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# Doomed: A Speculative Work of Science Fiction

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Doomed:  
A Speculative Work of Science Fiction

Caitlin Angelo

Submitted in Partial Completion of the  
Requirements for Commonwealth Honors in English

Bridgewater State University

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When Tammy was younger she let Pamela bully her into playing all sorts of stupid games. Worst of all was the flower game. Pamela would pluck flowers from her mother's garden and ask them questions, plucking petals as she did. A petal for yes, a petal for no. You were supposed to trust the flower's answers, but Pamela never did.

"Will Anthony ask me to Prom?" Pamela would ask. If she tore out all the petals before getting the answer she wanted, she would continue to pull up daisies until the answers satisfied her. Sprawled across the torn flowers, Pamela would glare at Tammy until she finally agreed to play. Tammy invented questions of course, each one more outlandish than the last. She wanted to make it clear she didn't take these games seriously, that she was above such childishness.

"Will I win an Oscar?"

"Will I have triplets?"

Pamela would roll her eyes and throw a tuft of leaves at her, her face contorting into a smirk.

"Tag, you're it!"

Pamela would run off, laughing, as Tammy dutifully wiped the grass off her shirt and chased after her. Tag was a game you could win.

Sometimes Tammy did ask questions of the daisies, in the safe confines of her mind.

"Will I live to go to Prom?"

"Will I live to graduation?"

"Will I live to get married?"

It didn't matter what the flower petals told her. The answer would always be no, which is why she never told Pamela. Tammy would just grin and roll her eyes at the questions and answers, throwing her flower down finally with the rest of the daisy remains.

\* \* \*

When Tammy was born, there had been a few happy seconds before the algorithm was computed where her parents thought she was a normal child. She was seven pounds, eight ounces, responded to light and sound, and had all her fingers and toes. The doctor put her information into the computer shortly after slapping her to see if she felt pain. Even with two healthy parents and a long history of Old Agers in her family, the doctor told them something was wrong. Something lay dormant in Tammy's brain, an infection that would kill her at age 16. It wouldn't be painful when it happened, they told her parents. She would be asleep.

They sent Tammy home a few days later with a thick file and a rigorous schedule of doctor's appointments. This was a courtesy, because all the doctor appointments in the world couldn't change a death status. She didn't remember any of this of course, being an infant, but she had dug up her file from her mother's papers a few years ago. She was raised with a general idea about her death status, but her parents had always tried to keep the specifics from her. She didn't know why. The doctors said it would be painless.

That was her first thought, waking up on the last day. She sat up in bed, facing the mirror on her wall. Did she look different today? Was there death written in the lines of her face today, more so than yesterday or the day before? She swung her legs over the edges of her bed and her feet pressed into the cold floorboards. Her last morning routine.

If ever there was a foolproof excuse for getting out of school, it should be impending death. Pamela had offered to skip school with her, but Tammy's parents insisted on her going for her last day. The night before, Tammy had lain in bed listening to her parents engage in a whisper-battle the next room over. Tammy's father wanted to spend her last day as a family, perhaps driving out to the lake house and playing ancient board games like Clue or Monopoly and listening to dusty records like they did every summer. Her mother was insistent: she should be with her friends; she should be in class; she should cling to whatever bits remained of a normal life. In the end Tammy decided to go to school, because even sitting through lectures and getting stared at was preferable to listening to her mother cry.

Tammy could have pleaded her way out of going if she wanted to. She had missed school for doctor's appointments, mild headaches, and days where she didn't feel like getting out of bed. Her father took a laissez-faire approach to her life. He figured she had earned the right to do what she wanted: miss school for increasingly ridiculous reasons, paint her walls fuchsia, eat an extra helping of dessert, the list went on. Her mother refused to acknowledge her death, aside from going to biweekly therapy sessions and the quiet moments she found to cry. Like now, as she was making Tammy's lunch for the first time since sixth grade. Something about a pastrami sandwich and chocolate pudding for dessert, Tammy's old favorites, caused her mother to sob quietly over the brown paper bag. She was making a valiant attempt to muffle the sounds for the family's benefit.

Tammy's dad had already taken off for work or perhaps to the shooting range as he often did when matters of emotional turmoil arose. Tammy's little sister, Abigail, was seven and

couldn't quite differentiate the reality of her sister dying vs. television shows with unicorns. Both realities felt equally plausible to her.

Tammy put on the radio as she stood in front of the mirror, puzzling over the nest that was her hair. When she had fallen asleep last night, she had hoped she would wake up and her hair would be different, finally deciding to listen to her. But no, she would have to flat iron it into submission.

"It smells like burning," Abigail had told her once, peeking into her bathroom as Tammy pulled the iron through her hair and watched it admit defeat, "You're killing it."

But every girl in the junior class had perfectly straight hair, aside from those select few who were above such social restrictions. Curly hair was almost as much of a death sentence socially as being a Disease was. Car Crashes were considered fairly cool and Old Agers were considered worthy investments, but Diseases brought to mind images of hospitals and baldness. They were bottom tier, though rated considerably higher than Suicides, who nobody talked to.

That was another reason she found herself getting ready to go to school, agonizing over her hair. She wanted to see what people would say to her. She and the other Die Youngs were rare creatures, transcending popularity based on looks, money, or charisma. There were moments when her popularity peeked, like when Pamela had organized an early Prom for juniors so Tammy would be able to go. Or on career day, when teachers treated her like some sort of martyr, giving her an emotional talking to and letting her skip out early. For the most part though, Tammy and her death remained under the radar. She had a feeling today would be different.

Pamela had helped her pick out a couple of different “last day” outfits: one for school and one for her funeral. For school, she was wearing a skirt that failed the “falling past the fingers” test, and a tank top with spaghetti straps. Tammy had never worn anything so revealing before. But she and Pamela were in agreement. No teachers would ask her to change, not today. So it would break their equal opportunity policy. From this point on, any girl who was asked to change could reply “But you let Tammy Popplewell wear spaghetti straps!” It was actually a really heroic idea.

Once her hair’s curls had been sufficiently straightened, she pulled out her makeup bag and began scrutinizing her face for flaws. The universe hadn’t lent her perfect hair on her last day, and of course she wasn’t given perfect skin either. She refused to be known as the girl with the pimples who died. She slathered on cover up and began applying eyeliner, determined to look nothing like herself. She didn’t use waterproof mascara, figuring it would be a little added incentive not to cry, though she hadn’t cried in months. Every time she lay in bed, staring at the ceiling and telling herself it was acceptable to cry when no one was watching, she couldn’t bring herself to do it. She had spent three months in middle school crying every single day because of her death and other reasons. She had reached maximum capacity for tears.

She heard Pamela honking her horn from the driveway. Pamela had been driving her to school every day since she got her license. Tammy’s mother had told her she should start taking Driver’s Ed classes, but Tammy had point blank refused. She wasn’t going to be driving anywhere, so it was better not to waste the money and sit through hours and hours of home videos of preaching Old Ager who had been paralyzed in car accidents.

Tammy hurried down the hall into the kitchen, snatching up her lunch bag trying to escape the house unseen. Her mother, who was standing with the refrigerator door open, shut it with a snap and turned to glare at her with red rimmed eyes.

“Put a sweater on.”

Tammy tucked her lunch into her bag, avoiding her mother’s eyes.

“No.”

“You’re going to freeze to death.”

“No, actually, I’m going to die in my sleep.”

Her mother pulled her hand up to cover the sharp intake of breath, squeezing her eyes shut and snapping them open, as if hoping to see someone else when she did. A pang shot through Tammy’s stomach but she ignored it. Her mother leaned back against the counter, as if she had been struck. Tears were filling her eyes again. Tammy left, slamming the door behind her. It wasn’t like this would be the last time she would see her mother. She had insisted on picking Tammy up from school to help her get ready for the funeral. Maybe by that time her mother would have cried out all the necessary tears and be able to help her. It’s not like Tammy’s death was new information. Why wasn’t everyone as used to it as she was?

Pamela’s red Toyota was waiting for her in the driveway. Tammy threw her bag into the open window before getting in herself.

“Seatbelt,” Pamela said, refusing to get out of park until Tammy strapped herself in. Tammy didn’t know why Pamela, an Old Ager, bothered to have seat belts in her car, but it was her car, her rules. A few weeks ago Tammy had pointed out seat belts weren’t going to save her life. Pamela had kicked her out of the car and she had to walk the three miles to school.

Tammy cast a glance at her best friend, who put the car in reverse and turned around to assess her blind spots as she backed up. Pamela's face too lay hidden behind a layer of makeup, but she had failed to completely conceal the bags under her eyes.

"So who died?" Tammy asked.

Pamela slammed on the breaks halfway out of Tammy's driveway. Tammy laughed, the sound escaping through tight lips.

"I'm going to ignore that question," Pamela replied, regaining her control and pulling out into the street. Tammy looked up from her lap to take in her street, the same one she had lived on since she was Abigail's age. Sure enough, Bobby was in his driveway, standing with the trunk of his beat up truck open and examining the engine.

A memory engulfed her mind despite her attempts to shut it out. They had been seven when Bobby found out about her death status. She was curled up, tugging her legs closer to her so she could fit into one of her dad's shipping boxes.

