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Of Mothers and Monsters

Senior Creative Writing Project

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For a Degree Bachelor of Arts with
A Major in Creative Writing at
The University of North Carolina Asheville
Fall 2016

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Navigating the Labyrinth

If I'd initially thought that Ecofeminism was a little over my head, a little too much for a small town girl who'd barely discussed feminism before, let alone feminism with an "eco" attached, then the professor and the students sealed the deal.

The first girl who approached introduced herself to me as Em, and the very first thing she said to me was, "Hey, I'm a lesbian, and I hope you're okay with that!" After her proclamation an anxious expression bloomed on her face and she nodded her head once, as though by nodding her head firmly and resolutely I, a complete stranger, would have no choice but to nod along and agree with her. Em was tall, with short pixie-cut orange hair and a navy blazer with a rainbow pin on it. My thoughts ran along the lines of *God don't let my mother hear this. She would never let me stay at this school.*

I didn't think it polite to bring to Em's attention that she was most likely the first lesbian I'd ever had a conversation with, so instead I lied through my teeth and said, "Of course I'm okay with that!" Did I have an option to not be okay with that? I didn't think so, not when, out of a class of ten people, nine of them were girls, all of whom looked like official card-carrying lesbians who could crush my head like a jellybean beneath their strappy Teva hiking shoes. Was this what college was like, I wondered, or was it just Ecofeminism?

When the professor appeared, she looked like a cross between a retired fortune-teller and a Mack truck driver, all frizzy gray hair, throaty voice, and, despite her small frame, the unquestionable authority that oozed out of a woman who knew how to take up space. She boomed to us in her scratchy voice that no, we would not be going inside our assigned classroom. Instead she herded us like cattle, out the building and into the grass behind the school's library. For what sort of virgin sacrifice we were about to partake in, I had no idea.

“This is the Labyrinth,” she said in a voice that projected across the field and seemed to travel a long distance through the fall air and into all nine girls’, and the one guy’s, eardrums. “And the first thing we’re going to do today is walk it.”

The girls mumbled their agreement, Em’s notably the loudest. It took me a few minutes to realize that the “Labyrinth” the professor referred to was what appeared to me to be no more than a large pile of stones on the ground arranged in spirals, with a big gray rock large enough to sit on at its center. Only the one male in our group looked as confused as I did.

With little fanfare, the professor led us through the “entrance” to the Labyrinth, where as a class we weaved and wove and walked through spiral after spiral for at least fifteen minutes, slowly, as that seemed to be the protocol. One girl tried to make it to the big center rock early by stepping over the low rock wall, and the professor reprimanded her so fast the girl’s foot froze midway over a smooth white stone.

“That’s cheating!” the professor shouted. “The point of this exercise is to meditate on the journey we each take to reach our destination; no shortcuts allowed.”

Though at first I’d rolled my eyes and snickered about walking around in circles trailing after a madwoman, the crazy professor was right about one thing—the Labyrinth was a relaxing experience, the rocks comforting guidelines, the curves gentle and misleading, sometimes bringing you so close to the center that you think you’re almost there, only in the next turn to bring you all the way back out to the outer circles again. I walked slower than anyone else, my eyes glued to the ground, thinking about what Em had said to me before class. How could someone be so brash to just blurt out their sexuality like that to a complete stranger? Confident, or brave, maybe, but risky too. Em glanced back at me once or twice, probably wondering what was taking me so long, maybe wondering why, after she announced her lesbianism to me, I

excused myself from Em's side and fled to the bathroom. All the other girls and the one guy had already made it to the center stone, but I still had one more loop to go. The professor looked at me and nodded, like I was learning something.

At her suggestion, I picked up a fiery red leaf off the ground and put it on the large gray stone when I finally reached the center of the Labyrinth, a token of appreciation, or good faith, or madness, I wasn't sure.

I sat on the ground with my back propped up against the big rock, feeling a little more at ease with the essential oil-toting, Teva-wearing, wild-haired group of lesbians, plus the still confused-looking guy who probably wanted to drop this class. I'd been right along there with him, but something about walking aimlessly in circles with strangers while passersby watched with amused expressions had softened the resistant part of me. The professor sat cross-legged on the ground, her backpack and notes splayed everywhere, and preached a little more about journeys and journeying, and this time I listened. Em scooted next to me, her orange bangs covering much of her eyes. She whispered, "Do you have a roommate already? Cause mine backed out last minute, and if you want..."

My eyes stayed on Professor Fortune-teller, which helped me hide my surprise at Em's offer. "I'm sorry, but I have a roommate," I said, which was a blatant lie. For reasons unknown to me, my assigned roommate never showed up, and her side of the room was still bare, waiting for someone to come fill it up. The truth was that Em made me uncomfortable--just talking to her in whispers while she looked at me so intently made me edgy. The idea of rooming with a lesbian proved too much for me to contemplate at that moment.

I turned my attention back to the professor. She had a green pair of reading glasses on now, reading a passage from a book, something about witches and protests and clean water. I had

no idea what she was talking about, but she was an entertaining person to watch, and the sun-warmed rock behind me cradled my back at just the right spot, and the one guy in this class still had a comical look of panic on his face, ready to bolt, but I felt like staying.

The wind picked up in a sudden gust, catching the fiery red leaf I'd placed on the center rock I leaned against. The leaf swirled around in the wind for a moment, and I tried to snatch it back, but it slipped through my fingers and flew away, lost in a mini-tornado of yellow, orange, and red.

Queer Theory

Whenever I hear the word “queer,” I always think of this--the tail-end of November, my mother twirling around the house in a crazed fit of cleaning and decorating, the crystal reindeer pulling a sleigh full of red lollipops; it is always my job to arrange them on the dining room table, at an angle--I must be delicate with the chains on their harnesses, because they fall off easily. There’s the Charlie Brown clock I bought my mother as a Christmas present years ago--it goes in the kitchen up above the ancient off-white telephone that’s been alive longer than I have. The Barbie ice-skating rink, one of my mother’s prized possessions, goes in the living room on the knick-knacks shelf, the bottom shelf, because it is too big to sit on the top shelves. Everything has its proper place, including me. I assemble the toy with care, all the little pairs of men and women embracing and skating, the magnets on their feet that twirl them in endless circles. The women cannot break themselves away from the men even if they wanted to; the designer made them permanently attached. While we decorate, Clay Aiken sings his heart out in the background, Christmas song after Christmas song, on a loop, on my mother’s old blue stereo full of gospel CDs and recorded sermons. It is not Christmas until I hear Clay telling me not to save it all for Christmas day. *Find a way*, he sings every year from that blue stereo, *to give a little love every day*. Every year my mother listens to his Christmas CD, and every year my mother says, “It’s too bad he turned out to be a *queer*,” and for so long I didn’t even know what that meant. “What a shame,” my mother says. “What a shame.” I know what that means now. I know why the Barbie skaters only come glued together in pairs of boys and girls, never girls and girls, or boys and boys. Every year the skaters spin their circles on the mirrored glass rink, and every year my mother plays Clay Aiken on her blue stereo, on and on and on.

Newborn

Almost two years after my first day of Ecofeminism, the first class of my college career, I sat in my car in the student parking lot, barefoot, wearing a sky blue nightgown with a cartoon of a black dog worrying a bone--“Bone Tired,” scrawled in blocky letters underneath.

Beneath my toes I felt the tiny pieces of gravel and blades of grass that coated the floorboard of the driver’s side, crumbly and ticklish on my soles. I pulled a small rock that looked like a piece of chewed-up bubble gum from the crevice of my big toe and threw it out the window onto the pavement.

“Did you two have a fight?” my mother asked. She sounded preoccupied, as though she held the phone with her shoulder and I’d caught her in the middle of filing her nails or cutting coupons. My cellphone sat on the dashboard, speaker turned all the way up, and her voice, though a good six hours away, sounded entirely too close and loud in the dark, intimate space of my Kia.

“No,” I said, hoping my mother wouldn’t think it was my fault that my roommate had high-tailed it out of our room and out of my life. “I don’t know what’s wrong with her,” I said. “I didn’t even know she was looking for other places to live.” I didn’t know it when I’d called her, but I realized now that I wanted my mom to get mad, to defend me and act indignant that Skylar had kicked me to the curb, *me*, quiet, considerate, mild—excellent roommate material for sure. My mother didn’t sound sympathetic yet.

“Did she ever talk about getting a single dorm room before?” my mother yelled, the sound of her overweight poodle barking in the background.

My mother adored Skylar for reasons I couldn’t comprehend, other than the whimsical notion that maybe Sky just had that effect on the women in my family. I ruminated, and toyed

with the silver bracelet on my wrist, a knock-off Pandora brand that my mom had gotten me for my twentieth birthday a few weeks before. I spun it round and round and round. The tinkling charms dug into the sensitive skin on the underside of my wrist, but I kept spinning. A silver running horse for me. A heart with the word “MOM” in it for her.

“No, never,” I said finally. “She always talked like we were gonna live together for all of school.” My fingers ran over the silver horse’s streaming tail. “She’s always been antisocial, but I never thought that I was one of the people she wanted to get away from.”

My mother hummed into the phone, immune to the rising panic in my voice. “Maybe she’ll change her mind.”

“She already signed the paperwork.” I waited for my mother to exclaim in disbelief, to offer condolences or comment on the obvious betrayal, but the line was silent. *I feel like I’ve been dumped*, I wanted to say, but the words sounded odd in my head so I kept my mouth shut. I released the running horse charm and watched it dangle above the gearshift, swinging as if it were actually running away from something. The car felt far too still all of a sudden, and I turned the key, wanting to run away too.

