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void

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void
by Bethany Fink

Ophelia Holt sat on the crumbling steps that connected her family's porch to the sidewalk. She looked down at the grey concrete and scratched at the end of a flaking piece. Bits of it came off underneath her fingernails until a large chunk broke off into her hand. She held it tight, bringing both of her hands up back to her lap.

She realized that if her mother had been there, she would have been told to sit straight up but her mother was not there, so she kept her awful posture, pushing up the sleeves on her burnt-orange cable-knit sweater. In the process, the shard of concrete caught on the end of her sleeve and pulled a thread loose. With her eyes, she followed the thread up to a red stain that was just above the source of the small tear. She remembered the night that the stain appeared. During a late night at the lake, she had been eaten alive by mosquitoes and couldn't help but scratch them until they broke open and bled.

Ophelia examined the small stain. It was a concrete memory, which was something she had had trouble collecting as of late. Her constant numbness made time feel like it was passing by impossibly fast. Memories slipped through her fingers like soft white sand, glittering in the sun. Her mind was clouded and fogged, especially when she stood up too fast or for too long.

Even so, time went on.

A small black car flew down the street in front of her. She could almost feel the whizzing of the wind in her hair, the car was going so fast. She was used to that. Her street was located right off of a busy main road which was connected to a freeway. People sped down the street, still maintaining the speed limit of the freeway. Right down the street, there was a park where children seldom played. There was an overpass with a railroad track over the freeway where high school students would go to smoke weed and get drunk.

Another car turned onto her street, this one driving much slower. It was a rusty blue truck with a large dent on its side. Ophelia knew this car, and she knew the dent too. She was there when it happened. Another concrete memory for her to collect in the dusty shelves of her brain. It had been a dispute over the music that had caused the accident, and the door hadn't hung right since.

As the car drew closer, a girl with long blonde hair pushed her head out the window. Adelaide Johnson. She had wanted to listen to her early 2000s playlist and was leaning against the front console from the backseat, grabbing desperately at the aux cord. Ophelia remembered the sound of the big blue truck scratching up against the metal barrier in the parking garage. It was the most ear-piercing sound she had ever heard.

At that moment, the car was blaring Elvis Presley's "Blue Christmas." Adelaide was singing along to it, her pitch not quite matching up with that of the notes in the song. Ophelia smiled. She stood up and dusted off her black jeans, which had small pieces of the stone porch steps attached to the legs.

“Hurry up, slowpoke! I’m hungry,” Adelaide said, motioning for Ophelia to get inside the car. Ophelia obeyed, swinging open the dented door and climbing in. When her thighs hit the seat, she felt a sharp poke, and reached under to find a remaining piece of stone from her porch.

In the front seat sat Ezra Trappe, his head brushing the ceiling. At 6 foot 4, he was one of the tallest people at their high school. Even in his big truck, he stooped over the steering wheel, his shaggy brown hair static clinging to the fabric on the ceiling. He turned around and grinned at Ophelia.

“It’s not Christmas time,” Ophelia stated, referring to the song that blasted through the speakers. Ezra reached forward to the volume knob and turned the music down slightly. He whipped around in his seat and stared at her with utter disbelief, like he just could not believe that anyone would ever say something like that.

“Lia,” Ezra said, aiming his wide eyes at her, “of *course* it’s Christmas time. On November 1st, it is legally Christmas time. I don’t know where you get your information, but it is inaccurate and I’d suggest getting a better source.”

“I agree,” Adelaide said, flipping her hair over her shoulder. “Although he did force me to listen to this song.” Ophelia let out a small chuckle. That sounded like Ezra. He loved Christmas and everything about the holiday. His favorite day was Christmas Eve, when his extended family would hold their party and the spread was nothing short of a feast. He would send the group photos of his plates of food, piled up with ham and biscuits and brussel sprouts, nearly toppling over from how tall the mound was.

“Until there are less than thirty days left until Christmas, it is still just general fall time,” Ophelia said matter-of-factly, but with a smile. It wasn’t a true argument, they were just giving each other a hard time. There was no anger behind their words, which on the surface sounded like ridicule. It was only love that they had for each other.

Ezra started up the engine and the three friends continued to chatter all the way to their local mall, a playlist of his favorite Christmas songs filling up the empty space in the background. He picked a parking spot in the back because the back end of his truck stuck out into the road, or in this case, the spot behind him.

The parking lot reeked of stale cigarettes. It never failed to amaze Ophelia how many people smoked in that town. Charred yellow butts were littered around on the pavement, sometimes blending in with the faded, painted lines marking out the spots. Ophelia let out a small cough. It was something of a costume she put on. No one knew about the pack of cigarettes she kept in her nightstand just in case the hunger got too much for her diet cola to tackle. She would shove open her bedroom window and lean out as far as she could without falling out, having already placed a towel underneath her door. She hadn’t gotten caught thus far, but she knew her father would not care much anyways.

The three friends strolled into the mall, nearly getting hit by a car going a bit too fast in the parking lot. This was a normal occurrence at their mall, so they didn’t pay it any mind. They chitter-chattered a bit while their sneakers stomped on the dirty white tile. They marched past the

eyebrow threading stand and made a left at the store that scammed people into buying overpriced exfoliator. The three came up to their final destination for the time being: the American Eagle.

“Hello, how may I help you today, assholes?” Vincent Moretti said, giving the friends a fake smile. They chuckled at him and his customer service voice. “See, I can say that and I won’t get in trouble, because I’m the manager,” Vincent said, turning around to wave at the employee who was checking someone out at the register. The employee gave a half-hearted wave back and then turned her attention to the customer, to whom she spouted off some spiel about a credit card and saving fifteen percent on her next purchase.

“We’re here to buy you out of stock,” Ezra said, picking up a multiple pairs of jeans that had been stacked up on the display. The poster next to them said that they were a new type of style - slim straight. Ophelia wasn’t quite sure how those two could go together but she didn’t understand much of corporate America.

“Oh, God, please do,” Vincent said, snatching the jeans from Ezra. He started to refold them. “I would get out of work early.”

“You already get out of work in like ten minutes,” Adelaide said, putting her hands in the pockets of her blue windbreaker. “That’s why we’re here.” Vincent finished refolding the jeans. The creases in them were so defined and crisp that Ophelia was sure that whoever bought them would have to iron them to make them look like normal jeans instead of pleated. Vincent looked at his watch, which he had had for as long as Ophelia could remember.

“Actually, I get out in twelve minutes,” Vincent said. The customer who was purchasing something earlier brushed past them, her blue plastic bag bumping up against her legs as she walked. “Hey, Maria,” Vincent shouted, referring to the cashier, “did she get a credit card?” Maria shook her head no.

“They never do, Vinny,” Maria shouted back, seemingly used to Vincent’s antics. He laughed.

“Yeah, I’ve gotten maybe twenty in my time here. The trick is to threaten them a little,” Vincent walked over towards Maria, gesturing with his hands. Adelaide, Ezra, and Ophelia laughed. They watched as he continued to spew bullshit about credit cards at her, speaking his words like they were irrefutable fact. He wasn’t one to take things very seriously most of the time, but he did follow protocol to the letter. He could not risk losing his job. In his two years there he had not gotten one blemish on his record. He knew that if he lost his job, his entire family could collapse.

Ezra and Adelaide began to chat as Vincent showed Maria something new on the register. Ophelia wandered around, eyeing all of the fall collection. Her eyes finally rested on a big, fluffy red sweater. It looked just big and bulky enough to hide her diminishing frame. She picked up a size medium and hurried into the dressing room, accidentally slamming the door shut behind her.

Ophelia edged her own sweater off, then peeled herself out of her undershirt. She looked at herself in the mirror. As she stretched her arms upward, her ribs jutted out sharply. She turned to the side and sucked in her stomach and admired the inward curve. It had taken her months of careful planning and starving to get to where she was, and she was nearing the underweight

range for her height. All of her clothes hung off of her now. She wasn't ready to let anyone know about her eating disorder. Not yet, at least. Not until she reached her ultimate goal weight.

Ophelia slipped on the red fluffy sweater and let it settle into place on its own. It seemed to swallow her. The only indication of her disorder was her hollow cheeks, which she attempted to hide with carefully placed blush on the apples of her cheeks. The pink powder also brought the color back into her face. She couldn't remember the last time her face had bore any sort of natural pink hue. It looked pale and sunken, but that was a small price to pay for her dream body. And besides, she had decidedly told herself many times that it wasn't a problem until she fainted. She ignored the clumps of hair that came out in the shower and her brittle, broken nails.

"Hey, Ophelia," Vincent pounded on the door to her dressing room, making the entire room shake. "I'm cutting out five minutes early, let's go." Ophelia quickly changed back into the sweater she had arrived in and gathered up her purse. She opened the door and Vincent looked into her hands. "Are you buying that? I can get you a 20% discount." Ophelia shook her head no. Vincent took it from her and placed the garment on the "not interested" rack for an employee to take care of later. Her stomach rumbled and she realized she had not eaten since lunch two days ago.

"Alright, let's go get Dorian," Adelaide said, linking arms with Ezra. She folded her other arm and extended her elbow to Vincent, who linked up with her and then extended his other arm to Ophelia. She walked up to them where they were standing and laced her arm through his. They walked out of American Eagle and turned right.

"I feel like the Wizard of Oz right now," Ezra said, and he started skipping, his torn-up sneakers clicking on the tiles. Adelaide let out a laugh.

"Yeah, totally," Adelaide said. She started skipping too. Vincent and Ophelia followed suit. "Ophelia is Dorothy, Ezra is the scarecrow because he needs a brain--"

"Hey!" Ezra elbowed her, but he was laughing.

