kneels down as if she is about to talk to a child before she sets the pills and the glass on the table. There is a coaster on the table, a purple knitted thing. It looks like it has been woven by two hands instead of a machine. The woman might’ve wondered where these had come from if she had not been the one to order them.

The woman in the bed doesn’t move.

“Nan,” says the woman kneeling. She says it so softly that Nan seems to not hear her at all.

“Nan, you’ve got to take your medicine today,” says the woman. “It’s been days since I’ve been here, and...”

“The place is fine,” says Nan, her voice brusque. She still does not roll over. The woman kneeling can still not see her face. Both women cock their heads to the side.

“Please,” says the woman, but she does not seem exasperated. She does not move either, as if she has been here enough times to know exactly what is expected of her.

The two women sit there facing each other. One sits as if sitting is what she must do, and the other lies in the bed as if it is what she must do. They remain like this for some time, until the light shifts slightly in the room. The curtains have been drawn; perhaps they were never closed at all. The sun leaks into the room.

The woman in the bed rolls over. The woman kneeling beside her only moves an inch, balancing up on the balls of her feet. The woman in the bed stares at the kneeling woman, and stares at her hard, as if accusing her of something. The woman in the bed gives off the impression that she was elderly and sick. She gave off an air of not only being ill but also of being surly and bad-tempered and having not left the house in an extremely long time.

The woman in the bed, Nan, has not made a move to take the pills from the bedside table. The woman kneeling stands. The women stare at each other for a few moments.

“You’ve forgotten the water,” says Nan, and breaks the thread between their eyes. “I can’t take my medicine without water. I’ve never been able to swallow them down dry.” She looks like she might cry, and rolls over again.

The woman standing does not move anything except for her eyes. They slowly roll in their sockets towards the bedside table, but it seems like she knows already that she has not actually forgotten the water. The cup is full, and it stands in the same spot that it has been put down, on the knitted coaster, completely untouched.

“Nan,” says the woman slowly, as if she is preparing herself for something. “You need to take your medicine today. Look, there’s plenty of water in the cup. I promise I didn’t forget it,” she says. “Again.”

The woman in the bed does not move.

“We also... need to leave today,” the woman standing says. She crosses her arms over her chest. “There are some designs you need to approve of, and we can’t do it over the phone.”

The woman standing leans over towards Nan, and touches her. Nan cringes at the touch. Both women seem uncomfortable with an act that seems so intimate. The woman helps Nan up, and her hand reaches out towards the bedside table, bringing the full glass of water to Nan’s hand. A bit of water dribbles out of the sides of Nan’s lips, but after a while, she swallows it all down.

Nan lies down, as if she is extremely tired after the whole ordeal. Her eyes close, The other woman notices this, and opens a closet door. She stands there for a moment, looking into the clean and orderly space that looks as if no one has ever touched any of

its contents, and brings her hand to her face in thought. She raises her arms and pulls out a few hangers, hanging them neatly on the edge of the closet door, so that if the woman in the bed were to open her eyes, she would see it. The clothes look like a sort of caricature of a human, as they hang there against the wall.

Nan finally opens her eyes and removes herself from the bed. She watches as the bed is made by her companion. The duvet is gray and soft and the woman making the bed folds the sheets underneath when she is finished. It looked as though there had never been a person in the bed at all. After the woman has finished making the bed, she turns her attention to the clothes, and helps the other woman into them. There is a cotton sweater in light periwinkle, and some soft brown corduroys.

One of the women calls a cab, and moments later one helps the other down the main staircase of the apartment building. It is an extremely fancy building, one made almost entirely of glass fixings. The stairs are a brushed metal on the bottom, but on the top they are translucent panes of glass. The front door to the apartment complex is extremely large and seems like it would be absurd in any circumstance. One woman opens the door for the other.

The two women get inside the waiting cab and ride in silence to the studio, the only movement being the turning of the driver's steering wheel and the women's nervous shifting. One of the women seems incredibly startled by how loud the world is. The other woman has taken out her phone, and is typing expectantly on it. The other woman cannot keep herself from looking out the window, like she can't believe how many people there are in the world as they drive past them all.

