

I was in that place between a boy and a man when I lost Her. She was like light itself, and proved to be just as fleeting in the end. But how things end does not matter after the fact. People only care about how they started. This end started when I began attending college.

The summer after graduating senior year, a private arts college reached out to me. They had enough glitz and glamour in their advertising to pull a rural child like me in instantly. They had my attention, and soon they would have my money. McCormack's Polytechnical college was a small, single building estate tucked away in the corner of Silicon Valley, down a forgotten side street attached to the entrance of every major highway you'd need to go from San Francisco, to Oakland, all the way down to LA. It was an empty shell of land, stripped of pleasantries, down only to necessities. And sprouting from the ground large modernistic structures filled with dozens of people typing away at computers. With a tapping that was endless. Even now I can hear the tapping.

I was terrified, at the time unaware that ultimately no one knows what they're doing. I had never had the easiest time making friends, which in part explains why I grew so attached to Her. She was something real. Something tangible in a sea of faceless people. Her smile lit something deep in my core, while simultaneously breaking me. We were never without one another. It became common knowledge to the school.

Besides Her I spoke only to one other person. Davy was a technical art major, and very outgoing for one. He had a proper way of speaking on most occasions, which made his outbursts all the more surprising. The nonsense he would say mesmerized me enough to waste time on him. And he seemed to respect me. We shared the entirety of orientation day together, wading

through the hours of paperwork and psa's about safety and etiquette. We shared laughs over inappropriate jokes, pushing each other to find our limitations. We had none.

He would never speak to me now. I only just realized how much I miss his voice.

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Morning all started the same. Pale light hit my eyelids, forcing me to life and dragging me out of bed despite how I'd try to fight it. I'd put on whatever found its way into my hands and leave my apartment. It was a process that weighed heavily on my morale. Yet, the moment I thought about getting to school and getting to see Her, everything I felt no longer mattered. She was the only thought in my head.

The path to school was fairly unremarkable. There was a large concrete building covered in graffiti standing just across the intersection from my high end complex, a sight that had some admittedly beautiful contrast. In fact, after crossing the intersection you'd be met with a rusted metal awning over weathered farm equipment sitting right on the edge of an orange orchard that would stretch all the way to the other apartment community down the road. The street itself was two sided , cars going in either direction. And on the other side of it was simply dirt and a tarped chain link fence. No sidewalk or path lay on that side. Only a fence blocking off all sight from the other side, with a line of tall metal power lines running down the whole length of the road. They were monolithic.

My first year was spent mulling over my career path, for which I was ill prepared, with the other side of that street eating slowly at the back of my mind. I could make out the tops of buildings that held a more monastery-like quality to them, with pale clay shingles and sun dried

cream walls. And from the right angle I could see a large tower deeper within the area, but only as a silhouette. It loomed over the scene.

I often found myself staring into it.

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She and I met my first day at McCormack's. We were both freshman, both majoring in digital art and design. She was a painter. And she was beautiful. She had long brown hair that fell well past her spine. Her eyes were two dark wells, sunken and glimmering. She had curves up and down her whole body, and skin as pale as snow. We caught each other's eye and I swear to this day her stare engulfed the next hour of my life. I can't recall anything else that happened within that time. From that moment we were never apart. She found humor in my words. I, on the other hand, was simply not used to a person like her paying me any mind. It was no wonder I latched on so fervently. In the first months it was a simple infatuation. But there was a growing intensity to Her that was infectious, and I found myself meeting her halfway. This created distance between us and the other students, who harboured discomfort in our presence. We would press our heads against one another and just stare. No matter who would try and speak to us, we would be unflinchingly focused on one another. Sitting on the couches in the library room, I would run my hand up and down the center of her body, mindlessly. It's as if it was looking for something all its own. I would often imagine myself reaching inside of her, and pulling out what I wanted.

Davy was walking to school with me one day towards the end of the year. It was overcast, and the world had become monotone. She was sick that day and wasn't going to be at school.

“You got so many options man. Your whole life ahead of you. Why settle on one person so soon?” Davy asked, kicking a stone along with him as we walked. It tapped against the ground rhythmically.

I looked at him with the corner of my eye and smirked, at which he sighed and shook his head.