"--and Vincent is the Tin Man, and I am Toto," Adelaide decided. They all broke down laughing.

"Why are you the dog?" Vincent asked, as they all slowed to a stop. They had reached their destination. The Wizard of Oz talk had faded into the background for Ophelia as the smell of Auntie Anne's pretzels assaulted her nostrils. She stared at the warmer, stocked to the brim with big, twisted pretzels, nuggets, and hot dogs engulfed in dough. She desperately wanted to shove five dollars at the cashier and be rewarded with a salted pretzel, but that was three-hundred-and-ninety calories. Those things were slathered with butter, she reminded herself.

"Hey guys, I'm just clocking out," Dorian Andrews said, hitting some buttons on the register. He and Vincent always made sure they got out on the same time on Sundays so that the gang could all get together. Ezra wasn't allowed to have a job, Adelaide had quit hers recently, and Ophelia didn't need one.

Dorian joined the group in front of the kiosk. He tugged on his belt and complained about having to wear khakis. The group groaned. He always complained about having to wear khakis.

The Star Diner was packed with old people. Ophelia assumed they were church-goers who had woken up too late to make the ten-o'clock service so they went in the afternoon. They were always dressed up in tweed jackets and ties or long, cotton dresses with flat shoes. It was truly one big fashion faux pas. The group was used to it, though. It happened every Sunday. They blamed themselves for being busy every other day.

It took them around ten minutes to be seated. The five filed into the big booth in the corner, with Ezra, Adelaide, and Vincent on one side and Dorian and Ophelia on the other. Ophelia sat closest to the window. She always did. There was a birds' nest that she liked to observe, even though she knew the birds would soon disappear for winter. Every week she would expect to see an empty nest but, every week, there they were, chirping and playing.

Ophelia looked at the napkin holder that was on the table, which had a piece of paper sticking out from behind it. She thought she knew what it was, but she pulled it out just to be sure. Sure enough, it was a pamphlet from a church, telling them to come in and be saved. She folded it in half once, making sure to crease the edge fully and carefully. She then continued to fold it in half over and over again, attempting to ignore the growls her stomach was eliciting, until it was as small as it could get.

"Hello everyone, my name is Fran and I will be taking care of you today. Can I get you guys started off with something to drink?" the waitress asked, setting down napkins in front of all five of the friends.

"I'll just have water, please," Ezra said, breaking his gaze with the menu to look up at Fran for only a moment before beginning to look at his options again. Vincent ordered a Pepsi, while Dorian opted for the much less popular orange soda.

"Do you guys have Sprite back this week? It was out last week," Adelaide said, twisting her straw wrapper around in her fingers. Fran informed her that they did have Sprite this week, so that is what Adelaide settled on.

"I'll have diet Pepsi," Ophelia said, and Vincent gave her a look. He raised his eyebrows, but looked concerned at the same time. She met his gaze and shrugged, not understanding what his meaningful look was for.

"Okay, I'll be right out with those drinks for you," Fran said, smiling from ear to ear. She walked away, placing her small notebook back into her apron.

"Why do you always get diet, Ophelia?" Vincent said, stealing a glance at Ophelia's collarbones, which were being slightly exposed by the neckline of her sweater. The glance did not last long, but it was pointed enough to make Ophelia pull up the top of her sweater.

"I like the taste better," Ophelia said, lying through her teeth. She would have given anything to have a sweet, sugary drink of regular Pepsi, but she knew that would be sabotage, and she would never be able to forgive herself. "If they had Pepsi Max, that's what I would be drinking."

"I don't know how they get that shit to taste like regular Pepsi," Ezra chimed in, looking up from his menu. "Guys I think I'm gonna have to sit this one out," Ezra sighed, leaning back

into the booth. "I got a C- on my last paper, but I told my parents I got an A and so they gave me \$20. I used it to fill up some of my gas tank."

"Did they give you lunch today?" Adelaide asked, reaching for her purse.

"Oh yeah, an A earns me a sandwich *and* chips on the side," Ezra said. "They'll figure out I lied eventually, but they aren't crazy enough to take the gas out of my tank," he said, tapping his fingers rhythmically on the table. He paused. "At least I hope not."

"Here," Adelaide said, placing \$5 on the table, "get a basket of fries." Vincent reached into his pocket and brought out his wallet. From it, he extracted a crinkled ten dollar bill.

"Guys, I can't take this," Ezra said, pushing the bills back toward their respective owners. Adelaide and Vincent both raised their hands up, refusing to take the bills back. Ezra sighed and grabbed them off the table, immediately shoving them into his pocket. It was as though he did not want anyone in the diner to know what had happened, but on his face was a certain, reluctant sense of relief.

Ophelia rubbed her fingers against the bills in her pockets. She quickly took one out and threw it on the table. Everyone's eyes went wide.

"I can't take twenty dollars from you, Ophelia," Ezra said, staring at the bill that was surprisingly crisp. The others shared glances between themselves, no one wanting to be the next person to say something. Ophelia knew that it wasn't really that much money, but for a bunch of seventeen year olds who were still in high school, it could go a long way.

"Just take it, Ezra," Ophelia said, feeling the bill that was still in her pocket, "my dad gave me forty dollars this morning and I don't need it all."

"You're lucky your dad gives you so much money," Dorian said as Fran walked up to the table. Everyone but Ophelia shot him a very pointed glance. Fran began to set their drinks down, saying which was which as she put them on the table in front of their respective owners.

"Can I take your orders?" Fran said, removing her notepad from the pocket of her apron.

"Can I just get a breakfast platter with bacon and rye toast?" Ezra said, reaching his arm out and taking the twenty dollars off of the table. Fran nodded and scribbled it down quickly. The table was so quiet that Ophelia could hear the pen scratching on the paper. They began to discuss how he wanted his eggs cooked, so Ophelia's eyes drifted back out the window. Sure, the money was nice, but it was just a feeble attempt for her dad to connect with her after her mom passed away a year earlier. She slammed her straw on the table until it burst through the wrapper on one end, then placed it in her cup and took a large sip of her diet Pepsi.

Dorian nudged Ophelia, who looked up to find Fran's attention was directed towards her.

"I'll have just two eggs, scrambled," Ophelia said, calculating the calories in her head. She estimated about 170, based on whatever oil they would use to cook the eggs, and added, "and a piece of white toast with no butter."

"I'll get those orders right in for you," Fran said, still smiling her ridiculous customer service smile. As she walked away, a chorus of "thank you"s came from the table.

Ophelia's sneakers crunched over the loose gravel that littered the sidewalk leading up to her house. Her dad had been saying for months that he would get around to sweeping it all off, or even replacing the steps, but summer came and went, and so did, it seemed, his motivation. Ophelia bent down and wiped some of the gravel into the grass with her hands. She was tired of feeling it under her shoes.

"Hey, Lia," Johnathan Holt said, standing up from his place on the couch as soon as she appeared in the doorway. His t-shirt had a series of yellow-brown stains cascading down the fabric from the collar to the hem. He was in his pajamas, she observed, looking down to see that he was in his ratty old pajama pants that had the logo for the college he went to many years ago. The bottom of the pants were frayed, with loose strings hanging down and brushing the carpet under their feet.

"Dad, it's seven p.m., why are you in your pajamas already?" Ophelia said, shutting and locking the front door. She slid her shoes off and brought Johnathan over to the couch where they both sat, and she took her purse off of her shoulder and set it down on the seat next to her. He sighed loudly and stretched, then reached down and pulled the lever that made the footrest pop up. It slammed into place with a loud metal clanging sound, making her wince.

"I had the day off today, so I thought I might as well be comfortable," Johnathan said, scratching his stomach under the hem of his shirt.

"You didn't want to do anything with Anthony?" Ophelia asked, opening the zipper on her purse to look for her lip balm. She dug through and found it.

"Your brother made it very clear that he was busy today," Johnathan said as Ophelia smeared the peppermint balm on her lips. After she was done applying it, she shoved it back into her tiny red purse.

"What did he say?"

"He said that he had zombies to kill, I mean, you know the drill," Johnathan said, standing up. He walked over to the other side of the couch where he had dispensed his slippers earlier. He slid his feet into them and began to walk into the kitchen. Ophelia sighed. She looked at the dingy carpet that her feet rested on. It was covered in dust. She had vacuumed last week, but her father had promised her he would vacuum while she was out. She could tell that he did not.

"Ophelia, Anthony, come in here," Johnathan said, shouting from the kitchen. Ophelia sighed, staring at the carpet. She would vacuum in the morning. It would more than likely be effective in waking up Anthony for school, too. She stood up and joined Johnathan in the kitchen. He was standing inside the fridge, the door wide open. In his hand was a 2-liter bottle of Pepsi.

The door that led to the basement slammed open and Anthony came stomping through. He had his gaming headset around his neck and Ophelia could still hear faint voices squabbling through the speakers. He grabbed one half of the headset and brought it up to his ear, then let out a loud laugh.

“Anthony, could you turn that off for a second?” Johnathan asked, closing the door to the fridge and sitting down at the kitchen table. Ophelia sat down across from him, staring at the soda. She watched it bubble, listening to the faint sizzling. The nutrition label was facing away from her, towards her father.

“Yeah, fine,” Anthony said, pressing a button on the side of the headset. He rolled his eyes, but only for a second, so that no one would notice, but Ophelia did. She ignored it and reverted her gaze back to the Pepsi.

“I was thinking we could order a pizza for dinner tonight,” Johnathan said, putting his hands on the soda bottle. Ophelia watched the bubbles intensify as it wobbled. She tried to ignore what her father had just suggested because the thought of it would send her spiraling. The thought of those circles of pepperoni, grease pooled in their centers, leaving orange residue on paper plates and napkins with heaps of cheese and thick crust. She felt bile rise in the back of her throat at the thought of being forced to eat a slice. She knew that if they got some she would have to end up eating two pieces, and maybe even a breadstick, so as to not make them suspicious.