The cab stops in front of a squat rectangular building. It is not located in a very nice part of town in comparison to the apartment complex. One of the women pays the cab fee with a few taps on her phone, and helps the other woman out of the car. She looks like she could blow away in the wind.

The gray building is rectangular and boxy and seems like it does not fit in with all the landscape around it. Both the women seem to tense up as they get nearer to the front doors. The cab driver pulls away and they are both left there, standing awkwardly in front of the building.

“Most unfortunate,” one of the women says suddenly, and starts towards the doors of the building. Both women rush forward.

It is even louder inside the building than it was outside. Whorls and twills of orange fabric are being twisted this way and that, flipping through the air; bobbins and empty spools of thread are rolling around on the floor, along with empty Red Bull cans and coffee cups. A scraggly looking young man seems to have been watching the door, and he rushes over as soon as the two women make their way inside.

“Thank God you’re here,” he says, practically pushing over a bunch of people feverishly-pinning swatches of fabric onto dress forms. “You can see this place is nothing but a mess.”

“And why is that?” Both women tap their feet as if they are waiting for something important to happen.

The man in front of them looks like he wants to say something rude, but instead he rolls his eyes and says, “We just need Nan to approve these next designs. We’ve been

going crazy trying to get it all done, and we don't even know what she wants." His body turns away from theirs.

Nan narrows her eyes down at the ground, and the smile disappears from her lips. She looks as though she might start crying at any minute, as if she might break down completely. The other woman does not seem to notice, nor does anyone else in the room.

But she looks up and stares at the man's back and says, "Well let's take a look, shall we?" She smiles.

He seems a little shocked that she has spoken, but takes her by the arm anyway and leads her around the room like she is unable to walk by herself. The other woman walks behind them, quietly. They hear her say, "This room looks like a jailhouse." Nan closes her eyes.

"You've given us a few sketches, but we had to do around thirty looks for it to be considered a true collection," Leo tells them as they stop again at the front of the room. "It took us forever to find this authentic unique blend of polyester and cotton that wouldn't make these suits completely unbearable to wear," he says. Nan opens her eyes and looks out at all that she had not built, at everyone working, all the young people with bright dreams of their own, hoping that I'll give them so much as a glance, hoping that they will grow up to be like me, their faces as new and shiny as pennies.

"And you do want to have a show don't you? We usually have a show," Leo says when the woman doesn't answer. The woman looks up at him as though she has never hated anyone more.

The fire returns to the woman's eyes. It looks like she wants to do something rash.

But instead, she just laughs and positions herself at the front of the room.

"Cancel the collection," Nan says. Without another word, she turns around, opens the front doors, and lets herself out.

THE FIRES

After I got off the plane, I took an Uber down into the city, San Francisco, but I didn't know exactly where I was going. I didn't have an address to give to the driver, so I just made one up, hoping that there might be some chance that it was actually where I needed to go. Of course it wasn't, and the driver said he was going to charge me extra and make sure I would never be able to use Uber again. He was so mean to me. I asked him if he knew of anywhere to stay that was cheap, somewhere I could stay for an extended period of time. He told me about a boarding house that was on the outskirts of the city, one of the only ones that existed. I looked into his eyes after I gave him a five-star review, but they were completely empty and they terrified me.

The room in the boarding house was a cold, blue slate, as blank and white as a sheet of paper. The room wasn't furnished save for a rather large and frumpy bed and a shabby brown armoire in the corner. The carpet was bare and brown. The walls were covered in an old yellowing wallpaper that I thought must've been several decades old; vintage. An antique fan with brass fixtures clicked and whirred. As soon as I stepped into the room, I felt like I'd gone back in time a number of years, but I said I'd take the room anyway. I ended up spending an entire week since my arrival in the large, creaking bed, watching TV on my computer. I wasn't sure what to do with myself.

