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A House Divided

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A House Divided

An honors thesis presented to the Department of English
University at Albany, State University of New York in
fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with honors
in English

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Abstract

Abraham Lincoln coined the phrase, "A house divided cannot stand." So how he would feel about the current administration's stances against individuals in minority groups, whose identities are already heavily politicized? This collection of short stories I've written delves into the lives of those individuals as they have been targeted and continue to be affected by the rhetoric and policy threats of this administration. Each story follows an individual who deals with the effects of this rhetoric, both directly and indirectly. The experiences of the individuals in these stories are not universal; these experiences illustrate the potential circumstances and consequences these individuals face in real life, on a daily basis. Additional characters within each story represent different attitudes and reactions to the rhetoric on groups like immigrants, Muslims, women, etc. Some challenge those ideas. Others internalize them. The project as a whole exhibits how dangerous unchecked language can be. Unlike other works that analyze the current administration's members, rhetoric, and policies, this collection takes the approach of fiction, in the form of short stories. The use of fiction evokes emotion in the readers that numbers and statistics cannot. Additionally, each short story contains elements of both realistic and speculative fiction, suggesting that while the events in the story may not have necessarily taken place, they are very much within the realm of possibility. Some of these stories include specific acts of violence, which may or may not have happened, but have been inspired by other acts that have been documented. My hope is that this project inspires allies by opening a lot of eyes to the insensitivity and bigotry being displayed and normalized.

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Introduction

Regardless of one's political beliefs, it's easy to see why the current administration is one of the most controversial. The leaders of this administration have chosen to use language that demonizes groups of people who have historically been marginalized in the U.S. and across the globe. The fear-mongering used by these leaders has only added to the oppressions and stigmatization these minority groups face in our society. The bigoted ideas and attitudes aren't necessarily new, but the rhetoric that validates them has been going on since the campaign. Despite its heavily problematic platforms, this administration wasn't properly called out. Clearly bigoted generalizations and comments didn't invalidate their platform to the public. To some, they even enhanced it. Those attitudes and the rhetoric they favor are what this work will analyze.

I was inspired to begin putting together this collection after the results of the 2016 presidential election were announced. I read about the spike in hate crimes and calls to LGBTQ suicide hotlines that resulted from the election. In that, I saw pain. I saw that more people were going to be suffering under this new administration because it validated decades of hate and bigotry. I wanted to tell the stories of those individuals to show that this administration was already having real harmful effects. I wanted to try and help them. Different groups began to be affected in different ways, all of which could be traced back to the callous rhetoric. These different impacts inspired the stories I wrote for this collection.

This work is comprised of six short stories. Each one is told through the perspective of someone living in the United States in its current sociopolitical climate. Each character is, in some way, a target; thus, each character is affected by the rhetoric. The ways in which each

character are affected will vary. But the goal for each story is the same: to show how the individual(s) in that group is/are potentially affected by the rhetoric that's been thrown around. The experiences and characters in these stories are not meant to be universalized or made into monoliths. Additionally, these stories deal directly with certain phrases, ideas, or policy proposals expressed by the administration. Some are also based on real events that have taken place throughout the country. Relating the stories to these events was done to further ground them and show the real impacts of the administration's rhetoric.

I understand my privilege in being able to write this. As the product of immigrants, this project is personal to me. As a cisgender, heterosexual, occasionally white-passing man, I'm not directly affected by most of what the administration expresses in its platform. Because of this, the stories I wrote aren't out of personal experience; I can't discount that in other individuals because I don't live those experiences. I wrote these characters based on what I've seen in the news, what I've seen in accounts on social media, and what I've studied in my years at this university, giving it a more theoretical approach. To some degree, this project may seem exploitative, but that's not my intention. I want to use my privilege(s) and this project to give back and help those affected by this administration. And when the time comes, I want to give those directly affected by this an opportunity to speak.

The names of the characters, and by extensions the stories, are based on charities and organizations that help individuals within groups affected by the current administration. I did this so that they each have a deeper significance. Additionally, I hope this encourages people to be allies by supporting these organizations. The collection's title, *A House Divided*, gets its name from the phrase coined by Abraham Lincoln.

The first story in this collection is “Angel.” The title and protagonist’s name are based on a charity called Border Angels, which aims to help immigrants obtain citizenship. This story focuses on a young Latin American woman as she copes with the loss of a relative. In addition to this, she is a character who struggles with neutrality in a conflict between her friend (now boyfriend), Chad, and her best friend, Ash. This deals with the microaggressions that people of certain ethnicities face because of their assumed citizenship status. The xenophobic attitudes and ethnocentric views on who gets to be “American” that lead to these microaggressions were promoted by certain statements made by members of the current administration. To some, jokes or comments like the ones in the story may be harmless, but they reflect and internalize bigotry towards people of color. That is addressed in this story.

“Rainn” is the second story, based on the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network. This organization deals largely with sexual assault, as it runs the National Sexual Assault Hotline. This story deals with a young woman who deals with the aftermath of a sexual assault. By this, I mean she deals with some external forces that reinforce rape culture within our society. But there is also an element of empowerment in this. This story may be triggering to some individuals because of its content and the topic it addresses.

The next story in the collection is “Nihad.” The name comes from the founder of the Council of American Islamic Relations. This organization advocates for the rights of Muslims primarily in America, but abroad as well. This particular story focuses on a Muslim teenager as he deals with the intricacies of social interaction in high school. He finds pleasure in fitness, an outlet that allows him to feel empowered and channel the competitiveness he feels towards his male friends and peers. This entry in the collection also has some elements of a romance story,

without the standard white-(washed) main characters. Overall, the point of this story is to humanize and normalize Muslims in American society.

The fourth story is titled, “Trevor.” This short story gets its name from the Trevor Project which is an organization that operates a suicide hotline specifically for members of the LGBTQ community. The story takes some inspiration from the events that followed election night in 2016 involving many gay teens. Many became victims of hate crimes or suicide, which is something that goes largely unaddressed in our society. The actual story follows a young man, named Trevor, as he helps his best friend and significant other cope with being outed. This story’s subject matter may be triggering to some.

The Sierra Club is a grassroots conservationist organization that aims to bring about social change for environmental justice. This organization inspired me to write “Sierra” about a young woman of color who finds herself in a potentially dangerous situation. This story takes some inspiration from the events that took place in Charlottesville last summer. By doing this, the story delves into contemporary racial issues and explores the connections between racial and environmental justice. This story is, in some ways, more suspenseful, as its characters have different things at stake and potentially life-changing consequences.

The final story within this collection, “Sylvia,” is based on the Sylvia Rivera Law Project. This organization also helps members of the LGBTQ communities. It provides individuals with any kind of legal assistance they may need in our cis-hetero-normative society. The story itself deals with an individual as they enter college (note that I use “they” as a singular gender-neutral pronoun). This new event acts as a point of self-discovery as they make new friends and find new interests. They slowly begin to realize aspects of their identity they never knew existed and that they don’t want to conform to the norms of society. Instead, they want to

express their true identity in different ways. The overall themes of this are personal growth and acceptance.

Angel

My family and I were among the first to arrive to the funeral. We were all dressed in black “dress” clothes; we couldn’t afford anything too nice, but we made due. I didn’t know my aunt, Anita, well enough, and that’s something I was starting to regret. The real pain I felt was watching my mother hurt from this. She and my Anita were cousins, but were more like sisters than anything else, hence her being my “aunt.” They were extremely close when they grew up and remained that way as adults. Seeing my mother without her was just heart-wrenching. She probably felt guilty because they hadn’t been seeing each other as much due to work hours and Anita being hospitalized. She had health problems, but that was normal for people in our family, especially in the states.

We got inside, where my cousins and uncle were standing, by the casket. Some other relatives were talking with them, trying to console them. There were rows of empty seats in the room. We knew those seats would be filled before the funeral started because of how extensive our family was and how many family friends would come to support us. We found seats in one of the middle rows and put our stuff there. My mother walked a bit faster than normal to the front to console her nieces. My father and brother, Luiz, followed. Maritza, my little sister was about to follow her when I gently grabbed her hand and guided her to sit down next to me.

“I need you to listen. You know why we’re here right?”

“Mhmmm”

“There are gonna be a lot of sad adults here. We need you to be on your best behavior.”

“Okay, Angel!” the seven-year old exclaimed before giving a hug.

“Also, you should probably stay back here.”

“Okay.”

I waited until my brother got back before I got up to see my cousins and greet them. It almost felt surreal to be walking around in a funeral home. It's not like I thought I'd never be in one, but I didn't think I would be in one yet. Then again, Maritza was only seven and she was here. My cousins had tears in their eyes as they hugged one of their cousins on their father's side. I felt some spark of happiness when I saw faint smiles on their faces as they saw me. We weren't as close as my mother and Anita were, but we were still family.

"Thank you so much for being here, Angel," they said, almost in unison.

"Of course. I'm sorry it's so hard. How are you holding up?"

"We're managing." My cousin, Maya, hugged me first. She seemed to be holding herself together well for a young teen.

"Yeah, but we think Papa is taking it really hard," Lorena, the younger of the two, whispered to me.

"I'm sorry. I'll say something to him too." I made my way to the other side of the casket to where my uncle was. "Hi, Tió."

"Angel, thank you for coming." He bear hugged me tight.

"I'm really sorry. I hope your family is okay."

"Thank you, niña."

I turned back to walk down the middle aisle. The room was slowly filling up with more people. More family members from both sides of the family slowly poured into the room. Then there was a tall, white guy who stood out from the crowd. His frame stuck out noticeably. That was my boyfriend, Chad. I went over to my family in the middle quickly and told them I'd be sitting in the back row. My feet moved clumsily now for some reason and I almost tripped. I made it to the back row, waving Chad over. He gave a wave back and a charming smile. He had

a small bouquet of white roses. We sat down near the end of the row and whispered to each other.

“I hope these help. I didn’t realize how big this was gonna be.”

“Can you hold them? And yeah, we have a big family.”

“You were right. It’s like no one knows how to keep their legs closed.”

“Chad, not here.” I tried to whisper

“I’m sorry. That’s just how I cope. How are you doing?”

“I’ve been better. Ash is supposed to come too.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, we talked and I told her all about it and she said she wanted to be here for me.”

“Looks like she’s late,” he muttered.

“Yeah, I guess so.”

Right after I said that, the door behind us burst open and Ash came through. She tried to quietly close it behind her but it slammed the frame loud enough for everyone to turn around. She mouthed “sorry” to everyone and found us, sitting down next to me. She hugged me tight for a minute.

“I’m sorry I’m late. How are you doing?” She held my arms reassuringly.

“I’ve been better, but I’m glad you’re here.”

A noise drowned out the mumbling in the rows of seats. It was my uncle at the front testing the microphone. He was about to speak and start the funeral part. He seemed a bit nervous and the sadness he felt was evident. He cleared his throat and the room went silent. The pause that followed felt a lot longer than it actually was. He began tearing up again. Maya

stepped over to where he was and put her hand on his back. It was a heartwarming gesture to watch. People began sniffing and pulling out tissues. He finally spoke.