“I just ate at the diner,” Ophelia said, nearly spitting her words out. The sentence came out so violently that it cut through the air like an arrow, shooting from her mouth and lodging itself in the bottle of soda on the other end of the table. She imagined it bursting open, a river of sugary Pepsi forming on the kitchen table.

“I was just gonna have something here,” Anthony said, looking at his phone. It was pinging nonstop. He was in some sort of groupchat with his buddies and they must have been losing the game without him.

“I thought it could be nice if we all did something together,” Johnathan said, looking at each of them. His head went back and forth, back and forth, like he was watching a tennis match.

“You’re overcompensating again, Dad,” Anthony said, shoving his phone back into his pocket and standing up. He flung open the freezer and grabbed the box of pepperoni hot pockets, then reached into the box and brought out two.

“If you’re having pizza hot pockets, wouldn’t you rather have real pizza?” Johnathan stood up, closing the freezer door that Anthony had left open.

“I’m hungry now, Dad,” Anthony said.

“We can go out!” Johnathan said, the desperation dripping from his voice and onto the floor. It was Ophelia who was looking back and forth now, from her father to her little brother. Both of them needed help but they were both too proud to get it.

“Fuck off,” Anthony took his paper plate and his hot pockets and stomped back down the stairs, Ophelia assumed to use the microwave down there and then stay there for the rest of the night. Johnathan stood there shocked for just a moment. Anthony had just delivered the match point.

“What am I doing wrong?” Johnathan reached into the cupboard and got out a glass. He brought it to the table to pour himself a glass of Pepsi. Ophelia could not answer. Her eyes were glued to the stream of soda entering the glass. She guessed it was somewhere close to 200

calories when it was all said and done. 200 empty calories that wouldn't do anything but rot his teeth and dissolve his insides.

"You can't force him to do anything, you know that. He's fifteen now-"

"But I'm his father."

"Yeah, and he lost his mother, so he's going to act out for a while. You can't suffocate him."

"I feel so distant from you guys these days."

"Well, mom is gone and life isn't real anymore. Goodnight, Dad," Ophelia stood up, leaving her father at the kitchen table alone. She traipsed down the hallway and entered her room.

Ophelia looked around her. Her room was comfortable, and she hoped that it could offer her some solace from the disaster that was sure to ensue in the basement. She knew Johnathan would go down and try to talk to Anthony, but that he would not be hearing any of it.

She flopped down on her bed and breathed a sigh of relief.

The ground outside of the school was littered with leaves of yellow, orange, and red, with the occasional green spattered throughout. The soft morning light filtered through the naked branches of the trees, creating complex patterns on the ground. It reminded Ophelia of a watercolor painting. She looked down at her feet, watching as her big black boots crunched across the dead leaves and their colorful counterparts.

Her backpack sat heavy on her shoulders, digging in so intensely that she half-expected the straps to leave purple bruises across her skin when she took it off of her body. She had been bruising easily as of late; her legs were covered with blooming patches of purple, which would then fade to an ugly, grotesque yellow-green. Every morning, she would wake up with inexplicable new marks all across her legs, ribs, shoulders, and collarbones. She knew she should be concerned about it but she, frankly, did not have time. She would just throw on a long-sleeved sweater and jacket so that she would not get any prying questions.

The blue wrapper of a packet of brown sugar cinnamon Pop Tarts crinkled in her hand as she walked. Johnathan had offered to make her eggs and toast, like he did every morning, but she opted for an on-the-go breakfast, like she did every morning. She clutched the package so tightly that the pastries crumbled in her hands. One pastry was 210 calories, making the entire package come out to 420 calories, far too many for a meal in her opinion. She dumped the package into the school garbage can that rested right before the main entrance. It had essentially become part of her morning routine.

"Hey Lia," Dorian said, approaching her as she entered the school. She smiled and waved. "Do you want to hang out in the library?" She looked at the clock above them as they walked down the hallway. The low buzzing of voices grew louder as they got closer and closer to the hall where all the freshmen had their lockers. "I'm meeting Vincent there," Dorian said, raising his voice slightly to account for the new background noise.

“I can’t,” she said in a low shout. They continued walking through the hallway, their feet stepping over pieces of crumpled paper. It seemed like the hallways were always scattered with papers from classes. “I have to make up an assignment from class.”

“You always have an assignment to make up,” Dorian said. Ophelia tried to ignore the annoyance that was dripping from his voice. “Why can’t you just do your work in the first place?” She didn’t feel like justifying the question with a response, knowing the answer would just make him worry.

The two parted ways at the door to the stairwell. Dorian continued on his path to the library and Ophelia began to make her way up the stairs. Her knees began to feel weak about halfway up. She would have taken the elevator if it had been anywhere other than the second floor, but she liked knowing that she was burning calories.

When she got to her classroom, her teacher was huddled over her desk, scribbling on some papers. Ms. Johnston looked up and said, “hey, Ophelia, just give me one minute, okay?” Ophelia nodded silently at Mrs. Johnston, who then went back to grading her papers. Ophelia made her way over to her assigned seat and let her backpack flop off of her shoulders onto the ground next to her desk.

Soon enough, the make-up assignment was in front of her and a pencil was in her hand. When her class did it the first time, she had been passed out in the nurse’s office and missed it. She looked at the sheet of paper and watched the words swim off of the page.

Ophelia bent over, peeking under the doors of the bathroom stalls to make sure there were no lurkers. She saw only one pair of feet, sticking out under the third stall, so she stood at the mirror, turning on the faucet and running her hands through it. She dispensed some soap from the machine hanging next to the sink and just rubbed her hands together until she heard the toilet flush. The girl who had been occupying the stall exited, and took her time washing her hands. Ophelia knew that this was time sensitive, so she silently yelled at the girl to hurry up. Apparently this telekinesis worked, because the girl shook her hands out in the sink, then grabbed two paper towels, dried, disposed of them, and went out the door.

Ophelia rushed over to the door which the girl had just exited from and clicked the lock shut. She didn’t think that the school officials knew that the bathroom doors locked from the inside, and she was certainly not going to be the one to tell them. It worked very much to her advantage. She pushed on the body of the door, making sure that it was shut all the way before making her way over to the other side of the room.

The window had a small ledge below it. She would often come in to find people sitting on it, having conversations, taking selfies, or browsing the internet. She always cited it as one of her favorite spots in the whole school. No one really knew why, and she wasn’t going to tell them. She climbed up onto the ledge, her clunky boots slipping just a little bit. After regaining her balance, she reached up and flipped open the latch on the small, frosted window. She always

went to the bathroom on the fourth floor, so there wouldn't really be any peepers, but they frosted the glass anyway.

She reached into the pocket of her sweatshirt and pulled out a cigarette. The end was a bit crumpled from being in her pocket, but she pinched it with her fingers to bend it back into shape. The right pocket of her jeans had an oblong bulge where she has shoved in a lighter, decorated with images of cartoon pizza. She extracted it.

Ophelia placed her thumb on the switch of the lighter. She flicked it and watched as the small flame emerged. It flickered from the slight autumn breeze blowing in from the open window. When she got her first lighter, it took her many tries to be able to light it. It had rubbed her thumb raw. Now, she had a small, raised callus where the switch rested on her finger when she went to use it. She brought it up to the end of the cigarette and held it there, sucking air in, until the end glowed a cherry red.

As she took in her first drag, she coughed, but only slightly. She knew she would never get used to the burning feeling in the back of her throat. The first time she tried it, she went too fast and her skin turned a sickly shade of green, but she was determined to like it. All of the forums online said that smoking was an excellent appetite suppressant, and it had zero calories, unlike gum. She held the smoke in for a moment before blowing it directly out the window. She watched as it floated up and evaporated into the clouds.

When there was nothing left but the yellow filter, she threw it down, stomped on it, and then ran it under the faucet before wrapping it in a paper towel and throwing it into the big, brown garbage can. She reached back into her hoodie pocket, from which she extracted a small white bottle that read "Before-You-Go Spray." She had found that it was the most powerful air freshener, especially when she didn't have access to a candle. She pressed on the component twice, releasing two bursts of lavender-lemon-cotton into the slightly hazy air.

The last thing she did before exiting into the hallway was spritz herself with the scent she had put in her perfume atomizer. It was the strongest perfume she had, with notes of sandalwood, bergamot, and black tea.

The cafeteria was bustling, as usual. The school was ridiculously overcrowded, so they had to split up the lunches into four different time slots, meaning the first group ate at 10 am. Ophelia would always walk past the cafeteria and see people with bagels and coffee and danishes. But now, it was 11 am, the time she and her friends were scheduled for lunch. Adelaide volunteered with the counseling office, so she rigged the schedules so that they would all be together.

Their table was already full, with Dorian, Adelaide, and Ezra sitting around it. They were seniors, so they got one of the circle tables this year. It was certainly a coveted spot, because it was right next to the window from which all the natural light was let in. Ophelia sat down, setting her grocery bag full of lunch on the table. Her 20 oz Diet Coke landed with a loud pound. As she sat down into her uncomfortable green plastic seat, Adelaide was handing Ezra a sandwich. They all made a habit of bringing him extra food.

“Hey, Lia,” Ezra said, opening up the Ziploc and taking a big bite of the sandwich. He closed his eyes for a moment as if he was savoring it, and said, “never in my life has bologna tasted so damn good.” Dorian laughed, picking up his pizza from his school-bought lunch. On his styrofoam tray, he also had a carton of milk and a little plastic cup of juice, because the cafeteria ladies made you take a fruit, but for some reason they counted juice as fruit, even though it had far too many added sugars.

