Cold Snap

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Cold Snap

A Thesis Presented

By

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Approved as to style and content by:

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ABSTRACT

For my Master’s Thesis project, I will be writing an original piece of realistic fiction inspired by the “dirty realism” literary movement of the 20th century. This piece of fiction, at the end of these two semesters, will resemble a novella in length and style while focusing on execution and maintenance of profluence as an element of narrative craft. My first semester will be spent conducting topical research on female urban youth and modern sex work in the form of short interviews and field research, closely reading some relevant contemporary “dirty realism” pieces of fiction, and using craft-based handbooks to inform my understanding of suspenseful profluence. My second semester will be spent writing and revising my deeply informed piece of literature.
I dedicate this manuscript to my family for their undying support and unconditional love.
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I'll start by telling you about the first time I did it, in the Canal street station, in the early hours of the morning, after work. For some reason, the morning right before feels like the right place to start, maybe just because I remember the weather so vividly. It was a real bitch that morning. The coldsnap hit us hard and quick that year, taking a hold of the trees in its death grip and making the usually short and pleasant route home from the train station suddenly unbearable. I used to walk back and forth to the train every day, sometimes several times a day. I still take the train sometimes, but far less often than I used to. I moved across the river a few years ago, and most places I need to go I’m able to walk or send Norman. But anyway, as I walked home that morning from Union station, I remember my entire body clenched against the chill, head tucked down into my hoodie, shoulders a half step ahead of my feet, almost dragging them behind, desperate for shelter. My cheeks and ears felt like they were being gnawed by the wind. I got home quickly--like I said, it was a pretty short walk and I was really moving--only to see a shadow bobbing about in the front window. It looked like a frantic spider, arms shooting off into every direction, jerking side to side on berserk feet. It was no beast, though. Just my mother running late for work. I halted in my tracks. I was really hoping to have missed her by the time I got home. My shift had gone so late and I was beat, but my mother would certainly be oblivious to my demeanor and seize the opportunity to talk to me about work or that asshole Samantha, or the guy who kept showing up at the diner on her shifts just to flirt and she keeps working him just enough to keep the tips coming but who she
secretly wants to take her out she's just playing hard-to-get cause he seems like the kind of guy who likes that, or the throbbing that still persisted under the scarring on her left hand.

My mother's injury had happened about a month prior, while she was walking to Wawa to get a pint of ice cream. She saw the “sweetest looking dog” sitting inside a parked car along the way. The window was cracked just enough for her to reach her arm in, up to her elbow, and try to give the dog a pet. The dog, however, was unprepared for the intrusion and bit my mother's hand, of course, leaving her with bloody gash and tendon damage between her thumb and pointer finger. It looked too painful for me to give her shit about it.

Now, out in the cold and fully aware of how futile it was, I ducked down behind the chain-link fence that surrounded our house, trying to wait her out. I was hoping that by the time she did step outside she'd be too late to hold me up for long, giving the obligatory mini-monologue before rushing off town down the street towards the diner where she worked, leaving me free to sleep the rest of the morning away. But she glanced out the window, probably checking to see if the mail man had come yet, and saw me squatting on the sidewalk through the fence. She opened the front door and hollered out to me.

“June, are you okay?” she said.

“Yeah, just tying my shoe,” I said, standing up in defeat.

“God, it's freezing out here. Get in, wanna borrow that big fleece I got from Costco? I'm going in late today. Cece took my opening shift. Oh wait, I think it's
in the basement. I gotta bring up all my winter stuff tonight," she said. I was fucked. I told her I had my own clothes and headed in to change.

My dresser drawers were old and sticky, so when I wrenched open the bottom drawer with enough force to open it, most of the succulents on top toppled over, dirt spilling all over the floor. My bedroom was filled, almost absurdly so, with plants and flowers. In each empty corner rested small trees in black-plastic pots. On the windowsill beneath the large picture window sat three different potted plants, all striking in color. The three hanging from the empty curtain rod overhead were getting so long they almost touched those below (I was quite proud of their heartiness). One was a spider plant whose babies I had transplanted and found other spaces for, like the stool beside my bed or the kitchen table. I can’t remember what the other two were, but they were colorful and round. These, along with the gathering of succulents on my dresser and healthy ficus that moved about the room periodically because I couldn’t quite decide where I liked it best, were the only notable features of my tiny, mellow bedroom. My mom once told me that there wouldn’t be enough light for all those plants, but they all seemed to like it well enough to keep growing just fine.

The light in my room was filtered through all this plant life, giving it a cool green luster that calmed me. When the sun rose and the room slowly filled with light, I imagined it was filling up like a pond. This light usually soothed me, but I knew I had to go deal with my mother before I could come back up to enjoy it. If I avoided her, she’d assume I was mad at her then she’d really never leave me alone. So I needed to go back down and appease for a short while.
I ripped my clothes off swiftly, leaving me naked and shivering, eager to rebundle in warm layers. My wooden dresser was old and creaky, so it wailed as I wrenched open the bottom drawer. I pulled out the first pair of sweatpants my fingers found, black and lined with pilling from the dryer, and fumbled my legs into them. I found a long sleeve shirt and a dense sweater in the other drawers, and some thick socks. I picked my succulents up off the floor and brushed the spilled dirt beneath the dresser with my foot. They were hearty, I knew they’d survive just fine. Before heading down stairs, I took a quick glance outside. The air had that look to it, seasons first frost. Opaque gray sky. The telephone lines bounced in the wind.

I shuffled down the hall, almost slipping on the hardwood, as I hadn’t worn socks all summer and forgot to take it slowly. I made sure to brace myself with my arms on both sides as I descended the curved, wooden staircase. They were tricky steps if you weren’t paying attention, but growing up going up and down them gave me great practice for the spiral stairs at work. Other girls stared down at their heels intensely, trying not to stumble to stick their toes through the opening. I climbed and descended effortlessly, even on platforms. I think that’s why I loved my job immediately, moments of basic coordination or innate grace felt like accomplishments. First, you’re simply walking around without falling and it’s beautiful, then you’re learning to move or swing or climb and it’s powerful. I’m not saying it was easy, but I felt good doing it.

Arriving downstairs, I found my mother and Nicky sitting around the kitchen table, Eggos on paper plates.
“Sup Junie,” Nicky said as he looked up at me, only moving his eyes and beaming a quick smile, then returning his focus back down at my mother's hands, which were pouring syrup all over his breakfast plate.

“What's up, my dude?” I said, wiggling my numb toes in my socks, trying in vain to create heat. Nicky prodded his Eggo impatiently, placing it directly under the pouring stream of syrup.

“Jesus, Nicky, will you wait a second?” my mother said, putting the bottle down half irritated and half amused. She grabbed a paper napkin, licked it, and began wiping the sticky brown dribble off the back of his hand. She then wiped off a fork with the same napkin and plopped it next to Nicky’s plate. One of her hands was wrapped in a thick, white bandage, so she had to do so by pinning the fork down with her bandaged hand and wiping the prongs with the other.

“Here, use this so you don’t spill,” she said.

I started towards the coffee pot, which looked to have just enough left for one perfect, warm cup. I had made it about four steps when my mother asked me to walk Nicky to school.

“I really need to get going if I’m going to put on a fresh bandage when I get there.” She gestured with frustration towards her defective wrist. “And Nicky still needs to brush his teeth and get his shoes on. Thanks, June.” She threw her things into a little green purse--cell phone, house keys, chapstick, pack of Marlboro reds. A blur of dancing, maroon fingernails.

“Mom,” I started in protest, trying to explain to her that the club kept me until 4am. I knew she just wanted to sit and eat a free breakfast in one of the
diner’s plushy booths with one of the other waitresses and chat before getting out on the floor, but she was already starting out the door, waving over her shoulder and blowing kisses with loud *Muah Muahs* to overpower the sound of my retort, pretending she couldn’t hear me. Plausible deniability. But she did manage to get one last comment out, in parting, that infuriated me more than I’d like to admit.

“Love you, sweetie, you’re such a help, all things considered,” she said. It flew through the closing crack in the door before it was nearly cut short by the closing. My mouth hung open, desperate for the chance to respond. But I didn’t have the time nor did I even know what I would have wanted to say. Still, it enraged me that I didn’t have the chance. I wondered what she meant by that, *all things considered*? What exactly were my things to be considered? That I’m so surprisingly responsible for a stripper? For a white trash Jersey girl? That I’m so wonderfully helpful for a poor little thing with an airhead for a mother? I wish I had told her she was such a good waitress for a waitress. I guess if I think about it, this comment is part of the reason I start this story off on a particular morning. Partly because of the weather, partly because of this comment, but mostly because of what was going on in my head at the time these forces hit me. I believe they both played their parts in tipping the scale.

When the door pulled shut it sealed the house off from the freezing air that was blowing through from outside. I looked over at Nicky, still eating his waffles. The fork was a little too big for him, so every other piece fell off, leaving a sticky mess on the table in front of him. When it did, he’d lower his mouth to the edge of
the table and push the straggler in, hazel eyes round with focus. His cheeks were puffy and smooth, and his little pink lips were coated in syrup.

“You’re lucky you’re cute,” I said, shaking my head. “Now get your shoes and coat on after you’re done and I’ll zip you up. I just gotta go put more clothes on.”

Back in my room, I threw on some extra layers--a pair of leggings under my sweats, a wool hat over my head. This dresser was filled only with home clothes. Sweats and T-shirts and old jeans. I didn't care much for style outside of work, I usually prioritized comfort. My costumes for work, however, I was really proud of. They were all in a plastic bin in the bottom of the closet towards the end of the hall. I usually went with a badass emo kind of look, goth rockstar. Lots of leather and latex, studded bras and belts and torn fishnets. Black and dark purples. Some band t-shirts, like the Stones or Metallica, torn and cropped so short my breasts just hung out the bottom. One awesome black thong with a bedazzled skull on the front. Such a great find. Thick, chalky eye-liner. I thought it’d be a good niche for me, since I couldn’t pull off the “sensual exotic” or “innocent harajuku” thing some of the ethnic girls could. And I turned out to be right. Guys seemed to really like the goth thing. Are you gonna suck my blood?

Too easy.

When I got back downstairs, Nicky was already standing by the door at the bottom of the staircase. He had his coat on and zipped, backpack on.

“Good job on zipping your coat, buddy.” I scratched the top of his head.
“I’m smarter than your average bear,” he said with obvious pride. I bent over to reach in the brown wooden chest near the door. It was the first day this season I had to reach into the winter chest and fish around for matching gloves. I found two Nicky-sized mittens and held them open, one after the other, for him to push his doughy hands into. The only hats I could find in the chest were big, but I figured one would have to do. His curls were so dense it fit more tightly than I thought though, just barely covering his eyebrows. Almost time for a haircut.

I glanced back at the kitchen table where I saw his lunch box sitting. It was blue with a black handle, with ‘Antonic Watters’ sharpie onto the bottom. He said he was “too old” for the paw patrol one I’d gotten him when he started school. All the other kids had plain colored ones, so I grabbed him this fabric one in “it’s a boy blue” from Walmart. I swiftly walked over and grabbed it, he knew the drill from here. He turned around to show me his open backpack and I threw it in with perfect free-throw form. It plumped right in. “Money!” Nicky exclaimed as I stepped back towards him, zipping his pack up in one fluid motion.

“Alright, Mr. Smart Bear, let’s hit it.”

“Let’s hit it!” he echoed, stomping his feet. I pulled open the door hard against the sucking wind. We walked down our short side walk towards the road holding hands. Just as we reached the T-shaped intersection where our sidewalk and the one that lined the road met, a car began pulling off the sidewalk just in front of our house. When the tires pulled off the curb, they made loud thudding sounds.
Nicky and I started down the street. I held his hand high above his head and his legs slipped around a little, but once we got a few yards away from our house the ice was mostly cleared up. It was a pretty quiet morning, the kind of quiet that usually follows a cold snap. No one left the house without a good reason. Lucky bastards. The trees felt the weather too, as they looked equally unhappy, lining the street with crumbled brown leaves and cracking bark. Their skins, like ours, were drying up and cracking in the frosty air. I’d better remember to moisturize, I thought, when I get home.

“How’s science?” I said, squeezing Nicky’s hand. We lived only six or seven blocks from the school, so it really wasn’t too far of a walk.