“Well, at the very least I’m calling too much PDA, man. You two are freakin’ everyone out. Freakin’ me out too, to be honest,” he began again. The tapping got louder. It rattled in my ears. Davy pressed the matter further, but the rock at his feet was making it impossible to focus. The tapping was piercing through my skull. I looked away from him, and out across the street. Davy was a muffled voice in the back of my head. I stared over the fence that lay on the other side. I looked up at the buildings, my eyes tracing every bump and shingle on every roof until finally landing on that silhouette. That tower that sat past the monasteries, looming over us like a monolith. Scraping the sky. Scraping my eardrums. I felt Davy tapping against me. I muttered something out of the corner of my mouth, but it was dim against the tapping. I was suddenly spun around.

“Dude, out the road man!” Davy’s voice came back into focus. I eyed him, suddenly feeling nauseous. I asked him why he was tapping that rock so loudly.

“Bruh, I tossed that thing aside like ten minutes ago, what tapping?” Davy looked at me, puzzled. He put the back of his hand on my forehead, then, shaking his head, pulled me back onto the sidewalk. I had begun walking into the street.

We stood there looking at each other for a moment. I cracked a smile for his sake, and Davy let out an exasperated sigh and placed a hand on my cheek, smiling as he patted it. He

turned and kept going, commenting on me frequently contributing to our tardiness. I looked after him with a smile, but noticed my nose dampening quickly. I ran the back of my hand along my nostrils, smearing a trail of dark blood across it. I looked at it, still as stone for a moment. I then wiped my nostrils one more time before shoving both my hands into my pockets before Davy could see.

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She and I spent our first night together during the summer sessions. I had never wanted that from Her, at least not from what I could understand of myself. We had only ever shared kisses with each other, and I had no intention of pressing Her further. That night felt different somehow. Perhaps it was the food She had prepared for us, the intimacy of curling next to each other listening to music. I had mentioned that place beyond the chain link fence to Her. Her head perked up from my chest as we had begun sinking lower and lower across my couch. She smiled.

“Oh, you haven't heard. That's surprising, you're normally telling me everything,” she laughed. She could always find something about me to laugh about. In a way, that almost hurt.

I asked Her what it was. How it seemed so out of place. She closed her eyes and sunk Her face into my chest. I quivered, feeling Her lips through my shirt. She opened Her mouth, Her warm breath hitting me. My heart was in a flurry as She spoke.

“It's closed down now. But it was an asylum,” she stated, running Her hands on my chest. I looked down at the top of Her head. I was completely flat on the couch at this point.

It was as if she could see my eyes questioning Her, because she hummed with a smile and continued.

“I know. It’s an odd place to have that. Right in the tech capital of the USA. Even stranger that they built this industry around that place. It was there long before that Samsung building,” she explained this in a drawl, stretching Her words with every pass of Her hands. She then stopped Her hand at my chest, tapping it in time with my heart beats, which were getting progressively faster. She looked up at me.

I swallowed and cracked a smirk. I leaned forward and kissed Her on the head, telling Her that was a creepy thing to find out, having to pass by there everyday. She continued tapping and I failed to notice my hands fidgeting. Her eyes got big as I said this and, pushing up against me, she slid to be eye level. I looked up at Her, and she smiled down. She continued tapping.

“I actually really like it. It’s a good word, asylum. People always attach negative things to it, because it’s a place where ill people go. But they forget that’s where those people go to get better. You know, asylum means shelter. That’s why you can offer it,” she hummed.

“And seek it”

Her words poured over me, I could almost feel them weighing my body down. I can remember that it was at this exact moment when my breaths quickened to a panicked state. I had my teeth gritted, and could hear them grinding against one another as her tapping pulsed inside my whole body. And I wanted Her. Oh what I wanted from Her.

I was shocked when I noticed my hands, one on Her throat, and the other halfway in her shorts. I was sweating profusely and felt ice cold inside and out. I looked down to the rest of our bodies, and then forward again, meeting her eyes with mine. She was still smiling.

She assured me there was nothing wrong. That people always want something from Her. Even me. It was only natural. It was nothing to be ashamed of. As I loosened my grip, I felt Her reach down and grab my genitals. She bent low and whispered in my ear.

“Everyone looks for shelter somewhere. After all, you only want to feel better.”

To this day, I can never remember what happened after that. I only recall the next morning. Standing in front of the mirror in my bathroom, my head light and swimy. My body feeling loose and unnaturally relaxed as if under an anesthetic. A grin stuck to my face. And there was dried blood on my nose.

