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Mooncussers

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Mooncussers

By Tait Brencher



Chapter One

Cool end of summer mist crept onto the shore from Provincetown Harbor. Winding between cars and intermingling with exhaust, it filtered through the half-cracked window of a rusting 1995 Toyota Tacoma. Kai sat shotgun with the seat laid back, his feet on the dash. He was trying to perfect the newly learned skill of rolling, but his fingers couldn't stop oscillating between raking back his tangled curls and just continually poking kief around on the paper. In between those episodes he tried to give Ruth a brief on his plan for party crashing.

“Okay so here's what's gonna happen. We go in from the back to the kitchen entrance right. Pepper's gonna be looking out for us there. He'll take us through the kitchen onto the balcony where we should be able to see the show without any ushers asking questions. He promised me wristbands so we could get drinks but I'm not sure that one will deliver. So.... insurance plan.”

He held up his creation flashing a chipped tooth smile, it's fat and slightly lumpy but it's the best she'll get this evening.

When Kai asked Ruth if she wanted to sneak into a P-town show she thought it would be some guitarist in the basement of a bar. To her, “sneaking in” was the two of them ducking a bouncer or picking up a job bussing tables to hear the band; and she was beginning to think Kai had brought them here for more than just music.

“Pepper's been telling me about it for a while, it's like performance art- there's like a political aspect to it you know? It's feministic.” He cracked a smile again, shoulders relaxed against the recline of the seat.

It's a good angle. Potential enough to let her forget a few elements of personal information and follow him into the club. She scrutinized his easy attitude, jealous of his

stainless countenance. She feels like they're playing a game of chicken, waiting for the other to cave first.

It was a new dynamic in their relationship, one informed by the incoming tide of their adolescent rebellion.

The pair were growing out of the well built shells of their parents. Inching from the nest, they felt themselves ballooning against each other, trying to redefine themselves against the nostalgic perception of the other.

Ruth ran her fingers over the leather strap fastened to her fathers car keys. Her thumb rested gently on the whale pressed into the center. Rubbing it, she wondered if the oyster smell would come off on the oil of her palm. She had taken the keys after making sure her father was safely stowed in his bed. He had a habit of occasionally falling asleep in the shower. She picked up Kai at the end of his street, his hair freshly washed and wearing a collared shirt.

“It’s to look older obviously.” He said when she asked.

She drummed her fingers on the steering wheel trying to absorb Kai’s easy energy and looked down at her own clothes: jean shorts, a somewhat clean T-shirt, and a washed-out pullover. On the street couples were wearing tight white capris, blond women flouncing Cindy Crawford curls. She sucked her teeth and took her hair down, it's tangled, but clean.

Kai flicked the lighter, making a show of his long drag. Ruth forced herself to take it gently instead of snatching it out of his hand. She took a puff, letting the familiar fog settle on her tongue. Outside the window, clouds covered the bright lights of the late summer stars. She could hear the torrid slap of the water hitting the pier’s pilings. Kai glanced at his watch,

“It’s midnight baby,” he says eyebrows wiggling, “Time to hit the road.”

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He exited the truck in a poorly attempted roll, his gangly limbs hitting everything on the way down. He popped up keeping low, just his curls and a finger gun visible from above the hood. Swiveling his head he checked the perimeter, looking more like a chicken than a spy.

“I can see you; you know.”

She hooked her arm through his and started pulling him along.

Leaving the pier, they were drawn like fireflies to the raucous blinking lights of the town. Street bands could be heard in the distance, sticks pounding the deep sound of trash can drums. Despite the hour, families sprinted up and down the docks, little kids licking sugar pops bought at the candy stores.

In the crowd Kai took lead, weaving them through the bodies that had turned the street into a sidewalk. They passed the club's main entrance where large, tattooed bouncers were scanning tickets and joking with colorfully dressed locals.

Kai took a sharp turn onto a gravel pathway, where the air was wet with cooking steam. Condensation stricken paint fell off the wooden fence in chunks, sticking to the bottoms of their shoes. Ruth could hear the familiar sound of backyard blues, the heavy vapor of fry oil settling on her skin. Outside the kitchen door line cooks smoke spliffs on overturned five-gallon buckets. Laughing and joking, they tap their feet to the song coming from a paint splattered stereo on the steps.

A large Hawaiian man appeared in the doorway smiling. A splash of dark brown freckles decorated his cheeks and nose, the attribute that earned him the nickname “Pepper.”

“Kaimana! Little man!” he shouted, coming down the steps and pulling Kai into a hug.

“Hey whatsup?” Kai asked, his voice coming out muffled from Pepper's stained apron.

Kai's mother and Pepper moved to the Cape together. They worked at a restaurant in Truro before his mom met his dad. Pepper was a believer in "youthful expression" owing much of his current character to its rule. Despite that, he'd only help them to a point. He would get them the fireworks, or spray paint, but they had to deface state property on their own. In his philosophy, trial by fire was how one learned.

Ruth was hardly surprised when Pepper showed up without the wrist bands.

"Alright my apprentices, here is the plan." Pepper gripped their shoulders. "I'll lead you guys through the kitchen, no questions asked, and point you in the direction of the back stairs. Take those up to the balcony and pick out some empty seats. If anything happens I'm back here, but don't tell anyone ya know me alright?" He spread his mouth into a large grin, enjoying the chance to impart wisdom onto them.

He led them up the steps and through the kitchen where dishwashers scrubbed a pile of plates stacked taller than their heads, and a waitress slept on a stool in the corner. The kitchen closed about an hour ago, but the busy bees were still tending to the hive.

As they push their way through the swinging doors the fluorescents from the kitchen were replaced by almost total darkness.

It took a second for her eyes to adjust before following Kai toward a sign marking the emergency stairs. Pepper stayed by the kitchen, his ghostly white apron illuminating the hall. Under the sign Kai gave him a formal salute before grabbing Ruth's shirt sleeve and hauling her through the doors.

Feeling the cool damp air Ruth gazed at the basement condensation dripping off the concrete walls. Running up the stairs she could feel the heat emanating from under the main level's door; bass tones pound out sending Ruth's heart into overdrive.

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“Kai, how are we gonna get drinks?” she asked, trying to channel her anxiety into something else.

“Way ahead of you dude.” Kai turned on his heels, climbing the stairs backwards, arms folded and demonstrating like a professor. “Do you recall the fateful night we bussed at the Beachcomber?”

Ruth wanted to hit him. They worked one weekend shift at the Beachcomber last July to help a friend. Kai got fed up with the clientele after one of his tables asked for a third time when he was going to bring over the pretty blonde hostess to help serve them. He knew there was nothing he could do to get them to stop. Entitled assholes weren't going to listen to a teenager, so he decided to do the next best thing, get drunk as revenge.

He swiped drinks off trays, downed them, and asked for replacements. He took sips from people's drinks when no one was looking or when they got up to dance. By the time Ruth finished counting tips he was passed out in the broom closet.

Then he got mono. Mission success.

“I don't want to drink something someone already put their mouth on”

“C'mon, where's your sense of adventure? Fine, fine, once we get up there, we'll assess the situation and then go from there, okay?” Kai spread his hands meaning he was going to improvise, which also meant he'd probably do something stupid.

“Our level madam”

He opened the door just enough for Ruth to slide through without letting too much of the light from the stairwell bleed onto the balcony. It consisted of four rows of seats overlooking a dance floor. Beneath them chairs and some cocktail tables were arranged in a giant U around a playing space. Black curtains rippled lightly from the massive fans on the ceiling.

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The bar was a small makeshift cart at the top of the regular stairs. Kai made a beeline for it, pulling Ruth along with him. They stopped when they got close to formulate a plan. The bartender looked overwhelmed. The show should have started by now and still customers were piling on the end of the line snaking it down to the first floor.

The bartender, reaching down into the cart for limes, bumped a wheel causing it to lurch forward. Open bottles from the top jiggled and fell over sending maraschino cherries rolling onto the carpet.

Ruth made for the cherry jar, pinching Kai hard on the arm. As she helped the bartender clean up the cart, she commended him on what a great job he was doing. She felt slightly bad. He couldn't have been that much older than her. His fuzzy red hair stuck up in a weird pattern, betraying the fact that he'd been pulling. His eyes were slightly manic, and he looked like he might cry as Ruth helped him get the olives back under control.

In the corner of her eye Kai bent down to snatch a bottle of tequila. She held her breath as the bartender turned around.

“Oh wow that one really rolled away on me.”

Ruth watched through gritted teeth as he approached Kai with his arm outstretched. Kai hesitated as his mind churned for clever ideas. At the last second, he thrust the bottle into the bartender's hands, clapping him on the back.

“Yeah, that one practically had a mind of its own!”

Ruth recognized Kai's customer service voice. The one he used at work when families in matching shirts asked for his name. He avoided eye contact with the bartender, attempting to let his shaggy curls cover his face.

“Hey you look sort of familiar, have we met before?”

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This stopped Kai cold; all his usual bounce and jitter was vacuumed out of the room.

“No, uh no. I don’t think so, my girlfriend and I are just visiting for the weekend, never been on the Cape before.” Kai gestured at Ruth, his voice half pleading and half confident. Ruth took the cue.

“You know the shows going to start in like two minutes, you could just close the cart.”

Slowly, the bartender turned away from Kai, looking frazzled but now with a clean mixture of confusion. Deciding not to give him a choice Ruth turned to address the crowd as Kai bolted towards the other end of the balcony.

“Shows on in two, please find your seats.” She used her best authority voice, channeling all the hours she’s spent minding the hostess stand at Sol. the vacationers shuffle off, not seeming to notice she had no uniform. When they crossed the Sagamore their eyes glazed over with lobster roll butter. The bartender sighed with relief.

“Thanks, I’m Max by the way. You?”

“Sarah”

“Nice to meet you, thanks for the help.”

“Don’t mention it.”

Ruth backed up quickly, scanning for Kai. He was on the other side of the balcony in seats near the emergency exit, tapping his toes to the beat of the preshow music.

“First sip to the victorious?” He asked, holding out a bottle of rum

“What?! Where did you swipe that one from?”

“I picked it up first, jammed it in my pants before the guy turned around.” Ruth took it gratefully, the bottle then betraying how light was.

“Dude, this is less than like a quarter full, why’d you grab this one?”

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“Well I didn’t exactly have time to browse the options, Jesus.”

Ruth took a big gulp and let him have the rest. It was about a shot and a half worth but it was free. Ruth looked at Kai, considering whether this is the best time for an interrogation. He was sitting forward in his seat, gazing intently at the stage. Despite having smoked half a joint before coming in here he looked alert, hungry. The encounter with the bartender wasn't visible on his face.

“Kai, who was that guy?”

“What guy?”

“The ginger, the bartender?”

Kai looked at her confused, perfect innocence drawn over his curious brows.

“He was the bartender?”

Ruth tried to burrow into his soul with her eyes.

He flashed her a cover up grin.

“Why? Are you thinking about asking him out? You would look nice sitting next to a redhead.” Kai reached out to tussle her hair, pushing her face away to break eye contact.

“Oh, I don't think he’s my type.”

Kai blinked. For a millisecond she thought he might retort, but he gathered his composure faster than she could.

“What a bummer” he said smiling, “I thought you two might just get along.” He faced forward in his seat, lightly shutting down the possibility for further questions.

The music started to speed up and a sultry voice emanated from the loudspeakers. Ruth felt her heart rising into her throat, almost immediately the debacle at the bar cart was

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extinguished from her mind. A single bronze leg appeared from the slit between the curtains, and the show began.

When Ruth was five years old, she started to get angry. Her elementary school guidance counselor told her father that it was natural for kids who had lost a parent to go through this. The anger was a result of all the other emotions that she was feeling overwhelming her undeveloped brain. Since she was too young to understand what was happening or how to help herself, her body reacted by filling her with an uncontrollable amount of rage. The counselor told her dad that it was a phase that would pass. Soon she would become a better communicator, understand more of the world, and get better at working through her emotions.

When Ruth's father asked how long they predicted this phase would last, they didn't have any answers. So, no one told a five-year-old Ruth to stop, and Ruth remained angry.

In late November when Ruth was nine, she was playing alone on the dunes, building tiny houses. She spent the morning combing the beach for shells, leaves, ocean smooth pebbles, and driftwood to build homes for the beach rose fairies.

The winds are bitter at that time of year.

The kind of wet cold that burrows its way into skeleton and keeps you frozen all winter. The light of the sun still plays off the cliffs, casting the landscape in otherworldly light, a beacon aglow on the surface of the sea.

Ruth was buried up to her knees in sand, her face inches away from an intricately woven seagrass mat when it happened.

Magic Cottage, across the street from her own home, was occupied by the grandson of the owner. He had brought his wife and kids there to avoid living in their house while it was

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under construction. They were from Iowa and didn't have much experience with the ocean. Their youngest, a girl around Ruth's age, drifted down to the beach in search of something to do. For a reason never explained, the girl decided to test herself against the bitter cold water by wading up to her knees. A wave came and pushed her to the side, swiping her feet off the sandbar into the riptide.

Ruth heard her scream, a combination of deep guttural cries and salty bubbles. Dropping everything, she raced towards the water, pulling off her heavy winter clothes. The distance between the base of the cliffs and the water's edge was agonizingly long and Ruth ran as hard as she could, the sand fighting to pull her down. By the time she dove into the surf she was grasping for the girl's fingertips. As soon as she made contact Ruth forced the girl's head above water, but it was lolling and pale. Fighting the cold and the weight of the girl, Ruth pulled her back onto the sandbar, and dragged her onto the beach, young muscles reeling from the strain.

Frantically she beat on the girl's body, trying to get her blood flowing, unsure of how to get a drowning victim to wake up again. She rolled the girl over and pounded on her back until she heard what sounded like vomit. The girl coughed up seawater in Ruth's face as she rolled her over. She was awake, but weak.

Ruth pulled her into a piggyback ride and started making her way towards home.

Walking up the hill bent warmth back into Ruth's body but was torture on her twiggy fourth grade legs. She talked the whole way home. Telling the little girl stories about the fairies who live in the beach rose buds, how they danced in the moonlight with the crabs and sang sweet songs to bring the frost.

When Ruth knocked on the Magic Cottage door the girl was pried from her grasp. They were wrapped up in wool blankets and deposited in front of the fire to thaw. Grandmother came to sit with them, stroking their hair with her bony fingers.

Ruth found out that the girl's name was Ella. She was nine years old and before that day she had never swum in the ocean before. Ella was a bit fearful of Ruth. Dad said that it was because Ruth had shown how strong she was by saving her. It didn't make Ruth angry, only a little sad.

Ruth would watch Ella from treetops when she went outside to play, talking to the same fairies Ruth had told her of weeks before. She thought Ella looked like a princess out of one of her story books. long honey curls and big brown eyes. Ruth thought about her often, how her cheeks would flush when her brother chased her, how she looked when she first opened her eyes after throwing up on the beach.

A week before Christmas, Ella and her family were set to leave. Grandmother helped Ruth make a batch of cookies for them to eat on their drive home. They weren't supposed to leave until midday, so Ruth was surprised when Ella came softly knocking on her window in the early morning.

Her whole body was bundled in a pink and white snowsuit, her cheeks pushing out from behind her hood. Ruth pulled up the window without taking her eyes off her.

"Thank you for saving me."

"It was no problem." Ruth waited, holding her breath for Ella to say more.

But Ella said nothing else. Instead, she reached out and cupped Ruth's chin. She planted a kiss on the corner of Ruth's mouth, like she was caught halfway between her lips and cheek.

Then, she turned away abruptly and ran up the dirt driveway back to the Magic Cottage. Two years later Ella's parents got divorced and she moved to California with her mom. Ruth never saw her again. Sometimes, absentmindedly, Ruth would find herself gingerly brushing over the corner of her mouth, trying not to remember the kiss.

Flashing pink and blue LED's swept over the glassy surface of her irises. The honeyed sweat of the bodies around her swirled gently. She could feel Kai swaying next to her. His face still, entranced by the energy of the crowd. In the corners of his eyes Ruth saw a faint glimmer. It grew, his eyebrows knitting together, his fingers still drumming he reached up to wipe it aside, guilty tears.

