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The Criterion Collection

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THE CRITERION COLLECTION:

A literary exploration of truth and humanity

by Mackenna Elizabeth

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The Criterion Collection: Introduction

Mackenna Elizabeth

The first thing you should know about this collection is that it is true. By this, I do not mean that it is a work of nonfiction. I do not mean that it is objective or strictly factual. One of the many things this collection sets out to do is challenge this popular conception of what qualifies as true. Truth is most commonly defined by what is factually accurate or whether something *actually* happened. I propose that this is a very limited and narrow understanding of truth. Through my work on this project, I have come to the realization that truth is not synonymous with reality. Although many events and details in the following stories are inspired by my own life and experiences, the heart of this collection's truth is in its fiction and the lives created within. I believe fiction to be uniquely qualified to examine the subjective way in which human beings perceive truth and the factors which mold this perception. Acting outside the bounds of reality through fiction and first-person narration, this collection sets out not only to relay stories, but to share the experience of these narratives between the characters and readers. In life, we cannot truly share our experiences with one another, because we are bound by the reality of our own subjectivity. Fiction is the closest we can come to comprehensively sharing first-person experiences while maintaining the third-person distance necessary for evaluating truth. It is through these experiences that truth arises in such a way that can only exist in the context of literature.

This collection contains three short stories, "The Criterion of Embarrassment," "Dear Mama," and "Smoke Stains," as well as three poems, one following each of the stories. Although the stories all share a common aim, to explore the subjective molding of truth within human experience, they all have different focuses. Each of these pieces revolves around what I believe lies at the center of humanity: interpersonal relationships. It is a distinctly human drive to

connect with those around us, and the connections that we form shift our perspective and in turn our perception of truth. The three first-person narrators featured in this collection all wrestle with different relationships they are involved with and how they affect their lives. The “Criterion of Embarrassment” focuses on platonic ties, “Dear Mama” on familial ties, and “Smoke Stains” on the romantic. In each of these stories, the first-person narrator has a different relationship with and pursuit of truth, although they all seek it out in different ways. However, what’s most important to note is the way their relationships have warped the way in which they view truth.

In “The Criterion of Embarrassment” we follow the relationship built between Callie and James. What starts as an innocent friendship between two kids quickly decays into a toxic and dangerously codependent relationship. The exploration of truth in this collection can be found in how her connection to James warps Callie’s view of the world and herself. Not only is she struggling to see herself as a whole person without James, but she also begins to project the darkness she sees in him onto her view of herself. Her struggle between her own morality and the perverse morality she comes to associate with James propels the internal conflict which defines her judgement of self.

“Dear Mama” is a bit different from the other stories both in narrative style and content. In this piece, I develop the relationship between the narrator and her mother as the narrator comes to terms with her sexuality. In this narrative, which is told in the form of a letter to the mother, I attempt to address several different iterations of truth in the narrator’s life. She struggles with embracing her own truth and her identity. She struggles to reconcile her mother’s homophobia with the obvious love between them. Mostly, she struggles to balance her truth with the love and respect she wants to show her mother. This story addresses not only the way that the relationship between her and her mother affected her perception and acceptance of truth at the

times the events unfolded, but also the way she continues to struggle with this truth retrospectively as she writes the letter.

Finally, “Smoke Stains” follows an abusive romantic relationship between two teenagers. The ability to distinguish what is true from lies and abuse is significantly damaged over the course of abusive relationships. In this story, I attempt to illustrate that complicated dynamic through the narrator Alyssa. Alyssa is emotionally and psychologically abused by her high school boyfriend Jack for years, and as a result, she struggles to come to terms with who she is outside of that abuse. Through her twisted recollection of the relationship, readers can see how deeply her self-image was warped by the damaging relationship, and all the lingering scars it left on her psyche.

The psychological effects on the consciousness of each of these narrators are central to the intentions of each story and the collection as a whole. This warping effect is one of the reasons I propose that truth is more difficult to ascertain in reality than in fiction. Oscar Wilde is quoted saying, “Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth.” This speaks to the aim of my collection in that we are compelled by our own self-bias to warp truths that we have personal stake in. Fiction allows us to explore truth with a different mouthpiece, one we are less compelled to protect through the warping of events. This is why I focus on first person narrators. I can embrace this human drive in my narrators while revealing the subtle warping effects it has. My goal in sharing this collection is that readers will be able to see and understand the position of each of the narrators while retaining enough distance to identify how the first-person bias and limitations affects the narrators’ ability to perceive the truth of their own situation. Though these characters are fictional, these relationship dynamics are not. My goal is that by illustrating the bias of truth in this way, readers will be able

to see not only the distorting of beliefs in these stories, but will possibly be able to identify similar misbeliefs in their own lives as well.

The poems included in this collection play a different role. In writing these poems, I use them as a vehicle through which I can speak back into each of the pieces I've written, entering more directly into the conversation my text has with the reader, while also revealing the conversation between me, as an author, and the stories I have written. In this way, I can guide the reader's perception of the stories to further highlight the intended themes. For instance, the poem "Spring Saudade" is a metaphorical exploration of the emotional pressures in "The Criterion of Embarrassment." It is my way of further illustrating the feelings that Callie is left with. The poem "Bad Faith" is an outside take on the relationship between the mother and daughter. Although I believe it is important that I capture the complex nature of the relationship between mother and daughter in this narrative and that this conflict isn't necessarily a death sentence for that relationship, I also think that I would be remiss not to recognize the way that the narrator's psychology is permanently affected by her mother's actions. Finally, "Burden of Grace" adopts an almost satirical voice. My goal here is to present the way that Alyssa accepts blame in such a way that makes the absurdity of such a thing obvious and undeniable. I also revisit the twisting of the concept of Grace reflect the abuse she suffered, which is something I attempt to touch on in the narrative itself but felt it important enough to highlight in my poetics.

In all of this, I feel it is important to note that my goal is not to erase the effects of subjectivity. My goal is not to ascertain truth that is absolute and unwavering. My intention is to explore and interact with the dynamics between truth, fiction, and humanity, and in this pursuit, a distorting predisposition or personal bias is wholly unavoidable. This collection is about experience being shared between reader and character, something that is entirely unique to the

realm of fiction. Thus, I do not wish for my readers to become preoccupied with chipping away at the narrative to reveal objective truth within, for there is no objective truth to find. *The Criterion Collection* sets out to synthesize literature, philosophy, psychology, and that distinct and elusive quality that defines humanity. In order for the collection to be successful, one must be willing to suspend the urge to interrogate the piece, and instead immerse oneself in the experience of the stories and poetry.

The Criterion of Embarrassment
A Short Story by Mackenna Elizabeth

The story I am about to tell you is the truth. I won't leave anything out for his benefit or for mine. I will give you every incriminating detail, every debasing truth. This is the whole story, whether I like that or not. I need to tell it. I need to exist within these words, or I know I'll lose myself all together.

There is a principle that scholars use to decide the authenticity of a story called the criterion of embarrassment. This states that any details that are embarrassing to the author or detrimental to their character are presumed to be true because they would have no reason to make up those pieces of the story. There are a lot of events, or pieces of events that I would rather leave out, but I'm about to share them with you anyway. So, when it gets to the end, and you look back on what you just read, you know you can trust that I'm telling the truth, and maybe I can trust me too.

When I met him, we were just kids. He lived in the house behind mine, but not too close like in cookie cutter neighborhoods where you could reach your hand out the kitchen window and lay your palm flat against your neighbor's siding. Where we lived, the houses had room to breathe. Between his yard and mine there was a little brook nestled in a grove of dense trees and shrubs. When I was little, just five or six, I used to run across the rocks, counting how many I could step on before I lost my balance. The moss along the creek bed was soft enough to break my fall. But it was also slippery. Six-year-old me learned this the hard way. I was sprinting across the rocks as fast as my tiny legs would carry me. I didn't see that one of the rocks in my path was entirely covered in a thick green jacket. I was going too fast. My feet flew out from

under me and I came crashing down hard and hit the corner of my head against a sharp edge of rock in front of me. After my world stopped spinning enough for me to realize what had just happened, I burst out in tears.

That's how he found me, alone on the side off the brook, my knees caked in mud, and a trickle of blood crawling down my forehead to stain my pale pink t-shirt.

"Why are you crying?" I didn't see him until he spoke, standing half hidden behind a tree. The tears in my eyes made him blurry and I struggled to bring him into focus. He was small like me, but his skin was tanner, his hair was much darker, and even through my tears I could see he was far more put together than me.

"Go away." I mumbled with an edge to my voice. The spite was unnecessary, but I was just a kid, and kids get mean when they get hurt. He didn't seem fazed, and he didn't go away. He stepped out from behind the tree and kneeled down next to me in the wet mud. I saw it soak through the knees of his otherwise spotless blue jeans. This didn't seem to faze him either.

"You're bleeding." He didn't sound concerned or grossed out. He hardly seemed affected at all. He just stared. He looked my age, he couldn't have been much older than me, but the way he talked you would have thought he was.

I just blinked at the unfamiliar boy in front of me. It took me a moment to gather myself enough to respond. "I fell." I had stopped crying, but the tears were still wet on my cheek. He was so calm and level, it made me feel silly for being upset. I wiped the tears hastily away and left a smear of dirt in their place.

"I know. I saw." He reached out with a steady hand and touched the spot on my forehead where I was bleeding. It stung where he made contact, but I didn't move. I didn't know why in

the moment, and I couldn't tell you why now, but even then, I trusted him. "You shouldn't run like that. It's not safe."

"But it's fun," I replied. My voice was small and shaky. It seemed to cower away from his in the space between us. But for the first time during our conversation I watched as his face shifted. He lost his certainty, and the hint of confusion made him look somehow younger than he did before. I rediscovered my confidence in the slip is his resolve. "Do you want to try?"

"You mean, running across the rocks?" His voice mirrored the confusion he wore on his face.

"Yeah," I said, and then pointed back to where I'd been running. "You can run on this side and I'll run over there. We can race." Already, the wound on my head was forgotten. It was nowhere near deep enough to distract from the strange new boy.

"I don't run."

I stood up smiling and pushed my bangs out of my eyes. I had lost the plastic barrette my mother had used to pin them up that morning. They fell disobediently back into my face, but I ignored them and reached my hand out to the boy still kneeling on the ground. "Come on, it'll be fun."

He stared at me for a second, considering the proposition carefully, and then put his hand tentatively in mine. It was like he sealed some unspoken contract with that little gesture. We raced across the rocks all afternoon. I beat him every time. I could tell he was afraid to step on the rocks by the way he tried to watch both of our steps carefully, like he was constantly analyzing the risk. I laughed at him quietly. I kept expecting him to give up, to refuse to race, but looking back I'm not surprised he didn't. He was never afraid to let me come first.

After we had finished running, and we were both red in the face, I asked him his name. Before then it hadn't seemed like something I needed to know, but by then I was sure I wanted to see him again. "James," he said simply. And just like that I went from being the lonely six-year-old with more imaginary friends than real ones, to being the weird six-year-old with a million imaginary friends, and a best friend named James. One day running across the rocks was enough for me.

"I'm Callie," I told him, and asked if he would come back tomorrow.

"Maybe," he replied, still slightly out of breath from running. My stomach twisted at the lack of commitment, already afraid of losing him. But sure enough, when the next day came, I ran down to the creek and found him sitting on a rock with his bare feet in the water. He looked up when he heard me coming, and for what I realized was the first time, I saw him smile.