I decided to get up. The room was rather old-fashioned, which was something I liked. It felt like I had stepped back to a time where I could be anyone, and perhaps now I finally could. I was here to see a friend, Hollis, who I didn't really want to see. I did

send her some money a while back, even though we weren't really in contact. We didn't keep in touch with one another.

My legs seemed to creak as I slid them over the side of the bed. The carpet felt like a crust underneath my feet. The suitcase, a pale green one that I had thrifted from a flea market years ago, sat in the corner.

I took a deep breath and opened the suitcase. The clothes had all been thrown in haphazardly, as if the person who had packed it had to leave in a hurry. Annoyed, I picked through the clothing, finding a handful of stray pins at the bottom from something I had been working on from before I had left New York a week earlier. A few of the pins stuck into my skin, but I just brushed them aside instead of picking them out one by one. After all, I hadn't brought my sewing machine with me. I hadn't even brought a pocket sewing kit with a needle or thread.

I felt something heavy drop to the bottom of the suitcase as I rifled through it. The heavy object pushed against the fabric of a light blue silk shirt I had gotten for \$2.99 at the Salvation Army. It fell to the bottom with a satisfying clunk, until I pulled it out. It was my bottle of fancy French perfume, the one that was supposed to smell like a meadow of lavender and clean sheets and the color of pale, pale yellow. It didn't even look like it had been opened yet, and I then wondered how I knew the smell of it so well. I hadn't even packed a toothbrush, but I had remembered to pack this perfume. I blushed.

I decided to unpack the suitcase. I could imagine myself laying out each piece of clothing with great care into the armoire. I wondered what kind of wood it was made

from as I turned my head to peer at it again, the great hulking thing. It was funny how something could be so elegant and graceful at the same time that it was so large and ominous. The past few nights it had loomed over my bed, and I had woken several times gasping in the night, clutching my breast, covered in a thin, cold sweat. I thought there had been someone standing in my room, a woman, graceful yet looming, someone who wanted to hurt me. But each time I awoke, it was just the armoire in the corner of the room, standing there silently, looking like it had a human face.

But today, I would claim the armoire as mine. I opened the two great, gaping doors, letting my hand run carefully along the curving body of the wood. The doors were so ridiculous and large, and there were no hangers, so I just dumped my clothes into the first drawer and whatever wouldn't fit into the second. The wood was splintery in the drawers, and I recoiled as soon as my skin brushed the roughness. I slid them shut and folded over the lid of my suitcase, sliding it under the bed and out of sight. No one would know I was a guest here. Maybe they would think I lived here.

I realized I had been in the same clothes for quite some time. I opened the bottom drawer and took out a clean shirt and clean pants, not bothering to see if they matched or looked well together. It didn't matter. My feet barely touched the roughness of the carpet as I laid the clothes out on my bed, taking the utmost care to unfold the sleeves, the torso of the top, each pant leg, and smooth it out over the crumpled sheets.

I went to the bathroom and into the shower. I used a piece of new yellow soap that they had left in there for me. It had come in a new, white paper package and I so enjoyed ripping it off like it was a present. I used it to wash my hair and every part of my

body, even though I didn't know what I was getting ready to do. I told myself I wouldn't go see her, no, not quite yet. Not until I had scoped out everything there was to see.

I got out of the shower, and toweled my hair dry. It took quite a long time. I had let my hair grow long, and now it was becoming tangled and unruly. I looked in the mirror, hazy with steam, and wondered if there was a soul out there who would consider me beautiful. In almost the same instance, I wondered how long Hollis's hair was. She had always kept it short, but I couldn't help imagining her face in the mirror instead of mine, her hair long and curling up at the ends.

I sat around near the window, in a scratchy beige robe that had been left in the bathroom and I spent a significant amount of time looking out into the cold January morning, wondering about what this place looked like in the summer. Then, I went over to my computer and tried to do some of my homework and research the medieval use of textiles for my History of Fashion class I was supposed to be going to. I tapped through a few web pages, clicked through a few images, and almost jumped out of my chair when my computer chimed, signaling that I got an email.