Slowly, she touched her own fingertips to her eyes, swiping the soft skin beneath them. She half expected to feel the light warmth of tears as well. None came.

Jumping up and down she tried to force blood flow down to her toes, anything to dissolve the stiffness taking over her lower back. She shook out her hands and rolled her neck around trying to dislodge the nerves tightening over the corner of her mouth. The rum hadn't hit her system yet, and the light cutting through the mob was harsh. She needed something to dull it, to put some distance between her and reality.

Reaching behind Kai to his seat, she dug through his pockets finding the insurance plan. In the club's artificial light, the flame from the lighter looked fuzzy, white, unthreatening. She took her first hit slowly, letting the burning feel in the back of her throat last. She blew it out into her sweatshirt, the thick cotton working to dispel the smoke and blend it into the white wisps emanating from the fog machines below. She watched it curl up towards the ceiling silently praying that sweat and cheap cologne covered the scent.

The second hit was a bit overzealous, sending her doubling over, choking on nothing and holding her sides trying not to throw up. Shutting her eyes tightly she puckered her lips trying to end the episode as quickly as possible. Everything but the queen was lost in the noisy shuffle. Time felt like it was slowing down as Ruth tried to focus on her breathing. It was unbearably hot and she could feel scarlet running up into her cheeks. The queen pulled bills out of the hands of the crowd, sequin dress glittering in the racing lights. She spun and thrust, allowing her hands to wander and feet to pump the rhythm of the crowd.

Slowly the tension between Ruth's shoulder blades began to subside. The hastily consumed rum settled in her stomach, spreading warmth through her body. She felt Kai reach out to take her hand. They gripped each other tightly through the finale. Splits, flips, wigs, and stiletto heels. The pair jumped up and down, screaming from the back of the crowd, pure elation cutting through the steam of so many people packed together. Streaking multicolored house lights flew up into the crowd beckoning everyone down onto the stage and people poured onto the performance space. Tables and chairs were pushed aside to make room for the crowd, performer and audience melding as the party began. Kai squeezed her hand, turning himself in the direction of the stairs.

Ruth hesitated and they considered each other.

She found her thoughts returning to the bartender. The fear Kai couldn't help but emanate when he asked if they knew each other. Kai's lower lip trembled, eyes desperate to go join the people below them. Ruth thought about the girl, singing softly to the beach rose fairies, shivering in the cold outside her window.

She was there again, at the top of the cliff.

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Maybe they would have stayed caught in that limbo forever, until the sticky floors were clear, and the sun shone through the smudged gray skylight above, but the person seated next to Kai had other plans.

Not waiting for the pair to clear the aisle he turned quickly, jumping over the back of the seat, elbowing Kai in the head. Kai lurched into Ruth, the two stumbling into the aisle. The tension inside Ruth snapped. Keeping hold of his hand, she turned on her heels and led him to the stairs. They started by stepping gingerly, but the shuffling rush gained momentum and became a stride, and then a full on run. They sprinted to the floor upending drinks and shouted conversations.

They didn't stop until the pounding of the base was felt in the floorboards encouraging them to lift off into the air. Nothing was held still; the walls of the building danced too.

At first, it was just the two of them, youth floating by itself underneath the crystal chandelier. The small yellow reflections speckling the sky sang for them only, the last two people left in the world. She closed her eyes, feeling the adrenaline course through her veins as she started to spin in circles.

She let her arms go loose, hair streaming out behind her. Her spins took her across the floor, nose trained on the sky, balancing dreams beneath the crystal chandelier. She bumped into a waitress holding a tray of shots and swiped two before she could notice she didn't have a wrist band. Letting the vodka burn in the pit of her stomach Ruth scream sang along to the music. She felt the weight of the little girl's body lift off her shoulders and it float into the sky. The release rippled off her back as she spun.

That is when she lost him.

A hand emerged from the crowd making its way around her wrist, beckoning her into the masses. By the time her brain caught up to her body she was nose to nose with a girl. All those dreams splitting the distance between them. The smell of vanilla and Svedka curls around Ruth's face.

The girl was a couple years older than her. Her hair short and choppy, dark brown eyes laughing playfully against the flashing spotlights. She smiled, talked, and asked Ruth's name. Her hands wrapped around Ruth's waist pulling the two of them close. Ruth noticed the clutter of her teeth, a glinting silver jewel on her nose, and the small freckle in the center of her cupid's bow. The girl leaned in, blinking, and waiting for a reply. Dumbly Ruth sputtered out her answer, heart hammering against her chest. The girl shouted her name back, but Ruth couldn't hear over the deafening roar of the music. She slid her hands behind Ruth's sticky neck swinging her hips to the rhythm, pulling Ruth into a dance with her.

Ruth was still in free fall, moving too quickly for her earlier shame to claw at her. She took the girls' cues and let herself be flown across the floor.

As the second song began the girl pulled away and looked at Ruth's lips, continuing her gaze down until she lifted her left hand to expose her wrist.

"You don't have a band?" she asked, taking a step back, sending earthquakes through Ruth's arteries.

"It fell off," she hoped her voice didn't catch too much. The girl considered her. Lips pursed before breaking out into a smile.

"Well, we should probably get out of here then, before they catch you."

Pulling Ruth's arms around her waist she began to lead her to the door. Ruth turned around once to see if she could spot Kai's curly head somewhere in the crowd, but he'd been consumed by the mob.

The girl gave Ruth an encouraging tug and they stepped out into the cool air. Even with the sidewalk menagerie of cigarette smoke and perfume the warm scent of the peat moss found its way to them. It was sometime between late night and early morning. White August light peeking out from behind the shadow of the monument.

The girl pulled her off the sidewalk into a colorfully decorated alleyway. Long green vines snaked up to the rooftops hiding painted symbols of the town's history. Humpback whales, lobsters, and a pilgrim filtered in and out of the street art. Ruth's sticky breath caught in her throat as she tore her eyes away from them.

In the balanced light she could make out a small splash of pimples hiding beneath the girl's powdered nose. Her lips were glossed in reddish brown sweeping warmth into her light-colored cheeks. The girl stepped closer to her, hip bones brushing gently on Ruth's stomach. She hovered there for just a second, millimeters between them and the bass from the club still pounding into the concrete. Ruth closed the gap, tasting the sticky syrup of the gloss.

She didn't notice when the noise of the party slowly emptied onto the street, she just felt the girl pull away. She untangled herself from Ruth's arms tenderly and slipped back into the light. Quickly she was re-consumed by the crowd from which she had once appeared. Ruth felt the taste of honey on the edges of her lips. Taking a deep breath and exhaling into a smile, she giggled.

A raw and real choking giggle that she might have been embarrassed about. Heat expanded inside of her chest till it threatened to burst her ribcage open. Catching her breath she turned towards the club.

Kai stood across the street from her his shirt wet with sweat. His chest was moving up and down heavily, his crooked jaw set. She watched as a face appeared from behind him kissing his ear before slipping away to join everyone else. He didn't break eye contact with her, even as the bartender disappeared. The heat inside of Ruth's chest bubbled into ice.

By the time they got back to the car the full bulb of the sun was almost visible above the horizon line. It taunted them with the punishment they would receive if not found in their beds soon. Kai slid into the passengers, his usual jitteriness resuming. Ruth drifted gingerly into the driver's seat, the helium of the night's events still carrying high inside her chest. The Cranberries played softly through the fraying speakers as she pulled out of town and on to Route 6. Neither of them said a word as they passed the P-town dunes.

While she drove, Ruth tried to push the girl away from her mind, but those chocolate iris's linger.

Kai chewed on his fingernails next to her, each bite sending little shock waves up and down her spine. She tried to imagine this new reality, where the two of them sneak off to gay clubs in Ptown on the weekends while still playing seven minutes in heaven at class parties.

Kai let out an exhale of pain, he bit his skin too close to the nail and a small pearl of blood started to make its way to the base of his finger. She cracked down on her jaw hard, tearing skin off of the insides of her cheeks until the images faded away.

They pulled off the road onto Kai's street, the Tacoma slamming the potholes with more violence than usual. They came to a stop in front of his house and waited silently for the crack of

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a screen door and his father to appear around the corner, swinging with anger and dolling out punishments. They sat still for a while, the rapture didn't come. Kai slipped out of the truck and scampered quietly up the steps of the cottage. At the last second, he turned and flashed a wicked smile at Ruth, one skittish hand waving. She kicked the truck into reverse and headed back out the driveway.

When she got to her own house, she was relieved to find that no lights were on yet. By some miracle both Dad and Grandmother were still asleep. Ruth crept to her window and pried up the summer swollen wood. It creaked slightly, puncturing the spaces between her eardrums. She waited there for three counts before crawling through the opening. As she got her upper body through, Modi, who had been asleep beneath the window, woke up. He shouted meowing accusations at her late arrival.

Ruth threw the rest of herself through the window, slamming her knee into the sill. Tumbling off the bed and into the fetal position she considered the fact that she might still be a fucked up. Her mind felt sharp, but her body was lethargic, the dissonance giving her a headache.

She stood and started stripping off her damp clothes catching a glimpse of herself in the mirror. Faint impressions of red were rubbed into the corners of her mouth, drawing it up into a cartoon smile. A raspberry bruise bloomed on the skin where her shoulder met her neck. Her eyes were bright and alert but somewhat scattered, like a piece of shattered glass. Slowly she reached up her hands, one gently rubbing the strawberry bruise, the other making a circle around the corner of her mouth.

Then, the guilty tears came.

They rained silently down her bare cheeks and onto the collar of her shirt. She stood, watching the green glass of her iris explode into color with the new presence of red rimmed

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lashes. A sob shivered up and down her spine but still she made no sound. She trembled in the center of her room, a nest of dirty clothes strewn about her feet. Finally, slipping into bed and pulling the covers over her ears she fell asleep, glad that no one heard her come home.

On the other side of the cottage an old wooden bed frame squeaked. The music notes of Ruth's grand entrance had drifted through the house floorboards. Grandmother began to stir. 39 years of mothering experience, her ears quickly attuned to the sound of her youngest child. The granddaughter creeping back into the house, a sound so familiar from the girl's childhood. Grandmother rose from bed and started to smooth the lavender sheets. The warm sun glowed through the lace curtains in her bedroom, morning had begun.

Chapter Two

Ruth slept until the summer sun beating its way through her walls became too hot to ignore. Flinging a leg out from under her sheet she stretched like a tom cat burying her face in the pillow and exhaling a dry yawn. The possibility of deep slumber had come and gone but the sticky sun made her feel disinclined to start the day. Instead, she rolled around in her sheets blinking gummy sleep from her eyes and staring at the slats of the top bunk.

The dark wood made the walls feel close, like they were pressing in on the light drifting from the thin slivers between the curtains. These beams found their way into the corners of the room, illuminating dust bunnies and forgotten art projects. Ruth stared blankly at her domain as a stiff knock sounded at her door.

Grandmother entered in her blue gingham apron; a mockingly disapproving face drawn over her delicate tan features.

“So, this is how you plan to spend the day then? Lying in bed sweating up your sheets, stinking up these walls, and nursing a hangover?” She put her hands on her hips to make it clear she was looking for a clever reply.

Grandmother was an artist, and she understood the value of experimentation in the creation of direction. A long time ago she had gained notoriety in the tourism industry of the Cape as a landscape painter. One of the straw hat women who brings their easel to the beach and continues to paint a sunrise well into the afternoon though the moment and all its color have long faded. She claimed she could smell saturation in the wind blowing off the cresting waves. One of Grandmother's miniatures hung on the wall above Ruth's pillow. Unlike her other work this painting was shrouded by a thick night, the long hair of its figure streaming beyond the frame, her eyes fixed on a yellow mark in the distance.

Grandmother made her way across the room and took a seat on the girl's bed.

“C’mon” she said, shaking Ruth’s thigh, “You can’t stay in bed all day. You’ll turn your brain to mush if you don’t get up and get it out. Turning your bedroom into a sauna is certainly not going to help you.” she nudged a piece of dirty laundry away from her foot.

C’mon let's go.” She stood dragging Ruth’s sheet with her, which the girl tried halfheartedly to hold onto. “I made muffins, you can grab one on your way out the door.”

“What kind?” Ruth called after her.

“Corn!”

From the way the sound reverberated through the walls Ruth could tell Grandmother hadn’t even turned, just yelled the response over her shoulder. Drawing a smile to herself she slid off the edge of the bed.

Muffin in hand she slipped out the back door, through the porch, and down the stairs that ran along the back of the cottage. Outside it was swelteringly hot, the thermometer on the corner of the house read 87 but it felt hotter with the August humidity thickening the air.

Barefoot, Ruth carefully picked her way through the skinny path in the woods avoiding poison ivy, thorns, and bits of broken glass. Coming to a stop under the canopy of a large oak, she gripped the old hemp line and began her ascent into the treehouse built ten feet above the forest floor.

This treehouse was the second to be built in this tree.

The first, put up in 1995, was constructed by Grandfather for a six-year-old Ruth. Only a few feet off the ground it had felt like a castle. It was a gift for her birthday, unveiled at the end of the summer as a private hideaway. Ruth brought every toy she owned to the treehouse, claiming that she was moving out and it was to be her new place of residence. It took her a few

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days to outfit to perfection, dragging her dad's old camping gear into the woods to construct a bed, a tarp over the roof for rain, and a basket of snacks in case she got hungry. Her grandparents watched from the windows, laughing to themselves over her three foot tenacity.

The first night Ruth spent in the treehouse she barely slept. Her father came and tucked her in with, "Go Away, Big Green Monster!" The intention was that by reading it Ruth would be brave enough to spend the whole night outside, continuously shouting at whatever monsters might creep up to her door to "go away". The ever turning beam of the lighthouse had been a good night light, illuminating the shadows inside of the treehouse. Ruth followed its trajectory until her eyes grew heavy and the real nighttime darkness settled over the thin dry forest.

When a truck with a bed full of people passed shouting loudly, Ruth was woken up. The still silence of her solitude prevented her from falling back to sleep and she watched trembling as Nauset Light's beam traced its way over her toys. Outside twigs snapped and leaves rolled in the late summer wind. No monsters appeared, but the anticipation of their imminent arrival crept up her throat, anxiety alarms rushing through her veins.

It had been an impossible choice, stay inside the treehouse till the sun rises, hoping Grandfather's walls would be enough to keep out the dragon slinking around the perimeter, or make the mad dash back to the house, hoping her little pink feet were faster than the ghosts trying to ensnare her.

Eventually it was the need to pee that got her out of bed.

In her Miss Piggy pj's she stood over the ladder leading to the ground pumping herself up for the mad dash. She copied the moves of her father when he prepared to enter the icy Atlantic surf, beating on her thighs, and stretching her wiggly arms. Letting out a silent battle cry she slid

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down the ladder and ripped towards the back of the house. She sprinted up the steps and straight to the bathroom, welcoming the thin yellow overhead light.

Dad heard her feet as they padded around searching for a lone toy; eventually she settled for a plastic dinosaur which poked painfully at his back as she curled herself into its curve.

Warmed by his body heat she fell asleep immediately, exhausted by her imaginative adventure.

In the morning, he gently suggested that perhaps she wasn't ready to move out yet and Ruth had agreed, believing that perhaps her toys missed the comforting dark wood of the bunk room.

Four years later Kai and Ruth accidentally set the treehouse on fire while playing with a flint and steel. It happened in the winter, when the surrounding forest was too wet to burn.

Two years after that Grandfather died, leaving behind a charred treehouse he had not been well enough to fix. That summer, while Ruth was in Maine, her Dad rebuilt it higher in the tree.

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Ruth pulled herself up and flopped down onto the floor to catch her breath. The walls were lined with painted bookshelves, and old beach chairs rested in the corners for hosting. The floor was covered by a round woven rug, its needling fibers scratching Ruth's face as she turned on the fan letting the cool air wash over her.