“Thank you for being here. Gracias por estar aquí.” He then looked over to his daughter and said, “Thank you, mija.”

Chad leaned over and whispered to me, “I didn’t know you still talked to Ash.”

“Yeah, we’re best friends. I mean, we haven’t talked in a while, but we’re still friends.”

“I just thought you might’ve realized how awkward it would be since she basically broke up the friend group.”

“She’s still my friend. Let me listen to this, we can talk about it later.”

His words sank in for a moment and I started thinking about our friendship. We had all been friends before because we had classes together and made up a study group. Ash and I were the best of friends. Then there was drama between some of the members. Things got heated between Ash and Chad. She called him out for being an asshole times, and some people sided with her. Chad said he was just being attacked for being blunt; others sided with him in the argument. Before I knew it, the whole group was divided and stopped talking. I tried to be neutral because I wanted us all to stay friends. Chad and I started seeing each other soon after. Ash and I were still friends, though we talked less; so they were all I really had left of that group.

My uncle spoke more about the funeral and took time to tell everyone how amazing Anita was. He told the story of how they met in the same language class. He spoke about how they enjoyed a lot of time together and then started their family. He then praised his daughters for being so strong and helping him cope with the death of his love. They had their chance after to speak about their mother and how kind it was for everyone to be there. I felt tears as they got emotional and ended their speech.

A funeral director then came up to the mic. “We will be taking a short break before we let other family members speak. Thank you.”

I got up and grabbed Chad’s hand. “Why don’t you come say hi to my family?”

He nodded. I let him lead the way and quickly told Ash I’d be right back.

“Chad! Dios mio, how are you?” My mother came over to hug him.

“Hi there, Mrs. Lopez. I’m good.”

“Thank you for coming.” She held him, teary-eyed. My dad came over and put a hand on his shoulder.

“Hey, mom. Chad and Ash came to be supportive.” Upon hearing this, my mother looked over Chad’s shoulder to where Ash was and waved. “Ma, I’m gonna go check on her.” I turned to Chad and whispered, “Why don’t you stay here and talk to my parents for a bit?” He gave a complicated look and nodded.

I went back to where Ash was and sat next to her. We looked at each other awkwardly for a second not knowing what to say.

“Thank you for coming. I really appreciate it.”

“I know, you mentioned that. What’s he doing here?”

“Ash, you know we’re dating.”

“Yeah, but why. I thought we were friends and you had my back.”

“I do, but I was friends with him too. You know I can’t play favorites.” I tried to put my hand on her arm.”

She turned forward and said, “It feels like you are.”

“I know. I’m really sorry. I could be a better friend.”

“Just promise me we’ll actually talk after this.”

“We will.” I grabbed her hand and squeezed a bit.

I looked up and Chad was coming back to us. He had a plain expression that I couldn't read. He sat back down next to me and his body language seemed blank too. That expression turned into a look of slight disappointment when he turned to me and Ash. I just tried to hold it together and keep things neutral, like I've tried to do before. They couldn't make a scene and ruin this funeral; it was a funeral for someone who was in my family. I kept thinking about getting through this as more relatives spoke about my aunt in front of everyone and celebrated her life. There were moments when I could focus on that, and I actually felt connected to her.

After a few hours, we had to load everyone up in cars because we were going from the funeral home to the cemetery so they could bury her body. Organizing and loading everyone into cars probably took longer than the actual trip would. I climbed into the back of my parents mini-van with Maritza on my lap, Chad, and Ash next to me. My brother Luiz went with my cousins. My parents were in the front, focused on the road and speaking to each other in Spanish.

Chad looked around a bit. He then remarked, “Better hope no one sees us and calls ICE.”

I turned to him with my mouth open for a few seconds. “Chad, not here.” I leaned in closer and whispered, “Not in front of Maritza.”

“What? Everyone's thinking it,” he said defensively. “I'm practically one of you, and I'm trying to help you laugh to cope.”

“Okay, just not in front of the family,” I sighed.

“Fine.”

“Thank you.” I leaned onto his shoulder and held his hand and took the bouquet of roses. My eyes turned to Ash and she just gave me an eye roll. I closed my eyes for some time, and

before I knew it, we were about a minute away from arriving at the cemetery. We were a few blocks away when our van was cut off by a speeding police car. It didn't have its sirens or lights on, so my dad didn't see it. The van swerved quite a bit and skidded to an immediate stop. We were all thrown around inside the car.

"Is everyone okay?" My mother turned to check on all of us in the back. We all groaned affirmative answers.

Chad whispered to me, "Told you we had to worry about ICE."

I rolled my eyes and whispered back, "You're being ridiculous."

"You're right. She's the one, who'd have to worry," he whispered with a dark grin, gesturing to Ash.

At that moment, I realized Ash was right. No matter how I looked at it, Chad was a racist asshole and there were no excuses for it. No matter how many times he tried to say he wasn't actually racist or that they were "just jokes," it was still wrong. There was something malicious in his words that I finally caught. I thought for the longest time that as long as I was "in" on the joke, everything was okay. But really I was just making excuses for him. All the good things he did: the nice gestures, romantic dates, and everything else were just cover ups for this. I felt anger and sadness, more at myself than at him. How could I be a part of this?

As soon as we had parked and all got out of the car, I took him aside and said, "Leave."

"What?"

"Just leave. You don't have to be here for the rest of this. And we're done."

"Why?"

"I'm tired of the things you say, even if they are just 'jokes.'"

“Fine,” he said, pulling out his phone. “You’re gonna hear about this in your mentions, and everyone at school will know what a self-righteous-”

Ash stepped between us and shoved him away. She cut him off. “Just go.”

He huffed and then walked away indignantly. He turned a corner and disappeared from my life. I put my hands on my face, where tears wet my fingers. Arms wrapped around me and my head was being caressed.

“I’m sorry...again. You didn’t have to do that for me.”

“I did it for myself. You were right. I guess I just wanted to hold onto as much of the group as I could to feel some kind of normalcy, and I just kept making excuses for him.”

“At least we can hang out more now.”

“Yeah. We should go join my family.”

We walked into the cemetery gates and went to where the crowd was. They had already carried the coffin over and were lowering it into the ground. Once it reached the bottom, people began throwing flowers and bouquets to be buried with the coffin. Their tears of sadness and mourning masked mine. I made my way through the crowd to the hole and threw the roses Chad gave me. When they hit the casket, I felt a sense of relief and closure. That part of my life was over. After some more words from my uncle, everyone got a chance to help bury Anita. I thought it was supposed to be symbolic of us all coming together to support my uncle and cousins. This was supposed to help them move on. I felt it too, and thought it would help me move on.

Rainn

I remember being so excited to go to my first high school party. Most people were shocked that I was entering my senior year having never been to one before. I just wasn't the type to go to parties. Most Friday nights, I curled up with a book and wine, because my parents were cool enough to let me drink in the house. People laughed when I told them that, but I really was that bookworm kid. My friend and next-door neighbor, Brad, finally convinced me to go to one. He was on the basketball team, which won its first game of the season, so his friend was throwing the party. It seemed like it would be a fun time.

When we got there around nine, it was overwhelming. Music was playing and people with plastic red cups were everywhere. It was like a scene out of some teen movie. Brad led me through the crowd and took me to the kitchen, where he poured some punch into two cups. He gave me one then downed the other. I sipped my punch, which was sweet and tasted like raspberries; that taste was immediately followed by extreme bitterness. My face contorted and I tried to get the taste out of my mouth.

“What's in this?”

“Fruits, juice, and a lot of other shit.”

I shrugged it off because everyone around us seemed to be having a good time. I decided to take another so I could feel something and actually have fun. I started to mingle with people in the crowd. A lot of these were people I knew of or vaguely knew and never really spoke to. I began to loosen up, dance, chat, and drink more. Before I knew it, the room was spinning and I could hardly hold myself up. I could only see shapes and lights. I heard words but they were unclear. A familiar frame came into view. I tried to focus but couldn't.

“Come...care of you.”

Everything began to fade into darkness.

I opened my eyes to dim and blurry lights. I was still feeling the alcohol, but I could focus. I heard the same type of music playing. It all got louder and clearer as I regained my consciousness. My eyes were adjusting to the dark. The ceiling was dirty and wet-looking, as if it was leaking. I was in some kind of dingy makeshift bed, which was just two mattresses. I started to move my body off the “bed” and knocked over a glass bottle. I jumped when it clanged on the floor. It rolled on the floor and clanged against another bottle. The noise echoed in my head. A rustling sound came from the other side of the bed.

“Hey,” a familiar voice said.

I panicked and turned around quickly. I saw Brad fixing his belt and putting on his shirt. Seeing him do this made me check myself. I realized my top was undone and my skirt had been moved. I began to fix my outfit.

“What happened?”

“I took you down here because you were wasted. There’s nothing valuable here for you to throw up on.”

“Why were my clothes like this?”

“Oh, you passed out. I came to check on you a few times and then you woke up started coming onto me.”

“So you had sex with me?”

“I wasn’t going to say no. You were asking me to and you were awake.”

“I don’t remember any of that. I was too drunk to...”

“Well you did. I’m sorry if it wasn’t what you wanted, but I don’t think I’m at fault here. I was taking care of you and everything.”

At that moment, I felt alone. I sat in the dim room, collecting my thoughts, trying to process and remember what had happened. I could only get back sensations and fragments. I remembered the bitter taste of rum, the heat of the room, and the loud atmosphere. I just couldn't put it all together. I was actually getting really nauseated so I got up and ran to where the party was still going on. I found a trashcan that was almost full to the brim. I didn't care that it was practically full, so I just let loose and puked.

A few people took notice and gave me disgusted looks. Most other people generally ignored me. My friend Leslie came over to me and started rubbing my back. She held my hair up with the other hand waited until I was done heaving. I was a bit surprised to see her because she never talked about parties or anything like that to me. As I stood straight up, she handed me a paper towel to wipe.

“Had too much, huh?”

“I want to leave.”

“Alright, I'm DD anyway, so let's go.”

She rounded up a few other girls who were just about done for the night. They were slurring a lot and stumbling around. Leslie started packing them in the car and saved the front seat for me. As I was getting in, I saw Brad in front of the house, watching us leave. What happened between us? The car ride back was actually quiet, until I decided to speak to Leslie.

“I think something happened between me and Brad.”

“Yeeah!” the girls in the back started cheering.

“Well, that's good, right?”

“I don't think so. I don't remember any of it.”

“But is that what you wanted?”

“I don’t think so. I was really drunk, and he...” I couldn’t finish my thought.

“Stop complaining,” one of the girls in the back yelled.

Leslie leaned in close. “Are you okay? Were you...raped?”

A part of me didn’t want to answer that question because if I acknowledged it, I would become that girl; I would be the rape victim. I clutched my leg and just nodded. “I think I was.”

“Okay, you need to report this. Try talking to one of the teachers and see if they can point you in the right direction.”