My car roared to life, humming beneath me, but I couldn’t think of where to go. I watched newborn leaves rustle in the forest behind the parking lot, their branches swaying on a wind that screamed and trilled from inside the bubble of my car. Before me, rows of cars all parked neatly in lines, threaded with empty slots where the freshmen had yet to come home from the weekend. I wished with foolish fervor that I could go home for the weekend too.

“You know, my college roommate ran off in a hurry too. Barry got mighty homesick, just like I did. I came home early.” my mother told me like I’d never heard the story before, like I had forgotten that when she was my age, she’d dropped out of college to go home and be closer

to her own mother. I barely listened. Her tired life story wasn't what I wanted to hear. I wanted to get off the phone that instant and make the world quiet and content again. I didn't know what sort of comfort I longed to find alone at ten p.m. on a chilly Sunday night, but my mother wasn't cutting it.

A streetlight next to the first-year dorm building flickered on and off every so often, light, then dark, light, then dark. I was pretty sure that same streetlight had been flickering two years before when I'd been a freshman, but maybe, like my unbreakable bond with Skylar, I had simply lost hold of what was a dream and what was reality. "I should go do some homework," I said, knowing that was one excuse my mother wouldn't argue with.

"Does she still love her Pepsi?" my mother asked suddenly. I couldn't imagine why she'd brought that up or what it had to do with my current predicament, but the question made me pause in the middle of hanging up the phone.

Of all the strange quirks that Skylar had thrilled me with over our two years living together, the most odd and endearing to me was her addiction to Pepsi Cola. I wouldn't have been surprised if she carried a flask of Pepsi with her and kept it in her back pocket when she went to work at the library every day in her hometown of Lexington. I thought of her going home with a pang now, because when Skylar came back to school after the summer vacation, she wouldn't be returning to our shoebox of a dorm room, the same room where she'd wake me up with her sleep-talking every morning, where she'd read T.S. Eliot poems to me when I couldn't sleep, where I'd once spotted a mouse in the bathroom and Sky didn't believe me until that same mouse scrambled under her bed later that night and we both screamed like we were being murdered.

Just an hour ago, I'd been in my dorm room with my suitemates, full from breakfast-for-dinner night in the cafeteria, and hyped up on caffeine and from beating my suitemate Lana at pool in the game room afterwards. When we returned to our suite, my roommate Skylar had something to tell me. She gave me that look, slightly pitying, eyebrows knitted together like the neon scarves she liked to crochet, that let me know I wasn't going to like what she had to say. After two years of living together on campus in room 307, she had decided that next semester she was going to move out and into her own single dorm. She already had a new room picked out, and new suitemates to go along with it.

I'd sat cross-legged on my friend Lana's loft bed and listened to her with a blank expression. My brain felt numb, the gears turning but no thoughts churned out. I felt a switch click inside of me, though I had no idea what it could be connected to: the porch light? The back door? Some ill-used garage in my mind I had forgotten about? Moisture gathered in the corners of my eyes and a lump formed in my throat but I choked it all down like bad Chinese takeout. Skylar was my best friend. I guess some part of me had thought that we were going to live together forever. I had excused myself to go on some fabricated errand, my gut empty, a snake coiled up inside of me where organs were supposed to be.

Now I tried to convey to my mother the feelings that even I couldn't give a name to. "I thought she cared about me," I told the speakerphone. My voice grew thick from crying and my mother could hear it, but I didn't try to hide it, didn't feign strength. My bracelet spun, faster, faster.

My mother paused. Then she said, "Melissa, every person you meet is going to break your heart. This is just one of many I'm afraid. You'll just have to pray about it and hope for the best."

I stilled. This was *really* not what I wanted to hear. I waited for more, but there was no more. No “I’m sorry,” or “you’ll find new friends,” or “I love you,” or even, “she’s a bitch.” Anything would have been better than the heavy silence that rang in my ears after her proclamation.

“Okay,” I said, and the hope for comfort I’d harbored when I made the call died like a dove shot from the sky.

“You sure you don’t want to come home next weekend?”

I shook my head, though my mother couldn’t see it. I wasn’t homesick; I was Skylar-sick, and my mother would never get that. *I* didn’t even get it.

I hung up, left alone with my car and my grief. I didn’t feel like praying, so I revved the engine instead. My wrist rubbed red and raw from my bracelet so I flung it off into the backseat and flicked on my headlights, the world illuminated for a moment.

A little voice in my head asked why I was so upset, tragically upset, disproportionately upset. Upset enough to turn to my mother, as comforting as a tarantula in your bed. Skylar was just a girl, just a friend, just moving to another building. Not a big deal. But in two years I’d learned Skylar like I’d learned to hug the curves on the winding roads of the Blue Ridge Parkway.

I felt in my bones that Skylar moving out would be the end of our friendship, and my heart didn’t know how to cope with that.

Why? my head asked. Visions of Skylar and me filled my mind, romantic, blurry moments where we really did live together forever, where there was no more loneliness for either

of us, where we lived in a house one day, not just a college dorm room. Dangerous dreams, forbidden, impossible. Ridiculous.

God help me, I prayed, the words rising up in me unbidden. *Do I love her?* my head asked.

Shut up, the rest of me answered. *You're a good Christian girl. You go to church and write award-winning essays about how abortion is wrong and God is good. You are your mother's daughter. You know who you are.* But I didn't. Not really.

My mother was no help. God was no help. Maybe what was wrong with me couldn't be fixed by either of them. Maybe it wasn't wrong at all.

I shifted gears and roared out of the parking lot, the wheel hot in my hands, the road before me dark and empty. I drove in circles around campus for as many rotations as I could stand, then climbed the exit to the highway, towards the mall. It was Sunday in North Carolina, so the mall was long-closed, but it didn't matter. It was the wandering I craved, the movement that slowed my mind, the warm lap of my car that held me like the newborn that I was.

June 26

I was in Walmart when my mother found out that I had a girlfriend.

I perused the shoe aisle, on a hunt for a pair of black, not-too-ugly, non-slip shoes for me to wear at Posana, a trendy, gluten-free restaurant in downtown Asheville that had just hired me to be their new host. I rejected shoe after shoe—all of them were either too expensive, too cheap, or too embarrassing to wear in public, nonslip requirement be damned. I cursed myself for coming here in the first place (I should have just gone to Target), and prepared to leave the store with a pair of pink Breast Cancer Awareness socks and a bag of organic chocolate bark that I hadn't intended to buy. Then I heard my phone buzz.

A text from my mother. Just seeing the word "Momma" light up on the screen was enough to make me nervous, but the contents of the text message made my face grow warm and my heart start pounding.

Why is a rainbow on your facebook picture?

I dropped the shoebox I'd been holding and stared at my phone like a nest of spiders had crawled out of it. *What is she talking about?* As far as I knew my mother had zero access to my Facebook profile: we weren't friends, my privacy settings were set to hide information to anyone not on my friend's list, and I'd been careful to keep any suspicious homosexual content to a minimum. What had slipped through the cracks?

Another text. **Hello?**

My mind couldn't keep up as my brain spun its wheels. What had I done differently?

Terror flashed behind my eyes. June 26.

Yesterday the Supreme Court had ruled that marriage equality was now legal in all fifty states, a momentous day for me and my family. My queer family, that is. My blood family probably spent the whole night praying and watching online episodes of televangelist Jack Van Impe.

Facebook in all its hype had offered a rainbow filter for users to attach to their profile pictures to show their support for the new law.

My privacy settings were set to hide my personal information, that was true, but even so my profile picture was always visible if someone were to search for it, which someone apparently had. My mother. I didn't think she ever looked at my profile, knowing she couldn't access it, but I'd underestimated her affinity for snooping. It was a miracle that my mother hadn't figured it out before now, my same mother who scoured the entire family's internet history every December in order to sniff out her Christmas presents.

My phone buzzed again. **Are U lesbian?**

I would have laughed if my throat wasn't pinched with panic. I read the words I'd been dreading for two years and the first thing my mind processed was that my mother couldn't even spell out the word "you." I slid to the floor. My Walmart cart went skidding down the aisle and released a God-awful screech, which prompted a tattooed woman pushing an empty baby stroller over by the flip-flops to turn around and gape at me with her large, fish-like mouth hanging open. The woman wore a neon orange bra beneath her mesh, see-through shirt, and when I moved my eyes up from her bra to her face, she shrieked louder than my shopping cart and screamed, "What are you looking at?" before pushing her empty stroller and storming away.

I curled up on the cold tile floor, one foot still bare from trying on shoes. The simple solution would be to continue doing what I'd been doing for months: lie through my teeth, as my mother would say. I could claim that it had been an accident, that my liberal college had brainwashed me into sympathy for all those heathen queer couples in the country, even that Facebook had installed the damn thing without asking my permission. Any lie or half-truth that I spooned out would taste better than the truth.

For almost two years I'd been living a double life, making secret dates with queer girls I met at online dating sites, creating new and rotating passwords for every electronic I owned: my Facebook, cell phone, computer, my OkCupid account, all password protected and never left unattended just in case my mother got nosy. I had even ripped and thrown away the incriminating white t-shirt I'd bought at the Blue Ridge Pride festival the year before, the one that read like a multiple choice question: *I am: A) Straight, B) Gay, C Bisexual, D) A Person*, with a checkmark beside "D."

I had successfully kept my sexuality a secret from my family, despite having a girlfriend, despite the cloud of guilt that followed me like a skunk smell everywhere I went. After so many lies, I had no idea how to go about beginning to tell the truth.