The lack of stiff wind turned the peninsula muggy and Ruth could feel sweat trails inching down her back as she looked up at the tide line treasures strung like chandeliers from the beamed ceiling. Sighing in melodrama she turned on the boombox so that something would be drifting through the air.

Dancing to the music she rolled the carpet up by half, exposing a short plank in the floor which she pried up using a flathead screwdriver. The board gave way to reveal a colorfully decorated cigar box whose contents rolled into a hangover cure.

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Smoke curled from the end of the joint wriggling between the hanging feathers and shells. Taking absentminded puffs, Ruth inspected them, occasionally finding an intriguing piece of sea glass or an interesting piece of bone. She picked up the treasure folding it over in her hands, fingers finding each rough groove or smoothed edge. When an object struck her with creative brilliance; she would place it on the old gingham stool, take a notebook off the shelf, and begin to sketch.

Occasionally they were still lifes, but mostly the objects served as a vehicle of her imagination. Shells became ships rocking on the open ocean, driftwood turned into fantastical thrones, and bottles caps the doors of witch's homes, the welcoming coca cola red serving as a beacon for absent minded travelers to become ensnared in the powerful sorceress evil webs.

On a special shelf, painted warm pink and detailed with light cream flowers, rested the makings of fairy houses. Cottony down pulled from a milkweed plant for bed cushion, the thin reeds that grow on the lower dunes to be woven into a mat. These miniature homes were designed to be left beneath an overturned log or in the cracks of a stone wall, small villages painstakingly assembled and never revisited.

These fairy homes were the blood children of an empty grief. Pulled from the pages of an unfinished story book left for the little girl who would grow beneath the light of a yellow sun and above the storming cliffs of a shrinking landmass. The curling black letters, drawn by her mother's hand, had been intended to be read by her voice alone. Instead, Ruth grew up with her father's rougher translation, leaving the little girl to pull fragments of her mother's voice from the music notes hidden between the watercolor images.

When Ruth turned the materials over in her hands she could hold a piece of her mother, pulled out of her imagination, and formed by the body she had so lovingly created.

Tracing her fingers over the shelves Ruth circled around the events of the previous night. It felt like a dream, her body moving while her mind stayed silent behind her eyes, no words of prophetic warning to prevent her from tumbling down into impulses. She felt crazed, trying to latch on to a singular moment of clarity, an epiphany to draw her out of this jumbled mess of thoughts and emotions so she could order them neatly in a row like her treasures, to be turned over a thousand times in her palms each silent secret and whispered truth memorized.

Instead, her teenage brain screamed and the dissonant noise caused her to turn the radio up till it blared in the front of her skull. Flopping onto the scratchy blue carpet she rested the joint conveniently in the corner of her mouth.

Salvation came in the form of cookies.

Kai, trying to scare her, sprang off the top rung on the ladder, slamming his head against the bottom of the floor. He screamed obscenities at the top of his lungs and rubbed the newly forming egg.

“I brought cookies.” he said sheepishly, pulling a plastic container from behind his back. They were fresh from the kitchen and now broken from travel. Just pulled from the oven, the gooey innards of the chocolate chips glistened in the sunlight.

“Don’t mind if I do” Ruth popped a whole one in her mouth, hoping it would dissuade him from asking her questions. She chewed slowly, waiting for lightning to strike as he oscillated between bites and puffs.

“It’s fucking hot today” he sighed eventually, throwing his arms dramatically over his head as he sank to the floor.

She envied the way he was able to tuck his scars up into the neat folds of his clothes.

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She thought about asking him directly about the red-haired boy. How she knew he lied when the pink rose from the back of the bartender's neck after Kai denied him. She quickly gave up on it though, assuming that its effect might feel more like a gunshot than a friendly jest. In uneasy defeat, she sank back onto the floor.

They sat in silence as the nub of the joint shortened and The Grateful Dead trickled from the radio.

Ruth's late start bit up the hours of the day. Late afternoon was just starting to bend from the sky. In the slowly waxing light, the temperature began to drop slightly, allowing the possibility of spending a few hours under the sun.

Kai leaned over towards Ruth's pit and sniffed the air dramatically.

"Ugh, you stink dude."

"Yeah well, you're pretty ripe yourself. Its fucking muggy out here." A smile spread over her lips

"What's the tide?"

Chapter Three

Grabbing the boombox they slid down the ladder and made for the house to gather supplies. They convened at the top of the driveway, coolers bungeed to the back of Ruth's bike, towels in Kai's basket, and a skimboard under each of their arms.

Taking a left out of the driveway they followed the curve of the coastline. The dirt road was rarely given help to recover from the damage of the icy cracking winters. It was riddled with potholes, some the size of garbage can lids, the others small ponds. The summer heat and occasional rain filled these craters with water leaving milky pools, perfect nurseries for mosquitoes. The pair wove in between them, one hand gripping the handlebars of their bikes.

Ruth's fingers fettered on the edge of the board, playing the grooves and dents from all the times she had dropped it. Navigating the pathways of this patchwork road had been a steep learning curve. When the two of them were young a journey to the break in the cliff meant a bike or a board. Her little arms had not been long enough to hold the edge and ride at the same time. Now she could feel it gently tipping back and forth between her ribs and inner arm, a clocking pendulum.

They zigzagged their way past the rented summer cottages, cedar shingled buildings set back from the road and slowly melting into the sandy ground. Taking a sharp turn left they worked their way towards the edge of the cliff in search of a path too skinny for cars, an abandoned fire road.

When Ruth and Kai were little, the woods on the ocean side of Fire Road had been thick enough to keep the pathway in dappled shadows, the bellowing thrum of the sea a hollow rumble in the protection of the skinny, red-barked pines that lined it. Now, the sun shone in beams through the thinning foliage, drying out the roots that clung to the sand keeping the cliff in place.

Reaching the end of the road they swung off the bikes, grabbed their stuff, and walked to the cliff. Despite its slow crumbling, the edge was slightly taller than the ground behind it. Inching over the edge exposed you to the upward swirling sea air in a rush that expanded from your lungs into your toes. They left the cooler on the ridge and threw the boards over the side where they raced like runaways towards the water edge.

There were only two entrances to the stretch of beach belonging to Nauset lighthouse. One, a mile and a half south of here, a staircase built into the edge of the cliff. On a summer day thousands of tourists file up and down its boards, shepherding enough gear to build a wall-to-wall tent city of people all trailing from inland in search of sun and water. They stretch out in each direction for about a half mile, with the densest population in the middle, content to spend the day on top of each other, unable to keep eyes on their kids through the umbrella fences. The staircase pulls at the cliff's foundation, causing more erosion damage than all the waves that hit the shore each year. Most winters it's swept away by the ocean, a new one built each spring.

This entrance was called Secrets. Passed down to Ruth through her uncles the entrance is technically illegal, a trespassing route on the national seashore. Formed by hand, here the steep cliff was slightly softer, giving way to more sand than rock. The entrance is marked as the center of a horseshoe which would later become a deceptive cornice, stretching out almost into a ring towards the water. On one side reed grass formed a thick enough wall to lean on, on the other rested a bench made of hastily assembled driftwood, held together with nails that had been rust orange since the 80's.

Grinning at the horizon, Ruth walked calmly back to the edge of the road; methodically planting her feet, before sprinting towards the edge. Jumping, she extended her body, the ground

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falling away from her feet. As the incline preserved her airtime, Ruth felt her hair lift off her neck, the wind curling around the backs of her ears. She was weightless, caught by the hands of the misty wind and the cold damp air rushing off the apex of the surf. She hit the sand, her well planted feet sliding slightly down the cliff, the ground reaching out to catch her.

Kai followed with the boombox bounding down towards where the boards landed. He cranked the volume, cutting through the sound waves ricocheting off the curved cliffs. Ruth grabbed her board and headed for the firm low tide sand. They skated on the soft ripples until the sun began to fall behind the other side of the Cape's wrist.

Panting and coughing slightly from the rib bashing falls, they made their way back up the dune, grabbing at the sediment and forcing their hands deep within the earth pulling themselves upwards. Kai threw himself on the left side of the horseshoe, his body perfectly fitting into the curve of the reed grass. Ruth went right, resting the heels of her callused feet on the edge of the driftwood bench.

The boiling froth of the sun exited behind the trees as the pair watched the golden yellow pools dimpling the surf.

Ruth's fingers tapped at the lip of her bottle.

She met Kai in the early summer amongst the piles of driftwood on Outer Beach. They were saucer eyed first graders, small for their age and permanently decorated in purple bruises and oyster nicks. When Kai lost his first tooth Ruth chipped hers in solidarity for her first and only friend.

She had a hard time connecting with her peers as she navigated the uneven maturation responsibilities of her early life. Kai was a distraction from all of that, like a warm blanket

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settling over the coldest parts of her life, allowing them to rest inside the cradles of her bone marrow.

An older cousin once accused her of being in love with him at a barbecue. She denied it vehemently, her tiny nine-year-old face boiling beet red and steam pouring from her ears. When Kai came and asked to play horseshoes, she shoved him to the ground and stalked off by herself while her cousin laughed.

She lay awake that night, wrapped in sheets of embarrassment replaying the moment over and over in her mind. She felt stupid and weak, like her cousin had poked a knife into her exposed underbelly and Ruth had buckled and fallen under the weight of the accusation.

Until that moment Kai was not a boy, but an extension of herself. Thoughts roiled around in her mind pulling on all perceived truths of her elementary school brain. Should she be in love with him? Was that what was expected of her? What if she was in love with him and didn't even know it?

The idea was panic inducing, enough to send her crawling deep under the comforter with her knees pulled tightly to her chest. How do you know if you love someone? In all the stories she'd heard, love gilded the edges singing sweet nothings, existing like a prophetic force. Love, it felt to her, was an inevitable trap.

Eventually she fell asleep, repeating the words "not him" to herself, a pantomime lullaby, or a pleading prayer.

The next morning Ruth appeared at the counter while Grandmother cooked breakfast. She stood at the corner like a guilty dog, tapping her toes and pulling at her fingers in hopes of claiming some attention. Grandmother stared at the precocious child, her curiosity piqued.

Solemnly, eyes as round and full as a goldfish she asked:

“How many kinds of love are there?”

Grandmother smiled thoughtfully, studying her hard-set chin and wide eyes. She could see small bubbles of panic rising inside of Ruth’s chest as her eyes flitted to the pictures of her mother on the fridge- arms wrapped tightly around her father's neck.

“Many many different kinds.” She said, pointing to their smiling faces, “There is the love she has for him, the love he has for her, the love they have for you.” She stepped towards her granddaughter, wrapping her taught and bony body up in her arms, “And of course the love I have for you.”

Ruth buried her face in the fabric of Grandmother's apron, its lavender scent making her braver.

“So, I don’t have to marry Kai one day? Or have his babies?”

Grandmother froze, pulling the child's face out of her armpit, her laugh echoing like a cymbal off the cedar beams of the house.

“No hun, you never have to marry Kai, or have any of his babies. Your cousin doesn’t know what she’s talking about.” She brushed the pearl tears away. “One day you’ll meet someone, and you’ll want to marry him and have his babies and you’ll be happy about it, but that isn’t for a long long time. Don’t you worry about that just yet.”

Ruth nodded solemnly, the bruises around her underbelly beginning to fade.

—

Uncertainty galvanized at the edges of her thoughts, preventing her from finding a resting place. The simplicity of their situation shone clearly in her mind before being washed away by a wave of self-doubt. She wanted to stand and scream into the surf until all the oxygen in her body

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was expelled and she crumpled to the ground like a crushed aluminum can, but she couldn't bring herself to speak.

To admit it, even to the person she trusted the most, even to the only person that she knew already knew, was to admit a weakness that felt key to her survival. It wasn't about who she loved and anatomy. It was about the fact that if she said it verbally, released this to the ears of Kai and the bugs, birds, fish, and whispering reeds of the dunes then it would be real. She would grow up to love someone else she might lose; she would open that door in the first place.

If Ruth had been the one in charge of printing calendars and setting clocks forward to face Spring the world would never have progressed beyond mud huts.

Kai reclined into the reed grass, its bitter smell peppering his nose. He watched Ruth pulling string from the hem of her shorts, chewing on her lower lip, a hickey peaking out from beneath the collar of her shirt.

She had appeared from behind the shadow of the building just as the first blood orange rays cut into the town from the sky. Her face was somewhat white, the staining around her lips pulling up into the corners. She glowed in the early light, frozen in its glory like she was behind glass. There was a part of him that had wanted to sprint back to the car, let her live in that moment for a little while longer, preserve the secrecy of her first real kiss, but he couldn't move. He stood stuck on the spot as her eyes traced the roofline of the club and slowly fell across the pavement to where he stood. The glass shattered.

“Nice hickey”

Before she could stop herself, she felt her fingertips dart to her neck, attempting to press it back into the skin. Here it was, in front of her now; screaming at her from all directions putting

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her mind through the blender as her cells jiggled with the volume of unspoken words. She set her edges.

“Jealous?”

“Not particularly.”

Kai sat forward, tracing the sand before him with his fingers.

“I actually, I feel like I owe you some kind of explanation about last night. I thought we would get the chance, but we didn’t and then you.” He waved his hand over the scribble sending translucent sea glass sailing over the edge.

“I’m gay.”

It ripped from her mouth, her voice higher and harder than usual. For the briefest moment he didn’t look up and Ruth could feel suffocating walls closing in all around her.

“I know,” relief brushed over his cheeks, “me too.”

They took a breath together filling the bottom of their well deep lungs to the brim, sucking in oxygen until it hurt before spitting it back out in lapsing giggles. Release cut the tension between her fingers and toes, some of her fear dissuaded by their tandem leap.

“So, who’s the redhead?”

Kai was silent for a moment before letting out a soft laugh.

“He’s a friend I guess.”

“You guess?”

His hair curled stiffly at the end, titling comically to the side giving him a slightly crazed look behind his sunburnt eyes. For a moment Ruth thought he would get up and walk away.

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“He’s not really a friend, more of an acquaintance. His name is Max.” Ruth watched as Kai’s thoughts receded inward. He swallowed hard before turning towards her with a question of his own.

“Who was that girl?”

Ruth smiled diffidently, remembering the feeling of tracing her fingers down the curve of the girl’s chin, feeling her warm breath slip slowly down her neck. She would never see that girl again.

“I don’t know her name.” She looked up at him, slightly guilty, he grinned at her, impressed.

“Wow, macking on nameless strangers in an alleyway. I never thought I’d see the day.”

“Yeah well, times change I guess.” She hadn’t meant it to, but the comment hung in the air, falling downward before them, slowly slipping into the ground. “How long have you known”

Kai was sitting back on the grass again, his restless fingers braiding three strands.

“I had my first serious conversation with myself at thirteen. Before that it was just something I didn’t know how to name. It wasn’t exactly a realization, more of just like an incoming tide, like I knew it was coming but I never thought about it in an active sort of way. I guess I just fell into it.”

“Yeah” she said softly.

Laying back onto the sand, she watched the clouds slowly creep across the horizon line, making their way into the bay to fall as dew onto the ships rigging crowding the protected harbors. Their fathers would be coming in to shore now, coiling lines and loading the catch into compartments for delivery. Soon it would be dinner, then tomorrow, and soon school would begin again, the last nights of the summer stretching not far ahead of them.

Neither of them moved as the blue day faded into the pink haze coming just before the drop into a deep purple night.

“Are you afraid?”

It was almost a whisper, carried to her ears by the sensitivity of her own paranoia.

On the sand below a crab was caught in the push and pull of the tide line. It scuttled along furiously as the eight-inch waves of the oncoming night pushed their way up the beach. With each snap of surf the crab rolled, sucking in its legs and frothy pincers trying to keep its belly against the harsh grain of the sand. Ahead, in the bubbles of scent being carried from the sandbar it smelled the snails and bait fish nesting in the safety of the rebar reef. Above, the squawking symphony of a white shore gull circles. It dove down, mustard yellow bill flipping the crab and tearing at its soft spot.

“No. I’m not afraid.” In the waning red light, she looked ferociously intense, dark eyes and jaw set hard on clenched teeth. Her hands were balled in fists at her sides, needling the calluses on her palms.