"Your fort's too small," he said as his face disappeared behind the closing cardboard flaps. Too small for them both, is what he meant.

"It's not a fort," she told him, smiling because she knew something he didn't.

"That what is it?"

She closed her eyes and lay perfectly still.

"A coffin, stupid."

"We should give him a ride," Pamela said, breaking Tammy's concentration and putting her hand on the lever to put the car into reverse.

"No," Tammy replied, so quickly that Pamela's hand jerked back.

“Suit yourself.”

Tammy looked down at her lap resolutely as if she had never seen him at all. In her rearview mirror, she could see him turn away from his truck, stand and watch them drive away. Pamela turned off the street, and he was out of sight.

When they got to school, Tammy scrutinized the brick building, the massive lump that was the gymnasium, the jagged artsy block that was the auditorium, and the glass paneled cafeteria. The sign, “Lachrymere High: Go Wildcats!” stared at her as they pulled into the upperclassman lot. Pamela slammed on the gas to compete with a black sedan in the daily game of Chicken for a parking spot. The driver was Pete Wilkinson, a burly football player whose face was covered with acne from all the Steroids. When he saw who it was in the passenger seat, Tammy was close enough to see his face. His face seemed to be twisted in an inner battle: outweighing the karma of cutting off a soon to be dead girl vs. losing an excellent parking spot. In the end Pamela took advantage of his hesitation and pulled into the spot.

Pamela flounced out of the car, tossing a perfectly coiled red curl behind her ear. Pamela’s hair was naturally pin-straight, and the curls would likely wilt into limp waves by the end of the day, but Pamela took a political approach to her hair. She didn’t want to be like the army of straight-haired clones. That was beneath her.

Most of the other students hurrying over to make the first bell paid Pamela and Tammy no mind. They were all too busy chattering on cell phones, staring at the ground in a desperate plea to go unseen, listening to headphones, or talking to a real human next to them. Tammy was not all that broken-hearted about this being the last time she would walk beneath the archways of Lachrymere High. Her parents had insisted she engage in all the regular activities of

people her own age, including going through the motions of the Lachrymere school system.

Tammy had overheard Pamela's mother on the phone one day, talking about how it was a waste of tax payer dollars to put "these people" through school. These people meant the early Murders, Accidents, and Whatever the Hell Tammy is Going to Die Of. What was the point of educating someone when they were going to die before they actually contributed anything to the world? When Tammy heard this the first time, she had cried hidden in her room. After hearing it about a hundred times since then, it affected her much like everything else did. As if it was happening in another room to another girl in another house.

Tammy did agree with one of Mrs. Tracy's points. School was a waste.

She was pulling her books out of her bag to put in her locker when she heard Pamela mutter "Seriously?" under her breath. Tammy looked up, wondering which of Pamela's ex-boyfriends was making out with another girl.

There was a table pushed up against the wall, with four girls wearing purple t-shirts appearing to be selling buttons and ribbons. Tammy squinted to see her own picture, from last year's yearbook, plastered over their t-shirts with the words "Never Forget" written across her forehead. Tammy would have been content to hurry past them with her head down, but Pamela grabbed her by the arm to drag her over there.

"What's this?" Pamela asked, and the girls looked up from their buttons to begin simpering at the girl from their t-shirts live and in color staring back at them. Tammy recognized one of the girls from her geometry class, and another who had a locker a few paces down from hers.

“Tammy, oh my God,” one of them said. Tammy thought her name was Elizabeth. She gazed at Tammy with big Bambi eyes. “We just wanted to show our support.”

Tammy looked desperately around, checking how many people were actually buying these buttons. To her relief, the girls in purple didn’t seem to be having much luck selling them.

“Your support?” Pamela asked, and Tammy groaned inwardly, recognizing the look in her eye. Pamela’s brother Alex used to have a snake that looked like that when a new mouse was put into his tank.

“We wanted to collect some donations, so we could send them to your parent’s house today,” said another girl, Shannon.

Tammy had a vision of her mother, in a bathrobe with bloodshot eyes and a bottle of Scotch under one arm, answering the doorbell to find a box with Tammy’s face on it. She had the sudden urge to grab one of the buttons and smack Shannon with it, but feeling Pamela lean forward next to her, she figured Pamela’s emotional abuse would be enough.

“Have you ever actually talked to Tammy?” Pamela asked, the corners of her lips twitching.

“I sat two seats behind you in French class,” a girl named Rachel said. Tammy remembered that class. She had taken it for the sole reason that at the end of the semester there was a French food party with croissants and French bread and chocolates. Taking a second language class had never been a priority to her, considering she would never actually meet someone that spoke French.

“Yeah? And what do you actually know about her?”

The girls exchanged glances, realizing that they had stepped into a mousetrap.

“Well, everyone’s here for her,” Shannon said, indignation creeping into her voice as she folded her arms over Tammy’s face.

“Right. And where were you the last few years, when we could have used your support?” Pamela asked, poised for the kill. Tammy shifted from one foot to the other, hugging her books closer to her chest. “Oh right. Two seats behind in French class.”

She sneered at the table one last time before hooking her arm in Tammy’s.

“Get a job.”

Pamela strong-armed her over to Blue Hall, which was where their next class was. The crowd seemed to part ways for them, though it was unclear whether from Tammy’s death status or from Pamela’s poisonous look.

The first part of the day went relatively smoothly, aside from the occasional sidelong glance or awkward pause in conversation. Steffan Albringhoff crashed into her in the hallway on his way to meet up with his beefy friends without apologizing. One beefy friend, Chase Vasquez, shoved Steffan and said, scowling, “Dude. She’s gonna die.”

“Oh. Uh, sorry,” Steffan said, barely looking at her, before he was herded over to the cafeteria by his friends. Tammy watched them leave before turning around to pick up her books. She found herself face-to-face with Bobby, who was picking up her books for her.

“Hey,” he said, standing up to return them to her. The lizard on the front of her biology book stared bleakly up at her.

“Keep them,” she said, turning away to escape the conversation and his outstretched hands. “That class is over for me.”

“Tam—”

But she was already walking in the other direction. It was her last ever brown bag lunch in the bustling hell that was the school cafeteria. Maybe she would get to see a fight break out.

She didn't sit with Pamela at lunch. People generally sat with the people they were going to die with. This meant Pamela would cozy up to the Old Agers and get to talk about things that she couldn't talk to Tammy about because of the awkwardness. Bobby sat on the other end of the table talking to a pretty girl named Kathryn who was set to die in about 70 years. An image popped into her mind of Bobby and Kathryn, in their 80's, rocking on their front porch with grandchildren playing in their backyard in front of them. She slammed herself down at her table, pounding her lunch bag down.

"Something the matter?"

Tammy hadn't even realized Karen had already sat down. Karen herself was a Car Crash, and could presumably sit over on the other side with the rest of her Death Statuses. But Karen would die at nineteen, unlike the other 30 and 40 year olds at the Car Crash tables. She had earned her seat at the Die Young table. Plus she was not exactly welcome with the other Car Crashes, who found her constant crusades tiring. What did they care about global warming? It wasn't going to kill them, obviously.

Karen wore clothes of her own making, toted around books and notebooks made from all recycled material, and carried around a bag that was littered with buttons advocating various causes. She came to the cafeteria every day with a vegan lunch in one hand and some sort of petition in the other. These usually revolved around improving political, social, and economic rights for other Die Youngs, though she occasionally also advocated for animal rights and environmental causes.

Tammy was surprised she didn't see a purple button with her face on it stuck to Karen's bag. When she pointed this out, Karen pursed her lips. "I don't get a button. Why should you?"

Tammy laughed, watching Karen stir up her avocado-almond-black bean salad.

"Happy Death Eve."

Jason, slamming his water bottle down on the table with a grin sat down next to Karen. Without looking up from her petitions, Karen handed him her apple to eat. Jason was the other student they sat with. He was going to die of impalement when he was twenty, the only Freak Accident in the school and thus immediately interesting and popular.

It hadn't always been that way. Before high school, he had been the weird kid constantly carving violent images into bathroom stalls and throwing himself into dangerous situations involving weapons, cars, high buildings, and bodies of water. Now that his voice had changed and he began channeling his energy into weightlifting, the things that had made him scary and unapproachable before suddenly had girls flocking to him.

Jason leaned back in the lunch bench, eating Karen's apple in his left hand today because his right hand was in a cast from his latest misadventure. The day before, during lunch period alone four girls had come over to sign it with loopy, heart-filled signatures. None of the girls sat with them, of course, because even Jason's good looks and dangerous appeal weren't enough for the general population to be around Die Youngs for long.

"Why are you at school?" Jason asked, leaning over Karen's stack of petitions, making her scowl and swat his arm away. "If it were me, I'd be robbing a bank or something."

"You can't spend money when you're dead."

Jason sighed, throwing the apple core behind him, where instead of landing in the trash, it landed on the table of a few Freshmen Old Agers.

“It’s not about money, young Popplewell. You can do anything. You could punch the principal, and literally no one would care.”

