

5-8-2020

Blue Harbor (A Linked Story Collection)

Sam Florsheim
Skidmore College, sflorshe@skidmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://creativematter.skidmore.edu/eng_stu_schol



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Florsheim, Sam, "Blue Harbor (A Linked Story Collection)" (2020). *English Honors Theses*. 42.
https://creativematter.skidmore.edu/eng_stu_schol/42

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Creative Matter. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of Creative Matter. For more information, please contact dseiler@skidmore.edu.

Blue Harbor

(A Linked Story Collection)

Sam Florsheim

2020

Morning Person

When I try to think of when the problem really started, I have to go back a ways, maybe even several years, to when Peter was eight years old.

I woke up that morning to the sound of Sophia's quiet breathing. When we first got together I would want her to wake up early with me, but she's never been a morning person, and I've learned after fifteen years of marriage that it's better to just let her keep sleeping. I got up slowly and tiptoed to the bathroom.

Every morning I would perform something of a ritual. I'd brush my teeth, splash water on my face, make coffee, and go out into the backyard to watch the sunrise over our peaceful, private yard. Sophia and I had lived in Brooklyn for a few years, but had gotten sick of all the noise and traffic. When she got pregnant, a year or so after my Dad died, we moved to Blue Harbor, a small seaside town in Maine. It was a strange place. The people were almost too friendly, like they were characters from a movie and not real human beings. I can't explain it well – but the important thing is that aside from all that, we had always been safe and happy there.

That morning, I played the radio softly and quietly prepared our Bonavita coffee maker. The house was still dark, and I looked out the kitchen window to see a small glint of orange sneaking over the horizon. After making my coffee, I put my slippers on, opened the back door, and stepped out onto the damp porch. It was unusually cold outside and had rained all night. I tiptoed back inside to find a towel to cover my favorite chair, but upon re-entering the house, I saw Peter, my son, standing in the kitchen, squinting at me. He hadn't been sleeping well, and would often come into our room in the middle of the night, saying he heard noises coming from downstairs, or his closet, sometimes even the attic.

“Hey Petey,” I said, trying to mask the disappointment in my voice at having been interrupted. “You’re up early.”

“I woke up and couldn’t go back to sleep,” he said.

“That’s okay,” I replied. “Do you want some breakfast?”

“Okay.”

He sat at the kitchen table as I poured a bowl of cereal and carried it over to him. He looked up at me, his eyes droopy and red.

“I don’t like this kind,” he said, looking down at the bowl.

I felt a twinge of anger. “You saw me pour the bowl, buddy. Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I don’t feel well,” he said quietly.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I said, trying my best to remain calm. “But you have to go to school today. You’ve stayed home too many times.”

“But my stomach hurts – ”

“Petey, enough. If you feel too sick at school you can go lie down at the nurse’s office for a little while.” I sat down across from him, rubbing my temples.

“I hate the nurse’s office.”

There was anger rising in my chest. “Peter. Stop it. I mean it.”

“You’re always so mean to me. It’s not fair,” he said.

I slammed my fist down on the table, yelling his name louder than I intended. I instantly regretted it. When I opened my eyes he was staring at me, his eyes wide with fear. He quickly

got up from his seat and ran upstairs – I thought about trying to follow him in order to apologize, but I could hear sobs coming from his room.

Here’s the thing about a routine. It’s nice until it gets broken, and once it is, your entire day can be ruined. I used to resent my father for how angry he would get whenever he was interrupted. But as I’ve gotten older, I’ve become more sympathetic to his outbursts. One afternoon, when I was driving my daughter Maisie home from school a couple of years ago, she told me she would sometimes wake up early and see me sitting outside through the kitchen windows, but knew never to bother me. She’s always understood the value of alone time – Peter not so much.

When I got home, Sophia told me sternly that I needed to talk to Peter when he came home from school.

“You need to control yourself around him,” she said, clearing books off of the kitchen table. “He’s just a little boy. If you keep treating him this way, he’s going to think yelling is the solution to everything.”

“I know that,” I said. “I’ve been a parent just as long as you have,” I snapped at her.

She looked up at me. “Really? You’re gonna yell at *me* right now?”

“Sorry,” I said quickly. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

That evening I tried my hardest to apologize. “I’m sorry I lost my temper,” I told him, sitting uncomfortably on the edge of his bed. “I just – I want to make sure you learn a lot in school and take some responsibility. But, well, I know I can communicate that better. I shouldn’t have yelled.”

He just stared at me in cold, fearful silence. I shut the door to his bedroom after turning off the overhead light. Whenever I got angry at him, it would take a long time for things to return to normal. He was a sensitive kid.

I slept terribly that night, and got up the next morning determined to have my morning ritual play through uninterrupted. I washed my face, prepared my coffee, and went outside, relieved that I didn't find Peter waiting for me downstairs. I found my favorite chair with the worn in cushion and sat down, wrapping myself more tightly in the fleece robe Sophia had gotten me for Christmas years back. Once I had gotten comfortable, the sun had already climbed its way into the sky and the yard was starting to get bright. I took a sip from my coffee and a deep breath. As I sat back in my chair, I noticed a strange sound coming from some indistinct location. "What now?" I thought to myself.

I stood up and began to pace around the yard – the noise sounded oddly familiar, but I couldn't place where I'd heard it before. It sounded like it was coming from the woods behind the fence, so I went through the gate and started to slowly step through the brush. As I stepped further and further into the woods the noise only got louder. It sounded like crying, but there was something about it that was inhuman – it was weaker, more muted.

I looked down into the tangled branches and overgrown grass. Once my eyes landed on the noise's source, my stomach dropped. Laying before me was a large deer – a buck, with red-brown fur, jagged white antlers, and deep brown eyes. His abdomen was soaked in blood and his eyes were wide open. To my shock, a knife stuck out from his chest, the blade buried deep into his skin. The air was filled with an iron smell and I had to crouch down to prevent myself from getting sick – the desire to turn around, run away, and forget I had ever heard the noise was

almost overpowering, but something kept me planted in front of the suffering creature. I couldn't just leave it there.

I had never been comfortable around death. When I was a kid, my father often took me hunting, but I always managed to disappoint him, no matter how hard he tried to get me to enjoy it. He would even train my sight for me and make sure my arms were positioned right, but I didn't want to have to murder some innocent creature, so I frequently missed my shot on purpose. He'd give me this look whenever I missed or scared something off – a look of reserved disdain, a look that questioned if this strange kid even belonged to him.

I reached my hand out towards the deer's head and ran my fingers through its soft red fur, shivering at how similar it felt to petting a dog. His eyes fluttered shut for a moment, then returned to widened shock. It bleated softly. I breathed deeply, trying to regain my composure – I needed to figure out a plan.

The knife's handle was made of some kind of industrial steel, about the size of a butcher's blade. Who would do something like this? And how did they get so close to the animal without being heard? My father always talked about deer and their keen hearing. The person wasn't hunting, or else they'd have killed the deer quickly and taken it with them. No, whatever they were doing wasn't for any logical purpose. They were just trying to find something and make it suffer. My stomach twisted with fear that someone that evil could be so close to my home, so close to my children.

I looked down at the creature and found myself thinking about my last moments with my father. Just a few weeks after Sophia and I got married, he had gotten sick with cancer. We went to visit him and my mother in Township, a small village in Minnesota where my parents had lived for nearly ten years. We stayed at the house, watching his condition worsen, until

eventually he was taken to the hospital. When I walked into the room moments before he was to be taken off life support, he had looked at me with glassy eyes, his mouth flat, his brow furrowed. His gray hair had begun to thin and fall out, where it had once been so full and neatly combed.

My mother sat beside him, staring at the floor, a thousand miles away. The look he gave me that day in the hospital was the same disappointed look he had been giving me for years. I clasped his hand, looked into his distant blue eyes for a long time, trying to feel something, until eventually there was nothing left to do. I gave his hand a squeeze and told him I loved him. Despite my initial, half-hearted protests, my mother and I had agreed that she would be the only other person with him when they pulled the plug.

I stared into the deer's eyes and it looked back at me, almost pleading. The dread had now swelled over my every limb. I stretched out my hand and wrapped my fingers around the knife's handle. Once my grasp was as firm as I could make it, I pulled upwards and felt the knife slide out from the deer's skin. It let out another bleat, louder this time, more pained. I avoided looking at the wound and tried to sort out what my next step was. Every instinct in my body was working against me. My brain was screaming, telling me to run back inside, to call 911, to get someone else involved, but I knew that meant more pain for the deer, a longer duration of suffering. I stood up and moved over to sit by the deer's head.