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Year two was when it happened to Her. Or maybe year four was when it happened to Her. I don't know anymore.

I had begun spending increasingly more time with Her and increasingly less time with Davy. He and I would catch each other in the halls, but our schedules didn't sync up like they had during our first year, so our interactions were semi-frequent, but always brief. We often had time to note how our days were going, and little else. Davy's face had almost softened around this time. He was no longer boisterous around me. Instead he was extremely focused, and seemed to really hang onto every word I would tell him. His smiles seemed pained. At the time I didn't feel responsible for checking on him. Our talks were just helping break up the monotony of the day. Even if it was hard to hear him through the tapping in my ears.

She and I had become extremely serious. People looked at us differently, as if what we had done was written on my face. She said it was, and laughed. She made me feel bad in the strangest ways.

Whenever we were alone, and even some moments when we weren't, she would press every piece of herself against me, grinding me down to my core. I was not the type of person to condone this type of behavior in public, and even the extent to which we would go in private. I'm not sure what had gotten into me. I simply don't remember thinking about any of it. Perhaps it was that state of mind, that absence of thought, that I was so infatuated by. I would do anything she wanted me to, to Her or otherwise.

One day Davy stopped me as I passed through the library and asked me how it was going with me and Her. He seemed concerned about something, and kept pressing me on it further than I would let him go, but did so in an indirect way. Davy would ask about how she was feeling. How I felt about Her. What we did for fun. After multiple failed attempts to redirect the conversation, I glared at him and demanded he just ask me what he wanted to know so bad. That was the first moment I ever saw Davy scared. I saw this look only one more time after this.

"Look man it's just... Some of the other girls saw Her in the bathroom. Her top was off and she covered in bruises. Real deep purple ones. She was scratching at her chest like crazy. I'm just wondering if you even knew that, or know what happened cause... look if word gets out, you're the first person people are looking at," Davy pleaded with sincerity. I knew this was coming from a good place, but I felt like someone was staring straight through me from somewhere far away. I couldn't focus past that tapping sound in the back of my head. It was echoey this time. Like it was coming from somewhere deep down, yet it boomed inside my head. I remember looking around frantically, trying to pinpoint who was doing it. Other students clicking their pens. The second hand on the clock beside us. I needed to find it more than anything else. I needed to bleed it out. My breathing quickened. Davy watched me.

“Hey man I’m not accusing you. Of anything. No one is. I’m just worried, alright?”

Davy pressed further. He had placed his hand on my shoulder, and was caressing with his thumb. I shuttered at his touch, a sharp pain shooting through me. I swatted him away. I demanded he get away from me, telling him it was too loud. He looked at me, confused. Other people sitting at the tables around the library had begun looking over to us. Davy let out a nervous chuckle and tried to guide me out of the library, but my body convulsed at his touch. I almost felt like I could vomit. I told him to stay away from me, far away from me. I ran off.

I went to the nearest bathroom. I bent low to peer under the stalls, checking if anyone else was there besides me. There was no one. I still felt someone staring at me. This time closer. I scrambled to the mirror and pull my shirt down over my shoulder where Davy had touched me. There was a large welt with, a deep magenta. It had deep impression inside of it, going around in a circle. They looked like teeth marks.

I don’t understand my body. Perhaps it was fear that drove me away from Davy. Perhaps it was fear of what was happening to me. Fear of what had been done to me. Fear of what I myself had done.

Or perhaps it was a natural reaction to realizing I couldn’t remember ten nights prior to that moment.

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That last night with Her marked our aforementioned end. But it would not be the end of everything. I don’t believe there is an end to this.

We spent entire nights speaking of that place beyond the chain link fence. That asylum. That shelter. To anyone else, our scheming could be rationalized as a young couple, retreating to

a forbidden place for cheap thrills and a story shared between them. But I promise you that this was something else. It felt sinister. It felt natural. We planned extensively how to get through. Talked entry points, talked potential security. All we could say to one another were thoughts about that place, those distorted buildings standing just outside our lives. We talked about what the asylum might have been like when it was running. The people that might have been there. We came up with names and conditions. We gave these fake people fake lives, with fake families. We began to update each other on what was going on with these fake people regularly. Her and I built entire lives in those walls, just beyond that chain link fence.