“Or you could, I don’t know, donate a few organs,” said Karen, glaring at him. “Give all your stuff to a homeless shelter. Something worthwhile.”

Tammy stared down at her pastrami, twirling it around with her plastic fork.

“You know most of the organ donations go to people who are going to die anyway, right?” he said, stealing one of her petitions and drawing a stick figure with knives sticking out of him, “No thanks, I like my liver the way it is.”

“Really,” Karen said, glaring pointedly at his water bottle, which as far as Tammy knew, had not actually held water since the seventh grade.

After a pause, Jason said, “So how does it feel?”

At first, Tammy, still looking down at her uneaten lunch, thought he was talking to Karen. When she didn’t respond, Tammy looked up to see both of them staring at her. Well, Jason was staring, and Karen was pretending to write on her own petition.

“Same as any other day, I guess,” Tammy said, shifting in her seat. Jason slumped in his chair a little.

“What? How do you think it should feel?”

“I don’t know. Exciting,” he said, smirking.

“Maybe for you,” she replied. “I just want to get it over with.”

She stopped talking, wondering why she had even admitted that much. She stabbed at her Pastrami, the white plastic prongs snapping off. For a moment, it felt like the pace of the entire cafeteria had slowed to a halt. Boys in Letterman jackets leaned back in their chairs and girls walked from table to table grinning. Teachers shook their heads in bemusement. Her gaze ran from one sight to another. She wondered if anything would be different when she didn't come to school next week. Would the scoreboard at the next football game maybe flash her name, the stadium going into a moment of silence? Would the same girls whose quick, stabbing laughs pierced through the cafeteria be sitting at their tables, crying, come Monday? Would the teachers ask their students to make cards out to the Popplewell family in class? Probably not.

The algorithm was wrong: she wouldn't die in her sleep. She would die being crushed by the walls around her, suffocating and drowning her, beating whatever was left of a normal life out of her. Every person in the room was a life bearing down at her, every face held a death that was too far away to grasp. Even Karen, who had decided to waste her money going to college for a year, would at least get to move away from Lachrymere.

Something worthwhile.

She stared down at her plate, seeing everything she had ever done or never done. What did she have to show for her life, besides surrounding herself with people who didn't care and pushing away the ones who did?

"Anybody in there?"

Karen and Jason were staring at her, and she came back to reality. Or maybe back out of it.

“We shouldn’t be talking about this,” she told them, her voice stern like Karen’s whenever she was lecturing them about priorities.

“It’s not like we’re complaining about dying in a hospital sixty years from now,” Karen said, snapping her Tupperware shut and putting it back in her bag. She always neatened up her space even when they pointed out that the janitor, a Disease, always mopped it up.

Jason grinned and leaned forward, excited as always about approaching the forbidden. Complaining about your death wasn’t illegal by any means, but it was considered weak and unseemly, like old people complaining about their organs or bodily fluids.

“Have you scheduled an Autopsy?”

Jason, of course. Karen elbowed him in the ribs, being careful not to touch his cast.

“Why? Do you want to watch?”

He laughed, crushing his empty water bottle and tossing it on the ground. Karen scowled again, either because of his littering or Tammy’s joke.

“We all want to know how it’s going to happen,” Jason told her, and she wondered if he had talked about her to other people, people who weren’t dying young. A cold feeling crept into her stomach, imagining him being his typical gruesome self with Old Agers, who would offer polite laughter in the face of her death.

“I’ve been looking into it,” Karen said, gesturing to one of the many heavy books piled next to her. “Likely it’ll be an aneurysm or a stroke. You probably won’t even feel it.”

“Well, she’ll be asleep. Boring.”

“We can’t all have exciting deaths.”

“You don’t know how your car crash will go. You could fall off a cliff or be decapitated by something smashing through your windshield or—”

Tammy tuned out their bickering. This was how they always talked about death, like it was a game or a silly joke. They couldn’t have a serious, emotional talk about death. No one could.

There was a death counselor on campus, who offered counseling to people about their deaths. Tammy had been asked to attend a few sessions after the essay incident. Freshman year they had been assigned a 700 word essay about where they saw themselves in the future. Tammy, in a fight with Pamela at the time, had written “dead” 700 times. After that the school thought therapy was in order.

The death counselor, a woman named April, had tried to make her as comfortable as possible, letting her dictate what they talked about. The walls of April’s office were plastered with inspirational posters of smiling children. Her saying was “feel what you feel,” and she tried to tell Tammy that whatever she felt about her death was fine. The following semester April was replaced by Charlotte, whose saying was “negativity leads nowhere.” Tammy never made a second visit with Charlotte.

Finally the bell rang, meaning lunch was over and it was time for students to get to their classes. As the students flocked to the doors, someone looped an arm through Tammy’s. Going rigid at the sudden contact, Tammy saw it was Pamela, grinning like they had some sort of secret. Tammy watched Jason and Karen drift out of sight, bickering the entire way, and she wondered if they would come to her funeral. She wondered what offensive t-shirt Jason would wear, what new cause Karen would pressure mourners into joining.

“So your mom’s picking you up for the funeral, right?” Pamela asked, pulling Tammy through the crowds of faceless students.

“Yeah. I’m getting dismissed before last period.”

“Are you wearing what we decided—”

Pamela stopped, her mouth snapping shut as they stood across from two Diseases walking towards them, almost bumping into them. Pamela jerked herself back, dragging Tammy along with her, as if the girls were on fire. The two girls muttered, “sorry,” looking down at their feet and scurrying away.

“You know you’re not going to catch what they have right?” Tammy asked, rolling her eyes.

“I’m not going to *die* from it. Doesn’t mean I won’t catch it.”

Tammy remembered another game she had played with Pamela when they were children. They would gather around the play table in Tammy’s basement and draw pictures of their deaths with crayons. Pamela drew herself with grey hair, brown skin splotches, and a hospital Johnny and oxygen tank. They swapped pictures, Pamela holding Tammy’s up to scrutinize while Tammy peeled the wrapping off a purple crayon. Tammy had drawn a stick figure lying on top of a rectangle meant to be her bed. Pamela had scowled, snatching the red crayon and scribbling over her own picture.

“I’m keeping yours,” she said, snatching Tammy’s drawing. It had been fine; Tammy hadn’t wanted it anyway.

“Want to skip sixth period?” Pamela was asking her now.

“And miss discussing *Frankenstein* with Miss White?” Tammy said, grinning.

“Why did she assign that to you now, of all times? I mean, isn’t Frankenstein stitched together from dead people parts?”

“Well in the movie the doctor paid them before they died. Maybe that’s what I’ll do. Donate my body to science.”

“And have them cut you open?!”

Pamela made a noise of disgust. Tammy slowly put her arms out in front of her, her mouth agape in an undead cry for help. Pamela giggled, clapping her hand over her mouth as if wondering if it was allowed. Her offer of skipping sixth period forgotten, she walked away, shaking her head. Tammy took a detour to her next class, walking by the hall leading towards the gymnasium. One entire wall was covered in a glass display case holding dozens of trophies from jocks of years past. She strolled along them, her fingers grazing across the glass, leaving an annoying streak that the Disease janitor would have to clean. The first trophy was from about thirty years ago, though the school itself was about a hundred years old. She wondered what the expiration date on these trophies was, when the janitors chucked them out to make room for shiny new ones.

Most of the trophies had a ball or disc on top, but some had little golden people: cheerleaders contorted into poses, runners gasping for breath, and football players gazing in the distance, another concussion on the horizon. Tammy was laughing at the dancer’s pigtailed when she saw a name she recognized.

Bobby Buckwood.

It was a baseball award, not for MVP or state championship, but “Team Player”. She didn’t even know he played baseball for a team. She remembered him throwing a baseball back

and forth with his father in the front lawn, but she and Pamela had played hula-hoop and hopscotch in the front lawn too. It's not like they were joining any teams or winning any awards for that.

Bobby had a normal life, with a girlfriend and trophies and a sports team. She wondered if they went out for malted milkshakes at Benny's after games, if that girl at lunch was allowed to go to their after parties. Benny named milkshakes after people that died dramatically in town, like The Pratchett, named after Ricky Pratchett who, terrified of his death by falling, had gotten mind-numbingly drunk and wandered off a cliff. Or The Delaney, after Penny Delaney, a Murder who had been cooped up her entire life by her father, who refused to accept that her death was unavoidable. Her father had ended up being the one to smother her with a pillow while she slept because he apparently "couldn't stand to see someone else do it."

Tammy wondered if one day Benny would name a milkshake after her. The Popplewell, so named for the girl who died in her sleep for no apparent reason.

"It's really the best way to go," people would say, cheering to each other, holding The Popplewell, a concoction of Diet Coke, cherries, and chocolate ice cream.

"Wouldn't even feel a thing," their friends would reply, before turning back to the local sports team on the television. Maybe Bobby would one day take his friends or kids there, buying a round of Popplewells for everyone and telling them it was named for a girl he used to know.

She tore her eyes away from Bobby's trophy, hearing Karen's voice echo in her ears.

Something worthwhile.