“Me neither.” He smiled and stood, brushing the sand off his board shorts. “But the suns almost set and that's kind of my cue to head home.”

She biked ahead of him, eyes trained on the road, expertly avoiding even the smallest pebbles protruding from the hard packed dirt.

In the winter of 1997, Kai rode the bike paths that crossed near the back of the elementary school playground. It was late February, the sun deciding for the first time in weeks to crack through the impenetrable steel clouds haunting the coastline. Their arrival inspired the young boy to sneak quietly into his younger sister's toy chest and slip a prized possession into his

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backpack. On the way to the playground he felt its weight on his spine, softly moving to the rhythm of his peddling legs.

The playground, consisting of a slide and swings pressed towards the side of a large open field, was occupied by another group of boys. They threw wood chips at each other, battling with sticks. Undeterred by their presence he biked quickly over to the opposite corner where a small ring of saplings provided cover. Turning his back toward them he slowly unzipped the pack to reveal his sister's Christmas present, the 1996 Holiday Barbie. Her head and shoulders were wrapped in white faux fur, the same material made up the muff. Cold sunlight sparkled off the golden trim of the burgundy gown as he twirled her.

He held her in his hands, content to trace the thin detailed patterns sewn into the buttoned corset of her dress. He spoke to her softly, skinny trails of guilt over stealing her from Momi, sometimes sending tremors through his shoulders.

The three boys had seen him crossing the field and bored of their uneven numbers made their way over, hoping to inspire him into a game. Startled, Kai whirled around trying hastily to hide the doll behind him.

A few hours later he knocked softly on the window of the bunk room, a purple bruise beneath his left eye, and the doll stowed safely inside his backpack. He told Ruth that he got hit during a game of capture the flag. Later, while searching for the box of crayons that she had lent him, Ruth found the Barbie. She demanded that the two of them throw a ball in honor of the lovely guest. They played until the moon shone high over the Sandpiper. Kai had to catch a ride home with Ruth's dad.

The boys approached him only once afterwards.

The following Monday on the blacktop during recess Kai and Ruth were passing a slightly deflated basketball when the tallest boy came up behind him, and gave his back a stiff shove. The words “girly boy” barely exited his mouth before he screeched in pain. Ruth, without missing a beat, had strode up to the boy, grabbed his wrist, and bit him.

Ruth peeled off the road and down her driveway. Waving, Kai continued onto the long-paved hill past Nauset Light. The first stars and planets of the night were beginning to appear, silver jewels cutting through the coastal haze. Their presence made him feel safe, cocooned by the complexity of the universe. Softly his thoughts drifted to open windows, trailing curtains, and morning light over auburn lashes.

For a little while, nothing changed.

Chapter Four

Modi spent his days following the light that drifted through The Sandpiper's windows as the sun trucked across the sky. The first pit stop of his morning was the sliver of warmth emanating from the space between the wall and curtain on Ruth's quilted bed. He woke her just before her alarm, his heavy fat paws pressing into the tender spot beneath her sternum. It was difficult to breathe with his dense body sitting on top of her lungs.

She stared at the pictures poked carefully into the space between the top bunk's mattress and the wood. They stretched out to her toes in a canopy, blanketing her in memories.

She made eye contact with a picture taken at Kai's ninth birthday. In it he's beaming, his face gazing down at the cake whose candles he has just blown out. Ruth is looking into the camera with a forlorn expression. She scrunches her face at it. The picture is seven years old now, the house where it was taken belongs to someone else.

She stretches, forcing a disgruntled Modi to shift positions on the bed. In the corner of her room her bag sits prepacked, waiting for the last few items to be randomly shoved into pockets. Ruth forces herself to roll out of bed as the alarm clock begins to blare.

Tuesday, September 6th, 2005.

Ruth steps up to her dresser and begins hastily pulling on her clothes.

She goes to the kitchen slipping on her shoes, and shoving random snack items into a lunch box. At one point Grandmother bustled in, producing a sandwich from the fridge and sticking it in her bag before strolling on singing operatically to her morning symphony.

Armed with a dozen fresh pencils and notebook paper still smelling of starchy dye Ruth walked her bike to the top of the drive and pulled on her headphones. Taking a right, she coasted

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around the winter weather potholes before turning again and trailing a U around the Light whose beam was hidden in the morning sun.

The ride to school hugged the rotting wooden fence that blocked tourists from scrambling to the edges of the cliffs. The rolling breakers crept up the steep vertical and poured over the other side echoing off the tree line. If she pedaled off the seat, Ruth could see the tips of their frothy apex's crashing down upon the sand. August's muggy haze was cut through by the breeze being pulled down from the Arctic as the climate slowly shifted towards September.

Gathering speed, she rode down the hill that stretched towards the Three Sisters lighthouses. Currents of sand stretched by the wind glinted over the surface of the road. Thin specks of glass and mica threaten to make her slide if she hits the brakes too hard. Turning at the stop sign the treble sound of students shouting across the parking lot echoed behind the long thrum of the waves.

The parking lot's confusion welcomed her boisterously as she turned onto the school grounds. Drivers honked and scolded each other as they competed for spaces. Buses lined the sidewalk before the front steps and kids poured out loaded with sports equipment and locker provisions. Ruth spotted Kai at the far end of the bike rack surrounded by underclassmen.

They were anxiously discussing this year's tryouts for the soccer team while Kai leaned casually on his bike every once in a while flashing a bemused smile. The boys were a combination of the lucky few who had ridden the bench last fall, and the hopefuls praying for the same treatment. As they combed through all line up possibilities, they looked at Kai for his approval of their opinions.

Ruth recognized all but one of them. Slightly shouldered out of the conversation was a stockier blonde. He was shorter than everyone else, having grown out but not up yet. Judging by

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the size of his shoulders he would be fairly tall one day, but it was clear he was insecure about his stature. Unlike the other guys who flitted eye contact between all the people trying to speak at once, he seemed to only be looking at Kai, a mixture of unreadable confusion and anxiety on his face.

Ruth shook her head at them as she approached, catching Kai's eye as he excused himself from their anxiety fest. She pushed her bike into the rack as the group of sophomores shuffled off waving overly excited goodbyes to Kai.

"I think that smaller one with the blonde hair wants to wear your skin as a meat suit," Ruth loudly whispered to Kai. He chuckled, not taking his eyes off the group.

"Noah Baker, Jacob's younger brother. He wasn't here last year, did a year long thing at a boarding school in Connecticut. I hope he's faster than his brother." He elbowed her in the ribs before pulling on his backpack.

They made their way into the school parting on the second floor.

The Baker family owned and operated some of the most popular mini golf courses on the outer Cape.

As the world trended away from the classic Americana style towards elaborate animatronic pirates and flashing fountain routines the Baker's set themselves up to roll with the tide. Their establishments were cash cows, tourists waited in line in droves for the price spiked rounds.

Jacob had never taken a shift at the front desk. He spent his summers off Cape, being shipped from soccer camp to tutoring and back to soccer camp. Each September he returned ready to wreak havoc on the pitch and every time Kai's ball skills dribbled by him.

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Jacob was a natural leader. He cared deeply about the success of his team, holding himself to the highest possible standard for their collective excellence.

Kai was a natural talent. The rhythm of the game was in his bones from the minute he first kicked a ball.

For every goal that Jacob scored, Kai had an assist.

When the two boys were younger the high school coach came to scout one of their practices. Jacob knew about the visit beforehand, the expectations of his performance having been clearly stated.

During the final moments of scrimmage Jacob got a break away, a rare opportunity for him. As his cleats pounded on the grass, he elongated himself into his well practiced running form. Built for muscle Jacob's weakness resided in his speed. As he closed in on the 18-yard line he could feel the inside of his right foot itching to plant the ball in the high corner of the net. Eyes trained on the spot of contact he missed the flurry of movement coming from behind him.

Kai, who was sitting high for his team, closed the distance between them. In the millisecond before the inside of Jacob's right foot kissed the ball he dove knocking it out of the way. As the ball rolled Jacob's foot landed on the inside of Kai's thigh sending tremors up the younger boy's nervous system.

As Kai stumbled trying to get up his teammates swirled around poking at the purple bruise that was already forming. Jacob stood unmoving, watching as their guest shook hands and began the walk back to his car.

Jacob did not speak when the team headed back to the lockers. He sat on a bench in his muddy cleats and shin guards as they packed up. Kai filed in last, walking like a cowboy trying to avoid cutting himself on the ziploc of ice taped to his leg. Jacob kept his eyes on the ground

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till the other boys' voices were gone. Before he stood silently, closing the distance between them. Eyes still trained on the ground he wound up, slamming his fist into the locker. The sound reverberated down the row.

Thin red lines spilled over his knuckles where he made contact with the locker's slats. The double time spatter of them hitting the floor filled the suffocating space between the boys. Without taking off his gear Jacob turned back to his bag, pulled it over his shoulders and walked out of the room leaving a small dent behind.

When Kai arrived on the field for preseason two years later Jacob bound up to him jovially. He showed Kai which locker he could use and where the best tasting water fountain was, introducing the younger boy to the rest of the team. It was a smart move. He knew Kai was guaranteed to make the team, that he would become a valuable player, as well as Jacob's linemate. They spent the next three years playing next to each other surviving the seniors hazing and the juniors razing side by side.

But Jacob never apologized, and Kai never forgot.

Ruth pushed through the cafeteria doors and headed into the high September sun. Introductions to this year's curriculum had left her feeling off kilter and fuzzy. It was unnatural to be shivering in her shorts at a metal desk while the sun baked the pavement outside the window.

Looking at the woods resting behind the open field she contemplated what would happen if she pitched her tray over her shoulder and sprinted into the freedom of the tree line. The thought gave her comfort as she found her way to the picnic table under a tree. Kai showed up a few minutes later, an apple stuck in his mouth and already half eaten.

“How was your morning?”

“Oh, you know, a little of this, a little of that.” She lounged into the back of the tree with mock drama “I heard a rumor that you and Tara Wilkins had sex under the pier behind Macs.”

Kai’s eyebrows shot up.

“That is an event that I do not remember.”

“I thought you might not have.”

“Seems like too much work to deny.” he said, stretching his arms out to catch the sun.

“You aren’t worried that it’ll damage your lily-white reputation?”

“Ha, I’m not all that lily white.”

The chuckle bubbled the anxious curiosity in Ruth’s stomach.

“Last time I checked you were a rosy cheeked virgin, care to enlighten the group on your roguish tales?” Immediately flashes of pink lit up his cheeks, a smile threatened to peek from the corners of his mouth.

Ruth laughed at him, lightly pleased with his genuine reaction. Quickly however, the blush was replaced by a small cough and the downward trend of his lips and brows. Wiping his nose he sat forward, rounding his shoulders indicating an attempt to privatize their conversation.

“As you have already figured out Max and I met before that night in Ptown. He was helping to set up the equipment for the band who played at Fox and Crow while you were in Maine. Anyway, I was bussing tables and we started talking about music, he invited me out for a smoke and um, well” He cleared his throat. “Yeah, anyway we saw each other maybe like twice after that, and once just because we ran into each other outside of CVS. But um, that night, at the club I mean.” He spread his palms delicately over the table, smoothing the creases in his story.

“When we got separated while dancing, I went to try and bum another drink, he caught me at the bar. It was so loud and hot in there and everything, so we walked to Dog beach, one thing led to

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another and we uh..." He looked up at Ruth trying to let her fill in the blanks by herself, but she wasn't done torturing him.

"You, you what?" she said, feigning innocence.

"Well, we might have done some un-lady-like things." A big stupid grin took over his face and the two of them cracked into mischievous laughter.

It continued for a long time, long enough that kids at other tables turned around confused.

"Man, you really lost your virginity on dog beach? Fucking dog beach dude?! That's, I mean wow, there is really somethin' to be said about that."

"Yeah, well you know me, hopeless romantic and all."

"Did anyone see you?" It hadn't been her intention, but the question flattened the air around them the moment it exited her lips. As Kai rolled back the events of the evening Ruth's heartbeat skittered and slowed. Eventually raising his head and making eye contact with assurance he spoke.

"No, no one saw."

—

Leaving the glistening sun for the bleached linoleum, Ruth rubbed her eyes, adjusting to the new light. Students whisked past each other in pursuit of new classrooms, their bodies gliding like fish in a bait ball. They swirled together conversation, droning laughter, and nervous silence- creating a sharp hum that reverberated vibrantly off the brick walls of the school. Ruth stepped like a line cook in rush hour through the crowd in pursuit of her next class.

E102 was in the southwest corner of the school. It caught the early afternoon light drifting through the windows high on its walls, illuminating everything in a hazy orange glow.

Ms. Wright left the fluorescents off. She taught English and had grown up in a city a long way away, in a place without an ocean. When she was a child, her father took her on a railway out of the city to a place with a beach. She had never seen open space like the kind that stretched between the stocky houses of suburbia. Fields as long as the uninterrupted nursery rhymes she sang were limitless wilderness. When she looked across the open water and was handed a lake where she saw an ocean, she vowed she would see the superior. She finished school and moved east until she could stand in the middle of her house and hear the waves everywhere.

Her hair was light brown, and she was tall with thin shoulders and steady hands. Her face was young, well-tanned and thoughtful. She was a disorganized teacher, grading papers in strange waves and forgetting what homework she assigned, but her free spirit allowed the students to drive conversation. Though the content was not always directed at a book, it usually proved fruitful in the long run.

She was a nightmare to the administration, but a favorite of the winter weathered parents. She taught mostly upper-level classes, electives for individuals continuing to pursue the english curriculum and college courses for those hoping to attend ivy leagues in the fall.

As she entered the room, Ruth sighed with relief at the stowed shades and open windows. The room was rearranged from rows to a rectangle, forcing all students to look at one another. Some were chit chatting in pairs, or with Ms. Wright, seniors who had taken classes with her before. Many people were staring into the well at the center of the circle, their faces intent on this singular middle distance. Ruth moved around them to a seat in the corner near the window. The chairs were almost all full now and the room slowly quieted to a peer pressured buzz as the thick clock on the wall closed in on two. Ms. Wright strode from her desk as a final student entered the room.

Ms. Wright let out a surprised ‘oh!’ as she backed away from the door, having been on the verge of closing it.

The girl, noticing that the whole class had looked in her direction, tucked her head back into her hood and frantically tried to stow the earbuds she had just pulled out. She smiled guiltily in Ms. Wright’s direction, and upon receiving a smile made her way to the only available seat in the classroom, the one directly next to her.

Ms. Wright sat down and reached her arms wide to welcome them. She spoke free form, handing out a syllabus filled with almost nothing but due dates. At the bottom in mostly lower-class letters, was the list of books that they would be reading this semester, including a selection of choice. Ruth tucked the paper into her notebook and rested her elbows on the table. Ms. Wright waxed poetic in a vaguely inspiring and surprisingly creative way, eliciting dreamy smiles from most of the room. Ruth fell headfirst into the trance, her pen resting upon the white lined paper. She was putting the finishing touches on a floating house when the teacher squealed in delight.

Ms. Wright reached out a hand to high five the earbuds girl. With her hood down Ruth could more properly make out her face. She had a freckle on the left peak of her cupid's bow, its effect pulled her lip slightly high, giving her mouth a soft resting smile. Her thin wire framed glasses slid slightly down her nose, causing her to push them up continuously. Her dark hair fell down past her shoulders to her ribs, rippling softly as she nodded at Ms. Wright.

Looking around the room Ruth took stock of those she had met. For some it was difficult, the effect of summer and puberty having changed their look almost entirely, but as she made her way around the circle she discovered that the earbud girl was the only person she didn’t know.

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Ruth realized nervously that she had been staring, the girl looked back at her, blinking quizzically from behind her dark lashes. Ruth quickly shook her head and returned to her notebook paper.

As class ended Ruth packed quickly, charging out the door to avoid another awkward interaction. As she bounced down the steps and back out into the sunshine, she quickly forgot the offense.