I pulled up the page for my inbox and was shocked to find a message from Hollis. I didn't move as I stared at the screen. I could feel my face flushing. I tried not to think of the bundle of clothes and bras I had brought from New York, the clothes that weren't even mine, the ones I had claimed to be hers. Did she know I had taken them for her? Did she know I had used her name? Did she know I was here to see her?

After a few minutes, I clicked onto the email. There was no subject, and the only reason I knew it was from her was because it was sent from her old school address, the

one she had used before when she asked me for money. I held my breath and squeezed my legs together as I read the message, trying not to think of the clothes in the armoire, the armoire's eyes boring into my back, or the lingering smell of French perfume, cheap and musty.

The email said:

Thanks so much for sending me that money it really helped me out a lot let me know if theres anything i can do for you i care about you so much miss seeing your face

If youre ever in the area let me know

I have another payment coming up so it would be great if you could just send me a little bit more not sure how much

Payment? I swallowed my tears. I wasn't sure which part of the email I was supposed to be focusing on. I closed my eyes and turned off the computer.

But I was in the area. Was this some sort of sign? Were we supposed to be meeting?

I decided that I might go out for a bit to get some fresh air. It wasn't all that cold today, I decided, not at all like it had been in New York. I wondered, in the back of my mind, if I might see Hollis somewhere, at a shop, or on the road. I could flag her down and tell her why I had come all this way. I couldn't believe I hadn't thought of this loophole before. If I saw her by bumping into her, by happenstance, then it wouldn't be as awkward, as formal. It would be just two old friends catching each other by surprise, and what a wonderful surprise it would be! I couldn't wait to see her.

I couldn't wait for this to happen, so I put on my shoes by the door, grabbed my key and my coat, and took nothing else with me. I stepped outside the door and locked it behind me. I put the keys in my pocket and felt the cold metal outline against my leg. I was wearing the same overly large blue velvet coat that I knew would make me stand out. Perhaps my friend remembered me that way.

A loud, piercing siren interrupted my thoughts. I was almost blinded by the noise, and gripped the side of the staircase. I had leather gloves on my hands. They were red leather. I didn't remember when I had put them on.

As soon as I gathered my senses, I walked down the stairs to the lobby of the boarding house. The kitchen was on the main floor, as well as a living room with a couch and a big, comfy-looking fireplace. I knew that some of the people staying here sat around to talk in the evening, but they were almost all extremely elderly. Their reverence made me depressed. I had only seen them the day that I had come in, but a part of me knew they sat there every night, talking about when they had been young, as if those were the greatest years of their lives. It made me feel cold and angry, and so even though I heard them downstairs every night, I stayed shut up in my room and refused to emerge.

But today, there was no one around. That was odd, even though I wasn't sure what time it was. The sun was milling about weakly in the sky, so I knew it had to be before mid-day. The sound of the siren blared in my head. Where was it coming from?

I went outside, and as soon as I breathed in the cool, winter air, I inhaled the tang of smoke. It smelled like wood burning. It smelled like the fireplace inside the boarding

house, but I knew that when I had walked past it earlier, the hearth had been cold.

Where was the fire coming from?

I looked up into the sky, and at the edge of the horizon there was a smudge of blackish beige, the hint of smoke. Something truly was on fire, and it looked like it was coming from the city. Was something from the city on fire? How terrible. Ash flitted through the air. It looked like it was snowing.

I walked a bit towards the parking lot, and noticed that not a single car remained there. That was very strange; so there really was nobody in the boarding house but me. Very strange. Maybe everyone had gone to see what was on fire, where all the smoke was coming from.