She and Bobby had gotten married in the second grade. They walked across the playground woodchips, Pamela walking behind them and tossing down dandelions, the closest thing to flowers in the school playground. Their class had snuck over to watch, though the teachers had forbidden marriages. Later they would understand why—encouraging children to form bonds with people of different death statuses was asking for misery later on in life. Since the algorithm was invented, divorce rates plummeted. Marriages of different death statuses did happen, whenever people got so caught up in their relationships they forgot about death. Typically though the most a Die Young could hope for would be to find someone else that would die the same year they did. Anything else was just irresponsible.

Of course, as children, most of this was beyond them. When they got married, Bobby had given her a plastic pink ring from the junk drawer in their art class. Tammy had loved art class. Generally her art teachers let her be a morbid little kid, drawing ghostly white faces and coffins and fresh mounds on graves. She didn't always draw her death; sometimes she drew Bobby or Pamela or her family, though she could never get herself quite right. Usually she just left an open space where she would be, her parents standing several feet apart or Bobby standing off center by himself.

“Will Tammy Popplewell please report to the principal’s office?”

The voice of the school secretary, Miss Fancy, came over the loudspeaker and broke through her day dream. She made her way slowly through the hallways, past the classrooms with open doors, students at their lockers, and the student artwork and paraphernalia that lined the walls. She wondered what Principal Hamish wanted, whether maybe he wanted to take her out of class for a “talk”. She had only ever seen the man once; there had been a special

memorial service for Penny Delaney after she had been murdered. Tammy had only been in elementary school at the time, but Penny herself had probably been about 16.

Penny had been homeschooled for years, as part of her father's desperate attempts to protect her. Why exactly the principal of what would have been her high school was called in to speak was not clear. Penny herself had been something of a shut-in, so she hadn't come to her own memorial service in the first place. Maybe it was better that way, not knowing what people were saying about you, letting them remember you the way they wanted.

Penny hadn't just been a Murder, Tammy realized, walking past the display of artwork from students in years past. She had died in her sleep as well. Had Penny never known exactly how she was going to be murdered? Less was known about Murders. They were rarer than Car Crashes or Diseases. Had Penny lived in fear of guns, knives, poisons, and everything else that could potentially kill her? Her father certainly did. Jason knew he would be impaled, but he was an Accidental Death. Reading intent was apparently the most difficult part of computing the algorithm. If Penny lived in constant terror, afraid to leave her own home, wasn't it more of a Mercy Kill? Maybe it was better to be smothered peacefully in your sleep by someone you loved rather than stabbed and mutilated by a stranger.

Just as Tammy was arriving at Hamish's office, the man was hurrying out the door balancing a coffee and briefcase. She was surprised he was at the school at all, usually he was away at "meetings" but maybe he had been called in to speak to her.

"You wanted to see me?"

He looked up from his papers and over the rim of his coffee, which was sloshing over the edges of the cup. He stared at her for a moment, forcing an adult little smile.

“Yes,” he said, dragging the word slowly from his throat, “Miss...”

She stared at him. He had no idea who she was.

“Poplewell,” she told him, with venom reminiscent of Pamela’s. “I’m dying tonight. Did you want to see me?”

“I’m very sorry,” he told her, shifting the weight of his briefcase and sipping his drink to give him a moment to think, “I don’t normally handle those types of affairs. Perhaps the death counselor called you in? Charlotte?”

He gave a smile mixed with a grimace and hurried off in the direction of his next meeting. Hamish was something of a legend because he would live to 112. He had told the newscast that interviewed him that his long life was due to a combination of “exercise, diet, and optimism”. She had a vision of him, 112 years old, covered in brown splotches and wheezing in a nursing home alone. She grinned, hoping the extra few decades of life he had been given were filled with agony and suffering at the end.

He lived in the city, rarely coming in to Lachrymere to meet with the students he was in charge of. Why would he know who she was, when he lived in a city where no one knew she existed? Far more people would wake up tomorrow morning unaware of the lack of Tammy Poplewell’s existence than not. She had a sudden urge to go into the city, with all its Overdoses and Manslaughters, just to see what it was like. She had seen pictures, even drawing her own fictional accounts of what it would be. No parents from town allowed their children into the city, though Tammy knew Jason had been there many times. A death status didn’t mean you were safe; you could still be paralyzed or kidnapped or tortured or robbed. There were a lot of things people could do to you that didn’t involve death. Still Tammy wanted to see

it, just once, to know that somewhere aside from tiny Lachrymere knew she had existed, knew she had walked through town and past faces and crowds.

“Tammy.”

Her father was stepping out of the office. For a few seconds they just stood there examining each other. In the span of those seconds, Tammy’s entire life was displayed before her eyes: every birthday party, every deathday party, every art fair and dance recital and game of softball in the back yard. Every car ride with Abigail in the backseat, her dolls spread around her like tiny bodyguards, her mother looking out the window, her father leaning back, one hand on the wheel, rolling his eyes at Tammy through the mirror at her mother’s latest wistful comment. Her dad had built Abigail a dollhouse, but for Tammy he had built an easel for a massive pad of paper, with hooks and shelves for markers, paints, and brushes. He had let her paint in the shed, spattering paint all over the cement floor. Her mother had never stepped foot in the shed; her area of expertise was in the office with her paperwork. Abigail didn’t like the smell of the oil and lawn mower. It had been Tammy and her father’s little domain. She wondered if, after she was dead, he would remodel the shed, hiding her paint splatters, or if he would keep them there as some sort of memorial to her.

If he was thinking any similar thoughts, he didn’t speak on them. He instead cleared his throat.

“I took the rest of the day off,” he said, gesturing for her to follow him out the front door. She glanced at the office to see whether she should sign out or not and caught eyes with Miss Fancy. She was standing in front of her desk watching them, and Tammy knew she’d never again see this woman, who had winked at her when she came in late, who had rescued

countless students from office detentions and let many others wait out uncomfortable or boring periods in her office under the guise of giving them copies to run off. Miss Fancy nodded once, slowly, before turning around and getting back behind her desk.

Her dad steered her out of the office and out to his car. "So what do you want to do?" he said, as they both got in the car. She buckled her seat belt out of habit, even though Pamela wasn't there to glare at her until she did.

What do you want to do?

She hadn't realized until that moment that that's what she'd been waiting for. Someone to ask her what she wanted and help her get it. She hadn't wanted anything, hadn't let herself want anything, for so long that when he asked there was nothing to say. She thought briefly of the things she wanted that she had pushed out of her mind so many times: to go into the city, to graduate with Pamela, to spend one last day with Bobby like they were children playing at being adults. He had been the only one of their class who hadn't played death games. His own father had died when he was in middle school. His parents had married despite the inevitability of his mother becoming a single mother, a fact Pamela's mother had seen as very low class. The idea that Tammy's parents would encourage Tammy to want things was also irresponsible to Pamela's mother. Maybe she was right.

Her father was asking her what she wanted to do, something he could actually take her to see, and she could think of absolutely nothing to say.

She gave him a sidelong glance, his knuckles white over the steering wheel, his forehead creased. His voice had taken on that false light-hearted quality it did whenever he had to cover up his own problems to make room for other people's.

“Do you,” she asked, trying to gather the words, “Do you want to play a board game?”

His face spread into a grin, and he took the turn that led into their street.

“Your mother doesn’t know I came to pick you up,” he said, and they fell easily into the old routines of him secretly picking her up from school in the middle of the day for “an appointment”, their code word for pizza, ice cream sundaes, and checkers. In case her mother was home for lunch, they would do a drive-by of the house, Tammy ducking her head between her knees while Dad scoped the house for activity.

“All clear.”

Tammy straightened up, laughing, and they got out of the car. She pulled every board game they owned out of the basement while her dad ordered a pizza. Guess Who was always a good choice for two people, Monopoly was boring but her dad loved it, and checkers was the old classic. The only game she left on the shelf was Life. It was one of the old editions of the games, the one that still had a deck for different deaths that people could choose. They picked their death card along with the cards for marriages, children, and jobs. The board of death statuses had agreed that it was cruel to give children false hope and had mandated the death status cards be done away with altogether. She brought Clue upstairs too, even though it was no fun with two people.

They spent the next few hours like any other appointment day. There were moments—like watching her dad pick the anchovies off his slices, ordered that way because she liked them, or watching his glee when he landed on the tallest ladder in Chutes and Ladders—when she almost forgot about her death. She had so much practice finding little threads in every conversation that somehow led her mind back to her death. Of course her dad felt the same

way. She hoped he played games with Abigail when she was old enough, and she hoped he laughed like this with her.

The time of the funeral crept closer and Tammy's father called her mother to spin some story about picking Tammy up, saving Tammy's mother the trouble. Tammy went upstairs to change into her funeral outfit, a cream colored dress with a blue shawl.

Yesterday after school Pamela had called her over to preview the dress she was wearing to the wake and funeral. To Pamela, this event was akin to Prom. Her outfit of choice was going to be a floor length black gown with a veil draped over half her face. She had been saving up for it for months, putting aside money from her crappy coffee shop job so she could order it.

"What do you think?" Pamela had asked Tammy, who had been sitting on the stool to Pamela's vanity. It seemed to Tammy that Pamela had been directing the question more at her own reflection than to Tammy herself, but she answered it anyway.