“I want to feel better,” she said to me one night as she lay naked beside me in bed. She was tapping a finger steadily against Her temple. I looked over to Her, running my hand down from the tip of her chin to the dip in her pelvis. We stared for a moment and understood one another. We would go there. Beyond the chain link fence.

“I want shelter.” The tapping grew louder.

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Davy had messaged me about five times that night. I hadn't spoken to him in weeks and I think he was becoming paranoid. I couldn't honestly be bothered with him. The way the streetlamps hit Her was mesmerizing.

She and I walked silently across the crosswalk, staying on the right side. It was an odd feeling. Two straight years of crossing that road, and now I finally got to step foot on rural terrain that stretched across that road. It appeared almost barren, as if we were stepping into the wild. But I knew it was our holyland. She walked briskly several feet ahead of me, her hands jittering. It was obvious she could barely contain herself.

We walked up to a dip in the fence, the tarp that covered it torn on the other side. She turned to me and I met her stare. She grabbed me and kissed me tenderly, running her hands through my hair. It all felt right. It all felt right.

It felt right.

She pushed me away and ran over, jumping up onto the chain link fence. It bent and creaked under the added weight, bending over even lower. It was just about flat enough to walk on. I ran down to Her and climbed up the fence, standing and outstretching my hand to Her. She ignored me and scurried forward over the fence. I followed.

Upon stepping down I realized only one thing. It was silent. Profoundly silent. On even the quietest night you can still hear the air around you. Cars passing by. People on walks far off in the distance. There was nothing within this compound. It was as if we had entered a sealed dome, keeping us grounded in only this singular place. And there was nothing.

It even appeared to get darker. There were no lamps past the dirt path behind us. Just a black void, getting progressively darker with each step. I pulled out my phone and turned its flashlight on. In front of me I could see nothing but a few feet of grass. And there she stood. Motionless. She spoke softly.

“Are you ready?” She said, still with Her back to me. She wasn’t jittering anymore.

I told Her I was. She began walking forward.

I followed her quietly through the dark. I could only see her and the ground between us. Every so often I could make out dark masses close by. The shapes of stones and trees. We made it to our first building after a couple of minutes of walking. My light only reached the corner of it as it stretched high up into the darkness. She ran Her hand across the wall, tracing the cracks and

chips in the paint. She stopped for a moment, and began tapping against it. The sound made the building appear hollow. It rattled through the dried walls. It shook me. She continued.

In the ground beneath I saw clothing. Old tattered things. Dirtied cloth shawls and light blue single piece jumpers. They were clearly aged, sun soaked and torn. At one point I even saw a nun's headdress. It was clear that this was a monastery of some sort. It had a white paint sprawled across the black cloth, creating a series of web like scriptures. I couldn't make out any symbols I knew, but it felt welcoming.

I am not sure how long it was before we arrived. But we arrived all the same. A large set of double doors stood before us. We seemed to be deep within the asylum grounds. The massive wooden doors were etched with intricate vine markings spread far across the surface of it. I watched Her reach for the handle, and noticed the cuts and scratches across both doorknobs in frantic batches. This failed to deter me. As she pushed the door open, the sound of aged dirt and rust shedding off of it's hinges, I looked skyward. Above us I could just barely make out the deep blue of the sky, city lights giving it's edges a dull luminescence. And against this ethereal lighting I could see a large black mass sprouting from the top of the building. It stretched far, scraping that deep blue. A sentinel in the dark. It was the tower, sprouting high from the roof of this abandoned place.

When I looked down I saw Her through the crack in the door, walking away from me. I sidled my way between the doors and hurried towards Her. The room around us was a pure abyss, and I lost all sense of location. Only my light proved to me that I was still on solid ground. Everything else was lost to the oblivion of this black tomb. I saw Her moving away, almost gliding across the ground. She had begun removing Her shirt, throwing it aside. It

disappeared from my view. Her shoes were off, and she stepped through cracked cement, patches of soil and moss, and what appeared to be the shattered remains of wooden chairs. Their legs littered the floor leading from the entrance. They stopped suddenly at the end of the cement. I moved the light along to see what was ahead of me, and could see that the floor altered into a different material suddenly, the cement cut off with a sharp edge. The floor became a creamy stone, divots littering it. I shined the light along this edge and found that it lead across the floor, the walls, and even the ceiling. The wooden banisters that lined the roof suddenly cut off and became that uniformly pale white stone. It was as if the entire room had shifted into a different era.