Swinging herself onto the seat of her bike she pushed out of the lot looking up at the cloudless sky. She took a right towards the bike trails, inspired by the weather to catch her dad off the docks and swing by the library for Ms. Wright's book.

Chapter Five

Willem pulled the hat off his head and ran his fingers through the thick curl's underneath. As his nails scraped along the top of his scalp, he could feel bits of sand rolling around his roots.

“It clings to my skin better than anything else,” he thought, rubbing at the brim of his hat. It was fraying on the corners already despite being bought at the beginning of the summer. The decal on the front was a silver oyster; the ridges, originally lined with purples and blues had turned brown and beige from his sweat. As he settled it back onto his head he wondered if it had been imbued with the smell of fresh fish and low tide, a scent he could no longer pick up on his clothes. He shook his head, allowing his curls to fall loosely down the back of his neck.

The sun was beginning its downward trend through the sky as *Leach* made its way into Wellfleet harbor. The red metal of its hull cast brown shadows in the murky water, its keel stirring mud trails as they approached the jetty.

He worked at midships, setting the dock lines and shifting the day's cargo, clam shells singing as they rolled over each other. Gordie stood helming in the chart house, his boots stomping lightly on the metal floor while he sang. Willem could recognize the faltering beat of “Fire on the Mountain;” Gordie was not much of a singer. On shore a 1996 Chevy Silverado was parked in the lot above the docks. It was unmistakable with a red body and blue hood, its color gently leaching into the cool breeze. He kept his eyes peeled for the owner as they swung gently into the slip, and he stepped onto the dock to tie off.

Gordie emerged from the chart house swinging to the silent beat. In the warm afternoon light, the creases of his face were smoothed, and Willem could almost recall the waxy look of his youth. The thought of Gordie's twenty-year-old face, still round and babyish despite his large stature, made him smile.

In 1986, the early days when Gordie had just bought *Leach* he would approach the dock at a snail's pace, scared to dent the object on which he'd had spent everything. It annoyed Willem to no end, having seen his friend dock larger ships three sheets to the wind with a beer in hand. To break him out of his lock step Willem would stand at midships and count down as they approached. If he made it to a full minute before Gordie finished docking, he would step off the rail into the water. It was terrifying for Gordie, who now worried about sucking his friend up into the propellers. While Willem would clamber back onto the dock grinning, Gordie would be howling. The game worked, and quite quickly Gordie improved.

Each day Willem shortened his countdown until he could dock the ship in twenty-four seconds, rain, or shine. They were forced to stop after that when at 23 seconds Willem jumped. The space between the dock and the hull thin enough that he hit it hard with his knees on the way down. When he disappeared beneath the dock Gordie assumed that he crushed him.

When Willem popped out from behind the boat and began his ritual taunting holding his freshly bloody knees Gordie fished him from the water, slammed him onto the dock, and ripped a shot at his right eye. The young men struggled until a pair of large firm hands had pushed them apart.

The same hands were now making their way towards them, fingers calloused from sleight of hand and moving cargo.

"Afternoon Dickie," Gordie sat on the rail and tipped his cap at the old dog, his cheeky grin displayed widely.

"You know that kid of yours owes me twenty bucks and an explanation." Dickie replied, rattling his fist in dramatic frustration. "I take a bet on him for a game winning goal post season,

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and he doesn't deliver? What am I supposed to do with that?" Dickie shook his head in annoyance, his face flushed, light eyes twinkling.

Dickie was sixty-five years old with a thick reddish beard and a torso like a rodeo barrel. He owned Poit's Lighthouse Adventure Minigolf off Route 6. Clerking at the ice cream counter had been Willem and Gordie's first jobs when they were kids, an honor the pair passed onto their children.

Dickie was a friendly enough man with a solitary soul. By the time the two boys had made their way into his care he was only 39 and already well past marriage and kids. Still, he functioned like a pseudo father figure, especially for Gordie who always seemed to find himself under thumbs.

"Sorry Dick but I'm not a snitch, especially on my own kid. You want twenty bucks from Kai, and you've got to catch him yourself." He started unloading crates as Dickie laughed.

"What can I do for ya?" Willem asked.

"Always the gentlemen this one," Dickie said pointing at him. "You guys got oysters?"

"Only for you, how many?"

"Four dozen?"

"Four dozen?! Fucking four dozen!?" Gordie reappeared from below. "Where do you get off saying shit like that, no way you're gettin four dozen free fuckin oysters."

Though he may not have been his flesh and blood, Gordie inherited Dickie's dramatic charm.

The old man waved his arms in defense, "They aren't all for me alright. I've got a bit of a game goin' on later you know the guys like the oysters."

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Gordie looked at him blankly, disbelief at the request, still stuttering his words. Willem would have let him stay there longer, his mouth hanging open like a cod fish, but a shout from the parking lot got his attention.

Ruth was standing in front of Dickie's truck, her bike leaning against the wooden fence. Whooping at them she produced a shiny metal object from her back pocket. Opening the Leatherman, she shouted down at Dickie and mimed slashing his tires.

"You and your fucking progeny," Dickie muttered. "Hey, you scratch my paint job and I'll make you clean the gutters!" he shouted at her, his voice crackling from years of smoker burn. She stuck her tongue out dancing in response.

"You can have two dozen oysters, and you tell the guys we said hi." Willem said, pulling bags for his old friend.

"Thanks for the generous spirit there, Chowder."

Chowder, the nickname Willem received for throwing up the creamy soup in one of the water features at Poit's when he was fifteen and drunk off spirits for the first time. The next morning Dickie made him drain and buff the moats with a scrub brush. It was probably the first and last time they had ever been cleaned.

When he was done and went to return his supplies to the counter, he found two presents waiting for him, a can of clam chowder and a fifth of whiskey. He threw up in the moat several times after that, but he made sure Dickie wasn't looking.

Up in the parking lot Ruth finished taunting them and made her way down the dock. Her long brown hair blew in all directions with the confused inland wind. It rolled off the crown of her head and grazed her shoulders in tangles. From far away Willem could see strings of fabric coming loose from the ends of her shorts and the laces of her shoes chewed and knotted. She

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laughed freely, coats of windy tears swirling over the surface of her hazel irises. He recognized the twitch of her nose from his own, the stride of her step mirroring his swinging gate.

When she was small Willem would set her up on the carpet with random items from the house for her to explore. She couldn't tell the difference between toys and spoons, so Willem opted for the less expensive route. She would sit on the ground, her round chubby legs kicking as she ran her meaty hands over dial up telephones, pots, and pans.

He watched from the couch, exhausted from the early mornings and late afternoons spent aboard *Leach*. He could see the flicker of his facial expressions formed by her lips and brows. She pulled the corners of her mouth downward, scrunching her nose just before she cried, her lips twisting into the same ruddy pout when she was angry. It was startling at first and he found himself tracing the outline of her face over and over, looking for a glimmer of her mother's features. The tiny baby they shared provided little proof of her mother's existence as her skin tanned away from freckles and a shock of dark brown hair sprouted from her head.

Over time Ruth became more than a pinchy cheeked toddler and he could see fragments of Sarah in her movements. She had the same laugh, pulling her hands together in a single clap before rocking back onto her heels or tailbone. She resembled her mother most in happiness, her father in everything else.

“Good afternoon gentlemen.” Ruth said, coming to a halt in front of them.

“Afternoon Bulldozer, defacing my property again I see”

Ruth earned Bulldozer as a toddler after she went down Dickie's back stairs on a Fisher Price rideable elephant. When she reached the bottom, arm broken, she gave it a stiff kick accompanied by Dickie's favorite expletive: “God fuckin' damnit.”

“Anything for you old man.” she grinned at him.

“Why don’t you help me by taking these up to the truck, I’ve got to have a couple more words with your old man.” Dickie said, clapping him on the back.

“Sure,” Ruth looked quizzically between them. “I’m going to head to the library to grab a book for class, I came down to say hi, and I figured I could bum a ride?”

“I’ll swing by for you as soon as I get everything unloaded.” He winked at his daughter, a secret message passing between them. He had started this when she was little, sending her winks across the dinner table or at parties. She learned to do it by mimicking him, he winked in assurance, she in confirmation.

“This better be good Dick, you’re freakin’ my kid out” he said, irritation rubbing at the edge of his voice.

Dickie glanced at the empty deck before he spoke. Gordie had gone below to put the boat to sleep.

“I found one, good condition, minimal repair- she’s a fifty-footer with working electrics.”

Excited energy slipped down from his chest and into his toes, he glanced back at *Leach*, trying to keep his voice down. “Where?”

“New Bedford. They’re going to want an offer soon; they don’t want it sitting in the yard forever.”

“I know- I know I need to tell him I just, I wanted to make sure there was a boat first- don’t want this to end in another pipe dream.”

“Believe me kid I know, but you’ve got to tell him soon or you’ll get caught out on a lie.”

Gordie re-emerged from below his fingers black with engine oil. He wiped his nose leaving streaks of the grease clinging to his whiskers.

“I’ll tell him soon I promise.”

Dickie nodded solemnly.

Sticking up a hand to Gordie he waved goodbye and made his way back up the dock to the pickup. Willem watched him till he was safely stowed in the driver's, the seat belt flapping out the open window.

There were crates to unload, shellfish to sort, and inventory that needed cataloging. Bending back into working position the men began their evening ritual, the taste of highly anticipated dinner watering on their tongues.

—

Ruth turned her nose to the sky, breathing in the early fall air as she pedaled towards the library. The leaves were still full and bright, and she imagined the way that they would soon curl up into themselves carpeting the ground. She could sense the oncoming season even as the coastal effect of the water pumped warm air onto the shore.

The library was a one-story building on the northwest side of the town center where the art studios and restaurants gave way to summer cottages and winter homes. Like many buildings on the Cape its clapboard walls were studded with cedar shingles that faded to grays and blues in the rainy spring weather.

Inside it was divided into two sections, one for the children with books, toys, costumes, and coloring pages. The children's section of the library was connected to the multipurpose room and over the warm thrum of the hvac system Ruth could hear children throwing themselves on bean bag chairs and squealing with delight. The adult's section was largely empty, a row of computers sat in front, each of the desktops occupied by frustrated looking young professionals attempting frantically to use the fickle printer. Behind them lay rows of shelves filled with books, movies, and magazines.

Wandering down the aisles Ruth collected the stack she would need for Ms. Wright as she daydreamed over her book of choice. Besides being written by a woman they had been given no criteria so Ruth snaked through the shelves, pausing to read the back of titles and covers that caught her eye. Eventually, finding nothing that piqued her interest she gathered her books and rounded the corner of the nonfiction stack towards the checkout counter.

Seated in the rolling stool with her hands spread out on the table was the earbud girl. Her eyes were closed, and she seemed to be responding to some invisible force.

As her head slowly rocked back and forth her fingers pulsed to life. They danced across the counter flicking and pouncing on invisible keys. Her movement flurried as she gathered her power up into a silent crescendo. The other patrons seemed not to notice as they rifled through their books and sharply shushed their exuberant children. Ruth, however, was entranced. The girl's lower lip trembled as she pressed her fingers into the wood breathing in short puffs in time with her internal rhythm. Too late Ruth realized that the song was ending and suddenly the girl's dark eyes were settled on hers once again. A moment of recognition passed between them. With her arms full of books and her father arriving soon, Ruth had no choice but to approach the counter. She smiled timidly, hoping that a friendly air might help to ease a second awkward interaction.

To her surprise the girl smiled back revealing a thin gap between her front teeth. Its presence changed the landscape of her face, brightening it with sweet imperfection.

“Hi, would you like to check out those books?” She held her hands out inviting Ruth to place them on the counter. Ruth tried not to chew the inside of her cheek as the girl began to scan and stamp.

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“I recognize all these, you’re in my English class, right?” The girl looked up, her hopefulness surprising Ruth.

She could see the emotion in her eyes, they were large and pleading and her soft voice hummed with an undercurrent of anxiety.

“I am yeah, I don’t think we’ve met before, I’m Ruth.” On instinct Ruth reached out to shake the girl's hand, immediately regretting it.

“I’m Dara, my family just moved here from San Francisco.” She took Ruth’s hand and shook it, her palms and fingers fitting easily inside Ruth’s. As they slipped away she could feel the calluses on Dara’s fingertips.

“That’s a long way away, what did you guys come out here for?” She didn’t mean to, but her tone came out incredulous and slightly sharp. She shook her hand lightly trying to forget the feel of Dara’s skin.

“We moved for my mom's job, she grew up on the east coast and wanted to be a bit closer to home.”

“But what about you? It isn’t close to your home.” Again, Ruth surprised herself with the sudden burst of emotion. She could feel her lower lip trembling slightly and her eyes threatening to water. Immediately the adrenaline gave way to embarrassment, pink creeping up the back of her neck.

Dara laughed, it was soft and chiming, swirling warmly around the curve of Ruth’s ears.

“Well, yes, it’s a bit far but it’s okay with me. I wasn’t too attached to my old school, and I think a fresh start will be good for my brother and I.” She smiled warmly, the longevity of her gaze prickling Ruth’s skin. Cocking her head slightly she pushed the stack of books across the counter.

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“You’re all set.”

“Oh yeah, sorry.” Ruth grabbed the books off the counter and shoved them haphazardly into her backpack. Pinching the top of her hand she spoke before she could lose her nerve.

“I saw you before, in class with earbuds, and again just now playing the piano, I think? Are you a musician?”

Dara leapt from her stool as if it had suddenly turned electric, a blue fire lighting up her dark brown eyes.

“Yes! Well, that is I play music, I don’t know if I would call myself a musician. I’ve never written anything, but I would like to learn.” Shyness and self-doubt crept over her demeanor as she finished, twisting her long fingers. Ruth, suddenly desperate asked:

“What do you play?”

It was enough.

“Piano, guitar, violin, cello, and I do a bit of percussion.”

Ruth rolled back on her heels, impressed.

“That’s so many”

“Well, you play one string instrument, you play them all.” She laughed, turning her palms up humbly.

“Well, I don’t know about that, but I would love to hear you play sometime.” Fear gripped her. She felt her momentum lurch to a stop as the entire world fell dead and she thought she would concave from embarrassment.

“I would like that.”

The steam released from Ruth’s ears as she said goodbye. She turned towards the exit; the air inside her head light.

Dara watched her careful footsteps pass over the threshold.

Outside the sky was beginning to tinge the world in early evening watercolors as Ruth threw her bike in the bed sliding into the passenger's seat of the tacoma.

The dash was covered in stickers, some older than her, displaying board wax logos, beers, and personal tags. Around the edges fuzz was gathering under the adhesive, begging a fidgety hand to rip them up. Ruth pulled a line from the backseat forming a monkey's fist as her father tuned the radio.

He was hunched over the center console, his brow narrowed in concentration. Ruth could see thin lines of fish blood on his cheeks where his fingers had been. His hands were clean meaning he had scrubbed them before leaving the dock, but his body still smelled of sweat and fish. It was slightly comforting yet repulsive, and she found herself breathing through her mouth and rolling down the window. When he finally hit the frequency he wanted, they pulled out of the parking lot, Jerry Garcia on the guitar.

They headed inland following the shuffle of cars working their way down the Cape's spine. Ruth kept her hand in the wind letting it dance as the breeze wrapped around traffic.

"Hey kid," Dad said tapping on the dash "how was school?"

"Good, got the syllabus for my English class, all female writers."

"That sounds awesome." He replied, still grooving to the beat. "Man, you know who would've loved that, a class of all female writers? You're mom. She loved that stuff. She was a great writer, your mom. I mean I had no idea what half the stuff she was saying meant, but I always felt it." He grinned and grabbed her knee, shaking it and laughing.

Sarah, Ruth's mother, had been an aspiring writer before her early passing. She moved to the Cape to bus tables for rent money in the city and stayed when she met Ruth's father. What

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remained of her work resided in an attic in Maine, protected by the roof under which she had grown.

Dad beat his palms on the fraying leather of the steering wheel to the rhythm. His skin was well tanned from years of working under the sun, scars scabbing white from exposure. His face held age well, sun blister crow's feet the only real creases on his youthful face. His hair remained dark; the roots protected from sun bleach under a sweat lined ball cap. He wore no jewelry, anything loose could get stuck around the equipment and risk of injury was too high, he showed his personality in knicks, bruises, and burns each medaled with spectacle and drama.