“Good, we have to do a planetarium soon,” he said. The cold didn’t seem to be affecting him at all. He bounced his knees slightly with each step, not shivering or tightening up in the slightest. With each house we passed, all of which were small and chipping and usually pale in color, his demeanor stayed the same. Awake and in thought.

“Oh, I loved doing that. Any excuse to play with Play-Dough- I’m in,” I said.

He giggled and shook his head, as if I’d said something illogical. “We can’t use Play-Dough!”

“Why not?” I asked.

“Play-Dough is a toy, it’s not science,” he said.
“It most certainly is science! Scientists made Play-Dough,” I said, eyeing him, but his focus stayed on the ground, which had started getting slippery again. He was trying not to fall.

“Okay but… the planets are like real. People made Play-Dough. So it's not natural. They’re not the same. I need to use fruit or something,” he said.

Honestly, I didn’t know if I agreed with him or not. Yes, the planets occurred naturally, but people evolved naturally, so the things we do and make… aren't they natural too? It reminded me of my battles with Norman lately. Norman had a funny way of justifying things, but usually by the time he explained himself I couldn’t help but waver from my original stance. We had actually gotten into it the night before, when I’d told him, for probably the fifth or sixth time, that I didn’t want to work the private rooms. He’d ask me to do it, I’d tell him no, he’d ask me to explain why, but I never had a good enough answer. I’d just say it doesn’t seem worth it, or I didn’t picture myself doing that, or it was different from working the floor. He’d always have better responses, more practical than my I-don’t-know-I-just-don’t-want-to. He wasn’t trying to pressure me, he had plenty of other girls prepared to take private rooms. He was just trying to show me he made more sense than I did, and somehow he always won. That morning, sometime before my walk with Nicky, I realized I was just about ready to cave, or at least to ask him the questions he was waiting for.

“If you start bringing clients to the private rooms in the back, you’ll make double the money in half the time,” he said as he scratched his wispy mustache.
“Ask some of the other girls, they’ll tell you it’s worth it. You’re already sex-working, you’ve crossed that bridge, so why not work sex?”

Finally, I told him I’d think about it, and he handed me a small stack of business cards with the club’s name on them, just in case, so I could give them to guys who seemed interested and build up some regular clientele.

A block from the school, I realized I’d been tuned out for a minute too long. I wanted to really savor these simple moments with Nicky before he crossed the rotten threshold from boy to man.

“Kid, listen,” I said. “Play-Dough is just as natural as fruit. People can only make things out of what was already here on this earth, so everything is natural. Buildings, cars, your clothes, your food like Eggos. They all, at one point, were made from things that grew on this earth.”

At this point I’d lost him though, as we could see the school building just ahead. Screaming children were bouncing off the busses parked out front and prancing into the school’s open doors. I felt Nicky’s eagerness to join them, so I let go of his hand and gave his head a quick pat.

“Alright, Mom or Doreen, but probably Doreen, will be here after school. I love you.”

He had already started to run off, but still he made sure to yell back, “Love you, too.”

As I watched him run off, hands swinging, I knew I had to somehow find a way to keep him like this forever--tender, willing to listen. One day, they all turn. Does someone go around whispering “The world is yours” into the ears of
teenage boys in such an honest and convincing way that they believe it, and they continue on in their lives with a ferocity to collect what they’re owed? These men become stock brokers. Others, I believed, buried this boy deep within themselves for pragmatic reasons. A defense. At least that I could understand. I’d decided to hold onto this theory—that somewhere, deep inside the festering pits called the heart’s of grown men was a sweet little boy who just wanted to play. I kept this resolution with me every day in places like the subway and every night at work, looking for the playful little boy inside even the most vile of men.

The walk back to my house was as brief as I could make it. My breath had even started to show, and I could smell wood smoke from somewhere close by in the neighborhood. The cold metal fences lining the houses on the street flew by in a freezing gray whirl until I finally reached my own. Our house was small but cute, a pale yellow color with white trim and maroon shutters. There were two windows on the bottom floor and one on the second, centered beneath the pointed roof. That was my window, I could see my hanging plants from the street, a glowing Devil’s Ivy whose vines draped down like curtains, alongside a string of pearls and a Boston fern which was twice the size of the other two and took up more than its third of the space. I paused briefly to look at the sidewalk in front of Noreen’s house next door. It was a little smaller but more noticeable for its horrendous seafoam-green color. It matched Noreen—unapologetic. Our houses looked like two unlikely friends.

After cleaning up the kitchen table a little, throwing out Nicky’s empty plate and mom’s untouched waffle, I went straight up to my room and pulled my phone
out from under the pillow. In an effort to get some sleep, I’d muted it hours ago. I had two unread texts. I sat crossed legged on the bed, opening my phone.

The first was from Nate. I had started dating Nate about six months before with no hiccups so far to remark. He was tall with dark hair, a little wiry but not to the point where you feel like you’ll break him. Just lean. He was Camille’s boyfriend’s roommate. We met when Camille brought me to a party at their place in Paterson. I remember not being in the mood for a party, but Camille had just started dating this guy and didn’t want to drive into Paterson alone. I didn’t want her to either, so I’d come along. Camille’s guy was so her type, loud and confident, overtly Italian, large white-gold chain. Just what she needed. He held her hand above the heads as he ushered us into the party, which was nowhere near crowded enough to need assistance sifting through. Nate was quieter though, more raven like. He was easy to talk to and already knew what I did for work so that saved us one awkward conversation.

Now he sent: Are you able to come tomorrow night?

I thought that tomorrow now meant today, which was Friday, which he should have known by now means no, I could not come. I always worked on Friday nights.

I sent: I’m sorry I can’t I work :

The other message was from Norman. I was a little nervous to open this text. Maybe it was him following up, trying to push the issue further, telling me how Lady made close to a grand last night and never even had to climb a pole. After staring at the phone for a second, I finally opened his text. It turned out to
be nothing important, something about a schedule change. I breathed a sigh of relief and, with this small relief of tension, I flopped over on my side. The pillow caught my head with a welcoming coolness. I pulled the messy blanket over myself and drew my knees up towards my chest, finally ready to close my eyes and drift off. I thought of Nate as I drifted off. I really didn't even like him that much. He was fine, but it certainly wasn't love. I had sex with him all the time, mildly enjoying myself but gaining nothing. Was I missing something? What I wasn't old enough to realize yet is that sometimes it's safe to have these debates with yourself and sometimes it creates so many more demons than you ever knew would want to hunt for you. I didn't know yet that everything I did mattered, that it all added up to something, that I could end up as trapped as I am today. At some point, I fell asleep.
Once when I was nine or ten, I saved my mother from being robbed. We were sitting in the food court at the Moorestown Mall when a man came up to us and started chatting with my mom. I didn’t find it unusual because my mother would, if given the opportunity, sit and chat with strangers all day, and it seemed as though chatty people always found each other. You can see that someone is looking for conversation; you can tell by the way their eyes linger on your face in the grocery line or on your hands at convenience stores. My mother was one of those people, always eager to swap a laugh, so I was used to similar adults seeking her company and holding up our shopping trips. In times like these, I usually sat quietly and waited for it to be over so we could go on about our day. This man stood next to our table, sort of hovering over my mother, who looked up at him with great amusement. I sat across and waited, as usual, but I began to notice a strange movement in his leg, a slight twisting of the knee and foot. With each small movement, he was pushing my mother's purse, which was sitting on the ground beside her, further and further away from the table. I looked over my shoulder to see another man standing by the trash cans, watching us intently. My mother was oblivious to it all, enthralled in conversation, hands waving in excessive gestures. When I looked back over at the man by the trash cans, he was moving towards us, sifting in and out of sight behind the swarms of other shoppers, eyes still focused on our table. I put my little finger tips on the McDonald’s soda cup in front of me and pushed, sending the cup toppling onto the bag. When it hit, the lid blew off and brown soda exploded everywhere,
splashing all over my mother’s bag, the stranger’s foot, and up towards our faces. He leaped backwards, startled.

My mother yelled, “Jesus!” snatching the bag off the ground by the handles and shaking it, sending soda streaming onto the ground. The man looked baffled, stepping backwards slowly until he finally turned around and began hustling off. With my mother’s purse now safely in her hands, I scanned the crowd for the other man, finally spotting his back as he headed towards the mall exit.

“What the hell, June!” my mother shouted. “I gotta go get some napkins. Stay here.” As she stepped over the soda puddle and walked away, I don’t remember feeling relieved or proud at all, just more alert.

When I dream about that day, which for some reason happens frequently, there’s always some reason I can’t save my mother. I open my mouth to warn her and no sound comes out. Or I’m frozen in my chair. Or the cup just won’t spill, no matter how hard I shove it from the table.

This time, I awoke from my sleep with a slight jolt after another helpless dream spent failing to save my poor, careless mother from robbery. I looked at my phone to find it was already 7:30pm. I had literally slept all day. I sat up in bed with my cocoon of blankets tight around me. I felt clammy, my hair pasted to my forehead. I stretched out my legs with glorious satisfaction, pointing my toes and flexing my calves. I could feel the blood trickling down in a tingling delight. I loved to stretch out after a long nap like this. Even after dancing at the club for three years, I still came home with sore muscles after long nights. It was now
completely dark in my room, so this tingling in my legs and the enticing smell of Pork Roll made for a lovely way to wake up, truth be told. I unraveled myself and headed downstairs.

The kitchen and living room were lit a warm orange. Jackets draped over the backs of chairs, small shoes with dirty laces scattered about. Nicky and the DiSabatino boys ran about with planes and trucks in their hands, yelling and jumping. My mother sat at the kitchen table, clutching a paper towel as she chewed deliberately. Standing at the sink was Noreen, washing out some glasses and setting them on the drying rack beside the sink.

Noreen was a massive woman. In size, in voice, in smile. The strings of her yellow-white arpon stretched around her in a desperate attempt to connect and form a small, tight knot in the middle of her back. Folds of stomach hung over the tightened string just as huge plump folds of fat hung over the indentations of her elbows. Her roundness was of an inviting kind, though, like you wanted to nestle your head into her huge, hanging chest. Her face was round and wrinkled, crackling with dryness, framed with wiry red hair. Today, as she sponged off our dishes in smooth circular motions, that red hair was tied back in a nice black ribbon.

At the sight of me, my mother yelled something intelligible, but probably along the lines of “WHAT’S UP?” through a full mouth of hamburger roll, which made Noreen turn from the sink with a warm smile.

“Well, hey there, June,” she said. Her teeth were shaped like candy corn, the gums receding to expose narrow and browning roots. She said she avoided
the dentist because she didn’t want to pay to stare up some old man’s nose for an hour, but I think it was actually because she didn’t have insurance and was afraid of what they would find.

“Noreen, you goddess, did you make pork roll sandwiches?” I asked.

“I brought home the pork roll from work. Joe never checks the freezer. Well, he does check the freezer but he doesn’t bother to dig around inside the cases, so he really doesn’t know how many are in there,” my mother said, along with a few more sentences, but my attention never outlasts her lung capacity.

I walked over to the pan, full of bubbling grease, and fished myself out a couple slices of pork roll. Noreen had set up a nice little assembly line, sesame seed buns, american cheese stacked on wax paper. I made my sandwich and hoisted myself up on the counter next to Doreen. The boys continued to run, karate chopping each other and throwing plastic cars about. Noreen’s three boys, wrestling around with Nicky on the floors and couches, always looked like one fluid blob of freckles and wiry hair to me. She used to say they came out of her just as they continued to exist in the world, quickly and loud. As chaotic as it could become, I was glad Nicky had playmates so close. The three were a more dominating force than he, so sometimes I feared he’d get trampled all over. But I figured he’d better get used to boys like that now, because loud boys never grow up or calm down, they just put on business suits and keep on pushing their way around.

As I ate my sandwich, sitting on the counter, ankles crossed, my mother continued to ramble on about something to do with work or her walk home from
work or something that work reminded her of. Between the boys romping and yelling and my mother carrying on, the house was chaos. Noreen, through the noise, mouthed, “How was your day?”

“How honestly, I slept most of it,” I said.

“Well, that sounds lovely,” she said, smiling and drying her hands on her apron. She reached over and gave me a light pat or two on my knee.

