Isabel Geary Phelps Honors Thesis: The Love Parade

English Department

Defended Monday October 21 2019

Jeffrey DeShell: Thesis Advisor ENGL Department
Karen Jacobs: Thesis Board Member ENGL Department
Annjeanette Wiese: Outside Department Member HUMN Department
Marcia Douglas: Additional Member ENGL Department
“Love is a murderer.”

-LCD Soundsystem
Chapter One

_A Funeral_

The weeks after the accident went by, undistinguished and hazy—masked by grief and an agony that caused the young girl to disregard everything and everyone. She neglected her normal duties; coming home each day, she retired immediately to her room, reappearing each morning for school. The young boy took a week off. His room, usually a rotating gallery of artistic, prodigy masterpieces, displayed no new works. He did not leave the house for ten days and remained in his room as the girl came and went. Their mother, the widow, busied herself with elaborate funeral plans of dove releases, gun salutes, readings from Dickens, Neruda, and Pushkin, all of which fell through by the funeral date.

It was held in the cemetery on a day with overcast but no rain. The girl wore black; the boy wore black; the widow wore black, and when the family of three rolled up to the graveyard behind the hearse in a black limo, the young twins saw that everyone wore black. As they stepped from the car, the widow opened a large, black umbrella, shielding her children from the dark, rainless sky. Six pallbearers carried a casket to the stand and the mournful group sat in black, fold-out chairs. A slight wind caused the smallest tree branches to bend and twist. Strangers and family members alike sniffled, muffling sobs into white handkerchiefs that looked like doves, blowing in the gusts among the dull clothes of the mourners. The girl looked around the gray cemetery. Her eyes strained through the fog for ghosts, spirits, and mirages. A crow landed on a headstone, letting out a caw.
A precision of people lined up to speak at the thin podium, eulogizing the man, now lying, eyes closed, in a casket on a stand, who resisted paraphrase and stood, in the minds of the audience, larger than story could illustrate. They spoke of bravery, of altruism that tested the great heroes of the world’s history, of a never-ending scholarship—grand theories and philosophical innovation; he was a leader of people, a commander, and an empath. His widow, so stricken with grief and sudden, permanent, and premature abandonment, could murmur through tears only the word goodbye. With the funeral’s end, each guest walked slowly to their car, got in, and drove away from each other to their separate, enduring lives.

The widow, the boy, and the girl arrived back at their house just as the clouds filled to the point of saturation and water fell, heavy, on the hood of the car and the tudor home. The house, in the cloudy light and rain-filtered air resembled a miniature castle with A-frames stacking from the foreground back. The entryway was built of pale stones; farther back, dark red bricks stood sturdy and auspicious. Protruding to the right was a convex cylinder, the inside of which was a circular floor to ceiling bookshelf, home to an esoteric collection of great literature—one that would likely not be perused again.

The boy, in his room, picked up a dark blue colored pencil and tore from a forgotten notebook a piece of lined paper. The girl, in her room, took three advil for a headache she thought may come, put in headphones, and turned on a Billie Eilish album. The widow sat alone, in the dark living room. A bottle of wine sat next to a half empty glass.
When the last cords of the album played into the girl’s ears, she stood, and walked toward the open door of the boy’s bedroom. She tapped her knuckle on the wood as she stepped through the threshold. On the far wall hung two pictures, one attached by a tack, the other had been pushed through a large nail that permanently jutted from the wall. They were both drawn on lined notebook paper; the one on the left was of a boy, the one on the right, a girl. Where the girl’s head should have been, flew a flock of colorless birds—doves—twelve or thirteen of them, all right above her thin neck. They pointed in all different directions but were still, in just that moment, drawn as part of a flock. The boy’s imaginary head was made up of trees, all of the trunks coming down to make a neck, and the tops growing up towards a blank, save for the light blue lines of the notebook paper, white sky. There were four trees where the boy should have had a head—three generic, puffy trees, and one, second from the left, with such detailed leaves that, looking closely, the girl could see the spine of each. She turned back towards him. He was lost, busy with another drawing, and hardly noticed her. She gazed at the fresh piece and saw, under his working arms, a pencil drawing of a man in a lightly shaded button up shirt with a dark gray overcoat. The shirt had one breast pocket; the overcoat had two pockets a third of the way up from the bottom hem. Where the head would have been, a large bouquet of flowers sprouted up. The picture was colorless, but they were made distinct from each other by dark outlines. There were a few fuller ones that, had there been color, would have been broad, yellow sunflowers. In between these, were longer, thinner flowers that had seed-like petals along the stalk. To fill the rest of the space, he had drawn small daisies and poppies.

“Trees, birds, and flowers,” the girl said.

“The big three,” the boy replied.

Then neither of them spoke, so she got up and walked out.
The next months were spent in a deep, speechless solitude. The mirrors were covered; black bands were worn; the three did not look at each other; they did not look at themselves; with the lights off, they passed by each other like ghosts—whatever walked there, walked alone—and as winter wore into spring and the days grew brighter, dark curtains were purchased and placed in front of the windows. The girl stole liquor bottles from a small downstairs cabinet, sleeping with them each night and most days. The boy drew enough pictures to fill a small museum. The widow, still clad in long dark dresses, still locked away in the far side of the house drinking wine and crying into her cold, pale hands, began to wither away, weighing no more now than she had in her youth; it appeared as if even her bones had shrunk away with grief and longing.

The twins, Maia and Wyatt, shared, even during this time of dazed isolation, a bond that may have even strengthened in the silence that overtook the dim house in those lonely months. Though the two rarely looked up from their own feet as they drifted around the house, they understood each other and grew out of the mourning with the mute help of the other. Alison, the widow, was not so lucky, and was not allotted a companion during the grieving period. She drifted from her children, recognizing them, when she finally looked up, less even than she recognized herself. As the twins emerged out the other side of a depressive, brutal, and unnaturally long winter, the widowed mother could not withstand the bits of life that returned to the house. She would wander into a room to find a curtain cast aside and a sliver of golden light falling across the wooden floor. She’d tell the twins it stung her eyes like sand and scalded her skin like an iron, but still, gradually, enduringly, room after room, the house was bathed in a mid-morning light that forced the widow to take leave
from the common areas of the home, in favor of her room at the far end of the large house—the rare willful prisoner of a solitary and dark dungeon.
Chapter Two

*A Party*

In just a week after the widow took to her room, the sorrow that clung to the walls like drying paint began to dissipate. The two returned to the pulse of the world; they opened the windows to the birth of spring, and left behind their vow of silence, whispering to each other in the empty house, laughing as the fresh air blew in. It wasn’t long before the healing spread through their bodies, lifting the signs of sorrow they thought would never disappear. The two agreed to feed this new life and agreed to attend a party being thrown to celebrate the end of high school and the beginning of adulthood.

The boy sat on the edge of his bed, looking at the closed curtains of his window as though he could see the world outside. He tied his shoes and stood, stepping over the small carpet that had bunched itself into a loose knot of the wooden floor. He picked up the fresh drawing of the man in the overcoat with the head of a bouquet and hung it above the ones of the boy and girl, like a family trees—as if the lineage were plagued with a hereditary malady resulting in a skulless, mindless condition—connected with nature to an inhumane degree, bearing their affliction at the neck.

In her room, the girl put on makeup, pushed her hair from her dark green eyes with a black bandana, slid into white shorts and a black t shirt with pale lettering that read “EAT SLEEP WHISKEY.” Her father had gotten the shirt at a small hotel that rested above a bar in Chicago. He’d gone to lecture at the university on the repetition of folklore and the archetypes produced in fairy tales, arguing that all literature is simply a modernized version, a conglomeration of prototypes
originally written in age old tales. She looked at herself in the mirror still covered in dust from its months hidden under a twin sized sheet. The family had thrown him a party in celebration of his successful dissertation and the following lecture tour, the attending of seminar after seminar, his constant presence as the keynote speaker for grander and grander scholarly gatherings. He’d made a toast, saying he and his wife had the very daughter and son from his favorite tale, *Hansel and Gretel*. “Only,” he’d added, “We’d never abandon our children.” He’d held his glass high while he spoke; his actions infectious, and the guests’ glasses raised in mimicry, clinking together.

“Ready,” Wyatt asked her from the door, bringing her to the present.

The two drove up to a house at the back of the neighboring woods. To the right of the log cottage sat a lake, black in the darkening evening; a bonfire smoldered on the beach, sparking excessively—brightest as it began to extinguish. The porch lights were on, attracting bugs that landed on the burning bulb with a faint sizzle. The twins walked up to the door, and Maia reached out to knock as Wyatt turned the doorknob, pushing by her into the warmly lit house, saying over his shoulder, “No one knocks at big parties.” She could barely hear him over the thump of blaring music.

The door opened into a living room with two couches meeting at the ends, perpendicular to each other, one facing a large black television, the other facing the door. Both couches were covered with young people drinking, talking over each other, and laughing. Maia stepped in and shut the heavy door, pushing through a group of guys crowded around the arch that led into the kitchen.
A keg rested on the kitchen counter; the hose extended down towards the tile floor, leaking, creating a small pool. The kitchen had an island in the middle with a bowl of crushed chips, dozens of unopened beer cans, bottles of differently flavored vodka and one bottle of whiskey. She smiled at the sight of the dark bottle and reached out for it. “Here,” Wyatt said, placing a cup into her extended hand. “I grabbed you a beer.” He held another close to his chest. “Let’s find everyone,” he yelled over the thundering bass.

The two continued through the rest of the kitchen and into a dining room, filled with more people and where a long wooden table sat atop with more beer, five wine bottles, and another bottle of whiskey. Maia sipped her warm beer looking around the crowded room. The first floor of the house was a circle and from where the two stood, they could just barely see around the corner to the front door, now blocked by a coat rack grown too heavy with shedded outer layers that it’d tipped. A staircase behind a cracked door fell down to a basement.

“Down here?” she asked, pointing down the set to a room with a warm, dim glow. Faint light flashed against the white wall at the bottom, indicating a TV played just out of sight.

The basement was carpeted with a gray, splotchy, wall-to-wall shag, and there were more couches, plushy and lux. Maia recognized the movie playing—*Girl Interrupted*. It was the beginning scene where Winona Ryder says she took so much Tylenol with all that vodka because of a simple headache. In the adjacent room a ping pong table stood, surrounded by guys playing some form of beer pong, shoving each other around as cups tipped, sending rivers onto the floor.