At this point my mother tried to call me, but my finger hit the reject button before my brain processed the action. Another text message buzzed in. **Is anna your girlfriend?**

I choked out a laugh that sounded more like a dying man's wheeze. My mother was asking the right questions now. Was Anna my girlfriend? Of course she was! If my mother had paid attention, she would have noticed that for the past year my "friend" Anna and I had been sharing everything: car rides, pet-sitting jobs, clothes, fears, kisses, air. All the breadcrumbs I'd

left behind, and all it took was a Facebook picture for my mother to start following the trail. I suspected somewhere along the way I'd grown sloppy, hoping that the truth would announce itself, without me having to say it. My toes curled on the cold floor, the pads of my left foot gone numb.

The painful fluorescent lights in Walmart beat down on me like heat lamps. Just lie, my head said, but the reasonable side of me admitted that I could lie until my nose had its own gravitational pull, but the jig was up.

My breathing grew louder, and louder, until the sound of my huffs of breath were the loudest sounds in the department store, the loudest sounds in the universe. I kept waiting for another patron or an employee to walk around the bend and spy me spread out on the floor, to ask if I was okay, to save me, but no one did. My hands clutched my cell phone between sweaty palms, the metal hot, like a beating heart.

It wasn't supposed to happen this way. I had decided, on my own and with the help of a counselor, that for my own safety I would continue to lie to my mother until the day came when I felt ready to blow her permed, old-fashioned, Bible-thumping mind.

I had never planned for today to be that day. Yet my shredded heart whispered that it was tired of lying.

But what would happen to me? If I told my mother then my entire journey of discovery would become real in a different way; the wrath of God and my mother would be upon me, and if it came down to a contest of compassion between my mother and God, my money was on God.

Before coming out, I always thought of myself as a terrible liar, but my greatest lie was the one I'd told myself for the first twenty years of my life--I'd pushed down my sexuality to

please my family, to appease God, and because my biggest fear in the entire world was that my mother would cease to be my mother if she knew that I was no longer the girl she thought I was-- I knew that I had become someone else over the past two years--a bitter girl, a potty-mouth, a liar, a heathen, a liberal, a red-haired demon. That is how my mother would see me. But I was learning to see the new me in a different way--I had become a braver girl, bolder, louder, and like my Ecofeminism professor had tried to teach me on my very first day of college almost four years ago, I was finally learning what it meant to take up space, and not apologize for it.

Are U lesbian? my mother asked again, and I felt tired, a thousand years old, aged by the weight of my lies and the weight of words left unsaid.

My fingers splayed over my phone's keyboard, shaky, slow, determined. **Would you hate me if I were?**

Agoraphobic

My favorite emotion is relief, and that's what I expected to feel when my ex-roommate Skylar pulled up in my parents' driveway in her little black Taurus--a deep, satisfying, breath of fresh air.

Skylar crawled out of her car, a pair of reflective sunglasses perched on the top of her head, a mountain of leopard-print luggage trailing behind her. She waved. She'd driven over four hours from Lexington to visit me in my hometown of New Bern, North Carolina, a city so in love with its own history that it often forgot how to live in the present. Skylar had never been here before.

Let me tell you what Skylar meant to me--she was my ex-roommate, my ex-best friend, my crush, my safety blanket. For the two years we lived together in our shared dorm room, she breathed the little breaths I fell asleep to each night, she read English poetry to me when my loneliness gnawed and I couldn't sleep. Hers was the first voice I heard every morning, those mumbled words and sentences that tumbled, jolted, and leapt from her mouth in the wee hours of the morning. Freshman year of college, in a world ruled by all things new--new friends, new teachers, new school, new town, new living arrangements, new life--Skylar was the stationary landmark that I drew my new life map around.

I sat on the front porch in one of my mother's white-painted wicker rocking chairs, where I'd been for the past thirty minutes, waiting for her to arrive. It was July, hot as Satan's armpit. Blue jays trilled in the massive oak trees in my parent's front yard, and fat squirrels fought each other to get to the bird seed my mother had bought at the Dollar Store to feed the cardinals.

Skylar labored with her bags, out of breath already. In the weeks prior to her visit, Sky struggled with some sort of chest problem, a sharp pain that knifed through her chest and left her breathless with even the most minimal amount of walking. Several doctors argued over what it could be, but I suspected it had something to do with the gallons of Pepsi-Cola that Skylar downed like water every day.

I frowned at her. “You shouldn’t have come,” I said.

Skylar climbed up the last stair of my porch and set her bags down, one hand on her hips, the other floating in the air in a gesture to “hush.” She breathed audibly. “You’re ridiculous,” she said in between pants. “I’m healthy as a horse. Wouldn’t miss this for the world.”

Sky came around and gave me a one-armed hug before she plopped down on the rocking chair next to me. “Pretty town,” she said. “I drove by the Pepsi store on the way here. Can we go to it later?”

I laughed a little. New Bern was where Pepsi-Cola had been invented, and we had a whole store downtown devoted to Pepsi paraphernalia. In fact, my own grandmother always told me that she knew Caleb Bradham, the man who first concocted “Brad’s Drink,” the very same soda that my ex-roommate Skylar was addicted to. “Of course,” I said, and then we were silent for several long, heavy minutes.

Finally Skylar’s breathing quieted, and she looked at me with that same concerned look that I’d grown accustomed to seeing on the faces of my family and coworkers in the last couple months. “How are you doing?” Skylar asked, and I knew exactly what she was referring to.

Before the two of us had left for summer vacation after our second year of college, I’d sat Skylar down in my car in the student parking lot and told her I needed to tell her something. As I

always do when I really need to say something, I rambled a bit before I got to the meat of the conversation. Finally I just blurted it out: “I care about you as more than just a friend,” I’d said. It had taken me two years and a lot of agonizing to come to that realization, and now that the truth was out in the open, and I knew that Skylar did not return my feelings, and I knew that my mother would never accept me as a lesbian, I’d fallen into a bit of a black hole of guilt, confusion, and lies.

Why did Skylar even come to visit me? I wondered. We were no longer roommates; we were barely even friends these days.

“I’m doing okay,” I answered. Skylar didn’t say anything. She knew I was lying, and I knew that she knew that I was lying. Skylar always had a peculiar knack for being able to read my mood, no matter what I said or how I acted to try to throw her off. It was one of the things that I loved about her.

Sky looked over at my sparkling red Kia, parked in the driveway and ready to run. “Wanna drive for a bit?” She asked.

I jumped out of my chair before I even answered. Hell yeah I wanted to drive. “Let’s go,” I said.

The year before, I thought I held Skylar’s pulse in the palm of my hand.

“Wanna skip class?” I asked her. I perched on the edge of my bed, leg bouncing with excitement, my words both wheedling and warm.

Sky sat with her back to me, fiddling with her notebooks and the color-coded pens at her desk. She pretended to be studious. I could tell from the twitch of her hands and the set of her shoulders that her heart wasn't in it.

I waited.

"What makes you think I'd want to do that?" Sky's voice was sugar and syrup, her words slow, a tease, a scold, a promise. She turned around and raised her eyebrows at me.

Sky was in a good mood, definitely, so I knew she'd give in.

"Cause History is boring!" I said. "And the mountains are calling." I pointed to our dorm window for emphasis. The sun beamed bright at the head of my bed and from the window we could see that the leaves were just beginning to change their colors.

Skylar toyed with the giant pink eraser that lived on her desk, the one that said, 'For HUGE mistakes.' "I don't know," she said.

We both had two classes on our agendas for the day, but I hadn't even finished my homework yet and I would bet all the gas in my car that Skylar had done her Latin homework but hadn't yet touched her Humanities paper.

She huffed and tossed her eraser onto her bed. "Did you have something in mind?"

I did not, in fact, have anything in particular on my mind when I'd suggested Skylar and I cut class, but once we were in my car, I drove like I knew exactly where I was going.

Sky slouched in the passenger's seat with her sunglasses on, looking relaxed and a million miles away from my fidgety roommate who sat in our bedroom just a half hour before.

Like a reptile, the sunshine warmed up her blood and brought Skylar back to life. She fiddled with the radio until she found a pop song she liked, then settled back in her seat with a small smile.

It was hard to get Skylar to leave our room these days, as she would usually rather nap in her bed than get out and play with me. But today I could feel the restlessness in her energy, the discontent I felt mirrored in my own blood, the need to escape. From what, I wasn't sure, but I'd always hoped that even if we weren't running from the same things, we would at least be running *toward* the same thing--each other.

Skylar often ran hot and cold on me: one day she'd stay up all night, talking and reading to me until I fell asleep, the next day she would pull away from my hug and say that I wasn't her best friend, because she didn't believe in "best" friends, and that all friends were completely equal to her.

"How are you feeling today?" I asked Skylar while I drove. A couple of weeks before, Skylar had admitted to me that she was clinically depressed, and that that depression sometimes kept her from doing things that she wanted to do, like get out of bed, socialize, and sometimes, it even kept her from leaving our room, like an invisible electric fence kept her trapped within our painted cinderblock walls. I googled the word "agoraphobic," and thought it sounded like her.

After she told me, I googled home remedies and things you could do to help people with depression, and I did one of them each day for a while. I left her little Post-It notes on her desk: *I believe in you!*, and *You are loved!*, and *You're going to have a great day!* I encouraged her to go to counseling, to look into medication, to get out more, to stop drinking so much Pepsi.

However, Skylar always did what Skylar wanted to do, and with her I first began to learn my most important lesson, the one I struggled with for years to come: you can't love someone enough to make them start loving themselves--they have to do that all on their own. Skylar did not go to counseling; she did not take medication. She did get a tattoo on the inside of her left arm, in Latin, that said "While there is life, there is hope."

Salem

Salem had some sort of phobia related to driving, so her mom dropped her off at Weaverville Elementary School on Friday night for our date. Her mom's beat-up Toyota pulled into the gravel lot at seven on the dot, the nearly-bald tires kicking up a ruckus of dirt and rocks as the car came to a stop about ten feet away from my Kia.