"Eye catching," she said, because it was the closest she could come to giving a compliment.

"Oh," she said, clapping her hand over her mouth, her eyes widening, "I'm so sorry! It's *your* funeral!"

In all their years of friendship, Pamela had yet to grasp that not everyone craved attention in the same manic way she did. Pamela's ability to draw attention off Tammy herself was the bedrock on which their friendship had been founded. Who could feel sorry for poor little doomed Tammy when Pamela was flouncing around in glittery jackets and purple eye shadow?

"I'll live."

Tammy followed this with a grin to tell Pamela it was a joke.

Pamela frowned, her forehead wrinkling underneath all the makeup.

“This is hard enough,” she told her, pulling out her ponytail to compare hairstyles with the dress, “Without you making awful jokes.”

Yes, Tammy had thought in the ugly voice that sometimes clawed its way to the forefront of her mind. I can see how hard this must be, for you.

Tammy was jerked out of her thoughts by the sound of her mother coming home downstairs, Abigail whining behind her. She gave one last look at herself in the mirror. This is the outfit you’re going to die in, she told herself. Some people, especially the elderly, interviewed people at the funeral home to decide who would change their clothes after they died. The thought of some funeral attendant dressing her dead body had been more than she could bear, so her family had made special arrangements to bury her in the outfit she died in.

“Tammy,” her mother was calling her from downstairs. She walked down the hall, past the professional portraits of the entire family hanging on the wall. She imagined her parents and Abigail, all of them Old Agers, getting new portraits every year, as was their tradition, their pictures getting older and older while Tammy’s remained sixteen.

They all piled into her father’s car silently. What could be said? She watched her mother in the side mirror, her head in her hands. Her father was silent aside from the occasional grunt at another driver’s rudeness. Abigail played with her dolls. The walls of the car were closing in, and all Tammy could do was breathe and close her eyes. She knew how long it took to drive from her house past Bobby’s and even with her eyes shut, she could feel the presence of his house. His mother had made homemade play-do once, and they’d rolled it into balls and flung

them at each other. They'd spent one afternoon timing to see how long they could stand on their hands, another burying treasure in the backyard, and another watching Disney films in slow motion to see if they really contained hidden swears.

They stopped talking after Bobby's father's funeral, or rather, Tammy had stopped talking to him. His father had opted for a more private funeral at their house, though he was old enough for his death not to make such a massive spectacle. Tammy and her parents had gone, but Bobby wasn't there. She knew where to find him, and she climbed up to his tree house, the one his father had built. He was sitting with his back pressed up against the blank chalkboard his father had designed when Tammy and Bobby played school together. He held a worn baseball mitt in his hands, running his fingers over every tear and wrinkle in the fabric. He looked up at her when she stood on the threshold, knocking on a plank of wood to announce her arrival.

"Hi," she said, sitting down across from him. One of her old sketchpads was on the floor and she picked it up, flipping through it and examining the drawings in case he didn't want her staring at him.

"Hey."

After a moment of silence, she pressed her lips together, debating whether it was ok to ask him a question. Finally it spilled out of her.

"Why aren't you with him?"

He shrugged, putting the glove down and picking up one of the books from the tall pile next to him. He didn't read it though, just stared at the front cover.

"There are a lot of people down there," she continued. "That's good."

“Why is that good?”

She hadn't expected him to start talking. She paused, and he stared at her, not looking angry, just wanting to know.

“Imagine if no one came. Isn't it better? To have a lot of people at your funeral?”

“It would be better not to have a funeral at all.”

“What? And just die?”

He closed his eyes and threw the book down next to him. Her heart was racing. Should she not have said anything? Her teachers had recently sent a note home for her parents. She opened it and read it of course, and it said they were worried about her, about her feelings towards her death. She was withdrawn and insensitive when she talked about it, blurting things out without filtering them for the other kids' ears. The note didn't mention what other people were saying: this was the problem with mixing kids with different statuses. Why should she spoil it for the normal kids, just because she was going to die earlier?

“Why do people have to die at all?”

It was her turn to stare at him, at the impossibility of this statement. She would never have entertained the thought in a hundred years. Of course people had to die. Some died sooner than others. Some died in more painful ways. That was the way it was.

“What if the algorithm's wrong this time? I read in this book—”

“It's never wrong. He's going to die.”

Guilt immediately coursed through her, but her mouth was quicker than her conscience.

“There's nothing you can do. Nothing anyone can do.”

His breathing grew ragged, his brow scrunched up. “Why are you telling me this? What’s wrong with you?”

“What am I supposed to say?” She stood up, having to duck her head to avoid hitting the rafters. Her hands balled into fists before she forced herself to uncurl them. “That I’m sorry? That it’s ok? That it’ll get better?”

He sat there, curled up in himself, his mouth hanging open. She fled, tears blurring her eyes as she struggled to crawl down the ladder out of the tree house. She ran from the yard into the street, down the sidewalk, and past her own house. What was wrong with her? What was wrong with *him*? Mr. Buckwood had lived for over forty years; he had a wife, a house, a kid, a job. He had *everything* he could want. He had lived long enough. He *had* his time.

She stopped, collapsing onto a park bench, putting her head through her hands to slow her breathing and the tears. How could he think, even for a second, that the algorithm was wrong? It was impossible. Hopeless. The thought alone made her want to scream.

A few weeks after Bobby’s father died, a few weeks of avoiding each other desperately, Bobby tried to approach her. Whether he wanted to apologize or yell at her for being such an insensitive horrible person she never knew. She never let him say more than two words to her again. She ducked her head when she drove by his house and he was outside. Whenever he approached her in the halls at school, she turned to Pamela and talked loudly over his words. Pamela became her new best friend. Whenever Bobby came to her house to try to talk to her, she had her father tell him she wasn’t home. She told herself it was better this way. He had already seen one person he loved die; he didn’t need to be around for her funeral. She told

herself it was because she was doing the right thing, that she was protecting him. Looking back at it now, it was painfully obvious how untrue that was.

There were many things she had to cut off from her life if dying was going to be easier, and he was one of them. The presence of him in her memories caused her stomach to twist and she closed her eyes for a moment, willing herself into another memory, another friendship.

Tammy's relationships with Pamela and Bobby had begun in preschool, before the reality of death had seeped its way into every facet of her life. Once the death concept sunk in, few people wanted to begin friendships with her, at least until the weeks before she died when it was cool to talk to her again. Her friendship with Pamela had had its ups and downs, but it had lasted this long. At least Pamela was consistent.

The funeral home came into sight and the car pulled to a stop. Tammy's father put the car in park and walked around to the other side to let Tammy's mother out. Mrs. Popplewell was looking a lot more splotchy and red-eyed than she had been when they left. She hugged her purse to her chest and turned her head from Tammy as Mr. Popplewell opened the door for her. Mrs. Popplewell attempted to put on a brave face for the funeral director, who had popped out of the back door with a tight smile.

"Mr. and Mrs. Popplewell," he said, nodding his head at them. Tammy's dad managed to shake his hand at least, but all Mrs. Popplewell could afford was a brief nod.

"You must be Abigail," the director said, and Tammy jumped. She had forgotten her little sister was in the car. The car had three rows of seats, in case Tammy wanted to be alone and "think" without a seven year old to chatter to her. Abigail was the farthest thing from

chatty. She looked up at the funeral director long enough to acknowledge his existence before quickly returning to her handheld computer game, one involving shopping and cake-baking.

“Tammy,” the director said, with an expression so solemn it was like she had already died.

“Hello,” she said. Being a funeral director, he had probably encountered tons of people reluctant to die. He was probably used to tears by now, but he wouldn’t be seeing any from her.

A few hundred people showed up to her funeral, typical for a Die Young. From the time the funeral home opened to around 5 o’clock when the service ended, a constant stream of people came to talk first to her and then to her family. She knew roughly half the people, through school or her family, but the rest were strangers from neighboring towns, typically families with kids about Abigail’s age. It was a rite of passage to go to a Die Young funeral, like a bar mitzvah or getting your driver’s license. Tammy herself hadn’t needed to find another town to go to hers; Penny had died at around the right time for her to go. There were other independent groups there too, like different religious groups and people like Karen who were campaigning for more rights for Die Youngs. Funerals were the closest thing Lachrymere had to town wide social gatherings.

Her mother and father stood next to the casket the entire time, her father wearing the pinched expression used to resist crying, her mother red-eyed but talkative, reaching out to hug the mourners who were particularly emotional. No one hugged Tammy, thankfully, aside from her great aunt who smelled of cabbage and who Tammy hadn’t seen since she was six. Most of the mourners tried talking to her, either through watery expressions or the false high-pitched

chatter of denial. A few didn't say a word, kneeling before her to pray, which made Tammy cringe.

"You were always nice to me," a boy with glasses from one of her chemistry classes told her. This was a lie; she had never actually spoken to him, unless copying his homework which he strategically placed on the corner of his desk counted.

Her seventh grade boyfriend gave her back the plastic Crackerjack key chain she had given him for Valentine's Day.

"I thought you could have it with you," he said, patting her on the arm. Whether he meant she would have it with her in the coffin or in the afterlife was unclear.