I lifted his head and rested it in my lap, trying to avoid getting stabbed by his large antlers. The next step had to be done carefully. I remembered my father's words from one of our trips together; that a mercy kill required finding the jugular and cutting it open. There was one time where he had caught a rabbit in one of his traps in our backyard, but it hadn't killed the animal as it was supposed to, so I was forced to watch him slit its throat.

“It may seem brutal,” he had said, rubbing the rabbit’s blood from his palms onto a white rag, his eyes fixed on the ground. “But in the end, it just means less pain for the thing.”

The thing. I brushed my trembling hands over the buck’s neck, trying and failing to find the largest vein. I realized I had no idea what I was doing, and that my plan wasn’t going to work. I cursed myself for removing the knife, realizing it likely caused the creature even more pain for no reason.

I looked around the woods for a large object and my eyes landed on a large, jagged log. I rested the deer’s head back on the ground, walked over to the log and picked it up, feeling its weight in my hands. It seemed heavy enough to get the job done. At this point, it was as if I weren’t operating my own limbs anymore – there was some other force that had overtaken me, something outside of myself that was figuring out what to do. I walked back over to the buck – his bleating and quick breathing continued as he looked up at me, desperate. I crouched down, held the log over my head, and shut my eyes tight.

I heaved it downwards with as much force as I could, directly onto the buck’s head. The log slipped from my fingers as I brought it down. I breathed deeply, trying to contain my dizziness, picked up the log again, and swung it downwards, again, and then again. With each blow, the deer’s bleats turned into sharp screams. After my third strike, the woods were silent. The bleating had stopped and his breathing had faded out. I looked down at the buck’s mangled, gory face and wide open mouth.

The nausea returned in full force. I grasped a tree trunk with my hand, leaning over and vomiting onto the forest floor. After it was over, I put my back against a tree trunk and slid to the ground. I sat there for a while as blood pounded in my forehead and my brain processed what I

had done, the brutality I had just inflicted. Tears escaped my eyes and my sobs echoed throughout the silent woods. I'm not sure how long I sat there crying.

Eventually the tears stopped. I waited for the adrenaline to subside before standing up again and making my way back towards the yard – I must have been a sight to behold, emerging from the woods, trembling, my clothes soaked in blood, tears running down my face.

I looked up at the porch. Standing on the deck, bleary-eyed, was Peter. He looked at me with intense fear, just as he had the night before, and before I could open my mouth to say anything, he turned around and ran into the house. I looked down at my shirt and hands, which were smeared with heavy, bright red blood.

I saw through the kitchen windows that Sophia was awake as well. Peter tugged on her shirt, and she looked out through the kitchen window, straight at me. Her eyes went wide and the blood rushed out of her face. She put her cup of tea down on the counter and came out through the back door, pausing when she reached the end of the porch. Her thick blonde hair was tied back in a messy ponytail, and she was still trying to shake sleep from her brain. We stood there staring at each other while Peter trembled behind her at the door.

“What happened?” she whispered, her voice quivering.

I tried to open my mouth to say something but I was unable to form words. I felt my legs give and I woke up lying on the grass. Sophia held my head and looked down at me with profound concern. I coughed and sat up. She continued to stare at me, waiting patiently for an explanation, clearly hoping it was something that wasn't as bad as it looked. I took a deep breath and rambled off what had happened.

“There...there was a deer...it was dying,” I stammered. “I, I had to – I had to put it out of its misery.”

She nodded in sympathy as tears filled her eyes, and clasped my hand in hers. We sat in silence.

I looked across the porch at my chair. The towel from the morning prior was still draped across the seat cushions, and my coffee sat on the table next to it. Steam was no longer rolling off the mouth of the cup. I thought about how strange it was that the sun was out – it felt as if it shouldn't be, it should have been hidden away, trapped behind layers of dull grey clouds. I looked around to see if Peter was still watching us, but there was no sign of him anywhere.

“Where's Peter?” I asked Sophia, my voice still shaking.

“I sent him upstairs.”

“I need to explain –”

“I think you should wait,” Sophia interrupted.

I figured she was probably right, and decided that in the meantime, I had to bury the deer, despite Sophia's protests.

“Just leave it, honey,” she told me, exasperated. “You've done enough already.”

I just shook my head, unable to form a coherent argument against her. I quickly changed my clothes and grabbed a shovel from the garage, trying to move without thinking about what I was doing. I worked at digging the grave for most of the morning, not muttering a word, just chipping away against the ground in stunned silence. I tried my hardest not to look at the poor creature laying beside me. Once the grave was dug, I enlisted Sophia's help in lowering the deer into the ground. I wrapped it in an old blanket so she wouldn't have to see the gory mess. She grimaced as we clumsily dropped the body into the pit, and when blood started to leak out from the blanket into the dirt, she began to gag, and walked away as fast as she could.

“I'm never doing anything like that again,” she said as she disappeared into the house.

I covered the grave and stood there for a while, looking at the patch of earth that now held the creature safely underground. I thought again about the evil someone had to have within them to hurt that deer in such a brutal way. I worried that it was like a virus, floating through the air, waiting to latch onto some unsuspecting host; I pictured it grabbing hold of me, guiding my arms towards the log, and bringing it down onto the deer's skull. I wiped the dirt from my hands and turned back towards my home. Later that day, I sat Peter down and explained what I had had to do.

“Why didn't you try to save it?” Peter asked. “How'd you know it was going to die?”

No matter how hard I tried to phrase it, I couldn't explain to him the feeling that had come over me, the obligation I had felt to put it out of its misery. He was too young to understand that kind of suffering, that kind of desperation that calls for an end rather than a solution. But something about the whole incident was removed from myself, as if something else had taken hold of my body. It worried me, and Peter's frightened eyes only made everything worse.

The other day was Peter's first day of high school, and he had decided this year that he'd just take the bus, and that I didn't need to drive him anymore. When he told me this news weeks ago, he had phrased it as if he were doing me a favor.

“It'll give you more time to get ready in the morning, to relax,” he had said. “I know you like your alone time. I just thought it'd be better.”

I couldn't tell if this was some kind of dig at me, or if he was genuinely trying to do something nice. It's hard to tell when it comes to teenagers. In the moment, I had just smiled and said okay, trying to tell myself his decision didn't mean anything significant.

“Want some coffee?” I asked him as he moved about the kitchen, gathering folders and stuffing them into his backpack. He was so tall now, his face more serious, his hair hanging over his cold blue eyes.

“Nah,” he said.

“You don’t like it?” I asked, searching for a to-go mug from our cabinets. I couldn’t fathom someone not having coffee in the morning. Maisie loved drinking it, ever since she was little.

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Caffeine’s bad for you, Dad.”

Recently it had felt that every comment he made towards me was some kind of subtle jab, a passive aggressive comment always on the ready. When I tried to make conversation, he only resisted.

“How do you mean?” I asked jokingly, trying to bury my anger. When he didn’t reply, I looked away from the cabinet into the now empty kitchen. The front door slammed shut. I walked into the living room and stood there, the empty mug in my hand, watching him walk towards the bus through the front window.

Blue Harbor

Liam and Anna arrived in Blue Harbor in late May, when the spring warmth had finally reached the East Coast. They were driving from New York to visit Anna's parents, who lived at the tip of Maine, near Brunswick. Her father had recently been diagnosed with early signs of dementia. Anna thought it would be good for Liam to meet him before it got even worse, and they'd talked about doing a road trip together since their relationship began. But Liam had a pit in his stomach from the moment they left.

First driving through Blue Harbor, Liam noticed all the standard coastal town draws: the tacky souvenir shops, various restaurants that sold fresh salmon and lobster rolls, and small bookshops with carefully laid out displays in the front windows. It carried a small-town-energy that had always been unfamiliar to him, but intriguing. He wondered what it'd be like to live in a place like this, far away from the urban sprawl and moody commuters.

The motel they had picked was on the edge of town. They arrived late and went to bed almost immediately, throwing their suitcases down on the floor and climbing underneath the stiff, polyester comforter. The following morning, the couple wandered through the town in search of breakfast and coffee, holding hands and staring wordlessly at their surroundings. Liam liked to think that the silence him and Anna often shared was a sign that they were comfortable together, but he wasn't always sure.