I stood slouched against the driver's side door of my car, arms crossed, my mouth moving, chomping a piece of Trident Layers into oblivion. The sky was a wash of dusky gray and cat's tongue pink, and the chill November wind bared its teeth, biting through the thin velvet jacket I held closed with trembling fingers.

As the dark-haired girl--my date--slipped out of the car, I wondered what the protocol was here. Should I introduce myself to her mother? Make pleasant conversation about the weather? Would that be too awkward? Not that it mattered, as this night was bound to be awkward as hell. I barely knew this girl, not that that had ever stopped me before.

But something about my date being dropped off by her mother in an empty school parking lot with no one around was enough to make this night feel even more surreal than the numerous Internet dates I'd indulged prior to this one. Though tonight did not technically count as an "Internet date", since I'd met this girl in real life, and not on OkCupid, the superficial dating app I'd been glued to for months.

As the moment for introductions faded, I went with my most ingrained instinct, the one that told me to play the polite, sweet girl, the one that parents invited over for dinner and old ladies smiled at in the grocery store. I approached the driver's side window wearing a smile as

warm as the setting sun behind us. “Hello!” I said, loud enough to be heard over the pop-country music hybrid drifting out of the open window. “I’m Melissa.”

The middle-aged woman behind the wheel stared at me with a bald expression of distrust. Her eyes took in my all-black outfit, the fake leather tights, the shiny combat boots I’d salvaged from a yard sale, the black t-shirt with silver spider webs painted in glitter across the chest, which I’d bought at Target’s after-Halloween sale a few weeks before. Her gaze settled on my blood-red hair, shoulder-length and far straighter than I would ever be. Her eyebrows rose to her hairline. “You look awfully old for twenty,” she said.

“I get that a lot,” I replied, trying to shrug off her unfriendly tone. For a split second, I’d forgotten that my exterior no longer matched up with the shy, quiet girl that wore my skin for most of my life. At the beginning of that summer, I’d wanted so badly to be someone else, to be bold, brave, intimidating, and judging by the guarded look on this mother’s face, I had succeeded in looking the part at least.

Salem appeared at my elbow, her face cajoling, her hand a soothing presence on the inside of my wrist. “She’s only a year older than me, Mom!”

I flinched at her touch. Salem was only a year younger than me, but I felt that year acutely as I listened to Salem and her mom argue back and forth for a few minutes, until finally her mother said, “We’ll talk about this later,” and Salem dragged me over to my car with her lips pulled together in a tight line.

Without a second glance, Salem’s mom roared out of the parking lot, all squealing tires and spitting gravel and dramatic flair. It was pretty impressive.

I knew from our emails that Salem had issues with her mom, but at least her mother cared enough to drive her to an impromptu date with me, an older, recently-closeted queer girl who Salem had met and spent a couple hours hanging out with at the Blue Ridge Pride Festival the month before. At least she was, in some way, trying.

If my mother knew that I was out on a date with any girl, let alone one I'd met only once before at a Gay Pride Festival, she would probably spontaneously combust, and if she survived that, she would undoubtedly cry and wail, scream and guilt, and throw Bible verses at me until I grew chastened enough to give up on my whole journey towards self-acceptance.

I could more easily imagine a fire-breathing dragon flying down from the clouds and offering me ride on its back than my mother willingly driving me to a date with a girl.

I opened the passenger's door for Salem and made my way back to the driver's side, keys jingling, suddenly wondering what I'd gotten myself into. Thoughts of my mother had left me with the familiar tug of panic in my chest, the flushed cheeks, the niggling doubts that all my effort and heartbreak and pain was for nothing. Other than Skylar, my straight ex-roommate who I'd fallen in love with, who I hadn't spoken to in months, none of the girls I'd been with had given me the feeling that I craved--like coming out was worth it

In the passenger's seat next to me, the girl coughed and shifted the part in her dark hair from one side to the other. She looked nervous, young, scared, exactly the way I had looked on my first Internet date.

The magic that surrounded my initial meeting Salem at the Pride festival dissipated into a feeling of resignation, a sureness that this date would turn out just like all the others--a disappointment. All of the queer girls I'd met up with had left me feeling guilty, dirty, and

empty. Why did I keep emailing girls and making dates, thinking that maybe this time, the pieces would line up and I would feel normal again?

Once we were both buckled in my car, the silence between us deepened and expanded. Salem still fumed from the disagreement with her mom, and my mind churned with doubts and a sudden urge to flee. But Salem's mom was long gone, I had already taken the night off work for this outing, and there was nothing to do now but keep walking on the path I'd chosen for myself.

I tried to approach the night differently. So maybe this date would crash and burn, maybe Salem wouldn't fill the hole in me that had been growing ever since Skylar walked out of our dorm room and left my life a mess, but maybe, for one night, I could just have fun with another queer girl who also had mother issues. No pressure, no chasing, no sultry "Queen Mel," the she-wolf of online dating.

I started my car and drove towards our chosen destination for the evening--the movie theater. The sun quivered and melted behind the mountains, leaving trails of pink and lingering shadows in its wake.

"You ready?" I asked, and I knew that I was talking to both of us.

In the months following my movie date with Salem, I only emailed her once or twice, not because I didn't have fun, but because of the way that fun made me feel.

Throughout that date, while we shared candy and personal space and stories in the dark theater, I'd learned that Salem had more than enough of her own crosses to bear. Salem was

queer, doctor-diagnosed depressed, and struggled with self-harm. She lived with her dog and her overworked mother, who didn't even understand one of those struggles, let alone all three.

"Gracie gets it more than mom does," Salem told me, referring to her massive Great Dane.

At the end of the night, after I dropped Salem off at her mother's house, a tiny farmhouse that sat all on its own in the absolute middle of nowhere Canton, NC, I felt overwhelmed. I liked Salem; I enjoyed spending time with her. I longed to meet Gracie, her certified emotional support dog whose claws Salem painted with a fresh shade of blue, pink, or red nail polish every week. But when Salem invited me to come inside and hang out for a bit before I left, I declined.

As nice as it had been to have a pressure-free date, to drive around the countryside together while we sang along to every Taylor Swift album I owned, I knew I wasn't ready for this. Salem clearly had many issues of her own, and she would be better off spending her time with someone who wasn't struggling as deeply as I still did. Her pain, especially her self-harm, rose way over my head, and I teetered close to drowning already. I'd been hunting down girls, looking for a savior, but I was beginning to realize that the girls I chased were all damaged people too, maybe we all were, and not one of them could save me.

Salem peered at me as I drove back to her house after the movie, her dark curly hair undulating in the breeze from my half-rolled windows.

"Your mom-mobile handles pretty well out here," she said, as we zigged and zagged around the tight curves and sudden turns on the way to her house.

“My car is *not* a mom-mobile.” I patted the steering wheel fondly. “It’s a small SUV.”

“Same thing.”

I smiled, a real smile, not the fake one I’d donned for Salem’s mother earlier that night.

“Did you have fun?” Salem asked, eyeing me from the passenger’s seat. She had a good three inches on my height, but she looked so small just then, toying with her jacket zipper, feigning nonchalance. She struck me as someone who needed a savior too.

“Definitely,” I replied. I drove one-handed, the way I often did when I drove alone, my left hand resting on my thigh, feeling more at ease than I’d been on any Internet date before Salem.

Salem hesitated. She looked out the window, then down to the floorboard, back out the window, then turned her eyes on me. “Do you like me?” she asked.

I closed my eyes briefly. I could sense how hard it was for her to ask that question, how brave she must be to just say it like that. I wanted to be truthful, but delicate. “A lot,” I said, and I think we could both feel that there was a “but” coming next. “But I think we should just be friends,” I finished. I explained to Salem my feelings, how overwhelmed I was, how unstable, how I was going to have to learn how to love myself before I could consider dragging someone else into the mess I’d made of my life. It felt sort of like a breaking up speech, though I think I was breaking up with the Internet Girls as a whole more so than I was with Salem.

I could feel her heart crumble in my palm, but I knew I was doing the right thing.

“One day you’ll feel whole again,” I said, and I knew I was talking to both of us.

Healing

I sat in the movie theater all by myself, nursing a pint of Ben & Jerry's and a glass bottle of Pellegrino that I'd smuggled into the theater in my giant brown leather purse. It was a Monday night, not one other person in the Carolina, my favorite theater that boasted leather couches instead of individual rows of seats, and it was the most fun I'd had in ages.

On the screen the scene played with no one there to see it but me--I couldn't remember the title but it was some terrible teen movie in which a gaggle of sixteen-year-old boys and their one smart female friend accidentally created a time machine and inevitably started fucking things up. I lounged with my feet propped up on the cream-colored ottoman that matched the theater couches, my black velvet jacket spread across my lap like a blanket.

My phone buzzed in my purse, so I leaned over to snag it with one hand while the other wrapped around my bottle of sparkling mineral water. *You have a new message on OkCupid!* my phone informed me. *Your perfect match is waiting!*

I scoffed. *Perfect match my ass.* I turned off my phone and tossed it back in my purse on the floor. In the weeks following my date with Salem, I'd been ignoring all of my Internet pursuers in favor of spending time doing things by myself--I treated myself out to dinners alone, took long drives on the Blue Ridge Parkway until I spotted a city name that looked interesting, where I'd stop off and explore little towns with old-fashioned gas pumps, country stores, and the occasional apple festival.

But most often, I went out to see movies alone. Kids movies, awful teen movies, horror movies that I usually didn't get to go see because none of my friends were interested in going with me. While I felt self-conscious the first time I ordered a single movie ticket from the front

desk with no one to follow after me, I owned that feeling now. I had no Internet dates to keep, no roommate to pine after, no mother to police my time or tell me I couldn't do it.