We got to my house and I nodded before getting out of the car. Leslie tried to give me a reassuring look and waved goodbye to me as I walked along the path to my home. I opened the door and closed it as quietly as I could behind me. This was normal for me. I crept through the halls stealthily. Any noise would wake my parents, and I’d get grounded for going out. My room door opened and closed quietly enough for me to breathe a sigh of relief. I was too tired to do anything, so I hopped into bed and passed out.

In the morning, I changed into my bathrobe. I went about my normal routine, brushing, combing, and then showering. For some reason, no matter how much I scrubbed or washed, I felt like I still felt dirty. I scrubbed harder until it hurt, trying to get rid of everything about last night. Eventually, I settled and went on with the rest of the routine, which meant breakfast, clothes. I had eggs, bacon, and toast, then got jeans and a turtleneck. I told my dad I was ready to be dropped off and we headed for the door. I ignored Brad, who was on the other side of the fence between our houses. He called to me and I just hid behind my father.

“You’re not going say anything to him?” my dad asked as we got in the car.

“No, he’s being annoying.”

My dad had been dropping me off at school for years. After that short conversation he did what he normally did, turning on the radio for news. The radio gave us the weather and other news updates. He hummed along to the news jingle. That was the kind of person he was. I wanted to break him out of that. I wanted to break down and tell him everything and be the little girl he used to protect from the world but I couldn't bring myself to do it. I couldn't speak. Before I knew it, we were at school, and my dad said bye. Wandering the hallways, I couldn't help but feel like everyone was watching me. It felt like everyone was judging because of something they knew that I didn't.

Some of Brad's teammates were by my locker. I had to walk around them because they practically took up the entire hallway. They were fooling around and shoving each other. I got to my locker and opened it to grab my books. After I grabbed my textbooks and a novel for between classes, a body hit me and pushed me against the wall. I turned to Brad, who looked down to me and tried to apologize. His friends settled down and watched him, giggling. Their reactions made me worry.

“Hey, Rainn. I wanted to talk with you about the other night.”

I could feel myself starting to get sick. “You mean last night?”

“Yeah. Again, I'm really sorry if that wasn't what you wanted, but I wasn't going to tell you no.”

“Whatever. I need to go.”

“What's your problem? I took care of you last night.”

I had no words, so I turned around and started walking away. I heard some laughter and more commotion as they started shoving each other again. I felt someone bump into me. I tried to say sorry but stopped when I thought I heard “whore” whispered to me. All I was left with

was regret and an awful feeling in the pit of my stomach. The bells started to ring, so I ducked into my next class, practically throwing myself into my chair. I looked around to see if anyone was staring at me. I needed to know if people were trying to judge me. This feeling of paranoia overwhelmed me during the whole class. I couldn't focus on whichever Shakespeare play we had to talk about this week. I just felt myself getting worse and worse.

The bells rang again. It felt too sudden. Had that much time really passed? Everyone was getting up and leaving. The paranoia made me watch everyone who passed my desk to see who might've been laughing or staring. Everyone was gone, and I felt like I knew nothing. I was about to leave when my teacher, Ms. Thurman called me to her desk.

"Yes, Ms. Thurman?"

"Rainn, are you okay? You seemed a little lost today; normally you participate."

"Honestly, not really. I feel sick."

"I'm sorry."

"And I think something happened."

"What do you mean?"

"I was at a party yesterday, and there were drinks. I don't remember anything. And someone told me I..." She came over to put a reassuring hand on me. "Ms. Thurman, I think... I think I was raped."

Her touch turned into a hug. "I'm so sorry, Rainn. That's awful. You should report it to the school's counselor. She can put you in touch with authorities too."

"But I don't remember, so I don't know. And I don't want this to turn into a huge thing. We've been friends for a long time and it could ruin his life."

She grabbed both my arms and looked me in the eyes. “You were there. You know what happened to you. These things go unreported and so the guys who are guilty go on to do it again and again. Do you want me to take you to the counselor?”

I couldn’t manage any words, so I nodded with tears in my eyes. She grabbed her stuff and held my arm. She led the way. Her heels clicked authoritatively through the halls. It felt validating to have her on my side and to have her helping me. I felt eyes on me as I followed her. I think a few guys from the basketball team gazed at me. Ms. Thurman didn’t notice any of it, or she didn’t care. She held the door to the guidance office for me. There were posters with inspirational quotes on them all over the room. I didn’t think they actually helped students because they were so generic. Ms. Thurman stepped in front of me to lead the way again and we stopped in front of one of the desks.

“Jan, this student needs to speak to you.”

An older woman in glasses turned to both of us. She tapped a stack of papers on her desk to even them out before setting them down. She adjusted her chair and glasses before leaning forward and giving me a patient look. “Yes? What’s your name?”

“Rainn.”

“I’m Ms. Davis. What seems to be the problem, Rainn?”

“I want to report a...a rape.”

“That’s very serious. I’m sorry to hear that. How long ago was this?”

“Last night.”

“Where did this happen?”

“This wasn’t on school property. But it was a student here who did it. I was hoping you could help me report this to authorities.”

“Oh. Well, who was it?”

“It was a member of the basketball team. I don’t want to say his name yet.” I began to feel my phone vibrate.

“Are you sure you want to file a report of this? It might reflect badly on everyone involved.”

“What?”

Ms. Thurman interrupted. “Reflect badly on everyone involved? How does this reflect badly on my student here?”

“Well, there’ll be an investigation and all parties will be examined.”

I checked my phone and saw that I had messages from Brad and a few other numbers. Some were threatening. Brad’s pleaded me not to report him because it could ruin his chances of getting scholarships. I finally spoke. “I think I want to report this. I understand they’ll want to make sure I’m not lying, but I feel like I’m already suffering because of this.”

“And you’re sure?”

“Yes. This needs to be reported.”

More bells rang and classes were finishing up for the day. Most students were leaving. The only ones that stayed were part of clubs or teams. I felt it was easier to talk with Ms. Davis and police knowing the school was mostly empty. I told them everything I remembered about the party. They listened intently as I went into detail about going there with Brad and then separating from him. I paused before continuing and talking about how I just woke up next to him in the bed of his friend’s basement.

The investigators told me they couldn’t promise anything but that they would speak to more people and look into everything. Something about that reassurance felt liberating. I felt

good walking back home. When I did make it home, I was able to sit down with my parents and tell them about everything. They were reacted intensely, but still showed me that they loved me and cared. The following weeks were spent waiting to hear back from investigators. In some ways, that was the most suspenseful part. But I would eventually hear from them.

Before that, there was a moment in all the drama that I think changed me. After the investigators told me they would look into things and they left, I spoke with Ms. Davis for a bit.

“I’m really sorry to hear about what happened, especially for that to come from someone you thought was a friend. I really hope they can help you,” she turned to me.

“Yeah, me too.”

“I’m sorry if it seemed like I doubted you before. I just know things can get ugly for the victim... I was harassed and then assaulted when I was around your age. No one believed me and it felt like my life spiraled from there.” Her expression seemed a bit distant and her eyes became glassy.

“I’m really sorry to hear that. I didn’t know that happened to you.”

“I’ve kept that part of my life hidden. It kind of made me want to protect girls like me. But I guess I’ve been going about that wrong.”

“How so?”

“I think I wanted to protect victims from people not believing them so much that I stopped them from reporting and actually doing something. And I mean not just girls from this school, but since then...since my own assault, I’ve only told people to protect themselves. But in reality, all I was doing was helping the perpetrators.”

“Well, I’m glad this was a wakeup call.”

“Me too.”

Nihad

The school bells rang. Except, our school didn't actually have bells, so they played ringing over the PA system. Just like that, Monday was over. At least the boring part was over. All my classes kinda went by; none of them interested me too much and the work was pretty easy. Now that classes were finished, I could head down to the gym and lift. The weight room was in the school's basement, which was dimmer than the rest of the building, but that didn't bother me. People liked to joke that it was haunted, but everyone knew we were underfunded.

The locker room was filled with sweaty ass boys who had just come from P.E. class. I don't know what they were doing, but they were drenched. Some people were wheezing, so they probably ran laps. I'm pretty sure it was a freshman class too, because there were boys in there who looked twelve. Then there were the guys who looked like those freshman's parents. That was our school's range: boys and grown-ass men. When they played sports in class, the differences probably showed a lot.

I put the combination in my lock and opened it to change. I'd been coming down here to use the gym for a few weeks already. I was still getting my routine down and trying to get in shape. I wanted to build muscle, but I also wanted to burn fat off my body. I wasn't in the best shape, but I was getting the hang of it. I told my friends I was getting in shape and soon enough, they asked if they could join. I thought about waiting for them but then decided to go ahead and start working out. I actually left at a good time because one of the larger freshman guys started going around whipping people with a towel. The squeals and cries of smaller freshman grew louder and closer. I rushed out of the locker room and ran into someone.

"Shit, I'm sorry, Nihad. I didn't mean to run into you." I looked and it was one of my sister's friends, Reyah.

“Oh, it’s fine, Reyah.”

“You haven’t seen your sister have you?” She regained her balance and adjusted her hijab.

“No, I haven’t.”

“Okay, well, I’ll go now,” she said, giving a quick smile before running off.

I thought about how weird that was. All of a sudden, I felt a shove from behind me. I almost fell, but caught myself. I raised my fist and turned around, ready to fight.

“Get a room,” my friend, Alex, teased me in a mocking voice.

“Yeah, what he said,” my other friend, Chid, stood behind him.

“Come on, let’s go lift.”

The gym was a small, poorly-lit room with rusty machines and equipment. Some of the school’s athletes were there huddled around one of the benches. There was no music or anything, so the only sounds were the clanking of weights and gross, guttural grunts. The place reeked too. Sweat, hormones, and body spray flooded the gym. That’s probably why there were never a lot of people down there, only meatheads and people like us. Chid and Alex were starting to become regulars, like me. They were mostly trying to bulk up. We used all the machines and tried to push each other. I was in the middle of a set on the curling machine when a girl passed by the window of the gym. That girl was Arianna Hernandez. She’d been going to this school for as long as I have, and I wanted her since the first time I saw her. Every guy probably did. I was hoping that getting in shape and looking better would give me the confidence to finally make a move. I must’ve been staring too long, because Alex pushed the weight down and started teasing again.

“Damn, you trying to bag that?”

“I think he wants to bag her.” Chid answered.

“Shut up.”

“First your sister’s friend, now Arianna?” Alex questioned loudly.

“You forgot your mother.” I replied.

Chid was practically rolling on the floor after that.

“Yeah, nice. Let’s just finish this.” Alex’s voice trailed off.

I pumped out a few more reps on that set and we finished with abs. We did that in a hidden corner of the gym, away from the meatheads. We each did a hundred crunches. That set was always a killer. I looked at myself in the mirror and flexed, trying to see my progress. Chid and Alex were already starting to notice changes. After that, we changed, made more jabs at each other, and said our goodbyes. I carried my bag out, walking past the security desk. Security was a necessity in this school. Sometimes people would get into fights for no reason. The officers patrolled the whole school and had cameras set up everywhere. If you cut class, they found you. But sometimes they’d give me stares for no reason.