On the couch, in front of the screen, a girl sat straddling a boy, kissing his neck. Maia walked over and sat down next to them, hard so they looked up. “Hi Jacey,” she said.
“Maia!” Jacey screeched, jumping up and hugging her. Jacey sat down so Maia was between her and the boy. “How are you? I’m so glad you’re here. This house is amazing isn’t it. You remember Sam, right?”

“Yeah,” Maia said. “How’s it going?” The boy nodded and turned to the TV. “This house is so nice.”

“I know right. What’s this?” Jacey said, pulling Maia’s cup to her nose and then taking a swig. “God. PBR. My, sweetie, why?” she said leaning over Maia to Sam. “Can you fill a cup with Jack and ice and some water for My and I? Please.”

He got up, and Wyatt instantly filled his vacant seat, one of only a few in the room. “I love this movie,” he said, picking the skin around his thumb with his pointer.

“You made it too?” Jacey asked, pausing as if awaiting an answer.

“I did,” he replied, after a second. “This house is incredible.”

“Ugh. I know. It’s Sam’s uncle’s, but he’s never around, so I’m here all the time.” She turned back to Maia, “You look amazing. I love your shorts; where did you get them?”

“Oh,” Maia said. “I don’t know actually. I’ve had these forever.”

“Well you look awesome. Have you seen Nate yet? He’s here.” Maia hadn’t actually spoken to Nate since he graduated. After the two had been so long forced together by their two friends, never apart from one another, Nate and Maia had taken on an inevitable feeling, like the two were circumstantial soulmates.

Maia had been about to say she hadn’t yet seen him when a girl walked into the room. She wore black shorts that showed the complete length of her legs. She had on a tank top that was loose and flowed down below the end of her shorts in the back and that she tucked slightly into the front.
Her skin was pale though her hair was dark and came down just past her shoulders. She was holding a shot glass filled with a clear liquid. “Bobby,” she said in a smooth voice that seemed so quiet Maia thought herself the only one who heard though she was halfway across the room.

A boy turned to face her. “Ready,” he said. And they tossed back the shots. He disappeared into the beer pong room.

The girl turned toward the TV. Angelina Jolie was shedding off her coat saying, *It’s good to be home*, walking into the asylum.

“I love this movie,” the girl said, then followed the boy away.

Wyatt, the artistic romantic, couldn’t help but let his stomach warm and his palms itch.

“Who was that?” he asked, turning from the screen that’s dark scene had obscured the girls face in shadow.

“You don’t know Hayden?” Jacey asked.

“No.”

“Okay so she’s super rich. Her dad owns some world-renowned brewery, out of London, and he goes to all these top restaurants in New York and places, and they buy this special beer he makes. Maybe they also own a vineyard and make orgasmic wine or something. She moved here two years ago. She’s kind of crazy but also kind of cool.”

Sam came back with the drink Jacey and Maia were meant to share but Maia downed it in three long gulps. “Sam,” she asked. “Do you think I could have one more?”

“Sure thing,” he said.

Wyatt drifted off to other corners of the wood house, not wanting to watch his sister guzzle the poisonous liquid. He hovered around the doorway of the ping pong room, watching Hayden
throw the balls straight into the cups on the far end of the table like it was magnetic. He slipped into the room to stand, back against the far wall, like a picture in a gallery.

Maia felt as though she had not seen Jacey in a year due to the withdrawn quality that had overtaken her after the incident. Jacey told stories of boys and bars and the busy plans she’d made for the following years—large and luxurious for herself and her beau as they moved into their adult lives—innocently ambitious ideas that would be forgotten in the night.

The house buzzed with youthful life as children bumped around the walls—party monsters, living each moment like they wouldn’t see another. In every corner of the house boys and girls poured bottles into each others open mouths, injected bubbling liquid into skin holed like a honeycomb, and kissed with lips always hungry for something more. Careless little creatures too full of life to consider the finality of anything, too young and smooth not to seduce and subdue, thoughts all consumed with devour—always nearing a deadly dose.

Sam arrived with the drink, waterless and strong. Maia slunk back onto the couch to focus on the film, portraying a sociopath, manipulating her fellow inmates in the women’s psych ward. The young girl watched in awe, captured by the skinny, quick witticism of the star, so charismatic. The woman, damned and immoral, lured the girl, so lost and ready to follow, dying for the chance to be led and controlled like a child—dressed, fed, and shown each turn.

Maia finished her drink and heard Wyatt’s voice from the other room. The two girls on the couch turned, leaning over the leathery back cushion to see Wyatt and Hayden heading up the stairs.
“Let’s go,” Jacey said, pulling Maia to her wobbly feet. She set down her empty cup and clung to her friend as the two toddled up the stairs behind the couple. “Shh. Shh.” Jacey said as the girls tripped together, muffling laughter, blending into a crowd intoxicated by youth and bargain liquor. The boy followed beside this new stranger up a second flight of stairs the existence of which had been unknown to the twins; he felt as though he were in a house inside a dream—the architecture changing with each turn of the head.

“Where are they going?” Maia whispered.

“There’s a music room upstairs. With a couch and some chairs and soft carpet and a really nice sound system.”

The four walked in; “Weird Fishes” by Radiohead played. It sounded good to the drunk twins, so used to silence from the months of lamentation, like this was how music was meant it to be heard—here and now. Jacey closed the door behind them. Wyatt sat, heavy, in a broad, grey reading chair, with Hayden a couple feet away, sitting on the soft floor with her back against the wall, picking at the carpet. A boy sat on a thin stool near the stereo, changing the bass and treble of the system so quickly his ears couldn’t register the differences in time to tell him to leave it at perfection. Another boy sat by the door searching through a hot pink backpack.

“Whatcha got there?” Jacey asked the boy with the backpack.

“Party favors,” he said, winking. “Just for you.”

Jacey pulled on Maia until she fell to her knees.

“Here,” the boy said reaching across Hayden and then across Maia to hand a small envelope to Jacey, who poured the white powdered contents onto the side table. She took it up her nose while Maia watched.
Looking up with glassy eyes, she asked, “Who wants some?” She turned to Maia.

“Oh,” Maia said. “I don’t know,” her voice shy and strange.

“What is it?” Hayden asked.

“Coke.”

“Nah. I’m more into the downers,” Hayden said.

Jacey poured another line and worked to roll the bill tight again. She handed it to Maia who did as her friend had done. It was bitter in the back of her throat.

The song switched to Nirvana. Maia glanced over at Hayden; a tattoo of a skull sprouted across her forearm—where it’s right eye should have been, a dark flower bloomed. The entire tattoo was the size of Maia’s palm and beautifully drawn. The ink wasn’t quite black but rather a dark navy color; the flower was intricate, budding from the eye out to the rest of the skull. A petal flew from the flower, away from the skull, as if the wind had blown a piece free. The other eye was blank and hollow.

“Did that hurt?” Maia heard herself ask, as she drummed her fingers, heavy as lead, on the silent ground.

“Nah, it felt good,” she swayed to the song.

Wyatt glanced at this new girl with a small smile. He picked at his cuticles, singing along in his mind—*I think I’m dumb, or maybe just happy*. He let his head nod back. The ceiling was painted light gray though the walls were pure white. The boy considered how bare it looked. He thought of the vanilla dreams one would have under such a blank and boring sky. He longed for spray paint; dark blue, pale pink, and black to paint an abstract image of curved lines, twisting around each other—making love or committing murder, maybe both.
Maia reached for a cup that wasn’t hers, smelling it—vodka. She took down the cups remaining contents in two gulps and leaned back in the chair.

Hayden’s fingers were clad with a ring each. One was gold with two small, black beads, another was a silver leaf, frozen in time as it curved, blown by a gust. A small silver one that wrapped around her pinky stated her name in faint, indented letters. Maia craned her neck to see the others but couldn’t make them out with the dim lights.

Hayden laid her head back against the wall, and Maia followed her eyes up to the white ceiling. “That’s a terribly lame ceiling.” Hayden said to no one in particular.

“Too bad there’s no paint or I could fix that,” Wyatt said, almost to himself.

“I’ve got all those crazy thick, colored sharpies in my bag if you really think you could do something awesome,” Jacey said.


Maia looked to see if Jacey caught the taunting mimicry in Hayden’s voice, but she’d missed it and was already digging through makeup and school books to pull out a light blue pencil holder. Inside were extra wide sharpies of every color.

“These are perfect,” he said, and grabbed the black one along with two different shades of grey. Standing on recliner chair, he reached his hands up and, on the roof above, drew a single dark rose. The stem came up, shaded, as if under the shadow of a thick cloud. At the top, bloomed the silhouette of the flower’s dark head. From the stalk sprouted small, dull petals; four in a clump on the left and two weaker ones on the right. While he drew, Jacey did more coke, and someone turned the music up. Maia didn’t know the song—*where is my mind*—but liked it, and she let it take her in
while she watched him work. The instrument was opposite the vocals and when the singer's voice swelled the music fell away. Wyatt finished and stepped off the chair back onto the gentle floor.

‘Those two petals are drooping though,’ Jacey said.

‘Yeah,’ he replied. ‘The flower’s been plucked. It’s dying.’ He looked at Hayden when he said this; she was still staring at the display above. She smiled, and stood, walking to the door.

‘We should probably go soon?’ Maia asked Wyatt.

‘Probably,’ he said standing. ‘Hold up,’ he said, following after Hayden. She stopped at the doorway, waiting until he’d walked by; she smiled with only one side of her mouth, and turned to follow.

iv

The girl sat around in the small, crowded music room; the air so damp from breath it could almost have supported clouds. She opened her eyes as another song came to a close and noticed Jacey was no longer there. She sat in a haze, with people she didn’t know, in a house like a mouse maze, so she pushed her way through the thick air to the hallway. She wandered around in the way she had for months, place to place, person to person, day to day, barely noticing; she drifted back to the dark basement where the movie had ended without an audience; the TV sat shining with a blinding blue screen. No one was down there, so she weaved in and out of empty bedrooms, unused since the last holiday, when extended family had cluttered the halls.