After eating pastries and drinking coffee at a small café where the waiters watched them too closely, they left and came upon a small book store, but it was unlike the ones Liam had seen when first driving through. It was a second-hand shop, filled with old wooden shelves and a musty smell. Upon entering, the shopkeeper greeted them with a kind but subdued hello. Anna and Liam made their way through the store separately and quietly.

Elijah, the shopkeeper, was a short man, about 50 years old. He had short, evenly trimmed black hair and a beard to match. He wore wire glasses and had a cream-colored button up tucked into his corduroy pants. After a few minutes, Elijah stepped out from behind his desk and began to wander after the couple. He spotted Liam in a corner of the store, sitting on a step stool. He was paging through a photo book – a collection of simple nature pictures. Each photo had a simple caption written underneath; for example, an up close shot of leaves with text underneath that looked almost handwritten – *Balsam fir*, or *Harebell flower*.

Elijah smiled when he saw the book Liam was reading. “How do you like the photos?” he asked.

“Oh,” Liam said, looking up. “They’re good. Strange there’s no author listed on the cover, though.” He never liked when people in stores tried to make conversation with him – maybe it was a symptom of being from New York, but he’d always been wary of strangers.

“May I?” Elijah asked, reaching for the book. Liam handed it to him.

“I took them, actually. I just felt strange about crediting myself. I don’t know why.” He looked up at Liam. “You’re the first person who’s ever even looked at it, I think.”

“Are you an artist?” Liam asked, standing up from the stool. Crouching for too long made his back hurt.

“I guess,” he said, not taking his eyes away from the book. He flipped the page. “It’s more that I’m just restless.”

“What do you mean?” Liam said. He wasn’t sure why he was making the conversation last this long. There was something strange about the whole experience. Out of all the books he could have picked off the shelves, he picked this one.

Elijah stood up and handed the book back to Liam. “I just need to be occupied with something. Sometimes it’s painting, sometimes it’s building. Sometimes it’s photography.”

Liam nodded.

“You’re not from around here, are you?” Elijah asked, studying Liam closely.

“No, my girlfriend and I – we were just driving through. We’re on our way to visit her parents, actually, up in Caribou.”

“I’m Elijah,” he said, extending his hand towards Liam with a tired, friendly smile. There was an honesty in his demeanor that Liam enjoyed.

When Liam reached out to shake, he noticed that his palms were unusually sweaty. He quickly wiped his hand on his pants before grasping Elijah’s. “Liam. Nice to meet you.”

“Let me know if you need anything,” Elijah said. He then drifted away, looking up towards the shelves that towered above his short, slender frame.

Liam found Anna paging through a paperback children’s book. Whenever he watched her become totally absorbed in something, Liam was reminded of how beautiful she was. Her short red hair was tucked evenly behind her ears, and her green eyes were bright and focused.

She looked up at Liam with a smile. “My mom used to read this to me as a kid. I thought maybe I should buy it, we can bring it with us. Might cheer her up or something.”

“Good idea,” Liam said. She reached her hand out to him and he grasped it, lifting her up from the floor.

Later that day, just as they were preparing to leave, Anna got a call from her mother. Liam hadn’t heard the exact conversation, but apparently her father was doing especially badly, and she had wanted them to hold off a few days before coming, believing “too much stimulation” would make things worse.

“He has these spells, or I don’t know, he goes through these phases,” Anna said, pacing back and forth in the small motel room, around their bags, which lay on the floor half-packed. “My mother seems to think him being alone will help it pass. I mean, there’s no science at work there. Just her own fucked-up logic. This was the whole reason for us coming. And now she’s using it an excuse to keep us away.”

Liam never quite knew what to say to Anna when she complained about her mother. Even though they’d known each other a long time, they had only been dating for about four months – so he figured the best thing to do was to just keep his thoughts to himself and say, “I’m sorry.” Whenever he tried to be honest with Anna, it felt as if she became resistant, or tried to contradict him in some way.

After a long, draining conversation about her mother and what the remainder of the trip might now look like, Anna chose to try and get some work done – she wrote small articles for a health and wellness magazine located in Brooklyn – and Liam decided to wander through town to get some fresh air and grab a bite to eat. He was oddly relieved to get some space. There were times when he was around her where he wasn’t himself.

Upon walking into the same café where they had breakfast that morning, he saw that Elijah was inside, sitting alone at a table drinking coffee.

“Hi there,” Liam said, oddly excited about having run into him. It was unlike Liam to approach someone he barely knew, but he was drawn towards the shopkeeper.

Elijah looked up from his coffee and smiled at Liam. “Hello again,” he said, gesturing at the seat across from him, indicating he wanted him to sit. Liam sat down.

“I thought you were planning on leaving soon?” Elijah asked.

“Yeah, change of plans. We’re probably going hang to out here for a few more days.”

Elijah took a napkin and wiped his mouth with it. He was clearly a man of simple words – not that he wasn't talkative, he just didn't try to make a conversation last longer than it should. Liam admired him for that, but also wanted to engage with him, to learn more about him.

“So how long have you lived here? In this town?” Liam asked. The waitress walked over and took Liam's coffee order – an Americano, since all they served was espresso – before Elijah could answer.

“About 30 years,” Elijah said.

“Wow. So you must like it here.”

Elijah shrugged. “It's a nice place to hole away. It feels removed from the rest of the world. Slowed down.” He smiled after he spoke, his eyes focused on Liam.

“I know what you mean,” Liam said. “I've always liked that about small towns like this.”

“You're from New York?”

“Yeah. But it's nice to get a break.”

They continued talking, sharing the basic facts that felt more like a necessity rather than a natural conversation, but as time went by, Liam forgot that he had only met Elijah earlier that day. Eventually it was time for Elijah to leave. As he got up, he asked Liam if he'd like to get a drink with him later that night, and suggested that Anna come too.

When he headed back towards the motel, Liam was revitalized. He told Anna about Elijah's invitation and was offended when she didn't react as he had hoped.

“Why do you like that guy so much?” She asked, typing rapidly on her computer. She was positioned rigidly in front of her laptop at the small desk in their room. Whenever she was upset, Liam noticed she tended to try and find ways to distract herself, even if it included mundane tasks for work.

“What do you mean?” Liam said defensively, sitting up against the rigid bed backboard and opening his book.

“You were talking about his little photo book for like ten minutes straight when we left his store,” Anna said, looking over her shoulder, a teasing smile on her face.

“I just think he’s an interesting guy. And out of all the books for me to look at, I chose that one. It was just a weird coincidence. And getting a drink – it’s something to do while we’re stuck here.”

“Okay,” she responded, suddenly quiet. She turned back around towards her laptop.

“Not stuck. I didn’t mean it like that. I’m just happy to spend some time relaxing, the two of us.” Liam had trouble communicating things when Anna and him argued. He felt like he was being put on the spot.

“It’s not just the two of us if what’s-his-name is there,” Anna said

“Elijah. And—”

“I’m sorry if I’m upset still. Being here might all be fine and good for *you*, a relief even, but that’s not how it is for *me*.”

“Jesus, Anna,” Liam said. Anger rushed through him as he stood up from the bed and threw his book onto the sheets. “I didn’t mean it like that. You know I didn’t. I can’t fucking win with you sometimes.” Liam knew he was overreacting, but something had come over him, a kind of meanness. It was a strange feeling that had begun to eat away at him ever since they arrived in the town. A desire not to be alone, but a desire to be away from her – away from reality.

Anna looked up at him angrily and he noticed tears brimming in her eyes.

“I’m sorry,” Liam said flatly. “I didn’t mean that, I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine,” she said, wiping at her eyes and turning back towards her computer. “You can just go by yourself. I have work I need to get done anyways.”

“Anna —”

“Please, Liam. Just go by yourself. It’s what I want.”

He decided at that point it was best to just shut up. They sat in silence for a couple of hours, Liam sitting up in bed, trying to focus on reading his book and failing. He found himself looking at his watch until eventually it was 6 PM. He took a shower and got dressed before asking Anna if she had changed her mind. She hadn’t, so he left without her, and walked quickly to the bar Elijah had mentioned.

The inside, surprisingly crowded, was decorated with bright neon signs and accented with dark, worn out wood. The air was heavy with talking and fuzzy rock music played from the speakers, slightly too loud. Liam spotted Elijah waving to him at the end of the bar. Once he squeezed his way through, he noticed that Elijah had draped his coat across the two stools beside him.