Just then I looked at the clock over the stove. Though it was caked over with grease and splatters of old food, you could still make out the time. Just after eight. On Fridays, Camille picked me up and we drove into work together. I was especially glad for it today, as I could still feel the icy bite in the air so the walk to the train would be nasty.

“That was really good Noreen, thank you,” I said as I hopped down from my post on the counter.

“It’s nothing sweetie. We’ve got to get going though, these three are filthy,” she said, putting her hands on her hips as if admiring her brood like some work of art. I felt a swelling surge of envy as she looked over them with loving warmth in her eyes, envious of the boys for receiving such selfless love and of Noreen herself for having created something she was so proud of. I wanted to create something to love and watch after, something that made me stand back, hands on hips, and smile with pride, no matter how outrageous or disturbing others might find it. I loved Nicky endlessly, and I would’ve done anything for that boy, but my mother, of all people, actually created him, so all my care and attention, walks to school and new nice backpacks, could never change that. I didn’t want
kids necessarily, not at that time in my life anyway, but I did desperately want something that was wholly my own.

Now Noreen and I gave each other a quick kiss on the cheek, saying goodbye as she threw coats at dodging children. My mother blew loud kisses and thanked her for picking Nicky up and cooking and everything. Noreen was instrumental in the functioning of this house. My mother worked so often that Noreen usually just picked all four boys up from school and watched after them until my mother’s shift was over, cooking and cleaning up. My mother offered her cash a few times but Noreen always refused, she had her own three to watch anyway and was happy to “dirty someone else’s kitchen for a chance.” My mother repaid her with lewd, extravagant stories and genuine laughter she couldn’t really get at home. Noreen was single and didn’t work; I never asked how she kept her bills afloat. Without my mother she probably would’ve been pretty lonely. I, myself, got something out of the proximity, as well. I couldn’t quite put my finger on it, but I felt heard by Noreen. She looked at me warmly and when she asked me “How was your day?” I felt like she genuinely wanted to know, unlike my mother who only ever asked in an effort to find an opportunity to talk about herself.

Noreen, her boys running out of the house in front of her, left with a gentle wave. I waited for the door to shut then made my way upstairs to get my backpack ready for work.
I waited out front with my arms crossed, rubbing my knees together in an effort to stay moving. I usually had a cigarette while I waited, but I didn’t want my hands exposed that long, so I decided to wait until I was in the car. My breath was just barely starting to show, I could see it rising like steam under the streetlights. The first cold day of the year was always the hardest. But I heard Camille’s car rounding the block, heavy bass bumping through the night. The green Explorer rounded the corner with only slight consideration for the stop sign and halted in front of me with screeching brakes. The window wasn’t rolled down, but Camille yelled out to me anyway. Her lips read, “Hi babe!”

I opened the door and used the handle to climb into the massive truck, throwing my bag into the backseat before pulling the door shut. Camille grabbed at me, squealing greetings as I tucked my numb pink hands between my legs and hunched my back over my lap. She poked and pinched at my back with excitement. The car smelled like cigarettes and coffee, a reassuring and familiar combination.

“It’s Friday,” she said. Her huge, white smile glammed through the darkness of the night. She’d gotten her teeth done about a year prior. I told her she looked like she had a mouth full of chicklets, but they really looked great against her dark hair and deep, olive skin.

“I know, I’m excited,” I said.

“I’ve been working on something new. It looked good while I was practicing, but I don’t know if I’m strong enough to hold it,” she said, laughing
then taking a drag on her cigarette. “It’s like all arms, I do not want to fall of the fucking pole.”

“You’ve got it, try it out,” I said. “It'll be a good night to come out with something fresh. Plus, if you fall, people will feel bad for you and that might make you a buck or two, if you find some tear fetish guy.”

She shoved my shoulder, and the car swerved.

She made quick work of the turnpike, jerking the wheel to change lanes, swerving around the other cars headed into the city. Between the wild driving, the loud music, and the cup of coffee she always picked up for me, driving in with her was the perfect way to get amped up for a night at the club. I felt in my element when I was in the car with her, loud music and wind whipping, headed in to dance for the night. The excitement of it all was like sunlight, I leaned in to soak it up. Once on the Newport bridge, you can see the city off in the distance, rising from the ground like a glittering, jagged mountain. I loved bounding towards it in this massive, loud beast of a car with Camille. It gave me confidence, a sturdy feeling in my bones. Competent and able. Being almost there, we both lit a cigarette up and cracked the windows just barely. There was a billboard just off the highway that showed a lady in a sports bra, twisting around uncomfortably to showcase a MeltaWaist weight loss shake. Underneath the picture it said, *Earn your reflection.* The city’s smell of exhaust blew in through the windows, we nodded our heads to the music. I was feeling energetic now, and thankfully the cold didn’t scare New Yorkers--a Friday night was a Friday night.
The parking lot was just about a block away, around the backside of the club where there were few streetlights and the prevalent stink of dumpsters. It always amused me how the inside of the club looked like a shiny, swanky lounge with gemstone chandeliers while on the outside, just beyond one brick wall, live colonies of rats and festering filth. It was just like the neighborhoods--cross over one thin boundary and you could travel to a different world, one less illuminated and more desperate.

As always, we entered through the back door, which was heavy and rust-covered. Camille leaned her whole body into pulling it open and waited for me to trot in before releasing it behind her and skipping along after me. This door brought you to a long, poorly lit supply closet. Tall metal racks, which lined the hall on one side, held huge boxes of paper towels, toilet paper, sanitizer bottles, baby powder, cocktail napkins, small black straws, windex, and non-perishables like massive jars of olives and cherries. The racks and boxes stuck out so far on the left, your space to walk down was pretty narrow. You had to keep in a pretty tight line to make it through unstained by the dirty cement wall on the right side.

We hustled down the hall, holding our large backpacks with both arms in front of us so as not to knock over any boxes or scrape against the wall. At the end of the hall were two narrow doors. One was to a small, green-tiled bathroom with flickering lights and the occasional drain fly. The other, straight at the end of this tight, dank hallway, opened up to our dressing room.

Opening the dressing room door nearly blinded me every time, as the large white room was lined on all sides with tracks of bright white neon lights.
The artificial light was better for hair and makeup. The brightness of the room was met with just as much noise, sights, and smells to create an absolute explosion of sensation--every night I came through that door I always smiled just a little.

The girls fussed about loudly, a mad swarm of flies attracted to the bright white room like a bulb. They laughed and spun around in their chairs, heads tilted back and hands clapping. They swore about bills or husbands or cheap customers. Houston had her hair up in massive rollers, spraying her entire head and face with sweet smelling hairspray. Coco had her foot up on the counter, slathering a gold colored lotion up and down her leg, hips squeezing out of her body suit just enough to reveal a small red tattoo on her hip, a faded heart maybe. Camille and I fought our way through to find a space to sit. The counters were littered with rosy-colored compacts, unsheathed mascara wands, broken shards of brown and gold bronzer, strands of hair extensions with clips on the end, checkbooks, hairbrushes, aerosol cans of body and hair glitter, pantyhose, vaseline, dirty and clean q-tips, cotton balls, sets of eyelashes, open notebooks with dainty scribbles and yellow highlighted boxes, cellphones, and more tubes of lip gloss than there were girls in the room. The white light bulbs over each mirror gave everything a more distinct outline, solidifying each item as its own individual entity taking up its own piece of space. I loved, and still love, artificial lights for this reason. They make me feel more pronounced, more vivid and colorful.

We plopped ourselves down in two empty chairs and began unloading our backpacks. While we were in the midst of changing, Ebony greeted us warmly
and asked if we’d heard what happened to her last night. Apparently some quiet, older guy, a real wallflower type, tipped her three hundred dollars if she’d sing something, anything, by Aretha Franklin while he rested his head on her chest.

“Must’ve been some retired five hundred owner I’ve never heard of,” she said. “Or old money.”

I wondered what was so different about what we did from acting. People wanted their emotions manipulated, they wanted to see human bodies moving sheerly in performance. That’s why they paid money to go see plays or movies or musicals or baseball games. It was all the same work, really. Other humans, moving their limbs in just the right way, changing their tones, putting on a display that inspires a certain reaction. That’s the thing, back then I really couldn’t see the difference—acting, singing, sports, stripping. I knew other people saw the difference, as I was certainly not treated like a movie star walking about the streets of New Jersey, but I chalked it all up to weird societal rules people follow if they were fearful or religious or old. Now, however, I know that there is danger in that kind of thinking. My open-mindedness, out-of-the-box thinkingness, led me to a place of no return, a place where I don’t know how to rationalize what I’m doing anymore, I just know that it feels wrong.

Anyway, I remember Ebony laughing and combing her fingers through her hair as she told us how he even teared up at one point, she could feel the wet hot tear dribble down her chest. “Like how lonely does someone have to be?” she said.
“I think it's kinda sweet,” Star said, popping her head out from behind her mirror, eyelashes clamped in a curler. “He just wanted a quick cuddle.”

“Hey, sweet, lonely, who cares what he is, I'm just glad he's not cheap,” Ebony said. Her toned bicep flexed as she brushed her hair off her shoulders. She'd been in a weightlifting club throughout high school, and she continued to use a lot of those skills on stage. When I first started, she helped me learn some of the basic grips and spins on the pole. I remember that she looked like she was floating, fluttering and gliding around it, landing so lightly. For an hour or two I tried to copy her, and I almost broke my neck. My arms were sore for weeks, and my knees and hip bones went deeply blue with bruises. I stuck to the floor from then on.

In my slippery seat before my mirror, I started the process of putting on my makeup, Camille shifting restlessly from side to side in her seat beside me. I held my arm steady as the glue between my lashes and lid dried. With a steady elbow, I flashed my eyes down at my phone sitting in front of me on the makeup counter.

Nate sent: I hope you have a great night, make a million.

He really was much sweeter than any guy I'd been involved with or even any guy I'd heard my girlfriends gossip about on the floor of the high school bathroom or while sitting, crossed-legged, on the makeup counter in the dressing room at work. I wasn't sure how long he and I would last, but I really appreciated being the more detached one in the relationship. I replied to his text with
something impassive. I probably said, “Thank you,” or “That’s so sweet,” and set to work on my other eyelash.

The main girls—the vets—went out in a line like soldiers. Camille and I had time to continue our process before we had to hit the floor.

“I wish I could find a big tipper like that,” I said. “Just sing for the guy and—Boom!—three hundred dollars.”

“I’d never do that,” Camille replied, holding her face totally still to create the perfect wing of eyeliner.

“Why not?”

“That’s way too personal,” she said.

I couldn’t believe what I had heard. I stopped what I was doing and turned my head slowly to look at her. “How in the hell is singing to someone too personal and grinding on their lap isn’t?”

She seemed unfazed by my logic. She didn’t even turn her head or eyes towards me. “Because singing to someone is like revealing a very serious piece of yourself, like installing a window into your soul then selling the view. It’s like soul prostitution.”

“Soul prostitution,” I said, chuckling and shaking my head. “Listen, I don’t tell people how to spend their money, so I don’t want to be told how to make mine.”

“Oh, no. I’m not saying you shouldn’t. I’m not here to judge. It’s just that I never would myself. Some things are sacred.”
Camille and I disagreed on plenty of things, one of which apparently was the definition of sacred, not to mention the convenience of brief and lucrative financial transactions. I fitted my wig onto my head carefully and stood up, studying myself in the mirror. “All right, well get your non-sacred ass up and let’s hit the floor,” I said, giving her hip a slap as I walked past her and out into the club.

My favorite part about the club was the neon lights. The pinks and purples, the way they made sequins and diamonds give off a glittering pink reflection. As soon as I stepped out, the smell of strong, clear liquor and musty mop water wafted out from behind the bar, the same as every other night. I gave a quick wave to the bartender and honed in on my surroundings. Busy night, plenty of suits and shiny watches, a great sign. A twenty-first birthday, a cute blonde girl. She wore a pink and white sash and she and her friends shrieked and hollered beneath the main stage. Since I hadn’t really gotten moving yet, I felt a slight chill, goosebumps pricked up on my arms and stomach. It was my job to find a group of guys to hangout with, get their blood pumping and cards out, try to sell a few lap dances. It always went the same. Neon glowing grins, a tight grip on my ass while a cold drink splashed on my legs and trickled down my foot. I walked over to a group of young guys and sat on the arm of the loudest one’s chair. He put his hand on my lower back and pointed at his friend, hollering, “That pussy over there, he really needs a dance.”