She bumped into a door, wavered, and clung to the wood of a bed frame that had lost its mattress. There was nothing else in the room and the thin carpet peeled up from one of the corners as if someone had decided to remove it but changed their mind, too lazy with indecision to place if
properly back where it belonged. She looked up to the white walls where words were sloppily painted in dark red: “Candy” she read aloud to the empty room.

When she was young, the girl wished for nothing more than to be like her father—calm, collected, never found looking around confused and embarrassed as the world so often was. She never surprised him; he took each question, each thought or opinion, every situation as though he were reading it in a book, able to pause and consider each moment for as long as he pleased. Any explanation to the twins, any retort to a stranger was coherent and pensive.

When the twins were still young enough to attach lunch boxes to their backpacks and waddle over the crosswalk leading to Walker Elementary School, their father took them to the Shop'n Kart in search of spaghetti, tomato sauce, romaine, and any salad dressing. Lured by colored cereal boxes, and a fluorescent light slightly dimmer and less headache inducing than the others, the family found themselves down a random isle housing nothing from their list.

“Can’t we get this?” the boy had asked, holding a purple, green, and red box of sugary, frosted colored wheat.

“Dad! Dad!” the girl squealed. “Look, it’s a baby,” she pointed to the far end of the isle where a mother browsed stock cards reading Thank You, Congratulations, Condolences. Beside her was a toddler of two, wearing a soft, red and white Winnie the Pooh shirt that she’d mostly grown out of and that showed an inflated child’s belly. The little toddler clung to her mother's sweatshirt, letting go for seconds at a time to test her balancing independence.

“Why don’t you walk down and say hello?” the father urged.
Maia walked down the tiles, watching her light up sneakers. Just as she began to bend down to the little child in dirty blond pigtails, the woman's arm seized, frozen in the artificial light as she reached toward nothing in particular. The woman fell to the floor—stiff and unconscious.

The baby girl cried out, crashing down with the mother—hard. Through her tears she pushed herself back to her feet using the mom's shoulder and palpitating chest.

“Dad!” Maia screamed.

The man abandoned their shopping cart and, grabbing Wyatt, ran over. “Call 911,” he yelled to the cashier who quickly picked up a phone. A circle of shoppers surrounded the woman, her arms covered in holes like a sponge.

Maia stood, paralyzed, next to the wailing child who kept pulling at her mother's hoodie, as if all the woman needed was a little encouragement and she’d stand, grab some Cheerios, carrying her round-faced baby to the self-checkout line. The man shuffled the children, all three, around the bend of the soda section. The baby girl cried, “Mama, mama;” Wyatt stared at his hands, and Maia held back tears.

“Guys,” the man said, calmly as if, around the corner, strangers simply picked out cans of soup, never to be thought of again. “Look what we have here?” He pointed to rows and rows of brightly colored candy packages. The toddler screamed on, as Wyatt reached for a king-sized Reese's. The man stopped his hand before it reached the chocolate treat. “Oh my goodness. Look at all this yummy, yummy stuff,” he said, quietly to the baby, so young she only understood inflection. She composed herself, taking small gasps as she regained her normal breath.
The woman, too familiar with an adult version of addictive sugary candy highs, lay still, barely breathing beneath a wall of wedding cards, birthday cards, and a somber blue card reading *Get Well Soon*.

The man tore open a small pack of Sour Patch Kids, giving a tiny handful to the toddler, young enough to have practically forgotten the nearby nightmare. She shrieked with joy; paramedics injected her mother with Naloxone.

Maia thought, standing in that abandoned basement of that crowded house, swarming with children, about the simple gift of ignorance. Then she thought that if she really wanted, she could sit in there and no one would come across her in the forgotten room of a seasonal house, and she could sit until she died of dehydration. If she wanted to. Instead, she walked back upstairs.

She grabbed a solo cup from the sticky counter and filled it half full of Jack and half full of PBR, thinking herself too drunk to taste the disastrous cocktail. It stung her nose and made her gag. She set it back down and took the bottle of Jack by the neck, swigging it fast. She hated even the idea of sobriety, couldn’t stand the idea of falling back into any aura of normality from the days before her father’s death. As normal as she had tried to make the days and weeks following the accident, they were always stained with an unfamiliar air and that feeling stung worse than whiskey, nauseated past any hangover she’d had; it was one that endured until being forced away.

“Need a cup for that?” It was Nate.

“Nah,” she murmured. “I like it straight from the vein.”

“Badass. So, how’ve you been?” He asked, surveying her bare legs.

“About the same. You?”
“Great. Trinity is pretty immersive; I’m actually not heading back there next semester. I’m waiting until Spring. We have more like three majors rather than just one like the schools here. So, it’s kind of like I’m taking a semester off, but really, I’m ahead, ya know?” he said looking into his empty cup.

She poured in some Jack. “Got it,” she said, and took another drink. It tasted watered down though it wasn’t. “Have you seen Jacey? I should say bye before I leave.”

“Her and Sam are in some fight. You shouldn’t leave so soon anyway though. It’s barely midnight,” He drank from the cup and made at face that he tried to disguise with a forced cough. “The wind, am I right? Stirring up my allergies.”

“Sure,” Maia said, looking around. The bottle was empty, but she needed something to do while waiting for Wyatt to come back around—drinking passed the time.

“I heard about your dad” he said, looking away. The world spun. “I’m really sorry; he was always so nice. Smart guy too.”

“He was good,” she said. “There’s not always so much good so. I like to remember how good he was.”

“He was good,” Nate agreed. “If you or Wyatt needs anything.”

“Thanks,” she cut him off. “You’re good too.” She walked out the front door to sit in the cool, dewy grass.

At the bonfire, flames flipped back and forth, reaching up to the sky, causing the stars to flutter and glare. Wyatt sat by Hayden on the far side of the blaze, so the fire blocked their view of
the lake house. They turned their backs to the warmth and watched the dark water ripple with an easy breeze. Her legs were thin, stretching out, bare foot to where the sand started to congeal with water; her knees stuck out in a girlhood way, though she moved with a grace that can’t be taught. She dragged her pointer finger along the sand in a light zig zag pattern that held for a second then flattened back into smooth order.

The boy felt brave with the taste of alcohol still on his breath and the warm air finally cool and alive on his skin. Her perfume, cherries and creme, caught on the air and fell over to him. “You’re beautiful,” the boy told her as she stared out over the short abys of the lake. Her tiny arm rested near his; he could feel the heat from them, or at least he thought he could. Drunkenly, it felt as though they were connected, as if everything were connected to them, not the kids in the house, loud and lost, but the water, pulled toward them by cool relaxing wind, and sand controlled by her touch, malleable by their will. The two of them on the edge of the water pulled the tide like a moon and pushed it back just in time. They worked the wind around in tiny cyclones that put her hair just so.

He hadn’t noticed that she’d been moving, swaying in a rhythmic way until she suddenly stopped at the sound of his voice. She sat, still as a stalk, on that sandy beach. He looked at her; in the light of the slivered moon, she looked hurt, like he’d put a shard of glass into her hip, or a cigarette out on her hand. She blinked rapidly so a sprouting tear wouldn’t fall.

“You just are,” he said.

“I guess I am,” she said. “I guess that’s just what I am,” she spat the word, and her voice sounded like someone else’s—mean. She ran her fingers up the length of her arm, holding her shoulder in her hand, only to remove it a moment later, leaving behind half circle marks from her
nails. “You know,” she said, still looking out over the glassy water. “A few days before Marilyn overdosed, she wrote a letter. Do you know what it said?”

“No,” he replied.

“I feel like I’m not existing in the human race at all.”

Maia walked over and dropped down next to Wyatt harder than she’d meant. Hayden was smoking a cigarette; Wyatt started at the embered end; the smoke twisted up joining with the thick smoke from the fire. She stuck the tip in the sand and, as if by magic, liberated Wyatt from his trance. “Hey,” he said to Maia, looking at his own sandy sneakers.

“Hey,” Maia said, trying to match his tone not wanting him to know how much she’d had to drink. “We should probably get going,” She turned her words up at the end as if it were a question, but he stood like he’d been command.

He brushed himself off and looked at his hands, then let his gaze bend back to Hayden on the ground. She looked so small holding her knees to her chest with one hand and letting the other extend out towards the open fire. “So, I’ll see you around then,” he said.

“Right on,” she replied in a monotone, staring at the blue flames.

Wyatt drove them home, smiling to himself and saying nothing. Looking out the window made Maia sick as the lights from people’s homes seeped out into the darkness of trees and streets without lamps; the world looked like a watercolor painting where someone had tipped the cup, smearing the dark tones into the bright ones, casting an unnatural shadow. She closed her eyes; the
bumps from the car flying along the small road jerked her around. She had to steady herself, a hand on the door and a hand on the middle compartment.

“That girl was weird,” she said as they turned onto their street.

Wyatt leaned forward, chest to the steering wheel, craning his head as if he needed to concentrate on where he was going, though they’d lived in the house since birth. When he pulled into the sloping driveway, he unbuckled his seatbelt, saying over his shoulder, “No she wasn’t,” as he climbed out into the air.

Maia got out too, hearing her car door not quite close as she walked toward the dim house. “Yes she was. She’s like a philistine or something. She’s not like us. And Hayden is a boy’s name,” her voice sounded weird, even to herself. The words came out loud and thick, like she wanted them to hang in the air in their driveway so Wyatt would see them tomorrow too. She was desperate to keep Wyatt from seeing this girl the way she’d seen her; enigmatic, reserved, like no one could ever wholly know her; with little effort this girl seemed to induce love, even envy. Maia felt pangs in her body; she’d always been so easily readable that people never even tried, correctly assuming they knew her through and through after a simple encounter. With the briefest moment, strangers understood she was entirely average—plagued eternally by a malady of mediocrity.

Adrift as the young girl felt in these moments of abandonment and loss, she felt compelled, under some spell, a deadly combination of envy and admiration, a type cast only by girls onto other girls. The kind Maia had fallen victim to her entire life; she’d always merely emulated those around her, taking bits of everyone to build herself—each thought was another’s belief, every emotion a mimicry, every movement a simple imitation. In the way that literature is truth and truth is literature; in the way that people emulate life in art and live as art dictates; in the way that everyone carries with
them a devastating, fatal flaw—a hamartia so unavoidable the moment it’s noticed it’s as though it’s always been—Maia could only be what others created her as. Without someone telling her who to be, she’d be nothing.