As they drove up the hill towards their road, he peered over her towards the cliffs. Tutting under his breath he parked the truck at the top of the hill seventy feet away from their driveway. They stepped out of the truck and walked towards the wooden fence before clambering over it onto the thin trail in the reed grass, the width of a single foot.

The top of this hill, resting under the beacon of Nauset, was the highest peak on the strip of beach that wrapped the length of the Cape's perimeter. The surf crashed seventy feet downwards separated from the foot of the cliff by a wide bed of soft sand.

Stepping gingerly towards the cornice, Ruth could hear her grandmother's voice in her head, spitting warnings to her younger self. Small children who stood on the edge of the cliff would fall when the ground gave way beneath them the sand swallowing them up in an avalanche. Children who were wild at the cliffs drowned in the earth.

Her father stared out at the waves before stretching his gaze towards the horizon line. It was hurricane season and swells would be pushing up from the mid-Atlantic soon. Massive storms laying waste to the Caribbean and Florida would become a surfable shore break in the north. He stood atop the cliff willing the warm air of the equator to bend into a tropical storm.

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In the morning on his way to work Willem will stop here again and complete the same pilgrimage, and then again in the afternoon.

Ruth passes by this trail now, content to catch glimpses of the water from her bike. Soon she will make the stop to see the view twice a day. Once in the morning and again at night, looking out past the surf line to the horizon, her father's expression written on her young face.

Chapter Six

The tall oaks on the western side of the field hid the sun allowing its light to spill like lace over the ground. Long summer days ended as the boys left the locker room behind and made their way onto the freshly cut field. The long white lines were newly painted, glowing against the dark wash of the grass. Twenty-seven boys sat on the sidelines relacing sneakers and nervously

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drinking their waters. Behind them, lumbering down the concrete path that led from the gymnasium offices to the field was their coach.

He was a man of averages. His height and build, the shape of his swing, the thickness and color of his hair all fell amongst the median in men his age. He measured his players in averages leveling his strongest demands of those who broke even and ignoring those in the negative. He carried a small notepad, small enough that his aging eyes and convenience store specs were not enough to make out the lines without difficulty. His handwriting was of poor quality but his strength of memory somewhat high. Altogether that meant he was averagely good at remembering each of his players' names.

Making it to the group he cleared his throat loudly, with an expression of contempt before breaking into a light smile. This was how he liked to begin each of his practices, nothing like a bit of fear to jump start the adrenaline.

He read out the players' names, making note of those he had never seen and affirming the attendance of all last year's returners. Nine of the eleven starting positions were back. They sat in a cluster in the center of the bench, Jacob in the middle, Kai standing behind him. On each side they fanned out from starters to subs until they bled into the haphazardly organized rest.

“Alright listen up! Jacob,” He pointed at the forward, “Stand.”

Jacob did as he was told, rising with his chest high and a satisfied smile on his face before turning around to face the rest of the group.

“Jacob here is the team captain and he’s going to lead you in a stretching warm up, but first, Kai.” He pointed again, this time not looking up from his notepad.

“You’ll be leading the aerobic warm up. Take these guys around the field.” He looked down at the boys and grinned, “Anyone who beats him after three laps gets out of the mile.”

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He laughed, slapping his knee and blowing his whistle as the boys jolted up around him. Kai took off down the field, his feet humming to the ground beneath him. The air dried his teeth as he smiled hearing the rest of the boys hollering behind. The older ones had seen this trick pulled before and kept up a few paces behind, their thudding breath boring holes into the earth beneath them. The rest stretched in a long line with Jacob drumming up the rear.

Jacob had been expecting this drill, but still when the whistle blew, he was frozen to the bench. Each of the last three times he had approached this field tryouts had begun the same way. First, the captain was introduced to the prospects, then Coach leveled his challenge, and blew the whistle. Because the captain was the only one standing, he had a head start on the rest of the team. Never had another player been asked to lead the pack.

Jacob pushed the throttle in the back overtaking the players who hadn't trained over the summer, their stamina weak and stomachs starting to roil.

Kai stood throughout the coaches welcome like he knew this would happen.

Jacob's blood boiled in his ears. Kai was half a field away from him now, the two passing at the midfield line. It was no longer possible to tell who was chasing who as the boys flicked looks at one another sucking their breath, keeping their chests high.

Kai finished several meters ahead of the rest collapsing onto the ground before rolling backwards to his feet again. Despite the fact that he was no longer running he could feel the traces of cold air that had wound their way between his coiled locks. He rested with his water bottle as Jacob finished in seventh place.

He walked past the other players, taking a long drink before turning around with a smile on his face. As the rest of the group finished their laps Jacob set out cones for their stretching, stopping only to yell encouragement at the stragglers.

Ren sat at the end of the bench, his hands gripping his knees to keep himself from shaking. His heart rate had only just dropped from running the laps around the field earlier. He finished thirteenth stumbling at the end to keep down his vomit. He hadn't run for most of the summer as his family made the road trip across the country to their new house. His mother had been too anxious to let him lose in most states and his conditioning had suffered for it.

“Alright!” The coach yelled, “we’re splitting into groups to run some drills, who here plays goalie?”

Ren shot to his feet as if the ground had caught fire, his hand raised high above his head. Quickly, he pulled it down to his shoulder looking around anxiously to see if anyone noticed, but the older boys were too focused on someone else.

He was tall with long arms, which meant an excellent wingspan. His shaggy hair was pulled away from his eyes by a neon bandana and Ren could see the dark coloring of stubble on his upper lip and chin. The older guys on the team were clapping and cheering for him. His name was Trent, he was their goalie.

Ren’s hands itched nervously as the coach split them up for the drill.

The field was divided into four sections, each equipped with a goalie. The oldest boys started walking over to Trent’s station but Coach stopped them and split them amongst the other drills.

Ren bobbed from side to side in front of his net as his group moved into positions, two defenders and three forwards. The boy who had led the run, tried to walk over to the left-wing position but the guy at center skittered away when he came close bending his head in deference.

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Ren leveled his gaze at the new center. He was tall, just under six feet with dark shaggy curls and long legs. He kicked righty and when he looked out over his opponents, he smiled.

He began the drill with a shrill whoop passing the ball to the player on his left before ducking past the first defender. He received the ball again as they closed, forcing him to jerk right and trail away. As he passed the ball back towards a teammate, Ren formulated what was to happen next: the center would veer left again faking out his defender, receive the pass and make a shot to the upper left corner. Lining his weight up onto the balls of his feet and preparing for action he stumbled as the center collided with another player. They went down hard in opposite directions, each letting out a stiff grunt as they hit the ground. The center picked himself up first shaking his wrist and shooting the defender an annoyed look.

“Watch where you’re goin or neither of us are gonna play this season.” He extended his hand to the boy on the ground who had the same sharp nose and square cut jaw as the captain. The kid took it saying thanks before lurching to his feet, but as he returned to his starting position he scowled and spat, muttering something under his breath.

Ren turned back towards the play.

This time the center made it around both defenders without passing, agility working seamlessly with his speed. Ren had never seen a player move like that before, like he could sense the fine muscle movements of his opponents, he was dodging before they finished moving-ripping around their weaker sides, his mouth open and his tongue hanging out. As he arched back his leg Ren steadied his gaze and let his instincts take over. The ball flew towards the upper corner of the net and Ren sprang loose from the ground with his arms extended high, his palms contracting around the sides of the ball. He ducked and rolled as he fell, the prize still firmly

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within his grasp. No one spoke as he stomped up from the ground and for a moment, he feared he might have done something wrong.

Unable to take it any longer, he looked up to see the center standing motionless in the space where he had kicked. His arms hung loose and his head was cocked just slightly to the side. Something flashed over his face before he headed back towards his starting spot on the pitch. Tightening the laces on his sneakers he stood and brushed the dirt from his knees.

“Do it again.”

Kai was heading back to the locker rooms with the others when he realized that he'd left his mouthguard on the field. Turning around and heading up the concrete path he held a silent pity party for his quads. They were killing him after the afternoon's strength and conditioning trials.

He was surprised to see someone was still on the field. A younger boy, the goalie, was practicing his ball skills near the net. He juggled with his ankles before popping it up over his head and catching it on his back. Potentially in celebration of landing the trick he danced before going back to foot skills.

In a half hour darkness would settle on the field and the caretaker wouldn't be coming to turn the lights on, he wondered if the kid knew that.

Locating his mouthguard near the bench he was disappointed to find that it had fallen into a patch of geese poop. He threw it in the trash before heading back towards the gym.

Noah had come centimeters away from bashing his skull against his, a move that probably would've given Kai a concussion. Not Noah though, his head was too thick.

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He was vaguely disappointed that the defender turned out to be just as dull and hot headed as his older brother and he secretly hoped that he wouldn't make the team. But fortune was on Noah's side as a defender was one of the only starting positions not already filled.

On the far side of the field the goalie kid took off his shirt and started running sprints.

Kai recalled the color of his face when he had finished the earlier laps. His eyes were pale and glassy despite their dark color and his olive toned skin turned green from sickness. Still, he had recovered remarkably well, stopping five of Kai's nine shots. It was one goal better than Trent managed during the next rotation.

The kid was kind of scrawny and a little strange but here he was running laps when everyone else had gone home. Kai was kind of impressed.

By the time he was reentering the locker room most of the guys were already heading out, the sour smell of their sweat perforating the air of the hallway. Kai yawned as he pushed past a group of juniors and seniors to take his spot on the bench.

"We've been a consistent team, we went to states last year with pretty much the same guys that showed up today, I don't see the point in switching that up. I mean yeah, we take like Noah and Jaimie or something because we need a defender and a middie but I just don't see a reason for changing people's positions."

Jacob was talking at the center of the circle, his friends surrounding him. On his right stood Trent, his face was a stark contrast from where it had been earlier. His hair, which had rippled gently in the breeze, now stood flat and stale against the locker room's intense air conditioning.

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The other players were agreeing with him, the most vulnerable nodding emphatically in support, the most secure more slowly. The strings of loyalty that criss crossed their team straining under the pressure of preseason.

Kai sat silently on the bench, thinking about the boy still running laps up at the field. Today his average was better than Trent's.

Another boy's voice squeaked up from the huddle.

"You're our goalie Trent, that scrawny fuckin freshmen isn't going to change that."

Kai's hand froze above his untied cleats. Jacob's statement had been carefully diplomatic. He reminded them of their past collective glory, galvanizing them once again into a singular machine. He had stayed out of the scrum and avoided placing Trent's name on the chopping block, probably to prevent what happened next.

"Yeah, that was just drills, his skinny ass wouldn't hold up in a game, the DYR kids would knock his ass flat."

"Did you see his face when he finished the run? He was green, he's fucking weak man, a weak little baby fairy."

"Coach won't put a freshmen pansy in the goal, did you see what he did when he asked for goalies? He shot up like his balls were on fire the fuckin kiss ass."

Jacob stood silently in the center of the huddle as the other boys grew braver, ramping up their insults until Trent was pushing and shoving with them. The fourteen year olds carcass lay on the floor.

Stuffing his cleats into his bag Kai tried to elbow past them towards the door when a hand reached out grabbing his forearm.

Jacob gripped the soft cotton of his pull over his ice blue eyes staring hungrily at Kai.

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“Nice job out there today.” He said, his crystal white smile sharp and familiar.

“Thanks man, you too.” Kai eyed Jacob’s goons as he walked out of the room.

He made his way to the other end of the gym where Coach was pouring over last year's game tapes. He rapped his knuckles on the door frame before slumping down into the empty chair in the corner of the office.

“Don’t get too comfortable there junior, go on and start the car.” Coach tossed his keys over his shoulder before taking a big gulp of black coffee.

Kai huffed to his feet again and walked out towards the parking lot, tensing his muscles awkwardly in case Coach was watching to see if he was sore.

By the time Coach sat down in the driver's seat Kai was sRuthng. He woke up as they pulled onto the road, the stereo started blaring Johnny Cash.

“I’ve got a question to ask you,” Coach said, his eyes squinting through the low beams. “What do you think of that new kid, the goalie- Ren.”

Kai remained silent for a moment, mentally noting that Coach had managed to remember the kids name.

“I had to go back to the field after try-outs ended, he was still out there running drills and laps. I don’t even know if he left.”

“Yeah, he left,” Coach grunted, “His sister came and picked him up while you were droolin’. What do you think about him for the team?”

“I dunno, I’m not the coach. Also, this seems kind of unethical, I’m still a player.”

“Oh don’t give me that crap. You and I both know you’ve been a talent on this team since you were a pimple faced freshmen, and that you’ll be captain in the fall. You’re going to have to

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step up and be a leader, now what do you think about him being on the team?" Kai thought for a moment, weighing his options.

"I think Ren's a good player. He has the right attitude, and he'll only get better."

Coach nodded at him, "Very good diplomat, overheard Jacob in the locker room did ya? He's a good player, Jacob. Strong kick, strong attitude," The coach paused glancing knowingly at Kai, "Good work ethic."

Kai bit his lip and looked out the window. In the darkness he could see the reflection of the moon bouncing off the jade black of the pines.

"Why did you want my opinion?"

Coach grunted again, turning the wheel hard in Kai's driveway before shifting to park and killing the ignition.

"Kai you wanna know what makes you a great player? It's not your speed or your strength, it's certainly not your smart mouth, it's your instincts. You always know where the play is going even before the people making the moves. You put yourself in the right spot, right where you're needed most. Why wouldn't I want that guy's opinion on where to put my players?" He turned the car back on, Kai's signal to get out.

As he made his way up the steps of the house coaches words reverberated in his chest cavity.

"The right place at the right time."

Chapter Seven

The first week of school was torturous. As the Hvac system flooded the halls with cold dry air, the sun cooked the earth outside. Each morning on the bike to school Ruth worked up a thin sheen of sweat over her entire body. By third period it sank back into her skin sending piss willy shivers across her shoulders and down her back. At lunch she attempted to rewarm herself to the core, imagining that the sun's happy rays were soaking right down into the organs below her skin. By the time lunch was over, the end of day was in sight and all that rested between Ruth and her beautiful weekend was a shift at the front counter at Poits.

The bell rang as Ruth shuffled towards her locker. Pulling out books and pens she hummed quietly, spotting Kai at the end of the hall. He was leaning up against the wall speaking to one of the guys on the team.

Kai's smile was large and warm but the other was obviously agitated. He was gesticulating wildly with his hands but maintaining a hushed whisper. She couldn't see his face, but she was sure it was contorted. She moved forward quietly, giving Kai a chance to see her before she interrupted them. When she caught his eye, emotion rippled quickly over his face, almost imperceptible. Rising from the wall he waved towards her, and the other guy backed off and out the door.

“What was that?”

“Just Duncan.”

“Oh, what um, what did he want?”

“Just some stuff about the team.” Glancing up towards the sky, Kai stepped forward and pushed out the doors of the building. Ruth watched him for a moment before following him out, tiny currents of curious frustration buzzing on her skin.

The parking lot was in full force as young drivers fought for the right to be the first to leave. Music emanated from open windows and an orchestra of laughter floated into the sky. As the golden sun hit Ruth's shoulders she breathed in the smell of the drying pines.

The earth was cool and soft beneath her feet, brightly colored flowers bloomed in the gardened beds. Mounting her bike and turning towards the main road she kept her eyes up watching bait-like cirrus clouds drag themselves across the sky. Gliding along the street she tracked the twisting turn of the electrical cables above her, imagining herself as pulsating electricity ripping from one edge of the Cape to the other.

Turning the corner her bike broke loose from her grasp with a frothy scream and sent her tumbling onto the asphalt. Landing hard on her elbows, her leg pinned beneath the bike she shook her head trying to orient herself.

Someone rolled the stop sign before taking the corner and hit the brakes too late. Luckily the car rode low to the ground and most of the impact had been taken by the bike's frame. Still, she could feel a bruise forming on her left leg, small pieces of sand burying into the raw flesh of her road rashed palms and knees. As she pulled her left leg out, she heard the front door of the car slam.