Her three cousins who lived in Arkansas also flew up for the festivities. They had thick accents and wide passive aggressive smiles. As they walked by, each shook her hand firmly. Each shake was like the sound of a hammer nailing in her casket. Old age, age 87. Heart attack, age 80. Old age, age 91.

Even Booker, at the spry age of 67, would die having lived four of her lifetimes.

The funeral home gave her the option of lying in the casket itself, in case her feet got tired from standing up all day. Lots of people did end up spending their funerals in caskets, but those were mostly the elderly. One twenty year old smartass from a few years back, a neighbor of Tammy's, insisted on sleeping through his funeral before overdosing the next day.

She kept looking up to see if maybe Bobby would come. She wondered how she could avoid him, whether maybe Pamela could distract him while she went to hide by the guestbook or the "weeping room" where family members could go to mourn in peace. This was an absurd thought. You couldn't escape your own funeral.

A religious group came shortly before dinner, the leader of which wore a long black robe and more hair in his mustache than on his head.

“Would you make peace with your God before your departure?”

She could scream. Why did these people insist that dying was some peaceful venture to go spend time with a holy being who had never died in the first place? Why did they imagine that, after death, it was some party surrounded by your grandparents who were young again, your old dog that died, and your best memories and dreams of who you could’ve been? There was nothing there. She would die and everything would end.

They seemed to correctly read her silence as refusal, and made strange gestures with their hands before walking away. She didn’t know whether they were sending her a blessing for the afterlife or trying to ward her evil spirits away from themselves.

“This is a funeral, for God’s sake!”

Tammy turned from the line of visitors, recognizing that voice anywhere. Pamela was standing, hands on her hips, towering over an unimpressed Karen, who was holding her ever present stack of petitions. Tammy scooted off her casket and strode over to them, leaving the next person in line, a woman in her mother’s book club, staring after her.

“What’s this one for?” Tammy asked Karen with interest.

“Disease rights. The way these people are forced into manual labor...”

Karen started to ramble on and Pamela continued to glower while Tammy scribbled her name at the top of the list. Would the name of a dead girl make people more or less inclined to sign this petition?

“Thanks!” Karen said, before taking back the petition and hurrying off to ask Tammy’s third grade study buddy to sign it.

“Why do you hang out with her?” Pamela asked, adjusting her veil and catching the eye of one of the other mourners. Charlie, his name was. He had mowed the Popplewells’ lawn a few times. He looked to be making his way over, then quickly turned and walked in the other direction when he saw Pamela was talking to Tammy. She had always thought death was an aphrodisiac, not a turnoff.

“Why do you think?”

Pamela gave her the same look she gave when Tammy asked why she put her blinker on when no one was behind her or in front of her.

“She’s annoying, Die Young status or no.”

“Oh, you thought I meant death status? No, it’s because of the free buttons.”

“Tammy.”

Tammy turned around, ignoring Pamela’s expression, to see her mother standing there, holding a handkerchief with shaking hands.

“We’re breaking for dinner.”

Tammy didn’t reply, turning back to Pamela. She heard her mother sigh and walk away.

“Aren’t you going with her?” Pamela asked.

“Why, when I’m having so much fun here?”

Pamela tugged the strap of her purse over her chest like she would her precious seatbelt.

“Right. I forgot you were the center of the entire universe, and we’re all just stupid planets in your orbit.”

Tammy blinked. It had been a long time since she had been the victim of Pamela’s wrath. She had forgotten how quickly it could rage through the room, without warning, like dry lightning. Was Pamela defending Tammy’s mother? As far as she knew, the only relationship the two of them shared was that whenever Pamela came over and then left, Tammy’s mother would pull back the curtains and watch Pamela scamper off, relieved she was gone.

“I’m sorry. Whose funeral is this?” Tammy said, though even in the middle of an argument little emotion crept into her voice. She had always been the constant in the midst of Pamela’s rages, the stillness to compare the storm to.

“How could I forget for a second?” Pamela replied, shoving past Tammy and over to a group of their History classmates, probably to squeeze out a few tears for their benefit. Tammy was at the center of the room, true, but people weren’t aware of her presence. They would continue circling with or without her approval or presence. She wasn’t selfish. Maybe she was, but it was her own death day. Surely she could be a bit selfish before she was dead?

She couldn’t breathe here, the gravity of all these people and their dramatic tears bearing down on her. She cut away from the crowd to the small dining room where her family was eating. She walked through the door, closing it behind her, and watched as her parents filled up their plates at the buffet table, her mother making up a plate for Abigail who was sitting at the table playing with her toys. Tammy came up to sit next to her sister. Abigail had once been like a human doll of her own, one whose hair she could style and games she could reign over. Tammy had once painted the walls to Abigail’s dollhouse, and she wondered briefly

if Abigail still had it or if it had been dumped to make room for her new line of toys. Tammy hadn't been in Abigail's room in years; for all she knew the dollhouse was still there.

"Who's this?" Tammy said, reaching over to pick up a doll with red hair. There had been a time when she knew all the names of Abigail's dolls.

"That's Car Crash," Abigail told her.

Tammy almost dropped it.

"What?"

"This is Old Age and Disease. That's Sleep."

Abigail pointed out each of their plastic vacant faces.

"Oops," Tammy said, popping off Car Crash's head, "Now it's Decapitation."

Abigail stared at her, before letting out a screech. "Mom!"

Their parents hurried over, Tammy's mother balancing two plates, one for herself and one for Abigail. Abigail wasn't actually crying, just scrunching up her face in an admirable impression of it. She snatched the doll from Tammy and waved it in front of her mother.

"Creepy little thing, isn't it?" Tammy's dad said, tilting his head.

"She broke it."

Abigail was making a big show of sniffing and hiccupping as their mother, sending a quick glare Tammy's way, popped the head back in place. Abigail had already forgotten, snatching a chicken nugget from her plate.

For a moment Tammy was caught up in the normalcy of it all. Another family dinner, with her sister making a show of being upset; her mother swooping in to save the day; her father sidestepping the incident with a quip or a change of subject. It was like they were at the

lake house again, where something in the water made them want to be around each other. Her dad didn't take refuge in the shed pattering around on machinery, her mother wasn't holed up behind a stack of paperwork in the office, Abigail wasn't playing in the corner by herself, and Tammy wasn't halfway out the door to hang out with Pamela. She wondered how many family dinners she had missed in the last few years. She had told herself at the time, as her time with her family became shorter and shorter, that it was because of her mother's stifling emotions, her tears and shaking hands. She looked at her mother, who was smiling slightly while she negotiated with Abigail to eat more broccoli. This is what it would be like after she was dead.

For years Tammy had nightmares about her death, visions of herself lying in a casket decomposing, rotting in her funeral clothes. She would wake up, her blankets thrown on the floor from trying desperately to claw her way out of bed. She was terrified of the playground slides at school, of Pamela's tree house, even her own bedroom felt tiny and dark and imposing. She would run to her parents' bedroom in her footsie teddy bear pajamas and sleep with her parents, her mother leaving the light on every night as a silent beacon. She would have crying fits in her classrooms that would lead to phone calls and early dismissals, her mother picking her up with her suit jacket half off and her car with some new dent in it from the mad drive over.

It took Tammy a long time to notice that her mother never hung out with the other women in the neighborhood, why she never went to their book club meetings or their afternoon teas. Tammy remembered coming home from Pamela's house one day, crying and trying to hide it. Her mother, balancing newborn Abigail in her arms, managed to read between the tears.

“What’s a replacement kid?” Tammy had asked, after recapping Pamela’s mother’s words, the ones she had understood.

Her mother hadn’t answered, though the color drained from her face. Tammy’s mother went over to talk to Pamela’s mother. Tammy would never know what her mother had said, because Pamela had refused to tell her. Pamela’s mother still looked at Tammy like she was a rotting piece of lettuce in her compost heap, but didn’t say another word about her death status. But after that, no one said hello to Tammy’s mother on her morning jogs. She ran past their porches though with her head held high as if she didn’t see them either.

The weight of everything her mother ever did for her hit her at once. Friendships and jobs had been sacrificed; she had spent the first years of her marriage in endless sleepless nights. For years Tammy had thought of her mother as the Woman Who Cried. Here at the funeral, her mother stood tall, her face staying still even through the tears, and her grief like a badge on her chest, daring people to ask about it. Even in the depths of her worst depressions her mother had gotten out of bed, came to work early, and managed to help raise two reasonably functioning girls. Tammy had always assumed her dad was the stronger of the two, the one that would hold the family together after Tammy died. Maybe she had been wrong.

Her mother looked up from Abigail’s plate and met Tammy’s eyes. Tammy looked down again at her own plate. The concept of eating anything right now felt foreign to her. Her mother’s plate remained untouched as well.

She forced herself to look back at her mother. She wasn’t crying, but she looked drained, as if the last of her tears had spent whatever energy she had left. The gray touches in her hair and the wrinkles around her eyes made her look far older than she was. The table grew

silent aside from the clanging of Abigail's fork. Tammy's mother opened her mouth to speak, but closed it just as quickly. How could either of them put all the years between them into words? There were no words in any language to describe what was translated in the look between them.