I'm sure most of my friends felt sorry for me, but I didn't feel that way. Whenever I told someone that I was going to go see a movie by myself, I was inevitably faced with one of two reactions, the first being pity. They felt sorry for me, maybe pretended that they didn't think it sad that I was off to go sit in a dark room all by myself for several hours. But the second reaction was pretty satisfying: "Wow! I wish I had the confidence to do that!" they said, and I puffed up a little, thought to myself *yes, yes, that's me*.

Now I sat up as the credits rolled, stretched my arms over my head and gathered my trash. The theater employee already stalked the back of the room, broom in hand, ready to clean the space as soon as I left. He looked at the empty tub of ice cream in my hand and I feared he would get mad at me for sneaking in outside food but he just gave me a thumbs up and moved his broom over the floor, chasing a miniscule popcorn kernel into a corner.

Kaleidoscope

The day I met Salem was my first time attempting anything so public and attention-grabbing in regards to my newfound sexuality--I'd driven alone to gay nightclubs in big cities and met unknown girls at coffee shops for clandestine dates in the dark of night, but Pride was different.

Blue Ridge Pride called to me like the Blue Ridge Mountains that had wooed me to Western North Carolina in the first place. Like Asheville had spoken to me two years before, Pride promised me a place where I wouldn't feel like an outsider, where people were open and accepting, where I wouldn't be met with guilt and threats of eternal damnation.

At ten a.m. I walked into the heart of hipster-run downtown Asheville and approached the festival area slowly and cautiously, as though there would be a bouncer at the gate who would take one look at me and know I didn't belong there.

That morning, I put together what I thought in my head to be the ultimate lesbian outfit--the long-sleeved red flannel I'd snatched from Goodwill, a pair of oversized pale blue jeans with rips and tears on the thighs, my brown Teva boots, and my black sheepskin hat, a recent present from my mother, though she had no idea what nefarious activities I'd be exposing it to.

Fake it 'till you make it, my mother always told me, and maybe it would work. Maybe if I could act the part of confident, unafraid lesbian, then eventually I would become that girl. In all reality, I shook in my hiking boots and I told half the Internet Girls that I was bisexual and the other half that I was gay, because I had no idea what to call myself and to fully commit to either one was terrifying.

What I really felt like was Skylar-sexual, but there was only one Skylar in the world and she didn't love me back, so I had to find someone out there who made me feel like she did, like I could face the complications of being gay head on, like they were less scary and absolutely worth it if I got to be with her. I hadn't found that person yet, but from what the internet said Pride would be a smorgasbord of gay and lesbian love, a field of rainbows and glitter, and maybe she was out there, the girl who would fill Skylar's role, the one who would make me feel like myself again.

I knew I was in the right place when I saw the protesters stationed on the corner, their hands filled with signs written in blocky red Sharpie, their faces twisted up with judgement and lips curled with hate. "God hates fags," one sign read, while the one right next to it was a little more all-inclusive: "God hates *you*," it said, with a frightening amount of exclamation points.

Their ringleader, a large man with shiny black hair and an equally shiny black Bible, paced the sidewalk with a face so pinched it looked like he was constipated. "Don't go in there!" He yelled at me. "Repent! And God will forgive you your trespasses!"

I walked on and avoided eye contact, suddenly shy in my flannel and my hat and my devil-kissed red hair. I allowed myself to be swept across the street with a flock of teenage boys headed in the same direction. The pinched man looked an awful lot like Buford, the loud Baptist preacher my parents would drive an hour every Sunday to listen to when I was in high school. "Fuck you!" one of the boys screamed at the top of his lungs. He gave the protester the finger, which caused him to scoff with a holier-than-thou expression and cast his predatory eyes on the next batch of heathens headed toward the fray.

"Thanks," I mumbled.

The boys hooted and hollered and ran in front of me, towards the music and the colors and so, so many dogs. I walked into the Blue Ridge Pride festival like I'd stumbled into another dimension.

A sea of people greeted me, hundreds, thousands, there seemed to be no logical way to quantify the amount of people who inhabited this new world. I was surprised by the amount of older couples who walked arm in arm through the flurry of tents and games, the men with colorful leis around their necks and the women with their matching short, steel-gray haircuts. They mingled with the bright-eyed teenagers wearing multi-colored grass skirts and undercuts with their hair dyed in every color of the rainbow: a sunset orange mohawk here, long cerulean-blue hair over there, bright green spikes sticking out of an otherwise clean-shaven head.

I felt an intense rush of pride for my furiously red hair. I dyed it the color of fresh blood several months before, during the earliest stages of my coming out, back when the idea of truly being a lesbian was little more than a pipe dream, too perilous a road to fully consider traversing. Now my pipe dream was a pipe bomb, and I picked my way among more gay people than I'd ever imagined, all of them carefree and strutting around just like any heterosexual couple I'd ever seen, in city blocks with so many rainbows and neon colors it made my eyes burn.

Impossible, I thought, that such a world could exist so far away from the guilt and shame that had followed me around for the past year.

I spent my first few hours at Pride without talking to anyone in particular, other than the occasional "hey, hi, hello," followed by a nervous smile as volunteers set up booths around me and vendors attempted to sell me all sorts of rainbow screen-printed merchandise: t-shirts,

hoodies, messenger bags, beanies, tank tops, crop tops, paper-thin dresses with the Pride flag stretched across the chest.

Mostly I watched. I watched the girls decked out head to toe in rainbow-colored capes and large cat's-eye sunglasses, glitter winking in their hair. I watched the girls with scary-looking tattoos of dragons and pythons, with piercings in their eyebrows and rings that hung from their nostrils like bulls. There were cute girls, average girls, butch girls, femme girls, girls that trailed behind their group of friends like they didn't truly want to be there, and girls that led the pack with loud voices and hair the color of some fantasy flavor of cotton candy.

Girls were everywhere, and many of them walked in pairs, holding hands, kissing, canoodling, licking ice cream cones, and buying a wide variety of intestine-clogging fried foods. I even spotted a couple of girls with long black hair and sad eyes, who made my heart pang with memories of Skylar.

No one had told me in church that Heaven would look like this.

Every manner of girl paraded around the booths throughout the festival, every type of girl I could dream up or crave was right here at my fingertips, all queer, all ripe for the taking, like a real-life version of my OkCupid app. Now all I had to do was pick one.

My eyes tracked the crowd, unsure where to begin. I had lied to my mother and come to Blue Ridge Pride that day not just to prove to myself that I was brave enough to do it, but also to meet someone.

I'd grown weary of my same old tired online dating routine: winnow through a small and increasingly familiar list of potential matches, make sure they were within an acceptable mile radius of my location, examine their pages to make sure they weren't serial killers or stalkers

(though who could really tell that from someone's online dating profile, where every other sentence was a carefully-crafted lie, meant to draw in whatever type of person desired?). Then there was the messaging, the waiting for a response, the maybe getting one back, the maybe not. The mundane, predictable small talk that followed when they did message you back, the questions, the answers, the flirty compliments on the other's profile picture or the insistence by one party that the two of you were "a perfect match," based on the dating website's one-hundred question personality test, where half of those one-hundred questions were about sexual preferences and me, a virgin at nineteen and twenty, couldn't even answer with any substantial level of accuracy.

Thus I embraced the Blue Ridge Pride Festival as an unrivaled opportunity, the best I'd had so far in my coming out process to meet some mesmerizing queer girl without having to read her bio on OkCupid first.

Earlier that morning I had folded up my printed-out copy of the schedule for the day's events and shoved it in my bra for easy access, so I pulled it out now and considered where I wanted to go to find my dream girl. The schedule informed me that around noon a drag show was set to take place, so I walked over to the North side of the festival and immersed myself into the growing crowd gathered around a makeshift wooden stage decorated with twinkling rainbow lights and garlands of feather boas that shed their multi-colored plastic feathers like molting birds. The cool October breeze gathered the dyed feathers in its clutches and swirled them around in mini-tornadoes.

I walked through the crowd of queer people who grew increasingly more rowdy, probably excited about the drag show about to start, and who had probably had time to get a little alcohol into their systems by now. I searched for someone to sit with, inwardly saying "no" to

that group of girls, there were too many of them already, and “no” to another girl with an empty seat beside her, because she was no doubt holding that spot for her girlfriend while she went to the bathroom or something.

Up close, the girls I’d been admiring moments before appeared less friendly, and far more intimidating in their rainbow paraphernalia, thick black eyeliner, some with their faces painted with rainbow hearts and middle fingers, some wearing black skinny jeans so tight it was probably cutting off their circulation.

I scolded myself. Here I was, “Queen Mel,” as I’d allowed a couple of the Internet Girls to call me over the summer, a lady-killer in the online dating world, yet in real life I was too afraid to approach even one of the multitudes of girls before me. I circled the crowd several times, building my confidence up with internalized pep talks, looking to see if any of the girls in the crowd were doing the same thing I was--searching, searching, always searching.

Finally I spotted a girl who sat a little apart from the rest of the crowd, her long white-blond hair splayed around her face and shoulders like a veil. She had her nose stuck deep into her phone, texting away, but she did appear to be alone, and I saw something soft and gentle in the flowy, cream-colored bohemian-style fabrics she wore.

The girl sat on a set of concrete steps to the far right side of the wooden stage, her legs tucked neatly underneath her, covered by a long filmy skirt decorated with a pattern of warm yellow butterflies and ice blue dragonflies. I stopped short next to where she sat and gazed at the stage many yards away, where a curvy Latina woman with exaggerated makeup and a sparkly purple dress stood on the top stair leading up to the stage, doing a sound check on her microphone.