“Hey guys,” Ophelia said, untying her bag. From it, she pulled a gallon Ziploc with two slices of leftover pizza and handed it to Ezra.

“Lia,” Ezra said, sighing, “you have really outdone yourself this time. What is this-” he looked at the bag, getting close to inspect its contents, “-Hawaiian? You’re the absolute best.” He tore open the bag, setting the bologna sandwich to the side and ripping into the first slice.

“Hey, losers,” Vincent shouted, throwing his lunch tray down in the spot next to Ophelia and then slamming his body down into his seat. He had opted for the special Monday option, which was a weird concoction of popcorn chicken, mashed potatoes, corn, and gravy. He also had a container of grape juice, which he had already peeled open and started drinking. He dug his fork into the container and pulled out a heaping portion which he promptly shoved into his mouth, making his cheeks bulge.

“Ophelia, I wish your family had pizza every day so I could get your leftovers all the time,” Ezra said, already three-quarters of the way through his first slice.

Vincent looked over at Ophelia’s grocery bag, which now contained only an apple and her diet soda. He said, “did you bring a sandwich today?” to which Ophelia responded by shaking her head. She twisted open the cap of her soda and listened to the sizzles. It was one of her favorite parts of drinking the stuff.

Vincent leaned closer to her, his nose scrunching up as if he was sniffing at something.

“Were you smoking or something?” Vincent asked, which caused Ophelia’s chest to tighten but she knew that if she showed that it would make him more suspicious.

“When would I have had time to smoke, Vincent? During class? In our five-minute passing period?” Ophelia said, and then immediately took the biggest bite of her apple so that there would be no follow-up questions. Vincent nodded reluctantly before turning back to his monstrosity of a meal.

“Hey, Lia, you ready to get our photoshoot on today?” Dorian said, putting his hands up and mimicking a camera pointed at Ophelia.

“Oh, shit,” she said, having completely forgotten that she had agreed to help Dorian with his photography project.

“What now?” Dorian said, sounding more exasperated than she thought a human could. He sighed and took an indignant bite of his lunch.

“Anthony didn’t come home for four hours on Friday so my dad asked me to walk him home,” she said, looking down. Her eyes rested on the sleeves of Ezra’s shirt, which were riding up to reveal what looked like blood staining his skin.

“This project is due tomorrow, I really need to get it done,” Dorian said, but Ophelia barely heard. She grabbed Ezra’s wrist and twisted it so that it faced her. Ezra froze and looked up at her with wide eyes, his mouth in a half-chew. He reached down and frantically pulled his sleeve down, but Ophelia could see on his white sleeve the tiniest speck of red seeping through.

“Ugh, fine, I’ll just shoot with Adelaide,” Dorian said.

“Hey, I’m just as good of a subject as Ophelia!” Adelaide protested.

“Okay, keep telling yourself that,” Dorian responded. Ophelia stared at Ezra’s sleeve, unable to take her eyes off of the speck.

After school, Ophelia leaned against the brick outside of the school building entrance. It was cold, even through her coat, but she didn’t mind. It was a nice, shocking jolt to remind her she was still alive. She looked up and saw the first inklings of snow trickling down from the clouds. She was waiting for Anthony, but she didn’t mind the wait so much. She enjoyed peoplewatching. She saw Dorian and Adelaide leaving to the right of the school, most likely en route to the local park just down the street. She saw Vincent run across the street to the student parking lot, probably running late for work.

“Hey,” a voice said, the accompanying body grabbing her by the wrist, causing her to nearly jump out of her skin. She turned to see Ezra’s lanky body next to her. He let go of her wrist and leaned in close, then whispered in her ear, “I don’t know what you think you saw earlier-”

“Ezra, I won’t tell your parents or anything, I’m just worried,” Ophelia said, looking him in his eyes. His eyes looked sad and droopy.

“I just wanted to say you didn’t see anything.”

Ophelia gently grabbed his hand and pushed up the sleeve of his denim jacket, eventually revealing his gauze-wrapped wrist. It looked like a hasty job, with pieces of scotch tape clinging onto the gauze for dear life, begging it not to burst open and let the gauze fall.

“Did your parents do this to you?” Ophelia asked, trying to keep her voice as steady as possible.

“I guess they did, in a way,” Ezra responded, pulling the sleeve back down, covering up the injuries. “They found out that I lied about getting an A on my paper and, well,” he reached up to scratch behind his neck, “you know them.”

“Oh shit, how did they find out?” Ophelia asked, looking around to see if her brother had come out of the school yet.

“They called my fucking teacher, man,” Ezra replied, shifting his backpack on his shoulders. Ophelia saw Anthony standing around with a couple of his friends near a tree.

“I gotta go, but please take care of yourself, okay?” Ophelia placed a firm hand on his shoulder before walking away to join her brother. “Hey, come on, Anthony.” He turned to her right as a cloud of vapor escaped from his mouth. She smelled cotton candy.

“Hey, Lia,” Anthony said, reaching his hand up to take another hit off of the electronic cigarette.

“Oh, hell no,” Ophelia said, snatching it from his grip. “Whose is this?” She turned to his friends, holding it up and shaking it. She didn’t mean to be shaking it but her hands were involuntarily trembling. One of the boys in the circle raised his hand and she shoved it towards him before he took it from her.

“Ophelia, I can take care of myself,” Anthony said as they walked away.

“Fifteen is too young to develop a nicotine addiction, dumbass. This is why Dad needed me to walk you home. Now, let’s go.”

The grocery store was not very crowded considering it was a Saturday night. She clutched the wad of cash in her hand and stormed through the aisles, furious that she even had to be doing this. She assumed everyone else was out on the town or relaxing at home, what she wished she could be doing.

She had asked her dad to buy and defrost a turkey during the day while she was out with Anthony at his cross country meet, but he just stayed home and did not make good on his promise. He had made them get a ride from someone else so that he could go to the store, but when they got home, there were no new groceries in the house. He handed her \$50 cash and sent her away.

Ophelia and her friends did a “Friendsgiving” every year, and it was her year to host. It was, of course, the host’s job to provide the turkey, and the attendees to provide the side dishes. The previous year had been at Vincent’s house, where the whole time was spent trying to not listen to his father’s hacking coughs.

She finally found the frozen turkeys and hoisted one up into her arms, the smallest one she could find. She felt a strain on her joints immediately and a small pain in her chest, so she let go and let the turkey and it slammed down on top of its counterparts. Her breathing labored, she went back to the front of the store to retrieve a cart, and then wheeled it back to the aisle with the frozen turkeys. Once again, she picked up a small turkey, bending her knees to give herself a little more leverage. It landed in the cart with a metal clanging.

She decided to spend a little more time at the store to avoid seeing Johnathan and his pathetic demeanor. She was tired of seeing her father look helpless. She pushed the cart, still breathing a little heavier than normal, until she came across the vitamin section. It was one of her favorite sections of the store. She loved staring at the yellow, green, and purple labels and seeing what all of the vitamins would do to her body. She wondered what would happen if she took one of each.

Her eyes stopped on one box. It was white with bright pink designs. The text read “appetite suppressant.” Her eyes immediately widened and she pulled it off the shelf, throwing it into her cart. It bounced off the turkey and landed in the bottom of the basket. The pills jangled around inside.

Ophelia wasn’t sure how many of the pills she was supposed to take, but she shoved three into her mouth and gulped them down with water. She had just carved the turkey and it was

resting on the stovetop. She used a Food Network recipe that she found online. The smell was sickening; it was a mixture of turkey flesh, butter, lemon, and garlic. She hadn't tasted it but she hoped her friends would like it.

"Wow, it smells great in here," Anthony said, walking up from the basement. He stood still for a moment, dramatically breathing the scent in through his nostrils, and then letting out a satisfied sigh.

"Much better than nicotine, right?" Ophelia said, standing up from the kitchen table and going over to the fridge to refill her glass of water. Anthony looked over her shoulder.

"You can't say that shit in here, Dad will hear you," Anthony said, taking the glass of water from her and setting it on the counter behind him.

"Oh, are you ashamed? Then don't do it," Ophelia said, skirting past him and snatching the glass back. She chugged as much as she could without taking a breath and felt it pool in the bottom of her empty stomach.

"You're one to talk," Anthony said, moving close to her and sniffing. "Is that cigarette smoke?" She froze up, but knew that she had to respond soon so that she wouldn't look guilty.

"Yeah, Vincent was smoking around me last time I wore this shirt. Nice try," Ophelia said, hearing the door push open. The voices of her friends drifted in through the newly opened door. A sense of relief washed over her. Anthony stepped away and grabbed his headphones from his neck, placing them firmly on his ears.

"I brought the mac and cheese!" Vincent said, holding up his glass container like it was something to be beheld. Behind him were Adelaide and Ezra. They all lived close to one another, and Dorian had a car, so he would be driving himself.

"I've got stuffing," Adelaide said as they made their way into the kitchen. Vincent slid his container onto the counter and began to remove the foil. It crinkled as he balled it up and threw it into the trash can. "I have to admit, this is instant stuffing, because my dad didn't know how to make real stuffing, and he couldn't figure out the internet while I was at school yesterday so he made this," she removed the foil from hers and it made the same crinkling sound. "I promise I heated it up."

"I've got the green beans," Ezra said sheepishly, placing them down next to the sad-looking stuffing. "And what I mean by that is, Vincent's mom made the green beans and I carried them in."