The boy went to the side gate and worked open the latch, sliding into the side yard, and then through the backdoor they’d left cracked, welcoming goblins and ghouls. He said nothing, and went straight to his room, closing the door softly. He laid down on his bed and stared up at the rough, white ceiling, thinking back to when their dad had put glow in the dark stars and moons and aliens up, and everything was easy.

The boy worked his way slowly through the memory, straining to remember the facial expressions of his father as he’d stood on the bed reaching up, moving the small stickers around asking again and again, “here?” Wyatt, cognizant that the memories he had of this man were now finite, knew he had to be careful with the moments. He needed to replay and solidify every detail, ensuring they would always be there—pure and full, so he could turn to a memory at any moment and watch it like a film, nostalgic, sad, but guiding, on the backs of his eyelids. So he went through the memory, just an instant in time then but a thought now more precious than life, slowly and with great precision, drawing towards the words the two had uttered, the hilarity, a kind only understood between a father and a son, they’d shared. He remembered how their father had made up stories about these glowing, plastic aliens and the adventures they’d been on; he fell asleep considering the woes of adventurous aliens, whose ships break down on foreign planets where they go out searching for life and fuel.
Miserable, the girl found herself, in these selfish moments of overindulgence and temporary, fleeting escape, not missing her father most, but missing the commonality of effortlessly drifting into accidental happiness. Any moment not already filled by an emotion had been a happy one, a content one. She picked headphones up from her floor and fell onto the bed, a leg dangling off. She tried to plug them into her phone but couldn’t hold either of her hands steady enough, and before she gave up trying, she was asleep.
Wyatt woke late on a hot, humid Tuesday. He wandered around the empty downstairs, closing the curtains to make the rooms feel smaller. The windowsills, tables, and lamp shades were gathering dust as they went unused longer still. Sitting on the couch, he allowed his gaze to drift out the window toward the big, empty street. A little girl walked by, coming from the left, staring at her shoes as they kicked up little puffs of dirt with each step; a tiny dust storm beneath her feet.

Wyatt watched the girl skip along through the air. Innocent, she kicked her feet into the bit of dirt caked along the sidewalk cracks, where she snagged a lip of concrete and fell forward into the pavement; Wyatt turned before the girl hit the ground. He stared into the house. The air felt impossibly still, like he was gazing at a picture; one taken of his home when no one was there.

Wyatt thought of the endeavors of humans—hangovers, car accidents, stubbed toes, and hangnails—everyone running around with camouflaged faces—smiles to match the crowds—the world an indefinite masquerade. Everyone, filled with resentment and regret, dragging their feet along a beaten path, going for car rides to watch the leaves change color, holding hands—flipping endlessly through the beautiful pages of a short picture book, replaying few, specific, sparse and blissful moments. In the end, everyone's a hypocrite, a sadist, who can’t stop breeding, replacing themselves with others, forever perpetuating mundanity. Humanity is a plague, a contradiction, a rogue science experiment in which the test subjects became too intelligent, able to comprehend their
own failings and mortality, leaving them with the unshakable truth that nothing they do has the capacity to matter. People are not granted life—they are condemned to it. Damned into freedom—allotted every decision; responsible for every misfortune. This epiphany arrived abruptly, like a cloud passing over the sun in an unseasonably strong gust of wind, leaving every sunbather confused and disoriented by the new, cold shade. The only factual, inborn predisposition to life is its finity—an always impending, unavoidable exit strategy.

He milled around as afternoon became evening, waiting for night so he could see Hayden. When he had to turn the hall light on just to find his way around the dusty furniture, he went up to knock on Maia’s door.

She’d slept most of the day away.

“Good evening,” he said, walking through. “I was wondering if you would share a little booze if I invite you to tonight's festivities?”

She moaned and sat up in the bed. “What's happening tonight?”

“Booze?” he asked.

“I’ve got Beam and a cab,” she said.

“Yum,” he said. “Hayden is coming here at ten and we’re walking over to Ashland Cemetery to meet up with Jacey and Sam and Nate. Wine then whiskey?”


They climbed out Wyatt’s window into the evening air; they opened a bottle of red.
The twins passed the bottle back and forth. It tasted good and made the few stars he could see in the graying sky extra bright; they blinked with increased frequency taking on a personal tone. The air was warm, and the scent of summer made him feel a long-forgotten sense—he felt fearless. He wanted to see this new girl again; he wanted to feel brave.

While the boy guzzled the wine that tasted like nirvana and smiled into the dark thinking of adventure and long nights with mysterious girls, his sister sipped the drink with an obscured and melancholy mind. She knew if she didn’t think too hard, it could almost have felt like she was just drinking wine with her brother on their roof on a sweet summer night—almost. Instead, of course, she thought too hard; instead she was getting buzzed with her brother so they could feel things just a little less; they were drinking to ignore their mother’s reclusivity, and their father, who’d never reappear. She swigged from the bottle not to feel brave, not to have an endless night in an endless summer but to summon an end and to feel nearly nothing. She endured the worst and dared the world to try something else. She’d been hit with a fatal blow, and still she stood—devastatingly invincible.

The twins let the empty wine bottle roll down into the tin gutter, and Maia cracked the Jim Beam seal. They laid back onto the shingles, still warm from the hot summer sun, watching for shooting stars that could never be seen due to the perpetual cloud cover.

“I bet one just passed by right there,” Maia said, pointing to an area of sky with only the thinnest layer of dark blue clouds.

“I think you might be right,” Wyatt said back.

She took a sip. “This isn’t sweet enough,” she said, holding it out to look at the label.

“It’s Jim Beam. It’s too sweet.”
“Too sweet isn’t possible. If I designed my own cocktail, it would be four ounces of bourbon and a tablespoon of sugar served on the rocks, and it would be called The Maia.” She held the bottle so tight that her knuckles were going white.

“Okay, well, that’s disgusting.” Wyatt pulled a cigarette from the pack in his pocket, lit it and took a drag, blowing it out and watching the smoke twist toward the clouds until it faded into the greyness.

“Can I hit that?”

“You don’t smoke,” he replied, not turning from the empyrean.

“But I could,” she plucked the cigarette from his mouth taking a long inhale through the filter and coughing violently. She tapped her palm to her chest like that would clear the poison from it. “Mmm,” she said, after regaining her breath. “Really smooth. Very nice.”

He laughed. “You have to hold it in your mouth for a second. It’s too hot to go right into your lungs. Let’s go,” he said, taking a final deep hit, putting it out on the roof, and throwing the butt over the metal edge.

The doorbell sounded.

Wyatt opened the door, and, without the breeze of the open aired roof, the heat hit them like they’d stepped into a boiler room. Hayden stood under the porch light wearing white high-top converse and shorts that frayed at the bottom. Her arms looked like tiny doll arms.
“Hi,” Hayden said smiling. She flicked a lighter to life, but the wind killed it before it waved for long enough to ignite the cigarette she held between her teeth. “Can I step in so I can light this?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Wyatt said, holding out a hand. He guided her over the threshold. She shielded her eyes from the overhead light with one hand and lit it with the other; he nails were a dark grey. A cigarette in anyone else's mouth is only that, but on her it was like she'd caught a small piece of fire, able to tame an element, holding in her hand a glowing ember. After taking a long drag, she moved the lit cigarette away from her lips. Leaning in close, she breathed the smoke toward his mouth. It smelled and tasted like cigarette smoke, but under that he thought he caught just a taste of her mouth.

The three walked the two and a half blocks to the back side of the cemetery and jumped the slight fence. The twins lagged behind; it seemed as though Hayden could see in the dark—inhuman, she never missed a step. The two followed closely behind, stepping where she stepped, bracing themselves on the trees and tombstones where she braced herself. They came to the river and followed it south, deeper into the necropolis, until they found the bridge. It was stone along the sides, coming up to Wyatt’s waist, and wood underfoot. He walked in the middle; Hayden hopped up onto the stone wall—a tightrope walker, never looking down. She jumped to the ground on the other side like it was a new world—a strange, dark place with no other people and where no one could find them even if they had to.

They came to a sepulcher two stories high; leaned against it sat Nate, Jacey and Sam sat with their backs pressed to the ivy laced stone. Maia plopped into Nate’s lap and whispered something to Jacey, who said loudly, “You are so right. Who brought the booze guys?”
“I got ya,” Sam said, pulling away from her lolling head to grab a backpack that had been dropped haphazardly, so when he pulled on it the contents, mostly bottles of whiskey and wine and a few small airplane shooters, spilled out a little. “Whatever,” he said to it and pulled hard on the underside, so everything fell out. “Everyone grab a bottle.”

“No chase?” Maia complained.

“Sissy,” Jacey said, grabbing a glass bottle of something clear and taking a swig. “This isn't even bad. We'll share it.”

Hayden dragged Wyatt around the side of the tomb and sat with her back against it. He sat down beside her; despite the June heat, the stone was cool behind them as he leaned into it. She pulled a small baggie out of her pocket, in it a fine powder. He looked at the sky—cloud cover from left to right, but the moon was big; he could see where it hung, illuminating the black with a purple hue.

“It’s oxy,” she said. She pulled her hand off the ground to hold it level, palm down, readying to lace her skin with the drug.

“Wait,” he said, taking the baggie and setting it on his leg. He took her hand in his and wiped her palm with the sleeve of his t-shirt, drying it.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

He poured a thin streak down the crease in her palm. “It’s your lifeline.”

She smiled, then inhaled it up her nose through a dollar bill—permanently rolled. She looked up at the starless sky then back down at her hand—her lifeline. “What does it say?” she asked, running her fingernail along the groove. Her fingernails were grey, he could remember from when
they’d been in the house and she’d been holding them to her face to light her Marlboro—in the dark cemetery, they looked black.

“Oh wow,” he said, inspecting her small hand. “It says you’ll live forever.”

“We’ll see,” she nodded toward the baggie. “Go ahead.”

He wiped his palm on his jeans and did as she did, looking around. The world was so opaque, he could only see a few gravestones. The boy and his father use to take walks after long school days through the graveyard saying the names of the deceased to each other, wondering the last time the names were said out loud must have been. He asked his father with youthful ignorance if he thought they could hear him—if saying, audibly, one's full name, pulled one from wherever people go when they die, if only for a moment. More than ever, in this second with Hayden, lost in drugs and booze and new love, the boy wished the dead could hear the living.