James and I spent the next few years running around the creek and climbing trees. It was nice to have another kid around. I was an only child and there weren't many houses out where we lived. He had just moved in with his family. Before that it had been owned by an older couple with two shih tzus named Taffy and Candy. They were cute, but it got lonely without a friend. As young as I was, I could still recognize the hole he filled in my life. I always had to work to convince him to go along with my crazy stunts, and he rarely put his foot down and said no. He wouldn't let me drink the "potion" we had made from twigs and berries we found lying around, but he helped me stir it, even if he didn't understand the point. He helped me build a fort by stacking broken branches across a fallen tree, but he refused to sneak out at night and sleep in it, and he managed to convince me to stay inside too. I was the kite flying high into the clouds, and James was the hand that held my string and kept me from crashing. We were a team, he and I,

and for years we were inseparable, as we grew up running across the rocks by the bed of the brook.

I made other friends in school, kids from my classes. They were fun for the few years we were in each other's lives, but those friendships all had expiration dates. They broke at the drop of a pin. James and I weren't like that. We saw each other every day after school and on the bus, and when we had classes together the teachers always had to separate us so we could get our work done. But I would still make him laugh with stupid faces from across the room.

James was always a smart kid, and we both knew it, but when we hit middle school it became clear just how smart he was. He was reading way above grade level, and he was too advanced to be in classes with kids our age. The administrators talked to his parents about bumping him up a grade level or two, but James was insistent. He would stay with me. I told him again and again that he would still see me at home, but he was stubborn. He always had been, and there was no swaying him when he made up his mind about something. To be honest, I was glad. I wouldn't say it out loud, but I had wanted him to stay. He was my person, and even though I wanted the best for him, the selfish voice in my head kept reminding me how much I needed him. The slightest bit of distance felt like too great a threat. I needed him more than I wanted to admit.

Still, I wondered, why me? James was the smartest, most capable kid I knew. Hell, he was probably the smartest person I ever knew, kid or otherwise. I could never understand why someone like him would pick me. But he did. Again, and again he chose me. He chose me over his own solitude and silence, which I knew he treasured as a near sacred thing. He chose me over

his education, staying back to be with me even though he shouldn't have. He chose me over himself. And as much as I was glad that he did, I couldn't figure out why.

I asked him once, sometime during seventh grade, I think. In a moment of stretched out silence between us, I raised the question I'd been too afraid to bring to his attention before. *Why me?* I don't think I expected him to have an answer, but he did. James had an answer for almost everything. "Because I need you." He didn't seem to think that his answer needed to be expanded upon. His eyes stayed locked on mine, but there was no urgency in his face, nothing to mirror the anxiety coursing through my veins. But I pushed. I wasn't satisfied with his simple answer. I needed more. After a while he relented. He told me that I was like his translator. I was the only person who seemed to understand him *and* the rest of the world. He said I taught him how to be a person, the way a person should be. He said it all in the same flat tone of voice he always used. He spoke as though he was saying nothing of any significance at all. Still, I had never felt so big, so important as I did in that moment. I loved the divine importance he assigned to me. "I need you too," I replied. But James didn't ask why.

Even though James was happy to stay behind with me, his mind still craved more. We started spending weekends in the local library. James' mom would drop us off after lunch, and my mom picked us up at five before the library closed. We didn't spend our time in the young adult's section, or in the room where they kept all the library computers. We set up camp on the third floor where they kept the books on philosophy, religion, and politics, along with all the reference books. James picked out a few books to look through each day. He usually steered away from politics, calling it unimaginative. Instead, we worked through dense collections of philosophical essays, and rants from people who claimed to know some secret about the world. Without James, I knew I wouldn't have spared the section a second glance. But I desperately

wanted to be a part of his world. We started with Plato and Socrates, the classics, he had said. By the time we were starting high school we must have read half of the books on the floor.

I remember one afternoon in the summer before freshman year, James had pulled a collection of Nietzsche's essays. I was sitting on a chair in our favorite quiet study room with a book open in my lap to some obscure essay by Sartre. I couldn't make myself look away from James long enough to read it with any degree of comprehension. He was sitting on top of the circular table in the center of the room. I was sure that if he were anybody else the librarian on this floor would have made him move into one of the room's many chairs, but he wasn't just anybody else. He was James. He was quiet, but confident. The kind of person that you wanted to trust, you wanted to listen to. He had this strange innocence in him, like he didn't quite see the world for what it was, and yet he seemed to know more about everything than anyone I knew. I never knew where his head went in those quiet moments of contemplation, but I didn't want to be the one to bring him back down to earth. I think everyone who met him was always just a little afraid that any sudden movement would startle him from his bubble. Watching him read felt like watching the pieces of the Earth shift. It was equal parts moving and unnerving.

I studied him as he flipped through the pages, picking up bits and pieces as he went. I was sure he would take the book home and study it in more depth, but I loved to watch the first impression of the words stretching across his calm features. It was like I could see the ideas saturating into his consciousness through the wrinkles on his forehead.

"Listen." His blunt voice startled me back to that present reality. He picked the book up and righted his shoulders before he began to read aloud. "And so, this feeling is a hindrance to the acquisition of new experiences and the correction of customs: that is to say, morality is a hindrance to the development of new and better customs: it makes stupid."

His eyes tore away from the pages and locked onto mine, inviting me to comment. I swallowed back the last bits of reverie floating in my head and scrambled to gather my thoughts through the haze. “That’s kind of... morose. Don’t you think?”

“Well, no.” His eyes flicked back to the book as he spoke. “Nietzsche isn’t trying to say that we shouldn’t be moral. He means that morality, as it is, is broken. We’re too concerned with what *society* thinks is right or wrong, which negates the need or even possibility for original thought.”

“I could see that,” I started, trying my best to mimic his confidence, “but don’t you think that society should have some kind of part to play in determining morality? And a pretty big part at that?”

“But that’s so limiting.” His voice was strong, but there was a question beneath it. My mind flashed back to the creek the first day we met. His eyes looked the same way they did then, as though he were aware that he was missing some key point, and he was trying to draw it out of me. James might have been brilliant, but he looked to me to know the world. I fed off of the importance he assigned to me, and I used it to define myself. I wish that wasn’t true or that I could leave that part out. I hate how it makes me sound. But it is true. I was a slave to the drug of his admiration.

“It is.” I looked back at him, trying to show him that understanding he was reaching for. “But sometimes, we need to be limited.”

For a while he just looked at me. He lapsed into silence a lot. I’d gotten used to it over the years. They weren’t awkward or accidental. James was as intentional with his silence as he was with his words. He didn’t feel the need to clutter the space between us with meaningless jargon. The quiet was already too rich. It roused even the most dormant corners of my soul.

“But why? Why waste time with limits? Why make things harder than they need to be?”

It was my turn to lapse into silence. James always had a way of making me question things that I hadn't considered questionable. He didn't see the world the way the rest of us did. The connections that I always took for granted were always open to scrutiny for James. He didn't accept things for what they were—he had to know why. That always seemed to fall to me. It was my job to try to fill in the blanks where he couldn't. And I loved it. I was a willing participant in his rearranging of worlds. Somehow, he turned doubt into something desirable.

“Do you remember when we talked about Thomas Hobbes a few weeks ago?” I asked. It was a stupid question. Of course, he remembered. “He talked about the State of Nature?”

“Yes.” I watched the confusion fall from his face, and I knew he had caught on to my train of thought, but his eyes remained attentive, so I continued. He almost never needed me to explain things, but he was always willing to listen to me speak.

“Without law, without limits, without structure, we fall into anarchy. We need that backbone to keep things running like they should. People need to be limited.” The corner of his lips twitched up into a half smile, and he nodded at me to show his understanding. And in that moment, I felt like his god, defining the world before him. Thinking about it now makes me sick.

High school was hard for James. He didn't connect well with other students. He didn't talk like they did or act the way they thought he should. He was too quiet, too formal, too comfortable in isolation. Even at home he struggled to find understanding. He didn't share his dad's love of hunting and the outdoors, and his mom was always too caught up in work to pay

him much attention. Most times it seemed I was all he had. His inability to fit the mold made him an easy target. Some people took advantage of that.

There was this kid, Tyler. He just wouldn't leave James alone. He followed him through the halls and bumped into him between classes so that he dropped his books, like a caricature of some idiot Neanderthal from a teen drama. I told James to ignore him, but I saw it wearing him down, day by day. It scared me. I didn't know how to protect him. And I knew, well, I thought I knew, that he would never retaliate. I should have stuck up for him more. I should have told the administration, or something, anything. But I shut my mouth while he broke, and I broke with him. It was easier to be sympathetic in his fallout than to try to put the pieces back together.

One day after school, when we were in the 11th grade, I found him out by the stadium, sitting against the chain link fence. He liked to sit out there, away from the world. It was quiet, and he had room to be himself, so it wasn't a surprise to see him there. I was only a few feet away when I realized something was wrong. He was sitting with his elbows on his knees, and his head down, his hand was pinching the bridge of his nose. It was covered in blood and there was a small pool forming on the ground between his legs. I ran to close the distance between us.

"What the hell happened?" The anger that my voice already held surprised even me. I dropped to my knees and put my hand on his chin, pulling it up so his eyes met mine. His nose was pouring blood, and there was a cut above his left eyebrow. I didn't know what else to say. I tried to speak but the words got caught in my throat. My eyes stung and I felt like crying, though I didn't understand why.

"Tyler." James' voice was muffled around his hand, still on his nose. He pulled his chin away from my grip indignantly, and I tried to ignore the way his sharp rebuff hurt me. "Him and his idiot friends followed me up here after eighth period."

“They hit you?” The stinging in my eyes got worse and I realized my hands were shaking.

“No, actually my face started spontaneously bleeding. They went to get help.” There was venom in his voice, and I flinched. I knew he didn’t mean to direct it at me, but James was never very good at dealing with his pain. “Yes. They called me a fag and Tyler punched my fucking nose.”

“People still say fag? What century is he from?” I was focusing on the wrong thing, I knew, but my brain wasn’t working right. This made James laugh, a short, stunted laugh. It did nothing to dispel my unease. If anything, it made it worse. “What happened here?” My hand reached out to touch the blood on his forehead. I don’t know what compelled me to do it, maybe it was the subconscious memory of James doing the same for me when I was the one on the ground bleeding, ten years earlier. “Did he hit you again?”

“No. I fell into the fence after the first swing. Tyler loved that.”

My shaking got worse, too much to handle, and without thinking I was on my feet again. “I’m going to kill him.” I tightened my hands, nearly vibrating at that point, into fists at my side. I was never an angry person, never violent. But for James, I would do anything, be anything.

“You’re five feet tall, and you weigh a hundred pounds.” He said, not bothering to move. “You’re not killing anyone today. Calm down.”

I stood for a second, staring at him. I didn’t want to calm down. That was my best friend, my life, sitting there on the ground with blood pouring out of his face. I wanted someone to pay. I did. But he was right. He usually was.

I forced my hands to fall loosely at my sides, and I slipped down onto the ground beside James. I ran my fingers once through his black hair. My heart ached at my inability to keep him safe. I needed to say something, but I didn't know what.

But James spoke first. "I don't get it." His voice was softer now, less angry. It was almost directionless, and I wasn't sure if I was meant to respond. After a moment, I did anyway.

"You don't get what?"

He looked at me and he was more vulnerable, more human, than I had ever seen him. Strange, isn't it, how much a single moment of weakness can change a person. So, I stared. Beyond the reason, beyond the calculations, I was finding the real James in a way I had never seen him before. I saw him broken, and I somehow loved him more. I wish I could tell you what was wrong with me that I found the damage so appealing.

"What am I doing wrong?" I wasn't ready for the question. It didn't come from anger, or frustration, or even pain. He sounded genuinely curious. It had never struck me that he would think it was some fault of his own that made this happen. For me, it was obvious that Tyler was the one with the problem. But then again, I could never find fault with James. I didn't know how. I knew he needed something more concrete. Simply offering him love and support wouldn't be enough. I had to find a way to explain. I sat in my stunned silence, trying to construct a coherent argument through the static in my brain.