"I wanted to carry the mac and cheese," Vincent said, opening the silverware drawer and getting out a fork. "Think of it this way-" he got a bite of mac and cheese, shoved it in his mouth, and continued to talk through the chewing, "who would you rather hang with? The guy who brings mac and cheese or the guy who brings green beans?"

"Fair point," Ezra said, sinking into himself a bit.

"The party is here," Dorian shouted as the front door made contact with the wall.

"I hope you didn't put a dent in my wall, Dorian," Ophelia said, trying to be her normal self. She looked at the uncovered stuffing and mac and cheese and decided she would have to

stick to turkey and green beans. Dorian, after kicking his shoes off, stomped into the kitchen clutching a tupperware.

“Here is our taco salad,” Dorian said, throwing the container onto the counter to join the rest. It spun for a moment before coming to rest.

“I thought you were bringing salad,” Ophelia said, her spirits lowering.

“Yeah, and I figured taco salad tastes way better than lettuce and tomatoes and carrots and stuff,” Dorian said, reaching for one of the ceramic plates that she had stacked up earlier.

“You idiot,” Adelaide said, grabbing a plate off the stack. “Something fresh would have really tied this together.”

“Vincent, how did your mom make the green beans?” Ophelia asked, getting in line behind Ezra.

“Uh, I don’t know,” Vincent said, grabbing three slices of turkey. “Baked them? I don’t really know how to cook vegetables.”

“Did she use butter or anything?” Ophelia asked.

“Probably. Why do you care? It’s Friendsgiving, calories don’t count and neither does fat,” Vincent said, “I hope you all brought your stretchy pants.”

“I know it’s cheesy, but I think we should go around the table and say what we’re thankful for,” Adelaide said through a mouthful of turkey. All of them looked up at her.

“We’re already eating,” Ezra said, and Ophelia looked down at her plate. It was kind of sad and neutral-toned. She had a slice of turkey and a small pile of green beans that were prepared with a mystery substance. Despite the pills she had taken earlier, she felt her stomach rumble just a bit.

“I’m thankful for being a senior,” Adelaide said, ignoring Ezra’s sentiments.

“I’m thankful to have friends who orchestrate meals like this,” Ezra said, a forkful of mac and cheese centimeters from entering his mouth. Ophelia thought about what she might say when they got to her. She knew that she was thankful for cigarettes for stopping her appetite.

“I am personally thankful for mac and cheese,” Vincent said, and everyone made a noise of agreement. She knew she was thankful for her ribs finally making an appearance.

“I am thankful that winter break is coming up soon,” Dorian said, causing a series of hooting from the rest of them. She knew she was thankful for low-calorie ice cream.

Realizing all eyes were on her, she said, “I’m thankful for you guys.”

Ophelia stood in front of the oven, moving the food in the pans around with a spatula. The fan on top of the stove was running, generating a bit of white noise. It mixed with the sizzle of the ground turkey in the pan. The house was otherwise silent. Ophelia thought that the mixture of sounds would be nice to fall asleep to. She closed her eyes for just a moment and listened, her body relaxing. After a couple of seconds, she opened her eyes and resumed her work.

They were having tacos for dinner that night. Her father was out at work for another couple of hours, so he made her promise that she would cook dinner for Anthony and herself. She told him that she would make sure that she made something and that Anthony would eat it, purposely leaving out any mention of her partaking in the meal.

Her phone lit up on the counter with a call from Ezra. She placed the lid of the pan over the sizzling turkey, which was just starting to brown, then answered the phone and put it on speaker.

“Hey, Ezra, what’s up?” she asked, wiping off her hands on the towel that was hanging on the oven door. All that she heard on the other line for a moment was heavy, deliberate breathing. “Ezra?” she said, taking the phone off of speaker and putting it up to her ear. “Can you hear me?”

“Yeah,” his voice was quiet.

“What’s wrong?” Ophelia sat down at the kitchen table.

“I don’t know.”

“What’s going on?”

“I’m just sad I guess.”

“Ezra, please talk to me,” she stood up and took the lid off of the meat, dumping in the can of tomato paste she had prepared earlier.

“I don’t know how I got here,” he said, his voice getting further away from the receiver. Ophelia heard a clang of metal and ruffles of fabric.

“Where are you?”

“I’m on the edge of Memorial Bridge.”

Ophelia froze.

“What are you doing there?” Ophelia asked, her voice becoming shaky. She stood up and looked out the window, the sun setting.

“I don’t know,” his response was the quietest that any of them had been.

“I’m coming over there now,” she said, turning the heat off on the stove. “Are you going to be okay for five minutes?”

“Yeah, I think so.” He hung up the phone, leaving her with a sense of urgency unlike that she had ever felt in her life.

Ophelia rushed over to the front door, where her family’s shoes sat stacked on top of one another. She thought for a moment about putting her flip-flops on because it would be the fastest, but she knew that the ground was starting to collect snow and that her tennis shoes would offer her the most traction and speed. She squeezed them over her big, fuzzy slipper socks and hastily tied the laces. The bridge was only a couple of blocks away.

“Anthony,” she shouted, running back through the kitchen and down the stairs to where Anthony was fiddling with his game controller. “I’m going out for a bit. If Dad gets home before me, can you tell him I had something that I had to do?” Anthony continued to mess around with his controller. His character jumped around on screen. “Anthony!” her voice was much louder this time, so he turned around and met her gaze, removing one ear of his noise-cancelling

headphones. “Tell Dad I had somewhere to be,” she said, immediately turning back around, then pausing for a moment and adding, “come lock the front door!”

Ophelia doubted that Anthony would move from his spot but she ran out of the front door and pulled it shut behind her. Her sneakers made soft crunches as they collided with the snow-covered ground; her arms swung deliberately beside her. She wasn’t sure of the actual merit of swinging your arms as you ran, but it made her feel fast. Her breath sped up and became more labored as she turned the corner and continued to run. The Memorial Bridge was a ten-minute walk, but she made it her objective to get there in five.

Ignoring the pain in her chest as she breathed, she turned another corner. In front of her was a semi-busy street standing between her and Ezra. She saw a practically endless stream of cars steadily rolling past. She hated when she saw people crossing the street not at a crosswalk, but she pushed that feeling down and dashed into the middle of the street, pausing in the turn lane. When she saw her small opening, she took it, and ended up on the grass. It was the fastest she had ever crossed that road, but she knew she didn’t have time to be impressed with herself.

When she rounded the corner to Memorial Bridge, she saw Ezra’s tall figure hunched over the wall protecting the edge of the bridge. She didn’t think at this point, she just ran.

“Ezra,” Ophelia said, bucking over and trying to catch her breath, her hands resting on her knees. A sharp pain pervaded her chest; she did not run often. He stopped leaning on the barrier and stood up, facing her. He was wearing his normal denim jacket. None of his clothes ever fit quite right due to his height, and his wrists were exposed. His wrists were coated in blood, some dried and some fresh.

“Ezra, we’re going to take your jacket off, okay?” Ophelia said carefully, placing her hand on his back. She could picture the denim rubbing against the cuts and reopening the wounds. The pain in her chest continued to grow and she let out a grotesque cough into her elbow. Her sweater was left with small speckles of blood, but she didn’t have time to be worried about that. She wiped off the beads of sweat that had formed on her forehead.

“Okay,” Ezra said, his face completely blank. She got behind him and reached up, grabbing onto the fabric of his collar. He dropped his shoulders in an attempt to help her. She carefully lowered his jacket, sliding it off of his arms. He winced as it rubbed against his fresh cuts.

“Here,” Ophelia said, pulling off her sweater. She was left in the tank top that she wore under it, but the adrenaline was pumping through her body so hard that she didn’t feel the cold air. Her arms were covered in a thin layer of sweat. Ezra pulled her sweater over his head. She was glad that she liked oversized clothes, because it covered most of his arms. It was much softer than his denim jacket, so she hoped it wouldn’t aggravate the wounds too much.

“I’m sorry about the cuts,” Ezra said, leaning against the barrier once again. “I used the blade from a pencil sharpener but I washed it really good before I did.”

“Shh, we don’t have to talk about that,” Ophelia put her arm around him firmly and closed her eyes. She changed the conversation mostly for her own sake, because it was painful to hear, but she knew it would be good for him to not focus on that. “What happened?”

“Just my parents reminding me how worthless I am,” Ezra said, staring down into the street below. “Nothing out of the ordinary.” His eyes looked glassy and glazed over as he watched the cars buzzing by.

“Why did you come here?” Ophelia asked, slowly rubbing her hand across his back. He shrugged.

“Like I said, I don’t remember coming here.”

“I’m glad that you’re okay.”

“I’m glad that you came. I think I might have actually jumped tonight.”

That sentence struck her like a dagger through the heart, adding heartbreak to her chest pains.

“I thought you hadn’t thought about that in a while,” Ophelia said, trying to keep her voice from breaking too severely. She remembered the last time something like this happened. It was a year or so before, and he had ended up in the hospital that time. Ophelia coughed and remembered how angry his parents were, even in front of all of his friends. They griped about the money they were spending for him to be there and the plans that they had to abandon that weekend so they could sit by his bedside. They took his truck away for a month and told him he better never do it again.

“It was really bad tonight,” Ezra said, his eyes widening, she supposed with the memories of whatever happened. “They just wouldn’t stop yelling and telling me how I’m wasting my life away and I guess I thought maybe they’re right this time.”

“No, you know they aren’t,” Ophelia said, unable to stop her voice from cracking this time. Her head was spinning and she made a mental note to never, ever run again. Ezra shook her arm off and put his foot on the barrier, hoisting himself up onto it. “Oh my god, get down,” Ophelia said, the panic evident in her voice. “Ezra, it’s slippery, get down.”