I made a quick stop at the bodega on the corner for some Arizona and caught the bus back home. I sat in a row alone and plugged my earbuds in. I was about to hit play when someone sat next to me. I got excited when I thought I saw long black hair. The ear buds came back out and I felt ready to finally say something to Arianna. Reyah turned to me, smiling and asked if I was heading home. I didn’t answer her right away. My excitement faded. Apparently, she stayed late and was gonna come over to hang out with my sister. She kept talking about stuff going on with my sister, but I tuned it out until I fully spaced out. I tried to make sure I nodded occasionally. Eventually, we got off and walked the few blocks to my house. We moved into this nice house a few weeks ago. It wasn’t too far from our old apartment, but it was better. The

new place was closer to the school, our mosque, and family friends. Reyah thanked me, and we went our separate ways. She disappeared into the hallway, towards my sister's room, calling her name and I went to my room. I peeled off my bag and hoodie, collapsing onto the bed moments after. I didn't think about how hungry I was, how I should've been doing homework, or how I probably should've unpacked some of the boxes in my room. I just felt the softness of my bed and went dark.

When I came to, I saw that my phone said nine, so I figured I had more time to sleep, so I closed my eyes. Then it dawned on me that it was bright in my room. I looked around and saw sunlight. I checked the phone again. It was nine in the morning. I overslept, by a lot. I didn't want to show up to my classes late, but I had no choice. When I realized how late I was, I wasn't fazed. I knew kids with way more absences who were passing classes; I could afford to miss a few classes. I took my time getting food, getting showered, then getting dressed. I had a polo, hoodie, and jeans. I even took the time to shave off the stubble growing on my face. I put fresh clothes in my gym bag and was out the door.

I was on my usual bus, just at a different time. My usual seat near the back door was taken, so I went all the way to the back. I plugged in my headphones and just zoned out again. The ride to school took some time. After a few songs, I heard yelling over the music and saw movement out of the corner of my eye. Some guy was yelling at a woman with a child and people were trying to separate him from her. I just looked away and turned up my volume. I could never get involved in shit like that.

I signed a late slip at the front security desk. The timing was perfect; I'd just gotten to school before the period ended so I could seamlessly go into my next class. I dotted the "I" in

my name right as the bell rang. Martinez, the guard, yelled at me to get my ass to class as I disappeared into the sea of student bodies. Turned out it wasn't perfect timing. These hallways got packed because people didn't wanna go to their next classes. I was shoving my way through when I ran into Reyah again. I tried to catch her to make sure she didn't fall. We stood there, really close for a second, and I heard yelling from familiar voices.

“Ohhhh, get it Nihad!” Alex yelled from the door of our next class.

“Bag it up,” Chid yelled too.

I shook my head and just trudged on to class, not acknowledging what had happened. They teased me until Mr. Tucker told them to cut their shit. We had a pop quiz I'm sure the entire class bombed. Everything seemed vaguely familiar so I guessed and felt like it was all right. For some reason, I couldn't focus in class after that. Every time something little happened, I had to resist the urge to slam my fist on one of the desks. I just felt angry for some reason. I only had to sit through a few more classes and then I could go lift weights. I needed to do that. I needed to let this weird feeling out and just take some frustration out on those weights. I hoped Alex and Chid wouldn't get in the way of that.

It was a different day, but the same shit was going on in the gym. A bunch of athletes huddled around a bench. They tried cheering each other on as they benched and curled dumbbells too. The guys and I would usually just use the machines. It felt easier and better than trying to lift the free weights. Sometimes the athletes would give us looks; they made me self-conscious. I was on one of the pressing machines, getting a pump in my muscles going. I felt a tap on my shoulder and thought it was one of the guys, so I stopped.

“Nihad, can you help me out here?” Reyah asked timidly. Alex and Chid were covering up their giggles and shit-eating grins.

“Reyah, what are you doing here?”

“I wanted to work out with you.”

“What? No.”

“Why not?” Her usual cheeriness dissipated.

“Look, right now, I just can’t. I just wanna focus on this.”

“Fine.” She mumbled as she walked away. As she disappeared behind the machines to another part of the gym, I heard chuckles.

“Marital problems?” Alex asked.

“Shut up and spot me,” I grunted going back to my pressing. I gripped the handles of the machine tight and pushed hard. Each push was explosive. I heard a little more chuckling and drowned it out with grunts. My set was finished, so I walked away. The water from the fountain was cool. Sipping it calmed me for some reason. I then noticed that Reyah was struggling with a cable machine. She couldn’t pull the knob to lower the pulley. I sighed and went over to do it for her.

“Look, I’m sorry. Those guys are dicks.”

“They weren’t the ones who turned me away.”

“I know, I’m sorry. It’s just this is my space.”

“No, it’s the high school’s.”

“I mean when I’m here, I just wanna focus on this, on lifting. I don’t want to get stuck helping anyone.”

“Well, I’m sorry I intruded on ‘your space.’ It’s paying off though.”

“Thanks. I’ll be by the shoulder press if you need anything.”

I was alone. I was away from Alex and Chid, away from Reyah, and away from all those athletes. I sat in the machine and breathed deeply. I gripped the handles and started pressing upward. I felt a slight twinge in one of my shoulders, but I kept going. I thought about them teasing me. Reyah and I weren't a thing. She was my sister's friend and that was just gross. She was always spending time at our house. She always took the same bus as me. That bus was dirty as hell. Shit happened there all the time. The man's yelling at that woman this morning was weird. Why would he yell at her like that? It wasn't uncommon for shit to happen on the bus... But she didn't look like the type to start anything. Before I knew it, I forced the weight up over my head one last time and had to bring it down slowly because of a sharp pain in my shoulder. I must've messed it up somehow.

I went over to the fountain again, took two big gulps and found the guys. They were horsing around on one of the other machines, so I left them there like that. I got to my locker, went through my things and changed as quickly as I could. I had to hold my bag on my other shoulder. As I was about to leave, I ran into two bodies.

“Whoa, where are you going?”

“I gotta leave guys, I messed up my shoulder.”

“Alex, I think we better let him go. He's probably on his way to let his wifey take care of him.”

They both started laughing, so I rammed Alex with my good shoulder to get him out of the way and yelled back, “See ya!”

I was a block away from the school when I heard girls' voices behind me. I turned to find Reyah and Priya, my sister, behind me. I must've looked angry because they just seemed frightened. We were caught in an awkward moment because no one spoke up. We all just

looked at each other, for a minute and then I kept walking. They trailed behind me because I could hear them talking again.

“Nihad, Reyah’s gonna come home with us.”

“Whatever.”

I ignored them both until we got to the bus. Once we were on, I was in my usual spot, but they sat in the row behind me, practically speaking directly in my ear. My shoulder still hurt, so I tried to stretch it out a bit and groaned when the pain got worse. The pain was dull now instead of being sharp, but it was still bad. I didn’t want this to set me back in my lifting.

“Nihad, are you alright?” I couldn’t tell who was speaking.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Just hurt my shoulder.”

“You should be more careful. How are you gonna help Pa around the house with a messed up shoulder?” That was Priya.

“I don’t know.”

“I could rub it for you.” That was clearly Reyah.

I turned to her and just stared at her for a moment. “What?”

“I said-”

“No! I don’t want you to rub it. Stop doing that.”

“Stop doing what?”

“Stop following me around and trying to get me to like you.”

“But-”

“Just stop! I’m not interested.”

Tears began to form. They slid down her face, then fell to the floor. She turned her face away and started breathing heavily, holding back sobs. I started to feel bad, but I kept a stern face. The bus had stopped and opened its doors. She ran out, crying. Priya tried to stop her.

“Wait! Where are you going?” My sister, concerned, yelled out the door.

“I’ll just go to the mosque. My parents are there. I’ll see you tomorrow,” she yelled back.

The doors closed before my sister could hear the rest of what she was saying. The bus started moving and she almost fell into a stranger’s lap. She made her way back and dropped right into the seat next to me. She was steaming. Her glare was fixed on me. I could see it out of the corner of my eye. We sat in silence for the rest of the ride. I couldn’t say anything and she probably didn’t want to. Once we were home, we just went to our rooms. For dinner that night, we had roti and curry chicken with vegetables. I moved the vegetables around with my fork because I didn’t feel like actually eating them tonight. While we ate with our folks, I wondered about Reyah. After that, we went back to our rooms, never acknowledging each other or what happened. I stared at the ceiling for hours that night just thinking about it. Eventually I was drowning in so many thoughts, it was like thinking about nothing at all and I fell asleep.

I woke up on time, despite not falling asleep till really late. I had to check my phone to be sure. “7:15, April 3rd” was displayed on the screen. Being awake early almost felt surreal. I went about doing my daily routine, still not talking with my sister. My mom came into the kitchen as we were having breakfast and asked if we needed a ride to school or anything like that. We both shook our heads and she withdrew to her room. Priya and I were sitting in silence at the table. The only noise was my mother on the phone, in the next room. I tried to listen, but I couldn’t understand her when she spoke her native tongue, Arabic. She spoke too quickly for me

to pick out any words. When she spoke to me and Priya, it was English only. I went back to my routine, just trying to treat this as a normal day I was going to get through. The only exception was that I was gonna skip the gym today and come straight home after school. My shoulder was still killing me.

Today wasn't a normal day though. In the middle of history class, I looked out the doorway into the hallway and saw Reyah, alone. At first, I thought she seemed sad and almost broken. She had chosen to wear a different headscarf. I felt guilt again. Later in the day, I saw her again. I didn't know if I was seeing her more frequently or if I was just noticing her more. But as the day progressed, she just seemed to get better and better, and something about that bothered me. I didn't know what it was, but something about her being happy without me felt wrong.

She was by her locker getting her things when one of the bigger guys from the gym leaned against the locker next to hers. They started talking, and then he looked down her body and back up. It looked like they were flirting. She started to laugh, when all of a sudden, another guy from the gym came up behind her and pulled her hijab off. Both guys started laughing and Reyah, slumped against the wall. She tried to reach for it, but the second guy kept pulling it away.

My heart pumped faster than it ever had before. I ran up behind the second guy and pushed him against the lockers. I told him to give it back and then got a shove from the first. Reyah quickly grabbed the scarf and ran away. I stood my ground against the first guy and felt a fist on my face out of nowhere. The second guy was pissed. They both started kicking my body on the ground until a teacher yelled from the other end of the hallway. They both darted away and burst through a door to one of the staircases. Mr. Tucker helped me up and then walked me

to the principal's office. I looked back to Reyah before we turned the corner. There was something in her eyes that before today I probably would have hated to see. This time, it felt reaffirming.

Trevor

I got up slowly, until I was sitting upright. My head was ringing. I'd fallen on the waxed hardwood floor of the school's gymnasium. I was dazed, but coming to my senses. I heard yelling on the other side of the court and saw them high fiving each other. A group of teenage boys on the other team were cheering, all dressed in athletic uniforms. One of them came over to me as my good friend, Jake, was helping me up. A freckled face with spectacles looked down on me, sneering.

"You're out, BOY." He bent down to say it in my face.

"Nope!" Our gym teacher yelled, coming over. "Headshots don't count, Tate."