Slowly I began to string together my jumbled thoughts. "Do you remember Plato's *Republic*?" Confusion fell over his face like a curtain being drawn shut.

"Yes?" The word was thick with doubt bordering on annoyance.

"Do you remember his idea of the Philosopher King?" He nodded at me but made no verbal reply. He wasn't following me, and I could see that. A strange rush of adrenaline pulsed

through me unexpectedly. It wasn't often that I held some understanding that eluded James. I almost enjoyed keeping him on that edge, in some messed up way. I stayed quiet longer than was necessary and reveled in the understanding that was mine and mine alone. "James, you're the Philosopher King. Tyler is threatened by you. Your mind, the way you think, it gives you an advantage over him, and he doesn't know how to handle that."

He sat and considered this for a few seconds. His face lost only a hint of the confusion he had worn before. "So just to recap," he started, his eyebrows raised, "I'm sitting here with a bloody face, because I'm better than the guy who hit me?"

"No," I said, almost too quickly, "Tyler is out there hitting people like you because he's too stupid to make any other kind of difference in this world."

He nodded a few times. His eyes tore away from mine and focused on the school parking lot, all the moving pieces buzzing around in front of us. He didn't say any more. He just sat there. That was the thing about James. He never said things he didn't need to, and he never said anything he didn't mean.

By the end of Junior year, I watched with growing unease as little stress fractures started to form in the foundation of our relationship. I hadn't seen it coming, but as we neared our final year of high school fear started to seep in, riding on the backs of college applications.

James was valedictorian. He got test scores so high I'm surprised nobody from the College Board had investigated whether or not he cheated. Knowing him, knowing his record, knowing what he was capable of, I knew that he could go to any school he wanted. And I knew that I couldn't.

I was smart too. I couldn't have been friends with James if I wasn't. I did really well on my ACT and SAT, and my application essay was perfect. My problem came with my GPA. Over the years I had to prioritize. I could keep up with schoolwork, or I could keep up with James. I put off studying and working on assignments to read over and over again the essays and books that James was planning on reading. I wanted to have something intelligent to say when he asked. I wanted to be capable of filling in the blanks. I chased his adoration like a junkie after a high. I didn't care what my teachers thought. I didn't care what my parents said. I didn't care that I had more missing assignments than anyone in my year. All I needed was his approval. I built myself around him, not caring if the rest of me fell apart in the process.

When it came time to pick our schools, James was weighing between Georgetown and Emery, and I was applying to state schools and crossing my fingers.

We were working on our applications together one weekend in the library when he froze in the middle of an essay. I felt the weight of his gaze before I met his eyes. He didn't say anything, he just stared. If anyone else had done it, it would have been weird, and I would have looked away. But it wasn't just anyone. It was James.

"Yes?" I broke through his silence.

"Let's not go." The words were quick, different from his usual cool and calculated tone. They caught me off guard and it took me a moment to process. His eyes grew impatient at my pause.

"Let's not go where?" I mimicked his rushed voice.

"College. Let's not go." As he went on his voice grew more and more excited.

“Why?” I wasn’t following. I couldn’t fathom why he of all people wouldn’t want to go to college. I couldn’t understand why harder classes and freedom in education wouldn’t be something he wanted to chase.

“We learn more here together than they could ever dream of teaching us in low budget classrooms and crowded lecture halls. We don’t need that. We’re better than that.” I tried to remember the last time he had sounded so excited about anything, but I came up blank. “Let’s not go.”

I wanted to be surprised by his suggestion, but somehow, I wasn’t. It wasn’t like James to be so impulsive, but it was just like us to grasp at ways to stay together.

“Where would we go instead?” I couldn’t keep a smile from edging into my voice, and onto my lips. I pictured myself with garden sheers, the sharp edges closing around the tether to my mundane life. The excitement was leaking from my veins into my words.

“Does it matter? I’ve been putting money aside from summer jobs. I can buy us a van.” He said this like it was all the information anyone could ask for.

“A van?” I raised an eyebrow, but my smile didn’t falter.

“Yeah,” he waved his hand dismissively through the air. “One of those white cargo vans. We can take out the back seats and make it into a bed.” He’d thought about this before. I could tell. Even in his frenzied words I could sense his carefully crafted vision. This wasn’t an impulse. It was real.

“The pedophile vans?”

“They’re not all pedophile vans. I saw one that was used for prison transport. And my mom’s church used one for a mission trip.”

“Pedophiles, missionaries, or prisoners. Got it.” The mocking was thick on my tongue, but behind it all I was excited. I would love that. James was the only person I could see myself spending that much time with, and it would be so much better than wasting four years of my life with a stranger crammed in a dorm the size of a broom closet. I couldn’t help but let my smile grow, and my exhilaration with it. We were standing together on the edge of something spectacular; I could taste it.

“Come on, Callie,” he said. “Be serious.” His voice was slower, but there was fire in his eyes. “Why not?”

I opened my mouth ready to jump headfirst into his fantasy. I wanted to let the fire in his eyes become my own, to let it devour me, unravel me. But before I could speak, my eyes fell to the paper sitting in front of him. The bold print spread across the top of the page read, *Essential Tips for Writing your Ivy League Admissions Essay*. He had underlined, and highlighted, and written notes along the edges. He had his favorite red pen out, the one he said wrote the smoothest without bleeding through the pages. Beside the sheet of tips was a draft of his application essay, swimming in fresh red ink. My heart sank. I needed him. I knew that. So, I let myself be selfish before. I held him back for years, but I couldn’t let the burden of me follow him into the next chapter of life.

“We can’t do that.” My voice had dropped several decibels, and I hoped it was loud enough for him to hear. I couldn’t stand to repeat it. His pupils dilated and his shoulders fell. I swear I could see the breath catch in his chest. He appeared to me then as the human embodiment of a simple, but immense question—why?

It wouldn’t have been enough to tell him what I was thinking. It wouldn’t have pushed him far enough from his train of thought to derail. At least, that is how I justified myself in the

moment. But that's not entirely true. I couldn't tell him what I was thinking, because I couldn't bear to tell him that all I do is hold him back and make his life worse. I couldn't survive hearing him agree with me. I couldn't stand to take that risk. I wasn't strong enough. So, within the span of a single breath, I created a falsified version of this truth, that was easier for me to swallow, and convinced myself it was for his sake, not mine.

"The greatest thing in the world is to know how to belong to oneself." I fought to keep my voice steady, and my eyes cool. I willed my body to keep the secrets of my heart.

James stared at me. What was once fire had turned to smoldering ash. Looking at him there, knowing I was the one who diminished his flame, my eyes began to water as though I were really drowning in his smoke. "I don't know who said that... I don't know what you mean." I had never heard him sound so weak, so small.

"Michel de Montaigne," I said as I forced my eyes away from him. Instead I focused on my own two hands. I hoped he wouldn't notice that my nails were digging into my palm, or my fists were beginning to shake beyond my control. "I don't belong to myself yet, James. And if I let myself go with you, then I never will. You have to let me go. I need to learn to be fully my own." I kept my eyes low, even as the self-destructive demon inside of me coerced me to look at the pain on his face, to see the damage I had dealt. "You do too." I barely let myself breathe between the words. They sounded sloppy and rushed, even to me.

For what felt like a long time, longer than I could stand, we just sat there in the immensity of our silence. Two minutes ago, I was going to run away with him. Two minutes ago, we were a team. Now, I had pulled the rug out from under eleven years of friendship, and I had done it with a lie.

“I don’t care about belonging to myself.” He caught me by surprise. I was anticipating an argument, some kind of logical rebuttal. I was ready for him to reference some philosophy I had never heard of or pull out the strings of my argument where I hadn’t seen them begin to fray. But he didn’t have a rebuttal. His small voice dripped with desperation I don’t think he knew how to put into words. “I don’t want that.” It was the closest thing to I *want* you that I ever got from James. Not need. Want. I found the unfinished sentence, the words beneath his desperation floating to the surface, and I felt my heart lurch towards him. *He wants me*, I thought to myself. But I pulled back.

The stinging in my eyes grew violent and I begged the welling tears not to fall. I prayed my voice would not crack. I prayed I would have the strength to keep going, to finally be doing the right thing. “But I do.”

It took everything I had to get those words out, and as my eyes flicked up to meet his, I watched them take everything from him too. In that moment, I could not have hated myself more. But I convinced myself not to back down. *Do it for him. Do it for James.* My mind was pained by the anthem it echoed.

He looked away, and immediately rose to his feet. “I’m leaving.” His voice was no longer small, he didn’t sound weak or defenseless, but he didn’t sound like himself either. For the first time, I found myself standing outside of the wall he built around the world in his head. I felt incredibly alone, and I was terrified of becoming intimate with that solitude.

“James, you can’t just leave. I drove both of us here.”

He was already shoving his things into the tattered brown backpack he carried. “I’ll walk.”

“You can’t walk. It’s below freezing, and it’ll take you an hour to get home from here.” He paid me no attention and started to walk away. As he went to swing his backpack over his shoulder, I reached out to grab his arm, “James, just—”

“Don’t.” He jerked his arm away from me. His movement was sharp, but I couldn’t find any anger behind his eyes. He looked broken, and hurt, and lost. But not angry. I wished he would be angry with me. I could more easily carry his anger than his pain.

Without another word he walked out the door. I sunk back into my chair and let the moment wash over me. My heart was beating impossibly fast, and my head was swimming with adrenaline and whatever god-forsaken chemical was responsible for guilt. I stayed seated for at least an hour after he left, or that’s how long it felt. I could only replay the look on his face over and over again in my head, like a sick loop of film. The image made me sick and yet, I had never seen him look so beautiful. I hated myself as that thought fluttered through my mind.

That week passed more slowly than I could handle. The days crawled by me on bloodied hands and knees. I shifted between being numb and being so depressed I thought my heart had fallen from my chest when he ripped his arm away from me. Mostly, I was nothing. I don’t mean I felt nothing. I mean I *was* nothing. I cried the night he walked away. I cried for the pain I handed to him. I cried for the fear that he would never forgive me. I cried for all the years with my best friend that shattered there on the library floor. But I did it for him. I did what I had to. I had to believe I was right if I wanted to survive the pressing emptiness.

Finally, it was Friday. I had gotten roped into going to a study group with a few girls in my biology class. I had known them since kindergarten, but only in the way that all kids in a

small town knew each other. My life was built around James, and James alone. Without him I was floating. So, when Amber, one of the girls from my class, asked me if I wanted to come to her house with her friends to study that night, I was caught off guard. I wasn't sure if she had asked because she saw how lost I was and took pity on me, or if she figured I could understand the material better than any of them. People always assumed I was a genius, hanging out with James and all. Honestly, I didn't care what her motivation was. I needed the distraction. I told her I would come, and she gave me a too-big, toothy smile. For the smallest space in time, I felt bad for using her. But the selfish desire festering inside of me won out quickly.

I went with her and her friends in her car straight from school to Amber's house. They were loud on the car ride over. I tried to smile at them when their eyes darted towards my face, but I didn't join in while they sang loudly with the radio. I knew I stood out, but I didn't care. It wasn't that I didn't like the girls. They were all relatively nice. In a different time, we could have been friends. But looking at them then, all I knew was that they weren't James, and they never would be.

I felt hollow as we got to her house and started to study. Hours passed by like seconds, but the seconds felt like years. I was barely in the same field of existence as the girls around me. I know it sounds stupid. He was just one person. It was just one fight. But I didn't just lose a friend. I lost part of myself, the part of myself that made me who I was. Everyone says that you're not supposed to build yourself on the shoulders of just one person. My mother always used to tell me not to put my key to happiness in somebody else's pocket. She said that was between me and God. The thing is, I never believed in God. I never believed in some man in the sky who calls the shots. I believed in James, so I made him the key to everything I was. And I knew that he saw me in the same light, and I let him, fully aware of the risks he was blind to.