“I’m not gonna jump,” he said, starting to walk across it, “but I don’t think I really care if I fall.” Ophelia couldn’t help it any more; she started sobbing.

“Please, Ezra, please get down,” she begged, watching him place his feet one in front of the other on the slick concrete. Her head felt like it was on a carousel that was spinning out of control.

“What’s the fucking point?” Ezra shouted, facing the street and throwing his arms out to his sides. “My parents hate me and I’m failing three classes so there’s no way they’ll let me graduate.”

“Ezra, you still have until May, there’s still time-”

“What would it feel like?” he said, putting his arms down. His voice was contemplative.

“What?” Ophelia asked, the word nearly silent. She felt more sweat form on her arms and her chest throbbed.

“What would it feel like to hit the concrete?” Ezra said, once again staring at the cars.

“I’m gonna guess it would hurt like hell.”

There was a pause.

“You’re probably right,” Ezra said, turning around and jumping down onto the bridge next to Ophelia. “I can’t go home tonight,” he said.

“What are you going to do?” Ophelia asked as Ezra bent over to scoop his jacket off of the floor.

“I’ll probably call Vincent. I know his mom has some, like, heavy duty first aid kits.”

“That sounds good, then,” Ophelia said, her head still spinning. She sat with him as he called Vincent, who agreed to let him stay over for the night.

“He said he’ll come pick me up in his car.”

“I’ll stay with you until then.”

They stood on the bridge, Ophelia finally beginning to feel the cold air, until Vincent came and Ezra disappeared into his car.

“Where have you been?” Johnathan said as he opened the door to let Ophelia into the house. She pushed past him, her entire body shivering. She was used to the cold, though. She was always cold. Her skin had developed a layer of peach fuzz all over to try and shield from it, but right now she was sure her skin would turn blue if she spent much more time outside.

“I had to do something,” she said, grabbing the first coat she saw and wrapping herself into it.

“Where is your shirt?” Johnathan said, going to sit back down on the couch, where Anthony sat, his legs crossed under him. Ophelia crossed the room and threw herself down onto the couch next to her brother. She knew that she needed to sit down or else her head felt like it might explode into a million tiny pieces.

“Where is your shirt?” Johnathan repeated, more forceful this time. She looked up at him, or, well, the two of him that appeared in her vision, and saw his pointed, angry gaze.

“I had to give it to someone,” Ophelia said.

“What do you mean?”

“I can’t tell you who,” she said, bringing her hands up to her head and slowly rubbing her temples. She urged her brain to stop merry-go-rounding in her skull. She became acutely aware of the sound of Anthony’s breathing and the feeling of the seams of the leather couch digging into the bare parts of her back. She felt a hair fall onto her face and she batted at it harshly until Anthony grabbed her hand.

“You were supposed to cook dinner,” Johnathan said, pacing the room. Ophelia smelled the remnants of the pizza that she assumed they had ordered while she was gone. She felt more hairs tickle her skin and she yanked her hand back from Anthony, beginning to aggressively attempt to push them back onto the back of her head to join the rest. “I’m really disappointed in you. Anthony didn’t know where you were.”

“I didn’t say that, Dad, all I said was she seemed like she really needed to leave,” Anthony said, his voice louder than what she remembered. He leaned forward as he spoke and Ophelia felt the shifting of the couch.

“You were supposed to make sure that he ate-”

“Dad, we had pizza, I’m fine.”

Ophelia’s eyes squeezed shut tight as she continued to rub her temples.

“That isn’t the point, Anthony.”

“Dad, she had to go do something. Everyone here is still alive and okay and healthy-”

“Anthony this isn’t about you-”

“You know, she’s not Mom.”

The room went utterly silent, even in Ophelia’s overwhelmed brain. She opened her eyes and saw her father’s face. It wasn’t angry anymore. She couldn’t quite place the emotion but it seemed to be a mix of shock and sadness.

She had only seen that look on Johnathan’s face once before: when a police officer showed up to their front door and told them of a building that had caught on fire downtown, resulting in four fatalities.

“You make her cook us dinner and you make her walk me home from school. All you ever do is offer to take us out to eat and give us money but, holy shit, Dad, you need to be our *father*,” Anthony said, standing up and matching Johnathan’s eye level. Ophelia didn’t remember when he had gotten so tall.

“I-”

“No, you don’t get to talk right now. You were at work late because you decided not to go yesterday. That isn’t her fault, Dad. She had something to do,” Anthony said, and Johnathan seemed to shrink. Ophelia began to breathe heavily as the pain in her chest sharply appeared again. “You can’t even see that she’s fucking starving herself.”

“What?” Ophelia said, prepared to deny everything to the full extent that she could, ready to push through the pain.

“What?” Johnathan said quietly, looking at Ophelia. His eyes were like that of a puppy dog, big and sad.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Anthony,” Ophelia wanted to stand up and yell at him, but she thought if she stood up she might collapse.

“Oh, okay,” Anthony said, then he stomped off into the kitchen. Her and Johnathan sat still as they listened to the fridge door creak and then to the sound of a Ziploc bag opening up. Anthony came back with a piece of leftover pizza resting on a paper plate.

“Eat it,” Anthony said, his voice calm and steady. He shoved the plate at her, his hand shaking. Ophelia stared at him, staying as still as she could. She figured if she didn’t move, she could disappear into her surroundings, like the vision of a t-rex. “Eat it!” he said, much more forcefully this time. She blinked hard, her head pounding, and looked up at Anthony. His eyes were expectant and a bit sad. She shook her head. She knew she couldn’t bring herself to force the slice down her throat and swallow three-hundred calories.

“Yeah,” Anthony said, setting the slice of pizza down on the end of the couch. “I didn’t think so.” He sat down next to the slice of pizza. Ophelia looked up at her father, who she wished would say something, anything. He just stood there, staring at her.

“I don’t starve myself,” Ophelia said, looking down at the carpet. She picked a spot and stared at it. She knew that if she stared at it long enough, the pattern would start to move. She used to do the same thing when her mom would take her to church on Sunday. Her mom only brought her and Anthony because she was friends with the pastor. Ophelia thought it was so incredibly boring but when they were having a potluck, she went down to the basement with her mom and helped her cook for everyone. This time, the carpet was swirling faster than usual.

“Dad, if you can’t see that she’s starving herself, you’re brain-dead,” Anthony said, standing up and taking the piece of pizza with him. He stomped through the house. She heard the sound of the lid of their garbage can and then the slamming of the door to the basement.

“Are you okay, Ophelia?” Johnathan said, joining her on the couch. She leaned forward to lean her head in her hands and felt the skin on her back peel off from the leather.

“I’m fine, Dad.” She knew they could never understand what she was actually doing. She knew that she had an eating disorder, but she was sure she wouldn’t end up like the poor people who died from it. She was in control, and she was almost to her perfect weight.

“Is it true?”

She rubbed her temples and begged him to stop talking because each word was a dagger.

There was then a moment of bliss as her vision began to cloud and the spinning stopped, and then her consciousness slipped away from her.

Ophelia had never really been in a hospital before. When her mom died, it was sudden, so they just skipped the hospital step and took her straight to the morgue. There was no point in trying to revive a dead person.

One of the first things she realized was that there were a lot of sounds. There was the beeping of her heart monitor, shuffling feet from the linoleum hallways, and cries from throughout the building. She looked around and saw a lot of neutral colors, and wondered why that was. She supposed they were soothing. The walls were the most boring shade of beige she had ever seen, though, and she wished there was some sort of pops of color.

She had mostly been sleeping, but was awoken by the uncomfortable pressure in her nose once again. They had placed a tube inside her, weaving it through her nose and into her stomach. She wasn’t sure what her insides looked like, but she had fun imagining that it was like a maze.

When the doctors thought she was asleep they had been having a conversation with her father. She squeezed her eyes shut and pretended to be asleep, hearing them say something about refeeding syndrome and hospitalization. Her dad replied that their insurance didn’t cover that, and when the doctors said inpatient treatment was a medical necessity, she heard him sigh and let out the most hesitant “okay” she had ever heard. She remembered that her mom had had the better insurance out of the two of them.

She did remember one thing the doctor said, and that was, “I’m surprised she was still alive.”

Now, she was alone. Well, mostly alone. Johnathan sat in the corner of the room on the weirdly boxy couch (which was, of course, a light, cool-toned brown), softly dozing off.

Anthony had gone down a few minutes ago to conquer the cafeteria. Johnathan had requested “some sort of chicken sandwich, and make sure there’s no tomatoes, and bring me mayonnaise packets,” and Anthony mentioned something about wanting to see if they had any pizza. They had asked her if it was okay for them to eat in there, citing not wanting to leave her alone. She felt like she had to say yes, they could eat in there, to save their feelings.

Ophelia looked down. Her body was encased in a paper-like gown with some kind of indiscernible pattern of pastel blues and greens. She wondered who had had to undress her and put her into this gown. She didn’t like the idea of it. She knew her body wasn’t perfected yet.

The machine connected to her IV let out a loud, protesting beep. Johnathan awoke from his slumber with a jerk of his body. He looked around to discern the source of the beeping from the many objects in the room until his eyes finally rested on the IV machine. When he saw that it was just adjusting itself, his eyes slowly fluttered closed again.

Anthony appeared in the doorway of the room, balancing two big, plastic containers. Inside one, Ophelia could see a chicken sandwich drowning in mayonnaise packets, and inside the other lie a couple of pieces of pizza and a twisted, parmesan dusted breadstick. It made her sick, the combination of the sight of the food and the tube that was forcing calories directly into her stomach.