"Oh my god! Oh my god! I am so so sorry, are you okay? Are you bleeding? Are you dizzy? Is anything broken? Are you breathing?"

Standing above Ruth, her piano hands gripping the sides of her face, was Dara.

The large pools of her irises bubbled gently as drops of golden afternoon warmed their surface. She reached out her fingertips and gently pulled Ruth's left hand out of her lap to examine the damage. Her grip was gentle but firm, she blew gently on Ruth's palm, dislodging the lightest pieces of sand. Ruth watched as larger clusters rolled over her skin, leaving light

blood trails across the creases of her hand. She could feel Dara's body shaking with adrenaline as she whimpered over her bloodied hands.

Ruth opened her mouth to reassure her when Kai careened around the corner.

"Ruth! Woah you fuckin flew Jesus are you alright? You just got hit by a freaking car!"

His voice bubbled with disbelieving laughter as he pulled her off the pavement. Kai's sudden appearance had spooked Dara, and she took a few steps back holding her sides from shock. Ruth hoisted her bike out from under the car, thankful the frame wasn't badly bent. Avoiding the raw skin on her palms she fixed the chain running her fingers along the dark grooves where the paint was freshly chipped.

"I'm very sorry that I hit you with my car." Dara said, avoiding Ruth's gaze. As she spoke, she wiped road sand off of her hands, "Is there anything you need? My insurance or ID or anything? Do you want to call someone?"

Ruth found herself staring again, Kai poked her helpfully in the back.

"No no don't worry about it seriously. It's just a few scrapes and bruises and my bikes not even really damaged." For a second she felt slightly insane, reassuring this girl she barely knew when she was the one who had just been hit by a car. But when she looked at Dara, nervously pushing her glasses back up the bridge of her nose, she wanted desperately to make the tears forming in the corners of her eyes disappear. "It's gonna take a bit more than a minor bicycle accident to take me out." She smiled as warmly as she could manage, comedically flexing her muscles to demonstrate toughness.

Dara's gapped smile revealed itself, glowing in evident relief that besides a few cuts and bruises Ruth was fine.

“To be fair, I think you might have rolled the stop sign too.” She said, Ruth blinked in surprise at the new challenging edge creeping into her dark eyes.

“Are you saying that my critical condition is my own fault?” Ruth laughed

“All I am saying is that cyclists are required to follow the same traffic laws as cars.” She shrugged, her chest bouncing under the strain of suppressed giggles.

“Well, I suppose you’ve got me there.”

They rested there for a moment, a light peace settling in the air between them. Kai broke the tension by clearing his throat.

“Well, it’s been very nice meeting you, but we should probably keep heading to work?” He looked at Ruth, his light brown eyes firing rapid questions into hers. A playful grin was tugging at the corner of his mouth.

“Oh, please please let me give you guys a ride, it's the least I could do after taking you out.” She clasped her hands together in pleading.

“You know that would be so kind of you thank you for offering!” Kai clapped in dramatic appreciation.

The idea of being in Dara’s car sucked the wind out of Ruth’s lungs. She thought of herself in the front seat, thighs sticking to the hot fabric while desperately trying to think of something to say. She flashed a look at Kai, begging him to think of a way out, but before she could open her mouth to protest, he bolted for the trunk.

Clumsily he stuffed his bike in the boot before planting himself firmly in the back behind the passengers. Ruth’s stomach churned as she tried her best to lay her bike on top, slicing her gears and pedals awkwardly against Kai’s. Slipping into the front seat she could feel his knees burrowing into the back of her seat.

“So where to?” Dara asked, her long fingers gripping the wheel at ten and two.

Ruth’s mouth was dry, and she wondered whether her deodorant was holding up.

“Poit’s place, it’s not that far.”

“It’s on Route 6, right? On the way to Wellfleet?” She smiled again.

“Yeah, that’s the place!” Kai chirped excitedly from the back. Pushing his body through the gap in the front seats he made sure to twist himself to get a full view of Ruth’s face before introducing himself. “I’m Kai by the way, it’s very nice to meet you.”

“Dara,” she said with a smile, giving his hand a little shake. “My family just moved here from San Francisco.”

“Oh, very exciting, welcome to the Cape.” He said, sliding back into his seat.

They pulled off the side of the road in silence, Ruth chewed on her inner lip.

“So, you guys work at a minigolf range? What’s that like?”

Ruth felt Kai’s knees shift and push her in the back, signaling that she was the one who needed to answer the questions.

“It’s pretty cool, I mean it’s alright, I guess. We mostly work the ice cream counter.”

“Fun!”

Silence started to creep back into the car, so Dara turned up the radio.

They started halfway through the song that was presumably playing when Ruth bounced off the hood. Dara’s fingers began to drum on the wheel and Ruth could make out the faint lilt of the words she sang beneath her breath. At first, she couldn’t recognize the song but as she settled into the breathy lines slipping from Dara’s lips the tune began to formalize in Ruth’s mind until it stuck firmly into her memory, “New Slang” by the Shins.

As the song ended Dara cleared her throat and Ruth sat slightly forward, ready to answer more questions. She was surprised when Dara made a half turn to address Kai.

“I don’t mean to sound like a creep but you’re on the soccer team, right?”

Kai, who had been intently gazing out the window whipped his head around.

“Yeah, I play left wing, we just finished tryouts yesterday. You should come to a game, they're usually pretty fun.”

Dara twisted her lips nervously.

“Hopefully I’ll be at all the games. My younger brother tried out- Ren? He’s a freshman, plays goalie. Did you um, did you see him?”

Ruth gazed at Kai in the side mirror. His mouth was hanging slightly open, his brows almost furrowed. His eyes flashed but they weren’t looking at anything. Whatever silent conversation he was having seemed to be intense. Dara stared at him through the rearview, her hands still and gripping the leather of the wheel.

“Yeah, we actually played together a bit, he’s good, pretty quiet.”

Relief spread over Dara’s face and her shoulders relaxed slightly.

“He is yes! He’s a quiet kid usually but you should hear him in a game. He directs plays from that goal like a field commander!” Her bright tone dipped slightly, “I know that we just met just now and I hit you with my car,” She gestured towards Ruth, a peachy blush flushing her olive cheeks, “But he told me about you when I picked him up last night. He said you were nice, and I was just wondering,” She took a long breath. “Do you think you might be able to keep an eye on him? Just a bit while he gets settled? Please don’t tell him I asked you I don’t want him to get embarrassed but I just-”

“I’ll keep an eye on him, don’t worry.” They made eye contact through the mirror, a silent understanding passing between them. When it ended and Dara returned focus to the road Kai’s dark eyes seemed to be glowing from the backseat. He turned towards the window gazing back out at the decorated lawns and bright blue sky.

A smile seemed to be permanently etched on Dara’s lips as she pulled into Poit’s parking lot. Stepping out of the car Ruth felt erratic and chaotic, as if she had just been tossed back over the hood of the vehicle. Kai made his way to the trunk silently, pulling out both of their bikes as Dara clumsily tried to help him from behind.

Thin green vines snaked their way up her ankles forming a jealous cage around her chest as Dara pulled Kai in for a thankful hug. His expression had softened slightly but the manic mica of his eyes was still glinting in the early evening light. Tentatively Dara stepped around the car towards Ruth. She realized with biting clarity that while Dara had pulled Kai into a hug freely, she planned to give their goodbye from a cautious two feet away, piano hands pulling at the ends of her cream-colored shirt.

“I’m sorry again for hitting you with a car,” She began sheepishly, “I was going to ask you after class on Monday, but I figured this is probably the best sign I’ll get. There’s a band playing at First Encounter next weekend. I was wondering if you might want to go? With me?” She looked up at Ruth before quickly turning to address Kai again, “You’re welcome to join as well obviously but…” She turned back.

“Yea, yeah that sounds like a lot of fun.”

As Dara got back in her car Ruth slowly turned towards the main house, her feet barely brushing the pavement as she walked. Kai recognized the light shade of pink creeping up from the collar of her shirt. Small waves of energy lapped at the edges of his consciousness, building a

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momentum that would not be dissuaded, even as the seeds of doubt Duncan had planted inside his mind began to take root.

Chapter Eight

As the rental season began to close the number of customers playing rounds at Poit's dwindled. The mini golf course opened in 1954 when boys started returning home from Korea and settling back into the easy living Americana lifestyle. Though it had been open for over 50 years the 18-hole lighthouse themed course never received a remodel. Instead, it was repainted summer after summer creating a thick and sticky shell over the surface of the scenery making it appear rounded and bulbous. The water running under the bridges and between the sidewalks was dyed neon blue, partially to cover the sickly green skeeve that grew on the walls of the pools, and partially to dissuade idiot children from drinking it. It mostly failed on both fronts.

There were two counters to run at Poits. One, in the main house where rigged claw machine games hoarded the electricity and Dickie watched his dog shows. He ran the betting pool on Sundays at the Bomb Shelter. On busy Saturday's Kai or Ruth would be forced inside the plexi cubicle with him handing out balls and sizing clubs while he blew cigarette smoke into damp washcloths instead of cracking a window. Typically, Dickie liked to be left alone, so the kids ran the ice cream window on the opposite end of the property.

The frozen treats helped to keep the air cool while the jerky white fan blew unevenly. In the peak summer months, the ice cream window attracted most of their clientele. They stopped here on their way up towards the Wellfleet nightlife after spending the day at the Eastham beaches. Most of them ignored the old iron and wood course, planning to play the more spectacular ones. So, the lighthouses were left to bleach in the sun while the giant soft serve cone stood like a beacon over Route 6.

Once the rental turnovers began to slow in favor of kids returning to school, the cold weather peaked over the crest of New England and business at the ice cream counter dried up.

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For the last few weekends of September Ruth and Kai's positions as clerks was a formality. They served as an alibi for Dickie as he slowly ramped up the gambling business to keep himself warm in the coming months. They sat at the counter, experimenting with new Sunday combinations and keeping their eyes out for law enforcement.

Dickie was loyal by nature, but he was not a trusting man.

His survival in life depended on the ability to read an individual's movements quickly. He noted small things wherever he went; the grocery store clerk who periodically wore a wrist cast, the jerk his mother used to fling her cane in time with her gate, the type of snacks Kai would eat before games. He kept them rolling in the back of his mind, the encyclopedia of the social movement that surrounded him, and it made him kind for the same reasons it made him dangerous. He knew where to smooth down anger, what flowers to bring, how to balance a checkbook, and what kind of lies everyone needed to hear.

He stood by the fence as Kai and Ruth pulled their bikes out of the girl's car. Even from a distance he could see the long drips of blood drying down the side of Ruth's leg.

He walked back towards his office, dragging the heel of his left foot. In 1973, when he had been a young man in the back of an ambulance in Vietnam, a doctor decided to leave a piece of shrapnel in the ruptured meat of his left knee. Now it rested like a tumor inside of his flesh, its memories leaking slowly into his marrow. He felt it stiffly as he padded to the back of the office placing a first aid kit on the counter and a sticky note on the window before creaking through the screen door to his waiting truck.

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“Good afternoon, sir Dickie” Kai chortled as he entered the room spinning the dials on all of the machines that lay between him and the counter. Hearing no response he peeled the yellow note from the window.

“Roach, there is a mouth guard near the kettle for you and bandages for Bulldozer on the counter- use the peroxide! -D”. Smiling, he tucked the note into the paper shredder and put water on to boil.

Roach was the name Dickie had bestowed upon him last summer. Kai accidentally left a box of drumsticks under a shelf in the back of the ice cream shop during a hurricane closure. The roaches had been driven up off the docks by the rising tide and a family of them turned the cardboard box into their vacation house.

Ruth stuck her leg out the door and poured peroxide on her cuts. Thin webs of her blood flowed down her skin and slithered their way beneath the deck. The road rash was deep, and the stingy pain was hot and sharp. She finished wrapping gauze around her knee and forearm and flexed her hands, wincing. A band aid on the palm was futile but she made Kai open the door to the ice cream counter to preserve its relief for a bit longer.

Three customers showed up over the entire afternoon. One, a young woman with two small children. She looked strained but happy as the kids spilled chocolate soft serve down their shirts. These were the kinds of mothers Ruth liked to watch. The ones who sat close to their kids, licking drips from their cones and kissing their sticky fingers. The other two lone adults. They were not very interesting.

When the ice cream scoops were clean, and the floor and counters swept and dried, Ruth sat next to the register and began to sketch. The faltering ball of the cheap ink pen brushed jagged lines along the surface of the notepad. She used its halting geography to her advantage,

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changing her strokes to define the season of her landscape. When she picked up her head to reveal the winter river crushing its way between the cliff ravine, the sun was a blistering tangerine against the peach softness of the hazy sky.

Kai looked over her shoulder.

“Oh, that's cool, shall I add it to the wall?”

Ruth nodded as Kai ripped it from the pad and rolled tape into its corners. He posted it on the left wall of the shop, nestled between flowers, caricatures, and creatures. As the white fan limped towards the pages, they fluttered like bat wings, soft pedaling on the plywood wall. Kai pulled up a stool next to her and looked out as the sun disappeared beneath the trees.

“Wishing on a star?”

Ruth let her head sink, resting her chin on the counter before letting out a long sigh. Kai smiled and folded his hands in diagnosis

“Ahh, it's melancholy.” He flashed his teeth and took a breath, trying to conceal his delight. “And could this possible melancholy have to do with a particular person? Maybe someone guilty of vehicular assault?”

Ruth hesitated before answering, but the slight bend in her response time was enough for Kai. His question had barely left his mouth before he was grabbing her by the arms and shaking her.

“You like her! You like her!” He rose up off his stool dancing a jig in the center of the room, Ruth had to start shouting to get him to stop.

“I don't even know her, she's just in my English class.”

Kai rested his chin on his hands, blinking his eyes innocently.

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“I just saw her at the library a couple days ago and then again today, all I know about her is that she likes music. And now that her brother is on the soccer team, which she seemed much more interested in telling you than me.”

At the mention of the team Kai’s face turned sour and he rocked back onto the stool.

“Keep talking to her Nor, go see the concert. She just wanted me to look out for her younger brother. I would’ve done the same for Momi or Allyna.” Mischief crept back into his mood. “Besides, she hit you with her car, seems like fate.”

“Yeah, I’ll keep that in mind.” Ruth shifted in her seat, trying to expel the negative voices clucking in her head. She should stop now, while there was still a chance of being Dara’s friend.

“How’s Max?”

Kai flicked his head slightly as the question reverberated inside of his skull. Illuminated from behind by the slowly fading sun the lighthouses looked like gravestones. Useless replicas of an iron giant that, just like everything else around here, would one day fall into the sea and become a miniscule piece of reef in an ever-widening ocean.

“I think I’m done with that, time to focus on school and the season and everything. Besides, I don’t think I could really be involved with a ginger”

“Understandable”

He laughed and ran his fingers through his hair, the curls sticking up haphazardly. In the past few hours, they had been together Kai's temperament had changed and doubled back several times. It was unlike him to be so transient. She recalled how Kai had reacted when Dara brought up the team.

“When do you know who made it?”

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“Coach is posting the list tomorrow morning, anyone who makes it has Saturday practice, everyone else gets to go home. Some guys are pissed, but it's his way of lessening the blow. Yeah, you didn't make the team and still had to be there at 9am, but now you get to go home and sleep instead of running sprints.” Kai pulled on his fingers and flexed his hands, his mind swept over glory shots from last fall.

“How many guys are you taking?” Kai's shoulders crumpled forward slightly; Ruth had found the sore.

“I don't know yet, we only graduated two players so the big thing is who might get replaced, people have lots of thoughts about it.” His turned cloudy as he stretched his arms out over the counter, eyes gazing thoughtfully towards the fading sky.

“Well, what do you think?”

“I think he should put the best players on the team, regardless of whether they played last year.”