"Son of a--"

"Cut that shit, or you're out." Mr. Schenck turned to me, "Are you good, Trevor?"

I started getting up to get back in the game, responding, "Yeah, thanks."

Mr. Schenck blew the whistle and ran off the court, escaping the flurry of red rubber balls. You could hear the bouncing and the cries of pain. Tate glared at me the entire match and tried to get me out a few more times. Before each throw, he would adjust his glasses. I played the game defensively until it was just me, him, and one of his goons. His buddy, Tommy, stood tall. Tommy was lanky and as dumb as he looked. The rest of our class watched us on the court. Some cheered for them; Jake and some others were rooting me on. I felt the pressure and wanted to knock him out for being a jerk. Suddenly he threw and missed, leaving himself vulnerable. As I dodged his throw, I wound up and launched my own ball at his leg. I heard the bounce and watched him clench his leg. The look on his face when he winced in pain was worth getting pegged by the ball Tommy threw at me after. Tate had gone so far as to lie in the fetal position.

As we were all heading to the locker rooms to get changed, one of the guys pulled me aside. Matthew, one of the larger kids in our class was looking around, almost trying to be inconspicuous. He didn't do it well, but he was trying.

“So, Trevor... You hang out with Katie, right?” He half whispered.

“Yes, I do.” I knew where this was going. He wanted me to play wingman, because I was the token gay best friend of every girl in our high school, including Katie.

“Has she said anything about me? Or going with anyone to the Winter Dance?” His voice almost cracked with nervousness.

“I'll put in a good word, for the right price.” I don't know why he was asking about the dance when that was a month away, but I was going to milk this.

“Anything you want.” There was a hint of desperation.

“You still work at the movie theatre, right? Can you get me some discounted tickets?”

“If you get her to come to the dance with me I'll get you free tickets to anything you want.” It was funny how that worked. Katie wanted me to get Matthew to take her to the dance and offered to pay if I could make it happen. People asked me pretty regularly to hook them up.

As I entered the locker room, I could hear all the other boys talking sports, classes, and parties. This was the norm for Rockville High. I navigated my way through the maze of cold metal lockers, insecurities, and warm, sweaty bodies. Jake was waiting for me. We normally hung out after gym, during lunch, and then went our separate ways for classes. He was one of the few decent people in our town.

“So, I saw you talking to Matthew.”

“Yeah, but he's not my type.” I winked. “I get to play wingman, which means we'll get tickets to any movie we want to see.”

“So *Rogue One* next month?” He couldn’t hide his excitement.

“Yeah, as long as he ends up going with Katie.”

Suddenly my locker was slammed shut and Tate stood with his group of friends, glaring at me. They were all a bunch of white, geeky looking kids. I had nothing against them, but they couldn’t pull off the acting tough thing. They looked like the kids who usually got bullied, not bullies themselves. Half of them were caught eating glue in kindergarten.

“I heard you two mention Katie! Stay away from her, Trevor. She’s mine and I don’t want you tainting her.” He snapped. He still couldn’t get the tough thing right.

“Dude, do whatever you want, but I think she’s into someone else.” I replied.

“Don’t insult him.” Tommy sounded dramatic.

“I was just stating a fact.” They didn’t understand how those worked.

Then they all started trying to hold Tate back, who was dramatically acting like he was going to attack me. He started turning red. He probably did stuff like that whenever he didn’t get his way. I felt kind of sorry for him. Schenck came to break it all up. After he left, Tate just glared at me silently and then held up a fist. Maybe he was starting to get it.

After that whole thing, I went on to the rest of my classes and band for drumming. The day was done. Jake and I started walking home. We lived in the same general direction; so naturally, we ended up walking together, becoming close friends. It was a long walk, so we kind of had to. As kids, we bonded over superheroes and sci-fi. We still shared a lot of the same interests. Jake was also still friends with me even though I was out and proud. I never really thought about the stigma he might’ve faced for being friends with me. It was a cool day, and the autumnal breeze showered us in brown, red, and gold. I couldn’t believe it was already

November. We walked for about a mile or so, until we got to the train tracks. I had to cross, so we parted ways and said our goodbyes.

Inside our small, two bedroom home, was my father. He sat at the kitchen table, reading the paper. He was a repairman who didn't always have the best luck with his job, even though he was one of the best. He could fix anything. He also did odd jobs to make ends meet. One time, he was a clown at a kid's party; that child has been terrified of clowns since. He did what he could to take care of me, and I really appreciated that. Things got harder when my mom left. She could never accept me for who I was, or what I was according to her. We still had family pictures. I picked one up, looking at us all together when things were simpler.

"Everything okay, Trev?" he asked.

"Yeah, dad. Sometimes I miss her." I said, staring at her wide smile and piercing green eyes.

"Son, that's not your fault. That's what I get for marrying a religious nut."

"Yeah, who needs to go to two church services each weekend?" We both laughed.

"I couldn't find any work today, but I have a job later tonight. Brett Simmons asked me to fix his door. Probably didn't want a black man alone at his home, so I gotta go tonight." He chuckled a little. "I can cook us up something before I leave though."

With that, he got up and started getting the food prepped. He slammed his hand on the side of the oven and turned the knobs to light the burner. He got out one of the old pots to get rice going. I watched him as I sat down and started getting my homework out onto the table. Later, my dad and I ate and talked about our day. I told him about the dodgeball game. He laughed and shared gym stories until he had to leave for work. I went to my room and texted Jake to come over and "hang out."

Jake and I lay in each other's arms, glistening slightly from perspiration. We caught our breath and just looked at each other before kissing one last time. His skin was light, practically translucent. The contrast between our bodies made them look nice together. I was lighter-skinned because I was mixed, but still dark compared to the town's demographic. The town we lived in was socially conservative as hell, so it's a shame we only get to share moments like these behind closed doors. I didn't care about what people thought, so I was just out and proud. Jake had different circumstances, so he had to hide this part of himself, especially from his family. When we were out in public, we passed for really close friends. I came out to my parents several years ago, and she called me an abomination. She called me morally-diseased and said I was tainted for living a deviant lifestyle. She did this until she couldn't handle it anymore. My father somehow took it well. When he and I refused to go to church to "fix" my problem, mom left. After that, my father told me I should hide it from folks in our area. We were already the different family because we were Black; at least my dad and I were. I didn't exactly listen.

"I wish you could come out." I wanted to see how he felt about it.

"Yeah, but then they'd try to exorcise me," he chuckled.

"That's when you start hissing and cursing in Latin," I joked.

"At that point, they might just off me and start over." We laughed and shared another kiss. "It won't matter," he continued. "By next year, we'll be in World War III or society will just collapse and we'll have to fend for ourselves."

"Man, politics suck. I don't know how you put up with it." My low voice was followed by the sound of our old car.

Jake got up quickly and started putting on his jeans and shirt. My father was pulling into the driveway. I helped Jake get to the back, where he got onto his bike and rode off, swiftly into the night. I'd see him again the next day at school. We acted like best buds, but we knew we shared more than friendship. We weren't necessarily a couple, although I wouldn't have minded calling him my boyfriend. Still, I started thinking about the stigma he had for being my "close" friend.

The rest of the week was fairly normal, if not, pretty great. Nothing too special happened. I'd met up with Jake a few more nights and Tate hadn't been bothersome. I know it might seem like the bar was low, but I think that just made everything better. This was turning out to be a good week. Friday came around and Mr. Schenck had asked a few of us to stay after school and help put away some new equipment. After carrying some heavy boxes, Jake and I found ourselves alone in the ball closet. Something about seeing him lift got to me, and so I got close to him. He tried to back me off, saying that we should only do stuff at home. I told him one quick kiss wouldn't hurt, and so we did. We jumped away from each other when we noticed a flash and noise. I ran to the door and saw a blur as one of the other doors open quickly. Jake and I looked at each other for a second and our heads lowered. There was a moment of terrifying silence. I could tell he was panicking but trying to hold himself together for me. I tried to tell him that we might not even be that recognizable. Schenck opened the door and we both jumped. He came in to tell us that we were done for the day.

That weekend, I hadn't heard much from Jake. I didn't think too much of it though. He would go camping with his father and brother sometimes. That would probably help him get his

mind off things. They were very outdoorsy people. And they were close to each other. So while he did that, I accompanied my father on a few of his weekend jobs. It sucked watching him negotiate pay for work he'd already done with stingy folks. Despite this, he always had a smile on his face and he turned whatever he could into a lesson for me. Sometimes it was a bit much, but I knew he was trying.

We were heading back home when we noticed a cop car behind us. I could see the vehicle in the rear-view mirror. There were no sirens and no lights. Something just felt off. I felt myself tensing up a bit. My father slowed the vehicle to let the patrol car pass. The black and white car tailed us a bit longer. As I watched it in the mirror I couldn't help but play all the footage in my head. All the viral videos. I tried to steady my breathing. After a minute or so, the car passed, only to slow down as it was next to us. A lone officer turned his eyes to us and peered into our car. He gave an intense stare and then had a surprised look on his face, which soon became a pleasant grin. He waved at us. My father waved back when he realized it was Brett Simmons. I forgot he was an officer.

He gave us the go ahead and waved one last time as my father drove off. My heartbeat was returning to normal. My muscles relaxed. My father reminded me that he went to fix Brett's door the other night. He told me about how he didn't want to charge Brett the normal cost because he was a family friend. They grew up together as social outcasts. That night, I lay awake thinking about that whole interaction. I overthought, but it was still scary. I tried to think about other things to distract myself and feel better. I thought about all the cool movies coming out this year. I thought about getting paid by Katie. That Winter Dance popped into my head. If only I could go with Jake. I needed to be back in school. I wanted to be around Jake again.

Monday morning, I woke up to the buzzing of my cellphone. Apparently, Jake had been texting me. He was frantic and scared and wouldn't be in school today. He had sent several pictures too. I felt my throat tighten as I saw us kissing in the gym's ball closet. He said that the pictures were being shared by everyone and if he went in to school, there's no telling what other people would do. He was freaked about his parents finding out. They'd hurt him. Or they'd kick him out onto the streets, and it's not like we could take him in. My father could barely make ends meet for the two of us on his own. It felt like someone held my heart and crushed it in their hand. I didn't know what I was supposed to do.

My father called me into the kitchen. I sat down and started eating breakfast. He was browsing the paper as usual and then went on about a job he was supposed to do that day.

"Another door," he said, sounding annoyed for once.

"That shouldn't be too bad. You did one a few days ago."

"This one is just missing." His voice had a grim tone.

"Oh." That would give me the chance to stay home today and possibly see Jake. I felt my phone buzzing even more, but I couldn't deal with all that in front of my father. He got up, rambling that he had to run some errands before he went to work. Before I knew it, I was alone in my home and my heartbeat quickened with each text. Jake was sending me screenshots of messages that he was getting.

"You're gross and sick! You should be ashamed!"

"I can't believe you like getting with guys. Just like your 'friend' Trevor."

"You might as well hang yourself."