When I stepped onto the other side I remember hearing a tapping. I looked over to Her and could see her standing still a yard ahead of me. After a brief survey of the room I could find no source of the tapping. I looked to the walls and saw only cracked and desecrated windows, the glass a maroon color, like a tar had been poured over it.

It took me a moment to notice that she was naked. I'm not sure when she took off Her pants and underwear, but there she stood. She was thin. Thinner, I think, then when I met Her. I could see the bumps of Her spine going up from Her back. I could make out Her hip bones sticking just barely out from her sides, and Her skin was wrapped tight around her ribs. I still found her breathtaking, and began to find it difficult to keep still. I wanted Her. I wanted it from Her.

Around us the pale stone was stretched out to make a box. And above, there was a hole in the ceiling. Perfectly round. With my light I was able to make out brickwork inside of the hole, growing up past my sight. The circle began at this cylinder of bricks, the ceiling itself appearing

cracked and broken around the hole. It was as if someone has blasted an opening to shoddley build around the gap. This is when I realized that I was looking up into the tower that I had seen so many times before that moment. It was completely hollow. I pondered the purpose of this design.

Clouds parted overhead, revealing the moon to us. I shut my light off with hurried movements, dropping my phone in the process. I did not dare pick it up, staring up into the tunnel overhead. The clouds dispersed completely, and a full moon shown its light down, perfectly framed in the tower walls. The top of the tower had been open the whole time without me knowing. Still to this day I think of this moment and shiver.

She stood in the center of this light, still at first, then, raising her hands slightly up from Her sides, began motioning with her fingers. It appeared she was pointing to the ground, but it was frequent. Almost rhythmic. I watched Her for a moment, then realized that she wasn't pointing, but tapping. She was tapping the air around Her steadily in time with the noise I had been hearing upon stepping into the white box. The sound seemed to grow, and I began to sweat. My mouth moistened and I began swallowing waves of saliva. I stared straight through Her, devouring every inch with my eyes. As the tapping grew ever louder in my ears, I began to see things. Or I was imagining them. Yet even now they are so vivid. I can see Her in front of me, and me reaching out to touch Her. I push my fingers against Her skin, further, and further. I push my fingers between Her ribs further and further, and feel euphoria. I remember seeing Her back to me, Her skin splaying away like pages to a book. I needed Her. My fists clenched, my nails digging into my palms until they bled.

These were only visions. Fevered images running across my eyes. She still stood in the center of the moonlight. The light seemed to intensify, piercing my eyes with its glow. I forced them open, looking to Her. And so she began to move once more. The tapping grew ever louder against my eardrums as Her back bent suddenly. Her spine almost seemed to bend into a perfect crease before she continued leaning backwards towards me. Her waist stayed perfectly still, Her body bending backwards into a u-shape. Her stomach shot up towards the tower opening. I looked into Her eyes and saw two black beads staring back at me. She then began to rise. The tapping became a drum, pounding against my ears. I was completely still. I tried to mutter something. Or something tried to mutter something. I felt it stare through me once more. She rose higher, completely folded, going waist first into the sky. She then left the ground, both feet dangling beneath her. She floated upward slowly towards the tower entrance.

Her mouth opened and froze, as if she was letting lose a scream that I could not here. The tapping was bleeding me out. It wanted it. She floated ever so gracefully through the air, until suddenly, Her screams met my ears all at once. Layers of Her shrill cry rang out through the whole building, and everything seemed to shake and jitter around me. The moonlight flared up, filling the room in this moment. She bent and flattened in a snap, flying up through the tunnel. There was a flash, and I was blind.

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It took me some time to clear the black blotches from my eyes. I blinked quickly, rubbing the back of my hands against my eyelids. When the dark spots faded, I saw that I was at the entrance to the asylum grounds. Sunlight had begun stretching across the sky in purples and oranges hues, clouds above the tower swirling in a circle overhead, with a clear opening in the

center of it. I was naked and shivering, completely soaked in sweat. I stood there for only a moment's time before turning and heading towards my apartment before the world started its day.

I never saw Her again.

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Year three was misery. It crawled past without my say in anything, and I scorned the life around me. There was not a single mention or trace of Her. No one made any mention of it. It was like she had never stepped through the halls of our university. I hated them all for that.