I took my phone out of my pocket and pulled up the Lyft app. Strangely, there weren't a lot of options coming up for drivers. I thought I'd like to get a fancier car just to show off if I were to see Hollis, but the only thing available was a 2004 Prius. The driver's name was D'Lacey. It sounded like the kind of name of a person you might find in San Francisco. I felt very much connected to the place all of a sudden, like I belonged. Even the blackish plume of smoke in the distance seemed to beckon me forward, to call me to it. My phone said that D'Lacey was four minutes away. As I sat and waited for the car to come, I thought about what I would find once I got to the plume of smoke. Would there be a huge fire right in the city? Was it all burning to the ground as I sat there? And how had the city gotten on fire in the first place? Wasn't January supposed to be a time where there were no fires at all? I thought it was much too cold for that kind of thing. If there were anyone around at all, I could've asked them what they thought about it, if

they thought it was strange at all. After all, no matter how much I pretended, I was not from California at the end of the day. Maybe they had these kinds of things happen all the time. Maybe fires constantly dappled their cities. I was unsure.

I sat and sat and waited, and all the while the smoke seemed to thicken around me. It seemed like the smoke was escaping from the city and coming off into the surrounding area where the boarding house was. I kept watching the plume of smoke at the city grow bigger and bigger, until I could hardly breathe, for the scent of smoke was incredibly strong. I wondered where Hollis was during all of this.

I was unsure and I couldn't breathe very well due to the gathering smoke, so I went back inside the boarding house and peered out the front window. I was sure that if anyone had been by, they would've seen me, a small circle glowing, perfectly framed in the window. I hoped someone would come. I was awfully bored. I kept checking my phone. The timer on the Lyft app did not change from 4 minutes no matter how many times I reopened the app.

It must've been about an hour when the car finally arrived. The Prius was even dingier than I expected, or perhaps it was all the smoke. The car looked like it had driven straight out of it, like it had come from the place where everything was burning down. I ran outside quickly just in case the driver thought the place was deserted and that the call had been some sort of prank. He saw me, slowed to a stop, and I got in.

The entire car stank like cigarette smoke, which was an awful mix with the smoke from the fires outside. I wasn't sure which was worse and nearly gagged before I saw

D'Lacey crane his neck over into the backseat and smile at me. His smile seemed to be pressed onto his face, and he looked very afraid.

“Hello,” I said. “I’d like to go into the city.”

“Yes, yes, I thought you might,” he said, but he didn’t turn his head back to the wheel. “You know, there’s a terrible fire down there,” he said. “I just came from it. Everyone’s being told to evacuate, you know. I think you should consider going somewhere else.” He peered down at me for good measure. “You should go back to wherever it is you came from. It’ll be much nicer there.”

He looked at me, but crossed my arms. “I am from here, thank you,” I said and looked him sharply in the eye. “I live in the city with my sister, and I was out doing business with someone at this boarding house before I saw the smoke. I need to go and make sure she’s okay. That’s where we’ve lived together for ages, you know,” I said. “Take me there at once.”

I looked up a random address on my phone and gave it to him. He looked weary and turned back to the steering wheel. He was a thin, balding man, and I found myself extremely disappointed that he wasn’t more interesting. In fact, I thought I might forget he existed at all the minute I got out of the car. I thought that nothing better could happen to this Prius than if it burned up completely in the fire.

We drove along in silence, and I sat imagining again. I imagined myself so far away that I ended up in a puff of black smoke. I looked around at the floor of the car. There was trash stuffed into the corners of the seats and into the cupholders on the doors. In addition to all the smoke, the car also smelled strongly like lemons, but I could

also just make out the smell of something deeper. It smelled like an animal had died here. I looked into the cupholder on my side of the car; inside it, hidden between a few old fast food wrappers, was a pair of black sunglasses. I picked them up. They were cheap and flimsy and it looked like the lenses could pop out if I applied even the slightest bit of pressure. I looked up at D'Lacey, and when I was sure he wasn't looking, I slid the sunglasses into my pocket, and then turned to look out the window at the smoke as it rushed by.

At some point during the drive, D'Lacey must've taken out a pack of cigarettes, because the smell of the smoke got stronger. The smell of lemons and death also seemed to get stronger as he puffed on it. The windows were all up. We were sealed inside the car. I really wanted a cigarette too so that I could be part of the smoke, but I didn't dare ask.