“Anna couldn’t make it,” Liam said quickly.

“Oh,” Elijah said, taking his coat off the stools so that Liam could sit. “That’s too bad.” Elijah waved at the bar tender, who gave him a nod. “What do you like to drink?” he asked, reaching into his back pocket.

“Oh, just a beer, an IPA is fine. I can pay—”

“Nonsense. You can get the next round,” Elijah said, winking at Liam and taking out his wallet.

“Okay. Thanks.”

Elijah put in the order, a local IPA for Liam and a whisky, neat, for himself. The bartender and Elijah seemed to know each other, a small-town signpost that made Liam smile.

“Thanks for meeting me,” Elijah said, taking a sip from his glass. “You really didn’t have to.”

“That’s alright, I’ve got nothing better to do.”

“Have you eaten yet?”

“I haven’t.”

“This place has good lobster. If you didn’t have plans with the girlfriend, that is. Anna, right?”

“We didn’t really talk about it. I could eat.”

As they sat and talked, Liam’s anger towards Anna melted away and hid itself in his subconscious. Elijah had grown up in the Midwest, just like Liam, so they traded stories about long winters, the stretches of farmland, the friendliness that was harder to find in the east.

“So how’d you and Anna meet?” Elijah asked somewhat suddenly.

“Oh, we went to college together. Didn’t start dating until a few years after we graduated. We had been casual friends. It just kind of evolved from there.” Liam sipped his beer. “What about you, are you married?”

“Used to be,” Elijah said, his expression suddenly distant. A few seconds went by and he turned his attention back to Liam, smiling and taking a sip of his drink. “So why do you live in New York?”

“It seemed like the place to move to start a career,” Liam said, shrugging. “I like it. I do, but I can get sick of it sometimes. I need to catch my breath once in a while.”

During their first introduction, Liam had been uncomfortable at how intensely the shopkeeper looked at him when he spoke. But he realized now that everything Elijah did had some kind of careful intention behind it – he was wholly himself. Liam noticed he wasn't afraid of pauses – he could let words hang in the air for a moment before swinging towards the next topic. Most people Liam had met all treated talking like a 500-meter sprint, needing to cover as much information as possible in the shortest amount of time. Liam knew he was guilty of this as well. He had trouble talking to people, and because of it, he had formed a nervous habit of spilling as many words as possible, cramming as much information as he could fit into each sentence that escaped his lips.

But with Elijah, all of that was different. Liam knew just what to say, and never worried about how it might sound or how Elijah might take it. They were just two men being honest with one another.

They ordered lobster rolls and ate them quickly. Liam marvelled at how fresh it tasted. They drank more beer and whisky, talking and laughing, and by the time the check came, they both quietly and mutually realized they weren't quite ready for the night to end.

“Let's have another drink at my place,” Elijah said, standing up uneasily from the bar stool. “It's just about a five minute walk from here.”

Liam knew he probably should have just declined the invitation, but he was feeling impulsive and slightly drunk, so he agreed.

The sense of distance had grown stronger. Distance from New York, distance from Anna, distance from reality. He didn't feel like himself, but it wasn't disorienting. He was fine to let himself drift.

They walked along the streets until they were on the edge of downtown and coming towards Elijah's small home, which was tucked in between clusters of trees just beyond the beach. Elijah fumbled with his keys for a moment before opening the front door and leading Liam inside. The house was tall and old, the floorboards creaking as they stepped inside. The walls were filled with all kind of things kept in frames – maps, drawings, old paintings. There was a strange smell in the air, a kind of dampness, indicating that things had been left lying around too long. Liam began to wonder why Elijah lived all alone. When he had mentioned at the bar that he had once been married, Liam hadn't wanted to push him further, but now he wished he had.

“Kitchen's this way,” Elijah said. Liam followed him towards the back of the house and found himself in Elijah's small kitchen, which was painted a pale blue. It looked eerily similar to Liam's kitchen in New York. He wasn't sure why, but it sent a shiver through him. The appliances were organized neatly, but the room still had a lived-in clutter. He noticed the sink was cluttered with dishes, jars of paint and water, and a rag with a smear of what he figured was red paint. He watched Elijah open the glass cabinets above the fridge and pull out a bottle of expensive-looking whisky.

“I know you're a beer man,” Elijah said, taking down two small glasses from the cabinet next to it. “But this whisky is too good for me to not give you some.” He poured a splash of the amber liquid into the glass and placed it on the small table situated at the corner of the kitchen. “Sit,” Elijah said, pouring himself a glass and sitting in the wooden chair opposite Liam.

Liam sat, uncomfortable at the rigidity of the chair. He tried to switch his position, but the seat was just too narrow for his body.

“What do you do, Liam?”

Liam looked across the table, realizing Elijah had been watching him try to get comfortable. “Oh, well, I’m a marketing strategi—”

“No, no, I know, you already told me that,” Elijah said, laughing and leaning back in his chair. He took another sip of his drink. “I mean, what are your hobbies?”

Liam didn’t quite know how to answer. “I’m not sure. I read. Sometimes I draw. More like doodling, I guess.”

Elijah studied him. Maybe it had something to do with the dramatic change of setting, but there was something he didn’t like about the way Elijah was now asking him questions. It was patronizing. Silence fell over the kitchen and Elijah took another swig.

“What do you read?”

Liam shrugged. He didn’t really have an answer at the ready. “I don’t know, the classics. Steinbeck. Hemingway.”

Elijah chuckled.

“I’m sure you read much more than I do,” Liam said defensively.

“Hemingway. He was quite the hunter.” Elijah paused. “Do you write?”

Liam was now more aware of Elijah’s drunkenness. In the bar, he hadn’t been quite this talkative. Maybe it was the extra whisky that had given him the final push.

“Sometimes. I’m not any good.”

“Do you hunt?”

Liam laughed. “No, no I don’t.”

Silence, again.

“Do you?” Liam asked, already knowing the answer.

“I do,” Elijah said, staring past Liam. “I have a lot of free time these days. The bookshop is a pastime to me as well.”

“You don’t like to work?”

“Hobbies are my work.” Elijah leaned back in his chair. “You know, I used to be a lot like you, Liam.”

Liam nodded, unsure of how else to respond. He found himself thinking about Anna. He hadn’t checked his phone in some time, and thought maybe she had tried to call and he didn’t notice. He began to reach for his pocket, before Elijah interrupted.

“I used to be so career-focused. I was a carpenter. A good one too, fixed up people’s homes, built furniture. And I still do. Build things. But I do it on my own time. I used to be so trapped. In my job. In my marriage, even.” He was staring at Liam closely, trying to gauge his reaction, but Liam couldn’t think of what to say. He had the weird sense that Elijah was trying to insult him – or get him to admit something he didn’t actually believe. His prodding made him realize how selfish he had been towards Anna – how he’d left her behind in an empty motel, when all she’d wanted was to see her sick father.

“You haven’t had any whisky,” Elijah said, taking a gulp from his glass.

Liam looked over to his cup. “Right,” he said, and took a swig. He was surprised at how much he liked the taste. He thought about finishing the rest of it, but realized he now had an intense desire to leave. The walls were closing in on him. He had an acute worry that he would be stuck here if he didn’t get out now. Stuck in this house. Stuck in this small, unfamiliar town. When at first it had felt like an escape, it was now starting to feel like a prison. He started to stand and formulate an excuse in his head, when Elijah started to speak again.

“Can I show you something?” He asked.

Liam lowered himself back into his seat. He was suddenly aware of his heart beat. “What is it?”

“Upstairs,” Elijah said, standing up suddenly. “My workshop. Maybe it’ll give you some inspiration. For hobbies, you know.”

Liam’s stomach began to twist. He didn’t want to be rude. He felt sorry for Elijah and scared of him at the same time – this was a lonely man, living only for himself, doing everything for his own interests and no one else’s.

Liam sensed himself receding into his mind, like he often did when he started to get nervous. So he stood up, took his still unfinished glass of whisky from the table, and followed Elijah to the other side of the house, trying to parse out the way back to town in head. The two men began to ascend Elijah’s creaky, narrow staircase.