“I assume Jacob feels differently?” she asked lightly. Kai sighed,

“Jacob thinks the upperclassman should be able to keep their spots since we've won together consistently.” He shook his head vigorously, “He's only saying it because he doesn't want Trent to lose his position as goalie.”

“Lose it to who?”

“Dara's brother, Ren.”

Ruth's eyebrows moved in surprise; Kai slumped further forward onto the counter.

“Trent's a fine goalie but he makes dumb mistakes, this kid- he's smart, he reads the plays better, he's faster. After tryouts on Wednesday, I saw him running laps on the field. I mean he'll work hard, he's proved that.” Kai delivered his speech to the sky, as if he was pleading with

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the universe to give the change a chance. “If he makes the team and takes the spot from Trent, they’ll torture him, but if they give it to Trent and we lose- it’s his fault.”

Kai remained lost in thought as they closed up the shop and walked out to their bikes.

He was several inches taller than last year, his shoulders beginning to grow round with muscle. He held his chest higher while he walked, the cuts and scars along his hands from sorting and shucking oysters glittered in the light of Route 6. Ruth imagined how Jacob must feel when they walked onto the field. They were opposite in almost all ways.

Kai’s long legs were curved and bowed, the perfect symmetry to send him racing across the field. Jacobs were shorter and heavy with muscle, all force and control ready to steady and ground the play. Kai’s body was riddled with nicks and slices from sprinting through the woods and throwing himself down the dunes, Jacob’s skin was mottled with bruises from lifting, pounding on his brothers, and physical therapy. When other teams came to play them, their coaches warned them about Jacob’s force, but they watched videos of Kai’s breakaways. Ruth silently thanked the universe that they were so evenly matched on the field, they were better teammates than rivals.

They walked their bikes to the top of the drive and turned to peer into the main building's windows. Dickie had not yet returned from his errand and the yellowing fluorescent lights of the office flickered as mosquitoes hit the bug zapper on the porch. In a few weeks the bugs would die, and the zapper hid away in some back corner of the attic to collect dust until the following June.

Chapter Nine

They parted ways at the top of the drive, Ruth turning left and heading towards the cliffs and Kai back up Route 6. As he pedaled, he thought absentmindedly about his lack of reflective clothing. The sun was beginning to set earlier in the day, shrouding his evening ride in deep shadows.

When Dara's car came around the corner he had been lost in thought, intent on what Duncan said. The shock was enough to stun him into freezing as Dara stepped out of the car spitting questions.

"I wasn't a hundred percent sure what they were talking about, but I heard your name, and I figured you would probably want to know. I tried to listen, but it was kind of hard to understand what he was saying, he just kept saying he 'saw it', I don't know if you know what that means?"

Duncan was anxious when they spoke, pulling on the ends of his shirt, slicking it with his sweaty palms. Kai remembered how long it took Duncan to fill the water bottles his rookie year. He had been so nervous that the glossy green Gatorade bottles had just slipped out of his hands, delaying practice and pouring water all over the floor. Kai helped him mop it up and ran the penalty laps with him. Perhaps that was why he was giving him this warning now.

"Yeah, I dunno man, not really sure what they would've seen, I'm not exactly the shady type." He'd said it with a grin, attempting to diffuse the situation with humor and stop Duncan from ringing any more alarm bells.

"Yeah, yeah, you're probably right. I would just stay away from Casey right now, you know how he gets about her."

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Casey O'Malley, the ice queen. He had heard plenty of guys talk about her over the years, they liked her strawberry blonde hair, white blue eyes, and ballerina ass. He had seen them, sauntering up to her at bonfires, putting their arms around her, and trying to land kisses on the soft skin of her neck. She never engaged, laughing as she declined their offers and moving to be surrounded by the other girls.

Once in their freshman year, a senior boy got pushy with her, grabbing her when she tried to move away, trying to force a kiss on her. Kai had been on the other side of the fire, smoking and staring up at the stars when he heard the yelp.

She spit in his eyes when he got close, her blue irises glowing in the firelight. She whispered something under her breath, and the guys staggered back like he'd been shot, his face blanched and sticky with her saliva. She'd left him there with his ego in the dirt to get another drink before climbing on the hood of Jacob's jeep to serenade them. She danced and sang like nothing had happened while the boy stared up at her from the sand, his chin trembling before he finally gave up and left with the shreds of his dignity. Kai desperately wanted to know what she said to him as he stumbled up White Crests' embarrassingly steep entrance.

"He just kept saying he 'saw it,' I don't know if you know what that means?"

Duncan's anxious reedy voice echoed in the space between Kai's ears. Of course, he had assumed that it had something to do with her.

Casey was Jacob's girlfriend. They had been together since homecoming their freshman year when Jacob had scored the game winning goal. To celebrate the victory, he ran off the field, into the stands, and kissed her on the bleachers. She hadn't pulled away; he had marked his territory.

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When they were in middle school Casey came to Kai's games with his number drawn in eyeliner on her cheek. He gave her his sweatshirt to wear in the Spring. She wore it twice in the Fall, returning it two days after Jacob's kiss.

Kai answered the door in his pajamas, sleep barely rubbed from his eyes. When she handed it back to him, so worried about hurting his feelings he thought for the first time about telling someone that he was gay. He almost did until she pulled him into a kiss, pressing the black and gold hoodie into his arms.

Early on Kai caught her making eyes at him from the stands, Jacobs number practically tattooed to her cheeks. It lit a furnace inside of his linemate that secretly made Kai want to find a hole to hide in. It felt like a thousand years since he had been a freshman attempting to force himself to imagine Casey's piercing blue eyes before he fell asleep, trying desperately to feel the curves of her body on his fingertips.

He hardly thought about her at all anymore, except of course when she was around, smoothing her wavy hair from her eyes and shooting him honeydew smiles.

Kai had yet to see Casey this semester and they hadn't crossed paths the whole Summer. Self-doubt gnawed on Kai's insides.

He turned off the dirt road and into his driveway. The rusty green suburban was there, signaling that his mother was home. He could see his father in the kitchen, scrubbing his grimy hands vigorously while fending off attacks from his younger sisters: Momi, Allyna, and Pua ages ten, seven, and three. They were the kind of little girls that Kai would describe as powerful, in that they were basically forces of nature.

Momi was already sharper than him- both intensely curious and incredibly discerning. Kai spent much of his summer bribing her with candies and ice cream so she wouldn't tell their

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parents about his late-night escapades and early morning arrivals. Allyna was born with a cleft palate and she had had problems with her bone density, a disease which Kai had long since forgotten how to pronounce. The tiny middle child was by far the sweetest of her siblings, built with a fire-like determination that the rest had not learned. She fixed toys, baked cookies and carried Pua everywhere even though they were practically the same size. Pua was a cherub, still round and soft with all of her babyhood. Together, the three were a cacophony of constant sound that worked well at keeping Kai out of the house.

The house was small, cedar shingled walls protecting them from the sun, wind, and rain. There was a playscape in the back, practically consumed by the vine-like underbrush that Kai's father was always too worn out to fix. Resting his elbows on his handlebars Kai could see the exhaustion swimming in the lines of his father's face.

Gordon Thatcher, or Gordie as he was mostly known, was born in rural Ohio, and his father was a violent man.

The fall he turned eleven, mom pushed him silently into the trunk of her car and wheeled into the night. She drove until she had made it to the edge of her map and in the reedy dunes of Truro she threw her spear in the sand. They rented a one-bedroom cottage where he would spend his nights pretending that the watermarks on the ceiling were animals marching two by two.

It was there that Gordie learned to breathe, in the icy Atlantic surf that pressed in on his chest, forcing his lungs to expand fully and take the first clear inhales of his life.

The Cape saved him, so he devoted his life to its care and cultivation. In the on season, he captained *Leach*, trawling for fish under the unrelenting sun and dug for clams in the glowing pink evenings. In the winters, bundled in rubber and wool he and Willem would brave the

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offshore currents, bending and warping their aging bodies and aching muscles to reel in catch as the big fish dwindled, and the ocean ate away at the coastline. After years spent listening to pitch differences in the songs of the wind off the shore and sea, he understood the ebb and flow of the peninsula's tides as if he had been born from the coastline itself. *Leach* melted like butter in his hands, the ship and its commander always working in tandem.

He and Willem had often joked in their youth that he was destined to marry the sea. End up an old haggard man with a scratchy beard that reached his shoeless callused feet and an ashy voice that told only of ghost stories and the migration of the fish.

In the Spring of '86 he met Aime. It was during an April rainstorm when the white sun peeking out from behind the thick soupy clouds never has enough power to warm the skin of your hands. Rain was coming down in walls slamming massive droplets into the ground with a vengeance. He was biking home from the docks without a coat after spending the day on a whaler. Water found its way into every crevice of his body, and he could feel his heart trying to keep his chest warm as it leeches the blood from the tips of his fingers.

She was on the side of the road in a purple raincoat, furiously kicking the wheel well of her car. Evidence of the flat was lying dead in the road fifty feet behind them, and the spare had rolled into a ditch.

He dismounted the bike before it stopped moving, drawn to the power of her voice as she yelled at the sky to "stop fucking raining!."

His first attempt at asking to help her nearly ended his life when he tapped her on the shoulder, and she spun around holding a wrench above her head. Luckily, he stopped it between them, catching her large dark eyes with his own silver green ones.

She knew that she should have been frightened but the endless struggle of the day had gotten to her. So, when this handsome and soft-spoken stranger offered to fix her car, she passed him the wrench and backed up.

She watched him as he pulled the tire out of the ditch, his hard forearms straining as he pushed up his sleeves. His hands were rough and coarse, covered in small cuts and the smell of the rain was barely dampening the stink of fish coming from his slimy rubber boots. His hair had been cut unevenly allowing the peppery brown locks to jut out of his head like little wet mountains.

He worked without looking up, changing the tire with surprising speed. When he was done, he stood and turned to her without saying anything, his giant frame bent slightly towards her face. His large sinewy body was a contrast to his smooth young face, and she tried unsuccessfully not to look into his eyes.

It startled her how bright they were against the opposing flat rain. They flashed like the scales of a small slippery fish, roaring with trouble. She heard her older sister's voice in her ear telling her to stay far away from boys like that, they meant nothing but struggle. She thanked him for his help, and he turned to walk back to his bike.

It could have ended that way. Gordie would never have got married, never had kids, or a cottage in the thin red pines. She might've lived a hundred different lives, but for him there were just two.

With her, or without her.

He dragged his feet as he walked back to the bike, the bubble of helium she had created in his chest starting to diffuse. As the car started, he thought about whether or not he would tell Willem about her, the beautiful stranger with hair as long and dark as ink. He imagined himself

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back home on the futon, slowly sinking into the foam, dreaming of the two of them being washed away under the early April showers.

She shifted the car into gear and felt the grind of her new rear wheel lurch her forward and back onto the road. She could see him in the reflection of her mirror, his lithe body swinging itself back onto a bike several sizes too small for him. She threw her skull back against the headrest as her sister's advice echoed once more.

He passed her window as she exhaled, her breath catching halfway in her throat as she scrambled to throw the door open. She felt insane chasing the stranger down a half-lit road in the pouring rain. She screamed at him to stop, and it was as if her will itself pulled him back. By the time they were standing face to face again her voice came out in a barely audible whisper.

“Do you want a ride?”

Aime sat on the edge of her bed as her daughter's voices squealed high and loud, signaling that her first born had returned home. Tossing a pair of newly washed pajama pants into a laundry basket, she brushed the hair from her eyes and walked out of her room. Allyna was hanging from her father's neck while he stirred spaghetti. His oaky laugh spun underneath the girl's shrill giggles as Momi and Pua wrestled Kai to the floor. They screamed in delight as he tickled their bellies and blew raspberries into their cheeks.

“Alright ruffians! Dinner is comin’ in hot.” Gordie jogged to the table, bouncing Allyna on his back as he went. His salt and pepper hair was sticking up on all ends and the collar of his shirt was stretched with a brown sweat stain. She couldn’t tell if it was new or residual dirt that their washing machine would never be able to conquer. He had a gift for attracting dirt, one that he passed onto all four of his children.

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Sometimes Gordie joked that they could measure their whole lives in baskets of laundry, by his calculations they had at least 500,000 more to go before Pua moved out and they eventually died.

She took her place at the end of the table facing her husband, Pua and Kai to the left, and Momi and Alynna to the right. The dinnertime conversation roared to life. Momi was doing a school project on the Iditarod and needed markers and poster board immediately, Alynna was demanding the entire family watch “The Princess Bride” after dinner, while Gordie attempted to wrestle Pua’s thick curls into a hair tie before she redecorated herself with spaghetti sauce. The only quiet member of the dinner table was Kai.

When he was a baby, he screamed and cried through every hour of the day. At first, she had been embarrassed, her little boy who disliked his mother so much that he would never stop complaining. She tried to hide it, not letting people into the house under the guise of being worried about his health. After about a week she caved and called her mother and every aunt she knew.

All of them had advice, some told her he had colic and to play loud music to soothe him. Others told her to change her diet and rub natural oils into the soles of his feet. She tried home remedies and doctors orders, but her son never stopped screaming. After weeks of sleepless nights Gordie began sleeping in the car in the driveway just so he would be able to survive work.

Everyday Kai screamed, and everyday Aime cried. She cried more than she had ever cried in her entire life. She wept for all the toys she had broken as a child, for all the fish she had ever eaten, she cried for the eggs she cracked in the morning, and for the clouds that blocked the sun. Most of all she cried for her little boy and the mother who he would be stuck with for the rest of his life.

At the beginning of August, when Sarah had been round with Ruth, she came to the house. Kai was nothing if not consistent and he cried just as hard in Sarah's arms as he did in hers. Eventually she got so fed up she started screaming at Sarah to do something, anything to make it stop. So, Sarah plucked him out of her arms and carried him to the rocking chair. She held his tiny head up to her heartbeat and began to tell a story.

She spoke of a violin hidden in a cave at the top of a mountain. Its strum would echo through the valley on the darkest nights when the wind would come and blow out the light of the stars. As she spoke Kai's cries began to waver until they turned to small puffs of breath that melted on Aime's tongue like honey.

Aime lay the child down in his crib, sleeping peacefully. The cherry wrinkles that usually peppered his taught forehead smoothed back down into the warm glow of his soft skin. Incredibly, impossibly- a story had been all that he needed. As she sat down by the bassinet and rocked it slowly with her palm, small droplets of fear began to soak into the landscape of her brain.

Who was this child, who had experienced so little of the world, who already needed something fantastical to soothe him, who already needed to escape? But she knew no other way.

So Aime told thousands of stories.

She told his little face everything that had ever happened to her, and her own mother, and their family. She told him about the loved ones she'd lost and the choices she had made. She wound her way through the entire labyrinth of her life until all the voices of her own childhood had been laid bare to the ear of her only son.

Then there came the time when his legs grew strong and he began to run and remember and speak and he no longer needed her stories.

But he had already heard them all.

Sometimes she would lay awake at night thinking of her worst fears, described in vivid detail to the baby who would surely wear them upon his skin. Though it wasn't possible, she feared he would remember and grow up haunted by the memories she shared, burdens that should have been hers alone.

That anxiety had dissipated with the arrival of Momi whose glittering laugh freed each corner of the house from Kai's residual screams. Then came Allyna who for all her physical determinants was brought into this world with toughness. Finally, Pua came home and there were already so many voices in the house it would have been impossible for her cries to cut through all the noise.

As she ate next to her son, Aime listened to Kai laughing at his sister's jokes, offering to help with class projects, and to give colored pencil drawings to Ruth. He responded to every question he was asked with a smile and the arch of his mouth was jovial.

But he shared nothing about himself.

Age was starting to fold him up. He had always been a character of half answers, fifty percent came from his words and the other from the expressions that only those who loved him most could read. But as his shoulders broadened and the cut of his jaw became sharp and hollow it felt like he was drawing back up inside himself, cutting his answers to a quarter and holding wishes in his sinew. She wished she could draw the little boy back out again, maybe a scream or two to jolt her bones for old times' sake. But he cleared the table with a relaxed face and dry eyes, going silently into his room for the evening as she gathered her youngest onto the couch.