After a while, I began noticing how the smoke from outside seemed to encircle the car. It wasn't just the cigarette smoke that I smelled. It seemed like we had driven straight into the belly of the fire itself. D'Lacey seemed to become more and more nervous as we drove. I was unsure of how he could really see anything. The smoke had become so thick around us that I bet he didn't have the slightest idea of where we were going. Something like nervousness, like panic, rose into the back of my throat, but I just kept imagining my way through the fog of it all, through the black plumes. I started to hum a little bit to calm myself. I hoped D'Lacey didn't mind. I had a sister in the city, someone very close to my heart, and I needed to get to her. That was all. I wasn't nervous because I needed to be with someone, simple as that. Once I was with that

person, we would decide what to do about the smoke together. D'Lacey could drive away in his terrible little car. I decided I never wanted to see him again. He made me feel quite terrible about myself for some reason. He made me feel like I was crazy. I decided I was the lucky one out of the two of us, and straightened my back against the seat, crossing my arms over my chest.

“This is as far as I can take you,” D'Lacey said, and craned his neck back around to stare at me. I wasn't certain until now, but his entire demeanor seemed extremely bird-like, and made me very uneasy. I looked outside the windows, but I saw nothing but drifting smoke. I wasn't even sure how far we had made it into the city. Time, especially when in a stranger's car traveling through great plumes of smoke, seemed to escape me again.

I stepped outside the car and watched it speed away, but only for a moment, because it disappeared from view in a matter of seconds. I switched on my phone to pay.

It turned out that we were, in fact, on a road, and not driving along on someone's lawn or on the edge of a mountain range like I had imagined. Now that I was outside of the car, I found that I could see a little better, but not by much. I seemed to have made it to the very outskirts of the city. It was a pretty quaint place when nobody was around. All the panic I should've felt had completely subsided. I felt very calm and knew that this might've been the most perfect activity I could've hoped to accomplish today. I felt rather proud of myself for having made it out of the boarding house at all.

I decided to walk around, and brought my coat up to cover my nose and mouth. I buttoned it up so that it would lay against my face like a kind of mask, and then fished in my pockets for the sunglasses I had taken from D'Lacey and put them on too. I felt very professional, and moved from the barren and empty street onto the sidewalk. As I walked, I could just make out the edge of some small shops and restaurants that looked enjoyable. I let my mind wander among the smoke, and thought about which one of those me and Hollis would choose to go into. What sort of food would we eat? What sort of things might we look at? Would we consider buying anything? I wasn't even sure where my friend lived, much less what she liked to do. I had only known her very well for about two years, and we had been very young. And where were the firemen?

I walked towards where I saw the outline of the shops, and stopped at a telephone pole with quite a few flyers taped to it. They were flapping in the slight rush of wind that accompanied the smoke. Perhaps the wind was to blame, then. They were colorful flyers, and every single one seemed to say something different, yet there were multiples of each one as well. There were so many of them taped all around one another, so many duplicates of them that it created a very strange effect, like I was looking down into one of those old children's toys, the cardboard tubes with the glittery paper around them and the plastic eyepiece. As I stepped closer, I could just barely make out what each of the flyers was advertising. Kite Day in a local park that was supposed to come after the cold and rainy season. Shops having discounts all throughout the week. Indoor concerts and live jazz music at a few of the restaurants. I could see the faces of the musicians. They looked so happy. They looked like they had found their place in the world.

The smoke was coming in waves now. It was getting harder and harder to breathe as I walked through each wave, but I knew I had to check one more place; the marina.

I wasn't sure how far away it was, and upon taking my phone out of my pocket, it appeared to be completely out of battery. I wasn't concerned that I wouldn't find my way back, but more so of which direction the marina was. Due to the clouds of smoke, I was unable to see the distance to where the marina was. I knew I had seen it before, perhaps when I had come in on the plane, the stretch of sparkling water that seemed to contrast so greatly to the drabness around it. Come to think of it, perhaps San Francisco was not my city at all. I decided I didn't like it, and that I must convince Hollis to move with me to New York at the utmost urgency. This place was clearly dangerous; what sort of area just randomly caught fire, and during the winter months? I had noticed that the air was particularly dry when I arrived, but I had only been here for a month, and so therefore could not make any conclusions.