Someone knocked on the door before flinging it open without waiting for a response. It was Pamela, of course, having gotten over their little fight.

"Hey, are you—"

The sight of the family at dinner seemed to wire her jaw shut. Her eyes darted between the four of them with uncharacteristic uncertainty.

"Hello, Pamela," Tammy's mother said, her voice cutting through the silence.

"Hi, Mrs. Popplewell."

Pamela stood there, her mind no doubt racing for a remedy to the awkwardness. Bobby had been allowed to call Tammy's mother Diana, but Pamela either didn't have the privilege or wasn't comfortable accepting it. Tammy had a feeling it was the former, since it literally took a life or death situation for Pamela to feel uncomfortable.

"I was just checking how you were doing," Pamela said, finally deciding to use Tammy as some sort of peace offering. "If you were ready."

"Right. The party," Tammy's mother said, taking her knife and cutting her chicken into smooth, even slices. "You must have quite the celebration planned."

Even Abigail seemed to pick up on the tension, glancing up from her formerly decapitated doll.

Pamela cleared her throat. "We all want to celebrate Tammy's life."

Tammy's sitting right here, she thought to herself. It wasn't the first time she had watched her life being debated in front of her, but perhaps it would finally be her last.

"I'm sure. Tammy?"

Her mother was looking at her, and soon so was everyone else. They wanted her to decide what she wanted. Again.

"I'll be back in a few hours," Tammy said, pushing her chair back and standing up. Pamela graced the family with a polite smile before turning around and walking out the door, not checking if Tammy was following her. Tammy paused in the doorway, looking back at the room, at the plates, the folded napkins, Abigail and her dolls, and her parents both looking back at her. It had all the makings of a normal family dinner, but, like so many times before, death came into the room and spoiled it. She left, telling herself it wasn't the last time she'd see them. She had a few hours left; it wasn't even dark out yet.

"There's a back door," she told Pamela before she could run down the hall into the crowd. Pamela shrugged and followed Tammy.

Tammy didn't remember much of the ride over to Kyle Benson's house. Kyle was a football player, one of Tammy's "fringe" friends who would occasionally talk to her in class or nod at her in the halls. He was a lot closer to Pamela, who had talked him into hosting Tammy's after party. His parents were rich Old Agers who would often jet off to tropical islands and leave their son to his own devices. Kyle himself was a Heart Attack at age 67. Unlike Tammy's parents, who made a point to call her to make sure she was safe or give her lectures on caution, Kyle's parents thought he could take care of himself. That, or they were disappointed by the fact he wouldn't live as long as them and preferred to keep him at a distance.

Pamela spent the ride over telling Tammy about comments people had made to her at the funeral. She, playing the role of Best Friend, had been a kind and thoughtful ambassador to Tammy's character, telling them all sorts of good anecdotes about Tammy's life. Tammy ran her fingers up and down the passenger seat window.

"Don't worry. I made you sound good."

She wondered if Bobby might come to the party. It wasn't really his scene; he wasn't unpopular, but he preferred to keep to himself. Regardless the setting: bus stop, classroom, hallway, sidewalk, he would pull out a book to fill the time. He had lent her a few growing up, some of them about Die Youngs rebelling against the government and dying heroically. Others were historical fictions that took place before the algorithm was developed, when people's deaths were a mystery. He had always seemed so eager to be living in any world but his own.

"I can't believe how many people showed up!" Pamela was saying, "I wonder if that many people will come to mine."

Bobby had been the only one, aside from her parents, who knew how terrified she used to be of dying. He was the only one that knew about her sketchbook.

She had two sketchbooks growing up: the one filled with hearts and four leaf clovers that Pamela and her parents knew about, and the second one hidden underneath her bed. She called it her death diary. Some pages depicted her corpse lying in its coffin, others depicted her funeral with everyone she knew bowing their heads around her casket, and the others, the most secret pictures of all, depicted what she thought would happen after. One page was filled with chubby little angels, when she was fresh off a visit from some door-to-door fanatics persuading her parents to convert to save their soon-to-be dying daughter. Another page

showed pictures of her parents, Abigail, Pamela, and Bobby grown up, because maybe being dead meant watching your loved ones get old. The picture she was most afraid of, the one she made sure to flip past whenever she was going to a new page, was left blank. In case she died and afterwards there was nothing. No heaven, no hell, no watching over her loved ones or living out the life she would have had. Nothing.

Somewhere in the middle of the sketchbook were the remains of a torn out page. In a moment of impossibility Tammy had drawn a picture of herself and Bobby in front of a house with a white picket fence, a dog, and two children behind them. After her fight with Bobby, she stared at the picture for days, finally deciding to tear it out. She tore it into pieces so tiny it was impossible to make out what the drawing had been. It was a stupid drawing, more foolish than any of her unicorn and fairy pictures.

“Well most of the people we went to school with will be dead by then, anyway,” Pamela was saying, her voice drifting in and out of Tammy’s awareness.

Suddenly she felt the urge to be ten again, to be able to pour out all her problems on a sketchpad and feel like something had been resolved. To be at the lake house again playing games with her family, with Abigail a newborn and her parents’ eyes full of possibilities. To be able to hide behind Pamela’s dramatics, shielded from the world by Pamela’s ability to make everything, even Tammy’s own death, about herself. To be at Bobby’s house again, talking about anything and everything with even the slightest hope it would end in anything aside from death. To be able to want things like her drivers’ license and a graduation and a wedding, without feeling irresponsible or stupid for even thinking of it.

“This is it!”

They had pulled up to Kyle's house, located on a cul de sac with cars already lining the circle. They got out of the car. Tammy flinched when Pamela slammed her door shut. They were one location closer to where she would die.

Kyle's house had a spiral staircase, a gigantic chandelier, gorgeous stucco paintings, and teenagers holding red Solo cups and wearing band t-shirts. It was filled with the heaviness of pot and too many people crammed in one place. It made Tammy gag a little, and she suddenly wanted to run out of the house and breathe the fresh air again, but Pamela had already looped their arms together and was steering her into the fray. They walked into the kitchen, all marble countertops and mahogany cabinets. Through the crowd of faces gawking at her, Pamela saw Ian Fields, the subject of her freshman year "love", a boy she had dated for three weeks. Their dates consisted of playing video games in his parents' basement. He nodded at her in greeting, and Pamela, ever the helpful friend, dragged Tammy over to talk to him.

"How's it going?" he asked, casually enough to indicate he didn't want a real response.

Fantastic, she considered saying. This is the best day of my life.

"Good. You?"

He took a swig from his beer in response, wiping the droplets out of his beard before shrugging. He reached behind him into the refrigerator and pulled out a beer can as if it was his house. He offered the beer out to her, a Keystone. She hated Keystone more than anything but drank it anyway to avoid conversation.

"Do you know where Kyle is?" Pamela was asking, giving Ian and his beard a haughty look.

He shrugged. "Not my house."

Pamela ignored him and abandoned Tammy there to search for Kyle. Tammy peered after her, forcing herself to take a sip of beer, glaring at Pamela's back for leaving her alone here.

"Are you ok?" Ian was asking her, and for a moment, she thought it was in response to her scowl. But of course he meant the dying thing.

"It's a party, Ian," she said, "Not therapy."

"It was just a question," he answered and then said, "So."

He stopped speaking and seemed to expect her to translate this monosyllable into an actual conversation. After a moment of silence, he took another swig and said, "I checked, and no one's in Sarah's room. Wanna finish that and meet me up there?"

She looked at him. He had been really cute once, and she had liked him about as much as other guys she'd dated. But she wasn't in love with him; she didn't even love him. This is why dating someone with a different death status was incredibly stupid and pointless. How can someone entertain the thought of a relationship's future when it would only end in one way? The thought of Ian touching her again made her insides clench. Plus, he had a gigantic mole under his chin. Why had she ever liked a guy like *that*?

"Yeah, I'll be right up," she told him to get rid of him. How much of his newfound interest in her had to do with this being her death eve and it somehow making it cooler, and how much was him figuring she had nothing to lose and would be more willing than ever?

Instead of following him, she put the beer down and shuddered, trying to shrug off the conversation. She wished she was at home, so she could take a shower and wash all of this off her skin.

Coming here was a mistake. She would just tell Pamela she had to leave. She tried her best to avoid conversation as she tried to hunt down her friend. Still she got bombarded by a bunch of random people on the way out. They wanted to talk to her, get to know her better, ask her deep, life-altering questions. They wanted people to think they were friends.

“I just want to focus on what’s important,” Olivia Wilson was saying to her, trying to get Tammy’s advice on whether she should break up with her boyfriend before college.

“Do you know where Pamela is?” Tammy said.

Olivia’s lips twisted in a caricature of uncertainty. “She’s in Kyle’s room. You might not want to go up there though.”

Tammy shrugged past her and went up the spiraling staircase. Those Old Agers really did well for themselves.

She walked past a door covered with hippy beads and plastic sunflowers. Figuring it must be Sarah, Kyle’s little sister’s room, she hurried past. The door was open a crack, and she could hear Ian breathing through his mouth in there.