“It took me forever to find this room again,” Anthony said, setting the two containers down onto the small table in the corner of the room. He shoved his hands in his pockets and pulled out a couple of wrinkled bills and jingly coins, she assumed the change from what Johnathan gave him for food. “First, I went to the third floor, because I thought it was 302 instead of 203, which made me think that maybe I was dyslexic,” he said, opening up his food container, “and then I went through like three different hallways to find the right one. But I made it back here, and I am alive.”

Ophelia cracked a small smile.

“By the way, I’m uh,” Anthony said, reaching up and scratching his neck, “I’m glad that you’re alive, too. And, I’m, uh, I’m sorry I didn’t tell Dad earlier because I guess we could have gotten you better treatment.”

“Trust me, I didn’t want you to tell him, and also trust that I’m still a little mad.”

“That’s fair,” Anthony said, smiling, “but I’m not sorry.” Johnathan’s eyes opened again and he arose, on a mission to get his chicken sandwich.

“Hey, you’re awake,” Johnathan said, picking up his food and looking at Ophelia. She nodded.

“What’s gonna happen to me?” Ophelia asked.

“Well, they said after they get your vitals stabilized, you’ll be in an inpatient treatment for a while.”

“How long?”

“They said two weeks at first, and then they’ll perform a reevaluation.”

Ophelia was silent. She wasn’t sure what to say. She never expected to get caught, but the possibility was always in the back of her mind.

“Dad, if we can’t afford this, we can just sneak out,” Ophelia said, looking over at her dad, who was now sitting back in his chair, taking a bite from his sandwich.

“No, honey, you need the treatment. We’ll be fine, anyway,” Johnathan said. There was a pause while Johnathan and Anthony ate their food. The machines hooked up to Ophelia whirred. “Do you smoke cigarettes?”

“What?” Ophelia asked, her chest starting to tighten with panic.

“The doctors ran some blood tests and said they found traces of tobacco and nicotine. They said that cigarettes are a common product for people with eating disorders to use as appetite suppressants,” Johnathan said through bites of his sandwich. Ophelia nodded. “How often?”

“Like a couple a week, usually. I don’t know.” Ophelia scratched her neck, feeling the IV tug at the skin on the back of her hand. It would be impossible for him to understand why she did it. She did it to feel the hunger leave her body and to feel the control enter. There was nothing like the feeling of chugging water on an empty stomach.

“Where do you keep them?” Johnathan asked, setting his sandwich down.

“In the drawer on my bedside table,” she reported, feeling as though if he had actually cared he would have looked in there at some point anyway, as any suspicious parent would. Although, she realized she probably hadn’t given him a reason to be suspicious in the first place.

“Yeah, not anymore. And not ever again,” Johnathan said. Ophelia nodded.

The facility was cold and lifeless, despite all the bodies that occupied it. They looked more like ghosts than like people to Ophelia. Everyone was so pale with big dark bags under their eyes.

Her cell phone had been taken away from her at the beginning, right before the family “orientation.” They called it that, like she was starting her college career. Like she would be signing up for courses. She thought about what courses they might have had there: Gaining Weight 101 was sure to be first on the list.

There were a lot of rules there. She sat in the cafeteria, alone but not really, surrounded by other people in their pajamas as well. Everyone’s plates were filled to the brim with an Eggo waffle, an apple, and a yogurt. A whiteboard on the wall told her she couldn’t cut her food up into more than four pieces. She took a fork in one hand and a knife in the other, slicing off a piece of her Eggo. A nurse hovered over her shoulder as she shoved the piece into her mouth and chewed.

When she finished her meal to its completion (an estimated 400 calories) she was made to sit at her table for an hour so the food could have time to digest itself and settle into her stomach. She was then whisked away to the bathroom. The tiles were cold, even through the bottom of her shoes. She looked at the signs on the wall, displaying big red letters that told her not to flush. She reached behind her to click the lock shut but just found a smooth doorknob.

While she sat on the toilet seat, her pants around her ankles, she felt tears well up in her eyes. She hadn’t really gotten used to it yet despite having been there a few days already. She

never meant for this to happen. All she wanted was some semblance of control, but now here she was in a bathroom with a nurse standing guard outside the door. She had told them she thought only bulimic patients needed to be monitored during their bathroom visits but they didn't really give her a very helpful response. She wondered if it was because of the cigarettes.

The therapy office was plastered with teal wallpaper with a scratchy pattern. She looked around the room before sitting down silently on the big, puffy couch in the corner. It was right across from a window, which made visible all of the happenings outside. There were a few big white birch trees, their tall, naked branches covered in a thin layer of snow. A small squirrel that must not have made it into his house for the winter crawled along the branch, causing puffs of white to fall and join the glittering ground.

"Hello, Ophelia, how are you today?" Dr. Madhavan said, sitting down into her chair in front of the window and blocking Ophelia's view.

"I'm doing okay, how are you?" Ophelia responded with her usual cookie-cutter phrase. She had gotten so used to people asking how she was and not really caring.

"I'm fine, thank you for asking," the doctor's voice was calm and even, as usual. "How was breakfast?"

"It was okay. A little bland," Ophelia said, not wanting to express her distaste for eating so much in one sitting. Dr. Madhavan chuckled.

"Yes, we hear that a lot about breakfasts. I hope you've been finding lunch and dinner to be more exciting," the doctor said, leaning forward and adjusting her glasses. Her short, dark hair fell in front of her eyes and she pushed it back behind her ear. The first time they met, she told Ophelia that they were trying to provide healthy but fun meals meant to make them fall in love with food again. She remembered seasoned grilled chicken, salmon, vegetables, and an array of other foods that someone else might find enchanting.

"Yeah, they're a little better," Ophelia said, as Dr. Madhavan clicked through her computer.

"It looks like the nurses wrote down that your weight is looking a lot better now. Five foot six and-" she clicked, "117 and a quarter pounds. Looks like you are officially back in the healthy weight range, good for you!" She looked at Ophelia and smiled.

"Oh," Ophelia said, not knowing how to feel. When she looked at herself in the mirror in the bathroom, she felt like she looked the same as before, but she did see a difference in her cheeks, which were rounder and pinker. It was definitely something she needed to get used to, but, and this came as a surprise to herself, she kind of liked the way it looked.

"How do you feel about that weight, Ophelia?" Dr. Madhavan said, taking her hand off of the computer mouse and resting it on the table.

"I think I like the number," Ophelia said. "One-hundred-and-seventeen," she continued, sounding out each syllable slowly and deliberately. She thought about it, and thought about the fact that each day that she was in the facility, she was riddled with more energy. "But I don't think I quite like all the eating yet. It feels weird."

“And it will feel weird for a while. Change is weird, it is for everyone,” Dr. Madhavan said.

“I have to get used to feeling full again. It’s been, like, a year since I have.”

“How have your thoughts been these past couple of days?” Dr. Madhavan asked.

“A little better. The worst is when we have dessert. My head yells at me to stop eating it but I can’t because I’ll get in trouble with the nurses.”

“Well, it’s important to be able to separate your own thoughts and those that don’t belong to you.”

Ophelia paused for a second, and then said, “but they’re all in my head.”

“I know that it feels that way, but right now, you have two different types of thoughts in your head. One type is your regular thoughts, and the other type is those that are placed in there by your disorder.”

“But I don’t know how to tell the difference,” Ophelia said, shifting in her chair.

“Your disorder targets thoughts about food and your body specifically, so that’s a good place to start,” Dr. Madhavan said, reaching to the front of her desk and grabbing a sticky note. She began scribbling something on it. “When you start to have a negative thought about your meals or your body, I want you to take a minute and really think about what is happening in your head. What’s a thought that you have commonly?”

Ophelia paused again, and then said, “I think about how people will like me more if I was skinnier a lot.”

“Okay, and how can you work through that?” Dr. Madhavan stood up and came around her desk, handing Ophelia the sticky note. It read, “slow down and THINK.”

“Well,” Ophelia said, thinking about it. “I’ve been friends with the same people for five years and my disorder only started around a year ago.”

“See,” Dr. Madhavan said, smiling, “that’s perfect!” She went back around to sit in her chair again. “It would benefit you to do that with all of your negative thoughts.” Ophelia felt silly that she hadn’t tried something like that before, but she knew that her disorder had been clouding her judgement. At least, that’s what she’d been told. “Now, I want you to go put that sticky note above your bed as a reminder, if you’re comfortable with that. Are you comfortable with that?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Now, Ophelia, I have one more question for you that I think will be beneficial for both of us to know the answer. Are you okay with me asking a question?” Dr. Madhavan said, adjusting her glasses.

“I think that’s what I’m here for, technically,” Ophelia said, cracking a small smile.

“Yes, it is,” she let out a small chuckle, and then continued, “what are you gaining from starving yourself? Take some time to think, if you’d like.”

Ophelia thought for a moment. She thought about the control it gave her, which was a nice change of pace from her home life. She thought about how pleasant she found the pain and how much she liked the feeling of drinking water on an empty stomach. She thought about the looks she got while out in public, some of concern and some of jealousy.

“Just to lose weight,” Ophelia decided.

Ophelia took the sticky note out of her pocket and set it on her bedside table. She didn't look at the drawer that used to hold her cigarettes; she walked over to her desk and retrieved a piece of tape from her dispenser. This piece of tape held the note to the wall above her bed.

She had spent three weeks in treatment, and had gained just under ten pounds, which was considered to be a miracle. She had gone home with a packet of coping strategies, as well as sheets covered in meal plans.

“Ophelia, dinner is ready,” her father called from the kitchen. She looked at the note she had just taped up, in Dr. Madhavan's wiggly doctor handwriting. “Slow down and THINK.” It was something she knew she always had trouble with but could never put it into words until Dr. Madhavan wrote them down.