Peering over his shoulder, I saw Ebony coming out of the VIP room with her hips swaying, chin held high. She looked so strong and dignified, so secure
in herself. I wondered what the difference was, really, between that place and the floor I worked on. I still sat on old men’s laps. I still laughed at the stupidest jokes about tax season, smiled as they ragged on their old wives for having stretch marks on their bellies. Everyone, I thought, is selling something. Behind the counters of convenience stores and typing behind glass storefronts. To make money you have to sell something, and to sell something you have to own something. What else did I own? And in truth, selling a dance or a touch or a smile made me feel more powerful. I liked learning to control the mood in the room. I liked the attention. I liked being active for my money, and I really liked the girls I’d met at the club, because they reminded me that you could still be beautiful and kind and counterculture.

I made my way over to the quiet one, across the circle from the one who’s lap I was sitting on. If he was elected to go first there must’ve been some reason for it — a breakup, a promotion. Something that makes people want to spend money. I straddled him backwards and started my dance. I felt a finger slip beneath my pantyline, leaving a folded bill tucked up against my cheek. It seemed as though they were willing to spend, after all. It was time to turn it up a notch. I turned back around to face the guy, whose eyes were glistening like a teenager who’d just gotten his floppy little penis fondled outside his jeans for the first time, lips parted ever so slightly, trying to mask his arousal. Poor thing.

Over his shoulder I got a different view of the club, more of the floor. I could see Camille standing over some grey-haired old man. She shimmied her shoulders back and forth rapidly and she rolled her tongue, her large, full breasts
shaking in his wrinkled face as he bruised her collarbone with dollar bills. Some things are sacred, I remembered her saying. Camille’s rationalizing of morality took her in different directions than mine, but was nevertheless convoluted and opaque. Now, I wish I had cared less about reconciling the differences and just thought for myself, felt for myself.

As I danced I felt the tickle of dollar bills flutter, falling, down my lower back. The friends in the circle behind me must’ve been in need of some attention-- it was time to open up the circle. I stepped back off the shy one and got down on my hands and knees in the middle of their circle and crawled over toward them. I could tell these guys liked a bold type, the classic conniving slut. It was in their body language--knees open, stiff-backed. Down on the ground, knees apart, I swung my hair around and around. They approved, showering bills down onto me. Transactions like these felt wholly honest and carnal, like calling a spade a spade, trading pleasure for pleasure. I had something to give them, something they naturally yearned for, dreamed about. They, in turn, had something that I didn’t have. We exchanged these things shamelessly, without loaded contracts or false advertising, here on the floor of this musty neon bar. Everyone left the club happy.

I will say, there is a slight degradation when the song ends and you begin collecting your money from the dance, both arms extended, sweeping the bills towards your chest off the crummy, egg-scented floor. I ran back into the dressing room, cradling my money against my chest like a newborn child, to lay it down in a warm, safe, locked drawer in the dressing room.
The night went on as such—loud smiles, sticky armchairs, warm, large laps clad in itchy khaki. I tried to work the room as freely as I could while Camille stuck with Grandpa all night. She learned a great deal about him, that he was a former eagle scout, that he’d once been stung by a jellyfish off the coast of Cozumel, and that he always regretted getting married before he had the chance to bed a beautiful latina chica like herself. Camille had worn her largest golden hoops and red lipstick that night, so it was the perfect storm. From this one guy alone she made almost a grand that night, and I didn’t do so bad myself. At the end of the night, we laughed as we traded stories about the night, the other girls swarming around us in the dressing room, counting money and piping in when our conversations seemed to align. The dressing room always smelled different at the end of a shift, still sweet but a little staler. Less like hairspray and more like old vodka and sometimes (the more experienced I got, the more potently I understood and recognized this scent) like sex.

Even through all the laughter and comotion, we heard Norman walk in as the metal frames of the swinging doors slapped against the walls on either side. He usually stayed out of our way until the end of the night, taking the time to balance the bills or count money or whatever that end of the business entailed. Norman was great with numbers, great with balancing them. Making them match or when needed, out match each other. At the time, I thought his skill with numbers was a symptom of his real talent for seeing the big picture of things all at once. I thought he had farther and clearer focus than others like a wide angle lens. Now I don’t think I feel that is true about him anymore. Or maybe I just
realize I should’ve taken the time to decide for myself how I like things to be balanced.

“You know what?” he said that night, walking up to Ebony who sat in the chair closest to the door. “I am so proud of you sexy bitches. You killed this goddamn floor tonight.” He took hold of Ebony’s shoulders and shook her back and forth with excitement. His small oval glasses bouncing up and down on his pointed nose. Norman was younger than you’d expect a club owner to be, and cleaner. He attempted to foster a sense of pride for us like I had my house plants but more resembled one of a prideful grandma whose grandson just got into a decently reputable state college. With one mighty backhand, Ebony wacked Norman’s wiry body off of her own, nearly sending him flying into the wall behind him. He caught his balance with a couple backwards steps and continued on his rant, undiscouraged.

“I've never seen anything like you bitches. Fucking stellar, fucking fire,” he said, walking about the room, grabbing a hairspray bottle to use as pointer. Most of us ignored him for the most part, and continued putting our sweats on. Some of us wiped our faces with moist cloths, but that night I forgot to. He quickly made his way over to where Camille and I sat and posted himself in front of us, knees locked, feet wide, hands on hips. “April? Lolita Raye?” he said, silver belt buckle glinting in our faces. “How was our night, ladies?”

Camille took the reins on this one, telling him all about her grandaddy with the Latin fetish, assuring him she had just recruited another loyal patron to the
club. She spoke loudly and excitedly, for which I was grateful as I hoped, in vain, it would keep Norman's focus on her.

“See, now that’s what I’m talking about. April. Make sure you take a good hard look at your friend’s wallet over here while you deep-think on my private room offer,” Norman said.

I certainly hadn’t forgotten his offer. The lights from my makeup mirror shone off his belt buckle like it was encrusted with little white diamonds all the way around.

“Oh, and I took the liberty of making these for you,” he said, offering a stack of business cards. “Throw them out if you want, but it can’t hurt to hand a few out, right?” I gave them a glance. They listed my stage name and phone number only, with a swirly water paint design in the background. Norman sat them on my vanity, knowing I wouldn’t put my hand out to actually grab them myself.

“Actually, earlier today April told me there’s nothing too sacred to sell, not even your soul,” Camille said, shooting a sly, sideways grin at me.

“I actually didn’t,” I said before Norman, shouting with fists in the air, interrupted me.

“Well, you’re damned right about that, my little death star,” he said, spit flying out from underneath the sparse blonde hairs that lined his upper lip and raining down on us. “We humans are so vain to think we get to decide what’s sacred and what’s not. Statues, photos, letters, old vases, we hide them away as if they have some kind of value other than what we decided to put on them. In
fact, we don’t even decide what’s sacred. Other people tell us what’s sacred. Your mom said ‘this belonged to your great great grandmother,’ a lady you didn’t even know, and all the sudden it means something? It’s insane bullshit. You know what I think is sacred? Security. Safety. And the only thing that’s gonna get you that is money. The more money, the more security, the more sacred alone time in front of the fire with sacred red wine and sacred lambswool slippers.” He squatted down to our eye level, his face puffy and red from lack of breath between exclamations. “So tell me, how big is the difference between shaking your ass on a man’s lap and just letting him in there for a few minutes?” he asked, eyes darting back and forth between Camille and I. “I mean, really? How big is it?”

“Usually about five inches,” I said. We all paused for the length of one breath until Camille and I burst out laughing, hands on chests or mouths to keep from inhaling Norman’s cologne too deeply. Norman stood up and ruffled the hair on our heads before walking away to harass the next unwitting girl in line. He was deranged and spastic, I was well aware, but maintained just enough logic that I couldn’t shake the thought. Dancing for men, sleeping with men… I really wasn’t sure what I was holding onto anymore. It’s not like people respected me anyway, and it’s not like I could strip forever. As much money as I was making, I’d need some serious capital upfront to start something more lasting, like buying a nail salon or taking nursing classes at the community college. Everyone else was out there having sex for free, with people they didn’t even like that much. *If you want to see results, you’ve got to get in the ring.*
I think it was right about then, right before I left that night, that I received a text from my mother.

She sent: Junie, don’t stress out about it, but I had to pop into your room and borrow a stack. Nothing I can’t pay back, but these goddamn debt collectors from the hospital are relentless. I’ll be at work when you get home, go kill it out there sweetie! xoxo

I slammed my phone shut and scratched my neck with both hands. I could feel warm heat rising in my face. I tried to hide my blushing cheeks from Camille by turning my head. My mother, going into my room without me there--had she ever done that before? She must’ve if she knew where I hid my cash. I bet she knocked over a plant with her careless hips. I pictured leaves and dirt on the floor, her black sneakers jumping about in the mess. In my mind she appeared as an invading force, an infestation. A new, ravenous predator in a formerly well balanced ecosystem.

I didn’t realize I was pressing my thumbs against my first two fingers, rubbing in hard circles, until Camille’s voice pierced through my wall of focus, asking, “You’re not going to take those cards, are you?” she asked.

At that point I think my hand was on them, moving them into my backpack without even realizing I was doing so. There was still a ringing in my ears from white hot anger. I don’t even think I answered her.

“Hey. You good?” she asked, a little louder.

I forced a loud breath out and responded, “Yeah, just getting tired.”
“Oh, well I’m sorry I can’t give you a ride home. Rockwell hates it when I come over too late, and I already told him I’d hang,” she said.

“No, that's fine,” I said. “I don’t mind the train.”
What I remember most about my walk to the station was how it cooled my cheeks and soothed the static in my mind. It was light out, but the sun wasn’t visible yet, so the air glowed a dewy purple that embraced and welcomed me, bringing me down from the anger I felt as I was leaving the club. The birds chirped lightly and the cold (just as cold as yesterday) breeze whipped against my flushed cheeks. I think everyone else out on the street was calmed by the cold and gentle morning, too. I remember noticing that we all seemed to float along in slow motion, swimming through the air. No one fought or screamed off their porches. The exhaust from the cars seemed to float toward the sky and join the foggy overcast hanging above. Maybe it was because I was still somewhat buzzing from my mother’s intrusion, or maybe it was just because of the cold, I’m not sure, but I’d gotten to the station entrance quicker than usual, alternating quickly from foot to foot like a bird, nose and mouth tucked into my sweatshirt for protection from the biting air. When I got to the entrance for the C line to Newark, I stopped, pulled a cigarette from my backpack and lit it. I looked up to watch the smoke rise and eventually melt into the violet haze of the morning. I always liked to watch the smoke from my cigarette float up towards the sky. I imagined it joining in with the clouds, born from a toxic spark but finally rising up and finding it’s tribe, melting in with acceptance. I tried to focus on this, I really did, I tried to clear my mind and imagine my small cloud of cigarette smoke dissolving into the clouds, but a car ran through a puddle collecting by the curb I stood perched on. It didn’t splash me, but the sound brought my attention back to my surroundings.
A few cars drove by, mostly black and silver ones, the exhaust especially pronounced by the cold. Tall apartments with no alleyways in between, clean new siding, brick staircases leading up to the first floor lined with slick-looking, black-painted handrails. Only one apartment on the block had flowers hanging from its window, and it was so far up I could hardly tell what type they were. Peonies maybe. I really wished I had known exactly what type. It would’ve made me proud to be able to recognize them. In losing myself in my surroundings, I almost burned my fingers with my now short, nearly finished cigarette. I flicked it into the puddle in front of me and turned towards the station entrance. I descended down the grainy cement stairs, into the filthy gut of the Manhattan block that was the train station reluctantly. I would’ve loved to have somewhere, anywhere, to go but home.