This time it was me trying to watch each of our steps. It was me who let him fall. I wanted him to need me like the sinner needs God, like I needed him. It was wrong to let it happen. I knew that. But I couldn't bring myself to regret it. I was too arrogant to take responsibility for the brokenness I had fostered in us both.

It was getting dark outside when my phone rang. The girls I was studying with didn't even look up from their books. They were all trying to find the answer to some question on the study guide. I already knew the answer, but I was pretending to search with them. I relished the silence of their pursuit. So, when I pulled out my phone, I only intended to silence it and move on. That is, until I saw the name flashing across the screen: *James*.

"I'll be right back," I said getting to my feet. Amber hummed a note of acknowledgment, keeping her eyes low. I walked around the corner but couldn't wait to be out of ear shot to pick up the phone. I was too anxious to hear his voice again.

"James," I breathed as I answered the phone. My heart was a haphazard intersection of anxiety, relief, and hope within my chest. "Are you ok? James, I'm so sorry." My voice was trembling as it reached for him through the phone.

He didn't respond right away. The silence between us was so heavy, I was worried the weight of it alone would be enough to break the connection between our phones. When he finally did speak, his voice was soft and shaking. I couldn't remember a time when he had sounded so small. "Hey." One word, short and simple, and it broke through the wall I had built that week, and the tears began to fall down my face.

"You have no idea how badly I needed to hear you—" I started, but he cut me off.

"I don't want to go to college. And neither do you." His words were faster than I thought they should have been, and it took me a beat to process.

“What do you mean?” I kept my voice low, not wanting the girls around the corner to hear. I wanted to keep him all to myself.

“This society isn’t for us. We’re just different and we both know it. I know we do.” He paused for a second. I could hear his labored breathing in the background. I closed my eyes and imagined I could hear the thrum of his heart beneath it, the beat like a metronome that settled the uneven chaos in my head. “We don’t need anyone to tell us how to think. We would be wasted sitting in a crowded lecture hall. We’re not made to be baby birds, being force fed information and swallowing it blindly.” His speech was strange, and it sent chills down my spine.

“James, I’m lost.” My voice was barely more than a whisper, and at first, I wasn’t sure if he had heard me. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“I’m leaving this town. I’m not coming back. I want you to come with me. We could leave it all behind, start a life for just the two of us,” he said, even faster now. Meticulous language collided with a desperate rush, and he sounded almost clumsy. James was never clumsy.

I took a deep breath and the air felt somehow like smog intruding in my lungs. It felt wrong. “James I—”

“But we have to say goodbye and we have to do it right. We’re different. We’re the Philosopher Kings. We’re the ones who should be doing the limiting, defining morality, taking our rightful agency over people like Tyler, or his stupid friends.” My stomach was twisting into a foreboding note. With each and every beat I felt my heart pleading with my brain, hoping beyond hope that I was misjudging the direction of his message.

“What are you saying?” My voice cracked.

“Callie, we can leave, and we can go out strong. Together we are something so commanding it should be terrifying to other people. We have a right to claim that authority, that power...” He paused for what felt like an eternity. “We could be like Bonnie and Clyde. We could really be Philosopher Kings. It’s all sitting there for us to take, and if you really love me, you will take it with me.”

“James, what are you talking about?” The words spilled from my mouth and their brokenness mingled with the mascara stained tears running down my face. “What do you mean limit? How?”

“Come on, Callie. Let’s take control for once, break down those walls that held us back.” He paused, and I struggled to hear what he said next. “let’s go out with a *bang*.” I heard his emphasis, like a twisted dash of humor dropped into a nightmare. I don’t know if he was trying to soften the reality of what I thought he was suggesting, but it only scared me more. The loosely veiled subtext beneath it all threatened to strangle me, and my mind flashed to the poorly protected, fully stocked gun cabinet I knew his father kept.

Right then, Amber walked around the corner. I was shaking so badly I couldn’t stand, and I fell harshly to my knees. She ran to my side with a look of concern and confusion plastered across her face, but she didn’t say a word. I ignored her. I hated her in some selfish way for making me do this with an audience.

“Ja-James. Tell me you won’t hurt anybody. You can’t do that.” Amber inhaled sharply, drawing my eyes to hers. Concern that James would hear her flashed across my mind. I didn’t want him to know I wasn’t alone. Even then, as twisted as it sounds, I was desperate to protect the intimacy of my life with James. I expected her to move, to yell, to say something, anything. But she seemed to be shocked into stillness and silence.

“Don’t say that. This is about more than that.” James’ voice crashed over the line, stronger than ever before. His words weren’t shaky anymore as they danced around what he was really trying to say. “You said it yourself, without limits people will fall into chaos. We have to act. We have the capability to make a difference, to give the world balance. It’s time I took a stand so I can belong to myself for once. But I want belong to you too. Why don’t we make our goodbye to this hellish place a lesson for everyone? Do this with me.” His words sounded plastic, like something written for a Bond villain, and I felt an absurd anger at them for crossing his tongue, for tainting *my* James with their cheap theatrics and insidious intent.

My eyes flashed to Amber. I wondered if she could hear what he was saying, she was kneeling so close to me. The look of shock in her eyes, the terror flashing across her face, the way her entire body seemed to vibrate anxiously, told me she had heard every word. I was backed into a corner.

She didn’t respond right away, but when she did, she started moving so suddenly it was as though someone had hit play on a DVD. I don’t know what prompted her. Maybe she saw something in my eyes that made her want to help. Maybe she saw something in James already, something I’d been blind to. Maybe she already knew where this was going. For whatever reason, she hurried to the other room, where her phone was sitting by the other girls. Suddenly she was surprisingly calm and collected. I might have been impressed, if the situation were different.

“James this isn’t what I meant when I said all of those things.”

“But they still apply.” The resolve in his voice, his certainty, made his words even more terrifying. “Callie, I love you. We are two sides of the same coin. We are meant to do this all together. I need you. Please?”

I was choking on the lump growing in my throat and pleading silently that he would tell me it was all a joke or some sick lie he concocted to punish me for hurting him. All I got was silence from his end, a James silence, full of purpose and intent. From the other room I heard Amber talking, “I need to report a possible shooter.” Hearing the words out loud shattered any illusion I could have clung to. It was as though she had plucked my words straight from my mind and vocalized the reality that I was too afraid or too weak to confront. Hearing the words out loud I knew I couldn’t pretend I didn’t know what he was saying, what he was implying. It was all too real, and I felt myself shatter beneath the demanding weight.

“I can’t,” I choked out. And just like that, the string that tethered me to my reality snapped.

The police went to James’s house, but there wasn’t any evidence, and he had never actually made a threat. He told them he was just upset and being dramatic, that he would never hurt anybody. There was nothing they could do. His parents pulled him out of school after that. Last I heard they had thrown him into therapy. I don’t know. I haven’t spoken to him since. It’s been weeks since I talked to my best friend.

But I’ve wanted to. I’ve *missed* him. I’ve seen what kind of person he turned into, but I still find myself wanting him. At night I see his face on the back of my eyelids. I relive the phone call again, and again, and again. Only, in my dreams, Amber isn’t there to hold me accountable. In my dreams there are no witnesses. In my dreams the ties I have to my James still hold, and I hang in the moment before my freefall.

And the worst part? I'm happy there, in the space between his question, and my answer. I'm happy being needed. I'm happy that I'm the one he turned to. I'm happy while he asks me to jump into the dark holding his hand. Nobody's watching. In my dreams, I can hover weightlessly in that blissful in-between.

It's hard to convince myself that I would do the right thing if no one was there to watch me make that choice. Inside my head, the logical part of me argues that I wouldn't, that I could never be that person, but I didn't tell him I didn't want to. I didn't tell him I wasn't like that. I didn't say anything like that. *I can't*. It wasn't that I didn't want to. It was that I didn't have a choice. And that will forever haunt me. They were my words that dripped off his tongue as validation. I planted those seeds. I watered them myself. I wish I could forget those words, now. Still, they ring through my head at night, growing louder as the night grows quieter, reminding me of what I'm capable of fostering. I was the one who taught him how to be a person, so I'm responsible for the person he has become. He said it himself. I made him who he was.

We're two sides of the same coin... James knew me better than anyone. *If you love me, you will take it with me...* I did love him. *I need you by my side...* and I needed him too. That terrified me more than anything. Even now I know it's true. As fucked as he is, I need him.

I've never wanted to hurt anybody, not really, not like that. Even through the haze of pain and fear and guilt I can't bring myself to doubt that. But at night, when I lay awake with only the darkness to keep me company, begging myself not to fall asleep and be trapped by my dreams, I think to myself, if I can knowingly love someone capable of what I know he's capable of, what does that make me? Maybe I didn't want to hurt anybody. But I wanted him. And now he's gone. I don't know how to belong to myself, because for all of these years I have belonged to him.

And it felt right.

Nothing feels right anymore.

Spring Saudade

They were her favorites,
little tufts of sunshine
rising from the ground
to greet her instead
of falling from the sky.
They were her joy.
Even in their death,
their metamorphosis
into fragile ghosts,
they were her secrets
blown into the wind.

The day she learned that dandelions were weeds
She tore her favorite flowers from her garden.

She stuffed the clumps
into black plastic bags
and left them in the sun
to wilt. to die.

Even now—
She closes her eyes
and begs herself not to notice
how empty she feels without them.

-Mackenna Elizabeth

Dear Mama

A short story by Mackenna Elizabeth

It's been a long time since I've written you a letter like this. You remember how I always used to, right? I was never so good at saying what I needed to say, not out loud at least.

Whenever I had something important to tell you, something I needed you to listen to, I'd write it down and leave it somewhere for you to find. I think the first one was when dad left. I can't even begin to remember what it said. I was so young. I only remember falling to pieces and needing you to make sense of the mess. I wrote a letter when that girl was bullying me on the bus in elementary school, and a letter when the middle school guidance counselor told me I had to tell you about my slipping grades. And the last one, the one I wrote when I left for college, the one I taped to your bedroom mirror because you'd cried so much the night before I had to leave, and I wanted to tell you I would miss you too.

I know they weren't perfect. I know it probably wasn't your favorite way to communicate about these important things. But you always told me you were there to listen, even if I couldn't find a way to speak. You promised to always hear me when I needed you to.

Mama. I need you to hear me.

I remember where things went wrong, the first time, I mean. It's not when you think, either. It was much earlier. When I think back on it, I wonder if this moment started some kind of unfortunate domino effect. I wonder, if it hadn't happened, would things still have unfolded the way they did? But I think that's putting too much pressure on one little memory. There was a certain inevitability to what happened between us.

I was twelve, listening quietly to you and your friends talk in our kitchen. I don't think you noticed me sitting there, just a few feet away. I don't blame you. I was so quiet then, and I

had a talent for going unnoticed. Still, I loved to listen to you talk. I remember feeling so special being privy to your grown-up world, like I was trespassing on moments meant to be hidden. I drank in every word like gospel, because that's what kids do. That's what you always said, right, mama? That kids are like sponges?

That night I listened as your talk shifted from benign middle-class gossip to arguments about politics. Of course, they were never really arguments, when you and all your friends were firmly planted on the one side. For a long time, that was the only side I saw. It was all you let me hear. I still remember every word. In my memory, I feel the air shift in that moment. I feel the whole room get heavier and the atmosphere begin to drip with foreboding. But I'm projecting. I had no way of knowing how important that shift in conversation would be.