As he went up each step, Liam began to realize more and more the reality of the situation he was in. He was in a stranger’s home, in an unfamiliar town, drunk, being led upstairs into an unspecified workshop. Elijah didn’t stop on the second floor. He instead moved towards an even narrower staircase that led to the third floor. Liam wanted to turn around, run out of the house, back to the motel where Anna lay awake, angry. The distant feeling was beginning to close in on itself.

“Sorry for all the stairs,” Elijah said, coughing after he spoke. “Almost there.”

Looking up at Elijah, Liam noticed a fragility in the way the man moved. He was clearly struggling up the steps, somewhat out of breath, his legs wobbling. As they reached the top of the stairs, Elijah moved towards the door that opened up into his studio.

“I just want to say, this isn’t normal for me. I don’t usually show people this,” Elijah said before opening the door. “But there’s something about you – I don’t know. I see myself in you.”

Liam could hardly breathe. When he first met Elijah, which seemed much longer ago than it really was, he had wanted nothing more than to be like him. But now he couldn't stand to see the comparison. Liam had a job in New York, an apartment in the city. He had a girlfriend, who he loved, despite the occasional fight. Elijah had his hobbies. That was it.

He watched Elijah open the door and turn on the light from the top of the steps. He looked back at Liam and waved him inside. Liam slowly entered the room and looked around. It was filled with paintings and half-finished pieces of furniture, wooden frames scattered about the floor.

"Sorry it's such a mess," Elijah said. "I've been meaning to organize all of it for some time now, but you know how it goes."

Liam looked closer at Elijah's paintings. They were strange, abstract pieces with sharp splashes of red and black. They were violent, in a way – visceral. Liam looked up at the ceiling, which was arched too closely. The room was closing in on him. Elijah walked closer to him, staring into his eyes too closely.

"Are you alright?" Elijah asked, his eyebrows furrowed in concern.

Liam mumbled something quickly about how he had to leave, had to get back to Anna, but as soon as the words escaped his mouth he had forgotten what he said. Elijah began to say something about how he had just got here, but Liam had already started down the stairs, going as quickly as he could. He realized the glass of whisky was no longer in his hand – he must have dropped it at some point. He remembered glass shattering and Elijah's yells. Liam was soon out the front door and on the street, running towards the main part of town.

Despite his disorientation, he managed to find his way back to the motel and into their room. When he went in, Anna didn't stir. He stripped down to his boxers and got into bed beside

her. He could tell she was awake, but not willing to put in the energy to start a fight this late. So he just lay there, breathing heavily, unable to sleep.

“I’m sorry,” he spoke into the darkened room – but the words just hung there.

Crawlspace

I hold the joint loosely, examining it as if it were some strange specimen picked off the forest floor. It's more lopsided than I had hoped for and wrapped unevenly in white paper. My phone buzzes from across the room, so I walk over to my desk and read the message lit up on the slightly-cracked screen. It's from Abby.

"I'm so sorry Mais," the text reads, "I thought I could come over but my parents are having their game night tonight. They want me here for it since I'm leaving soon. Separation anxiety."

I exhale loudly and type out a response. "So now I have to smoke this joint by myself?"

My phone buzzes again. "Smoking weed is sometimes better alone. Just don't go overboard. I'm sorry!"

I throw my body down onto my bed and stare up at the glow in the dark stars plastered on my ceiling. I hate how kiddish my bedroom looks. A few times I've nearly found the motivation to redo it, but I usually end up losing steam right after starting.

"Bye Maisie!" I hear my mom yell from downstairs.

I get up and run over to my open bedroom door. "Bye!"

"We'll be home in a few hours. Call if you need anything."

"Okay, have a good time!" I say, and retreat back into my room – they're going to this fancy seafood place in town. Seafood seems to be the default for old people going out to dinner in Maine.

I watch Dad pull his Volkswagen into the street from my bedroom window. The yellow headlights project harsh beams across the quiet, freshly-paved street in front of our home. I look at the house across from ours, a perfect square frame with its four perfect square windows lit up.

I was born in Blue Harbor, but never really felt at home here. My neighborhood has always looked too perfect and clean cut. I have this feeling that, because of that, everyone who lives here is probably hiding some kind of weird, twisted secret. I've probably been watching too many scary movies – it doesn't help that so many of them take place in Maine.

After flopping back down on my bed, I pick up the joint again and stare at it. Most people I know started smoking and drinking when they were sophomores, but I've always taken on the role of the sober friend, making sure everyone is hydrated, and pretending to be motherly to hide the fact that I'm scared. I mean, the strongest drug I've ever done is caffeine, and I definitely drink too much coffee, but I know that's different. I've never liked the idea of drinking or smoking because I'm scared of losing control over my own brain. I have this idea that if I were to ever allow myself to relax, something horrible would happen. My mom used to tell me this story about this time she ate a pot brownie in college and 'forgot who she was.'

But, I figure I should find out what it's like before leaving for college. And I want to do it in a setting where I have authority over my surroundings, not at a party surrounded by strangers. I pick up the joint from my bed and flatten out my comforter before making my way downstairs into the kitchen.

I know my mom likes to sneak the occasional cigarette, so I start to rifle through the drawers in search of a lighter. After no success, I go back upstairs into my parents' bedroom. Eventually I'm able to find a lighter deep in the clutter of their nightstand. Guilt starts to swell in my chest. My parents trust me too much. I think that's another part of the reason I've been hesitant to try drugs, because I know they've never thought of me as someone who would do that – if they found out I did, they'd probably see it as some sort of betrayal. When I was little, I was

perfectly behaved, never crying or whining, always going along with what my parents told me to do. As I got older, the pressure got worse. Now I have this *reputation* to uphold.

I could just picture my Dad finding out that I smoked weed, and giving me that look of intense disapproval, of restrained anger that I've been more aware of recently. Usually, it's directed towards my little brother – I don't know if I could handle it if it were directed towards me.

Our backyard is pretty secluded, so when I step outside I realize I don't have to worry about being seen – my parents, particularly my dad, love privacy. Once I get comfortable I realize I'm sitting in my dad's favorite Adirondack chair, which feels wrong, so I move to a different one. I put the joint in my mouth, spark the lighter, and inhale. I blow my first cloud of smoke up into the sky and start to cough loudly. When I look up, the smoke is still suspended in the air, fading into the darkening sky. As I take my second drag, which hits more smoothly, I think back to a few days ago when I had bought the joint from my next door neighbor, Grey.

“Since it's your first time, make sure you inhale as deeply as you can, or else you probably won't feel it,” he said, handing me the joint with a small smirk on his face. We were sitting in his grungy basement, which was trashed with empty video game boxes and half-full cartons of milk and orange juice. He had texted me telling me to come over since his parents were gone and he didn't like dealing when they were home.

“And also don't smoke the whole thing if you're doing it by yourself. Some people can get pretty paranoid when they're high.”

Ever since we first met I had been fairly certain he was a drug dealer. He just gave off that vibe. But he was an attractive drug dealer, even more attractive than I had previously thought. When I was actually sitting next to him, I noticed how green his eyes were, how even

his jawline was, how effortless his smile stretched across his face. When I mentioned my theory about his dealing to Abby, she confirmed it, and wasted no time in pressuring me into asking him for some, if not for me, then for her. When we first started talking, I thought maybe he had thought I was into him, but he didn't act weirdly when I came over. I tried to pass off my disappointment as relief.

When I started to pay him for the joint, he insisted it was "on the house."

"Honestly, I never thought I'd see the day Maisie Willis hit me up," he had said as I got up to leave. Even though the comment was somewhat patronizing, I figured it was best to just smile and laugh it off.

I inhale the smoke as deeply as I can. The fourth hit makes me cough until I'm lightheaded, so I snuff out the remainder on the porch and brush away the ash. I close my eyes and take a deep breath, listening to the birds chirping in the trees. A warm evening breeze sweeps over the porch, wrapping me in a sense of unfamiliar peace, so I sink back into the chair and let my mind wander, thinking about what the summer will bring, whether I'll like my job at Rockfall, the local cafe, whether I'll actually like Middlebury, whether I'll make friends. But then I realize I'm thinking of things that are going to inevitably stress me out, so I sit back up and try to relax. Avoid paranoia – that's what everyone says.

A tightness starts to develop in my chest and my mouth has become somehow both sticky and dry at the same time. I realize I desperately need water.