As soon as I crossed through the turnstile, the smell of wet clothes and iron hit me, sending me plummeting back from my serene trance into reality. A thin layer of dirt coated the brown tiling on the floor so it crunched under my feet as I walked. I was used to the creaks and groans of the subway, but I still kept alert, always scanning even the most familiar and mundane of surroundings. Water dripped from the ceiling landed in a small puddle with loud, rhythmic plops. In the center of the two railways, a man in uniform sat encased in the glass office, leafing through a newspaper. I sat myself down on a bench opposite a well-dressed man and his baby. As I hit the iron bench, I felt a hard jab on the left side of my bum as the plastic of my cellphone dug into my flesh. I had only been sitting for a few seconds before I felt it vibrating. I pulled out my phone and a
nauseous pressure grabbed a hold of my stomach. My mother was calling me. I didn’t stop to wonder why she would be calling me so early before my frustration took hold once more. *My mother was in my room, rooting around looking for money,* I remembered. I’d paid the electric bill that month. I’d gone to Walmart just a few days prior to get Nicky a new pack of socks, some cartoon brand toothpaste, and lunch supplies for the week. I didn’t know one other girl my age who gave to her family, to her mother, what I gave to mine. It still wasn’t enough for this woman. The one place I had that was mine, where I grew my little plants and slept when I had the hours to do so, she had to infest and take over just as she had the entire rest of my life. I had nothing, not even my own private room or envelope of money that I had earned on my hands and knees, that was just mine. That only belonged to me. The worst part of it all, the part that made me want to take this small, smooth cell phone and spike it down under the tracks of next incoming train, was the fact that if she had just asked I would've, even if reluctantly, given her however much she wanted, and her awareness of this made her just go ahead and take it.

I cupped my phone with one hand and squeezed it down against my thigh, coming back into the hollow, cement and tile room I was actually sitting in. On the bench straight across from me, the clean-cut men sat next to his baby. Both seemed completely detached from their environment, as I probably would've seemed to onlookers a few seconds ago as I sat and fumed over my mother. But now I was present again, and watching closely. The man’s eyes stared off into one direction for a long time, as if focused on something that
wasn’t even there. The baby slept peacefully under soft blankets. Hanging from the top of the carrier was a toy I recognized. When Nicky was one, I spent two, maybe three nights worth of cash on the same toy to hang from his crib. It was a blue car with spinning wheels that flashed bright neon colors, singing different little melodies when touched. A little disco-ball hung from the car’s rear view mirror. I remember pointing up at it as it hung from his little bassinet, whispering, “Disco.”

The subway was dark for the most part, but out from under a flickering light in the far corner emerged a raggedy old man with a shopping cart. Though his clothes looked filthy and old, I remember noticing the health and shine of his long, gray ponytail and matching beard. They looked strong enough to make beautifully functional ropes. He must’ve gone to great lengths to keep his hair as immaculate as it was, which surprised me in comparison to the rest of his appearance. He limped as he walked towards the benches where I sat. Despite his grooming, I had to assume he was homeless based on the number of things he was carting around with him. I honestly can’t remember what was in the cart, but slung over his shoulder was a gray satchel full of god knows what, but it looked like a real burden to lug around. A gray, or maybe brown, liquid was dripping from the bottom. He hobbled over from the corner of the station, pushing his screeching cart and whispering melodic chants under his breath all the way.

When he reached the bench where the father sat, he slung his satchel off his shoulder and onto the bench a few feet away from the baby. It landed with a
clatter that sounded like an avalanche of tin cans and glass bottles, maybe a small collection for the redemption center. The father looked over at the sack with brows pushed together as considering an insult. The old man bent over to tie his shoes, so he couldn’t see just how angry the father was.

“Are you serious? Get your shit away from my kid,” he growled at the old man.

The man jumped up from his bent position and quickly gathered up his belongings and started shuffling off. He hadn’t had time to finish tying his shoe, though, so he stepped on his loose lace and tripped, dragging his gorgeous silver beard against the filthy floor. His sack, which did turn out to be full of cans and empty bottles, went flying, all of its contents scattering across the tile floor. He got up onto his hands and knees and crawled over to the mess, slowly recollecting his treasures.

I honestly didn’t know how to feel in that moment. All I remember is that clenching, that angry grip on my guts loosening as a tickle rose up into my throat. I felt a little ping of sadness for the man, crawling all over the floor, bits of dirt now visible in his beard. Life’s unkindness plays out in a variety of ways, this man’s trajectory being one of the worst case scenarios, I guess. He finished picking up rather quickly, then hobbled off towards the stairs leading up into the world. I hoped--in vain, I knew--that his luck would turn once he found his way back into the cold, fresh air. As angst-ridden as I now know this was, I typically associated myself with the downtrodden, the misunderstood, so I felt immense sympathy for the grumbling old man as he made his way, slowly and with plenty
of commotion, out of the station. But looking back at the father, the man on the bench with his child I couldn’t bring myself to feel hatred or scorn. I just felt out of the loop, really. I didn’t understand what it was like to have a child, and I didn’t see any reason this man should value the comfort of some destitute street wanderer over that of his own child. I felt a slight pang of judgment, as I do automatically whenever I see a person who looks rich, especially a business looking type like this guy. But his face didn’t look hostile or greedy or taunt. His cheekbones caved in with the same gray shadowing as the creases of his eyes. His lips, reddish, dehydrated, parted ever so slightly. The arm draped over the baby’s carrier, his hand hung loosely and weak like an old piece of fruit off a low-hanging branch. I knew this look. The man was simply exhausted. Now, more keen to his surroundings, he seemed to notice that I was looking at him. Quickly, I thought of something to say that would somehow excuse my staring, when I realized he had a built-in awkward moment diffuser, or conversation starter, if you will. It’s never weird for women to comment on babies, right? Rather expected, in fact. I figured that would be my least awkward way forward.

“Your friend here enjoys an early morning train ride?” I asked. I knew some babies liked the sound of cars or fans, any low humming in the background. Some people drove them around just to get them to fall asleep. Maybe that would explain the exhaustion, maybe the baby has been restless so he figured he’d try a train ride.

“We’re headed to a funeral,” he said, looking down at the sleeping child. At that, I should’ve just said ‘Condolences’ and spent the rest of my time in the
station avoiding eye contact. But for reasons I can’t explain, I kept talking. Maybe my ego was hurt. After all, men often got excited when I struck up a conversation with them. Maybe because my attempts of relieving the tension were squashed, so I figured I’d ride out the conversation I’d started, or maybe the intrinsic intimacy of the early morning got the best of me. Who knows.

“I’m sorry. Whose funeral?” I asked, realizing as it came out how prying I must’ve sounded. He didn’t look offended, though.

“My mother passed away last week. We have to get to the house early to set everything up for the wake and what not,” he said, just matter-of-factly enough that I knew he was really hurting. “My siblings aren’t flying in until later. So it’ll take me some time.”

As he explained, he reached up to lightly scratch the back of his head, revealing that he was first of all, very uncomfortable, and secondly, wearing a thick gold watch under his navy blue jacket. I couldn’t get enough of a look at the face, but the clasp looked solid and polished. I noticed him studying me now, seeming to be particularly interested in my eyebrows, in my jawline and where it met my earlobe. He glanced briefly down at my polished nails, at my fingers intertwined and resting on my lap, but then went right back up to my face, tracing its features with moving eyes. It was then that I realized I still had my makeup on from the club. With Norman’s antics and my mother’s message, I’d forgotten to wipe my face off. Sticking out from a gray baggy sweat suit was an immaculately painted face, each feature embellished with powder and gloss in an effort to exaggerate its contours. Usually, I would not have been embarrassed, but for
some reason, at this moment, I was glad. It felt like a protective and performative layer between him and me, a flowery curtain drawn shut in the window of a messy house, preventing a curious stranger’s glimpse at the rooms inside.

“Well, I hope you get the summer home,” I said, hoping he’d appreciate a joke amidst the endless recitations of the same polite, sorrow-laden script most people were probably reciting to him. He smiled at this, and I couldn’t tell if it was forced or reluctant, but it certainly wasn’t wholehearted. He looked back down at the baby, still motionless and peaceful, but I knew he could still see me out of the corner of his eye.

Then the station began to rumble with the slightest of shakes, only detectable by my butt and thighs pressed against the hard bench. An echoing, muffled horn went off in the distance, signaling the rapid approaching of a train. This wasn’t my train, but I knew it would be the next to pull in, so I figured it was a good time to go to the bathroom. I stood up, glancing over at the man, trying to think of an appropriate way to wish him well, but he must’ve felt the same pressure because he spoke first.

“Well, this is us,” he said. It wasn’t a goodbye, which confused me, but he smiled, or grinned I guess, with half of his mouth. He looked a little brighter in color than he did when I first looked at him. Like maybe I’d woken him up a little.

I can only compare what I did next to a time in seventh grade when I stole a can of soup from the grocery store. It was in my hands, and I saw that no one was standing by the doors, so I just walked out. My only real motivations were saving money and the urge to make use of the opportunity, even when, in
hindsight, the benefits were slim. I walked towards him, unzipping and reaching into my backpack as I did so. He looked surprised but not afraid. I found the stack of cards Norman had given me, separated one from the stack by pulling it free from its constricting rubber band, still stepping towards him, and once I got close enough to where he had to tilt his head back slightly to look at my face, I held it out to him.

“You’ll probably want some fun when you get back, or something like, relaxing or something,” I said, stumbling over the words. I was so annoyed at myself for butchering the moment that I hardly waited a second after he grabbed the card to scurry off into the bathroom. His train pulled in as I did so but my racing heart and pounding blood muffled the sensations, all I could hear was a light ringing in my ears.

When I got into the bathroom I paused to take a deep breath, head down and shoulders finally releasing tension. I don’t even think I used the bathroom. I just washed my hands in cold water, calling myself stupid and irrational for even attempting such a stunt as I rubbed my thumbs into my palms.

I dried my hands on the scratchy, brown paper towels and waited until I heard the train pull away to open the bathroom door. Instead of an empty corridor like I expected to see, I saw the man, the pressed navy suit, the purposeful strides as he walked, holding the baby carrier, towards the bathroom door. I glanced over my own shoulder at the small, green-tiled bathroom behind me. No one else was in there.
The train ride didn’t take too long, around 45 minutes, and dropped me off in walking distance from my house. It might have warmed up a little now that the sun was out, or maybe I just didn’t notice anymore, but my body had lost its tension. It no longer clenched against the cold or leaned into the wind. I just kind of plodded along, looking up at the branches, bare and intertwined, weaving over the gray sky like fishnets against bare skin. Occasionally a branch would stretch so far out that it would almost touch the top of a house planted on the street. As my eyes followed the branches out, they’d suddenly be interrupted by the harsh white trim of a pointed roof. I hated being brought back into the real world this way, trying to trace the outline of the bare trees only to be interpreted by a protrusive, gutter lined, filled-with-lies suburban house. I tried to bring my eyes back to the trees and the branches whenever they were pulled away, so much so that I was surprised when I suddenly recognized the rusted fencing running next to me as my own. I pulled my head down from the clouds, regaining focus on the world I was walking through, to see Noreen checking the mailbox in front of her house. Bent over slightly, looking inside the bright green box painted with cartoonish birds and fish, her belly hung almost to her knees, and her dress lifted just enough to show wide, dry ankles bulging out in purple defiance where the elastic of her white socks squeezed them. She saw me just seconds after I saw her, turning her head slowly towards me. A warm smile, exposing her brown jagged teeth, grew on her face. I was really hoping to crawl right into bed but if I had to run into anyone, she would be my number one choice.
She looked at me curiously, almost examining my face. Her brow furrowed, she knew something was up. When I lost my virginity at a bonfire in the woods when I was a teenager, she knew immediately. As soon as I came down the stairs the next morning, hair frizzy and fingernails dirty, she took one look at me and grinned, patting me on the shoulder with silent recognition. She was not looking at me with that same tender support now, she looked inquisitive, and a little concerned as she studied my face. I knew I looked ridiculous, because I took a quick look at myself in the bathroom mirror after pulling my pants back up. All the makeup on my right eye was smudged all over the side of my face. I had tried to wipe away the swirls of blues, blacks and browns with dry fingertips, but it only made it worse. I knew she must be seeing this and wondering what the hell happened. I stiffened, readying myself for a question, or a puzzled remark. But instead, she closed her mailbox, stood up straight and raised her arms out straight on either side and said “Good Morning sweetie.”