"It's just...wrong." Your voice fell to just above a whisper when you spoke. I leaned it from my hidden corner as all your friends nodded in affirmation. "I mean, I don't want to encroach on anybody's happiness, but it's just not a political issue. Marriage is, first and foremost, a biblical concept. Passing a new law, or whatever won't change what marriage is: a covenant between a man and a woman." My stomach tightened as you spoke, and I felt the desire to back further into the wall, to become even more invisible. I couldn't understand why your words made me so anxious, or why my cheeks had started to burn. I knew what you were talking about, of course. I wasn't blind to the world around me. I just didn't know why I cared.

"Exactly!" one of your friends agreed, though I can't remember which one. "I just don't want my kids to grow up in a world where the government gets to dictate morality. God's spoken on the issue, and as far as I'm concerned that's all that matters."

There were more nods and remarks of agreement, and I'm sure the conversation went on, but I slipped out of the room before I could hear anymore. I wonder a lot if, on some level at

least, I knew why hearing you say what you did hurt. I wonder if I knew why I cried for hours that night before finally falling asleep, or why there was shame burning in my chest. I can't say for sure. But either way, I was far too young to be crying in fear of having a defective heart.

I tried to forget about that night for a long time. Or, at least, it felt like a long time from where I was standing. Regardless, I couldn't get rid of it, not for good anyway. You'll remember this part of the story, of course. I had been wrestling with my sexuality for years, realizing I was gay and learning to hate myself because of it—but for you, this is where everything started.

She was my first real girlfriend and I was convinced I was in love with her. I told her over and over, in hidden corners and quickly deleted messages, that she was the love of my life. I know now that wasn't true. I wasn't in love, but it *felt* like love, because for the very first time in my life, it was real. I had dated before, all boys. Throughout the first two years of high school I clung to heteronormativity like a security blanket. I tried to cover up the “broken” way I loved, but all of those relationships felt like lies. They were short lived, unfulfilling, meaningless. With her it was honest and good and true, even if it wasn't love. I wanted so badly to be proud for letting myself have that kind of happiness. I wanted so badly to be proud.

But you didn't see it that way. Pride is a sin. Isn't it, mama?

I know I should have told you myself, but I won't blame myself for the way things went down. You made no secret of the way you felt about people like me. I mean, think of all the things you said. Every time you went on a tangent about the “danger of tolerance” or argued that same-sex love wasn't really love at all, you weren't just talking about some hypothetical stranger you'd never have to look in the eye. You were talking about me, mama. I know it's the way you were raised. I know it was asking a lot of you to unlearn decades of believing one thing, because

I needed you to believe in me. I know it was unfair to ask you to abandon that part of your faith. But do you know what it feels like to grow up believing that you are fundamentally broken?

So, I didn't tell you when she and I started dating. I just wanted it to stay mine for a little while longer. The problem was it didn't stay just mine. I didn't get to make that choice for myself. You never told me who it was that told you, or how they found out in the first place. I had my guesses, people I was suspicious of, but that's not important anymore. All of those people are gone from my life, forgotten. But what happened between you and me didn't go anywhere—that stuck around.

Can you remember walking into my room that day? I can remember every last detail. I was sitting on my bed, working on statistics homework. I had a stubborn headache, and my mouth tasted like a peppermint hard candy, a cure-all you gave me as a child whenever I was sick that I always held onto. Everything was normal and routine. And then you knocked so lightly, so unassumingly on my bedroom door. I knew right away that something was wrong. You never knocked.

You walked in and pulled a chair from the corner of my room to the side of my bed. "We need to talk." You folded your hands in your lap, your fingers tightly interlaced, the same way they did when you prayed. Your movements were so clinical. Practiced. It was likely watching a play actress on stage, every movement perfectly blocked and rehearsed. There was no emotion, no life. Just duty.

And that's what it was to you. You told me I could never see her again. You told me she wasn't good for me, for my soul. I had to call her, right there in front of you, and tell her we were over. For me, it was humiliating. Debasing. Another exercise in shame and a lesson that'll take years to start to unlearn. It was my very first heartbreak and you were there in the audience with

no expression on your face. Because for you it was just your responsibility. You were protecting me the only way you knew how. It's hard to blame you for that. But regardless of your intentions, the door closed between us that day.

We went on like that for too long. I would spend months, or years pretending to be somebody I wasn't, and then I would... slip up. It was different things every time. I'd start seeing someone new or join the gender and sexuality alliance club at the high school. I'd sit a little too close to a girl in pictures posted on social media or I'd trust the wrong person. Whatever form those "slip-ups" took, they were little reminders of the reality we were both trying so hard to ignore. Every time that truth surfaced, we'd get in the same damn fight. I'd beg you to see things from my perspective, to love me for who I was. You'd tell me it was never a question of your love for me. You would say you knew what was best for me and for my heart, always armed with the perfectly cited biblical argument to back you up. And we both fell apart. We'd argue, and yell, and cry. But when push came to shove, I would reject my heart and choose you. Over. And over. And over.

We had to know it couldn't last. I built my life in that warzone, our warzone. I was constantly being ripped in two between the life I was raised to believe in, and the life I was desperate to live. That kind of existence just isn't sustainable. With all the lies, and the repression, and the denial, I felt my personhood fracturing under all the pressure. It was killing me. Little by little, it was killing me. I wouldn't have survived a lifetime like that. You have to understand. Please understand, mama.

I know you remember the breaking point. I don't think either of us will ever forget. I waited until I had graduated from college. I had moved out of the house and I was finally on my own. It felt safer to do it that way. There wasn't as much to lose.

In my head, I planned on sitting you down for coffee or dinner. I framed and reframed my argument at night while I was trying to fall asleep. You don't know this, but I spent weeks pouring over bible verses and sermons online, anything to give me a leg to stand on. I didn't just want to live my life, I wanted you to be okay with it. I wanted your support. I was going to have a civil conversation with you, open up a dialogue or some Dr. Phil-style bullshit. I wanted to do it right.

The thing is, a million years of research and rehearsal couldn't erase the shame or the fear. In the end, I sent you a text message telling you I was ready to live my truth. It was excessively long and well-written. I even spent time checking and rechecking the grammar before I pressed send. But I knew what it was. It was an act of cowardice, an admission of the guilt I still harbored. And it lost me my mother.

I know you were still there, at least in some respects. That why I waited so long after all. You didn't abandon me. We didn't share a home for you to kick me out of, though I doubt you would have even if we did. But everything changed. The phone lines grew cold. We didn't talk anymore. I only visited for Holidays, and we both said we were just too busy, but we knew that was a lie. I had hurt you. I had chosen my *life of sin* and made you feel like a failure as a mother.

I grew up telling everyone that you were my best friend. Maybe that wasn't true. Maybe it was an exaggeration, but I never cared about what anyone thought except for you. It was just you and me. It felt like you were all I had. No siblings, no father. I needed you. And you were gone and I knew it was my fault.

I don't think I could have survived that loss if it weren't for Sara. Do you remember how you used to tell me that God sent people into our lives when we needed them most? Well, I never believed that until I met her.

Mama, I swear she was perfect from the second I saw her. I know how cheesy and ridiculous that sounds but I knew right away, she was the girl I wanted to spend my life with. I told her that once, years after we got together, and she laughed. I think she thought I was joking, or just trying to be cute. But I wasn't. I mean it. She was my miracle.

Do you want to know something kind of funny, mama? One of the first things I realized when I met her was that you would love her. I mean, if she were a boy and I would have introduced the two of you, you would've started planning the wedding on the spot. Part of me really loved knowing that. Another part of me registered the pain of knowing that it didn't change anything. Regardless, I fell so swiftly into love with her, and it was real, and it was good, and it was worth it all.

Of course, you know all about Sara already. I don't think I ever told you what it felt like, falling for her, or what it was she meant to me in those early days, but you got the watered-down version of the story in the years that passed. I know I kept her from you for a long time. I don't mean that I hid the relationship, I mean that I tried to keep her sweet soul safe from the wreckage of the wars that had been waged between us. Even that was difficult. I didn't know how to explain to Sara why she couldn't meet you. It's difficult to describe how a person could be so distant from my life, and yet the most important person in my world. Not many people can make sense of the contradiction we lived within.

Eventually I couldn't delay the inevitable. Sara and I had been dating for nearly a year. We lived in the same apartment. We had plans for the future. It was becoming more and more ridiculous that she hadn't met my family. We picked so many fights with each other over the delay in that major relationship milestone. I realized that after everything I'd gone through, I was still letting what happened between you and me drive a wedge between me and the woman I loved.

"Come to my mom's with me for Christmas." I hadn't really planned to say it. The words slipped out in the middle of a comfortable silence while we were sitting together in the small kitchen of our apartment. She looked at me like I was some sort of alien creature, not the girlfriend she'd been sharing her life with for the better part of a year. I knew I'd caught her by surprise. It was the first of November, so maybe it was a little early to be talking about Christmas, especially for me. I never liked the holiday. Still, I had expected her to say something. She was quiet, blank-faced for so long, but once the shock wore off, I watched tears start to well in her eyes, and the most amazing, transformative smile stretch across her face.

"Are you sure?" she asked. I looked at her across the kitchen table. I'd seen her happy so many times before, but never like that. In that moment, she was the kind of happy that radiated, the kind of happy that you could feel as warmth in your bones just from being in her vicinity. She was the kind of happy that when I looked at her, practically vibrating with excitement, I knew that what we were was magical, not because it was some perfect fantasy, but because was real.

"Yes," I said. And I was sure, not about Christmas, or introducing the two of you. I was sure about her, and that was enough.

You were nice about her coming home with me, much nicer than I had expected. I didn't feel like I deserved that pleasantness after everything my choices put you through. But you always wanted to be good to me, mama. I hope you never think I didn't see that.

I was so anxious, walking in the front door. I paused for a second on the porch. I couldn't decide if I should knock or just walk in. It used to be my home, after all. Sara squeezed my hand in hers, noticing my hesitancy, and we walked in together, choosing not to knock.

I thought it would be more eventful than it was. I thought, one way or the other, something life changing would happen. Maybe it was just too much pressure to put on one evening, but nothing really happened. You shook her hand. You smiled. A lot. You served dinner. You introduced her to Aunt Kristi, who made a late appearance after we ate. You even got her a gift to open under the tree. It might have been perfect.

But it wasn't real.

You talked to me, pleasantly, sweetly, but you wouldn't look me in the eye. You were cordial towards Sara, but when you introduced her to your sister she was my "friend". You never let the smile fall from your face, but when you looked down to see me holding her hand, I watched the pain flash across your eyes, and I let go.

I let go.

I think about that a lot. All that talk about pride and still, I let go of her hand.

I let Sara drive on the way home. I stared silently out the window for the two-and-a-half-hour trip. It was pitch black out. There was nothing to see, but I stared, transfixed on darkness.

When we got home, and I heard the click of the door shutting behind me, I broke down. I never told you that, but the second I walked through the door, the second I was safe in my apartment where I could breathe, I was sobbing on the floor.

Sara was right there. She didn't miss a beat. She told me everything was going to be okay, and she grabbed my hand, pulled me into our bedroom, and laid me down in bed. She let me cry into her arms most of the night. Just a few hours before, I had let go of her hand under the weight of childish shame, and yet, she opened her arms up to me without a second thought. Sara always had that slight figure, her petite build. But laying there while she held me, I knew I was safe. She was so much stronger than everyone gave her credit for. It wasn't lost on me how little I deserved that selfless act of love, but she gave it so freely. Isn't that what you said real love was, mama? Love that isn't earned but freely given?

I knew in that moment, filled with tears and reopened wounds, that I was never going to let go again. I asked her to marry me a week later.