I didn't know the numbers. I had to block them when I came out. But I heard the voices behind the words. I could hear people telling Jake he should die. I think some of them were

from people I even suspected to be gay, like Jake and I. I wasn't sure, but sometimes other guys came to me with "questions." I would never tell anyone because I know outing someone could ruin their lives. But this made me sick to my stomach. I ran into the bathroom and just let loose, clutching the toilet after. I checked my phone again for more messages from Jake. I couldn't find anything through all the hate. I tried to text him, each hour felt like days passing by. I had to distract myself somehow so I played video games until that was boring. I browsed social media, scrolling past drama and complaints about class. I scrolled past election stuff too; I normally tuned out politics because it was boring and more of Jake's thing. But as I was scrolling, I saw one line that made me sick again. It read, "'Societal collapse was always brought about following an advent of the deterioration of marriage and family.' I.e. gay people are ruining the country." Apparently it was from an article someone shared talking about the quote, which came from one of the vice presidential candidates. The person who shared it commented "Preach." Fear choked and paralyzed me, as it set in that this person could have a position of power in the country. Election Day was looming ahead. Was this why Jake was so involved with that? Is that why he said we would all be dead?

Jake finally responded, telling me to come over. My laces felt impossible to tie. Eventually, I pulled myself together. My heart pounded as I stood in front of the door. I had to be there for Jake. I had to help him through this. I had to be his lifeline. I took a deep breath and stepped outside. The fall breeze felt cooler than usual. All the red and orange hues in the leaves had faded to brown. The wind and rustling felt ominous. I had to resist it as I crossed the tracks and trudged on to Jake's house. The trip felt longer than usual. We needed to see each other and figure out how to deal with him being out.

I reached the creaking gate and quickly made my way into his yard. The leaves continued to rustle and the gate slammed shut. I walked up to his door and rang the bell. I stood waiting at the door, hoping he would come soon. The first door opened, and I could see he had a black eye. I opened the screen door and quickly went in, hugging him tight. We sat down and I tried to hold his hands. He withdrew and tried to open his mouth to speak, but only silence came out.

“What happened to you?” I asked with concern.

“Well, my dad saw the pictures. He told me he was going to whip me into shape.” His voice was sullen.

“I’m so sorry, Jake.” Tears began running down my cheeks.

“They want me to go to a church conversion camp. They think I can ‘pray the gay away.’” I felt the pain in his voice.

“That’s bullshit.”

“And get used to this,” he said pointing to his injury. “Between school and home, I’m going to get beat up a lot.”

“I’m really sorry I got you into this.” My head hit his shoulder as I leaned on him.

“Look, I know this is hard, but I think we need to put some distance between ourselves right now.”

“What? Why?” My voice cracked.

“If we’re together, that’s just gonna make us bigger targets for everyone. They’ll forget it and move on, but we have to lay low,” he tried to reassure me.

“But I wanna be there for you and help you get through this,” I protested.

“But--”

“I could coach you through dealing with all the bullies.”

“Trevor, please. You put me in this. Just let me get through it. I’m so fucking stressed. Between this and the election, I just feel like everything is going to shit.”

“Fine,” I said, realizing that I wasn’t helping by smothering him. “Just remember, I’m here for you.”

On the way back to my house, a car skidded to a stop on the street next to me. I didn’t recognize it until Jake’s dad got out and approached me. He was a burly man, wearing a camo jacket and cap. His cap had four words that made Jake’s eyes roll whenever he heard them. His beard hid most of his features, but I saw hate in his eyes.

“You need to stay the fuck away from my boy!”

“I’m going home now, Mr. Woods.”

“What you do is disgusting! You’re an abomination,” he yelled.

In that moment, I was transported back to when I came out to my parents. My mother got up and started yelling. I wasn’t her son anymore. I was an abomination, a disease, and a tainted soul. Then she tried to say I was sick and needed help. My dad stopped her when she started trying to throw holy water at me. How could all the love she had for me turn into hate?

“You stay away from us, you sick little fa-” His insult was cut off by the booming of the train next to us. As soon as I heard what he was saying, I ran home.

I wanted to tell my dad everything. I wanted to tell him the situation Jake was in. I wanted to tell him about what his father could have done to me, about what he was doing to Jake. But what could we possibly do? We couldn’t save him from his parents. We couldn’t save him from society. At the dinner table, we just sat in silence as we ate spaghetti and meatballs. Despite everything seeming like shit, my dad’s food always seemed to bring some joy to me. I

tried to focus on that instead of all the awful shit. Later that night, I fell asleep with tears streaming down my face. All I wanted was to run away with Jake, but that couldn't happen. It could never happen.

I woke up feeling exhausted, not realizing how much time had passed. I checked my phone, seeing that it was well into the afternoon. A stack of pancakes rested on a plate for me with a note letting me know that my father had to leave for the rest of the day on another job. He also said he was going to go vote. The pancakes were cold. I ate them and checked my messages. Nothing from Jake. I couldn't deal with anyone at school with my mental state the way it was, so I stayed home again. I played video games again, as I had the day before. I wish I could have hit a reset button on my life. I wish everything was different.

The day became a blur of *Call of Duty* and naps. Eventually my dad came home and cooked. I still heard nothing from Jake, which worried me. Dinner calmed my nerves a little, but I still worried. My father and I stayed up kinda late after that. We watched the election results and sat in silence until I announced I was going to bed. Jake was probably freaking out. I wished he would text me. I stared at the ceiling until I succumbed to my fatigue and slipped into the darkness of slumber.

My eyes struggled to open. I sat up and managed force my eyelids apart and let my eyes adjust to the darkness of my room. I was groggy and falling back asleep. My hand felt around the bed for a few seconds, before I found my phone. It was three in the morning and I had a new message. It would have to wait until morning.

At six, I cried my eyes out. My body woke me again, and this time I stayed up. The message I received was from Jake. It only read "Goodbye Trevor." Jake must've run away or

something because he couldn't deal with his family and everything. I wish I could have fucking been there for him. He pushed me away and had no one else. I shouldn't have let him do that.

I walked out into the house. My dad sat in his chair, staring into space. He held the phone in his hand. I tried to quietly and cautiously move closer to him. He turned to me slowly.

“Dad? Are you okay?”

“Yes, Trevor. Just in shock.” A tear rolled down his cheek.

“What's wrong, Dad?”

“I just got off the phone with Brett Simmons. He was at your friend, Jake's house.”

“Did he run away?” I now stood in front of his chair.

“I don't know, son. Right now, they're trying to find him.”

I fell to my knees and slammed my fists onto the floor. I sobbed and wheezed. My tears and snot dripped onto the floor. I struggled for breath. My father got on the floor with me and put his arms around me. He just held me and tried to tell me things would be okay. My heart was breaking. I failed Jake. He wasn't coming back. I was the whole reason everything happened to him. No more sound came out of my mouth. All I could do was sit there and soak in my pain. Jake was gone.

Sierra

The slamming of a truck door jolted me awake. I had just had my afternoon coffee, and it hadn't hit me yet. I tried opening my eyes as wide as I could to see if that would help. I realized I wasn't alone when I turned to see the new intern in the driver's seat, staring at me with an almost horrified look on his face. I was sure my exhausted but wide-eyed expression wasn't the most pleasant thing to look at, but he just seemed haunted. Neither of us really knew what to say for a moment, so we looked at each other awkwardly for a minute.

“Okay! Um, did you load the trees in the back?” I found my voice as the more experienced intern, having been in the conservation program before.

“Yes! I did that, so we could take them up to the park.”

“Okay, so we're gonna drive there now.”

“Yes,” he nodded, doing nothing after.

“You're driving, remember? So you have to put the key in the ignition...”

“Right, sorry.”

I lay back in the passenger seat of Ben's pickup truck as we drove into the forest. I didn't complain. I wanted to go back into the woods as I had in previous years. It wasn't uncommon for them to send interns off into one of the local parks with a shovel and a bunch of saplings or plants. Sometimes we even got to bring injured wildlife back into their natural habitats. But a lot of the time, the job involved fundraising and public outreach, so we could keep doing what we were doing. I was also pretty sure Ben just wanted to be out of the school it operated out of. This wouldn't be a bad first day for him. He seemed a little off, which was a weird first impression to have of someone. So that was either normal for him or he really was nervous about the first day of this internship. The ride was generally quiet. I mainly stared out the

window, not wanting to stare at him or the road ahead. Despite having the almost mouse-like appearance he did, Ben maintained a certain charm. I watched as we passed buildings and waited for the fresh green of trees. But he eventually broke the silence, trying to engage in some conversation to avoid more awkward silence.

“So, you like Jurassic Park?” He tried to sound smooth, peering at the logo on my shirt.

“Yeah, I loved the movies as a kid.”

“Dinosaurs are the shit. The first one was good, the others kinda sucked.”

I smiled through the contempt I felt towards that comment, and replied “Well, to each their own.”

“Yeah, they were just bad.”

“Okay then. Do you have any siblings?”

“I have a younger brother, and I had an older brother. He died when I was really young.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“No, it’s fine. Do you?”

“I’m an only child. I had pets as a kid though.”

“What kind?”

“Lots of dogs.”

“My uncle has a dog. I got to see him in Virginia a couple months ago.”

“The dog or your uncle?”

He laughed, replying that he’d seen both.

I pointed to a sign that indicated our stop was coming up. “There’s a small path coming up on the right. It’s a dead end, but that’s usually where we go to unload things in this park.”

He nodded and soon turned onto the path. We were surrounded by the trees and grass of the park. There was still road, and we reached a small parking area. The gravel crunching under the wheels seemed to grow louder as the truck slowed down. We pulled to a stop and proceeded to get out so we could start moving the trees. Our footsteps were noisy. Ben lowered the tailgate and started pulling the saplings out onto the ground.

“Wait, I don’t think we’ll be able to take them all at once.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, it’s fine. It’s not a long walk to plant them or anything.”

We picked up a few and left the rest either on the ground or in the bed of the truck. I made sure to bring a shovel too. The young trees we did carry moved clumsily in our arms. They weren’t overwhelmingly heavy or hard to hold, just long and difficult to maneuver. We trekked through the dense, wooded parts until we found a decent clearing that looked like it had space for some trees. I lowered everything to the ground then picked up the shovel to start digging. I started on a decent sized hole in the ground when Ben insisted he take on the rest of the digging. I let him take the shovel and dig, so as not to hurt his ego.

I stood in awe of my surroundings. The trees towered over me; I used to think they never stopped growing. Leaves of rich green hues filtered the sunlight shining into the forest. Every breath that filled my lungs felt pure. When I closed my eyes, it was almost like I could feel each leaf tremble in the wind, hear each stream running, and feel every single heartbeat within the tree line. I felt the wind on my skin and through my short, straightened hair. Normally, it’d flow through my curls, but I wanted my hair straight today. But this is why I chose to study atmospheric science and got involved with environmentalist groups. I did it so I could surround myself with this as much as possible. I took a second to look at the saplings we brought to the

forest. Someday, they'd grow into large trees, like the ones around us. These weren't harmful or new to the area. We were just supposed to add to the forest and provide new homes for the wildlife. When Ben was facing the other way, I took a small mason jar out of my knapsack and filled it with dirt. The jar went back in the bag and I bounced back up to my feet before he could turn around. Technically, I wasn't supposed to do that, but I wanted a part of the park with me. I was also pretty sure Ben didn't know that, so I didn't really have anything to worry about.