Once I'm back inside, I turn the TV on in my living room. I sit on the couch with my glass of water and stare at the too-bright screen, but I'm distracted, rubbing my hands against the couch cushions, feeling the smooth fabric between my fingers. Everything about the room is strangely removed. It's like I'm looking at everything through a different, harsher lens. The

lights are brighter, the TV is louder, and the AC is on too high. As I stare at the large screen, I think I can hear a creak come from upstairs and my blood runs cold. I mute the TV and put my cup down on the table in front of me. Silence returns to the house.

My mind wanders towards Abby. I wish she were here. She was good at bringing me back down to earth when I was nervous. I'm suddenly remembering a sleepover I had with my friends a few months ago – they were getting high and telling ghost stories in Charlotte's dark basement, and despite being the only sober one, I was starting to get scared, and had tried to change the subject.

“Are you guys gonna apply early decision anywhere?” I asked, immediately cringing at how awkward and out of place the question sounded.

Ava snickered. “I wonder what high Maisie would be like,” she said, passing her large water pipe to Charlotte. “If she's scared right now, I can only imagine how much of a freak out she'd have after ripping bong.”

Everyone laughed but me. Even Abby.

“Some say there's a version of Maisie out there that likes to have fun,” Emma said, turning on her speaker and dialing it up loud. “But it might just be a myth.”

I shake my arms out in front of me, as if to physically rid myself of the memory. It's something I've thought about a lot recently – what things would be like now if I had decided to just smoke weed with them the first time they tried it. That was another memory that was extremely vivid. I was sleeping over at Ava's, and her older brother had just gotten home from a party with a friend. They had stumbled down the basement steps, drunk, waking all of us up. But I just stayed still, pretending to be asleep. I heard my friends whispering about going to the back room to ask if they could smoke with them. They eventually decided yes, and my stomach

started to twist when they called my name, asking if I was awake, asking if I wanted to come. I just shut my eyes even tighter and stayed perfectly still, until they decided to go back there without me. I had felt so many things when that happened – betrayal, embarrassment, relief. I don't even know which was strongest.

And then, a large thud comes from somewhere upstairs. My limbs freeze and there's a ringing sensation in my ears. I need to get out, I think to myself. I need to get out and call the police, because there is someone in the house. Maybe even multiple people.

But what if I'm wrong? What if I'm just being paranoid and I call the police and they come but there's no one here and they smell weed on me and arrest me? I feel myself losing control. I should have just smoked weed when I was still 17 – that way I wouldn't go to jail if I were caught.

"There's no one here," I begin to repeat at first just in my head and then out loud. "There is no one here."

But I can't sit comfortably until I know for a fact that it's true. I realize I have to go through the house, just to make sure, so I force myself up from the couch and move over to the kitchen to try and find something to defend myself with. I open the drawer and take out a huge kitchen knife, marvelling at how big it looks in my hand. Have my hands always been this small? I quickly decide that if it comes down to it, I definitely don't have it in me to stab someone, so I decide to use my brother Peter's baseball bat instead.

I move towards the stairs and flip the light switch in the upstairs hallway, gripping the bat firmly in my right hand. I turn into the hallway. There's nothing. I duck my head into my little brother's room and turn the light on. Nothing. I then move to the end of the hallway and look inside my parents' room. Again, nothing. My heart rate starts to slow as I cross the floor of the

bedroom and quickly check their bathroom. Seeing their large fancy shower makes me wonder what it would be like to stand under steaming hot water right now, but I decide instead to focus on the issue at hand.

As I make my way back towards the stairs, I hear a rustling. The noise draws me back down the hallway, tip-toeing so that I can hear as clearly as possible. I creep down the length of the wall, my ear pressed against the surface. As I reach the end, my fingers run over the outline of a small rectangular square, jutting out slightly from the wall. It's about the size of a dog door. I've noticed it before, but always figured it was some tiny storage space that the old owners had painted over. I press my ear against it and hear movement. My brain races through all the different scenarios of what could be inside, of whether its worth it to cause property damage to just calm myself down. But then, I hear a cough come from inside the wall and the ringing sensation returns to my ears.

Without thinking, I run downstairs for the large knife. I jog back upstairs, out of breath from going up and down so many times. As I dig the blade into the corner of the square's outline and run it along the border, the thick white paint starts to chip and fall onto the floor.

Once I reach the final corner, the shape pops open and I realize I've carved out a small, hidden door. I start to realize that I just stuck a knife into the wall – I can't even imagine what my parents will say when they see this. My heart pounds as I open the door further and shine my phone into the hidden space. When I see what's inside, I blink rapidly, sure that my brain is playing some kind of weird high-minded trick – but the image remains locked in front of me. The room is small, about twelve feet wide and eight feet tall, and in the corner, sitting cross-legged on the floor, is a figure of some kind, emitting a strange blue glow. I nearly fall backwards, but steady myself by pressing my palm against the floor.

Trying to control my breathing, I lean forward once more, hoping desperately that there's nothing there. But the figure remains, still cross-legged, almost hovering above the wooden floor. I slowly climb through the crawlspace into the strange room. Despite how scared I am, something draws me inside.

"Hello?" I whisper, my voice trembling. The form doesn't move.

At first, all I can make out is a fuzzy blue aura vaguely resembling the form of a human being – but the longer I stare, the more the details come into focus. To my shock, the thing looks just like me. I feel outside of my own body, watching myself watch myself. The figure finally notices me, and stares back for a few moments, almost like she's sizing me up. She's holding something in her hand, and I realize after squinting at it that it's either a joint or a cigarette.

"What the fuck..." I finally manage, coughing the words up.

She smiles. "Took you long enough to find me," the figure tells me, her voice a cool, effortless whisper. She puffs from the joint and blows the smoke up into the air, smiling as she watches the smoke form into an alien blue cloud. She looks at me and smiles knowingly. "Sit down," she instructs politely.

I walk closer to her and lower myself to the ground, my entire body shaking.

She brings her hand up to the right side of her hair, which is cut shorter than mine, and tucks it behind her ear. I see that it's covered in piercings.

She then ashes the joint onto the floor and shifts her posture so that her legs are stretched out in front of her. "I've been watching you," she says, now looking more directly at me with a pursed smile on her lips. Her eyes are like mine, but there's more brightness behind them. Her skin is clearer, her makeup applied more evenly. I look down at her chest and torso. She's dressed better than I am too.

“What are you?” I force out, although the question comes out quieter than I intended.

She tilts her head and gives a soft smirk, and then brings the joint back up to her lips, taking a long drag and shutting her eyes. The red tip glows brightly against her blue, fuzzy form. She takes the joint away and leans forward.

“You,” she says, matter-of-factly. Her eyes narrow and smile at me as she takes another drag.

“How?” I ask.

She shrugs again. “Not sure,” she says. “But I’m glad we finally get to talk, ‘cause I’ve been meaning to tell you for a long time – you *really* need to learn to relax.”

I shift uncomfortably, embarrassed at the prospect of this weird being watching over me when I wasn’t even aware of it.

“I don’t really relax,” I respond. “You should know that – I mean, if you’re me, you should know that, right?” I ask, unable to believe the words coming out of my mouth.

She shrugs again. “Maybe I’m not you, then,” she says, scooting closer, trying to make eye contact with me. I refuse to look at her directly.

“Is it about control?” she asks, taking another hit and holding the joint out to me.

“What do you mean?” I ask, hesitantly accepting the joint and bringing it to my lips. I take a small puff and hand it back to her. It tastes extremely strange, like what I imagine ozone would taste like.

“Is that why you can’t relax?” she asks earnestly, as if she’s a therapist, trying to get to the bottom of some issue that’s been bothering their patient this week. “Like you always need to have a grip on everything around you?”

“I guess.”

“Well,” she says, scrunching her face into concentration and looking up at the ceiling.

“You can’t control everything, right?”

“I can control certain things.”

She shrugs. “You’d think that. But you can *lose* control if you try to control everything around you. I mean, you know that, right?”

“That’s not true.”

She studies me for a moment before speaking. She then sort of points at me, a playful look on her face, her eyes narrowing. “I think you want two separate things. You want to be normal. But you also want some kind of.. weird *domination* over every aspect of your life. To be fair, a lot of that is probably Mom and Dad’s fault.” She takes another hit. “But still, that’s gonna fuck you up in college,” she says as she exhales.

I shift uncomfortably, shocked at how honest she’s being. She’s definitely not me – I’d never spell things out in such a blunt way.

“Do me a favor,” she says, smiling at me. “Pour yourself a drink. Then pour another. Play some music. Try and just...loosen up a bit, okay? It’ll be good for you.”