Ophelia exited her room to see the faint, smokey remnants of her father's cooking process. She waded through the steam to the dining room. Johnathan was working away, placing a big serving dish in the center of their dining table. They never ate in the real dining room.

“Oh, hello, Ophelia, can you please help me out and bring the vegetables in from the stove?” Johnathan said, wiping his hands on his pants. “Just dump them on a plate, but be careful, they're probably hot.” She made her way into the kitchen, where she saw basically an entire feast. There was a pan of asparagus, a pot of instant rice, a pot of real mashed potatoes with the skin and everything, and a package of dinner rolls. She saw an empty serving plate sitting on the counter, onto which she dumped the asparagus.

Johnathan appeared in the kitchen and made his way to the pot of mashed potatoes. “Take the vegetables and go sit down, honey, I'll get the rest,” he said, placing heaping scoops onto another serving plate. She brought the asparagus with her to the dining room table, and set it down next to the plate of roast chicken her dad had brought in only a moment ago. She had grown quite fond of the dish when they served it at the hospital, so she requested it for her first meal back home.

Anthony was sitting at the table in one corner, looking at his phone. He glanced up and saw Ophelia, then clicked his phone off and adjusted his posture. Johnathan came in, balancing the plate of potatoes on top of the package of rolls in one hand, and the rice in the other.

“Anthony, go get the drinks and pour us all some,” Johnathan said, sliding the food onto the table. The dark, stained wood was covered with cloth placemats; they were red and green with a shiny gold border. They were the good Christmas placemats, the ones that were usually reserved for actual Christmas dinner. Anthony came back with a bottle of grape juice, Ophelia's favorite from when she was a kid. He twisted open the cap and tipped it over into her glass. A rogue drop splashed out and landed on her placemat.

“Okay, please start serving yourselves,” Johnathan said, reaching across the table for a piece of roasted chicken. Ophelia took the serving tongs and grabbed a piece of her own. She chose the smallest piece because she felt a bit daunted by the rest of the feast; she added to her

plate a few pieces of asparagus, a scoop of rice, and one dinner roll that she knew she wouldn't finish.

"Do we want to say grace?" Johnathan said, finally sitting down. Anthony looked at him incredulously.

"Since when do we say grace, dad?" Anthony said, laughing a little. He picked up his fork and ripped into his chicken.

"Well, I read that it's good for recovery to establish new routines, and I don't know what they did in the facility."

"We didn't say grace, Dad," Ophelia said, picking up a piece of asparagus and decidedly taking a bite. They ate in silence, but only for a moment.

"So, I know that I've been kind of neglectful for the past year," Johnathan said, having just finished a gulp of his grape juice. Ophelia nodded as she chewed on a bite of rice, feeling it get all in between her teeth. She counted her chews, one, two, three, four, but then remembered that she wasn't supposed to do that.

"Yeah, I'd say that's accurate," Anthony said, a bit of mashed potatoes falling out of his mouth and onto the table. He looked at it for a moment before scooping it up with his finger and dispensing it on his tongue.

"Well, I've obviously seen where that got us, so I promise it could never happen again. It will never happen again, and if it does, I want you guys to call me out on it," Johnathan said, watching Anthony with disgust.

"I don't think we're allowed to, because you're our dad," Anthony said, going back in to scrape the remnants of his mashed potato spill from the table.

"I'm telling you to now, and you have to listen to me, because I'm your dad," Johnathan said, only half-serious. "Oh, by the way, Ophelia, I bought all the snacks for your party tomorrow."

"What party?" Ophelia asked, chewing on her last stalk of asparagus.

"Dad," Anthony said, placing his head in his hands, "that was supposed to be a surprise."

"Oh shoot, I'm sorry," Johnathan said, turning towards Anthony, "I thought she knew about it."

"How would she have planned something when she was in the hospital?" Anthony laughed.

"Well, I guess I'll dress up tomorrow," Ophelia said, "thanks, Dad."

Ophelia stood in front of her full-length mirror, examining the outfit that she had pulled from the depths of her closet. It was from Christmas just last year; it was a scoop-neck velvet dress that she used to hate. The first time she put it on, she thought she looked like a sausage, and was afraid her dress would burst at the seams. Now she was thirty pounds less than she was, and the dress hung off of her. She looked at her collarbones, which were still prominent but not quite as much so as they were only a few weeks prior.

She did not like how she looked in the dress in front of the mirror. It was ill-fitting and did not suit her. She reached to the side of the dress and pulled down the zipper, removing the dress from her body. She heard Dr. Madhavan's voice in her head, telling her that wearing something like that would be a possible trigger. The dress went into the bottom of her closet. Instead, she selected a skirt that had elastic on the waist. The band sat on top of her hip bones, so she pulled it down until it was hugging her body. On the top went her cable-knit burnt orange sweater. It fit her a bit tighter than it used to, but it still engulfed the shape of her curves, which she appreciated.

Ophelia thought that her mom would adore her outfit. She would have said she looked just gorgeous, or something like that. Ophelia smiled at the thought.

The hardwood floors were cold through her tights on the bottom of her feet. Once again, she saw the faint smokiness of a meal being cooked. She followed the scent through the hallway and ended up in the kitchen, where Johnathan was removing a ham from the oven. She smiled. He had remembered that she liked ham more than turkey even though she was pretty sure she mentioned it in passing a while back.

"Go ahead and relax, Ophelia, I've got this all down," Johnathan said, removing his oven mitts. He looked over at her and his jaw dropped. "Honey, you look beautiful," he said, going over to her and taking her in for a big hug. She couldn't remember the last time he had hugged her. She wrapped her arms around him, returning the embrace. An unfamiliar kind of warmth spread throughout her, emanating from the spots where her dad's body made contact with hers. She remembered that the last time she had felt that kind of warmth, it had been the last time her mom hugged her before she went to work.

"Go sit down," Johnathan said, urging her into the living room. It was decorated for Christmas. It felt weird. The weeks that she had spent in treatment had felt like limbo. Time was an illusion there, so it didn't feel like Christmas time. She had half-expected to still see the haphazard Thanksgiving decorations that had littered the house when she left. Now, there was a Christmas tree lit up with red and gold ornaments, as well as fairy lights lining their big picture window.

"You're not really supposed to say that she looks 'healthy.' I read that online," Vincent's voice came from outside. Ophelia's chest suddenly tightened. She didn't want them to see how she looked now. She could picture them laughing at her chubby cheeks or her collarbones that were hidden by fat. She couldn't follow her wandering thoughts any longer, because Vincent knocked loudly on the door. It made her jump.

Ophelia walked over to the door and pulled it open, the cold air rushing in through the newly introduced portal to the outside world. Vincent looked at her and smiled, wider than she had ever seen him smile before. Ezra towered behind him, staring at her with an emotion that she couldn't quite place.

"Merry Christmas, Ophelia!" Vincent said, handing her a shiny red bag with silver tissue paper sticking out of the top. She reluctantly took it and moved out of the way so that the two

could enter. As he passed her, Ezra wrapped his gangly arms around her and held her for a moment.

“Where should we put the presents?” Ezra said, making his way to sit on the couch.

“Under the tree, dumbass,” Vincent said, pushing past him and setting his present carefully under the tree. “You smell great, by the way, Lia.”

“Thanks, I guess,” she responded, seeing Adelaide and Dorian pull up. He went up onto the curb before backing up and parking properly.

“I mean, I don’t smell anything bad,” Vincent said in an attempt to clarify his first statement.

“Shut up, man,” Ezra said, placing his wrapped box next to Vincent’s.

“No smoke or anything,” Vincent said, earning an elbow to the side from Ezra. Adelaide and Dorian finally arrived at the front door.

“Hello, friends,” Johnathan shouted from the kitchen. They all laughed as the two new guests slipped out of their winter coats.

She stared at the feast that her father had cooked up for them. It included a huge ham, carved into uneven slices, mashed potatoes, sweet potato casserole, brussel sprouts, and a heaping container of cornbread stuffing. She knew that, not long ago, this would have sent her into a panic, but now she just stared, calculating. She used to be able to remember calories really well, but in the three weeks she was gone, that ability faded.

“Dinner is served,” Johnathan said, opening up the cupboard and pulling out five of their best ceramic plates. They clinked as he set them down onto the counter. He gestured to the food and Ezra was the first to grab a plate.

Once they were all seated at the dining room table, Ophelia looked down at her plate. She had taken two slices of ham, one scoop of mashed potatoes, two scoops of brussel sprouts, and one scoop of stuffing. Her mouth watered just a bit.

“So, how was life in the clink?” Vincent asked, a mini marshmallow falling from his mouth onto the table. He seemed not to notice and continued to look at Ophelia.

“It wasn’t really like prison,” she said, “and besides, I’d rather hear about what you guys have been up to.”

“Good ol’ Ezra here finally got what he needed,” Dorian said, patting Ezra on the pack. Ezra coughed from the pressure.

“What do you mean?” Ophelia asked, taking a piece of ham into her mouth. Ezra grinned.

“I turned eighteen,” Ezra said. “I went to a damn psychiatrist and got some fucking medication,” he said, punching the air in a silent celebration. “They can’t tell my parents shit.”

“That’s great!” Ophelia exclaimed, getting up from her spot at the table. She made her way around to the other side where Ezra was sitting and gave him the best hug she could from her vantage point.

“Yup, I haven’t had what they call ‘suicide ideations’ in a few days,” Ezra said, proudly placing a dollop of sweet potatoes on his tongue. Ophelia never wanted to let go, but she figured

it might be weird if she held on any longer, so she returned to her seat in front of her plate. Her next plan of attack involved her stuffing. She took a bite and immediately realized that it was her mom's recipe.

She looked up and smiled.