"So you knew to come here. You've done this before?" He tried to face me while digging the last few holes.

"Yeah, a few times. Why did you apply to work for the club?" That was a common nickname for the group.

"I wanted something to do for the rest of the summer, but also nature is nice. It almost makes me feel connected to my brother."

"That is nice."

"How about you? What made you do it?"

"I really liked science and nature stuff when I was a kid, so here I am."

"Huh, I never really knew any Black girls in my area who were into that."

"Well, we're not all the same." I had to consciously try not to roll my eyes.

"Oh my god, that's not what I meant at all, I'm sorry. It's just where I'm from there aren't many people who aren't white. One of my best friends in grade school was Black though." He seemed flustered again.

"Alright, well I'm gonna go get some of the other trees. Just keep digging, kid."

I made my way back through the woods to the truck parked at the side of the road. The dark and earthy soil under my boots was soon replaced with gravel, then asphalt. Exhaust fumes

burned my nose as I approached the vehicle. I noticed another car was parked nearby. It was an older, blue Chevrolet with rust spots starting to form. The bumper had a confederate flag on it, which wasn't uncommon given where we were, but still made me shutter. I remember kids wearing it in different ways all the time at school. My parents told me I could never wear it because of what it meant though. I snapped myself out of my thoughts and grabbed a few more of the saplings. I started heading back into the woods. I'd taken the path multiple times, but something felt wrong with my head. Navigating was a bit harder now.

I lumbered through the woods until I reached a different clearing. I knew this place and it wasn't too far from where I had to go. I was just about to turn and head back to where Ben was, when I saw a man in the clearing. The leaves rustled and crunched as he shuffled into the clearing. He had on a red cap, a camouflage jacket, and really muddy boots. His beard made him look like he had been living in the woods for some time. He had a cigarette in his mouth and held an axe, leaning it on his shoulder. I began to realize that he probably owned the car I saw. I didn't know exactly what he was doing in the park's woods with an axe, but I didn't want to find out, so I tried to move quietly back to where Ben was probably waiting for me. There were a couple of trees entangled close by so I tried to move there. I was at a point where neither of us could see each other, when a twig snapped. I froze in place and held my breath. I heard rustling on the other side of the tree.

"Hello? Is someone there?" an older raspy voice filled the air.

I put my hand over my mouth and tried to stay as silent as possible.

"I have an axe and I'm not afraid to protect myself!"

My heart was racing and I felt sweat starting to run down my head.

“Hey! Hi there, um what are you doing here?” This voice was familiar. It was a young man’s.

“That’s close enough, kid. I just wanted a little timber for my fireplace. It’s been cold the past couple nights.”

“Hey man, I get it. I’m not gonna tell you to leave or anything.” Ben. That asshole wasn’t even gonna try to protect the park. My fear turned to annoyance. I decided now would be the time to move, so I started slowly stepping through the woods again, being careful not to hit the saplings against anything.

“You know, you look kinda familiar, kid.”

“I get that a lot.”

“Hold on a sec.”

Ben and the old man came into view. The man was squinting really hard, staring very intensely at Ben. I tried to speed up my pace a little bit more so I’d be out of sight again. I reached another tree and then peered out to where they were. The man still seemed to struggle. He then reached into a side pocket and pulled out some glasses, which he held up instead of putting on. He did this for a few more seconds then had a look of amazement on his face.

“Awww hell, man. I remember you.”

“You do?”

“You were one of the kids who almost got his ass beat by commies.” I stopped to listen more.

“I’m not following.”

“A couple months ago. At Charlottesville. You and some other young guys had shields and kept banging on them.” What the hell? Ben was at Charlottesville? I started slowly moving again because I didn’t want to stick around for more of the conversation.

There was a silent pause for a minute. Then Ben spoke. “I remember you. You had the sign about Obama, and that van with the confederate symbol.”

“Yeah. I don’t have the van no more, just an old Chevy. How’ve you been man? It’s been a while.”

I was finally out of hearing range, so I picked up a faster pace and ran through the trees. The saplings didn’t weigh me down. I think fear made me stronger, or just numb to some degree. I had to distance myself from that. I found the clearing I was supposed to be at and place the trees on the ground. One by one I put them in holes and tried to secure them with dirt. My breathing became heavy. I forced myself to run back out to the pickup truck. The shovel I carried thwacked a few trees as I ran. My lungs began to burn. I burst through the tree-line to see the blue Chevy gone. I put the shovel in the bed and took a minute to catch my breath, leaning against the truck.

A hand grabbed my shoulder. “Sierra, hey.” I turned, startled to see Ben. My automatic response was some quick crying noise. He must’ve realized I was freaked. “Whoa, I’m sorry. I didn’t know what happened to you, so I brought the rest of the trees in and planted them. Are you ready to go?”

I bent over, holding my knees, still leaning on the truck. I caught my breath and replied, “Yeah. You can get in, I’ll be in too in a sec.”

“Okay,” he left me there and got in.

I stood up and walked around a little bit, trying to breathe smoothly and calmly. He didn't know I was there. I could survive the drive back with him, I had nothing to worry about. I calmly opened the door and sat in the passenger seat, buckling myself after. The door slammed shut behind me and I turned to Ben with a nod. We pulled out of the parking area and I internally said goodbye to the forest. We drove for a few minutes in silence, until I decided to break it.

“So, what'd you think of your first day so far?”

“It's been alright. Not what I expected, in a good way.”

“I'm glad it was good. I hope it stays that way and after you finish this program you decide to come back.”

“It's a nice thing to do. By the way, are you alright? You seemed shaken up.”

“Oh, I'm fine. I just thought it was getting late and that we had more to plant,” I lied.

“Okay then. And you didn't see me in the park after you went to get more trees, did you?”

“No, I didn't. Why?” Shit, why'd I ask him that? What if he tells me?

“I actually saw someone there from my past. I wanna put that behind me and I think I did today.”

“Well, that's good. I hope.” I shifted a bit nervously in my seat.

“Do you believe in second chances for people?”

“I think it depends.” I didn't have time for white guilt.

“What if you only messed up because of bad people?”

“I think everyone still has a choice.”

He nodded and bit his lip. He seemed frustrated or agitated, but he didn't say anything else. I turned and looked out the window the way people do in music videos or movies. I twisted my straightened Black hair around my finger. The green blur of forest soon turned into lawns which then turned to the plain gray of sidewalks and scattered buildings. We passed a gas station, some kind of church, a fast food restaurant, and a post office. All of these were fixtures of my little hometown in Kentucky. I paid little attention to what was going on in the truck until we got closer to the school.

“Sierra?”

“Yeah, Ben?”

“I wanna get something off my chest.” Shit, here it comes.

“Okay.”

“I know you probably know this because I saw you in the forest, when I was talking to Vincent, the old guy. But I was at the Charlottesville rallies, or protests, or whatever you want to call them.”

“Oh.” What else am I supposed to say?

“Yeah, that's generally the response. I went there because I had friends who are really into all that, and I'm just not like them. I mean, I think everyone needs to stop playing victim, be self-sufficient, and pick themselves up by their bootstraps.” Here we go.

“Mhmm.”

“But I draw the line at that outright racism. That was bad. I don't believe in that and it's been ruining my life for the past few months. I've lost friends and job opportunities because I went there out of peer pressure.” Sure he did. “I don't know. I guess what I'm trying to say is I'm sorry, and please don't think less of me.”

“I can try. That’s just a lot to take in.”

We pulled in to the school’s lot and parked. I tried to calm myself down again before we both went in. I got out of the car first and walked a bit fast toward the building. Ben got out, caught up to me and then jumped in my way, trying to slow me down.

“Promise me you won’t tell anyone what I told you. I don’t think they know and I want to keep it that way.”

“Ben, please stop.”

“I can’t afford for this to get out. I’ve already lost enough.”

“Ben, get out of my way. I’m not promising anything.” I tried to walk past him to the building.

“Sierra, please. I’m sorry. I just need–”

“Validation?” I cut him off. “You need something to feel better about yourself because you messed up and did something pretty fucked up?” I had it with him.

“I’m sorry.”

“If you’re really sorry, then do better. Put that behind you and help other people do the same, because there are a lot of other people who are actually really racist. They need to change.” Or instead of badgering me with this, he could have apologized to his black friend and had this talk with him.

Ben lowered his head and just started walking back to his truck. He leaned on it and just stared off into space. I turned back to the building and went inside. I still had work to do for the club.

Sylvia

As I put on my makeup, I tried to sing along to the music playing from my phone. I mouthed the words to Pat Benatar's "Hit Me with Your Best Shot." My smoky eye shadow contrasted well with my pale skin. The blouse I had was borrowed, but fit me well. My look was coming together. I stood up and posed, admiring my figure. The new clothes and makeup were gonna take time to get used to. But I enjoyed them a lot. I sat back down and leaned in close to the mirror to apply red lipstick. After the song ended and I was done, I gave myself one last look and said, "You're beautiful." I thought about how life was before and what brought me to this point, where I could be me, where I could be Sylvia.

College was surreal for me. For one thing, I couldn't believe that I could make it anywhere as a 17 year-old, at least coming from the family I had. I thought college was full of adults. I guess that happened with home-schooled kids. I mean, I still had friends and some "school" experiences; but as time went on, they seemed less like friends and social events for home-schooled kids made me feel like I was missing out on something. Going into college was completely different for me. Being constantly surrounded by people was weird to me, but something about it filled a void in me. Despite not getting to know all of these people, there was just something about their presence that was comforting. Maybe it was just a "misery loves company" sort of feeling that came when you knew other people had to go to classes and read or write a ton too.

I remember wandering an open courtyard with crowds and tables everywhere. People were screaming, laughing, and conversing. Each table was decorated to represent some kind of club. They had a lot of similar groups close together. Boxing next to MMA, which was next to bodybuilding. Those were full of the manly men. I always hated guys like that. Seven frat and

sorority tables lined up next to each other. Another dozen were lined up across from those. And in all the madness of people handing out fliers, pens, and paperweights, one table stood out to me. One table made me think “I didn’t think I’d see this.” The organization was called the Gender, Love, and Sexuality Center. Their table seemed to be one of the least decorated. There was a blue tablecloth with slightly torn edges. They had a cup with small rainbow flags and some small fliers strewn across the table. And yet despite not having an extravagant table or having a huge crowd around the table, the people there seemed to be genuinely enjoying themselves. Something about each of them fascinated me. They all seemed to have vastly different personalities, yet for some reason they seemed familiar to me. I approached the table and they greeted me warmly. They began to tell me all about themselves and what their club was about.