You never knew this, but when we were planning the wedding things got bad for a while. I was angry all the time. I would snap at her about little things. I took everything out on her, and she tried to be patient with me, but she was just a person. There's only so much a person can take.

I almost lost her, mama. It came real close. It was about three months into the engagement. She asked me if I had finalized my guest list, and I just snapped. I yelled at her about always breathing down my neck and always asking so much of me. I told her she was suffocating me. "This stupid fucking wedding is driving me insane," I screamed senselessly at the love of my life.

She was quiet through my whole rampage. She stared me down, an intensity in her eyes I didn't recognize, until I finally fell silent, and she said what I knew she'd been holding in for weeks.

“I’m sorry that this is hard for you, really I am. But I gotta tell you, you are scaring the hell out of me. This isn’t supposed to be some ‘stupid fucking wedding,’ this is supposed to be the start of our lives together. I love you, but if you’re so lost in your internalized bullshit, that you can’t be here for this, I mean really be here, then let me promise you, I won’t stand here and watch you self-destruct,” and then she walked out the door.

I wasn’t sure she was ever coming back. I wasn’t sure I had a fiancée anymore. But I knew she was right. I knew something needed to change. I thought that I had put the past behind me. I thought that I was strong enough to move forward, but that’s not what I was doing. I was straddling the divide between the lies I’d grown comfortable with and the truth I claimed I was proud of. Nobody is strong enough to live in that space. Eventually, the pressure of it all was going to break me, and I would have neither lies nor truth to fall back on.

And that’s when I called you. That’s when I asked you not to come to my wedding.

Mama, I need you to know that I loved you in that moment as much as I’ve ever loved you. I didn’t tell you not to come out of spite or anger or even hurt. I wanted you in my life, I always did. I just didn’t want anybody at my wedding who couldn’t be 100% behind my marriage, and that included me. I couldn’t see you there, knowing that the tears on your face weren’t of joy but of sorrow, and be confident in the love I was choosing. You have no idea how sorry I was then, and how sorry I am now. I wish it was different, mama. Honestly, I do. I just wanted to do things right. I wanted to do right by her.

It is one of the greatest joys of my life that our story didn’t end there. I will forever be thankful that you were willing to try to unbreak the ties between us. I didn’t think it was possible.

After the wedding we were further apart than ever before. I couldn't imagine how we could bridge that gap.

I think there were two factors that made it possible. First, that I was sure about my life. I wasn't feigning confidence anymore. I was proud of the life I was living. I was proud of my wife. I was proud of myself. I finally gave myself permission to love myself and the pieces of me that you couldn't accept. I never thought I could love us both, but I guess sometimes love can be a contradiction. I had to be proud of the life I chose, proud enough to fight for you to be a part of it.

Second, and I think most importantly, the birth of Adela. Mama, you were the best grandmother. The second you meant Adela I could feel the way things changed. You were standing there in the hospital room, and Sara was lying on the cot with our baby in her arms. I was standing across from you, looking at you, look at them. For the first time in a long time, I saw in your eyes the same fierce love and overwhelming joy that you gave to me growing up.

Everything shifted in that moment. For years I thought the only reconciliation we could know would mean one of us changing our minds, submitting completely to the other's beliefs. That's just not what happened. You still had beliefs, and I still had mine, but we were willing to love each other in spite of that. I saw the way you loved me, and you loved my family. I can't begin to tell you how much that meant to me.

I think when people die, we put this pressure on ourselves to remember them perfectly, rose-colored glasses, I guess. When we lost you, I didn't handle it well. You lived a long life, but we spent so much of it wrapped up in this fight against reality. After your funeral, I was lost. I knew I loved you and the part you played in my life those later years. But I also refused to erase the past. I still don't quite know how to reconcile how far we've come with the ugliness of where this all started. I let the guilt of those broken memories consume me.

Sara convinced me to see a therapist. As usual, she was right. I needed it. Dr. Carlson suggested I write this letter. There were things I needed you to hear, and I didn't know how to say them so that you would listen. I hope you're listening now.

I don't want to pretend that things were easy, or that everything that happened between us was okay, because it wasn't. I don't want to give our story up to any more lies. We both made a mess of those years. We both gave in to fear so many times that we lost ourselves to it. Even after we reconciled it was hard. Sometimes it felt impossible. There was still fighting and tears, and there were nights when I went to bed in agony over the hurt between us. But there was also the deepest, most selfless love, a love that we woke up every morning and chose to fight for. And mama, that's the love I remember you by. That's who you are to me.

I miss you. I miss the constant surprise visits, when you'd show up at our house out of the blue without any warning. I miss how you laughed with Adela and spoiled her rotten when you thought Sara and I weren't looking. I miss the way that you told me you'd pray for me every time we said goodbye, not because I was some lost lamb, but because you wanted to see me, my wife, and my daughter happy. I need you to know that even though our past was messy, when I think of who you were, or what I'll tell Adela when she asks me about her grandmother, I think of the strong and loving mother, who after everything, after all these years, chose me, and let me choose her too.

I love you, mama. Always.

Bad Faith

She lies slowly,
her words hanging in air
long enough for the molecules
to putrefy, suspended in space.

She lets herself fragment,
And hopes that her pieces
might be small enough to lose—
To hide like dirt in pavement cracks.

She swallows opposition,
so quickly she cannot hear
the screams plunging her throat.
Her own screams. Her own voice.

She will be deaf.
She will be dirt.
She will be rot.
But she will not let herself be.

And she will be pretend it was the life *she* chose.
Pretend not to remember the lies you fed her
that she could never spit out.

-Mackenna Elizabeth

Smoke Stains
A short story by Mackenna Elizabeth

When it comes to the story of my life, I am my own unreliable narrator. Every thought, every belief, every memory that flutters through my mind is something that I can't trust. The more I think about it, the more I examine myself, the more I feel my existence begin to fragment, and nothing feels stable anymore. A teacher of mine once told me that we are our own only constants. She said that people come and go, relationships shift and change, situations evolve over time, but we keep ourselves. The only thing we can truly count on in life is our own company. I think about that, and then I think about how trying to understand myself is like grasping at sand that's constantly slipping through my fingers, and I realize that the one thing that's supposed to remain constant in my life, the one thing that I'm supposed to be able to count on is completely and utterly unstable.

I'm afraid to write this story, but I need to write it. My hope is that if I can treat myself like any other character, if I can dig into my past like it's any other story, then I can sort out what's real and what's a product of the lies he told me. If I can chip away at the layers of false realities that I have been a slave to, then maybe I can make something stable out of the constantly shifting mess that is my own identity. I want that. More than anything, I want that constant. And yet, I am terrified that in the end, I will blow away the dust and find that I am exactly who he said I was, just hidden away under layers of fabricated trauma. I am so scared, that he was right. Still, I have to believe that knowing something so terrible would be better than knowing nothing at all.

I could start from the beginning. I could tell you about my relatively normal childhood, about growing up in the epicenter of upper-middle class suburbia. I could bore you with all that

exposition, but that's not really where the story starts. It started with him. It started with Jack. But even then, the beginning felt so normal. Looking back, those first few months seem like a lighthearted prologue to a much darker book.

We met in our freshman year of high school. We were like any other young couple. I was smitten. I wrote our names together on my notebooks, *Jack and Alyssa*, and marveled at how perfectly they went together. He put his arm around me protectively in the hallways, and it felt good to have someone to lean on. He was so different then. Digging through my memory it's hard to reconcile the two versions of him that I hold in my mind. In those early days, all I could see of him was his lopsided dimples, and the way he cracked his knuckles when he was nervous. I couldn't see past the tan skin and the sweet way he smiled at me like every young naïve girl wants to be smiled at, the way the left side of his mouth always curved up higher than the right and it made his whole face seem softer. He was something out of a dream when we met. I think that made it easier to ignore the obvious faults. He always had a bit of a short temper, and he smoked cigarettes he stole from his parents and his older brother. Still, those things didn't matter to me. I was blind. But when you're fourteen you're allowed to fall with eyes shut and fingers crossed just because you've never fallen before, right? And he really was sweet in the beginning. But maybe that's just my way of justifying my own naivety.

But the relationship changed, so slowly I don't think I knew it was happening. Or maybe I didn't want to know. But either way, it changed.

"Let me see your phone," he asked, although, I don't think it really was a question as much as a command. We were sitting in his basement. It was one of those nice, finished basements that looked more like a living room than anything. I remember I looked at him funny, but I was still smiling.

“What? Why?” I asked, but I was already handing it over. I never considered that anything would really come of it. I had nothing to hide. That’s something I remind myself often: I handed my phone to him willingly. He didn’t force me to give it to him or steal it when I left the room. I gave him permission to look. Maybe, in so doing, I sent out an open invitation for everything that came next. Maybe I asked for it. Even now, I have to wonder what I did to requisite his lack of trust in the first place. I wonder, why did he feel he had to look at all?

“I just want to see it.” He pressed the home button on my phone and typed in the password. My eyes widened minutely as he pressed in the four-digit code without thinking on it for even a second. I had never told him the password. I wondered briefly when he had watched me type it in. I wondered how long ago he had committed it to memory. But still, I didn’t worry. He was my perfect boyfriend. Some subconscious part of me chose not to see that red flag.

“Who’s Aaron?” he asked flatly. I looked at his face and saw that his smile had disappeared. There was no lopsided grin. No lone dimple. No light in his eyes, save the reflection of my LED phone screen.

I felt the heat rise into my cheeks. I hadn’t thought about those messages, waiting to be found. I hadn’t thought about how he would perceive them. I should have thought about what it would look like to Jack. “He’s just a friend,” I said. And it was the truth. Even so, I felt guilt start to bubble up in my chest. Maybe that guilt was damming enough.

“Then why are you blushing?” His voice was sharper than I could ever remember it being. We had never fought before.

“I don’t know.” I mumbled the words under my breath, I could only tell he had heard them by the way the blank look on his face turned to one of disgust. I should have told him how I was caught off guard by the accusation, how I wasn’t guilty I was just surprised. I should have

done something, anything to explain away the redness in my cheeks. But I didn't offer a single word in my defense.

"I think you should go," he looked away, and held out my phone for me to take. His words were like slabs of ice dropped into my gut, and I flinched away from the hurt in his eyes.

"What?" I asked, my voice shaking. "Jack, why?" but he just shook his head. He wouldn't look at me. He wouldn't meet my pleading eyes, but I could see the tears beginning to roll down his cheeks though he tried to hide them and I shifted into panic mode.

I did that, I thought to myself. I hurt him. I'm the reason he's crying. It's hard to describe the way the fear tasted, overcoming me for the first time. I couldn't believe I would be the one to hurt him like that. It was bitter and nauseating and too much to handle. I wanted to wash the feeling away. I wanted to scrub the taste from my tongue but I didn't know how and so, I fell into the only solid thing I could reach—Jack.

"Please I'll delete his number. Look, just look." And I did. Without pausing for a second to question why, I erased those messages, and then I erased his number.

Aaron was my best friend then. We lived next to each other growing up and we were inseparable until he moved with his family to a city a few hours away. We promised we could keep in touch, and for a while we did. He was there for years before I met Jack. Almost all of my memories were tied to him. And I erased him, at least symbolically, for the crying boy in front of me. I still don't know if I did it out of love or shame.

"Please, forgive me," I begged as Jack held on to his silence. "I'm so sorry, baby." And suddenly I was sobbing. I hated myself for giving him a reason to look at me with anything but love. I hid my face in my hands, unable to control the sobs rising in my chest.

And then his arms were around me. I looked up, shocked by his gesture. I was the villain in this scene, the one who had made him cry, given him a reason not to want me anymore. I was the one who should have been comforting him. And there he was, pulling me into his chest. I swallowed his smoky scent in gasps between my crashing sobs. "It's okay," he whispered, as he pressed his lips against my head. "It's okay. I forgive you."