“Good morning,” I said. I probably sounded pretty flat, I was beat.

“Long night?” she asked.

I thought of the train station, of the man walking towards me with the baby carrier in his hand, the empty, hollow station behind him. When he stepped past me into the bathroom, he shut the door and locked it, turning the small silver paddle all the way right. He stuttered as he tried to speak.

“I have three hundred in cash,” he finally managed to say.

I nodded and said “Okay.”
He put the carrier down on the ground and patted around his thighs and butt for his wallet. When he held the money out, I could see that his hands were shaking. I thought, for less than a second, about backing out in that moment. I could've turned around, unlocked the door and walked back to the bench, but I wanted his goddamn hands to stop shaking so bad and, if I'm being honest, it was the most thrilling moment of my life. My heart was pounding so furiously I thought it was going to pop. I took the three hundred dollar bills out of his hand and tucked them up into my bra. I turned around, hands and forehead resting on the bathroom wall.

“You must see some of the wildest things at that club,” Noreen said with excitement in her voice. She didn’t seem to have much of a life outside of her boys, so I bet to her what I did seemed fascinating and remarkable.

“Yeah people never cease to surprise you, that’s for sure,” I said.

“Like how?” she asked.

I thought about how I let the father be the one to pull my pants down, exposing the black, rhinestone thong I’d worn on the floor that night. He looped his cold fingers around the sides and pulled that down as well. All said and done, it was quick and rather sensationless. A few minutes, maybe less. The light slapping of skin against my bare butt cheeks, over and over a few times. Cold fingertips pressed into my hip bones, a smell similar to baby powder or wet clothes. A slight grunting and squeezing at the end. I mostly focused on the baby carrier that sat on the floor beside our feet, the two little pink socks that stuck out from under the blanket, and the grainy feel of the grout between the tiles on the
wall. We were both pulling our pants up by the time I heard my train bounding
towards the station in the distance.

I realized, with a deep breath and a stiffening of my back, that I might be
taking too long to respond so I shrugged and said the first intelligible answer that
came to my mind.

“People are just weird,” I said.

“Yeah you’re not lying about that,” Noreen said with a chuckle that jiggled
her stomach and breasts. I just stood there absentmindedly. I usually loved
catching up with Noreen, she had a way of bringing me peace. But in that
moment, all I could really think about was washing myself and crawling into bed.

“I’m sorry sweetie, you must be so tired and I’m out here jabbering away”
she said. I’m sure it was obvious just how detached I was.

“No I don’t mind it, it’s not that,” I said. I tried to find the words to say I
didn’t know where to go with my life and I don’t see any avenues opening up
anytime soon and I just locked myself in a public restroom with a stranger for a
stormy four minutes worth three hundred dollars and still don’t know what my
next step should be.

“I’m just cold,” I settled for.

I walked back into the house rather moodlessly, clenched against the cold
but still feeling weak. I made no conscious effort to think about anything in
particular, but my thoughts seemed to act on their own accord, popping in and
out of the hollow void of my mind as they pleased. The makeup lights, the
bathroom, the tree branches. I thought one was home when I walked into my
house, and the sound of the door closing reminded me of my ride home on the train, the echoing of the doors off the walls of the hollow train cabin. There were only two other passengers inside the train, other than me, and they were nondescript and distant enough for me to barely notice they were there. It took me a minute after sitting down on one of the sticky, red cushioned seats to realize I still had my backpack on. I twirled it off and let it hit the ground with a light thud, metal zippers pinking off the hard ground. I reached up to rub my eye only to notice that one of my false lashes was missing. I felt over to the other eye, to see if perhaps I’d removed them without remembering but it remained intact, fashioned to my eye as perfectly as when I’d placed it there. It was just the one eye that was missing its fluffy black lashes. I pictured them stuck to a green tile on the wall of the bathroom, hanging there throughout the busy day, leaving visitors to wonder how the hell one eyelash set could've gotten stuck to the wall. The image brought on a light chuckle, which quickly turned into a belly laugh, which swelled and grew, taking control of my body. My stomach began convulsing uncontrollably, like a dry-heave of a laugh. My eyeballs began to tickle and tear. I couldn’t remove that image from my mind, the eyelashes stuck to the green tile wall. I broke out into a violent outburst of barely supressable hysteria, laughing painfully, crying slightly. I would try to breath and press my lips together to stop the laughter, but it would just come bursting out again. I looked at the other passengers, who barely flickered their eyes towards me, paying little mind to my outburst. My abs started trembling with pain, strained with tightness. Then I felt the hot water spilling out of my eyes, trickling down my cheeks. But it
became more than just a tear or two, the flood gates had opened. It was a full stream, pouring down my face, dropping onto my lap, onto the ground. I knew if the other passengers had really looked at me, they wouldn’t be able to tell if I was laughing or crying. Looking back, I guess it was both. At that moment, I didn’t know what I was really feeling other than overwhelmed. I folded in and out of laughter, of sobs, convulsing, gasping, holding my stomach, wiping my cheeks, rocking back forth in my seat, glancing (when I could see through the water in my eyes) out the window to see the walls of the tunnel rushing by with little streaks of color and metal. I think I finally composed myself with about fifteen minutes to spare, to breath the redness out of my cheeks and eyes, before leaving the train and walking home.

I dropped my backpack in my room before quickly showering off. Once under the hot water, I could feel just how puffy my face was from my outburst on the train. My toes and hands turned red as the cold left them. I made my shower hot and quick, toweled off my body before wrapping up my hair and trotting, naked and cold, down the hall to my bedroom. Suddenly, and much to my surprise, a small human voice sang out from the other end of the hallway.

“Junie,” it said.

I stopped dead in my tracks. It sounded like it was coming from Nicky’s room but he should’ve been at school. I pivoted on the scratchy carpet and started down the hall in the opposite direction. I opened his chipped, white bedroom door and, to my surprise, there he was. His little head poked out of thick blankets, looking up at me with sad, puffy eyes.
“What are you doing home?” I asked.

“I'm sick,” he said. I walked over to him and pressed the back of my hand against his forehead. He wasn’t lying— he was burning up.

“Wait, so where is mom?” I asked.

“Working,” he said.

“So she left you here alone, sick?” I asked.

“I've been trying to sleep,” he said. I think this must've been his way of trying to excuse her. For leaving him home... Alone... Sick.

I bent over and wrapped my arms under his knees and head, scooping him up, blanket and all. He put up no protest, knowing whatever I did to him was in an effort to help. I carried him down the hall and put him down in my own bed. He took to it right away, adjusting to get comfortable. From my dresser I pulled a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt, which I wiggled on from within my towel. I pulled it out from under my shirt once I was dressed. I gave my plants a quick drink from one of the many cups of water I keep sitting around (they like room temperature water best) before grabbing my phone out of my backpack and putting it down on the stool I used as a bedside table. I climbed in next to Nicky, his body felt limp and heavy on top of my blankets.

“Will I get you sick?” he asked. His poor voice was so small and weak.

“No, I'll be fine,” I said. I was willing to take the risk. He might have been the one with the cold, the baby of the two of us, but I was the one who really needed him near.

Before closing my eyes, I checked my phone to see a text from Nate.
He wrote: Do you and Camille wanna hang tonight?

I figured I would wait until I woke up to respond. Camille wouldn't miss a chance to occupy Nate and Rockwell's house, and she wouldn't go alone, so I knew I had no choice anyway.

I rolled over towards Nicky, curling towards his head like my plants do the sun. The last thing I remember is the sound of his slow, rhythmic breathing as I listened from behind closed eyes.
It felt like a different world when I woke up, the way it sometimes does after a long, deep sleep. Nicky was no longer in my bed, my sleep so deep I hadn’t noticed his leaving. I took Camille up on her invitation, excited actually to get normal clothes on, ripped jeans and a tight gray turtleneck, and do something normal- hangout with friends on a Saturday night. My mother was sitting at the table when I went down stairs. She began a pointless explanation of her rationale for leaving Nicky by himself. She had to, she thought I’d be home by then. I wasn’t answering my phone, she had to go to work, she knew I’d get there sooner than later. I interrupted her blabbering to ask where Nicky was now. She told me he was feeling much better so she let him go watch movies with the boys next door. I really wanted to go over and see his state for myself, get a hug from his still babysoft arms, but decided against interrupting his playtime. So I walked outside and called a cab to Patterson. It was late afternoon, the time of year where the sun starts setting earlier and earlier, it was only 5 or 6 and the skies were already almost black. As I started out the back window I was surprised to feel a gentle grumble deep in my gut. I hadn’t eaten all day. I asked the cabbie if he wouldn’t mind stopping at a deli once we got off the highway. I finished it in the car before I got to the boys’ apartment.

Rockwell and Nate’s place was fairly nice, especially for the area they lived in. It wasn’t newly renovated or anything, the appliances didn’t shine but everything worked. The brown cabinets had big, ugly black hinges that clashed with everything else in the kitchen, and groaned miserably when opened, but
they lined a spacious kitchen with a nice, open serving hatch that allowed a look inside from the living room. It made the place feel bigger. When Rockwell stood at the fridge, like he was doing that night while Camille, Nate and I soluched around on the couches in the living room. Through the opening, Rockwell could ask us what we wanted to drink and let us know what they had. He didn’t need to shout, we could hear him perfectly fine through the opening, but he did anyway, as this seemed to be his only mode of communication.

“Beer… Spritzers… uh, some vodka with sprite or O.J.,” he yelled out, back hunched, head stuck into the fridge. Nate and Camille both opted for beer while I chose a vodka drink, which Rockwell poured into a coffee mug and stirred with his pinky before bringing it out to the living room and placing it on the coffee table in front of me. I settled myself down on the carpet, eye level with my drink, while Nate sat on the couch behind me, who’s folded legs were still so long they extended past me. I found myself ignoring him more than usual that night, or trying to anyway. If I sensed any rising suspicion from him, any inkling that I wavered in excitement over him, I’d give just enough attention to eliminate it then return my focus to the group as a whole, to the room, the lone terracotta pot in the corner of the living room with a dying nerve plant. They were kind of picky, nerve plants, so perhaps it wasn’t totally the boys’ fault.

“So what do we want to do, play a game?” Rockwell asked.

“I love that idea, what about a card game?” Camille suggested. She sat in a chair of her own, back straight and poised, beer resting on her lap, lightly held
with interlaced fingers. She’d been a dancer since she was little, ballet, tap, jazz. You could tell when you looked at her, by her posture, the upward tilt of her chin.

“Like what?” I asked, trying desperately to enter the conversation seamlessly. My voice sounded foreign to myself. I always felt my interjections into a group conversation were just that, interjections. For this reason, I usually just let others make decisions and went with the flow. I don’t know if this was my preference or because I felt others would probably be happier if I did.

“Oh you know what we should play? Straight Face,” Rockwell said decidedly. The rest of us had no quarrel with this, so we nodded and went ahead. I was the best at Straight Face, in fact, I might’ve prefered it to normal conversation. Two people went against each other, one saying something ridiculous or grotesque and the other tried to keep a straight face. The loser drinks. It felt totally natural to me, honestly pretty effortless. Nothing the others said, no matter how vulgar or loud or close to my face, ever unsettled me enough to react.

“I’ll go first, June why don’t you try to get me to budge, huh?” Rockwell said, combing back his hair, chin length and blonde, with his fingers, rooting his body to the ground, ready to sit frozen. I thought he was much better looking than Nate. Not that Nate was unattractive, but Rockwell was truly handsome, a word I rarely use about young men. His jaw was defined, his beard was golden and trimmed. I bet it would scratch your face if you kissed him. It made sense to me, at the time, that Camille would be his girl. I thought of them as equally radiant, the perfect sun and moon.
“No, let me go at you, babe,” Camille said to Rockwell.

“I feel like that’s less fun,” Rockwell replied.

“Why’s that?” Camille asked, voice rising to fein offence, head cocking to one side.

“You make me laugh all the time, you know how to do it,” Rockwell said, lunging towards her to pinch her knee lightly. Camille brushed his hand off with a feather like wave.

“Exactly,” she said. And so they commenced the game. As I watched the two of them battle, I felt a cold hand on my shoulder, gently squeezing and rubbing back and forth. I gave it a quick pat, hopefully not too quick, in approval but kept my eyes on the game. After a few seconds he stopped.