He felt good, and he felt warm.

He got, very suddenly, the sensation that he was floating above the ground. He opened his eyes, although his lids weighed on him and tried to remain shut. He turned, heavy, toward Hayden who sat smiling, eyes loosely closed.

He stared at the universe around them.

“I watched my grandfather die,” she said casually.

“Oh,” he said. She’d moved her hand closer to his, and he reached out so their pinky fingers touch.

“His eyes just slammed open—he reached for me, blindly” Even through the night her eyes were bright; they reflected the cloud filtered moon and looked pale purple. “He didn’t say anything,”
she continued. “I asked if he could see a light. ‘I see nothing,’ he said to me, and he never closed them again.”

The two sat very still and her finger felt as cold as the stone behind him.

“Fuck that’s depressing,” Wyatt finally said.

“No it isn’t,” she said. Then, moving her hand from his, she reached into her pocket to pull out a pack of cigarettes. She pulled out two, lit his, then her own. She inhaled deeply, breathing the smoke out like a dragon. “It’s truthful,” she said. She lifted herself up to face him, then leaned back, putting her hands on the ground behind her; the second they touched the earth, she jerked forward.

“Oh,” she said, inhaling sharply, squinting at her palm; he squinted too, leaning in to see. A thorn stuck out of her hand. It marked the end of the line she’d taken the oxy off of. She pulled it out, unplugging the small hole; a thin stream of blood started to flow as she tossed the thorn out in front of the couple. It landed by Wyatt’s shoe, caught gently by tall blades of grass.

He pushed himself up and leaned forward so he could reach the thorn. He plucked it up off the ground and slouched back against the tomb. She sucked the blood from her hand like she was hungry for it. Between his thumb and forefinger, he held the thorn—small but sharp like a shark’s tooth. Then he stabbed it into his left palm, pushing until he felt the puncture. The warm blood ran from the wound down to the veins of his wrist. It looked black.

“Wyatt!” she said, reaching for his hand.

“I’ll do anything you do,” he said.
The twins worked to match and one-up the abnormality of their new life; not wanting to use the door, they climbed up the tall wooden fence of their house until they could hoist themselves onto the garage roof. They slid in through Wyatt’s window so the front door could remain closed and locked, a happy family thought to sleep peacefully inside.

The sobriety of the walls only exacerbated Wyatt’s drugged and drunken state. With great effort he clung to them until he reached the turning bed—a sailor in a storm. Waves of moving air crashed against his hot face and tossed him to the far side of the bed. He held onto his pillow and a piece of the bed frame with closed eyes. He stared up at the ceiling where the faded glow in the dark stars and planets resided, no longer emitting even a faint gleam. They were like stars of ancient times that supernovaed millennia ago—planets in which no life inhabited.
Chapter Four

*A Library*

Hayden’s vacation house, in the Siskiyou Mountains, had been built up by Jacey to be a mansion with floating flamingos in an infinity pool and champagne fountains of Crystal, the kind of Gatsby caliber—*a tower on one side, spanking new under a thin beard of raw ivy*. It was a two-hour drive from town, so on a random Thursday Hayden, Wyatt, Maia, Nate, Jacey, and Sam piled into a car and headed up to spend a long weekend in the secluded home that Hayden’s family wintered. The drive was a short distance but lengthy; the roads curved around trees and the crew wound up and down over small hills as the car climbed into the clouds of the tall mountain. Though the drive was littered with dirty rest stops along the state highway, and then long single lane country roads cratered with potholes, Hayden drove in an unhurried manner, as though the drive itself were the event. The group had left early, the clouds still hanging low—fog—the air still thick with night, so while music played lowly in the too warm car no one spoke as everyone looked out their windows, slumping into the coolness of the glass.

The time of year was green and Wyatt, in the front seat, watched everything fly by like a blurred watercolor painting, with his eyes fixed he saw only a rush of green with only a few uniquenesses standing out as they passed ponds, parked cars, or small dirt roads leading into a forest so dense that down the road it looked of early evening. Maia and Jacey chatted in the back seat in a voice so hushed Wyatt couldn’t make out the words but let the whispered tones act as white noise as
his eyes fluttered closed. He drifted in and out of consciousness in a dreamless bliss until he was
woken by Jacey’s sharp laugh.

“Well obviously not,” she was saying, in the middle of some story Maia had questioned. “Do
you think I’m stupid? I let him get close, like we were gonna kiss then just turned and walked out.
You should have seen him. Hilarious.”

Wyatt never thought Jacey’s stories were hilarious; he rarely found them even mildly
amusing. She could be entertained with much less than it took to pull his attention for long; he
wondered what about her was so endearing to Maia, and figured it was likely that same quality of
distracted ignorance and shrill naivety that so easily turned him off—her ability to hold both sides of
a conversation, the way she never noticed if her listeners attention had drifted—so full of life, it felt
nearly contagious even to those pushing back against the light she emanated.

Outside the window and up a good distance from them, Wyatt watched a small brown dot
move around in the tall grass. He thought it could be a small stag or more likely a doe. It kept
putting its head down, nose in the long, wild grass, only to raise it up and look about itself after only
a moment by the ground. Suddenly, it was spooked by an unseen danger in the thick, dark woods
just beyond the small creek it had been nursing. It bound away from the safety of nature and onto
the pavement where a station wagon style SUV knocked its legs out from under it. It rolled some up
onto the windshield. Though the glass did not shatter, the animal had been hit hard and all the cars
crushed their brakes. The deer turned around in the rolling looked at the woods and then back at the
far side of the highway, unsure which was right. It sat on the ground as a woman got out of the
driver side of the perpetrating car. The rest of the traffic funneled slowly into the left lane and slowly
began to pass the sickening nightmare.
Wyatt pulled a cigarette from a carton sitting in the cup holders, and though Maia told him not to light in the car, he took Hayden’s tiny shrug as permission and lit it, taking a long drag.

“Ugh,” Nate sighed. “Just go around.” He said loudly to his closed window. “This fucking blows. Hayden turn on the fucking air.”

The deer was seated on the concrete despite the people who were now standing unnaturally close to such a skittish wild animal. It worked to stand itself up but as it took a step its front legs gave out under it and its nose hit the road again. The broken leg had been flattened by the car tire for the knee down. There was blood in the street and Wyatt could see the pink of revealed muscle. It sat on the ground, unsure what to do, with its legs tucked under itself like a house cat. Wyatt watched it try again, in vein to take steps back toward the woods as they drove by, it’s bloody chin to the pavement; eyes wild yet lucid, it flopped unnaturally like a fish out of its world, all gasping and blood, wide eyed yet lucid, knowing and scared.

They arrived in early afternoon, and while the sun blistered down, it was much cooler than it had been in town. The kids shielded their eyes from the reflection cast by the sleek outside of Hayden’s car as they unloaded their few bags, staying only a couple days to celebrate the end of a final childlike summer.

Like the beautiful castle in a dark fairytale that turns cruel and haunted with the setting of the sun, the mountain house was a dark grey, covered in ivy; the front of the house, past the iron gate, sat, obscured by tall hedges and leafy trees. The gardens surrounding the home were unkempt, the ivy suffocating the southern entrance; wild grasses came up to the knee with pink or purple flowers poking up, yearning for the sun.
Inside, Hayden, still quiet from the sleepy drive, led them through the empty, high ceilinged halls to a huge library straight out of a Poe story—*a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded*. The walls were lined with bookshelves so tall wheeled ladders stretched up them. In the center of the room, down three small steps, were leather chairs and a couch. If Hayden were a princess, in this fairytale of a story—children without parents, faraway mansions, dark libraries with whiskey decanter clad tabletops—she would be Belle, this house her castle, a beast sleeping lightly in the darker parts of the vacant manor. Hayden walked to a large wooden desk on the far side of the room and grabbed a bottle of whiskey from underneath and behind. A few feet to the left was a large window with a window seat padded in a dark maroon upholstery. Near black curtains fell down on either side, pulled perfectly aside by invisible hooks; fog hung low outside and little light shone through. She opened a cupboard and pulled out six glasses.

“My dad’s Pappy Van Winkle,” she said holding the bottle to her lips as if she were drinking. She opened it and poured them each a glass, a quarter full. “He was saving it for my parents fiftieth—like they’ll get that far.” She threw her glass back—a ninety dollar shot; she poured herself another.

“You know,” Jacey said, looking into her pilfered glass. “As a good Christian, I really shouldn’t.” She paused, then drained the glasses contents into her open mouth while giggling. “You totally thought I was serious.”

“Well you are Christian so,” Sam said.

“Yeah I’m Christian not a prude.”
“Eh, you’re both,” he said.

Maia laughed and drank her glass, holding it out for another. It seemed Wyatt was the only one still not fully recovered from the dreary drive up. He thought of the deer and wondered if it had died right there in the street or if, maybe it had made it back to the natural cover of the woods, laid down there on moss covered ground and taken its last breath as it had taken its first. still. Or perhaps it had been trying, limping its way back home on flattened legs and a police officer had finished the job early, deeming the scene to horrific to continue. He shook the image from his head, rubbing his palms along his forehead and down his cheeks, and attempted to fill his mind's eye with the beautiful interior of the room with dark corners that nearly looked like corridors leading to deeper, smaller, more private rooms, meant only for secret meetings on important matters.

“Shut the fuck up, Sam,” she whipped back. “Being Christian is better than being a satanist,” she turned to Hayden who smiled.

“Actually,” Hayden said, refilling everyone's glasses, even the ones that still held liquid. “I'm a hedonist. What about you?” She turned to Wyatt who was studying the stacks of books that hadn’t yet found their place on the walls and were milling around the sides of the couches.

He looked into her eyes and then down at his glass on the table then around the room, surveying its vastness, then back at his glass which he picked up. “I,” he said, sniffing the glass and taking a small sip. “Am a fatalist.”

Maia smiled at the tension he’d built in the room; he’d have made a good actor had he not become an illustrator. He was like their father in his innate naturality to the arts, any arts.