Something shifted in our relationship in that moment, in that show of *grace*. I was sure I didn't deserve his forgiveness. I don't know why, and I don't think I realized it in the moment, but after that I felt indebted to him, somehow. Even now, I can't understand how he convinced me so quickly to condemn my actions, actions I had thought were entirely benign just moments before. I don't know when I gave him that power over me but I did. We stopped being equals. From that moment on it seemed that I was the sinner, and he was my grace-giving savior.

Everything sort of snowballed from there. Jack went through my phone more and more. He would tell me if he thought that someone who I was talking to wasn't good for me. "She's just jealous," he said when one of the girls in my choir class asked if I was happy with Jack. I dropped out of an ensemble she was part of to make him happy. "He's just trying to get into your pants," he insisted when my lab partner kept texting me day after day asking for notes. I failed a lab for refusing to work with him.

Jack was careful, though that might be sugar coating things. He saw everyone as a threat. I wonder all the time if I gave him reason to, if I was the one who was naïve and he was just looking out for us. All I know is that I burned a lot of bridges. He'd point out the threat, and we'd argue, but it always ended in me deleting their numbers and trying to forget that the issue

ever came up. He was so protective over me. He said he just wanted to keep me safe and to keep us together. But I couldn't help the growing feeling of suffocation. I was losing so many people.

I learned pretty quickly that loving Jack, choosing him, meant swallowing my objections more often than I would have liked. The longer we were together, the more times I stifled my voice to save him tears, the smaller I felt. Still, I was the one who chose to delete their numbers. I chose to give in. He nudged me in the right direction with carefully leveled accusations and tears when words failed, but he never actually made the choice for me. I can't pretend I didn't have agency.

But it wasn't just my phone I gave him control over. I remember one day, a few months into our relationship, I was walking into school to meet him. He rode the bus most mornings, and I rode to school with my older brother. Even though he always got to school before me, he would wait every morning by the front office until I got there. Even when my brother was running behind and waiting for me made Jack late for class, he would always be there when I walked in the door. No matter what. He was sweet like that. I couldn't deny that much. He just wanted to walk through the halls holding my hand, so everyone knew that I was his.

On the morning I'm thinking about, though, we were running ahead of schedule. It was towards the end of the school year, the end of April, I think. I was smiling when I walked in the door to see him standing there, but I watched as his face fell as soon as he saw me. My heart caught in my chest. I knew that look of disappointment.

"What are you wearing?" He wouldn't look me in the eyes. His gaze was glued to the white t-shirt I was wearing. It had been one of my favorites for so long. It was just a plain white shirt, but it was comfortable and reliable. I loved that shirt. I couldn't imagine why he had a problem with it. I looked up at him with confusion written plainly across my face. I didn't

answer his question. I didn't know how. "It's practically fucking see-through. What kind of a message do you think that sends?" Each word came out louder than the last, and I could see what looked like revulsion in his eyes. I drew my arms across my chest to hide myself from his heavy glare.

The hallways were bustling around us and I was all too mindful of the stares from passersby that we were beginning to attract. I crossed my arms tighter against my chest. Shame burned crimson on my cheeks. What would it say about me, if they knew that the boy that was supposed to love me was repulsed by what he saw? More than anything, I wanted to disappear.

"I'm sorry," I said quietly as I took a step closer to Jack. I just didn't want to cause a scene anymore. "I didn't mean to." The words came quiet and quick. I was used to the capitulation. I was used to damage control.

Jack rolled his eyes and swung his backpack off his shoulder. "It's fine," he grumbled, and he pulled out a crumpled sweatshirt from the bottom his bag. "Just put this on," he said, shoving it into my arms just a little too hard, but I managed not to lose my balance. I didn't mention that it was almost eighty degrees outside or that the sweatshirt smelled more like cigarette smoke than I had ever remembered him smelling, or that my lungs contracted at the scent. I didn't raise a single objection. I submissively pulled the black, oversized sweatshirt over my tiny frame and offered him the most genuine smile I could muster. I couldn't help but feel relieved to see the half smile he gave me in return.

That day in class all my friends fawned over how cute it was that he gave me the sweatshirt, and I laughed and agreed with them. That night at home I threw away my favorite t-shirt, and I cried over the kind of girl he must have thought I was to love such a skimpy piece of clothing that much in the first place.

I gave myself too much credit. I thought I would be stronger than I was. I thought I was capable of maintaining what Jack and I were. But I wasn't.

It wasn't too long into the following summer; we had been dating just over five months, and I realized that I didn't find his lopsided smile endearing anymore, and the clouds of smoke that hung around him more and more often became too much to tolerate. I realized that I missed my childhood best friend and my worn white t-shirt. I was fourteen. Fourteen-year-olds should be allowed to change their minds. Shouldn't they?

Deciding to breakup with him was one of the hardest choices I had ever had to make. I wrestled with it night after night. I remembered how badly it stung to see him cry, how much I agonized over causing him pain. It's a special kind of torment, the end of a first "love."

I knew that. But I wasn't prepared for the way it all unfolded.

It was a Saturday morning. I had my mother drop me off at his house, since we were both too young to drive. I knocked on his door and tried to plaster on my best fake smile, but I had always been a terrible liar. He knew something was wrong the moment he saw me standing there on his doorstep.

"What's wrong?" His voice was flat, but I saw the anxiety behind his eyes. I stood there for a moment. Silent. The whole speech I'd planned in my bathroom mirror was gone from my mind.

Jack had always been impatient. He waited only a few seconds before grabbing my upper arm and pulling me harshly inside. There was no one in his living room and he moved us quickly down the hallway into his first-floor bedroom. He waited until he heard the door click shut behind him to let me go. I fought back the urge to rub a hand over the spots where his fingers

dug into my skin. Later that night I would look at the bruises that formed there and worry about what my mom would think if she saw them, how she would we look at me if she knew, but I wasn't worried about that in the moment. The intensity of his stare didn't give me room to worry about much else.

“Jesus Christ, Alyssa!” he yelled at me. I took a step back and hit a wall. His bedroom was too small. There was nowhere for me to hide. “Tell me what is wrong.” He over enunciated each word, and the sharpness in his tone made me cry, not just because I was afraid, but because I could feel the fear and vulnerability beneath his anger, and I hated myself for provoking it.

“I think we should break up,” the words came out fast and whispered.

I had been afraid of him before, but not like I was in that moment. I wrote earlier that Jack had a temper. I'd seen him get into fights with his older brother. I'd seen him push kids around in the school parking lot, though he never would tell me why. I'd seen how strong he is. I knew what his hands were capable of. So, watching him clench and unclench his fists as he stood in front of me in that too small bedroom, I tasted a fear I had only known in nightmares.

My eyes were glued to the floor. I squeezed them shut instinctually, scared of what it was he might do. But no blow came. Instead, I heard a soft thud followed by broken sobs. I opened my eyes to see him lying on his bedroom floor, face down, with his hands clenched in his light brown hair.

I had seen him cry before, but they had always been silent, stoic tears. They always seemed like they had slipped out without his permission, betraying the pain he felt. They were painful to watch, but they were nothing like the tears he cried in that moment. These were the kind of tears that rocked through the body. The ugly kind of tears that wouldn't let you care who saw. These didn't just hurt to see. These tears broke me.

After the initial shock wore off, I dropped to my knees to comfort him, though I didn't know how. What right did I have to console him when I was the one who broke him? I placed a hand tentatively on his shoulder, and he shocked me by immediately reaching back to grab it and press my palm against his cheek. I'm not sure anymore if the gesture was for his own comfort, or to ensure I felt wetness on his face from all the tears I made fall.

"Please..." He cried out. It was the smallest he ever sounded. I had been ready for him to be angry, to fight. I had expected him to argue or yell. I didn't expect him to look so weak, so shattered. "Don't go. I need you. Alyssa, I need you." I didn't say anything. I couldn't say anything, but his words kept pouring out. "I can't do this without you. I can't live without you. If you leave, I'll die. I mean it. I'll die." I swear my heart stopped when he said those words, if only for a moment. "I'll kill myself if I lose you."

His last words were the softest, so soft I tried to convince myself I hadn't heard them at all. But I knew what I heard. *I'm killing him.* I couldn't silence that voice in my head. *I'm not just hurting him, I'm killing him.* The whole room started to spin. Maybe I shouldn't have believed him. Maybe I should have seen it as an empty threat. But it was more real to me in that moment than I have ever been strong enough to bear.

I was just a kid. I was terrified. I didn't want to be the kind of person who returned love with pain, better yet a death sentence. I did what any scared kid would have done, I think. I took it all back.

"It's okay," I said, trying to pull him into my chest. "I'm not going anywhere. I'm right here." I tried to sound reassuring but my voice shook. "I'm so sorry. I love you."

And I really wanted to mean it.

When I was growing up, I thought of my story like a fairy tale. I thought I would meet a prince and I would get my happily ever after. The thing is, after living the way I did for so long, I realized I didn't get to be the princess in this story. Every time something went wrong Jack made it clear that it was my fault, and I couldn't ignore what I had become. Even as I look back, I find it hard not to see myself in that same broken light. I wasn't the protagonist anymore, but the antagonist. I learned to see myself as someone with a fractured sense of humanity, an inherent capacity to break everything she touched. He taught me that. Always the bad guy. I still find it hard to trust the account of a villain.

It's hard to explain with any degree of accuracy how much the years blurred together after that. That's right, years. We fell into a sick cycle that dragged all through high school. Every few months I would conclude that we shouldn't be together anymore, citing different reasons every time. They almost always revolved around the same thing, though. I was bad for him. I really believed that. Every time he told me that my clothes were too provocative, or that I was too friendly with other guys, I would watch the way he looked at me with tears in his eyes and know that I had become that thing that caused his pain.

I started to shut down. It was too heavy a burden to carry, the constant awareness that I was the villain in my own story. I didn't want to feel anymore, so I did whatever I could to stay numb. I picked up smoking with Jack. He had offered me the choice dozens of times before. He would blow the smoke into my hair when I wasn't looking at him and ask if I wanted one. It disgusted me, until out of the blue I said yes. It made me sick the first time, but I liked that it burned. I liked that it seemed to make Jack happy. I think it made him feel better, that we had that one thing in common, an addiction that tied us together. Maybe he thought that addiction would keep me coming back.

When my mom smelled the smoke on my breath, she lost her mind. She had gotten used to smelling it on my clothes, although she always protested. But this was too much. I yelled at her about how I was an adult and I could do whatever the hell I wanted, even though we both knew I was a far cry from adulthood. I pushed her as much as I could, the way that evil things do, and she would ground me over and over again. It was so much easier that way. I always had an excuse not to see him if I needed one. Even so, he would convince me to sneak out in the middle of the night to meet him in his car. We would fill the small space with smoke, and steam, and lust. And I would feel nothing. I would come home each morning before the sun rose with bruises left by hungry hands and fire in my lungs, and I would be just as empty as before.

I'm telling you it was no way to live. It wasn't really living at all. I need you to understand how awful it was to exist in that haze of anesthetic apathy. I need you to understand why I did what I did next.

When a person's drowning, they fight. They can't repress the instinct to gasp for air that isn't there, or to try to reach the surface. I spent all of high school underwater, and Aaron was my gasp for air.

I reached out to Aaron my senior year. He was a year older than me and off at college. I don't know what compelled me to get in touch with him again. It had been years since I'd erased him from my life for Jack's sake, and if I'm being honest, I hadn't thought about him for at least a year before I made the choice to seek him out again. I found him on Facebook and messaged his profile. I was genuinely surprised that he responded at all after the way I disappeared. But he was so nice, and he almost felt safe. He told me he missed me, and that he thought about me

from time to time. It's funny how desperate people can be to attach themselves to another when we're drowning in our own brokenness.