I took a deep breath and looked down at the blonde girl cradling her phone in her lap, who had yet to notice me. “Is it okay if I sit here?” I asked.

She looked up at me, her fingers still moving across her phone screen. Her eyes were the faded blue of well-worn denim, and her eyebrows were colorful though her hair was not--they stood out on her face, dyed pink like the inside of a conch shell. “I don’t care,” she said.

Not a great start, but I persevered. I sat down and asked the girl how she was doing, her name, if she was liking the Pride festival so far.

“Pride festival?” She looked at me with new eyes, and finally I had her full attention. She looked me over, from my black hat down to my Teva boots. “You’re gay, aren’t you?” The girl laughed a mean little laugh. “Well, you can stop barking up this tree, because I have a boyfriend.” She waved her phone in my face like it was proof. The girl got up and trudged away, muttering under her breath, “You can’t go anywhere these days...”

I sat on the steps and blinked, startled. Wasn’t there some unwritten rule that it was illegal for straight girls to prowl around the periphery of Pride festivals? I stayed there on that same step and watched the drag show for a while, trying to decide whether or not I should just go home. I was just about to get up and make one last round of the festival when two girls ran up to me both wearing beanies and dark jeans. “Anyone sitting here?” the shorter girl asked. She had a rainbow button on her shirt that said “Ally” on it. I shook my head and both girls collapsed on the steps beside me.

The taller girl sat beside me, breathing hard. Her purple flannel shirt was covered in dog hair, as though she’d been wrestling with dogs all day. She noticed me staring and spoke up,

“Sorry! We just had to run away from a very mean bulldog over by the hot dog stand.” She smiled a timid smile. “My name’s Salem,” she said.

Monster House

Like everything else in New Bern, my parents' house was old and "historical," and it seemed so much older now that my grandmother, my mother's mother, had died almost three years ago, and her ancient furniture lived in every corner of the house, even my room where I slept that night.

I woke up at 3 a.m. with a roaring headache from clenching my teeth so hard, a mountain of shivers racing up and down the curves of my body, feeling dehydrated and ready to throw up my guts and bones.

I had been home for less than forty-eight hours, and already I struggled to breathe. The humid air in my hometown of New Bern, North Carolina tugged at my skin and choked up my lungs like acrid smoke. It was late December, yet the thermometer plopped itself down right in the middle of eighty degrees, and for the whole week before Christmas, it rained every day.

Even now I could hear the insistent *tap tap tap* of rain striking the old green roof of my parents' house, as well as the assortment of creaks and wails that are par for the course in a home built more than fifty years ago.

Just five more days, I thought. *I can make it for five more days*. Despite my better judgement, I had come home from college for six days, to appease my dad who begged and begged for me to come, swearing up and down that Mom wouldn't lose her temper, that everyone would be on their best behavior. This was the first time I'd seen my mother since I'd inadvertently come out to her nearly six months before, my heart racing in the shoe aisle of Walmart as I texted her the words that haunt me still: "Would you hate me if I were gay?"

In all that time my mother had never answered that question.

I sat up in bed and looked around the dim room, the only light emanating from my pink rock salt lamp in the corner. My red hair clung to my skull in sweaty clumps. I blinked. My eyes adjusted to the pink light and they didn't like what they saw. The room didn't even look like mine anymore. The summer before last, my mother asked if I would be okay with moving all my old furniture out and moving in a bedroom set from my grandmother's now-empty house. It was the same bedroom set that sat in the "Monster Room" in my grandmother's house, as my mother called it, supposedly because the room had a tendency to house bats and other dark creatures when my mom was living there.

It wasn't just the name that was intimidating. The Monster Furniture dwarfed my none-too-small bedroom--the headboard rose up all the way to the ceiling, ending in jagged points and peaks that rose like spires from a gothic church. My dad had no choice but to saw off the tops of the two highest ends just to make the thing fit into our house. The matching dresser was topped off with the same massive pointed steeples, and the top of the piece was laid out with a thick, deathly heavy slab of white marble that gave the dresser even more of an otherworldly look. Both pieces were rumored to contain secret compartments in them, though I'd only found one secret drawer in the dresser so far. The Monster Furniture loomed and glowered, made of a deep mahogany wood with ornate carvings that made the room feel more like a dungeon than a castle.

The posters and pictures that I'd painstakingly taped over every wall and flat surface I could find had been ripped off and burned in the wood-burning fireplace in my parents' living room. All the horse pictures, the wolf magazine clippings, the old photos of my high school friends and the inspirational quotes I'd taped all around my old mirror. All gone. The walls were bare, covered with odd white shapes where the wallpaper had been ripped from the walls while

removing all my decorations. Even the ceiling had been completely replaced; all the glow-in-the-dark stars and inflatable planets I'd counted when I couldn't sleep had been scraped off and thrown away, and the old rectangle-shaped scar in the ceiling had been healed at last, the remnants of where the floor in the attic had collapsed under my dad's weight when I was a baby, when he had fallen through and landed directly on my older brother's giant Lego replica of the Statue of Liberty.

I knew I'd given my parents permission to make all these changes to my room months ago, back when I wallowed in misery and floundered in process of coming out to myself, when I thought a change of scenery would do me good. But the lack of familiarity in the room was unsettling, especially now that my family themselves had lost their familiarity too.

My home as I'd known it here had disappeared.

That afternoon my seven year old nephew Lee sat on the same bed that I fretted in now, and told me that my mother had told him that I was a mistake. "Girls are supposed to have boyfriends," my nephew informed me in his arrogant, child voice. "Boys are supposed to have girlfriends, and girls do not have girlfriends." He smirked at me as he said the last sentence, the expression on his face far too cruel to belong to a first grader. I sat in stunned silence, unable to form a response.

"You made a *baaad* choice," my nephew said, drawing out the word "bad" so that it came out of his mouth like the braying of a sheep. "And God will punish you for it."

"Who told you that?" I asked, my voice barely above a whisper. I knew in the rational part of my mind that I had no business listening to the words of a seven year old, but I couldn't stop myself from asking more questions.

So this was how my family had really been feeling, I thought, even though the whole first day I'd been home they had smiled and tried to act like nothing bad had happened between us, not one ill word.

"MeeMaw said," my nephew said, referring to my mother. My heart went tumbling down into some hollowed out hole in my chest. Lee started picking his nose as he spoke to me. He said that John, my brother, as well as my sister-in-law had also told him that.

I asked him, "Why do you believe that?" I tried to keep my voice in that cheerful, high-pitched tone that adults use when speaking to children and small animals, but my voice broke halfway through.

"Because it's right," Lee said, without pausing for a second.

I felt disappointed in that moment, not just because my family had been playing me for a fool, but because this innocent, seven-year-old child was already being brainwashed, just like I had been when I was a child.

I started sobbing with my nephew right there in the room, too tired to care about whatever drivel he was continuing to repeat to me. Later, Lee ran off and told my mother that I was crying and upset. "She misses Anna," he announced, as if his seven-year-old brain knew that bringing up my girlfriend Anna was the perfect thing to say to make a bad situation worse.

"I didn't say that!" I yelled. Not that it mattered. My mother just sat on her throne of our dark green couch that had melded to the shape of her body and didn't say anything. She didn't ask me if I was okay, what was wrong, didn't offer a hug or a smile or an apology. My stomach churned and I scampered off to my room that wasn't really my room and shut myself up in my

closet, an old habit from my high school days when I would hide out in there after a fight with my mother.

My mother had never treated me like a mother should, I thought. My mother was a monster, and this house had never felt like a home. My mother turned up her nose at Anna, my beloved girlfriend of nine months, though to me she felt more and more like the only family I had. My mother would never understand that, and she would never understand me.

I couldn't respect my mother as a woman who used her religion to fuel ignorance and breed hate--I wanted a different life. I finally had a little happiness and love in my life, and I'd be damned if I was going to let my mother ruin it because she had her head stuck up so far into the Bible's ass she couldn't even see the stars. For so many years I had allowed my mother to pick apart my happiness, guilt me into submission, and push me into a place of darkness and self-loathing and the constant wondering, "Why am I never good enough?"

This woman did not deserve to be called my mother, I decided. I had no mother. And if I had no mother, I was free.

Gravewalker

I glided down the hill like a ghost, trailing behind Anna as the two of us made our way across the east corner of Riverside Cemetery, acorns and water chestnuts crunching beneath our sneakers. Everywhere I looked: granite tombstones, mausoleums, marble angels and more than one headless Jesus statue. The clouds blocked the last of the fading sun and cast an eerie gray glow over the graveyard.

A few stray raindrops plopped down on the top of my head, cold like the bite of a knife. Anna continued on, her phone held out like a lantern, snapping pictures of this tombstone and that obelisk, turning this way and that, leaning in, leaning out, contorting her torso upside down to capture a sleeping stone lamb at its most captivating angle.

Cemeteries were Anna's obsession, though I often accompanied her if the weather was nice, if I had the day off work, if I felt like stretching my legs on the paved trails at Riverside, a massive historical cemetery in North Asheville that housed the remains of famous authors like Thomas Wolfe and O. Henry, as well as another fourteen thousand or so dead Ashevilleans whose stones dated all the way back to the 1800s. I knew that Anna loved me like the stable ground we walked on, but it was cemeteries that put oxygen in her lungs and filtered it back out again.

It might've scared me that Anna, my girlfriend who'd come within a hair's breadth of taking her own life more than once, spent nearly every day traipsing through unkempt bone yards alone, but the knowledge eased my anxiety instead of amplifying it.

Some people felt at peace when they meditated, when they slept, when they worked, when they were lazing on vacation or getting laid. If they were like me, they felt at peace alone

behind the wheel, with the windows rolled down and the heat on low, high on the rapture of a tank full of gas and nowhere to be.