Camille, once she used some pretty extreme antics, could usually get a reluctant laugh out of Rockwell. On that night I think she did so by wetting her fingers in her beer and flicking them at his face. He snickered and drank in defeat.

“You guys are up,” she said.

I turned my head back at Nate to find him looking down at me with a crooked smile. I gave a quick smile back, attempting to egg him on.

“You might as well just drink now and get it over with,” I said, turning my body towards him, chin tilted up at his face.

“We’ll see,” he said, leaning in closer towards my face. I took a gentle breath in, closing my eyes on the inhale and opening them, my face frozen, on the exhale. He started out with a few silly faces, stroking my hair, trying to tickle
the inside of my nose with his fingertip. All the while my face stayed completely still. None of these antics were surprising or revolutionary or changed anything about the moment, so why should I react? After those didn’t work, he tried a few funny phrases.

“Your nipple is out,” he said.

I didn’t budge. I knew it wasn’t but if it was, it was too late anyway.

“There’s a bug in your hair,” he said.

Again, I didn’t budge. Any bug in that room would’ve been feasting on the dead plant in the corner.

“I have herpes,” he said.

My hand twitched ever so slightly, but my face didn’t move.

He flopped back on the couch, scratching his dark hair in defeat. “Jesus, I give up,” he said.

I gave a small grin and reached for my cup, grabbing its handle firmly and taking a few long gulps.

“June, you won you don’t have to drink,” Rockwell said, his voice booming with jest from his seat across the table.

It always felt like he was talking at me. I shrugged my shoulders. “I drink when I want,” I said.

“Thata girl,” he said, raising his beer in salute. He pressed the opening tight on his lips and raised it high, almost completely upside down, gulping.

The laughing, the spilling drinks on the carpet, the banter—all of it was expected, but I was honestly glad to be here with them. It always felt good to be
out of my house, fucking around with people my age. I had never had great friends growing up, and it felt good to be with people in the same stages of life. That night, in particular, it was the perfect environment for distraction. The lights were dim and the conversation was mindless. Mindless might be too dismissive…but what? Uncomplicated? We spoke with ease, inserting our voices when excited or inspired. Some moments got loud, all four of us erupting in playful argument or banter, opinions on movies, a story from the week.

I’d spend a few hours feeling one with the moment, in the loop. Then, once or twice, I looked over at my backpack propped up against a far wall, and suddenly, the entire dynamic of the room would seem to change, as if in those moments there were three humans and one alien sitting around the coffee table. It felt like I was a different color than the others in the room and somehow more defined by the light, hesitant to chime in for fear my words would project a bit too loudly or I would speak out of turn, having misunderstood the joke. When, I wondered, would they be able to see me clearly? What if they saw me too clearly? I’d come back to the moment eventually, usually by focusing on my fingertips rubbing against one another, leaning, perhaps a bit too heavily, on the drink as well. Rockwell always finished his the fastest and made everyone another when he got up to refresh his own. For the first time, I just about kept pace with him, being about finished with my own by the time he dropped another in front of me. Camille and Nate’s would sit on the table dripping beads of sweat before several minutes they were touched. As the night went on the room got darker, or so it seemed, to the point where I could barely focus on my backpack
anyway. I felt so heavy on the carpet I didn’t move from my spot at all, afraid of what walking would feel like. We ordered pizza. I think I even ate some, still planted in my spot on the floor. Eventually I must’ve stood, though I can’t remember it, because I got to the bathroom and into the empty tub by the end of the night.

What I remember was the brightness hurting my eyes and the coolness of the tiles against my cheek. White and black hexagons… octagons? A sticky plastic shower curtain. Then, with a shrill persistence, the chirping of birds coming through a small window overhead.

I heard faint knocking on the door. I didn’t say anything, but the door opened anyway. I saw Camille’s face through the mirror, looking right back at me. At first she looked surprised, perhaps a little concerned, but when she spoke to me, she mostly looked like she found the sight to be humorous.

“Have you been in here all night, pal?” she asked, stepping into the bathroom and gently closing the door behind her. I don’t think I responded, not with words anyway. I didn’t really know the answer. Had the whole night really gone by? I looked up at the small window, which revealed to me that the sky outside had begun to turn a light purple, and those heinous birds were chirping. It was probably around 6am. A timeframe that was slowly becoming my life’s god-forsaken hour.

“Find a nice little comfy spot for yourself?” Camille asked, pulling her pants down and sitting on the toilet. “Did you throw up?”
“When did I come in here?” I asked, my voice like a stranger’s again, thick with film and scratchy.

“Right before we went to bed. You told Nate you’d be right in,” she said, wiping and flushing. She closed the lid to the toilet and sat back down on top, looking at me with the same sleepy amusement. “You must’ve puked and passed out in here.”

“I don’t remember puking,” I said.

“Yeah, you probably don’t remember crawling into the tub, but here we are,” she said. A solid point. “Let me get you some water,” she said. She got up and shuffled off to the kitchen, coming back into the bathroom just as the silence of the room began to ring in my ears. She sat back down on the toilet and sat a tall plastic cup of water on the edge of the tub.

I pulled myself upright, the skin of my back squeaking stubbornly against the movement. For some reason, sitting up and grabbing the cup got my heart pounding, or maybe I just noticed it for the first time, waking up a little more. My chest felt tight, lips chapped. It was almost like a childlike nervousness swept over me, even though I knew this room was of no threat to me at all. I sipped the water slowly, but I just couldn’t get my heart to stop racing.

“You might be comfier in a bed, hun,” she said.

I thought about Nate’s warm body, about crawling in beside him, but she was wrong. I couldn’t go in there, I needed more time.

“Something kinda crazy happened yesterday,” I said.

“Yeah, you passed out in my boyfriend’s bathtub,” she said.
“No, not yesterday I guess. Like Friday, after work. Or yeah, maybe yesterday then, yeah,” I said, my temples throbbing.

“What then?” Camille asked.

“Some guy paid me for sex,” I said.

“Wait, what?” She put the water down on the sink. “Some guy tried to pay you for sex? Where?”

“He did pay me for sex. At the train station,” I said.

“Wait, June,” she said.

I knew she didn’t understand what I was saying, or was unwilling to accept it, but I didn’t answer right away. I thought I’d let her work it out for herself. This kind of thing was not completely unheard of in our line of work, of course, but neither of us had ever done it. She would have had no way of knowing that I had been thinking about it, but the leap wasn’t an impossible one to make.

“You had sex with some guy from the train station?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said.

“Where?” she asked.

“The bathroom,” I said.

“The bathroom of where, his place? A hotel?” she asked.

“No, the station,” I said.

“The bathroom in the train station?”

I couldn’t keep doing this back and forth with her, keep saying it out loud. I just nodded, and she folded herself forward over her knees, her lips parted.

“How much did he give you?” she asked.
“I think like three hundred,” I said.

“June,” she whispered. She wasn’t disgusted. I don’t think she was even judgmental. Just very surprised. Or so I thought at the time.

“Honestly, it wasn’t really about that,” I said. “The money, I mean.”

“Then what was it about?” she said, sitting back up straight, her voice growing even quieter. “You cheated on Nate.”

“Not really,” I said.

“How do you figure?” she said

“He gave me money,” I said.

“So?”

“So it’s not really sex, like I wasn’t so uncontrollably horny I went and found someone to have sex with. This guy wanted sex, and I offered it to him for money.”

“That doesn’t make it not sex,” she said.

“No, but it makes it like… a sale. Or like, an agreement. Right?”

“I don’t think so,” she said, but then we heard a slight bump in one of the other rooms.

We both froze. I knew we were too quiet to have been heard, but the moment felt dangerous, and dangerously alive.

“Do you want to go back to bed?” she asked.

“No, I’ll just stay up now, I guess. Probably just go home.” I actually didn’t want to go home in the slightest, and my dismay must’ve been apparent because Camille offered that I come back to her house instead.
“We can rest up and shower. My family is having a cookout tonight. It’ll be so fun, please come,” she said. I wondered if she actually had picked up on my unwillingness to go home or if she thought she had to take care of me, keep me from stumbling my way into any more disastrous situations. The night before, I was actually able to have a little fun and keep my mind off things, for the most part, by forcing myself into a social setting. I thought maybe the same could happen at Camille’s, maybe I’d look over at my backpack less. So I agreed. Camille crept back into Rockwell’s room and quickly packed up her things. I’d passed out in my clothes from the night before, so I had nothing to collect or pack, I just grabbed my bag and had a smoke by the car while I waited for Camille. She came out of the apartment only about a minute after I did, and we both climbed into the car in silence. It seemed as though the morning wanted us to stay quiet, so the drive was rather peaceful, calm. I appreciated it, because I knew I wouldn’t get much peace for the rest of the day at Camille’s house.
When she opened the heavy door of the large, ivy-adorned brick house, I heard the subtle sound of a coffeepot gurgling from the kitchen. The short hallway connecting the door and kitchen was clogged with puffy winter coats of all sizes that made switching noises as we scurried past them. Hunched over the counter was a robed body shaped like a soda bottle, lightly humming as she twirled a silver spoon around a thick, ceramic mug. Camille’s mother was a bit of a contradiction to me. Most lovely, soft things were helpless, somehow fragile. But Eunice knew of her beauty and liked to wield it. She looked like Camille with a different set of dimensions, like you’d clicked on her corner and dragged it out a few inches. When she noticed us walking in behind her, she gave a huge, warm smile and waved with the spoon. Immediately, I felt an awful burning in my eyes. I blinked rapidly to ease hot scratching, but it grew worse in a matter of seconds. Seeing her warm eyes and white smile comforted and frustrated me, she melted my guard down just enough for the exhaustion to set in, and a few hot tears started welling up in my tired eyes. I lifted my hand to rub them when Eunice hissed loud tsks, waving her hands frantically.

“Don’t touch, sweetie,” she said. I lowered my hands blinking and squinting. “It’s the onions, I chopped them last night but they’re still pretty strong.”

Through my tears, I noticed all the bowls and pots, covered in plastic film, all lined up on the counter. She was up so early to continue prepping for the party.
“Why don’t you girls go get some sleep, I won’t need any help until later,” she said. She then turned to Camille and asked her something in Spanish, probably asking if I was staying for the cookout because when Camille said ‘yes’, she cocked her head towards me and smiled with bright eyes, saying, “Oh June, it will be lovely to have you here with us, go ahead up and nap girls.”

We crept up the winding stairs quietly, as it was still pretty early and we didn’t want to wake the rest of the family. Camille’s room was big, much bigger than mine but filled with more childish things. Movie posters and woven trinkets hanging from the grayish walls and a gigantic purple canopy enveloped her entire bed, hanging like a giant mesh skirt but open in the middle, revealing that which was meant to be private. We dropped our bags on the floor, and she loaned me a pair of pajamas, a shirt and pants duo that was meant to be worn as a set. I felt like an imposter in them, but the soft cotton felt so good on my skin I couldn’t say no. Camille pulled out a similar set in black, and I felt like we were at a sleep over like those I’d attended when I was young. We crawled up onto her bed, lifted tall by risers, and I curled up with a huge pillow. The bed was big enough that we turned and sprawled without touching.

“How are you feeling?” she asked. With my eyes closed and the room still, her voice was my last sensation before I fell asleep. It sounded low, perfectly calm and reassuring, the voice you’d use to speak to a sick child.

“My back is happy to be in a real bed, that’s for sure,” I said. If she responded, I didn’t hear it.
When I awoke up she was already up, sitting at her large wooden bureau, half her hair up in clips while she ran a straightener down the length of the bottom strands. She didn’t notice I was awake until I rolled over.

“Well, good morning,” she said, turning to look at me while keeping her neck straight to avoid burning herself.

“It’s not the morning,” I said, stretching my legs so far out they tingled.

“For us it kind of is,” she said. She wasn’t wrong, of course. Working nights sets you on a different schedule than the rest of the world. There wasn’t really a morning or night. You slept when you could and worked as long as you had to. Most afternoons, however, I found myself waking up with a thin layer of sweat and forearms full of wrinkles - it kind of was the morning for us. I sat up in bed and looked around at the small heaps of random garments on the floor. Soft fabrics intertwined, only distinguishable by the differences in color - a white eyelet dress, a dark pair of jeans, a beige cotton bra. She must’ve seen me looking through the mirror and felt the need to explain.