The smoke was getting stronger all around me now, and was whipping my coat up and around my body. The makeshift button-mask I had fashioned for myself had come apart entirely, and my eyes were streaming tears all down my face. Wherever the fire was, it was certainly very near to me at that moment even though I still hadn't seen any flames at all. I wasn't sure what sort of crazy idea I had had to be able to successfully enter a city that was burning from the ground up. Certainly the city was very large, and surrounded by water, and yet it had still caught fire. There were no people around. I thought for sure I was going to die in a city that I didn't even know, that wasn't even mine.

But I knew I had to see the marina. I started walking, slowly, with my eyes half closed, towards wherever I thought the marina might be. Perhaps I switched directions at a certain point and turned around completely, heading the opposite way that I had just come from. Perhaps I was trying to find a singular way out of the smoke where I could get just a hint of fresh air, some water, or a familiar face. Or a car that wasn't old and beat-up and unfashionable. I had never longed for the boarding house more, or for my little quaint apartment in New York.

I thought if I might wander around in the smoke, some sort of holy order or stroke of luck would take hold of me and my sense of direction and lead me right to my destination, or wherever it is I ought to go according to destiny or fate. I also thought that if I was meant to die, it wouldn't actually be so terrible.

I ended up bursting open into a sort of clearing. The air was much brighter here, much more fine, and I could see for several paces in front of me. It was the marina, finally, with the sweetest boats bobbing all around. The entire thing seemed completely untouched by the fire, yet there was still nobody around. I turned around to face where I had just come, and it seemed all the smoke had created a sort of wall that stopped right here, at the edge of the water.

The water stretched out in front of me as far as I could see. The flat expanse of dark grayish-blue led right up to the edge of where the sky was, and the colors were so close together that I couldn't tell where the ocean ended and the sky began. The shadows of the boats bobbing in the calm and glossy water stretched across the marina and climbed up onto the deck where they merged with my shadow. There were sailboats,

mostly, and the windows were dark and solid against the white-and-red stripes that lined most of them. White poles sliced into the twilight, and the sails stayed slapped up against them, or were probably folded up and put away until the next day.

I was still surprised that I hadn't seen anyone yet. There seemed to be something safe about being at the water's edge, especially the way the smoke encircled it, not daring to come any closer, as if it might dissipate the moment it came into contact with the water. Surely finding the marina meant something. I wished with all my might that Hollis could've been here to see it with me, to look up and see the hard white glitter of the stars against the gathering blue dusk.

I decided I would stay at the marina and wait it out. Either the smoke would clear and the fire would be put out and I could go back to the boarding house and try again the next day, or I could wait until my friend met with me here. I walked along the water until I found a white metal bench that I could sit on to wait more comfortably. I watched the water.

The sky began to darken and it began to get very, very cold. I began to be even more aware of the stench of smoke surrounding me, and even though I knew it must be clinging to my clothes, I knew not to take off my coat or I would freeze right there on the bench. I sat shivering and looking at the black, lapping water for what seemed like hours. The night continued to darken and the temperature continued to drop. The shadows along the sides of the boat slipped into the water and disappeared from view. I scratched the toe of my shoe against the white speckle of the concrete and relished in the scraping sound it made.

It began to snow. Cold, wet drops splattered along the lining of my coat. At this point, I realized I had lost a glove, but I didn't care. I stood up from the bench, and my eyes widened in wonder. Every second it seemed to snow harder. I turned back to look at the wall of smoke that I had left behind me and it looked like it was disappearing, getting smaller just as the snow started to pick up. If I hadn't been so happy, I would've been worried, worried and panicking and anxious about half a dozen things, about the cold, about how I was going to get home, about where my home should even be, but in that moment, I could only focus on the smoke as it dissipated.