But Anna? She walked into a cemetery and lit it up like a princess in a fairytale. Every time I watched her stride through a new-found bone garden I half-expected her to start singing to the groundhogs and the rabbits and the robins, half-expected them to sing back to her and fetch her crown and her throne.

Knee-deep in death, she hummed and skipped and her feet churned up the grass, like a filly fresh from the womb, with wobbly legs and an indomitable spirit. So, so alive.

I felt alive too as I followed behind her, ignoring the raindrops that threatened my perfectly flat-ironed, blood-red hair. *This is what it's like to love a girl.* Not just to chase one through doomed internet dates and clandestine coffeehouses and stemless wine glasses filled with cheap Riesling that tasted like hellfire.

After my months of mindless wandering through gay nightclubs and Gay-Straight Alliance meetings and Pride festivals and endless online speed-dates, Anna, despite the ravaged look that sometimes filled her eyes and the faded scars that crisscrossed her left arm like highways, felt like a good place to rest.

Anna waltzed into my life just weeks after I decided that I was done chasing girls, online or in real life. After a heart-wrecking roommate and failed internet dates and enough Ben & Jerry's "Half-Baked" to fill a swimming pool, I deactivated my OkCupid account and waved goodbye to the sultry and miserable redhead that stared back at me from my online dating profile.

By the time I met Anna, I was finally, finally, satisfied with the level of red I'd managed to achieve with my new, painfully expensive, Asheville-grown hairstylist named Hope. The day I walked out of the Salon Dragonfly without the familiar twitch of the itch to turn right around and run back in, that was the day when I knew I was ready.

Ready for what? Ready to move on, perhaps. Ready to forgive myself for the sins that ripped through my insides like a child opening a long-awaited Christmas present--I'd fallen in love with a girl, lied to my family, sneaked out to secret dates with atheist girls and, worst of all, turned my back on God and Christianity, the life-blood my parents had hand-fed me from birth like they used to feed my older brother Pepsi in his baby bottle.

That was the world I inhabited when Anna appeared in my life, at the time her presence barely a blip on my radar.

I walked into a Literature classroom at the beginning of my third year of college and stumbled into a cloud of artificially scented Bath and Body Works product that hit my nose with the smell of apples and the assault of memories. I wasn't particularly keen on artificial scents, but Candy Apple was as familiar to me as the double yellow lines on the highway, because of my brother's red Mustang, the one that I'd driven around in high school, the one with the owner's manual that called it not just red, but "Candy Apple Red." I loved that car in all the ways I had forgotten how to love my brother--with pure adoration, senseless loyalty, and a sense of kinship. Subsequently I'd filled my high school room with Candy Apple-scented air fresheners and room sprays.

“That smells just like Candy Apple,” I said out loud as I took a seat in the small white-walled classroom that sat twenty students, max.

“That’s because it *is* Candy Apple,” a girl sitting in the desk to the right of me said, her voice equal parts snark and pride. As if by magic, she produced a small container of hand sanitizer with black and orange Halloween packaging all over the front, though it was barely September. Sure enough, “Candy Apple” was emblazoned on the label, alongside a horde of black cats with their fur standing on end.

Anna was tall, lanky, with fading pink streaks in her hair and a smile that was all teeth and no eyes. Later, she’d tell me that when she said “That’s because it *is* Candy Apple,” in her head she’d added “you idiot,” and laughed at the wonderstruck expression on my face as I inhaled the antibacterial hand gel in the middle of a roomful of Lit majors. I always countered with a comment about how handing out fruity sanitation products was her signature move.

I’d ditched the Internet Girls by the time I met Anna, though it would be months and months later before the two of us finally spent time together outside of class and became friends, and many months more before we sat together on a grassy hillside in the backyard of the house of the woman we’d been pet-sitting for and decided, in far more halting words, that we should probably just date already.

Cars and Compromises

When I told my mother I wanted to move across the state to go to college, she offered me a deal: if I forfeited my plans, stayed in New Bern, went to community college and lived at home, she would buy me a brand new car. Anything I wanted. I could have a shiny new Dodge Charger like the one my mother had, a bright purple behemoth of a car that my mother bought herself when I was in eighth grade, that the car manufacturers had dubbed Plum-Crazy Purple.

The first day I saw my mother pull up in her new Charger to pick me up from my private Christian school, I initially thought the car looked like a monster from a children's book--the wide-rimmed headlights looked like startling pupils, the black grille a gaping maw. I could have a dark green Jeep with a soft roof and removable doors, the fantasy car I'd dreamed of for some unexplainable reason before I hit puberty. The options were limitless.

If I wanted it, I could have a brand-spanking new 2013 Mustang to replace the 1999 black-and-red relic I'd inherited from my brother when he grew tired of it when I was in tenth grade. For a moment, I allowed myself to imagine what my new baby would look like, what color I'd choose, how the Mustang would rattle and tremble beneath me like a racehorse ready to leap from the starting gate.

My mother was smart in her transaction--of all the things she could have offered me, a new car was just about the only one that could make me pause--along with my religion, my love of cars had been injected into me early, by my father and my brother, who if you asked me, spent more time dedicated to cars and tinkering than in worship of the God I'd been raised to obey.

My mother was a smart woman, but ultimately my need to escape her sphere of influence ran far deeper than my desire to crank the engine on a brand new breathing metal monster.

I smiled at my mother and offered up some of the truest words I'd ever spoken to her: "I wish I could take you up on your offer. But I can't. I have to go."

Circles

On June 26th, my mother found out she had a gay, deceitful, devil-worshipping daughter. I refused to take her calls or answer her texts for several days. I did it for my own safety, I told myself. Whatever my mother had to say to me, I wasn't ready to hear it. I wasn't ready for any of this: the sharp pang in my chest that refused to fade, the pure, undiluted panic that coursed through my bloodstream whenever my phone buzzed, the way my breath escaped my lungs in short, shallow gasps that shook like a sob every time I exhaled.

In the past year or so since I'd first discovered my own sexuality, whenever I'd thought about coming out to my mother, I always imagined the scene to play out on my own terms, in some quiet moment alone, face to face, sometime in the distant future when I either became a braver woman, or my mother became a softer one.

I'd never imagined the moment to play out the way it had, with me unsuspecting of my mother's inquisition until it appeared on my phone screen like a magic trick gone wrong, messages of doom in uncompromising black and white. **Are U lesbian?** My mother's words trapped me and crushed my heart into itself like a daisy pressed inside an Encyclopedia Britannica.

For days I attempted to sleepwalk through my life and go about my normal business like there wasn't a giant hole in my chest that leaked blood and vital organs every time I moved. That week, I went to my summer internship at the local newspaper, sat at my desk and typed up news blurbs and copy-edited, all the while my throat swelled up with fear and my eyes burned with unshed tears, and I shoved my phone as deep in my backpack as I could manage, looking at it as

seldom as possible, that phone the only physical tether to my mother, who existed in an old city more than three hundred miles away from me.

The only place that offered me any sort of relief in that first week, oddly enough, was my workplace. The weekend following my coming out was the Fourth of July, and I put on my favorite black polka dot dress and brown Teva boots and went in to work at my new-ish job at a trendy downtown restaurant called Posana, where I was so busy for most of the weekend that I had no time to dwell on my mother or the chaos that was undoubtedly going on at home. I could breathe a little easier behind my host desk at Posana, where I knew at least my co-workers and managers supported me, and they'd told me as such, even though I was new and the hardly knew me.

One day not long after my unintentional coming out, I sat down with my manager James and tried not to cry as I asked him if I could be scheduled for as many shifts as possible, since I was unsure what kind of support I'd be getting from my parents from now on.

"My family is very close-minded in their way of thinking," I said, my eyes on the wooden tabletop in front of me. My index finger traced the swirling patterns on the wood, my nail making a tiny delicate *click* as it made contact with the unforgiving surface.

"I'm not sure what's going to happen to me now." My voice threatened to break, but I forced the emotion back down, refusing to cry in front of this thirty-something man I'd only known for a few weeks.

James and I sat together in the private dining room near the back of the restaurant, away from the prying eyes and inquisitive ears of the servers, the kitchen staff, the other hosts.

I tried to keep my face carefully schooled, my voice as calm and collected as possible, but I sensed he could tell that I was mere heartbeats away from losing my well-crafted facade of distance and acceptance. Much later, I would learn to accept that there were some things I would never be able to change about my mother, but for now, my heart was broken.

“Do you think she’ll come around?” James asked me. Usually his voice was so full of mirth and jokes; it was odd for me to hear him sound so solemn, like an adult.

Since I’d first met him, James had struck me as a sort of oversized child. He had a thin, wiry frame that resembled that of a still-growing teenage boy, square black glasses that gave him a distinctly intelligent yet nerdy appearance, and short dark hair peppered with the slightest hints of grey--he looked a little bit like the actor from the “Touch of Grey” hair dye commercials.

In response to James’s question, I pulled out my phone and showed him the email I’d received from my mother just days before, the email that more than a year later would still send waves of panic through my blood and deep aches in the pit of my chest. I had been blocking out my mother on my phone, yes, but an email I hadn’t been expecting.

I was at my girlfriend Anna’s house working on an article when the email popped up in my inbox, staring at me in a plum-purple font.