“Is that so?” Hayden asked. “I think you’d much prefer being a hedonist with me.”
“Maybe I would.” His voice was even and steady as though he truly had memorized a script. “But I can’t convert. It has always been, unchangeably so, that you would be a hedonist and me a fatalist, and for neither of us to ever, ever change.” Hayden was smiling a smile like she didn’t want to be showing her amusement and Wyatt was smirking back with the cadence of someone who’d just solved the crisis of purpose.

“So, you really don’t believe in God?” Jacey asked, missing every beat.

Wyatt started to speak but Hayden cut him off. “Even if I did, I’d never pray; so selfish. He’s got enough to deal with,” she said.

“Okay well that’s enough from the hellbound atheists,” Jacey said. “Turn the music up and stop talking about theologies and depressing belief systems.”

With a small remote that had been living beneath the table in front of the young group, Hayden turned the music to a blistering volume.

Maia listened to the lyrics. It was a love song or a sad song, or maybe it was both. She thought about her own doctrine of faith—some juxtaposition of nearly opposing axioms demonstrating the sole importance to life is love, though life is so short nearly nothing could matter. Her father was an intellectual innovator; a scholar; he was published, and he was a professor. Then he died. Wyatt started throwing himself at girls from the wrong side of the tracks, taking any random drug around any random corner; Maia was drinking herself into oblivion every night, yelling devastating thoughts so loud in her head she hardly heard the world any more, and no one knew where their mother had been this past month. That was the legacy left by the twin’s father, his widow and two fatherless children—cheers. When people read his dissertation, they read it for the knowledge, barely glancing at the author’s name, but when Wyatt rails a line by Hayden’s side or
Maia grabs a twelfth drink, the kids do it for him. The most alluring homage. The only true measurement of one's life is who they leave behind and in what ways it wrecks them. ‘Here’s to you dad,’ Maia thought, and grabbed the bottle to fill her, again, empty glass. She watched the liquid and wondered who she had—who would love her when she was gone? Who would fill their glasses past the brim when she finally got to leave all this behind?

A silence fell across the group as the music swelled. No one said anything, though Hayden smiled with her head bent looking into what was her fourth pour of the stolen drink. The guys, antsy from the drive, looked around the room as if they expected other people to be standing at the edges talking about sports or the weather.

Jacey turned to Sam, “So we should probably find an empty bedroom or something, no? I’m sure this house has dozens.”

“It does,” Hayden said. “You guys are welcome to another bottle,” she motioned to a small wet bar upon which sat a Hendricks bottle, Blanton's, and three other bottles of varying opaqueness. “Any room you find is yours for the taking.” She smiled a genuine smile.

Maia liked her in that moment, seeing her as Wyatt did—an agent of chaos and an antidote for the same. Nate had slowly grown closer and closer to Maia on the dark brown leather couch. His hand resting on the cushion was so close to her bare, goosebumped leg, she could feel her tiny hairs, cold in the draft of the huge room, standing on end just barely touching the back of his palm.

“What about us?” Nate whispered to her, turning his hand around some and rubbing her with his thumb. She didn’t actually mind Nate because he was an excuse to get away from the rest of the people in any given situation and he never wanted to do anything more than she initiated.

“I suppose we better find one. Which is the most haunted?” She asked Hayden.
“Go out the library doors, through the living room and up a spiral staircase on the right; it leads straight in,” she replied.

The two walked out, Nate pinching at her sides trying to force a giggle.

And just like that there were two, as if the young group were trapped in some Agatha Christie novel and soon only one would remain.

Wyatt stood and walked slowly around the dim room trying to read the titles of the thick leather-bound books that coated the walls but could make out very few of them and of the ones he could make out he didn’t recognize a single title.

“They’re encyclopedias and old, forgotten classics mostly,” she said.

“Can a classic be forgotten?” He asked and smiled.

She smiled back. “Let’s walk around the grounds before the sun clears all the fog.”

Outside, adjacent to the stone house was a green garden. It looked like the one Wyatt had imagined when his father had read him and Maia *The Secret Garden* as children. There were few flowers, instead it was filled with moss covered rocks and bushes of varying greens, some so vibrant in color they nearly looked fake. He remembered the story well and remembered even more clearly Maia’s attraction to the sickly girl and boy of the tale. She’d been enthralled by the lack of agency the two young children had, the lack of responsibility and a life so simple and still so thought provoking. The story had taken a long time to leave her. *The sun shining on the rain; the rain falling on the sunshine.*

When their father had finished, the girl had asked to keep it in her room, sounding out the words as she reread passages in which the young girl sat, unloved and alone, passages of the young boy in a greater pain that she could imagine. Though she knew all the words in the book, the order in which
they were strung together, the connotation they carried shook her to her bones and taught her something she had not previously known though she was never able to put her finger on exactly what.

Hayden led him to a small creek with big round stones leading across. They sat down with their backs against a large pine tree that rested at the edge of the property, the branches dipped over the iron fence that encircled the grounds. Wyatt could feel the needles beneath them, but with the constant dew, they were soft. Hayden pulled out a small balloon filled with white crystals.

He dried the back of his hand on his jeans, readying to inhale the powder, but Hayden pulled out a spoon and a white lighter.

“Hold this,” she said, handing him the spoon. The clouds were thick, and fog clung to the plants that breathed it. The thick tree shaded them from the small amount of light but still Wyatt could see the scorch mark on the convex side of the thin metal spoon. She pulled a small metal straw from her bra. She took the spoon back and filled it with white pieces from the tiny balloon. “I didn’t have time to crush it. But it’ll be fine, I’ve been getting bored just railing it anyway. That drive nearly had me pulling my hair out waiting for this, ya know?” Wyatt didn’t know but nodded slightly. He’d been snorting with her, but still hadn’t found himself enjoying the feeling nearly as much as he liked the feeling of being near her, sharing a secret with her, and the way they sometimes touched when it set in.

Wyatt wished he’d stayed in that grand library to peruse ‘forgotten classics.’ He wished he’d followed, uninvited, after Nate and Maia to sit on the floor of a bedroom while Nate complained about school and Maia rolled her eyes behind his back. He wished he just stood by the car to smoke and drink, letting the car radio leak out into the dusty air of the driveway. But he was here, lost in this shadowy, hidden garden; he loved her. He loved her in a reckless, panicked way that made him
follow her wherever she went, do whatever she did. He loved her smell, like an addictive poison that clung to his clothes long after they’d separated, that made him edgy and strange, and his heart broke with the thought of missing a single utterance of hers. So when she put the hard straw in his mouth, he let her; when she held the trembling flame to the spoon creating a foul smelling smoke, he inhaled until his lungs were so full they hurt, as if he were at the doctor’s office and her hand on his back was a stethoscope.

Walking back, he felt dizzy; he looked toward the sky—hazy, he could see the wind high in the air. The trees swayed a strange sway as if the world was under water. Hayden had taken two hits before standing without saying anything. She walked away from him back toward the house.

Halfway back, he heard her breath catch in her throat. “Do you know what Van Gogh said in his suicide letter?” she asked.

“Umm, no I don’t think so,” Wyatt replied, his words heavy and slow; they leaked from his mouth, tactile, and slumped to the forest floor, ugly and thick.

“He wrote, *this sadness will go on forever.*”

Wyatt didn’t know what to say, so he said nothing, focusing on breathing and a heartbeat too loud to be his own that echoed out of the forest just beyond the bushes and the pine tree and the iron fence. Before long at all, it was too late to say anything, he pulled open the door, heavy as lead, and caught his breath before following her in.

Maia and Nate had wandered off to a bedroom at the back end of the large house with infinite rooms piled to the brims with plush, dusty furniture. He was laying on a stranger’s bed; she was pacing around the room—slow and listless, dragging her finger along surfaces, looking at
pictures of people dressed for a different time when it wasn’t customary to smile for a photograph; as though the photo were meant for posterity they stared right at her. She’d shed her grimy road trip clothes and was clad now in socks, underwear, and a t shirt, standing on pointed toes looking up onto cluttered shelves—old perfume bottles, cobwebbed books, an old tin of chewing tobacco—like the house were set for a movie she would love and Wyatt would hate.

“You’re a ballerina,” Nate said, as she turned, still on tip toes to face him. She stretched her arms out, elegant, then let them drift above her head, hair in a bun far too loose for the tight, fast spins of a ballerina. She shook her head around so her hair fell to her shoulders. “I like that,” he said. “But I can’t quite see from here, it looks like it might be tangled. Why don’t you,” he paused. “Come a little closer?”

She took careful step after careful step, placing the balls of her feet on the old Persian carpet that sat atop the dark wood floor that honestly felt it had the spring of a dance room, never letting her heel touch. When she was within his reach, he sat up quick, snatching her off her feet like he was her ballet partner and this was the big finish.

When they were done, they returned—crazed hair, calm eyes—to the library. No one was there and with the sun having left turning the day to night it was dark; even with the lamps turned on, shadows hung around and the tall ceiling sucked the light away.

“Guess you were quickest,” Maia said, venom behind the comedy.

“Shut the fuck up,” he said matching her tone. The two, compatible only on a bed, spread out around the room. She drifted to the far side, grabbing a shockingly old copy of *The Portrait of a Lady* off a sparse shelf. The hard, leather cover was holding on by threads. It was a first edition. On the opening page, in the upper right corner, in a beautiful cursive print it read *Mildred 1890*. Maia took it and flipped it open; the margins were covered in penciled annotations; the print so pure it
looked typed. As if by magic, as if the aura of the ivy house with chambers and corridors and fairy dust had seeped into her fingers, she flipped it open—*she is written in a foreign tongue*. She took the book and placed it at the top of her bag, still sitting by the huge wooden door.

“A clepto and a nerd,” said a voice from behind her—Hayden.

“Just borrowing,” Maia said, panicked.

“No really, take it,” she said, walking over and picking it back up. In the warmth of the heavily carpeted, curtained home she too had taken off most of what she’d worn on the open window blown journey up. “My parents will never know it’s gone. They honestly probably don’t know we have it. And I’ve never heard of it.” She dropped it back into the bag from too high and the cover caught on the opening of the bag. “We’ve decided on a scenery change and are gonna get drunk in the kitchen now. Cool?

“Umm. Yeah, I’ll be right in.”

“Sounds good. It’s through those doors under the stairs.”