She heard voices in the next room over, recognizing Pamela’s high pitched sound. It wasn’t laughter she was hearing, or any other possible sounds. It sounded like she was crying. What was Kyle doing to her? Tammy ran over to the door and was prepared to tear it open when she heard Pamela’s voice muffled through the sobs.

“I just can’t believe it’s here already,” she was saying, and Kyle made a sort of hushing noise that sounded like a cross between sympathy and a desperate attempt to stop the crying.

“I used to think I could stop it from happening, you know? Like, I used to have all these theories about how it would happen. You know those movies about the people that get drunk,

pass out, and choke on their own vomit? I thought, what if that's what happens to her? That's why I never drink. You know, I never take her drinking with me. Or what if she has a brain aneurysm? If it's like, brought on by physical activity? We never signed up for sports. I never *did* anything."

Tammy's mouth hung open for a few moments before she realized and closed it. She leaned against the wall, bracing herself for the blows of this conversation. She shut her eyes, her head spinning. She would open her eyes and this would all be over. She would already be dead.

"Why should I get to live, when she has to die? I mean, I've been trying to live for her all these years. Do everything she can't. I just don't know anymore."

She continued to sob, and Tammy fled the house, the faces rushing past her a blur. She would walk home if she had to. Let Pamela finish up crying and panic over where Tammy had gone, wondering if she'd hurried home to bite the bullet already.

Growing up, she and Pam used to think it was the funniest thing, their nicknames rhyming. Pam and Tam. They used to think it was great, and now it seemed like the dumbest thing Tammy had ever heard. It made her want to hit something.

She tore her way out of the house and into the night air, cold and unforgiving. What did she want? To feel like she wasn't scarred all over, marked by something she had no control of. Like she was normal, like she could go back into Kyle's house and meet up with any random stranger she liked, and drink whatever she wanted, and smoke if she felt like it. Because there would be more waiting for her after.

She didn't remember making the walk to Bobby's house until she found herself knocking on his door, angrily, frantically. Time was running low; the sun would come up soon. Why wasn't he opening the door? Bobby finally answered, his eyes wide and his glasses seeming too big for his face. He had a book under one arm.

"Hi," Tammy said before she could stop herself and think of something wittier to say. This was so embarrassing, but not humiliating enough for her to leave again.

"What can I do?" he asked, taking in her wrinkled outfit, her hair that frizzed at the ends, the smell of beer and smoke on her skin.

"Don't be nice to me."

He looked at her, really looked at her, the way no one else ever did, and she thought she could cry. "You smell like cheap beer," he said, "And you look like you just rolled around in the grass for a few hours."

"That's better," she said, grinning for the first time that day since she had played board games with her father. They looked at each other for a long moment, still standing on the threshold, before their hands found each other and their feet found the old battered path that led to the woods behind his house. There was a tree house there they played in when they were kids, but her hands were shaking too bad to climb the little rope to get up there, so they settled on lying in the tiny patch of grass next to his shed. It felt like a dream, and not for the first time she wondered if she was already dead and this was all some sort of sick game, making her relive everything over and over.

Bobby gave her a sidelong look, assessing whether it was safe to talk to her in this state. Bobby had always been the one she was unafraid to snap back at. With Pamela, standing up for

herself seemed impossibly hard with Pamela's ability to twist every word or action into a slight against herself. She tried to give him a smile, to assure him he could say whatever he wanted, that he had earned that right, but she could barely manage a grimace.

"Why didn't you ever call?" he asked, his eyes searching her face while she resolutely stared upward.

"You were the one I'd miss the most."

She had practiced that answer, just in case. He looked at her for a second with the expression her parents did. Every hope he ever had for her was draining away from his face, and his eyes travelled over her features, committing them to memory. She looked away quickly and swallowed.

"And I was jealous," she continued, "You're an Old Ager. You'll have a wife and grandkids and a nice house and probably a dog."

"I'd trade with you," he told her. And she knew he would.

"I'm sorry I didn't come to the funeral," he continued.

"Don't be. I wish I hadn't."

They both looked at the stars for a few minutes. She didn't know which one he was looking at, but she was watching the star they had claimed when they were seven. It didn't shine brightly; it wasn't in the middle of the sky. It was tucked into a quiet corner, burning dimly, where it was unnoticed and maybe forgotten.

"Do you think it will hurt?" she asked. She was being melodramatic, but it was ok, because it was only her and Bobby.

"No."

“Will you tell people about me, Buckwheat?” she asked, using her old codename for him, for when they were playing Spy. She had coined it when they were nine, because of his last name: Buckwood.

“Of course,” he said, and, after a pause, he added “Poppyseed.”

Finally a smile reached her lips. At times with Bobby it felt like she was living someone else’s life, someone who would live a long and happy existence. She leaned into Bobby’s shoulder and stared at their star. For all they know it could have died out years ago, its light faded and wasted, but at least the light was still reaching them.

She didn’t know how long they laid there but she knew time was running out. She forced herself to sit up, hugging her knees to her chest, shielding herself from every terrifying thought.

“Will you walk me home?”

He stood up, brushing the grass off his pants and held out a hand to help her up. She grasped it, not letting go after she stood up.

She knew how long it took to walk from Bobby’s house to hers; it was a journey she had taken so many times a thousand years ago when she was young. She walked at a glacial pace, wanting it to last forever, wanting to postpone the night for as long as possible. She remembered him walking in her room one day and finding her with her sketchbook, her death diary. He would see her with her fake sketchbook and never ask what she was drawing, never ask for a drawing to keep for himself like Pamela always did. One day she decided to show him the contents of the death diary, and she watched him examining the pictures, his fingers hovering over the pictures but never touching them for fear of smudging the charcoal. She

didn't explain any of the drawings, not even the blank page. That sketchbook held every piece of her, and she had left it open for him to see.

She took a shuddering breath and asked him the question she had wanted to ask for years.

"What if there's nothing there?"

He didn't ask what she meant, but stopped walking and turned to face her. She stopped too, staring at her shoes and terrified to look him in the eye.

"Tammy," he said, and the sound of her name on his lips was enough to slow her ragged breathing, "What if it's better? The algorithm doesn't account for that. It's already taken over your life. You don't let yourself do anything, *have* anything because it'll get taken away. But maybe that changes after. Maybe you're the lucky one."

"What?"

She stared at him. She was many things, but "lucky" was the farthest item down on the list.

"What about the rest of us? God, what about your parents? We're the ones who have to stay here, miserable, without you."

She wished she could stay there, talking with him. She wished she could do something, something worthwhile, so he could remember her as someone wonderful and brave and heroic instead of a girl on the brink of tears. She wished she could formulate into words something, anything that would possibly be enough.

She leaned in, pausing to test his reaction. When he didn't pull away, she kissed him, trying to put everything she had ever felt or thought into the kiss, trying to tell him things she

wouldn't live long enough to know how to put into words. Breathless, she leaned back and said, "You're gonna move on. In a few years."

"No," he said, reaching out, hesitating, then touching her face, "I'll move forward. There's a difference."

She held back tears with as much dignity as she could muster. She walked up her front steps. Hand on the doorway, she looked back at him. He was forcing out a smile, as if smiling itself was foreign to him. She committed him, everything about him, to memory and stumbled through the front door.

She found her parents curled up together on one of the couches, Abigail in a sleeping bag on the chair next to them. There was an empty sleeping bag with her pillow on it next to them. It was just like Christmas morning, all of them camping out in the living room, next door to the family room where the Christmas tree and presents would always be. By the time Abigail was a toddler, Tammy was too old to believe but pretended to sleep anyway. Abigail always slept like a rock, right through the delivering of the presents. Abigail still believed in Santa Claus. Tammy wouldn't be there when she stopped.

She curled up in the sleeping bag quietly so she wouldn't wake up her parents. Mr. Fuzzy, her childhood teddy bear, was resting against her pillow. She wrapped her arms around him, his fur muffling her tears, holding onto him with such force she would die with him still locked in her arms. Despite her efforts to keep quiet, her mother opened her eyes and held out a hand. Tammy grabbed hold of it, wondering if her mother had been asleep at all.

"I love you," her mother said, locking her fingertips into Tammy's and holding on for dear life.

“I love you too.”

They stayed there in silence. Tammy hadn't realized how exhausted she was until she closed her eyes and nestled further into her pillow. When she thought about this night before, she had told herself, you won't fall asleep. You'll drink energy drinks and coffee and exercise and force yourself to stay awake. But she wasn't Penny the Murder or Ricky the man who walked off a cliff. She wouldn't die screaming or crying or begging for a different life. Bobby was right. There were things that were better than what she felt now. She had always felt a fragile little hope that she tried to hide from everyone else and herself, but maybe Bobby saw something in those sketches she herself hadn't seen. A future somewhere else. Somewhere better.

She didn't remember the exact moment she fell asleep, but she remembered what it felt like to finally open her eyes. She could see the news team on her lawn, parked up and down her street and flashing cameras at her. She saw Pamela's dumbfounded face and her parents' overjoyed expressions and tears. She felt Bobby's arms around her again; death didn't matter to them at all any more than it did when they were young. She heard the cries of the town, of the world, over the impossibility of it all. The girl who had died had finally begun to live.