Well I hope you are happy with yourself for destroying our family. If you meant to finish us off I think you may have succeeded. Your body is not your own smart girl it is God’s and is meant to be a temple to be used to honor him. I have noticed you pulling away from us I just did not know how far you had pulled away from God up there thinking you can hide from your sin you cannot. You had already told me Anna had issues as well as you now I know why. You

cannot serve God when you the devil has you in his grasp. I am disgusted and cannot believe how far you have sunk since going to school up there. I hope you are prepared for the consequences of your actions. Not only with us but from God. I want my car back home asap, will not be paying insurance for your health or car, no phone bills. If your grandmother finds out I doubt your rent will be payed either which I will not tell her. I will not in any way contribute to this lifestyle. You did not remember our Anniversary, my birthday, Father's Day too busy you say. I pray for your health your safety multiple times daily do you ever pray for us? You have all but abandoned your brother he is broken like I have never seen him. As far as me and daddy we are a heart attack waiting to happen. You displaying this rainbow on your picture on facebook for all the world to see. Well I will have you know I showed you your first rainbow and told you what it meant and it surely was not to represent what you did with it. I don't know where we stand on anything anymore or what kind of relationship we can have if any. Your one and only Mother and I thought the one who would have your back for anything.

Fresh Blood

I entered the Salon Dragonfly with a headful of overgrown, dull red hair, a wad of cash in my back pocket, and the expectation of being disappointed. While making my appointment days earlier, I'd told the secretary on the phone that I wanted "an expert hair colorist," but I still had my doubts. The kind of red I wanted was half-color, half-dream, and I was beginning to suspect that there wasn't one stylist in all of North Carolina who would be able to give it to me.

A handful of dried leaves blew in with me as I stepped over the threshold into the little salon in downtown Asheville. Oversized East-facing windows filled the salon with bright beams of sunlight that painted the room in a canvas of gold. The sign above the door featured a stunning sky-blue dragonfly with its wings outstretched, poised for flight.

The salon buzzed with activity: hair dryers whirring at full speed, middle-aged women gathered with their heads under dryers while reading up-to-date copies of *People* and *Cosmo* and *Better Homes and Gardens*. My nose picked up the familiar scent of hair dye and expensive styling product, the sharp sting of hairspray and the mild burning smell of a stylist who hadn't put on enough thermal protectant before they'd started flat-ironing someone's hair.

I was greeted by a shining array of professional-endorsed shampoos and conditioners, styling gels and leave-ins, as well as hair drying accessories and attachments that lined the walls of the immaculate white and light blue-painted salon. My eyes took it all in, the old flutter of excitement tingling in my stomach at the thought of what sort of magic the stylists here could work on my hair. I caught my own eye in one of the many mirrors while I waited for my turn, and the tingle in me fizzled and sputtered.

My faded red hair snaked down my back in long waves, my roots grown out about two inches, revealing the dishwater blond color that my mother loved and I worked tirelessly to cover up. Those few inches of exposed virgin hair had been the impetus that wooed me back into the world of salons and hairstylists, even though the many I'd visited in New Bern and the surrounding cities over the summer had only left me feeling empty, gutted, disappointed at the end of each fresh dye.

No matter how many times I'd insisted to my usual stylist in New Bern, Kailey, that no, my hair was *not* red enough, she balked. "There is no such thing as too red for me," I'd told her on more than one occasion as I sat in her high spinning chair and looked at my reflection in the wall-high salon mirror studded with rhinestones and old-style polaroids of Kailey and her longtime boyfriend.

She always reacted the same way every time I said something about wanting my hair to be brighter. First, she'd click her tongue and run her fingers through my hair, her long pink nails scraping through my copper-colored hair and smoothing the ends with her fingertips. Then she'd sigh and meet my eyes in the mirror. "But your hair is so gorgeous," she'd gush. "You don't want it to look gawdy, do you?"

Gawdy struck me as such a New Bern-esque word. Gawdy? Really? I laughed in the face of gawdy. In my mind, my hair was washed-out, a waste, a disappointment in its current state, a coppery, shimmery color that was light enough that older women would come up to me in the grocery store and exclaim, "Is that your *real* hair, sweetheart? How beautiful!"

In the summer of Internet Dates, broken hearts, and hair dyes, I received nothing but compliments on my light red hair, but still I hungered. I didn't want beautiful, natural-looking

hair that attracted compliments from little old ladies shopping at Belk in the sad excuse for a warehouse that New Bern had the nerve to call a mall.

I didn't want that kind of attention.

What I wanted was hair so red that the casual observer couldn't help but stop and stare. I wanted hair that would make those old ladies *tsk* in disapproval and cross to the other side of the aisle to avoid me. *Danger, Danger*, I wanted my hair to say, because I was a ticking time bomb of heartbreak and illicit homosexual feelings, and I was due to self-destruct any moment.

"Give me hair as red as sin," I ordered Kailey, but she must have thought I was joking. I spent hours in the stylist's chair and dished out hundreds of glorious green bills in my endeavor for the perfect shade of red, but my hunger rumbled still, and by summer's end, I drove back to Asheville with a heavy heart, a hollowed out bank account, and a deep-rooted mistrust for hair care professionals.

In the months between mid-August and the end of November, in between numerous internet dates with queer girls and biweekly counseling sessions at the Student Health Center, I attempted to dye my hair myself with Manic Panic Amplified semi-permanent hair dye. It worked to an extent, bringing about a bloody red tint to my hair that Kailey had never managed to pull off, but the process was time-consuming, messy, and had to be done every three weeks to keep the color as fresh and bright as I craved.

"Melissa?" A throaty voice called my name and startled me from my thoughts. The woman who spoke approached me with her hand outstretched, her other hand wrapped around a blue coffee mug with a colorful rooster on the side. "My name's Hope. Are you ready to get started?"

I considered the hand stretched out to me for several seconds before I took it and shook the woman's hand.

Hope looked unlike any stylist I'd worked with before. She didn't have the blonde, highlighted masterpiece of curls and extensions that I was used to seeing on Kailey. Instead, her hair was silver and cropped close to her head, the tips ending in mountain peaks of miniscule spikes and tendrils that framed her face like some punk-rock fallen angel. Her face was plain and open, without a drop of foundation or mascara to mask it. She wore black jeans, Vans, and a gray t-shirt with the silhouette of a whiskered cat face on the chest. Until that moment I'd just assumed that all hairstylists wore two-inch heels to work.

I followed Hope mutely across the salon towards a styling booth decorated with swirly gray seashells with stunning pink insides, cat's eye marbles in small wooden bowls, and blue glass bottles with single ounce samples of various hair masques and styling serums.

Hope sat me down in her station and asked if I wanted anything to drink. I was a tea-drinker in those days, but my eyes clung to the steaming mug in Hope's hand; the smell of her coffee floated up to my nose and took me back to my first semester of college, when I downed around three cups a day of black coffee brewed in the little stainless steel single-serve coffeemaker that my mom had ordered for me off Amazon. Those were the days when my roommate Skylar and I would stay up all night talking, getting to know each other, comparing favorite books and TV shows and learning how to do our own laundry for the first time in our dorm's basement at 3 a.m. Simpler days, back before I'd realized how in love with Skylar I really was, before I realized I could no longer pretend to be straight, before I realized how truly devastating the coming out process would be for me.

“I’ll have some coffee,” I told Hope. “Black, please.”

She nodded and disappeared into the back of the salon, giving my shoulder a pat as she walked away. I picked up one of the marbles and rolled it between my palms while I waited.

I hadn’t thought about Skylar in weeks, but now that her name sat on the tip of my tongue, I found it hard to expel thoughts of her to their usual place in the dustiest corner of my mind. Skylar hadn’t just been my roommate; she was my best friend of two years, the first and only girl I ever loved, even though she never returned my feelings, and the girl who finally, after my nineteen years of growing up with essentially no knowledge or understanding of the queer community, made me realize that in fact, I was a part of it--me, a straight-laced Christian-raised girl who’d been bottle-fed with Sunday school, youth group, private religious schools, and the irrefutable belief that gay people were down dirty sinners, caught in the devil’s clutches. Wrong. Every synonym you could think of or look up in a Webster’s thesaurus.

I spent the next year walking around in a haze, confused, heartbroken, scared, living in constant fear that somehow my mother would find out that I had betrayed her and her upbringing, and she would hate me. For a while, I hated me too.

Hope reappeared then with a cup of coffee for me and a refill for herself. She handed the coffee to me and clinked our mugs together in a caffeine-filled toast. “So,” she began, as she spun me around in my spinning chair and met my eyes in the mirror, “What do you want to do today?”

“I just want red hair,” I blurted out. “No one’s been able to get it red enough before.” I gulped my coffee to hide my desperation.

Hope ran her fingers through my hair, examining its color and texture, testing its mettle. “Your hair is pretty red already,” she said. “What do you really want?”

“I *really* want red hair,” I insisted. I thought I’d made an appointment with a hairstylist, not a therapist? I sipped my coffee again. It tasted hot. Bittersweet. Like memories. “I just feel better when my hair is red,” I said with less force.

“Better how?” Hope already had a book of color swatches out, flipping through it carefully as we spoke.

I swished the coffee around on my tongue before I swallowed it. None of the other stylists had ever asked me that question before. “Less afraid,” I said finally, nodding my head.

Hope’s fingers came to rest on a hair sample and she looked up at my eyes in the mirror. “Ya know, *you* are the one who gets to choose how brave you are,” Hope said. “Not your hair color.” She held out the sample to me. “But what do you think about this?”

Two hours later I walked out of the Salon Dragonfly with a spring in my step, struck by the distinct sensation of, what was this feeling? I felt...satisfied? After many months of gnawing, rumbling hunger, I scarcely remembered what it felt like to feel full.

I looked at my reflection in the store windows as I walked back to my car, admiring my sparkling red hair. Hope showed me the chemical formula for my new hair color before I left, and even though it was very similar to different reds I’d worn in the past year, the color felt like it fit me this time. Maybe, finally, I was ready to look at myself in the mirror and see what was, instead of what was lacking.