I look down at the ground, annoyed by the instructions she’s trying to give me. The whole situation is so bizarre, and deep down I’m scared that the things she’s saying might be right. How could she know what college is actually like? But I realize, given the circumstances, that’s not really a question that’s worth asking. I’m in denial about some things, but I guess I know the truth when I hear it spoken out loud.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see her smile and lean towards me. Suddenly, she’s placing her right hand behind my head and bringing me towards her face. Before I can register what’s happening, she’s kissing me with her ice-cold lips, filling my mouth with stale smoke.

Time slows down as she presses her mouth against mine, and a tornado of emotion stretches through my body. It's as if the smoke is pouring into me, transforming and reconfiguring my insides. Everything around me starts to change, even though I can no longer see it. The wooden floorboards recede into the walls. The walls collapse and dissolve into dust. I can feel the cool, nighttime air wrap over me, and I try to pull away from her freezing lips.

When I open my eyes, the figure is gone. My body is heavier than normal and I crumple to the ground, trying to take in oxygen. I close my eyes and see images flip through my consciousness as my brain tries to categorize what I just experienced – I see the fuzzy blue surrounding the edges of her skin, the laughter behind my friends' eyes as I sit across from them, watching them, hearing them, but unable to reach them. I wonder what they'd all think of her if they saw her, whether they would make fun of her in the same way they did to me – whether they'd treat her with coddling, patronizing amusement, or if they would actually respect her.

I move back towards the crawlspace opening and find myself again in my empty house, unsure of what to do. Despite the fear and confusion, there's something new inside of me, a feeling that is unfamiliar and unplaceable. My thoughts are further way, and I slowly make my way down to the kitchen – I'm more removed from my own mind than I've ever been before, like I'm a zombie just following commands. I walk towards my dad's liquor cabinet and open it wide. I see a tall bottle of Maker's Mark and grab it in my hand, twist off the cap, and bring the bottle to my lips.

The liquor rushes down my throat and I cringe at the burning sensation that follows it. The taste is something that I can only assume resembles the flavor of windshield wiper fluid, but the warmth that stretches throughout my stomach once I swallow replaces the coldness of the smoke, and in spite of myself, my lips stretch into a smile and my cheeks grow warm. The edges

of my skin feel fuzzy, and after taking another swig, I imagine myself glowing. I put the bottle down after my third swig and I sidle through the house, lighter than before, less concerned at my surroundings.

I move over to the living room and allow my body to fall onto the couch. When I look up at the ceiling, I see the figure drift over me, smiling. I close my eyes and my body floats away. Somewhere, there's music playing.

I wake up to the sound of the front door slamming shut, and my body jolts upwards. My cheeks grow warm as my parents walk into the room, laughing and talking. But as soon as they step into the living room, their smiles drop. I see them both look over to the kitchen, the open bottle of Maker's Mark still open on the counter, the unfinished joint sitting next to it. Music is blaring over the stereo system in our living room, playing a song I don't even recognize. They look at me, trying to process what is going on.

"Maisie?" My Mom asks, unsure of how to even begin.

I feel something trying to escape my mouth, a noise I'm trying hard to suppress. The corners of my mouth turn upwards and the noise escapes, my spine flexing, my head thrown backwards.

"Are you laughing right now?" one of them asks. But I don't have it in me to respond.

The Visit

The timing couldn't have been more perfect. Noah was driving back to New York from Quebec, where he had been visiting his college friend for the week, and it just so happened he would be passing by Blue Harbor on Saturday night, the small town in Maine where Alex lived.

"I can buy another ticket today, and you just pay me back at some point," Alex said as he held his cellphone to his ear, clearing the couch off in his living room. There was a concert at the bar where Alex worked, and Noah had asked if he could crash at his place for the night.

"Thanks dude," Noah said. "Who's the artist again?"

"This band named Crown. Small, indie. They're really good."

"Ah. I'll let you know when I'm coming through. Text me your address."

"Will do. See you later."

Alex and Noah were best friends in high school, basically inseparable, always grouped together and referred to as if they were one person. It made sense that this was the case – they arrived at parties together, hung out every weekend, walked through the hallways side by side. But it had now been nearly a year since they had seen each other.

They had both just graduated from college, and Alex was hopeful that going to this show would give them a chance to reconnect. When they met up during summer or winter breaks, it had been strained – it was harder to talk now that their lives were so different. Noah had rented an apartment in New York after graduating from NYU, studying econ. Alex had moved to Blue Harbor, a small village in Maine, with a bachelor's degree in English. Everyone accepted this as a somewhat strange decision on his part. Blue Harbor was where he had lived for the first 12 years of his life, until his parents had decided to move to Portland, where Alex and Noah met and

became friends. When he decided he wanted to move back to the small town after graduation, he found that he was having to defend himself constantly.

“Right now, it feels like this abstract place that only exists in my memory,” Alex had explained to his parents and friends. “Moving there – it’ll help with my writing. Maybe it’ll inspire me. And I can get a job at a coffee shop or something. It’s cheaper than moving to some big city.”

The last detail had helped to convince his parents, and so far, his plan was working fairly well. He had moved into a small one-bedroom apartment for fairly cheap in the downtown area and had published a few pieces in online magazines – granted, he hadn’t made much money from that. But he also worked full time at The Clam. He even got an employee discount on his concert tickets when he bought them.

But he was also lonely. Isolated. There were times when he was worried nostalgia had gotten the better of him, and that while the town may have been nice when he was a kid, living there as a young adult wasn’t quite the same. Blue Harbor left a lot to be desired when it came to entertainment. The Clam usually only hosted local musicians who were fairly underwhelming performers, but finally, a band he loved was playing at the place he worked – and now, his best friend would be joining him for the night.

Noah was running late, so they made plans to meet at the bar. Alex waited for him near the door, listening to the opener – a jazzy, inoffensive sounding band – and sipping a beer. All the tables that usually filled the open wooden floor had been cleared away. It was now occupied with people lightly swaying to the music, drinking, and half paying attention to the people on stage.

His coworker, Maisie, was working behind the bar. They had become fairly close over the course of the summer – she had just graduated from Middlebury and moved back home to make some money before figuring out the rest of her life. Alex had been burying secret feelings for her ever since he started working there. He wanted to talk to her as he waited, but knew she was busy, and crowded nights never put her in the best mood.

20 minutes went by, and Alex was starting to get nervous. The opener finished their set and thanked the crowd before exiting the stage. Noah still wasn't there. Alex finished his beer and ordered another as Crown got up on stage and started to tune their instruments. His neck hurt from looking towards the door so many times.

Alex had arranged for them to meet the band after the show, but figured he'd wait to tell Noah until he got there, wanting it to be a surprise. Usually, Noah was the one with the confidence to accomplish things like that. In high school, whenever they went to shows or parties together, Noah was the one leading them through the crowd, getting from one place to another, bending the rules to make sure they had a good time. But working at the venue had provided Alex with an opportunity to be the impressive one. He had talked to his manager, who said he'd have Alex come backstage with him for a few minutes after the set.

After Crown had already played their opening song and were launching into their second, he looked towards the entrance and spotted Noah at the door. Noah waved at him with a smile, and Alex quickly walked over to greet him with a half-hug, half-handshake. Noah looked slightly different than how Alex had remembered. His beard had grown out, and he was wearing glasses instead of his contacts. He also had a purple, faded NYU baseball cap pulled tightly over his curly dark hair.

“What’s up, dude?” Noah said with a tired smile. His voice was marked with a slight rasp and Alex smelled cigarettes when they embraced.

“Good to see you, man,” Alex said, grinning and gently shoving Noah backwards.

“You too. Sorry I’m running late,” Noah said, looking around the bar.

“All good.”

“I got kind of lost. This place is really in the middle of nowhere,” Noah said with a half smile. “Anyways, let’s go get a drink. I had a long drive.”

Alex sensed that Noah was tired, but that was sort of his permanent state, so he wasn’t worried. They made their way over to the bar where Noah ordered a double rum and coke.

“You work here, right?” Noah said, looking around the space.

“Yup, this is the place.”

Noah nodded. Alex couldn’t tell if he was impressed or disappointed by the venue. He figured he was usually going to places much more crowded than this one. He was more of the club type, where as Alex liked smaller, more relaxed bars.

“How was Quebec?” Alex asked.