“I can’t decide what to wear,” she said.

“Isn’t it just your family? Also, isn’t it cold for a cookout?” I asked.

“Well we’ll stay mostly inside and on the deck and such, it's my cousin's birthday. It's basically just a party where we use the grill,” she said. She didn’t explain why she felt the need to look so nice, though. When I’m at home I hardly change out of sweats.

“Can I borrow something to wear?” I asked. I didn’t want to be the scrubby friend ruining the family photos.
“Oh my god, yes, literally anything you want.” She was more excited than I expected her to be for someone loaning out clothes. I think she saw this as her opportunity to enhance my aesthetic, throw a fresh coat of paint on. I knew I wasn't less attractive than Camille. When we were out, we got equal attention and we both knew how to work the seats, but she knew all the right things to do for herself—the gentle waves of hair perfectly framing her soft, powdery face, the box-fresh sneakers. I usually did the bare minimum. Unless it was for work, but that didn't really count.

I slid open her closet doors and sifted through my options. Mostly natural colors—beiges, skin tones, mauve greens and browns, with a floral sundress popping out every so often. I picked out a nice tan top, a warm material that revealed the shoulders. After sliding into it, I bent over to pick my jeans from the night before off the ground.

Camille, ever alert, piped in again from her post. “Actually, I have killer white jeans that go so well with that,” she said, pointing to the other side of her closet. “They're hanging on the far left.”

I'd never loved white jeans, they seemed too risky to be functional, but it didn't occur to me to put up a fight. I slid the doors to the other way and found, with Camille's guiding instruction, the exact ones she was talking about. She also suggested a little concealer for under my eyes and some blush to brighten my cheeks up after my long, deep nap. I figured it wouldn't hurt.

When we were almost ready, we heard some ruckus begin to stir up downstairs. The first guests had arrived. Camille said it was probably her closest
aunt, her mom’s irish-twin sister and her brood, here to help cook and get the morning drinking started. We made our way downstairs, hearing the clanks and clatter of kitchen prep work growing louder as we descended. Our appearance in the kitchen was greeted with some commotion, some drawn out greetings and exclamations. Camille made her way around and hugged everyone, so I felt like I should probably do the same. An uncle or two, some cousins—all younger—her grandpa who, being already on his second mimosa, pressed his stubbly cheek against mine as he wrapped me in a tight warm hug.

“It's good to see you, sweetie,” he said. I was surprised he remembered me. I’d only met him in passing once or twice while Camille swung through her house to grab something as we were on our way elsewhere. It seemed like her family gathered at her house often and didn’t need much in the way of an occasion. I’m just not used to this willingness to spend time around family, I guess. Her mother handed us mimosas and told us not to worry about helping, most everything was already chopped, marinated or thawed. We were just waiting for everyone to get there.

The rest of the party showed up in groups—loud groups. I think the more people came, the more excited to eat everyone got, so the greetings grew louder and more enthusiastic. Her cousin Marcus, whose birthday it was, snuck in kind of quietly, or at least it seemed that was to me because, when he came up to me, I hadn’t noticed his entrance at all. He was one of the only people there around my age, so he mostly stuck around Camille and me unless beckoned by an aunt
or little cousin. Even then, he always made his way back to the two of us quickly, usually carrying fresh drinks.

“Honestly, you guys saved my life,” he said, shaking his head. “If y’all weren’t here--I mean, look around at what I’d be dealing with.”

I grabbed my drink out of his hand, but he was very tall so my angle was a little awkward. A line of orange champagne trickled down my arm. Before I could even put the glass on the counter, he was handing me a napkin.

“No way, your family is great,” I said, wiping down my arm and balling up the used napkin in my sticky hands. Marcus opened up his hand for me to drop the trash into. I did, hoping I understood his signals properly, and he turned quickly and extended his arm, throwing the napkin in a nearby garbage can without missing a beat.

“Yeah, I mean I’m not complaining, I can’t really. I’m just happy chilling with you guys,” he said.

Camille had been standing right next to us, but her attention had strayed toward two aunts or cousins or great-step-whatevers for a few minutes. Now she stepped back to our conversation and asked Marcus what he’d done to celebrate his birthday the night before. “Or should I say who?” she asked, smirking and sipping her drink.

“Yo, chill with that,” he said, laughing but also clearly feeling uncomfortable. He scratched the back of his head awkwardly.
“Oh, trust me, you don’t have to be shy around June here,” she said. I felt a bead of sweat form on my forehead. I prayed to God my cheeks didn’t blush up, but the drinks weren’t helping. Thankfully, Marcus played it off perfectly.

“It’s probably me and June that should be shy about you, Camille. I know how you like to get down. I got friends that go to the club,” he said.

“Awww, so why do you never come with them? You think I wouldn’t appreciate a visit from my cuz at work?” she said.

“You’re so gross,” he said, but we were all three laughing. Looking back, I think it was the first time I had really laughed since the train station. I should’ve appreciated that moment more.

A salty, savory scent slowly filled the room with a thickness and heft that made my stomach grumble. The three of us were having such a great time I hadn’t noticed that most of the commotion going on around us, other than the children romping about, was food preparation. I smelled potent spices I couldn’t identify, peppery scents with varying levels of kick that tickled my sinuses and chapped my lips. Lids were lifted from simmering steel pots, unleashing pinkish and gray clouds; aunts and cousins wrapped meats in corn husks while tossing warm salads and macaroni. By the time I thought to offer my assistance, the meal was just about ready. Eunice pulled out thick stacks of paper plates and boxes of squeaky plastic cutlery, placing them on the counter. She waved her arms and said something in Spanish that incited movement from the crowd, a wave inward towards the kitchen—I figured that meant it was time to eat. I stood in line behind an uncle who’s back was wet with sweat. I’d never seen so much
food in one place in my own home. I felt greedy even taking part, foreign grabbing the serving spoon and dishing myself a small portion of potato salad. But the sweaty uncle in front of me kept pointing out dishes I must try, I'd better take more of because it'd be all gone soon, that was great grandma’s recipe from Guatemala that went amazing with the cilantro-lime rice. By the end of my trip around the kitchen, I had a heavy plate, one filled with things I could only somewhat identify, but they all steamed with heat and smelled so heavenly my mouth was watering with anticipated discovery.

I sat myself down at a folding table that was placed perpendicularly to the dining table to allow for more seating space. As I ate, I couldn’t help but look around at this family. The young boys devoured everything on their plates before I could finish one dish, then they ran back and forth from the table to the counter to get second and third helpings. Aunts, uncles, and cousins talked and laughed as they ate. As embarrassing as it is to admit, I felt a little sorry for myself in that moment. We’d never had family over at my house. When Nicky was little, his father would eat with us, at least on the days when he showed his face after work, but never struck up much conversation and certainly never made me laugh. It was at that moment, sitting there siphoning the familial energy off this large, lively clan, that the image of my beautiful Nicky ripped its way into the forefront of my mind. It had been two days since I’d walked him to school, or even seen him for that matter. I’d been running around looking for stimulation that I hadn’t even thought to be home for him, to make time to see him these last two days. If I wasn’t able, Noreen always walked him with her boys, so I wasn’t
afraid for his safety. I just wanted him to know that I wanted to be there. The half of the plateful that I had eaten began to churn and gurgle in my stomach. I put my fork down and slumped back in my chair, wondering what the hell I was doing there.

I must’ve been staring off into space because Marcus’s hand startled me. I saw it reach over my shoulder and grab my plate from in front of me.

“All done?” he asked. I nodded, waiting for him to ridicule me for barely eating, but he said nothing and lifted my plate away, stacking it on top of his own and taking it over to the plastic garbage can already filled with other plates.

Once everyone was done eating, the music turned up and a tame sort of ruckus began. For the children, that meant returning to their lightsabers and razor scooters. The adults began to dance. It happened without any signal that I was aware of, yet everyone in the family seemed to understand how each song was telling them to move. The first made them move side to side rhythmically, slowly. With the next, they stepped faster, backwards and forwards, spinning around every so often, mirroring each other’s steps. For Camille and me, dancing in the center of a crowded room felt less like fun and more like work, so without speaking we simultaneously avoided the kitchen, where all the action was, to otherwise occupy ourselves. Camille took this opportunity to join the children in the other room, letting the girls show off their newest dolls while she led them in games and asked questions about school. I felt somehow that joining them in play would be a betrayal of my poor Nicky, who hadn’t seen me in two days, so I leaned up against the table and watched. Camille looked like a counselor among
her fawning campers. They hung off her every word, trying to impress her with their expansive doll wardrobes.

I didn’t realize I had been swaying slightly to the music, maybe even tapping my foot, until I felt the pressure of a hand on my hip. It placed itself just in time for me to rock myself into it, catching me. I turned over my shoulder to see Marcus’ nose and lips hovering over my ear.

“You like bachata?” he asked.

“Oh, I’ve never tried,” I said.

“If you know how to move, you’ll be fine. Turn around.”

In an instant, I forgot why I was avoiding the dance floor. He taught me with confidence, the kind of easy confidence that makes no demands. The kind that only comes from grace.

“One two three, pop! Back two three, pop,” he chanted, leading me side to side, popping his hip up before stepping back in the other direction. He made it easy to follow right along.

“That’s it gringita, one two three, pop. Now play two three, pop,” he said, spinning around in front of me, returning to face me just in time to pop his hip in sync with mine. With our hands unclasped, I balled mine in fists, like I’d seen the adults in the kitchen do but probably a lot tighter. I swung them in circles at my sides like I was running along to the beat. He cheered me on but laughed a little as he did. I must have looked like a turkey trying to take flight—capable of the basic motions yet ridiculous to watch. I started laughing, too. It was sometime right about then, right as I started laughing along with him, that I felt it.
When someone is looking at you a certain way, a way that I eventually became accustomed to, you can feel it long before you see it. I peered over my shoulder to see Camille in the next room, sitting straight up on her knees, staring at us while we danced. With wide, round eyes and pursed lips, she stared me down as if to say, *Not my family, you whore.*

All at once, I flashed back to those bathroom tiles. It was in that moment I realized the true cost of what I’d done. I had fucked a man for money. I was no different physically. I’d boarded the train with no scars or bruises. I’d had a pretty normal day off with a friend. And yet I knew I was changed. Not because I was different in some tangible way, but because I knew than that anyone who would ever hear the story of the train station bathroom would know it forever. They might still care for me, want the best for me. They might even invite me over and let me borrow clothes, but they’d keep me away from their cousins. They’d probably double wash their sheets after I left. I would be different because those around me would decide that I was. Now I lost my count, fumbling, and turned around to collect my things from the table.

“God, I forgot,” I said. “I have an Uber coming.”

Marcus stopped dancing and straightened up, furrowing his brow with confusion. The more I spoke, the more I knew I would make a mess, so I just waved goodbye. I thanked Eunice for the meal and told Camille I’d bring her clothes to her at work, then I b-lined for the door. I walked to the edge of the driveway and called an expensive ride home.
While sitting in the back seat, I was put at ease by the thought of being home soon, and by the realization that I didn’t really have a choice anymore. What I’d done once was no longer mine to hide or reveal. My best friend knew. I was now different from her, and she knew it. I’d already crossed the threshold from free-sex-haver to paid-sex-giver, and though I didn’t realize I was doing so, I gave my peers permission to get on with life on their side of the line while I now dwelt in a different world. Perhaps before the train station, before the bathroom tiles and kicking baby legs, I could’ve gotten to know Marcus, maybe even sleep with him. Now, that part of my life involved transactions, cash in envelopes or folded in damp hands. It was already over, I thought, I was a whore.

Today, I don’t know what to say about that moment or how to explain why I felt what I felt. I just know that I made a decision. If I’m a whore now, I thought, then fuck it. I can’t go back. I was ready to capitalize. I saw my next steps realistically for the first time, or so I thought. Had I known then what I know now, this might have been the moment I’d chosen to change. Or maybe not, maybe I never really had a choice. But as I left Camille’s that night, I really felt I did.

I acted. It felt good.

I pulled out my phone. I texted Norman, I told him I wanted to speak with him the following night at work.