Most days I walked mindlessly through the halls. It was as if I was in a dream, only capable of watching the day proceed. People would speak to me and I believe I would respond, but I have no recollection of what I would have said. Davy came to me on multiple occasions, and there seemed to be a faint air of joy about him. He would never have said it, but I knew fully well that Her absence filled him with joy. I was all his now. And I never felt lonelier. I loathed him.

I began skipping my classes enmass, attending only to avoid being dropped out of them or to turn in a project that I had not managed to finish. My teachers reached out to me, sending me words of encouragement. They fell on deaf ears.

It became painfully clear that I would never be happy again. My memories of that night raced through my mind every night as I lie in bed, attempting to force myself to sleep. It was an odd feeling, that loneliness. Because ultimately that's all it was. Her and I had been each others days, each other's nights. She had occupied each facet of my mind, every fiber of my being. I lived and breathed her for two years. I had never felt anything like that in my mind. I had never

shared that with anyone. And then suddenly, in a flash of blinding light, it was all taken from me. And I was returned to the emptiness that I had carried with me throughout my entire life. Since I was small. Life was a mistress playing a cruel game with my spirit. And she was winning.

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I had begun phasing Davy out of my life. He would insert himself into my days with an eagerness that he failed to hide. He would shower me with food and gifts, asking me how I was feeling, telling me that he would always be there for me. The looks in his eye was sincere. He disgusted me. Half the year passed before he began to take the hint, slowly fading from my days. For once, I was thankful to him.

Yet, late one night, I heard a banging on my door. I got out of bed with a sudden vigor and rushed the entrance. I swung the door open to reveal Davy standing there, a clear bottle with a black label hanging loosely between his fingers. My excitement was replaced with disdain. Davy pushed his way past me without uttering a single word. I shut the door behind him.

Davy stomped around the living room, swinging his arms around as he ranted at me about my conduct. He cursed me and the way I had treated him. At one point in his tirade he dropped the bottle of whiskey, staining the carpet with what little alcohol remained in the bottle. I stayed by the door, staring at him dimly. His words barely reached me. I was about to tell him to leave when he threw himself onto my couch. He had begun crying, his face red with exhaustion. I made my way to him and sat down. His hysterics died down for a moment, and he looked up at me.

“I would....so good to you, you know that?” Davy muttered with pleading eyes. I failed to notice his hand creeping up my leg.

Davy suddenly flung himself onto me, kissing me sloppily over my face. I froze for a moment, my arms tensing to a point of discomfort. But I did not fight him. I didn't do anything as he drained his emotions onto me. I felt he had to. I sympathized with him suddenly. I understood what it meant to be able to get that sort of release. To need it. Honestly, for a moment, I stopped feeling so alone. I wasn't attracted to Davy, but for the time we held there, I felt as though I had returned from a long time being away. It was in those seconds where I felt alive once more. Davy slid his hands over me with a drunken sluggishness, and I wondered if he was even aware of what he was doing. But then I heard it. Somewhere, faint but ever present. The staccato pulse. Bouncing around in my head. There was a tapping.

And I felt *it* look at me.

I threw my elbow into Davy's face, sending him careening onto the floor. His hands slowly raised to cover his face, which was a deep purple. I could see red between his fingers. It was as if I had awoken from a dream. My mind loosened from its comatose state, and I raised to my feet. I stood there, glaring down at Davy, and as I stared I realized something. I hated him. With all my heart and soul I hated him. I wanted him to disappear, to be torn away from this world. He looked up to me with watery, bloodshot eyes.

"She never deserved you. You don't know what the hell you want. You don't know how to be happy!" Davy uttered these words in a nasally grunt, sputtering blood onto my carpet from the two streams trickling from his nostrils. I gave him two dead eyes in return.

I lurched over him and screamed into his battered face. I screamed at him to leave my home, cursing his name all the while. His sobs did nothing to ease my rage, and I swelled and screeched at him as he struggled to stand. Davy, curled into himself, began moving towards the

door. I stood where he had fallen, screaming until my throat began to crack. As he made his way through the doorway, he looked back to see me yelling bloody murder behind him. The door slowly shut, and I remained there. I do not know how long or how loud I screeched, as I stood barefoot in a dampened carpet now stained with a mixture of whiskey and blood. The tapping in my head growing evermore deafening.