From that day on, I spent as much time as I could with these people. The three I met that day became my first real friends. They were Josh, Sam, and Valerie. They were all leaders in that club. I learned so much from them. My parents had never taught me anything about gender and sexuality. They gave me a basic “birds and the bees talk” and told me to wait until marriage. It wasn’t until I got here and met my friends that I realized how little I actually knew about these things, and myself. I grew very close with Valerie. She taught me the intricacies of pansexuality and being trans. Something about her sparked feelings and emotions in me that I loved and feared. I hung out more and more in the GLSC, as it was called. It was a large room with a lot of floor space, several bean bag chairs and two computers. There was a little speaker in the corner for playing music from time to time. Generally, the space was for people to hang out, get away from the world, and chat, or in a lot of cases rant. Sam would rant quite a bit because of how often straight guys would hit on them.

“I got the question again today everyone.”

Everyone began to chuckle and almost in unison asked, “What happened this time?”

Sam proceeded to share a story of how they had to decline a guy’s date offer in the middle of a group study session for one of their classes. This often happened to them because they mostly presented their identity in feminine ways. This would have been fine, if the guy hadn’t followed that request up with asking them who the “man” was in their relationship with their girlfriend. I sat in the corner with Valerie chuckling a bit. At first, I barely noticed it, but she put her hand on mine and moved her fingers between mine. Everyone continued to laugh as it was getting late and Amy was finishing another story. Valerie stopped me in the hallway.

“I was just wondering, do you wanna go out this weekend?”

“Crap, I completely forgot to tell you, but I’m going home this weekend.” As soon as I said that, I saw the excitement in her eyes fade a bit. “But I really want to when I get back.”

Her eyes slowly lit back up and she nodded. “Okay, call me when you get back and I’ll have a place picked out.”

I watched her walk towards her building. She opened the door and vanished inside. Moments later, a guy came out the door and looked back in. My fist clenched tight. My heart beat a bit faster. He soon passed me, giving me a weird glance. I did nothing. Once I was back in my dorm, I lay in my bed staring at the ceiling until the weird mixture of emotions I was feeling went away. I thought about Valerie and what it would be like to be with her. I fell asleep thinking about the way her hand felt on mine.

I set my suitcase down on the front step and unlocked the door. I pushed the door with my body after the knob was turned. I pulled the suitcase in and explored my home, which had an eerily empty feeling. No one seemed to have heard me come in. No one came to greet me.

Something about this place that was my home started to make me feel empty. For some time, it was all I knew, and now it felt so wrong. Something about college had changed home.

I lugged my stuff up the stairs and passed my parents room. I stood in the doorway and looked in. My mother sat in the armchair by the door. She had some romance novel in her hands. She didn't even look up at me until I coughed. I almost felt bad because she jumped and turned to me.

"Oh, hi, Ray." Something about the way my name sounded in her voice irked me.

"Hey, mom. I'm here for the weekend."

"That's nice. Did you say hi to your father? He's in the basement."

"No, I guess I'll go do that."

"Good, we can catch up later."

I put my stuff away in my room and unpacked one of my bags. I didn't understand why I was unpacking if I was just going to pack again in a few days, but I did it anyway. I guess this was a distraction and my version of procrastinating. I didn't really want to go down and speak to my father, but he was my father, so I had to. He tried to teach me traditionally manly things, but none of it ever stuck. When he tried forcing them on me, I resented them and him. Eventually he gave up and I think I just became a disappointment. I went down to the first floor and navigated my way to the basement door. It was cracked open, and creaked a bit when I pushed it the rest of the way. I inhaled slowly and then made my way down. A tiny whistling could be heard coming from within. I reached the bottom and saw my dad tinkering with a little caboose. He hadn't looked up and I'm sure he heard my steps.

This basement had gotten a lot smaller. Before I left, he enjoyed collecting antique toy trains. He had an entire rack of them on a back shelf. Now that seemed to be gone and a large

table that took up half the floor space sat in the middle of the room. It had a complex series of tracks on it and a little town set up. It had lights everywhere and little switches. Did my dad become a toddler? He excitedly got up from his stool and placed the caboose behind a train, attaching it carefully. With the flip of a switch, the train and caboose were off, making their way towards a mountain-like structure. He clapped and made a triumphant grunt.

Still smiling, he turned to me and said “Finally got the wheels to turn.”

“Wow. That’s great dad! Um, hi.”

He came over quickly and hugged me, then gave me a little shove. “How’s it going son?”

“Good. How long have you been down here?”

“Only a couple of hours. How long have you been here?”

“Maybe twenty minutes.” I shrugged.

“Okay then. Well, let’s go up. Your mother ordered food.”

We sat around the table, quietly staring at each other while we ate takeout. My parents ordered from this fancy family-owned place. Their specialty was meat, like literally any kind of meat. I had rice with chicken breasts and pork & beans. It was really good compared to a lot of what they served in the college dining halls. Everyone kind of looked at each other as if we expected someone to just start the conversation so we could all just engage. But no one actually spoke up. My parents and I were basically finishing with dinner when I finally decided to say something about college.

“My classes are good and I’m making friends!” I blurted.

“Wow,” my dad said in disbelief.

“Well that’s nice.”

“Yeah, they’re cool. They’re all part of this club.”

“Oh, what club?”

I didn’t think I would actually reach this point of the conversation, or at least that it would have been steered away. I honestly had no idea how my parents would react to finding out I hung out with people in an LGBT organization. I couldn’t even imagine how they would react to me being a part of that group. A bead of sweat ran down the side of my head. My face felt a bit flushed. I would like to think they would still love me and support me as their child, at least how they normally do, in their weird ways. I couldn’t break it to them that I was...different.

“Umm bodybuilding.”

“Really? You in a body building club?” My dad didn’t even hide the disbelief in his voice.

“Yeah, I would have expected like poetry or painting,” my mom chimed in.

“Yeah, I want to get in shape.”

“Well okay, son.” My dad shot me an approving grin and then everyone quieted down and went back to their plates.

A bump in the road shook the bus violently, causing me to jump almost out of my seat and awaken from my hour-long nap. My cheek was a little wet from sweat and drool, so I tried to wipe that before checking my phone. I realized how late it actually was and how close I was to campus, so I quickly texted Valerie that I’d be arriving soon. I hoped that I’d have at least some time to unpack and get ready for our night out. The bus made a quick stop before speeding to the campus and I got ready to unload my stuff. I thought I was gonna have to sprint to get everything done. So I ended up sprinting to my dorm building, checking the time and my

messages before running up to my room. My heart beat faster and skipped when I saw she said she'd be on her way. I burst through my dorm door running past my roommate and some girl he had on our futon with him. My suitcase flew across the room and hit the wall with a loud thud before landing on the bed. The bathroom door flew open as I ran in there to wash my face quickly; then it flew open again as I went back out the dorm, down the stairs, and outside to meet my date.

I was gasping for air by the time I was out and saw Valerie walking towards my building. I felt a little embarrassed as she gave me a weird and curious look, so I waved and then bent forward, panting to catch my breath. I told her I needed a minute and we'd be good to go soon. She was kind and waited for me. Then we were off to enjoy our night. She led the way, with each step of her bright red heels clicking against the sidewalk. The edges of her skirt fluttered in the wind as she swayed her hips while she walked. Something about that stirred something in me. There was some deep, hidden longing in there. I wanted to spend more time with her.

We were walking on the sidewalk, enjoying some of the views of the city. This was pretty different than what I was used to in the small town I called home. Everything was so big, bright, and overwhelming. Something about it was beautiful and almost peaceful. I held Valerie's hand as we roamed. With her, it wasn't just like I forgot about the world, but I finally felt more like myself. I was beginning to get lost in thought when I bumped into someone on the sidewalk.

"I'm so sorry."

"Watch it," some bigger frat-type of guy said, stepping away from his friend. He looked somewhat familiar.

Valerie turned and tried to hide behind me. "We'll just go now."

Another frat guy tried to leer at Valerie. “Well, what have we here?”

His friend grabbed him and yelled, “Watch out for the he-she!” The creep started backing away.

Valerie withdrew more, tugging on my arm. “We should go.”

“Yeah, go on, faggots!”

I tensed up more. I wanted to fight them, but couldn’t. I turned, putting my arm around my date and we continued on our walk. Her heels clicked a little faster. I tried to reassure her I’d protect her.

“If you can’t even protect our country, you shouldn’t be in it!”

We quickened our pace, turning a corner and then ducking into a chain restaurant. We were seated by a lanky man and soon served by a waiter. Both of us ordered burgers and ate them slowly so we could talk. We tried to process what happened. Valerie explained that things like that weren’t uncommon, but she never felt like she could handle them well. I told her about how I wanted to fight them for her because it wasn’t right. She just held my hand and told me to ignore them next time. She then cleared something up for me and explained that she caught one of them checking her out the other day. We laughed and then proceeded to talk about classes and friends. I told her a little about my weekend and how my family was just weird. I told her about my father’s weird new obsession, and that shifted the conversation to family. Hers were apparently very open and supportive about her coming out and transitioning. She seemed really happy, and that made me happy. We continued our conversation, mostly about her life outside the restaurant. We had spent almost two hours just talking there and it was getting late.

We rushed back to campus before the drunk party crowd would start getting back. As we were walking, we came up behind a slow-moving crowd of guys and girls. It seemed like we

didn't actually beat the drunk party crowd. I asked if they could move faster or let us through. The two stragglers at the end of the crowd turned. They looked like they might have been in the same frat as the guys from before. One of them had a confused but nervous expression and bloodshot eyes. His eyes widened as he saw us both and he yelled something incoherent. The rest of his group turned to watch him as he stepped towards us and took a swing at Valerie. He missed her, but came barreling towards me, knocking us both to the ground. There was a lot of yelling, when suddenly he was being pulled off of me.

"I am so sorry," one of the guys pulling him off said. "He gets really bad when he's drunk."

"Yeah, please don't report our frat or anything for this. We'll give you like \$20."

My head rocked as I slowly got up. Valerie helped me, subtly trying to hide her face. One of the more sober guys walked us back to her building and handed me a few crumpled bills, apologizing one last time. My date helped me up to her room and I sat on her futon, as she scrambled to find things to dress my wound and clean at the same time.

"I'm really sorry this place is a mess. God, where are the band-aids?"

"Hey, it's fine. Just ice is fine if you have that."

She pulled a cold-pack out of her fridge and sat next to me, applying it to my head. I felt the numbing cold dull the sharp pain. Soon it almost felt as if it stopped altogether. She apologized a dozen more times for how things went and said she understood if I didn't want to do that again. I turned to her, and for a brief moment we made eye contact that was more intimate than any of the conversation we had the whole date. I leaned in close and kissed her. I'd never felt the urge to do that before. Something about it felt pure. After several blissful

minutes, we broke the kiss. I think she knew how I felt, and vice versa. She leaned on my shoulder and I wrapped my arm around her again. I kissed her head and sighed.

“I don’t know why, but something about me feels different.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know,” I replied. “But I feel changed, in a good way.” We hugged and I saw my reflection in the mirror. I had some of her lipstick on my mouth and her hair over my shoulder. Something about this image of myself felt right. Something about seeing myself as being more feminine just clicked. I thought about this and wanted to share it with Valerie.

“Would you still like me if I was...different?”

“Different how?”

I thought for a moment. “What if I wasn’t Ray? What if I asked you to start calling me Sylvia?”