Outside, Wyatt kicked at the ground while looking at the sky, cigarette in hand. He’d dropped the pack and lighter onto the smooth, light brown wood of the back porch that stretched out from the double doors of the kitchen. Maia walked out toward where he stood, free hand resting on the banister; a light breeze slid the pack to her; stopping it with her foot she pulled one out and then lifted her shoe so it slid again to the lip at the bottom of the door leading back into the warmly lit house. The light leaked out, faintly, to the twins; it was weak against the moonless night.

“Remember,” he said. “It’s not a joint; hold the smoke in your mouth for a second before you breathe it into your lungs.” He spoke slowly and kept lifting his hand up lazily fingers dangling down like wind chimes. He felt that everything in the world was being pulled together like a weak
magnet and one day, when the universe had gained the strength, it would suck all its matter back together so that it could all be one.

She dragged on the cigarette with care, small puffs into her mouth and then, warm like an ember rather than like a dragon’s harsh flame as before. She pushed the smoke out into the cool air. “I guess we walk around?” She said.

“I guess we do.”

The two, an undeniable unit, stuck together still in the rush of the wild house with its books, drugs, drinks, rooms, attics, and secrets, stepped quietly down the creaking steps of the back deck and out into a short yard with a steep grassy hill leading down into the endless blackness of wilderness. The thick trees and cluttered brush of the yards edge worked almost like a fence and the two had to poke around before finding a small clearing that allowed them to enter the forest. Wyatt stepped over wet logs blocking the small animal path they were following; his shoes felt as though they were filled with damp sand when he lifted them. His head moved—massive, as though all the world’s details could fit comfortably in the confines of his boyish head—toward the sky where the inky black of the dark leaves dripped down like dew from a quill pen. The trees seemed to close up behind them like a portal to a familiar but strange world of mountain houses and clinking classes and missing family members, so Wyatt thought if they could just keep going, keep letting that portal close they could find themselves soon in a world different but similar where the past could be altered, a moment tweaked, a butterflies wings leading the way to a vastly changed future.

“You good?” The girl asked as she watched the boy turn his head slowly around though seemingly taking in none of the surroundings.

“Yes,” he replied after a moment. “It’s dark out.” She couldn’t know what he’d done. He knew she would feel alone; he knew she wouldn’t understand that even in this state of nearly
complete dissociation he felt still he understood her and still it was them against the never-ending
ocean of grief that plagued their days and would for a very long time.

iv

The twins walked, ducking under thin branches drooping with ivy and moss. Roots, slick
with unevaporated dew, seemed to grow around their feet, tripping them as they crept forward into
the thick air. Steam rose off the ground, littered with the wet muck of rotting leaves; birds rustled in
the tops of the trees letting loose droplets of caught rain from a past storm.

The two squinted through the dark until their eyes adjusted and they let the forest take them
in. The girl thought of the months she’d suffered in a muted agony; she’d bruise herself alone in her
room or lay in the poorly lit streets before the sun came up, watching planes make faint jet streams
in the dark light of the moon—a white crayon dragged along black construction paper. There
seemed to be something so wicked and cruel about her invisible fall from grace; the behind the
scenes moments felt so wrong, sadder even, this quiet and secret hurting that plagued the girl, than
the plainly visible drug fueled intermission from the beaten bath, that the boy had been whisked to.
She pushed her fingers into a bruise on her hip; looking past her brother into the moss green woods,
the purple of the moon filtering through tree tops and fog, and the black of the thick distant
air—the world looked the same color as the bruise that had bloomed, instantly, like a baby rose
placed in water so thick with food coloring the petals had gone black.

“I’ve not been sleeping,” she said, her words disappearing into the thick of the gloom.

The girl liked being with the boy; the two wandering off. But there was something messy and
serious about the twin’s moments of isolation. She’d recently grown to prefer loud crowds, the way
she could shrink away as glasses clinked or spilled and people kissed or pushed and shoved. She
could perform—laughing or gasping, smiling and winking, and no one asked her about more than
the weather. With Wyatt, with the bond shared only by siblings—unexpressed thoughts transmitted and received blindly and silently across rooms—she couldn’t perform, couldn’t pretend things were different than they were. Her heart beat slow, once for each step she took deeper into the woods, but when it beat, it beat hard like a fist pounding on the inside of her ribs; it made her stomach sink and her sight narrow. She worked on breathing; looking around the low light of the night, her eyes caught imaginary dangers always just out of sight.

The girl’s voice was lost in the air between the two, caught by a nearly mystical thickness of the troposphere. Ahead, the boy, too lost in mind by his poisonous drug haze to notice he’d let his body lead that of his sister’s deep into a lost world of nymphs and elves and hobbits. The two reached a small, clear pond. The space around it was even more humid than the air the two had been pushing through. The boy wanted to tell her what’d he done, that there was a liquid streaming through his veins—bile black—sticking to his bones and running to his brain confusing him, shoving him toward desire for more, running through his heart and taking up space reserved for his family, for books and movies and friends. Instead he let his arms drop by his sides as he sat and leaned against a soft log, rotting from the moisture and the bugs that clung to it in the day. The world was so still, the air thicker with each breath he took; he thought it might all just end on a night so calm; everything would just slow to a stop.

The boy said nothing as the two, finally exhausted from the walk through space as thick as water to reach an air thin pond, walked home. Like characters in some dark fairytale, calamity loomed over them as they moved amid trees and monsters in a dense forest at midnight.

Inside, the air felt clean—absolvent.
The mansion, absent of overhead lighting fixtures, glowed slightly in golden orbs in the corners affixed with lamps with stained glass shades and indigo fringes hanging down, still, in the sterile air. The darkness seeped in from the large windows, toward the group of kids sitting on the floor of the living room, backs against leather couches, legs extended out along a hand-woven carpet. Maia sipped red wine from a half empty bottle; Wyatt smoked cigarette after cigarette, filling a crystal ashtray with butts and ash; Hayden lay on her back, staring at the ceiling watching the white paint swirl like they were all inside a snow globe; Jacey and Sam paced a warm bottle of wine back and forth, lingering on the opening of the glass as though they were whispering messages to send out to sea; Nate had fallen asleep in the room where Maia had spun like a girl in a music box and he’d sat, the binocularered, gallant audience of a grand opera.

The weekend already seemed to be waning. While their bodies were filled with booze and drugs and lust and pleasure, the kid’s minds drifted to secrets and thoughts they couldn’t or wouldn’t express, leaving their heads loud yet lonely.

“Don’t you get scared here alone?” Jacey asked. “This place is like a haunted house in a movie.”

“Or a fairytale,” Wyatt said.

“Some dark and twisted tale in which a group of friends drive up a long and winding road to a dark and secluded house,” Hayden said in a voice that rang of performance. “The night wore on and the children grew tired, and outside the darkness grew thick and the monsters hungry.”

Her voice was deep and caught in her throat like a whisper; Wyatt liked it.

“If we were in a story,” Jacey said to Hayden. “You would be a siren. Luring men into this huge house with your skin and your voice and your money. Then you’d eat them.”

Maia laughed. “The house makes me want to say you’re Belle, but Jacey’s right, Belle was all pure and innocent. You’re all corrupted.”

“And you’re just the opposite,” Hayden spat back. “So sweet and young. So soft and quiet. A nymph. All the more dangerous. Your prey thinks they’re hunting you, stalking you through the woods as they grow thicker and thicker. Men—hunters and fishermen—going along, happily enough following the young girl with flowers in her hair and unsteady feet, until they’ll never again
find their way back. You just follow me or Wyatt or Jacey or even Nate around. You’d feel so blessed to be stalked and followed you wouldn’t even care what they were gonna do. All daddy issues and abandon. Poor little thing.”

Maia stood and walked to the bar, pouring a generous red wine, while Hayden went on.

“And Jacey,” she said. “In a world of beauties and beasts and sirens and nymphs, where elves populate that woods and mermaids the seas you, my dear,” she stroked Jacey’s head, tucking her hair behind her ear like a hateful stepmother. “Would still be just a human, so plainly average its painful.”

“Fuck you,” Jacey said.
Chapter Five

Gloomies

The drive back down the mountain took place early the next morning, a morning nearly as overcast as the drive up. Maia drove, with Jacey in her front seat, the three boys crammed in the back; Wyatt slumped against the cool, dewy window, coming down from the binge. Hayden's parents were expected back from London the following day and she'd told them she'd wait for them at the mountain house for a family summer gathering. This left the five to drive back in an uncomfortable, hung over silence.

The clouds parted only slightly in the distance and the early morning sun came down in visible golden rays. “Glories,” Maia said quietly.

Wyatt in the back opened his eyes and saw the streaks. “Mhm,” he replied. And looked at the dark oppressive clouds that hung over the car, raining large infrequent drops on his window, then looked past at the streaks of pure gold out across the valley. He thought of Hayden, her dark hair and light eyes, her pale skin with dark ink and dark fingernails. He thought of the way her skin felt cold even in the heat of the summer. He thought that no matter how bad he felt on the harsh, winding road that led down from her, he would always go back up.

But Hayden’s parents didn’t return to the mountain house the following day. They texted that business required their presence for just a couple more weeks in London, then New York. They said they’d be happy to fly her up to New York when they knew their exact dates.

Hayden looked around the lamp lit house with heavy curtains and settled dust. She wished there were a monster hidden behind a bookshelf or up a flight of stone steps. She sat on the floor of the dark library surrounded by lives unobtainably large. She wandered around her great house, in and out of rooms from great novels in which great heroines set off on great adventures and thought that she would never be great.
And so, in a faraway mansion like a castle in an age-old tale, alone, a girl gave her life to a beast. The poor child with parents as distant as an aunt and uncle, by herself in an empty house that felt, to her, as large as the world, took too much of a thing that felt so good, like scalded leaves on the south side of a flowering plant. The beauty sent herself to a permanent sleep, from which neither a princes’ kiss nor a parent’s gentle touch nor a sprinkle of fairy dust could ever wake her.

The twins arrived home, walking around the side yard to slip in the backdoor. In the kitchen stood a woman, hair darker than before, for all this time she’d been denying herself the sun; it came down in thin strings, but her smile, when she turned to her two children, was pure, motherly, and genuine.

“Mom,” Maia said.

The three stood in a strange silence; the moment laid out a choice of strangeness or a reacquaintance so quick the past months would be forgotten. Maia dropped her bag and ran into her mother's arms. The air of the house felt lighter, less weighed down by dust; Maia didn’t fear that bumping a table or counter would send her coughing and fleeing the room.