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Summer passed with the dim light of the morning sun seeping into my bedroom, cutting my dreary eyes in half. Days passed me by as I lie in my bed, unsure what day it was. I had decided to take the summer off this year, and would resume classes the following Fall. It was a wonder I passed any of my classes, but I found the motivation to keep up on my work, even if the end product was completed half-heartedly. I decided to use summer to recover from whatever this ailment was meant to be called. Heartbreak seemed dramatic, although my chest felt heavier with every passing day. Or, it had, at least.

One morning, as light formed streaks across my face, it hit me. I'm not sure what was new about this day, but I got out of bed. I ate a bowl of cereal out in the living room, sitting on the couch in silence. The brown and red stain remained on the carpet, and I had half a mind to clean it, if given the chance. I took a walk that morning, still in the clothes I had been sleeping in for two weeks straight. I made my way to a bench at the park in my small community. It was the first time in a long time I had visited it. It was a calming moment.

For the first time, in a long time, I was alive again.

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I never got to finish my fourth year.

The first months passed by with nothing remarkable to note. Davy had completely vanished from my routines, and although my mind was clearer than it had been in the three years prior, I'm glad I did not have to face him. What had happened between us muddled what little good I had ever felt in his presence, and I could not be held accountable for his feelings while I desperately attempted to sort through my own.

I worked avidly to produce the best work I could, although my skills were severely stunted by the slump I had suffered the previous year. I had to constantly push my skills back to the level I was meant to be at, and spent most of my spare time practicing my draftsmanship. My recovery was a process, but I welcomed the work.

It was night when it came for me, as I walked home from school after a late session. I was groggy from fatigue and allowed my legs to carry me forward from routine. I looked around lazily, looking up at the white glow of the street lamps above me. There were no cars, and the air around me became suddenly still. My gaze wandered away from the path ahead of me, and fell to the other side of the street. My eyes froze onto a figure who was standing, fully facing me, in the dirt on the other side. The figure stood just outside of the light of an old orange street lamp. They were unnaturally still. I squinted my eyes to try and make out a face through the darkness. I could see only the color of their skin, a pale cream against the harsh orange hues cast above them. They were completely naked, with a long dark hair. I tried to find their eyes. There was nothing on their face. But I could feel them looking at me. It was a familiar feeling. It pulled at me, scratching at my legs. My feet began to quiver uncontrollably. I realized all at once who this was. It was Her. She had come back for me. Without hesitation I took a step forward, tripping over myself as both legs made to walk at the same time. I stumbled and fell to my knees in the

gutter, splashing water up my pants legs. I was down on my hands, and looked up to spot Her again. I saw bare legs in front of me, and slowly traced the form with my eyes until I was looking into Her face. Her face was shrouded in a dense shadow, and I failed to make out any features. She did not speak a word. She only stood over me, motionless. I suddenly heard three taps against the back of my skull, and closed my eyes briefly, taking in the relief that was washing over me. I opened my eyes to nothing in return. No trace of Her anywhere around me. My breathing quickened.

I yelled out into the darkness, sobbing.

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That night that followed was a restless one. I was sweating profusely, and tossed and turned in my bed. The tapping had not ceased since my walk home. Suddenly I was dragged back into my devastation, feeling a hollowness growing deep in my chest cavity. I saw Her every time I closed my eyes. I clawed desperately at my head, trying to release this tension that was building steadily inside me. Eventually I managed to fall asleep.

And the dream I had broke me. I was standing on the surface of a large, still pool of liquid. It was a silvery color, reflecting the sky above me, which was a deep blue. A fog circled and churned in the surrounding area. I stood there, as still as I could, and stared out in front of me as she stepped closer to me. I could not make out Her face, but I knew it was Her. I reached out to Her, trying with everything I had to touch Her, to hold Her. But no matter how many steps she took, she was always just out of my reach. I tried stepping towards Her, but my legs failed me. And I looked up to see the sky tear open. A hole, pitch black and ever expanding in

diameter, formed over our heads. It crept lower and lower over us. I peered into the abyss on the other side of it, and it held an emptiness that I could not comprehend. And it looked through me.

And I woke up. Naked and alone. I stood, and walked slowly to the front door, leaving my apartment.

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I stumbled over the fence, my legs getting caught in the chains. I scraped them and continued forward. My bare body did not so much as shiver in the open night air. I kept focused on the tower, which loomed over me, welcoming me with open arms. My bare feet stepped through rocks and filthy glass shards. I felt the pain only slightly as it punctuated my steps. I clamored to the large wooden door and pressed my entire body against it, barely raising a hand in aid. I entered that black abyss.