I ran back towards the way I had come like I was a child who had never seen snow before. Snow in California? Was that such a normal thing? I was still exasperated that there were still no people around to ask about this, but the thought seemed to annoy me less and less as the snow fell. The smoke seemed to be completely gone now, and was replaced instead by a cold white glow. I couldn't believe my luck. First the marina, and now the fires were gone. I had made it through.

I decided I had no other option than to go back to the boarding house and try again later. There was no one around, and surely the boarding house was still standing, unless the fire had spread all the way out there. No, there was simply nothing to do. I couldn't wait around, especially now that the weather had completely toppled over. I wasn't sure what was next in this craziness. Hollis wasn't coming. I wasn't sure why I had ever thought that she would.

I did have a card for the Bay Area Rapid Transit train, and I had loaded money on it as soon as I got to the boarding house. I knew based on the roads I had been

wandering down for so long that the BART station was not only near where I was currently walking, but it also would drop me off relatively near where the boarding house was. Perhaps that's why I was never really worried about finding my way home; I always knew I had lots of tricks up my sleeve, even if I didn't always remember what they were.

As I got closer, I realized I wasn't even sure if the train was even working at this point, especially considering that the power appeared to be out and everyone in the city had probably been evacuated. Not even the firemen had ventured into the city to put them out. Was it really so dangerous? I didn't think it was. After all, I had braved them, and I was really no one at all. But perhaps I was braver than all of them, though I didn't feel like it as I approached the station. It was completely dark and deserted. There were no trains to be seen, as if they had all left right on time. None had come in since then. I felt exasperated yet again. Was there to be no ease in this world at all?

As I was walking, I nearly ran into a parked car. It turned out that this vehicle was the same drudgy old one that had brought me to the city in the first place. The paint had been dull and unwashed before, but now the entire body of it was almost completely unrecognizable; it was caked in black soot. The car seemed to now have a permanent tinge of brownish-greenish-black. It looked absolutely terrible.

I walked over to the driver's seat. Sure enough, D'Lacey was sitting there, and it looked like he was asleep against the steering wheel. Thinking of nothing else better to do, I tried to knock gently on the window to rouse him a bit, but perhaps I did it a bit too sharply due to the amount of adrenaline I had worked up. He started all too quickly, and

when he saw me, he looked rather angry and displeased. I felt taken aback by that, and the remembrance of how much I disliked him came rushing back all at once. I still thought it was good timing that I had run into him here, that it was simply another stroke of my luck. After all, now I had a ride home so that I could put that plan into execution. I hadn't gotten burned up by the fire. Everything seemed to be falling into line.

D'Lacey didn't make any movements to roll down his window so that I could explain myself and ask for a ride back in a more polite manner, so I just took a few steps back, opened the back door, and climbed in. Again, he craned his head back to stare at me in that birdish manner, but I suppressed my distaste.

"I'm so sorry to bother you, again," I said, using my most polite tone. "But I just learned that my friend has already evacuated. Would you mind...?"

"I thought you said she was your sister," said D'Lacey, and his voice was dismissive. Did he think I was just a crazy woman roaming the streets? That I would purposefully and by choice walk straight into a city on fire? He was the one who had to be crazy... or did he know who I truly was? Did he know the truth?

He started the car, but I couldn't think of anything to say other than "Yes... that's right, my sister," in a soft voice that sounded like it had come from somewhere very far away, outside the car and on the small mounds of snow that were beginning to form over the old snow that had hardened into dirty crusts.

I saw D'Lacey look into the rearview mirror as we pulled away. "Are those my sunglasses?" I didn't say anything.

For the first time I had been in California, I thought about leaving and going back to New York without seeing Hollis at all. At least the weather wasn't very confusing there. Everything was more confusing here. I found that I couldn't really trust anyone, not even the people I paid to house me and drive me around. I couldn't even trust the emails.

I wasn't sure about anything anymore. Perhaps I would wait it out. I would go into my room at the boarding house and I would lay in bed until everything felt better. Until all the fires went away, not just the ones in the city. Until the snow came and covered everything.