Wyatt went to his room, shutting the door, confused. Maia went to her own room to clear out the embarrassing evidence of her wasted months. She picked up empty bottles from under the bed and in the closet; two had sat on her desk long enough to stain the light wood with dark red rings. Arms full she crept down the stairs and towards the side door to trash them at the neighbors, but one slipped as she stepped down the last step and hit the carpet with a light thud. Her mother came around the corner and took in the scene—her young daughter standing, arms overflowing with emptied liquor—she picked up the fallen bottle and carried it over to the living room cupboard. She opened the small wooden door and took out the unopened bottles of wine, the half empty gin and bourbon, and followed her daughter to the large trash bin by the side of the house. The two emptied their arms.
That night, Wyatt saw a boy in his mind, and, pulling out a blank page of computer paper he drew the boy. He wore a black suit jacket buttoned only once. Underneath a white shirt shown through with three small, black buttons leading up to a long black tie, tied in a Half Windsor. He leaned against the edge of a sofa with his hands in his pockets. Instead of a head, the boy had a black bomb with a short fuse coming out the top, lit and sparking. Standing on his bed, he tapped the drawing to the roof covering a small constellation of stars.

The twins heard of Hayden’s ‘accident’, as everyone was calling it, a week after they returned from the mountain house, though she had been found only the next day by a scheduled housekeeper. The family had kept everything quiet until the funeral plans were arranged and about to be carried out. It would be posh, private, and take place in London; a small wake would follow for family only. Wyatt and Maia were not able to attend and instead walked through the cemetery slowly.

“I’m sorry,” Maia began.

“Don’t,” he said. “Let’s not.”

So, they walked on in silence. The night was dark, as they always were—no moon and a dismal, gloomy sky. Steam rose off the headstones, warm from the day, into the fog blending the ground and the air. The stones were mossy; green grew from the grass up, clinging to the engraved names, pulling them down deeper into the Earth. The two walked through the entire graveyard to the far corner where a small church stood, empty. The door was unlocked though it was late, and it was cooler inside than out. Their footsteps echoed quietly as the two walked to one side and then down to a statue of Christ that hung high above the alter. Wyatt stood under a large stained-glass window; the night caused the beautiful colors to look only like varying shades of grey and black.
“I hate her,” he said. He thought how careless she’d been, drawing him into her darkness then leaving him there. He thought how grand and large she must have considered it all, pulling people onto her stage, performing for them—with them. She’d thought her hurt was so different than everyone else’s, like she’d been so special. Her tragedy was so beautiful and pure. Fuck her.

“Wyatt don’t” Maia said. “We don’t have to.”

He picked up a small statue of the Mary who stood at the nativity scene. She’d been on her knees, praying in front of the baby as the wise men stood behind her bowing down. Animals lay, calm below—an angel played a harp. He threw Mary into the stained-glass image in which a saint stood haloed. It shattered, raining shades of dark glass down on the two.

With that, a depression of grief fell once again over the house. Alison, this time unaffected by the sorrow and the solitude of mourning, stood constantly over a boiling pot of soup—chicken noodle, lemon quinoa, vegetable stew—bring nurturing bowls up to her bed ridden young ones. The winter wore on and they burrowed deeper under covers.

Maia was first to emerge out the far side of the dark, brutal winter. She joined her mom in the bright, cold kitchen to stir the large pot with a long wooden spoon and bring meals up to Wyatt.

She went, one day, to his bedroom door and knocked quietly, twice. The expected noiselessness of silence answered, so she cracked the door. Despite there being a window in Wyatt’s room and not in the hall it seemed darker on the far side of the threshold. She opened the door enough to glide in. Blindly, she walked through the room, hands held out before her so as not to run into anything in the blackness. She reached the window and drew the curtains back enough so a sliver of moonlight could drift across the bedspread that had been hiding Wyatt.
In the new light of the half-moon that swayed in the sky, she saw the philodendron, their father had got him just over a year ago; it sat in the back corner of the room. The leaves were shriveled and brown, so brittle if she had touched the edge of any leaf, the entire plant would have disintegrated.

She felt no remorse for the deceased plant, only longing. A painful urge to be as simplistic as that plant had been in life. She wished this for Wyatt even more than herself. If only humans could be so simple minded as to desire only two vices in order to live. Sun and water. She wished—with such passion, such intensity that it arose in her an agony she’d never felt; an anguish that went unquenchable—that Wyatt were a flower. That she could help plainly by pulling back the curtains, by letting the sun pour through the entire room, soaking Wyatt and bleaching away the sorrow that had hung over this room for weeks now. She wished the light could run like a river into his bloodstream and warm him in that way only the sun can. She wanted it to evaporate from her brother all his pain. She wanted even memories of stubbed toes and skinned knees—childhood woes—to be lifted from him and made into condensation she could wipe away from the cold windows.

But she knew this misery resided not only in his blood but within his skin, in each cell rested a malice pointed only deeper within him—rogue blood vessels turned against each other waging a war in his body that no amount of waving white flags or protruding sunlight could solve, and so she sealed again the curtains, turned her back to him, and walked out of the room like she was never there.
Time, in this new adult world, felt strange and disregarded. Maia hardly checked the clocks; she got coffee as the sun was setting and fell to sleep as it was rising, finding her mother always at the kitchen sink or in front of the warm stove, flames licking the bottom of a cauldron sized pot, “I’m making consommé,” she’d say.

Maia brought him bowls and left the door to the lighted hall more ajar with each trip and slowly, nearly immeasurably at first, he began to recover.

Allison returned to a job, reluctant but willing to bring her back on and began working again on her a short story entitled “The Abundance”; Maia, now working as a barista down the road, picked up every book she could find. Each morning she’d throw on ripped jeans and any oversized band t shirt she could find of the ones she’d taken from her dad’s drawers and headed down to Hither. She’d read behind the counter when the flow of high school goths—Americano, underwhelming writers—black coffee, and boozy housewives making appointments—iced vanilla latte, finally slowed. At home, she spent most of her time outside, rain or shine, often sitting on the porch as the sky shot down thundering bolts of light.

Wyatt learned to draw in the permanent half-light of his room and began to work on the family for the boy with the bomb as a head. He drew a girl in a dark blue dress with pockets decorated in white dots—sporadic and heavy; her arms came out and went down to wrists that lacked hands and instead opened up to the blankness of the paper. Around the thin neck of the young girl was a black diamond necklace. From the pockets, candy overflowed. Her perfectly circular head was as light as the pure paper; a line came down from the top to the bottom, cutting it straight down the middle. On the left side Wyatt wrote the letter K; on the right, he wrote 18. He
hung this lowly girl beside the explosive boy. Next he drew a man. The man wore a dark black t-shirt with a single breast pocket and dark grey jeans. His hands were drawn with careful detail—veins, wrinkles, cuticles. He wore faded purple converse; the hem of the dark jeans came down perfectly to the tongue. Instead of a head, the man bore a rope, a noose, loop side up with the two pieces coming down together to form the neck. Wyatt hung the man above the two children. A noose, a pill, a bomb—the big three, he thought.

vi

Perched carefully on the slick roof, bundled in clothes and blankets the two siblings sat on a cool evening in late March. The sky above was clear though clouds brewed on the outskirts of town. They could see a faint rainbow falling from a dark cloud; the rain was steady in the distance. The two could see it falling; it looked like light grey pencil marks down the horizon.

“Gloomies,” he said, pointing out to them.

She thought for a second, watching the still lines. “Yeah,” she said. “The opposite of glories.” She reached for a cigarette from the pack laying between them.

He pulled the pack closer to himself before she could reach one that had been slipping out.

“Nah don’t,” he said. “You shouldn’t.” Putting the pack in his pocket he stood and worked his way back through the window, leaving her to the silence of the snow and the crisp of the evening air.

She watched the gloomies until the storm neared enough that she could no longer see them and had to move inside herself, then down to the porch with a Gabriel García Márquez.
On the encouragement of both his mother and his sister, Wyatt submitted all six illustrations to Southern Oregon University and was accepted into the arts program. Orientation came too quickly, and Wyatt dragged himself from bed and into jeans, a t shirt, and sneakers. He shoved his computer, a notebook, a couple pencils, and a book into his bag.

The day was too bright and the bus ride too crowded. People sat, headed to mindless jobs or from suffocating families. They all looked soberly strung out, like the very air they breathed was reminded them of an overused substance. They looked sickened, and Wyatt was sickened watching them lug their used bodies on and off the stuffy bus.

At the sign in table a man stood, smiling too wide and checking names off a list, handing overstuffed packets to happy go lucky kids, wide eyed and bushy tailed. Wyatt rolled his eyes at no one as he stood in line.

“Hey man,” the guy said, when Wyatt got up to the table clad in a “Welcome Orientation Sign-In” sign. “Could I get your name?”

“Wyatt Greyson,” he replied.

“Greyson,” the man said. “Any relation to Clay Greyson?”

Wyatt was taken aback. Though the school was small and he and Maia had grown up running around the halls and spinning for hours in office chairs while their father finished up, he’d never thought anyone would remember him or match the name. “Yeah,” he said after a beat. “He’s my dad.”

The man let his hands rest on the table, Wyatt’s folder in his grasp. “We were all so sorry to hear what happened,” he said. Wyatt caught his eye and saw real, genuine sorrow. “It’ll be nice to
have another Greyson here at the school. Welcome.” He handed Wyatt the folder, smiling a sad but true smile. “Hi miss, could I have your name?” the man said to the girl in line behind Wyatt.

Wyatt turned away to the open grass of the quad; it was especially green for the early season. Flowers were just beginning to be speckled again with color; the sky shown a lighted blue blocked only by a few wispy cirrus clouds; the trees looked as green as a drawing. The breeze felt nice even with the coolness of the day. The sun softened as the afternoon waned.

Someone bumped Wyatt’s arm as the passed. “Oh sorry,” a boy said.

“All good,” Wyatt smiled.

“Are you going to the welcome lecture?” the boy asked. “None of us know which way the building is,” he laughed.

“Yeah,” Wyatt said. “I was just gonna head over. I think it’s in Hannon. Around this way.” he walked, as the boy signaled a couple other students over and they joined him, walking around the side of a stone building and through a small courtyard to the grand glass library.