The moonlight was already filtering through the building, the walls lit up in a dim glow. And so I saw *it* for the first and only time. Across the hall from me. It did not have eyes, yet I knew the moment I entered that it could see me. It knew I was there. And it was looking through my heart. Into my veins. It traced my bones with its stare, and engulfed me. The large mass of pulsing meat that clung the farthest walls, protruding out into the ring of moonlight that the tower allowed to seep into that holy space. It gyrated as I took a step closer. It was uneven, bulging in and out in different places every moment. Mounds of the flesh rolled over into itself time and time again. It had a sickly gleam to it, like a beached whale drying in the sun, beginning to decay. It smelled of rotten fish and sun dried grass. Like the grass from my hometown, expanding forever into the horizon, it's yellow hue burning into my retinas in the sun.

This was my one truth. This was my love. I approached it with caring steps, and in a moment I found myself face to face with this beauty. The metal frames of the windows around us shook as the mass pressed forward towards me. It was growing up the back wall, all the way to ceiling. I looked up to see its roots spreading into the tower entrance overhead, a greyish tint with red tips at the ends of each stem. All around me was silent, until I began to hear the faintest sound. Off somewhere, somewhere I could not see. Miles away from me, years away, was that tapping. That tapping that had come with me all these years. That tapping that was with me when I was birthed. That tapping was my mother's heartbeat. It was my feet running on concrete. It the wings beating against the sides of a hummingbird. It was ice falling from soda machines, pencils against desks. My fists against Davy's head. Her fingers pushing through my skull.

I raised my hand slowly. It was on the inside. Of this mass, the tapping was hiding. I put my hand against the flesh and pushed gently. The mound compressed under my hand, and the skin began to give way. My hand pushed through the being, slowly at first. With a moments effort my hand sunk further in, until my forearm had entered it. A dark blood began pouring from the orifice, covering my arm and dripping down to my feet. An indescribably wave of euphoria washed over my body. I shuddered under this rush of feeling that sparked throughout my body. The experience was orgasmically potent, and my knees shook and buckled as I pushed my arm further in. My side was against the mass as I moved my hand around. Blood poured over my chest and splattered against my face. It felt as though my hand was wading through a thick syrup. My body was jittering every second, until my hand finally found something. Something pulsing deep within the pile of meat. My hand enclosed around it, and I squeezed until it felt liable to burst. I stepped back, attempting to drag what I had found out by force. There was a

snapping and a crack, as the tapping in my mind head grew deafening. I struggled against the stubborn flesh, until my hand broke free. I stepped back to catch myself, and peered into the cavernous hole I had dug with my arm. There was only darkness within it, pink meat and red blood sloshing around inside. The aroma had become nauseating. The tapping had grown to a piercing shrill cry.

I slowly looked down into my hand. I lose my grip.

And saw a heart. Slowly pumping, until eventually becoming still. The tapping ceased.

I stared at the heart for a moment. It had a familiarity to it that caught me off guard. It struggled to inflate one last time, before falling completely lifeless in my hand. It was empty, yet, Her heart remained heavy in my hand. I looked up to examine the mass once more. But it was not that hulking mound of flesh nor the asylum walls that I saw around me. I saw only the front of my school.

My eyes suddenly blazed against the morning sun that was beating against my body. The white fire of the light poured over my face, and I lowered my head to shield my gaze from it. My eyes squinted and struggled to adjust themselves to the sudden influx of daylight that surrounded me. I blinked rapidly, looking down into my naked figure. I raised my head and looked towards the front of my school, the sudden gravity of my situation dawning on me. I spun around to leave, and stopped in my tracks.

Davy and another dozen students stood behind me. As their eyes met my front, they shifted backwards in horror. Some looked away from my naked figure. Others stared at the heart that lie limp in my hand. Davy pleaded with his eyes, examining every inch of me, looking for an answer. His stare met mine, and we looked at one another. Davy then reached into his pocket,

and pulled out his phone. My body tensed, my hand with the heart hovering out in front of me, shaking. I stared into the increasing body of students and faculty who were gathering around me. I stood, pale in the sunlight. I stood covered in the blood of an unknown victim, it smeared across my face. I stood shivering and alone. I stood grasping Her heart. And I knew that soon *it* would come for me.

And I knew it would come from me.

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