“Oh, it was great. A really good time. Those guys don’t fucking sleep though, so I’m pretty exhausted,” Noah said, taking his glasses off and rubbing his eyes. When he put them back on, he smiled at Alex. “I’m glad to see you, though.”

They made their way into the crowd, both holding their drinks. It was hard for them to hear one another over the music, so they only traded the occasional comment back and forth as they stood at the edge of the crowd, watching the band perform. It was the exact kind of music Alex loved – jangly guitar, mixed in with female vocals and energetic drumming. The lead

vocalist had long, wispy blonde hair, and a crinkled white blouse. Alex had always been attracted to her, and watching her in person he felt it even stronger.

“She’s hot, huh?” Noah said, leaning over to Alex with a smirk.

Alex laughed. He realized he was more nervous than he had expected to be. He didn’t really know why – Noah was his best friend. But nonetheless, he realized he was overthinking every word he spoke, every little movement he made. He drained the rest of his beer.

He looked over to Noah and noticed that he was no longer looking at the stage, but instead looking around at the people in the crowd, smiling.

“I love places like this,” Noah said, leaning close to Alex so he could hear him.

“Yeah,” Alex said, laughing reflexively. “What do you mean?”

“Small town bars. They always have the best characters. Like, look at that guy over there,” Noah said, non-subtly pointing to an older guy wearing a tie-dye shirt, his hair reaching all the way down his back, swaying haphazardly in mini-circles.

Alex smiled and nodded, trying to refocus his attention back on the music. The image had embarrassed him. This was where he worked, after all – he felt some kind of need to vouch for it, but his mouth stayed shut.

Noah said something, but he couldn’t hear what it was.

“What?” Alex said.

“I feel like the acoustics in here aren’t that great,” Noah said louder, looking up at the ceiling. Alex hadn’t even noticed. He didn’t really have a response, so he just shrugged. He then turned towards the bar, trying to suppress annoyance.

“You getting another drink?” Noah asked.

“Yeah,” Alex said.

“I’ll come with you.”

They walked over to the bar, which was more crowded than it had ever been. Alex noticed Maisie processing a payment. When she looked up and saw them standing together, her face lit up with an overwhelmed smile. She finished the payment and walked over to them.

“Busy night, huh?” Alex said.

“Yeah for real, I can’t remember it ever being this crowded,” she yelled over the noise, tucking her hair behind her ear and smiling at Noah. She looked around the crowded bar to make sure she wasn’t missing anything important.

“Oh, this is my best friend from high school, Noah,” Alex said. “He’s visiting for the night.”

“Nice to meet you,” Noah said, stretching his hand across the bar and shaking her hand, giving that same smirky smile he always had whenever he was flirting with someone.

“You too,” she said. “I’m Maisie.”

Alex cleared his throat a little too loudly when he noticed them staring at each other. “Could I get a bourbon?” he asked.

“Oh, uh, sure,” Maisie said.

“I’ll have another rum and coke,” Noah cut in. “Thanks.”

Maisie went behind the bar and started quickly mixing their drinks for them. Alex watched her intently, admiring how smoothly she went about the task, pouring the rum into a silver shot glass and emptying it into a small glass cup in one fluid motion. He looked over at Noah and noticed he was watching her too.

“So how do you like the band?” Alex asked, looking back over at the stage, where they were now playing a slower song. The drummer sat silently, and the spotlight was focused solely

on the lead singer, who swayed lightly back and forth, singing with her eyes closed. She leaned as close as she could to the microphone, strumming lightly on her guitar.

“Oh, they’re good,” Noah said. “I can tell they’re talented, you know? Not really stuff I’d go out of my way to listen to, but. Good.” He shrugged after he finished talking.

Alex remembered the music Noah liked to listen to in high school – mostly electronic, poppy sounding stuff. Alex used to listen to that stuff too, but since he had gone to college his taste had changed dramatically. He probably should have realized that this band wouldn’t be Noah’s favorite.

“Are there a lot of shows like this around here?” Noah asked.

“Not really,” Alex said. “Mostly local stuff. They don’t get a lot of musicians to come here from out of state.”

“Makes sense,” Noah said, smiling at Alex.

Alex’s anger began to break through. Noah was doing the typical, condescending thing he always did. Alex knew it was just teasing, but there was something underneath it that made him tense. So many of their conversations, even in high school, were tinted with Noah’s idea that he knew better than Alex, had a better understanding of what was fun, or what was worth their time. Before Alex got worked up enough to say something, Maisie arrived with their drinks, setting them down on the bar and smiling at the two of them.

“I get off in a couple hours,” she said. “Text me if you guys are doing anything?”

“Will do,” Alex said, not planning on doing anything of the sort. He saw the way she was looking at Noah. She had never looked at him like that. To Alex, flirting was so obvious. He knew so many people throughout his life that lamented to him over missed signals and lost opportunities. Alex could never relate. Maybe it was because he spent so much of his time in

high school watching Noah flirt. Alex chugged his bourbon and set it back down onto the bar a little too hard, turning back into the crowd and walking towards the stage. He didn't even look behind him to see if Noah was following. After all, this night was about the concert, he told himself. He didn't care if Noah liked the music, or was even watching. He'd enjoy it by himself – that was the original plan, anyways.

Alex had first been drawn to Noah for his social abilities, his perpetual calm around large crowds of people, his charisma when it came to talking even in large groups. He was a life raft when Alex was standing around a party with no one to talk to or nothing to say. But standing in the crowd, the music and lights washing over him, Alex realized how many years had actually gone by since he and Noah had a good night out together. Alex had gone off to college, found friends on his own, started his life here in this small town that he was embarrassed by, but loved at the same time. Noah had kept doing the same old thing. The only difference was Alex wasn't there to float by his side.

He found a good spot up front, and noticed Noah take the place beside him out of the corner of his eye, but he didn't look straight at him. He just kept his gaze fixed on the band, pouring all his attention into the music, the noise of the guitar, the way the sounds all lined up perfectly with each other. He was grateful for a distraction.

After a few more songs, the concert was over, and it was only 11 PM. Alex remembered his plan to go backstage, but all of a sudden, it meant nothing to him. He didn't want to waste the opportunity on Noah, who didn't seem to care. Alex knew that if he told Noah about it, he would probably just greet the information with an indifferent shrug, or a half-hearted "Cool man!"

He also realized he had nothing else planned for the rest of the night. Alex was fine with just going back to his apartment and going to sleep, but he had the sense that Noah wouldn't love the idea. He knew being tired never really stopped him.

As the concert cleared out, Noah and him walked along the street in relative silence. Alex thought about asking Noah things to try and catch up, but everything he wanted to say just caught in his throat.

“So, are you gonna text your bartender friend?” Noah asked. “Or do we have other plans?”

Alex had tried to forget about that. He considered for a moment telling Noah that he was into her, but again, couldn't bring himself to say it. “Yeah, maybe,” Alex said. He started to suggest they go back to his place, but Noah interrupted.

“Check this out,” Noah said, reaching into the pocket of his hoodie and bringing out a small pill container. He unscrewed the lid and let two small, green pills fall into his hand. “I have some left over stuff from Quebec. We weren't able to finish it all so I nabbed the rest. Interested?”

“Is that Molly?” Alex asked. The question came out more condescending than he had intended.

“Yeah,” Noah said, looking at Alex, his eyes narrowed. “I figure there aren't really any clubs around here, but, could be fun to take it and just fuck around. I'm down to explore.”

It had been years since Alex had done ecstasy, and he wasn't really in the mindset to do it tonight. He knew if he shut down the idea that Noah would give him that look he gave him in high school whenever he didn't want to come out.

“I don't know,” Alex said, frozen.

“Is something wrong, dude?” Noah asked, pocketing the pill bottle. “Feels like you’re in a weird mood.”

Alex thought about what he could possibly tell him. Noah hadn’t wronged him in any profound way. It dawned on Alex that it wasn’t really about what Noah had done – it was just about who he was. It was about who Alex was, too. As Alex stood on the street, Noah on the sidewalk, they watched people file out of the bar. Alex was no longer angry, just indifferent. Somehow that was worse. He imagined a crack forming between the two of them, growing wider and wider. He pictured reaching his arm across the crevasse, grabbing Noah by the hood of his sweatshirt, and pulling him into the street before it widened further. But he didn’t. The crack wasn’t real.

“I’m fine,” Alex mumbled. There was nothing else he could say.