I hid him from Jack. He still went through my phone whenever he saw me, so I changed Aaron's name to the name of a girl from my math class that I had mentioned to Jack a few times before. I figured seeing her name wouldn't raise suspicion. I probably should have felt bad about lying to him. Maybe there was something broken in me on a fundamental level that made guilt more and more elusive. Maybe it was just hard to feel bad for doing what he had always expected of me.

Aaron told me he was coming into town for a few days and he wanted to see me. I told him that my mom never let me out of the house and that Jack would be upset if I spent time with him, but he was persistent. If I'm being entirely truthful, I didn't put up much of a fight. Eventually I told him I could see him, but only after midnight, when my parents were asleep, and I had convinced Jack I was asleep too. We made plans that he would pick me up three houses down from mine, and I waited by my phone for his text that he was there. I was excited for the first time in a long time, and some small part of me that I couldn't quite silence hated me for it. Even so, I jumped up the second my phone pinged, and crept out my back door.

His beat-up red Corolla was sitting right where he said it would be. I was nervous as I walked up and pulled the door open. I was suddenly very aware that I hadn't seen this boy in almost four years, and he had become all but a stranger to me. Still, I slid into the seat beside him without hesitating.

I looked at him in the warm glow of the car's overhead lights. He looked almost the same as I remembered him, but there were subtle, unsettling differences, like the way a person's face looks when you see them in a dream and your subconscious warps their features ever so slightly.

I couldn't reconcile the baby-faced boy I remembered with the man sitting in front of me now. His jaw was too sharp, not as rounded as I thought it should have been. Even sitting down, I could tell how much wider his frame was. I focused in on his green eyes with flecks of brown scattered through. They were exactly the same. His auburn hair was grown out just a bit and was wavier than I remembered. There was a thin layer of stubble across his face and neck that was so different from the boy in my memory. Still, his smile was comforting.

"Hey," he said. He sounded nervous, the way people do on first dates or right before they make a mistake that they know they shouldn't make. I was pretty sure we were sitting at the intersection of those two moments, so his nerves didn't seem out of place.

"Hey," I responded. I knew I sounded just the same.

We didn't talk much other than that. We didn't have much to say. It felt wrong to try to fill the space between us with pleasantries and small talk. The silence felt more honest. We both knew what we were doing.

We pulled into a clearing off a back road that I knew from similar nighttime ventures. He turned off his car and shut off the headlights but flipped on one of the overhead lights so we weren't in complete darkness. There was a strange energy between us. The air prickled, like it's supposed to just before lightning strikes. The tension was there and strong, and yet neither of us moved. For the first time that night it felt awkward between us, like neither of us had actually thought the moment through this far.

He laughed, breaking the silence between us. I raised an eyebrow in his direction, not sure what it was he found funny. "I gotta tell you," he started, his voice low, "the Alyssa I remember would never do a thing like this."

I smiled, but I couldn't return his laughter. I guess I didn't find the change so amusing.

"Well, I gotta tell you," I retorted, "I'm not that Alyssa anymore."

His eyes widened slightly, almost imperceptibly. "Oh, yeah? And who is this new Alyssa?"

I heard the challenge beneath his question. I sat there for a moment contemplating an answer. Then quickly, and clumsily, before I could talk myself out of it, I pulled myself over to where he sat on the driver's side, so that my knees rested on either side of his thighs. I knotted my fingers into his hair and pulled his head back gently so his eyes met mine. "The Alyssa that'll ruin you." I didn't smile or look away. It wasn't a line or a comeback. It wasn't a strange attempt at seduction. It was the truth.

"Is that so?" Aaron smiled up at me, and his breath smelled like spearmint, with no hint of ash or tar on its tail. I nodded shortly in response. "Well, I might just let you."

My childhood best friend tasted like self-loathing and vice, but his touch was soft and he left no marks.

I wanted to feel different after Aaron. I didn't care if I felt better or worse, I just wanted different, but nothing changed.

Jack picked me up for school the morning after, like he always did. I sat in the passenger seat and lit a morning cigarette, like I always did. He walked me to class and found me in the halls, just like every other day. I kept waiting for the remorse to hit, but it didn't. I was numb, just like always.

Of course, I should have known the storm would come. I might have thought it would have taken a little longer than it did, but still, I should have expected it. When it comes down to it, it was all just bad timing.

We were sitting in Jack's car in the school parking lot, neither of us in a hurry to get home. He had my phone in his hand. He didn't ask for it anymore. He just picked it up and started looking. I was used to it, so I wasn't worried. I had all the messages from Aaron hidden under the fake name, and Jack had never cared enough to read them before. I felt safe in my deceit. That is, until I heard my phone ping, like a modern-day alarm bell going off too late.

"What the fuck is this?" He went from silence to screaming without missing a bit. I jumped in shock and felt fear flood into my veins stronger than it ever had before. He was looking at me with his eyes wider than I had ever seen them and his jaw clenched shut so tightly his whole head was shaking. "Why does *Ana* want to know if you can talk about 'what happened last night?'"

I stayed silent, shaking in my seat. I had never seen him so angry and hurt all at once. The adrenaline coursing through veins broke through the frost of anesthetic ice that left me numb. I felt the guilt. I felt the shame. And most of all I felt terrified. I was all but paralyzed as I watched him scroll through the conversation, realizing then I should have deleted the messages when I had the chance. As he read back through the texts, I saw the bewilderment turn to understanding on his face, never once losing the intense fury beneath it all.

In a swift and sudden movement, he threw my phone out the open car window. I heard it shatter on the pavement, but it was the least of my concerns. He was staring at me now with a look I'd never seen before. It was pure fire. I had never been so afraid of him.

“Aaron?” He wasn’t screaming anymore. His voice was hushed and yet somehow more forceful, more lethal. “The guy you promised me years ago you would never talk to again?” Through all my terror, some part of me managed to still be surprised that he remembered that far back.

Jack opened his mouth to speak again, but he choked on the words. I saw the rock-hard exterior begin to falter, to reveal the weakness within. He turned away from me as tears spilled over onto his cheeks. He always cried. I wonder now if he cried because he knew what it did to me. Familiar feelings of self-hatred and disgust rose up in my gut, and I felt my own eyes fill with tears. I was still shaking, filled with fear of his next move. You never could tell what Jack was thinking. It was impossible to know if he would lash out or break down. It was difficult to say which one hurt more.

“You cheated on me.” It wasn’t a question. He already knew.

I answered anyway. “Yes.” I was surprised by how clear my voice was, even as tears fell down my face. I wanted him to know. Maybe then, he would leave, and this would be over. I was startled by the realization.

He looked at me with a confused expression. He couldn’t understand the sudden shift in my demeanor. I don’t think I could really understand it either.

“Yes?” He teetered on the edge of anger and sadness. “Is that all you have to say for yourself?” I stared ahead at him. There was nothing more I could say. We were at an impasse, and all I could do was wait for his next move. He stared at me without speaking for a while. It wasn’t like him to not know what to say. He always had something to throw at me. The silence stretched out between us to fill a space that felt intimate. It could have been seconds, or minutes, or hours. I don’t think I would have been able to tell the difference.

“Damn it, Alyssa just-” he finally spoke, breaking off in the middle of his sentence, “You can’t see him, or talk to him, or fucking think about him again. And then maybe we can work past this.”

I felt my heart deflate. I realized in that moment that nothing I did would make him want to relinquish his hold on me. I belonged to him. I was his most dangerous addiction, the one that hurt him the most, and he was never gonna quit. There was no end, as long as I kept coming back. All my life would ever amount to was this slowly escalating warfare that was killing us both.

“No.” I wouldn’t let that happen. I wouldn’t be the poison he couldn’t help but crave. “Jack, we can’t do this anymore.”

He looked at me and he seemed more shocked than anything. I watched different emotions pass behind his eyes in rapid succession as he tried to process what I just said. “What do you mean we can’t do this anymore?”

“I mean we can’t do this anymore,” I said, surprised by my own conviction. “I’m done.”

“Let me get this straight,” he half yelled, “*you* cheated on *me*, and now you’re the one who’s dumping me?”

It sounded wrong when he said it out loud. I should have been begging for forgiveness and desperately trying to make amends. Yet, the more I thought about the situation the surer I was.

“Yes,” I said. I wouldn’t back down this time. I couldn’t.

Jack shook his head, “No,” he said, “I won’t let that happen. No.”

“It’s not really up to you, Jack.” I wasn’t interested in watching the rest of the scene play out. I knew how it would go. I grabbed my bag and started to open the door when he called out, causing me to freeze in place.

“Stop. Alyssa, you know what’ll happen if you walk out that door. You know what that means.” I looked at him. He wasn’t crying anymore. There wasn’t sadness in his eyes, only desperation. I knew exactly what I was wagering. I heard the words in my head, *If I lose you, I’ll kill myself*. I knew the risk I was taking, and I took it anyway. No matter how many years pass, I can’t help but fear my willingness to take that chance.

I pushed open the door and walked away, leaving all his broken pieces in my wake.

It’s been three years since we broke up. A lot has changed since then, but a lot has stayed the same too. Jack and I ruined each other for four years before things finally came to an end. That kind of things leaves scars.

I knew I had this write this story a year ago. I was telling a friend from a writing workshop class I was taking in college about the relationship I had with Jack, about all the beliefs about myself I took out of it. I told her how I wasn’t meant for love. I told her that I was tailor made to fuck up lives. I told her how much pain I managed to cause. And she told me that I was wrong. She said it was abuse.

I had never thought about it that way. I was always the “bad guy” in the narrative. I never imagined myself as the victim of anything other than my own stupidity. I’ve tried to look back over it all in my memories, to separate what he wanted me to believe from what was real. Sometimes I’m sure I can’t be held accountable for what happened. Sometimes I’m positive that he was an abusive asshole that ruined my life.

Other times, I can't get rid of the voice in the back of my head that tells me I'm wrong. I can't ignore how much pain he was in. I can't ignore the fact that I made my own choices, and I chose wrong. I can't ignore that I left him sitting there in his car, not sure if he would survive my self-centered decision to walk away.

I believe in two separate versions of myself that can't coexist: the victim and the villain. I hoped that writing this story would change that, that if I put it down on paper it would be black and white, and easier to sort out fact from fiction. But I still don't know what's real.

Maybe some things never go away.

I quit smoking two years ago, a year after the breakup. I haven't touched a cigarette since. I threw out all my lighters and smashed my ashtray to pieces. There isn't a drop of nicotine flowing through my veins. I am no longer a slave to that addiction.

But everything I owned back then still smells like smoke. Every piece of clothing, all of my cushioned furniture, even the carpet in my old bedroom, hangs on to that memory. I can detox all I want, but the smoke follows me, because smoke stains.

I detoxed him from my life, too. I gave up the addiction. I threw it all out. But everything he said, everything he made me believe, every fear he programmed into me, sits like a stain on my bones and in my brain. I have spent years trying to scrub him from my life, and still—he is the smoke that follows me everywhere.

Burden of Grace

She wants to be seen,
to be touched, to be known
in the deepest sense of the word.
She needs to be told that she
is not worthy, that she must beg
for salvation. For she knows
she could never wash
herself clean—she is tired
of scrubbing until her knees
are raw, skin peeling back
to reveal a fresh hell. A fresh
canvas. A fresh target for the hungry
eyes of a savior. He will show her
all her foundations cracks,
all the weakness that she built
herself on. He will be the reminder
that she will never be enough.
He will be the silver blade
that breaks through paper skin.
And she will bleed out.
She walked into the temple.
She chose to kneel.
She died upon his altar—

But *“she asked for it.”*

-Mackenna Elizabeth